

The Power Of Metaphors in Training

by Wendy Sullivan

Key learning points

- Definition and characteristics of metaphors
- Why using metaphors is powerful
- How to generate metaphors
- Choosing suitable metaphors for training
- Harnessing the power of metaphors in 5 training applications

What is metaphor?

"The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another."
- Lakoff & Johnson

This definition is broad and includes stories, fables, similes, parables, and also non-verbal experiences that may be visual, auditory, or feeling/ movement-based. It includes the metaphors you generate and use in training to help participants learn, and those generated by your participants themselves.

It is worth noting that while we have a degree of shared meaning for metaphors, there are individual differences: the details of exactly how I reach for the stars, and kind of stars they are, will be the different from what 'reach for the stars' means to you.

Why bother with metaphors?

Let's start with a movement-based metaphor. Please put your hand in the air as high as you can. Now stretch another inch ... this is what the thought-through use of metaphors can do for the success of your training. Here's why:

- Most of our thinking is metaphorical



"Metaphor, that's how the whole fabric of mental interconnections holds together. Metaphor is right at the bottom of being alive." - Gregory Bateson

There is growing agreement that we understand one thing by comparing it with our experience of something else. So we can make learning easier if we provide participants with metaphors for what we want them to learn.

- You can't not use metaphors

Language is metaphorical, e.g. reach for the stars, light at the end of the tunnel, get in touch, fight disease. You would be hard pressed to talk for a minute without any metaphors, so you might as well craft your metaphors to help you to achieve your training outcomes.

- **We live our metaphors**

We all have metaphors underpinning our thinking e.g. some see work as a roller-coaster ride, while others find it a grind - and our behaviour matches our metaphor. If as trainers we suggest a useful metaphor, and participants take it on, we can help them to get into and remain in a state that will support their learning.

Seeking a metaphor?

Asking: 'X is like what?' is the best way to find a metaphor.

Harnessing the power of metaphors in training

Below are some ways that you can use metaphor to make your training more powerful. As you read, I expect you will identify instances where you already use these ideas - and perhaps you will become aware of additional ways or contexts in which you could start using metaphor to make learning stronger and deeper.

Delivering a point indirectly

Sometimes it is useful to get a point across without making it headline news. Metaphor lends itself to this, by allowing you to suggest a useful way for participants to interpret and understand what is going on, or in other words, to set a frame.



You can use this to set a frame for the whole training, e.g. I frequently start soft skills trainings by suggesting that participants act as though they are in a clothes shop, by trying on the ideas presented, giving them a tug, turn the hem up etc and seeing how each idea fits them. I suggest that they take away the ideas that suit them and leave behind those that don't. I also suggest that it would be a pity not to try on the ideas during the training, since we have all had the experience of trying on a piece of clothing that we thought wouldn't suit us, and finding that we look and feel very good in it. Feedback from participants is that this frame around the training makes them more inclined to suspend disbelief and engage with unlikely-sounding ideas - often to discover that this previously uncharted territory contains treasure, or at least new and interesting views.

You can also use metaphors to set a frame for the participants' experiences during the training, e.g. you can suggest that material that they find challenging is best treated as you would a glass of home-made apple juice, which may have lots of 'bits' floating in it when first it is poured, but if left to settle for a while, becomes clear and sparkling.

As Lawley and Tompkins say: *"A metaphor describes one experience in terms of another, and in so doing it specifies and constrains ways of thinking about the original experience. This influences the meaning and importance of the experience, the way it fits with other experiences, and actions taken as a result."*

Making an impact to make your material memorable

A well-chosen metaphor for the point that you are making will almost always give your training content more impact than if it was only presented conceptually, e.g. if you want to emphasise the importance of following a tedious health and safety regulation: 'It is rather like crossing a high-speed railway line: nine times out of ten, you get across safely, but the tenth time, you won't be slightly injured: you will be dead - so you'd be mad to take the chance.'

Stories as metaphors



Stories or anecdotes that you tell to illustrate a point are usually



metaphors. These are very effective because people naturally compare their experience of the world with the story that you tell, to find out how the story fits them. This process engages them far more than a list of conceptual bullet points and that engagement makes it easier for them to remember the points that you made.

For more information on ways to use stories as metaphors, see Sue Lickorish's articles: 'Storytelling: how to enrich the learning experience' (Issue 4) and 'Storytelling in NLP - and NLP in Storytelling' (Issue 7).

