Stepping Up, Keeping on Track, and Pulling Your Own Weight: Collaborative Arts-Based Service-Learning Metaphors

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the author explores metaphors related to students' experiences conducting collaborative arts-based ethnographic research in a U.S. nonprofit organization. A metaphor analysis of 25 students' essays revealed they were most likely to frame their experiences with arts-based service learning as a journey or a sports contest. The author examines the extent to which students' metaphors legitimize or delegitimize arts-based service learning, as well as the degree of novelty that characterizes these metaphors. She explores the implications of her findings for teaching and promoting arts-based service learning in the academy.

Keywords: ABR pedagogy, ethnography, community engagement

Arts-based research (ABR) is a form of creative inquiry that applies creative arts in research contexts. Scholars from various disciplines have used artistic practices such as creative writing, visual art, theatre, film, music, and dance to generate, analyze, interpret, and represent data (Leavy, 2020). ABR is also a widely used pedagogical technique. Teachers from communication studies, education, social work, and sociology have developed theoretical and pedagogical innovations that employ ABR (e.g., Benton & Russell, 2016; Davis, 2018; Dixon & Senior, 2009; Faulkner, 2020; Lapum & Hume, 2015; Norris, 2011; Traver, 2018). Recent research has demonstrated ABR methods increase student engagement and foster students' curiosity and creativity (Benton & Russell, 2016; Lapum & Hume, 2015).

One subgenre of ABR pedagogy, arts-based service-learning (ABSL) blends arts-informed teaching with community engagement. According to Krensky and Steffen (2008), "arts-based service-learning brings together the power of the arts with the essential components of service-learning in a

mutually empowering way" (p. 15). Combining service-learning initiatives with ABR methods promotes relationship building, reciprocal learning, and intercultural competence (Power et al., 2014). Teacher-scholars have found that ABSL experiences enhance students' levels of social and civic engagement (Alexander, 2015; Feen-Calligan & Matthews, 2016; Hutzel, 2006), as well as their career and personal development (Alexander, 2015; Feen-Calligan & Matthews, 2016). ABSL also increases students' skills related to diversity, empowerment, communication, academic achievement, and critical thinking (Alexander, 2015).

Although faculty and students have reported significant benefits from participating in ABR and ABSL, faculty face institutional barriers to practicing ABSL because service activities and arts-informed scholarship are undervalued in promotion and tenure policies (Boydell et al., 2016; Hutzel, 2006). In their poetic play, Wiebe et al. (2018) employed a military medical simile to describe the state of Canadian education. By comparing a student in a classroom to the life-or-death

situation of a soldier or patient in triage, Wiebe et al. emphasized the urgent nature of issues students and teachers face today. We live in a world where funding cuts threaten the future of public education, student success is measured by standardized tests, and teachers are pressured to do more with less. In this milieu, ABR and ABSL run the risk of being seen as elective outpatient procedures that have no place in the triage room.

As Greer and Blair (2018) have observed, the "discourse of danger" (p. 243) has been invoked frequently in discussions of ABR. Harkening back to Eisner's (1997) identification of "the promise and the perils of alternative forms of data representation" (p. 4), Greer and Blair argued metaphors we use have the power to legitimize or delegitimize ABR. In their metaphor analysis of scholarly literature about arts-based inquiry, they found authors were most likely to frame ABR as landscape and warfare (e.g., Eisner, 2006, framed ABR scholars as those "seeking adventure on uncharted seas," as well as revolutionaries who fought against institutionalized positivism). As I read Greer and Blair's findings, I wondered whether students would employ similar metaphors to describe their experiences with ABSL. What metaphors would they use? Would their metaphors legitimize or delegitimize ABSL?

These questions led me to conduct my own study, in which I examine metaphors students used to frame their experiences in the course *Creative Approaches to Studying Organizational Culture*. As I describe below, this course blended ABR with service-learning, thereby offering students an opportunity to learn about organizational culture by studying a nonprofit organization in their community and representing their findings with creative practices. Although previous research has identified charity, text, and border-crossing as predominant metaphors in service-learning (Taylor, 2002), it is not yet known whether combining service-learning and ABR will yield similar metaphors or generate novel metaphors. In her cross-case

analysis of teaching and teacher education, Craig (2018) made the distinction between stock metaphors and novel metaphors: whereas stock metaphors are trite, novel metaphors are imaginative. As I read Craig's findings, I wondered whether students would employ stock or novel metaphors to describe their experiences with ABSL.

