

## The 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Human Resource Development Research and Practice Across Europe

Paper Title: **'Flesh and Blood and Action': Organisations, Learning and Aesthetics**

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Submission Type: Working Paper

Reference Number: 1 13

Stream: Business strategy, Organizational Learning & Knowledge Management

Key Words: Epistemology, levels of learning, context, organisational learning, recursion, complexity

### ***Abstract***

This paper uses a modified version of Gregory Bateson's levels of learning (Bateson, 2000) to review data from a case study of an arts organisation, in order to contemplate a multimodal understanding of organisational learning; one that sees emotions, aesthetics and learning as complex, interactive and interdependent. Tosey and Mathison (2008) argue that this requires a framework such as Bateson's, which differentiates between logical types, and (in its modified form) between embodied, analytic and aesthetic modes of knowing. Such a proposition starts to explode the myth of rationality in organisations and approaches which 'propound an objective and universal interpretative key to organisational life' (Strati, 2000: 14). 'Bateson... distinguishes between *process* and *description of process*, because "our description will be in words or figures or pictures but that what we describe is going to be in flesh and blood and action".' (Roach & Bednar, 1997)

## Introduction

It used to be that the senses were primary. A person knew something by ‘being deeply and intimately connected to it, a knowing that was somatic and emotional.’ (Clark, 2001: 84). Following the Scientific Revolution, reason displaced somatic connections. The cognitive has since been regarded as the primary way of knowing. However, as Polanyi (1969) and Lakoff and Johnson (1999) have argued, knowledge begins in the body; to make sense of the world we rely on our tacit knowledge of impacts made by the world on our body, and vice versa.

Constructa is a case study in Dawn Langley’s (DL’s) doctoral work on arts organisations that have survived crisis. Data were gathered through participant observation, a series of semi-structured interviews, and document review. This present paper is an exploratory analysis undertaken for the purpose of illustrating, testing and refining Bateson’s framework.

### Theory: Bateson’s levels

Gregory Bateson (1904 - 1980) recognised the challenge of speaking of ‘learning’, and of its relationship to the somatic (Bateson 2000). His theory of levels of learning has influenced work in organisational learning and change (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Bartunek & Moch, 1994; French & Bazalgette, 1996; Roach & Bednar, 1997; Visser, 2007). Inspired by observing the training of dolphins in Hawaii in the 1960’s ( 2000:276-8), Bateson described the theory 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(Russell, 1921)<sup>1</sup> to the concept of “learning”.’ (Bateson 2000:279). It is therefore predicated on logical relationships between different orders of learning (Table 1), and emphasises qualitative differences between levels.

Table 1: The levels of learning, adapted from (Bateson 2000:293)

Learning IV	‘...would be <i>change in Learning III</i> , but probably does not occur in any adult living organism on this earth.’
Learning III	‘...is <i>change in the process of Learning II</i> , e.g., a corrective change in the system of <i>sets</i> of alternatives from which choice is made.
Learning II	‘...is <i>change in the process of Learning I</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.’
Learning I	‘...is <i>change in specificity of response</i> by correction of errors of choice within a set of alternatives.’
Learning 0	‘...is characterised by <i>specificity of response</i> , which – right or wrong - is not subject to correction.’

Relationships between levels are recursive; it is not a simple hierarchy, nor is it a stage theory of learning, by which one advances from lower to higher levels.

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<sup>1</sup> The theory of logical types distinguishes between a class and members of that class and, in order to avoid logical paradoxes, stipulates that a class cannot be a member of itself.

