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Dwelling in the Ruins: Recovering Student Use of Metaphor in the Posthistorical University

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Abstract: This article argues that the field of Rhetoric and Composition has long harnessed the active potential of metaphor to change its own practices but has considerably overlooked student use of metaphor—a particularly urgent oversight given the metaphorical battleground that constitutes the discourse of contemporary higher education. Using this exigency, the article 1) explains how a more thorough reading of Lakoff and Johnson's popular work on metaphor theory can re-energize Rhetoric and Composition to be more inclusive of student experiences in classroom coverage of metaphor and 2) offers imaginative but concrete pedagogical approaches and activities aimed at facilitating student learning of metaphor in the context of a consumer-based "University of Excellence."

> "Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build."
> —Martin Heidegger (1971)

Let's begin with a little literary humor:

> You see, that's the whole problem. Writing is a lasagna to me. There are layers and you have to put them together carefully and then you are done. But you keep saying that I have to narrow my focus. You are trying to turn my lasagna into a meat loaf and I don't like meat loaf. (455)

Taken from a student reflection in Lad Tobin's article "Bridging the Gaps: Understanding Our Students' Metaphors for Composing," this excerpt uncovers the notion that metaphor provides an accessible, safe, almost playful way to talk openly with students about the nature of writing processes. Students are comfortable with metaphors of writing. They can understand paragraphs as sandwiches, introductions as V's, and editing as polishing the paint on a vehicle. The above excerpt, however, can also be interpreted another way—that, in fact, lurking beneath the seeming playfulness of the student's comparison of lasagna and meatloaf is the notion that students don't always find writing teachers' metaphors familiar, productive, or even particularly useful. And why would they? Since metaphors arise from having to make sense of our interaction with our physical environment (Lakoff and Johnson), there is a sort of pedagogical malpractice in what Tobin might call the "thoughtless unilaterality" with which we apply metaphor without considering first the experiences of our students. And this is precisely why Tobin was writing: to admonish writing teachers and the field generally to address how to bridge the gap between our own metaphors and those of our students so as to avoid the type of clear, palpable frustration felt by the student above. The conflict here is conceptual, but it is also experiential, and this poses a problem. Making students see writing as a meatloaf, while seemingly playful, is a coercive act that can play a significant part in hindering our ability to succeed in teaching writing.

So much for humor.

Tobin's contention was that even though Rhetoric and Composition had up until his point in writing in 1989 acknowledged the active role of metaphor in writing practices, the field had not parlayed that understanding to students, had not studied the metaphors students were using to write with, and had not considered how our metaphors were emplacing students in conceptual paradigms unfamiliar to them or outside their realms of experience. Tobin positioned metaphor as a productive means to access underlying assumptions students had about writing and as a way to challenge teachers to explore and make apparent the disjunct between our metaphors and those of our students. It has been almost three decades, however, since Tobin challenged a field of writing teachers

to "bridge the gap" and learn more about our students' metaphors. Over the last three decades or so, how much more have we learned about our students' metaphors? How much effort have we exerted to designing assignments that uncover *their* metaphors rather than asking them to participate in *ours*? Given the vast changes in writing technologies, international enrollment, educational curricula, and higher education culture, what are our students' current metaphors about writing and learning? How do we know? I contend that we have done a poor job at taking up Tobin's call. Without reservation I argue that we might see Tobin's student's anti-meatloaf sentiment as symptomatic of a lingering and prevalent disease: teacher metaphor self-centeredness.

This diagnosis is particularly disappointing because we as writers and writing teachers continue to write about and love metaphors. And not just a little bit. We *really* love metaphors. But why do we love metaphors so? Why do we find it so pleasing to define our role-casting in terms of metaphor—as guides, gatekeepers, gardeners, thermostats? Why do we tell our students to write paragraphs as they would assemble a sandwich? to think of the integration of research sources as remixing? discuss genre as a rhizome? speak of shuttling between languages or trafficking in meaning? Why do we call our course websites public squares, always come back to metaphors of ecology, and why do teachers in Rhetoric and Composition no longer use the frontier metaphor to define their practice? The answer to all of the above questions consists of two simple facts: first, teachers are intimately aware of the powerful, pragmatic potential of metaphor, of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's timeless, familiar, and resonant assertion in *Metaphors We Live By* that "we act accordingly to the way we conceive of things" (5); and second, teachers by and large accept Paul Lynch's claim that there simply is *no teaching without metaphor*. With most of us priding ourselves on being what Donald Schön calls reflective practitioners, we—neophytes and experts alike—try and make sense of our teaching methods, writing, and our roles in the university through the perspective of metaphor; in a way, then, it is less about whether or not metaphor informs and determines our practice and more about which metaphors we choose.

But to what extent are we bringing our students along on this ride? What about our students and *their* use of metaphor? What about the positions we put them in? The roles we assign them? Are they aware? And to what extent? If we as writing teachers are convinced of the pragmatic power of metaphor, then how are we relaying this message to our students? Put another way: most thoughtful, reflective instructors are quickly able to respond to the question, "What metaphor guides your teaching?" but are perhaps less likely to have a quick response to the question, "What metaphors do your students subscribe to when learning?", or even, "How do students challenge or respond to the resulting metaphors of your choosing?" Tobin himself shares in this mild lament:

> In spite of our own reliance on metaphor, we have failed to make full use of its pedagogical potential: we rarely encourage students to question, criticize, or develop our metaphors, or, more importantly, to develop their own. As a result, most metaphors in the composition classroom are rarely integrated into the course as a whole or into the students' own conception of and experience in composing. (466)

Given that Tobin's work was written almost three decades ago, I argue that Rhetoric and Composition has not advanced enough in the conversation about student use or adaptation of metaphor. And this is not because there has been a dearth of work on metaphor itself; on the contrary, there has been ample scholarship on the topic, as will be discussed below. Perhaps one might speculate that this lack of student-centered coverage of metaphor is intimately connected in some way or another to our push to establish the field, which Joseph Harris points out might be the reason for the steep decline in our field's collective studying of actual student writing. Perhaps.

