Making Accessible the Reform Implications of Gregory Bateson’s Core Ideas on Language


This book is especially timely as Bowers has a clear sense of what has been missing in the thinking of environmental writers, and in today’s liberal and right-wing political discourse that fails to take seriously environmental issues. He understands that Bateson’s core insights on the nature of language need to be more widely understood if this problem is to be addressed. The problem that continues to go unrecognized by environmental writers and political pundits has roots that go way back in the history of western culture. A key aspect of the problem was summarized in recent years by Michael Reddy who identified the misconception as thinking of language as a conduit in a sender/receiver process of communication. This view of language, while now being challenged in the growing literature on the metaphorical nature of thinking, is reinforced in public schools and especially in universities where the myths of objective knowledge and data, a rational process that is free of cultural influences, and that there is such a thing as individual thought, are still the dominant orthodoxies. What sets Bowers book apart from other books on Bateson is that he focuses entirely on Bateson’s five core ideas on how language carries forward the misconceptions of earlier thinkers who were not aware of environmental limits.

Bateson’s most famous book, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972) is widely known, but according to Bowers the organization of the essays as well as Bateson’s penchant for introducing mind-altering insights followed by other mind-altering insights that are not always connected or examined in terms of their multiple social and ecological implications has contributed to many readers putting the book aside as too difficult to understand—and to engaging students already socialized to thinking of language as a conduit through which they communicate their supposedly original ideas.

Bowers’ summary of the five core ideas include what Bateson refers to as the continued dominance of recursive epistemologies, that the map is not the territory, that the difference which makes a difference is the basic unit of information circulating through both cultural and natural ecologies and undergoing constant transformation, that double bind thinking occurs when the ecology of language processes are not understood, and that the way to avoid double bind thinking requires Level III thinking.

As Bowers has been writing for years about the need for fundamental reforms in public schools and universities, his discussion of Bateson’s core ideas focuses on the need to take them seriously if we are to begin addressing the cultural roots of the ecological crisis—including how the global spread of computer-mediated learning reinforces the western myth of individual intelligence and the penchant for abstract thinking. He states that this will require current faculty to recognize how their own graduate school mentors socialized them to take for granted the cutting edge patterns of thinking that promoted a modernizing
and environmentally destructive westernizing agenda. Bowers recognizes that it may be easier to understand Bateson’s core ideas as an academic exercise than it will be to persuade faculty to address how their own taken for granted interpretative frameworks are based on many of the same deep cultural assumptions that provided the conceptual basis for the industrial/consumer-dependent culture. Nevertheless, Bowers explains the educational reform implications of Bateson’ five core ideas on language in a way that overcomes Bateson’s often terse treatment, and even goes beyond Bateson’s own thinking.

The following provides a brief summary of how Bowers expands on the language processes that continue to go largely unrecognized because of the current spread of computer-mediated thinking and communication, the long-held assumptions that privileges print-based and thus abstract knowledge over oral traditions, and the current myths of individual autonomy and that continual change is essential to progress. By focusing on Bateson’s insights about the language processes largely ignored because of the widely held view of language as a conduit in a sender/receiver process of communication, Bowers has brought together in a single chapter what he claims are Bateson’ five core ideas. By presenting these ideas together, readers are more likely to recognize their interconnections than if they were to encounter them spread throughout the different chapters in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. The following represents a brief summary, as well as Bowers’ expansion on the implications of Bateson’s insights.

1. Bateson challenges the widely held idea of progress whereby new ideas displace older patterns of thinking with his claim that a process of epistemological recursion has been a dominant characteristic of western thinking. In being influenced by Bateson’s explanation of some of the characteristics of metaphorical thinking, Bowers suggests that Bateson’s claim of recursion can be seen today in how the root metaphors derived from the past continue to serve as the meta-cognitive schemata that underlie the development of modern culture. These root metaphors include patriarchy, anthropocentrism, mechanism, individualism, progress, economism, and evolution—with ecology emerging as a new explanatory framework and with patriarchy now being challenged. In Bowers’ other writings, also influenced by Bateson, he explains how these root metaphors influence the vocabulary that frames our taken for granted patterns of thinking—including how the root metaphors also exclude certain vocabularies that limit alternative ways of understanding.

2. Bateson’s famous statement that the “map is not the territory.” as Bowers points out, is key to understanding Bateson’s insights about how words, as metaphors, carry forward the insights, misconceptions, and silences of earlier thinkers. Put simply, words are metaphors that encode the analogs settled upon in the distant past, and in some instances revised by current thinkers. The implications of recognizing that words have a history, that they are influenced by the root metaphors taken for granted in earlier eras, and that they are likely not
to take account of current changes occurring in today’s natural and cultural ecologies, further challenges a number of current orthodoxies reinforced in public schools, universities, and the media. As Bowers points out, Bateson’s metaphor for representing language as providing the conceptual/moral maps that are the basis of much of current thinking challenges the idea of individual autonomy in thinking and in making moral judgments. Bateson’s insight, if taken seriously by educational reformers, would lead to emphasizing that words have a history, and thus to examining what Bowers refers to as the linguistic colonization of the present by the past—as well as the linguistic colonization of other cultures.

