**Title:** Metaphors: Creativity to Engage Students & Illustrate Course Concepts

**Type of session and length of time:** Activity/Exercise, 60 minutes

**Three Key-Words:** Metaphor; Active Learning; Sensemaking

**Abstract:** Looking for a new, creative, and fun way to train management and business theories in your classrooms? This session will discuss multiple options an instructor can embed metaphor assignments into the curriculum in a variety of formats from online to face-to-face. We will share the exercises, the feedback from students at all levels undergrad and graduate, and run through a practice exercise that you can quickly incorporate. Come learn and share your experience with metaphor assignments.

**Introduction**

How do you give meaning to Theory X and Y, Hygiene Factors, Administrative Management, Bureaucratic Management, Scientific Management, Strategic Management, Motivation & Leadership Theories … and hundreds more theories that management and business students are expected to know, understand, and apply to their organizations? With the wide-range of theories and the foundational theories based in largely western cultures until the turn of the century, teaching these theories to diverse students for understanding and application is critical.

Over the last year, in several different management classes, we have utilized a metaphor assignment in which students are asked to either take an individual concept or a group of concepts and create a metaphor. In 3 out of the 4 classes, the students were participating in undergraduate classes. The students identify as largely non-traditional, culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse and with a wide range of organizational work experience. The fourth class was a doctoral level management theory class. The metaphor assignment has been used as individual, group, project-based assignments, and online discussions. A fifth class this spring, focused on nonprofit leadership and management, will test our method of using metaphors when adopting strategic management principles from the management sector more broadly.

We have successfully utilized the metaphor assignment in multiple courses. This includes (with adaptations) as a group and individual assignment, as well as with in-class or online delivery modes. While our experience using the metaphor assignment has focused on management topics, there are many publications which indicate that it can be used successfully across multiple disciplines. In addition, this literature is also persuasive in its effectiveness as a teaching tool for diverse students.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

For humans who are sense-making, utilizing metaphors in the classroom can be a profound and culturally relevant exercise for all students (Perrow, Feldstein, and Sieler, 2020; Hammond and Jackson, 2015). Gareth Morgan in his *Images of Organization* (2006) proposed eight metaphors for an organization. In his introduction, he states, “The basic premise on which the book builds is that our theories and explanations of organizational life are based on metaphors that lead us to see and understand organizations in distinctive yet partial ways … For the use of metaphor implies a way of thinking and a way of seeing that pervade how we understand our world generally”(p. 12). In fact, many disciplines such as Linguistics, English, Writing, and Communications see creating metaphors as fundamental building blocks to our understanding of the world around us and feels innate for most people due to the nature of metaphors in our lives (Price and McGee, 2009). In addition, in the Journal of Management Education metaphors have been employed, including a recent occurrence with Lund Dean and Forray (2020) using the metaphor of an “Editorial Garden” in their February 2020 editorial.

A metaphor imaginatively makes the connection between a complex concept (such as theory related to a management concept) and a concept that we better understand (one that is known/familiar). The metaphor involves making links between new knowledge and existing knowledge in order to aid in sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Tabor (2007) felt that metaphor writing could be used as a medium for expressing meaning to a concept. This attainment of meaning is what will help students remember the concepts that we are teaching in the classroom.

**Learning Objectives**

The principle learning objective, though simple in nature is powerful: The students will be able to explain a complex management theory/concept by applying a commonly understood concept in the form of a metaphor. The knowledge, attitude, and/or skills students can expect to learn from creating a metaphor assignment include:

1. Higher order level of understanding of and ability to apply course concepts.
2. Increased ability and confidence to communicate both verbally and in writing.
3. Ability to explain a concept in a way other than repeating the definition.
4. Ability to commit theory to memory and to express its application to others within an organization in a way that can allow seamless integration into processes.
5. A positive attitude toward active involvement in discussions and learning – it is fun to be creative and innovative.

