Thinking and Writing Critically with Metaphor

by
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Imagine a classroom of students asked to question the claim that people have the right to own weapons because this right is guaranteed by the Constitution. They might begin by wondering about our cultural assumption that the authority of the Constitution is absolute. Their instructor might then explain that we call this line of reasoning an "appeal to authority" when we cite a person or, in this case, a document considered especially authoritative. If all goes as it should, this exercise in critical thinking should help teach students to analyze ideas systematically.

Through an exercise such as this, critical thinking and writing encourages students to focus sharply on what they read and write. Many educators feel that students possess only a fuzzy sense of how to abstract ideas from a text and need formal guidance in methods designed to move them from a merely shallow processing of a text to a deep understanding of it. As a remedy for shallow thinking, we have turned to the notion of teaching a set of rhetorical skills, which taken together constitute the rubric of critical thinking. These activities are derived from familiar strategies of traditional rhetoric, including distinguishing between inductive and deductive reasoning, learning to recognize assumptions and draw inferences, constructing syllogisms, and uncovering logical fallacies.

Clearly, this critical process encourages precision in reading and writing by providing students with a ready-made heuristic. What is problematic is that the process moves the students in one direction only, a direction that learning studies characterize as the "serialist" approach. That is, learners tend to focus on details and procedures, taking note of sequential details and working systematically through a series of steps (Schmeck 240). As useful as this process may be, overreliance on it alone can encourage an unbalanced and inflexible approach to learning in which students develop intensity of vision at the expense of

breadth, because they fail to schematize analytical parts into a larger whole context.

This lopsidedness of our current analytical approach to critical thinking and writing can be counterbalanced by teaching metaphorical heuristics. The word "metaphor" comes from a Greek word that means "to change and to transfer meaning." In its most general sense, a metaphor transfers meaning from one context to another, shows a context differently, or even creates an entirely new concept from a fresh perspective on the same context. Metaphor is thinking by synthesis. Contemporary research has moved our understanding of metaphor far from the limited assumption of classical rhetoric that metaphor simply meant the transfer of meaning from one word to another. In this ancient view, the statement "That person is a lion" was said to derive its meaning from the transfer of qualities associated with lions—such as aggressiveness and independence—to the qualities we associate with a person. Today, we recognize that metaphor can function not just on the discourse level of the word, but at the sentence- or even text-level. It is not just a substitution of a fancy word for a plain one but is a key way that we conceptualize (Ricoeur 216). Our metaphorical propensity for seeing one thing in terms of another is recognized as a central part of the structure of thought and language, a structure very much in evidence in actual written or spoken texts and in our general cultural attitudes.

Metaphorical thinking is one manifestation of the learning strategy labeled "holist." That is, a learner takes a global perspective, building an overall map of an issue by using metaphor, illustration, and anecdote in a random way. Such a strategy produces a broad focus of attention (Schmeck 240). Both serialist and holist thinking are necessary if learners are to achieve a balanced perspective; thus both analysis and synthesis should be part of the repertoire of available thinking and writing strategies we offer students. However, despite the availability of research establishing the centrality of metaphor in thought and language, schools still lag in emphasizing its importance for balanced critical thought. Pollio, in his study of metaphor use in education, finds that even now it is rarely taught as a thinking strategy but is instead usually confined to its ancient ornamental function (170). However, metaphor when used in its broader sense, is well suited to teaching particular kinds of synthesis.

Those metaphors that we find permeating the language of our culture are often implicit ones that organize our experience and orient us in a certain direction. They impose their perspective on us whether we are consciously aware of it or not. Lakoff and Johnson, in their well known study Metaphors We Live By, have identified many of these underlying metaphors. For example, they present a family of metaphorical expressions such as "He attacked every weak point in my argument"; "I've never won an argument with him"; and "He shot down all of my arguments" (4). Underlying these interrelated metaphors they find a central controlling metaphoric equation—ARGUMENT IS WAR—and it is from the agonistic perspective imposed by this metaphor that, they suggest, our cultural perspective on argument pivots. Conversely, we must assume that this particular way of conceptualizing an argument probably developed initially because it reflected some tacit cultural attitudes about the nature of argument. As Lakoff and Johnson point out, the people in political power derive that power in great part by the metaphors they impose on society (160). Though these metaphors can be said to serve a positive purpose in organizing our collective views, unfortunately, they can also manipulate us. It is the unreflective or uncritical learner who will be most easily influenced by a metaphorical perspective. If students learn to think critically with metaphor, however, they can learn to recognize the metaphorical assumptions beneath the surface of our thought.

