Bateson’s levels of learning: a framework for transformative learning?

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This paper is principally an appreciation of Gregory Bateson’s ‘levels of learning’; a reconnection with, and latest attempt to fathom, a framework that has influenced my thinking for years. This is also part of an intellectual project to develop a systemic understanding of learning for management development and Higher Education contexts.

The purpose is to explore Bateson’s framework as a vehicle for indicating multiple possibilities of learning from experience. Bateson’s framework may also synthesise a variety of ideas about ‘learning to learn’, and represent an intersection of disparate literatures of education, management learning, organisational learning, and transformative learning.

Keywords: Bateson, higher education, management development, learning from experience

Who was Gregory Bateson?

Gregory Bateson (1904 - 1980) was an ‘eminent biologist and systems theorist’ who has influenced diverse fields including cybernetics, family therapy and communications studies (Hawkins 2004 p. 410). He was the son of the geneticist William Bateson (1861 – 1926), and married Margaret Mead, the anthropologist. I am delighted to have discovered that Bateson attended Charterhouse School in Godalming, Surrey, the town in which I now live. For reviews of Bateson’s life and contribution to multiple fields of thought, see among others Harries-Jones (1995), Levy and Rappaport (1982), and Lipset (1980).

Bateson’s ‘Steps to an Ecology of Mind’ (Bateson 1973) would probably be my desert island book. I first came across it in the early 1980’s, while working on my doctorate, through people who remain strongly influenced by Bateson’s work (e.g. Hawkins 1991, 2004; Reason and Goodwin 1999; Marshall 2004; Marshall & Mclean 1985).
Bateson was also a formative influence on a field that is one of my main research interests, that of Neuro-linguistic Programming (see Bateson’s foreword to Bandler and Grinder 1975; and Bostic St. Clair & Grinder 2002). For me Bateson’s work represents an intellectual underpinning for NLP, providing epistemological and ethical principles that seem to me crucial for a field whose practices have been subject to much questioning.

Another connection came in 2004 when I attended the Bateson Centennial lecture given at the Tavistock Institute, London, by Mary Catherine Bateson, the daughter of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead. This lecture made much use of the levels of learning framework, bringing it creatively and poignantly alive.

This paper is both an intellectual challenge and a labour of love. The fact that Bateson’s work remains so important for me suggests that the connection may be aesthetic as well as cognitive. I sense a deep appreciation of the patterning of his ways of thinking – as Bateson’s focus was on the ‘the pattern that connects’ across systems and ecologies. I also find his thinking elusive, wondering if my mind is capable of stretching enough to understand genuinely what Bateson was talking about, because his work implies a profound revision of the epistemology implicit in common perceptions and understandings of the world. Bateson defines epistemology as:

‘A branch of science combined with a branch of philosophy. As science, epistemology is the study of how particular organisms or aggregates of organisms know, think and decide. As philosophy, epistemology is the study of the necessary limits and other characteristics of the processes of knowing, thinking and deciding.’,

(Bateson 1979 p.242)

The desire to engage with Bateson’s ideas in ways that may illuminate issues of learning in organisational settings is intertwined with a sense of the risk of getting it quite wrong. The paper is therefore an exploratory walk through an appealing but deceptively tricky landscape.

**Bateson’s Levels of Learning**

How does Bateson’s work relate to learning? His epistemological stance can be summarised as involving principles such as the following (e.g. based on Capra 1996; Hawkins 2004).

- Learning is a systemic phenomenon (the mind does not reside in the brain)
- Learning is inherently relational
• Learning is emergent
• Learning is recursive, involving multiple logical levels.

Mary Catherine Bateson’s foreword to the new edition of ‘Steps to an Ecology of Mind’ emphasises that ‘The processes with which Gregory was concerned were essentially processes of knowing: perception, communication, coding and translation…. Basic to this epistemology was the differentiation of logical levels, including the relationship between the knower and the known, ergo a recursive epistemology’ (in Bateson 2000 p. 5).

