

## Transforming Education Part 2: How Metaphors Influence Reform and Transformation

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**A**s we begin our discussion of what it will take to *transform*, rather than *reform* education, it will be valuable to revisit the topic of metaphors. For this discussion, the word *metaphor* is used to mean any circumstance in which one conceptual category is used to describe or define another. “All the world’s a stage...” Included metaphors may be simple or extended, and with or without the words *like* or *as*. “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another.” (Significant metaphors will be italicized to help the reader become aware of them.)

Why metaphors? Although many people still think of metaphor as “merely” a literary device used to make language more interesting, linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson<sup>1</sup> 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. When people include such words in their speech, they

give us insight into what the person is seeing, hearing, or feeling when they conceptualize an abstract concept, such as *top students* or *leaving children behind*.

When people are confronted with an unfamiliar or complex situation, they unconsciously compare it to a situation with which they are already familiar. People joke about “the meaning of life.” The humor arises because *life* is so huge and complex a topic that expecting one to answer a simple question about its meaning is absurd. Therefore, it’s natural for people to “simplify” the complex concept by unconsciously comparing life to some familiar but less complex process.

For example, *Life is a journey*. When we hear that statement, we immediately understand that people are *travelers* along the *road of life*. Their goals are *destinations* along the route. (I haven’t *reached* that goal yet.) Plans for one’s future are the *itinerary* for the journey.

Problems become *detours* or *bumps in the road*. Sometimes people have to *find a way around* a problem, *back up and look for another route*, or just *wait around* until the problem goes away. People may *reach a crossroads*. They *cross some bridges when they come to them while burning others*.



There is an inherent logic in this metaphor that makes it appropriate and useful. But what people often fail to realize is that it also limits them from interpreting their lives in other ways. If you think of life as a *banquet* rather than a *journey*, how do your perceptions change? Is an *adventure* different from a *journey*? Is life a *bowl of cherries*? Or *the pits*?

Each metaphor focuses our attention on a particular aspect of life, but no metaphor has a perfect one-to-one correspondence. Therefore no metaphor is ever complete in its "explanation" of the complex concept. Furthermore, even when people "speak" in the same metaphor about a concept, they are often focusing on different aspects of that metaphor.

Metaphors have tremendous influence over the way people think about any issue. They enable certain ways of thinking while inhibiting others. And because they are used unconsciously, their transparency makes them even more powerful. This is why examining the metaphors through which we describe educational institutions and practices is so critical as we attempt systemic change. Understanding the metaphors can give us insight into why people support or reject ideas. They make us aware of how differently people "create" their realities.

### **The Up and Down of Metaphors**

**T**he strength of metaphors is their ability to make the unfamiliar more familiar. But they have an inherent logic that is consistent only within the framework of that metaphor. Therefore, they permit a person to perceive only those

alternatives that lie within that framework. For example, Lakoff and Johnson give examples of three metaphors for "ideas."<sup>2</sup>

#### ***Ideas Are Food***

What he said *left a bad taste in my mouth*. All this paper has in it are *raw facts*, *half-baked ideas*, and *warmed-over theories*. That argument *smells fishy*. That's *food for thought*. This is the *meaty* part of the book. I have to *spoon-feed* my students.

#### ***Ideas Are Plants***

That's a *budding* theory. Mathematics has many *branches*. Chemistry is an *offshoot* of physics. It will take years from that idea to *come to full flower*. She has a *fertile imagination*.

#### ***Ideas Are Commodities***

You have to *package* your ideas more carefully. I don't *buy* that. That idea just won't *sell*. That's a *worthless* idea. I wouldn't *give you a plugged nickel* for that idea. There's always a *market* for good ideas.

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*.

