

Refereed Articles

Transformative Learning Through Conceptual Metaphors

Simile, Metaphor, and Analogy as Levers for Learning

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Abstract: This article presents findings from a research study wherein participants demonstrated the use of similes, metaphors, and analogies, termed *conceptual metaphors*, in response to disorienting dilemmas instigated by breast cancer.

In this qualitative case study of 18 breast cancer survivors, conceptual metaphors were used in three distinct ways: (a) to uncover tacit ways of making meaning, (b) to name experiences, and (c) to imagine new possibilities. The experiences were considered transformative because the participants claimed new ways of thinking and being, leading to a fuller and richer lived experience. Educators aspiring to promote transformative learning may want to add techniques that incorporate conceptual metaphors to their (metaphorical) toolbox of pedagogical resources.

Keywords: transformative learning, metaphors, psychosocial transition, breast cancer

Adult learning can, and often does, include profound experiences that change deep, habitual ways of thinking and being. This article reports on research examining the experiences of breast cancer survivors who claimed the disease, although difficult

and challenging, ultimately resulted in positive changes that could be considered transformative learning outcomes. I sought to understand the experiences of these survivors in hopes that such an examination would yield insights into ways to promote such outcomes for others diagnosed with breast cancer or who encounter other distressful challenges.

The diagnosis, treatment, and effects of breast cancer are challenging in a number of ways.

First, there are physical affects, which can include a mastectomy or lumpectomy, menopause, infertility, menstrual changes, lymphedema, pain, sleep problems, weight gain, and various other physical problems limiting physical activities. Second, perhaps more taxing, are psychosocial effects, which have been categorized as

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psychological discomfort, changes in life patterns, fears and concerns related to the disease, existential crises, and social challenges (Lydon, 2008).

Most survivors experience a healthy long-term psychosocial adjustment, but some survivors traverse beyond a healthy recovery and report significant, positive changes in their lives because of cancer experiences (Stanton, Bower, & Low, 2006). For those who survive breast cancer and move through the psychosocial transition in a way that creates significant, positive outcomes, very little is known about how such a positive psychosocial transition happens. Thus, the purpose of this research was to examine the process of positive personal growth from breast cancer through the interpretative lens of transformative learning theory. A guiding question for this examination was, "How do participants describe the process of learning and growth they experienced as they recovered?"

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation has been groundbreaking in that it launched what has become the largest body of research within the field of adult learning over the past two decades (Taylor & Snyder, 2012). In defining this phenomenon, Mezirow (2000) limited transformation to those learning experiences whereby one's preconscious mental schemas are laid bare and scrutinized through the process of critical self-reflection:

Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference . . . to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (pp. 7-8)

As others have contributed to the development of the theory, a significant change to Mezirow's formulation has evolved. Many scholars now use the term *transformative learning* to refer to any of a wide range of phenomena involving deep learning and change. For instance, Dirkx (2012) claimed it involves a process Jung described as individuation, resulting in greater authenticity. Lange (2004) asserted that in

addition to Mezirow's description of changes in worldview and habits of thinking, transformative learning often results in changes in being, such as in one's forms of relatedness to others and to the world. Kegan (2000) illustrated how cognitive development involves transformative learning. Many additional descriptions of transformative learning abound (Taylor & Cranton, 2012), the commonality of which is a focus on the phenomenon of deep learning and change regardless of the particular form it takes or the processes that lead to it. Whereas Mezirow defined transformative learning outcomes as revised frames of reference, many new perspectives describe transformative learning outcomes more broadly, as new ways of thinking and being resulting in a fuller and richer lived experience (Dirkx, 2012; Lange, 2004; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2001).

