

# Re-thinking strategic thinking

## What if Gregory Bateson taught Business Strategy?



00:00 Hello.

Take three. Oh, you don't know about that, do you?

What if Gregory Bateson taught business strategy?

This series, if you haven't seen the earlier ones, is me reflecting on my experience teaching in a good business school in the UK, and trying to recover from a feeling that for many, many, many of those years, what we were teaching in the arena of business strategy was wrong. Not only was it wrong, I think the expectations of teaching in a business school did not make for a good environment for learning strategy and strategy process.

So I posed myself the question, what if Gregory Bateson was teaching strategy? From your knowledge and insight into Gregory Bateson, John, what do you think he'd do?

The irony is, as I get to the last, and I don't know how many, two, maybe three, three pieces in this series, I might even have got this series all wrong, because I've gone back and I've been rereading *Mind and Nature*. Wow, what a book. And Gregory Bateson. And also *Angels Fear*. This is a precious book given to me by a friend of mine that I've lost contact with since we moved, Major Richard Wilson. Richard, thank you. Really, really important book. But anyway, sorry, go back to it.

I think even what I've been suggesting here isn't entirely right, because I **haven't got the balance** of how Bateson would be posing questions and anticipating student learning from their inquiry process and from their responses. And so it's the concrete that they told. So,

02:39 Here we have bull ring, as called by Steve, and ball ring, as called by me.

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It's funny. An exercise that we first used many, many, many years ago. And while many of my colleagues saw this as another exercise in the process of team building, it struck me from quite early on that this exercise is a real metaphor for the way in which we approach handling complex tasks within an environment strategy. I absolutely love this exercise, and I want to show it to you and explain why. But sadly, sadly, having gone through all of my files, gone through Steve's files that he's got in the public domain, and having asked my students, there is no video *that we have* of this.

03:52 Ball ring.

03:59 This is the setup of ball ring.



And if you look, please, in the centre, more or less, of the photograph, you'll see a ball sitting on what actually is a coil - a bit bigger than my hand, but of course a circle, not a heart-shaped one, a circle.

04:25 And as you can see, there are strings coming out of that centre.

They have picked the ball up somewhere over the back by the swings from a dog dish inside that rectangle, just like you can see laid out in the forefront of the picture. And they are moving towards this one, I think. It's possible they're going in the other direction. It's possible that they're going in the other direction, but...

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05:06 So, my favourite.

When students first pick this up, to them, it seems really, really obvious. We must not let the ball fall off. So, we have to keep the ring, within a certain tolerance, level.

05:27 That means we have to keep our strings taut.

This isn't difficult, is it? So, they pick it up, and they drop it. This isn't difficult, is it? So, they pick it up, and they drop it.

05:50 Well, they have to learn fairly quickly, because it's not something you can see before the event.

It's the dynamic behaviour of the ball in the ring at the end of the strings.

And they have to be very, very careful to watch how individual movements impact on the ring and the ball. They have to begin to understand the behaviour of this system.

06:21 Sharing understanding, of course, is really, really helpful. So, they talk a lot. We have actually, after students have done this a few times, like two, asked them to do it without talking. That really extends, in one sense, their ability to communicate non-verbally as

a team. I'm not sure that it necessarily adds any understanding or contribution to the idea of business strategy. So, they chat. They chat a lot.

06:54 And chatting becomes very, very important as they handle obstacles in the environment.

07:12 You'll notice, actually, this is a different session. This is a different team working with them all. Actually, they're in the same location, just a different part of the playground, different part of the field.

07:27 So, moving together, keeping the thing in line, keeping it stable, even though it's dynamic, so you can't keep it still. There's a discussion that Bateson has in different places.

07:40 There's a need to communicate.

It's interesting how individuals and the team have to engage and react very quickly to how they are communicating.

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08:04 This looks really comfortable, doesn't it? I suspect this



is an inquiry.  
This is a “how are we doing? What are we doing?”  
Helpful. The facial expression invites engagement, I think.  
Then that's just a personal reading of this young lady's body language.

