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Frames, Framing, and Designed Conversational Processes: Lessons From the World Café

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Abstract

In this article, we use the anthropologist Gregory Bateson's conceptualization of framing and his theory of interpersonal communication process to explore how relational realities develop in designed conversational processes. In recent years, there has been a blossoming of interest in large group methods as a way of achieving whole-system change. Many of these techniques seek to construct alternative spaces or dialogic "containers" in which the usual routines and authority structures are suspended; as such, they require that practitioners give particular attention to issues of framing. By analyzing examples drawn from two World Café events, we attempt to clarify theoretical principles underlying dialogic approaches to organizational change. We also consider the practical implications inherent in Bateson's ideas, particularly the possibilities they offer for enhancing the facilitator's awareness of the context in which he or she is a participating member.

Keywords

frame, context, World Café, dialogue, large group methods, Bateson

In an effort to foster greater participation and dialogue, many organizations continue to develop and experiment with large group methods that seek to achieve whole-system change by involving large numbers of members in new forms of collective experience. These new meeting forms may be aimed at designing the organization's desired future

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or simply developing collaborative ways of working to explore key questions related to the organization's identity (Bunker & Alban, 2006; Manning & Binzagr, 1996; Seo, Putnam, & Bartunek, 2004). For example, Search Conferences (Emery & Purser, 1996) bring organization members all together in a structured flow of activities for the purpose of defining what is held in common and planning for the future. Future Search (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000) also stresses the discovery of common ground among stakeholders to create a shared vision for the future of their organization or community. Dialogic forms of organization development practice (Bushe & Marshak, 2009) have blossomed in recent years, making use of a variety of meeting formats and conversational processes. However a distinctive feature of many such methods is the way in which they attempt to create a contrast with more conventional meeting formats. By reconfiguring seating arrangements, altering the usual rules and structures of participation, and even introducing opportunities for choreographed physical movement, the goal is to challenge participants' expectations and thereby change the shape of the conversation (Bunker & Alban, 2006). The intention in staging these special, demarcated events with their distinctive experiential character is to create a loose "container" for dialogue so that taken-for-granted assumptions can be surfaced, questioned, and perhaps revised (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; see also Olson & Eoyang, 2001).

As Bushe and Marshak (2009) note, dialogically oriented approaches to organizational change require skills that extend beyond the "classic lists of OD [organizational development] consultant competencies" (p. 364). Practitioners, acting as hosts or facilitators, must create a context that not only encourages active participation, but arouses the kind of "intense communicative engagements" (April, 1999, p. 233) among participants that promote ownership of the emerging ideas. The challenge is to stimulate a readiness for democratic dialogue that enables the creation of new meanings and that fosters the kind of actionable knowledge needed to implement emerging plans and decisions. Insofar as these methods invite participants into alternative spaces where a new kind of talking is desired, they require that facilitators pay close attention to how that space is created for participants, each of whom may bring a different understanding of the communicative "situation" to the meeting. In this sense, large group methods require that facilitators give particular attention to issues of framing.

A deceptively simple term, the words *frame* and *framing* are widely used to refer to sense-making devices that aid in organizing and classifying experience (see, e.g., Bolman & Deal, 1997; Fairhurst, 2010; Goffman, 1974; MacLachlan & Reid, 1994). When we frame a subject, we make use of background knowledge to accentuate one possible view of a particular situation over other possible views. The earliest articulation of the concept of frames and framing is usually attributed to the anthropologist, Gregory Bateson (1956, 1972a), whose work explores such topics as learning, play, and fantasy. Bateson's exploration emphasizes what he termed the *metacommunicative* nature of messages, that is, how we create messages "about" our messages to allow for their interpretation in what we hope is a shared context. Within Organization Development, Bateson is perhaps best known for his concept of second-order learning, referring to humans' ability to self-correct through learning "about" learning contexts (Raelin, 2006). However, emerging forms of organizational practice are now inviting

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renewed attention to another aspect of his work, his theory of interpersonal communication process. For Bateson, communication must be seen as multifunctional in that every conversational utterance conveys both a report and command aspect; the report aspect refers to the "literal" content while the command aspect provides cues for how we might interpret the content. These later came to be referred to as the "content" and "relationship" aspects of messages, emphasizing the idea that the same content may be differently understood in the context of different relational cues (G. Bateson, 1968; see also Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). What is most important for organizational development practitioners in Bateson's theorizing of interpersonal communication is his focus on the relational processes at the heart of communication in groups and on how forms of communication are implicated in the construction of organizational realities.

