

Using Metaphor in Academic Advising

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Student understanding of academic programs and student services is essential to academic progress and the first step to enjoying an enriched college experience. However, student conceptions of college are often inaccurate, incomplete, and difficult to change. Through the use of metaphor, advisors can redirect students' attitudes about seeking assistance, increase their understanding of higher education and its philosophies, and encourage them to solve problems creatively.

Advisors often find that advisees see curricular requirements as bureaucratic hurdles and regard student support services as exclusive needs of problem students. Some of these misconceptions may be fostered by higher education. In presentations, publications, and Web pages, education professionals present large amounts of information on requirements, programs, policies, and resources, often leaving the student with lists of disembodied facts. Lost to them is an overarching and layered understanding of how all the information fits together. Also, students may have strong, often naive, conceptions of the college experience. Their notions may come from high school or other college experiences or from friends and relatives who pass down generational information about their college lives.

To assist students to both effectively organize information and strengthen their conceptual understanding of higher education, advisors can make use of metaphors. At its core, metaphor involves "[c]hanging a word from its literal meaning to one not properly applicable but analogous to it. . . ." (Lanham, 1968, p. 66). However, metaphors have come to be embraced by those outside of literary tradition not only for their dramatic effect, but for their usefulness in representing multiple theories and as an alternative to using rigid models to explain phenomena (Dening, 1980; Paris, 1988; Sfard, 1998). Through this expanded definition of metaphor, advisors can use language familiar to students and imbue these words with the new meanings and concepts needed for better understanding.

Introduction

Metaphor is commonly used in daily life. Analogies can often effectively explain a new or complex idea: "Getting to the truth is like eating

an artichoke." They are natural teaching tools because they connect the familiar with the unfamiliar, taking a figure of speech from a familiar and concrete domain (e.g., eating) and then coupling it with a novel or abstract domain (e.g., truth seeking) (Martin and Harre, 1982). The novel, abstract domain is often referred to as the "tenor," and the familiar, concrete domain, the "vehicle." In educational research, some psychologists use the information processing metaphor to explain the nebulous mechanism of human cognition and learning: Our mind encodes and stores information which is later retrieved when we need it.

Metaphors are flexible to use. The vehicle and its images can be changed while the tenor remains the same. For example, if information processing is not understood by students, other images can be used to represent the unclear concept, such as, human cognition and learning is analogous to gathering, categorizing, and storing agricultural crops.

Metaphors aid in memorizing and conceptualizing new information. The metaphor creates a visual mental image much like schemata—mental representations of knowledge consciously or unconsciously created. Schema development is important because new information one receives can be added to an existing schema, which makes for easier recall (Andre & Phye, 1986). For example if one has a "truth-seeking as artichoke-eating" schema in place in which the tenor is "layered truth," and then reads that truth is elusive, the person could add this new fact to his or her existing truth schema. Because the individual's truth information is organized with metaphor—vividly portrayed in the mind's eye—the facts will be more easily recalled. Some education researchers also believe that the metaphor, if compelling enough, will, like a paradigm, help one see information in a new way. The limitation is that the new schema may exclude information that does not align itself with the metaphor (Sfard, 1998).

In addition, metaphors can generate emotions and ideas. In bringing two domains together using figurative language, the first domain can be infused with the emotional attributes of the second (Thrall, Hibbard, & Holman, 1960). Thus, anxiety can be ascribed, if one buys into the metaphor, to the process of truth seeking: The unpleasantness of the choke must be endured if

one is to reach the heart. New ideas can be generated because the dynamic tension between the two domains are different but parallel (Paris, 1988). Truth and artichokes are dissimilar, but might the method of eating an artichoke, which requires patience and caution, pertain to a new way of seeking truth?

Method

Because of metaphor versatility, I have used them in working with different student groups from the Colleges of Arts and Sciences at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. I work with sophomores and juniors declaring their majors, probation students, and transfer students.