METHODS

Project Description

In fall 2018, Ball State University's Department of Communication Studies offered a course entitled *Creative Approaches to Studying Organizational Culture*. This course brought together undergraduate and graduate students to learn about organizational culture by conducting ethnographic arts-based research in a nonprofit organization in the community. Twice a week, students engaged in seminar-style discussions about scholarly journal articles related to organizational culture, collaborative ethnography, and ABR; then they applied what they learned in ethnographic ABR projects about Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training. This course was a unique creative experiential learning opportunity for students: Although they may have had the opportunity to engage in other service-learning courses, this was their first encounter with ABR methods.

The class was comprised of 28 students: 16 undergraduates and 12 graduate students. Students formed eight research teams of three to four students. Teams were either all undergraduates (n=2), all graduates (n=2), or a mix of graduate and undergraduate students (n=4). Students were encouraged to form teams across educational levels based on shared ABR interests, but some students chose to work with their friends or people with whom they had previously collaborated.

In mid-October, students began a collaborative ethnographic study of CIT training, a week-long program delivered by a coalition including members of the Muncie

Police Department, Meridian Health Services, and the Delaware County Indiana chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). The goal of the program was to teach new police officers skills to manage crises involving people with mental illness and to provide those individuals with the help they need, rather than incarcerating them. Students engaged in observation or participant-observation by volunteering to perform in role plays during the training. In addition, students conducted one interview each with a police officer or NAMI member who was involved in the training. Toward the end of the semester, research teams produced scholarly papers, ABR products, and final presentations attended by NAMI board members and CIT participants.

Data Collection

At the conclusion of the semester, each student wrote a self-reflection essay in response to a prompt that asked them to describe, interpret, and evaluate their experiences in the class. I asked students to address issues such as cognitive learning, motivation, personal and interpersonal development, creativity, and civic engagement.

Because my institution's Director of Research Integrity classified my research project as course assessment rather than human subjects research, I was not required to submit an IRB application. Nevertheless, I administered informed consent, guaranteeing students confidentiality and emphasizing their participation in the study was voluntary and would not affect their performance in the class. To protect students' identities, I used pseudonyms and removed identifiers from all comments. Twenty-five students submitted essays, as well as signed informed consent forms, resulting in a response rate of 89 percent.

Analysis

In order to answer my research questions, I performed a metaphor analysis. I began by reading through the data until I was familiar with students' essays. Next, I scanned the data, searching for metaphors participants used to frame their experiences. I drew upon poets (e.g., Oliver, 1994), linguists (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Lakoff & Turner, 1989), and researchers (Malvini Redden et al., 2013; Tracy, 2020; Tracy et al., 2006) to identify linguistic markers signaling metaphor and simile use, such as "like" and "as." I searched for both explicit and implicit references to metaphors, mindful of dominant metaphors in U.S. culture (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Lakoff & Turner, 1989). I used edge-coding and highlighted text to identify metaphoric language. I identified nine metaphors in my preliminary analysis, including a journey (8); sports (6); sailing (3); games (2); an animal (1); architecture (1); a baby (1); electricity (1); and medicine (1). Some statements fell into multiple categories because they reflected multiple or mixed metaphors (e.g., "When something falls in my wheelhouse, in the past, I have had difficulty letting go of the reins.") I answered my first research question by identifying the most common metaphors students used to describe their ABSL experiences. I answered my second research question by examining the valence of students' metaphors: Positively valenced metaphors legitimized ABSL, whereas negatively valenced metaphors delegitimized ABSL. I answered my third research question using Craig's (2018) typology to differentiate between stock and novel metaphors associated with ABSL.

FINDINGS

Journey

The most frequently used metaphor was a journey. Many undergraduate students talked about "stepping out of their comfort zones," juxtaposing their challenging ABSL journeys with the predictability of a traditional classroom. For example, Michelle stated, "It pushed me out of my comfort zone by having

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to work with graduate students and interviewing police officers. I was incredibly nervous starting this project, but I was able to step out of my comfort zone, work hard, and learn a lot." Likewise, Nancy commented, "Participating in ethnographic research put me out of my comfort zone. I learned how to effectively communicate with participants and my group members and position myself to be a creative person in order to complete the arts-based project." Finally, Penny reflected, "[This] has been an insightful course that has given me the opportunity to push myself and step out of my comfort zone in more ways than one."