In response to Bushe and Marshak's (2009) recent call for clarification of the theoretical principles that make dialogic approaches effective, we seek to bring Gregory Bateson's (1972a, 1956) ideas more clearly into the foreground of Organizational Development practice. Bateson's ideas have sometimes been misperceived as "flights into abstraction" (Keeney, 1983, p. 6), probably because they make use of alternative forms of description, emphasizing patterns of relationship across diverse kinds of social systems. In this article, we hope to show their potential for improving large group methods practice, and particularly the possibilities they offer for enhancing the practitioner's awareness of the context in which he or she is a participating member. Similar to Bateson's "play" frame, described below, designed conversational processes attempt to construct situations in which the ordinary interactional routines are suspended. In doing so, these processes may capitalize on experiential ambiguities, inviting organizational members to wonder about what is really going on during the event. Are they, for example, working "as usual" or involved in "serious play," that is, engaging in fun, intrinsically motivating activities with the goal of achieving work-related objectives (Statler, Heracleous, & Jacobs, 2011). As a process intervention, serious play is thought to be conducive to improvisation and a sense of involvement, processes crucial to reflective dialogue (see also Heracleous & Jacobs, 2005).

To understand how notions of framing and metacommunication might bear on new meeting genres, we focus here one such format, The World Café, from Bateson's communication process perspective. Our analysis of two World Café conversations suggests that concepts of framing have much to contribute to large group methods practice by shedding light on how alternative meeting genres, as frames, are experienced, and on problems that may arise when the definition of the meeting situation differs among participants or between participants and meeting planners. We begin this article with a review of Bateson's conceptualization of framing as it is embedded in his discussion of the composition of messages and contexts. We then turn to the World Café, describing its key process elements followed by two brief examples. These vignettes of Café conversations are drawn from one of the authors' ongoing action research experiences at a regional science center that has made the World Café a regular part of its culture and way of working. In the spirit of Kurt Lewin, we see framing as a practical theory underlying World Café design. Its elaboration can shed light on the subtle but crucial

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dynamics of interventions aimed at opening up space for dialogue and for "serious play" (Statler et al., 2011). By analyzing these episodes through the lens of framing, our aim is to show how the emergence of new meanings is not strictly determined by prior conditions. The staged elements of designed conversational processes are likely to produce a variety of outcomes depending on how they are interpreted by participants and how those interpretations play out in interaction. Although reframing, as an organizational change process, has often emphasized goals of *shared* meaning, we hope to move toward a deeper understanding that also recognizes the inherent possibility for intended frames to generate ambiguity and uncertainty. We go on to consider how these qualities of indeterminacy, as evoked in World Café and other dialogic approaches, can set the stage for paradigmatic shifts to appreciating the importance of contingency and multiple perspectives.

Theorizing Frames in Practice

In reviewing the literature on frames and framing, Dewulf et al. (2009) note that the term *frame* has come to mean different things within alternative research paradigms. They distinguish two primary camps within the scholarship on framing: knowledge schemas and interactive frames (see also MacLachlan & Reid, 1994; Tannen 1993). The first of these theoretical strands draws from cognitive science and artificial intelligence and treats frames as autonomous mental models that serve as resources for interpretation. By contrast, the second, interactive view considers frames to be socially generated "definitions of the situation," that arise in, as well as structure, face-to-face encounters. This latter view stresses *framing* as "an active, processual phenomenon" involving an ongoing negotiation among contending meanings (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614), as participants reflexively examine and make sense of their unfolding interactions. It is in this second, interactive, approach to framing that we find unique insights for understanding alternative meeting genres.

The interactional view of framing as a process of coevolving interpretation can be traced to Bateson's discussion of communicative patterns in face-to-face situations and the importance of context as a necessary resource in meaning making. In attempting to understand how it is that animals' and humans' play communicates through its own fabricated character that it is not "real," Bateson proposed that communication operates at many contrasting levels of abstraction. Here, drawing on Whitehead and Russell's (1910/1962) theory of logical types, he proposed that higher order messages cue particular understandings of words or behaviors and define the nature of the relationship between communicators. Messages qualify—and are qualified by—other messages, so that what we might call "lower order" or framed messages also allow for insight into higher order meanings (G. Bateson, 1968; Haley, 1976; Rawlins, 1987; Wilden, 2001). A unique feature of his work lies in his emphasis on the ability to communicate about communication, to "comment upon the meaningful actions of oneself and others, as essential for successful social intercourse" (G. Bateson, 1972b, p. 215). Animals engaging in pseudo combat are capable of contextualizing their behaviors to convey the message that certain gestures that, in other circumstances, might be

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construed as hostile (i.e., "this is combat") are no longer to be taken at face value; "the animal's playful nip denotes the bite but does not denote what would be denoted by the bite" (G. Bateson, 1972a, p. 180).

