

“The Map is not the Territory”: Stories from the Classroom

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Gregory Bateson’s (1988) enigmatic phrase, “The map is not the territory,” carries a provocative message for scholarship on teaching and learning. I explore the implications of Bateson’s phrase by way of reflecting on Bateson within the context of my own classroom story, which was based on teaching a literacy course to pre-service teachers. Teaching and learning comprise the “territory” while the curriculum is the “map.” The teacher-educator helps the student teacher construct bridges from one realm to the other by way of a process in which both teacher-educator and student teacher are participants. Learning is reconceptualized as about learning about the learning process itself rather than being focused on producing a map.

I. Pleroma and Creatura.

Gregory Bateson was deeply interested in teaching and learning and often used classroom stories to clarify his meaning. For example, to a group of psychiatry students, he posed the following exam question: “Define ‘sacrament’ and ‘entropy’” (Bateson, 1988, p. 6). These terms must have seemed remote to his students, and the connection between the two terms even more elusive. However, Bateson often challenged his students to look for relationships between things that appeared to be dissimilar and removed from the students’ experiences. He brought a crab into a class of art students and challenged them to prove that the inert object was a living thing. Bateson tried to impress upon his students that “the map is not the territory.” While this phrase of Bateson’s sounds enigmatic, it lies at the centre of his teaching practice: “in the Pleroma there are no maps, no names, no classes, and no members of classes. The map is not the territory. The name is not the thing named” (Bateson & Bateson, 1987, p. 21). Bateson’s pedagogical approach was to have students confront the map-like boundaries used to compartmentalize and sunder things. Bateson’s accounts of his students’ initial bafflement in such situations has reminded me of my own stories from the classroom, and of how student teachers resist notions of curricula that sound foreign against the background of their schooling or seem inconsistent with their conceptions of how practicing teachers teach.

“The map is not the territory.” These words rushed through my brain. “How can doing this assignment prepare me for developing units in my practicum?” the student teacher demanded. Pause. “I took this course because I was told,” and she emphasized the word “told”, alluding to the higher power that supported her bone of contention: “I was told that I would be working on an assignment that I could directly use in the second week of my practicum.” She paused again for dramatic effect. “That was what I was told.” She munched on her food and waited for my response. Her reaction was provoked in response to a map, a course outline, a specific geographical point on this “map”: my choice of assignment. Are we quibbling

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over maps, I asked myself, or is it just a semantic difference, namely, the word, "unit"? The name is not the thing named.

"Well, you're right that the assignment focuses on using a literacy strategy within instructional scaffolding. It is not intended to be a unit but it will provide you with strategies that students can use to be autonomous learners. That is our purpose. To encourage students to be autonomous learners rather than dependant on the teacher." As a conciliatory gesture, I inserted, "You could expand it into something like a unit. People have done that before. Combined strategies."

"How many days?"

"Pardon?"

"How many days will this lesson last?"

Ah. A light goes off inside and the waves start to wash over me. I've been here at the university for so long that a part of me has forgotten what it was like to be there, a beginning teacher, with the insecurity of not being able to imagine what teaching looks, feels and tastes like, and feeling pressure from the powers-that-be to produce something that conforms to a pre-set plan. In a unit, you begin by specifying a theme. You specify your objectives, which materials you'll need, how the lesson will proceed from introduction to middle to closure. The lesson follows a precise rhythm that can be clocked. You specify how many days the unit will last and how many minutes each lesson, and each part of the lesson, will endure. My teacherly frames have shifted so far that, immured in my new location, I've forgotten that such frames exist. I'm in a different place from where she is. But I too am in a new teaching situation: a novice university instructor. So, touché.

Not all of these thoughts come right away. It is on the familiar walk up the hill towards home that it hits me and, as Bateson might say, information comes through pleroma in the form of difference. An understanding of the difference between where I am at and where the student teachers are (or some of them are; I don't want to overgeneralize). My answer, as I sit down at the computer that night, a little weary but determined, is to bridge between paradigms.

Bateson (1972) tells the story of how Jung complained that his house was full of noisy ghosts bothering him and his family. Bateson thought that Jung was experiencing "an epistemological crisis" because when Jung sat down to write, all the ghosts disappeared; he dated "all of his later insight" to these writings (p. 455). One of Jung's insights from this period, records Bateson, was that there are two worlds, "pleroma" and "creatura" (p. 456). In the pleroma, "events are caused by forces and impacts" (p. 456). Here, "no distinctions" obtain among things (p. 456). Differences are what speak to human beings across pleroma. Synonymous words for "difference" include "information" (Bateson, 1988, p. 72) or "news" (Bateson, 1972, p. 454; Bateson & Bateson, 1987, pp. 14, 17). Information comes to us from the pleroma. The map is not the territory. Pleroma is not creatura. The "territory never gets in at all" (Bateson, 1972, p. 454). Only "difference" does.

Bateson emphasizes how, as a society, we tend to mistake the map for the territory. A paradigm shift needs to take place, not in order that we can move into pleroma from creatura, says Bateson (1988), but so that we can achieve a higher level of creatura. To understand the significance of the shift within teaching and learning that Bateson is proposing, we need to look at his thoughts on cybernetics and the difference between analogic and digital thinking.

II. Paradigm Shifts.

Bateson (1988) says about the paradigm shift to the cybernetic: “As I see it, the root of the matter lies in the contrast between the digital and the analogic or, in another language, between the name and the process that is named” (p. 200; emphasis in the original). Digital thinking is allied with logical systems of defining and naming, such as the student teacher’s preoccupation with definitions and procedures. Analogic thinking, on the other hand, is “cybernetic” as in a self-regulating circuit (Bateson, 1972, p. 459). A continuous transactional communication runs among the elements. Bateson’s idea was for society to arrive at a more cybernetic, or self-regulating, way of thinking about things. The question of how to accomplish this shift relates directly to my classroom story.

