Metaphors and How We Use Them

The following text was written by Colleen Finegan-Stoll (2003) at Wright State University, entitled “Using Metaphors in Education,” and has been adapted for use here. The complete document is available at:
http://www.engl.polyu.edu.hk/metaphor/lit/finegan.doc

Just for fun, after you have read through the piece once, please re-read and count up the metaphors that you can find. They are especially plentiful near the end of the article!

Using Metaphors in Education

What is a metaphor? Think back to upper elementary school days and you will recall that a metaphor is a figure of speech by which a thing is spoken of as being that which it resembles. Metaphor are everywhere. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) state that they are "pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but in thought and action" (p.3). We studied metaphors in our education, but even without realizing it, those of us involved in the educational process use them in education as well. Using metaphors for educational processes is not new. As a child, I remember an exasperated teacher voicing her wish that she could just open my head and directly pour in the knowledge. I wish she could have too; it would have been easier than memorizing those times tables!

Each of us sees the process of education, our role as an educator and the student in a different manner. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) recommend searching for appropriate metaphors as a step toward self-understanding and to help us make sense of our lives. They suggest that "we seek out personal metaphors to highlight and make coherent our own pasts, our present activities, and our dreams, hopes and goals as well" (p. 232-233).

Bowman (1993) challenged the participants of the Lilly Conference in Excellence in College Teaching to investigate their own viewpoints of the educational process and create a metaphor reflective of these feelings. She presented examples of educational metaphors suggested by teachers and students... "Education is basic training for the world of work"; "Teaching is sowing seed", "Students are...vessels to be filled"; "Education is discovering your soul"; "Teachers are stepping stones to learning"; and "Students are "budding flowers". (Please note that all of these are examples of common educational metaphors.)
The way we see ourselves and picture our roles influences the way in which we teach and how we interact with our students. Strenski (1989) suggests that "Metaphors have consequences. They reflect and shape our attitudes and, in turn, determine our behavior" (p.137). It is obvious that teaching methods used by a teacher who suggests that "Teaching is a battle; keeping the troops in line" will differ significantly from a teacher who feels that "A teacher is a midwife, assisting in the birth of ideas" (Bowman, 1993). [Note: Can you see the different attitudes expressed by the metaphors used here?]

Students of all ages attempt to discover "Who is my teacher, really, and what does teacher want?" If we openly communicate ourselves and our beliefs about education to our students, possibly in terms of a metaphor, they may come to understand the parameters under which we are operating more quickly and accurately.

My history as an educator has included working with students from kindergarten through teacher preparation and graduate school—but my personal metaphor is appropriate at all levels. As a teacher, I see my role, metaphorically, as a travel agent and a tour guide. I am not only pointing the students toward their general goals, I am also facilitating each person's journey and, in many cases, accompanying them along the path.

Students require various amounts and types of guidance to reach their destinations. A few adventurous students only need a pointed finger, others, a compass. Still others require a "Trip-Tik" (apologies to AAA) whereby the entire trip is mapped out for them mile by mile. There are even one or two students who may require a guide or travel companion to accompany them for all or part of the trip and to cheer them along their way.

Students arrive at their destinations by varying modes of transportation. Some go by foot—a little every day; some go by hot air balloon as the weather permits; others go by jet and arrive there before all others, even their teacher. One or two set out to travel on their own and get to the goal by their own means just the same and still others prefer to travel in a group and arrive by tour bus. [Note: Can you find the metaphors in this paragraph? There are several.]

Students vary in their preparation for the excursion. Many begin their journey with a well-equipped backpack and seem prepared for any and all surprises; others come with barely the equipment needed for survival. Some come with more than they can carry and, finding that much of what they brought was superfluous, they abandon it along the way.
Even after arriving at their destination, I find that students recall different aspects of their trip. Some students remember the rocky paths and the rickety bridges, while others recall the trees, flowers and animals along the way. When at their destination, some of the travelers merely complain about their sore feet while others experience pride in their accomplishment, as they enjoy the view.

And, what's in it for me? Part of the reward is in the pride of watching, facilitating and guiding those I've taught. But, the personal and very real reward for me has been remembering that first grade child stuck in the quicksand that has now scaled the mountain. It's that college honors student that "just had to be first" down the trail that is now helping others to cross the slippery bridge. It's knowing that I've made a difference in the lives of many of those travelers, and in some very special cases, having the opportunity to share with them that glorious view from the mountain top.

References


