

## Has the metaphor of ‘learning journey’ any value in the analysis of research data on access, retention and ‘drop-out’ in higher education?

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Since the earliest times the act of *travelling*, of proceeding from one place to another, has been seen as a natural metaphor for *learning*, for the acquisition of experience and knowledge. (Bishop C. Hunt Jr., ‘Travel Metaphors and the Problem of Knowledge’, *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, Spring, 1976, p.44)

### What’s a Metaphor?

Metaphors are often employed in academic research to assist in the analysis of data, particularly where learning is the core focus. According to Dickmeyer (1989) a metaphor is ‘a characterisation of a phenomenon in familiar terms’ and ‘to be effective in promoting understanding of the phenomenon in question, the ‘familiar terms’ must be graphic, visible and physical in our scale of the world’. He cites an example of a student being seen as ‘an empty vessel’ into whom knowledge is ‘poured’. He adds that

‘Metaphoric characterisations bear no real physical resemblance to the process being described, except in the most limited sense. A student is not a vessel; knowledge is not a liquid. Nevertheless we can act on these metaphors in reasonable ways.’ (Dickmeyer, 1989, p.151)

Dickmeyer identifies three reasons why metaphors help us to understand any phenomenon under study. Firstly, metaphors are ‘hortative’ – the associations often have connotations that may reflect, for example, the emotional dimensions of the phenomenon under study. A metaphor, for example, may intentionally be used to reveal the ‘dehumanization’ of learners. A recent example from the United Kingdom is that with universities employing ‘business models’ to manage their finances, and with students having to take out lifelong loans to pay for their higher education, universities are beginning to perceive their students as ‘customers’, and hence the development of a rigorous quality assurance to check ‘customer satisfaction’ through National Union of Students’ annual National Student Survey. I myself forewarned of the implications of this at a conference several years’ ago (Armstrong, 1993).

Secondly, Dickmeyer suggests that metaphors are often reassuring. Where we have yet to truly understand the processes of learning at work (and after centuries of theoretical speculation, and a century of research, there remains an element of mystery in how learning *really* happens, especially as the notion of situated learning has currency, leaving us free to suggest ‘Well, it depends .....’. In this changing context when there is no agreed theory and explanation, ‘the vision of a student receiving knowledge in liquid form calms us’, says Dickmeyer. He adds that without ‘some sort of vision like this, we may have difficulty in grasping the importance of what we do’ (Dickmeyer, 1989, p. 152).

And thirdly, metaphors he proposes, are helpful because they are not measurable because they are – at their root – ‘non-quantitative’. If we cannot identify the key characteristic of a phenomenon, we cannot measure, rank or judge that phenomenon. Instead we have to accept that a metaphor is a heuristic device that helps to illuminate, support understanding but rarely to ‘explain’. Metaphoric analyses, then, are most likely to be used in qualitative rather than quantitative research. Dickmeyer adds that ‘we may be able to move beyond metaphors, but we really cannot subvert them to quantitative analysis’, for they ‘highlight and make graphic some simplified component of the real system’ (p.152). Taking account of context, we can judge whether or not a metaphor is appropriate or not. It has merit if it illuminates or clarifies; but if it mystifies or confuses, we need to reconsider the use of the metaphor and find an alternative. Current sociological theory is playing with the metaphor of complexity,

and in such contexts metaphors can be used in an illuminative way, without promising to 'explain' the complex phenomenon under study. Inevitably, we have to recognise that however appropriate a metaphor may be, it offers an inherent risk of 'over-simplification', particularly in seeking to understanding complex phenomena such as learning. Dickmeyer suggests that we use metaphors in a limited sense of being paradigmatic. Of course, there is a whole discourse in qualitative theory and research that would support, or offer alternative paradigms, such as Bourdieu's notion of 'disposition'. Dickmeyer (1989, p.153) argues:

If we define our world in terms of a metaphor, our research can focus on the questions raised by that metaphor and, in fact, because we focus on an extreme simplification of the system under study, our methods are quite simple. We look for cause and effect resemblances between our metaphor and the system being described. As we take a metaphor and begin to build a paradigm, we build a world view that starts to make question of how we should do research more rigorous.

### **On the metaphor of travel**

The purpose of his paper is to use 'explore' a sample of data the English partners in the Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in Higher Education (RANLHE) project data to 'discover' whether or not, the metaphor of a learning journey has proved to be helpful. The reasons for questioning this is that the sensitising concepts that were generated through this project drew on alternative metaphors that reflect change without recourse to the analogy of seeing accessing, staying in, and completing higher education as a 'journey'. Two particular sensitising concepts are of interest: 'transition' and 'transformation', both of which suggest change from one state to another, although not necessarily connoting 'travel'. However, whether or not they are related to travel, these sensitising concepts are most often metaphorical, and therefore we need to consider the explanatory power of metaphors.

