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Metaphorical Response and Student Revisions

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Writing instructors and writing tutors are often interested in discovering whether their responses to student writing facilitate student revision at a deep level. This teaching article illustrates how written metaphorical response can prompt student revision beyond surface features. It includes a description of tutor training in metaphorical response; tutors' responses offered to first-year composition students' first drafts of an assignment; students' second-draft revisions; and remarks from interviews with tutors, students, and course instructors. In particular, I examine the specific metaphorical strategies used by tutors to convey revision advice. Generalizing from these findings, I show how tutors *and* teachers can use metaphor as a means of clarifying their intent, motivating students, and stimulating deep revision of students' texts.

Keywords: metaphorical response, first-year composition, writing centers, online tutoring

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This article offers a practitioner-oriented approach to responding to student writing using deliberate metaphorical feedback. Following a brief summary of conceptual metaphor theory and two studies investigating metaphorical feedback, I describe a training session for instructors and the results of metaphorical feedback in students' revisions, along with commentary from first-year composition instructors and the students themselves.

Conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff, 2014; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) holds that embodied and neural cognition rely on metaphorical “mappings” between source and target domains. A source domain is usually concrete and often references the human mind or body; the target domain is usually more abstract. In English, common metaphors are (1) object/container, (2) conduit/path, and (3) temporal. Some examples are

- Object/container: STATES ARE CONTAINERS, “We’re *in a panic*.”
- Conduit/path: COMMUNICATION IS SENDING, “He worked very hard to *get his idea across*.”
- Temporal: TEMPORALITY IS LINEARITY, “They pushed the appointment *back an hour*.”

More complex metaphors derive from these, such as LIFE IS A FLUID IN THE BODY, “The life *drained out of him*,” “She’s *full of/brimming with life*,” or LOVE IS A JOURNEY, “We’re *at a crossroads* in our relationship,” “Our marriage is *on the rocks*” (Lakoff, 2014).

Whereas conventional wisdom suggests that metaphorical language is more difficult to understand than literal language, research suggests that communicative metaphor is in fact associated with greater, not lesser, ease of comprehension (Kintsch & Bowles, 2002). Indeed, metaphors can act as pedagogical “bridges” from the known to the unknown, particularly in writing instruction (Carter & Pitcher, 2010; Elbow & Belanoff, 1999; Levin & Wagner, 2006). Wan (2014) showed that metaphors can create greater emotional engagement and prompt student motivation. Eubanks (2011) argued that writing instructors need to move beyond judging metaphor as cliché or trite and instead employ metaphor as a rhetorical teaching tool.

Thonus and Hewett (2016) demonstrated how online writing center tutors could be educated in deliberate metaphorical response. We trained a group of tutors and found that they used considerably more metaphors in their feedback to students post-training as compared with pre-training. Several tutors incorporated metaphors into a coherent system, producing systematic metaphors such as *A TEXT IS A ROADMAP*. In a follow-up study (Hewett & Thonus, 2019), we presented evidence that first-year composition students who had received deliberate written metaphorical feedback from tutors who had been trained in metaphorical response were more likely to revise deeply than those who received written feedback from those who had not been trained. The difference between treatment and control groups was statistically significant. We claimed,

Metaphorical metalanguage [is] an instructional tool. . . . [It] may create semantic integrity in a way that literal expressions do not and, in fact, cannot. . . . We speculate that students' interpretations of the effect of that feedback will be more accurate, thereby enabling them to make more significant [revisions]. (Hewett & Thonus, 2019, p. 15)

Crucially, we illustrated how deliberate metaphor, especially its systematic use (often spurred by student-supplied sources and targets), could instigate students' revision and effect deeper revision. In short, students were more likely to make deeper, meaning-focused revisions when supplied with metaphorical response.¹

Our findings led us to believe that all of the following are possible and facilitative of writing development and revision:

- Tutors and teachers (henceforth *instructors*) use metaphors for and about writing, when possible, in response to student-generated metaphors.
- Students respond to metaphors for and about writing in their drafts and revisions.
- Students use metaphors to transfer learning from one assignment and context to the next.

