

Using Metaphor to Make Sense of My Personal Pedagogy

Rebecca Jackson



I am a teaching fellow in English Language and Linguistics at the University of Sussex. I research how we understand repetition and emphasis in the field of pragmatics. I am passionate about innovative and creative teaching and I am delighted to be part of the facilitation team for this #creativeHE conversation. @chasing_ling

Why metaphor?

I am a linguist. I work on how we understand language and how we communicate. One of the concepts I teach is metaphor which can be understood as talking about an abstract thing in terms of something more tangible (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). With metaphor, the attributes of something we already understand are transferred cognitively to a ‘target’ that is more abstract and harder to make sense of (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Love is complex but journeys are not. If we say “our relationship is at a cross-roads”, we use a less abstract domain to talk about something that is hard to conceive of. This is the essence of metaphor in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, and see Evans & Green, 2006).

Pedagogies are slippery beasts (itself a metaphor!). We can’t touch a pedagogy, or see, smell or hear it. But while a pedagogy is an abstract concept, we can perceive the traces and influences of a pedagogy in ourselves, in our students, and in our learning artefacts. However, since pedagogies are ever present in our teaching and learning thinking and practices, we need to understand what they are and what they can offer us, and metaphor can help.

I would like to tell you about my personal pedagogy, in part using metaphors. I see my pedagogy as a toolkit, as a lump of fresh, brightly-coloured play-doh, and as a good luck charm, like Dumbo’s white feather that helps him fly. I also see my pedagogy as something that can help me model creativity for students, and I shall explain how. But, first, I’d like to start by explaining why it became so important for me to develop and cultivate a personal pedagogy.

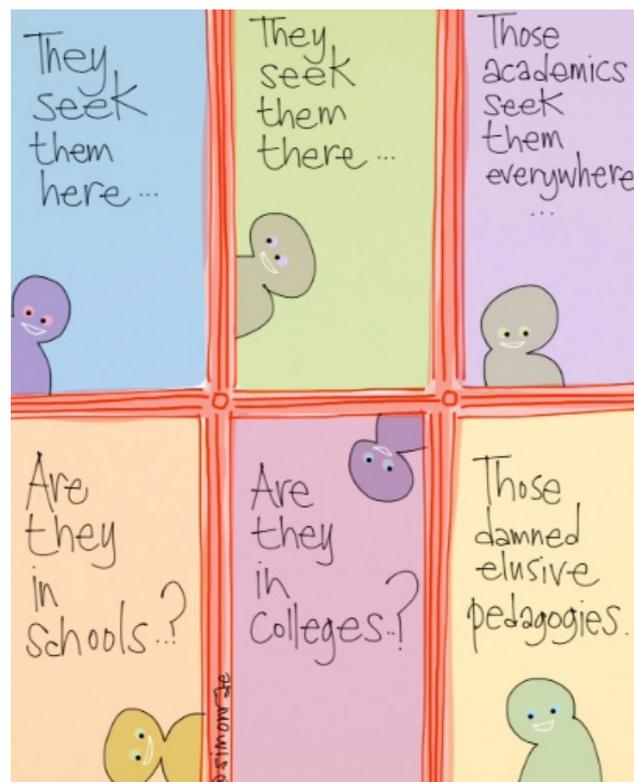


Illustration by Simon Rae

Who has shaped the way I teach?

When I was a graduate teaching assistant, I was expected to go into the classroom with virtually no training and assist undergraduate students in their learning activities. Before the first week of teaching, I prepared diligently. I read. I planned. I memorised. I printed things. I got to my classes, thinking I was ready to inspire young minds. But the students were quiet, disengaged, and, perhaps, even bored. I didn't understand. I thought I had done a good job of getting ready to teach. I was replicating the forms of teaching I had enjoyed myself, and I had earned good marks, so I had just assumed I could carry on transferring knowledge and 'delivering' content in the same way that other people had taught me. But, something clearly wasn't working. I hadn't realised that I could teach in a different way, that I could change what I was doing to fit what would benefit the students as a group. I didn't even think I was allowed to do this.

