



"Ezekiel"
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“Madness with a Method”

On humanistic metaphors and educational research

When metaphors from the arts are applied to studies in education they can have a startling and exhilarating effect on those for whom the time-honoured approach of the social sciences seems to have rather missed the point. Did we not use to say that teaching was an art? And a metaphor in any circumstances (before it becomes a cliché) has the potential of bringing to bear on a topic the several benefits of clarity, force, and grace. But, Milburn warns, these rhetorical effects have their temptations and their dangers, as the few writings on curriculum that use humanistic metaphors have begun to show. Some polemicists have yielded to the temptations; and others need to become aware of the dangers of new metaphor both in logic and in practicality, for there can be deep-seated resistance among practitioners to ideas emanating from the fine arts.

In recent years, a few educational researchers have shown interest in the application of humanistic metaphors to educational research. Such an approach to educational research, it is argued, is distinctly different from the social scientific approach that has dominated educational investigations for a half-century. There exists a small but significant number of general discussions of the principal issues in the use of humanistic metaphors, and a growing number of empirical studies, largely based on thesis work, that attempt to put the general discussions into practice (Eisner, 1979, and Willis, 1978). Since this work is relatively new, and the sources comparatively scattered, critical comment on the new approach is far from advanced - indeed, the review articles currently in the literature may be counted on five fingers. The purpose of this article is to point out a few arguments and practices in the body of this new work that require further thought or more detailed investigation. It is, in short, a survey comment on the state of

the art in the use of humanistic metaphors in educational research (Milburn, 1983a,1983b).

What scholars interested in alternative metaphors have tried to do is clothe educational research procedures and methods of reporting with understandings, approaches and procedures derived from disciplines other than those in the natural and social sciences. Given Eisner's observation that "the forms of art, as well as the forms of science, afford unique opportunities for conceptualization and expression" (Eisner, unpublished), scholars have examined such disciplines and related fields as drama (Gehrke and Bravmann, 1981), theatre (Grumet, 1978), music (Eisner, 1983), architecture (Chalmers, 1983), journalism (MacDonald, 1976, and Barone, 1980), and literary criticism (Kelly, 1975), to locate sources for alternative metaphors for examining educational phenomena.

In that process, roughly the same pattern has been followed by all researchers. First, the original source is examined for understandings or concepts that have a presumed capacity to throw light on matters educational. Thus from journalism (MacDonald), for example, such notions as "scene-by-scene construction," and the "symbolic detail of the subject's life," or from literary criticism (Kelly) such concepts as "plot" and "theme", have been transferred from their original humanistic homes to educational settings in order to cast a different light on objects of study. Secondly, some researchers have attempted to locate particular methods of reporting, or even specific styles of writing, that have been developed within the humanities, and to use them within educational settings. Thus Vallance (1975 pp.134-138), for example, identified certain methods of expression, such as "implied technique", "implied movement", and "overlapping adjectives", that she claimed were not only typical of art criticism, but also appropriate for descriptions of educational situations.

In a previous article, I suggested - perhaps somewhat rashly - that a kind of "open season" had been declared on the humanities, with scholars hunting through either the broad field of aesthetics in general, or the narrow fields of particular disciplines, to locate metaphors to apply to education (Milburn, 1983b).

Some scholars have already pointed to features within the arguments for the use of new metaphors that call for clarification and discussion (Gibson, 1981, Pecover, 19883, Pratte, 1981). Indeed, sufficient comment has been made on the body of theory that has been developed to justify the use of alternative metaphors, that a second stage in the development of the new paradigm - the emergence of a body of criticism - may already be upon us.

Problems with the sources of metaphor

The first difficulty that may be identified is the relative paucity of actual examples of curriculum evaluation that uses the new metaphors. Although new studies are appearing with some regularity, the total is not large; and the relationship between the print expended on theoretical justification on the one hand, and on actual classroom study on the other, has already attracted attention. The "adherents" of these new approaches, observes Vallance (1981, p.6) - not by any means an unsympathetic critic - "talk to each other a lot, not necessarily talking to teachers or even doing much criticism." This shortage of actual examples that can be scrutinized with some care by other observers has taken discussions on the use of new metaphors away from the metaphors **in action** back towards metaphors **in theory**. While the latter is no doubt necessary, it is a dangerous focus for critical comment in a field such as educational research which has some pretensions to be an applied art.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that most of the examples that have appeared thus far in the educational literature are derived from a particular segment of the humanities, the fine arts, influenced no doubt by the pioneering work of Eisner and his students. Despite the usefulness of the examples that are available for scrutiny, they are thus not only few in number but significantly skewed towards a particular image. It is scarcely surprising then that some early critics of the use of new metaphors may be perceived as having a limited vision of the ultimate possibilities of the new approaches that are being advocated.

