

# ISI Conversations

Newsletter of the **Asilomar Design Conversation Community**,  
an affiliate of the **International Systems Institute**.

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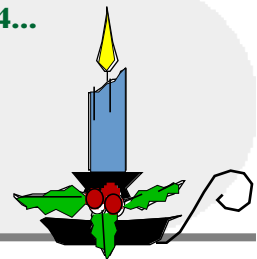
## ISI MISSION STATEMENT

*The International Systems Institute is a non-profit, public benefit, scientific and educational agency. Organized as a community of scholars and practitioners and a network of institutions, ISI aims to apply systems and design thinking: [1] to create models and methods for the design of educational and other human activity systems, [2] to develop resources for systems and design learning, and [3] to design models and methods for social and societal systems.*

## Wishing you the happiest of New Years! And, to inspire us in 2004...

"This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it."  
Ralph Waldo Emerson

"Example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing."  
Albert Schweitzer



Happy New Year to all ISI Fellows!

As we enter the new year, now is a perfect time to reflect on how we can best make a difference in the world. Not only are there many dangerous currents that threaten our sustainability as a planet and society, but simultaneously we are beset by multiple, almost overwhelming distractions. It becomes difficult to stay focused on the truly meaningful pursuits in life. We must regularly take the time to evaluate how our precious efforts are being directed.

I was honored to be able to spend the last Asilomar Conference in intense dialogue with a group of people who have focused much of their lives to studying and developing systems design theory and methodology. Long-time ISI fellows, such as Drs. Gordon Rowland, Yoshi Horiuchi, Lynn Jenks, Diana Ryan, Judy Bach, Christine Wailand, Barbara Vogl, Peggy Gill, Charlene Block, and Sue Gabriele provided a rich array of design experience and expertise. Ted Ferguson, also a long-time ISI member, offered, as usual, careful and penetrating insights. We also benefitted greatly from the profound contributions of relatively new participants, such as Cholly Devon and Drs. John Gill and Jed Jones.

One persistent theme discussed throughout our evening conversations was the emerging desire to renew and redesign ISI. Everyone who was present seemed to resonate with this, and we agreed to conduct an inquiry in the upcoming year that would revisit the direction of ISI and seek to renew and reinvigorate the organization. It is time for us to understand how we can take what Bela has given us and form ourselves into a strong and vibrant community that manifests a better society. How can we best focus our efforts as fellows in an institute dedicated to social systems design? The answer is by collaborating together because together we have the potential to do great things.

Now begins the conversation cycle for 2004. We are hoping to get an early start in identifying teams. To that end, I have recently sent out a list of proposed topics, seeking input regarding which topics are of interest to members of the community. If you haven't responded, please give consideration to what teams you would like to be on or would even like to create!

As additional support for online conversations, I am striving to make additional website capabilities available. This will come at least in the form of more registration and team information on the website, and the opening up of an ISI discussion board that will enable teams to have a private collaboration space, if desired. I am piloting this discussion board now and will provide more details in email or the next newsletter.

Finally, one of the outputs of work at ACC 2003 was a new definition of small, lightweight roles for sustaining the ongoing administrative functions of the community. Graciously, many of the members have agreed to take on these roles. Diana Ryan is serving as our Historian; Lynn Jenks and Gordon Rowland are heading up our outreach effort; Peggy Gill is continuing as our site coordinator; Jed Jones is working on developing systems content for the web site. Chris Curley continues as our webmaster, and Sue Gabriele is of course doing a great job with the newsletter. If there is anyone else who has some small amount of time to help keep the community running, please feel free to contact me.

So, returning to the idea of focus, are we serious about benefiting society? I have been asking people this year: “What aspect of creating a better society can you commit to?” It is easy to criticize what is going in various arenas, from the environment to international politics, but it is much harder to have the focus and discipline to take responsibility for our own cultural evolution. I invite you all to join me this year in renewing our focus as an organization and in examining what pursuits are worthy of our focus and our commitment.

Regards,

Doug Walton , President  
International Systems Institute

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**A GUIDE TO THE YEAR 'ROUND PROCESS** by Bela H. Banathy and Sue McCormick

**PHASE ONE: PROGRAM ANNOUNCEMENT AND TEAM IDENTIFICATION/SELECTION**

Mid- to late March: Research Team Topics are announced in the newsletter/ bulletin. Participants respond using the attached registration form. This form serves two purposes: (1) It gives the Conference Planning Team information related to expressed interest in research topics so teams can begin to coalesce; and (2) It provides critical information related to reserving a block of rooms at the Asilomar Conference Center.

