How Is A Crisis Brewed?

This chapter is about the language of national crisis—especially how crisis functions as a powerful metaphor in public discourse about educational reform. Leaders attempt to influence citizens’ beliefs and actions in order to effect change, often in terms of “crisis.” Such crises have personal consequences but are presented or perceived as problems of large scale and broad impact. They do not arise within, nor are they expressed by individuals. The characterization of a problem as a national crisis is a sociolinguistic transformation of that problem into an urgent call for organized response. The crisis is structured in a particular time, place, and social context. It is described in terms of the problem, its cause, the urgent need for decisive change, and the nature and content of that change.

A problem, a crisis, is a public event that has reached proportions threatening the national welfare. The cyclical appearance of an urgent call for reform in education is sometimes referred to by practitioners as the “swinging pendulum of the pedagogy.” However, identification of a national crisis sometimes illustrates problems in disparate locales, thus raising them to national significance. In addition, international crises may affect US society in ways that call for response in education policy and practice. This chapter offers examples of the varied contexts for and negotiation of crises in 20th Century US education.

One of the most powerful figures of speech we use to account for change in times of crisis is metaphor. When orators use metaphor to move readers and listeners, they are using a heightened form of the ordinary human capacity to make and share experiences by means of figurative language. In Lakoff and Johnson’s words, “Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is metaphorical in nature” (1980, p. 3). Thus, metaphors can shape consciousness in an individual life history and in a nation’s shared history. In an analysis of the role of metaphor in the education of literacy teachers, Rosan and I (2008) wrote that, “metaphors are... central to how we explore and understand the world because they provide an experiential framework for making sense of abstract concepts” (p. 706). Since the entwining of language, thought, and culture happens as part of ordinary experience, we come to hold, and share tacit meanings passed on within cultural groups. We often do not recognize how our interpretations and actions have been shaped by powerful social rhetoric. We can see evidence of this in the ways that we readily assimilate ideas and situations into our vocabularies, take them for granted as “the way things are.” This is a decidedly mixed blessing. It enables us to develop a working consensus with one another quickly and with relative ease, but it also enables us to take shared understanding for granted. This can close off inquiry and authentic dialogue in our personal and professional relationships as well as in our response to problems.

In the past decade, for example, in my practice as a teacher educator, I have noticed how even the most experienced newcomers to literacy teaching readily pick up and use acronyms associated with reading education policy in the nation of my state (e.g., NCBI, AYP, GLIES). Along with this shared fluency comes the assumption of common knowledge of what these acronyms mean, belief in their objectivity, and urgent need for decisive action. The newcomer may reply, “Because it’s a GLCE.” (This acronym is pronounced, “gluck,” and refers to Michigan Grade Level Content Expectations.) When asked, “What is a GLCE?” the response is typical, “It’s a strategy I am expected to teach.” As a teacher educator, I try to help my students resist breaking this sociolinguistic frame. Acknowledging the ubiquity of the GLCE’s, I urge my students to put them aside for a while and to try their hand at designing curriculum. In this way, they begin to think about teaching literacy by asking such questions as, What do my students know? How can I find out? What do they need to learn? Why is it important for them to learn this? How will I help them learn it? How will I know that they have learned it? This shift centers their practice, students, and local context. It highlights the need for their thoughtful action as educators. We will return to this idea at the end of the chapter.

Crisis in Education and the “Nation as a Family”

A fundamental metaphor by which we understand ourselves as a society is that of “the nation as a family” (Lakoff, 2006, p. 49). This metaphor is tapped—implicitly or explicitly—in times of crisis. Lakoff notes the depth and durability of “the nation as a family,” as a cultural metaphor by pointing out, for example, We have Founding Fathers, The Daughters of the American Revolution. We ‘send our sons’ (sic) to war. This is a natural metaphor because we usually understand large social groups, like nations, in terms of small units, like families or communities” (ibid., p. 5). When we think about something large in terms of something small, or something “experience distant” in terms of something “experience near,” (Geertz, 1973), we are making iconoclastic associations. Both the familiar and the large are complex. It is the association of the two metaphors permits us to contemplate complexity as—Pinker (2008) says, metaphor “fails the ineffable.” What Pinker means is that something we otherwise would find difficult to contemplate or comprehend becomes easier to understand when we think about it in terms of something more familiar, immediate, or concrete. Thus, for example, we can contemplate the history of our kinship relationships with the familiar image of the “family tree.”

