

# Metaphors for University Teaching



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***On 21st February 2005, Kim McShane, Lecturer in the Institute for Teaching and Learning at the University of Sydney, presented a seminar for Learning and Teaching Unit staff and fellows on 'Metaphors in the Conversations of Academic Development'. That presentation was based on Kim's current research into academic teacher identity and 'the move' to online teaching, and challenged us to consider our assumptions and motives as academic developers. Here, Kim shares some of the teaching metaphors of her lecturer research participants and invites you to reflect on your understandings about our teaching beliefs and practices using metaphor.***

## University Teaching (and Learning): Going Online

In my current research into academic identity, online teaching and change, I seek to explore and describe how academics themselves understand the changes to their lecturer identities and teaching roles - particularly for those colleagues who 'make the move' (Taylor, Lopez and Quadrelli, 1996) to integrate online learning environments into their teaching. In this paper I will outline briefly my research study and present an overview of the early interpretative analysis of my academic participants' teaching metaphors.

I am investigating academic teacher identity in a time when university teachers are being overlooked (or criticised for transmission-based, 'indifferent teaching') in recent higher education teaching and learning documents in Australia (DEST, 2002).

Allied to the 'erasure' of the academic in teaching and learning policy, there are several significant discursive shifts that bring the student to the fore of attention. The interests, experience and conceptions of the student are the focus of much of the (phenomenographic) literature in higher education teaching and learning (see for example, Laurillard, 2002; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 2003) - a discourse which provides the theoretical underpinning for many of the course evaluation questionnaire regimes that are currently implemented in Australian and in increasing numbers of UK universities. As funding models and management practices have shifted, this (surface and/or deep learner) student has become the same discerning 'client' of the corporate university. The convergence to these various discourses is producing the 'flexible learner' of the early 21st century. (And seen from this perspective, we might wonder if the university teacher is being re-cast as a salesperson and service provider).

The teacherly work of academics is rarely mentioned in recent Australian

higher education teaching and learning policy documents. Instead we find that new modes of ICT are now touted as enablers of more effective student learning, with technology being advanced as an implicit solution to supplement or replace 'out-moded transmission-based approaches'. As an academic developer who has worked in 'flexible and online learning' with individuals and project and departmental teams in several universities, I see how my colleagues are confronted by, and find various ways to cope with, new technologies in their teaching. This research project has enabled me to investigate academics' espoused teaching beliefs and teacher self-concept - in traditional on-campus teaching and in online modes. I have also set out to capture their sense of change about their teaching role. To do this, I have been using metaphor as an elicitation and interpretative research strategy.

## Metaphor and Identity

Our imaginations and desires cause us to imagine and perform intentional identities (Butler, 1990, 1993; Pecheux, 1982), that become realised though verbal and non-verbal, embodied representations. The conscious and unconscious use of metaphor, anchored in our language and communication, is tied intimately to the intentional, discursive production of our identities. According to Ricoeur (1978: 33) metaphor is an artful, rhetorical strategy of inventive attribution - a substitution of elements that invokes 'the pleasure of understanding that follow surprise'.

The notion of metaphor (the Greek *meta-pherein*) is about *carrying with/over/beyond* or *transferring*. Metaphor is a creative linguistic and conceptual device that enables us to describe a way of being, feeling or doing in terms of another image. That image translates and recontextualises the original being, feeling or doing. By recognising and articulating one kind of thing in terms of another (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), Self and Other are established as separate, even as they become bridged through metaphor (Koro-Ljungberg, 2001).

Fox (1983) reflected on the personal theories of teaching that emerged from conversations with newly appointed and experienced polytechnic teachers in the United Kingdom in the early 1980s. He identified four basic theories of teaching that read as metaphors: *the transfer theory*, *the shaping theory*, *the travelling theory*, and *the growing theory*. In Fox's view, simple views of teaching are reflected in the metaphors of 'transfer' (filling empty vessels and minds) and 'shaping' (of raw material and minds). Personal theories that are constructed around 'travelling' (teacher as guide) and 'growing' (teacher cultivating minds) are appreciated by Fox as more complex in his schema.