More important, however, is the argument that those who have attempted to use alternative metaphors in educational research have not been sensitive to some of the difficulties that are logically inherent in the intended operation. Metaphor-making has a lyrical - perhaps even heady - quality about it (note Goodman's remark that "in metaphors, symbols moonlight", 1979) but poetic vision is no substitute for rational and reflective analysis. In his study of the nature of metaphor, Black reminded us over twenty years ago that "understanding a metaphor is like deciphering a code or unravelling a riddle". (1962) He reminded his readers of the old adage, "Whereof one can speak only metaphorically, thereof one ought not to speak at all". (Black, p.25)

Building bridges for the purposes of metaphor-making would be more feasible if the foundation from which the bridges commence is more or less on firm footing. That cannot be taken for granted. Given the intention, for example, of examining educational phenomena through the eyes of "literary criticism", it is worth emphasizing that literary criticism exists in a very great variety of forms. One commentator has pointed to what he labels the "competing schools" that exist: "marxism, structuralism, new criticism, hermeneutics, deconstruction,

formalism, archetypalism, receptionism, transactionism... ," each one of which supplies its own system of discourse and method of reporting and consequently could be used as a basis for metaphor-making (Gibson, p.197).

The same argument may be used for "drama" and "art". In my own work, I have attempted to show how a variety of metaphors may be drawn from the many fields of drama (Milburn, 1983b pp.10-14), ranging from the suggestions made by Aristotle down to such contemporary theorists as Beckerman. Another commentator, however, in pointing out the significant differences that exist between formalist, expressionist, and marxist views of art, maintains "that no consensus exists as to what exactly art is, or how it should be judged". (Pecover, p.5) Her conclusion, incidentally, is devastating: "art therefore seems to be a strange choice for an analogy with a non-traditional approach to curriculum. The result is indeed... often nothing more than loose and pointless talk". (pp.5-6)

The possibility then of the existence of an enormous variety of interpretations within the many humanistic disciplines needs to be recognized by investigators. If, indeed, it is true that a great number (perhaps even hundreds) of metaphors may be drawn from the many humanistic disciplines that are conveniently at hand, then some criteria for the selection of this metaphor rather than that need to be identified. Thus far, there is little evidence of that task being undertaken.

Problems with the transfer of images

A second difficulty is connected with the nature of the image that is transferred from the original source to the educational matter under study. It is by no means certain what particular set of understandings is indeed transferred. When we say, for example, that a "politician" is a "shooting star", we have certain features in mind; some (e.g., that the politician's rise has been swift) are transferred, and others (that the politician actually consists of sidereal solids) are not intended to be transferred. This particular metaphor is commonly used and widely understood. The process of transfer is more complex when a metaphor such as "man" is "wolf" is used; in this case, the intended qualities to be transferred (e.g., that man is a wilful predator) may not be the actual properties of the feral creature. But no harm is done, because in this case again, the nature of the particular qualities intended to be transferred is well-known to both originator and receiver.

There are several reasons for thinking that the transfer of understandings from humanistic sources to education may not be as easy as the transfer from "politician" to "shooting star". Suppose, for example, we wish to treat "teaching" as "drama". Of the entire range of possible definitions of drama, which one is intended in any given case? Even if one particular source is identified, say a theorist such as Aristotle or Langer, which

particular parts of the theory are to be transferred to teaching, and what reasons may be offered for such a choice? Unlike the case of "man" and "wolf", there is no set of understandings deep within the culture to give guidance to both the originator and the recipient. The originator of a metaphor cannot assume that the particular understandings he intends to convey - what have been called the "commonplaces" of the metaphor - will, in fact, be conveyed.