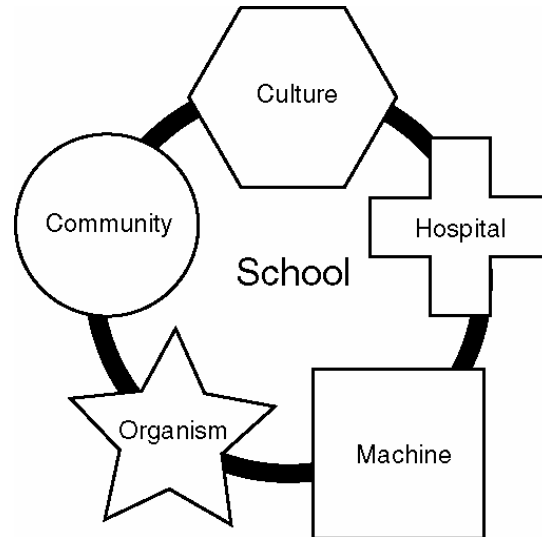
In the *ideas-are-plants* metaphor, it's perfectly consistent to hold an idea for a while without trying to sell it. After all, plants take time to *ripen* and *mature*—to *come to fruition*.

Unearthing current metaphors in education—bringing them into the light of day—is essential before anything more than superficial change can occur. Along with beliefs and values, metaphors form the foundation on which our understanding rests. Some metaphors are more valuable in the insights they provide than others—they form a more appropriate foundation for change. Unless we take the time to examine those foundations, we will continue to see the same piecemeal and largely ineffective reforms to which we have all become accustomed.

Examining these foundations requires new communication tools and a commitment of time. In essence, we must transform our thinking before we can transform our schools.

### Metaphors of Schools

Schools have been characterized by teachers as *factories*, *prisons*, *gardens*, *families*, *teams*, *organisms*, *beehives*, *zoos* and more.<sup>3</sup> How would you complete the statement, My school is like...”?



The diagram shows several of the metaphors that are currently used in the language of schools. Notice that each metaphor only overlaps a portion of the concept of *school* itself—that is, the points of correspondence only focus on certain aspects of the school and its functions. Therefore, each metaphor is a limited and often limiting perspective.

In this article, we'll briefly examine three of the metaphors. This discussion is *not* intended to judge the validity of a particular metaphor. By recognizing the limits of the operating metaphors of an institution, it is often easier to see what works and does not work in that frame—and to understand why. In fact, it would be preferable if schools could be perceived through as many different relevant metaphors as possible because each metaphor will illuminate only a part of the process. The more metaphors we employ, the more ways in which we can think about schools and the more alternatives we will have to work with.

### ***School as a Culture***

In *Images of Organization*, Gareth Morgan explains that the word *culture* “derives metaphorically from the idea of cultivation.” The factors within a cultural environment allow the *growth* of certain ideas but not others. *Culture*, says Morgan, is “the pattern of development reflected in a society’s system of knowledge, ideology, values, laws, and day-to-day ritual.”

Westerners often perceive indigenous cultures as “primitive” or strange, yet give little thought to the rituals of their own culture. “For example, why do so many people build their lives around distinct concepts of work and leisure, follow rigid routines five or six days a week, live in one place and work in another, wear uniforms (think broadly here), defer to authority, and spend so much time in a single spot performing a single set of activities?”<sup>4</sup>

Within the larger culture, organizations such as schools create their own unique sub-cultures. There are “unique norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the ‘persona’ of a school.”<sup>5</sup> The culture of a school can be seen in the way administrators, teachers, students, parents, support staff, and other members of the culture interact.

- ☑ Is there a shared sense of purpose, or is the culture made up of disparate groups who are suspicious of one another or whose efforts work against each other?

- ☑ Do the “stories” about the history of the school focus on successes or failures?
- ☑ Are students seen as the reason for the school’s existence or as problems?
- ☑ Who receives credit for the school’s successes and blame for its failures?
- ☑ Is the environment one of mistrust or collegiality?
- ☑ Do the people within the culture have a sense of self-efficacy? That is, do they perceive themselves as being in control of their own actions or as being ‘victims’ to the whims of the system?
- ☑ Do the majority feel that they have the power to influence the culture in a positive way?