This article will illustrate all three points in the provision of metaphorical feedback to student writers. It goes beyond the previous finding that

metaphorical feedback is correlated with deeper writer revisions by delving into the details of metaphorical feedback to individual student texts and the instructors' assessment of the revisions made.

Metaphorical Response Training: How To

During a two-hour training session, instructors learn to provide deliberate metaphorical feedback, to pick up on student-provided metaphors, and to avoid mixing metaphors by selecting a single dominant metaphor or systematic metaphor to frame their response. The protocol includes these steps:

- Instructors are presented with three common metaphor types, A TEXT IS AN OBJECT/CONTAINER, A TEXT IS A PERSON, and A TEXT IS A PATH—for example, “Break your intro up,” “This is a strong essay as it stands,” and “Let your reader know where you’re going.”
- Instructors are shown their own pre-training written responses to one or more student drafts and asked to analyze them for metaphorical content. This step is crucial so that instructors recognize the pervasiveness of metaphor—albeit unintentional—in instructional language. They are already using metaphorical feedback, whether they realize it or not!
- Instructors are shown how to use deliberate metaphor in their feedback. They select a single dominant metaphor in order to avoid mixing metaphors and thus diluting its impact. Instructors draw from the set A TEXT IS AN OBJECT/CONTAINER, A TEXT IS A PERSON, OR A TEXT IS A PATH.
- Instructors pay attention to students' metaphor use (if supplied in a request for feedback) and are encouraged to pick up on it, using that metaphor in their own responses. For example, if a student asks, “How can I improve the flow in my paper?” the instructor might select A TEXT IS A PATH as the dominant metaphor in framing a response.
- Instructors are further encouraged to create a systematic metaphor, for example, for A TEXT IS A PATH, “Use these so your reader has *an easy roadmap through your writing*,” as a frame for their responses.
- Instructors practice writing metaphorical responses to students' drafts.²

In training, we begin by showing instructors that they are already using metaphors *non-deliberately* in their written responses. These metaphors fall into six categories, including the three most frequent and less complex (A TEXT IS AN OBJECT OR CONTAINER, A TEXT IS A PERSON, A TEXT IS A PATH) and three less frequent and more complex (A TEXT IS A VALUED POSSESSION, PROGRESS THROUGH TEXT IS TRAVEL, UNDERSTANDING A TEXT IS SEEING). For example, one instructor, in response to the student's question "Is my paper headed in the right direction?" [A TEXT IS A PATH], wrote,

I read *through your paper* today [PROGRESS THROUGH TEXT IS TRAVEL]. I enjoyed reading that paper and thought that *it took an interesting approach* [A TEXT IS A PATH] to the topic of looking at games and the culture that surrounds them. It *seemed on target* [A TEXT IS A PATH] to the assignment.

This instructor was not aware that he was using metaphor; therefore, he was using it *non-deliberately*.

We then teach instructors to use metaphor *deliberately* by selecting a dominant metaphor from among the six categories and using it consistently. For example, one instructor responded to a writer's concerns by consistently appealing to A TEXT IS AN OBJECT, one that can be handled and moved:

You mentioned that your thesis was *a big point of concern* for you. Here are a *few takeaway points* for you to consider in *this and other pieces of writing*. I already see a lot of *great observations you've made of the image*. They're all related, but you haven't explicitly *laid out that connection* yet. Which leads me to my second point: *Synthesize these elements into your thesis*. What is the *common element of each of your main points*? You are arguing that *this common element is the nucleus* of what makes the poster work so well. *Explicitly lay that out in front of the reader with a solid thesis statement*. . . . You need to *bring it all together for a nice, pretty, concise whole*.

Having trained instructors to identify the metaphors in their pre-training feedback, we teach them to craft consistent and deliberate metaphorical

feedback responsive to students' needs, when possible by exploiting a single systematic metaphor.