The use of metaphor is an imaginative strategy that can transport with it other nuances and shadows that might not otherwise articulated in the description of the lived phenomenon. I was intrigued to find that role metaphors abound in the research into academic work and the up-take of ICT.

## Metaphors for University Teachers Who Use ICT

In much of the literature on computer-based and online learning over the past 10 or so years, a role shift for the teacher is always acknowledged. Some writers actively exhort that shift, and counsel university teachers to change their ways.

The traditional teacher is often cast as independent, expert and ego-centred: performer, actor, 'authoritarian provider of knowledge', 'expert presenter', 'sage on the stage', the 'information transmitter with absolute master and control'. Additionally, the teacher of old is represented as a holder of information that must be delivered to students ('dispenser of information', 'deliverers of content').

The teacher who uses ICT (must) become(s) a 'facilitator' of learning, and here the metaphors and images tumble forth: mentor, guide and fellow traveler, coach, leader, a 'cybernetic cowboy' (Hiltz, 1999), director, manager, mediator, 'a resource to be consulted by students' (Reeves, 2001), community organizer, chairman, host. Taking up some of these images, as well as an extensive list of others, Berge (1995) has summarized the role and function of online teacher moderators into four categories: pedagogical, social, managerial and technical.

The metaphors of the literature are used loosely, usually to call for change in terms of what teachers (should) do. For the most part these are superficial labels, and the assumptions that produced them remain unpacked and unexplored. Thus I decided to use metaphor in my research for two reasons. Firstly I thought it would offer a safe, playful and meaningful way of accessing the personal-professional identities and local contexts of university lecturers. Secondly, metaphoric images provided an imaginative gateway into reading and interpreting academics' sense of change in their work.

## Methodology and Methods

This is a qualitative, interpretative study - a collective case study (Stake, 1998) - of 12 university lecturer-colleagues from a spread of disciplines in two Australian universities. My role, as one of the research 'instruments' in this qualitative study, is deliberately and carefully reflexive; I grapple knowingly with my knowledge of context, my selectivity, and my own positions on the matters I interpret and write about. (However, in this paper I have strategically reduced my voice, to enable the inclusion of more interpretative writing).

Participants were selected after firstly reading about my research project and expressing interest. All participants were using some kind of online computer-mediated communication (CMC) format, such as e-mail, electronic discussion lists or 'chat', in their teaching. In 1998, 5 'technology enthusiast' lecturers from a large multi-campus university in Victoria formed the first research phase. In 2001, seven lecturers (5 novice online, 2 online distance educators), from a large metropolitan university in NSW, were selected to participate in the second phase.

Participants reflected on their teaching beliefs and practices in a series of dyadic conversational interviews and in the occasional e-mail exchange with me. They were encouraged to exemplify their beliefs with lively stories and anecdotes, and the sharing of subject outlines and online teaching artefacts. Table 1 presents a summary of participants, their disciplines and the metaphors they actively discussed in this study.

In reflecting on these metaphors we need to consider what it is they signal about the academic identity work (-in-progress) of the participants. It is noteworthy for example, that some colleagues have supplied more than one metaphor to describe their teaching at different stages of the research. Certainly these images and metaphors lead us into understanding some of the challenges faced by those who took up or were engaged in online teaching.

Name	Discipline, Years of University Teaching	Metaphor, Image
Ron*	Health Sciences, 25 years	performer, model, (pastoral) carer
Zhang*	Business (Chinese language, culture), 8 yrs	team leader, team member
Hilary*	Business (Communications), 17 years	(once a splashing fountain') mentor, facilitator
Seb*	Computer Science, 22 years	performer
Paul*	Health Science, 21 years	Obi-Wan-Kenobi, guide, mentor
Evan	Arts, 4 yrs	preacher, performer
Frank*	Medicine, 5 years (DE/ ICT-only)	facilitator
Jane	Arts, 19 years	lamplighter
Aurea	Health Sciences. 23 years	a big ear, big brain, big heart, big eye
Rose	Arts, 3 years	tour guide and social worker à stage manager and jugglerà orchestra conductor (and policewoman)
Cora	Arts, 3 years	coach, social worker
Rahime	Arts, 16 years	No metaphor; all metaphors and none; develops a relationship with students

Table 1: Research Participants, Discipline, Years of University Teaching, Metaphor, Image. Names supplied are all participant-selected pseudonyms.

