Once upon a time... tales of organisational learningⁱ

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Abstract: Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to enrich the conceptual vocabulary of organisational learning by discussing the relevance of the interdisciplinary work of Gregory Bateson, an original and challenging twentieth century thinker.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper debates a number of principles identified by Bateson, which reflect patterns that appear in stories (including for example Sufi teaching stories) as well as in practical experiences of organisational learning.

Findings – Bateson's ideas have the potential to overturn assumptions about organisational learning and to offer new perspectives on the subject. This author believes that Bateson's thinking implies, for example, that communication is multi-layered and paradoxical; that learning is always political; that organisational learning is emergent and transient; and that stories can provide more effective encapsulations of the complexities of organisational learning than rational analyses.

Originality/value – The article offers fresh views on the conceptualisation of organisational learning that may assist practitioners to 'think outside the box', together with some practical insights, good stories, and even a few pictures.

Keywords: Organisational learning, learning, emergence, complexity, metacommunication.

Article Type: Conceptual paper

What is this 'Learning Organisation' idea? I think of it as more like a story than a subject, one that has entailed all kinds of useful connections. Through it I have encountered the UK Learning Company conference, many good colleagues, and of course this journal. It has also proved to be fruitful for reflection on my experience both as an employee and as an educator supporting a professional learning community for some 15 years (a Masters programme for facilitators and consultants).

Once upon a time, then.... when doing postgraduate research in the early 1980's, my supervisors and other mentorsⁱⁱ introduced me to the writing of Gregory Bateson, 'one of the most provocative social scientists of the twentieth century' (Rieber 1989). Bateson has influenced much thinking about organisational learning (Roach & Bednar 1997; Tosey & Mathison 2008; Visser 2007) and, as Engeström (2001) points out, offers the field some useful and uncommon insights; indeed his ideas not so much add to thinking about the Learning Organisation as turn it upside down. This article is by way of tribute to Bateson's contribution.

One of my fellow students in the 1980's, Peter Hawkins, was investigating the workings of learning communities (which he claims was the first doctoral study of the learning organisation). Peter not only shared an enthusiasm for Bateson (Hawkins 2004) but also introduced me to the Sufi teaching stories featuring the Mulla Nasrudin, which have been collected by Idries Shah (Shah 1983a; Shah 1983b; Shah 1993)ⁱⁱⁱ. Here is one such story:

Mulla Nasrudin used to stand in the street on market-days, to be pointed out as an idiot. No matter how often people offered him a large and a small coin, he always chose the smaller piece.

One day a kindly man said to him:

'Mulla, you should take the bigger coin. Then you will have more money and people will no longer be able to make a laughing stock of you.'

'That might be true,' said Nasrudin, 'but if I always take the larger, people will stop offering me money to prove that I am more idiotic than they are. Then I would have no money at all.'

(Shah 1983b:27)

Gregory Bateson realised that when people or animals interact, communication happens on two levels simultaneously. As well as the content of the interaction, there are always signals exchanged about the context. The signal 'this is play' is different from the one conveying real aggression (Bateson 2000:177-93). Play and fighting may involve similar behaviour, yet animals know which is which, in effect by giving each other information about the category of activity their behaviour represents. The technical term for this is *metacommunication*, an idea that Bateson's biographer David Lipset (1980:296) describes as the 'key theory of communication' to which Bateson devoted his attention.

According to Bateson, and others such as the Palo Alto School (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson 1967), *all* human interaction involves metacommunication, which concerns contexts of meaning and relationships between people. Metacommunication is usually tacit, though can become more noticeable when punctured. Should the Mulla take the apparently rational course of accepting the coin of higher value, the context of the game is destroyed. The person offering the coins, not he, becomes the idiot. The kindly man perhaps represents the well-meaning but deluded super-rational stance that imagines organisations would be improved if only all communication were more precise and explicit.

In writing about organisations and learning, however, it is rare to find recognition of metacommunication. It is crucially important to have a concept like this available because, for example, this is how people negotiate and shape power, authority and culture.

'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 1989:37)

Metacommunication can also contradict verbal communication^{iv}; one can espouse the value of learning whilst simultaneously discouraging it, for example by enacting support for the status quo – perhaps with regard to status in the organisation, gender, ethnicity and so on. Indeed if we accept that all communication about learning involves metacommunication, it follows that organisational learning is inherently political (Vince & Saleem 2004). That is, all communication has embedded within it messages that regulate.

