Unleashing the Imagination

Using metaphor as a heuristic in the composition classroom

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Fiction writers and poets from Stephen King to Adrienne Rich mirror what philosopher Suzanne K. Langer says about metaphor in her book *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*—that metaphor is a means of creation through recognition. These writers understand how metaphor can act as a vehicle for creative and critical thinking. Yet I wonder why we don’t use metaphor in this way more often in the composition classroom. James E. Seitz says in *Motives for Metaphor* that we have to “consider the possibilities offered by a metaphoric, rather than a literalist curriculum” (200). This change in perspective for composition would use the concept of metaphor to shake up students’ expectations for language and meaning making. Even so, for various reasons, we do not think of metaphor as a way to create new ideas, as a means to invention, as often as we should. Perhaps this is because writing through the use of metaphor takes the writer beyond established, “rational academic” thinking. Metaphor, in its capacity to show rather than tell, is commonly understood in English Studies as the essence of critical thinking and analogy, but it could also be used as a pedagogical tool in composition courses. Putting two seemingly disparate concepts (words, images, or ideas) together can be a way to discover new ideas, as opposed to just describing or correlating old ones. We often leave this kind of thought-play to the “creative writers.” However, all writing is creative in that it is an inventive process, and metaphor can be used to generate critical writing as well. Seeing likeness in difference and difference in likeness is one way to understand not only the world, but also the way we think and communicate. Since Aristotle, the writing of a strong metaphor has always been a sign of skill in language. As he says in *Poetics*, “the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor” (1459a5). He sees it as a “sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars” (1459a7-8). While Aristotle’s ideas are certainly important to build upon, we generally think of Aristotle’s notion of metaphor to be about style, a way to communicate something that already exists, something intuitive and not conceptual. Besides the idea of crafting specific metaphors, composition classes can focus on the way they help writers to think, to create, and to understand language.

Langer touches upon the complexities and the inventive nature of metaphor in *Philosophy in a New Key*, when she writes that “Metaphor is our most striking evidence of abstractive seeing, or the power of human minds to use presentational symbols. Every new experience, or new idea about things, evokes first of all some metaphorical
expression" (141). In this vein, she describes discovery in terms of a light shining for the first time on something that had always existed: "Most new discoveries," she writes, "are suddenly seen things that were always there. A new idea is a light that illuminates presences which simply had no form for us before the light fell on them" (8).

In his mainstream book *On Writing*, Stephen King discusses the craft of writing in terms that echo Langer’s theories. One major premise that permeates his writing philosophy is the use of metaphor as a way to create new ideas in fiction. I believe that King would add that metaphor is the way fiction is created, and that fiction could not exist without metaphor. Through King’s advice, we can discover an understanding of how to invent through writing, and find a way to show our students how new ideas can be created. While Langer describes this phenomenon in terms of the light as giving an idea form and existence, King describes it in terms of recognition. He believes that all story ideas come from such “recognition,” the same recognition that occurs from the bringing together of two ideas that makes a good metaphor:

> Let’s get one thing clear right now, shall we? There is no Idea Dump, no Story Central, no Island of the Buried Bestsellers; good story ideas seem to come quite literally from nowhere, sailing at you right out of the empty sky: two previously unrelated ideas come together and make something new under the sun. Your job isn’t to find these ideas but to recognize them when they show up. (37)

King goes on to share with the reader how several of his story ideas (many of them bestsellers) came into existence by his putting together two seemingly random concepts. For one of his first stories, “Happy Stamps,” King describes how he watched his mother lick green S & H stamps to save them up for a present for her sister. He notices his mother’s green tongue and thinks, “how nice it would be if you could make those damn stamps in your basement” (38). Thus he created a story about a boy who counterfeits stamps in his basement in order to buy a house for his mother. Later, the idea for his first bestselling novel, *Carrie*, came into being during a stint as a janitor in a high school. Wandering through the girl’s bathroom, King is amazed by the curtainless showers and the metal tampon machines. This memory came to him one day while he was working at a laundry, when he also recollected a *Life* article that linked telekinesis with girls and the onset of adolescence. “Pow!,” he writes, “Two unrelated ideas, adolescent cruelty and telekinesis came together, and I had an idea” (75). Hence *Carrie* was conceived.

According to King, the need to cause the reader to “prickle with recognition” is an ongoing goal for writers. Sometimes, the urge to convey certain feelings, sense, or perspective might not even be articulated or even fully known to the author until the moment of invention that, in turn, leads to further creation. Each creative thought must be allowed, if not for itself, then for the thoughts that will follow. This is true not only for “creative” work, but all types of thinking.

Likewise, Adrienne Rich, in her essay “Woman and Bird,” discusses how the concept of metaphor helps in creating poetry, helps to “evoke other worlds of meaning” (5). She describes spotting a great blue heron while walking through her neighborhood. Thinking of the concepts of “bird” and of “naming,” she says that “I wanted to be sure I could name what I had seen: to stay with what I had seen” (4). She needed to acknowledge the heron with a name, with words that are inevitably symbolic of something. And she realizes at the same time that all words are metaphors. Rich also knows that good metaphors cause us to pause, reflect, and create, and that “the core of
metaphor, that which lies close to the core of poetry itself, [is] the only hope for a humane civil life. The eye for likeness in the midst of contrast, the appeal to recognition, the association of thing to thing” (6).