There is some evidence - both logical and empirical - that the acceptance of images from the humanities by practitioners in education is likely to be imperfect. As Turbayne (1962, p.18) has indicated, there are no metaphors per se: a "plain man" may only see in Descartes' "machine of man" the literal truth; only the initiated, "aware of the 'gross original' sense, as well as the now literal sense", may perceive the metaphor. At least one critic has already observed that the notion that "curriculum" may be conceived as a "work of art" sounds to him "pretty strange". (Gibson, p.192) In the prevailing pattern of teacher assessment the categories and methods of procedure based on the social sciences are generally accepted; reluctance to accept an alternative system built on entirely different principles is predictable. One researcher (Vallance, 1975, p.204) has reported that a group of secondary-school teachers "could identify no situations" in which her reviews based on an artistic metaphor "would be particularly helpful." In my own work (1983b, pp.17-18) with the derivation of a dramatic metaphor, I concluded (on the most fragmentary evidence, it is true) that comprehension of any alternative metaphor was likely to be very limited indeed unless the grounds for such comprehension had been prepared very carefully.

Such arguments are not necessarily insurmountable. It may be possible to introduce on a systematic basis many of the alternative approaches that have been suggested by researchers using humanistic metaphors. But it is likely that the introduction of these new approaches will be accompanied by significant alterations in current practices in teacher-training or graduate institutions. If it is true that educational change can only be accomplished by intervention with teacher beliefs (Fullan and Park, 1981, p.9), then the intervention over the long term may have to be both extensive and dramatic. In other words, even if it can be demonstrated that the transfer of alternative metaphors will have certain desirable results, the current approach to educational evaluation may be deep-seated enough to resist the recommended changes.

The credibility of the results

A final difficulty is located in the examples of evaluation that have so far appeared in the literature - admittedly relatively few in number. Two problems appear to have surfaced (whether fairly or not is not the issue): first, the

credibility of the written prose of the evaluations that have thus far appeared; and secondly, the academic role of the writer of such evaluations.

Educators at a variety of levels seem unwilling to accept the type of prose or sorts of judgment that result from the enterprise, however well justified in theoretical terms that prose or those judgments may be. In her discussions of art criticism with a few secondary-school teachers, for example, Vallance (1975, p.204) reported that they "disliked the colorful language and interpretive adjectives." This type of comment has been expressed in more forceful terms by an observer at the university level, commenting upon one of the major collections of such humanistic reviews that have thus far appeared in print. Much of what he read Gibson (p.199) characterized as "painful to read," self-centred, grandiloquent, artificial, over-drawn, and full of dubious images, flashiness and one-line put-downs (pp.199-206). "Such overdramatisation and grand analogies are invariably the mark of poor criticism. It assumes that the invocation of great names, transcendental themes, superhuman stories, will cause the mantle of literature to fall on weak writing". (pp.202-203)

The following extract (Eisner, 1979, pp.240-241) was written by an observer reflecting on his journey to a school, prior to visiting a classroom:

"As I drive past, I wonder about the people in these lavish houses with their redwood paneling and their thoroughbred stallions in the adjacent fields. What are they like? How do they live? Do they balance their lives as effortlessly as they have balanced their houses on these hills? Do they ever stroll through their woods and sniff the honey-colored air and listen to the California mist as it steals softly over the hills? Or do they gaze straight ahead, like their houses? What distances do they maintain from whomever might be their friends? Does each wrap his arms around his life to insist that it is his alone? What is it about them that the world has chosen to reward in a manner such as this? What did they need to learn in order to secure their sumptuous perches on top these hills? And most of all, because I am a teacher, I wonder what kinds of lives they desire for their children."

Certain phrasings immediately attract attention: "their thoroughbred stallions in the adjacent fields," "Do they gaze straight ahead, like their houses?", and "What did they need to learn in order to secure their sumptuous perches on top these hills?" As a sociological comment on that particular neighbourhood, the passage is not lacking in clout; the specific location of that type of social interpretation is not difficult to pin-point. But there is no hint of a reason why such language should be appropriate to the particular educational situation. Such a reason may yet be provided, of course, but the point is that thus far it has not been offered - we are left only with

the reviewer's particular focus. "The validity of curriculum criticism," Gibson (p.207) observes rightly, "involves rigorous examination of the relationship between language and what it describes."

