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Metaphors for Meaningful Documents

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INTRODUCTION

The ever-increasing speed and reach of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are often lauded for the beneficial social effects we are told they have. These benefits are frequently framed in terms of proliferation: that is, greater access to knowledge and increased connections between individuals. According to this line of thinking, networks and community become linked, with “dreams of reviving a civic society, interpersonal ties, or organizational cohesion” accompanying each new technological breakthrough (Jung, Ball-Rokeach, Kim & Matei, 2009, p. 564). These ideal new communities are strengthened by the influx of newly accessible knowledge (Castells, 2015, p. 15).

Whether or not these stories told about ICTs are well-founded, they do raise questions about the connection between knowledge and social relationships. To be in relationship with another person, we have to know that person. Our most important relationships, those that occur face-to-face, are founded, in part, on full and immediate access to the other person. With this access comes greater knowledge of that person. However, ICTs are closely tied to globalization and the expansion of social relationships beyond the face-to-face. How do meaningful relationships occur in a world where, as Ron Day (2014) notes, both individuals and groups are increasingly represented in the form of data?

To answer this question, one approach is to consider the role of documents as things that hold and communicate content. In a world increasingly influenced by ICTs, one that allows ever more connections between individuals who would never otherwise meet, a greater burden is placed on documents to achieve the relational function that would otherwise be performed only face-to-face. In this context, documents are a key element of increased connection and increased access. Documents connect individuals in this environment, presumably with the tacit assumption that the content they hold communicates knowledge from or about other individuals. To continue the line of questioning, however, we need to ask whether the content carried in the document is “meaningful.” It is clear that documents are one of the primary ways we gain knowledge about another person in the globalized world, but it is not clear what happens in that encounter in terms of relationship.

Articulating the association of relationship and knowledge requires recasting knowledge as understanding. Understanding here means something other than what Bawden and Robinson (2016) argue should be included in the data–information–knowledge–wisdom hierarchy within the information sciences. Their call to focus on understanding as higher-order knowledge has value but does not get at the sense of understanding as relational. 20th-century philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (2006) insists that understanding is not epistemological. Whereas knowledge is given or received, understanding is revealed or experienced. This is a significant distinction that allows us to move beyond what the document says

“about” the other to the kinds of encounter “with” the other the document might allow.

USING METAPHORS TO UNDERSTAND ABSTRACT PHENOMENA

Again, though, we are presented with something that is difficult to articulate. This paper takes the approach of using metaphors to think through the possibilities for documents to aid or impede relationships. Specifically, it asks what the document may be compared to when considering whether it provides the opportunity for understanding. Scholarship on metaphors has argued that rather than something extra, thrown in for rhetorical punch, metaphors are actually one of the primary ways we think through relatively abstract and unstructured phenomena. They are not just elements of language, but are instrumental components of thinking (Gibbs, Lenz Costa Lima & Francozo, 1995, p. 1191). Joel Weinsheimer believes that Gadamer raises the possibility that “understanding itself is essentially metaphorical” (Weinsheimer, 1991, p. 65) when Gadamer writes about “the fundamental metaphoricity of language” and then states that “Being that can be understood is language.” Without taking the time to fully unpack that set of statements, what we can take from Gadamer is the idea that whenever our attempts to wrestle with an idea exceed our grasp of that idea, that thinking is metaphorical. That is because metaphors allow us to consider what is simultaneously different and the same, fusing two horizons, in the parlance of Gadamer. Metaphors, then, are an appropriate way to beginning studying the role of documents in relationship.

The idea that documents play a role in relationships that cross space and time may be evident. What is not obvious is how this relationship actually works in a document itself. In wrestling with this idea, I find myself articulating it through the following metaphors: the document as a bridge, a window, a painting, a briefcase, and a mirror. As a bridge, a document may provide a way to traverse an obstacle—in this case the space that separates individuals—unimpeded. As a window, maybe a document provides a clear line of sight, but one that is framed. Perhaps a document is a painting, something created and then appreciated or interpreted. As a briefcase, a document is a container, something that is filled with, stores, and carries things. Finally, as a mirror, the document might reflect individuals back to themselves.

To provide something concrete upon which to reflect, this paper applies the metaphors to my hermeneutic reading of specific documents that are explicitly tied to meaning about individuals. The United Church of Canada ran 15 of Canada’s 139 residential schools until 1969, when the last one closed. Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or TRC, was established to hear from Indigenous people who were taken as children to these residential schools. According to the TRC, the schools were intended to “break [Indigenous children’s] link to their culture and identity ... a policy of cultural genocide” (Truth and Reconciliation

Commission of Canada, 2015). Though the church has since apologized, the process of reconciliation with Canada's Indigenous people has been difficult. Between 2008 and 2017, the United Church of Canada produced 38 documents as part of this process. Together, the documents are intended to increase awareness and understanding of Indigenous people and Indigeneity in relationship to the church, a focus that lends itself well to my study of understanding others through documents.