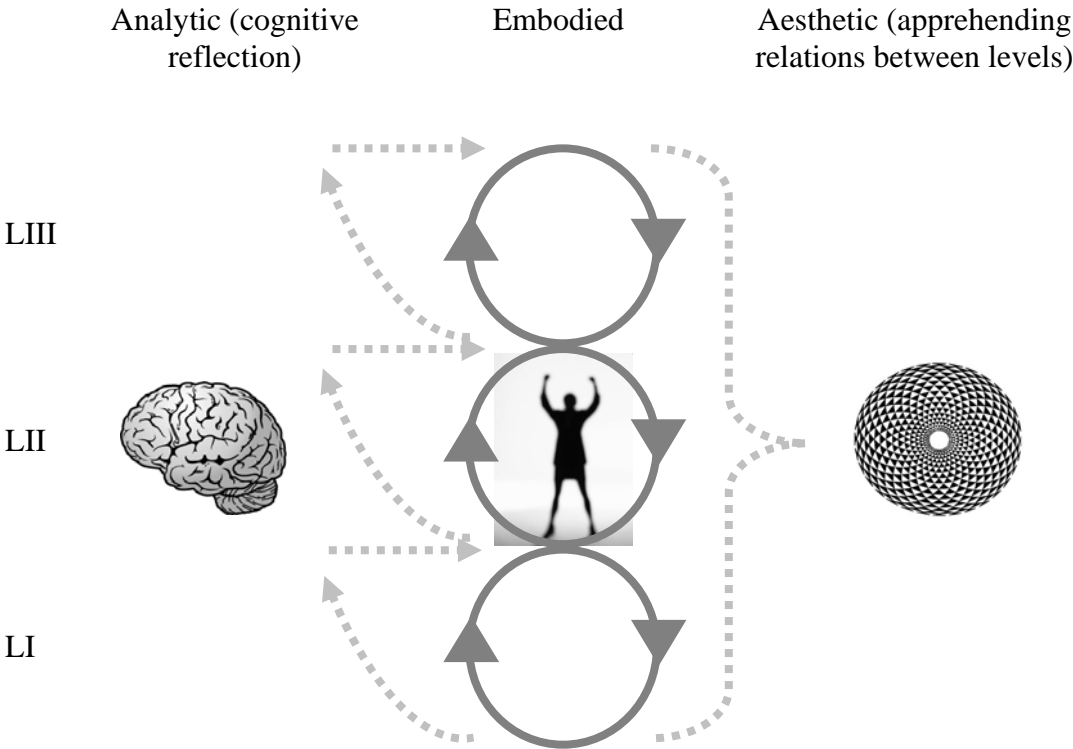
Contrary to the dominant notion that learning is automatically a good thing in organisations (Contu, Grey, & Ortenbald, 2003), ‘higher’ orders of learning are neither necessarily superior to, nor more desirable than, lower levels (Tosey & Mathison, 2008). Bateson said that ‘even the attempt at level III can be dangerous’ (Bateson 2000:305), since it can lead to fragmentation of one’s world just as easily as it can lead to enlightenment.

According to the evidence of his writing, Bateson’s levels are clearly not about cognition alone; he refers repeatedly to embodied, enacted change, in tune with recent theoretical notions of ‘embodied mind’ (Lakoff, 1999; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1993). Moreover, Bateson emphasised the epistemological importance of art and the aesthetic, both generally in his writing (Harries-Jones, 1995: 14), and specifically with reference to apprehending relations between the levels of learning:

*‘...art is commonly concerned with... bridging the gap between the more or less unconscious premises acquired by Learning II and the more episodic content of consciousness and immediate action’.* (Bateson 2000:308).

Figure 1 modifies Bateson’s theory to indicate three modes - embodied learning, reflective processing that is primarily cognitive, and an aesthetic mode that can apprehend unconsciously the pattern of relationships between levels.

