ABSTRACT

TIM BECKER. Boundaries, Thresholds, and Roads: Navigating the Spatial Metaphors of Transfer. (Under the direction of Professor Chris Anson.)

This article analyzes a systematic metaphor that envisions writing transfer as a spatial phenomenon, shaping the conversation around transfer theories and terminologies. The question of writing transfer, most often asked in terms of how to best prepare students to bring their learning from first-year composition to bear on other writing tasks across the curriculum and in the workforce, is a central and urgent topic in writing studies and connects to broader conversations in educational theory and practice. As a conversation that involves abstract concepts and draws on other disciplinary areas, writing studies relies heavily on metaphorical language to conceptualize and communicate about writing transfer and its related concerns. Like any conversation bringing in concepts from other domains, however, use of these metaphors may involve conceptual entailments, which, if left unchecked, risk influencing our thinking in subtle ways. Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of metaphor, I propose that spatial conceptions emerge from our embodied experience of writing transfer across the four dimensions of physical, social, technological, and temporal space, and I contextualize this spatial metaphor within larger trends and traditions in educational discourse. I examine potential implications of spatial metaphors on transfer-focused theory and pedagogy, including ‘near’ and ‘far’ transfer, ‘critical transitions,’ ‘transfer of learning,’ ‘boundary crossing,’ ‘threshold concepts,’ and others. I argue that such spatial terminologies and conceptions perpetuate problematic theories of language and mind and incline us towards a tacit hierarchy of transfer research, privileging cases that can be mapped onto discrete, unilateral movements through space and diverting attention from cases happening concurrently within and across contexts and apart from traditionally conceived educational trajectories.