It is unwise to underestimate the power of the cultural metaphor. In many cases, the culture defines who its members are. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye says that “Because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is, and what God expects him to do.” Tradition is not easily overturned. Steve Andreas suggests that “A culture is the accumulated wisdom of a group of people...but culture also contains the accumulated *stupidity* of a group of people.”<sup>6</sup> Sadly, traditions are not always conducive to needed change.

Case in point. Teacher education professor Judith Newman tells of a new teacher who is filled with enthusiasm about her teaching assignment. Bursting with excitement, the teacher stands in her classroom thinking about how she can transform it into an exciting place. A colleague drops by and the new teacher excitedly shares her ideas. When she is

finished, the colleague finally speaks. “We don’t do stuff like that here. We’ll hate you if you do because then we’ll have to start doing the same thing.”<sup>7</sup>

Several months later, this new teacher admitted that she still hadn’t done much of what she had planned. As a new teacher, she “couldn’t afford to make waves.” And this is not an isolated case. Recently, I’ve seen similar stories in the various teacher chat boards.

The culture of a school is, of course, influenced by the larger culture. Neil Postman<sup>8</sup> suggests that, earlier in our history, the stories told by our culture honored the gods of family, social responsibility, humility, democracy, and hard work. But a “chicken in every pot” eventually became a car in every garage, a TV in every room of the house, a cell phone and iPod in every pocket, and computers in every classroom in the school.

The gods we worship, albeit unconsciously in most cases, include economic utility, consumerism, efficiency, and technology.

If we don’t know what gods we worship—what values the school culture promotes—if we unconsciously pass along our belief in those gods to the next generation, then we are responsible for the persistence of those gods in our culture. Awareness of our cultural values is the first step.

Here’s an example of why some in education have begun to recognize the importance of a school culture. When theorists tout a “scientifically proven”

program or a new approach “that works,” they often cite exemplary schools in which that has proven true. The implication is that, because it worked in those schools, it will work in all schools (assuming that it’s done “right”—read, “the way we do it!”) What is seldom mentioned, or even examined, is the *culture* of the schools in which the program “worked.” Attempting to implement something new—even if has proven spectacularly effective elsewhere—without factoring in the school culture, is an invitation to disaster.

Many of you have probably heard (or even spoken?) thoughts about a proposed change such as these.

- “Did you hear the latest? Now, *they’ve* (government, principal, superintendent...) decided that we all have to....”
- “I don’t have time for all this new stuff along with everything else they make us do.”
- “Another meeting? What a waste of time.”
- “Why won’t *they* just let us teach?”

When the majority of staff engages in this type of conversation, it is indicative of a negative school culture—one in which meaningful change is difficult, if not impossible. It should come as no surprise that schools with a positive culture, characterized by cooperation, collegiality, and efficacy, provide a richer growth medium.

The first step in any attempt to transform (or even re-form) a school must be to examine the culture in which that reform or transformation is to take place. If the culture is negative, further efforts to enforce change are costly in terms of wasted time,

money, and effort. The inevitable failure of the proposed change will merely enrich the stories of failure that often circulate within a negative school culture.

But all is not lost. In his book, *Leading in a Culture of Change*, Michael Fullan refers to the process of "Reculturing." For a fascinating look at the cultural metaphor of schools, and what can be done to alter it if necessary, refer to reference 5 and the following website:

<http://www.schoolculture.net>

### ***School as a Community***

**M**etaphors are not simple, discrete ways of understanding complex issues. Metaphors may overlap. For example, the organization of a school may profoundly influence many elements of a school culture. Conversely, a school culture may influence the type of organization the school adopts. Traditionally, schools have had a hierarchical structure. In a hierarchy, roles are defined and there is a recognized "pecking order" of responsibility. Goals come down from on high. Everyone is expected to do their assigned part to accomplish those goals.