\* *These participants are 'technology enthusiasts' (see Thompson and Holt, 1997); they are experienced and confident users of online learning resources, which they integrated into their on-campus teaching.*

## Metaphors and Similes to Describe University Teaching

To support and enable my analysis I have clustered the metaphors into 5 arch-metaphors, or simile groupings. I have used similes for this analysis of my participants' metaphors as they invite comparisons using *like*, but never assume the 'sameness' of metaphor-for-concept (see Koro-Ljungberg, 2004). Some metaphor labels cluster under several similes, so that for example, the tour guide may be both a metaphoric manager (of students) and a person who serves a community (of students).

The 4 similes (with accompanying metaphoric roles) that have emerged from my analysis of participants' metaphors are:

- **Teaching is like Performance**  
Performer, Model, Preacher, Juggler
- **Teaching is like Care**  
Mentor, Obi-wan-kenobi, Lamplighter, Pastoral Carer, Social Worker, (synecdotal) Body Parts: 'a big ear, big brain, big heart, big eye'
- **Teaching is like Community Service**  
Social worker, Policewoman, Tour guide, Lamplighter
- **Teaching is like Management or Direction**  
Orchestra conductor, Stage manager, Team leader, Coach, Tour guide, Guru

- **Teaching is Facilitation**  
(no metaphors or images for facilitation - it is a decontextualised function)

For the purposes of this paper I briefly summarise some observations about these similes, and how they reflect or relate to 'the move online'. This brief discussion is intended to give some insight into how I am conducting my interpretative analyses of the metaphors and similes of colleagues' metaphors.

The teaching focus of the *Performance* simile is on teaching as an embodied act, where the performer-teacher transmits and interprets knowledge from a central stage or platform. All (student) eyes are on the Performer at the lectern, and there is pleasure in the tension between following a script and improvisation. For Performers, there is risk and thrill in spontaneity, and

certainly the juggler/teacher, whose act/work is least scripted, reflects this ‘in the moment’ riskiness most vividly. The evangelical Preacher also holds the floor and relies on a particular rhetorical and dramatic performance to ‘convert’ those who listen and watch:

I’m not somebody who stands at the lectern. You know I’m somebody who, who paces around and gestures. It’s very much a dramatic performance with me. You know a lot of overheads, but you know I’m whipping things on and whipping things off. [Evan, Conversation 1a, 28.02.02]

Other participants in the research, though not Performers themselves, indicated an awareness of the teaching ‘style’ and several expressed a wish to develop the lively characteristics of the Performer in their face-to-face teaching.

The Professor [...] was one of these charismatic people who used to sit up the front of the room and, sort of sit on a desk, and just talk off the top of his head. And.. he used to go off in all sorts of directions, and was.. just entertaining, the students loved it. But he never actually stuck to any of the curriculum. So the students felt really inspired. [Cora, Conversation 1, 01.03.02]

And the thing I think I’d like to improve most of all is, is the sort of, ahm.... evidence of enthusiasm when I teach. Ahm...I think I need to go to drama lessons and, ahm yeah because, I’d like to sort of, come across more... more dynamically. [Hilary, Conversation 1, 01.11.99]

While rehearsal is possible, the Performers in this research gave no explicit indication of pre-and post-performance activities that would point to the other work of teaching: preparation, planning and assessment of student achievement. Those who laid claim to being largely performance-oriented in this research were also the most reluctant to let go of face-to-face teaching formats, and struggled with the transition to online teaching. Evan and Seb defended face-to-face teaching over online teaching and even Ron, who regarded himself as an online enthusiast and Performer on a world stage, nevertheless stated that:

I can inspire, cajole, communicate passion, ah, enthusiasm, face-to-face in a way that I think is impossible online. Absolutely impossible. Ahm, because... you, you communicate facts, you can communicate knowledge, you can... certainly have a little bit of interaction through responding appropriately y’know, to emails and questions. And, y’know, that can be very valuable, ahm, and has it’s own place. But ah, I don’t think I can communicate any of the things I’m best at.. online. [Ron, 05.12.99]

The focus of the *Management and Direction* simile is on teaching as managing and leading people, and motivating them (or coercing them) to achieve the Manager’s predetermined goals. Teacher control is highlighted. Those colleagues who articulated managing and directing roles in the research did make the transition to online teaching, but with lots of face-to-face monitoring and support. For example, one colleague Zhang conducted his WebCT™ language quizzes and online activities in a computer laboratory, where he could oversee his students’ work. Cora comments too:

I guess I’m more like *coach* in some ways. It’s about keeping people enthused, and.. challenged and.. encouraging them. Yeah... [Cora, Conversation 1, 30.03.02]

The teaching focus of the *Community Service* simile is on being seen to serve others, in a dutiful, responsible manner. Community service requires a certain sense of duty and collective responsibility, and one participant, Jane, expressed this sense of duty in terms of being a metaphoric lamplighter - a notably historic community role. Her metaphor was rich with imagery:

I like the idea of ‘shedding light’ for students - not so much telling them what they need to know, but helping them to see things differently, move outside their own frame of reference, and question what they have learnt so far. Thus, it is part of my responsibility to keep my own candle bright by conducting research, reading, thinking, debating and generally keep up with the field. [Jane: email communication, 16.04.02]

Those teachers who served the community also made the transition to online teaching, and their students were entrusted to find their way, supported by both online and face-to-face monitoring and support on the part of the teacher. In this service image, students are required to collaborate more to support their learning.

The teaching focus of the *Care* simile is on caring for the emotional and spiritual well-being of the individual student. University teachers who value care in their teaching appear to make the transition to online teaching relatively easily, although a lot of effort and time are devoted to setting up and maintaining the two-way communication environments such as online discussions that foster dialogue, shared reflection and communication with and between students. Aurea expressed to me her empathy with her students’ confusion and anxiety when they were online:

When I read online, for example, [that] they didn’t know what to do and they are throwing ideas back and forth on how to organize themselves, I know they are very anxious. They know what to do, but it is just so difficult. I know what they are feeling. Maybe I am putting myself into their shoes and can feel what they are going through and that is when I say, ‘I am reading it this way’. And I respond accordingly, whether that response is giving them more information that could help them put things into perspective. [Aurea: Conversation 3, 30.04.03]

## Teaching is Facilitation

The fifth image in my analysis, the Facilitator, does not fit exactly the mould of a contextualised metaphoric image, but is a common label in the literature for describing the teacher who uses ICT to support or enable teaching and learning. The contexts of Facilitation are flexible - they comprise nondescript ‘facilities’ of all sorts, and Facilitation suggests the notion of making an experience easier for someone else. Frank says that his online facilitation role is about ‘...oiling the wheels. Making things happen smoothly. [Frank, Conversation 1b, 15.04.03]’

It seems that the Facilitator adapts well to the ‘unbundled’, disaggregated curriculum design, teaching and assessment process typical of distance and self-paced learning packages (Levy, 2003). Once planning is complete, the Facilitator either abrogates or shares the teaching responsibility with others: the learners, tutors, specialists and experts. The Facilitator establishes and maintains networks to connect everyone engaged in the learning process. For example, Hilary says of her under-graduate Business Communications students:

...in the discussion groups it's not.. they're not writing to me. They're writing to each other, mainly. And.. ahm... they allow me to read it. They know it's for marks, so they put nice things about me every so often, just to (laughs).. to get marks. But they... they're writing to each other - in the discussion lists [Hilary, 01.11.99]

The Facilitator-teacher supports students to be autonomous, and becomes an outsider to the interactions of students. The emphasis in teaching as facilitation shifts to a student focus, to student autonomy, and the process is (more or less) student-led. Of course, as she suggests in the last quote, Hilary and her students are aware that in this institutional context, she is still responsible for the assessment of her students.

