

Turns of Phrase and Routes to Learning: The Journey Metaphor in Educational Culture

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Introduction

This paper looks at the underlying conceptualisation of the journey in our cultural understanding of the process of learning and educational practices in general. This conceptualisation is manifest in cognitive metaphors from different domains of physical experience, but the underlying 'image schema' of source, path, and goal is paramount, although different aspects of this tri-partite structure may be highlighted in any particular domain. It is suggested also that certain aspects of contemporary educational practice have their roots in the educational culture begun in ancient Greece, although this cultural continuity is unlikely to be conscious. Ultimately the aim of the paper is to demonstrate that learning is not only linked to a prominent cognitive schema, but that that schema is itself variously articulated according to cultural predilection and evaluation.

Metaphor as Methodology

The methodological use of metaphor as a means of analysis in areas other than literature is a relatively recent phenomenon. However, to look at the metaphors used in a particular discourse or aspect of a

discourse is a particularly fruitful route into a deeper understanding of and also, of course, critique of that discourse. Examples of such a route can be found in collections of articles such as Ortony (1979, 1993) on metaphor and thought, Paprotte & Dirven (1985) on the ubiquity of metaphor, and Taylor (1984) on metaphors of education. In these works the recognition of the constructivist role of metaphors is pivotal. As Taylor (1984, p.5) says:

“Far from being a mere linguistic decoration, metaphor comes to be seen as a ubiquitous feature of our thinking and our discourse, the basis of the conceptual systems by means of which we understand and act within our worlds.”

The focus on metaphor has undoubtedly been enhanced by the ‘discovery’ of preconceptual or cognitive metaphor in the work of the cognitive linguists, prominently Lakoff & Johnson (1980), Lakoff (1987), Johnson (1987), and Sweetser (1990,1992). What cognitive metaphor reveals is the motivation for cognitive structuring in bodily experience, what Johnson (1987) calls the “embodied mind” and Lakoff (1987) “experiential realism”.

While the primary emphasis in their work is on how cognitive metaphor along with its conceptual siblings, “image schemata” (Johnson, 1987) and “prototypes” (Rosch, 1973, Rosch & Mervis, 1975, Rosch & Lloyd, 1978) reveals the explanatory inadequacy of generative semantics, the insights gained have been extended to many areas of enquiry taking a cognitive or cognitivist perspective. In the present paper, I want to focus on what Lakoff & Johnson call conceptual metaphors, although they are really more like conceptual frames that enclose sets of metaphorical expressions that are consistent with the framing conceptualisation. One of Lakoff & Johnson's most often quoted conceptual metaphor in this regard is: ARGUMENT IS WAR.

I will retain the convention of capitalising such conceptual metaphors throughout this paper. The focus will be on conceptual

metaphors that have importance for understanding the process of learning and conceptualisation of knowledge in educational culture.

The JOURNEY as Conceptual Metaphor

The JOURNEY is a prototypical example of what Lakoff (1987 p.275) based on Johnson (1987) terms the *source path goal* image schema. Image schemas are preconceptual structurings emerging from pervasive everyday experience. Every time we move anywhere, there is a place we start from, a place we end up at, places in between, and a direction. This basic image-schema serves for the mapping system of conceptual metaphors themselves (Lakoff, 1993), i.e. the target domain is conceptualised in terms of the source domain. So in the example of ARGUMENT IS WAR, the source domain, war provides the basis for the target domain, argument. The journey from its starting point to its destination is the **path** of transfer between them. The pervasiveness of the journey metaphor is reflected in its mapping onto the process of life itself. We **go through** life from birth to death. After a period of difficulty, we **carry on** with our lives. It is a common platitude to state: life must **go on**. In their 1989 book, *More than Cool Reason*, Lakoff & Johnson refer to the pervasiveness of the journey metaphor as follows (pp.60-61):

“Our understanding of life as a journey uses our knowledge about journeys. All journeys involve travellers, paths travelled, places where we start, and places where we have been. Some journeys are purposeful and have destinations that we set out for, while others may involve wandering without any destination in mind, consciously or more likely unconsciously, a correspondence between a traveler and person living life, the road traveled and the ‘course’ of a lifetime, a starting point and a time of birth, and so on.”

Johnson too, focusses on the pervasiveness of the journey metaphor for the source, path, goal schema. He gives examples from the domain of reasoning. To quote (1987: 38-39):

“When we reason, we understand ourselves as starting at some point (a proposition or set of premises), from which we proceed in a series of steps to a conclusion (a goal, or stopping point). Metaphorically, we understand the process of reasoning as a form of motion along a path - propositions are the locations (or bounded areas) that we start out from, proceed through, and wind up at. Holding a proposition is understood metaphorically as being located at that point (or in that area). This very general metaphorical system is reflected in our language about reasoning in a large number of ways:

Let us **start out from** the proposition that Hamlet feared his father.

