Chapter 15

The Power of Metaphor in Bringing Clarity for Learners in Learner-Centered Design

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ABSTRACT

The study focuses on guiding students through an exploration of social constructivism model as it relates to the roles of instructor and learner. It explores the use of a metaphor, the dot, to demonstrate that metaphors can support deeper understanding of difficult concepts inherent in learner-centered and constructivist pedagogies. This research was conducted to ascertain whether metaphors provide common reference points for learners that can be used to build and test new assumptions of knowledge. Additionally, the study highlights challenges that learner-centered pedagogy face when identifying pre-conceived constructs and moving towards the adoption of new thoughts, perspectives, and reasoning. In theory, this study identified the continuing role that metaphors play in the learning theory and how the literature can be explored further. In practice, the study identified student-centered activities, which include the learner as a contributor to knowledge, learning in a community of learners, and empowering the learner to change.

INTRODUCTION

Narrative: The Use of a Metaphor in Creating Enduring Understanding

A colleague recalled the following story. At the end of one teaching session at a major university, a past university student popped into his classroom as students were heading out. After waiting patiently for a while, she stepped forward and stated, “I don’t know if you remember me, but I was in your morning class about three years ago! I am now teaching and fully love it! I was walking down the hallway and...”
noticed your familiar voice and wanted to step in for a moment and say hi.” The student continued, “I wanted to let you know that you inspired me and I have told so many of my friends to make sure they take your course. I loved your enthusiasm, humor, and knowledge of the subject—you are one of the best profs I have had and hope that I can bring to my own future students what you gave to us.” While my colleague tried to get his get ever increasing head size out of the proverbial door—his recollection, not mine—my colleague of course did what the rest of us do. He searched his memory for her name. A place. A time—some sort of reference. Who was this student? When did she attend? She looked familiar, but . . . did she get the right person? My colleague did not dare ask, especially since she had stated so openly such warm sentiments.

The student continued. “Oh, you don’t have to worry. I don’t expect you to remember my name—she was being kind. I was the student who brought the student textbook that Tolstoy wrote before he later became renown for his writing of great works of literature!”

It was instant recall as my colleague remembered the event! He stated, “You don’t forget such things. She was a student from the Republic of Georgia and this was her grandmother’s textbook. She brought it to class as an artifact and told us a story related to the object. I remembered the look of the “old” ragged book with pages torn and yellowed over time and part of the cover bent out of shape—it had traveled great distances to be in our class. The book was a Social Studies book written in Russian. This student translated a few passages for us . . . and I remember thinking, *The great Tolstoy was once a textbook writer?* Certainly there still must be hope for me as a writer then!” Actually he recalled, “I marvelled that in a small classroom at a university located in Western Canada such a student would appear through that door and bring with her a connection to such a treasure. (This included students having artifacts from the Mayflower, another being a daughter of a prominent politician, and another informing us during a discussion that her great grandmother was one of the personal confidants of Gandhi himself, so nothing surprised me as an educator.) I was reminded that students come from such interesting and unique backgrounds and no two were the same.

The student then related something that was my colleague had not anticipated at all. “Oh… I wanted to say that I still remember your ‘dot’ illustration—you know—that metaphor “thingy” you used at the beginning of our course to help us remember learning theory.” It made so much sense to me that and even today when I think of my classroom strategies, I am reminded of it. I have applied the same ‘dot’ thinking to other areas of my teaching as well. . . and it works!”

My colleague quipped, “Of all the topics, concepts, and multiple hands-on learning activities we worked through in that class, and all she remembers is the ‘dot’! Remarkable! It worked! In a sense, as my colleague continued, “I remembered her as the student who brought to me Tolstoy and she remembered me as the ‘dot’ prof.”

What began as a small and seemingly insignificant learning activity now took on new meaning in the life of the students. It was clear that the metaphor my colleague had created provided a meaningful learning point for the learner. The test? It endured. The metaphor was obvious something that had connected with many students and over the years it proved worth retaining and paying more attention to. My colleague recounted that numerous students shared similar connections to their learning experience through this particular metaphor. It became a useable illustration and place to begin discussion on the topic of learner-centered pedagogy. In fact, in one session of the class, a student stated, “Oh, this is the ‘dot’ illustration that my friends who have taken your course mentioned.” So the dot is a natural place to begin our own study of learner-centered pedagogy.
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