Figure 1: A representation of Bateson’s theory with multiple modes



## Case Study

*“Come in. Out of the glare. Let your eyes adjust to the partial light inside...”*

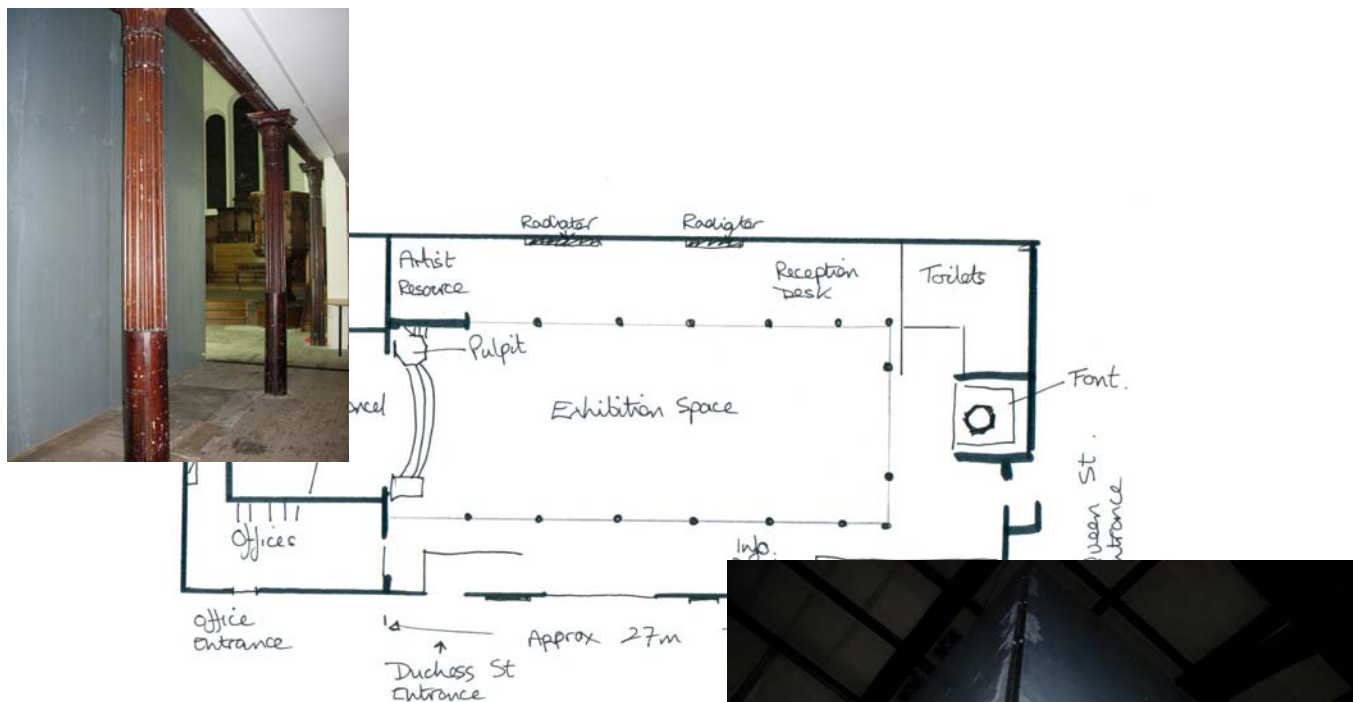
These are the opening lines of a press release for an exhibition at Constructa<sup>2</sup>, a contemporary art gallery based in the south of England.

Constructa was set up in a deconsecrated Church and describes itself as:

*“A place where artists come to make new work.”*

When first opened in 1996 by a group of artists it was regarded as avant garde. Some ten years later it is grappling to understand its present and possible future. It has prided itself on supporting artists who are keen to experiment, be adventurous and push the boundaries of their work – perhaps by changing scale, method or materials.

Figure 2: Constructa Floor Plan<sup>3</sup>



Sitting in the gallery space it is clear that the heart of the building is dedicated to the arts programme and its associated activities. The work across the years has ranged from textiles fine as spider’s webs to a meadow of wild flowers. Audiences can move through, interact, touch and smell the works. A central aim of the space is to bring people in direct contact with the artist and their work – an aesthetic experience.