Based on these latter perspectives, there is a partial overlap between transformative learning and the experiences of the small subgroup of breast cancer survivors who experience significant, positive growth. Because of challenges associated with breast cancer, some survivors experience a period of deep personal questioning, which some researchers have said begins with an existential crisis (Krouse & Krouse, 1981) or spiritual disequilibrium with severe psychosocial pain (Coward & Kahn, 2004). The deep personal questioning, existential crisis, and spiritual disequilibrium described by researchers are very similar to Mezirow's concept of disorienting dilemmas.

Furthermore, the positive outcomes resulting from deep personal questioning in the face of a life-threatening disease have been categorized as more genuine personal relationships, a greater appreciation of life, greater personal strength and resources, improved spirituality, and more authentic life priorities and goals (Stanton et al., 2006). Such outcomes are similar to the transformative learning outcomes described by different scholars. For instance, Lange's (2004) description of a change in people's ways of being in the world encompasses outcomes such as more genuine relationships and a greater appreciation for life. Similarly, both literatures refer to a deeper sense of spirituality and greater authenticity (Dirkx, 2012; Lange, 2004; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2001). Consequently, the psychosocial transition of breast cancer survivors who claim the experience ultimately

resulted in significant, positive effects can be understood as one type of transformative learning experience, and the processes engaged in by these breast cancer survivors may be able to inform transformative learning theory.

As scholars attempt to understand transformative learning phenomena, a central question inquires into the actual mechanisms by which such deep learning occurs. Mezirow (2000) asserted these experiences arise from the process of critical self-reflection following disorienting dilemmas. The concept of disorienting dilemmas has not been challenged, but scholars have pointed to such a wide variety of ensuing processes leading to transformative outcomes that it is likely no single, comprehensive answer to this question exists (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). This study was based on the premise there are many processes that promote transformative learning, and the purpose of research such as this is to highlight these processes.

Method

This study used a qualitative case study approach because of three conditions. As described by Yin (2003), I had little control over the events; the focus was a contemporary phenomenon, and understanding the phenomenon within its real-life context seemed important. I used a multiple case design anticipating each case would be unique, and it would be beneficial to understand the holistic experience of each case as well as commonalities between multiple cases (Yin, 2003). Although there are no strict guidelines for the number of cases that should be included, I initially collected data from 12 participants. However, using constant comparative analysis, I determined data saturation had not yet been reached, so expanded the study. Finally, after coding data for 18 cases, I concluded data saturation had been reached.

Following a purposive sampling strategy, I sought study participants who reported the occurrence of significant, positive benefits in their lives because of cancer experiences and had been in remission from the disease for 3 to 7 years. This time frame was designed to balance the competing needs of (a) allowing sufficient time to gain some emotional and mental distance from those events and (b) limiting the time frame to capture relevant narrative data while it was still relatively fresh in their memories. After Institutional

Review Board (IRB) approval, I recruited participants meeting the specific criteria through a local cancer support organization that emailed an advertisement for the study to survivors in its database. Volunteers were screened to verify perceived positive benefits because from the cancer experience, those benefits could be classified as a significant change in their ways of thinking or being in the world, and they felt they could recall with accuracy their cancer experiences.

Data collection included four sources. First, the primary source was individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews of approximately 1 hr, providing context-specific descriptions of the phenomenon being studied from the perspective, and therefore the lived reality, of the study's participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Data collection also included the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory and Core Beliefs Inventory (Cann, et. al, 2010; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). These two instruments, respectively, measure the ways participants have changed and the specific types of worldview assumptions that were challenged because of traumatic experiences. Although normally used to generate quantitative data, I used these data sources for triangulation as I interpreted and made sense of each case. The fourth data source was a focus group composed of participants who met the study's criteria but were not interviewed.

For data analysis, I recorded and transcribed the interviews and focus group session, assigning pseudonyms and replacing participants' names as applicable. The transcribed interviews were imported into Weft QDA, a qualitative data analysis software package, to aid in organizing, categorizing, theming, and coding the data. Data analysis included an emergent category technique to develop and refine the coding structure, used as the basis of a cross-case synthesis technique to better understand similarities between the cases (Yin, 2003).