"Community Fishing": Extending the Metaphor

The problem: Students who are declaring their majors in University of Hawai'i colleges often find program requirements jargon-laden and complicated; the requirements are difficult to comprehend and remember. Advisors often find these requirements tedious to explain, but the information is essential for students to know.

Advisees see the following description in the course catalog (University of Hawai'i, 1997):

Complete basic subjects. . . ; Fulfill the requirements of a major field of concentration [over 40 majors] . . . ; Earn at least 60 hours of credit in non-introductory courses . . . [which] may be upper division courses (courses numbered 300 or above), or 200-level courses that have an explicit college-level course prerequisite; Acquire a minimum of 124 hours of credit, of which no more than 20 credit hours may be in subjects not offered within Arts & Sciences [104 Arts & Sciences credits needed] . . . (p. 88). [F]ive writing-intensive (WI) courses . . . [a]t least two WI courses must be from courses numbered 300 and above (p. 42).

The metaphor: In my group advising session for these students, I use an extended metaphor on community fishing to explain the process of meeting program requirements. Fishing was chosen as the vehicle because of the pervasiveness of ocean experiences and imagery for those in Hawai'i. Also, the process of catching fish according to community guidelines is similar to the selection-acquisition process of obtaining courses and credits according to policies established by the university. The metaphor is introduced at the beginning of the session. To aid

students in visualizing the metaphor, I make quick sketches on the chalkboard or overhead projector transparency. My narrative goes something like this:

Congratulations on your decision to be a fisher(wo)man! Fishing is an important community activity in Hawai'i. Therefore, once you commit to fishing, you must follow the community guidelines: By the end of the fishing season you must have caught at least 124 pounds of fish, of which at least 60 pounds must be middle or deep feeders and 104 pounds must be caught offshore of O'ahu, which is your island community.

What species of fish to catch? Your community will give you two lists: one describes fish to sell on the open market and the other describes fish to offer a specialty shop. Most of you have chosen which specialty shop you want to catch for—there are over 40—and you should stick with this shop for the season. Because the poundage from the fish on these two lists amount to only about 100 pounds, you are free to catch any type of fish to increase your total catch poundage to the minimum 124 pounds. About 10 years ago, the community decided that fish with gold-colored eyes—of any species, location, and weight—are valuable and it wants at least five of these, of which at least two should be deep feeders.

Both the students and I have found this metaphor engaging. Because of the familiar fishing terminology, the students could focus on the important relationships and concepts of the course selection process. Course attributes (e.g., credits) and their relationships to each other were placed in the foreground.

In addition, because of the richness of fishing imagery, the metaphor can be extended further and new issues and ways of thinking about meeting program requirements can be discussed. For example, students are asked to consider what strategies might be used if fuel (time or money) is limited or fish become scarce (courses are not offered due to budget cuts). Discussion then ensued about how students can "increase their capacity and fuel supply" by improving study skills and being more aggressive about obtaining financial aid.

Wider use: An extended metaphor can be effective in explaining complicated information.

However, the metaphor's vehicle must be familiar to the student population and closely match the tenor. For example, the selection-acquisition metaphor for a rural population might be choosing an appropriate seed corn variety for maximum yield in a particular climate, and for an urban population, selecting songs for a disk jockey's play list according to market demographics, publishing company, and type of music.

"Peak Performance": Transforming an Existing Metaphor

The problem: Students who are on probation often resist seeking help and using campus resources. In talking with them, advisors often hear students say they feel the need to "beat the course" or "fight for the grade." These students already have a metaphor for academic performance: solitary, one-on-one competition. In addition, students may believe that their academic abilities are fixed attributes and performance can only be improved by expending more effort. Consequently, the idea of seeking assistance is rejected because it is perceived as superfluous and implies low ability. This judgment erodes self-concept, especially if ability is believed to be fixed.