For this reason, my students and I explore perspectives suggested by metaphors in the news. We have found that the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor is only one of a multitude of concepts structured by the idea of war. Today, for example, both disease and drugs are "enemies" our society is "fighting": we have the "war on drugs" and the "fight against AIDS." A few years ago, when the war on drugs was a lead story on television and front page news in the newspapers, my students and I collected examples that explored ways that this metaphor shaped our thinking. Since the story dominated the news exclusively for several weeks, we were able to watch attitudes toward the issue unfold as the metaphor structuring it unfolded. The media, in fact, seemed to organize reports around the gradual working out of the metaphorical connotations. Early on, they wavered about who the enemy was if we were at war: should it be the drug smugglers, the pushers, or the drug takers? Later, questions asked by reporters in opinion polls were still shaped by the metaphor: "Are you for or against drugs?" was one question asked as if this material substance was an issue that, like war, demanded allegiance to one side or the other. We noticed too that often people responded to these questions with emotions verging on hysteria, as if they had been whipped into a war-like frenzy on the subject. Our metaphorical thinking exercise made us more aware of the way in which this social problem was framed and ultimately made us wonder whether there were not a more appropriate and effective metaphor for it.

Similarly, we considered the "fight against AIDS" and why so often we use military metaphors in response to disease. We compared several diseases with which U. S. culture has gone to war. For a historical perspective, I told them about the March of Dimes organized to fight polio when I was a child. And we speculated on why we do not "fight cancer" but instead alliteratively seek a "cure for cancer." Is cancer too insidious to be perceived as a form of guerrilla warfare or a war front on which we are dug in for a long siege? Ideally, through heuristics such as these, students can begin to understand that such metaphors shape our thinking, that they provide a way to conceptualize abstract social problems, but that they can also limit or even manipulate our perceptions by presenting only limited perspectives.

Any dramatic shift in one of our standard cultural metaphors can change our perspective on an issue. As Lakoff and Johnson ask, what would happen if our society regarded argument not as war but as a dance? In fact, most social problems, if considered longitudinally, are cast and recast in the molds of many different metaphors. For example, Donald Schon, in his work on metaphors and social policy examines how our attitude toward the problem of the slums has been shaped first by the notion of the slum as a "blighted area" that should be cleared and renewed and next by the idea of a "natural community," which should be preserved as much as possible (Schon 262-66). As our culture's metaphors shift over time, we see how metaphor always highlights some aspects of a concept while hiding others. It is this quality of metaphor that both shapes and limits our perspective and that eventually makes most social metaphors outmoded, since new metaphors must emerge to reveal aspects the old meta-

phors had hidden. My students and I struggled unsuccessfully to develop a more effective metaphor to frame the drug problem, learning for ourselves how difficult the task of changing perspective can be.

Though new metaphors can signal drastic shifts in firmly entrenched concepts, multiple metaphors can also be generated for a single idea. Multiple metaphors for the concept of argument in our culture include not only war, but buildings, containers, and journeys: "We've got the framework for a solid argument"; "Your argument doesn't have much content"; and "We have arrived at a disturbing conclusion" (900-92) are all ways we might speak of argument. By generating multiple metaphors, we produce multiple perspectives: perspective widens holistically to include not just one map for a given concept—but many. My students practice this metaphorical synthesis by working collaboratively on a concept familiar to them. In one instance I joined my class in developing multiple metaphors for the concept of residence hall life—a subject on which my students, university composition freshmen who were almost entirely residence-hall dwellers, were authorities. Working together, we characterized residence hall life variously as survival training, the real education, a dress rehearsal for life, a never-ending party, a zoo, a heavy metal concert, a free beauty and charm course, adoption by a family you didn't choose, and one large unmade bed.

