

## **Intentional Language and the Power of Metaphor** *Helping Students Build a Learning Community*

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### **Abstract**

Metaphors are an effective pedagogical tool used within the classroom to enhance and facilitate learning and growth. This article draws attention to the intentional, and sometimes even unintentional, use of metaphors with regard to what metaphors open up and afford, and how metaphors are created or formed. Specific examples of metaphors are forwarded to offer practical examples and their intended outcomes. Finally, challenges and cautions are noted for all to consider as metaphors are accessed, leveraged, and refined.

**KEYWORDS:** *Community building, learning community, metaphor, pedagogy*

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For this next section of material, I would like to plant the seed before we begin. As we discuss it, let it grow through our continued dialogue about.... In this classroom, we will be doing more than simply pouring in ideas and knowledge for you to regurgitate back on tests or papers, we want you to be critical thinkers and learners.... It is important for us to create an environment and context to cultivate learning so that we can leave here transformed and inspired.... One thing I always say is it is better to teach a person to fish rather than just give him a fish. This is the philosophy of this course: teaching you to fish.

The use of metaphor is a commonly encountered pedagogical strategy found across diverse courses and disciplines. Metaphors are a potentially powerful tool due to their informal, tacit, and intuitive structures that attempt to invite deeper and more meaningful engagement and learning. Steeped in poetic, lyrical, and storytelling qualities along with the intentional use of language, leveraging of metaphors creates a communicative sharing of ideas and associated feelings to facilitate a context where learners gain understanding through novel and personally resonating means. There is an implicit invitation through the use of metaphors for students to *read* and *see* themselves, their learning, and the world in simultaneously different, and yet familiar, ways. In this article, metaphors are forwarded as *one* potential pedagogical tool for the creation of communities of shared learning. Examples are provided of metaphors employed by the various learning communities featured in this special issue, as well as a discussion on the challenges and cautions to be considered when employing this pedagogical strategy.

### **Metaphors Are Like. . .**

In the classroom, metaphors can be purposefully used as narratives, anecdotes, or a collection of experiences intended to introduce, explicate, or clarify a concept, idea, or strategy for learning. It is through these ways that metaphors can assist in learning, acting as an agent of transference through which meaning making can pass from one person to another, or one situation to another. Since the term metaphor has such widespread use, it is tantamount that it be carefully defined. A metaphor is defined as "a figure of speech wherein one thing is likened to another in such a way that the comparison throws new light on the subject" (Bacon, 1983, p. 2). In a more pedagogical sense, metaphor may be defined as "exploiting a comparison to prove a point." (Gillis & Hirsch, 1998, p. ix). A variety of disciplines (e.g., biology, chemistry, religion and spirituality, medicine, recreation and leisure, psychology, higher education, English and literature, and computer-assisted learning) employ metaphors as meaning making agents. Through formal and structured, as well as informal and unstructured ways, metaphors shape the classroom and learning environment, impacting instructors and students in their mutual learning and growth.

While the use of metaphors can be generative in a pedagogical sense, they often exist in disconcerting ways moving through and encouraging discourses without their presence being detected or their influence critically examined. Arguably, these metaphors are *axiomatic*, or perceived to be self-evident or unquestionable. For example, Sfard (1998) troubled two dominant axiomatic metaphors concerning

education and learning, and their influence on pedagogy. The traditional, older, and dominant approach to learning was situated in an *acquisition metaphor*, which implies that knowledge and learning takes place when students “acquire” knowledge for their individual enrichment. Pointing to the axiomatic nature of this metaphor, Sfard noted, “the *acquisition metaphor* is so strongly entrenched in our minds that we would probably never become aware of its existence if another, alternative metaphor did not start to develop” (1998, p. 6). This “other,” emerging, and alternative metaphor was proffered as a *participation metaphor* with regard to teaching and learning. Here the focus of learning is situated both in participating *in* and *with* a community. The *participation metaphor* situated learning as belonging, participating, and communicating within aspects of practice, discourse, and activity. Sfard’s metaphor shifts focus of the learning from individual gains to that of a community of understanding and collective growth. Being alert to the potential axiomatic qualities of the many metaphors that circulate through pedagogical discourse warrants pause and reflection to consider their significance, influence, and ultimately their use.