After examining the reviews that have been written by those who advocate the use of humanistic metaphors, a number of commentators have expressed some concern about the academic position adopted by the reviewers. Most of the examples have appeared to be highly critical of the pattern of education in North America. "What smacks of the traditional," one observer has argued, "is given an unflattering connotation". (Pecover, p.8) Note the following extract. (Eisner, 1979, pp.229-230)

"This classroom is almost a caricature of the society.

The curriculum is served up like Big Macs. Reading, math, language, even physical and affective education are all precooked, prepackaged, artificially flavored.

The arts are valued here as they are valued in a larger society. The teacher states simply, "They are not one of my priorities."

Teaching is orderly; learning is ordered. Page 47 always follows page 46. Short-vowel words are spelled before long-vowel words. Discussion of simple feelings precedes discussion of more complex ones.

Each day is remarkably like the day before and the day after. The school year seems to have been made with 174 pieces of carbon paper. The same things are done at the same times in the same ways in the same books. Only the pages change."

Of course, one could argue that the accepted way of doing things in North America **ought** to be subject to adverse criticism, but if that is indeed the case, the criteria used for criticism ought to be fairly well articulated. Such critical comment ought not a **priori** to assume that the existing pattern of things is wrong, or that the system needs massive overhaul. In other words, humanistic criticism should not be, nor appear to be, ideologically loaded.

The attitude of a reviewer towards a practitioner needs particular care. Given the skill and expertise of the reviewer, there is a danger that he will perceive himself as being in a somewhat superior position to the teacher in the classroom (Elbaz and Elbaz, 1981, p.117), or a person whose judgments are necessarily to be preferred to those of the teacher. In other words, the nature of the authority to be exercised by humanistic reviewers has not yet been subjected to sufficient scrutiny, and the weight that ought to be given to their judgments has not yet been adequately assessed.

On this question of the credibility that may be attached to humanistic reviews, a number of observers have pointed to an essential difference that exists between reviews in the arts on

the one hand, and reviews in education on the other. It is often possible to check the reviewer's comments on a painting or a novel by referring to the actual object itself. "In art criticism," Pecover writes (p.8), "we are able to check our own experiences against that of the critic." In many educational situations, especially in the assessment of teaching, the phenomenon can only be created once, and no public referent exists. In consequence, when humanistic metaphors are used we are unable to corroborate in the traditional sense the content of any particular critique of teaching. As Pagano and Dolan indicated (Pagano and Dolan, 1980, p.374), "no 'public forum' exists for the adjudication of the validity of the connoisseur's observations and consequent praises or complaints."

Conclusion

The problems encountered in recent work in the application of humanistic metaphors to educational situations are important. We tend to be long on rhetoric about the fruitfulness of such an approach - itself a signal for caution and restraint, given the track-record of educational ideas - but very short on actual examples. The number of studies in my own field of history and social studies is almost nil. Many of those writing in the field do not appear to have taken a sufficient reckoning of the nature of metaphor, of its inherent absurdity, and of its selective nature. In particular, the type of transfer between original source and educational phenomenon that characterizes the process does not appear to have been subjected to careful scrutiny. Even when the process has been completed, important problems remain in the justification of the types of language that have been used in conducting such studies, and the role of the evaluator appears to be subject to dispute. Given this list (which covers almost every aspect of the enterprise), it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the search for humanistic metaphors to supplement (or perhaps even replace) traditional social scientific approaches has got off to a very rocky start.

Despite the difficulties that have been outlined in this paper, it would be unwise to announce or assume the demise of attempts to write about educational research in humanistic terms. The task is enormously complex. It involves discussing the principles by which research is to be undertaken, and also examining specific techniques in practice. In the course of that discussion roadblocks and controversies are to be expected. Solution of those difficulties may well be eased by a willingness to accept the limitations as they appear, and a capacity to acknowledge and discuss comments that are adversely critical of the work that has so far been done. In short, let's take care with the "method" when we indulge in the "linguistic madness" of alternative metaphors.

NOTE

An earlier version of this paper was read at Simon Fraser University in November 1983. The quotation in the title is taken from Brown, 1977, p.82. I am grateful for the helpful comments of Robin Barrow, Richard Courtney, Roger Simon and Joel Weiss, and for the secretarial assistance of Mrs. M. Hamilton.

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