

Metaphor as Renewal: Re-Imagining Our Professional Selves

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Teaching is like cheerleading. Your task is to motivate, enthuse, and get the students off the bleachers and involved in the game. When the team is winning, that's easy to do; but when things are looking bleak, that's when you really have to shake your pompoms, make a leap, do back-flips.

I am spring weather. I see the world coming alive. I am dark clouds, heavy with rain, but I pass more quickly than my sullen winter cousins. I hear the returning geese across the ridge. I hear the worms under the grass, running from the robins. I enjoy rolling over the prairie, surprising the joggers. I am a teacher.

These are the metaphors of two students in English education programs who have imagined what lies ahead of them. They are about to become teachers, and their images of themselves, while joyful, are tempered with caution. ■ As beginning teachers, many of us were told, “Don’t smile until Christmas.” We believed early on that to enter an English classroom as an army sergeant would guarantee a well-ordered environment and respectful, disciplined students. Others of us felt like Santa Claus, pulling treasures of great literature from a magical bag for the starry-eyed, eager readers who sat at our feet. How we see

ourselves as teachers of English depends on many things: culture, gender, and experiences. The metaphors we construct to describe our teaching lives arise from the teachers we have known, from our knowledge of pedagogy, and from our relationships to literature, language, and writing. Because they reveal our educational values, beliefs, and principles, they contain information essential to our growth as professionals.

The work of Joseph C. Fischer and Anne Kiefer, and of Sarah Efron and Pamela Bolotin Joseph on teacher self-image illuminates the power of metaphor as a tool for exploring our attitudes and beliefs. In “Reflections in a Mirror: Teacher-Generated Metaphors from Self and Others,” Efron and Bolotin Joseph show that “metaphor allows teachers both intuitively and rationally to engage in a reflective process about their personal notions of their roles in schools” (57). Through the creative use

of metaphor teachers can “portray their personal philosophies of what teaching is, their own vision of their goals as teachers, and their sense of classroom realities” (57).

These studies and the research of Anne Ruggles Gere, Sharon Pugh, and others advocate metaphorical thinking as a means of deepening our awareness as educators. Their views have been confirmed in our own workshops and classes, where we, too, have found the strategy a rich one for helping people clarify problems in their teaching situations and identify directions for change. Educational reform movements and their accompanying pressures—to adjust curriculum, to incorporate technology, to incorporate mandated programs, and to be more visibly accountable—as challenging as they may seem, present us with a valuable opportunity to reexamine our professional lives. If we are to make changes that are harmonious

with our goals, beliefs, and philosophies, we should first “take stock,” and metaphor is an ideal starting point. As Pugh, Hicks, and Davis suggest in *Metaphorical Ways of Knowing: The Imaginative Nature of Thought and Expression*, metaphors can help us understand “the selves we want to become or despair of becoming . . . the selves we have been and the selves we escaped being” (48). And it can show us the selves we are able to become.

Metaphors of Two Teachers

Candy: I earned my teaching certificate in a program that stressed induction, problem solving, and what was then known as discovery learning. A teacher was supposed to be structured but not authoritarian, in charge but not dictatorial, the creator of an environment in which students explored and drew their own conclusions. The ideal teacher was not dominant in the day-to-day activities of the classroom, but worked arduously behind the scenes to ensure that students arrived at sound conclusions and received appropriate inspiration from the material. I saw myself as a lighthouse—a beacon guiding my students, the ships, to a safe and rich harbor. Adolescence was a stormy sea. By introducing my seniors to Shakespeare, Keats, and Golding, I would light their way across the treacherous water to a calm, literate adulthood. My students were lost ships in need of a port, and literature and writing were their saviors.

When I look at my teaching today in light of this metaphor, I am struck by how much I believed in my own power and the power of texts. While I still see myself as a guide, I have abandoned authority over the interactions among readers, writers, and texts, having long since converted to reader response and workshop approaches. Students have choice and exercise self-determination; they are sailors capable of charting their own courses, fixing leaks, mending sails. Now I am more inclined to envision myself as a videogame hotline counselor (“You’re stuck on level six? Try these moves.”) or a series of signs in a self-guided tour (“Push this button to hear about . . .”). I am an expert on strategies, a resource in a playful environment that supports exploration and finding one’s own way.

