Chapter 6

The Role of Metaphors in (Re)producing Organizational Culture

Floor M.R.C. Basten

The problem and the solution. To design effective organization change interventions, HRD professionals must first understand the history and culture of the organization. They must also understand how existing paradigms influence how employees define problems and design solutions, and the difference between employees’ espoused theories and theories-in-action. Can metaphors be used to analyze and describe cultures, to highlight employees’ paradigms, espoused theories, and theories-in-action? This chapter answers this question and illustrates the application of metaphor in organizational change using the case study of a university business school.

Examples of the use of metaphor in HRD, such as Short presents in chapter 1, are fine for communicating descriptions of organizations in memorable, perhaps even powerful, ways. However, can there be more to the application of metaphor in analyzing organizations, and if so what methods can HRD professionals use? In this chapter, I illustrate the use of a learning history instrument to analyze an organization’s culture and how it changes over time. By identifying dominant metaphors in that culture, I illustrate how employees may be constrained by existing paradigms that influence how they perceive the situations they face and the organizational problems they seek to solve. Those dominant metaphors can be identified, tracked over time, and challenged.

In terms of the themes for exploring metaphor in HRD (Table 1, Chapter 1), the chapter focuses mainly on illustrating the use of metaphors in HRD practice and illustrating one methodology for collecting metaphors in HRD research and practice (both theme 3).

The chapter is structured in three parts:

- A summary of the application of metaphor in organizational analysis.
- The case study of applying a learning history instrument to identify metaphors, including descriptions of the setting, the objectives, methods, limitations, and findings.
- Implications for HRD of using metaphor in organizational analysis and of using this particular method.

Metaphor in Organizational Analysis

Organizations and metaphors are closely linked. Morgan (1983) argued that the term ‘organization’ is itself metaphorical, and that when we refer to a group of people as ‘an organization’ that we are using metaphor to capture a significant aspect of relations between those people in a particular location of space and time.

Metaphors to describe organizations have a long history. As well as exploring metaphors for whole organizations, metaphorical terms are also commonly found to describe
organizational issues or used in language about organizations. Examples include: organizational culture; drivers of change; vision and mission; organizational memory; re-engineering organizations; and learning organizations. Some of these are good examples of ‘dead metaphors,’ that is statements that were once obviously metaphorical but which have since, through regular usage, become accepted in their own non-metaphorical ‘right.’

These examples illustrate a few of the many metaphors applicable to modern organizations, each constituting and capturing the nature of organizational life in different ways and offering powerful, distinctive, but essentially partial insights (Morgan, 1980). Perhaps the most frequently cited organizational metaphors are those from Morgan (1997), who offered eight metaphors for organizations, such as organizations as machines, organisms, and brains. Another powerful metaphor is that of the organization as an army (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

There is also evidence of metaphors being used in organizational change to diagnose and transform organizations, with perhaps the most famous example being that of Lewin’s ‘unfreezing-movement-refreezing.’ Krefting and Frost (1985) relate management of organization culture to the therapeutic use of metaphors: “They [metaphors] may become clear only by working through alternative types of metaphors to find the most apt in activating recognition of the existing condition and in mobilizing energies to deal with it” (p. 161). This resonates with Schön’s (1993) findings on the anatomy of generative metaphors, by way of which each participant in a problem-solving discussion frames his or her story into a specific context and looks for solutions within that framework. Morgan (1980), also described the use of metaphor both as a supplementary and contradictory approach to organizational analysis.

In the following section, I will present an overview of my research into an academic business school, using metaphor as an instrument for diagnosis.

**Nijmegen Business School Case Study**

**Setting**
The setting is the Nijmegen Business School (NBS). The NBS is part of the Faculty of Policy Sciences, which was founded in 1988. The NBS – formerly the department of Business Studies – was established in 1996 as a new organizational structure, when that department separated organizational research and business education into two sub-departments. The NBS now offers academic education in business studies to approximately 1100 students.

**Objectives**
The research objectives were to: identify periods of development in the culture of the NBS; describe the culture during each period; and analyze the culture by comparing theories-in-use with espoused theories. In this chapter, I will summarize each period (for a description of the full research findings, see Basten, 2000).