You **can't move to** that conclusion from *where* you are now.

From here, I'll proceed to show that humans are slaves of their passions.

Once you **reach that point** in the argument, you've got to *go on to* the conclusion.

The **next step** is to demonstrate that monkeys can make tools.

He **got off the track** of the argument.

That assumption will **lead you astray**. ”

Learning is a Journey

From the LIFE IS A JOURNEY conception, it is but a short **step** (in terms of the REASONING IS A JOURNEY conception) to see a major process of life, namely learning, also in terms of a journey. The pervasiveness of this conceptualisation is particularly prominent in the titles of EFL textbooks, i.e. textbooks for learning English as a Foreign Language. Block (1991) lists such titles according to which aspects of a journey they highlight. He finds five different clusters altogether.

(i) The *Streamline* series of textbooks published by Oxford University Press, whose popularity is evident in their longstanding position in the bestseller lists, encapsulates the source, path, goal schema of the journey. Their titles are: Departures, Connections, Directions, and Destinations.

(ii) Titles in other series are distinguished by their conceptual consistency of referring to geographical points along the way. They include: *Beyond Words*; *Checkpoint English*; *Crossroads*; *Frontiers*; *Horizons* ; *Interchange* ; *Meridian*; *Milestones*; and *Stepping Stones*

(iii) While the titles listed in (ii) emphasise the locations of progress, the following draw attention to the process of starting and continuing to make progress. They are: *Starting English*; *Opening Strategies*; *Advance your English*; *On Course*; *Progress Towards First Certificate*; *Progress Towards Proficiency*.

(iv) Another assumption of progress in learning is that it does not occur without difficulty. The recognition of such difficulties on the route are apparent in the titles which follow: *Break into English*; *Impact*; *Inroads*; *Headway* .

(v) Yet another predisposition for titles is to emphasise the exploration of uncharted territory. They include: *Discovering English*; *Encounters* ; *New Dimensions*; and *The Fourth Dimension*.

The choice of titles for books concerned with language learning are indicative of embedded assumptions about learning. The pervasiveness of the journey metaphor underlying those choices is stark. They mainly focus on the nature of the **path** aspect of the three-part schema. I would like to single out two qualities of how the learning path is construed as particularly indicative of the value system surrounding education from a western cultural perspective. One is the assumption of challenge, implied in the notion of coping with difficulty in titles under (iv) as well as in reaching particular reference points as **horizons** and **frontiers**. These latter geographical metaphors also fit

into the second value system, which is that surrounding the notion of exploration, as in the titles under (v).

The word 'challenge' functions as an honorific concept in English, not only in the educational context. For example in giving reasons why you want to study a particular discipline or why you would like to apply for a particular job, it is usually positively evaluated to say something to the effect of: 'It would be a challenge' or 'I would find it challenging.' Similarly in sport, it is the idea of the challenge that keeps the sportsman or woman going, to reach ever greater goals. Accepting a challenge connotes the positive attributes of being able to cope with difficulty and being confident of success. Both attributes promote achievement, a concept related to the 'goal' or destination end of the journey schema. Lakoff (1987, p.275) cites the example of purpose as a metaphorical extension in the abstract domain of the physical experience 'destination'. 'Achieving a purpose is understood as passing along a path from a starting point to an endpoint'. The concept of 'challenge' then embodies the worthiness of overcoming obstacles in reaching one's goals. As such the 'challenging route' takes its cue from a focus on the endpoint of the journey. These goals are themselves judged by the extent of the challenge overcome in order to attain them. The implication is that the 'challenging' journey is better than the 'easy route'.

Seek, and ye shall find.

This biblical exhortation is indicative of the valorisation of exploration in the western tradition. The concept of exploration combines an emphasis on both the starting point and the end point of a journey. One is starting out from what is known in order to seek out the unknown and thereby make it known. The exploratory journey is typically one of pursuit, i.e. the pursuit of truth. The journey as pursuit is readily manifest in numerous expressions relating to the educational process and the acquisition of knowledge. Pursuit involves seeking and finding, as well as having the connotations of persistence. The seeking

element is embodied in the educational function '**research**' and commonly found in collocations such as '**truth-seeking**', or the '**pursuit of knowledge**'. The finding element is expressed in notions of '**uncovering**' the truth, '**getting to the bottom of things**', and the '**naked**' truth.

The exploratory nature of truth-seeking, linked to the notion of mapping uncharted territory is also available in evaluative expressions related to the pursuit of knowledge. They include: **breaking new ground**, and **pushing back the frontiers** of knowledge. These metaphors of territorial expansion imply that what is known is charted territory, i.e. already clearly '**mapped out**' whereas the unknown still has to be explored. The underlying assumption is that KNOWLEDGE IS TERRITORY. This is further evidenced in the division of knowledge into **fields** of study and learning **curricula** (another term whose etymology is an example of a particular journey, namely a charriot race) or **courses** of study which **chart a route** through them. The charting of physical territory is the basis for the conceptualisation of intellectual inquiry.