The challenges the church faces make this group of documents especially relevant for a study concerned with the meaning documents are able to convey in an ICT context. On the one hand, the documents are created with good intentions, but it is not clear that meaning is fully delivered. On the other hand, the demographic challenges of Canada, with its immense geographical distances and dispersed population, necessitates the accessibility of documents through ICTs. Each of these documents, in their publicly available form, is found online on the church's website in different formats. According to its own records, the United Church of Canada wants reconciliation to be embraced not just by the church as an institution but also by the church's individual members and pursues the communication and realization of that goal, in part, by creating and disseminating these documents.

FIVE METAPHORS FOR DOCUMENTS IN RELATIONSHIP

The first metaphor we will look at is the bridge. Bridges are structures that carry people across an obstacle like a river or ravine. The obstacle necessitates the bridge. Bridges also orient us to our destination because the number of paths to traverse the obstacle are limited. If documents are bridges, they overcome the obstacles of space and time that separate individuals. The reader hopes to reach knowledge of the document's subject; that is the destination on the other side of the obstacle to which the reader is oriented. When that subject is the other, we need to think carefully about that destination and orientation. Whereas bridges actually allow us to reach the destination, documents only get us part of the way, not allowing a face-to-face encounter *with* the other—the location of true relationship—but only the acquisition of more information about that other. In orienting us, however, the creator of a document provides good guidelines to make that initial movement across the bridge. Even within its limitations, we may come to reach a point where we can see the destination across the obstacle a bit more clearly, even if we cannot reach it. *Aboriginal Sunday: Celebration and Thanksgiving Service* (Aboriginal Sunday, 2016) shows a document working as a bridge. Its goal is for participants “to explore what reconciliation means and to dream about what reconciliation might look like in their community of faith,” a destination that puts the focus not just on the spatial and temporal obstacles that separate those participants from Indigenous others, but on the ongoing obstruction of broken relationship. *Aboriginal Sunday*

orients its readers to the abstract Indigenous other in the form of a theme, that “Stones are sacred holders of wisdom and story,” which sets up an unspoken association of stones with Indigenous ways of knowing—a very general way to consider the Indigenous other—that is carried throughout the liturgy. In this document, then, no individual Indigenous person is present and available to reach, yet we get a limited sense of Indigenous people in general.

The next metaphor is the window, something that we use for two main purposes, to provide light and sight when a wall restricts those things. The window is always framed within a wall and can provide only so much light and sight. What may be seen through the window depends on where one is in the room. Documents, as windows, provide an opening through the specific contexts in which they are embedded to the other, even if that opening is restricted. Readers may glimpse something important about the other, even though it cannot not be the full complexity of the other, and what is glimpsed depends on the orientation of the reader. At the same time, just as a person may experience the light coming through a window even without looking for it, the reader of a document may experience an undetermined aspect of the other that shines through despite the document’s framing. In a letter written on September 8, 2016, concerning the church’s commitment to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Right Reverend Jordan Cantwell provides us with a document that acts as a window to the Indigenous other. The UN Declaration forms the frame—the structuring context for the document’s subject. Cantwell, as the Moderator, or leader, of the church, invites readers to stand in a specific vantage point in relationship to that frame that matches her own. She sees the Indigenous other not just in terms of policy, though she acknowledges that dimension of the relationship. Prior to that acknowledgement, she focuses on how “the UN Declaration offers us a new way of understanding how we are in relationship with each other.” She also uses the letter as an opportunity to give a line of sight to a specific Indigenous person, Alberta Billy. We can only see so much of Alberta Billy through the window of the letter, not learning much beyond the fact that it was she who told the church in 1985 that the church owed Indigenous Peoples an apology. Yet, the light of Alberta Billy shines through this letter in her quote from an interview in which she answers a question about what the church can do now to live out the apology for which she asked, a quote in which she focuses on what it means to be Indigenous. It is limited to a few lines, but it gives a sense of her and her Indigeneity that goes beyond the words.

The third metaphor, that a document is a painting, is not new. Tim Gorichanaz (2018) explicitly considered this relationship just last year at DOCAM in his discussion of documents and moral knowledge that focused on art in Yellowstone National Park. Because art itself is a very complicated subject with many different lines of inquiry, this has the potential to be a much more complicated

metaphor. Instead of focusing on aesthetics and hermeneutics, for instance, I want to consider painting in a very colloquial way. Paintings are created and then viewed, just as documents are created and then read. People tend to think that paintings are about something and often spend some time when they are viewing them trying to perform the act of interpretation that will give them insight into what that something is. Because paintings do not have words, this act of interpretation may seem difficult. The subject may be obscured, but people are fairly certain that it is there. What they are left with, more than an exact subject of the painting, is an impression, something they have difficulty putting into words. The focus of documents is often their words, but the interaction between the reader and the document may be similar to the interaction between the viewer and the painting. This metaphor places the emphasis on the act of interpretation, a kind of intention that readers have as they approach the document. As with paintings, interpretation of documents may involve struggling with an obscured subject. When the subject is the other, the other is obscured. To what extent depends on the creator, just as with a painting. Even if the creator explicitly intends to present the other, that other will still be partially obscured because of the creator's particular style and point of view. That a painting leaves an impression does not surprise us. We do not expect a painting to deliver a very specific message. We *do*, however, with many documents, where our anticipation is epistemological. Yet, when a document concerns the other, the epistemological appropriation of the other may obscure the impression that inevitably accompanies it. The *Prayer for Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women*, written by Alydia Smith, is much like a painting. In the prayer, Smith asks the Creator to

