

Metaphors in Education

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“Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel.” ~Socrates

Metaphors in “Teacher Talk”

“My classroom is a zoo!”

“I try to weave all of the concepts together.”

“Those kids are really blossoming.”

“He’s one of my top students.”

“We’re always falling behind.”

Teachers typically use such language when they talk about their work. Each of the sentences contains a metaphor. For the sake of simplicity, I plan to use the word *metaphor* to mean any circumstance where a person uses one conceptual category, experience, or “thing” to describe or define another conceptual category. *“The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another.”*¹

In literature classes, many of us were taught that a *metaphor* is a linguistic device used to add interest to speech or writing. Karl comes into the teacher’s lounge shaking his head. “My classroom is a zoo today!” If what we learned in literature is correct, Karl is simply using a figure of speech—making his description of his classroom more interesting or unique. Other teachers recognize that Karl’s classroom is probably noisy and unsettled. The “animals” may be on a rampage and difficult to control. But is this just a “figure of speech”—a linguistic device? Or do such statements spring from something much deeper—from Karl’s conceptual system?

Linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson² provide convincing evidence that metaphors may actually be people’s *primary mode of mental operation*. They argue that because the mind is “embodied”—that is, it experiences the world through the body in which it resides—people can’t help but conceptualize the world in terms of bodily perceptions. Our concepts of *up-down*, *in-out*, *front-back*, *light-dark*, and *warm-cold* are all related to orientations and perceptions acquired through our bodily senses.

The “teacher talk” sentences at the beginning of this section contain several such metaphors. A *top* student represents a vertical orientation, whereas *falling behind* suggests a horizontal orientation. (Metaphors will be italicized throughout the article to make them more obvious.)

Lakoff and Johnson suggest that the metaphors through which people conceptualize abstract concepts influence the way in which they understand them. In *Metaphors We Live By*, they provide several commonly used metaphors for the concept *ideas*. Here are some familiar expressions people use when describing *ideas* as *food*, *plants*, and *commodities*.

Ideas Are Food

What he said *left a bad taste in my mouth*. These are nothing but *half-baked* ideas, and *warmed-over* theories. I can't *digest* all of these new ideas. I just can't *swallow* that claim. That argument *smells fishy*. Now there's an idea you can really *sink your teeth into*. That's *food* for thought. We don't need to *spoon-feed* our students. He *devoured* the book. This is the *meaty* part of the paper.

Ideas Are Plants

His ideas have finally *come to fruition*. That idea *died on the vine*. That's a *budding* theory. It will take years for that idea to *come to full flower*. He views chemistry as an *offshoot* of physics. Mathematics has many *branches*. The *seeds* of his great ideas were planted in his youth. She has a *fertile* imagination. He has a *barren* mind.

Ideas Are Commodities

It's important how you *package* your ideas. He won't *buy* that. That idea just won't *sell*. There is always a *market* for good ideas. That's a *worthless* idea. He's been a source of *valuable* ideas. I wouldn't *give a plugged nickel* for that idea. Good ideas are *currency* in the intellectual marketplace.³

It should come as no surprise that humans attempt to understand vague, abstract, or complex concepts in terms of more familiar experiences. The point is that the metaphor a person selects to frame a concept/experience necessarily focuses attention on some aspects while ignoring others. Thinking of *ideas as commodities* focuses attention on how those ideas will be received (*bought*) by other people and whether they are *salable*. If *ideas are commodities*, then they must be *marketable*. Having an idea just for the sake of having it isn't consistent with this metaphoric structure. You want to *crank out* lots of ideas and *get them out the door*. On the other hand, in the *ideas-are-plants* metaphor, it's perfectly consistent to hold an idea for a while without trying to sell it. After all, plants take time to *ripen and mature*—to *come to fruition*.

Rather than having to describe a number of particular events that occurred in his classroom, Karl got his point across by saying that it was a *zoo*. Because people are familiar with zoos, they “get the picture.” That picture would have been quite different had Karl said, “My classroom is a *beehive*.” The important thing is that, under the influence of the *zoo* metaphor, Karl *perceives* student activity as negative—uncontrolled. If he employs the *beehive* metaphor, he might *perceive* that same behavior as productive—*busy as bees*. Thus, Karl's unconscious metaphor directs his perceptions—and his resultant behavior.

Discussing the influence of metaphors on behavior, Lakoff and Johnson state,

*“Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies.”*⁴

Metaphors Create Realities

Metaphors contain within them *beliefs* about knowledge and the expected role of the student. John Locke described the mind at birth as a *tabula rasa*—an *empty slate* on which all knowledge must be “written” by others. Similar descriptions of teaching reflect the belief that students’ minds are *empty vessels*. “If I’m teaching facts and the things that the ITSB (Iowa Test of Basic Skills) teaches, then I can open her up and pour it in—just open their little heads and pour it in.”⁵

Unfortunately, many educators persist in perceiving students as *receptacles* for information despite extensive research demonstrating that knowledge is internally-generated. The quote at the beginning of the article suggests that, even without that research, Socrates believed education was about “drawing out” what was already within, rather than “stuffing in” as much “knowledge” as possible. In fact, the word *education* comes from *educere*—meaning “to draw out.”

Common Metaphors in Education

In recent years, educational researchers studying teacher metaphors have consistently concluded that the metaphors teachers use to describe their work profoundly affect their behavior and perceptions. Here are a couple of the more common educational metaphors.