But my argument, more than just a critique of Rhetoric and Composition's under-consideration of student experience, is steeped more in metaphor theory itself. I argue that our relative inattention to student usage of metaphor stems from an over-valuing of the pragmatic, outcome-based potential of metaphor to bring about action. We are quick to grab hold of Lakoff and Johnson's expedient assertion that "we act accordingly to the way we conceive of things" (5) but often at the expense of fully understanding the scope of the experientialist perspective of metaphor Lakoff and Johnson were proposing, which was presented in the context of metaphor studies as an alternative to the interactionist (Max Black), postmodern (Friedrich Nietzsche), and substitutionist (I. A. Richards) camps of metaphor theory.[1] Lakoff and Johnson's seminal *Metaphors We Live By* aimed at providing metaphor theory with a "third choice" (192) of understanding metaphor—free from the objectivist-subjectivist divide—that moved metaphor towards what they call "imaginative rationality" (193). Metaphor does provide a framework for action, yes, but these frameworks are based on individual experience, so, as such, to develop and deploy metaphors in our classrooms without consideration of student experience is to ignore the way metaphor emerges out of individual experience in the first place. We as a field have become so infatuated with the pragmatic, results-oriented potential of metaphor that we have overlooked or left behind the experientialist nature of how metaphor emerges in the first place. This article is a modest attempt to pick up where Tobin left off and works to move us back in the direction of attending to the metaphors of our students.

Our nearly exclusive focus on teachers' and researchers' metaphors is particularly lamentable given the larger

context of continued "corporatization" trends in higher education politics and practice. Severe cuts in state funding to public institutions and subsequent unprecedented rises in student tuition, not to mention stagnant salaries for faculty fortunate enough to have them, have driven wedges between administrators, faculty, and students. In addition to teachers and students not sharing common experiences and metaphors with writing, we are continually seeing market and consumer metaphors of higher education further distance and work against teachers and students in their shared metaphors of education—as the latter sharpen their focus on shopping for classes, tabulating credit hours, and pragmatically selecting majors with the highest return on investment, while the former craft reading lists that promote diversity, design pedagogy that cultivates democratic citizenship, and opine about personal and communal values of inquiry and evidence. If we as a field continue with our relative ignorance of student experiences and metaphors of both writing and higher education, we risk allowing the consumerist model of education, which already positions teachers and students against each other, to define our roles for us and potentially further erode the distance and disconnect we may already feel between our democratic and their pragmatic ends. What is at stake is our shared experiences, far more serious than taste disagreements between meatloaf and lasagna—indeed at stake is our very ability to establish a common framework for understanding the purpose of higher education and the roles writing can and should play within it.

In the remainder of the essay, I begin with a brief overview of Rhetoric and Composition's treatment of metaphor, pointing out a gap in our thinking revealed through closer attention to Lakoff and Johnson's work in the broader context of metaphor theory. This re-direction focuses on Lakoff and Johnson's notion of metaphor as a form of "imaginative rationality." From there, the essay explores the role of metaphor in the discourse of higher education, specifically through the lens of Bill Readings' characterization of the contemporary university as being "posthistorical" and thus lacking a cohesive metaphoric referent. I situate this characterization as a productive space where students and teachers alike are encouraged to collaboratively participate in "imagining" the university. I end with a pedagogical activity I created in my own classroom based upon Lakoff and Johnson's notion of imaginative rationality within the larger context of an increasingly consumer-based framework for understanding the university, exemplifying an experiential perspective of metaphor and affording students the opportunity to imaginatively co-construct their own metaphors in the classroom.

Our Productive Use of Metaphor

The field of Rhetoric and Composition should be proud of its work in getting scholars to see past the merely ornamental, poetic functions of metaphor. By the time Lakoff and Johnson's seminal work *Metaphors We Live By* was published in the field of cognitive linguistics, compositionists had already explored the generative, active potential of metaphor to change writing practices (Bentley; Petersen), to better understand how others—particularly students—approach writing (Gibson), to argue for more adaptability in teaching practices (North; Rankin), and, of course, to fundamentally re-shape the way writing gets thought and taught—as a process (Emig)—on campuses all over the country. From processes, to ecologies, to maps, to windowpanes, metaphor has played an integral role in the development of our field as well as an entry-point for open discussions with students about how to become skillful, thoughtful writers. These early approaches—stemming from a pedagogical, outcomes-oriented mindset— helped undergird the approaches we see now, which are approaches tinged with pragmatist takes on the value of metaphor. That is, we find ourselves asking these questions to ourselves a lot: "Which metaphor is most valuable for me to do what I need to do? Which one helps me do the best work?" Gregory Clark's "rhetoric as travel," Kristine Hansen's push for the metaphor of "network" over "tower" in describing our service, Philip Eubanks' defense of the conduit metaphor, Peter Elbow's musical metaphor for writing organization, Kristie Fleckenstein et al.'s ecological metaphor for writing research, Paul Lynch's view of composition as a thermostatic activity, Steve Parks and Nick Pollard's point on replacing "contact zones" with community-based "confederations"—to name just a few—all to varying extents bring with them a valuation of our own metaphors as having, well, *value* for our own work as writing teachers. Fleckenstein et al., for example, describe their piece on ecological metaphors as arguing "for the value of an ecological metaphor in conceptualizing, designing, and enacting research in writing studies" (388). Metaphors have become in a way tools, as Tobin pointed out long ago, to help us deal, dwell, and grapple with our circumstances.

Understanding metaphors as tools affords us the opportunity to *do something* with them, whether that be change the shape or direction of our field (Reynolds), rethink institutional space (Zoetewey), or change the way we write and get students to write (Bowden). Our collective use of metaphor is unabashedly characterized with deep appreciation of potential for metaphor to change. Take, for example, James Seitz's book *Motives for Metaphor: Literacy, Curriculum Reform, and the Teaching of English*. In it, he explores the idea that, despite our best efforts, literature, composition, and creative writing remain competitive fields in many respects but specifically with regard to the curriculum we co-create together that forms English studies. Seitz contends that we remain disjointed not only because of the different metaphors we bring to the table in terms of our pedagogical goals (e.g., discover, simplify) but also because students

are not coming to us equipped to handle the scope of metaphor. We all treat metaphor as a basic concept that we assume students can fully grasp, but when prompted to consider metaphor more deeply as a critical tool, students can only refer back to the poetic functions of metaphor they learned in high school. So, if students have not fully grasped metaphor, and we in literature, composition, and creative writing all have varying underlying metaphors driving our pedagogy, how can we expect students to be receptive to our teaching? Seitz takes the main feature of metaphor (bringing two entities together, understanding one thing in terms of another, different thing) and attempts to provide a fresh solution by proposing a writing assignment around meta-fiction, or an assignment that has students imagine or role-play a different scenario than the one they are in. The unique ability of metaphor to find illumination and purpose through difference—to echo his earlier work (Seitz, "Composition's Misunderstanding of Metaphor")—can, he argues, help the field of English studies work towards a collective identification that would serve to strengthen and conjoin rather than weaken and diverge.

