

Composing With Metaphor

by
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Ask your students sometime what a metaphor is, and you may discover, as I did, that they first look horror-struck, then strain to remember just what the difference was between synecdoche and metonymy. Metaphor—an umbrella term I use to cover figurative language in general—has most often been presented to students as one in a series of tropes that must be defined, differentiated, and finally memorized. This pedagogical approach persists although there is good reason for us to find alternatives. As James Moffett (1968) points out, the information we present in the English classroom is not really a body of knowledge, but is instead a symbol system. In this respect our subject has more in common with mathematics than with history. As a result students profit more from actually using parts of that system, than they would from simply studying those parts as objects. Thus students who only learn to match examples of metaphor with their memorized definition may not come to understand it as a technique for making meaning.

Fortunately we are changing our traditional approach and are beginning to explore alternative ways to teach metaphor. Both the *Making It Strange* series for children and young people and the book *Writing the Natural Way* by Gabriele Rico for adults provide a wealth of suggestions for teaching metaphor as a heuristic—as a way of conceptualizing, making connections between ideas, and even structuring writing. But our field is not alone in reconsidering metaphor. In the last fifteen years studies from fields as diverse as philosophy, psychology, and linguistics have contributed to a growing accumulation of knowledge on the subject. Metaphor appears to be in its renaissance. We are discovering that it is not enough to settle for that basic definition we ask our students to memorize: metaphor is an expression that says one thing in terms of another. As studies show that stopping point is really only a point of departure. And what we are learning has implications for the teaching of metaphor. My purpose here then is to consider some of those implications and to recount my own experience and method of teaching students to compose with metaphor.

To account for how metaphor says one thing in terms of another we must start with the working labels provided by I. A. Richards (1936): the tenor is what is being compared, while the vehicle is what it is compared to. Thus in the stock metaphor, "That man is a fox," the tenor is the word "man" and the vehicle is the word "fox." These two roles must remain constant for a metaphor to be judged a metaphor, though in some kinds of figurative language, such as literary allusions, either the tenor or the vehicle may be implicit. A third component the metaphor must have is a ground—the connection between tenor and vehicle. The ground must be clear enough for the reader (or listener) to grasp the association and thus comprehend the metaphor.

Yet even within this basic analysis of parts and within the general definition we see a variety in what we can call metaphor. In the stock metaphor (or cliché) "She was as

good as gold" the ground between "good" and "gold" is an obvious one. With cliches, we can understand the metaphor as quickly as any literal expression (Swinney & Cutler, 1979). At the other extreme, the famous conceit of John Donne (a kind of novel metaphor) comparing the souls of two lovers to the legs of a compass stretches the ground connection to such extremes that we can comprehend its meaning best within the context of the whole poem.

Explaining how metaphor works using the labels of Richards is, of course, important in teaching metaphor. But students also need to grasp the range of possible metaphors. In my experience the majority of students will produce stock metaphors, with the novel metaphor occurring only rarely. This trend in the classroom reflects the outcome of much research in which stock metaphors are most often produced; ability to produce novel metaphor is, in fact, one measure of verbal creativity found in numerous creativity tests. So students can be made aware of these differences and encouraged to explore the possibilities of both.

While the stock and novel metaphors demonstrate extremes of distance in the ground, we also find that some metaphors can be more easily paraphrased than others. The ground of the stock metaphor "That man is a fox" can be broken down into features that describe the qualities the man has—"sly," "clever," "careful," and so on. However as Andrew Ortony (1975) points out, other metaphors cannot be paraphrased, and these may actually create a new concept. An example that comes to mind here is a metaphor a friend spontaneously produced once when we were stuck in a traffic jam in New Orleans. He remarked, "Living in New Orleans is like living in the mind of a demented person." While we could attempt paraphrase with adjectives such as "chaotic," "unusual," "dangerous," or "interesting," in the end, the whole of the metaphor seems to be more than the sum of its parts. As many residents of the city can probably testify, the concept is apropos! This principle comes into play when teaching students to produce their own metaphors. They need to understand that through metaphor they can actually create new concepts through a playful process similar to wit.

Many students find it far easier to produce analogies than metaphors. As we look at metaphor from yet another perspective, we can view it as similar to an analogy, but multi-faceted and more complex. Consider the analogy "A bee in a hive is like a person in a stadium." In it we might focus primarily on visual similarities of size, shape, and proportion. Or we might describe the analog as "animate creatures within an inanimate structure." Then compare the metaphor "That cat is a powder puff." It suggests not only something about the way the cat looks, but something about its personality, and possibly something of the cosmetic function of a cat—and it communicates all these facets simultaneously.

While the metaphor may be the more evocative of the two, having students practice creating analogies can be a useful stepping-stone to learning metaphor later. It can provide practice in seeing one thing in terms of another. As this excerpt from an analogy one of my students wrote shows the analogy also suggests to her how to structure her text:

Taking care of a plant is a lot like raising an adopted child. Once you've purchased your plant and have it back home, you have to decide what kind of environment is best for it. Where will you set up the "nursery?" Most parents select a sunny, bright room for their infant to grow up in. Children seem to thrive in colorful environments. The same is true for most plants. A majority of plants flourish in bright environments, like areca palms, sheffleras, and dieffenbachias. However, direct sunlight, as it can burn delicate newborn skin, will also burn most leaves, so make sure the light isn't too intense.

She shifts back and forth between the two concepts, comparing, contrasting, and providing support for each feature the two have in common.