Recognising that organisational learning always involves a relational context, which people recursively shape, interpret and re-interpret as part of the learning process, overturns the notion that 'learning' has a linear trajectory within a known context that is defined by managers and that functions as some outer container for action:

It is replaced by a circular model, in which managers are participants too, and in which understandings of context (still often tacit) both shape and are shaped by interaction (Stacey 2003). Here, managers can influence understandings of context, but they cannot determine it or stand outside it:

There is only space here for a snippet of my second story. Lewis Carroll's 'Hunting of the Snark', in which a group of characters set out in search of a fabled creature, struck me a few years ago as having intriguing parallels with the 'quest' for the Learning Organisation (Tosey 2005). The story ends with the Baker's apparent discovery of their quarry:

*Erect and sublime, for one moment of time.
In the next, that wild figure they saw
(As if stung by a spasm) plunge into a chasm,
While they waited and listened in awe.
'It's a Snark' was the sound that first came to their ears,
And seemed almost too good to be true.
Then followed a torrent of laughter and cheers:
Then the ominous words 'It's a Boo—'*

(Carroll 1974:94)

The Snark, assumed to be a desirable prize, apparently turns out to be a Boojum – a frightening, devouring monster. One moral of this story is 'be careful what you wish

for, for you may receive it'. It could also be taken as a caution against regarding the Learning Organisation as some kind of holy grail.

With few exceptions (e.g. Contu, Grey, & Örtengren 2003; French & Bazelette 1996) learning organisations are seen as desirable, and 'learning' as universally a good thing. There is a sense in which such thinking is in denial because it ignores the shadow side of learning, and the many ways in which behaviour and ideas are regulated in organisational structures. Learning is emotional and has subversive potential. It is perilous and risky; people do not always live happily ever after, as in some sanitised Disney version of a fairy tale. Organisations will continue to search for Snarks, with scarcely a mention of Boojums - until they inconveniently appear.

Offsetting these tendencies, it is encouraging to find thinking about organisational learning that is informed by fields such as psychodynamics and critical management studies. Otherwise there is a temptation to regard organisational learning as something that rational people can do and will do, if only they are shown how. My experience, for example, in the learning community of our Masters programme, tells me that this is far from the case. This kind of enquiry is highly challenging to each and every person engaged because, for example, it confronts us with our own shadow side. Nor is this kind of enquiring compatible with the typical culture of a business setting. I am therefore sceptical of the likelihood that organisational employees will engage in this enquiry together in a sustained way.

This adds shadow and light to our circular learning process, represented here by the Taoist yin-yang symbol:

My third story is one I heard during a training course in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), another practice that has been influenced strongly by Bateson (DeLozier & Grinder 1987)^v.

A well-known Congolese drummer, TaTitos, was asked how new compositions are created in that culture. TaTitos replied that there are three methods. In the first, a new piece of music is presented to someone in their dreams; in the second, musicians notice and build on mistakes they make while they are playing, and generate new variations from those errors; in the third, someone consciously constructs a new composition. However, TaTitos added, there are no known examples of successful composition using the third method.

Effective composition, which I suggest we can treat as analogous to organisational learning, is, to use a term from theories of complexity, emergent (Goldstein 1999). By contrast, much effort seems to be put into TaTitos' third method, represented by commercial solutions that are based on rational, planned change.

Bateson's work inverts the common assumption that change in organisational performance will follow from the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. His theory of learning, based on observations of a dolphin being trained (Bateson 2000:276-8), implies instead that an effective change in pattern behaviour is more likely^{vi} to follow

from a change of contextual conditions. Thus we could begin to think of organisational learning as the emergent patterns of behaviour that result from changes in context.

Of course, changing the structure of the organisation so often constitutes cosmetic change, a rearranging of the deckchairs on the Titanic. What interested Bateson was the type of change of conditions that would lead people to interpret the situation as different, and to change their interaction. In the literature, one example is Yorks and Marsick's (2000:264-5) description of organisational learning at International Foods.

The introduction of performance targets is an interesting example of rational design to promote desired behaviour. Ironically, targets do create differences in contextual conditions, and can result in changed patterns of behaviour – in other words, organisational learning - but often in unintended ways^{vii}. Especially when there are significant sanctions for failing to achieve targets, there is plentiful evidence that people focus their ingenuity on being *seen* to achieve these outcomes. Thus one finds stories about police forces that attend to crime figures at the expense of dealing with the crimes that matter to the communities they serve^{viii}; hospitals that allegedly massage waiting lists; educational institutions that become driven by their position in league tables^{ix}; and cars salespeople who forget about customer relations (Pfeffer 2007).