I was perplexed but as a result, I contacted the amazing Chrissi Nerantzi and signed up for a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice where I was encouraged to explore, experiment, play and be creative in my teaching - and to do so boldly and with confidence. I have never looked back. It was the best thing I have done, as a teacher. Students became much more involved in my classes, and started to take much more responsibility for their own learning. In my classes, we were asked to think about how we see ourselves as educators - to develop metaphors for understanding our teaching and learning ethos. I found this so helpful, and that's why I carry on using metaphors to explain my practice.

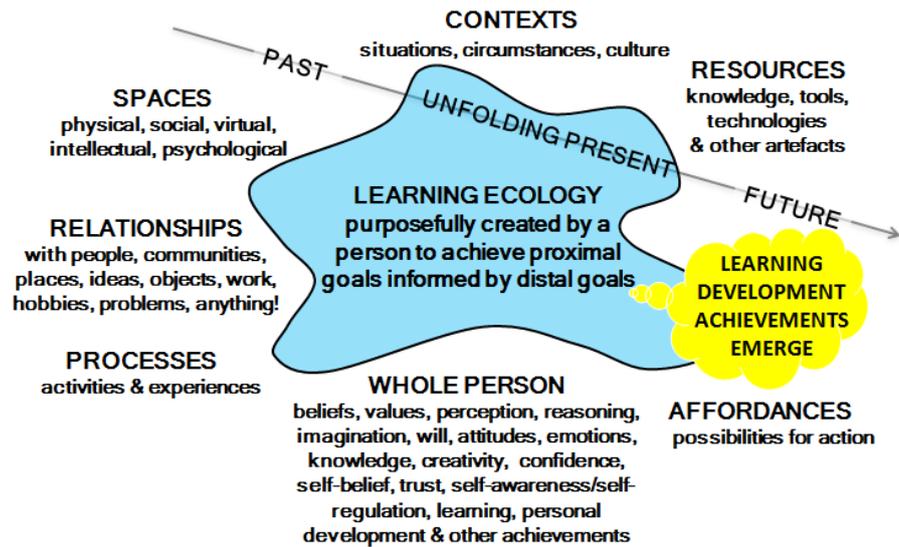
I understood myself as a *gardener*, setting up the conditions for fertility of the mind, and healthy growth and development, stepping back when conditions were right to let the 'plants' grow. In spite of this, I still didn't know what a pedagogy was. I didn't know I had recognised the need to develop one, and had set about doing so. I told you pedagogies were slippery beasts!

The ecological metaphor

Jackson (2016, 2017) uses the metaphor of 'ecology' to try to make sense of learning and teaching. In nature, an ecology is understood as the organism living in and interacting with its environment to achieve a particular purpose. In nature this purpose would be to sustain life and procreate. Organisms can and do shape their ecologies, and an ecology can shape an organism. Ecologies provide resources and nourishment for all that are inside them, and we could transfer this attribute of ecologies to make sense of pedagogies. When the environment changes, the organism must adapt (change its ecology) to survive.

In human ecosocial systems, people create and inhabit ecologies not just to sustain their life but to learn and develop, and achieve many other things. Teaching as a means of encouraging others to learn is an example of an ecology in an educational ecosocial system.

Figure 1 Model of a learning ecology: An ecology developed for the purpose of teaching in a specialised ecosocial system called a university would contain these elements (Jackson, 2016).



The elements of a learning ecology (Figure 1) which I find most helpful to think about, and which overlap with my own understanding, are as follows:

Pedagogies can change over time, and are influenced by the past, present and the future. My history as a learner, and as an academic in the early part of my career shape what I do now, and goals and future student needs shape where I am going. Framing pedagogies in time helps me reflect on my learning journey as an educator.

Pedagogies include our relationships to other students, and to colleagues and collaborators. I think we should see these relationships as resources. I learn more from working with and for my students than from anyone else. We explore subjects together.

You should be a whole person inside your pedagogy. This includes two important sub-elements:

- You should try to be creative.
- You should not ask your students to do anything that you would not do yourself. This embeds care and respect for the student, and enshrines a principle of modelling what you would like the students to do.

I interpret the idea of “being a whole person” as “being our authentic self”. Allowing our true self to be confidently and proudly seen in the learning environment helps students to be comfortable with and proud of who they are. I believe that sharing our own identity with our students is a vital way of supporting the diverse identities of our students. I like cats, bad pop music, and karaoke - unashamedly. My students know this, and I’ve been able to find points of commonality with students because of this, helping me to forge good pastoral relationships.

