

Conceptual Blending in Communication Classrooms

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2012

This activity is designed primarily for communication courses in which theory or concepts are being introduced. I have successfully used this approach in courses covering organizational communication, mass media, and team building. It is particularly useful for upper division undergraduate courses and graduate courses and is especially strong when applied to courses that are introducing communication theories such as the typical Contemporary Theories in Communication title offered by many communication departments.

I take the phrase conceptual blending from the work of Fauconnier and Turner (2002). Their work is predicated primarily on linguistic constructions and uses a network model to conceptualize how people entertain multiple concepts and synthesize new ones. Mental spaces are “small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk for purposes of local understanding” (p. 40). When mental spaces merge, they aid people in constructing new conceptions passing through phases Fauconnier and Turner refer to as “cross-space” mapping resulting into a final step they call a “blend.” This final step is crucial to not only the understanding of concepts, but to the creation of new ones.

The linguistic approach to conceptual blending represents the long tradition of education as a print culture. “Teachers are highly likely to teach in the way they themselves were taught” (Kennedy, 1991) but in a paper published as a result of the 1991 conference on the State of Research into Critical Thinking (Nosich, 1991) it was clear that pedagogy required skills and approaches beyond just linguistics. Even in the face of a tradition of arguments about the need for a diverse array of

pedagogical approaches (Bloom, 1956; Young, 1982; Bloom 1985; Margolis, 1987) we still spend an inordinate amount of time in communication classrooms working through concepts linguistically. I agree with and base this exercise on the statement that “an idea is nothing more nor less than a new combination of old elements” (Young), an idea that is perfectly in line with conceptual blending.

This exercise brings to the forefront two important aspects of learning about concepts (and by extension theory): metacognition and intention. Metacognition refers to thinking about one’s own thoughts and intentionality has to do with students who engage in willful steps to construct meaning (Hennessey, 2003; see also: Flavell, 1976; Brown 1978; Sinatra, 2000). In order to support these aspects of the learning process, it is important to occasionally step outside the linguistic constructs commonly repeated in classrooms, especially in communication studies. James Sosnoski (2010) has attempted to make the potentiality of conceptual blending into a systematic approach useful for discourse analysis, but I focus his work into classroom activities. In collaboration with the Society for Conceptual Logistics in Communication Research (www.sclcr.com) he discusses “visualizing conceptualizing” (2011) an important step in transcending the pedagogical limitations of a strictly linguistic approach typical of lecture courses, objective tests, and required textbook readings:

“The process of comparing, for example, is a process of conceptualizing. By visualizing this process, we can make explicit what was foregrounded, backgrounded, the focus of attentional operations, the details selected, and so on. A visualization tool...can guide persons in recalling the various aspects of the process since it first asks you to identify all of the salient parts of comparable mental events and then organizes them into generic similarities and specific differences.” (2011)

The activity requires students engage the following process: (1) identify a concept from their coursework of their own choosing; (2) select a second and *seemingly* unrelated concept from the coursework; (3) students visualize each concept independently and are encouraged to be creative in their

approach; (4) students create a third and final visualization that blends the first two concepts into a meaningful re-conceptualization of the concepts from steps 1 and 2.

In the visualization steps, students have in the past engaged this approach quite enthusiastically and depending on time and resource constraints created a vast array of visualizations. When used as take home assignments where they have a week to prepare, students have created their own comics based on the exploits of army men positioned around their home and engaging in organizational communication concepts. Other students have photographed themselves and fellow students acting out concepts. Still more students let their artistic sides shine creating sketches, computer aided drawings, logo designs, and even musical scores that visualize concepts from the coursework. The real strength of the approach comes through when students must think through each of the concepts from steps 1 and 2 in order to effectively blend them into a third. This process requires active engagement by students at a conceptual level rarely achieved with traditional approaches. Visualizing concepts in this blending approach forces students to take an active role in abstraction, a non-trivial element of higher order thinking (Hunt, 1962) and a crucial skill for those studying human communication. An additional benefit of this approach is that some of the most creative and expressive works have been done by students who were reserved and shy in class. Conceptual blending as a learning activity can help stimulate many of the opportunities, challenges, and outcomes that other methods strive for but fail to accomplish with students who are reserved, have disabilities, or simply do not respond well to reading and writing assignments.

This approach has been used in three settings: as take home works with at least a week of preparation time, group-based in-class activities, and as part of exams. The approach was easy to adapt to take home work, and has met with success in the classroom; however, its use in exams has been less successful. One drawback to this approach for exams is that some students who are otherwise creative

start to feel overwhelmed by the time constraints of in-class exams and may lack the tools of their artistic trades that would otherwise make them feel comfortable expressing themselves. However, student grades tend to rise when this type of work is included in a course and students have reported enjoying the work to the extent that they report spending significantly more time engaging the concepts from class content than they did with a paper or presentation. I am currently using this assignment in two online courses with positive results. In sharing the conceptual blending approach I would be happy to provide examples during the round tables and to provide handouts that have proven effective as in-class and out-of-class instructions. Conceptual blending, with a visual approach, is an important augmentation to the traditional print/linguistic style our communication studies courses rely on, sometimes too heavily.

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