Both the analogy and the metaphor we just looked at use images to convey meaning. In this they reflect the commonplace that metaphor works by producing pictures in the mind. Studies from psychology over the last decade have attempted to determine more precisely just what the role of image in metaphor is. They agree that metaphor appears to work both verbally and visually. Thus in our metaphor "That man is a fox" we focus on the verbal proposition "man is fox," and therefore the implied qualities "sly," "crafty," or "careful." Yet we probably also visualize the vehicle or the "fox" and through this process instantly transfer those visual qualities into words. It appears that metaphors vary in their reliance on imagery to convey meaning (Verbrugge, 1977): some metaphors produce a vivid image that seems more important than the verbal proposition, while others contain a clear proposition with little imagery at all.

What bearing does this finding have on teaching students to understand and produce their own metaphors? You may find that students do well at producing metaphors that start with an abstract tenor, one that is verbal rather than visual. So they might find metaphors for "friendship" or "school life." Or you might use as tenor inner states such as "contentment" or "sadness" which are so intangible that we can know them *only* through metaphor. For example, one student of mine developed an extended metaphor beginning, "Depression is a heavy weight on my chest." However, metaphors anchored in the visual are more difficult for them: asking them to find a metaphor for "the atmosphere of a restaurant" or "a walk in the woods" may prove more difficult.

This contrast between the verbal and the visual components is nowhere more apparent than in the mixed metaphor. Consider the metaphor "Kansas is the heart of the bread basket." Often the incongruity of the mixed metaphor—and thus the humor we find in it—is the result of it making sense as a verbal proposition, though the image it produces is preposterous. We might paraphrase this metaphor as "Kansas is the most important state of the wheat producing region." As a verbal proposition this interpretation of the metaphor makes sense. But the image this metaphor creates is a human heart in a basket of bread! So it is the image that is incongruous and therefore humorous.

Here too your students may fail to see the humor in mixed metaphors you show them. They may also produce mixed metaphors themselves. It is important here to understand why this might happen and not to impose our stringent literary standards that downgrade the mixed metaphor. As a metaphor it is as serviceable as any other,

and for the students it may be a way they choose to express themselves through metaphor.

This current research has been refining and redefining our understanding of metaphor, and its main implication for the classroom is that we can increase student understanding of metaphor well beyond our pat definition that "it says one thing in terms of another." We can combine this information with opportunities for students to identify metaphor in a broad range of contexts and to produce their own metaphors. Among books I recommend are *Teaching for the Two-Sided Mind* by Linda Williams and *Metaphors and Symbols* by Roland Bartel. Several books are also available through SES Associates (121 Brattle Street, Cambridge, MA 02138) including the *Making It Strange* and the *Strange and Familiar* series for elementary and secondary students and *The Metaphorical Way of Learning and Knowing*, an all-purpose introduction to metaphorical teaching.

In my own work teaching students in college-level composition classes to compose with metaphor I have developed some techniques for teaching them both to comprehend and create metaphors. Generally I begin by bringing in examples of metaphor from a variety of common sources—advertisements, history books, accounts of scientific discoveries, speeches, and newspaper articles. These are non-literary sources, so this selection helps to make the point that metaphor is not just a stylistic device confined to literature, but is instead a common means of conceptualizing and communicating. Students might also be asked to bring in their own examples. We arrive at a common definition of metaphor and then consider the following questions: "Where is the metaphor?" "What is it doing in the text?": and "What does it mean?"

Through this process we begin to focus on the larger conceptual value of metaphor in different written contexts. This method contrasts with the more traditional approach that presents metaphors in isolation and trains students to discern the minute differences between metonymy and synecdoche. In addition, this part of the process enables students to see the pervasiveness of metaphor as a conceptual device in our culture and helps build confidence in their ability to understand metaphor.

In the second stage each student creates her own metaphor and then uses it as the controlling metaphor for an essay. Here we practice by using a collaborative brainstorming technique borrowed from the book *Writing the Natural Way* by Gabriele Rico. For example, I might write the topic "dorm life" on the blackboard. Then we brainstorm qualities associated with dorm life: making friends, sharing clothes, lack of privacy, junk food, freedom from rules, self-discipline, doing laundry, and so on. Then the class begins to create metaphors for dorm life: survival training, a never-ending party, a madhouse, living in a heavy metal concert, backstage at a Miss America pageant, the real education, and so on. The qualities we generate during the first part of the brainstorm help students focus on the multiple aspects of dorm life; they work with it broken down into many components instead of trying to extrapolate from the undifferentiated term "dorm life." This initial brainstorm lays the groundwork for the *variety* of metaphorical concepts that follows.

Results from pedagogical applications and metaphor research suggest that metaphor is a valuable heuristic for student writing. It provides a means of conceptualizing and

gaining control of a topic. Here often students feel they are unqualified or have insufficient facts to speak knowledgeably about a subject. Yet through metaphor they discover an alternate mode of knowing, through which they know more than they think they know. My students, for example, found metaphors for the aging process, a topic remote to most of them.

They may also learn to explore a concept, to find out what they think about a topic through extending a metaphor. One student explored the problem of artist's block through metaphor:

The blank page; the white canvas; the empty void. . . all of these are phrases used to describe the problem that plagues most artists. Where does one start is the question that comes forth. What does an artist do when faced with an undefinable wall? It is a common thing for an artist to at some point be unable to produce. Because she or he will meet up with the "wall." Ideas run out, nothing is new, and the doldrums get in the way. . . . A blank page can cause a blank mind. . . and the wall can seem to go up and on forever. . . . The wall is her lack of practice and fear of failure. . . . Another wall is the artist's audience.

They may learn that any topic can be viewed through many perspectives. My class discovered that views of dorm life may vary from a madhouse to a Miss America pageant to an educational experience. Or they may form a new concept as my friend did about living in New Orleans. At the very least they should discover that making connections requires imagination as much as reason. Composing with metaphor will move them beyond simply memorizing a definition and give them instead a technique for making meaning.

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