Reflection and Metaphor in Conversation

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Talking with one another is a prime medium through which most designing, planning, and learning takes place. Through our interacting and interrelating, we make visible, affirm, develop, maintain, change, and reaffirm our education systems. This short essay focuses specifically on two mental activities that can be used as effective methods with human communication to converse within an education community in order to facilitate changes in the system. I shall first define these methods, then provide a vivid example. Finally, I will describe two contexts in which they are being used for systemic change in education.

Two Methods

Reflection is the first method. It is a mental act of fixing one's thought—a mental turning back, if you will—upon some subject of serious interest. Reflection is also often described as a thinking activity through which one sharpens and clarifies various ideas that form from one's many experiences of others and the world. Based on their experiences with children engaged in making objects out of clay, Lego, and Erector sets, for example, the idea "learning by design" becomes more profoundly evident to both teachers and parents as they come to realize that the various similarities among these play activities constitute an important rudimentary foundation for a person to participate actively in the design of his/her world. Reflective activity does not reference everything that comes to mind, but only those ideas drawn into this more poignant process, in which one dwells on and scrutinizes the idea to remove ambiguity and confusion, so that it is distinct in one's thinking, and consequently can be communicated more clearly to others. This activity requires a concerted mental effort on the part of the thinker. In contrast, most ideas in one's daily stream of thought pass quickly like rapidly changing images of a Music Television video. Thus,

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reflection is both a process and a product. As products, reflections can contribute to the conversation of systemic change in education.

Metaphor is the second method. It is a linguistic label or symbol directly given or transferred to some object, person, or thing. But the label is different from the thing, even though it seems analogous to it in many potential ways. For example, the phrase, "he is a greenhorn," of course, does not have literal meaning—one does not see a new student with green horns protruding from the top of the head—but the phrase does communicate a set of potential qualities about the learner commencing the task of learning a new subject. The metaphor serves to catalyze imagination; it is image provoking. The analog is seductive; it tantalizes one into believing, even if temporarily, that the metaphor is the thing. Various images provoked by the metaphor and the analogous characteristics implied between the label and the thing provide much food for thought that can be harnessed for personal reflection as well as group discussion. Although metaphor is much of the life-blood of all artistic and literary forms, metaphors are widely used in everyday conversation. But it is the disciplined use of metaphor as a methodological device in small group activities that reveals its promise for facilitating the conversation of systemic change in education.

An Example

As methodological tools, specific reflections and metaphors are the fruits of cognitive activity that can be expressed in writing, spoken concisely, and drawn out pictorially. In so doing, they may enter the stream of conversation leading eventually to the ocean of discourse of the education system. To illustrate the use of reflection and metaphor, I provide this excerpt from an unpublished paper about my experiences at an International Systems Institute conference (see Banathy, this issue):

Walking along Asilomar Beach on the Pacific Ocean, I noticed finely drawn lines in the sand made by spent waves returning to the sea. As the water flushed to, over, and around the small stones, they created intricate leafy web-like tracings merging to greater and greater indentations. They reminded me of erosion patterns on a large scale, specifically mountain ranges viewed from high altitude. After examining one stone placement after another, the remarkable variety of patterns became apparent—a family record generated by liquid gravity on sand and stone. It seemed that from the underlying repetition of self-similarity and the path variations, there emerged variegations of confluence to a rock nested within a depression extended into a micro river basin stretching toward the ocean. It astonished me that they had gone unnoticed after so many walks on so many beaches. Undoubtedly, these beautiful web-stone-stalks had

always been there, displaying themselves before me, and right under my feet, just waiting to be discovered and appreciated.

The newborn images suggested to me a natural metaphor for systemic design and inquiry. That is, in the design of a systems methodology for human inquiry, which is characteristically a human activity system and is to be applied within a human activity system, various streams of inquiry can merge and the investigation expands as the inquiry proceeds. However, here the key concept is **confluence**, *not mergence or expansion. Different threads to streams come into play until eventually the methodology forms. In this process of constructing and executing, the communications of co-inquirers yield an oncoming river—an informative, comprehensive, and hopefully satisfying flow—thus fulfilling its purpose. Research design in systemic inquiry is a dynamic collective tension between making and releasing leading to confluence. When constructive and productive, this movement is confluential collaborative human interactivity seeking answers to questions, solutions to problems, and positions on issues, perhaps much like liquid gravity on sand and stone, etching its way toward the sea and leaving an elaborated record in its wake.*

The first paragraph communicates a powerful visual metaphor from a phenomenon in Nature that any seeing person can observe. The metaphor transfers the image to the human activity system. Further, the core concept or idea projected through the metaphor is confluence, which once revealed, can be openly discussed in the conversation. Furthermore, various statements follow the imagery in the second paragraph that consist of specific reflections upon the metaphor in terms of its analogies between the metaphorical image and design inquiry in education systems. Finally, the example is also a global reflection—a record of concerted dwelling upon the idea provoked by the metaphor.

Two Contexts of Use

Reflection and metaphor are currently being used for systemic change in education in two contexts: (a) in the privacy of one's own thinking and writing activity, and (b) as a part of a facilitated group activity.

Regarding reflection, this activity has been an effective means to impact individuals at conferences of the type producing the example above. Reflections are shared by those who write them at times their authors wish to do so in their small-group meetings as well as in reports given when the conference participants meet as a whole body. They also may appear in published proceedings (Reigeluth, Banathy, & Olsen, 1993).

Regarding metaphor, this activity has been used effectively (a) for individual professional work as noted in the illustration cited above, and (b) by organizational consultants in group exercises within organizational settings to break down strongly held employee conceptions of their organization and transform conceptions into healthier and more productive images (Morgan, 1986, 1993).

Personal and group activities of reflection and metaphor are complementary. For example, a focused group discussion may be considered to be a group reflective activity. It can be recorded, played back to the group or listened to individually, and reviewed in conversation. A conversation may be viewed as a confluence of persons that shows movement of collective thought. Personal reflections may be interjected into the conversation. Reflective statements may be produced outside conversation, distributed, and subsequently included in conversation. Metaphors often are used within reflections, as illustrated above. Conversation may generate a metaphor, signifying a kind of confluence, which may be catalytic to a collective breakthrough in thought, after which the participants conceptualize their education system in a different way. These arrangements are only suggestive of the myriad of ways that reflection and metaphor may become methodological adjuncts to conversation.

The examples described above in the two contexts, personal and social, have direct parallels to those conversations that transpire among students and teachers. The uses of reflection and metaphor in their conversations can contribute to the completion of curricular assignments, lessons, and subject papers and presentations. These conversations also represent important opportunities to engage students and teachers in improving their facility at exercising these two mental activities.

Conclusion

As two conceptual means available to educators, reflection and metaphor, whether used primarily in personal or social context, can be part of the conversation to foster systemic change in education. In practice, it is the participant learners (teachers and students) in conversation who largely determine their unique configuration that can effectively include both reflection and metaphor in their process of systemic change. ☐

References

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