The coalescing power of metaphor is revealed also in the work of Nedra Reynolds, as she points us towards the politics of space, the "imagined geographies" we as a field have used to understand our work. The geospatial metaphors of frontier, city, and cyberspace we have used to characterize our field have deeply material consequences, as the power of metaphor ("composition as frontier," for example) can enliven our work and establish the importance of what we do, but it can also mask the material realities we often find ourselves in (e.g., crowded classrooms, administrative work). There is a lingering danger in metaphor, Reynolds writes, as it might mask the politics of space and wrongly encourage us to see classroom space as transparent, much in the same way that Darsie Bowden articulated the limits of the "container" metaphor for writing and that Kristine Johnson warned against using older metaphorical teachers' roles (i.e., midwife from Maxine Hairston and cultural critics from James Berlin) to teach students of the millennial generation, who have a paradigm much at odds with longstanding debates in our field. Reynolds shows us how geospatial metaphors are powerful tools that simultaneously unmask and blind us to the material realities of our campuses and of our work as a field generally. This has also been shown to be true in a recent conversation between Dylan B. Dryer and Mary Jo Reiff in *JAC*, in which Reiff considers further the critical role of spatial metaphors in the development of Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS). Metaphor, in all these cases, is an agent for coalescing change. The very notion that metaphor is commonly used as a way to *get things done* speaks to the value we collectively grant metaphor in helping us address pressing problems in our field and in our classrooms.

What is missing, for the most part, from our coverage of metaphor is an explicit transferring of this acknowledged use and value to our students. There have been hints, as mentioned above, such as Seitz's encouraging students to role-play or Johnson's acknowledgement of generational differences in student paradigms, but they continually circle back to the value of metaphor to solve administrative or teacher problems. For decades we have seen metaphor help us shape our field, our teaching practices, and our work with others, and this has undeniably affected our students in ways beyond their control. We have long honed our skills in and with metaphor and have collectively become quite dexterous in our usage of metaphor, but we have not placed enough attention on how to get students themselves to hone the same type of skills. We emplace students in our teaching metaphors, implore them to resist consumerism in education, and impassion them to write recursively, but to what extent are we treating students as subjects able to gain agency through the use of metaphor, as we have so effectively done, based on their own experience? And how might we do so now, three decades after Tobin's claims?

Lakoff and Johnson's resounding anthem "we act according to the way we conceive of things" is everywhere in our work, really since our field's professional inception. But largely missing from our coverage of Lakoff and Johnson is closer attention to their underlying critique of metaphor theory as not being based in experience, more thoughtful consideration of the "we" in the anthem. "We" act according to how "we" see things—and this attention to action has been fruitful—but with metaphors being steeped in our own collective, shared experiences, the "we" mainly, if not only, includes educators. As Timothy Giles notes, Lakoff and Johnson sought in their work to move away from the correspondence theory of metaphor and towards an experientialist one, away from objectivist notions of metaphor, in the scientific manner of speaking. The issue with Tobin's student conflict in the opening excerpt, for Lakoff and Johnson, is a conflict of nonuniversal conceptual systems (226). This clash of "truths" in part characterizes our objectivist tendencies when dealing with metaphor in our field. Metaphors, for Lakoff and Johnson, change through experience, as when our perception of when a conversation transitions into an argument is largely perceptual and based upon our own individual experiences of feeling threatened by the other conversant (79). In focusing on the active potential in metaphor, we have overstepped the critical concept underlying Lakoff and Johnson's theory of metaphor: that common experiences create shared action and that promoting a metaphor stemming from our own sole experience and enforcing it onto another is an act of epistemological force that regresses the potential of metaphor as a driver for action and change. And while our dominant mode of interacting with students is in the writing classroom, the larger context of university cannot be separated from this interaction.

Our Ruined Campuses

My contention thus far has been that while the field of Rhetoric and Composition has amply discussed the active potential of metaphor to bring about change, we as a field have, for the most part, left our students and their experiences behind. We have done so during an untimely historical moment during which the very conceptual, metaphoric idea of the university is being continually subjected to empty, consumerist models of institutional "excellence." We should be concerned that our relative neglect of studying and understanding student metaphor continues during a time where the predominant consumerist paradigm of education continues to work against student/teacher interactions, indeed continues to drive a wedge between our own experiences in higher education and theirs, our own goals and theirs, our own futures and theirs.

I want this essay to do more than just point to a blind spot—albeit a significant one—in our work. Thus, in this section I place our field's treatment of metaphor in conversation within the larger framework of higher education discourse pertaining to the "corporatization" (Rawlings) or commodification of higher education, indeed the prevalence of consumerism as a dominant model in the discourse, which really isn't new.{2} In doing so, I aim to deepen our understanding of the experiential nature of metaphor but also aim to reveal how re-focusing on student use of metaphor is precisely the type of approach needed to counter divisive consumerist metaphors of education because it moves us as teachers closer to building and uncovering common experiences—and thus common metaphors— between ourselves and our students.

In one of the more astute critiques of consumerism in higher education, Bill Readings' *University in Ruins* draws our attention to the metaphorical failures implicated in the market structure of the contemporary North American University. Readings suggests that the market structure for the "posthistorical"—that is, after the modern iteration of the Humboldtian, nation-state German model of education—University makes the figure of the student as consumer more and more a reality. The commodification of "knowledge" is the result, according to Readings, of the shift away from the cultural models of the university (which offered a more shared, collective experience between students and teachers) as supported by the German Idealists and towards the dereferentialized "University of Excellence" model (which offers consumerist paradigms that individualize education) prevalent in North America: "The time of education is still addressed in general under the terms of the modernist metanarrative that has lost its purchase: the passage from ignorance to enlightenment in a particular time span. And it is in terms of time, 'credit hours,' that teaching is reduced to the logic of accounting" (127). Readings calls for the recognition that the university as we know it to exist today is a *ruined* institution, encouraging us to think about what it means to dwell within these ruins without resorting to a romantic nostalgia and what it means to "explore the ways in which we can understand the University today, as it abandons its role as the flagship of national culture but before it embarks irrevocably upon the path of becoming an excellent bureaucratic corporation" (125). The ruined nature of the University is metaphorical in nature as well, and as such "the University has to find a new language in which to make a claim for its role as a locus of higher education —a role which nothing in history says is an inevitably necessary one" (125). This new language will inevitably contain remnants of cultural models of education (e.g., citizenship), but will be influenced heavily by the economic realities facing students and higher education today.