Bateson developed a variety of terms to describe the layered quality of human communication. He spoke of "context marker" in referring to both the symbolic objects and the inferred metamessages that are seen as commenting on and modifying other behaviors and messages, thereby helping to establish interpretive frameworks (G. Bateson, 1968). But he later proposed the metaphor of "frame" (G. Bateson, 1956), drawing on the analogy of a picture frame as a border separating and foregrounding a painting from its background, which serves to tell the viewer that a different form of interpretation is invited. In conceptualizing frames as contexts surrounding events or actions that condition their interpretation, Bateson's description prefigures recent discussions of the "containers" created during dialogic interventions. Bushe and Marshak (2009), for example, describe the facilitator's role as creating a container in the form of "a safe and bounded space within which stakeholders can share their views of social reality" (p. 356). While Bateson's conceptualization of frame accords with this recent work, it also emphasizes the idea that the frame is not given ahead but, rather, is produced by the participants continuously as each responds to the other; thus, it pushes the interactive and emergent aspects of the container/frame to the fore.

Bateson developed and articulated his ideas about framing through his exploration of play, psychotherapy, and other marked contexts, such as hypnotic trance and ritual. In these temporary periods of "make-believe" (Nachmanovitch, 2009), events and relationships are understood differently from those of everyday reality. Erving Goffman (1974) later extended these ideas in his development of framing to include the concept of "keying" as a kind of transposition in which an activity that already carries a certain meaning is transformed into something modeled on this activity but interpreted quite differently. (Thus, for example, a wedding rehearsal is understood differently from an actual wedding.) An important contribution of Bateson's thinking is in showing the problems evident in an objectified notion of frame as an immutable structure that can stipulate what is inside with any certainty. Frames are "nonprescribable" insofar as participants have various resources available for challenging the premises of an encounter, thereby "breaking" or altering the frame (G. Bateson, 1972a, p. 187).

Bateson's ideas about the importance of frames for behavior have been particularly important for family therapists, as practitioners, in understanding pathologies of communication in family and interpersonal contexts (Watzlawick et al., 1974); they also inspire questions about more everyday occasions of organizational meeting in which "task" (or "business") and "relationship" dimensions are intertwined. How, for example, does a meeting as a frame legitimate the behavior that occurs within it as concerning the "business" or "work" of the group or organization? (Schwartzman, 1989, p. 275). How does a meeting provide a structure in which participants may appear to be focused on business even while they are engaged in negotiating relational concerns and conflicts? Bateson demonstrates the importance of taking participants' perspectives as a starting point. In his view, the meaning of communicative contexts

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(including staged events such as the World Café) cannot be dictated by the intentions of the designers through the orchestration of a physical and social setting; how participants orient to the setting and select relevant features remains an open question.

Rethinking the Meaning of Meetings

One example of efforts to encourage more diverse forms of organizational participation and a more relational kind of talk that is seen as fundamental to creating and sharing knowledge (April, 1999; Mengis & Eppler, 2008) can be found in the World Café. Developed by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs (Brown, 2005; see also Tan & Brown, 2005), the World Café has been categorized as one of a new generation of participatory methods that attempt to achieve collective change by bringing all members or stakeholders of the system together in one place, using a highly structured process of movement to create flexible and coevolving networks of conversations. Similar to the goals of the strategy workshops described by Hendry and Seidl (2003), the World Café is seen as holding the potential to reshape social relations by establishing a bounded and "safe" conversational space in which the usual routines and authority structures are temporarily suspended. With their alternative structuring of space and talk, the new forms of meeting invite comparisons to what they are *not*: ordinary meetings.

To help foster the desired frame, alternative formats make use of various spatial and symbolic markers, for example, staging the event at an off-site location or in a space outside the usual meeting or conference room. Special seating arrangements, such as smaller, decentralized, face-to-face groupings, are aimed at "deformalizing" (Morand, 1995) the proceedings and minimizing status differences. Some methods use shared writing exercises, or, as is often used in the World Café, a graphic recorder whose role is to create a visual depiction of the ideas generated. By establishing a structure for participation outside the boundaries of everyday interaction, these genres provide an opportunity to explore alternative communicative practices as a means of bringing about whole-system change (Bunker & Alban, 2006).

