



Creating Metaphors

Parker J. Palmer (1997) developed the Creating Metaphors protocol. Gene Thompson-Grove (n.d.) adapted it, and then I further adapted it to its present form. Effective teachers know about the power of figurative language in helping learners to access and retrieve information. Singing the alphabet or chanting a list of conjunctions can help cement memory. In working with adults, sometimes leaders forget the adults are still learners, albeit bigger ones than many of their students. The Creating Metaphors protocol captures the potential of a meaningful metaphor, placed in whatever context is important for the group.

Purpose

Participants aim to use metaphors as a reflection tool.

Group Size

Any size works for this protocol.

Sequence

1. Ask participants to fill in the blank following these words, “When I am at my best as a (for example, teacher, administrator, librarian, or coach), I am a _____. (Two to three minutes)
2. Have them create a nonlinguistic representation to illustrate their metaphor (for example, a drawing with markers or colored pencils or a sculpture using clay), as if they are creating a museum exhibit. Tell them to be sure to make a placard for their exhibit. (Less than ten minutes)
3. Ask participants to stand and walk around the museum. (Less than five minutes, depending on the group size)
4. This is optional. Lead a whole-group discussion about how these metaphors can sustain them in difficult times. (Less than ten minutes)
5. Debrief the process. (Five minutes)

Notes

- This abbreviated version of the original protocol is often effective at the end of an experience, using metaphors as a way to synthesize learning.
- It may take some time for participants to generate a metaphor in step 1. Don't be surprised if participants use some of the 3-D materials (such as modeling clay) as inspiration before they officially articulate a metaphor.

Application Examples

- After a two-day session on teacher leadership, Beth asks teachers to create a metaphor specifically for their work in leading their colleagues. Laughter permeates the room as they try to make their clay into something identifiable.
- Caroline, a human resources director, wants to ensure teacher evaluators understand the differences in the new appraisal system. She uses Creating Metaphors as a way to gauge their thinking about the post-observation conferences.

References

- Palmer, P. J. (2009). *A hidden wholeness: The journey toward an undivided life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Thompson-Grove, G. (n.d.). *Creating metaphors*. Accessed at www.schoolreforminitiative.org/download/creating-metaphors/ on August 20, 2020.