In qualitative research, the two paramount issues of trustworthiness are credibility and dependability. Using multiple data sources improves credibility, in this case study, interviews, surveys, and the focus group. I compared the interview data with the survey data and presented preliminary findings to the focus group to generate alternative perspectives. This triangulation of data served to check the appropriateness of the explanations and conclusions drawn by the researcher

(Yin, 2003). To ensure dependability, I engaged in a peer review process with an experienced qualitative researcher regarding all data collection and coding decisions.

I expected participants would describe experiences they had while negotiating the various challenges associated with cancer, as well as overall impressions derived through reflection on those experiences. I felt what they chose to discuss was central to the way they constructed meaning from and about their cancer experience (Dominicé, 2000). Therefore, although it is impossible to know which particular experience or process contributed to transformative learning and which ones were merely incidental, I felt it was reasonable to conclude what they chose to talk about was an indicator of significance and, therefore, may illustrate the processes leading to their eventual outcomes.

Although I did not set out to explore the use of similes, metaphors, and analogies in this study, I acknowledge my prior writing on the subject likely ensured I would be sensitive to it (Hoggan, Simpson, & Stuckey, 2009). Similarly, my positionality relative to the topic of this study is important. I have never had breast cancer and, as a male, cannot relate to many of the challenges described by female breast cancer survivors. Three members of my immediate family have had cancer, one fatally. I have seen the long-term effects of cancer, both physical and psychosocial. This study emanates from my experiences with a family member whose quality of life dramatically improved after her cancer experience.

Findings and Discussion

The participants in this study demonstrated the use of several processes while negotiating their difficult transition through breast cancer (Hoggan, 2011). One process used by 9 of the 18 participants was the use of conceptual metaphors through similes, metaphors, and analogies. Simply put, conceptual metaphors serve the purpose of representing one thing (presumably difficult to understand or describe) with another thing (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Authors addressing metaphors in the transformative learning literature have focused on the power of metaphor to promote intuitive ways of knowing (Deshler, 1990; Dirks, 2012; Hoggan et al., 2009).

The literature of career counseling has also focused some attention on the use of metaphors. Based on a review of the literature, Barner (2011) credited metaphors with four specific mechanisms: (a) give voice to life experiences, (b) uncover tacit assumptions, (c) facilitate expression of emotional states and experiences that may otherwise be difficult to convey, and (d) facilitate the creation of new ways of making meaning. Similarly, Campbell, Parr, and Richardson (2010) described the role of metaphor in educators' professional identity formation as a powerful tool to capture, make explicit, and thus transform tacit understandings of self and work.

Based on this study's findings, I delineated three distinct ways the participants used conceptual metaphors: (a) to uncover tacit ways of making meaning, (b) to name their experiences, and (c) to imagine new possibilities. I will discuss each use of conceptual metaphor in detail.

To Uncover Tacit Ways of Making Meaning

One way participants used conceptual metaphors was to uncover problematic ways of making meaning, demonstrated by two participants and appeared three times in the data. Both participants described an experience where they realized through simile how they were thinking about themselves as cancer survivors. "For a long time after my diagnosis . . . I felt like damaged goods." Suzanne did not realize she perceived herself negatively because of the disease until after her treatments were finished. As she reflected on the emotional malaise she had been experiencing since diagnosis, the image of "damaged goods" provided an important starting point to help her realize how cancer had affected her self-image. She described this realization as a major turning point. This notion that cancer somehow taints those diagnosed with the disease is one of the common facets of psychological discomfort described in the literature (Meyerowitz, 1980).

Similarly, Reba used a simile to realize she developed a negative self-image: "That's when I realized I was treating my cancer survivorship like it was something bad . . . like I was a convict." Reba also demonstrated the use of metaphor in realizing self-expectations that existed prior to her diagnosis and became especially problematic during cancer

treatments. As she lay on the couch, too sick to move and worried about accomplishing the many responsibilities of a single mother, she realized she had always expected herself to be “super woman.” That metaphor helped her accept the problem was with her own self-imposed, unrealistic expectations rather than with her perceived shortcomings as a mother: “I saw that I was not super woman, and I didn’t need to be to be okay . . . And once I sort of took off that cape . . . the stress level went down.”

