



Exploring the impact of metaphor on the student experience of articulation

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Presentation abstract

UK-wide government targets for widening participation in further and higher education institutions have seen increased numbers of students following routes to university which depart from the 'typical' pathway of school to university. There is a range of alternative routes, one being articulation, whereby students who complete relevant qualifications are considered for entry into an advanced level of university study. In Scotland, students completing Higher National Certificate (HNC) or Higher National Diploma (HND) qualifications in college are considered for entry into year two or three of specific undergraduate degree programmes (Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland, 2020). Learning Developers are often tasked with supporting specific student groups, such as articulating students; however, research on articulation is limited, and the student perspective is often absent from discussions. Research which does exist appears to focus on transition as a key area of concern, highlighting specific literacies and attributes as potentially lacking in this group. In addition to indications of deficit, discourses on articulation frequently employ metaphors such as 'spoon-feeding' to document the student experience and idealise education as a 'smooth journey'.

Metaphor theorists such as Ortony (1975), Reddy (1979) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors are powerful actors in discourse, with significant consequences for thinking and action. Drawing on these theorists, this paper reports on a study undertaken with articulating students, foregrounding their voices and exploring the metaphors they choose to describe their experiences. Visual methods were utilised, with students producing insightful drawings, using an array of metaphors to depict a complex and at times, contradictory experience. Findings suggest that metaphors appear to impact how

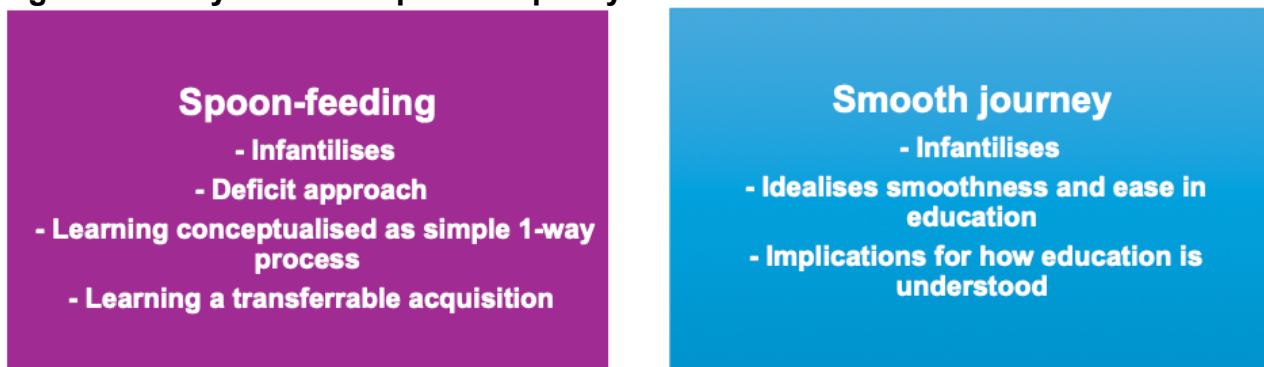
education is both conceptualised and experienced, with implications for how Learning Developers engage with and support articulation.

Keywords: articulation; metaphor; transition; widening participation.

Community response

Community responses indicate that this session was impactful and showed the significant (and powerful) role that language has in shaping students' experiences. The presenter referred to metaphors as having an impact on how we feel and how we are, as metaphors can conceal and reveal, can be embodied and experienced, and can influence how communication is presumed and achieved. The session explored two dominant metaphors in higher education (HE) and further education (FE). First, the idea of students being 'spoon-fed' and second, the idea of a smooth journey that argues the journey should be artificially smooth for certain groups (Figure 1). The session highlighted the difference between the perspectives at the college and university levels of study.

Figure 1. Analysis of metaphors in policy documents and research literature.