As shown by its design principles and operating assumptions, the World Café is predicated on the importance of conversation, which has been described as a "declining art" (Miller, 2006). This is most evident in the root metaphor of "café," which connotes a place of neighborhood sociability and casual but convivial encounters with friends and strangers. The Café process can take anywhere from several hours to a day or more and consists of a series of evolving rounds of discussion with participants sitting "café"-style, at small tables for four or five people (Brown, 2005). The event is densely symbolic. Tables are often covered with red and white checked tablecloths reminiscent of an Italian restaurant as well as bud vases with flowers. Sheets of butcher block paper laid on each table along with colored markers or crayons are intended to evoke an atmosphere of play and allow participants, if they desire, to capture emerging ideas with sketches or notes. The experience is designed to be highly participative while also remaining open to different forms and levels of participation (Arnstein, 1969).

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For a group meeting in a Café format for the first time, the facilitator often begins by posing the following question: "Remember a time when you had a genuinely good conversation, one that really made you think. What was it that made it a good conversation?" By inviting participants to identify the qualities they value, this beginning extends an invitation to self-organization by setting expectations about the nature of Café participation based on participants' own emergent criteria. In contrast to a conventional meeting format that tends to limit reflection about the meeting's conversational routines, the Café's opening question encourages participants to "go meta"—to think about the meeting context as a whole.

In the first round, as for each subsequent round, the groups have 20 to 30 minutes to collaboratively generate ideas. In our own experience as Café participants, we have noticed that a typical response as the Café gets underway is often hesitance followed by joking, suggesting the tension many participants feel in beginning an unfamiliar and open-ended task. Sometimes a participant raises procedural issues ("Should I write this down?") but then the talk shifts toward more serious inquiry as participants begin to see the group as a sounding board for ideas. At the end of the first round, each table reports out on their discussion and then one person at each table volunteers to be the temporary "table host," to provide continuity of ideas. Everyone else at the table moves on to different tables and the process repeats itself with additional questions. After several iterations of discussion followed by reporting out, the entire group engages in a discussion of what has occurred. Drawing on Bateson's idea that messages carry multiple orders of information, reports and commands (Ruesch & Bateson, 1968), we can appreciate the multifunctional character of the exchanges among Café participants. As their comments, on one level, address the questions posed by the facilitators, thus advancing the conversation at hand, they also implicitly affirm (or sometimes question) the assumed frame itself.

The World Café website (http://www.theworldcafe.com) and official documents (Brown, 2005) offer a set of guiding principles that indicate the importance of framing in the design and enactment of a café. Two of the principles underscore the importance of framing in facilitating World Cafés. The first principle, *setting the context*, involves making clear the shared purpose of the café. This purpose may range from knowledge development to strategy creation to the exchange of experiences. More fundamentally, setting the context involves "helping people know what's the appropriate 'Café way' of being and learning together" in which the commitment is to creating a more relational kind of talk as distinct from achieving a particular outcome (Mota Margain, 2005, p. 46). A second Café principle is *to create a hospitable space*, that is, to ensure that the design of the Café includes attention to the physical, psychological, and relational space. The small tables and other artifacts serve as context markers, intended to nurture a sense of personal and interpersonal comfort.

At a science center in Tampa, Florida, these principles are used to foster participation in meetings within the organization as well as in meetings involving the organization's larger community. We now turn to this science center to explore the enactment of frames in a World Café setting.

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Café Culture at the Museum of Science and Industry

The Museum of Science and Industry (MOSI), in Tampa, Florida, is a large, regional science center receiving 800,000 visitors a year, including school groups, families with children and grandparents, and adults. The interactive exhibits invite playing and learning with both the material objects that form the exhibit designs as well as with other visitors. For the past several years, MOSI has made extensive use of World Cafés with different kinds of groups on its campus. While both of us have participated in Cafés, Fred has also observed and facilitated Café conversations as part of a broader action research project focused on organizational learning at MOSI. These events have included World Cafés for board meetings and staff meetings, as well as Cafés involving members of the local community (senior citizens, parents of young children, academics, and county administrators) for the planning and design of exhibits and galleries and for joint exploration of issues of general community interest regarding science and society. MOSI's president, Wit Ostrenko, recently noted that in situations requiring participatory decision making, he has heard staff say "Why don't we have a World Café for this?" suggesting that the Café is gradually becoming integrated into the organizational culture at MOSI.