According to Clark (1998, 2000) travel as a metaphor can be illuminating because travel puts people into situations where they must act in 'conjunction and connection' with unfamiliar others. Outside the boundaries of their home territories, people may experience an anonymity that undermines their habitual assumptions and attitudes. Those situations offer them opportunities to become less 'self-enclosed' as they look for the 'proper part' they might play there. But the metaphor, is problematic. The concept of traveller that dominates many discussions is that of the recreational tourist, for whom the purpose of travel is at variance compared to those who travel as an educative process. Clark talks about the traveller who as 'a rhetorical agent cut loose from territorial identity tends to recommend a relinquishing of individual identity altogether'. In this case, his use of the travel metaphor limits 'rhetorical identity to two opposing choices: one that is self-enclosed, autonomous, and territorial, or one that embraces every transformation of self that follows from encounters with others who share the road. Rather than enabling groups and individuals to adjust to one another, each of these identities tends to negate the other'. For this reason, Clark wishes us to 'revisit the travel metaphor briefly with these problems in mind'. Then, in an attempt to model a more constructive encounter of individuals and groups, he shares his thinking about an alternative metaphor for rhetorical identity and interaction, in which the success of the group is an expression of the strong individual identities of its members. Soclow (1998) argued that relinquishing one's identity is one thing for an altruistic tenured professor, but quite another for most students.

Reynolds' contribution is important because she also identifies some limitations implicit in the metaphor of travel related to learning. Metaphors risk oversimplifying complex and multi-faceted phenomena such as learning. Reynolds' response is a call for a rhetoric that abandons territoriality with a more complex, and probably more realistic, proposal: 'rather

than advocating travel to get us away from the discourses of territoriality, we should work toward an understanding of the contested spaces that keep people divided'. We should note at this point that 'space' is – like travel – is an alternative and equally popular metaphor, which has been employed to illuminate processes of learning (for example, Quilty, 2008). According to Clark (2000, p.900) understanding these contestations requires us to deal with the

destructive potential inherent in those self-enclosed ways of interacting that follow when individuals identify themselves territorially. Safe within their home boundaries, individuals have little incentive to learn ways of behaving in conjunction and connection with those who are not at home there.

Moreover, Reynolds' research demonstrates that territorial identities work both to keep people from crossing those boundaries to encounter others whose identities are different and to keep them vigilant against those others who might cross inside and change their sense of 'home.' That, she says, is a fact of social life. But it is also a problem, and increasingly so. That is why, Reynolds argues, we need to remain interested in Dewey's ideal of an education that would develop 'all the powers of the individual' for the purpose of preparing each one to contribute to their own communities or collectivities.

Reynolds is right about travel. She says 'in the 'real world' people don't move around that much' (2000, p. 543). And the material imperatives that drive most of our actions in the world make it difficult, if not impossible, to enact the transient sort of identity that Reynolds (2000) tried to describe. Her research exposes the good reasons of security and convenience that keep people at home in places that, constituted culturally as well as spatially, provide them with the elements of identity. But it is also true that in the real world others who do not belong are increasingly making homes for themselves in everyone's territory, prompting the residents to protect both their places and the identities they have formed there. Reynolds argues that she is looking for models of rhetorical interaction that can reduce the tensions that follow when different people find themselves sharing the same place, and that is what she was reaching for in 'Writing as Travel': that search may be idealistic, and idealism can blind us'. However, ideals can also be made accountable to reality, and that is what I am attempting to do in this paper by exploring the use of metaphor of the journey and travel. Clark goes on to cite the work of Sullivan (1993) and Jackson (1997):

It still seems to me that travel can expand people's experiences of what Dale Sullivan terms 'the common dwelling place' that 'enfolds' them in collectivity with others (p.127). Sullivan uses these terms to describe the epideictic function of rhetoric that asserts as exemplary the attitudes and actions of those people who share a situation and place. John Jackson also describes places as doing that kind of epideictic rhetorical work. As we travel, Jackson explains, we encounter images that prompt us "to identify ourselves and our desires with the landscape, by asking ourselves how anyone would fare who had to live in it." He contends that as travellers we experience in each new place "a concrete, three-dimensional, shared reality" within which we must, at least imaginatively, identify ourselves. (Clark, 1998, 901)

According to Kenneth Burke in his classic *Grammar of Motives* (1969) – a book that influenced the theoretical and analytic framework of my doctoral research, referred to earlier, what travellers encounter are alternative 'scenes' for both identity and action, and those scenes are the 'grounds for identification' (Sheard, 1993, p.299). This has echoes of Goffman's 'presentation of self' (1959) – another influence on my doctoral thesis - which led Clark to turn to the travel metaphor to explore how experiencing new 'scenes' might enable individuals to adopt more expansive identities. Of course, Goffman is renowned for his use of the 'dramaturgical metaphor' in illuminating social interactions between people, in the way

they choose to present themselves by constructing a particular identity or sets of identities depending on the 'stage' on which they are 'performing' whilst reflecting their 'selves'.

