

11.965, Reflective Practice, Or, How to Give Global Relevance to Local Knowledge  
Caesar McDowell, Claudia Canepa, and Sebastiao Ferreira  
**Lecture 8: Reframing for Strategic Creativity**

## **Introduction**

We always have a frame in our mind about a situation we are facing. We always try to use all our resources as best as we can, and in this way we understand the situation. The most effective tool that we have for changing the effectiveness of our resources is reframing. I can be in a situation where the best I can do is what I am already doing. Sometimes the best way to change is not to work harder, or organize better, or have more resources – but to rethink what we are doing.

*I of course agree with that, but isn't it difficult to rethink something intelligently?*

Yes, it's very hard. Our thinking is always correct, in some sense. We are always doing our best. We have a vision of what we are working with, and we cannot see beyond this idea that we have. Tomorrow we will talk about the role of concepts – concepts define what is visible and what is invisible. If you are working in communities, for instance, where people have been working with a problem for twenty years, the most effective thing you can do is help them reframe. It's the exploration of new possibilities, and reframing is what makes this possible.

However, for doing reframing, I need some conditions. The organization of the exercise is oriented to achieve these conditions. First, I need to be aware of my frame. We tried to express the characteristics of the frame with a statement of the problem, its factors, and how we imagine the results. There are other ways to express this – Schon preferred a matrix.

*Can you give us a graphic representation of what a matrix is?*

Here we have elements and relations [indicates the "Conditions" graphic with factors, problem, and scenario]. A matrix is a different structure. It defines two kinds of elements, rows and columns. Each time a column intersects a row, you have a cell. This cell expresses the relation between the two elements. You need to have two kinds of elements to represent in this way. Graphics are more flexible, but perhaps less powerful in going into the structure of what we are trying to see. With a matrix, you can perhaps analyze it better. But here, you can express causal relationships more easily.

I need to be clear about my frame. I need to understand my frame. I need to verify if my frame is complete and be aware of its main characteristics. You need to be aware of the frame you have, the elements and relations. When you have a frame in your mind, you may interact with another frame which has a different way of looking at things. If I am not aware of my frame, I may begin to think with two frames in my mind, and I cannot process the interaction with two frames. My behavior will be incoherent, and I will not be able to finish my cognitive process. I could bring this incoherence with me for many years, with one frame acting in some situations and not in others.

*But they can also be combined to develop a new frame?*

Yes, a third frame. Cultural identity is often like this.

## Participant Presentations

### *Group One*

*We thought the main problem was the perception of visions held by the main stakeholders.*

The problem is framed as perceptions. This is different from conflicting visions themselves.

*We think it's difficult to bring people together to talk, because they think they have very different ideas about the future. The factors that lead to this problem are an imbalance of power, little dialogue between the groups, maybe not a lot of organization among the different stakeholders.*

When you say power dynamics, what did you mean by power? What did you have in mind when you wrote this?

*Authority, and ability to make executive decisions. But I think there are a number of different ways power comes into play. There could be something about cultural power; the Brazilian community could feel disempowered compared to the developers.*

*Then we had some information that there might be stratification within the Brazilian community itself.*

When I say "lack of", it is difficult to characterize what actually exists, so it is hard to go forward in my understanding of the problem.

*If the development went forward, we think there would be increasing factions between the stakeholders. Also, the Brazilian community may be displaced, if the new property is more expensive, for instance.*

The idea is that the problem will produce the impact. The problem is perception of different visions. So we are saying that perception of different visions may produce factions – that is reasonable. But perception of visions produces displacement? The way the problem was stated was not enough to foresee this scenario.

*We don't actually know if the displacement will happen. It is highly likely, but people may realize after the process that they like the new development, and want to stay.*

You don't need to change too much. Right now power dynamics are a factor, but if that is incorporated into the problem statement – perception of visions between stakeholders with an imbalance of power – I can more clearly see how displacement results.

*Yes, this is a thumbnail sketch. If you have to characterize the problem in one sentence, you end up leaving a lot out.*

Do you mean voluntary displacement?

*We thought it could be either. I don't know that we really specified that part.*

We should make sure that all our questions are to refine the consistency of the model, not to gain more understanding of the situation. Let's go forward to the assumptions of this case.

*We assumed that the value of real estate and cost of living would increase. We assumed some destruction of the existing property, and that the new development would in some way not be acceptable to the current population.*

So the problem is not one of perception – it has to do with the actual. These assumptions disturb how the problem is stated.

*We assumed that one of the segment's visions would not be realized at all, that the developers would just do whatever they want. If it's true that it's only the perception, and it's true that one segment completely prevails, it isn't necessarily true that there will be more factions between existing groups. Maybe one group will realize that their vision is not that far from the vision of the developers.*

*I think this could actually still work with the visions not conflicting. Maybe the people think the developers' vision is unacceptable to them, when this is really their perception, and the actual vision may be acceptable.*

What we have here is that one assumption contradicts the way the problem was stated.

I was trying to say that this is a probably a simplification.

