

Using metaphors in theory and teaching: as useful as a chocolate teapot?

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There is good news: career studies is a banner under which interdisciplinary work on career is being performed. There is bad news: the benefits of metaphor are being promoted without reference to their disadvantages.

The opening paragraph may appear familiar to readers of *Career Research and Development*, as it mirrors the opening lines of Inkson's (2010) article in issue 23. I have been moved to respond to that piece not because I disagree with the content in relation to interdisciplinary working but because of my concern over the uncritical acceptance of the benefits of using metaphors to aid understanding. I draw here from a paper originally published in the *Leeds Met Journal of Assessment Learning and Teaching* in response to Inkson's work (Dean 2009).

In Inkson's article, metaphor is promoted as a mechanism for generating integration between disparate disciplinary approaches (p.9) and he provides a range of examples of metaphor use in career thinking. I propose that in career terms many commonly used metaphors serve to reduce rather than enhance clarity and may confuse students and academics alike. For example, in my title the term chocolate teapot is used: what understanding would others have of that title, if they, for example, came from the USA where tea is drunk cold. Would it carry the same associations of uselessness? Whilst metaphor can be extremely powerful where there is common understanding, for example, it can provide short cuts by stimulating the use of particular schemata. It can also be problematic where the common knowledge base is small, and, in particular, metaphors can cause difficulties when communicating between cultures and between disciplines.

Metaphors are already used in face-to-face interactions and, along with similes, can be highly effective in stimulating mental representations of complex or abstract concepts. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) seminal book describes how they can be used to extrapolate from our existing knowledge to understand new subjects and as a tool to structure our thoughts and deepen understanding. To link with career management theory we need to look at how this operates in the face to face situation of guidance. It is possible to use feedback to establish whether the recipient understands the key similarities being drawn and can move on from that to grasp something new about the concept or idea the teacher is expounding. In this way, metaphors can be highly effective tools in assisting understanding and embedding new concepts. However they also have the potential to be misleading, inappropriate and confusing, particularly when interacting with someone with a different knowledge base from one's own.

The main danger with their use is that learners may make links between inappropriate aspects of the comparison object, for example, let us take a well-known metaphor.

All the world's a stage and all the men
and women merely players

(Shakespeare 1623/2007)

I think this metaphor is effective to English speakers in rapidly portraying a complex series of ideas: people are not in control of their destinies; they may 'act' in different roles throughout their lives; people are the same across the world.

In comparison let us take the simile from the film *Forrest Gump*:

Life is like a box of chocolates
(Zemeckis 1994)

Without the subsequent clarification (“You never know what you’re going to get”) this simile is less effective for learning. How is the learner to know which aspect of a box of chocolates is to be compared? There are many aspects of chocolates: Are they similar in that both are fattening? In that both can be presents? That neither lasts long? Each individual may focus on a different property to compare the two objects or ideas and not necessarily the one the user intended.

In teaching, the purpose of metaphor is to increase understanding. Schiff described this as “a bridge enabling passage from one world to another” (1979: 106). If a metaphor does not work for one learner, the educator can adapt. However, when using metaphors in theory or with large groups there is less flexibility to switch if it is not effective. Therefore users should be highly cognizant of their own cultural interpretations embedded within a metaphor and how that translates to others. To be effective, Ortony (1993) argued that metaphor must be vivid, compact and also expressible. Halsasz and Moran (1982) argue that it is also vital that, if metaphors are used, they do not cause ‘overlearning.’ They warn of the dangers of overlearning, i.e. carrying more information from the comparison item than is required. For example, if we return to the metaphor “All the world’s a stage”, a learner may transfer across from it the idea that the

world is like a stage in other ways: made of wood; surrounded by lights; or relatively small. We would not want our learners to get mixed up and have to begin to unlearn these aspects of the metaphor.

Anderson et al. (1994) have developed a step by step method to assess whether one should use a metaphor to aid teaching. Firstly, assess what mental effort is saved by the use of metaphor. Secondly, identify the conceptual baggage associated with the metaphor i.e. elements that are not relevant and need disassociating. Thirdly, compare the two elements to decide if effort is saved or not. Finally, users should consider whether the metaphor can be extended to support other aspects of learning in the future.

Having chosen one of the world’s best writers and best metaphors, it is hard to see how one could really confuse the relevant aspects of stage and world. Let us consider a metaphor which is used in career discussions and assess the potential problems. The idea of a career ladder is well established in the UK and yet is one which causes ‘overlearning’ difficulties. Using Anderson et al.’s method I have analysed this term in figure 1.

I have shown that some of the ‘effort saved’ associations are also represented as ‘effort wasted’ associations. This is because, for many people, careers are diverse and they might question some of the associations. Based on this analysis, I maintain that use of the metaphor causes more work than

Figure 1

Metaphor	Associations/Effort Saved	Conceptual Baggage/ Effort Wasted	Potential Extensions for Future
Career as Ladder	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Over time you advance higher. You can only be on one route at a time. The aim is to reach the top. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> The aim is to reach the top You cannot step to the side without going down to the bottom again. You cannot be on different routes at one time. You are alone on your career. Others are either above or below you. Each rung is the same. 	Looking at the concept of the ‘top’, what are you aiming to reach?

Figure 2

Metaphor	Associations/Effort Saved	Conceptual Baggage/ Effort Wasted	Potential Extensions for Future
Removal of documents function as a recycle bin	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Things can be retrieved from this area if done quickly (before it is emptied) 2. After a time things are irretrievable. 3. It is not immediately removed so not appropriate for confidential documents. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. For people who don't empty their own bins they may expect this to be automatic. 2. For people who do empty their own bins they may expect to be able to retrieve documents unless they have emptied the bin. 	

not using the metaphor and so it is not a helpful concept. In comparison, an effective metaphor, assessed by Anderson et al's method, is the recycle bin in Microsoft applications. A similar assessment is made in figure 2.

I suggest that the metaphor of an electronic recycle bin is effective because it has been accepted by users across the globe; however, even with this metaphor, some elements do not match. Some users expect the bin to be emptied automatically (as their own recycle bin is) and others expect to have to empty the bin (as they do their own recycle bin). The user's current associations with the comparison object are likely to be different from other users

and so it is likely that learning from the metaphor will be different as a result. This is potentially of greatest difficulty to those learners coming from different cultural backgrounds.

So does this mean metaphors are too difficult to use? I hope not, for using a metaphor allows users to shortcut into ideas, imagine difficult concepts and structure their thoughts. They should not, however, be used uncritically. Hopefully, by assessing the metaphors used, one will be able to assess what is and is not effective in increasing learning for the widest group of students.



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