It is also important for us to think about the context when shaping a pedagogy. One way is to see context as institutional culture. Educators do have to consider institutional ethos and requirements about courses, teaching styles and standards. However, context can also

include the physical environment of the classroom, the objects within it, and the affordances of these items. Part of a pedagogy might be taking the decision to move furniture around or display items differently to encourage students to move, interact, and think in new and interesting ways. By manipulating or accommodating contextual factors in a pedagogy, it is possible to deepen and widen what we can think about in learning situations. In my own practice, it was a light bulb moment when I realised that I could move chairs and stand at the back of the room instead of at the front.

Let's now build on these ideas by looking at the metaphors I use for my own pedagogy.

My toolkit metaphor

I see my pedagogy as a toolkit. What attributes do toolkits have that I can carry across to understanding pedagogies? I can take a toolkit with me. It is portable. If I prepare it, and think about it before I go "on the job", I can set it up to have the tools I think I need. But there are also just tools lying about in my toolkit that I can use on-the-fly and unexpectedly. I can lend the tools to other people. I can show - or model how I use - my toolkit for people. I can teach my students how to use my tools, just like a plumber helps his apprentice learn his craft. In fact, we might see a toolkit pedagogy as a kind of cognitive apprenticeship (Collins, 1987), where learning occurs not through didactic teaching, but through 'coaching'. Instead of hammers, nails, crowbars, gaffer tape and a screwdriver, my toolkit is filled with reflective knowledge, tips and tricks from other educators, and positive personal attributes such as a can-do ethos and a creative outlook. My toolkit features practical tools such as pens, paper, post-it notes, toys, props and technology. You never know when students will finish a task early, and you will need something else to do!

My play doh metaphor

My pedagogy is a fresh, bright lump of play doh. It is mouldable into whatever I and my students need it to be. It won't hurt us - it's non-toxic. The play-doh can be transformed creatively. It IS creativity itself. I can safely play and tinker with my designs for tasks and for courses, and with solutions for supporting students. If it goes wrong, no matter. We just start again. By visibly living my pedagogy as something that can be creatively shaped, and by openly accepting it can go wrong, I show students that it is safe to create, to fail and, indeed, we can only learn from this cycle of creation and development.

My "lucky charm" metaphor

Finally, my pedagogy is a lucky charm. I am not superstitious, but when I think of how I approach teaching for my students, I want to do the best for them at all times. I want ideas to work. I want students' needs and interests to be met. I know that teaching can be high stakes for all involved. Tasks might not work. People - me included - might not prepare sufficiently or they might be derailed by something I have not considered. We might hit a roadblock in understanding that means we progress slowly. It doesn't matter what challenges come along if you see your pedagogy like Dumbo saw his white feather, or Harry Potter saw his invisibility cloak.

With my good luck charm, I feel prepared, ready, pumped and motivated for whatever comes. Develop and cultivate your pedagogy, however you see it. Be open to filling your toolkit, to using and sharing it. Be open to moulding your pedagogy like putty to twist it into new shapes to make learning fun and engaging for all - yourself included. Grasp your white feather and enter learning situations with confidence, being yourself, and being visibly willing to create and fail. It can only help students to develop and grow.

By writing this article, I have come to realise just how important metaphor is to me in visualising my pedagogical toolkit. **What metaphors appeal to you when you think about your own pedagogy?**

References

- Collins A (1987) Cognitive Apprenticeship: Teaching the Craft of Reading, Writing, and Mathematics. 403. [online] Illinois: University of Illinois. Available at: https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/17958/ctrstreadtechrepv01987i00403_opt.pdf?sequence=1
- Evans, V., & Green, M. (2006) Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Jackson N. J. (2016) Exploring Learning Ecologies. Lulu.
- Jackson N. J. (2017) Exploring Personal Pedagogies Creative Academic Magazine CAM7C March 2017 available at:
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980) Metaphors We Live By. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

This article will be published in the March issue of Creative Academic Magazine CAM7C <http://www.creativeacademic.uk/magazine.html>