

Peer Review Dialog Session – Boston 2007

By Martin Schaffernicht (chair) – 8/17/2007

On Wednesday, August 1, from 15:00 – 16:00, the third “peer review dialog” session welcomed 16 participants from the policy council, the program chair of the conference, track chairs and reviewers (list below).

After briefly reviewing the main topics of last year’s report, several topics were discussed.

1. Variance amongst reviewers’ opinions

There is a wide variance amongst reviewers’ opinions. This is partly due to the diversity of opinions concerning what makes a good paper for this conference. It may be that the number of reviewers, relative to the number of participants, is high: if there are 400 papers, 1.200 reviews are needed; if the mean paper quantity per reviewer is 4, then 300 people will do reviews.

Diversity of opinions does not mean bad quality; however, thread chairs are trusted to critically reflect upon their reviewers work’s quality (and indicate “bad” reviewers to the program chair).

However, the program chair said to be satisfied with the thread chairs’ work (and thus also with the reviews).

2. Processing of formally incorrect papers

Last year, it had been suggested that papers that do not comply with basic formal rules (delete authors’ identification on anonymous papers, excess length ...) might be returned to authors without revision.

This time, it became clear that this should not mean “rejection” but authors should have a chance to correct and resubmit. It was not discussed what would happen with papers that are submitted on the last day: would their authors be given additional time?

It was suggested that the more obvious problems (author information, total number of words) might be filtered out by a computer program; this would be practical, but does not exist yet.

3. Paper quality

Even though it still sometimes happens that a paper that was recommended for rejection becomes accepted, it is understood that the decision is not up to the reviewers. Reviewers inform the thread chair who informs the program chair. The decision is usually taken by the thread chair, but in not-so-clear cases, the program chair decides.

It was also said that reviewers did not have to suggest if the reviewed work should be a plenary, parallel or poster session; it is thought that this decision is better taken by the program committee, since they have a better overview.

The general desire to reject bad quality papers is widely shared. We have been informed that, thanks to more numerous submissions, this year the rejection rate was a little above 20% (which is much higher than usually). While this seems to have worked out this year, at other times the need to have a sufficient number of papers can possibly lead to “satisficing”: there may appear a goal conflict between the need to improve quality and the need of financial equilibrium.

4. Types of papers

There is a tendency to believe that “posters” are somehow inferior to “parallel” presentations. This has been explicitly contradicted during various conferences, in discourse and also by the fact that many prominent dynamicists have repeatedly presented posters. However, some remarks on how sometimes a paper that is hard to classify or has received rather contradictory reviews is finally assigned to a “poster” session appear to tell a different tale; as the discussion showed, it is currently not so clear what to think about the posters: are they worth the same or not? Maybe future conferences would benefit from an official statement concerning this point.

Probably there are different types of papers; at the 2005 conference, we’ve had “research sessions” for projects in their early phases. Now several attendees said they feel “surprise” when in one same session, two papers report fully developed work and a third one presents “only” a conceptual model. It might be that one can typify papers according to the stage they achieve in the system dynamics methodology. A different possibility to typify would be *student*, *scholar* and *practitioner*, since it can be argued that each has to satisfy a different set of expectations. However, this is a debatable idea: if an attempt to typify leads into an ever-growing set of descriptors, we would rapidly have an unworkable bureaucracy of rules and exceptions.

It was then proposed that each paper should respond “yes” to at least one of the following questions:

1. is it a contribution to system dynamics methodology?
2. is it a contribution to system dynamics technique?
3. is it a contribution to an application domain?
4. is it a contribution for a client?
5. Otherwise: would the author benefit from being able to present his work?

The idea to reject papers that cannot respond “yes” at least one time seemed attractive; however, concerns were raised if question 5 is not hard to justify: people pay and come to the conference in order to receive something from the presentations they attend to, and many may feel they are not supposed to “suffer” from poorly developed work only because it would help the author.

5. Feedback to reviewers

Several reviewers would like feedback about the quality of their reviews to be given to them. However, it is not clear if those who could give such feedback – mainly the thread chairs – could take themselves the time to do so systematically (on top of their usual tasks). Currently, the submission system allows for authors to send messages to their reviewers; maybe we should encourage authors to make use of this item.

