

Metaphor

What are metaphors?

A metaphor is the tool that enables us to see one thing in terms of another. Or, to put it another way, metaphor involves representation of one thing as though it were something else. “I felt like I was walking on air;” “Feeling down in the dumps?” “He pulled himself up by his bootstraps;” “The markets went south;” etc. We constantly make this peculiar kind of substitution in order to give force and energy and richer meaning than can be managed by a simple literal phrase or sentence. This peculiar ability lies at the heart of human intellectual inventiveness, creativity, and imagination. We do not all use metaphor equally well, but we all have access to it, and the use of appropriate metaphors can stimulate the imagination and creativity in all subject areas. It is important to help students keep this ability vividly alive by exercising it frequently; using it routinely in teaching will help students learn to read with energy and flexibility.

In the imaginative classroom, then, teachers will not only use metaphors constantly—which we can hardly avoid doing—but will call attention to them (as, for example, in the above case of “influence”), discuss them, encourage students to recognize their own and reflect on how they work. Just one or two daily—or even less frequently, as long as it becomes a consistent exercise—bringing metaphors to conscious attention and analysis.

How can we employ metaphors in teaching?

For examples click [here](#).

Topic: Flags

Subject Area: Social Studies

Cognitive Tool: Metaphor

Flags represent nations/places. They are visual metaphors upon which symbols, patterns, colors and so on, represent some quality or feature of the nation/place. Students can be encouraged to explore flags as metaphors—what can they learn about a nation/place from the flag?

Topic: Vocabulary Development

Subject Area: Second Language Learning

Cognitive Tool: Metaphor

A teacher might tell her students they are journeying to a new land. In this new and exotic place they encounter things like “pupitres” and “crayons” “murs” and “portes”. She may later tell them they are in fact learning French. In this example we have a metaphor of French being “a different planet” and learning French being a journey or expedition to a new world. Teachers might assign students the task of discovering the scientific usage of these oddly named items. So, for example, what does one do with “des souliers”? One could provide

students with three or four different verbs associated with “soulers” (shoes) that they could then use in describing the functions or actions of shoes. Des soulers *marchent, courent* etc. What do people do with them? On *porte* des soulers. On *enlève* des soulers... etc. Students could work in pairs to “explore” each new item (new French noun) and then present their findings to the class. Of course, we would ask them to use as many adjectives as possible to describe their items as well. Once everyone had presented their new vocabulary (which could be written on the board) students could then compose a tale of their voyage to the great Planète Française.

Why do metaphors engage our imaginations?

The power of metaphor is easily accessible to us; it suffuses our language at every turn. “Every turn,” “accessible,” “power,” and “suffuses,” for example, all involve casual uses of metaphor. Metaphor is one of the foundations of all our mental activity, a foundation upon which our systematic logics of rational inquiry also rest, or—a better metaphor—a ground out of which they grow. As Lévi-Strauss observes, “metaphor . . . is not a later embellishment of language but is one of its fundamental modes—a primary form of discursive thought” (Lévi-Strauss, 1962, p. 102). We value highly those people who can generate new metaphors; they can offer striking insights and they simply expand our power to think. We value writers who can enliven our reading by clever metaphoric play. Shakespeare seemed able to generate vivid metaphors as easily as breathing, and this power makes his lines seem fresh and striking hundreds of years later. Einstein has described how his insights into relativity came through his seeing the cosmos as though from the perspective of a particle moving towards the speed of light.

To get some idea of the influence and power of metaphor, you might try to construct a sentence that has no metaphors. Once you look carefully at the previous sentence, for example, you see a graveyard of metaphors. I call it a graveyard (to use a metaphor about metaphors!) because what were once clever linguistic creations have become so much taken for granted, and read so literally, that we fail to notice their metaphoric essence. “Influence” comes from words that literally meant to “flow in.” How creative an act it was to apply this sense of water flowing in to some area or container to the way in which an idea might affect the way someone was planning an action. Or how strange, but apt and striking, it must have seemed when someone applied the sense of putting stones or wood together to build something—“constructing”—to putting words together to make a sentence.

Perhaps surprisingly, it has been shown that the capacity to generate and recognize appropriate metaphors seems to peak in humans at about age 4 (Gardner & Winner, 1979; Winner, 1988). Thereafter this crucial skill seems to go into decline, with a slight spurt again during puberty, and then it’s downhill all the way, not exactly following the progressive profile suggested by “developmental” theories. We would be prudent, then, to consider ways in which this metaphoric tool can play a role in the transition of children and adults to enriched understanding. If metaphor is important for imaginative activity, as seems undeniable, we should consider it an important educational priority to work out how we might keep it energetic beyond the period of its usual decline and help its development.