Problems of identity are my central concern as I study adult learning and teach adults, who are primarily 'non-traditional students' who may have difficulty in not only assimilating to the cultures of higher education but at the same time have difficulty accommodating to the differences of others. The use of the travel metaphor does help - as Clark argues - to 'reconceive identity within a communication transaction' in ways that would 'enable individual transformation and collective cooperation'. The concept of identity developed by Clark in 'Writing as Travel', however, tends to require a suppression of the individual, as Clark himself argues, and led him to consider alternative metaphors for rhetorical interaction between students and teachers, and between themselves in which they as individuals can express, and even enhance, their identities as university students.

To help explore these alternative metaphors, we need to recognise that phrases like 'mapping my future', 'routes to a degree', 'turning points', 'distance travelled' – referring to progress – and ultimately 'reaching the destination' does not necessarily entail physical movement. There are immediate issues for example, about mapping a career route, when in many cases the destination may not be perfectly clear on entry into higher education. The destination may only become clear when reaching that journey's end; and even then, this will – in 'the journey of life' be simply a change of direction.

For the purpose of this paper, I have scrutinised the transcripts of just three in-depth interviews, looking for examples of the journey metaphor. I have used italics to emphasise both the travel and alternative metaphors.

#### *Paul's interview*

Paul (Kingston University) in retelling his family history said that his '*progression* to HE was via an *alternative route* (that is the non-A-Level route). He offered the information that his older brother has since opted to *return* to education as a mature student. He said 'I love Kingston as a *place*.' He reported that he had an *orientation* session. Paul also talked about having doubts and considering '*backing out*', and deciding against that he said 'probably gave me a bit more *drive* ... I *drove down* determined thinking I'm gonna do this'. Paul also mentioned that students could join a Facebook group before they *arrive* at the university. This reminds that journeys have beginnings and ends that might overlap. As the saying goes, employing a different metaphor but one that still relates to the journey metaphor: 'As one door closes, another door opens'. It was interesting to note that students at Kingston University had a website called 'I am *going* to Kingston University in September'. In talking about persistence, Paul noted that he appreciated that there was 'scope to be able to take my degree *down the route* I wanted ...'. In concluding the interview, Paul was positive and said that 'I feel that from school if you don't *follow* the traditional A-Level *route* you get *lost along the way*, so I now tell people that there are *alternative routes*.'

#### *Paula's Interview*

Paula offered the information that her parents had returned to education as mature students. During the interview, Paula frequently refers to '*going back* to work', meaning her university studies, which she included her extra-curricular activities in doing voluntary work. On reflecting that she was nearing completion, she talked about *reaching the end* of her degree: 'but I actually wish I hadn't finished now as I've got to *go back* and be a grown up, but it's a real achievement to *get to the end* of it'. 'I thought about *leaving* during the first year. I was

*homesick* really. *I went home* for a bit and then *made myself stay* [at Kingston] until Christmas. If I hadn't *gone home* then I don't think I'd have made it.' And. 'I think it's a good practice [as a student ambassador] not just *to be around* in Freshers' week but two or three weeks later in the term when students really start to struggle. We could provide them with an email address, or a room they can just *turn up* so they know there is someone available otherwise Freshers have to *go and actively seek* someone out.'

#### *Jonathan's interview*

'I didn't learn much from the lecturers in the second and third year ... it was more independent study. I was quite disappointed because I thought *coming to* university that every year would be a *progression* and that they'd teach you *further on* what you had already learned in the first year and that wasn't the case ... they just give you work and they say 'get on with it'. ... I thought the university would get students *ready for employment* but when I left I didn't get any information on jobs, *what I am going to do next, the next steps after university*. There was no *preparation*.'

Jonathan's disillusionment also confirmed that he saw himself very much as a 'customer' and wanted value for money: 'I remember thinking in the second year I was thinking 'is it worth it?' and there were a couple of others who thought that too because we just weren't receiving what we were paying for, but I thought by that time I had already done three years at university including the year at Brunel before I dropped out, so for me there was *no turning back so that kept me going* – I wasn't going to *waste my time*.'

It should be noted that the transcripts also revealed that in some examples, the interviewees (and I include myself) might have inadvertently encouraged the elicitation of the travel or journey metaphors by the prompt questions that were used:

'Tell me about how you decided to *return* to education, and *go back* to University; what's your story in *getting to* Kingston University?

Tell me about when you *first arrived*, what was it like adjusting to *moving south* and *somewhere new*?

