Designing for Metaphor in a Study of Adult Educators: An Exploration and Critique of Metaphor Analysis

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Abstract: The authors argue that designing for metaphors in case study can offer insight into how adult educators view their roles and responsibilities in the classroom. They also critique metaphor analysis, arguing that, like all dialogue with participants, metaphors must also be analyzed within the space of the interview.

The characteristics of the learner, sociocultural context, and learning process in adulthood present a unique professional setting for developing adult educators (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The instructor's role in the adult classroom is perhaps not as clear as professional roles in other contexts. Thus, as adult educators engage in the process of narrating their professional identities in these settings, they may encounter inconsistencies between their prior notions of learners and learning and their practices in the classroom (Schön, 1983). When these dissonant moments arise, metaphors provide a powerful tool for framing a novel situation through the lens of a familiar construct. The claims made through these metaphors can offer a window into instructors' unique *metaphorical landscapes*.

Metaphors impose existing social structures on human experience and provide structures for imagining the world in novel ways (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Individuals can use metaphors to author *positional identities*: how they see themselves moving in lived social spaces and in relation to aspects of power (Clarke, 2008; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). Metaphors are also available to author *figurative identities*: the imagined roles individuals narrate for themselves (Clarke; Holland et al.). These identity practices are discursive, using existing meanings to create new meanings. This reliance on the old to create the new is the purview of metaphor, so we might expect metaphor to figure prominently in adult educators' navigation of dissonance.

Yet metaphors also act as a bridge for dissonance because they allow people to view one concept through the window of another concept, bringing together reason and imagination. Metaphor is a useful tool for educators navigating their professional identities and researchers interpreting them (Campbell, Parr, & Richardson, 2005; Dirkx, 2006; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). The use of metaphor as an analytic tool is perhaps particularly attractive in adult education, where educators are often simultaneously balancing several professional identities as part-time workers and volunteers (Smith & Gillespie, 2007; Ziegler, McCallum, & Bell, 2009). In these positions, in order to get up to speed quickly, adult educators may be asked to see the adult classroom through the lens of other classrooms, other workplaces, or other experiences. Their identity work as adult educators is, to some extent, metaphor work.

In this paper we relate our experiences designing for and analyzing metaphor in adult educators' narratives. We argue that using metaphors as an analytic lens can offer insight into how adult educators view their roles and responsibilities in the classroom. Yet we also critique the ways this kind of analysis can place metaphors outside of the participants and the researchers

as separate, verbal entities. Like all dialogue with participants, metaphors must also be analyzed within the space of the interview.

Designing for Metaphor: Identity Exploration

Our findings about metaphor grew out of a multiple-case study of five adult educators' narratives of their professional identities. Three of these educators were part-time instructors of General Educational Development (GED®) preparation courses and the other two were the full-time administrators who work with them in a community-based organization. Each of these participants was selected because they provided a unique "opportunity to learn" (Stake, 1995, p. 6) about the navigation of an identity as an adult educator. Each participant was undergoing a major transition and actively wrestling with her various professional identities: two were new to the adult classroom, one was just about to leave the classroom for graduate school, one was contemplating leaving the organization to form her own non-profit, and one was in the process of determining whether or not to leave her job because of a family situation. We expected that participants in these transitional spaces would be experiencing dissonance or confusion as they negotiated their identities as adult educators. We found, instead, that participants were using language—primarily metaphor—to self-author those spaces and to draw together the potentially dissonant contexts of their lives. In asking about dissonance, we found cohesion, but an improvised cohesion unique to each participant.

Because professional identity is the kind of commonsense knowledge that is often difficult to explicate, we chose to conduct semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Each educator participated in one interview, ranging in time from 45 to 90 minutes. Three of the five also participated in follow-up interviews.

We began this study with an interest in how adult educators improvised both what they believed to be their established positional identities as adult educators and what they perceived as their figurative identities into which they hoped to live (Holland et al., 1998). Our interview questions, then, moved back and forth between lived experience (e.g., "Walk me through one of your recent classes. What were you doing? What were students doing?") and the "what-if" world of figurative identity (e.g., "Where does support or caring fit into the adult education classroom, if at all? How do you conceive of it?"). They were designed to provide what Clarke (2008) calls a "'space' for authoring and improvisation" (p. 29), particularly in the face of potential dissonance (i.e., between the norms of the adult classroom and their other professional contexts; Holland et al.). Some of our later questions were directed more explicitly at this dissonance, asking participants to identify and explain differences among their various professional environments ("How would you compare teaching adults to your experiences of the K-12 classroom?"). In response our interview questions, participants explored and created their identity as adult educators, frequently using metaphor to balance their various professional and personal identities and beliefs.

Analyzing for Metaphors: How Metaphors Can Emerge from Stories

Our analysis began with an application of Riessman's (2008) thematic analysis, using topic and prosody (i.e., intonation or pausing to indicate topic shift) to segment the interviews into distinct stories. For each bounded story we identified the attributions participants made. For example, one participant wove a narrative about how students' ignorance causes them to be "off by a degree and then…off by another degree," eventually resulting in "really a different kind of human *being.*" This story attributes examples of gross student ignorance to a kind of "cumulative off-ness," caused by repeated small misunderstandings.