But Readings also, and more importantly, wants us to recognize that the catalyst behind the resulting ruined university is the shift from a Humboldtian cultural model of education to what he calls the "University of Excellence." Readings argues that "excellence" and even "culture" no longer have specific metaphorical content; terms used to describe the nature of the University have undergone a process he calls "dereferentialization"—they no longer have specific referents in the metaphorical sense. Readings asks, "How are we to reimagine the University, once its guiding idea of culture ceased to have an essential function?" (119). This act of reimagining is for Readings a largely metaphorical process and activity. What Readings calls dereferentialization of "culture" and "excellence," Lakoff and Johnson would call a vacancy in the source domain of conceptual metaphors. That is, the source domain is the conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions (i.e., argument as *war*); the target domain is the conceptual domain that we try to understand (i.e., *argument* as war). "Excellence," or that which unfortunately characterizes today's University, has, for Readings, no source domain: excellence is _____. (Intentionally so, even.) Because of the way the University has been dereferentialized of its modern metaphors, so to speak, students occupy a rather indeterminate place in a metaphorically-ruined institution: the default position is that of an expedient business model—one built on striving towards excellence (or excellency?) in everything we do, whatever that means. This is echoed in all of our institutions' mission statements on our websites. Students see themselves as a transaction number, they shop around for classes, they view their peers as competitors and not collaborators, and they view writing as a commodity that will help them achieve desired results and that will fill a line on the resume under "Skills." This often contrasts with the metaphors we have as teachers for University. Of course, not all students think like this, but each student is exposed to the lack of meaningful metaphorical discourse, in a way "role-casting" student metaphors for themselves to be what many might deem inappropriate or unproductive or counter-intellectual. As Readings notes, students are situated in these positions in ways that might make them feel powerless, and perhaps unaware. To echo Seitz from above, sometimes metaphor chooses us.

Yet, Readings' goal is not just to introduce a new term into the mix, nor is it to necessarily lament the loss of a social institution that once sought to breed well-informed, well-rounded citizens (*Bildung*). His goal is for us to use this vacant space once filled with cultural consensus to our advantage, to productively explore the meaning behind a "posthistorical" University that has no "idea" and that is quickly losing the dialectic between established tradition and rational inquiry that characterized University for so long. Readings argues

> that we accept that the modern University is a *ruined* institution. Those ruins must not be the object of a romantic nostalgia for a lost wholeness but the site of an attempt to transvalue the fact that the University no longer inhabits a continuous history of progress, of the progressive revelation of a unifying idea. Dwelling in the ruins of the University thus means giving a serious attention to the present complexity of its space, undertaking an endless work of *détournement* of the spaces willed to us by a history whose temporality we no longer inhabit. Like the inhabitants of some Italian city, we can seek neither to rebuild the Renaissance city-state nor to destroy its remnants and install rationally planed tower blocks; we can seek only to put its angularities and winding passage to new uses, learning from and enjoying the cognitive dissonances that enclosed piazzas and non-signifying *campanile* induce. (129)

Readings' utilization of metaphor here—of joyfully dwelling in ruined Italian cities—is not by accident, as he thinks that metaphor is the one of the main ways we can "enjoy cognitive dissonances" and give "serious attention to the present complexity of [the University's] space." Underlying this way of thinking is a reimagining of the notion of community itself as Readings seeks to think about—and relish—the University as a *dissensual community* without stable identity (127), a place where the question of being-together is continually posed and re-posed in a move away from a stable, ideal community, a place where there is an acceptance that the Modernist grand narrative of education as inculcating students from ignorance to enlightenment over a given time span has "lost its purchase" (127). This reimagining of the community within higher education helps establish the missing emphasis on "we" that has long been absent and affords an opportunity to facilitate shared action. There is room for metaphorical playfulness in creating and recreating relations within the University because the "discourse of excellence" is in Readings' view non-ideological—not in the sense of being divorced from politics but rather because "what gets taught or researched matters less than the fact that it be excellently taught or researched" (13). Readings continues: "Excellence is clearly a purely internal unit of value that effectively brackets all questions of relative value-for-money, the question posed to a student who is situated entirely as a *consumer*, rather than as someone who wants to think" (27). The type of work Readings proposed and that he unfortunately didn't get to pick up[3] has been picked up by others.

Readings' image of the "University of Excellence" provides a conceptual underpinning for understanding the metaphorical landscape of higher education and specifically provides a lens through which to discuss the market metaphor, which has become part of the dominant discourse of education (Cookson Jr.). Any explicit discussion of consumerism in higher education can then be understood as inherently metaphorical, since consumption itself is an economic metaphor. While not citing Readings, some scholars have directly addressed the state of the posthistorical University with specific attention to teaching, thinking about how we might change our pedagogy in light of this tectonic shift in educational administration and practice and the larger "consumer culture" that has become even more pervasive these past few decades. Erica Rand, in the introduction to a special issue in *Radical Teacher* on Education and Consumerism, speculates about how critique might function to develop reasonable alternatives to full-on consumerism; in that same issue, Bryan M. Kopp argues that even making consumerism transparent through teaching is a strong way to build a critique. Sean Murray has argued that our approach should be steeped in our students' own experiences, and as such he offers the idea that students can watch documentaries discussing our consumer-based culture to make explicit connections between their processes of consumption and the university as a whole. In Leah Schweitzer's discussion in this journal of how we can accommodate the consumer-student through directed self-placement, she asks: "How do we deal with the consumer-student?" More specifically, how can we deal with the consumer-student in a way that resists the sweeping generalizations Mark Edmundson and others make about students not wanting to be challenged and only entertained? Schweitzer proposes directed self-placement as a sort of negotiation between the choices students want and the traditions we respect:

> I still believe that directed self-placement [students choosing their own composition course that is right for them] is the best placement method available to us; I would like the fact that it's also consumer-friendly to be absent from the conversation with students. We need to make sure that we're not conflating consumer-friendly with student-friendly. The danger is that they've become one and the same and they've become that way partially because admissions and administrations are on the front line of the university experience. Students are treated as customers first—and it's easy to understand why. But, we can change the rhetoric, re-frame it once they step foot in the classroom, so that the pedagogical benefits—the learning outcomes—of student-centered pedagogies such as directed self-placement are at the forefront of our conversations.

