Avoiding Violence by Design

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> Upshot • I propose that a lack of a common ground or culture of understanding is a design flaw in academic conferences that creates opportunities for violent reactions. I suggest that an additional or revised design principle or praxis should be considered through application of second-order cybernetics.

« 1 » Based on his many and varied experiences, Larry Richards describes a series of 10 principles to be used as guidelines for designing academic conferences in light of seven features of second-order cybernetics (SOC). In this commentary, I focus on the third principle in order to bring attention to what appears to be a persistent flaw in the design of academic conferences that results in the inciting of violence and disruption of the intent of the conference. Principle 3 has to do with encouraging desired "events, behaviors and outcomes" and avoiding those that "interfere with the desired," especially "any interaction that could be taken as violent" (§22). Richards helpfully footnotes his definition of violence as:

"a situation in which any party to an interaction experiences a reduction in participation (loss of choice or alternatives), whether experienced by themselves or observed in others. The extreme case occurs when the only alternative perceived as an available response to a behavior by one or more individuals in the situation is a violent one—one they do not want to use, but have no alternatives. In a conference this could be manifest by dismissing the ideas of others before a conversation can happen, dominating a conversation so that others cannot participate, rambling incoherently, mischaracterizing the statements of others, as well as the obvious: yelling, name-calling, gangling up and so on – all examples of behaviors I have seen at traditional conferences." (Footnote 3)

« 2 » This extended definition of violence is helpful because it identifies and details a number of situations that are in fact too frequently experienced in academic conferences. Other related behaviors that could be characterized as violent and disruptive include interrupting, verbally attacking, insensitive sarcasm, or disruptively leaving a session. Avoiding these types of violence and disruption should be of particular importance to those who desire to design conferences with alternative structure, activities and outcomes, especially as described by Richards in light of the SOC features. However, it is inherent in the alternative design and nature of these conferences that certain types of violent situations are incited, albeit unintentionally, by the inadequate attention given to establishing a common basis for participation by all attendees before or at the beginning of the conference. Establishing a common basis could be understood as creating culture in the way discussed previously by Richards in his constructivist approach to social policy formulation (Richards 2007). Herein, I suggest that acknowledging the persistent reoccurrence of violence in alternative conferences indicates a design flaw that requires further reflection and analysis to determine what is needed – a new or revised principle, or a new or improved praxis.

A challenge of alternative conference design

« 3 » While Richards recognizes that violent behaviors are present at both traditional and alternative conferences, the focus of his article on designing conferences with alternative formats provokes a closer examination of the ways in which alternative conferences are structured that incite violent responses. Alternative conferences are those designed with intentions that go beyond presentation of papers and exchange of predetermined information. The focus is often on generation of new ideas from the interactions of participants from varied disciplinary backgrounds as well as with a range of experiences. Varied processes for building knowledge will likely be employed in these conferences and the settings might be intentionally unusual and unfamiliar to stimulate innovative thinking. Thus, the patterns and settings of interactions as well as the subject matter might be unfamiliar to many attendees. They are being inserted into a new culture. If culture functions as a system of constraints on human behavior (Richards 2007), then being quickly inserted into an unfamiliar culture can create behavior problems. The novelty can present several challenges to participation for new attendees and those who attend the conference infrequently.

« 4 » An even more experimental approach to the design of academic conferences, where a new set of experiences and expectations are created for each annual conference, can expand these challenges to include an impact on even the regular attendees. Challenges to attendees’ participation include confusion, fears, and/or lack of confidence due to either surprise about or lack of understanding of the norms and expectations surrounding the format and content of the idea exchange, i.e., the culture of the conference. Such confusions, fears, and lack of confidence can and do result in situations that incite violent behaviors or disengagement. Whether attendees are supposed functioning as observer, listener, or participant, a sense of exclusion can result even if there has been explicit invitation to engagement and certainly when the invitation has not been forthcoming. Such situations are typically not intentional, but rather the results of some design failure and clearly interfere with the desired outcomes of alternative conferences. Analysis of a design failure is the ethical responsibility of conference designers – an ethical responsibility that can be evaluated in light of the four principles of common morality, to do no harm, to provide benefit, to respect individual autonomy, and to treat all [attendees] with justice (Beauchamp 2007; Beever & Brightman 2015).

« 5 » Several examples of alternative conference designs with experimental approaches are provided in Richards’s article (primarily from his experiences with the American Society for Cybernetics (ASC) since 1981). While my attendance at these ASC conferences has been recent and limited, I can provide several additional examples from other recent conferences with alternative formats or components, namely the 12th Early Atlantic Reading Group (EARG12) in April 2012, the 10th Design Thinking Research Symposium (DTRSI0) in October 2014, and the 11th Engineering, Social Justice, and Peace (ESJP11) conference in September 2015. From my participation in these conferences as observer, listener, and performer, I can attest that all of these conferences had attendees who experienced such challenges to participation. So while...
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ASC conferences do have some unique designs, experimental approaches, and desired outcomes, the challenge of avoiding inciting violence by design is more widespread.

