DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 206 030 CS 503 568

AUTHOR Meyrowitz, Joshua
TITLE Analyzing Media: Metaphors as Methodologies.
PUB DATE Nov 80
NOTE 16p.: Paper presented at the New England Conference on Teaching Students to Think (Amherst, MA, November 14-15, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Processes; Communication (Thought Transfer); *Critical Thinking; Higher Education; *Mass Media; *Metacognition; *Metaphors; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Students have little intuitive insight into the process of thinking and structuring ideas. The image of metaphor for a phenomenon acts as a kind of methodology for the study of the phenomenon by (1) defining the key issues or problems; (2) shaping the type of research questions that are asked; (3) defining the type of data that are searched out; (4) shaping the language in which the problem and results are expressed; (5) determining the procedures that are used to examine and collect data; and (6) determining what problems, questions, data, and procedures are ignored. For example, the most common metaphor for a medium is that it is a kind of "conveyor belt." The medium is seen as a passive delivery system of important messages. A very different metaphor for a medium is that it is a "language," that is, a specific way of encoding a message. This leads to the analysis of production variables or a study of the expressive potential of the particular medium. In television and film such variables as shot selection, choice of lens, camera angles, and so on can be studied to see how they affect perception and interpretation of the content. A third possible metaphor in media research is "environment." The medium is seen as a type of social context or social situation that includes and excludes participants. The use of metaphors is one way to start students thinking about thinking before they fully realize it. (HOD)

Analyzing Media:
Metaphors as Methodologies

Joshua Meyrowitz
Theater & Communication
University of New Hampshire
Durham, NH 03824

Paper presented at the New England Conference on Teaching Students to Think, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, November 14-15, 1980.

When my students at the University of New Hampshire heard about this conference with its ominous title: "THE NEW ENGLAND CONFERENCE ON TEACHING STUDENTS TO THINK," some of them threatened to hold a counter-conference called "The New England Student Conference on Teaching Teachers to Stop Thinking So Much." While they were joking, their response reveals something I believe they really feel about thinking--that it is a complex and mysterious task, and that it is something that has to be consciously started and stopped. For many of my students, thinking is something that a teacher imposes on them when the teacher is in a bad mood or wants to be "tough." I have had a number of students come to see me privately to tell me that asking them to think is not fair. They never had to do "that" before, they've said. I have also been told by students that I must have taken courses in thinking or had some special training in it, while they have not.

I have worked very hard, therefore, to demystify the process of thinking for my students, to show them that thinking is something that goes on consciously or unconsciously all the time. I also try to convince them that critical thinking is a tool that should simplify rather than complicate their digestion of course material.

The particular problem I have tried to attack is what I call my students' "poor relationship with ideas," particularly with ideas they read in articles or books. My students seem to have an intense love-hate relationship with ideas. They either accept them uncritically or they totally reject them as stupid or wrong. If they are told to learn an idea or theory, they try to memorize it--right down to the particular

words and phrases. If they are encouraged to criticize an idea, they often turn around and dismiss it as merely "someone's personal opinion," or just "an interpretation." (To many of my students a personal interpretation is something to be discarded along with yesterday's newspaper; they, after all, have their own interpretations.) They seem to have little sense of the nature of an argument, a perspective, a way of seeing. In other words, they have little intuitive insight into the process of thinking and the structuring of an idea. And they generally do not consider the possibility that many of the "facts" they are busy worshipping through memorization are also linked to specific perspectives or particular ways of seeing the phenomena being studied.

One of the techniques I've developed, therefore, attempts to blur, at least temporarily, the line between interpretation and fact, and thereby allow students to look for alternate ways to see a phenomenon without immediately judging one way as better than another.

I begin with the simple idea that an image or metaphor that a person has for a phenomenon may unconsciously shape his or her description of it, and also shape the ways in which he or she might go about studying that phenomenon. In this sense, I suggest that metaphors can act as implicit methodologies, shaping both what is studied and what is ignored. And I suggest to my students that they approach what they read or hear about in class as a kind of puzzle. I ask them to search for unstated images or metaphors that might be shaping or guiding the direction of the thinking or research. In this way I try to get them involved in the thinking that is going on before they have a chance to question whether they personally accept or reject the conclusions.