For Schweitzer, negotiating the posthistorical university does not mean ignoring the consumerist elements, then, but making our framing of student-friendly practices with consumer-friendly practices clear to our students.

But how do we "re-frame"? Is it really that simple? And what specifically goes into this process? Faith Kurtyka, in a recent issue of *Composition Forum*, explores this problem and specifically how consumer rhetorics form the way first-year students understand the nature of life at university. What Kurtyka found was that students' conceptions towards the university, while typically framed as consumerist, were in fact not so simple, and moreover that students are actually able to "deploy" certain metaphors for specific situations, as it suits them best; she positions this via Fredric Jameson as a sort of cognitive mapping that allows students in "insert themselves" into situations in which they feel powerless. On the topic of student expectations of college, Kurtyka writes: "To amplify this mindset and constructively confront consumer culture, students can be re-connected to their original expectations and think about what *they* can do to change their university experience, re-mapping themselves onto the university space as active learners." Kurtyka wants to replace consumerism with active learning, believing, as Lakoff and Johnson did, that conceptual metaphors can be changed. Kurtyka's piece reveals that students need considerable guidance, however, in understanding and connecting the metaphorical roles in which they are placed, since they have so many different metaphors for so many different aspects of what she broadly calls "university life" (food, registration, learning, living arrangements, etc.).

Kurtyka's observation of students as having varying, conflicting, eclectic metaphors for different parts of university life brings to light three notions: first, it qualitatively reinforces Readings' notion that the University as it stands now is a conceptually-ruined institution; second, it leads us to think that students have more complex metaphorical dexterity than we might think; and third, this lack of metaphorical cohesion offers a productive entry point for imaginative work in the classroom. The students' annoyance at being treated as customer while still complaining about the lack of food and curricular choices reveals dexterity in metaphor use, yes, but it also reveals something deeper, something fragmented about students' university experiences. There is no overarching conceptual metaphor for these students of the University. But this is where we begin, for according to Readings: "We need no new identity for the University, not even the supplement will save us. Rather we need to recognize that the dereferentialization of the University's function opens a space in which we can think the notions of community and communication differently" (124). Kurtyka began this process, and I'd like to pick up where she left off.

Imagining the University in the Writing Classroom

This final section of the essay points to how we might translate this thinking on metaphor usage in our field, in the context of the posthistorical university, to work we do in the classroom. My contention for the remainder of this essay is that re-visiting the larger contribution of Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphor We Live By* in light of our posthistorical University exigency can facilitate the type of imaginative work that foregrounds student experience.

In re-visiting Lakoff and Johnson's work, what is important to keep in mind is how they describe their approach to metaphor as offering a "third choice"—what they describe as an experientialist synthesis—to the issues of subjectivism and objectivism that characterize the debate on metaphor. Metaphor itself was identified as significant because it unites reason and imagination—metaphor itself is *imaginative rationality*:

> Metaphor is one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness. These endeavors of the imagination are not devoid of rationality; since they use metaphor, they employ an imaginative rationality. (193)

What often gets overlooked in our field's treatment of Lakoff and Johnson is that they were explicitly, and boldly, seeking a resolution to the "myths of objectivism and subjectivism" since both approaches "miss the way we *understand* the world through our *interactions* with it" (194). For them, objectivism overlooks "the fact that understanding, and therefore truth, is necessarily relative to our cultural conceptual systems" while subjectivism underestimates the extent to which "our understanding, even our most imaginative understanding, is given in terms of a conceptual system that is grounded in our successful functioning in our physical and cultural environments" (194). While it is not my intent to go full epistemological here, it is worth noting this drive in Lakoff and Johnson's work because it stresses just how significant a role experience plays in the successful development of metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson might respond to Readings' assessment of the university with optimism then, or at least opportunism, since the posthistorical landscape of universities provides new material experiences and new conceptual framing through which to generate metaphor.

It is under this larger umbrella of imaginative rationality that I wish to take up metaphor. While conducting qualitative

and large-scale studies of student writing is something I do think our field should do more of, for the purposes of this piece, I wish to focus more on the types of activities we might conduct in class. Seitz challenges the field to consider why the progress made in understanding the power and nature of metaphor has yet to "make a difference in our classrooms" (*Motives for Metaphor* 5). Many of us expect students to already know about metaphor (Seitz 24), to already be aware of its pervasive, constructivist presence. Having metaphor "make a difference" can be done through thoughtful assignments that explicitly link metaphor with consumerism in higher education. This is a challenge, however, as Seitz puts it, since "[w]hen it comes to metaphor, direct pedagogical applications may prove more elusive than those in search of them would wish" (6). He argues that "this is one of the crucial paradoxes with which teachers of composition must contend when they contemplate the lessons of figurative language—for how do we 'use' what is always in use even when the users don't know they are using it?" (6). The challenge for teachers of first-year writing, for example, is that since the development of metaphor is "experiential" in nature, developed through "constant interaction" (Lakoff and Johnson 229-30), we can only provide a sliver of experience as compared to the rest of their university experience. Students are using the gestalt of business for the educational realm, and writing classrooms are but a stop—oftentimes a reluctant stop—in their journey towards obtaining their degree. So what can we realistically provide students? If, as Seitz writes, teaching metaphor is difficult, and we only have students for a semester, what can we do to actively get students to become, as North once put it, "purveyors of metaphor"? (Actually, we can use North's gridding work from decades back to begin to see how we might structure this kind of assignment work; see Table 1.)