**Design failure**

« 6 » If the results of a design include undesirable outcomes (violent behavior in this case) either by failure to avoid intentionally the undesired or by unintentional triggering of the undesired, then there is a flaw in the design. However, the root cause of the failure is not immediately clear. Whether the failure is from an inadequate or missing design principle or from an incomplete or inadequate praxis cannot be ascertained by either an external or an internal observer. Analysis of the design failure in light of the features of SOC would suggest that the design did not adequately account for the “centrality of the one or more observers/listeners/participants in the formulation of” knowledge (feature 1, §16); that “the importance of the desires of the observer/listener/participant” (feature 2, §16) were not adequately considered; or perhaps that “the avoidance of hierarchical thinking whenever possible, giving precedence to recursive relationships, especially in social systems” (feature 7, §17) was not achieved in the design. In any case, alternative conference designs that intentionally create uncommon experiences and encourage interactions from many disciplinary perspectives with the desire for enhanced and innovative knowledge production must consider the necessity of establishing some common ground of understanding and interaction on which all attendees might stand and engage if violence is to be avoided.

**Establishing common ground**

« 7 » Richards has some awareness of the importance of establishing common ground, or at least recognizes the need to inform attendees “of the design intent before they decide to attend” (§44). He sees this as especially important with experimental conference design, where there is the possibility of “mistakes (undesirable consequences not anticipated)” (§23). However, the depth of this awareness and consideration in the design of alternative conferences has typically been insufficient. Alerting attendees of the design intent is one part of the preparation needed, but this should be expanded to include all variations in structure, additional or novel activities, or experimental formats for engagement. To develop a common ground or culture of understanding, more than an alert is needed. To respect their ability to make informed choices, all attendees should be prepared with clearly articulated details and with descriptions of the expectations and options associated with any unfamiliar or experimental formats or practices. In fact, new attendees should be given details and descriptions of even the formats, activities, expectations, and content that would be familiar to regular participants so as to establish a just and equitable potential for participation for all. Establishing a common ground of understanding or culture in this way provides accessibility of engagement in the conference and reduces potential situations of harm and violent responses due to frustrations about perceived exclusion from the benefits of participation.

**Participation is essential**

« 8 » Situations of potential exclusion or incited violence due to frustration by limitation or perceived power dynamics are clearly to be avoided by academic conferences such as those of the ASC, where engaged participation is seen as essential and desired. Engaged participation is essential for knowledge creation and for creating harmonious societal impact. This can be seen as an issue of social justice in which those in the know (regular attendees/participants and the conference designers) have the power to exclude or to dominate the conversation. Richards recognizes this critical issue in design principle 2, yet he also suggests that “Designing by constraint does not guarantee particular outcomes: anticipating the variety of personalities who will show up and the dynamics of interactions that could arise so that the design can preclude all possible undesirable behaviors is problematic” (§21). Clearly, this is a significant challenge that requires deeper reflection and analysis and potentially new principles or practices.

« 9 » So how much preparation is needed to achieve a common ground or culture for all attendees and how much of this preparation can be done in advance of the conference when potential attendees still have a chance to decide whether or not to register (respecting their autonomy)? These questions are of particular interest to me and to my artist collaborators, who have contributed performance art components to several academic conferences, both traditional and alternative. Our desire in these components has been to introduce novel conceptual material and perspectives on the conference theme in an alternative format that inspires new thinking. We see our performance work as creating essential asynchronicity and dialogic interactions in light of the SOC element (feature 5) requiring “a friction, conflict, disagreement, inconsistency, being out of sync among observers/listeners/participants in the generation of continual change in human knowledge and understanding” (§16). However, we have regularly encountered the challenge of determining how best to prepare attendees with a common ground of understanding and expectations that provides accessibility and engagement as an observer/listener/participant without reducing the novelty, surprise, and shifts in perspective that are intended to create an asynchronicity that inspires new thinking and stimulates conversations (McMullen, Jaycox & Brightman 2016).