For example, a student who received the following instructor response framed by the systematic metaphor A TEXT IS A BASEBALL GAME made significant changes to her draft, particularly in her thesis statement. Metaphorical expressions are italicized:

I am very concerned that you have *missed the overall mark* of an analysis of a text/image. I suggest you use the assignment the instructor gave you as *a playbook for writing this paper*. . . . In order to *hit a home run* with a paper like this one, it is important that you cover all the major points of the assignment clearly. . . . Then use evidence from the text/image to *bring your point home*.

Of course, the tutor assumed that the student knew something about the target domain (baseball) so that the systematic metaphor would make sense.

Sample Interventions

Below are two examples of students' requests for response, tutors' responses, composition instructor interview findings, and evidence of deep revision—interventions based in metaphorical feedback.

Margo³

Margo was assigned a rhetorical analysis of a multimodal object. She was asked to employ *pathos*, *ethos*, and *logos* to explain the argumentative value of this object. Tutor Aaron's response to Margo's draft was framed in terms of A TEXT IS AN OBJECT/CONTAINER and the specific related metaphor A TEXT IS A BUILDING, both in his overarching comment and in his marginal notes. Aaron wrote,

Structure your paper around a solid thesis. You have all of the materials for a strong thesis right now, but you haven't brought them all together yet into a coherent whole. The closest you got to this is in your conclusion . . . and your introduction, which is a bit unorganized. Bring them together for a solid argument.

In a marginal note on Margo's draft, Aaron wrote,

I like how you have started to *construct your paper* here. You started off with a *solid foundation*. . . . You *built on that* with giving a specific example. . . . Let's think about how we can *combine these two things for a solid thesis* that will be the *outlining structure of your entire paper*.

Of her rhetorical analysis response from Aaron, in an interview Margo recalled it in the same terms, A TEXT IS AN OBJECT/CONTAINER:

To *structure my paper around a solid thesis* . . . I know that a thesis is like a main point or idea for my paper. It is stated in that thesis and then *supported all throughout the paper*, so if the thesis is not strong then a reader may not be fully aware of what my argument is.

Margo noted that metaphorically speaking, "revising a paper is like cleaning a room. It wasn't fun, but it wasn't too bad with a bit of help."

In her revision, Margo made six meaning-altering macrostructural changes, all additions to the original draft. These specifically connected to her revised thesis statement and its reiteration. For example:

First draft:

Love is a treasured thing and this picture works to show that.

Second draft:

Love is a treasured thing and this picture works to show that. *In any given country one could find a new translation as well as writing style for the word and meaning. This shows that love is valued, understood and written in many different ways across the world.*

Another addition offered greater detail and connected it to the thesis:

First draft:

This is very much so relatable to the fact that the picture is in black and white.

Second draft:

This is very much so relatable to the fact that the picture is in black and white. *To emphasize that either the color is there or it is not, love is either there or it is nonexistent. One may choose to believe the picture is black and white for any one given reason. However, it may be almost troubling to choose just one reason as to why the picture is in black and white rather than in color. Many viewers perhaps choose to believe multiple reasonings as to why or how it came about for the photo to be in black and white alone.*

Margo also made 10 meaning-altering microstructural changes, 13 surface meaning-preserving changes, and 16 surface formal changes.

When interviewed, Margo's first-year composition instructor, Barbara, applauded the helpfulness of Aaron's response. She reported that Margo had spoken well of the tutorial and made deep revisions to her paper afterwards; Margo also made significant revisions to the next assignment on her own. Barbara wondered whether she was seeing a "transfer effect," that is, Margo's learning from the online tutorial on one paper transferring to revision skills for her subsequent papers.