While some critical insights emerged from this thematic analysis of distinct stories, it did not offer the insight into identity construction that we were seeking. The unit of the story was too broad to capture many of the identity moves that we saw participants improvising through language. So, in stage two we focused closer in on the text, using rhetorical moves rather than stories as the unit of analysis. We asked what claims participants were making about themselves, their students, and their local context. This kind of analysis retains the connected quality of narrative analysis, examining the text as a connected whole, while providing a closer focus on instructors' use of words and phrases. In this second stage, metaphors emerged as a tool that all the participants used to navigate the interviews.

It was only in our third stage of analysis, then, that we focused explicitly on metaphors: moments when participants used one concept to explain or elucidate another. We determined that our exploration of positional and figurative identities could be seen as an exploration of metaphor. Whether these metaphors were commonplace (*breaking down* a lesson into pieces) or imaginative (confusion in class as being *in the vortex*), instructors used them to position themselves in relation to what is and what could be.

Findings: Metaphors of Access and Space

Each of the five participants narrates a unique metaphorical landscape. One, a long-time administrator, describes adult learning as "murky" and herself as personally "wrestling" with her own and her organization's notions of what literacy is. One, a social worker new to teaching, talks about how she and her co-instructor (an experienced middle-school teacher) "are like superheroes" and that her job is to "pull people out." Her co-instructor has a different experience, describing herself as sometimes feeling like "this child teacher" with little depth of life experience to bring to the adult classroom. Each participant's metaphor use is unique, drawing on her particular experiences and interpretations (see Konopasky & Reybold, 2014 for a detailed discussion of these results).

Alongside their unique combinations of metaphors—their metaphorical landscapes—the participants have some commonalities, describing literacy as offering learners some kind of "access," whether it be to resources, to information, or even to the world: "I think [literacy is] about access because if you can make those connections and you can absorb information and you can do it automatically, then you are able to access your world." This use of the access metaphor positions learners outside of the world occupied by the literate, displacing them from the space instructors inhabit. In this access metaphor, instructors have positional identities much like gatekeepers, giving them the social power to "expose" students to resources. Meanwhile, they imagine figurative identities for their students in which they can "walk independently through the world."

Some instructors, however, use the access metaphor in a slightly different way at times. These participants talk about how learners have *already* "navigated the world" and simply need to acknowledge their own abilities. While the first access metaphor presumes learners are on the outside of the world and need to get past some boundary *into* it, this use of the metaphor positions learners inside the world with instructors alongside them, both having equal access to power. These instructor and student positional identities as walking together through the world are, at the same time, imagined figurative identities: what *if* instructors acknowledged their students' access, how would learning be then?

Also, two participants talk about the space of the classroom as one that they, as instructors, are protecting *from* the world. One talks about simply "providing the space," but another actually seems to actively defend it: "You *cannot* disrupt the space. Because *you* said

you're ready to do this and I'm going to do *everything* in this classroom to make sure that happens." The way these two instructors use the space metaphor, they position their students as overwhelmed or embattled and position themselves as caretakers of their students' learning space.

A Critical Perspective: Re-placing metaphors

These participants are authoring positional identities in which learners are framed as internally motivated by some individual goal to cross into some "better" world or space. They are also evoking figurative identities for themselves in which learners accept the access and space they are offering. These metaphors mask the structural conditions of poverty that exist outside of individuals that may make it incredibly difficult to walk across that boundary into some supposed separate literate world (Schafft & Prins, 2009). In these authored positional identities, the instructor has the social power to allow students to enter the world of literacy. But this does not account for the social structures of oppression based on class, race, and gender that can act as far stronger gatekeepers than literacy skills (Sandlin, 2005; Tisdell, 1995). Learners who are in more marginalized positions may silence themselves in the face of boundaries, even if they are offered access (Tisdell).

Also, like other views of andragogy, these participants' notions of access are based on an assumption of internal motivation that is specific to a Western, individualist view of the world (Plaut & Markus, 2005; Sandlin, 2005; Tisdell, 1995). Within this view, learners are like Rodin's sculpture of *The Thinker*, internally focused and hard working: "[thinking] is done with eyes closed, the body hunched over, while the world is held at bay" (Plaut & Markus, p. 460). If the central role of the teacher is to provide access and space to work, then the learner is responsible for finding the internal motivational resources to do that work. A number of studies of teacher belief and identity mention this metaphor of the teacher providing access as the guide or facilitator (Clarke, 2008; Martinez, Sauleda, & Huber, 2001; Massengill Shaw & Mahlios, 2008; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). But this metaphor projects self-directedness and individualism on learners whose values may not match (Sandlin).

Finally, by placing a lens on metaphors as separate entities, distinct from those who create and utter them, we displace them from the space of the interview and may actually contribute to legitimizing access as a "natural" construct. Even within the local space of a literacy program, our broad analysis of a metaphor across several cases is a generalization that takes power away from each individual's story. This generalization moves away from the particularistic "force of example" that makes case study so powerful (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Designing for metaphor, then, may offer a seemingly cut-and-dried linguistic category for analysis, but it may remove the analysis too far from the participants whose narrative identities are of primary interest.

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