The metaphor: Because this individualistic metaphor seemed to be strongly held among struggling students my colleague, Dawn Nishida, and I decided to transform the metaphor into a more positive one. When meeting probation students, we affirmed their beliefs that academic performance is primarily individualistic and dependent on personal effort. However, we then worked to transform the existing metaphor from an individual alone in competition to an individual supported by others in competition.

Being a college student is like being an athlete trying to attain peak performance during a race. Because of the high level of challenge of the race course, the performer puts together a team of experts who can assist in attaining peak performance. For athletes, the team may consist of a coach, weight trainer, nutritionist, and doctor.

In using this transformational metaphor, we chose athletes as the vehicle of performance because of student interest in sports as either a participant or observer. As simple as the shift is, which is adding a team of experts to help an individual in a competitive situation, fundamental assumptions are changed. College studying is a

complex task; academic ability can change and be developed; and those who achieve peak performance use expert help. Because the students are receptive to this metaphor, we have used it as a central image in our program publications.

Wider use: When students resist an idea or action, advisors should listen for images in their language and suggest a countervailing metaphor. In transforming an existing metaphor, an equally compelling image should be presented, one that will transfer its positive emotional attributes to the new idea or action. For example, a more radical transformation of the metaphor could be to depart from a competitive image to one that elicits more ideas about cooperation, such as being a member of a relay team.

"Camp Fires": Contrasting Metaphors

The problem: Transfer students are often in turmoil when they move from a community college or small liberal arts school to a large research university. After receiving close attention from the transfer institution, these students may feel abandoned and lost. These feelings often give way to resentment toward the new campus. Students' conceptions of higher education are often simple and do not account for the variance in institutional missions and goals. When the differences are presented, student resentment may abate to resignation.

The metaphor: Two contrasting metaphors are used to explain the differences between the student-centered focus of the community/liberal arts college and the knowledge-centered focus of the research university.

The camp fire plays an important role in some nontraditional cultures. Everyone gathers around it, has a part in keeping it alive, and celebrates in its strong light. At the community/liberal arts college, you, the student, are this camp fire around which everyone gathers and works to have shine brightly. This represents the college's teaching and student-learning mission. At the research university, however, knowledge is the camp fire around which everyone gathers to have shine brightly. This represents the university's knowledge-creation mission.

Students have indicated that these contrasting metaphors put the transfer experience in a clearer perspective. However, discussion does not end with metaphor introduction. Metaphors raise other issues for students and faculty: How should

the undergraduate student “gather around” and participate in knowledge creation? What changes in attitude and behavior are required to participate in knowledge creation? What should faculty do to bring undergraduates quickly into the culture of knowledge creation?

The strength of these contrasting metaphors is the affirmation of the student's experience at the community/liberal arts college. When the metaphors flip, the student should feel the paradigm shift. In the previous example, the focus changed from the individual to the community in which each person is an integral participant.

Wider use: Instead of having one encompassing metaphor, several metaphors can be more effective, especially if the reality is complicated. Sfard (1998) argues that because of the complexity of the education process, the two metaphors of learning—acquisition and participation—are not mutually exclusive and together better describe teaching and learning.

Discussion

While metaphors are communication workhorses, they do break down (Paris, 1998). Caution must be taken not to extend the metaphor too far; it can distort the idea being conveyed. For example, the camp fire metaphor oversimplifies faculty roles: Some community/liberal arts college faculty engage in research and some research faculty nurture students. Relationships among students, staff, and faculty are more intricate than just gathering around “the fire.”

However, if the metaphor is set up well and used judiciously, it can be a powerful tool for advising. Through figurative language, metaphors establish dynamic connections between advisor and student, old and new information, emotions, ideas, and concrete and abstract concepts. Applied to academic advising, metaphors can be used in many ways: a segue to a more formal presentation; a method to start discussion in small groups; the central image or theme for a publication; a way to bridge the academic policy and procedures “culture” and language to a multicultural student body; or even as a basis for an educational game at new student orientation. If academic advising is the gateway to higher edu-

cation information, resources, and programs, what better way to enter than through the figurative language of metaphor?

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Author's Notes

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