A school with a positive culture characterized by collegiality and cooperation may well perceive benefit in moving away from the hierarchical structure. Recently, many schools have begun referring to themselves as "learning communities." This metaphor focuses on the nature of leadership (shared rather than hierarchical) and the roles that members of the community play in the ongoing educational process. Communities often arise among people

who have a common intention or interest. They are held together by commitment rather than contract. Communication about commonly perceived needs flows among members of the community. The unique contributions of individual members are recognized and utilized, and roles arise from need rather than assignment. Rather than rules, there are shared values and beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

Although many people recognize the difference between a hierarchy and a community, the success of the "learning community" depends on the ownership that each person takes in its success. If an administrator in a hierarchical school suddenly announces that the school will become a community and sets up "rules" for how it will operate, other members of that "community" may notice little difference between it and the original hierarchy. And they are correct. Communities do not arise by fiat!

Birthing a learning community entails much more than simply "deciding" to be one. It requires a very different communication structure. Each member of a community must be encouraged (and feel free) to express his or her concerns and opinions. Of equal importance, those concerns and opinions must be addressed in some way. If they are not, efficacy will be diminished and people will fail to take ownership of, or even continue to participate in, community issues.

Becoming a learning community often requires that members of the school learn new ways of communication. This is particularly true in schools where previous communications have been adversarial.

This process requires both time and a commitment on everyone's part. If a school is attempting to form a learning community at the same time that is trying to move from a negative to a positive culture, early efforts at communication may drop back into old patterns. Rather than accepting yet another "failure," it is imperative that each person in the school is encouraged to recognize and alter personal communication habits in support of change.

A true learning community will include people who have previously been without a voice.

- How often have students (with the exception of the president of the student council or other "representatives" of the students) been asked to share their concerns about the way the school operates?
- How often have parents been included in decisions about curricular changes in anything more than the most superficial way or through "representatives" chosen from the more vocal and visible parents?
- How often have the concerns of teachers been honestly heard and addressed rather than being swept away by platitudes, promises, or external mandates and policies?
- And how often does everyone in the school environment perceive themselves as learners?

A school is unlikely to become a true community unless the perception of who is responsible for the effectiveness of a school is broadened, and a new dynamic of interaction is adopted.

### ***School as a Hospital***

In a quick overview of educational publications, medical metaphors are easy to spot. While a few schools are seen as *healthy*, theorists are quick to *diagnose* weak programs and *prescribe* solutions to *cure their ills*. *Ailing* schools may require an *infusion* of funds. There are classes for *remedial (remedy)* students or those with various learning *disorders*. Students are given *batteries of diagnostic tests*. Teaching is perceived as a *clinical* profession. Where *school is a hospital*, teachers are cast as *physicians*. In fact, some consciously choose that metaphor as demonstrated in the following quote posted on the internet.

"As a teacher I see myself like a physician...During the all-too-brief time that the students are *in my care* I must try to help "*fix*" *acute needs* while offering a *prescription for chronic needs* that will last beyond my interactions with the students."

This quote highlights a belief inherent in the *school as hospital* metaphor—the presupposition that students are *sick* and need to be *cured* (or broken and in need of fixing). The metaphor forces educators to focus on the negative, just as medicine has for so long focused on illness.

Let's face it. How many schools perceive themselves as "wellness" clinics—working to maintain the good health of students?



Parker Palmer suggests that when the medical metaphor is used,

*"The dominant diagnosis...is that our 'patients' are brain-dead. Small wonder, then, that the dominant treatment is to drip data bits into our students' veins, wheeling their comatose forms from one information source to the next until the prescribed course of treatment is complete, hoping they will absorb enough intellectual nutrients to maintain their vital signs until they have graduated... [O]ur assumption that students are brain-dead leads to pedagogies that deaden their brains."*<sup>10</sup>

Despite its negative entailments, we can deliberately use the medical metaphor to gain insight into educational issues. Let's consider the approach NCLB takes in improving the learning of the lowest performing students.

Many researchers agree that students who arrive at school physically, mentally, or emotionally *undernourished* must, *before they are able to digest the traditional food of schools*, be treated for those deficiencies. These students are effectively like premature infants who must be nurtured intensively until they reach the size of a full term infant. They may not reach that weight for several months or longer, and often develop at slower rates than full term infants.