**Methods and Limitations**
The research was completed from a constructivist perspective, based on the hermeneutic dialectic approach, which uses the claims, concerns, and issues of stakeholders as the organizing elements, and produces an agenda for negotiation drawn up by the evaluator and the stakeholders (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Data were collected using the learning history instrument (Kleiner & Roth, 1997), with a two-column format. In the right-hand column appeared an integrated, theme-based and chronological story of the NBS produced from interviews I held with 17 NBS employees (selected from a population of 65 employees in
total). I refer to that story as the ‘tale’, which I considered as an echo of the theories-in-use. From the word material, I distilled conceptual metaphors (see below).

In the left-hand column of the learning history document, usually a team of learning historians, comprising both organizational insiders and outsiders, comments on the tale by asking questions and identifying recurrent themes. In my research, because it was completed for a Ph.D., the team was replaced by me as researcher, management as sponsor, and a small group of NBS staff who advised me in choosing hot items and suggesting overarching metaphors. My adapted version of the instrument highlighted metaphors from the story in the right-hand column, and interpretations of those metaphors in the left-hand column.

In addition to identifying the tale, I also analyzed 60 scientific publications on organization written by NBS staff. These I labeled the ‘lecture’, which I considered an indicator for espoused theories. I completed the left-hand column comparing the issues raised in the tale with the solutions offered in the lecture. In several feedback loops my findings were presented for in-depth discussions within the organization, thus establishing co-ownership of the end-result and making sure that the metaphors chosen were internally valid.

The Tale
The following is a summary of the tale produced by employees of the NBS. It was originally written in Dutch, and I have tried to produce a translated summary that reads normally in English but without losing any of the main metaphors as they appeared in the original language. Some of the sentences may therefore sound a little clumsy to native English speakers.

As you read the tale, pay particular attention to metaphors, and look for themes in those metaphors. If you find yourself struggling, then think about how the tale hints at images of building, journeys, and battles.

Part 1
The school was built in no time. Elsewhere, they allow one or two years, but we did it in half a year using an incredible no-nonsense approach (“it has to be done, so we do it”). It was good that we managed to do it in such a short time and to get the school into the marketplace. There was a genuine pioneering spirit.

It took a lot of work, and we still have a heavy workload because of the numbers of students we bring in. People have had to work under too much pressure because too little energy has been put into bringing in the personnel we need. With that much pressure, we could only do the routine else it turns your stomach. These last few years it has been nothing but production, because of the educational set up and the increasing student numbers: it was ‘women and children first,’ and a crisis every year. We gave too little thought and attention to what we were trying to achieve and how to achieve it. We had very nice ideas as our starting-points, but to truly realize what we wanted takes more time; and the last eight years we have been lagging behind especially because of that.

We have achieved some balance during the last one and a half, two years. Now we have to enter a phase of consolidation: we really must slow down our pace, not throw everything upside down again, and genuinely improve what we have. We are entering a phase in which we have to confirm what we’ve built over the last eight years, where we can invest more in the quality of our activities, to preserve and extend what we have built. We have been busy with the construction and have the foundation. Now we have to move on.

Part 2
When we started business education in Nijmegen, we wanted to have our own face. We therefore leaned on the expertise of Professor De Sitter. The moment you bring him in, you
bring in Socio-Technical Systems Design (STSD): we brought De Sitter here as the big guru, and he stands for STSD in the Netherlands. In a way, he was the most appealing and, for outsiders, most visible professor, who could present a clear vision to the profession. STSD has explicitly been our spearhead. From the beginning of the ride, with De Sitter inside and the stressing of socio-technical, we immediately had something like ‘Nijmegen business education is the STSD of De Sitter.’ We had De Sitter as our flag, and we were immediately put onto the map. We kind of interwove this into our mission together with what we then called the integrative character of business education.

Part 3
A lot of funny things happened in the power game between what we have since started calling the NBS and the university. Funny in the sense that the strategy that worked in the first years, closure from the evil world outside as it were, ceased to function: the university no longer approved of it. For example, we found that some people wanted to take career development steps that proved impossible. That is inherent to the power game between a young club that wants something and its environment that also wants something. If it is a power game, then that is okay if the field is defined and you know approximately how the game has to be played: but that wasn’t the case. So several people here ran their heads against a stone wall: appointments for professorate got stuck, and there were no opportunities for teachers to do research. Some people got the feeling of being stuck. There was disintegration: a few teams were formed, but the word ‘team’ did not really apply to them. Instead, I saw a lot of people individually trying to keep their heads above water: for one, that was being at home on sick leave, for another it was being here playing the comedian. We all have our ways, but in terms of work quality, the risks for our well-being were, from a socio-technical perspective, extremely high.