Cheryl: When I started teaching I saw myself as the engineer of a train. The Boxcar Queen. I thought that if I assembled a pattern of ideas and strategies, separating the skills into their own compartments, I

would create a trustworthy structure. The only links holding these boxes together were the days of the week. On Mondays I gave out the spelling words from a vocabulary workbook for tenth graders. On Tuesdays I worked on identifying subjects and verbs; on using appositives, dependent clauses, and participial phrases; or on varying sentence structure. On Wednesdays I assigned a short story and the questions that accompanied it. On Thursdays I taught writing. On Friday we were ready for the test on Monday’s spelling words and for a reading comprehension test. In sum, it was a fragmented week: I taught separate skills and kept them separate. The only noise a passing administrator might hear was the yawn of a bored student.

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Eventually, I derailed that train. I began to see that I viewed learning as a mastery of separate skills. I valued each day’s work, but did not see how I might combine the skills on one given day in a larger framework. Now I am more like a Miles Davis trumpet piece both improvised and structured, using many instruments to meld various tones and skills in the classroom. Structure is still important in this “arrangement,” but now I teach story, language, and writing on the same day. I’m like a jazz trumpeter. I may lead or follow other instruments as we create the score.

Charting the Journey

In creating metaphors we clarify our relationships to the people with whom we work and to the teachers we were, are, and want to be. Thinking metaphorically, we articulate assumptions we bring to the classroom: assumptions about teaching, learning, and literacy, and assumptions about power, authority, and community in our classrooms. We have found numerous activities as useful starters for this

Exercises in Metaphor

- Imagine your classroom as one of the “restaurants” listed below. Which would it be and why?

Gourmet restaurant	Truck stop
Fast food	Potluck
Smorgasbord	Family holiday dinner
School cafeteria	Vending machine
Mall food court	Hot dog stand
Delicatessen	Outdoor barbecue

(Suggested by Carolyn Tragesser, English teacher and gifted-talented facilitator at Moscow [Idaho] Junior High School.)

- Imagine your classroom as a room in a house. Which is it and why?
- Imagine yourself in the classroom as a kitchen utensil or household appliance. What would you be and why?
- Imagine yourself as a mode of transportation. What kind, and why?
- Create a metaphor for your work as an English teacher by writing a metaphor poem. First, select one of the following tasks:

Teaching grammar
Teaching literature
Teaching writing
Teaching speech

Next, select one item from this list:

A hot tub	Animal crackers
A basketball game	A traffic jam

A marching band	Spaghetti
A snowstorm	A chain link fence
Ping pong	A bad cold
Vegetable soup	Whitewater rafting
A rose bush	A concerto
Bungee jumping	

Now write a poem that begins with the line “Teaching _____ (grammar, literature, writing, or speech) is _____ (the item you’ve selected). For example, “Teaching grammar is animal crackers.” The poem should be at least six lines long. (This activity is fun to do with a colleague. In our workshops, each group of teachers draws one item from the second list at random.)

- Create a metaphor for each of the following:
 - the teacher you wanted to be when you began teaching
 - the teacher you now would like to be
 - the teacher you think you actually are (if different from your ideal)
 - a teacher you hated
 - a teacher you loved
- Create a metaphor for each of the relationships in your professional life:
 - you and your principal
 - you and your colleagues
 - you and your community
 - you and your students

Or, as the teachers in Efron and Bolotin Joseph’s studies did (65–75), construct metaphors for how these people might see you.

journey of self-discovery. Try some of those listed in the sidebar to this article.

Where the Journey Can Lead Us

Is your class like a meal in the school cafeteria, with meat and potatoes to start with and big cookies at the end? Do you see your class as a gourmet restaurant, where people have time to savor carefully prepared meals (books) in a comfortable atmosphere? Perhaps you are a whisk, keeping the talk moving and your students stirred up; a vacuum cleaner, tidying up the irrelevant digressions; or a cherry-pitter, forcing the seeds of good ideas out of your writers.