In 1964 Bateson wrote an essay titled ‘The Logical Categories of Learning and Communication’ (Bateson 1973 pp. 250 – 279; see also pp. 219 – 220). This essay, which describes the levels of learning, merits a close and careful reading. Bateson’s introduction describes it as an attempt to illuminate ‘the barriers of misunderstanding which divide the various species of behavioural scientists… by an application of Russell’s Theory of Logical Types to the concept of “learning”.’ (Bateson 1973 p.250).

According to Flemons (1991 pp. 5 – 6):

‘Russell’s Theory of Logical Types distinguishes between levels of abstraction. Originally invented as a way of eschewing paradox in the world of logic, the notion of logical types is used by Bateson as a way of charting the classification inherent in all perceiving, thinking, learning, and communicating.

A class is a different logical type, a higher level of abstraction, than the members it classifies: The class of “all books” is not itself a book; the name of a thing is itself not a thing, but a classification of it… This hierarchy of types - classes, classes of classes, classes of classes of classes, and so on - provides a convenient bridge to the critical notion of context and the interdependence of wholes and parts. The notion of levels makes clear that learning, for example, is a contextual affair; one not only learns, but simultaneously learns how to learn.’

For example:

‘Lewis Carroll’s Alice asks the White Knight the name of the song he’s going to sing for her. He says the name is called “Haddock’s Eyes”.

Alice thought that to be an odd name for a song and the Knight responded, “No, you don’t understand. That’s not the name of the song, that’s what the name is called”.’ (Keeney 1983 p.34)

According to Bredo (1989 p.36), ‘(Bateson) posited a nested hierarchy of social contexts in which individuals communicate, much like the later Wittgenstein analysis of
“expressions” within “language games” within “forms of life”. Also according to Bredo (1989 p.36), Bateson’s levels of learning are ‘properly viewed as a framework and not an elaborated theory’. Bateson’s original chapter posits five levels, designated as L0, LI, LII, LIII and LIV, although he commented little on LIV. Here I am concerned mainly with LI, LII and LIII. Bateson’s definitions are shown in table 1.

Insert table 1 here

As an alternative description of these levels, and an illustration of the key idea that one not only learns, but simultaneously learns how to learn, I recommend Bateson’s paradigmatic story about a dolphin from ‘Mind and Nature’ (1979 pp. 135 – 137).

The Levels and Literatures of Learning

The framework of levels has influenced, and been discussed in, diverse literatures, for example Bales (1995), Bartunek and Moch (1994), Bloom (2004), Dilts & Epstein (1995), Keeney (1983), Peterson (1999), and Watzlawick et al (1974). There are literatures that seem yet to be linked, in organisational learning, Higher Education and transformative learning.

Bateson’s framework appears to have influenced Argyris and Schön’s work on single and double loop learning. Argyris & Schön themselves attribute this conceptual distinction to Ashby, though in the same place cite Bateson as the textual source of the paradigmatic example of the thermostat as a cybernetic system (Argyris and Schön 1974, pp. 18-19).

In Tosey (2005) I used the levels as a conceptual scaffolding to explore issues of organisational learning. Here I noted the tendency to frame learning as universally ‘a good thing’, and argued that we need to see ‘politics’, which is often cast as being antithetical to learning, as a process of learning itself. Equally, I suggested that we need to understand organisational learning as inherently multi-dimensional, both paradoxical and aesthetic, and that only a framework such as Bateson’s, which differentiates between logical levels, can account for this.

Bateson’s framework also appears in educational and management texts, often relating to the notion of ‘learning to learn’ – a term that is imprecise term and which may or may not denote learning at a higher level.
Brockbank and McGill (1998 p. 41) refer to Bateson’s framework, though tend to portray Learning III as a sophisticated form of rational, cognitive reflection. It also seems to me that Brockbank and McGill conflate learning with knowing. In other words their descriptions of the levels are of cognitive categories of knowing or awareness that follow from reflection on learning.

