

MISREADING CHARLIE: INTERPRETING A TEACHING STORY THROUGH METAPHOR ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT. In this article the author interprets a teaching story, written over a decade ago, about a troubling student who failed her course. Using George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's cognitive linguistic theory, she shows how the conceptual metaphors implicit in her interactions with the student prevented her from responding helpfully to the student's situation. Through her re-examination of "Charlie's Story," the author demonstrates how conceptual metaphors, as interpretive tools for narrative analysis and reflection, can reveal the philosophical and social commitments that shape teachers' pedagogical practices.

MAUVAISE LECTURE DE CHARLIE : INTERPRÉTER UNE HISTOIRE D'ENSEIGNEMENT À PARTIR D'UNE ANALYSE DE MÉTAPHORES

RÉSUMÉ. Dans cet article, l'auteure interprète un récit d'enseignement, rédigé il y a plus de dix ans, relatant le cas d'une étudiante qui éprouve des problèmes et qui échoué à ses examens. Faisant appel à la théorie linguistique cognitive de George Lakoff et de Mark Johnson, elle démontre comment les métaphores conceptuelles que comprenaient implicitement ses interactions avec l'étudiante l'ont empêchée de bien gérer cette situation et d'aider l'étudiante. L'auteure démontre dans ce nouvel examen de « l'histoire de Charlie » comment les métaphores conceptuelles en tant qu'outils interprétatifs de l'analyse narrative et de réflexion, peuvent mettre au jour les engagements philosophiques et sociaux qui façonnent les pratiques pédagogiques des enseignants.

In this article I interpret a teaching story, written a decade ago. During the early 1990s, I wrote and interpreted several stories to explore the potential of using narrative for faculty development in institutions of higher education in the United States (Gillespie, 1991; 1996; 1999a; 1999b; 2000). Encouraged by the works of cultural and narrative psychologists Jerome Bruner (1986; 1990) and Donald Polkinghorne (1988), I explored how teacher narratives were not just expressions of the teaching self but actually constitutive of it. As Polkinghorne put it: "On the basis of [linguistically] constructed experience, we understand ourselves and the world, and we make decisions

and plans regarding how we will act” (p. 158). In this new turn toward narrative in faculty development, researchers wrestled with issues such as socially sanctioned images of teachers and the gap between instructional values and practices.

One story I wrote – “Charlie’s Dream” – bewildered me. I tried to interpret it several times but finally gave up and tucked it away in a drawer. Finding and analyzing the story ten years later, I discovered new meanings through re-examining the conflicts in the story. As I re-framed the conflicts, the teaching metaphors informing my practices became apparent. Re-interpreting this story has given me new insights into myself as teacher and a deeper appreciation of the interactions between narrative and metaphor in reflective teaching practice. Here is the story.

Charlie’s Dream

Walking into the library classroom, I found the students in my undergraduate psychology class talking quietly together in small groups. As I walked over to one of the groups, I saw Charlie enter the room. “Ah, good,” I thought to myself, “there’s Charlie.” He walked by me and sat in the back row, alone. His tousled blonde hair was pulled back in a red kerchief, and he was wearing jeans ragged from the knees on down. Earlier in the semester, when we were studying Carl Rogers, he had brought up his earmarked copy of Hesse’s *Siddhartha* because, Charlie said, “Rogers’ ideas remind me of Hesse.” Today I knew I had to talk with him because he had not been in class for about a week and had missed the midterm examination. I felt a brief rush of irritation with myself for not having tried to reach him sooner and then a brief rush of irritation at him, at his elusiveness. Another student called to me because she couldn’t find relevant articles on weight management for her project. Seeing the librarian enter the room for his presentation, I responded to her, “Ask the librarian during his lecture.”