**Exercise Overview**

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| Timing | * For multiple concepts/complex theories, the assignment is at the end of the term and used as a review and integration of concepts from throughout the term. The assignment is outlined on day one and then referenced throughout the term. Group time is given during class sessions as the assignment due date approaches. This encourages students to ask questions of the instructor and to gauge their group progress on the assignment. * For individuals, usually the metaphor is one concept and is a discussion posting online with a period of time (5-7 days) to select a concept from the week’s readings, create the metaphor, and post it on the discussion board. * If in-class with no prior preparation required, we use groups. |
| Materials | * No materials from the instructor other than markers, whiteboard and access to the classroom computer if F2F …many groups include a visual even if an in-class exercise. * Formal presentation requires PowerPoint |
| Class size | * Group size of 3-5 (found 3-4 was optimal) * How many presentations you have in a given day depends on the length of the class session (3-hour block vs 50 minutes) * It should be noted that at our university, the class delivery is primarily in 3-hour 20-minute blocks, so we have the option of multiple presentations in one day. Also, our maximum enrollment of students in a section is usually 32. If teaching a large section of 150 (for example), the presentations would need to occur over multiple sessions and would need to utilize groups. |
| Flow of exercise | * Pre-assigned Formal Presentation: 15-20 minutes for the presentation and 5-10 minutes for discussion (depends on UG vs. Grad students). Students must be prepared to lead discussion if there are no questions/comments from the audience. They have new appreciation for their instructor 😊 Note that we have allowed groups to choose their topics as well as having assigned specific topics to them. * In-class discussions: It is possible to use several variations. 1) Assign the same concept to several groups during a class breakout; or 2) pre-assign different concepts being covered that week to groups or individuals and then ask them to present their metaphor when that concept fits into the class; 3) allow groups/individuals to choose a concept (from the chapter(s) or from an instructor list). With option #3, usually the presentations are done at the end of class as a summary/reflection. * Online discussion is similar to the in-class discussion above. If the course is synchronous, the activity can mirror the in-class discussion. If the course is asynchronous, then students either present their metaphor via a written discussion post or a short video. In some cases, this has been decided by the instructor and in other cases, students have been allowed the choice of written vs. oral. Given differences in technical capacity, it seems somewhat easier to have them present their metaphor by posting it in a written format. |
| Debriefing | * Did visuals help you convey your message? We then discuss how people learn and remember concepts differently. Can be used as a study guide for own learning as well. * By preparing the metaphor, is your understanding greater? * By having a concept explained to using a metaphor, did it help you understand? * What elements of culture and individual characteristics did you see come out in the metaphor? The same can be said for observing organizational culture which sometimes plays out as a metaphor if you think about it that way. * Would your preference be to do this assignment as an individual or as a group? Pros/cons? * How can you use this skill in your own life? At work? In your role as a parent (we have non-traditional students), or roommate, or student in a group? With people of another culture? |

**Comments:**

* Metaphor examples must be given to students. Once you provide the examples, students realize just how much metaphors are used in their daily life.
* If a formal presentation is required, we recommend assigning a paper because you miss the nuances of how well the students tie things together if they are presenting for 15-20 minutes. Their written words provide this detail. So, the longer the presentation, the greater the need for a paper to accompany it.
* We also had them submit the paper and PowerPoint the day before their formal presentation so we could be better prepared.
* During the session, we will talk about the assignment guidelines we use as well as how we grade the metaphor.

**Session Description**

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| **Session Timeline** | |
| **Time** | **Activity** |
| 10 minutes | **Welcome & Introductions** |
| 10 minutes | **Background**   * How we use the metaphor assignment (what courses, F2F vs online, written vs. class discussions) * How we introduce the assignment * Examples of student submissions * Student reactions/feedback |
| 15 minutes | **Small Group Discussions**   * Experiment with a metaphor – let’s see how creative our participants can be - select one management concept and create a metaphor |
| 20 minutes | **Debrief in Large Group**   * Share concept and metaphor * How would you adapt this to your own courses? * How might you adapt to various delivery modes |
| 5 minutes | **Wrap-up** |

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