<sup>2</sup> A pseudonym to respect confidentiality

<sup>3</sup> Taken from field notebook

Using the 'Kevin Carter' exhibition, as a starting point we will explore organisational learning at Constructa through the three modes.

### *Embodied*

As you walk into the space, the features of the church are still clearly visible; yet in its centre sits a huge galvanised steel box. Inside the box you sit on a church pew and the lights are dimmed.



Flash! The image burns the screen. It takes a while for startled eyes to adjust. Into focus emerges a small African child, emaciated and curled in the dust. Less than a metre away stands a statuesque vulture. This is the only image in a text based installation that tells of the short, troubled life of Kevin Carter. His beginnings, his life as a photojournalist and his ultimate suicide brought on by the scenes he witnessed, captured and distributed. This is a nerve jangling, skin rippling, emotion wrenching experience. It is in your body before your thoughts form.

Imagine that you are standing there, spanner in hand, one of the team that is being rushed in to help with the construction of the box. There is a plan to follow but no-one knows what it is except the artist. You are running out of time. It takes far longer than anticipated. The sheer physical labour of creating the enormous galvanised steel box in which the work is to be housed is exhausting. This is not the place to work if you cannot think on your feet, hold your nerve and commit yourself completely. One of the Gallery Directors talked about a lack of time for reflection Staff seem unwilling to discuss the event – unable, apparently, to move into reflection about it. It was a visceral, emotional experience.

This is an international artist they have not worked with before and the relationship is often mediated by a third party. The staff describe how they tried to explain their ethos to the artist, but it was only the Chair and Vice-Chair who succeed in sharing some of the culture at the end of the week, by just 'chatting' at the exhibition's opening night – 'we want people to have a learning experience, we want people to grow' (Chair, female).



## *Aesthetic*

*The Kevin Carter piece this year*

*Was a magnificent piece  
That everyone loved*

*It's difficult to discuss it*

*With anyone who worked on the project  
Or in the office*

*Because the process was hard  
In making it  
It left a bad taste in people's mouths*

*People don't want to talk  
about it*

*or can't*

*Appreciate the value of it  
That's a real shame. (Co-Director, male)*

The enormous box; the difficulties involved in constructing it; the emotional impact of the exhibit; all resonate with the plight of the organisation. The exhibition's story seems to mirror the process the organisation has been through; it is a story of winning through against the odds, of delivering in spite of a lack of resources; of inspiration and learning to innovate, to overcome the challenges.

## *Analytic*

Reflecting from the perspective of each of Bateson's levels of learning (see also appendix 1):

### *Learning 0*

Learning 0 denotes absence of change, yet does not imply that action was unskilful or deficient; highly skilled and proficient behaviour can be automatic. The gallery regularly produces exhibitions, so Constructa drew on existing capabilities. Many past routines were utilised. Behavioural patterns, possibly features of the culture, were also manifested. Drawing on Scott-Morgan's (1994) 'unwritten rules', DL identified rules about quality, delivering on time, giving all your effort, respecting the artist – above all, 'the show must go on'. One of the Gallery Directors talked about a lack of time for reflection.

### *Learning I*

Learning I effectively involves change in behaviour to meet stable or familiar goals (i.e. mounting the exhibition). There was evidence of some new operational skills.

The relationship with the international artist was often mediated by a third party. The timescales and late decisions on funding meant that some processes and procedures needed to change; the extensive project management handbook was abandoned and they used existing networks to find emergency help.

### *Learning II*

Learning II is a change of pattern, the emergence of a new punctuation of events. The exhibit involved a new relational reality, with an unfamiliar international artist. The Chair & Vice-Chair succeeded in sharing some of the culture by just 'chatting' at the exhibition's opening night. The resonance between the exhibition and the organisation. A Director recounts the complexity of the experience and the emotional containment the team learnt; the difficulties were 'undiscussable', as in the poem in the 'aesthetic' section.