To demonstrate the relationship between metaphors and thinking, I ask my students to look at a familiar experience such as "going to grade school." I ask them to come up with some common metaphors for this experience by completing the sentence: A grade school is like a _____. Then we explore some of the metaphors they come up with. Here are some common ones.

[DISCUSSION OF CHARTS]*

Which of these metaphors is the "correct" one? I'm sure we each have our favorite. And there are many other possible metaphors for school (war, meal, horse race, strainer, boot camp/basic training, etc.), but none is the objectively correct one. And none is complete. Yet, I think that we go about studying many complex phenomena by consciously or unconsciously thinking about them as if they were something simpler. In The Origins of Knowledge and Imagination, for example, Jacob Bronowski suggests that Newton was able to solve a number of complex problems about the rotation of the moon around the earth by conceiving of the moon as a ball thrown so hard and fast that it would never fall to earth.

I am suggesting, therefore, that an image for a phenomenon acts as a kind of methodology for the study of that phenomenon. It does so in several ways:

--it helps to define key "issues" or "problems"

--it shapes the type of research questions that are asked

--it defines the type of data that is searched out (who do you interview, students or teachers?)

*see appendix

--it shapes the language in which the problem and results are expressed

--it determines to some extent the procedures that are used to examine and collect data

and finally, it determines what problems, questions, data, and procedures are IGNORED.

The example of school metaphors is very simplistic, but I think that the same technique can be used to give students some significant insights into the research and theories in any field. I think students can be taught to search for implicit images and metaphors and to start to consider how these may be shaping the types of questions that are asked in their discipline.

In my own field of Mass Communication I have found at least three distinct metaphors for a medium of communication. In other words, when different people look at things such as print, film, radio, or television they apparently see different things. These metaphors are rarely expressed, but they are there if you start to dig below the surface. I try to get my students to look for these and other metaphors in any study, theory, essay, or idea about media they come across.

While this is not a discussion of communication media, I think that the best way I can demonstrate the usefulness of the metaphor technique is to give you some detailed examples from my own field of how metaphors may function as unconscious methodologies with profound consequences for what gets studied and what gets ignored.

So I'll briefly describe the three dominant metaphors I see in media studies and give examples from a currently popular research area that I think we are all familiar with: minorities and media. (A popular type

of study examines the images of women, blacks, children, handicapped, and others in television and film.)

The most common metaphor for a medium is that it is a kind of "conveyor belt." The medium is seen as a passive delivery system of important messages. In other words the "goods" delivered by the conveyor belt are the most important thing to study. This leads to the study of media content. Content is that stuff we all recognize as the "message": things such as setting, action, character, dialogue, etc. Content is in a sense "medium-free." It is that aspect of the information that stays the same regardless of whether the medium is a book, a movie, a radio show, or a stage play. If you miss your favorite television show and you ask a friend to tell you what happened, generally what you get told about is the content. You might be told, for example, that the sexy wife of a rich industrialist is kidnapped for ransom and taken to a warehouse. The kidnappers are two black men, and their boss is a bitter past employee of the industrialist who was hurt in a factory accident and is now confined to a wheelchair. The kidnapped woman is a housewife who has spent most of her life in the kitchen and now unthinkingly adopts her kidnappers as her new family. She cooks them three meals a day.... And they all live happily ever after.

This description includes many important elements. It tells us much about the portrayal of women and minorities in the story. But it doesn't tell us anything about the specific medium through which the content is experienced. Of course, analysis of content can be more sophisticated than a friend's description of a missed show. One can look at latent content, implicit value systems, the effects of content, or correlations between media content and "reality." And all this can be quantified and analyzed

statistically. But even then, one is still looking primarily at the content, rather than at the medium or channel through which the content is delivered. The medium is viewed as significant only in so far as people receive its content. Television content, for example, is a very popular subject of study simply because 98% of American households own television sets. The workings of the television/conveyor belt--the ways in which it packages and delivers its messages--are generally ignored. The content of television is studied the same way the content of comics or novels is studied. (By counting acts of violence or sex, for example. Or counting how many minorities are portrayed and in what social roles.) The medium is seen as a neutral delivery system. Most media studies are content-oriented. Most media studies are based on this image of the medium as a "conveyor belt."[1]