Late March to Mid- April: The Conversation Planning Team, using input from conference registrants and others expressing interest, begins to clarify research teams and connect registrants with team coordinators.

April: Team Coordinators send to all interested members an elaboration of the topic/theme that includes a

brief history of the team's work from previous conversations year' round inquiry, as well as a list of recommended readings. This list will include earlier topic-relevant summary reports.

## **PHASE TWO: PREPARATION**

The preparation phase of the research conversation serves a critically important purpose. Preparation enables participants to explore topic-relevant knowledge bases, and in so doing, come to the Conversation with a rich set of core ideas. Preparation also gives team members a chance to interact with one another, sharing background experiences and current systems design research interests. This early interaction is usually electronically mediated.

From Conversation experiences of the past 20 some years, we have learned that the success of the program greatly depends upon the team's generation of a substantive knowledge base prior to being together for the week. We are also learning that team interaction during the preparation phase has some positive effects on the quality of the conversation during the week we are together at the conference.

We strongly urge participants new to the design conversation process to identify a team early in the year, and begin the preparation phase with that team. If during the preparation phase, research interests change, it is always possible to change teams, assuming the team of interest is open to new members.

April-September: Participants (1) Explore the knowledge base of the research topic; (2) Prepare a "think paper" that (a) presents a brief personal introduction, (b) specifies personal interest in and previous work on the topic, (c) summarizes knowledge base findings, (d) states core ideas about the topic, and (e) states expectations for the learning and work of the team; (3) Mail copies of the input "think paper" to all members of their research team.

Mid September -Mid October: Team coordinators develop a preliminary, proposed agenda of their team's "theme," based on a synthesis of the input papers and mail it to the members of the team. Members of the team continue to explore current knowledge sources and generate ideas that they will bring to the group work during the conversation week.

## **PHASE THREE: THE CONVERSATION**

During the first sessions of the Conversation, teams review their agenda and develop triggering questions that guide the conversation. The teams are encouraged to use generative and strategic dialogue methods. Periodically throughout the week, research teams report on their progress, and those interested in inter-team learning and dialogue may pursue that experience in the evenings. Another option for inter-team learning emerged at our conference in the late nineties, and this is a daily Round Table conversation, held before breakfast at an announced location.

In the final team sessions of the week, each team decides whether members wish to continue to work on the theme, modify the topic or select a new area of focus. On the final evening of the conference, participants present their work and findings to the large group. They also announce whether or not the team plans to continue their research into another Year 'Round Conversation Cycle. On the final morning of the conference, participants engage in a preliminary design and planning session for the following year's conference and for the projects that may involve inter-team collaboration. Participants are asked during this last session to formulate their "valuations" of the Conversation experience.

## **PHASE FOUR: FOLLOW-UP**

Mid November - Early March: Teams develop (1) A Summary report of their learning and substantive findings, (2) A summary description of program recommendations for the Asilomar Conversation for the upcoming year, and (3) A final formative evaluation of the overall conversation experience.

Mid January - Mid March: Individuals develop and submit scholarly papers based on their work with the topic. The papers will be published as a compendium of proceedings and selected papers will be included in special issues of international systems journals.

Mid March on: We initiate the beginning phase of the Asilomar Year 'Round Conversation cycle for the

upcoming year.

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**RESEARCH TEAMS: REFLECTIONS ON 2003 AND PLANS FOR 2004**

by Team Leaders

(For photos of our 2003 Conversation, see  
[http://www.networkeddemocracy.com/photogallery/ACC2003/acc\\_2003\\_photo\\_gallery.htm](http://www.networkeddemocracy.com/photogallery/ACC2003/acc_2003_photo_gallery.htm))

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**RESEARCH TEAM A & B: ISI DESIGN TEAM**

Doug Walton ([doug@networkeddemocracy.com](mailto:doug@networkeddemocracy.com))

These topics focuses on taking a fresh look at what ISI ought to be. The intention is to engage as much of the community as possible. This effort is divided into two subsections:

- Kernel Design, which deals with administrative services for ISI
- The Fire & Flame, which deals with deals with ISI strategic direction, mission, and the soul of what we are doing.

These are described below.