The face-to-face Facilitators in my research appeared to make the transition to online teaching apparently easily, as independent work, group work and peer support can be explained, enabled and managed quite efficiently in online text-based communication modes. Indeed for university teachers, being an online Facilitator can help some lecturers become more Facilitator-like in their face-to-face teaching. For Hilary, facilitation

...allows you to practice some of these, good things. You know like, asking, asking a question instead of making a statement.... Ahm, it sort of helps you move your mindset around, when you can deliberate on it and think, ‘No, this is not the way I should do this. It would be better if I did it this way’, and you can do it on paper. You can sort of train yourself a bit to do a bit more, in person. So I think, in that way, it's probably changed my teaching. [Hilary, 01.11.99]

I intend exploring the experience and notion of online facilitation further with my research participants in coming months. As a pedagogic role it seems to enable and disable certain kinds of relationships between teachers and students, and it stands in discursive contrast to the notions of teaching as performance, management and direction, community service and care.

As this cursory overview has shown, discussing teaching metaphor can offer an imaginative and productive strategy for probing academics’ experiences of, and values about university teaching.

## Reflections on Teaching Metaphors in this Research

It is worth noting, too, that several colleagues in this research articulated new and different metaphors as they made ‘the move online’ and engaged in more extensive online (and face-to-face) teaching, highlighting the shifting, discursive nature of our identities. Of course, some of us may not identify with a primary metaphorical type. Rahime, for example, was insistent that her teaching role was reflected in all metaphors and none. At times she described her lectures as performances; in other moments her strong commitment to developing a relationship with her students was emphasised. And she was adamant that online teaching could not enable her to develop those relationships with her students.

An electronic environment, it has no emotion, I don't care what anyone has said. It has no emotion. I think it is very difficult to write teaching materials that are passionate. [Rahime, Conversation 2, 12.07.02]

Metaphors may be useful too for exploring disciplinary allegiances and differences. This research into change, as perceived by university teachers, has also revealed a hidden layer of longing for another time - a golden past? - as well as some optimism for future generations of students we teach. Jane spoke to me some more about her teacher-lamp-lighter metaphor :

...[I]t is also partly the generation image and it is the torch of knowledge that goes from generation to generation. The thing about real lamps is you can't run with them, you've actually got to nurture them and protect them, so it is a less competitive image. And it is also because the lamp-lighter... I have had many students who are much smarter than me, and that is one thing about the lamp. The lamp-lighter can contribute to a candle which is much brighter than the one that sets it going and I think that is true in teaching. I have had some fabulous students, really going on to make their mark. So I think that another point is about seeing yourself in perspective. Teachers aren't the font of all knowledge, but we have this responsibility to create environments and provide resources and encourage and nurture and protect and illuminate, and bring people into the circle. [Jane, Conversation 3, 27.05.03]

The shifting discourses of teaching and learning (or learning and teaching?) in higher education policy appears to be ignoring - if not erasing - the teaching work of academics. Jane's insights about her teaching stand in stark contrast to pronouncements such as the following - in this case the public views of two researchers whose publications are oft-cited in current higher education teaching and learning policy in Australia:

Many academics will have to confront the reality that the task of the academic teacher, traditionally encapsulated in the designation of lecturer, is shifting from the transmission of information towards the management and facilitation of student learning (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999: 7).

In closing I invite you and your colleagues to ponder and discuss your own teacher selves via the lens of metaphor. My hope is that my research will stimulate lively, reflective, self-conscious discussions about our changing roles as university teachers - in an era when the corporatisation of universities and new management practices threaten rapid change, and reveal considerable ignorance about what it is we strive to do as teachers (of learners).

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- \*\*I would be happy to discuss the ideas in this paper further by email. Please forward any comments and suggestions me at: [k.mcshane@itl.usyd.edu.au](mailto:k.mcshane@itl.usyd.edu.au) . Thank you.\*\**