Relieved from the duties of direct instruction, I concentrated in a different way on my class. The chair next to Charlie was empty, so I settled in next to him and immediately noticed the darkened circles under his eyes. “My god,” I thought, “He looks like an old man. What does this mean?” “Can you stay after class?” I quickly whispered. “Yeah, sure,” he replied. My attention turned to the librarian who was showing students how to do a computer search for their literature review. As he finished his presentation, students asked questions of him and me until the end of the hour. After the last student left, Charlie and I sat down across from each other, alone in the room.

“You are really behind, Charlie,” I stated as neutrally as I could. “What’s going on? I’m worried about you.” “Nothing,” he replied. I waited. He looked off into space as he said, “You know I read all the time, but I can’t read what

people tell me to read. I only like to read what I want to." I inquired, "What have you been reading lately?" "Nietzsche," he answered without emotion. "I really like reading guys like Nietzsche." "Philosophers?" I asked. "Yeah," he chuckled and looked me in the eye for the first time. I responded, "You know I'm married to a philosopher? He teaches Nietzsche. I kid him about studying all those dead, depressed white men. But he tells me it's better than reading the white men who weren't depressed." Nodding that he understood the humor in this exchange, Charlie smiled, and his eyes lit up. Tentatively, I asked, "Do you think you could read for someone in a philosophy class?" After several minutes, he replied, "Probably not." As I heard his response, I noted the flatness in his voice again and his lack of emotional expression.

After a long silence he said, "I had a dream." "Oh?" I asked. "It must be important." "I don't know," he answered. "But I came to tell you." There was more silence. And then in a soft voice, he started telling me about it: "I walked down to a graveyard, like the one down by the end of my street, but it wasn't really my street; you know how dreams are. And there in the middle of the graves was a beautiful, strong moose. As I walked up close, I saw that he was eating a deer. The deer was still alive and struggling. The moose kept tearing into the flesh. I couldn't take my eyes off the scene; it was real gory. I was horrified but I couldn't take my eyes off. I was paralyzed."

I didn't say anything because Charlie was looking far away, as if he were still looking at the scene. After a time, I asked, "How is the dream related to what we were talking about before . . . I mean your feelings about being told what to read . . . about assignments given to you." Looking at me, he chuckled and said, "I would have never thought about that." His body moved as if coming to life as he smiled at the puzzle. "Well, what do you think?" I asked. "How would you interpret the dream in terms of your life as a student right now?" "Oh, you mean that I'm either the moose or the deer?" he asked. "Maybe," I answered him, "but actually, Charlie, I thought that the moose and deer might represent different parts of you – different ways of being, you know, ways that feel at odds with each other." "God," he replied, "I never would have thought of that." His body was still again.

Sensing that the next moments might be critical in this exchange with him, I asked tentatively, "How might you feel like the deer and how might you feel like the moose?" He replied, "Well, I want that strong self to emerge, you know, the dignity in the moose's head as it lifts up from the prey; but I feel a tenderness in me like the deer." I waited and then said, "That seems important . . . to feel those feelings and how they pull against each other." "Yeah, but I'm so trapped," he replied. We were both silent. "There's a way of out of this dream, you know, Charlie," I said moving closer to him. "Oh yeah, what?" he asked. Holding my breath, I stated, "Moose aren't carnivorous; the moose doesn't have to eat the deer." "I already thought of that," he blurted

without hesitating. “I forgot to tell you one real important thing – about the moonlight. The moonlight was shining down on this scene, on the moose, and so I know that the moose is supernatural, not a real moose.”

It was then – in the moonlight of his dream – that I knew that I could not reach him. As his hollow eyes gazed into mine, he connected with me as someone who cared about him as a human being, but his slight smile told me that I could not reach him as a student. I am, finally, someone who assigns him readings and gives him tests. My heart sank. I began to redirect our conversation away from the dream and back to his situation as a student. I gave him concrete options about counseling and counselors, about ways of trying to stay in school. I tried to be hopeful. But we both knew subconsciously that the deer was dying and that he was paralyzed and that he would paralyze me, connected, as I was, with the reality of school.