**RESEARCH TEAM A: Ongoing ISI Design: Kernel Services Structure**

During the 2003 Asilomar Conversation Conference, a systems model was outlined for administrative services needed by ISI. This model (called the Kernel Services) was based on an organizing principle of creating many thin interlocking roles that would enable a number of volunteers to keep the system going without placing excessive burden on any one person. During the 2004 conversation cycle, the Kernel Services team seeks to expand and deepen the concept by (a) piloting the roles, (b) analyzing the results of the pilots, (c) developing a master calendar to drive time-triggered activities, and (d) deepening an understanding of the associated technology (e.g., websites and communications tools).

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**RESEARCH TEAM B: The Fire & Flame of ISI**

*(This conversation complements the work of the Kernel services structure group.)*

What are we about?

In view of the most recent shift change that we at ISI have experienced, it appears not only timely but also of paramount importance to give attention to ourselves and the core of ISI. It is time that we grow into the space opened up for us by Bela (Doug Walton)

Who may join us?

This research group will form a Design Team representing the various interest groups. We will formulate ideas around the evolution of ISI. We will prepare for and conduct a Future Search conference during ACC 04. We will explore ISI s history, reach for common ground and an actionable agenda to present to the whole ACC community.

How to prepare prior to November 04?

ISI's mission, core values, a proposed manifesto, stewardship definitions, the Year Round Process , and other related foundational work for ACC is available and will serve as starting points for this conversation dedicated to Bela's concept of Systems service.

Initially we are looking for participants that are committed to work on this Design Team, conduct research in

preparation for ACC 04, and follow up with actions as determined by the Future Search conference.

**RESEARCH TEAM C: The Thread of ISI**  
Coordinator: Diana Ryan; dianafryan@msn.com

*(This conversation is proposed to complement the work of the Kernel services and the Fire and the Flame.)*

As everyone on the mailing list is aware, Diana Ryan, as ISI Historian, is gathering documents and artifacts of ISI history. These are threads that bind ISI as an organization and a culture. The data will be of value to the re-design process and, therefore, if you are interested in contributing to the creation of our story, please join Diana in the tedious and the sublime. The intention is to put the survey outcome into useable and interesting form (minimally, documents could be indexed, for example and stories simply listed) and to weave the thread of the story around the Kernel, Fire and Flame that are the heart of the ISI fabric.

**RESEARCH TEAM D: Evolutionary Development (Sponsored by Syntony Quest)**

Alexander Laszlo, Ph.D., Kathia C. Laszlo, Ph.D.<alexander@syntonyquest.org>

We'd like to announce the rekindling of our group, originally founded in 1993 as an offspring of the Design Culture research team. Over the years, our team has gone from being Group D - The Design Culture team, to D-Gang, to the ELC team (Evolutionary Learning Community), to the HAC/ELC team (Healthy & Authentic Community and ELC), to a time when we explored Agoras as a form of ELC, to what we would like to propose now: the Evolutionary Development team. We see Evolutionary Development as the process focus for which ELC is but one type of vehicle (and where the Agora is but one type of ELC). Inquiry in the area of Evolutionary Development involves revision of development notions and strategies from a systemic and evolutionary perspective in order to integrate the often isolated areas of human, economic, social, and sustainable development.

Doing more with less, promoting living simply and meaningfully, and creating a sustainable economy where present and future human needs can be met without compromising the natural environment are some of the concrete objectives of Evolutionary Development. Evolutionary Learning Communities, as learning environments where people can learn together about the interconnected nature of our world, the ecological impact of our individual and collective choices, and the joy of finding a meaningful way to contribute to the emergence of sustainable and evolutionary futures, are the social units where Evolutionary Development can be set in motion for the ongoing self-organization of human societies in syntony with the planetary life support systems upon which they depend.

This research team will be explicitly related to the action-research conducted by our organization, Syntony Quest. We will do our best to announce and promote the conversation event as a project of Syntony Quest, and by doing so, we hope to bring people to ISI/ACC events who are either theoreticians or practitioners in areas closely related to evolutionary development. Anyone who has any interest in any of the following types of topics is very welcome to join our team at Asilomar:

- Human, social, and natural capital
- Self-directed sustainable development
- Community empowerment and participatory/anticipatory democracy
- Socio-ecological competence and the evolution of consciousness
- Design of ELCs as evolutionary guidance systems
- Evolutionary Systems Design as praxis
- Syntony as an organizing force in societal evolution

We intend our team to represent an opportunity to do much more than simply share ideas. It will also explicitly cultivate relationship. The emphasis on pattern and process in understanding both the 'what' and the 'why' of the systems we are, makes ISI events rich and rewarding.