For Bateson, the world is organized into two stochastic systems: evolution (genetics) and biology (mental process). A stochastic system is one that combines random with non-random elements. Whereas historically these two systems (evolution and biology) have vied with one another, Bateson wants to argue that both are indispensable. Rather than combining them into a new synthesis, however, they need to be “alternating” (Bateson, 1988, p. 201). In terms that return us to the significance of his phrase, “the map is not the territory,” Bateson (1988) clarifies that “to get from the name to the name of the name, we must go through the process of naming the name” (p. 201; emphasis in the original). One of the ways in which to understand how this learning process might take place is to consider the first of Berman’s (1990) three R’s: “reflexivity, reciprocity and rootedness” (p. 3). Berman’s three R’s were inspired by his reading of Bateson. Reflexivity, Berman explains, “involves the deliberate awareness of constructing or using a code” (p. 3). The present alternative to reflexivity, argues Berman, is the conception of knowledge as a mirror. However, it does not take very long for a mirror to “harden” and for us to mistake our world-view for the world (p. 3). Or, in Bateson’s language, “we talk as if the *Creatura* were really *Pleromatic*” (Bateson & Bateson, 1987, p. 27).

With awareness of the code as a construction come two insights. One insight Berman (1981) identifies with Bateson’s notion of limits and thresholds. The other is Bateson’s (1988) idea of possibility or “relationship” (p. 17) (discussed in the next section). On thresholds, Bateson (1988) says that “what we, as scientists, can perceive is always limited by threshold . . . Knowledge at any given moment will be a function of the thresholds of our available means of perception” (p. 29). For science, those “means of perception” are instruments or technological apparatus (p. 29). Thus, for example, there is no allowance within a scientific framework for somatic knowledge. Berman (1981) recalls that one of Bateson’s favorite quotes came from Pascal, Descartes arch-rival: “The heart has its reasons which the reason does not at all perceive” (p. 197). Bateson was interested in how knowledge, and the naming of knowledge, is constrained by paradigms and how to move past that. He would remind us that the name is not the thing named (Bateson & Bateson, 1987, p. 21). Coming back to my story, instead of asking what a unit is, which is a question about definitions, or of suggesting a pragmatic agreement on what a unit is, Bateson would likely have asked: What can a unit be? Answering this question involves seeing things in relationship to one another.

III. Seeing Things in Relation.

Bateson (1988) articulates his notion of relationships using Goethe’s description of a leaf:

*A stem is that which bears leaves.
A leaf is that which has a bud in its angle.
A stem is what was once a bud in that position. (p. 18)*

Similarly with nouns, predicates and adjectives, says Bateson. These ought to be shown in relation to one another rather than as things-in-themselves (p. 17). The role that relations and connections, or what Bateson calls “patterns,” play are analogous to the part “intimations of immortality” play in Wordsworth’s ode. Bateson ascribes to the poets a knowledge of which we have lost conscious awareness. Recognition of patterns, and realization of meta-patterns, connects us to a broader realm of possibility by which we can live. “The name is not the thing named.” What is it that both I, as instructor, and the student teacher are trying to articulate by our words, “unit” or “teaching-learning strategy”? Bateson (1972) suggests “that “pleroma” and “creatura” are words which we could usefully adopt to construct bridges between worlds (p. 456). One bridge that Bateson identifies is of a meta-level of learning, which consists in an awareness of the code that regulates our living as well as an ability to regulate, adjust, or change it. Bateson suggests “a non-Cartesian mode of scientific reasoning . . . to quote Don Juan’s admonition to Carlos Castaneda, ‘a path with a heart,’ and yet without any corresponding loss of rational clarity” (Berman, 1981, p. 233). In teaching student teachers, that path would involve recognizing where student teachers’ understanding begins (the “unit”) and ways in which to challenge that learning, thus constructing bridges from creatura to pleroma so as to let “difference” in.

IV. Telling Teaching Stories about Learning.

Bateson, in asking himself whether regions existed that angels could live in but fools dreaded to enter, contemplated his own experiences of learning how to play the violin. He recalled that he persisted in focusing on achieving the right note, and that his goal continuously eluded him: “By continually trying to correct the individual note, I prevented myself from learning that the music resides in the larger sequence” (Bateson & Bateson, 1987, p. 49). Bateson “feared to tread” in those regions that move between “conscious self-correction” and “unconscious obedience to inner calibration” (p. 49). What does it take to break out of one pattern into a new pattern? What does it involve for student teachers to recognize how their previous schooling experiences have shaped their perceptions of what it is possible to do as teachers? How do teacher educators themselves avoid the trap of delivering a preferred curriculum and instead learn to move into regions where only angels tread? What is that “larger sequence” in relation to teaching and learning? As answers to these questions, there is simply Bateson’s adage that patterns will become static unless challenged to change. In speaking about the training of a dolphin, Bateson (1988) recounted, the dolphin stubbornly persisted with the same tricks until pushed into inventing his own “routine.” Is this not what both teaching and learning are about? Returning to my classroom story in light of Bateson, I imagine a different path:

“The purpose of doing this “unit” is to break into a new place in which other possibilities can be envisioned. My plan won’t work for your teaching, because it comes out of where my heart and mind have been. However, the message that I am trying to convey is: Play with the strategies and texts, and create out of your own context. That is what teaching is, and what a “unit,” so far as it can be defined, also is.”

*“But, but, but, but . . .how, how, how . . .”
Don’t focus on the individual note.
The map is not the territory.*

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