A Lesson Is a Journey—Knowledge Is A Landscape

The word *cover* appears frequently in teacher talk. “I *covered* Newton’s Laws last week.” “We have so much material to *cover* before the test.” Although *cover* has several definitions, the primary meaning in education is that of *covering ground*—*moving across a terrain* of some kind. In this metaphor, *knowledge is a landscape* across which the *learning journey* travels. We see this reflected in teacher language, such as:

“I just *went ahead*...”

“Some of the students *fell behind*.”

“If he’s *lost*, he’s just going to get *further behind*...”

“We didn’t *get to* that.”⁶

Concepts and principles are objects

Many teachers unconsciously perceive the concepts and principles they teach—the bits of human thought considered “essential knowledge”—as *objects*. *Concepts and principles are objects*.

“Did you teach grammar?”

“Yes, I taught *it* last year.”

The knowledge objects have become “objective”—apart from the human thought processes and minds that conceived them.

In the *learning is a journey* metaphor, *knowledge objects* reside at various locations on the *knowledge landscape*. Teachers must move students quickly across this *landscape*, urging them to “pick up” the concepts until they have *covered* it all and arrived at their final *destination*—*Testland*. Here, teachers make sure that students *possess* the concepts *acquired* during the *journey*. Then it's time to move on to the next goal—to begin *coverage* of the next bit of *territory* on the *map* of human thought. In this interpretation, one might think of the *journey* as the teacher driving a busload full of students at full speed along a predefined road to reach the *destination* before nightfall—the test.

The *lesson is a journey* metaphor can have other interpretations. If a teacher *believes* that learning requires students to interact with their environment, the trip becomes a *journey of discovery* instead of a *flat-out race* across the *landscape* of a discipline. In this interpretation of the metaphor, the teacher and students travel more or less together, along a somewhat defined route, making frequent stops along the way as students notice something of interest that they wish to explore. There are occasional interesting side trips to unexpected places. At times, groups pursue different paths and, after returning to the main road, report to the class about what they have found.

Many teachers unconsciously resist this interpretation because of the pressures of testing and school-defined curricula. (By the way, the word *curriculum* is also a metaphor—in Latin the word means “a race”!) Teachers feel that they've been hired to get the kids ready for the test and they can't *take the time* for leisurely exploration. This brings us to yet another metaphor—one shared not only by teachers, but by the Western mind in general.

Time Is a Resource

Time is a resource is a metaphor that drives much of what teachers do (and don't do) in teaching. Generally, that *resource is money*. Time is something that people can *spend* or *waste*, wisely *invest* in productive activities or *squander* in questionable pursuits. Thus, *time* becomes the *cost* of discovery—all this exploration on the part of the students.

Unfortunately, time is not a resource that teachers *own*. The traditional content of a given course or school year *allots* specific *amounts* of time to accomplish certain tasks. Time is, after all, a *scarce resource*. Teachers must *budget* that time, *spending* only within the limits of what they have been allotted. *Wasting* time on material that isn't part of the assigned curriculum means that they will *run out* before they have *covered* all the material. Heaven forbid that time *runs out* before the test and the class hasn't *covered* everything!

In Western culture, *time is a resource* is so much a part of our shared metaphor that it rarely occurs to us there might be other ways to think about our lives. People in other cultures don't necessarily think of time as a resource. According to Lakoff and Johnson,

*“Cultures in which time is not conceptualized and institutionalized as a resource remind us that time in itself is not inherently resourcelike. There are people in the world who live their lives without even the idea of budgeting time or worrying if they are wasting it. The existence of such cultures reveals how our own culture has reified a metaphor in cultural institutions, thereby making it possible for metaphorical expressions to be true.”*⁷

In Western cultures, people no longer recognize *time is a resource* as a metaphor. They just assume that it is true and act accordingly.

Metaphors and Roles

One of the most important aspects of a metaphor is the roles it creates for self and others. If I am a *shepherd*, my students must be *sheep*. If I am a *gardener*, my students are *plants*. What unconscious expectations do these metaphors create in the mind of the teacher? Must the *sheep* be docile, *feeding* complacently in the *pasture* chosen by the teacher? Is the *gardener* tending a field of corn, where every plant receives the same care—or a botanical garden, where the gardener fosters the unique development of each species?

Metaphors that focus on *what the teacher does* rather than *what the students learn* cast students as passive receivers. They inhibit teacher behaviors that might encourage students to take an active role in their learning. Sadly, teachers will often condemn students for laziness or apathy when, in fact, they give the students no opportunity to assume responsibility for their learning. Examining the roles inherent in a teacher's metaphor can provide remarkable insights on these problems. If reforms are to succeed, teachers must actively explore these critical components of their thinking. The unconscious cognitive processes of both theorists and teachers must be brought into consciousness if there is any hope of creating a meaningful change in education.

[Readers may find a continuation of the discussion of metaphors in education in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of *Teaching in Mind: How Teacher Thinking Shapes Education*.]

References

- 1 Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 5
- 2 Ibid, pp 56-60. See also Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1999) *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- 3 Ibid. *Metaphors...* pp 46-47
- 4 Ibid. *Metaphors...* page 146
- 5 Noble, A. J. & Smith, M. L. (1994). Old and New Beliefs about Measurement-Driven Reform: "The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same." National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing, Los Angeles, CA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 378 228)
- 6 Munby, H. (1986). Metaphor in the Thinking of Teachers: An Exploratory Study. *The Journal of Curriculum Studies*, Vol. 18, 197–209.
- 7 Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1999) *Philosophy in the Flesh...*, 165.

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