Of course, if there is anything we can help clarify for you with respect to any of the above, please do get in touch with us.

**RESEARCH TEAM E: It's a Small World Ideabook Team: "Into the Rabbit Hole" Board Game Development** Coordinator: Yoshi Horiuchi (KHB15476@nifty.ne.jp)

At the 2003 Asilomar, the SWI (Its a Small World Idea Book Team) devoted its time for developing a more advanced, college-level educational board game. In 2004, the SWI team will return to the continuing development of the "Into the Rabbit Hole" Board Game that we started development at the 2002 Asilomar. What the Game need is to incorporate more learning lessons on systems approach and the global ecology. However, the SWI does not wish to produce "good medicine that tastes bad," This balancing of the fun aspects and educational aspect of the game will continue to be our main task.

Trigger Questions:

- 1. What the game goal should be? It is great and very important that we are having fun in developing and playing this game. We hope to make it as a real, marketable game either this year or the next year, while we have a good going.
- 2 How can we make it educational, while maintaining its fun element?
- 3 What systems/ecological points to incorporate into the game? In what way?
- 4. As we can agree that this is a fun game, what is a good strategy to make it as a real product?

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**RESEARCH TEAM F: Co-operated Roundtables for Schools, Workplaces, and Other Organizations or Communities** Sue Gabriele (sgabriele@gemslearning.com), Ted Ferguson (tedferguson@gemslearning.com), Diana Ryan (dianafryan@msn.com)

The Roundtable Research team met for the first time as an ACC Research Team at Asilomar in 2001. Building on Sue's dissertation research, the team was to create a rich picture of opportunities for future Roundtable research and development. We wanted a flexible design/master plan to help us [1] to continue to locate opportunities for Roundtables; [2] to create Roundtable guides, workbooks, and/or starter kits for interested and potential users; [3] to create promotional pieces for the buyer; and [4] to continue developing the "Roundtable Program."

Our progress in 2001-2003: We continued offering morning Roundtables in ISI/ACC and ISSS, as feasible. We introduced Roundtables in 8 teachers classrooms in four different schools, and continued working weekly or monthly with 4 teachers. We convene a co-operated Roundtable weekly book study at a local book store. We demonstrated the Roundtable in an after school program in Oakland, which was continued by the participants. This year, with the help of Diana Ryan, the Roundtable Research team expanded to include the introduction of Roundtables in university courses--in a course offered at a corporation and in a graduate education course.

Our goals in 2004: With regard to ISI and ACC, we see three possible developments for our "Roundtable" work during the year and at the November ACC conversation. First, we are prepared to continue the morning Roundtable, open to all attending the conference--both those interested in becoming Roundtable facilitators, continuing their current Roundtables, or helping with the Roundtable Program and those who simply want a morning opportunity to connect and reflect in this way. Second, we will offer a formal Roundtable Research Team if there are a number of people interested in working more at depth with the Roundtable theory and practice during this conversation. A third possibility is to assist in bringing back the whole community evening team report, adding value to it with emancipatory features of the Roundtable. We anticipate two benefits in this possibility: [1] whole group connection with ongoing team and individual progress reports, and [2] the opportunity for later risers to experience the Roundtable benefits. Please contact us with questions or comments, or to indicate your interest in our work or proposed work.

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**RESEARCH TEAM G: Evolution of Communities as Complex Systems**  
by Mark Ottenberg mark@riverrock.org

Diverse communities demonstrate an amazingly similar set of dynamics and evolutionary paths. What are they? What are the stages of evolution for these complex systems? What are the conditions that are necessary to allow a community to evolve from one step to the next??? Let's examine known communities in light of ISI principles to learn what we can.

**Please Note:** New teams are still forming during these initial weeks and months of the Year 'Round Process. The June edition of our newsletter will carry current and emerging information related to new teams as well as additional details on existing teams.

### Historian's Progress Report Diana Ryan

In December I sent out a survey to the Asilomar Conversation's electronic mailing list in an attempt to start gathering our organization's documents and stories, as well as participation feedback before the trail got too cold. This is the update I promised. Quite a number of you wrote back supporting the effort, but substantive responses to the request for documents have come back from Matt Shapiro, Gordon Rowland and Sabrina Brahms. Thank you! It gives us a place to start. Here are a few of the key entries:

**Proceedings:** Gordon R. has **1992-98** so we are hunting any others that exist. **Paper newsletters:** Sabrina has December 1995, March, August, November 1996, January, March, September 1997, January, March, June, September 1998, March, June, September 1999, January, March, June September 2000, January, March, June September 2001

And Matt S. has July 1995, June 1996 and June 1997.