Part 4
As a student, I always valued teachers who gave their own views and opinions, translating models and approaches into reality. I did not value those who presented opinions bound in shackles and fetters. That is precisely the charm of an academic education: that you don’t have some sort of master-frame into which everything falls precisely into place and in where it does not really matter that much which individual teacher fills in which spot; but that you have people who can evocatively put a certain subject on the stage. Students always need teachers who have something good to say about the subject, who have a vision and propagate it. They appreciate a good teacher who really has something to say, not someone who rattles off two lectures every week. Someone with the occasional good argument about how he thinks about a subject or a theme.

The teaching approach we have to use is a bit at right angles to all of that. A teacher is less able to tell his own story, less free to chose the form that fits his message. There are more masters to serve and we must make sure that we are in tune with the rest. I think that you lose on that territory. The finger in the pie of a recognizable teacher leads to the best courses. The ideal teacher stimulates, challenges and maybe even seduces students to think for themselves, by representing that thinking as something particularly pleasant, as something interesting and useful, through the belief that something is extremely beautiful. I found the best teachers to be people who told things about affairs they themselves were occupied with, who were clearly inspired by them and who could actually transfer their fascination for the research field onto the students. It just has to be more fun for the teacher and for the students, and the message comes across better.
Part 5
Most education affairs are organized badly, or not at all. The director of education quite often has to act as a policeman, making sure that the teams organize their education well. I find this policeman-like behavior undesirable, but most things here are put on track at five minutes to midnight. These discussions simply need more time. I protest constantly, but it is more like fighting windmills. It always gets on my nerves that things are started up very late all the time. They say that under pressure everything gets fluid, but the pressure you build with time doesn’t have that effect. The organization is a fire fighter, busy putting out flames rather than preventing fires. Long-term policy is usually lacking, it is more of an ad hoc reaction to all sorts of developments: so we are always being surprised, and always working on events that have overtaken us. Our quality suffers as we deal with the frustrations and time-pressure. We need to develop people to anticipate, to think ahead.

We can make progress through assessments. They made a big fuss about announcing these, but the promises have already been broken. Feedback within the education-teams and agreeing upon joint action have all come to nothing. You could attack the problems with those assessments, if the right people were to carry them out, that is, people who can and dare bring the bad tidings. I think people are handled with kid gloves.

Our culture is not one of taking action and making certain that everything runs smoothly: management does not intervene sufficiently. This has something to do with the culture of an academic environment where the world revolves around self-conceited professionals and that relates very poorly to the ideas of team-based work. The academic structure, with very heavy and powerful positions for the professors, is at right angles to the concept of self-regulating teams. We need a change of culture.

Part 6
Education takes too much time and energy and you cannot score with it. Your own strategic and tactical activities therefore play a part in innovation of education. A drawback is that a lot of extra work is generated, and so innovation of education is like horse-trading: you receive hours for it, but the number of hours is derived through a random guess. You can spend the remaining hours on research. What also plays an prominent part here is that in the end everybody is evaluated on publications: there are therefore a lot of points, appreciation, and rewards for backing out of education in an academic setting. It is a funny little world.

I feel split up between those two ‘account’ systems with two bosses, of which ‘education’ is stressful and not rewarding for your career and ‘research’ is intellectually challenging and good for status and prestige. Being a teacher is not a smart career move.

I feel that self-interest plays a very important part in curriculum development. At a recent working-conference, management put down a final report on a project called Traject 2001. We called that the ‘demonstration day.’ I recognize a lot of remarks in the final version, but I suspect that management has had a significant steer on the content, had pretty much made up its mind early on, and hasn’t really deviated that much. Newcomers do indeed have the idea that they are being heard, but the plans are, from front to back, recognizable as those that have been around for the past nine years. It has been shot at during two conferences already, but it keeps coming back. Maybe people very cleverly take advantage of the weakness of the system - that nothing happens with reactions and proposals.

The Analysis
The tale is rich with the metaphors used by NBS employees. From an organization change perspective, HRD professionals should be interested in those metaphors because any themes present in the surface language provide a window into how employees view the organization,
and particular problems or situations. What then can we learn about the dominant metaphors in NBS from the surface language used in the tale?