While there is no direct link between Mezirow and Bateson, to my knowledge, Mezirow’s (1991) notion of ‘perspective transformation’ (which builds on the work of Habermas) is redolent of Bateson’s LII and LIII. In Tosey et al (2005), colleagues and I developed a case study of transformative learning that included critique of the conceptualisation to date of transformative learning. We advocated Bateson’s ‘levels’ as a suitable framework.

Finally, the levels also seem relevant to discussions of recent work on metalearning (Jackson 2004) and metacognition. These notions of ‘meta’ imply a relationship between different logical levels.

Critique of Bateson appears limited. Brockman vi notes that:

‘Bateson's readers often find it difficult to grasp that his way of thinking is different from theirs. His students believe that he is hiding something from them, that there's a secret behind his thinking that he won't share. There's something to this. Bateson is not clearly understood because his work is not an explanation, but a commission, As Wittgenstein noted, "a commission tells us what we must do." In Bateson's case, what we must do is reprogram ourselves, train our intelligence and imagination to work according to radical configurations'.

Thus appraisals tend either to reject Bateson altogether, or to become fascinated with him and grapple appreciatively with his ideas, but rarely to critically evaluate his stance. One author to have attempted this is Midgley (e.g. 2003).

**Recursion**

Bateson’s levels describe orders of recursion, a hierarchy of logical types not a hierarchy of contents – and here lies a notable difficulty of the landscape, for clarification of which I am especially grateful to Keeney (1983) and Woodsmall (undated).

As orders of recursion, the levels need to be understood as nested loops, patterned like Russian dolls. As Mary Catherine Bateson sums it up, ‘every effort to know about knowing involves the cat trying to swallow its own tail’. vii

Intriguingly, Bateson’s own use of metaphors such as ‘levels’,
`higher' (e.g. Bateson 1973 p. 265) and `ladder' appear to mask this recursive dynamic. Indeed I set out in this paper to develop Bateson’s ladder into a `climbing frame’ that would indicate a variety of emphases of (particularly) LII. However I have come to think that this metaphor, although congruent with Bateson’s, is also likely to compound any confusion about the recursive nature of the levels.

Insert figure 1 here

Schematically, therefore, the levels can be represented in a variety of ways. As in table 1, the arrangement could be a ladder-like, hierarchical list. Alternatively as in figure 1 based on Hawkins’ (1991) diagram (and reflected in Pedler et al’s ‘learning company’ diagram, 1991) they can be represented as dynamic ‘loops’ stacked one on top of the other.

At present, I prefer a form of representation that directly portrays the idea of nesting, as in figure 2. This notion of recursiveness has significant implications:

Insert figure 2 here

- In contrast with the often implied idea that ‘learning to learn’ is superior to ‘learning’ (e.g. ‘Learning to learn... Will help you ultimately with everything you need or want to learn in the future.’, Pedler et al. 2001 p.260), higher orders of recursion are not superior to lower orders. They can be ‘generative’ (Senge 1990 p.14) in both positive and negative respects – i.e. both liberating and limiting.
- These loops occur simultaneously, not sequentially: ‘It is important to note that this multilevel approach to change is not a stage theory moving sequentially from lower to higher levels of learning. Rather, the different levels of learning go in parallel’ (Bredo 1989 p.32).
- The higher orders of recursion comprise metacommunication about the context within which communication is to be understood. It entails reciprocal influence between these levels as well as mismatches and contradictions. Bredo (1989 p.30) says; ‘Where Russell and Whitehead’s approach to this problem, in their theory of logical types, was to ban all such sentences by cleanly separating statements at different logical levels, Bateson pointed out that good logic may be bad natural science. Some of the most interesting aspects of communication may depend upon the use of contradictory messages at different logical levels…’.

The Levels and Experience of Learning

I will now attempt to walk through Bateson’s levels, referring along the way to a recent, formal learning experience of my own, which consisted of attending a training course. The course was independent of my institution, and I chose to attend for professional and personal reasons – it offered me skills development, and was linked to a current research project.

This commentary aims to illustrate Batesons’ ideas and to surface some of my questioning about them. For this purpose I will concentrate mainly on LII. LIII, as
will be noted, is more difficult to engage with; and LIV seems entirely beyond language.