Though one must exercise all due discretion in constructing and deploying metaphors in the classroom, this is not to diminish their potency as a pedagogical tool. In order for meaning making to provide lasting change, transference through metaphors should occur. Metaphor, as a method of transference, is an affordance for what is learned in one setting to be applied in other contexts. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) noted, “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (p. 5). This experiencing and understanding can facilitate growth and development that transcends isolated contexts. Referred to as the transfer of learning, Gass (1995) identified three different types of transfer with regard to learning: *specific transfer*, *non-specific transfer*, and *metaphoric transfer*. Metaphoric transfer “occurs when parallel processes in one learning situation become analogous to learning in another different, yet similar situation” (p. 245). A key concept within metaphoric transfer is *isomorphism*, which Bacon (1983) described as “having the same structure” (p. 4). The similarity of structures—between what unfolds in the classroom and experiences that occur outside of it—allow for the transference of knowledge, learning, and skills to multiple contexts and situations.

The creation of metaphors generally occurs in three ways: *a priori*, *a posteriori*, or *iteratively*. This article uses examples from integrative approaches of teaching and learning to illustrate how metaphors were employed to build communal learning environments. Some metaphors were identified *a priori*, or before the experience, and then associated with specific learning goals and outcomes for a given course. Other metaphors arose *a posteriori*, or after the experience or class, often arising from teaching team meetings to further develop and reinforce the learning outcomes for the course. A third way metaphors were created was *iteratively*, or during the experience. In these cases, the line between pedagogues and students was blurred. In these instances both were invited to co-create metaphors where learning becomes fluid and multi-directional.

### **Metaphorical Examples**

What follows are brief descriptions of metaphors employed to contextualize learning and build community for students. In each description, the metaphors are described with their associated learning outcomes and the purposeful intent

behind their development and use. Although we welcome adoption of the forwarded metaphors, we prefer that you as readers and metaphoring pedagogues be inspired by what is shared, and thus create salient metaphors that work directly with your specific contexts, students, and learning outcomes. Additionally, the metaphors presented here are continually revisited and restructured as the context of the learning environment changes, further illustrating the iterative and evolving nature of pedagogical metaphors.

The University of Georgia's *Unified Core* (Powell, Johnson, James, & Dunlap, this issue) employs the use of several metaphors throughout the semester to foster and enhance the learning community. Early in the semester scenes from the *Matrix* (Silver, Wachowski, & Wachowski, 1999) are incorporated with an introductory lecture on experiential learning. The scene where Neo (played by Keanu Reeves) is given a choice by Morpheus (played by Laurence Fishburne) to either take a blue pill or red pill, is used as a metaphor for the academic journey on which the students are about to embark. This metaphor works to illustrate the parallel structures between the classroom and what is visually depicted on the screen: just as Neo is given the option to leave the Matrix by taking the red pill, so also are students presented with the option to leave the traditional model of education (*acquisition* metaphor), for that of a student-centered, experiential, and empowered approach to learning and understanding (Carver, 1996). Here, the curtain is drawn back to invite students into the process and to trouble their role of being only passive receivers of knowledge, truth, ideas, or concepts.

Two-thirds of the way through the semester, students are presented with another metaphor: the flashlight. Up to this point in the semester, most of the educational decisions (e.g., content, process, medium, sequencing, and timing) are made for the students by the instructors. The metaphor of the use of a flashlight signals a shift in the decision making power from teacher to student. The metaphor is dramatically introduced as students begin work on their *Critical Issues* projects, an assignment that promotes engagement through community connection and civic action (Pate, Tobias, Powell, & Johnson, 2011). An instructor positions herself/himself at the front of the class with all of the lights turned out. The instructor then puts on a headlamp and proceeds to shine its light around the room allowing it to fall on textbooks, notebooks, and other teaching materials. The intent is to "illuminate" all of the mediums used so far throughout the semester, which have served as guideposts and materials to facilitate learning. Then the instructor takes off the headlamp and hands it to one of the students. The students are informed that they are now "entrusted with the flashlight" to seek out their own learning through the *Critical Issues* investigations. The emphasis here is handing over the learning to the students (via the flashlight) for them to illuminate issues of their choosing, encourages them as light holders to go forth as engaged citizens and professionals.