Modifying the diagram again, this portrays change of behaviour not as an *input* that must be crafted through training programmes and so on in order to create a Learning Organisation, but as an *output* of the changed context:

Another theme in the Ta Titos story is to do with emergence and transience. Can Learning Organisations be enduring structures? Is 'learning organisation-ness' more likely to exist in transient moments, as it were (in TaTitos' world) in the act of drumming? As Bateson points out, we are orientated to difference. When we habituate to new circumstances we stop learning. We may be performing skilfully and highly effectively, but not *differently* any more (in his theory of levels of learning, Bateson calls this 'Learning 0'). This supports the logic that organisations would need to keep introducing difference in order to stay at 'the edge of chaos' as Stacey et al (2000) put it

My experience as an employee is that new contexts, which are often temporary, have been among the most fertile for organisational learning. I recall examples such as a national quality assurance inspection that engaged my (then) academic department in new types of interaction; supervision for the staff team of our Masters' programme; and more everyday differences in context such as conversations with colleagues in coffee shops.

Sometimes, these transient shifts are genuinely temporary; sometimes they catch on, like viruses, and spread and survive. Might we focus therefore on pursuing organisational learning through creating temporary contexts that can generate these shifts of pattern, knowing that many of these shifts will be transient? The work of

people like Haynes and Price (2004), who study connectivity in working environments using principles from complexity theory, is relevant here. The logic is that increased interaction enhances the emergence of new ideas (memes) and practices, some of which will 'survive', even though the specific nature of these new ideas and practices can neither be predicted nor micro-managed.

The diagram could then evolve to show 'the Learning Organisation' as moments or phases when a new pattern emerges:

You will no doubt have been conscious that this article is based around stories. Stories have their own significant part to play in organisational learning; they are here for more than entertainment value alone. Bateson argues that stories convey patterns of meaning without attempting to unpack that meaning in an analytical way; hence the notion of the Learning Organisation *as* story:

'A man wanted to know about mind, not in nature, but in his private large computer. He asked it (no doubt in his best Fortran), "Do you compute that you will ever think like a human being?" The machine then set to work to analyze its own computational habits. Finally, the machine printed its answer on a piece of paper, as such machines do. The man ran to get the answer and found, neatly typed, the words:

THAT REMINDS ME OF A STORY.'

(Bateson 1979:22)

For Bateson, stories are an example of the significance of the *aesthetics* of human systems, or 'responsiveness to the pattern which connects' (Bateson 1979:17). Bateson does not mention Sufi teaching stories specifically, yet I feel sure he would have loved the Mulla Nasrudin. In a similar vein, psychiatrist Chris Nunn (2005) argues for a narrative metaphor – man as story – to replace that of the machine. It is interesting to note that the relatively recent field of organisational aesthetics (Strati & Guillet de Montoux 2002) is enabling this particular connection to be made (Tosey, Mathison, & Langley 2008).

Bateson's thinking remains significant but little understood^x. These stories hopefully convey something of his insights into circularity, light and shade, emergence, transience and the aesthetics of human systems and learning. In sharing them, I realise my thinking has changed little in the twenty years since my first encounters with Bateson and Nasrudin, except in T.S. Eliot's significant sense of arriving back where I first started and knowing the place for the first time. This is a journey I have made repeatedly, and one that I am sure will continue:

'Mulla, Mulla, my son has written from the Abode of Learning to say that he has completely finished his studies!'

'Console yourself, madam, with the thought that God will no doubt send him more.'

(Shah 1983b:4)

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ⁱ For the purposes of this piece, I do not regard the distinction between organisational learning and 'the learning organisation' as significant.

ⁱⁱ Adrian McLean, Professor Judi Marshall, Professor Peter Reason.

ⁱⁱⁱ For Peter's own contemporary re-telling of the Nasrudin stories for the business world see Hawkins (2005).

^{iv} While the theoretical prospect of such contradictions, especially the potential for paradox, troubled Russell's logical philosophy, Bateson recognised these as an inevitable and often helpful feature of human communication in practice.

^v The story does not appear in any publication, to my knowledge.

^{vi} Because context and behaviour are recursive, it is of course possible that change can happen through learning new behaviour first. The difficulty with this as a planned approach is where it lacks a concept of context and its significance.

^{vii} Which, paradoxically, according to the popular current literature on behavioural economics, result from the rational decisions of individuals about how to respond (Harford 2008).

^{viii} Police condemn 'target culture': <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6656411.stm>, published 15/5/2007, accessed 19/11/2007; 'Wasting police time', <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/programmes/panorama/6995649.stm>, published: 14/9/2007, accessed 17/11/2007

^{ix} BBC News website <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7336631.stm> 8/4/2008

^x It has been developed further through, for example through second-order cybernetics (Von Foerster & Poerksen 2002), the work of the Santiago School (Maturana & Varela 1998), and complexity theory.