1. INTRODUCTION

In the course of the last decade an observer of the mode of discourse in our various societal groups and communities was able to observe the emergence of new approaches to intentional communication. This emergent mode has several designations, such as: Dialogue, consensus-seeking conversation, thinking together, and searching together. It seems to me that these modes of intentional social communication modes are, on the one hand, reactions to the ever degrading and hostile political discourse and, on the other, they represent an increasing yearning for civility, mutual respect, and dignity in our social discourse, and they are preferred modes of searching for common ground.

Engaging in these new modes of discourse, we are also discovering the surprising power of intentional collective communication, as we are searching together for solutions to often, intractable issues and problem situations. Most significantly, however, we find the use of these communication modes most rewarding as we aspire to take charge of our future, and collectively engage the design of systems, in which we live and work.

By now, the societal landscape is rich with a great variety of people, groups, intentional communities, community agencies, volunteer and professional associations learning to use, and using, these new modes of civil discourse. They create not only their own future, but create a wealth of social and intellectual capital. Collectively, I see these emerging groups, communities, organizations, constituting a new societal movement: The Conversation Movement. In this chapter, I introduce a modest but ambitious part of this movement, which started almost 20 years ago and created a number of conversation communities.


2. THE CONVERSATION MOVEMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEMS SCIENCE COMMUNITY

Having attended systems conferences for many years, by the late ‘70s some of us in the international systems movement began to question the usefulness of the traditional conference format as a forum for knowledge development and application exploration. Searching for a more meaningful and satisfying format, we initiated RESEARCH CONVERSATIONS as a method of choice of collective communication in systems inquiry. A group that engages in conversation is called a CONVERSATION COMMUNITY. Conversation as a mode of disciplined inquiry combines “generative dialogue” and “strategic dialogue.” While “generative dialogue” aims at establishing “common ground” of values and beliefs and a “common frame of reference” in an intentional community, “strategic dialogue” involves the community in addressing an issue of shared interest and purpose. (This paper is linked with an earlier, called “Conversation Heuristics.”)

Since our first conversation in 1982, we have asked: How can we use the insights gained from systems inquiry for the advancement of the human condition? By now, several conversation communities in several countries have explored this question. These communities jointly constitute the “The Conversation Movement” of the international systems community.

In Part One, I describe the work and organization of the Conversation Communities, the conversation method, phases of a conversation cycle, and the characteristics of a Conversation Community. In Part Two, I provide an example of how a team works, by summarizing the program of one of the Research Teams of the 96 Conversation.

PART ONE: THE WORK AND ORGANIZATION OF THE CONVERSATION COMMUNITIES

In this Part, I (1) provide a brief history of the various conversations of the Conversation Communities over the last two decades. (2) Characterize the conversation method. (3) Describe the phases of a conversation cycle. And (4) Introduce the characteristics of authentic conversation communities.

3. THE CONVERSATION MOVEMENT: A BRIEF HISTORY

The first conversation took place at the Fuschl Lake in Austria in April 1982. A group of systems scholars met in a small hotel at the Fuschl Lake, near Salzburg. Participants came from three continents, representing ten cultures. They were invited as leaders of various systems societies. The conversation was organized by the International Systems Institute. The group