A final metaphor employed, this time in the *Integrative Event Design* (cf. Johnson & Pate, this issue) course that combines classes on Experiential Education, Research and Evaluation, and Event Management, is based on Lewis Carol's *Alice in Wonderland*. In the Research and Evaluation course, students are presented a lecture introducing them to research with the central metaphor centered on the adventures and outcomes of Alice wandering down the rabbit hole. Through this metaphor, students discuss what things Alice confronted as she proceeded further into Wonderland. Conversations arise about how Alice's world is turned upside down due to the things in which she

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was certain were true but are now questionable. These observations relate directly to conversations on varying epistemologies and worldviews that inform philosophical decision-making underlying research design. Students find themselves exposed to worldviews that challenge dominant and entrenched beliefs concerning what they know, or think they know, about truth, fact, and the outcomes and processes of science. Further, discussions are facilitated on how Alice must identify and voice where exactly she wants to go as she is pointedly confronted by the Cheshire Cat. Instructors use this exchange to metaphorically address issues related to the purpose, design, and intended outcomes that must be identified when creating and developing a research study. These examples illuminate specific metaphors used to facilitate the creation of learning communities where students engage with content, processes of learning, and others in unique and innovative ways.

### **Challenges and Cautions in the Use of Metaphors**

As with any pedagogical strategy, it is important to continually evaluate its use and effectiveness to facilitate learning. With regard to forwarding metaphors as a pedagogical tool, Bacon (1993) warned that if their use is too widespread, their power and impact may become compromised. Further, unintentional outcomes can arise from metaphors based upon how they are presented and used in the classroom. Parks (2010) critiqued the hierarchical language and nature of many of the metaphors employed with students. She noted that through their articulation, and re-articulation, metaphors become “dense,” eventually taking on axiomatic qualities that are blindly accepted as truth, as opposed to being socially constructed and reenforced. Examples include notions that “up” or “forward” is desired and best and “down” and “behind” designates a person’s skills and competencies as *literally* being less than. Finally, Gass (1995) illuminated the subjective, individual nature, *and* partiality of metaphors by noting their possession of value only when: “it is able to interpret the right experience; in a manner that provides the right picture; that produces the right words; that have deep meaning; for that particular person” (p. xv). These thoughts are offered as challenges and cautions not to discourage the use of metaphors, but to encourage a continual re-examination of their intent, effectiveness, and application to the dynamic and fluid learning environment.

To note, all of the metaphors forwarded in this work were continually critiqued and assessed on their usefulness and effectiveness. For example, use of the movie the *Matrix* (Silver, Wachowski, & Wachowski, 1999) was frequently questioned with regard to whether students could connect with the movie and the associated metaphor employed in the class based on their familiarity with the movie as an accessible cultural reference. As the years pass, the number of students who have not seen the movie increases, thus challenging instructors to identify more contemporary metaphors with which students can directly and more fully relate. Another critique is whether the reference to red or blue pills promotes substance use as Neo is given the choice between the two. Although the focus of this metaphor is on the choice, and the subsequent outcomes of this choice as it relates to student’s ability to choose to take ownership of their learning and ultimately their future, it justifiably can raise concerns over its appropriateness within an educational context.

## Conclusion

Metaphors are an effective pedagogical tool used within the classroom to enhance and facilitate learning and growth. This article sought to draw attention to the intentional, and sometimes even unintentional, use of metaphors with regard to what metaphors open up and afford, and how metaphors are created or formed. Specific examples of metaphors were forwarded to offer practical examples and their intended outcomes. Finally, challenges and cautions were noted for all to consider as metaphors are accessed, leveraged, and refined. Metaphors, and the intentional use of language, afford a powerful pedagogical strategy to engage students as part of a holistic and community approach to learning.

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