In my experience, Bateson’s framework provides rich and challenging questions over which to puzzle; not by any means a straightforward explanation of events. I will do my best not to overcomplicate it through my own uncertainties, while also endeavouring not to oversimplify or eliminate the complexity from Bateson’s ideas.

A second trap in this landscape is that the way we think and talk needs to change as we move ‘up’ Bateson’s levels. It appears that we cannot apprehend LIII and LII, for example, through the same rational-analytical mindset with which we can address LI; ‘…no amount of rigorous discourse of a given logical type can ”explain” phenomena of a higher type’ (Bateson 1973 p.265). So ‘flattening’ the levels in that way would represent a reductionism that, while not absent from the literature, quickly and fundamentally misrepresents Bateson’s ideas.

Learning 0

Learning 0 (zero) entails me doing what I have always done; responding to stimuli but learning nothing - making no changes based on experience or information. L0 is implied by the two mice who continue to look for their cheese in the same place each day, even after it has disappeared, in the popular book ‘Who Moved My Cheese?’ (Johnson 1998).

While I believe I experienced significant learning and change during this course, I have no doubt too that there were ways in which I also produced automated response. For example I generally replicated habits such as conforming to the trainer’s instructions. The phenomenon of the training participant who exhibits no substantial change in belief or behaviour is probably familiar to all, and is typically is framed as a difficulty, though it is important to note that it may not be so for the participant.

Learning I

LI is ‘change in specificity of response by correction of errors of choice within a set of alternatives.’

My course enabled me to learn a range of new skills, for example a questioning framework called ‘Clean Language’ (Lawley and Tompkins 2000). Attending the course made the difference for me too between being aware of the existence of these questions (I had first come across the book some years previously) and having sufficient understanding of them to try them out in practice. I then learnt to become more effective through correcting errors in my use of the questions.

LI refers to the development of our usual, commonsense notion of ‘learning’ – cognitive, conative and affective, or changes in knowledge, skills and attitude. In practice, LI is the explicit focus of most Higher Education and management learning. It is also the focus of much learning theory. Thus behavioural, cognitive and
experiential theories of learning are much concerned with the acquisition or development of knowledge and skills.

Finally it is also worth noting that one common usage of `learning to learn’ refers to study skills. This is firmly LI in Bateson’s framework.

**Learning II**

LII is `change in the process of Learning I, e.g. a corrective change in the set of alternatives from which choice is made, or it is a change in how the sequence of experience is punctuated.’

This is where the principles of logical typing become significant, and where one not only learns, but simultaneously learns how to learn. Bateson’s LII (and its relationship with LI) brings a wide range of concepts about learning into the picture. LII is essentially learning about the context in which activity takes place, and thus the meaning that is to be given to behaviour. It introduces a reflexive aspect; thus Bredo (1989 p.36) says `Instrumental conditioning tasks, for example, teach not only how to discriminate between particular stimuli, but also about instrumentality itself.’

Bateson usage of `context’ is perceptual, communicational and psychological. A context of `play’ is significantly different from a context of `assessment’, for example. Context is influenced socially but also interpreted and defined individually – it is not definable objectively although there may would often be consensus about the nature of a context. LII is about learning a pattern that can guide one’s action and interpretation in other, apparently similar contexts. Also, `for Bateson a context is the particular whole which a given part helps compose, not something separate from or abstracted from that part’ (Bredo (1989 pp.28 - 29).

Especially at the start of my course, I remember being aware of aspects of my patterned behaviour – for example, noticing how I made contact with other participants. I was also alert and sensitive to the norms and expectations of this new social setting, and how it might be different from other apparently similar settings in my experience. Within a broad category of training or learning contexts, what expectations would be set about (e.g.) the level of personal disclosure? In what respects was socialisation happening in parallel with the teaching of the overt content of the programme?