Charlie came back to class two more times without his assignments and without making efforts to get caught up with his work. Each time he came in late, sat quietly in class, and left before I could talk to him. Perhaps he could see me under the pressure of the work that comes with the end of the semester, or perhaps he could see that the students whose dreams were not so troubled commanded my energies and attention. He drifted out of my net of awareness until, on a cold, gray day, I sat alone late in my office tallying grades. There was his name in my book followed by a row of blanks, a column where numbers should have been – as evident as a too shallow grave. Having tallied all the other grades and looking back at his record, I was suddenly flooded with the realization that I had stayed with him in the graveyard and thus had accepted the terms of the struggle. What would have happened if he had told me about the moonlight earlier? Would I have walked him out of the graveyard first, to stand on safer ground? Face flushed, I wrote the registrar to withdraw him administratively from my class – as if there were still a way out of his dream, as if the deer’s life might still be spared.

Identifying the conflict

When I wrote this story, I thought that I had done what a good teacher would do, even though my efforts did not result in Charlie passing my class. I had engaged with him, staying present with him as he described his dream and encouraging him to stay in school. Yet when I reflected on the story after writing it, something bothered me, as if I were still standing in the graveyard with him. Interpreting the story a decade later, I discovered what I had not seen when I originally worked with the story; namely that I was not really listening to him. This article takes up the question of how I came to interact with Charlie in the way I did through examining the

central metaphors that structured my interactions with him. I discovered these metaphors through an examination of the conflict in the story.

Originally, I thought the conflict in the story involved whether or not to administratively withdraw him from the class, which, at the time, opened a philosophical can of worms for me: what concrete evidence did I have that Charlie deserved another chance? He never asked me to withdraw him. I had flunked students before for just this record. If I withdrew Charlie, would I not have to withdraw other students who had attended sporadically and not turned in their work? Yet, by not withdrawing him, by putting the "F" in the mostly empty column, I thought that I would be sealing his fate: failure. He would be someone who would, at the least, be on academic probation and, at most, never be able to recover from an "F" grade on his record. The haste with which I made this decision indicated that, at the time, I did not want to think these issues through. I used my intuition about Charlie's potential in light of his independent reading (Hesse, Nietzsche) and his fragility (deer): he might get stronger.

Re-analyzing the story ten years later, I found a conflict much earlier in the story, in the following lines:

"You are really behind, Charlie," I stated as neutrally as I could. "What's going on? I'm worried about you." "Nothing," he replied.

Originally, I thought that the conflict was Charlie's, as well as mine. But these lines illustrate that it was I who was worried, not Charlie. Charlie told me, a second time, that his performance in school was not a conflict for him when he replied that he could probably not read for someone else. I experienced his unwillingness to read assignments as a conflict for him. He did not even present his dream as a conflict; he simply asserted, "I came to tell you." I am the one who framed the dream as a conflict about school:

"How is the dream related to what we were talking about before . . . I mean your feelings about being told what to read . . . about assignments given to you." Looking at me, he chuckled and said, "I would have never thought about that."

When he did answer my question about how the dream might be related, he came the closest to stating that he felt conflicted: "Yeah, but I'm so trapped." I responded immediately, pushing to get him out of the trap: "There's a way out of this dream, you know, Charlie." Not surprisingly, he once again removed the conflict by telling me. "The moose is supernatural, not a real moose."

My new insight into the tension shifted my thinking about this story and moved me into an arena where I felt not so much conflicted as vulnerable. Why had I been so dogged with him about school, even in the face of his direct statements that he was not in conflict about it? I take up this ques-

tion now, arguing that I unwittingly employed a teaching metaphor that I superimposed onto my interaction with him. I further suggest that I avoided deeper analysis of the story at the time I wrote it because the metaphor that I employed was not widely affirmed in higher education. These complexities made it easy to tuck the story in a drawer.