In the study presented, FE experiences were negatively represented by the participants, while HE experiences were perceived as more exciting, having symbolic value. The study concluded that the participants seemed to echo these dominant metaphors, which can conceal their developmental experience in FE. The presentation made the audience think about the extent to which HE practitioners contribute to the creation and maintenance of these metaphors. These differences were well visualised by research participants of the study (Figures 2 and 3).

evident that such interactions are an important factor in building and shaping identity and self-efficacy. Such careful exploration of why and how language affects us, our perceptions and our sense of selves, was fascinating.

Reflecting on the session, we cannot do without metaphors, it seems, but as the presenter of this rich and deeply humane session made clear, nor can we fashion or wield them in a state of ideological innocence. I was really struck, during this session, by just how powerful (for better and/or worse) metaphors are in shaping our experiences of education; how the metaphor is as likely to foreclose as to enable possibilities for student agency and development.

For the delegates in attendance, they felt the session would change how they work with their FE/HE students. The session was described as 'fascinating' and very 'thought-provoking'. One delegate noted that the session 'is one which will stay with me'. The passion of the presenter clearly shone through, with attendees noting 'Deborah was a wonderfully engaging speaker, clearly vastly knowledgeable and motivated by genuine care and interest, and brought us into the project through sharing the narrative'. There were also clear implications for practice, with the strongest voice noting the session was 'brilliant', and in their words: 'I feel like I've struck gold when a conference talk unexpectedly opens up some entirely new thinking to me, and this was my striking gold moment of ALDCon25:

I loved the way Deborah exposed how insidious metaphor can be - and how easily a metaphor can take hold and 'pollute' discourse, thinking, and practice ('spoonfeeding' in FE) - but also what potential there is for making metaphor empowering and liberating. The student participants' drawings and metaphors were fascinating.

Next steps and additional questions

The presentation concluded with clear learning points from the research (Figure 4). For the community, the session raised awareness around language use and its long-lasting impact on students' own perceptions of their academic journey. From the research findings presented, it is clear that when talking and considering belonging in HE, it is highly important to acknowledge the importance which language has and could be key when forming student identities.

Figure 4. Conclusions.

What I found
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students echoed dominant metaphors from grey and research literature• Language informed by metaphors impacting on student experience• Metaphors may be acting to conceal a developmental experience in college• Students perhaps unsatisfied with teaching practices in college• University perhaps represents a modern rite of passage• University has symbolic worth• College perhaps represents a liminal space• Student support: an 'anti ideal rhetoric'? (Gil, 2016)

The session had a profound impact on those present, making them feel that more explicit discussion of metaphors could be a valuable activity within learning development, allowing the Learning Development community and our students to interrogate and challenge the assumptions our existing metaphors might unwittingly encode, as well as create new (but always fallible and imperfect!) metaphors.

Author's reflection

Thank you to those who attended my session and shared their thoughts and experiences. I am deeply grateful for the community response. It was heartening to see so many colleagues interested in the potential power and influence of the language used to describe specific student groups. I was delighted to be able to share some of my PhD work and hear reflections from others on how the data resonated with their own experiences of working with similar student groups.

I was particularly struck by how some community members felt that perceptions of FE institutions and their students may not have shifted positively in recent years, and that a stigma continues to be felt by this student population. The metaphor of spoon-feeding in particular raised questions about what exactly spoon-feeding entails, how it is understood and experienced, and why it persists.

I thoroughly enjoyed delivering the session and feel energised to continue work in this area, perhaps extending consideration to other student groups such as international students and/or co-creating metaphors with students to explore how they might choose to document their own educational journey.

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Deborah O'Neill is an academic development tutor in the School of Health and Life Sciences at Glasgow Caledonian University. She has worked in the HE sector for almost 20 years, in both professional services and academic roles. Deborah's background is in English literature and she has recently successfully completed a PhD at the University of Stirling, exploring the impact of metaphor on the student experience of articulation. Her research interests include widening access, educational transitions, government education policy, international students' experience and academic literacies.

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