08:26 This proves over time, and very quickly,



not to be constructive and helpful in terms of balling. I don't know what expectations she has of her intervention, but it's unlikely to be successful. One, because of the tension in her physique in her face and the pointing finger. And secondly, because while she's doing this, her left hand is not being attended to and will be having an impact on the ball system.

09:04 Now, here we have evidence of people being much, much more attentive to the system, even while they are in discussion.

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Even while they are in discussion.

09:19 There's a need to be talking and listening, and a need to be paying attention to, in my notes, I put three, but actually more than three things concurrently.

09:34 We have an expression, attending to.

### **Attending to.**

When we're talking about attending to, it's what is it that you set yourself to go and to look for? What are your expectations? What is it that you're trying to experience? What is it you're trying to see? What is it you're trying to gather data or information? I should say information from information about? What are the little differences that you're paying attention to, to

understand the dynamic behaviour of that system and whether or not you're making progress?

10:18 Now, here we can see the speaker is still paying an awful lot of attention to what's going on with the ball.

10:24 The person to his immediate left is attending to him. She clearly finds him worth listening to. I was going to say authoritative, but that's probably the wrong expression. Worth listening to.

Subject from the previous slide, she's being much, much more attentive.

And the redhead girl on the speaker's right, is definitely paying attention to the ball. Paying attention to what's happening with the ball system as she's listening.

So, we have a notion of what you are attending to.

The differences in the system that are emerging in its dynamic state.

11:13 What are the differences that you're looking out for? And how are you processing those views of difference to your understanding of the system?

11:24 But that's not all you need to pay attention to. I love this slide because this lady, she's very, very self-aware

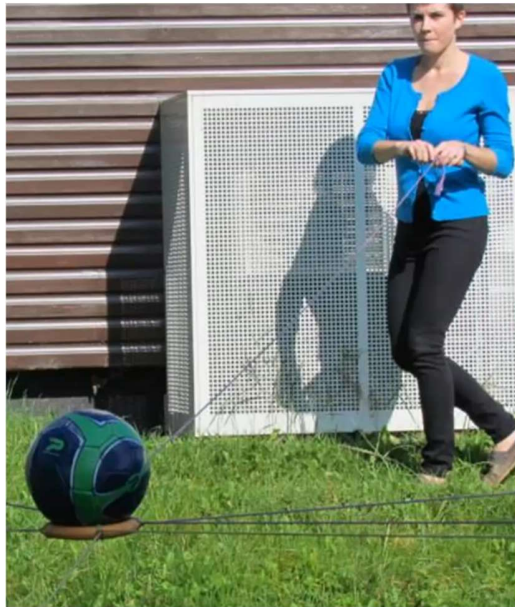
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of her movement and the impact that she's having on the system.

Now, it's not surprising because when you look at the directions that the strings are in, she is the individual with, (I want to take my hand the right way on the



screen), that angle, posture, attitude of the ball on the ring.

If she were to slacken off her string, the ball would drop away from you as an observer, onto the grass. But she is having to move along and around the air

conditioning cupboard and come in it. Or the whole system to be able to move. So, we have all of this attention to the environment and self-awareness of how I'm moving, the way in which I'm moving, and the impact I am having as I move on the system.

12:50 This, it seems to me, is at the nub of Gregory Bateson's thinking, but also is buried, but not very deeply, in Chia and Holt in their writing. Because they speak of the observer as being aware of how they are engaged within that business system. The way in which they're scanning and looking for things, how they are set up, what they are going for, and also being aware of the impact of the way in which they conduct themselves, the way in which they behave upon that business strategy system.

13:34 Oops!