My suggestion is that there are several themes in the metaphors, and at least one dominant metaphor. However, before describing that one, let me first concentrate on and introduce three themes that I believe combine to create that dominant metaphor. They are:

- **NBS IS ON A JOURNEY** (time and space definition). This comes from such language as - genuine pioneering spirit; nice ideas as our starting-points; lagging behind; slow down our pace; now we have to move on; we were immediately put onto the map; career development steps; people here ran their heads against a stone wall; most things here are put on track at five minutes to midnight; rewards for backing out of education; management has had a significant steer on the content.

- **NBS IS A BUILDING** (identity construction/self-definition). This comes from such language as - the school was built in no time; get the school into the marketplace; confirm what we've built over the last eight years; preserve and extend what we have built; we have been busy with the construction and have the foundation.

- **NBS IS IN A BATTLE** (definition of environment). This comes from such language as - STSD has explicitly been our spearhead; we had De Sitter as our flag; the power game; the strategy that worked in the first years; trying to keep their heads above water; you lose on that territory; it is more like fighting windmills; it has been shot at during two conferences already.

My suggestion is that each of these metaphors form part of a larger, dominant metaphor for the NBS of NBS IS A PIONEER. As a pioneer, the NBS is an entity on a journey, setting down new foundations and building a new way; moving forward, and prepared to battle those who threaten that progress. The element of battle is, I believe, very important for the history and its evolution of the NBS.

As well as identifying these main metaphors, it is also possible to track how the metaphors are used at different stages of the tale. For example, in the early stages, the main metaphors are of journey and building. Increasingly, the language of the battle metaphor takes front-stage as the university challenges the NBS. Individuals feel that their journey is under threat, they are stuck and can no longer take the steps they would like to take. This is a very critical period in the history of the NBS: the unit of action shifts from NBS to the individual professional, who starts to embody the battle-element, wanting to pioneer within a new dangerous environment - the NBS itself. This is an important marker for the point where tale and lecture start to diverge.

**The Lecture**

Whereas the tale derived from interviews with NBS employees, the lecture consists of the theories espoused by the NBS employees in their writings on organizations. Some of the highlights of the lecture were:

- The main assumption is that organizations are systems that have the conservation of their vitality as their primary goal.
- A system reaches this goal by reproducing itself; and it consists of a network of mutual relationships.
- An organization is a specific type of social system that creates and reproduces itself by distinguishing between an adopted ‘self’ (internal perception) and an adopted ‘environment’ (external perception).
• By nature, a system produces ambiguity. An organization is therefore constantly involved in a process of solving paradoxes and dilemmas. This problem-solving process, in its turn, causes new ambiguity. This is considered a learning opportunity: an organization should embody continuous change in order to survive.

• Learning is a process of sharing knowledge, of interaction and communication, of teamwork and creating win-win solutions.

• The need for innovation and the form it will take is a subject for discussion between equal partners who co-operate constructively in an open atmosphere in which they exchange valid information.

Using the Findings

The learning history of the NBS confronts the NBS with differences between the lecture and the tale (as described above). These differences have several consequences in that they create paradoxes and double messages: the message that is communicated is denied instantly by the very words the message is communicated with. Take for instance the term ‘student-activating education’, referring to the perceived need to actually activate students to participate in education. The message is that students are considered independent in their choice of goals, materials and subjects: self-steering. However, ‘student-activating’ refers to an image of a student who is essentially passive and needs to be switched on by an outside party, the teacher.

These and other double messages suggest that in the social reality the NBS creates for itself, employees act and live by rules they would not suggest to others. In fact, in their publications and study material, they advise others to do completely the opposite of what they are doing. For the NBS, this means a challenge to bring the lecture and the tale back in line, either by adjusting the lecture or changing the tale – or by re-inventing both.

Implications for Human Resource Development

In this chapter, I set out to illustrate how HRD professionals can use the learning history as a means of identifying dominant metaphors in organizational cultures, and to track them over time. Using a case study, I have demonstrated how that method works, and the potential benefits for organizations. When considering the main implications for HRD, I believe that there are three:

• The learning history instrument provides HRD professionals with a method for deriving an agreed history of an organization and organizational change – what I refer to as the tale. That history will contain metaphors that can be analyzed to identify dominant metaphors.

• Employee metaphors are not fixed, but change over time. Tracking those metaphors in an organization’s history illustrates how employees’ perceptions have altered, and can be used to show how employees approach the solving of today’s problems using outdated, inappropriate metaphors of yesterday.

• Dominant metaphors in organizations may be hidden from employees’ awareness but can have a serious impact on how situations are perceived, and problems are approached. Identifying those metaphors raises them to a level of awareness where they can be challenged and, if needs be, altered.
References