*One assumption was that if we had more equitable power distribution, there might be better dialogue, and an opportunity to change perceptions.*

My problem with this assumption is that it's about the solution, not about the problem.

If I have assumptions about how the solutions may happen, I may not be able to see how things are actually happening in reality. I may have a plan going in one direction and a reality going in the other directions. I need assumptions inherent to the problem, not the solutions.

*But in order to state the problem, you make assumptions about how the problem came into existence. So you have to make certain assumptions to get the problem statement to begin with. If these factors didn't exist, the problem would not have come up.*

Yes, I understand your approach. I would like to point out that "lack of" is not dialogue.

You're assuming that this solution is correct, and then identifying the factors. The causality is backwards.

When I frame a situation this way, I am clear about what is lacking, but not clear about what there is. We are sure that we're not in California, but what state are we in?

*We don't know enough about the characteristics of the environment to know what actually happens. It is easier to describe in terms of what is not.*

*A frame will be only as strong as the information that we have.*

I understand that there is a lack of information. But you imagine not what the reality was, but what it wasn't. Lewis Carroll, when he wrote Alice in Wonderland, he created a world. We should make a wonderland of Framingham! We should make statements about what is.

We are trained to think based on solutions. We always work with solutions in our mind, because solutions organize actions. Problems don't organize actions, problems only organize inquiry. When we have responsibilities in action, then we prefer to organize around solutions. I am just trying to explain how we frame situations in practice.

*I just wanted to clarify what we should have done. Power dynamic imbalance is stated as a thing that exists. It didn't seem like there was any way to make a clear connection between the two, by stating it in the positive. I don't understand how we could have framed it clearly in the positive.*

## **Group Two**

*There is no attempt to integrate divergent cultural perspectives, interests, lifestyles, and contributions to economic development into a mutually beneficial plan.*

*It is important to integrate immigrants into community decision-making. It is actually a consequence of the other elements – intolerance, xenophobia, etc. These attitudes generate an incapacity to involve immigrants in decision-making.*

You don't have economics in there.

*We didn't think it was the fundamental thing. We were trying to hit on one thing that was the essential core.*

*We were concerned that this closed-ness on the part of the Anglo community in Framingham would cause social and economic damage to both communities, and lead to ethnic Balkanization. The Brazilian economic community is actually an asset to the town, and if there is a way to integrate that into the town, they would be stronger.*

The question is whether you need other elements to make this scenario emerge.

*As far as stigmatizing immigrants, there probably needs to be some abetting factor. It's probably more complicated than what we have here.*

The way they formulated the problem – that is a very good statement of a solution, but is not the statement of the problem. It is hard to look for the factors that

generate a problem if the problem has not actually been stated. A problem is a situation that I would like to change. Instead of describing the situation I want to change, I describe the solution I would like to carry out. So it is difficult to establish grounds for discussing the problem with people, if I come into the room with a solution in mind. Other people may have different solutions.

What I am trying to make clear is that we frequently state problems as desirable solutions, or the lack of desirable solutions. Then my mind gets stuck because, if there is no object I can see, I cannot analyze it.

*So maybe we should say that the town's current actions will lead to stigmatization?*

At this moment we will not reframe. Right now we are trying to understand the way we framed the problem.

*Even right now, it's interesting how uncomfortable we are. We're not comfortable just hanging out in a place where the problem is – you want to jump to the conclusion. We're looking to one person with power to give us the solution. We ourselves are uncomfortable with the process of not knowing and discovering. We frame the problem the way we know how to solve it. So I am trying to enjoy the discomfort.*

Let's go forward to the assumptions.

*We had a hard time with this part, but we thought contextual problems were language barriers, Anglo xenophobia, a closed-ness to change from both sides. We assumed there was a lack of creativity and collaborations.*

Notice that the assumptions rephrase the factors.

*Integration can solve social and cultural problems. Working together can create mutual benefits. Ignoring the Brazilian community will create animosity. Brazilians are committed to both redevelopment and integration.*

*The moment they were writing this, they were assuming the arrogance was on the other side. That seems coherent – the Anglo side was arrogant, and the Brazilians were committed to integration.*

### **Group Three**

*We named our problem "Deepening Democracy. Organizing for Change, and Building Power". The problem is a lack of organizing structure. Why is it a problem? Limits to participating in democratic processes. Limits ability to be included.*

We have elements of thinking about values here.

*What contributes to the problem? Different visions within the Brazilian community, no previous threat to force them to organize.*

*If the problem is this, and yet the situation happens, it's still good for resolving the problem. If we live through this problem, it will be good for the community in the*

*future. Whether the development occurs, or doesn't occur, it will be important to the community. It is a threat that they could turn into an opportunity.*

In the future, they would be able to organize better. If there problem is not solved, that would lead to the development going through. Then, in the future, that community would organize better and in that way, they would address the problem.

*I don't know if what we did is presenting a different conceptualization of the problem. We didn't see the problem as the development. We saw the problem as a community not organizing to solve its issues.*

So you're saying that the lack of an organized structure will lead to an organized structure? I'm not sure that follows in my mind.

