

Essays on Teaching Excellence

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Metaphors We Teach By: Understanding Ourselves as Teachers and Learners

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The Power of Metaphor As human communicators, we unconsciously use metaphor as a tool that helps us make sense of reality. Metaphors serve as filters for our perceptions, providing a kind of framework within which we interpret our experiences and assign meaning to them. When filters work negatively or inaccurately, they may delete or distort information or cause us to make false generalizations that confuse our perceptions. In this essay metaphor is to be understood as a global term meaning a comparison between two unlike things which serves to enhance our understanding.

Because the metaphors we live by are typically below our level of conscious awareness, we may not easily recognize the strengths or limitations of their messages. Nevertheless, they are a powerful influence upon us, not just reflecting attitudes but shaping our perspectives and our actions.

The metaphors we use determine how we interpret reality and experience. Consider, for example, metaphors for love. "My love is a flower" suggests delicacy and beauty, along with fragility and impermanence. "My love is an open book" suggests honesty, frankness, and self-disclosure or perhaps with no secrets and no mysteries. "My love is a rock" suggests stability, permanence, and strength, as well as rigidity and static growth. "My love is my life"

suggests complete commitment, dedication, and investment of self which could suggest total dependence. Our perspective on love will affect not only our attitudes about relationships but also our behavior toward those we love.

Any metaphor we use has the potential to expand or limit our range of options to lead us toward growth and development or to keep us chained to narrow, inflexible, unchanging ways of being. The challenge is to bring our operating metaphors into conscious awareness, to consider how they may be encouraging or restricting our growth, and to change those metaphors that are creating too many limitations.

A Sampling of Teaching Metaphors Many educational metaphors exist that describe the processes of teaching and learning. The metaphors with which we are most comfortable as teachers communicate clearly our philosophy of teaching and learning, revealing how we see ourselves in relationship to students and what we think it means to teach.

Perhaps the most basic, traditional, and common metaphor of teaching is simply to say that "teaching is telling." Many college and university faculty appear to have this as their primary operating metaphor. The teacher possesses the body of knowledge, and learning occurs when the student is told the information. At its most fundamental level, this metaphor is based on the assumption that the teacher who stands in front of the class and talks about the subject at hand is engaged in teaching and that therefore students are learning. Much large-class and lecture teaching is clearly based on this metaphor.

Many college curricula support this metaphor through their detailed objectives about what students must learn, without clearly developed strategies by which the learning will occur. Faculty express this metaphor implicitly when they state their concerns about "covering" the material, meaning that they need to tell the students about the material. They also reflect this metaphor when they define faculty development strictly in terms of gaining more knowledge about their disciplines, excluding activities which enhance teaching.

Another traditional metaphor of teaching that fits under the "teaching is telling" model is that teaching is like banking. Knowledge exists in the head of the teacher, who deposits the information into the head of the student. The student is a passive recipient of the wisdom of the teacher.

This model at least allows for the possibility that the student's knowledge may earn interest.

The metaphor that "the teacher is the master, the student the disciple" also fits in this general category. This metaphor more explicitly delineates the power-over relationship between teacher and student although when the teacher is telling or depositing knowledge, power-over is also suggested.

What are the limitations of these kinds of metaphors?

- They view the teaching-learning process as a one-way exchange in which the power, authority, and expertise of the teacher exert control over the student.
- They view students as passive, rather than active learners, and tend to overlook opportunities for students to become engaged with the material they are learning.
- They view teaching excellence as primarily dependent on discipline knowledge and tend to overlook other factors that contribute to quality teaching and learning.
- They subtly encourage faculty to be nonreflective practitioners in their teaching role.

Other metaphors express the teaching role differently. For example, if teaching is understood as gardening, a more organic view of the teaching-learning process emerges. The teacher has to nourish the soil, eliminate the weeds, and do all the other hard work that creates a nurturing learning environment; but this model recognizes students as living beings with realities of their own. The teacher makes learning and growth possible by tending the garden of new learners. Cooking is a metaphor that can view teaching from either a

traditional teacher-centered approach or from a more cooperative, group-centered one.

Some people cook with inspired creativity, some with bored monotony. Some cook from standard recipes while others create their own. Some repeat the same menus week after week while others are continually coming up with new presentations and inventions. Some cook to delight the diners, while some disappoint or displease. The cooking metaphor can be enlarged, however, to include group efforts. In the traditional view, the teacher cooking alone as a master chef would be the important focus; from a more cooperative perspective, students and teacher could be cooking and creating together.

In the metaphor of teaching as coaching, focus again is on a cooperative approach. Individual team members do the work of learning, often in a group setting, and they are expected to do the hard work of learning and achieve learning outcomes that will enable them to perform competently when they leave the classroom. They cannot be passive recipients of information. The teacher's role is to motivate, encourage, challenge, and inspire students to achieve their potential as learners. Students are actively involved; but if they fail to achieve, the teacher cannot simply assign blame to them as poor players.

Another common metaphor is of the teacher as a guide on the journey of learning. This perspective recognizes the superior knowledge and experience of the teacher, but in addition can include the mutuality of the learning process. Students and teacher are together engaged in the adventure of the journey. The teacher may have been on the path more often and may know the right direction, so from a traditional orientation, the guide would simply tell the students where to go.

A more cooperative perspective, however, would allow the guide to take advantage of the collective wisdom of the students. As fellow travelers the students would be able to share in the difficulties of travel, to point out new and inviting paths, and to help make corrections if the group should become lost.

Conclusion Our culture is rich with colorful and interesting metaphors of teaching. Identifying our own metaphors allows us to reflect on the way we define our role and purpose in the classroom. What are the values reflected in our metaphors, and how do we manifest those values? Do we see ourselves as the sole authority, or do we view learning as a shared process? Do we want to give up some power so that students can learn cooperatively, or do we want to retain control?

At a time when rapid increases in instructional technologies and distance learning and continuing constraints in budgetary resources are causing a reexamination of the role of higher education faculty, we may be experiencing a shift in the dominant societal metaphor for teaching. A common phrase in our current discussions about teaching and learning suggests that a paradigm shift is occurring, moving from "the sage on the stage" to the "guide on the side." Such a shift would signal an enormous change for many faculty, and we have yet to learn whether these values are actually being internalized by a majority.

Because the language of metaphor shapes our perceptions and influences our behaviors as teachers, we clearly need to have a conscious awareness of the dominant metaphors that guide us. Knowing what we believe gives us the freedom to make changes if we find that such a step is necessary. Whether we determine that our perspective is part of a more traditional view or closer to a vision for the future, understanding our own philosophy of teaching will in itself enrich and enhance our practice.