This use of conceptual metaphors is very similar to research in other fields, such as the teacher education literature in which metaphors are used to investigate implicit beliefs about learning and teacher beliefs otherwise difficult to ascertain (Sykes, 2010). Suzanne and Reba demonstrated the difficulty in realizing one’s current self-image or sense of identity. As Kegan (2000) described, a person’s current sense of identity is so subjective that only when she evolves past a particular aspect of her identity can she begin to comprehend it as something other than herself. In this case, as Suzanne and Reba began to notice their negative self-images related to the disease, they used conceptual metaphors to begin to understand their sense of identity and were able to change it. As Suzanne said, “Cancer is done, I can move on. I’m done [thinking of myself that way].”

To Name Their Experiences

Participants also used conceptual metaphors to make sense of difficult experiences. This was the most common use of conceptual metaphors, demonstrated by eight participants and appearing 10 times in the data. In almost all cases, participants sought ways to describe particularly troublesome and challenging times during their cancer experience.

Amy spoke of a time when she was keeping a diary to help her cope with the challenges brought about by cancer. She was struggling to articulate what she was feeling and how to describe the experience. While driving, she saw a license plate that said “whirlwind.” She realized the metaphor of a whirlwind captured her experience as a cancer patient and used it as fodder for her personal reflections and diary writing. Similarly, Leslie used a metaphor to name and better understand the hectic pace of changes and activity that came with her cancer diagnosis, as well as the inexorableness of

the disease. Speaking to God, she said, “I can’t breathe. You’re putting me on this merry-go-round that I can’t jump off of.” Participants who used conceptual metaphors to name their experiences demonstrated the power of metaphorical language to allow people to “claim the right to name their own experience and to shape their own understanding of traumatic situations and experiences” (Wissman & Wiseman, 2011, p. 243). Thus, even such a simple process as naming her experiences as a “whirlwind” may have helped Leslie “claim the right” to name and shape the way she made sense of them.

Nina’s tale of loss due to breast cancer is heartbreaking. A nurse for 20 years, she was devastated when she lost her job because cancer treatments made her too weak to fulfill her normal duties. She lost her driver’s license when treatment side effects caused her to occasionally lose consciousness. She lost her last sense of independence when forced to move in with her daughter’s family because she could no longer meet the financial and physical demands of living alone. Wrestling with guilt, self-pity, and resentment for the sudden downturns in her life, she used an analogy to understand how God would allow such things to happen to her:

It’s an educational moment that the Lord gives you. And sometimes He uses a two-by-four. And . . . once in a while He puts nails in that, too. Because if you’re not paying attention to what He’s telling you, He’s going to get your attention somehow, someway.

Some participants described their experiences in more light-hearted ways. Tana said,

It’s sort of (like) when you’re in college, and you have your head laying against the toilet bowl. It’s all nice and cool, and you’re like, “God, if you just get me through this, I’m never going to drink again.” So, it’s, “God, if you get me through this chemo, I promise (to do anything).”

In naming their experiences, participants may have been better able to obtain a measure of control over their traumatic experiences (Wissman & Wiseman, 2011). Deshler (1990) asserted the process of metaphor

creation and analysis allows a person to gain a better understanding of and strengthened position toward his her or her current reality. The person is, therefore, able to “do the easier pieces of psychological work, which do not require sorting out past and present in the midst of a confounding, negative affect experience” (p. 137). The power of conceptual metaphors as a mechanism for naming one’s experience, and thus taking control of difficult situations, may thus lie in its heuristic nature. By allowing the understandings from one concept to represent new and challenging experiences, conceptual metaphors become a vehicle for assimilating the new experiences into manageable cognitive categories.