**Designing a new principle or new praxis?**

« 10 » Recently, I participated in two academic conferences with approaches to establishing common ground at the beginning. Both approaches were inadequately designed in that they were not able to prevent undesirable violent behaviors in reaction to the conference. The recent ESJP 2015 conference began with a welcome and icebreaker, followed by a guided discussion on the theme. The first session was a plenary panel of several members of the coordinating committee discussing an overview of the roots of the ESJP conference. While this approach provided some common ground of historical and conceptual understandings as well as inviting an open forum for dialogue, it was clear that some attendees came to the conference with a different understanding and found this information presented in the first main session very challenging to their participation. It seemed to have come too late and too publicly and without clear options to avoid violent responses. This approach also did not capture all attendees as some arrived later in the conference. At the 2014 DTRSI0
conference, a pre-conference workshop was offered specifically to engage attendees in personal experiences of the performative content of the conference (McMullen, Jaycox & Brightman 2016). While this workshop was well received, it was not attended by all who later were impacted by the performances and it clearly did not prepare some attendees adequately for the more artistic approach they encountered. Attendees could have been better served by including a discussion of how they might respond to the performance in appropriate ways, which could include permission to leave during the performance or not to participate at all.

Certainly other, more successful approaches might exist of which I am not aware. And I did not experience the pre-conference workshops at ASC 2014 and 2015 or the opening sessions at ESJP 2013 and 2014. Yet the challenge remains to consider more deeply a design principle or practice of creating a common ground of conference culture early and adequately to avoid inciting violence and other undesirable behaviors. If societies such as the ASC and ESJP that have intentions “to contribute to the conceptualization of a new and more humane society” (§5) and to be “a network of activists, academics, and practitioners dedicated to social justice and peace,” respectively, continue to design alternative conferences then this challenge is especially pertinent. So I conclude with questioning whether more concerted attempts are required to design a better praxis for alternative conferences or whether an additional design principle is needed to avoid inciting violence. Could a new design principle be formulated in light of the features of SOC and added to Richard’s initial set of 10? Would this not be an application of SOC to the creation of principles for designing academic conferences?

Desires, Constraints and Designing Second-Order Cybernetic Conferences

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> Upshot • I relate my own experiences of participating in and organizing conversational conferences to Richard’s discussion. Perhaps contradictory to Larry’s argument, I believe that in order for conversational conferences to be successful, they require some rules, structure and some hierarchy. Below, I would like to add reflections from my own experience and also point to some guidelines worth considering, taken from Callaos’s recommendations.

> 1 • Larry Richards’s argument appears to me as idealistic as it is radical in that it recommends rigorous second-order cybernetic principles for conference design. However, I think this also might be its practical weakness. The target article suggests second-order cybernetic principles that conferences should implement or adhere to, linked to Heinz von Foerster’s notions around “human experience and concerns, including the relationship between humans and technology – that is, biological, psychological and social concerns” (§12). These suggestions recall Margaret Mead’s recommendations from the inaugural ASC conference that cybernetics should be conducted in a rigorously cybernetic manner (Mead 1968). Ralph Glanville writes that a cybernetics conference should not only discuss cybernetic ideas but be done in a cybernetic manner (Glanville 2011). This was implemented, in a structured design, at the 2010 ASC conference at Rensselaer Polytechnic in Troy.

> 2 • From my perspective, progress has indeed been made in developing an ever changing conference format with surprising variety – that deeply engages in Heinz von Foerster’s aforementioned themes – yet after almost 50 years a genuinely self-organising cybernetic conference is still waiting to be implemented. Why is it so difficult for a genuinely self-organising cybernetics conference to emerge, even among committed and experienced participants? Could it be that conversational conferences work better with clear rules, moderators and some degree of hierarchy? Perhaps this is more effective as we are accustomed to this type of structured approach.

> 3 • Richards’s recommendations presuppose that there already is an existing culture of respectful and generous listening. In my view, however, this culture of conversation needs to be reaffirmed and made explicit on multiple occasions. One way of doing this is by participants following a few guidelines, hopefully to be perceived as satisfactory by all.

> 4 • The first conversational conference I participated in was the American Society for Cybernetics 2010 conference at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in Troy, NY. I experienced this conference as extraordinarily inspiring, but also became aware of some frustrating effects, mainly that some individuals monopolised conversations, interrupted or showed little respect for other people’s opinions. Perhaps this was a sign of weak or lacking moderation? In 2011 I conducted a two-day conversational conference at the University of Huddersfield, UK. Both conferences explicitly reminded participants to prepare for the conference by reading Nagib Callaos’s text giving short guidelines on how to conduct conversations in groups, which had been introduced and tested in various iterations over several years at the Puschl and Asliomar conversations and at Callaos’s own conference series:1

> Groups require moderators which help to find a common ground, make sure everyone can express their views, encourage tolerance, keep conversations moving, ask questions that challenge assumptions, re-establish rules, summarize points, propose changes, register names of participants, take notes and make descriptions.

> Establishing explicit ground-rules such as engaged listening, avoiding dogmatism, comments should be brief and last less then five minutes, no