A very different metaphor for a medium is that it is a "language," that is, a specific way of encoding a message. This leads to the analysis of production variables, or a study of the expressive potential of the particular medium. In television and film, for example, such variables as shot selection, choice of lens, camera angles, editing structure, and depth of focus, can be studied to see how they affect perception and interpretation of the content. (Some of these studies have explicitly been called "media grammar" studies.)[2]

Medium variables are very difficult to see and attend to, especially when they are used professionally. They are there if you concentrate on looking for them, but it is generally hard to focus on them and also pay attention to the content at the same time. If, for example, you are

watching television and you begin to concentrate on shot selection, mood music, and camera angles, you usually find it difficult to "follow" the story as well. You would have to watch the show several times to take it all in.

Generally, only production people and media analysts concentrate on medium variables. The average viewer of a tv show will feel pity during the kidnapping of the industrialist's wife and will NOT say: "Wow, what an interesting camera angle, and I'm glad he used that tight close-up; it really grabbed me!" Yet such directorial decisions are very significant in terms of creating images, even stereotypes, in television and film. Choice of shots and angles shapes response to content elements When you watch tv, for example, you may notice that you rarely have a particularly strong response--either negative or positive--to characters that you only see in full-length shots. Unless you see characters close-up, you usually respond to them only in terms of the social role they are portraying (secretary, jury member, soldier, for example). This is one of the reasons why we don't get very upset every time a soldier gets killed in a war movie.[3]

Therefore, if you were to make a movie about a hospital in which all the doctors are black, but all the janitors are white, you could still put the blacks down in this film if you only show close-ups of the white janitors. The black doctors then become background characters and the janitors become people. The example is extreme, but the point is that there is always an interplay of content variables and medium variables that creates the final "image."

Another significant production variable in television and film is the

use of subjective and objective shots. An objective shot is one that shows the action from a neutral perspective. A subjective shot, however, shows people and events as one of the characters sees them. The use of subjective shots, in effect, gives the viewer a perception of a perception (somewhat analogous to first person narrative in novels) and there tends to be a natural empathy with the person whose perspective we see. In the story about the kidnapping of the industrialist's wife, for example, we might see the disabled kidnapper only as the woman sees him. He may be seen, therefore, as the major threat and source of evil in the drama. Yet if we see the action from his perspective (including perhaps a nice flashback of the accident), then the drama may become one in which we empathize with his attempt at sweet revenge. Changes in shot structure, therefore, can change object into subject.

Such variations are used to make us take sides in war and cowboy movies, even in documentaries. Such manipulations explain, to some extent, the very different response we have to the criminals in The Godfather and The Untouchables. And my own guess is that the use of subjective shots is often very sexist--more often showing the perspective of men than women (especially when eyeing members of the opposite sex).

Men and women are also presented very differently in terms of shot angle and framing. Women are rarely "looked up to" by the camera; men often are. Women tend to be shown much more often in tight close-ups--indicating an intimate encounter; men are more often shown in medium shots suggesting social position or physical power. Even when men are shown close-up, they tend to be shown in head and shoulder shots. With women, however, it is common to see close-ups of ears, necks, knees,

backsides, ankles, and hands. Therefore even when a woman is portrayed in the content as an executive, the shot structure can suggest that she is an accessible sexual object.

Again the point is that to explore such issues one must abandon the "conveyor belt" metaphor and begin to look at the medium as a kind of "language" with a particular code or "grammar." (It is interesting that virtually no studies of the image of minorities in media explore these variables.)