I have long thought that Snyder’s (1971) notion of the `hidden curriculum’ is an example of Learning II (Bredo, 1989 p.33, apparently agrees). This concept refers to the tacit expectations and rules or success of a formal educational context, of which the teachers themselves may be unaware but which they also reinforce through their behaviour. The concept draws attention to mismatches between what Argyris (1999) might term the `espoused theory’ and `theory in use’, suggesting that `savvy’ students are quick to identify and orientate their action to the hidden curriculum.

Bear in mind that LII and LI are happening simultaneously, and are mutually influencing. As another example, one might decide that being on a team awayday
with the boss, which has been marked out formally as emphasising `play’, is more appropriately considered ‘assessment’ once it becomes apparent that the ‘hidden curriculum’ seems to involve (say) pressure to perform according to the boss’ expectations.

On my course I sensed a general congruence between the overt, espoused intentions and the ‘hidden curriculum’. For example, the trainer expressly invited feedback on how participants were experiencing the course; and when feedback was given, responded respectfully by both acknowledging and acting appropriately (as I would define it). On other courses, differences between communication and metacommunication have been more evident – for example, the trainer invites feedback but responds by discounting its value or using put-downs. Here the interplay between messages at different logical levels may suggest that the ‘hidden curriculum’ concerns the maintenance of power relations between trainer and participants.

LII involves other dynamics too. An example given by Bateson himself (1973 p.220, p.271) is the phenomenon of transference. Transference is, in effect, LII at an early age about the patterning of relationship between (say) a child and a parent. The individual then unawarely imports this patterning into other contexts later in life. A classic example is the relationship with authority figures in the workplace. Here the LII has taken place in childhood, and the subsequent overlay of this learnt pattern into other contexts represents L0. As Bateson says, `this behaviour is controlled by former Learning II and therefore it will be of such a kind as to mould the total context to fit the expected punctuation… this self-validating characteristic of the content of Learning II has the effect that such learning is almost ineradicable’ (Bateson 1973 p.272). It is when the individual is enabled through their relationship with a psychotherapist to differentiate between, and to behave differently according to, contexts, that renewed LII happens.

Therefore while the potential for LII is in principle constantly present, often we simply reproduce previously learnt patterns. On my course, transference may have existed in the way I related to the trainer, a woman; in what ways did I, re-enact patterns of behaviour learnt originally in relation to my mother? I found it easier on this course than on some others to share ideas and to feel creative - to what extent was this to do with the course itself, as a context for learning, and to what extent to a transferential wish to feel supported and approved of by a parent figure?

This example also illustrates the point that LII is not necessarily superior to or beneficial than LI. With transference, the pattern learnt early in life is likely to be helpful at the time (it may be adaptive or even essential for survival), but if that learnt pattern persists in other contexts it may become unhelpful.

What the above examples of LII have in common is Bateson’s emphasis on a change in the way events are punctuated. We learn `patterns that connect’, hence `learning to learn’ is about pattern recognition.

This view of learning as necessarily involving learning about context has some interesting potential implications for management and organisational learning. For example:
1. As argued in Tosey (2005), politics is integral to organisational learning, not, as is sometimes perceived, as an impediment to learning. Politics may be reframed as, for example, ‘teaching and learning about the metarules of context’. ‘No task instruction can be done in a socially neutral way… It must always… exemplify some form of social relationship…. Bateson’s theory helps show how they are different aspects of a common process rather than different things.’ (Bredo 1989 p.37).

2. The nature of (and epistemological framing of) the problem of ‘transfer of training’ is challenged if the content of a learning experience is inseparable from its context. Theories such as Lave and Wenger’s ‘situated learning’, on the other hand, appear to highlight the significance of context.

3. Across LII there appears to be a varying emphasis on psychological and critical/sociological frames, the former focusing more on the person and the latter more on the context. Often these are framed as oppositional, with the one perceiving the other as deficient. I raise the question of whether they might both be seen as examples of LII. Bredo (1989 p.27) notes that: ‘Learning theorists tend to focus on individual task learning independent of social context, while socialization theorists focus on the effects of social context independent of the task.’

