

THE NEXT MOVE IN THE METAPHORIC GAME

ROY SCHWARTZMAN

*Assistant Professor of Speech Communication
Director of the Basic Course
Department of Theatre, Speech and Dance
University of South Carolina
Columbia, South Carolina 29208*

Proper play implies that players recognize the limits of the game, and judicious application of metaphors entails recognizing their conditionality. The game metaphor allows for further specification of problematic educational practices: doing things to students and doing things for students. Within a model of games, teachers and students choose to cooperate in the learning process.

Metaphors, especially powerful ones, begin to take on a life of their own after becoming entrenched in a language or culture. Kenneth Burke (1969) recognized the importance of metaphor as a device to structure thought. Identifying metaphor as the first of four "master tropes," Burke failed to recognize the ironic ambiguity of his own terminology. Although metaphor can facilitate understanding by reframing how we conceptualize topics, the mastery metaphorically bequeathed is reversible. As the succession of metaphors to describe and improve the educational process demonstrates, metaphor can enable mastery or the particular metaphors can master those who use them. A judiciously used metaphor can expand interpretive possibilities, rejuvenating thought about a topic by highlighting latent similarities. The malignant metaphoric master, like any autocrat, restricts innovation by channeling linguistic and conceptual choices to conform with the metaphor. Thus in understanding education as business, the commercial-like aspects of education expand to absorb *all* components of the education process. Instead of treating education as if it were a business, the

conditional predication shrinks until education is understood as nothing but business. The sense of play and its concomitant joy are played out.

As Michael Osborn observes, the amoeba-like expansion of any metaphor toward totalizing description presents dangers. I believe, however, that the gaming metaphor offers some rather unique ways to circumvent this tendency. Professor Osborn cites the postmodern impulse to avoid totalizing descriptions, a reluctance capture in Lyotard's mistrust of "grand narratives." In its healthiest manifestations, gaming fosters the play among alternatives, not just the play against opponents. Ray Linn (1996), summarizing the educational implications of postmodernism, concludes by invoking the liberating impulse of gaming: "This postmodern liberation ... is important because it opens up the possibility of creating new kinds of identities and social relationships, which, unlike those of the past, are not brought into existence against the Other" (p. 145). The final sentence of Linn's book appeals to "the importance of a good play" (p. 145).

Ina Rae Hark's students with the insatiable sweet tooth would do well to

internalize the lesson of “good play.” Yes, everyone sooner or later wants their candy. But in the midst of healthy gaming – indeed, often after it as well – participants lose their self-centeredness. I have in mind the sensations that resemble ‘flow’ experience: egolessness, merged action and awareness, high concentration, clear feedback, control, and enjoyment of the activity for its own sake” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1995, p. 138). Far from a utopian, mystical state, flow experience amounts to someone “hitting the groove,” in common parlance.

The zero-sum gaming of Professor Hark’s students understandably makes her cautious about the game metaphor. The behavior she mentions represents an all-too-common game in educational environments. If gaming can improve learning, the wrong sorts of games can stifle it. The contrast between the examples cited by Professors Hark and Greiner is instructive. The game Hark observed harkens back to an educational philosophy reminiscent of cutthroat competition: do it to others before they do it to you. According to this view, education amounts to something one inflicts upon others. To visualize this harmful type of gaming, imagine someone wielding a baseball bat menacingly while snarling, “I’ll teach you!” Sadly, many people can recall a teacher, parent, or sibling who fits that role perfectly.

Another permutation of gaming contrasts sharply with Professor Hark’s examples, but also endangers learning. Instead of doing *to* others, the teacher (or another student) performs tasks *for* others, thereby avoiding confrontation but fostering dependence. Suppose, for instance, that

a student constantly asks for definitions of terms the teacher uses in class. Wanting to satisfy the student’s curiosity, the teacher continues to offer definitions. When students leave this classroom setting, however, they will not always encounter someone willing or able to provide definitions on the spot. Unfortunately, by not being instructed in how to use a dictionary, the curious student lacks the resources to become a self-sufficient definer. Antonio Gramsci reflected on how educators must emphasize equipping students with ways of learning, not just things to learn. He asked: “Does one go to University *to study* or *to study in order to know how to study*?” (1995, p. 151) Instead of guaranteeing success by spoon-feeding answers to students, educators would do well to provide students with the resources they need to succeed for themselves. The victory then becomes much sweeter because it is earned rather than received.

Exploring the gaming metaphor more deeply reveals that metaphoric frameworks are far from univocal. Any metaphor can become pernicious under certain circumstances. Perhaps the greatest danger of metaphors in general lies in the tendency to reify them so that a single master metaphor is treated as a perfect description of the entire educational process. The users of metaphors remain masters of these master trupes as long as they are *qualified* understandings of one thing in terms of another. A “good” metaphor retains the tension between similarity and difference so that no metaphor is reified as the final, grand explanation. The implicit reservation in metaphor explains why Gerald Casenave claimed:

Metaphor, however, as long as it remains metaphor, does not assert absolutely its new order. As long as it remains metaphor, the old order and the new vision remain in tension and metaphor is a proposal for a revising of reality and not a dogmatic assertion. (1982, p. 144)

Rephrased in the language of gaming, we can play as hard as we like – as long as we remember that we have *chosen* to play along the lines of certain metaphors.

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