The Conscious Use (or Avoidance) of Metaphor in Outdoor Adventure Education

By Simon Beames

Facilitated discussion before, during and after experiences is widely accepted practice in the field of outdoor adventure education (Gass, 1990; Greenaway, 1993; Priest & Gass, 1997; Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988). These facilitated sessions refer "to the organised discussion, prior to or after an activity, that has the intention of enabling participants to generalise what they have learnt to other life settings" (Brown, 2002, p. 101).

Much of the literature appears to house the assumption that individual learning may be considerably restricted if participants' experiences are not processed with the help of an external facilitator, as they may not be able to make sufficiently clear connections between program activities and their daily lives on their own (Knapp, 1999; Luckner & Nadler, 1997; Schoel et al., 1988). This business of making clear connections between program and home is central to courses with personal and social development as their principal aim, yet this fundamental concept of transfer lacks convincing support in the literature and has been described as outdoor adventure education's Achilles' heel (Brown, 2010).

It is within the broad themes of facilitation and processing that the discourse surrounding the use of metaphors as a means of helping participants make greater sense of their experiences exists. In this paper, through an examination of the relevant metaphor literature, I examine the possibilities and pitfalls of outdoor instructors using metaphors to enhance their course facilitation in non-therapeutic contexts. The title of the paper is a play on the title of Stephen Bacon's seminal 1983 book, *The Conscious Use of Metaphor in Outward Bound.*

My interest in learning more deeply about metaphors stems from the numerous times I used personal and group metaphors during my early career as an adventure-based outdoor educator. This practice was entirely uncritical and was largely informed by observing reviewing sessions led by more experienced senior instructors—none of whom were qualified counsellors or licensed therapists. My concern surrounding the unconsidered use of metaphors by outdoor instructors has been so great that I have not deliberately used any kind of metaphors in my practice in at least ten years—principally because I suspected they may have as much potential to harm as they do to help.

Metaphor Literature

The outdoor education-related literature on using metaphors is, of course, located within a much greater corpus of writing in the field of linguistics. Knowles and Moon (2006) view metaphors as "instances of non-literal language that involve some kind of comparison or identification: if interpreted literally, they would be nonsensical, impossible, or untrue" (p. 5). Widely regarded as the seminal book on metaphors, *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; 2003) is based on the assumption that "metaphor is pervasive everyday life, not just in language, but in thought and action" (p. 3). Indeed, no one raises an eyebrow when people refer to computers having "viruses" or colleagues being "on the same page." For Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors are primarily about sense-making and language is merely a way this complex process can be revealed.

Knowles and Moon (2006) state that metaphors employ concrete images to communicate abstract ideas that are difficult to explain. For example, "if we want to fully understand an abstract concept [e.g., love], we are better off using another concept that is more concrete, physical, or tangible [e.g., a building]" (Kovecses, 2010, p. 7). Similarly, Gass (1991) explains how metaphoric transfer happens when "parallel processes in one learning situation become analogous

to learning in another different, yet similar situation" (p. 6). These quotes lend considerable rationale for this investigation into metaphors and outdoor adventure education. If, as Knowles and Moon posit, we might not understand many things in our lives "except with the help of metaphorical models or analogies" (p. 4), it then behooves outdoor educators to better understand how they might facilitate this process more deliberately for the participants with whom they are working.

Metaphors by the People and for the People

My initial interrogation of the literature on metaphor indicates that it can bear two particular distinctions: First, metaphors can be generated by participants or determined by facilitators. It may be that self-generated metaphors are more powerful, meaningful and personally relevant than those determined by instructors. Instructor-determined metaphors appear to be particularly suited to courses with specifically prescribed learning outcomes, such as with therapeutic programs (cf. Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988; Gass, 1991) or development training programs.

Second, metaphors can be used on an individual basis and with groups. I would argue that caution should be exercised when using metaphors to describe other individuals' attributes, except within groups possessing a collectively high degree of trust and where all members are interested in receiving this kind of rather personal feedback. When individuals are given metaphors by others (e.g., Fred is like a rusty chain on a bicycle) this can serve as a form of direct feedback on their behaviour. In some contexts this may be desirable and in others it may be entirely unjustifiable, as the potential for emotional harm is considerably heightened. Group metaphors, on the other hand, can be used to explore behaviour during the course, or to consider the group's interactions after the course. The latter is particularly suited to teams that will be working together after the course finishes (e.g., back in the office).

Metaphors in Practice, on the River

During our paddling trip, my "official" metaphor session took place on the fifth of 14 days. At this point in the journey, I reasoned, people would have settled into their own routines of living on the tundra and would be able to concentrate on a more cerebral task; setting up tents, packing canoes and going to the bathroom had become routine and we had found a pleasant rhythm with each other and the land. I asked members to describe the group's functioning by relating it to some kind of entity (e.g., a sea-going vessel, a computer, a bicycle).