In re-examining the story, I used Lakoff's and Johnson's (1980; 1999) cognitive linguistic theory of metaphor, a theory increasingly employed as an analytic tool in qualitative research (e.g., Aubusson, 2002; Dexter & LaMagdeleine, 2002) and for promoting reflective teacher practice (e.g., Martinez, Sauleda, & Huber, 2001).

Conceptual metaphors and teaching

During the late 1980s and 1990s, educators at both the K-12 levels (e.g., Bullough & Stokes, 1994; Dooley, 1997; Knowles, 1994; Richards, & Gipe, 1994) and the college and university level (e.g., Hoffman, 1994; Parks, 1996; Palmer, 1993; Tiberius, 1986) explored how metaphors can help teachers reflect meaningfully about their teaching. I use the word *metaphor*, not in its historically narrower sense, as restricted to figurative language, but in its broader, more contemporary sense, as critical in cognition, as central to how we understand the world. Although metaphors can operate explicitly on surface levels of description in speech or writing, they often carry implicit inferences with them. As I will illustrate, these implicit inferences structure our interpretations and evaluations of our classroom experiences.

According to contemporary cognitive linguists, such as Lakoff and Johnson, conceptual metaphors organize cognitive processes, including perception, memory, concept formation, and behavior. In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) stated, "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (p. 5). Rather than a comparison of certain features to others (e.g., *my love is a red rose*), they argued that conceptual metaphors carry over experiential gestalts. They use the term *gestalt* to emphasize the way in which experience gains coherence and meaning given the experience's larger background and context. Take their famous example LIFE IS A JOURNEY: the experiences associated with journeys, such as *traveling along a path toward a destination*, are transposed onto the abstract concept of life, as in *I'm on the path to success*. Originating in bodily experiences, these metaphors are common and much of the metaphor operates inferentially. That is, in life (an abstraction), we infer – from our physical experiences of traveling – that our goal is to get to a destination, in this case what we define as success (another abstraction). That one's life can *move along a path*, *get sidetracked*, or *stuck in rut* are inferences that are implicitly carried over in the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor.

For Lakoff and Johnson, our ordinary experiences in the world are a rich source for reasoning metaphorically. Educational activities are no different. As Tiberius suggested, “Most of us . . . have well formed metaphors for teaching and learning which organize our understanding of these concepts” (p. 146). Concepts such as *life*, *teaching* and *learning* are abstractions, so we appeal to our ordinary experiences in the world to explain and make sense of them.

The literature is full of different metaphors for teaching and learning. In this article, I draw on Tiberius, who described two conceptual metaphors for teaching and learning that are common in US American education. Tiberius called the first conceptual metaphor *transmission*, “the transference of information from teacher to students” (p. 146). Using this metaphor, teachers assume that teaching is a matter of getting information to flow, usually from instructor to students. Learning is a matter of receiving the information that has been transmitted. We take our experiences with sending and receiving information (usually mechanically) and project them onto teaching and learning (e.g., Did he *get* what you taught him? I tried to *convey* the main points to my students.) If one uses this metaphor, then the instructor’s focus is on the information in the course: managing it, usually by breaking it down into units or bits that can be sent to and received by the student whose job is to process and store it for later recall. In focusing on the information and its *flow*, this metaphor highlights subject matter and the mechanics of *getting it across*. Tiberius noted that Paulo Freire’s (2002) metaphor of banking education is a “dramatic” example of the transmission metaphor, in that the student becomes a “receptacle” to be filled by “deposits” from the teacher (p. 147).

