SELF MANAGED CONFERENCE DESIGN

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ABSTRACT: *World Café and Open Space Technology offer new ways of organizing highly productive conferences. The Centre for Continuing Education at the Australian National University, through developments of Search Conferencing has created innovative ways of integrating different approaches. To maximize community learning we need to become a lot more creative.*

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INTRODUCTION

In 1982 at a Non Formal Education Conference, organized by the Papua New Guinea Government Department of Education at Ukarumpa, in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, I met Alan Davies, from the Centre for Continuing Education at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra. I was to meet Alan again, when I was taken to ANU, to teach through the Kellogg Foundation program supporting the development of Non Formal Education with participants drawn from a dozen countries of the Asia Pacific region, late in 1983.

ANU, through the work of Fred Emery, had been instrumental in developing the Search Conference technique, a most innovative method of program design, which I had already used in a Conference on Alternative and Community Education in 1979, for teacher trainees through what is now Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia, but which was then Churchlands College of Advanced Education, and which had been used again in 1983 for the Provincial Plan of the Southern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea, in that country's Second Five Year Plan.

Alan had created a "Self Management Conference Design" approach which in some ways anticipated the "Open Space Technology" later developed by Harland Owen of the USA. Like Open Space, it was designed to minimize the stress suffered by conference organizers, maximize the opportunities for participant action, and be a means of capturing synergistically the collective intelligence found whenever groups of people come together. I have used the technique on a number of occasions, most recently through the organization of a series of 7 highly successful Community Building Weekend Gatherings for the Gaia Foundation of Western Australia, for groups ranging between 64 and 128 participants, seeking to explore the nature of "true community".

THE SELF ORGANISING APPROACH

In building a conference that is self organizing, it is important that participants understand in advance that they are not coming to a conventional "talk fest" where a few "experts" present pre-prepared papers on their work, and where everyone else sits and listens passively, asking a few polite questions when the paper has been delivered, and proceedings of the conference arrive years later to sit on shelves and slowly gather dust. A self organized conference engages all participants in active learning-by-doing, and challenges them to extend themselves to extend beyond their comfort zones of past experience. It is a place where people uncover new knowledge through active collaboration with shared insights, and undertake, through being

active in the organization and administrative arrangements of the conference, to minimize their own and other's costs. Conference proceedings get prepared on the spot and are available to participants within days if not weeks of the end of the conference, and in which continuing appropriate follow up is an important part of the whole approach. It requires people to "think outside of the box" and draws heavily on state of the art research into how people learn effectively.

Prior to the conference, the organizers work hard in creating the best learning environment possible. Two sorts of venues are created, one where small group interaction is possible, and the other for large plenary sessions, where the whole group is encouraged to meet. In addition resources are provided for the preparation and copying of session reports, so participants may receive a conference report at the time they depart.

Various working parties are established as registrants arrive.

    (a) *A Financial Group*; takes responsibility for registration and payments

    (b) *An Accommodation Group*; handles individual accommodation needs

    (c) *A Meals Group;* takes responsibility for food preparation, as well as dishwashing and cleaning.

    (d) *A Childcare Group;* if required.

    (e) *A Program Group;* takes responsibility for organizing the program, room allocation and any requirements of presenters

    (f) *A Proceedings Group*; ensures the collection, copying, printing and distribution of proceedings.

    (g) *A Celebrations Group*; organizes the entertainment, the Conference Dinner, any tours and excursions and the concluding event.

When participants arrive they are asked in which group they wish to serve. The idea is that participation in the organizing of the event is an important part of the proposed learning involved.

At the start of the conference, the first item on the agenda is that the organizers of the conference introduce themselves, and promptly resign. This throws responsibility for the Conference for the remainder of the time upon the groups who have to come together and make decisions relating to their areas. This is not to say that the organizers abrogate themselves of all responsibility, merely that they become an equal amongst equals, as each one of these too work with one of the 6-7 groups mentioned above.

To assist with the tasks of the working groups, indicative checklists of the duties for various groups are suggested in advance. These lists are not inclusive, as emergent duties may emerge as the Conference proceeds.

In Western Australia we have added others changes to this list. Frequently we have added an early morning program that includes Yoga or Meditation. Responsibility for organizing these activities is usually given to the program group.

As our culture takes more from the Earth than it gives, depleting valuable scarce resources, and exceeding the capacity of ecosystems to cope with our wastes, to reverse this dominant "mindset" we also add a component that "Service to the Earth" is an important part of the program. This may take the form of cleaning, gardening or some other physical activity. The Gaia Foundation of Western Australia in this way includes these activities, including the cleaning of the venue as an important part of the program. This has a double effect. As it always results in the venue being in a better condition than it was before we conducted the event, our hosts are always pleased to accommodate Gaia Foundation gatherings.

The "Open Space" idea seems closely based upon the earlier ideas of Ivan Illich, author of "Deschooling Society". Illich proposed an *education exchange* where participants at the start of a period listed a set of course *offers*, listing the content, methods and activities they were prepared. As with the LETSystems, created by Michael Linton and others around the world, participants also listed a series of requests.

The Program Group takes responsibility then for organizing the course of the program. Like everything in Dragon Dreaming, it is important that the sequence of activities follow the logic of the Dreaming, Planning, Doing and Celebrating.