This does *not* mean that they don't (or can't) eventually reach or exceed the development of full term children. It's simply that their development does not occur along the same general timeline.

Several critics of NCLB have pointed out that it does not adequately address the need for "preemie nurseries" where physically and mentally undernourished children can receive the developmental care they need.<sup>11</sup>

Instead, in the apparent belief that "expecting" great things of every student will magically cause them to develop more rapidly, the government insists that all children of a certain age be held to the same standards. If the children do not meet those standards, the school "fails" and teachers are blamed for "low expectations."

Of course, expectations are important! Studies have repeatedly shown that there is a positive relationship between a teacher's expectations and the child's learning. But there are also such things as unrealistic expectations. Is it realistic to "expect" a preemie to have the same physical development at six months as the child born at full term? Is it the *fault* of hospitals, nurses, or parents if they do not? Will setting a "standard" for growth and development help?

Suggesting that students who enter school impoverished in mind or body should not be held to the same expectations as other students is, in the words of President Bush, "the soft bigotry of low expectations." But all expectations are not created equal! We "expect" preemies to achieve as rapid a development as they are able, given the proper care. In the same way, educators must "expect" each and every child to progress as rapidly as he or she is capable. But that progress must be as-

sessed on a child to child basis rather than against some fixed and rigid standard.

Research shows that students who start out with below “normal” physical or mental development can ultimately attain the same levels as so-called “normal” children, given proper nourishment and stimulation.<sup>12</sup> *I would suggest that not providing them with that care is the true bigotry.* Like the care of premature infants in the hospital, the role of schools, *with the assistance of the community*, must be to provide the support and nourishment to promote that development. This must occur *before* confronting students with the traditional demands of schooling. *Equal* educational opportunity is not synonymous with *the same* education for all. One Size Fits All education is both scientifically unsound pedagogy and “bad medicine.”

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In next article in the series on transforming schools, we'll examine the factory and organism metaphors for schools. The factory metaphor is arguably the most pervasive. It's no coincidence that it “fits” the cultural values of productivity, efficiency, and technology. Evolving from the industrial age factory metaphor are the various ‘business’ metaphors that have taken root in many schools. A [commentary in Ed Week](#) addresses the corporate metaphor for schools. (To read Ed Week articles, you will need to register.)

Here's [one final example](#) of how a school characterizes itself in metaphor. The metaphor itself is a bit sparse, but it's easy to see the aspects of the school's role on

which the metaphor focuses. Look for the beliefs and values that are expressed in each frame.

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The more conscious attention you pay to metaphors, the easier it will become to recognize them. I invite each of you to jot down a few of the metaphors you hear around your school during the next few weeks. Examine your own metaphorical conceptualization of your environment. My school is like...

Another way to get insight into the culture of your school is to ask questions such as “If my school were an animal, what animal would it be?” (You can replace *animal* with any class of objects that has sufficient variety.) After you have completed the statement, be sure to elaborate on why you made that choice. My school is like....because... This will help you flesh out your metaphor and will provide additional insight into which aspects of your school you are addressing in your metaphor.

The metaphors of culture, community, or hospital may also be applied to classroom. Think about your classroom through each of these metaphors.

- If your classroom is a culture, is it one of cooperation, collegiality (yes, you can be collegial with students), and efficacy (on the part of both students and teacher)?
- What benefits or problems do you perceive with this metaphor?
- What beliefs or values underlie your perceptions?

- ☑ Is your classroom a community, in which each person—teacher and student—has a voice?
- ☑ Or is it a hierarchy in which you are “the boss” and responsible for defining the role of students?
- ☑ Is your classroom a hospital where “Dr. Teacher” focuses on what is wrong—what needs to be “fixed” in students. Or is it a wellness clinic where everyone works to maintain their present health—and enhance it?
- ☑ Or is it something very different? Whatever the metaphor, does it support your stated goals in terms of students? Why or why not?

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