Tiberius described another metaphor, one that competes with the *transmission* metaphor, as *dialogue*. Using this conceptual metaphor to describe teaching and learning, teachers draw on their experiences of being in conversations with others, especially during times when they join together to solve real life problems. As Tiberius stated, in the dialogue metaphor, “the emphasis is on the interactive, cooperative, and relational aspects of . . . teaching and learning” (p. 148). Through interacting with the student, the instructor is able to *draw out* students’ prior knowledge so that students can contribute meaningfully to the dialogue and in the process develop and enrich what they already know. In this way, the teacher is *interrogative*, a partner who engages in inquiry with students. Tiberius argued that Freire’s a dialogic approach (“problem posing education”) to teaching literacy exemplifies this conceptual metaphor.

According to researchers such as Tiberius, the metaphors instructors employ matter for their thinking and practice. For example, if a teacher employs the *transmission* metaphor, she might identify the source of a learning problem as in her *delivery* or the student’s inability to *receive it*. Or if a teacher employs

the *dialogue* metaphor, he might improve his teaching by studying how to *ask questions* that reveal students' thinking. Writing in 1986, Tiberius argued that the transmission metaphor was dominant in higher education. More recent applications of conceptual metaphor theory (Deignan, 1997, 1999; Eubanks, 1999a; 1999b; Lakoff, 1996; Santa Ana, 1999) have similarly demonstrated that certain conceptual metaphors gain normative power in discursive contexts, especially when they cluster together to present a coherent explanation for the way the world is. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) hinted at this when they stated, "People in power get to impose their metaphors" (p.157). Such power can also render other metaphors questionable, even illegitimate. Teachers who structure their teaching using the *dialogue* metaphor, for example, might be tempted to keep their classroom experiences private if they teach in an institution where the *transmission* metaphor predominates.

Conceptual metaphors in "Charlie's dream"

In "Charlie's Dream," the conceptual metaphor of *dialogue* that I employed broke down – for him and for me. I attempted seven different times to engage Charlie in a conversation about how he could do better at school, a topic to which he never really responded. I attended to him, trying to draw him out by listening intently, responding to what he said, engaging with him about the dream that he came to tell me. When a teacher thinks that learning occurs in *dialogue*, she must discover what students know so that they can begin to participate meaningfully. An implicit assumption of this metaphor is that knowledge resides and grows inside students as they participate actively. Ideally, every student can come to understand any subject matter if they get engaged and participate.

One variation of the *dialogue* metaphor is the teacher as *midwife*. In this variation, the teacher assumes that learning is a natural process; students have good ideas that are waiting to be born. The *midwife* teacher wants to get students into an optimal setting for the birthing of their ideas. For labor to start, students must believe that they have worthy ideas to give birth to. Once students believe in their potential, the teacher serves as a coach while their students examine their prior knowledge in light of the new subject matter. In their now famous study of women's intellectual development in the college years, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) defined *midwife* teachers as those who believe "that [their students] possess[es] latent knowledge" and "draw it out. [Midwife teachers] assist the students in giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it" (p. 217). Once the students' ideas are born and can survive on their own, the teacher steps back, as the fully developed ideas are now the student's.

Although the use of the *midwife* metaphor goes back to the ancient Greeks, feminist educators such as Belenky and her co-authors have used it as a

particularly apt metaphor for teaching women and other groups who have been economically and socially oppressed, as their capacity as knowers is often called into question by the dominant group. Freire argued, for example, that the dominant group justifies its power ideologically, by claiming its own intelligence as superior, especially in contrast to the oppressed, whose intellectual capacities are deemed inferior. Part of the work of liberatory educators, Freire noted, is to bring out the knowledge and intellectual capacities of the oppressed through dialogue.

As a feminist teacher in the early 1990s who worked with students who demonstrated significant financial need, I had consciously embraced the *dialogue* metaphor. I had not, however, considered how I might distort it. I think now that my inability to examine its potential for misuse resulted from the radical nature of the metaphor in an educational environment which privileged the *transmission* metaphor. I felt uncertain about the interaction and how much Charlie self-disclosed in telling me his dream. Perhaps I even wanted to prove the metaphor worked in just such situations, with a seemingly lost student such as Charlie.