At the sharp end.

The phrase, 'working **at the cutting edge** of the discipline' combines the territorial imperative with the quality of sharpness. This quality is valued in inquiry, as evidenced for example by its positive evaluation in collocation with mind or as an attribute of an individual. For example, **she's sharp**. The quality of sharpness is implied also in the notion of *probing*, as in 'asking **probing** questions.' In probing the unknown, the unknown is often envisaged as deep, or the depths. Another positively evaluated term for cutting into and reaching the depths is **penetrating**. In the academic context in particular, a penetrating account, argument, or analysis is looked upon favourably. The conceptualisation of '**penetration**' as a means of acquiring knowledge can be traced back at least to pre-Platonic philosophers in ancient Greece, the Pythagoreans. Tarnas (1991) speaks of them

honing the instrument of mathematics in order to 'penetrate' the mysteries of the world and reveal the patterns of regularity.

Quest and Questioning: The Inner Journey

In the quest for truth, the cognate notion of the question also plays a role. The art of asking questions has a rich heritage in the western educational tradition. It goes back to Socrates whose stress on dialogue as a means of ascertaining appropriate judgments about what was right and wrong, has given us the notion of the Socratic dialogue. Basically, what could be said about certain things was an important determinant of their epistemic validity. Judgments were arrived at by the Socratic technique known as the '**elenchus**' (see Robinson, 1953) which was a process of questioning to get debaters to agree to certain propositions and then by further questioning examine the implications of this agreement which is accepted in order for the implications to be discovered. Answers to questions concerning the definition of particularly valued moral concepts which had high status in the society of the time, such as virtue, courage, justice, piety, and beauty, were subjected to analysis, inconsistencies were brought out and the definitions thereby rejected. This procedure to discover the essence of things by the rejection of flawed arguments and further attempts at explanation or elucidation was as important as the right answer. The pedagogic technique of drawing out such judgments led Socrates to call himself a midwife, as it were, the person helping to give birth to the ideas or understanding within the students. This conceptualisation is embodied also in the etymology of education. The verb '**educere**' means to **lead out**. The process of reaching understanding therefore may be seen as an inner journey on the part of the student, and a drawing out or facilitating role on the part of the tutor. This inner journey is a journey by questioning.

The notion of the inner journey concurs also with the Platonic understanding of knowledge being revealed from within the individual mind, which mirrored the nature of the universe, embodied in the divine Forms or Ideas. Plato's academy held forth the ideal of inner

perfection through disciplined education. That discipline was enforced through self-critical reflection. As Socrates declared: 'The life not tested by criticism is not worth living,'(quoted in Tarnas, 1991, p. 35). The English word 'criticism' derives from 'krites' the judge in Greek and the process of judgment remains pivotal to the process of learning, particularly in higher education.

It is interesting for example, that in looking at the pragmatic difficulties of Japanese students studying in the arts in Britain (Hiraga & Turner, 1995; Turner & Hiraga, 1996), questions from the British tutors relied on strategies of comparison and contrast, and of hypothesis testing, in order to bring out the necessary critique from the students. These movements of bipolarity on the one hand and the projection into 'what if' on the other, seem to have come straight from Socrates' and later Plato's academy, although undoubtedly the contemporary perpetrators of such strategies are not conscious of this cultural continuity. Such questions (of performing and visual arts students) invite the students to state their preferences with regard to appropriate aspects of the discipline and although not usually overtly stated, it is clear that along with the stated preference, students are required to give reasons. Such questions include 'What's your favourite composer?' asked as a lead-in question to a music student, who is ultimately being invited to display what he/she knows in an area of music of their choice, and 'Which is the best one?' or 'Which is the worst one?' asked of a fine art student who is being encouraged to supply a critique on his/her own work. Hypothetical questions such as 'what would it be like if it were free-standing as opposed to hung on the wall?' by virtue of extending the range for judgment, are inviting students to show their awareness of the possibilities and their visual implications.

In their answers to a discourse completion task, British students also tended to display strategies of comparison and other kinds of evaluation in their responses. The following are examples given to the elicitation as if from a tutor:

Are you familiar with the work of X (=any scholar you know)?

BS(1): Yes, at least I've read one or two of her recent papers on contourite drifts in the North Atlantic..... but she doesn't seem to relate the structures to paleoclimate, and that's what I'm really looking for. Do you know of any papers that address this issue?

BS(2): Not extensively, no. I've, of course, read her 'international politics'. It was one of the set texts for a seminar last term, but I thought that her very heavy reliance on macro-economic determinism *discounted the role of*, often irrational, perceived national interests in shaping policy decisions.