### *Learning III*

A number of people, DL included were profoundly moved by the work. We can find no evidence that Learning III occurred for the organisation.

### *Discussion*

The Constructa case study illustrates, we hope, the relevance to organisational learning of the senses and the emotions. Aesthetics 'derives from the knowledge-creating faculties of all the human senses' (Strati, 2000). Bateson saw aesthetics as enabling people to extend beyond the limitations of explicit, conscious knowing.

*'One of Bateson's most penetrating insights is that when we are actively engaged with any element of beauty we are able to reaccess much of the systemic wisdom that our total reliance on conscious thought and intention has overlaid and largely sealed off from us.'*  
(Charlton, 2003:226)

Strati's usage of 'aesthetic' (Strati & Guillet de Montoux 2002) refers to sensory experience that seems closer to the 'embodied' mode in Bateson's framework.<sup>4</sup> Strati suggests that we should not confuse aesthetics with art; there are clear differentiations between the two<sup>5</sup>. By contrast, we regard Bateson's emphasis on pattern (as holistic representation of networks of relationships) as the defining characteristic of the aesthetic mode. It is not 'art' in the sense of being an intentionally produced 'work of art'; it is 'art' in the sense of something that represents the pattern without being intentionally produced for this purpose.

Writing our paper raised awareness to the difference between using Bateson's theory as an interpretive framework, rather than a rational analytical tool. Bateson emphasised that the logical relations between levels would not correspond to separate phenomena in practice.

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<sup>4</sup> "Knowledge is gathered in a particular organizational context by breathing its air and atmosphere, smelling its odours, appreciating its beauty and enjoying the stories told. It is also gathered by being repelled by its ugliness, upset by tragedy, amused by the grotesque." (Strati, 2002: 757)

<sup>5</sup> The etymology of art is in the ancient Greek being 'techne', suggesting the transformation of raw materials with ability and intelligence, whereas aesthetics is concerned with knowing on the basis of sensible perceptions. The Chambers Dictionary defines 'aesthetic' as relating to perception by the senses and the Greek verb 'aisthanomai' denotes the stimulation of abilities related to feeling (Strati, 2000).

Multiple levels may be encapsulated in a single event. Our identification of levels is an act of interpretation more than one of analysis.

### ***Conclusion***

Bateson's theory implies that organisational learning is always taking place; the question is, at what level(s). In our view, it also implies that organisational learning emerges through *difference* in behaviour and meaning, in response to changes in *context*.<sup>6</sup> Organisational learning could be thought of in an aesthetic way as (for example) a new 'story'.<sup>7</sup> Bateson strongly criticised the view that intentional action can produce the desired effects in human or natural systems. His theory therefore contrasts sharply with the view that actors can intentionally produce 'learning organisations', and with the logic that people learn new understandings and skills first, then enact these in order to generate new organisational capabilities.

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<sup>6</sup> Bateson's concept of 'context' is complex; see for example Tosey & Mathison (2008)

<sup>7</sup> Recent work in the field of consciousness studies (Nunn, 2005) proposes the metaphor of 'man as story' (there juxtaposed with De La Mettrie's 'man as machine'), which echoes Bateson's own interest in story (Bateson, 1979). 'Stories' are seen by Nunn as multiple, complex, interacting, competing and fluid patterns of meaning, including personal biography, local situational meanings, cultural scripts, and mythic archetypes.



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## Appendix 1: Constructa Case Study: An Interpretation using Bateson's Levels