Other students emphasized the importance of "staying on track." Claire, a graduate student, reflected on challenges associated with keeping her team on task: "Sometimes it was difficult to keep them on track without feeling like a stick-in-the-mud… It took me a while to realize that they would eventually get back on track." Elle, another graduate student, discussed challenges she experienced related to ambiguity: "I personally discovered that I love thematic analysis but can struggle with ambiguity. Sometimes I wasn't sure if I was on the right track and I allowed that to hold me back at points." Perhaps the most evocative journey metaphor was offered by Renee, who equated completing assignments with mountain climbing: "It was like climbing small mountains. Each time we would complete a little piece and reach the top of that mountain, we would give each other a pat on the back and then feel a drive to move onto the next one."

Students who employed the journey metaphor to describe their experiences used strong action verbs, "stepping out" and "climbing" onward and upward. These word choices suggest students were motivated to succeed and took an active role in their education. When Renee recalled how she and her research partner patted each other on the back as they set out for the next peak, she reveals how her collaborative partnership was a source of social support.

Sports

The second most frequently invoked metaphor students used to frame their ABSL experiences was a sports contest. Multiple students alluded to "pulling one's own weight" when discussing other students' performance in class and in research teams. Typically, sports metaphors were positively valenced. For example, one graduate student, Fran, noted, "Every group member pulled their own weight" when talking about her undergraduate research partners. Similarly, Brooke, a member of an all-graduate student team, stated, "everyone did what they could to pull their weight," when referring to her research team. Fran's and Brooke's allusions to "pulling one's own weight" are reminiscent of crew, where each member of a team must pull their oar hard enough to compensate for their weight in order to propel the skiff forward.

In contrast, another graduate student, Jack, described how he felt the first day of class when I went over the syllabus:

> The dreaded words that a majority of college students hate hearing: "group project." I frantically scan the room and search for the brightest students in the class. I lock eyes with my friend Ike and see a similar sense of acknowledgement. Although the panic of being in a group with people who cannot pull their own weight was still strong, I felt a sense of ease knowing I have at least one partner who will work alongside me.

Jack's instinct to scan the room for the brightest students evokes the image of a grade school student who automatically looks for the biggest, strongest, fastest kids when charged with picking members for their dodgeball team in gym class. (Ironically, Jack's friend Ike, another graduate student, actually was the biggest, strongest person in the room.) Like varsity athletes who disparage junior varsity players, some graduate students resisted working with undergraduate students because they perceived them to be inferior to graduate

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students. This type of elitist thinking reified the status divide between graduate and undergraduate students, making it difficult for students to collaborate across educational levels. Unfortunately, some undergraduate students internalized their second-class status: As Lily confessed, "I was intimidated and reluctant to be working with graduate students because of the difference of our intelligence levels."

Not all graduate students made negative attributions about undergraduate students, however. Fran portrayed undergraduate students who were willing to "step up" as good research team members. Hope, a member of an all-graduate student team, used a sports-based metaphor to convey the idea that different group members brought unique contributions to the research project. "Having multiple perspectives on the findings and the ability to bounce ideas off of one another made our project much more robust than it would have been if done alone."

Sports metaphors these students invoked imply effective collaboration on a research team is like playing on an athletic team: Valuable team members pull their own weight, step up to the plate, and bounce ideas off of one another. By imbuing research with qualities associated with crew, baseball, and basketball, students equate taking initiative in a research project with rowing a boat or hitting or bouncing a ball, all physical activities that are foundational athletic skills. In this sense, many students' metaphors discursively constructed ABSL as an active, embodied learning experience. However, as Jack and Lily's stories indicate, metaphors students used also reinforced status differences, impeding collaboration across educational levels.

Legitimation and Delegitimation

My findings indicate students' metaphorical language both legitimized and delegitimized ABSL. According to Goatly (2006), English language metaphors equate height with power (p. 26); thus, when Renee framed ABSL as mountain climbing, she imbued it with positive connotations. Recall that most students' sports metaphors were also positively valenced. Numerous references to "pulling one's own weight" invoked crew, a sport in which a skiff is literally propelled forward when team members pull their own weight. Given that forward movement represents success (Goatly, 2006), positively valenced metaphors legitimize ABSL.

In contrast, students who viewed ABSL as an activity "out of their comfort zone" socially constructed ABSL as an atypical pedagogical technique. Viewing it as a departure from the established way of doing things raised implicit questions about its legitimacy as a method of inquiry. Similarly, students who expressed negative attitudes about collaboration, specifically dread of group projects and partners who do not pull their own weight, reinforced competitive individualism and hierarchical thinking. By expressing resistance to working with "slackers," students valued competition over collaboration, revealing deeply inculcated capitalist ideology (Goatly, 2006).