Abdul

This dyad differed from Margo and Aaron's in that both student and tutor were bilingual speakers of English (Arabic for Abdul and Korean for Uma, his tutor) and multilingual writers. Abdul's assignment was to compare two genres written about the same topic: a scholarly article and a blog post. In her response, Uma created a systematic metaphor, *TEXTS ARE BACKPACKS AND BRIEFCASES*, based on *A TEXT IS A CONTAINER*, comparing the two text genres to a backpack and a briefcase:

Your paper has some good paragraphs that do convey valid points about the rhetorical skills used in the two texts you chose, but there are *other paragraphs that fill this paper* with mere summaries of the *CONTENT* of the texts and not enough of the *ANALYSIS*. *First off, imagine that someone asks you to explain the difference between a backpack and a briefcase.* Both are portable containers for office-type materials, but they clearly have different functions, purpose, and characteristics. You decide to bring out your own backpack and your father's briefcase, and use them as reference as

you explain the difference between backpacks and briefcases in general. Your genre analysis paper needs to do the same thing. *You are using the blog and the article as examples to carry your point about how the two genres are different.*

Abdul made eight specific meaning-altering macrostructural changes, most of them additions. For example, Abdul's original introductory paragraph read,

Obesity has been a growing health problem in the world for both adults and children. Many have even called it an epidemic. Obesity has not only effected adults but also children. Justin Lawrence explains what childhood obesity is in his article *Childhood Obesity*. While Scott Morefield has a problem solution outlook on obesity in his blog *Obesity--the Epidemic Big Medical loves to hate*.

The revisions (shown in italics) made after receiving Uma's response read,

Obesity has been a growing health problem in the world for both adults and children. Many have even called it an epidemic. In the article "Childhood Obesity," Justin Lawrence *defines the diagnosis of obesity in children and the health risks that come with it*. Scott Morefield has a blog, "Obesity--the Epidemic Big Medical loves to hate," and that has a more problem solution outlook. *Morefield's blog talks about the problems obesity has caused other than the obvious health problems. I will be discussing the rhetorical appeals in both the blog and the article. How each genre uses those appeals? Are they effective in using them?*

Abdul also made 10 meaning-altering microstructural changes, 13 surface meaning-preserving changes, and 29 surface formal changes, many of the latter prompted by Uma's prodigious use of marginal notes on grammar and vocabulary, returned to him as an attachment to her overarching comment.

When interviewed, Abdul's composition instructor, Hannah, stated that he had told her, "I just wanted grammar help." This is consistent with his original request to have his tutor cover "style, tone of voice," "clarity of language and expression," and "sentence structure." Hannah, however, was glad that Uma had chosen to first respond to higher-order concerns,

specifically organization and analysis. She mentioned that Abdul's paper showed improvement. Hannah wasn't sure, however, whether he had been able to "make the leap" from the two genres through the backpack and briefcase metaphor. She thought, however, that with greater exposure to metaphorical feedback he might learn to make such a "leap."

Conclusion

Whereas it may be argued that all writing feedback relies on a metalanguage that is inherently metaphorical, nondeliberate metaphors are often overlooked since they are so much a part of everyday language that we no longer immediately recognize them as metaphorical. In this training and intervention, tutors' deployment of deliberate and systematic metaphors goes beyond the language of nondeliberate metaphors to create memorable learning: "Metaphorical metalanguage may enable the cognitive leap that Hewett (2015) argued must occur when students read written feedback and struggle with how to employ it in their writing" (Hewett & Thonus, 2019, p. 15).

The durability of metaphorical response is an area for further research: If students do transfer learning through metaphors from one writing context to another, metaphorical feedback should be an important topic in writing instructor education. For the time being, I hope that this article encourages practical strategies of how to create and deploy deliberate metaphorical response for revision-focused feedback to student writing. I propose that tutors *and* teachers may benefit from adding this technique to their response toolkits.

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Notes

1. The scheme used to analyze revision changes is based on Faigley and Witte's (1981) taxonomy as further explicated by Ellis (2011). Surface formal and surface meaning-preserving revisions are viewed as “shallower” than the “deeper” revisions of meaning-altering micro- and macrostructural changes.
2. Further metaphor examples in the training protocol appear in Thonus and Hewett (2016).
3. All names of study participants are pseudonyms.