And what do these metaphors reveal—about your environment, your relationship with your students, your comfort level with administrators? We have discovered in our workshops that the exercise of creating and analyzing metaphors has many benefits.

Metaphors Clarify Our Teaching Practices

Gus, a third-year high school teacher, described his classroom as a fast food restaurant:

I have four different preps. My whole day is moving from one thing to the next, and quickly. Civics one hour, freshman English the next, and so on. In

addition, I coach varsity basketball and have three children at home, with a two-hour commute each day. I am hurried and frazzled. I rush through a whirl of classes, activities, meetings, practices, and games. My life is a burger and a coke, and make that to go.

On exploring this metaphor Gus discovered he felt just as frazzled in his classes—racing through activities to meet objectives and cover the material. He was surprised to realize that his classes were highly teacher-centered, despite his belief in more student-centered learning.

Metaphors Clarify Our Attitudes

Is teaching grammar root canal surgery or a look through a microscope? Melissa, a preservice teacher, found her metaphor for grammar teaching in the place where she lives:

Teaching grammar is like whitewater rafting on the Lochsa in June. The paddles you've handed out are only half in the water, or are simply lying on the bottom of the raft, and the sight of the first small ripples of curling foam set your fellow rafters into screaming fits.

(Interestingly, rafting at high water in June might be dangerous, but it can also be the most exciting time to be on the river. Navigating grammar may promise similar rewards and risks.)

Is teaching writing more like building a bridge or cleaning a messy room? For Ingrid, a veteran high school teacher, it's like searching for a spring. It reveals her belief in the innate fluency of children:

You can feel it under your feet, see the vegetation that marks its underground path, hear it looking for a way to surface, and suddenly there it is, gurgling up as pure as anything you could have imagined, maybe out of the rocks, maybe from under a rotten log. Sometimes, you just sit down on the wet moss and wait, maybe sing a bit until it finds you.

Teaching literature might seem more like a voyage to Mars (a dangerous adventure into unknown territory) or an adventure in the kitchen, serving up books to be savored. One group of teachers described it as “a hot tub—social, bubbly, inviting, relaxing, intimate, intimidating, steamy, private, too hot for comfort, baptismal, restorative.” Their metaphoric juxtapositions—social/private, inviting/intimidating, secular/spiritual—reveal the complexities and chal-

lenges of teaching literature, juxtapositions that could evoke profitable discussion during an inservice workshop. (How do we invite students to read Shakespeare and not intimidate them? How do we teach controversial works that are both “restorative” and “too hot for comfort”? How do we “convert” our students to devoted readers?)

Metaphors Show Us How We Perceive Our Students and Colleagues

[I am] a sturdy flint, ready for little or large stones (students) to rub up against me—pass by and spark or flame.

[I am] a spouse. There is an exchange in the relationship between married couples that should be built upon trust; this trusting relationship should be carried on between the teacher and students.

A flint and a spouse are two very different images of teaching. The first metaphor implies that the teacher is strong, passive unless approached, and a provoker; students must seek her out and use her to ignite their own learning. A spouse, on the other hand, is a collaborator who works in harmony with students, sharing decisions and working with students to create a trusting environment. Implicit in each of these descriptions are concepts of authority, power, and status, and beliefs about how knowledge is constructed or transmitted. Do you draw knowledge out of your students, do you impart it, or both? Do you prescribe drills to strengthen muscles or medicine for ailing minds? Do you respond more to the image of charismatic Mr. Keating of *Dead Poets Society* or to the fatherly Mr. Chips? Are you protectors, collaborators, or mediums that nourish and fertilize but do not direct growth? And how would you describe your fellow teachers and administrators—as resources and supporters, or obstructors? Do you feel with your principal that you are an answering machine with a cheerful, prerecorded message, or a place-kicker, relied on for the extra point? Is your English department a nest of black widow spiders or a cluster of snowflakes, each separate and distinct?