Before deep discussions of metaphor can take place in the classroom, students need to be made aware in class of some key principles underlying the theories of metaphor, which are extensive but are based largely here on the widely-accepted, oft-cited ideas of metaphor put forth by Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, an accessible text for undergraduates that provides many resonant examples of shared metaphors (e.g., time is money, argument is war). As such, these principles reflect Lakoff and Johnson's work: a social-cognitive explication of the structured conceptual function (understanding one idea or conceptual domain in terms of another) of metaphor in our perceptual and linguistic capacities. The first principle to teach students is that metaphor is not merely a stylistic, poetic, or rhetorical device/technique. (Remember that, as Seitz found, most student experience with metaphor through high school had been poetic or ornamental in nature.) Metaphor has been typically cast in the Western intellectual and scientific tradition as a purely linguistic construction. However, metaphor allows deeper access into the cognitive schemas of individuals, into how people organize and understand the world. Students can comprehend this principle by reading the first chapter, "Concepts We Live By." The second principle is that metaphors are primarily a conceptual construction and are central to the development of thought. That is to say, "[o]ur ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (Lakoff and Johnson 5). We are both constrained and contained within myriad intersections of metaphorical constructs. The cognitive metaphorical concepts within this system are socially constructed through physical, social, or cultural interaction. This principle can be addressed in the classroom by asking students to write about a certain topic, say family, and have their peers read through and identify any metaphorical patterns (i.e., family is clan, family is team). The third principle is that metaphors *alter our behavior and structure our actions*. The rhetorical (including physical) moves we make in intellectual argumentation are based upon our understanding of the most prevalent metaphor in our tradition: argument is war (described below in the context of a writing project). Another example: "Thinking of marriage as a 'contract agreement,' for example, leads to one set of expectations, while thinking of it as 'team play,' 'a negotiated settlement,' 'Russian roulette,' 'an indissoluble merger,' or 'a religious sacrament' will carry different sets of expectations" (Shrodes et al. 45). These are all strong examples to drive this action-based principle home. For Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor serves a function: "We *act* according to the way we *conceive* of things." Metaphor draws from past experience, shapes the present, and determines the future by explicitly linking thought with action.

But to end at "we act according to the way we conceive of things" would be misleading, as our own material experiences drive how we develop metaphors in the first place, which explains how we and our students could have such fundamentally different—or even similar—metaphors of higher education. The fourth principle is that metaphors are *experiential* by understanding one thing (target domain) in terms of another (source domain). That is to say, we understand things according to our own personal experiences that took place in the past. The "source" refers to a previous experience that our mind recalls and uses to make sense of a new concept. Experiences are the basis of self-understanding (Lakoff and Johnson 233); experiencing other things can lead to new metaphors. Are we providing our students with alternative experiences through curricular design that might serve as an alternative conceptual frame going forward? Awareness is not enough, but what are we to do? The fifth principle is that the metaphors we use determine and are determined by particular worldviews. As such, worldviews can be accessed and extracted from critical discussions of metaphor.

These principles were introduced to students enrolled in the second half of the FYC sequence at the University of South Florida (USF); the first half of the curriculum focused on genre and composition strategies while the second half focused on argumentation, specifically exploring alternative forms of argument. With Rogerian Argument being

one of the core assignments part of the standard first-year composition curriculum at USF, I was provided the avenue to have students engage in different modes of argument, to become aware on a practical level of how one's metaphor for discursive exchange determines one's purpose, methods, and tone. The aforementioned principles of Lakoff and Johnson can be extrapolated through one specific example they provide and that is of relevance to those of us in rhetoric: argument *is* war.

Supported by Carl Rogers' experience of getting political diplomats to understand each others' perspective, Rogerian argument has students adapt a rhetorical methodology that focuses more on common ground and understanding through moves of empathy and informative neutrality. This project thus has the potential to get students to fully understand the five principles outlined by Lakoff and Johnson above while simultaneously meeting the learning objective of exploring alternate forms of argumentation. Engaging in Rogerian argument requires students to undergo a seismic shift in conceptual paradigms, in what Lakoff and Johnson would call the "source domain": argument is no longer adversarial or antagonistic but rather cooperative and empathetic. To introduce this idea and provide a subsequent pathway for practice, I drew up a table in class based on North's gridding work from decades ago (Table 1). First, I charted the statements Lakoff and Johnson use to indicate the "war" metaphor (left-hand column); second, I charted the middle column, which asked students to create their own statements to indicate a "dance" metaphor (content based on class discussions); and, third, I charted the right-hand column to act as an imaginative, creative opportunity that encouraged students to think beyond the metaphors given and create their own source domain for argument and the correlated statements one using that metaphor would utter to describe their experiences.

Table 1. Alternative metaphors for argumentation.

Argument is war	Argument is dance	Argument is _____
Your claims are *indefensible*.	We performed an *aesthetically pleasing* piece.	
He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.	We need to *work together* to achieve our end.	
His criticisms were *right on target*.	Our communication requires a high degree of *technical skill*.	
I *demolished* his argument.	I helped *balance* his argument.	
I've never *won* an argument with him.	Your point *coordinates* with mine.	
If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*.	I can help *support* your last claim.	
He *shot down* all of my arguments.	Our arguments must take into consideration the *spectators*.	

This exercise challenges students to think beyond conceiving argument in terms of war—something our field has addressed{4}—and other violent associations we make with the act that lead us to "shoot down argument," and "destroy the opposition with our logic." It addresses Thomas Rickert's notion that many student issues surrounding writing relate back to students not having the appropriate "framework approach" to writing. In following Lakoff and Johnson's example, I asked them to consider what the argument might look like if we conceived of it in terms of "dance" or "symphony" or other cooperative metaphors. I asked: How might changing our metaphor for argument change our practice? What rhetorical moves would we make? Which ones wouldn't we make? Which rhetorical techniques best exemplify these metaphors? What is our goal then? I then gave the students time to record three different ways to conceive of argument in an attempt to fill in the right-hand column.