I know that I believed that Charlie had ideas that could be brought to life within the university. If only he could find the right place, he would be able to give birth to his ideas. After his first admission that “nothing” was the matter, I responded as if he “could be” in labor, if only we could find the right delivery room. For example, the following responses were directive:

“Do you think you could read for someone in a philosophy class?”
“[Your dream] is related to what we were talking about before.” How?
“You feel like the deer . . . the moose?” How?
There’s a way out of this dream, you know, Charlie.”

When he told me that the moose was supernatural, unreal, I backed down from trying to coach him as a student by becoming more prescriptive. Yet, even as I graded the class at the end of the semester, I wanted to save a place for him to come back. Looking at my grade book, I thought, “[He stayed] in the graveyard.” I tried to imagine, even at the end of the quarter, that I could do something that would take him out of the graveyard so that he could find a place where he could fit in school, where he could bring his ideas to life.

Lakoff and Johnson argue that conceptual metaphors structure our everyday thinking and behavior, including how we tell our stories and maybe what stories we tell. But metaphors are always partial renderings of reality; they shed light on different dimensions of experience. During my interchange with Charlie, I never considered that he might, for example, have been strung out after spending the night with a demanding but perverse aunt or in the first stages of diabetic reactions. When metaphors become routinely applied, like any habit, they operate mechanistically. As Green (1971) put it,

A dead metaphor is one which we use in thought as though it were literal. It no longer impresses us as metaphorical. Its inference is so shrouded in custom and habit, its comparison so covered over by the blind convention of everyday thinking that the metaphor controls what we think. These are the dangerous metaphors. They frequently obscure useful philosophical questions that we want to raise and force us to frame our investigations within unnecessary limits. (p. 62)

Perhaps the same thing happens when we idealize our metaphors or use them only in private. We then hold on to them so tightly that we do not think to explore what they hide. The dialogue metaphor has worked for me in most teaching and learning situations. In the early nineties, it was a metaphor I held more privately, in part because the transmission metaphor remained privileged in US American higher education. Not only did many of my colleagues view students as recipients, but my students also had been institutionally conditioned to be recipients and so were less likely to perceive dialogue as a form of teaching. Given the emphasis on collaboration and student empowerment over the last decade, the dialogue metaphor has gained much more legitimacy and respect.

In mindlessly employing metaphors, we paint over or distort the empirical evidence in front of us. Charlie told me why he came to see me, but I could not hear what he said. When he did not fit my metaphor and the sequencing did not flow, I could not get out of it. I kept trying to get him into a dialogue that would keep him in school because, I believed, he had ideas that mattered. Even after I had written it up as a story, the interaction haunted me. I see, now, that the story raised troubling questions for me, albeit unconscious ones: was I losing my effectiveness as a dialogic teacher? In a public telling, could the dialogue metaphor stand up to the transmission metaphor? Why did I bother at all, for example, with a student who was unwilling to read assignments? It was easy to put the story in a drawer.

Stories have a way of teaching us long after their original telling. As reflective practitioners, we can look back and see what shaped our thinking and actions – then. Much in our thinking and acting is shaped by our conceptual metaphors for teaching and learning, and if they are alive and generative and loosely held, we can ask ourselves the “useful philosophical questions” that a mechanical application of a dead or idealized metaphor might cut off. Even if we continue to deploy the same metaphor, we can be mindful, ever alert to the exceptions, to the metaphor’s edges. I am not suggesting that I needed to deploy another metaphor. To the contrary, had I used the transmission metaphor at the onset of my interaction with Charlie, when the first conflict arose, when he first told me nothing was wrong, I would never have engaged him at all, would never have been particularly troubled by his absence, and would have never stood with him in the moonlight of his dreams. My interpretative work with narrative and conceptual metaphor

continues to remind me that I need to be fully present so that my metaphors take the lead from, instead of overshadowing, what my students bring me.

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