The third possible metaphor in media research is that the medium is an "environment." The medium is seen as a type of social context or social situation that includes and excludes participants. And like most environments, the people who have access to it share an experience that gives them a sense of group identity, while those who are excluded from the environment are also excluded from the sense of belonging. (Conferences are a great example of this principle because they happen suddenly, go away very quickly, and are completely arbitrary environments, yet they usually work so successfully to pull strangers together and simultaneously separate them from the outside world.) I call the type of questions the environment metaphor leads to "Context" questions. Questions are asked about the patterns of information flow created by media and their impact on social structure, social roles, and institutions. Different media are seen as having different effects regardless of their specific content.[4]

Context analysis involves the most abstract of the three types of questions. The questions are more historical and sociological in nature. They move beyond the individual's experience of a medium and its messages and study such things as: Who in society has access to this medium and who does not? Do different groups, sexes, religions, ages, and races attend to the same

set of messages or to different sets of messages? And how does "who knows what about whom" affect relative status and social role? In part, context analysis tries to explain social change by looking at changes in dominant media of communication.

I don't have time to fully lay out the theoretical groundwork for context questions. What I will do is run through some context speculations regarding minorities from my own research.[5]

In a book culture, different social groups tend to read different books. Books must be actively sought out and actively read. People therefore tend to read books on topics of particular interest and concern to them. A book about the disabled would probably be read mostly by the disabled and their families. With tv, however, one buys the tv not the show. In addition, the passive nature of tv viewing tends to widen one's diet of topics. A television show about the disabled might be watched by millions of the general population. Topics once of concern only to small sections of the population, suddenly become public issues.

Not only does the general population start to share in minority experiences, but on the other side of the same coin, a medium like television suddenly plugs members of minority groups into the general information system that is shared by everyone. Whites and blacks tend to watch many of the same television shows. The same is true for people of different ages, incomes, sexes, and social roles. Even convents and prisons have television sets. What are the social implications of this sharing of information environments?

I've heard older people say that when they were young and poor they didn't realize they were poor because everybody they knew was poor. Today's

ghetto children are painfully aware of their poverty. They see what they are being deprived of in every tv show and commercial. With tv, a number of social groups that were once splintered away from the mainstream are now thrust into a common information environment--groups such as children, blacks, women, disabled, the elderly, nuns, priests, and prisoners. A contextual analysis might look for connections between the information integration caused by television and the current demand for integration of roles, rights, and access to places.

Let me use an interpersonal analogy to finish explaining this perspective. Suppose I told you that somewhere else in Massachusetts this afternoon there is another conference where the participants are not sitting on hard chairs like you are, but are sitting in soft armchairs and are being served liquor and hot appetizers by an attentive staff. Well, you might say: "Gee, I wish I was at that conference instead of this one," but you would probably not be moved to anger or to political action. But suppose instead, that in this very room there were two people sitting in soft armchairs, being served as I described. That would be very different. You might demand to know who they thought they were, or why you weren't getting the same treatment. The point is that the content of the behavior is not the key to the complaint, but the context. When you share a context with someone you expect some consistency of treatment. (This principle also explains why you can change the responsibilities of the students each time you teach a course, but cannot get away with giving different responsibilities to different students within the same class.) Looking at media as environments would suggest that the same dynamic is at work in many minority-rights movements.

This metaphor for a medium, medium as "environment," is a poor tool for political advocacy. It does not lead to easy value-judgements. Indeed it tries to explain changes in values. But it does suggest a whole other set of questions that can and should be asked about media.

Again none of these metaphors is the "correct" one. Indeed all three types of studies are needed to flesh-out our understanding of mass media. Yet each provides one clear way of seeing media. Each is like a pair of glasses that is designed to bring certain things into focus and, in so doing, leaves other things blurred.

I've found that this technique of asking students to hunt for implicit metaphors helps them in a number of ways:

1) it helps them to see a given reading or idea as a way of seeing a phenomenon, rather than the way.

2) it allows them to look for types of questions, and weans them away from trying to memorize answers.

3) it encourages them to compare and contrast studies before they become judgemental about the content of the studies.

4) it gives them a way of looking beneath what is explicitly stated to see untested assumptions, and a way of looking beyond what is written or said to suggest what has been ignored or left out.

And, perhaps most importantly, this technique is one way to start students thinking about thinking before they fully realize it.

