

The Magic of Metaphor!
Chapter Seven of *Shake, Rattle and Roll!*

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In *How To Give It So They Get It* I tell the story of my first solo cross-country flight in a Cessna 172. I plotted my course carefully on a sectional, one of those flight maps a pilot uses. When I showed the FAA instructor my flight plan, he was really amused. His comment? "*Sharon, you're in an airplane. Airplanes don't need to follow the roads.*" Think about it for a minute - I had planned to zig-zag my way across the state in an airplane, following all the major highways, so I wouldn't get lost.

Following the roads is a metaphor for left-brain learning - linear, logical, analytical, moving from point A to B to C, all the way through Y, until you reach your destination, point Z.

Flying an airplane - traveling as the crow flies without the slow step-by-step pace of road travel - is a metaphor for right-brain learning, i.e. learning that is visual, spatial, sometimes instantaneous, analogical, *and metaphorical*. This type of learning is like flying an airplane from point A to point Z without having to visit points B through Y along the way.

Left brain training strategies include lecturing, reading, outlining, test-taking, Right brain training strategies include using learning aids, games, storytelling, drawing, *and metaphors*.

The flying story itself is a metaphor, a way of giving you the essence of my idea by representing it with something else. You got the picture inside your head and understood the point of the story quickly, without much explanation from me.

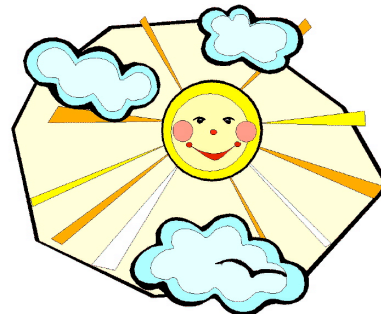
Metaphoric thinking is probably one of the most powerful ways of describing and understanding a concept or idea. The metaphor captures the essence of an idea and forces the learner to "think out of the box," to deepen her understanding of the concept in a right-brain way. And metaphors usually paint mental pictures which stick inside the learner's head long after the classroom learning has ended.

Before you begin to protest that coming up with metaphors is a tough thing to do, let me assure you that we use metaphors every single day. Our daily conversations are peppered with them:

It hit me like a bolt out of the blue.
He's one brick shy of a full load.
She's such a pain in the neck.
It's raining cats and dogs.
He thinks he's the ca'ts meow.
It's on the tip of my tongue.
She's burning the candle at both ends.

Want to hear a few more? These are from my train-the-trainer participants - some of them even I can't figure out!

That's so Martha!
Through butter like a hot knife.
Sick as a dog.
Blind as a bat.
Skinny as a rail.
In the hour glass mode.
Dumb as a box of rocks.
A couple fries short of a happy meal.
So bright his mama called him sun.



Are you thinking that all this stuff about metaphors is brain candy? (Hey, that's a metaphor!) After all, you teach technical skills - maybe software programs. Or you train others in accounting basics or systems writing or whatever. So why would you bother your head about metaphors? The envelope please: And the answer is *DON'T*. You don't need to use metaphors at all - *UNLESS* you want to add a right-brain way of

thinking about your topic that will help your trainees learn it better.

If you agree that metaphors might have a place in your training, how do you go about creating metaphors that are related to your training topics? Easy:

***You let your learners
create their own metaphors
for the learning.***

You set the stage, then let them take over. For example, with your trainees working in small groups (for better creativity), they choose a common machine that represents the topic and elements of what they're learning. They can verbally describe the machine or they can draw it on chart paper and explain it as they hold up the visual metaphor. Let them take it one step further and use their bodies to represent the metaphorical machine.



Or ask them a question - "How is _____ (insert your topic here) like a bridge?" - and have them create a variety of answers.

Or tell them to choose something in nature, science fiction, sports, cooking, history, or music and use that item to represent the training topic.

Of course, combining metaphors with learning aids such as toys can be enormously fun and effective at the same time:

1. Finger Trap Metaphor: You pass out finger traps to your training participants. You give them a few minutes to put their fingers in the traps and to figure out how to get their fingers out again without tearing the straw trap apart. They can help each other with this. Then you ask them to name ten ways this experience with the finger trap is like _____ (insert your training topic). If your topic is computer skills, you would say, "Tell me ten ways this experience is like learning computer skills." You can get even more specific and ask, "How is this activity like the computer program you're learning about?" Their answers may range from the general: "At first you're frustrated, then it's easy," or "You need your co-

workers to help you when you're stuck," to the more detailed: "Putting your fingers in the trap is like inputting the data. Trying to get your fingers out is like getting the data to read the way you need it to read. Tearing the straw trap is like a computer crash when you lose everything." Get the picture?

2. Balancing Clowns: Each trainee gets a packet of small plastic balancing clowns to put together. The rule is simple: Within ninety seconds (more time if you wish), the clowns must all be connected and free-standing (without human support). After time is called, participants check out the many ways they've connected and stacked their clowns. Ask them to share how this activity is like the training topic. Or they can review pieces of information by stating what each clown represents in relation to its position in the stack and the training content. You can vary the activity by having them work in pairs or triads to create their clown stack.

3. Pipe Dreams: At the beginning of a training, Joanna Slan, author and professional speaker from St. Louis MO, gives each learner a giant fuzzy pipe cleaner (about a foot long). Since her topic is stress management, she asks trainees to scrunch the pipe

cleaners into shapes that represent how they feel when they are stressed out. They do a quick pair-share with a neighbor after that.

4. Laser Amazers: At the end of the training, participants wear Laser Amazer glasses while stating at least ten ways the glasses are like what they've just learned.