The following examples, drawn from Fred's experience as a World Café cofacilitator at MOSI, illustrate how issues of framing permeated the meetings at many levels. Following the two vignettes, we offer several insights that emerged as we viewed the episodes in light of Bateson's theoretical framework, with its emphasis on context and relationship and his view of communicative systems as both determinate and indeterminate (Fogel & Branco, 1997). In particular, Bateson suggests that even though a proffered frame is designed to evoke certain effects through the use of physical and environmental markers, it cannot ensure that the frame will be recognized and accepted. In other words, he recognized frames as nonprescribable. Participants may infer an entirely different meaning from that intended or they may alter the meaning of the markers through chance discoveries that emerge in the dynamics of their interactions.

Vignette 1: An Executive Board Meeting

After holding several staff meetings using the World Café, the President of MOSI decided to adopt the Café format for one of its regularly scheduled Executive Board meetings aimed at exploring futures for the Science Center. In addition to the instrumental goal of future design, a relational goal of the Café was to create a climate of safety in which members could offer their perspectives in ways that would foster innovative thinking. MOSI's president, Wit Ostrenko asked Fred, with whom had he had cofacilitated World Cafés in other settings, to cohost the meeting.

In an e-mail announcement of the upcoming board meeting, Wit signaled to the members that this would be a different kind of meeting from the usual highly structured event in that it would be held in a World Café format. In the e-mail, he also presented the Café theme: exploring possible futures for MOSI to increase

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sustainability. Although a small number of board members had taken part in previous Cafés hosted at the science center mainly for staff and community members, this was the first time a MOSI board meeting would be organized as a Café conversation. In contrast to the usual boardroom setting with its large elliptical table and "executive" chairs, the World Café board meeting was held in the Black Box space usually used for creative science demonstrations. Café seating was arranged to accommodate 30 people at small, round tables for 4, each covered with tablecloths and drawing paper. Crayons and colored marking pens were provided at each table and coffee was served. Most board members arrived directly from their workplaces for the afternoon meeting.

During the usual arrival and check-in, participants were given name tags with first names only and seated themselves at the café tables. The cohosts began the Café by outlining its purpose. As the president explained, this was a time of increasing economic uncertainty for museums and other public institutions, requiring a serious and yet imaginative conversation about MOSI's future, both short and longer term. The focus would be on generating actionable ideas, using a World Café format in order to enable a new way of interacting. The cohosts gave a basic description of the Café process: how the small groups would be in flux over the course of the afternoon session with individuals free to choose which table they moved to, subject to minimal constraints (four people to a table, etc.). In this way, board members were given both content and process guidelines. Since this was a first World Café for the Board, the facilitators began the first round by asking participants to discuss with one another the qualities they considered as making up a good conversation. After 20 minutes of discussion, each table summarized their ideas for the entire group and then participants moved to other tables around the room while one person at each table remained as "host." In subsequent rounds, the facilitators posed more specific guiding questions. They asked participants to respond to the imaginary situation: "What *could* MOSI be like in 5 years?" Finally, they asked participants to imagine, "We're now 5 years in the future and MOSI has attained these goals. What did we do to get here?" thus drawing attention to the actions and processes necessary to reach those goals.

After several rounds of this networked conversation, the facilitators invited participants to create a summary of the ideas generated by the group and then the group shared their experiences of the process. One board member offered that "this was the first time in a long time that we really talked with each other," and mused that "maybe this is what a board meeting *could* be like." Several other participants agreed. Against the backdrop of appreciative comments, however, another comment drew the facilitators' attention when a senior board member declared, "Yes, this has been great. But now let's get down to business."

Vignette 2: Designing a Learning Space

In an effort to encourage more user-based design processes for the creation of exhibit galleries, MOSI staff planned a World Café to engage members of underrepresented communities who were also mothers of young children in codesigning a children's

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gallery. Unlike the executive board whose members had a history of joint interaction, participants in this Café were an ad hoc group. Even so, the facilitators hoped to generate a sense of involvement and ownership toward the future gallery by inviting the mothers to participate in an enjoyable design process. Participants were contacted by letter and invited to take part in the afternoon session aimed at creating a new space for children's learning and play at MOSI. Recognizing that lack of childcare options might present a barrier to the mothers' participation, the Café planners invited the mothers to bring their children and provided an area for supervised childcare in close proximity to the Café space. Café tables were set up in a large open space usually reserved for traveling exhibits. Fearing that the Café might seem dwarfed by the larger empty space, the designers tried to create a more hospitable feeling by surrounding the Café area with a circle of low picket fences from MOSI's stage design sets. By situating the play area adjacent to the enclosure, the overall layout allowed the parents to have direct "sight lines" to their children.