One starts the Conference with those topics that look at the "Stimulus of Intention in Relationship" and encourage us to "Perceive Newly". These topics should open up our thinking, increasing our awareness, building motivation and enabling us to gather the information we need for the next stage of the process.

The second stage looks at "The Threshold of Possibility in Context", and encourage us to "Think Globally". These topics need to be about considering alternatives, creating and designing strategies and testing and trialing of ideas in pilot projects.

The third stage is about "the Action of Behaviour in Commitment", and encourages us to "Act Locally". This is about the implementation of our plans, their management and administration and about evaluative systems of monitoring progress.

Finally, the stage of "The Response of Feedback in Satisfaction" is about "Being Personally", and looks at the issues of acquiring new skills, the results for individuals and the exercise of judgement. The Conference should finish in celebration of what has been achieved, debriefing as to how things could have been improved and identification of what follow-up is required.

To enable the Conference to get and keep its own sense of direction, there is a need for large gatherings, where announcements can be made, where new and challenging perspectives can be aired, and where participants can engage fully, through their whole being, sharing dance, song and spirit, as well as their minds and intellects. Engaging the whole person in this way will help maximize the creativity such an event requires.

At the same time, people communicate best in small groups, of not more than 12 – 15 people, where everyone has a chance to meet their needs, to contribute and to be contributed to. It is highly recommended that one begin and end each day with a large gathering of all participants, but the middle part of the conference to be in smaller groups, maximizing the possibilities for networking and creativity. It will be impossible to meet all of the needs for all of the people at once, so maximising possibilities for choice and diversity in the middle parts of the program are essential.

Thus as the program as a whole follows the Dream, Plan do Celebrate cycle, it is highly recommended that this also be the nature of organizing the program as a whole. People gather together to share their dreams for each day at the start of the day, split into smaller working parties to engage in planning and doing what has been decided, and then gathering together in celebration at the close of each day.

CONCLUSION: WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Self organized or self-generating systems are the ways in which we can use our energies in ways that mimic the way living systems themselves self organize. Mechanical, or militaristic ways of organizing in the 21st century are proving not to be effective, and in fact are a big part of the problem that the world currently faces. We need to model our social organizations upon organic living systems. Persisting with the mechanical, hierarchical, top-down control paradigm will leave conference organizers feeling stressed and burned out, whilst conference participants may come to feel that it is the breaks and the networking that the event provided which was the best part of the program.

To build a truly Life Sustaining culture we need systems that

(a) Build a sense of community

(b) Are simple to develop

(c) Maximise creativity

(d) Are built upon spontaneity and non-violence

(e) Preserve knowledge

(f) Engage the spirit

(g) Build an economy that supports the whole system

Self organizing, self generating conferences are a great way of getting new ideas created fast, and disseminated to a large and powerful audience. It enables small groups of dedicated people to spread the word and to really make a difference. It is part of the armoury of tools that change agents in the 21st century require.

Mao tse Tung is supposed to have said that if we wish to bring about permanent change we need to build systems that do the following five things.

- Firstly: we need to take people away from their everyday situation, and put them in a new place, which opens them up to the possibility of change

- Secondly: we need to give them a chance to examine the past and see the emerging directions that are opening up

- Thirdly: we need to engage them as participants in emotionally powerful experiences which they can share as a group

- Fourthly: we need to allow them to think of the future, and make resolutions for the changes they are going to make

- Fifthly: these four will be useless unless attention is given to the support and follow up with participants upon their return.

In the design of the workshop or conference it is important that this last factor be given consideration. A conference is a being with a collective world spirit or Zeitgeist of its own. This spirit is born out of the collective interactions of its participants. It will die with the dispersal of

the participants back to where they have come from. It is important for conference organizers to realize, that as with any death, there is a process of mourning, a sense of grief or loss that needs to be acknowledged at the conclusion of the event.

For each session, how does its wit and wisdom get captured, so that those who were not part of that session can benefit from its insights. For this it is important for the proceedings group to create some kind of process for recording the session and ensuring that this is shared as soon as possible with all participants.

In circumstances where materials were scarce, a simple stencil system, with using a low tech silk-screen printer have been used (for example at Alternative Technology workshops in Papua New Guinea). A recorder in each session wrote down what happened and the printed sheets were gathered into booklets and distributed in multiple copies.

In better conditions with access to typewriters and photocopiers, these have been used to get proceedings to people before the end of the workshop. In this day and age, of computers and CDs, with MP3 recordings it is possible to mass produce CDs with photos, text and recordings of presenters.

Very soon with improvements in voice recognition software computers will be able to record speakers and turn their session into written text. Until that day comes it is important for self-organising conferences to give a thought to how the information produced at sessions will be captured and disseminated.

A conference of this nature is also a huge affair of cost, time, effort and logistics. It is important to think of "what difference does this event really make?" not just in the lives of the participating men and women who come together but also for the larger living system of the world of which we are a part.

As Margaret Mead is reported to have said

> *"Never doubt for a single instant,*
>
> *that a small group of committed dedicated people cannot change the world.*
>
> *Indeed it is the only thing that ever has"*