6. Reviewer workshop

It was proposed to offer a “reviewer workshop” during future conferences, where reviewers could learn from experienced peers. This idea received general and intuitive acceptance.

7. Closing remarks

As compared to the previous meetings, this one has been a notable progress. Counting members of the Policy Council, of the Program chair and Thread chairs amongst the attendees, it has been possible to *dialogue*. As comparison: last year, there were only

reviewers, and so the conversation was a little more a “monologue”; the report was sent and later answered to by the Policy Council. Now we’ve had an interesting and constructive meeting. The importance of having all the roles participating is not to be underestimated.

One relevant question is “how shall we continue?” The satisfaction of conference attendees with the papers’ and presentations’ quality is certainly a “strategic” issue. Additionally, as the proceedings will be opened via the society’s web-site, the quality of the downloadable material will become even more important. Maybe the Vice-presidency for Electronic Presence would be a convenient place to attach some kind of responsibility? Then, some guidelines could be developed by the Policy Council, and several possible new features could be decided:

- ? shall thread-chairs give feedback to their reviewers?
- ? shall there be types of papers?
- ? shall there be a reviewer-workshop?

As its chair, I want to thank all of the attendees for the time they’ve invested in the session and in the posterior e-mail exchange.

Post-meeting discussions

Several relevant issues were discussed past the meeting, and their content is included in this section.

1 Paper quality (Alexandra Medina-Borja, amedina@uprm.edu):

“We all know of other prestigious professional societies regarding their conference paper acceptance policies from which we can learn. There is a wide spectrum of philosophies. Let’s not forget this is a conference, we are not talking about a peer-reviewed journal. On one extreme of this continuum we have INFORMS accepting everything submitted in the form of a short abstract, giving everybody a session to present their work. There are no posters and lately INFORMS national meetings have had over 3 thousand attendees. The last International INFORMS meeting that traditionally brings fewer submissions had 700 presentations in Puerto Rico this last July. While it could be a logistics nightmare, their philosophy is one of providing the OR community with a forum to present and get feedback from their colleagues.

The other side of this spectrum could be the American Society of Engineering Education. ASEE has a lengthy submission process that begins almost a year in advance. Authors have first to submit abstracts to specific tracks. Abstracts are sent to reviewers and based on those reviews authors are invited to submit a full paper. Reviews are pretty long for abstracts. They have a large rejection rate at the abstract level. Then they give you 4 months to have the paper ready and again authors

are subject to receive rejection, acceptance or acceptance with changes decisions. At this level, the majority of course, falls in the third category. Then again, you re-submit your corrected paper and in most cases those accepted with changes get into the program. Some tracks or subdivisions have poster sessions only. So it is up to the author to actually select one of those tracks based on the paper content and their individual interest. The ASEE conference is also a large one. Close to 3 thousand presentations in Hawaii this last June. I imagine being such a multi-disciplinary and hot topic, ASEE has no problem getting to their financial goals even with such a strict review process.

As a society we need to decide where in that continuum we want to be. That, I guess is a policy decision that will involve considerations regarding the number of system dynamicists eager to present their work, what is the mission of the conference, and the sustainability of the same.”

Posters (Alexandra Medina-Borja, amedina@uprm.edu):

“Regarding the debate about posters, I think we should have an on-line survey out to assess the opinion of those who have had the opportunity to present the posters in this and other occasions, and those who have not. In many societies posters are for papers that do not fit with others, and for students’ work. I particularly do not like posters and this is the first time I had this situation, but I did it. Not sure I will do again. However, I know my students rather present a poster than talk during a parallel session. I suspect many faculty share my feelings about it.”

More feedback during sessions (Jim Lyneis, jmlyneis@WPI.EDU):

“While I agree that a paper might be accepted because the author might benefit from being able to present the work, I also think that we do not provide any good mechanisms for providing constructive feedback, especially at the sessions themselves. I wonder if we should charge the thread chairs with also reviewing the papers, and providing summary feedback to authors both before and after the conference. Before the conference, thread chairs can explain why a paper was rejected and what steps could be taken to improve the quality of the work, and similarly for papers that are accepted. After, the thread chairs might comment on any steps the author has taken to improve the work based on the reviews, and of course provide feedback on the presentation.”