Creating New Metaphors

Developing new perspectives on complex issues

THINKING | Sensemaking

→ What you will need:

- up to 40
- Groups of 2-5
- 1.5 hrs preparation
- 1.5 hrs execution

→ Menu:

I. Overview
II. Learning Activity
III. Assessment
IV. Key Advice
V. References

→ Related Tools:

Positive Gossiping

Positive Reframing

Travelling Concepts

Embracing Uncertainty

"What if you could expand your conceptual vocabulary—thinking, imagining, and making connections in new ways? Creating New Metaphors is a creative tool for generating ideas and reframing problems, using images and language to offer new perspectives on transitions and futures."

—Dan Lockton

I. Overview

Many challenges facing humanity today and in the future are complex, involving relationships, complexities and timescales which are difficult to visualise or make sense of in simple terms. We often use metaphors, unconsciously or otherwise, to make sense of these issues. But these metaphors can also cause particular ways of thinking and framing ideas to become entrenched, sometimes getting us stuck in the same old loops. In such cases, new metaphors can be helpful.

Creating New Metaphors can help inspire students to take creative approaches to imagine the future, creating new strategies, products, services, communication campaigns and ways of explaining ideas, and more widely, help reframe societal issues. All metaphors are wrong, but some are useful. Coming up with - and discussing - new metaphors can become a kind of disruptive improvisation technique, an expanded conceptual vocabulary for helping us think differently and reframe issues, together or individually.

Learning outcome

- ✓ The student is able to generate and use a range of metaphors for making sense of complex issues

II. Learning Activity

Students use a set of cards with both images and words to make unexpected combinations and create novel metaphors. These are discussed to explore the potential impact of new modes of thinking.

1. Warming up: Getting into Thinking Metaphorically   ⏱ 10 mins

Introduce the importance of metaphors in society – in media, politics, popular discourse and in our language. For example, examine the use of war metaphors during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as 'fighting the virus'. Discuss how these metaphors impact our thinking.

Next, provide a selection of image and concept cards and ask students to form groups and randomly combine the cards to create novel metaphors. For example, how could waves be a metaphor for community? This activity can be repeated with different combinations of cards until students feel comfortable with this metaphorical sensemaking approach.

In conclusion, discuss the thought processes and the insights gained using metaphorical sensemaking.

> **Tip**: download the New Metaphor's Introduction booklet, Image cards, Concept cards and A3 Worksheets.

2. Exploring Existing Metaphors   ⏱ 20 mins

Introduce an issue (i.e. societal or environmental) and encourage group discussion on the metaphors, images and associations that we (the public, academia, media, politicians, etc.) consciously or unconsciously use to describe and act in relation to it. Leverage diverse knowledge and backgrounds (cultural contexts) and incorporate examples from popular

media and youth culture to complement "academic" perspectives.

Challenge students to identify three existing metaphors or framings. Critically analyse these framings and discuss their presuppositions and implications.

> **Tip**: create a table in which only columns 1 and 2 are completed, to facilitate the discussion.

3. Mix & Match to Explore New Metaphors ⏲ 20 mins

Lay out a selection of image cards, face up. Select about 20 cards for each group of 4 students from the 100 available cards. Using the ideas generated in Step 2, each group will compare and contrast them with the qualities of the phenomena or objects illustrated in the image cards. Select 1 or 2 image cards per person.

Invite students to discuss new metaphors: which qualities do the images share? Can any of the images offer a metaphor that contradicts or challenges a problematic aspect of the existing metaphors? Select one to fill in table columns 3 and 4.

4. Presenting ⏲ 30 mins

Students communicate the use of the new metaphor in a short presentation with Q&A.

For example, students in design might apply a new metaphor to a transition design project, politics students might use it in an essay or when imagining a new kind of political campaign and business students might pitch a new product or service. They can choose a specific audience so that they can compare and contrast their new metaphor with the target audience's current thinking. If time is limited, students can find their own images online or in magazines to illustrate how the new metaphor can be applied.

This stage works best when there is a feedback loop that allows other stakeholders to engage with the new metaphor, and the students can observe how the new thinking helps others understand the issue differently.

5. Reflection 🕐 10 mins

Discuss how the use of new metaphors impacts new modes of thinking and acting.

III. Assessment

The self-assessment template is largely focused on metacognitive (thinking about thinking) reflection for the student.
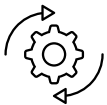
Purpose

Assessment *as* learning aims to strengthen the learning process and the development of metacognitive skills. It empowers students to direct their own learning and to become independent, critical self-assessors.

Roles

Self-assessment

Characteristics

Students reflect on and discuss their own learning

Materials

Reflective questions

Assessment

Reflective questions

1. Reflecting on the process of thinking metaphorically, what did I discover about my own thinking style and sense-making approach around big or difficult concepts? Did I find it challenging or rewarding?

2. Did using new metaphors help me comprehend complex ideas better or see them from a different perspective?

3. How might I apply some of this thinking in my work or daily life where sensemaking is required? Where could I find a use for it - and what would it offer me?

IV. Key Advice

Example tables (Steps 2 and 3) can be downloaded below.

Key Advice

Current metaphor/framing	Issues and implications	New metaphor	Why this reframing helps
Example: *The economy as an insatiable beast that constantly demands to be fed.*	*This can lead to exhausting of resources, exploitation of peoples and breaching planetary limits.*		
1.			
2.			
3.			

Key Advice

Current metaphor/framing	Issues and implications	New metaphor	Why this reframing helps
Example: *The economy as an insatiable beast that constantly demands to be fed.*	*This can lead to exhausting of resources, exploitation of peoples and breaching planetary limits.*	*A tree shedding its leaves (products in the economy), which then, in turn, become the soil in which the tree (and other trees) grows.*	*Such an economy could be centred on regenerative or circular product design and balanced giving and taking within planetary limits.*
1.			
2.			
3.			

V. References

Dan Lockton, Devika Singh, Saloni Sabnis, Michelle Chou (2019). 'New Metaphors: A Creative Toolkit for Generating Ideas and Reframing Problems'. Pittsburgh & Dawlish: Imaginaries Lab. https://imaginari.es/new-metaphors-downloads/

Dan Lockton, Devika Singh, Saloni Sabnis, Michelle Chou, Sarah Foley, Alejandro Pantoja (2019). 'New Metaphors: A Workshop Method for Generating Ideas and Reframing Problems in Design and Beyond'. C&C 2019: ACM Conference on Creativity & Cognition. June 2019, San Diego.
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