When the activity was introduced after breakfast, ideas such as a canoe, a soccer team and a herd of caribou were suggested as suitable metaphors for us conference delegates. We did not decide on our group metaphor there and then; rather, we revisited the question that night after finishing our shepherd's pie. As we were on the tundra and had come across hundreds and hundreds of caribou so far, there was no disagreement to the proposal that we adopt the herd of caribou as the metaphor for our group. We were now 14 *rangifer tarandus* that were free to go and graze on lichen—as the metaphor goes. What was remarkable was how our adoption of the herd of caribou metaphor directly influenced the way the group interacted over the following nine days.

Sleeping Bull, Wolverines and Metaphors for Landscape

The day after my metaphor session we found ourselves with some free time before dinner. Some people elected to explore the surrounding landscape, some wrote in their journals, others fished and some slept. Despite being deliberately woken three times, one of our group members— our leader, as it turned out—was so much enjoying his nap that he missed dinner entirely. The group member who read out the next morning's group journal entry reflected on the night before and how "Sleeping Bull" had to eat his dinner cold. With that, a moniker was born, and our leader was called

Sleeping Bull by the rest of the "herd" for the remainder of the journey. This, however, was only the beginning of the fun, as others who distinguished themselves in unique and distinct ways were often dubbed "Snoring Bull," "Portaging Bull" or whatever name was topical.
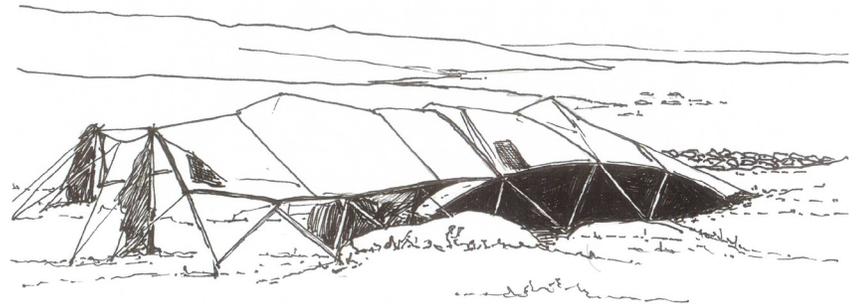
Five days after the initial generation of the caribou herd metaphor, I posed two questions over stoned wheat thins and peanut butter: What dangers threaten caribou? And what nurtures caribou? Among the answers were wolverines and luscious lichen, respectively. I then enquired if there were any wolverines lurking around our group. Was there anything out there that could harm us—anything that we should be wary of?

One person offered that a "wolverine" could be our somewhat relaxed attitudes towards washing hands before eating. Not washing hands could lead to the spreading of illness (e.g., gastro-intestinal sickness, colds and so on). Clearly, sickness could harm our herd of caribou and should be prevented. Examples of lichen that would sustain our herd could be helping the kitchen crew in the morning, once one's personal kit was packed, and being sure to say please and thank-you around camp, so that we did not take each others' goodwill for granted.

One night after dinner, the point was raised that my crude categorization of metaphors included those for people and for activities, but not for the land. For example, if people could be animals, and expeditions like challenges in our daily lives, what could this landscape represent to us? Is it like a warm and comforting blanket or like a scary film that constantly elicits feelings of anxiety?

This discussion showed me how perhaps I had been unwittingly perpetuating a very limited view of how metaphors can be employed as a means of processing

experiences. After all, if I believe that part of my job as an outdoor educator is to help learners make connections to the landscape through which they are travelling, and if I believe that metaphors can be a useful means of more deeply understanding our experiences, then wasn't I missing something rather obvious? It is entirely supportable, then, that encouraging individuals to construct a metaphor for the landscape may enable them to more deeply understand their own connection to it.

Final Thoughts

As the bow of my canoe reached the brackish water of Bathurst Inlet, I found myself agreeing with Stephen Bacon (1983) in that there is room for outdoor educators to consciously use metaphors. After all, it seems undeniable that the caribou herd metaphor enabled us to discuss the ways in which we interacted in camp and on the water, and in ways that were different and complementary to our normal ways of communicating. The caveat, of course, is that there are kinds of "metaphor pedagogy" (e.g., instructor determined, participants generating for other participants) that may be best avoided in conventional outdoor education contexts.

Finally, there appears to be much scope for individuals using personal metaphors to explore their relationship with the landscape through which they are travelling. For me, the river's shores were open, welcoming and life affirming. Ironically, it was this so-called "barren" landscape that filled me with pleasure, awe and peace.

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Simon Beames directs the MSc in Outdoor Education at the University of Edinburgh.