Gordon R. may be able to fill in some of the gaps as he has "many."

**Electronic newsletters:** Sabrina has only 2002.

Gordon R. has **ISI Summary Reports** from 1993, 1996-98.

In addition, these faithful fellows have listed many papers, letters, brochures, evaluations, surveys and other artifacts produced from our conversations. The plan so far is to locate as much as possible and give folks an idea of what we have and don't have before November. I have collapsed the responses received so far into one document, but very crudely. Hopefully, we can decide where or how to collect, house and index everything when we meet next time (See my suggestion for a topic).

We don't have any stories yet. Many of you say you are thinking about the stories you want to share. Go ahead and send them after they take shape. These are the real glue of our culture.

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#### Special Event: Saybrook Holds 4-Day Intensive Seminar on Bela H. Banathy's Work by Doug Walton

Saybrook Graduate School will sponsor a four-day systems intensive from January 17 to January 18, 2004 in San Mateo, California, to honor the work of Bela Banathy, Sr., founder of the systems programs at Saybrook and the International Systems Institute. This seminar will be given by ISI fellows Kathia Laszlo, Ph.D., Gary Metcalf, Ph.D., and Doug Walton, Ph.D. The seminar will provide a background in systems thinking and theories, from which Bela drew for his work, as well as in-depth coverage of social and evolutionary systems design. There will also be presentations of systems work by Bela's alumni, including ISI fellows Sabrina Brahms, Ph.D., Sue Gabriele, Ph.D., Jed Jones, Ph.D., Elizabeth Pavka, Ph.D., Charlene Block, Ph.D., and Sherryl Stalinski, M.A.

*The newsletter staff invites readers to submit pieces related to systems design, design learning, ISI or ACC. We welcome reports, stories, quotes, passages or poems FOR OUR INSPIRATION as well as your thoughts, theories or POINT OF VIEW. Illustrations, pictures, etc. are encouraged, too. We prefer short pieces, so that we can present an interesting variety. Keep in mind that we want to give preference to contributions that are reader-authored to emphasize the creative/generative thought process of our readers. We also invite readers to submit short inspirational citations. Yours in Service, Sue and Ted*

**INVITATION TO OUR ANNUAL CONVERSATION:  
The Asilomar Conversation Conference for 2004**

**SAVE THESE DATES: Sunday, November 14 through Friday, November 19, 2004**

What follows is some information about our Asilomar Conversation Conference for 2004, our annual event sponsored by the International Systems Institute and the Asilomar Conversation Community:

The dates are 11/14/2004 to 11/19/2004. Our first meal at the center is dinner on the 14th; our last meal is lunch on the 19th. Please watch for more specific details about the 2004 conference in our May Newsletter. The rates include lodging and three daily meals. The exact rates will be available in the May Newsletter. Last year our rates were as follows:

Single \$150.50/day for a total of \$787.50

Double \$91.25/day for a total of \$491.25

Since we need to make periodic deposits six and three months in advance of the conference, we need to collect an initial payment by May 15, and the remainder by August 15. We have both single and double occupancy rooms available. The single rooms will be assigned on a first-come first-served basis.

Please submit your initial deposit covering lodging for the first day and \$85 (\$35 registration and \$50 fellowship fee) by May 15 and the balance by August 15. Checks should be made out to International Systems Institute with "Asilomar Systems Conference" in the memo and mailed to Geri Walton at 619 Travis Circle, Livermore, CA, 94550. (Contact here at [geri@networkeddemocracy.com](mailto:geri@networkeddemocracy.com)). If you wish to pay the fees electronically or through direct bank transfers, the account information is as follows: Wires should go to

International Systems Institute  
 Wells Fargo Bank  
 235 South K Street  
 Livermore, CA 94550  
 Account: 3444-333656  
 Routing: 121042882

**DATES TO REMEMBER: MARK YOUR CALENDARS!**

<b>Due May 15, 2004</b>	Deposit and Registration for accommodations for ISI/ACC
<b>Due August 15, 2004</b>	Remainder of payment for accommodations for ISI/ACC
<b>November 11-19, 2004</b>	Asilomar Conversation Conference (ISI/ACC), Pacific Grove