

# The Metaphors

**We should expect to practice what we teach, and become students of general education ourselves**

“IT’S GOING TO BE A BLOODBATH,” my colleague warned.

I had just become chair of a general education task force charged with reviewing and reforming our core curriculum. And the metaphors were running wild. We were about to awaken the core-war giant, and it was going to be every department for itself, a zero-sum game of winner takes all. We’d be carving up the pie, redrawing the boundaries, parceling out the credits, and protecting turf.

At about this time, my wife and I had some good friends over for dinner, and they told us a story about a couple they knew who had recently discovered evidence of rats in their basement. The wife, determined to find an alternative solution to traps and poison, decided to call an animal communicator. Upon her arrival, the communicator was asked to tell the rats that they should leave or an exterminator would have to be called. With these instructions, the animal communicator went down into the basement. After fifteen minutes or so, she appeared at the top of the stairs and said, “Well, I told them what you wanted, and they discussed their options.”

“And?” the husband replied, doubtful all along of her psychic calling.

“Like I said, I gave them the choices, and they talked it over for quite awhile. But the long and short of it is—the rats are still divided.”

I immediately thought of my new responsibilities in leading curricular reform and of the need to keep faculty more or less unified and on track.

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Actually, I entered into this grand experiment in faculty collegiality with a great deal of hope. I wanted to promote a different way of thinking about curricular reform. I wanted to facilitate the broadest participation possible. I wanted to conduct patient and shared research into best practices in general education.

Lucky for me, I had an excellent faculty team on this project. And lucky for me, they were also keenly interested in ways that would make our work together collegial and productive. And lucky for us all, we were in agreement that the current core was not working.

## **Core problems**

From a general education perspective, the core had been stinking up the place for some time. During our last accreditation visit, the evaluation team noted that our core curriculum was an underdeveloped resource to support the university mission. Ouch. The team also pointed out that the core was so open to choice within the disciplinary distribution requirements that it failed to guide students adequately through common experiences. True again. Beyond introductory courses in writing, math, communication, and philosophy, all other courses in the core had only to respond to broad disciplinary distribution requirements; thus, an upper-division history, literature, or biology course, while not designed with general education students in mind, could be used to fulfill core requirements. In other words, the core served majors and faculty interests quite well. The students? Not so much.

The core was the ever-popular Chinese menu. Or better yet, it was a mix of train schedules. Students made choices based on

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when they happened to arrive at the station; they were not particularly concerned about where they would end up, as long as they could get their tickets punched enough times to be exchanged for that bigger ticket, the diploma.

Additionally, the evaluation team said that without a committee or administrative structure to oversee the curriculum, program assessment and improvement would be very difficult. While a core committee of the faculty senate had been established to respond to this charge, there really never was a “general education program” to bird-dog in the first place, just an incoherent flock of courses with responsibility for oversight nested within individual departments. The one exception, however, was our mixed-bag foreign language/foreign culture requirement, and the core committee did spend quite a bit of time sorting out the criteria for what could count as “foreign culture.” Still, that was pretty much it. No general education program, no real oversight, no real assessment, no real improvement, and most tragically, no real advocate.

Many faculty colleagues across campus were also unhappy with the current state of affairs, and a survey of opinion early in the process revealed similar concerns, including the lack of a clear connection to our institutional identity and mission, the offering of few common courses, and the “roll-your-own” nature of the curriculum. In addition, faculty were concerned about the absence of clear outcomes, the lack of sequential learning, the failure of upper-division courses to respond to general education needs, the lack of a universal foreign language requirement, and the absence of funding for faculty and curriculum development keyed to general education.

Beyond the accreditation team’s critique and the faculty survey, the task force—composed of twenty-five members of the faculty across the disciplines, including the dean of the business school and the vice president for university mission and heritage—had issues of their own. Primary among these was the desire to make general education a shared interest of all faculty—not only to promote collaborative

responsibility for the curriculum, but also to prompt serious dialogue concerning the central academic enterprise of the institution.

Our general education identity crisis was quite obvious to many. Not so obvious was the solution.

### First defining metaphor

Another metaphor occurred to me one morning as I watched one of my neighbors walk her two dogs down the sidewalk past my house. A young Labrador retriever was out in front, chugging along full bore, intent on the path ahead; a beagle lagged behind, head down, sniffing and snuffling. Trying to keep her balance, my neighbor was caught between the tug and the drag along, one leash yanking her forward and the other pulling her back.