Level/Mode	Analytic	Embodied	Aesthetic
<b>III</b> <i>Paradigm Shift</i>	No direct evidence from the case study data of LIII	<p>(Possibly for some individuals) the exhibit shocks and disrupts habituated assumptions, raises consciousness.</p> <p>`I agreed to see it again, and it was <u>incredibly</u> moving and we came out of it and I'm not good when something moving has happened, believe it or not, in snapping back into chat mode does rather knock me out.' (Chair)</p>	
<b>II</b> <i>Emergent pattern; reframing situation or context</i>	<p>A new relational reality was created (Constructa plus international artist).</p> <p>Staff found it hard to discuss, learnt emotional containment:</p>	<p>`...and L came up to me and just grabbed my arm (gestures the gripping of her arm) and said THANK you SO much for that. For what? Because I thought we were just chatting to the artist and his technician, and she said we, this, this week, for two weeks we have been trying to make them <u>understand</u> what Constructa is about, err, that this isn't a theatre space, it's <u>not</u> the Whitechapel it is a public space where we want people to BE and that is our ethos, we want them to engage and we want them to have a learning experience and we want people to grow as a result of seeing that extraordinary piece and what you and N said has said it all. Now we didn't know we were saying it all, we were simply talking about what Constructa meant to us.' (Chair)</p> <p>`AJ piece this year which was a, you know a magnificent piece of work that everybody <u>loved</u>, everyone got a lot out of, but uhm, it's difficult to discuss it with anyone who worked on the project or anyone in the office because the process of, was</p>	<p>The exhibition and its construction mirroring the organisation.</p> <p>Unknowing: `We didn't know the significance of the box, he (the artist) wouldn't tell us.' (Co Director). A collective moment – everyone jumps when the flash happens and the image of the child emerges. Responding to uncomfortable sensory knowledge. Issues of representation, the role of the media, life and death. An experience of something sacred; horror, beauty, tragedy, ugliness. A shared, archetypal experience of profound tragedy.</p> <p>`We're, we're, we're keepers of the flame and we like different shaped flame holders and we like other people to put colours in the flame uhm but I think that's what we are. I think we're keepers</p>

Level/Mode	Analytic	Embodied	Aesthetic
	<p>Navigating the exhibit and its setting; challenge expected responses to a 'gallery'. A changed environment in which to experience the world afresh.:</p>	<p>hard, in making it and it left a bad taste in people's mouths and people don't want to talk about it or can't appreciate the value of it because of that.' (Co-Director)</p> <p>`So being in the presence of an installation or an exhibition or an event is an opportunity for a person to grow (.) intellectually, emotionally, spiritually almost certainly not physically (laughs) otherwise we'd all be a lot taller. uh, uh, they see art as vital to the human experience, simply that, so by creating art for the public to experience in a space that is free to enter they feel they are creating opportunities for people to grow' (Chair)</p>	<p>of the flame and we need to find a way to finance it.' (Chair)</p>
<p><b>I</b> <i>New operational knowledge</i></p>	<p>Drawing the team together. Using networks and finding emergency help to deal with pressure to get the funding and have it done on time.</p> <p>Uniqueness of construction</p> <p>Communicating with an International artist for whom English is a second language.</p>	<p>...the funding was late, it took much longer to construct than we expected, we had to get a load of volunteers and people worked three days solid. M was exhausted..." Project Manager</p> <p>. `We had the skills but we had never done this before';</p> <p>`...extraordinarily high production values, genuinely collaborative, very demanding of self and of artists, not demanding of potential backers, investors, sponsors and finally funders.' (Chair)</p>	
<p><b>0</b> <i>Unchanged response</i></p>	<p>Following routines to carry out the project plan..</p> <p>The `unwritten rules'. Getting the look and feel right. – following the artist's instruction.</p>	<p>Physical fabrication. Bolting the steel together and making the box; `We had used, spanners, nuts and bolts before.'</p>	

Level/Mode	Analytic	Embodied	Aesthetic
	No time to reflect	<p>‘it’s actually a very strange process going from one exhibition to the next that uhm, there’s never time to really sit down and appreciate what, what you’ve done’ (Co-Director). ‘But I, you know in a way its another symptom of being over stretched, that you know, people wouldn’t thank me for setting up another meeting once a month to talk about, (.) stuff like that even though people thought it was valuable, there’s just not the time to do it.’ (Co-Director)</p>	