Their responses were insightful. In an unintentional invocation of Plato's *Gorgias*, one student wrote "argument as cooking," bringing up questions of habit and art and how they relate to rhetoric. This student positioned effective arguers as experts with a given skill-set, in complete control over the outcomes, revealing the assumption that argument is a skill-set capable of mastery. Another student wrote argument is "disarming a bomb," repositioning the rhetor on the defensive, indicating a rather Aristotelian understanding of argument as something individuals must

protect themselves *from*. Aside from a few breakthroughs, the majority of students had difficulty exiting the violent, dualistic, and competitive metaphors: sparring, tug-of-war, football game, marriage, and many others. But as Seitz would remind us, metaphors cannot easily just be used as "tools" to resolve specific situations ("Composition's Misunderstanding of Metaphor" 289). Shifting metaphors should be difficult, and not really actualized until tested by experience. And as Sharon Crowley reminds us, "[a]rguments can't be 'won' in the way that basketball teams win" (47). Getting students to enact this difference in argumentation in class and through writing papers is an imaginative start.

Challenging students to critically rethink dominant metaphors that have shaped their paradigms for a given situation is not easy, but the rewards can be significant, especially given our posthistorical moment in higher education and the dominance of the University of Excellence as metaphorical foundation. Re-framing rhetoric and argumentation can provide students with a larger repertoire of argumentative strategies by helping them understand how changing their metaphorical framework can directly influence their practice—and thus by extension that metaphor is neither merely a subjective stylistic strategy nor an unchangeable, objectivist paradigm. Metaphors are changeable but common enough across experiences to speak of concretely; they are both imaginative and rational in this sense. Using practical examples such as the Rogerian one above facilitate in safe, accessible ways student understanding of metaphor and help mitigate against the underlying and unacknowledged metaphorical conflict that can happen between ourselves and our students—as Tobin reminds us at the beginning of this essay.

But we cannot, in my estimation, stop there.

If we are aware of the power of metaphor and of the fact that we are currently dwelling in institutions that are lacking significant or at least problematic cultural referents, then class discussions, in my mind, must extend beyond rhetorical techniques, beyond the differences between wars and dances and into the differences between consumerism and humanist goals. The conflict between careerist, business models of education and critical literacy models is of course nothing new; however, viewing this conflict through the lens of metaphor on a larger, institutional level affords us the opportunity to make visible our ways of thinking and provide students with the opportunity to imagine and engage with, through awareness and potential action, the metaphorical structures in which they have been placed and the material infrastructures that brought about these pervasive metaphors in the first place.

My approach to this issue was slightly different than in discussions contrasting Rogerian and agonistic forms of argument: rather than focus on the principle that metaphorical structures guide our actions (although this remains important), I chose to focus instead on the principle that our way of defining roles is based largely upon our frames for understanding environments. Students need to take control of the ways in which they are positioned by metaphor. Us making them aware of the larger system is not enough; are we equipping them? That is, students might see themselves as a "number" because they first identified the University as a production factory. Metaphor is about power relationships, about what Lynch calls "role-casting": if we as teachers see ourselves as embodying the metaphor of "gardener," then we may treat our students as if they are flattened, non-enriched soil; if we are a "guide," then we may treat them as if they are lost. We also may not. So, if students experience the message "The University system is a business," then, by extension, many students would, through role-casting, view themselves as an entitled consumer, a line on the administration's income statement, or, perhaps even just a brick in the wall (see, of course, Pink Floyd).

Table 2. Metaphoric relations in the posthistorical university.

Student	Teacher	University
Star	Judge	Competition
Number	Line Worker	Factory
Sheep	Herder	Farm/Slaughterhouse
Explorer	Guide	Untamed Wilderness
Brick	Mason Worker	Wall
Consumer	Salesperson	Business
?	?	Excellence

Because power relationships dominate this issue, I turned back to my trusty gridding and found myself at the end of one class with a white board displaying something akin to Table 2. In challenging students to become cognizant of the power relationships inherent in metaphorical discourse, this table is aimed at tracing the "role-casting" and implications of metaphor and was created primarily by the students. Students had to rack their brains to think of metaphors for themselves as students (left-hand column); I needed to provide some examples (e.g., star, explorer). But they were then able to fill in the rest of the chart on their own. The final entry under University of "excellence" allows an opportunity to imaginatively explore how students see themselves as positioned with this dereferentialized idea and an opportunity to discuss what exactly Readings means by the ruined posthistorical University.

As I did before, I framed metaphor as a shared, safe, exploratory and speculative pathway for both students and teachers to articulate their conceptual paradigms and experiences about a given topic. At times, asking students in a first-year writing course what they think or how they feel about being caught up in a whirlwind of conflict between political and bureaucratic forces trying to commodify knowledge and humanities teachers and scholars trying to (re)establish more rhetorical modes of education is quite challenging, as students do not necessarily have access to the language necessary to articulate their experiences—so experiences are communicated and individuals are empowered through different, more familiar and accessible communicative modes. For students, as was the case for mine, this might be metaphor.

The gridding nature of the exercises allows both ourselves and students to approach metaphor conceptually. As Lakoff and Johnson configure it, a conceptual metaphor is a holistic way to understand one domain in terms of another. Rather than piece together smaller elements of university life on a granular level, thinking about the university systemically as a stand-alone entity encourages students to make sense of their experiences generally. Students very well might come to the conclusion on their own that the university is a business, or they might not. Either way, we are learning about student use of metaphor and making them cognizant of the roles they perceive themselves being placed in. From there, we can discuss what to do about that, and that's where pedagogical creativity can come in. Students could write a reflective or place-based essay recounting or tracing their institutional experiences (i.e., visits to Registrar's, conversations with friends, institutional communications, etc.) over a few weeks' time and thinking metaphorically, cohesively about their experiences. Students could compose a research essay consisting of various interviews they conduct with stakeholders in and around the university (e.g., parents, local businesses, administrators, advisors, etc.) and identify meaningful overlaps or differences in conceptions of the university and its purpose.

All this to say that such gridding exercises outlined above don't reach full potential if unaccompanied with corresponding questions exploring the implications of the metaphorical relationships established—these questions can generate class discussion and/or serve as prompts for larger writing projects. Personal experiences, which necessarily vary greatly between students, are used to determine metaphor's place on the chart:

- What actions or thoughts are similar to both experiences (i.e., being a student and being a sheep)?
- Is the metaphor too specific or too general?
- Does the choice of metaphor relate to the others in the same row?
- How are the power relationships defined in the choice of each metaphor?
- Do your personal experiences in any way counter what is presented here?
- What specific experiences have you had as a student that testify to the validity of these metaphors?
- How would shifting paradigms and beliefs (e.g., from a star to a brick) alter your actions?