**Learning III**

LIII is ‘change in the process of Learning II, e.g. a corrective change in the system of sets of alternatives from which choice is made.’

If LII is tricky to understand, LIII is more so. What does it mean to say ‘one not only learns, but simultaneously learns how to learn, and simultaneously learns how to learn how to learn’? Bateson added the section on Learning III to his essay in 1971. He said that Learning III ‘is likely to be difficult and even rare in human beings’ (1973 p.272), and that ‘the concept of “self” will no longer function as a nodal argument in the punctuation of experience’ (1973 p.275). He commented that ‘something of the sort does, from time to time, occur in psychotherapy, religious conversion, and in other sequences in which there is profound reorganization of character.’ (Bateson 1973 p.273)

Bartunek & Moch (1994) draw on Bateson’s levels for their idea of ‘third order change’. Bredo (1989 p.35) says, ‘The “problem” to which third-order learning is a “solution” consists of systematic contradictions in experience’. This seems to match a focus on what colleagues and I have called ‘dilemmas of participation’ (Tosey et al 2005). It also seems consistent with Bateson’s emphasis that double binds can be triggers for LIII, but noting that double binds can lead to psychosis as well as to enlightenment. Yes, LII may entail profound changes, but changes that are not guaranteed to be benign or transcendent.

Is there an equivalent to this in my training course? I would not claim so. However the course’s content focus on symbolic modes of knowing did demonstrated the significance of the type of metaphor at the root of one’s perception, and the profound potential for learning should such metaphors change.
Between Levels: Aesthetics, the Sacred and Liminality

This leaves me with a question, one that I feel is unresolved in Bateson’s work (alternatively, one that I have not yet resolved through my reading of Bateson), yet one that seems to me central to the development of the logical levels as a theory.

What I find hard to reconcile is the view that to talk about LII necessarily entails discourse of a higher logical type (i.e. by implication LIII), with the following statement:

‘Learning III is likely to be difficult and rare even in human beings’ (Bateson 1973 p.272)

Although Bateson does also allow that ‘there might be replacement of premises at the level of Learning II without the achievement of any Learning III.’ (1973 p.273)

This position seems an attempt to have one’s cake and eat it too. In other words it seems that one can talk about LII without that talk necessarily constituting Learning III. (Logically, therefore, this problem applies equally to the relationship between L1 and LII). The question then arises, what or where is this discourse that is about LII but is not LIII? What form of ‘learning’ is this?

The idea of such talk makes sense, though. Hawkins (1991) extended Argyris’ double loop learning by adding the idea of ‘triple loop learning’, saying that ‘For double loop learning to be enabled there is a need for level three or treble loop learning in organizations’ (Hawkins 2004 p. 414). Some processes of reflection on action and beliefs – including Argyris’ ‘double loop learning’, and critical reflection (e.g. as described by Brookfield 1995, Moon 2005) – promote awareness of LII but without, it seems, constituting LII as defined by Bateson.

There is space for only a few comments on this. First, it appears that intellectual reflection on LII would entail separating the knower from the known, which Bateson regarded as an epistemological error. This serves to emphasise my discomfort with depictions of LII such as that of Brockbank and McGill (1998), in which the egoic perceiver/knower seems to remain central.

It would also separate ‘primary process’ from conscious thought, leaving conscious thought alone to understand a level of patterning that according to Bateson is beyond its reach. Bateson affirmed the necessity of emotion and of non-verbal communication to communicate about context. According to Brockman (1977 p.61), Bateson argued for a ‘double involvement of primary process and conscious thought… the emotions, those things that we are accustomed to regard as rather amorphous and unintellectual – indeed, as interfering with the effective pursuit of intellect – are the partial perceptions in consciousness of highly precise and patterned forms of computation.’