To Imagine New Possibilities

A third way participants used conceptual metaphors was to imagine new possibilities, demonstrated by four participants and appearing 5 times in the data. These participants described times when they purposefully explored new ways of thinking that helped them overcome challenges or heal emotionally. Jerolene, for instance, spoke of self-image issues that arose after her lumpectomy. She was very self-conscious about the scars that showed when she wore a swimsuit: “That was difficult at first: the deformity of my body.” As time progressed, she reflected on the ways she was interpreting the scars and decided to think of them as “battle scars” rather than as a “deformity.” With that metaphor helping her reframe her perceptions of them, she said, “I don’t care. I’ll show [them to] the world.”

Similarly, while undergoing chemotherapy treatments, Leslie suffered from insomnia. She developed a technique where she envisioned being in God’s hands:

I just imagined this big hand that I would crawl into. And it was His hand, and so the safest place on Earth to be is in the hand of God. So at that point I could kind of curl up and go to sleep. So it was very comforting.

Leslie also used a conceptual metaphor to negotiate her new identity as someone who has had cancer. She did not want the disease to form a central part of her identity. It was important for cancer to be an experience she went through, but not for it to overshadow the rest of her life. She created a mantra

that she was a “cancer thriver” not just a cancer survivor.

Because metaphors, similes, and analogies are so deeply embedded in the ways we understand and make sense of ourselves and our worlds, they can be a powerful mechanism for disrupting and transforming our ways of thinking and being (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The transforming power of conceptual metaphors may lie in their ability to open a liminal or in-between place between what a person currently is and what she can or will be (Cook-Sather, 2003).

Overall, the findings presented in this study align very closely with Barner’s (2011) four specific mechanisms of metaphors (see Table 1). It is important to reiterate I followed an emergent category coding process and the use of metaphors was not among the predominant processes I expected to find in this study. Indeed, I did not search for related literature until after completing the coding. Therefore, the similarity between my findings and the literature of a peripheral field is validating. The one discrepancy, namely, the lack of the use of metaphors to facilitate expression of emotions, is puzzling. All the participants spoke of emotional experiences, many of which were very intense. Nevertheless, in none of the 18 cases did the participant use conceptual metaphors to express their emotions.

Implications

As with most qualitative research, readers should be cautious about overgeneralizing these findings. The study consisted of 18 participants, and only half of them demonstrated the use of conceptual metaphors. In addition, the link between the participants’ descriptions of their use of metaphors and their eventual outcomes, although implied, is impossible to determine. Furthermore, the experiences explored in this study were very specific: those of breast cancer survivors who believe they garnered positive benefits as a result of their experiences with the disease. The extent to which the findings can be generalized to other distressful challenges cannot be concluded by this study alone. Nevertheless, the similarity between the categories of data in this study and those portrayed by Barner’s (2011) review of the career counseling literature provides some support for the validity of these findings.

Table 1. Comparison of Barner's (2011) Metaphor's Mechanisms and This Study's Findings.

Barner's (2011) metaphor's mechanisms	This study's findings
Giving voice to life experiences	Names experiences
Uncover tacit assumptions	Uncover tacit ways of making meaning
Facilitate expressions of emotions	—
Facilitate creation of new meaning	Imagine new possibilities

Practitioners should evaluate their specific context to determine the relevance of these findings for their own practice. This study indicates conceptual metaphors may be particularly helpful when a learner is struggling to articulate a particular understanding, such as self-concepts, new and challenging experiences, and tacit knowledge. This study also points to the power of metaphors to provide motivation, inspiration, or an example for learners aspiring to new possibilities. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, adult learning often includes profound experiences that challenge deep and habitual ways of thinking and being. Therefore, at a minimum, practitioners may consider the use of metaphors for their (metaphorical) toolbox of pedagogical resources.

Conflict of Interest

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