The roles we see ourselves as embodying as teachers—such as guide, gatekeeper, mentor, or authoritarian—are acknowledged as acts of resistance, indeed of agency, just as when Paulo Freire shifted models of education and the roles of the teacher. In discussions of banking and liberation, Freire achieved his goal through metaphor. We need to recognize that our students and their actions stem from a much larger conceptual metaphorical framework that is the result of many social, political, and cultural experiences; we then need to realize that metaphor is potentially a site of resistance, and getting our students to think about metaphor critically can access the full resistive qualities of metaphor during a time of overwhelming consumerist paradigms of thought in post-secondary education, and might allow students to at least make sense of the ways they are positioned and give them opportunities to think about how they might want to conform or resist to these emplacements. But harnessing the active potential of metaphor, as we have in our field so effectively, requires first thoughtful consideration of experiences, requires projects that unpack the connections between the metaphors we have for a thing (e.g., argument) and our experiences that established this paradigm in our minds. The "active potential" of metaphor, as Lakoff and Johnson phrase it and as our field has latched onto it, only comes through realizing shared experiences and understanding that while "we act according to the way we conceive of things" (5), we conceive of things based on our existing

experiences—some of which are endlessly varied but some of which are surprisingly common and shared. Collectivizing and uniting students and teachers in the classroom to bring about change together through metaphor, be it a learning objective or project or change in attitude, comes only after consideration or creation of shared experiences.

I do not claim here to understand students and the metaphors they bring to the table. I am asking how we might go about doing this as it relates to metaphor and metaphors of consumerism that are a real part of the discourse on higher education. The challenge here is designing assignments and activities that reveal these metaphorical underpinnings. It is not simply the case of asking students, "What metaphors do you have about higher education?" It requires more strategy than that to uncover how students think about the university and how this relates to metaphor. The challenge here is designing prompts that would help us as teachers access these metaphors and have open discussions about what this realization of power might mean.

Conclusion

Metaphor needs to be placed in student hands so they can identify the consumerist models of "Excellence" of University education and have the opportunity and potential to resist them. Extracting preexisting metaphors and "offering" new ones is not an easy process; it should be a very arduous process, especially for our students, because we are going against the grain of the very conceptual and linguistic structures developed through our lived experiences. In this way, we might configure it as a threshold concept in composition studies.

The exercises I conducted with my class served a practical purpose in terms of project completion, but they also laid the foundation for students being able to think critically through metaphor about the places in which they dwell and the physically "mundane" artifacts that might spur invention (Bacha). Beyond resistance and invention, this type of agency might also help students understand better disciplinary writing styles and the different metaphoric constructs used by those in the sciences and humanities to understand communication. It might also help students enter more seamlessly into public conversations about higher education, or better understand their own university administration's decisions to allocate funding in one area and not another. More immediately, student agency over metaphor might help students better navigate the type of student-teacher difference humorously articulated by Tobin at the beginning of this article. Better understanding how metaphors are "used" by teachers in writing assignments and how their own response to an assignment might be shaped by their own metaphors of writing, which might very well be different, gives students a voice to initiate a conversation about a writing struggle or complexity with which they are struggling. As Bowden argues, "The composition field is especially rife with metaphors because composing involves complex cognitive activities ... that are difficult to talk about and understand" (364). Metaphor is an accessible and practical way to bring in different perspectives, include student experiences, encourage student creativity, and develop critical metacognitive skills to help them understand complex concepts.

It is not merely my goal to convince a readership of writers, teachers, and writing teachers of the power of metaphor. This point has been proven long before this piece. We need to recognize that our students and their paradigms, and thus actions, stem from a much larger conceptual metaphorical framework that is the result of many social, political, and cultural factors and is currently lacking in large part because of what Readings calls the dereferentialization of the University as an extension of the nation-state. Students are in the midst of an ideologically-driven metaphorical battle, and it is our responsibility as educators to equip them with skills to resist the consumer metaphors that abound in the contemporary North American University. As such, we must teach students not only how to occupy the ruins, but how to successfully dwell within them.

Notes

1. These categorizations of metaphor theory are based on the literature review provided by Timothy D. Giles in *Motives for Metaphor in Scientific and Technical Communication* (2008). ([Return to text.](#))
2. We have all encountered this framework through one means or another and have most likely at some point lamented the future state of the university as well concerned ourselves over the commodification of what most of us do in the humanities. And while it seems as though this reality emerged over the last few decades, it really isn't new. Take Christopher Newfield's piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (*The Chronicle Review*) in which he discusses Thorstein Veblen's 1904 book *The Higher Learning in America* that outlines skepticism and disdain for the "spirit of business" that was then beginning to take over the way universities

were managed and drew a stark distinction between the enterprise of business and scholarly research. Wrote Veblen: "Much effective surveillance of the academic work is exercised through the board's control of the budget. The academic staff can do little else than what the specifications of the budget provide for" (13). Indeed a cottage industry of research on cuts in state education spending and the problematic appointing of presidents and boards of visitors in charge of budgets has emerged. I'm not interested in covering that literature here, but needless to say, any expedient thinking on campus on behalf of students, administrators, or faculty stems inevitably from budgets and infrastructures and material conditions resulting from cuts or redirected funding. There are deep political and governance problems underlying this reality. ([Return to text.](#))

3. Readings sadly passed away in 1994 before final publication of this book. ([Return to text.](#))

4. See A. Abby Knoblauch (2011) and Philip Eubanks (2015). In his writing about the stifling communicative impasses reached in discussions about climate change, Eubanks (2015) argues that our win-lose approach to argumentation is long-lasting and prevalent because of the conceptual metaphors that are well-established in our notions of argumentation: "Metaphors about argumentation reveal to us that arguing is *systematically* conflictual. In ordinary talk, we say that people *win*, *lose*, *overcome*, *strengthen*, *weaken*, and *defend* arguments. Even seemingly non-competitive metaphors can be tricky. We *build* arguments. But whatever is *built* can be *destroyed* by counterarguments. If our arguments *go in circles* (itself a cultural bias) or if our arguments *have holes in them*, we can *lose*. All of these expressions add up to a metaphor system that sets the parameters for thinking about argumentation" (Eubanks 5). ([Return to text.](#))

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