Explaining unfamiliar concepts

If you use a metaphor to explain an unfamiliar concept, it can make it easier for participants to understand the concept, e.g. explaining I.T. concepts to non-I.T. people: 'This program is a bit like going to your local parade of shops - less choice but there's no chance of getting lost - while the other program is like shopping in the centre of London...'.

Here is an effective experiential, non-verbal metaphor that I enjoyed as a participant. The trainer used the metaphor to explain one of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator dichotomies (e.g. judging - perceiving). The handout had bullet points for one pole written in red, and for the other written in blue and each participant had either a red or a blue plastic sheet to use as a filter. As we read the handout through our filters, half the page looked blank, while the text on the other half stood out clearly ... this experience was common to all of us, but the text that stood out for some was invisible to others, and vice versa - a good metaphor for our experience of a world inhabited by people with different Myers-Briggs preferences.

Building your understanding of participants

The way a participant talks may give you an idea of the sort of metaphors they have for training, learning, their experience of the material etc. Paying attention to their metaphors can build your understanding of them as people and that can help you to deal with a 'difficult' person, or to fine-tune the way you motivate each participant, e.g. if someone says: 'I have been dreading today - learning all day is worse than having teeth pulled out.' It suggests that their metaphor for training days is of a visit to the dentist, only worse, and this will cue you into paying very careful attention to that participant's state during the training.

Tapping into the participants' metaphors



best support their learning.

In addition to building **your** understanding of your participants, a participant's self-generated metaphors can be used to help them understand themselves. An individual's metaphors can provide the foundation for long-lasting and profound personal change and growth. Helping participants to fully explore their metaphors like this is beyond the scope of this article but here is one application that focuses on the participants' own metaphors relating to the state that would

What you do is ask the participants 'You want your experience of this training to be like what?'

Then tell them how you want the training to be for yourself, and give them a few examples of possible answers to the question. Such as:

- Like sparks jumping back and forth in the room as someone says something and that sparks off something from someone else.
- Like a smoothly flowing river, that finds a way around the occasional rocks in its path and

keeps moving calmly along.

- Like going with friends to a symphony concert, having heard some of the music before but not the entire piece.
- Like a roller-coaster with fast, exciting bits and other slower bits.

This cues them in and gives them some thinking time to become aware of what they want ... and in the process, they can't not step into their desired state, since that state will be an integral part of their metaphor. By reminding them of their metaphor during the training, you can help them to notice ways in which to respond to the training so that they get the experience they want.

The most enticing answer I have had to my question was from a participant who said she wanted it to be like jumping naked into a vat of chocolate mousse!

Ways to get started

- Start by becoming aware of the metaphors that you already use to good effect.
- Offer to swap metaphors with some other trainers. Ask them for their metaphors for concepts that you find difficult to get across.
- As your participants build their understanding of a concept, listen to the metaphors that they naturally and perhaps unconsciously use in their comments, especially any that participants 'catch' from one another. Consider using them for training similar groups in future, e.g. in getting to grips with the concept of facilitating others to use solution-focused thinking, a group of participants adopted a metaphor suggested by one of them - to 'keep people in a warm bath, not let them get into a cold shower' and this has worked well with subsequent groups.
- Look and listen for feedback that the metaphors that you use make sense to your participants and not just to you.

Finding a suitable metaphor

So you suspect your participants are going to have some difficulty understanding a concept, or you want to be sure that if nothing else, they remember one key point ... and you decide to use a metaphor ... but what?

- Start by asking yourself: 'This concept is like what?' and see what you come up with. Then consider the following:
- Is your metaphor a more-or-less universal experience, like driving a car, looking forward to something and being disappointed (or vice versa), trying to make a foreigner understand us, or experiencing beginners' luck? I have heard a CEO discussing creativity and using the metaphor of cooking salmon in foil in a dishwasher. This was in Africa: many of those listening had no electricity at home, had never used a dishwasher and hadn't encountered salmon. This is how **not** to do metaphor! He'd have done better to go back to the drawing board and to have asked himself: 'When creativity is like cooking salmon in a dishwasher, it is like what else?'
- Can you give them a 'real' experience of the metaphor? E.g. as a metaphor for change, ask participants to 'fold your arms the way you don't usually do it and then quickly keep alternating this with your usual way. Soon you'll find that you aren't sure any more which the unfamiliar way was, it now feels so natural.'
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- Can you give them a symbol, or have them make or draw one, to act as a reminder? E.g., handing out starfish fridge magnets while telling the starfish story as a reminder that any small actions that they take after the training will make a difference.

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Website with many articles on metaphor: www.cleanlanguage.co.uk