Stock and Novel Metaphors

Metaphors students used most frequently to describe their experiences with ABSL (i.e., a journey or a sports contest) were consistent with two of three predominant metaphors U.S. and Canadian college students used to describe the role of their teachers (a tour guide or a coach) (Hard et al., 2021). This congruence indicates students were most likely to use stock metaphors when describing their experience with ABSL. In contrast, students used novel metaphors infrequently: The only student who invoked a novel metaphor characterized by poetic language was Renee, who employed the game metaphor to describe her experience with ABSL: "It was like being a kid again, playing dress up with your friend."

DISCUSSION

Summary

The primary purpose of this study was to determine whether students would use metaphors similar to those identified by Greer and Blair (2018) (i.e., landscape and warfare) to describe their experiences with ABSL. Students' most frequently invoked metaphor, a journey, mirrors Greer and Blair's landscape metaphor. Reminiscent of Lakoff and Turner's (1989) analysis of the common metaphor, "Life is a journey" (p.3), students who viewed research as a journey positioned themselves as adventurers embarking on a voyage into the unknown, leaving their comfort zones in pursuit of distant mountain peaks. Applying Lakoff and Turner's "mapping" schema (p. 4), students' study goals were destinations that determined the routes they traversed; their progress was measured by the distance they traveled and the landmarks they reached; challenges they faced were bumps in the road; choices they made were crossroads; their aptitude and skills were supplies for their voyage; and I, as their professor, was their tour guide.

Although students did not make explicit references to warfare—their journeys were ones of exploration, rather than conquest—one could argue sports are akin to warfare, as they are both competitive contests. Goatly (2006) noted metaphors of competition reinforce capitalist ideology (p. 35). Thus, students in my study, as well as authors of ABR articles Greer and Blair (2018) analyzed, employed metaphors that reflect the economic system in which U.S. higher education is located: a constellation of teaching, learning, and scholarship that revolves around twin suns of cost-effectiveness and accountability.

The secondary goal of my study was to determine whether students' metaphors legitimized or delegitimized ABSL. My findings indicate students' metaphorical language both legitimized and delegitimized ABSL. Positively valenced metaphors (e.g., "pulling one's own weight") legitimized

ABSL, whereas negatively valenced metaphors (e.g., "out of their comfort zone") raised implicit questions about ABSL's legitimacy as a method of inquiry.

The third objective of my study was to determine whether students generated stock or novel metaphors to describe their experiences with ABSL. Metaphors students used most frequently to describe their experiences with ABSL (i.e., a journey or a sports contest) were stock, rather than novel, as they were consistent with predominant metaphors college students use to describe the role of their teachers (i.e., tour guides or coaches) (Hard et al., 2021).

Limitations and Implications for Teaching and Promoting ABSL

One limitation of this study is that it is based on data from a small, non-probabilistic sample gathered from one class in a university in the United States. Although generalizability is not the primary goal of qualitative research—rather, as Tracy (2020) argued, transferability and naturalistic generalization may be more salient than statistical generalizability—it means the findings cannot be generalized to all contexts. I invite readers to consider the extent to which this study offers unique insight about metaphors they can apply to their own experiences teaching ABSL. Instructors who are cognizant of metaphors students use to make sense of their experiences may be better equipped to frame course goals, objectives, assignments, and exercises in ways that resonate with students. For instance, if students think of ABSL as a journey, they will be more likely to understand instructors who use journey metaphors to frame course activities and outcomes than instructors who employ warfare metaphors. This intentional use of metaphor may have positive effects on student engagement, as well: Researchers have found instructors who frame students' future academic identities with journey-based metaphors increase academic engagement (Landau et al., 2014).

Intentional mapping of metaphor with pedagogical goals and academic identities can also provide an opportunity for teachers and students to align their linguistic choices with their academic goals and identities. When metaphors reflect community values and beliefs, they create and reinforce collective identity (Abawi, 2013). Faculty members who engage in dialogue with students, administrators, and other faculty about the relationship between metaphor use and course goals, linking them to institutional values, have the potential to build an organizational culture that promotes a shared vision that values ABSL. If an educational institution's vision is congruent with the mission statement of their community partner organization, service-learning initiatives are likely to have high levels of buy-in from all stakeholders. Thus, by employing metaphor with intention, instructors can promote courses that legitimize ABSL in communities they serve.

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