3. Bateson’s concept of double bind thinking, which has influenced a number of disciplines, is also critical to understanding why, in the face of mounting scientific evidence of life-altering environmental changes, most of the formal and informal processes of education continue to reinforce the patterns of thinking (the root metaphors) that have been major contributors to the ecological crisis. Double bind thinking, which usually goes unrecognized, can be seen in the current emphasis on promoting economic growth which will further accelerate the degradation of the environment, in educating the younger generations to take for granted the conceptual orthodoxies and silences that characterize a modern and consumer-dependent lifestyle that will make it more difficult for them to recognize the patterns of local self-sufficiency (what Bowers refers to as the cultural commons) that still survive in the face of the constant efforts of the market system to monetize all aspect of daily life. Again, as Bowers points out, double bind thinking goes largely unrecognized because of the failure of educators are all levels to challenge how the conduit view of language marginalizes awareness of what Bateson refers to as an ecology of unsustainable ways of thinking about human/nature relationships.

4. Bateson identifies three levels of thinking: Level I being the non-reflective patterns of stimulus/response, Level II involves learning the taken for granted patterns of thinking of previous generations, and Level III involves learning to examine the deep taken for granted cultural assumptions (root metaphors) and to continually revising past ways of thinking in ways that take account of the current changes in the interdependent cultural and natural ecologies within which the individual’s life-world is nested. Bowers expands on Bateson’s concept of Level III thinking by utilizing a fifth Batesonian insight that leads to recognizing that Level III thinking can be better understood as exercising ecological intelligence.

5. Batson’s fifth insight is that the basic unit of information in all cultural and natural ecologies is what he refers to as a “difference which makes a difference.” Bowers points out that Bateson’s expanded explanation, namely, that “such a difference, as it travels and undergoes successive transformation in a circuit, is an elementary idea”, is key to
understanding Bateson’s criticism of thinking of entities and events in terms of their unique characteristics rather than in terms of their relationships and responses to the differences which make a difference in relationships within the different interdependent ecologies. These differences, which may be coded in ways that range from the chemical, genetic, behavioral, linguistic, and larger system responses, leads Bowers to emphasize in other chapters how being aware of these differences requires giving attention to how one’s behavior and thinking needs to take account of the ever-changing patterns of information (differences) being communicated through the different and interconnected cultural and natural ecologies. The need to give close attention to these complex information systems that characterize all relationships leads Bowers to point out how the current privileging of print and digitized communication leads to reinforcing abstract thinking and thus to a lack of awareness of the ecology of differences that need to be recognized if we are to lighten our ecological footprint and to improve our relationships with others.

The remaining book chapters address the following: the connections between the exercise of ecological intelligence and local democracy, the failure of educational social justice advocates to recognize how the ecological crisis will require shifting from the promotion of middle class values to recognizing the importance of revitalizing the local cultural commons of different ethnic groups that provide alternatives to the consumer-dependent lifestyle that is undergoing fundamental changes, the role that root metaphors play in framing moral values, and how the educational uses of computers undermine the exercise of ecological intelligence while reinforcing the modern view of individual intelligence that does not take account of the influence of language. As the idea of ecological intelligence requires thinking against the grain of the current educational orthodoxies about how to promote the supposedly autonomous individual’s own construction of knowledge and values, Bowers devotes an entire chapter to explaining the many ways individual intelligence is being reinforced in public school and university classrooms, and the ways in which the exercise of ecological intelligence can be reinforced. This requires explaining how limited forms of ecological intelligence are exercised in everyday experiences. Too often, as he points out, the exercise of ecological intelligence falls short of recognizing the relationships between responding to the differences which make a differences in playing a game, preparing a meal, engaging in a conversation with others, driving a car, introducing a chemical into the environment, and so forth, and how these activities impact the ecologies of natural systems.

As Bowers wants to challenge the possible misconception that ecological intelligence is something that only exists in the realm of theory, he invited Jorge Ishizawa and Grimaldo Rengifo, the co-directors of the NGO that coordinates the cultural affirmation projects among the Quechua of the Peruvian Andes, to contribute a chapter that explains how this ancient culture exercises ecological intelligence through their traditions of giving close attention to how every aspect of their natural environment is understood as communicating to them how and
where they should plant their crops and manage their herds of animals. Their chapter also provides a powerful example of how a culture based on a profoundly different mythopoetic narrative that holds that nature nurtures the Quechua as they nurture nature has succeeded in expanding the diversity of plants and animals in what we would regard as extremely harsh and unforgiving environments. He also invited Rolf Jucker, the Director of the Swiss Foundation on Environmental Education, to discuss how the UNESCO 10 year project for promoting ecologically sustainable thinking in the world’s teacher education programs is actually the recursive patterns of thinking that gave conceptual direction to the Industrial Revolution that has now entered its digital phase of development.

There are definite limitations connected with the decision to focus entirely on what Bowers has identified as Bateson’s five key ideas about the language processes he regards as fundamental to introducing genuine and far-reaching educational reforms. His decision was driven by a concern with addressing educational reforms rather than with a concern with presenting a well rounded understanding of Bateson’s ecology of mind, or with an understanding of how Bateson’s ideas developed in response to other major thinkers of his day. The other limitation of Bowers’ book is that many of the reform implications need to be discussed more fully as they go against the grain of the current taken for granted patterns of thinking of most educators—including both teacher educators and academics across the disciplines. Indeed, what really needs to happen is for Bowers to engage with leading trend setters in the academic world in a dialogue about the reform implications of Bateson’s core ideas about the role of language in double bind thinking. The reliance upon print and an extended presentation of ideas as the vehicle for promoting the deep cultural changes that will be needed in the decades ahead may itself be a relic of the pre-digital past when academics were less hurried and less disciplined focused. A final observation is that Bowers’ book should not be viewed as a substitute for reading *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, and *Mind and Nature*, as the encounter with Bateson’s own thinking will likely lead to other the insights that go beyond what Bowers presents.