Moreover, at LII Bateson’s conception of the sacred becomes highly relevant. In short Bateson argued that some levels of patterning involve such profound unconscious, ecological process that they should not be spoken of – because to do so would be an attempt to apprehend them with conscious thought, which again would fracture thought and ‘primary process’.
Second, apprehension of LII must involve logic of a higher order than that of LI. Our thinking may need to become reflexive and paradoxical. The mindset through which contradictions between LI and LII, and differences between contexts, are perceived is significant (see for example Fisher et al 2001). If seen as data about a wider context, for example as indicative of an inherent paradoxicality (as in, say, quantum physics), rather than as contradictions to be resolved, then the potential for "change in the system of sets of alternatives from which choice is made" seems evident.

Bateson emphasised the role of the aesthetic as central to the "logic" of such patterning. For example:

"…what is true of tales and words between persons is also true of the internal organization of living things." (Bateson and Bateson 1988 p.163)

To illustrate this in relation to learning, consider what might be needed to explain analytically the nuances of meaning of content and context in the following story of the Mullah Nasrudin, the Sufi "wise fool":

"Nasrudin was eating a poor man’s diet of chickpeas and bread. His neighbour, who also claimed to be a wise man, was living in a grand house and dining on sumptuous meals provided by the emperor himself.

His neighbour told Nasrudin, “if only you would learn to flatter the emperor and be subservient like I do, you would not have to live on chickpeas and bread”.

Nasrudin replied, “and if only you would learn to live on chickpeas and bread, like I do, you would not have to flatter and live subservient to the emperor”.

Finally, and following from the above, the experience of LII seems unlikely to be a purely intellectual movement. Meyer and Land (2005), working in Higher Education, use the term ‘liminality’ to describe the process through which students acquire ‘threshold concepts’, commenting that this involves a transition that can be troubling, which involves change in the learner’s identity as well as a reconfiguration of their conceptual schema, and which appears irreversible. This appears to link well both with our work on the experience of transformative learning (Tosey et al 2005) and with previous, related work such as that by Frick (1987).

Conclusion

In this discussion of Bateson’s ‘levels of learning’, my focus has been mainly on the nature of LII, and the relationships between LI, LII and LIII respectively, in order to illuminate issues of learning. This understanding of learning is an example of the type of ecological understanding that Bateson advocated not just for social systems but for the planet. It involves thinking and behaving relationally and systemically, through a
mode that fundamentally challenges our (certainly including my) habitual frames of reference.

I have suggested some elaborations to or implications of Bateson’s framework:

- Learning is inherently political. It is regulated; LII (as learning [about] contexts) involves sensitivity to and adaptation to that regulation. Consequently it may be in error to regard organisational and individual learning as epistemologically separate.

- LII may be seen as the process synthesising a variety of concepts including transference; the hidden curriculum; learning to learn; metalearning; critical reflection; and transformative learning. Consequently, there may be a worthwhile project of critically reviewing the literatures to which those concepts belong.

I have also raised a question about the way LII is experienced in relation to ‘talk about’ LII, suggesting that this is an area for theoretical development.

The potential implications for both theories and practices of learning are varied. If the potential for multiple orders of learning (L0, LI, LIII, LIII) is inherent from any experience, Bateson’s framework appears significant for both learners themselves and for facilitators of individual and organisational learning. Taking Bateson’s framework into continuing work on transformative learning is another obvious line to pursue.

To conclude with a final quotation from Bateson himself:

“`The myths in which our lives are embedded acquire credibility as they become part of us’ (Bateson and Bateson 1988p.182)

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning IV</th>
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<td>Learning 0</td>
<td>…is characterised by specificity of response, which – right or wrong - is not subject to correction.</td>
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Table 1: Bateson’s `levels of learning’ (Bateson 1973 p. 263 - 264)
Learning IV

Learning III

Learning II

Learning I

Learning 0

Figure 1: Bateson’s levels as stacked loops
Figure 2: Bateson’s levels as nested loops
1 The Institute for Intercultural Studies, 
http://www.interculturalstudies.org/Bateson/index.html


iv See also Bateson’s Curriculum Vitae at
http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/bateson04/bateson04_index.html, accessed 2nd April 2006

v http://www.oikos.org/stepsintro.htm accessed 3rd April 2006

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