There are two problems associated with such “effability. First, the small is not the large—they are schematically related. If we confuse one with the other, we will distort rather than illuminate aspects of the complexity of each problem. This is a serious one if we are trying to predict, or control what is happening in one context based on our understanding of it by analogy to another. Second, the power to use the human capacity for metaphor to move large groups of people to a shared sense of meaning and collective action is socially consequential. In Classical times, it was thought essential to master the skills of oratory, especially the rhetorical skills of persuasion by means of using figurative language, in order to lead (Lentriccia & McLaughlin, 1999). It is important but difficult to apply checks and balances to such power precisely because of its transparency, its use of ordinary sense making to shape ideology and in its enactment. Pursuing the complexity of the nation as family metaphor, for example, Lakoff wonders, “If there are two different understandings of the nation, do they come from two different understandings of family?” (2006). The information referred to here draws on Lakoff’s text, pp. 50-66. However, we might look at the way we view the nation as a family, depends on your sense of the safety of that family in the context of world events—both those directly experienced and those about which you are told. This, in turn, influences the kind of parenting you value. A dangerous world view, Lakoff suggests, calls for a “strict father” that can (1) protect the family in a dangerous world, (2) support the family in the difficult world, and (3) teach his children right from wrong. In contrast, a view of the world as a safe place invites nurturance rather than vigilance. In Lakoff’s terms, such a national family would value the following: (1) If you want your child to be fulfilled in life, the child has to be free enough to do that. Therefore, freedom is a value; (2) You do not have very much freedom if there is no opportunity or prosperity. Therefore, opportunity and prosperity are values; and (3) If you really care about your child, you want your child to be treated fairly by you and by others. Therefore, fairness is a value.

Teachers Reading the Rhetoric of Crisis

Multiple calls to national crisis have characterized education as problem, solution, or both. The crisis-driven rhetoric of educational reforms tips toward the strict parent. However, even in crisis, teaching must balance discipline with nurturance of the child’s developing intellect, convention with invention (Bruner, 1960/77). As noted above, the metaphor of the swinging pendulum is often used to characterize educational changes. Yet, if we look across the last century, the path of change seems circuitous. At intervals roughly approximating the political ascendancy of various parties or social movements, leaders have used crisis-laden rhetoric to attempt to change the nation’s direction, and education has played a part in that process (e.g. the Presidential Report, “A Nation at Risk”). There have also been occasions when an unexpected national or international event has been interpreted as a moment of crisis in which education should play a central role (e.g. the Cold War launch of Sputnik by the U.S.S.R.). Thus, although they are neither as predictable nor as repetitious as the swinging pendulum, education-related crises are frequent and alter our society’s educational trajectory.

Regardless of their source, crisis calls are made by leaders and resemble another form of metaphor. They depend on core narratives and make heavy use of metaphor to accomplish the following: (a) identify clear and present danger, (b) assert the decisive changes to be made (typically framed by leaders and the experts who advise them), and (c) call citizens to action. Notwithstanding their variety, the rhetoric of national crises tends to reinforce the structural features of public institutions even as it calls for changes in their activities. This is described in terms of the nation crisis of the last century we typically sought to regain order, not to create new order. However, as we will see in the examples below, since crises and their narratives are of human creation and proportions, they can, in Elbow’s terms, be “believed or doubted” (1986). Moreover, we can tell new and different stories of change and respond to them in novel ways (Florio-Ruane, 1997).

One of the most powerful figures of speech we use to account for change in times of crisis is metaphor. When orators use metaphor to move readers and listeners, they are using a heightened form of the ordinary human capacity to make and share experiences by means of figurative language. In Lakoff and Johnson’s words, “Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is metaphorical in nature” (1980, p. 3). Thus, metaphors can shape consciousness in an individual life history and in a nation’s shared history. In an analysis of the role of metaphor in the education of literacy teachers, Rosan and I (2008) wrote that, “metaphors are... central to how we explore and understand the world because they provide an experiential framework for making sense of abstract concepts” (p. 706).

In the past decade, for example, in my practice as a teacher educator, I have noticed how even the most experienced newcomers to literacy teaching readily pick up and use acronyms associated with reading education policy in the nation of my state (e.g., NCBI, AYP, GLCES). Along with this shared fluency comes the assumption of common knowledge of what these acronyms mean, belief in their objectivity, and urgent need for decisive action. The newcomer may reply, “Because it’s a GLCE.” (This acronym is pronounced, “gluck,” and refers to Michigan Grade Level Content Expectations.) When asked, “What is a GLCE?” the response is typical, “It’s a strategy I am expected to teach.” As a teacher educator, I try to help my students resist breaking this sociolinguistic frame. Acknowledging the ubiquity of the GLCE’s, I urge my students to put them aside for a while and to try their hand at designing curriculum. In this way, they begin to think about teaching literacy by asking such questions as, What do my students know? How can I find out? What do they need to learn? Why is it important for them to learn this? How will I help them learn it? How will I know that they have learned it? This shift centers their practice, students, and local context. It highlights the need for their thoughtful action as educators. We will return to this idea at the end of the chapter.


