

NLP and Education—Part 3

How Metaphors Shape Teacher Behavior

by Judith Lloyd Yero

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

The importance of metaphor in the way people shape their “realities” has been the topic of several *Anchor Point* articles. In the May 2001 issue, James Lawley and Penny Tompkins explained how they encourage clients to explore and elaborate on the symbols and metaphors used to describe psychological issues¹. A similar approach to examining the metaphors teachers use when describing their work yields considerable insight into how those metaphors both limit and enable behaviors and perceptions.

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.”²

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 Johnson³ 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 cannot 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.

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*.⁴

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*. 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 in 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.*⁵

Early Educational Metaphors

Metaphors have been used since the earliest days of education. In ancient texts such as the *Mishnah*, an early part of the *Talmud* written in the second century, four kinds of students are proposed:

*The sponge, the funnel, the strainer, and the sieve. It will surprise you to know which one is preferred. The sponge, we are told, absorbs all; the funnel receives at one end and spills out at the other; the strainer lets the wine drain through it and retains the dregs; but the sieve that is the best, for it lets out the flour dust and retains the fine flour.*⁶

These metaphors contain within them *beliefs* about knowledge and the expected role of the student. Each suggests that knowledge is something that is "taken in" as opposed to being generated internally. Even in the second century, students weren't expected to retain everything. The preferred role of the student was to "separate the dust from the fine flour."

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.”⁷

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.⁸ 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 a 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.

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.

Lessons as Journeys Across the Landscape of Knowledge

Researchers frequently quote “teacher talk” that almost exclusively uses the metaphor of *lessons as movement—journeys across the landscape of knowledge*. Here are some examples from an interview of a single teacher.

“I just *went ahead*...”

“They *get behind*.”

“They’re always a *step ahead* of the other classes because everything *goes so smoothly*...”

“We *move along faster*.”

“We’ll probably even *back up a little bit*.”

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

“They like to *get off of the subject* on to different topics.”

“We didn’t *get to that*.”

“We didn’t even *get past* those ten sentences today.”

“I might *move on*...it was time to *move on very quickly*.”

“I’m *pushing and backing up as far as I can*...”

“I thought the class *went fairly slow*.”

“He’s kind of a *slow starter*.”

“She was slowly *plowing through it*.”

“I finally *got to the point*...”

Not only is the lesson seen as movement, but the journey appears to be along a fixed two-dimensional road. This teacher defines her role in terms of *covering a specific distance* along that road in a specific amount of time. In this metaphoric context, some behaviors, such as discussions about topics that interest students (*getting off the subject*) are unlikely to occur. Notice how the metaphor puts the subject matter—the *road to be covered*—in the foreground and assigns value to the students with respect to how much of that road they have traversed. Clearly, this teacher’s metaphor heavily influences her perceptions.

...Munby, H. (1986). Metaphor in the Thinking of Teachers: An Exploratory Study. *The Journal of Curriculum Studies*, Vol. 18, 197–209.

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 bus 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”!) They 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 anthropologist Elizabeth Brandt...the Pueblos do not even have in their languages a means of saying the equivalent of ‘I didn’t have enough time for that.’ They can say ‘My path didn’t take me there’ or ‘I couldn’t find a path to that,’ but those are not instances of time being conceptualized as a resource.”⁹

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.”¹⁰

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

Being Educated Is Possessing Knowledge Objects

Although few still maintain that the minds of students are a *tabula rasa*, many continue to

conceptualize teaching as filling an empty space. The mind is some sort of container in which the knowledge objects are stored—*mind as filing cabinet*. Therefore, being educated is perceived as having your knowledge objects neatly filed in the appropriate folders. *Possessing* the knowledge objects is the important thing—as verified by the tests.

Using the objects receives little attention due to a *shortage* of time. There is an assumption that students will naturally *use* what they've learned. Yet we find students who get straight As in science unable to relate what they've learned about electricity to lightning during a thunderstorm. In the *mind as file cabinet* metaphor, "Electricity" is apparently a *knowledge object* stored in the folder marked "School," while "Lightning" is an experience stored in the folder marked "Real Life"! Never the twain shall meet.

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.

There are dozens of metaphors that unconsciously shape education in general and teacher perceptions in particular. The factory metaphor (*turning out* good students) and the transmission metaphor (*giving* students information) are two of the most pervasive and potentially damaging metaphors at work in our schools. Without examining the metaphors and beliefs that underlie reform efforts and addressing prevailing metaphors that do not

share those beliefs, reforms are doomed to failure before they begin. For example, reforms that support internally-generated knowledge cannot succeed when educators *believe* that *knowledge objects* exist outside the mind and that education's role is to *transmit* that knowledge to the minds of students.¹¹ Yet both the teachers and reformers remain ignorant of the inconsistencies that produce the failure. Reformers blame teachers for not carrying out the mandates properly and teachers grow skeptical of any new theory that promises improvement.

I would again encourage NLP practitioners and trainers, who are accustomed to listening for the language of belief and metaphor, to take an active role in helping educators 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.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ Lawley, James and Penny Tompkins (2001) *Metaphors In Mind: Transformation Through Symbolic Modelling*. *Anchor Point*, Vol. 15, No. 5, pp 21-29

² Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 5.

³ 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.

⁴ Ibid., *Metaphors* pp 46-47.

⁵ Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors* 146 .

⁶ Postman, Neil. (1995) *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 174.

⁷ 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)

⁸ For example, Bullough, R. V. Jr., with Stokes, D. K. (1994). Analyzing Personal Teaching Metaphors in Preservice Teacher Education as a Means for Encouraging Professional Development. *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 210.

⁹ Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1999) *Philosophy in the Flesh* , 164.

¹⁰ Ibid., 165.

¹¹ Yero, Judith Lloyd (2002). *Teaching In Mind: How Teacher Thinking Shapes Education*. Hamilton, MT. MindFlight Publishing.



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