This is an apt metaphor for how our faculty task force lurched forward and then back again as we searched for a replacement model for our core curriculum. Early in the process, we divided into two teams. One group wanted to leap forward, dream big, work deductively. They drafted vision and mission statements, mapped out learning objectives, studied best practices. They were focused on future and grand designs. The other team wanted to move more slowly and carefully, inspecting the lay of the land, not wandering too far off course. They worked inductively, focusing on the present realities and concrete, smaller steps. In these two ways, we moved haltingly, patiently, and at times, unsure of our destination and schedule. Still, we were making progress. And eventually, we reached a compromise of sorts, a proposal that reached new heights but still accounted for our hesitant past and current circumstances.

There's also another image at play that was particularly influential to me as chair. Raphael's *The School of Athens* portrays two great philosophers walking forward in the center of a busy and bustling crowd. Locked in each other's gaze and oblivious to those around them, each is clutching a treasured text. At left, Plato lifts his right hand with a gesture toward the heavens, pointing to ideal and eternal truths. Next to him, Aristotle extends his right hand flat out in front of him, reminding his teacher of the necessary realities of the world. This painting represented for me the intellectual spirit of our task force, understanding the need to account for both an ideal vision and the conditions on the ground.

### Second defining metaphor

The most startling and inspirational change happened when we were developing our mission statement. Early on, we had agreed that establishing an institutional identity would require us to go beyond revising the categories of courses; we would need to create an actual curriculum with learning objectives that was supported by administrative leadership, by a faculty committee with real teeth, and by a real budget. So as we began to develop a mission statement, a new image emerged to replace "the core," that sadly worn and threadbare metaphor that still controlled much of our thinking about the curriculum.

In academic circles, "core" refers to the set of common courses or requirements all students must take prior to moving on to their advanced coursework in the major. Of course, all sorts of harmful metaphors accompany this way of thinking about general education, such as general education as a waste of time or an obstacle to overcome. But our core was never really a core: students were still fulfilling requirements with first-year courses into their senior years—college algebra, for example, and communication. In our mission statement, we wrote:

The General Education Curriculum is at the heart of a student's educational journey, conveys the values embedded with a rich Mercy heritage, and infuses personal and professional practice with the spirit of liberal learning. It provides a foundation for learning for life and livelihood by exploring a range of disciplines, their relationships, and how they contribute to human understanding and the common good.

These conceptual metaphors—heart, journey, convey, infuse, foundation, exploration—came closer to describing the active and developmental learning we desired. Even the word "curriculum" has its roots in the terms "current" and "to run." These contribute to the notion that a curriculum is active and formative, that courses flow into the stream of the curriculum, moving students forward in their learning, progressing onward toward participation in a larger world of learning. Thus, maintaining "core" as the controlling metaphor would not only fail to adequately define a progressive curriculum but also limit our ability to consider its rich potential.

Even more powerful to me was the first metaphor in the statement, "heart." Containing

some of the attributes of the “core,” this rich metaphor suggests several beneficial and related concepts, such as vitality, life, bloodstream, infusion, pulsing, conditioning, connection, rhythm, time, and flow. But more importantly, it is reminiscent of the emotional requirements of teaching and learning. For example, there is “learning by heart,” or how we might describe the mindful embrace of a subject, or how we become “flush with knowledge”—that is, how our faces exhibit the thrill and joy in knowing.

### Third defining metaphor

We soon decided that an off-campus summer retreat would help us accomplish more work than was possible in our periodic committee meetings. I arranged for two days and an overnight stay at a retreat center, and contracted with two facilitators to assist our progress. First, the bad news: it was a fairly



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slow-going, frustrating couple of days; the dog walker was everywhere, and I was worried that we would go away empty-handed. The good news is that, during the last hour of our time together, one of our task force members proposed a new curricular

model that revolutionized our thinking about the role and reach of general education.

From that point on, we understood general education not as a distinct set of courses or requirements, but as a journey. Students would begin their general education experience with a first-semester transitions course, a time to get oriented to college learning and the character of our institution. They would also take common courses in writing, math, philosophy, and communication in the first year, as well as begin to take a range of disciplinary requirements as they moved into the second year. Next, as they began to acquire learning in their major, there would be a junior-level interdisciplinary course, an opportunity to integrate fields of learning to better understand a particular problem or

## We proposed a process whereby faculty and students filled each other in on what it means to be liberally educated

issue. Finally, they would conclude with a senior transitions course, an opportunity to apply their general education to real-world occasions and to reflect upon its value beyond the university.