How can residence hall life be seen in such radically differing ways as survival training and a charm course? It is the process of trying to understand this paradox that allows students to see the classical concept of definition, a staple of critical thinking exercises, in a new light. Whereas with classical definition, students might be asked to follow a structured heuristic that directs them to trace the history of residence hall life or to compare it with other living situations, metaphorical definition asks them instead to simply free associate in an unstructured way, to exercise imagination on some aspect of the whole experience of residence hall life. Classical definition holds out the promise that something can be defined precisely, once and for all, that through it we can arrive at objective truth. Metaphorical definition, in contrast, demonstrates through its multiplicity that truths are relative and contextual. When we ask students to wrestle with the question of how residence hall life can be so many different things to so many different people, we are teaching them that knowl-

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edge is always contextualized. As students begin to identify these contexts, they develop the advanced conceptual skill of cross-sorting according to categories. For example, in the work my students did with the concept of residence hall life, the diversity or our responses was eventually seen to be not at all arbitrary: we were able to group such metaphors as "survival training," "the real education," and "dress rehearsal for life" under a general category of "responsibility," while such metaphors as "never-ending party," "a zoo," and "one large unmade bed," fell under a general category of "freedom." This process of category-sorting plays a role in the development of abstract reasoning, since these "middle" categories are the most useful for organizing knowledge, learning, and remembering (Lakoff 56).

Metaphor also enables us to acquire new knowledge, since the unknown is information for which we as yet have no context. For ideas to be intelligible we must have some means of grasping them holistically by relating them to what we already know. Metaphor helps us to accomplish this learning task by functioning "interactively," a term used by Max Black to describe the process by which one system of knowledge is seen through the filter of another system in a way that generates an entirely new concept (72-77). We think of this application for metaphor most often in connection with the sciences, in which, for example, new concepts in physics are conveyed entirely through metaphor. However, many psychologists working with the role of metaphor in cognitive development theorize that it is this basic metaphorical capacity that enables children to learn at all. Howard Gardner cites as an example a young child who upon sipping his first glass of ginger ale, announces that it tastes just like his foot feels when it has fallen asleep (291). He speculates further that even as adults we continue to use this capacity in order to comprehend what is beyond our special domain of experience.

A student using metaphor in this holistic fashion thus precipitates a shift of two conceptual systems rather than trying to break down the new domain of knowledge piecemeal by analysis. Teachers can encourage this synthesis by using metaphors as tools for conveying new information: when we tell young students, "The atom is a miniature solar system," we ask them to relate what they don't know to what they do. I once gave my students a newspaper article

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that described "aging" as an "interior drama." As the article put it, "The internal drama of aging can never be directly known but must be carefully intuited. . . . It is pathetic. . . . It is not solvable, but it is not without joy or hope." The subject of aging was clearly remote to the experience of most young people, yet my students learned, for instance, that aging can be dramatic or even vaguely unreal, that the interior signs of the process can be different from the external ones. Thus, a new concept began to be intelligible to them. It is this process Jerome Bruner refers to in his studies of meaning-making when he says, "World making rides on wild metaphor" (48). Metaphorical synthesis makes possible the stretch from a known domain of knowledge to an unknown.

Metaphoric Heuristics for Thinking and Writing

Metaphorical thinking can be explained and encouraged by asking students to become aware of current popular metaphors, by having them explicate the meaning of metaphors in reading, and by having them use metaphor in their own writing. All of these approaches challenge them not only to identify and comprehend a metaphor but to mull it over, explore it, and explain how it works. Classroom activities I have found successful include the following:

Discussing popular metaphors:

Students are asked to collect samples of metaphors that frame current concepts and problems in popular culture or perhaps in the realm of their own interests and hobbies. Such cultural metaphors as the "war on drugs" or the "fight against AIDS" can serve as points of departure for class or small group discussion. Ask students first to identify the metaphor, then to explain what the metaphor hides and highlights about a concept, and to speculate about why we frame the concept in this particular way. Additional activities might include having students reframe concepts by replacing stock metaphors with new ones, (find an alternative for the "fight against AIDS"); identify a concept or problem and develop appropriate metaphors for it (find a metaphor for the way you learn best); track a developing metaphor over time (how we understand emerging connotations of the ongoing "war against drugs"); or trace historical metaphors now considered outdated (explore the implications of the "domino theory").