The cohosts began the meeting by explaining its purpose: to elicit ideas for what a new gallery might be like, particularly if it were to be a place that the participants could feel was "theirs" (this gallery would later be dubbed "Kids in Charge"). As with the Board meeting, the participants were given a description of how the Café process would unfold. This Café began like other Cafés meeting for the first time with the question, "what is it that makes a good conversation for you?" Next, the facilitators asked participants to consider what makes for a good museum experience in which children have fun and learn. For the final round, participants were asked to design an actual space that would allow for learning and fun. Initially, the tone of the collective conversation was subdued and contributions were sparse. However, half way through the session, a shift seemed to occur as some of the children chose to "visit" their mothers, and join in, some quietly and others noisily, with the drawing activities at the tables. Their participation in the table activities seemed to animate the conversation as the mothers began to engage more actively both with the children *and* in the Café conversation. At the end of the Café, one mother remarked that although she had never felt as though MOSI was "my institution," the presence and involvement of the children made her feel more at home. Other mothers echoed this idea.

Binocular Vision: Bringing the Vignettes Into Joint Focus

By juxtaposing these two vignettes, several issues emerge that link theory and practice. One is that even though we, as practitioners, would like to know what the World Café or any meeting genre looks like from the perspective of participants, the particular features of the setting used by participants to produce their interpretive frameworks are difficult for us to anticipate. How participants constitute the meaning of a World Café conversation depends not only on the designed features of the Café but also on the circumstances in which it is embedded and the presuppositions used in their framing of it. This includes participants' prior history of interactions and sense making in perceived similar situations. In the executive board meeting example, participants found themselves in an ambiguously layered situation in which an existing

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organizational practice, a regular board meeting, was partially transformed by the seating arrangements, furnishings, and the peripatetic rotations of the conversation, as well as, perhaps, the label "The World Café." While these intended framing elements were meant to create a contrast with more conventional meeting forms by generating a network of conversations rather than one centrally focused activity, previous meeting experiences still served as a frame of reference. (As Bunker & Alban, 2006 suggest, employees attending a meeting like this may initially assume that it will be a waste of time.) The different comments offered at the close of the Café indicate the need that participants have to surface and affirm their sense of what is going on. Furthermore, verbalizing a frame for an ambiguous situation is seldom a neutral act for, as Coyne (1985) suggests, it may have important implications for what follows, including decisions on actions to be taken. Those Board Meeting participants who suggested that the Café could be a new way of meeting, seemed to have opened themselves to experience the event within the intended frame. However, the senior board member who replied, "This has been great. But now let's get down to business," implied that, for him, it was merely a prelude to the real business of what a meeting should be. Even though he initially appeared to have accepted the frame on offer, he seemed to eventually dismiss the experience as merely play, or a rehearsal. Thus, while he may have been in the same frame as his colleagues *during* the café, he did not seem to share their imputed frame afterward when linking the activity to larger contexts. While it is easy to dismiss this "let's get down to business" statement as missing the point, it is also important to try to grasp its meaning in context, a context different from what we may have imagined.

In this case, it appears that as the facilitators strove to create a context that emphasized difference, they might have created a setting that was *too* different, at least for this board member. The Café was held in a room used for science demonstrations and thus it is possible the senior board member may, ironically, have perceived the situation as a *demonstration*, rather than an enactment, of a World Café. This is similar to what is thought to happen in technology demonstrations when audience members perceive the demonstration as a rehearsed "showing" of how something might be done (Smith, 2009). Viewed from this perspective, the board members were not *really* meeting but were participating in a showing of how a group *would* do it in a World Café; the senior member saw only the efforts of the organizers to illustrate a group discussion tool. The episode suggests that what participants take as "real" as opposed to pretend in the World Café is difficult to untangle and yet the entire process depends to some degree on this tension for its effectiveness.

In the second vignette, the mothers' interactions within the World Café also reveal the ecological relationship among frames and shows how understanding derives from the placement of the experience within larger interpretive contexts. While the planners tried to make the physical space as hospitable as possible according to the Café's guiding principles, the use of artifacts such as checkered tablecloths and picket fences was not, at least initially, enough to overcome the mothers' ambivalence about the institutional setting. These objects may even have made the setting seem strange or incongruent (e.g., rather than signaling sociability the red-checkered tablecloths might have

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underscored the absence of a real meal with wine!). The overriding issue for many of these participants was a sense of MOSI as a public institution with a particular history with which they had not engaged. In spite of the planners' desire to foster a participatory design process, the relevant context for participants seemed to be a sense of the setting as alien.

