



## Relating Systems Thinking and Design (RSD12) Symposium | October 6–20, 2023

### **Epistemological Error, Levels of Learning, and the Double Bind**

**Joanna Boehnert and Ben Sweeting**

#### **A workshop on Gregory Bateson's Theories of Mind**

This workshop examines how the work of anthropologist and cybernetician Gregory Bateson informs deeper understandings of the complexities of environmental crises and the practical challenges of designing adaptive responses. It offers participants an opportunity to consider how Bateson's ideas manifest in tangible ways and how they might inform design practice. For example, Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972) describes a fundamental "epistemological error" in ways of knowing. The error is part of the denial of ecological context with wide-reaching implications from schizophrenia at an individual level to pollution in Lake Erie at the regional ecological level. The concept of epistemological error suggests a major reframing of design practice in line with more contemporary debates on ecological and plural ontologies in design, as described by Arturo Escobar (2018), Renata Leitão (2023), and others. This workshop makes time to explore three key Batesonian concepts: the ideas of epistemological error, levels of learning (deutero-learning), and the double bind. We explore how these ideas manifest in everyday life and in design practice with the aim of interrogating how they can be used in systemic design. We invite participants to spend time with concepts that disentangle errors in modernist siloed and dis-embedded ways of knowing and invite situated learning on complex feedback loops. Finally, and only briefly, we consider if and how these concepts might inform practice in regenerative architecture and design.

KEYWORDS: ecologies of mind, epistemological error, levels of learning, the double bind, extended mind, Gregory Bateson

RSD TOPIC(S): Learning & Education

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## **Workshop Description**

Gregory Bateson's ideas have been influential in the systemic design community. Bateson was an early ecological theorist whose work engaged with ideas such as entanglement and emergence—although this language was not used at the time. We explore the scope to widen and deepen systemic practice by collectively exploring three Batesonian concepts. The workshop connects to the #NewMacy and second-order cybernetics focus at RSD12-Kingston (UK), as Bateson was part of the core group that developed the Macy Conferences in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The session begins with an introduction to the concepts of epistemological error, levels of learning (deutero-learning), and the double bind. The workshop includes individual and group work identifying examples and experiences where these concepts become manifest. The aim of the workshop is to share ideas with participants and make space to explore how these concepts might be evident in our experiences and practices. Workshop participants may or may not decide to share any work they create with the project.

## **Agenda**

### **90 minutes | 20 participants maximum**

Registered participants are given a selection of short readings to prepare.

- 10 minutes – Introduction to the project
- 15 minutes – Introduction to three key concepts: epistemological error, levels of learning (deutero-learning), and the double bind
- 5 minutes – Individual visualising or storytelling method on chosen concept
- 30 minutes – Small groups created to explore each concept
- 30 minutes – Group discussion

## References

1. Bateson, G. (1972) *Steps to an ecology of mind*. University of Chicago Press.
2. Escobar, A. (2018) *Designs for the pluriverse: Radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds*. Duke University Press.
3. Leitão, R. M. (2023) Pluriversal worlding, *AM Journal*, 30, 17–35.  
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