Susan Florio-Ruane

Michigan State University I thank my colleagues, Cheryl Rosan and Paul Morsink, as well as the students in my graduate literacy seminar for helping me think about the topic of this chapter. The Michigan State University Literacy Achievement Research Center (LARC) sponsored my work on this chapter, a version of which was presented at the Annual Meetings of the National Reading Conference (2007) in Austin, TX. Its content is my sole responsibility.
The Cold War centered education in the struggle to both American ideology and values, and also its very existence and the security and safety of its citizens. The Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik, the first manmade satellite to orbit the earth, is widely viewed as the major crisis of the Cold War period. The launch disrupted ordinary time and expectations, evoked rapid and definitive response, and changed the course of American education. Sputnik’s launch came at a low point in our own development of rocket technology. Americans were aware of the competition between the two nations in rocket development programs and the importance of both prestige and national defense. Sputnik insinuated itself into Americans’ public and everyday lives. With the naked eye, adults and children watched from backyards as it blinked across the night sky (Hickam, 1998).

The metaphor of the nation as a family and ship of state, so common in crisis moments, is also not new. It is implied in many of our national anthems and is an important part of the American psyche. It suggests that the nation is like a family and the teacher like a parent. Like a parent, the teacher is responsible for the welfare of the children (students). Like a family, the nation must work together to ensure the safety of all members. This metaphor suggests that the nation is in crisis, and that the teacher must act to save the nation. This is a powerful metaphor that resonates with the American public.

The metaphor of the nation as a family and ship of state is also used in crisis moments to foster a sense of commitment and cooperation. The nation is like a family, and the teacher like a parent. Like a family, the nation must work together to ensure the safety of all members. This metaphor suggests that the nation is in crisis, and that the teacher must act to save the nation. This is a powerful metaphor that resonates with the American public.

The Cold War centered education in the struggle to both American ideology and values, and also its very existence and the security and safety of its citizens. The Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik, the first manmade satellite to orbit the earth, is widely viewed as the major crisis of the Cold War period. The launch disrupted ordinary time and expectations, evoked rapid and definitive response, and changed the course of American education. Sputnik’s launch came at a low point in our own development of rocket technology. Americans were aware of the competition between the two nations in rocket development programs and the importance of both prestige and national defense. Sputnik insinuated itself into Americans’ public and everyday lives. With the naked eye, adults and children watched from backyards as it blinked across the night sky (Hickam, 1998).

The metaphor of the nation as a family and ship of state, so common in crisis moments, is also not new. It is implied in many of our national anthems and is an important part of the American psyche. It suggests that the nation is like a family and the teacher like a parent. Like a parent, the teacher is responsible for the welfare of the children (students). Like a family, the nation must work together to ensure the safety of all members. This metaphor suggests that the nation is in crisis, and that the teacher must act to save the nation. This is a powerful metaphor that resonates with the American public.

The metaphor of the nation as a family and ship of state is also used in crisis moments to foster a sense of commitment and cooperation. The nation is like a family, and the teacher like a parent. Like a family, the nation must work together to ensure the safety of all members. This metaphor suggests that the nation is in crisis, and that the teacher must act to save the nation. This is a powerful metaphor that resonates with the American public.
of the mandates, methods, and materials in their environment but also using their prior knowledge, experience, and the tools and artifacts of their classroom community) to make necessary changes in the immediate moment?" (p. 165).

In case study research on urban teachers who responded creatively to the actual and presumed mandates of NCLB (Florio-Ruane, Highfi

NCLB was hardly the first of such calls for teachers to respond to a crisis. Yet entailed within its identification of the limits of its conceptual horizons as well as its support for lasting change have been noted.

The calling of a crisis under one is allowing of a crisis that the DOE did not—in fact legally could not—require that any state include in their proposed plan for improvement of any of these resources. To do this would be explicitly violate the limits set on the DOE at its inception and violate the legal limits the Congress had set on NCLB to promote products or promote particular methods. Yet from the perspective of many teachers, a clear line could be drawn from NCLB through their state department of education to their intermediate school district directly into their district, school, classroom, bookshelf—or for ninety minutes of their day.

Initially the rhetorical force of NCLB was sufficient to move states and districts to fall in line with the DOE before what was requested, required, or even legal. Yet sufficient public restiveness about NCLB in general, and Reading First in particular, prompted an investigation of the program six years into the authorization of NCLB. Its Reading First grants programs was investigated by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) so that Congress could determine if there had, indeed, been conflict in interest in the ways the grants were awarded to states by the DOE. In the investigation and the follow-up recommendations for change, the GAO identified the DOE’s failure to act, rather than its having acted inappropriately in using that particular materials or methods would be privileged in the competition for funds. Henceforward DOE would make it clear and in writing that there were no such expectations or advantages...

http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org/Publications/publications.htm