Bateson emphasizes that the boundaries between what is inside the frame and what lies outside are not always clearly differentiated for what we take as the frame and framed content exist in a mutual relationship; each can be simultaneously the context for and within the context of the other (MacLachlan & Reid, 1994; Rice, 2008). The experience of the World Café space as "hospitable" is continually being renegotiated as certain features that may have been in the background are foregrounded. Framing, according to Bateson, is a recursive process in that what we offer as a frame feeds into an ongoing process of frame coevolution. Returning to the Café with mothers and children, we sense that the mothers' ability to see and hear their children in the adjoining play area may have enhanced their reading of the setting as hospitable and the children's subsequent involvement as they entered the Café area and began playing at the tables may also have bolstered the experience of the café as an alternative "friendly" space. The episode serves as a reminder that any particular content can emerge as the context to reinterpret a whole pattern of interaction (Rice, 2008). For the mothers, the emerging definition of the situation as a result of the largely unplanned involvement of the children allowed them to more fully appreciate the space as hospitable. The result was a recontextualizing of the "institutional" frame. Even so, the renegotiation of the larger context through chance discoveries is by no means guaranteed, as the senior board member's comment in the first example seems to indicate.

One of the distinctive features of the Café format is its openness for participants to create their own dialogic guidelines for working with each other. This openness is embodied in the original invitation to consider "what makes a good conversation?" The question and how the group makes sense of it enter into the group's evolving frame. The bind facing practitioners and facilitators is that inviting participants into "setting the context" by surfacing their own guidelines for conversational protocol still requires an invitation (and a context setting itself) that cannot be prescribed. For example, participants might feel that they are being evaluated by their hosts for the criteria they generate, as though there is a correct answer.

Most important, these vignettes, which center on the emergence of new frames for meeting, can also be seen as illustrating change in the very process of change. This second-order change is not just a change in format but a more fundamental change in how transformations in the meaning of being together unfold. In the first vignette, the senior board member's framing of the Café as a prelude to the "real" meeting fostered for the hosts an awareness that his imputed frame was not the one intended. In the second example, an unplanned "disruption" helped to generate the vitality of that World Café, as participants discovered the possibilities inherent in the situation. Yet it was only later that the designers recognized this as a key feature of the setting. It is these dynamics of difference and change that the concept of framing invites.

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Conclusion and Implications for Practice

We have tried to show how Bateson's conceptualization of framing offers a unique vantage point for investigating connections among messages, meanings, and the development of relational realities as they occur in designed conversational processes. As Schön and Rein (1994) have noted, frames often operate an unspoken level. We would argue that this doubly so with respect to designed conversational processes. Not only are the frames that guide our interpretation of "what is going on" themselves tacit, but a theory of frames that informs our practice is often left unarticulated. Becoming more aware of processes of framing that are often taken for granted can afford practitioners a better understanding of dialogic approaches and how they open possibilities for ourselves and for others, should they accept, to gain alternative understandings by seeing familiar phenomena in new ways. Practitioners bring this awareness to bear in their roles as facilitators, responding to the unfolding dialogue by perceiving and labeling what is occurring, thereby stimulating a recognition among participants that new frames may be emerging.

While we have developed these ideas specifically with reference to our World Café experiences, the same issues can be extended to other genres of large group methods. Of course, the World Café, with its shifting networks of conversation, may allow processes of framing to play out differently than, say, a large town hall style meeting organized around a central focus of attention. In other meeting genres, the context will be different. This attention to the role of context in shaping interpretation is another example of the importance of framing-in-practice.

For those of us involved in dialogue facilitation, concepts of framing call attention to the fact that an event prescribed by leaders and facilitators cannot be viewed solely from their perspective but must be understood from participants' experience of it as well. Thus, they underscore the importance of seeing meeting design as an ongoing participatory activity. From the moment the invitation is offered, participants' interpretations are in play. Thus, Brown (2005) advises Café hosts to craft invitations carefully in ways that "arouse curiosity" (p. 164) to create an expectation of learning and engagement.

At the same time, Bateson's work reminds us of the dynamic, even precarious quality of the frames we are attempting to evoke. His perspective implies that individuals need to be in the "same" frame in order to participate in concert with others, a point that accords with psychologist Ragnar Rommetveit's (1979) paradox of intersubjectivity, where intersubjectivity refers to the accomplishment of a jointly stipulated reality among interactants. Rommetveit proposed that we "take the possibility of perfect intersubjectivity for granted in order to achieve a partial intersubjectivity in real life discourse with our fellow men" (p. 161). In other words, as participants in any encounter, we must assume a shared frame in order to communicate with each other at all. At the same time, we must question the very idea of shared frame since sharing is not something we could ever verify; even if we try to create a conversation to establish whether we're in the same frame, the creation of this meta-frame is subject to the same dilemma. For practitioners, this seemingly paradoxical quality remains a central issue.