You talked about the impact of development on the problem. We were asking for, if the development goes through, what is the impact of the problem on Framingham?

Let's go to the assumptions.

We used the assumptions that we generated in the homework and tried to categorize them. Under Scenario and Impact: the organized community will be able to effect change better, will gain power, more people will vote and be involved in the democratic process.

Organizing is the starting point for all these things.

*In Problems and Factors: group cohesiveness is a characteristic of a strong community, the Brazilian community is not organized and powerless. Power is the ability to effect change.*

The first is theoretical. We have a lot of these beliefs in our minds, and work with these for years. It is important to be able to question these beliefs.

*We assume what "Brazilian" and "community" mean.*

The problem here is that you are not saying what these assumptions are, just that you have them.

*We assumed that the other side had a shared interest and that it was conflicting to the Brazilian side. We assumed that the Brazilian community actually had a shared interest.*

*The way we came to some of these was to look at how we were describing the situation, and realize that for that to work, we needed this assumption.*

*We assumed when people are knowledgeable about an issue and communicate about it, that allows them to create strategies for change.*

*Once the community is organized, there will be an opportunity for them to be heard. We assumed people had hope, and that the community could see themselves in development change.*

I was not very clear about the instructions in this part yesterday. Claudia expressed it better as contextual conditions – elements that were external to the Brazilian community.

### Participant Exercise

We're going through these three steps, looking at the relations between the components. We will work on the third frame, which said that the problem was a lack of organizing structure. You may draw components from the other frames.

Steps for identifying assumptions:

- 1) Deconstruct your frame to identify the main components of your frame. In yesterday's exercise, the components of the frame that you constructed were: problem, impact/scenario, factors that contribute to problem, contextual conditions.
- 2) Depict your frame graphically.
- 3) Analyze the relationships between the components to verify assumptions.

Instructions: Assume that organized community happens after you affect change. In other words, imagine that you live in a world in which organized community is not a condition for affecting change, but rather a result of affecting change. How would you frame the problem in Framingham in this world?

Students were asked to restate the problem on small papers that were taped to the wall.

- *Brazilian community is not integrated into town decision-making.*
- *Disagreement about how to manage growth and development.* This is stated clearly as a problem.
- *Power balance, stratification, cultural barriers, conflict.* This is a lot of different problems, grouped together. I need a bit more precision. The author should define which one is the problem for him or her.
- *The Brazilian and Anglo communities are not connected.*

*Are we trying to solve the development problem, or trying to solve everything about Framingham, in this reframing exercise? Is the redevelopment what we are trying to solve, or is that a symptom of something deeper?*

These are different ways for framing the problem. It is necessary to define the frontiers of the problem. The problem should be related to the development. Secondly, at what level should I formulate the problem? For our purpose, let's maintain it at the level of the story Caesar presented, without analyzing different levels of causes.

We heard a story of a situation. How do you perceive the problem, now that you have heard that?

- *The process of community change is being determined by one set of society, city government and developers.* Great. This is a situation I want to change; now we have a problem.

- *Town can't cover operating costs.* This is formulated at a deeper level than other ones.
- *Ethnic groups are not integrated or acknowledged.*
- *Framingham is undergoing change in its social, physical, economic, and demographic structure, and it is unclear what the future of the city and its residents will be.*
- *The Brazilian and Anglo communities inter-relate poorly.*
- *Commercial redevelopment will displace pre-existing Brazilian business.* This is a statement about the future. I can take this as a problem, but I don't know what is going on at this moment.

Now we want to select two of these. Some of these problems seem to be still under the previous frame. Try to vote for two formulations that incorporate the new way of understanding the situation, that have nothing to do with organization as a pre-condition.

We had three options that received three or more votes. Tomorrow we will talk about these.

What have you discovered through this exercise of reframing?

*The idea of looking at the situation you want to change, as opposed to what's wrong, was helpful to me.*

*I feel like now I can see better the problem behind the problem.*

*I noticed the level at which you engage the problem is very important. I tend to see things from a deep, structural viewpoint, but others may not.*

*If I'm having problems with this, how would I go into a place like Framingham and facilitate when they've been thinking one way for years? How do I engage this sort of process when I have fifteen minutes, or an hour, to get someone to rethink an intractable problem like this?*

First of all, there is no handbook for this. People need a very strong motivation, and they need to achieve something that is important to them. They need to feel that this is the only way to get their objectives. So we need to make clear to them that their objective is possible. Then, we need to deconstruct the way they are framing the problem, ideally with the language and ideas and logic that they are using. After that, it is necessary to challenge, to identify the assumptions. What the facilitator can do is explore the assumptions. Then we need to bring information that disturbs these assumptions. The most important element is to give people information that isn't consistent with their assumptions.

*My concern is more about the on-the-ground applicability of this method. How do you get someone to even be willing to come into the room to start the process? What if your time is very limited?*

Often it's through regular conversations you have, if you're working in a place for awhile. You have a more acute way of analyzing your thinking and theirs. Sometimes you say something with your questions and you don't even realize you've planted a seed. It doesn't have to be this structured.