Metaphors in reading:

Select metaphors from a variety of nonliterary and literary contexts, including not only samples from poetry and novels but also passages from history books, newspaper articles, speeches, and magazine advertisements. It is important to keep the metaphors in the contexts of the passages in which they appear, so that students can see how metaphor does not just occur at the level of the word but can influence an entire text. Ask them to identify the metaphor, then generalize about why they think the author used it in the passage and what effect it has on the reader's response to the text.

Some metaphorical passages may be brief, such as the short newspaper article on "aging as an interior drama," whereas others may be longer pieces in which the metaphor is diffused throughout the passage. For example, I give my students a passage from a book on ancient history, an introduction to a chapter in which the metaphor of geological stress is used to summarize the general cultural collapse in the third century. It skillfully suggests the overall effect of cultural instability without actually detailing the problems at length:

> By the third century after Christ the political and
> cultural framework of the ancient world was beginning
> to totter. Premonitory shivers had occurred in the
> previous century, but few had noticed their import. . . .
> Other peoples were shifting as the long clam of Eurasia
> cracked. The external challenges were accompanied by
> ever more critical internal problems as the deep seated
> weaknesses of the Empire, like hidden geological faults,
> caused rifts on the surface. . . .

In response, students generalize about how the metaphor influences the meaning of the entire passage. Among their comments: "It shows how strong stress can be"; "We relate it to our own experience of stress." And they discuss what it hides and highlights about the concept of cultural instability. They have said it "emphasizes the hiddenness of the problem," "implies impending downfall," and represents the "restlessness of countries."

This process works equally well for metaphors in literature. Find a passage in which a metaphor resonates implicitly or explicitly and ask the

students to comment. For example, we work with the famous passage from <u>The Great Gatsby</u> in which Gatsby and Nick Carraway discuss Daisy:

> "She's got an indiscreet voice," I remarked. It's full of _____" I hesitated.
> "Her voice is full of money," he said suddenly.
> That was it. I'd never understood it before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it.
> . . .

After exploring all the possible connotations, we speculate on how and why Fitzgerald seems to synthesize Daisy Buchanan's entire character in this single metaphor.

Of course, students expect to find metaphors in literature, so it is the metaphors drawn from nonliterary sources that often surprise them, convincing them of the pervasiveness of metaphor in language. But the figurative language of literature is often daunting to readers, so this exercise provides them with an entrance into it by showing them ways to explore connotations of metaphors in order to relate them to their literary contexts.

Metaphors in writing:

Students are asked to conceptualize using a controlling metaphor that will structure a brief essay. To prepare them for developing their own metaphors, we work collectively on a topic familiar to all the students, proceeding in stages. For example, if we decide to look at possible metaphors for residence hall life, I first ask them to brainstorm freely any and all details that come to mind when they think of this topic. On the blackboard I write their ideas—"laundry," "cleaning," "self-discipline," "dates," "talks," "roommates," "junk food," "no privacy," "homesick," and whatever other associations might surface. Then with these details before us, we begin to generate possible metaphors, which like the details also develop along an associational chain: "never-ending party," "zoo," and "heavy metal concert" are all correlative ideas. We may produce several related metaphors before moving on to another chain. After participating in this process, students are ready to produce their own metaphors and to extend them into essays.

As students work with these various metaphorical heuristics, they begin to develop global perspectives by seeing whole contexts, generating new concepts, and building metaphorical bridges between concepts. By developing the ability to synthesize and think holistically as well as analytically, they can develop a broad range of critical thinking and writing skills.

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