Metaphor and Reflective Teaching

by

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As co-director of the New Jersey Writing Project with Dena Linett, I work with teachers to help them reflect on their writing and their teaching of writing, a process Schon (1983) recommends for all professionals. In the summer workshops, I ask teachers to reflect through the lens of metaphor.

Metaphor has been variously defined as ornament or as a powerful way of knowing. I intend teachers to use metaphor along the lines of the latter definition, so that they might discover their tacitly-held beliefs on writing, learning, and teaching.

A number of theorists have discussed this power of metaphor. I. A. Richards (1964) writes that we construct metaphors out of necessity, that the mind is a connecting organ whose connections, though indefinitely large, are never aimless. Colin Turbayne (1972) argues that metaphor is at once distortive and insightful. He suggests that we: 1) recognize the metaphor, and since Turbayne sees all language as essentially metaphoric, this step is often difficult; 2) strip away the metaphor; 3) reapply it consciously. Emig (1983) extends this analysis by distinguishing between "pupillary" (unconscious and necessary) and "magistral" (intentional and optional) uses of metaphor.

In writing workshops I have teachers begin a reflective process by completing the sentence "Writing is ..." with something they can draw. This direction requires specificity, but relieves the weighty academic overtones of metaphor-making. Teachers may complete the sentence more than once, eventually selecting the metaphor that has the most power. In this case, power translates into memorability and flexibility.

Once they have completed their sentences, I ask that they draw the picture their metaphor introduces. After they draw the representations of their metaphors, I ask them to examine the drawings to find any details they had not expected when they wrote the original sentence. The most interesting discoveries begin here, as teachers move away from the magistral to the pupillary uses of metaphor. The imagery of the metaphor begins to develop a life of its own, the teachers engage in a practice of "playful seriousness," and the extended text gives teachers a basis for analysis. Through the metaphor teachers realize they "know more than they can tell" (Polanyi, 1967), and they begin to tap into the ways in which they construct meaning through experience (Kelly, 1963).

One teacher wrote vivid fiction, where she chose her own topics, developed her own style and tapped her own experience. When she discussed teaching her own students, however, she said that she required them to map out their prewriting each time before moving to composing. She played with a metaphor to explore her writing and teaching practices to determine where one was consistent with the other. The result revealed an underlying incongruity:

We just had some major construction done on our house and when I was planning the changes in the kitchen, I asked the construction supervisor if he could put the microwave oven next to the conventional oven. He told me that usually wasn't a good idea, since microwave ovens cooked from the inside out, while conventional ovens cooked from the outside in. As I was thinking about that, I realized that I am a microwave writer, but a conventional teacher. I think I want to change that.

The result of teachers' metaphor production vary. Some teachers become more comfortable using metaphor as mediating language through which they examine someone else's ideas or text:

We also discussed Emig, Chapter 9, specifically Kelly's notions about individuals discovering their personal templates and personal constructs. We discussed my metaphor relating these templates to
sunglasses or contact lenses. If we are not aware we are wearing them, our construction of reality may be impaired for the purpose of communication.

This sparked further talk between us about personal knowledge. Some think that we all construct reality as they do. This type of thinking seems to be exemplifying the notion that we all have the same glasses or contact lenses. We do not.

This teacher thinks about a complex system of ideas and uses the metaphor of lenses to manage Kelly's construct theory in order to examine and discuss it. Although a deeper analysis of this theory would require additional stripping and reapplying of the core metaphor, the vehicle of lenses does allow this teacher to explore the ideas with some measure of personal control.

After they create metaphors, teachers analyze them with a voice which demonstrates the ability to live with the unpredictability of their evolving texts. One teacher admitted that the organic metaphor for teaching was a bit overworked, but decided to use it anyway:

O.K. Here's yet another metaphor to deconstruct and evaluate. As a teacher, what I do in my garden (a hackneyed metaphor for the classroom, but hold on, it does get better) is nurture, feed, weed, etc. all the things that provide an environment for the seeds (students) to flourish in. They're gonna grow whether or not I do all these things, but I, as the gardener/teacher can enhance their growth by improving the environment.

Those teachers who believe in the 'magic' approach plant the seeds and tell them to grow. They do grow. But, for lack of a nurturing environment, they don't flourish.

Poets, it seems to me, operate through both the magistral and pupillary applications of metaphor. They select intentional metaphoric vehicles and follow the path along which such vehicles take them. In that sense, the metaphor becomes necessary, and in many ways, unconscious as it leads to the not-yet known. Teachers can engage in this kind of sophisticated investigation, leading the metaphor and being led by it. One teacher pursued this balanced investigation, maintaining the playful seriousness which allowed new paths to open for her. She manipulated the activity to gain control over it, and in so doing, created a rich and thoughtful investigation:

The Metaphor That Ate My Honda

The Entrance Ramp

"Writing is _________. Finish the metaphor with something you can draw."

What? My first assignment and I don't understand the question. Something I can draw? Maybe I didn't hear him correctly. Maybe he said "chest of drawers" or "it's the law." It doesn't make sense. Everyone else is pondering, having Ah-hah experiences, and setting pencils to paper. My eyes slide to Gail's paper. Sure enough, she's actually drawing something. I must have heard him correctly.

Writing is ... something I can draw. What can I draw? The only thing I can draw is a horse's head. Writing is a horse's head.

Perhaps I'm going about this whole thing backwards. A highway takes you places. Sometimes places you've never been before. Writing does the same thing. I'm starting to like this. I begin to draw. As I maintain flow of thought, entrance ramps bring in new ideas, new characters, and exit
ramps give you a choice of endings, subplots, digressions …
That’s it

Writing is a highway with many entrance ramps and exits.

The writer in this instance carried her metaphor much further, including section titles such as “A Toll Booth,” “On The Road Again,” “Off The Beaten Path,” “The View Out The Windows,” and “Avoiding Congestion.” For her, the metaphor determined the initial direction while she recorded the trip. At times she would make the metaphor more intentional in order to examine the importance of what it told her about her own beliefs about writing as a mode of discovery.

Such sophisticated manipulation is not the rule; teachers can work comfortably with profound and complex notions but within the context of metaphor. To use Richard’s (1964) terms, teachers are able to discover the not-yet known at the level of the metaphoric “vehicle” (concrete image) before they analyze that knowledge, making it more explicit, through an examination of the “tenor” (tone containing the underlying implications) of the metaphor.

Metaphor offers a kind of profundity of thought as well as flexibility and portability. Teachers can play with difficult concepts through the memorable metaphorical images they create. The connecting mechanism of the mind which Richards describes allows teachers to conduct purposeful exploration and reflection about writing, learning, and teaching. The connections and implications that metaphor presents leave complex ideas available for close analysis, leading to the kind of comfortable yet persistent reflective practice which Schon and others endorse.

References

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begin talking to themselves about why the memory is meaningful to them. And then, they must get that meaning down on paper.

Reshaping Experience

Now they should return to the first shaping (the text they created) and see how it can be changed or transmuted to carry more fully the weight of the idea that has emerged from Step 4. As I did, they may want to extend, to develop, or even to create anew the image that they generated in the first free writing.

References

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