Both creative writers, Rich and King have no problem articulating how metaphors help them generate new material. Yet the pressure to find direct meaning in academic domains can shut down creativity and new ideas even before they have the chance to develop. There is a risk in experimenting with metaphor in a class that is supposed to teach “analytical” writing or “argumentation.” As composition instructors, we should question the extent to which our classes need to focus on analytical thinking, and how much they can draw on the realm of creative writing and thinking. Like Ann Berthoff, I tend to believe that the two are not mutually exclusive, but such a view is not always echoed by administrators, department chairs, and other instructors in the field. However, regardless of where we stand on the issue of whether the creative can be separated from the academic, metaphor in the composition classroom has the potential to foster critical and creative thinking and, ultimately, effective writing.

Although studies on metaphor abound, I would here like to focus on two particularly pertinent ideas:

1) The need to spend time analyzing weak and strong metaphors in order to show students how we both speak and think in metaphor (Lakoff), and to prompt them to determine whether these metaphors are effective at conveying meaning.

2) The practice of choosing metaphors to represent their thinking, so that students will be able to generate material and discover whether their conceptual metaphors accurately mirror their initial ideas.

One way to utilize the concept of metaphor in the composition classroom is to acknowledge and make explicit language’s inherently metaphorical nature. Even the way we discuss how to turn the material of our lives into pieces of writing is fraught with metaphor—we use terms like “germ” or “seed” of an idea, or phrases like “white-hot center.” These terms may be “right on” conceptually, but they may also be vague to many of our students, yet we use them as if they were concrete. If we do begin to acknowledge our constant use of metaphor, perhaps students will begin to understand the role of metaphorical language in developing more sophisticated ideas.

The use of metaphor as a writing tool can help students learn about their own writing processes. One assignment, “My writing is a . . . ” (as taught to me by Hephzibah Roskelly), asks for a 2–page paper on a metaphor for a student’s individual writing process. This exercise fosters analytical as well as creative thinking. Once the students choose a metaphor, they are then asked to examine why they’ve chosen it. Students have said their writing process is a rainbow, airplane engine, river, tornado, waves on the ocean, etc. Instead of asking them for a literal account of their writing processes, the metaphor exercise helps them think about their writing processes in new ways, leading them to examine whether their beliefs about writing are accurate. Only by following the explanation to its completion will the student realize whether or not the writing process is most like a tornado or a river.

To push critical thinking even more, and because “thinking begins with perception” (Berthoff 64), students can first represent their writing processes through a visual representation. I like to bring in paper, colored pens, clay, glue sticks, construction paper, and crayons, and then have my students spend around 20-30 minutes putting together an object or design that makes their metaphors visible. Students believe this task will be easy . . . until they sit down with a blank piece of paper
and have to really make decisions about what they actually do when they write and try to communicate their writing processes accurately. The reminder of activities (playing with clay, markers) from their younger days can actually push them to think about writing in new ways. Once they have constructed their visual representations, I give them the writing part of the assignment, asking them to produce the two-page reflection as explained earlier.

When I did this exercise myself, I drew a chaotic mess on the page, scribbles that had no rhyme or reason, but once I had time to reflect and respond to my drawing, I realized that I actually do have a process with some sort of pattern and repetition. Although writing may begin chaotically for me, the entire process is certainly not a mess. I want students to learn this lesson early on, so they do this exercise in the beginning of the semester. It ends up being a lesson on language, invention, and revision. Perhaps they discover that their initial image no longer fits, and then they can write about how they’d like to change it in their two-page reflection. Thus, students learn that they have to start out with something (whether an image or the written word), and then revise it as their understanding of it alters.

The best part of this assignment is what comes at the end of the semester when students are putting together their portfolios. Since I (or they) have saved their initial projects, they get to revise once again. Now that they have thought about their writing processes throughout the entire semester, they can once again reflect on their first thoughts about their writing processes. I often have them write their final reflection letter on how their thinking about writing has changed since the day they came up with their writing process metaphors. Using metaphor as a way to generate writing not only affects the relationship dynamic between teacher and student but, because students are the experts of their own metaphors, writing through them also forces students to become authorities over their own ideas and writing.

As valuable as this exercise is, any assignment can include a metaphor option as a different way of generating writing and ideas. For example, students can take imaginative leaps by attaching metaphors to any subject. The act of claiming a metaphor, of saying that my writing is a pile of vomit (actually a common one), allows the writer to shift perspective and question the reasons behind the choice of metaphor. And in essence, finding the perfect metaphor is the best avenue to strong writing. Metaphors that “prickle with recognition” allow the writer to truly communicate his or her thoughts to the reader, and that specificity helps create writing that has meaning, writing that makes an impression on the reader.

By looking beyond the concept of Aristotle’s metaphor, a fixed entity, composition instructors can harness the theories of I.A. Richards and (more recently) James Seitz to reveal the pedagogical possibilities of using metaphor in the classroom. As Seitz writes, “by fusing one thing with another, metaphor overlooks their differences and passes on to writers and readers the responsibility for bearing those differences in mind . . . [offering] an entry into the fictive space generated by the metaphor, where dialogue about equivalence and difference can take place” (195). I agree with Seitz’s belief that we need to embrace the metaphor as a tool for learning analytical and creative thinking as well as discovery. Composition instructors need to use metaphor as a place from which to launch ideas. We need to acknowledge what poets and fiction writers already know, that metaphor can help lead the writer into a place of discovery.

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Works Cited