(Paul's interview, Kingston University)

Has your involvement in (extra-curricular activities) helped *keep you going*? and

Have you ever *reached a stage* where you've wobbled, and questioned *staying* at University?

(Paula's interview, Kingston University)

Whilst this would, *prima facie*, suggest that the travel metaphor is used to describe the student experience, it needs to be said that the presence of alternative (perhaps 'additional' would be more accurate, as the interviews are characterised by the use of 'mixed metaphors'). In that context, it is suggested that the journey metaphor, whilst present in the autobiographical accounts, other metaphors emerge more strongly, and these are illuminative of identity issues, particularly the processes of 'becoming' and being'.

#### **Travelling in Space and Time: changing metaphors**

It is clear that the metaphor of learning as a 'journey' has been popular in the United States as a way of capturing the processes of 'being' and 'becoming' a student in higher education. In some circumstances the metaphor of a 'journey' is linked to the construction of an identity of being a learner. The issue here of course is that those identities are rarely fixed, and are subject to a process of continuous construction and deconstruction, and whether 'changing landscapes' are influential on that process is still open for debate. The literature review for the RANLHE project (Johnston, 2010) has however just one reference to a participants'

‘educational journey’, and no reference at all to the ‘learning journey’. In spite of its broad popular appeal, the metaphor does not feature significantly in contemporary research on lifelong learning. For example, it is not a concept that features in the ESRC project on *Learning Lives* undertaken in the UK between 2000 and 2004. Why has this metaphor not been found to be useful? Does it have any value in the examination of the data collected in the RANLHE research? If not, what alternative metaphors are used to explain the transitions involved in accessing, persisting, completing or not completing the degree programme?

In the qualitative interview data, people’s stories are inevitably complex. As just suggested, an examination of an admittedly limited sample of interviews from the RANLHE project reveals the paucity of references to the vocabulary of a learning journey. However, alternative metaphors are evident in the students’ interviews. These are – in particular - ‘space’ and ‘time’.

Using the same two students’ interviews, we can see these alternatives:

#### *Paul’s interview*

‘My thoughts of university were definitely that it’s *‘not for me’* and that *I wouldn’t fit in*. I always thought it was for ‘academic people. *I didn’t particularly know where my personality would fit into it*. Maybe it was because where I was, but on the whole there were so many people, so many different ages. I was living in a block that had more mature students living there. *That was a lot more helpful for my integration* and to meet people my own age before I went out and met other people. My absolute worst nightmare would have been being thrown in with a bunch of 18-year-olds, out every night. I was 24 when I started Uni; *I’d already done all that’*.

He also shared the moment that he realised he needed to *change his life*: I got up at 5.45 every morning; it was really a cold day and I sat up and thought *‘there’s something more than this!’*

‘Students get a bad press because people are looking up students on social networking sites such as Facebook before being made an offer from a Uni so it might put them off ... *a more personal approach* might be better – a letter or email addressed to the person from the tutor might be better ... it’s important because you spend a lot of time at the university, and you need help to be as *comfortable* as possible with the staff you’re working with, I suppose’. [Being involved in the student ambassador scheme] I got more *involved in being involved* in those things that really made me *value my time* at university.’

#### *Paula’s interview*

Paula reported that she had considered ‘dropping out’ during the first year of her degree. However, she felt strongly that her *involvement* in a number of extra-curricular activities prevented that as they have *enhanced her sense of belonging and community*: *‘you really feel you are part of something’*. She added *‘I do feel more like an individual now, particularly in my final year.’*

#### *Jonathan’s interview*

‘Being a student and what university life is really about, that sense of unity it really did give me a sense of identity that I really did go to Kingston University’.

In the process of transition from school to higher education both traditional and non-traditional students may create a ‘space’ between the sectors. And time would appear to be very different. In the research data, it would appear that the ‘gap year’, for example, is most

often seen as positive, and may well be a variable that supports retention, not just as part of the learning journey', but as a period of 'transition. There are alternative metaphors in students' stories that remind us that the process of entering and staying in higher education is a part of the process of learning to become a higher education student, and the necessity for coming to recognise one's self, not just as a student, but as a student who can and will succeed. Ultimately, from the research data, the completion of the degree would confirm their state of 'being a student', but not be necessarily the end of their journey.

Within the wider European experience of the project, it would be evident that the travel metaphor is not sufficient to fully capture the student experience of all students. Alternative metaphors around 'transition' and 'transformation' would offer support to the use of those metaphors that derive from a sociological perspective – those of 'becoming' and 'being', in understanding the social and cultural constructions of the identity of the higher education student, and which may help to challenge and transform the rather negative connotation of those who 'drop out' as 'failures.' They may simply be on a longer journey with more detours seeking the path to enable them to make a successful transition from 'becoming' to 'being'.

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