13:39 Special circumstances. Individuals, while they're contributing to the whole team effort, may well get into serious environmental difficulty or problems. They might have issues which have to be dealt with, or they have to be assisted with, as part of the team, as part of the strategy process. What I haven't told you, one of

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- the rules is you may not shorten your string, okay?  
And she might have the option of shortening that string so she doesn't have to get stuck in the hedge and around the tree. **Not allowed!** Not allowed! So, she starts off being by the tree, and then right, right, back in the bushes. The team now has to work in a way which accommodates her circumstances and her ability to still contribute and to recover. Because if she loses control of that string, they lose control of the ball, they lose control of the dynamics and the stability of the ball.
- Attention to detail. I'm sorry, I could not resist the pun.
- 14:53 Here we are, almost at the end of the exercise, and they are seeking to get the ball down into the dog bowl. And you might think that that is actually fairly straightforward. I can tell you, both from having done it and having observed this exercise many, many times, apart from the pick up, this is probably the most difficult part.
- The strings need to be together in a way which is coordinated extremely well.
- 15:29 Because it's so, so easy for the one side of the ball just to suddenly, or the ring, just to suddenly flop and go.
- 15:49 There is an indoor version. Actually, I think this is probably a lot more difficult, that little ball on that little ring. At least the strings are smaller.
- What I find intriguing as I look at this picture, or what I was going to say, what I find intriguing looking at this picture, is why two members of the team are facing away. But they're under an obligation to keep their strings taught. Tight. Sorry, terrible pun I'm talking to. This also might merit the title. "Attention to detail".
- Oops. So, the whole system.
- 16:40 I really think it's a splendid metaphor. But the issue is, it needs very, very careful debriefing. And the things that I've spoken to you about need to be drawn out from the team. And that ain't always easy. That ain't always easy.
- 17:03 So, watching the ball as a subsystem, the strings, colleagues, looking for news of difference in the way in which the ring and the ball are behaving.
- 17:18 As information to which they have to respond by adjusting their hand holding. And they need to have a

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- consciousness, an awareness of themselves as a whole system to be able to move across the landscape. I really love this exercise.
- So, careful debriefing and reportage, talking through what it is that you found out. Please don't use green. This is just as well, because I've probably taken a slide which wasn't from this exercise, rather feedback which wasn't from this exercise. But still.
- 18:14 Bateson very, very careful.
- 18:25 He's not explicit in the material I've been rereading about the debriefing process.
- No. Not explicit. But his own commentary on what he's doing is very clear, very, very clear, that he carefully draws out feedback from the students.
- Reinforcing the things which are significant in the sense that on his agenda, as he set the exercise. But also listening for things which students have found important, but he hadn't necessarily anticipated.
- 19:07 I really cannot stress enough, as I get more and more into the thinking through what Bateson would be doing. The need for sharing, the need for reflecting. The need for thinking, what is it that we need to be looking for? News of difference. Thinking through and doing differently to make a positive difference in the way that we do things tomorrow.
- 19:39 The education system that I was part of was not good at this. Not good at this. The development of competencies, competency statements, and reporting learning and learning development and learning logs.
- 20:01 There is no substitute really for people talking to each other and sharing and uncovering and doing things. These learning report style stuffs, this is what I learned from this module.... Absolute rubbish, because the students are formulaic. They find stuff on the internet which has got the appropriate wording. The key thing in this exercise that I learned was learning objective. It's not personal, it's not real. Anyway, shut up John, stop being political.
- 20:37 Bye-bye. I hope you enjoyed this little piece. I hope vicariously it's added to your experience and your food for thought. On to the next one, John.

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You take care. We'll see you next time.



The playlist

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLOlzrdw8c9lxsImsgFsyy7CO32-kTfqj4>



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<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLOlzrdw8c9lzyKhwi0Xupdt6uaLjVAT9I>

### What if Gregory Bateson had taught strategy?



If Bateson taught business strategy, what would he do?

I/We taught "good practice" in my school, **but** I can't help thinking it was **wrong**

This is about thinking through why it was wrong



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Playlist :

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLOlzrdw8c9lwHRAUm4v9VIm2AifP3B2N>