Notes

1. For a recent review of television research and an indication of the heavy emphasis on analysis of content, see George Comstock and Marilyn Fisher, Television and Human Behavior: A Guide to the Pertinent Scientific Literature (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1975).

2. See, for example, Alan Wurtzel and Joseph Dominick, "Evaluation of Television Drama: Interaction of Acting Styles and Shot Selection," Journal of Broadcasting, 7 (1972), 103-110.

3. For a detailed analysis of the ways in which medium variables affect our perception and response to television and film content, see my "Television and Interpersonal Behavior: Codes of Perception and Response," in Gary Gumpert and Robert Cathcart, eds., Inter/Media: Interpersonal Communication in a Media World (New York: Oxford, 1979).

4. See, for example, Harold Innis, The Bias of Communication (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951), and Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media (New York: New American Library, 1964).

5. For a detailed "contextual" analysis of the impact of new media on group identity, socialization, and hierarchy, see my No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Structure and Behavior, Diss. New York University (East Lansing, MI: University Microfilms, 1979).

APPENDIX

CHART # 1

COMMON METAPHORS FOR "SCHOOL"

SCHOOL	PRISON	FACTORY	FARM	FAMILY
CLASSROOM	cell	assembly line	field	home
STUDENTS	prisoners	products	plants	sons & daughters
TEACHER	guard	assembly line worker	cultivator/ harvester	parent
PRINCIPAL	warden	plant supervisor	farm manager	grandparent

How do these various metaphors relate to:

1. The major goal/function of the institution?
2. The goals of individuals within the institution?
3. The definition of "problems" or "issues"?
4. The language that people use to describe the institution?
5. The type of research that might be undertaken?

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

CHART # 2

IMPLICATIONS OF METAPHORS

	PRISON	FACTORY	FARM	FAMILY
1. MAJOR GOAL/ FUNCTION OF INSTITUTION	To confine; to see that a "debt" to society is paid	To produce a standardized product	To fulfill Nature's potential	Reproduction Nurturing
2. GOAL OF INDIVIDUALS	Prisoners want to get out Guards and wardens want to confine	Products have no role Workers try to produce a standardized product (some just try to pass inspection) Supervisor sees that products are inspected and tested	Plants have natural tendency to grow Cultivators have to provide correct environment and fertilizer Farm manager checks for proper conditions to fulfill natural potential	Children need to be directed but also have natural tendencies Parents teach by example as well as punishment Brothers and sisters learn from each other Grandparents and parents argue over best means but everyone has mutual respect & love & a common goal
3. PROBLEMS	Prisoners escape (absent or leave room without a pass)	Too much variation from a standard (reading below "grade-level")	Bad weather (environment not good)	Parent dies or child leaves family (lack of emotional support)
4. SOLUTION TO COMMON PROBLEM (example: teacher absent)	Lock the room or bring in a temporary guard (a substitute teacher)	Have some "basic maintenance" work done on students (spelling or math drills)	Send students to playground or give them a creative task (they can grow on their own)	Send students to "Aunt Mary" for day (combine two classes)
5. LANGUAGE USED TO DESCRIBE SCHOOL	"Let's get out of here" "When I get out" "At least school keeps them off the streets" "After you do your time, you'll get a good job" "I can't control my students"	"What's your product?" "test scores" "standardized fifth grade reading level" "nation-wide tests" "nothing's getting in their heads" "listen, don't talk" ("Teaching students to think"?)	"He's not fulfilling his potential" "This school is not a good environment" "Bring out what he has inside him" "Get out of the students' way" "Respond!" "What do you think, Johnny" "I want to encourage them" "LET students think"	"My kids are giving me problems" "I want to set an example for my students" "a character-building experience" "Are you being fair to your classmates?"
6. POSSIBLE RESEARCH QUESTIONS	How to build stronger prisons/schools (no windows), decrease absenteeism, improve control	How to raise test scores, develop and maintain school standards, develop standardized tests	How to create proper environment and bring out each individual's potential	How to increase teacher/ student interaction and affect

Meyrowitz 11/80