Strategy: Developing a Course Metaphor

Identifying a guiding metaphor can help you refresh a course through infusing a creative structure and new activities that improve student engagement and help students understand and organize course content.

Origin

Weimer, M. (February 28, 2012). Freshen up a course with a course metaphor.
http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/instructional-design/a-course-metaphor/.

Mills, M. K. (2010). Using the jazz metaphor to enhance student learning and skill development in the marketing research course. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 32 (3), 300-313.

Application

Developing a metaphor for your course can:
- Refresh the course: Creates a new approach to an existing course; Gives students a fresh introduction to course material; Makes a familiar course different and exciting.
- Engage students: A creative metaphor can "lighten" the weight of the content and help students feel more confident by comparing something they know more about to something they know less about.
- Organize ideas: Provides a structure for course concepts, especially those students typically struggle with, and can help students navigate the course more easily.

Course metaphors should:
- Be easily understandable by students and transcend culture
- Connect with student interests and be relevant in the current context
- Fit the goals and objectives of the course
- Support the main ideas/concepts of the course; align with the principles and/or values of the course and discipline

Guidelines for using metaphors:
- Choose one that is easy for students to understand and relate to.
- Reinforce the metaphor through class discussion, activities, student learning experiences, research, etc.
- Provide opportunities for students to explore and build on the metaphor.
- Encourage a classroom climate of cooperation, fun, and acceptance of change.

Example: *Jazz in the Marketing Research Course*
- Generally students understand and like music.
- Jazz represents understandings and skills students need to develop in a marketing research course: creativity, collaboration, confidence, leadership, and artistry.
- Activities and experiences:
  - First day of class: The instructor introduces the metaphor and divides students into different groups and assigns them an instrument. The students role-play, imagining that

they are improvising in a band. After a brief rehearsal, students perform for the class. During the reflection that follows, the class discusses how their performances reflect the skills needed in the marketing research process.
  - o Group activities: Before a group presentation, the students discuss "bad performances" and brainstorm ways that a jazz musician would enhance the presentation they are preparing to make it more interesting.
  - o Learning experiences: "Art" versus "Science" Debate. Students read about jazz as an art and learn and listen to jazz artists. Then they consider and debate art versus science in marketing research.
  - o A disciplinary "toolbox": Students discuss the tools that jazz artists have in their toolbox and when and how these are used. Students then apply this discussion to marketing research.
  - o Innovation and trends: Students study innovators in jazz music and then consider possible innovations for the future of marketing research.

Student Reflections
- "At the beginning, I was a bit put off when this guy started off talking about and playing jazz in a marketing research course. I mean, what planet is he from? But his method gradually won me over. Now I use jazz thinking in a lot of my courses and other things as well."
- "As we started applying the jazz metaphor some of our discussions got really good—we started feeding off each other and got more creative about how we could approach research, try different methods, and focus on the real issues. Very enjoyable and good learning! There's really a lot more to it than I would have imagined."

Reflection

- Thinking of your course, what metaphor could you use for the course and/or a specific unit or concept?

- How do you think this would enhance your teaching and student learning?

- What are some activities that you would develop to apply the metaphor to course content?