BS(3): Yes, I've read his works on immunisation and his latest research on aids, where he questions its significance as a new syndrome, postulating many of its manifestations could in fact be symptoms of syphilis.

The Birth of Knowledge and Educational Growth

While such strategies of comparison and hypothesis testing are facilitating the inner journey of learning, the result of this journey is the 'birth' of knowledge and the birth metaphor links with other biological metaphors associated with the educative process. They include: **implanting the seed** of an idea; the idea **took root** ; her research is **flourishing** ; he **grew** in competence, and last but not least the venerable reference to **fruit** from **the tree of knowledge**. It is frequently pointed out by educationists that the metalanguage of the discipline itself is structured in terms of biological metaphors. While learning may thus be conceptualised as growth or development, growth or development may also be seen in terms of a biological journey. Frequently heard talk of pupils and students being allowed or enabled to 'fulfill their potential' confirms this predisposition.

Cultivating Critical Judgment

The predilection for comparison and contrast, and for measuring the extent to which something is the case or not, is prevalent in the academic tasks set for students in contemporary higher education. **How far, to what extent, and discuss** epitomise instructions for the academic essay, a cultural artefact which values the exercise of judgment. Such instructional phrases imply the need for measurement, as does judgment itself, whose conceptual structuring is graphically embodied in the metaphor '**weighing things up**'. The ideal judgment is one which is '**balanced**', one which is '**even-handed**', not '**weighted**' in favour of one side over the other. This ideal of balance is embodied also in the main presupposition of academic discourse, namely, rationality. Its etymological root is the latin word 'ratio' meaning reason. Its contemporary cognate '**ratio**' harks back to the importance of exact ratio or proportionality important in classical Greek architecture and extolled as a virtue by Aristotle who established the notion of the golden mean as a standard for the good life in the intellectual, moral, and spiritual spheres. The continuation of this cultural preference appears to be extant in the criteria for good academic writing, particularly in the demands made for the student essay.

Weaving the Textual Route

The coherence which the academic essay has to display is often judged in terms of weaving metaphors, both in terms of formal structure and argument. To be coherent the text should be **tightly knit** not **loosely woven** ; an argument may have several **threads** running through it which an interpreter has to **unravel**; and the argument should have no **flaws** or **loose ends**.

The cognate relationship between 'text' and textiles is well known and so it is not surprising that judgments on textual performance are formulated in terms of weaving. Weaving is also an instantiation of the

source - path - goal image schema, in that threads are being drawn through an expanse of space to complete a finished cloth and thereby the 'textual weave' may also be seen as a particular kind of journey.

The Journey into Cyberspace

The foregoing 'journeys' through various educational practices have all been based on experience in three-dimensional space, namely our everyday experience of space. However, developments in electronic technology no longer restrict us to this 3-dimensional experience. The territorial imperative of truth-seeking or knowledge acquisition, with its assumption of starting from ignorance, is gradually being overturned by the proliferation of knowledge in the contemporary world. The means of accessing this 'information' is no longer a question of a rigorous **linear** logic, but of orientating oneself in a '**web**' or '**net**' of pre-existing knowledge. It is a pre-determined electronic traffic network of superhighways that draws the 'user' into one of its many web-sites. This **drawing in** marks a distinction from the purposive **setting out** of the traditional learning journey.

In the new electronic landscape of the World Wide Web and the Internet, learning is becoming associated with activities such as 'surfing' 'cruising' and 'browsing'. These pleasurable activities connote also a measure of passivity. Surfing in its original sporting sense depends on the quality of the waves on any one day, and is not subject to the plans of any individual. Cruising similarly is a leisurely activity implying that the driver of a car, or the passengers on a ship have nowhere particular to go but where the car or the ship takes them. It does not have the sense of A to B determinacy of the usual journey. Browsing, while retaining a link with the traditional site of learning, namely the library and books, connotes randomness and contingency. These connotations stand in stark contrast to the traditional educational values of setting goals and working hard to reach them. Learning in cyberspace may be exciting, but also passivising. Learning as search will be speeded up and the process of finding will be fun, but the exercise of judgment by the individual learner may be undermined. It

appears that the inner journey of development by exploration, of asking questions and accepting answers by a process of critical judgment, a process that has been revered since the time of Socrates in western educational culture, may be reversed. Rather than evaluation on the part of the student, it may be the power of attraction of particular web sites that controls the exploration of cyberspace. Learning is still a journey but it is the destination rather than the traveller that is determining the route. The net-surfer is 'drawn in' to a particular web site whereas the traditional learner is attempting to draw his/her own map. In the electronic landscape as opposed to the traditional **territory** of the mind, issues of agency and control appear to be reversed. The learner is not so much '**pushing back the frontiers of knowledge**' as **landing in the net**.

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