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Our analysis of two World Café conversations suggests that even a meeting context with an expressed agenda may be full of chance discoveries as participants respond to the moment. In this sense, the World Café as a designed conversational process has elements of improvisatory joint performances described by Mary Catherine Bateson (1994), in which each person inventively participates in concert with the other without necessarily having a clear script or plan. As the family therapist James Coyne (1985) has noted,

> It can even be the case that participants could not proceed if they had such an explicit grasp of what is unfolding. [for example] many couples would never have gotten together if either partner had framed their first encounter as "initiating a long-term relationship.". (p. 339)

Viewed from this perspective, Bateson's focus on pattern and process leads to a fuller appreciation of frames as emergent. We find further echoes of this idea in reading the published transcript of the Macy Conferences on Small Groups in 1954 (G. Bateson, 1956), where Bateson introduced his ideas on frames. Throughout this talk, *The Message: This is Play*, and ensuing discussion, Bateson appeared to be trying to convey the idea that "play" is not an action but the name of a frame for action. Yet in reading the subsequent dialogue among conference participants, one sees that he was also playing with ideas, trying out new perspectives on framing as they emerged in conversation with his colleagues. A close reading suggests that some of his colleagues, in a different spirit, seemed to expect him to defend an already hardened position as typically happens at a professional conference. Perhaps, in his introduction of the idea of frames, Bateson and his colleagues were in different frames.

Finally, several conceptual features of frames hold particular implications for practice. One is the systemic idea of embeddedness. Frames are embedded within larger frames that guide the construction of, and meaning-making within, local interactional frames. These larger frames, which may be tied to assumed cultural norms, are not always readily apparent until an action occurs that violates or calls attention to them. Practitioners must be aware of the larger political and behavioral landscape that they are attempting to alter for the sake of the meeting. For example, while the World Café and other large group methods attempt to establish a participatory process and democratic dialogue (an alternative to hierarchy), individual members may still be making sense of Café interaction in light of their more hierarchical understanding. Even the simple question posed by the hosts, "What makes a good conversation?" might be heard relationally as a request by experts for a correct answer requiring (commanding?) a display of competence. Awareness of the relational valence of what is occurring can shed light on these tacit cultural frames.

A second key feature is recursion. Framing is a recursive process where frames act on prior frames and set the stage for the construction of new (or repair of old) frames. Frames act on themselves. Bateson (G. Bateson & Bateson, 1987; Harries-Jones, 1995) stressed the importance of recursion as a fundamental concept for communication, where attempts to set the context, as with the World Café, build on existing frames. Furthermore, there is no frame-neutral position from which to view anything, including another frame (Schön,

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1983). What this means for practitioners is that we must always attend to ways in which these different frames surface in the course of a session, or over the course of several sessions. Sometimes these alternative frames, which appear merely as "noise" for us, are meaningful to participants. The question, then, is how to respond. That is, do we offer an opportunity for self-correction to get the group back on track? Or do we go along with the emerging rhythm to allow for positive feedback that might enable seeing things in new ways? (Such dilemmas arise, for example when a group shifts away from a frame of dialogue about a desired future to a debate over what's currently wrong). Either way, the challenge for the facilitator is to articulate an understanding, to posit a frame and test its resonance for the group, without "fixing" its meaning. And as with all cybernetic processes, recognition that framing is recursive opens up to realizing that the task of framing is never done; framing is an ongoing process.

Third, framing is an indeterminate process, fraught with ambiguity. As highlighted in Bateson, frames are nonprescribable. Our way of inviting people to our large group session, whether a World Café or another format, helps to create a context for the meeting but does not legislate it. This means that as practitioners, we must not only take responsibility for our invitation and context setting but also take responsibility for making sense of how our frame is heard and acted on by others. Building on the previous principles of embeddedness and recursion, this implies taking seriously Schön's (1983) notion of reflection-in-action, responding in the moment to divergences in frame setting that we, as good listeners, allow ourselves to hear.

In recognizing that framing occurs at multiple levels, Bateson called attention to the presence and acceptance of ambiguity and paradox as a crucial source of novelty in such frame-altering experiences as psychotherapy and humor (Fry, 1968). Viewed from this perspective, the World Café and other designed conversational processes can become arenas for fostering ambiguity and uncertainty necessary for a system's renewal and growth, even when participants' responses appear at first to bear little relationship to the frame intended by facilitators.

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