***Variation One:** Joanna Slan also uses the glasses as note-taking items. She passes them out at the beginning of the training and has participants write a topic-related word, phrase, or doodle on the glasses at different times during the training.*

***Variation Two:** If Joanna has frou-frou table items available, she asks trainees to choose items that represent information they have just learned. The trainees attach these items to the glasses.*

5. Cube Puzzles: When trainees walk in, they receive a cube puzzle with a card that reads, "Puzzled about _____ (the topic)." At the closing, they state something they learned from the training which they are no longer puzzled about.

6. Rewards: You can combine toys and metaphors to reward your participants too.



Give 'Em a Hand: *Whenever a trainee has contributed a humorous or worthwhile idea, give him a back scratcher and say, "(Name) deserves a hand."*

Feather in Your Cap: *Jessie Tolar passes out colorful feathers when trainees have participated in activities and group discussions. She tells them to put a feather in their cap.*

Tooting Your Own Horn: *Jessie also reminds trainees that they can "toot their own horn" when they get a bright idea - and she passes out toy party horns to those who do just that.*

Penny for Your Thoughts: *Use a bunch of pennies as rewards for contributing ideas. Participants may exchange them for penny prizes at the end of the training.*

Worth Your Weight In Gold: *Gold foil-wrapped coins (from See's Candy stores) make sweet rewards for active participation.*

What if you don't have the resources to buy enough metaphorical toys for your trainees? No problem - try these ideas:

7. Uncommonly Common: Display five common household objects (let's say you choose a funnel, can opener, broom, fly swatter, and hammer). Ask your learners to think of everything they've learned so far about the topic. Then, working in small groups, each group chooses one object as its metaphor. The small groups brainstorm and write down all the ways the learning can be represented by the objects they chose. At the end of the designated time (from two to five minutes), each group shares its object metaphors with the whole class.

Here are some examples of this activity from the **Training '99 Conference and Expo** session on using learning aids:

A woman from a software company mentioned that her company's theme is "*Power Tools for a Modern World*." So her group chose the hammer as a metaphor for software applications: "*A software application is like a hammer because you hammer out work with more efficiency, there's no need to beat the computer - you can use it to beat*

your competition, and it's a new tool to build a solution."

Another group, with members from a banking company, chose the broom as a metaphor for customer service: *"Customer service is like a broom because you clean up messes that other people make, you sweep money into accounts and sweep problems away, you keep things clean between you and the customer, the bristles work together as a group to get things done, and some of your customers are witches!"*

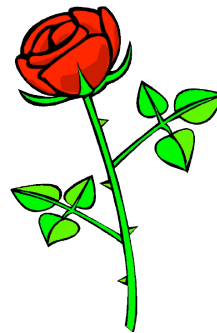
Variation One: *Put a number of household objects in a paper bag and have small groups reach in the bag to choose their metaphorical object. Or have a trainee choose one object for the whole group to use as a metaphor.*

Variation Two: *Have the participants, as a whole group, brainstorm a list of objects first. Then small groups can each choose one item from the list to use as a metaphor.*

8. Children's Games: Dan Coughlin, President of *The Coughlin Company* and author of *Build World-Class Teamwork*, uses a children's game like Beachball Toss as a metaphor for a topic like effective communi-

cation. The beachball represents communication. The ways participants catch, keep, or avoid the beachball represent both positive and negative communication traits. Other children's games can be metaphors for different subjects: London Bridge for steps in a certain process or computer program, Cat and Mouse for problem solving, Tag for internet information.

9. Thorns and Roses: This is a great verbal metaphor to get participants thinking about the topic. At the beginning of your training, direct trainees to form standing pairs. They introduce themselves to their partners, and then share one thorn (the downside or negative aspect of the topic) and one rose (the upside or positive aspect of the topic). If customer service is the topic, the thorn would be the downside of customer service and the rose would be the upside. Use a Random Response Device to debrief the Thorns and Roses.



10. Metaphorical Training

Themes: Use an entertaining theme for your training and tie all information and activities to it. Include toys and props (you can make your own) that have to do with the theme. Some of the themes I've seen trainers use are: murder mysteries, baseball, Disney cartoons, ocean voyages, golf, carnivals, safari, sailing, famous people, TV game shows, the Wizard of Oz, surfing (as in "Surfing the Net"), and, of course, gambling.

A few things to keep in mind when using metaphors: ***First, everyone must understand the metaphor.*** Pretty basic, huh? If you're not sure about it, ask your trainees to explain the metaphor to you.

Second, it should be a metaphor that most people can relate to. Someone may get the context of a computer metaphor but using bits, bytes, serial and parallel ports to represent a customer service program might be a little much.

Third, be somewhat careful of metaphors that are gender-based, culturally-based, or generational. A training buddy of mine recently spoke to a group of high school students on careers.

She used the metaphor of LP's versus eight-track tapes. Say what? The puzzled expressions stopped her cold. Right metaphor, wrong generation.

A corporate trainer for the managers of a hotel-casino in my hometown peppered his speech with gridiron metaphors. Football fans loved it. The rest of us sat wondering what some of the points were.

A final reminder: The metaphor is only a part of your information delivery. Even if someone doesn't quite connect the first time, using a variety of ways to explain your information will help all your learners make their own connections to your topic. What works for the goose may not work for the gander. So bite the bullet, leave no stone unturned, and don't put all your eggs in one basket. *Get the point?*

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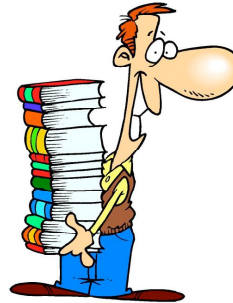


Author and traveling teacher Sharon Bowman helps educators and business people “teach it quick and make it stick,” - fine-tuning their information-delivery skills and turning their passive listeners into active learners.

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