This four-year developmental framework simplified our thinking about the overall structure and path of general education, and it also helped us integrate other desired requirements. For example, while we wanted to add courses in diversity studies, global studies, and service learning, we had already agreed that we would not increase the already substantial number of hours required by the current core. But given the transitional and formative nature of the framework—and the large number of transfers coming from nearby community colleges—we decided that integrating these requirements across the entire undergraduate curriculum was the best approach.

Because we were better positioned to understand the significance of students’ transition into college life and learning, we instituted a first-year cohort experience. This three-course model would include a newly redesigned first-semester transitions course matched with a first-year philosophy course and a first-year disciplinary seminar. The latter two courses would contribute to students’ introduction to university learning by focusing on close reading of primary texts, analytical writing, and concentrated discussion. And of course, this proposed scheme would prompt faculty and curriculum development on issues related to first-year learning—another opportunity to dissolve disciplinary boundaries and create the shared conversations about general education.

It soon became clear to me that this journey had a particular shape. That is, as I imagined students’ transitions in and out, their growth in knowledge, the breadth of their learning, the integration of disciplines, their turn toward more concentrated effort in their majors, plus the reflection available to them in the interdisciplinary seminar and senior transitions, I began to see an image that graphically expressed our general education curriculum and students’ experience in it. This was the “loop-the-loop” metaphor, or as I sometimes pictured it, the roller coaster 360-degree flip. This metaphor worked for me for a couple of

reasons. First, it clearly demonstrated the coming in and going out of the college experience for students. Second, it offered a way to visualize growth and reflection. But what I like most was the inversion. The university should play a countercultural role in society, and overturning students' misconceptions about the role and value of a college education, particularly general education, is one of the major challenges we all face.

#### **Fourth defining metaphor**

A major challenge we currently face concerns the need to overturn the faculty's attitude of neglect toward general education. Because our core is primarily an "anything-counts" curriculum, and because almost all major courses can also fulfill general education requirements, faculty have no incentive to attend to general education as a distinct enterprise. Students have no incentive either. Thus, silence prevails.

Further, because what counts as a general education course is defined by whatever departments decide to offer in any particular semester, no real criteria exist for course inclusion, except that the course must fit within the range of distribution requirements. This "up-for-grabs" attitude toward students' general education is big on choice and freedom but thin on critical analysis and judgment. And that is why core wars tend to be bloodbaths. Lack of communication often leads to screaming and yelling.

As I said before, our task force heard this silence loud and clear and proposed a process of continual dialogue and improvement led by a general education program committee that would be responsible for the integrity and vitality of the curriculum. It would also have the power to propose changes to the framework if necessary, without starting from scratch and claw. Therefore, faculty and curriculum development as well as the broadest possible participation would be necessary. In other words, we would have to turn faculty members' attention in new directions, shift their gaze toward new occasions for learning and scholarship, and more importantly, redirect their interests toward a different set of colleagues outside their customary disciplines—and more particularly, toward a different set of students, intent not only on acquiring expertise in a major but on acquiring a coherent and integrated general education with distinctive teaching and learning expectations.

So instead of a process whereby faculty and students filled in blanks on core curriculum checklists, we proposed a process whereby faculty and students filled each other in on what it means to be liberally educated. The task force created both a framework of requirements *and* a process for promoting dialogue about what should be included in the framework. In other words, we proposed a collaborative course of action designed to challenge faculty to decide together, on an ongoing basis, what general education students should learn and demonstrate in a particular course or collection of related courses. Faculty would embark upon a shared path of common purpose rather than trailing off into divergent routes of individual and departmental concern.

#### **Getting along**

To be clear, faculty have just recently approved our program proposal. The real tests are ahead of us as we move the process of faculty and curriculum development along. It will require quite a bit of getting to know folks from other disciplines. It will require quite a bit of talk; quite a bit of listening; quite a bit of give and take; quite a bit of study, research, debate, and agreement; quite a bit of humility, level-headedness, courage, and hope. That is, it will require quite a bit of what we expect our students to gain from a general education. We should expect to practice what we teach, and become students of general education ourselves.

The dog walker, the heart, the loop-the-loop journey, the shared path, the faculty as student: these defining metaphors present useful ways of conceptualizing general education reform and the collegiality required of us all as we strive to sustain our agreements and commitments. There will be more defining metaphors ahead; the trick is to know which to live and work by.

And by the way, the rats did finally agree to get along and out of there. □

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