Nurture and care for the women who are still missing; may they be sustained by love despite the hatred around them. Gather the women who have been murdered; may they find peace despite the violence that has bound them. Comfort the families and communities of the missing women; may they find joy in the memories of their loved ones despite the sadness in their hearts. (Smith, 2014)

We have an impression of these women as individuals caught between hatred and love. Readers do not actually learn anything specific about these women, who they are or their circumstances. Depending on the reader and the circumstances under which they encounter this document, there may be an epistemological temptation to inquire after those missing details and not only miss the point, but reduce those women to the details we wish to know about them.

The fourth metaphor, that of the briefcase, was my earliest attempt to make sense of the document as something that conveyed meaning. I was struck by the container and content metaphor that scholars like Richard Smiraglia (2001) and Ron Day (2008) have discussed, as well as the closely-related conduit metaphor, and found myself applying them not just to the text as a concrete set of ideas, but

to the meaning behind those ideas. The text is not just printed letters; it conveys some mixture of information, knowledge, and meaning. The container metaphor drew attention to the fact that documents are objects, things that are bounded. This allows them to be carried across time and space and transport their ideas with them. But it also means that the meaning they contain must necessarily be limited, too—limited because it corresponds to the text in some way. A briefcase, after all, can only hold so much. When the text is about individual people or a group of people, as is the case with the UCC's documents concerning Indigenous peoples, that constraint of meaning may be problematic. Meaning is always complex; the meaning of others is more so; trying to confine it in the object of a document limits the meaning concerning the other that may be experienced through that document. *Living on the Path of Respect: A Worship Service on the Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery* (Hur et al., 2017) contains information about the subjugation and assimilation of Indigenous people in Canada. It also contains abundant language designed to reflect Indigenous ways of knowing, which is common for the church's documents. For example, the opening prayer appeals to "Creator and Keeper of covenants and treaties old and new, whose voice we hear in the winds of the four directions, your Spirit inspires us to celebrate your presence and live with respect in creation." These are the right kinds of things for the authors to place inside *Living on the Path of Respect* and yet, even though the document was reviewed by Indigenous individuals, there is no Indigenous other in the document *with whom we may have a personal encounter*. The reader is, above all, presented with a reconciliation exercise based on knowledge about the group of people and the language associated with them in a general sense.

The final metaphor is a mirror. Mirrors reflect us back to ourselves, showing us what we look like in that moment of reflection. If a document is a mirror, what exactly is reflected back to a reader? Unless that document is something like a personal journal entry, this may seem like a strange comparison. Obviously, the reflection is not physical in form. However, documents may reflect meaning back to the reader in the form of understanding. In other words, in experiencing a document, a reader may come to realize where she actually stands in relationship to the other. A document, because it cannot provide direct contact with the other, shows the limitations of that relationship, one based on epistemology. As a result, the document may aid in the reader's self-understanding of her own prejudices and situated context. This is the nature of Gadamerian understanding. Of course, metaphors are never perfect comparisons and that is true here as well. Mirrors do not reflect back to us something that is not there, which is the case with Gadamerian understanding. Also, a mirror will always reflect you back to yourself, but readers do not always experience understanding when encountering a document. Nevertheless, thinking about the document as a mirror may be a first step to better comprehending how the act of understanding the other interacts with the seemingly

one-sided relationship a reader has with a document. The church's General Council Officer for Residential Schools, the Rev. James Scott, wrote a sermon titled *The Gift in Apology* that interprets the church's 1986 apology in terms of self-understanding and, in this way, positions the document in the role of a mirror. He writes:

when we open ourselves in apology, we see not only ourselves more clearly but also the other. ... Real apology offers us the opportunity to leave the prison of our own preconceived ideas and become enriched by encounter with those whose ways and wisdom are different from our own. (Scott, n.d.)

Though this document explicitly reflects readers back to themselves, showing them their shortcomings in understanding, other documents with less explicit language may do the same thing.

CONCLUSION

Thinking about the church's documents through the lens of metaphors is an initial conceptual step in thinking about meaning in these documents. As is the case with all metaphors, documents both are and are not the metaphors applied to them, both different and the same. Yet, through these metaphors, we gain important insights into the extent to which documents connect individuals as they are called to in this ICT environment. There is much that documents cannot do. Because they are not bridges, they cannot physically get us to the other. As briefcases, documents cannot contain all that may be said of the other. They share the "limitation" of windows in restricting our range of view, obscuring the other just as occurs in paintings. These weaknesses, taken together, do not inspire much confidence in the ability of documents to help create meaningful relationships. Yet, the metaphors tell us more. Documents, as bridges and windows, may orient readers to the other. As windows and paintings, they may allow readers to have an undetermined impression of the other. Documents, as mirrors, may reflect self-understanding back to readers. In all of these ways, documents play a role in helping to form the meaningful relationships we have across space and time.

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