Examining the nature of professional relationships that our metaphors reveal can be an important step in clarifying how we relate to the educational community. Efron and Bolotin Joseph describe two sets of dichotomies in teachers' metaphors: 1) the teacher as creative, nurturing artist (play director, actor, orchestra conductor) vs. the

teacher as mechanic keeping the machine running smoothly (manager, train engineer); and 2) the teacher as guiding parent (mother, lighthouse) vs. the teacher as co-learner (big sister, traveler, companion) (57–61). Fischer and Kiefer note similar patterns: Teacher as interpreter, presence, elder, child, advocate, therapist, parent, animator, companion, and storyteller (42–50). Do our metaphors reflect the relationships we truly want to have with students, colleagues, parents, and administrators? Do they reflect the teachers we want to be ten years from now? If not, what can we do to improve these relationships?

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a nest of black widow spiders
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Metaphors Are a Springboard for Change

Gus, the teacher who described his class as a fast food restaurant, could see cardiac arrest waiting to happen. When he compared this metaphor to one of his ideal class, a family holiday meal where students shared a buffet of activities they helped create, he began to see the sources of his frustration: the external pressures from his job description; and the internal pressures coming from his perception that he had to be “center stage” in the classroom, that he was the authority in the learning-teaching processes. As a result of this exercise, he began to seek ways to reorganize his classroom, to create an environment in which students were more comfortable and self-sustaining, in greater control of their learning. He investigated and began to adopt strategies such as literature circles and writing workshops that would focus briefly on minilessons he prepared but would otherwise function on their own once the students knew how the approach worked. Addressing the limitations in his first metaphor and comparing it to the second helped him see a way to create a buffet, rich in activity, learning, and camaraderie.

Through Metaphor, We Meet Ourselves

Metaphors are not static, nor are our careers as English teachers. The possibility of change is implicit in the metaphors we create. If the waters are calm and the sailors fit, the lighthouse may dim the light; the engineer may leave the switchyard and head for the jazz club. At any point in our histories we can retrace our journeys, encounter our earlier selves, learn from our evolutions, and chart new journeys. In short, metaphors capture our professional lives as we have woven and created them within and beyond the classroom walls.

The Journey Never Ends

We know you are pressed for time. With all of the pressures placed on you to meet new standards and adopt new programs, there is scant time to focus on your needs for self-reflection and renewal. But remember: daydreaming and thinking like a poet can be just as invigorating and useful as an inservice workshop or a summer school course. In this self-study you are your own teacher and well qualified for this important, at times playful, task.

Work with other members of your department and share your responses to the earlier exercises or the following suggestions. Invite an administrator to join your self-study group. Or take this metaphorical journey by yourself; the elixir you bring back to your classroom and to your teaching life is your reward.

Supplementary Exercises to Try

- Keep a “Teaching History” in which you chart and reflect on key points in your journey as a teacher. You might list these and then create metaphors for them and write about them in your journal. For example, Pugh et al. use water, weather, or seasonal imagery to coax new associations. For weather imagery, associate your key points with a storm (from raindrop to rainbow), a blizzard, the eye of a storm, high pressure fronts and lows, jet stream, changes in direction, zephyr, breeze, and hurricane (86).
- Keep a teaching journal for awhile (a month, a semester, a summer, a year). Explore different metaphors of yourself as a teacher: write about your daily life in the classroom, collect quotes and dialogue from students, and record whatever

Metaphors for "Teacher"

Here are a few metaphors our students and participants in our workshops have generated. Maybe one of these will work for you or inspire one of your own:

Actor	Spouse	Plowshare	Sand on the beach	Minister
Snake-oil maker	Tour guide	Funnel	Traveler	Spark
Art pallet	Wizard	Stage hand	Worker bee	Fishing lure
Card game	Apple tree	Coach	Road atlas	Weaver
Fountain	Magician	Juggler	Farmer	Flint
Guide for the blind	Mother bird	Compass	Astronaut	Pitcher
Movie director	Candle maker	Master chess player	Apple	The sun
Oak	Gardener	Health care giver	Potter	Open book
Parent	Backpacker	Petri dish	Gatekeeper	Conductor
Pill	Chef	Ski instructor	Construction worker	Lioness
Rolodex	Spider	Passionate lover	Salesperson	Engine
Rose	Companion	Planet	Easel	Rubber band
Sculptor	Knight	Jack-in-the-box	Best friend	
Ship captain	Fruit basket	Runner	Railroad engineer	

will help you focus on yourself professionally. At the end of this period write a letter to yourself and explain, through metaphor, where you are and where you hope to be in three years. Seal this journal and letter to your future self and open it at the specified time. You might ask a family member to keep it and promise to mail or give it to you when the time comes. Encountering your former self will be an event worth waiting for, like finding an old letter you've written that opens a door to new understanding.

- View films or television dramas about teachers and create metaphors for the depictions. What images are projected of teachers generally? Of the "teacher-hero"? Critique these cultural metaphors in your journal. Create new images and metaphors for your profession. How might you act, direct, and produce a movie or television program that exemplifies these new metaphors? Films to consider: *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*; *Dead Poets Society*; *If*; *Blackboard Jungle*; *Up the Down Staircase*; *Educating Rita*; *To Sir, With Love*; *Dangerous Minds*; *Stand*

and Deliver; *Lean On Me*; *Mr. Holland's Opus*; *Conrack*; *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*; *Good Will Hunting*.

- In *Bridging: A Teacher's Guide to Metaphorical Thinking*, Pugh et al. suggest creating your own fantasy and imagining yourself in a different form. First, see yourself as the teacher you are, then imagine the teacher you might become—from a pigeon to a peacock, for example. In your journal imagine yourself waking up as someone else, focusing on what you were and are now becoming. Possibilities: changes in nature—caterpillar to butterfly, river to a waterfall; changes in fiction—Clark Kent to Superman or a character of your choice; changes in perspective—how a closet looks to a cat; imaginary changes—a mouse changing into a cat, a Republican changing into a Democrat (96).
- Compare problems in your teaching to something else and imagine not only what the problems are but also how you might address them. In *Writing with Power*, Peter Elbow includes a list of different ways to resee a problem

or dilemma. Do several of these in one sitting: compare your problem to a pump that needs priming, defective materials, a car that won't start in the winter, a Gordian knot, bad digestion, a mental illness, or too many cooks in the kitchen (91–92).

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EJ 75 YEARS AGO

Studying the Life of a Fiction Writer

"The writer of fiction is no different from the rest of human kind, except to the degree to which his emotional susceptibility is more heightened and his senses more discerning. He does not possess a different set of mental processes mysteriously comprehended in that word 'genius.' Anyone may learn in varying degree the novelist's analysis of character or the short-story writer's appreciation of situations. It is a perverted educational emphasis, indeed, which denies the value of teaching students to understand life with some of the acumen of the fiction writer."

Luella B. Cook. "A Technique for Training in Thinking." *EJ* 16.8 (1927): 588–98.

Censorship Exhibit

When planning your exhibits for Banned Books Week in September, you may wish to consider including the 2002–2003 edition of the exhibit **Censorship in Schools and Libraries**, published by the Long Island Coalition Against Censorship. This history highlights incidents of censorship that have occurred in the United States during the last one hundred years, including descriptions of the censorship of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *In the Night Kitchen*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and the novels of Judy Blume and Robert Cormier. US Supreme Court and lower court decisions are an integral part of the exhibit.

The new edition includes efforts to censor the popular Harry Potter children's books (in December 2001, Harry Potter books were burned in Alamogordo, New Mexico), and the installation of filtering software in all the computers in the Loudon County, Virginia, Public Library. In addition to new cases, there is an update of censorship incidents in libraries and schools that occurred throughout the 1990s.

For additional information, send an e-mail to coalcen@juno.com or write to the Long Island Coalition Against Censorship, Donald Parker, Co-coordinator, PO Box 296, Port Washington, NY 11050.