



...putting creativity to work

## Metaphor and creativity

by Martin Shovel and Martha Leyton

Imagine you are settling down to a long train journey. You reach into your bag and pull out the novel you are reading and just as you are about to take up the story the stranger sitting opposite starts talking to you. You have plenty of time on your hands so you welcome the chance to begin a conversation with her. But how would you respond if she were to start by describing *the song of her life* or by explaining *the painting of her life* or even, perhaps, telling you about *the recipe of her life*? Her behaviour might seem very strange and you would probably feel a growing sense of discomfort and confusion.

Now rewind the tape and start again. This time she begins by telling you *the story of her life*. Now the experience of listening to her feels comfortable and familiar, and both the content and structure of what she is saying make sense to you. Story is the medium through which we understand and experience our lives and the lives of other people. Stories give our lives their structure and meaning. They help us make sense of the world around us by transforming the constant flux of experience into meaningful patterns. Without stories our existence would be chaotic and ineffectual.

In their influential study of metaphor Lakoff and Johnson (1980) write that, 'the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another' (p.5). In Western society, for example, life can also be understood and experienced as a journey. It is not always a *smooth ride*, sometimes you can *take a wrong turn* and *lose your way*, but if you *keep going* you will find *the right path* and get to your *destination* in *the end*. To return to our friend on the train, life is not conventionally understood and experienced as a painting. But it could be a creative and valuable exercise to look at a number of different paintings, select one that strikes you in some respects as a metaphor for your life and then produce some statements along the lines of, 'my life is like this painting because...' In the process you may well uncover insights about your life that were hidden when you made sense of it through the more conventional, and therefore largely unnoticed, metaphor of *life as a story*. As Lakoff (1993) puts it, 'metaphor is not just a matter of language, but of thought and reason' (page 5).

The key point is that life is not just *like* a story, it *is* a story. The metaphor of

*life is a story* encapsulates the essential nature of the experience of living one's life in Western society. Moreover, if we lived in a culture in which the metaphor that structured our experience of life was quite different, then our experience of life itself would be qualitatively different too. Another example will help to clarify the point. In Western societies the structuring metaphor for argument is *argument is war*. Most of us are unaware of this structuring metaphor and its all-pervasive influence on our day-to-day experience of argument and debate, but the evidence for it is reflected in a wide variety of everyday expressions.

Arguments are *lost or won*; *positions* are *attacked or defended*; *opponents* can *destroy or demolish* our arguments. Claims can be *indefensible*, while arguments can be *shot down* and so on. Lakoff and Johnson wonder just how different our experience of argument would be if the structuring metaphor for argument were, instead, *argument is dance*. 'In such a culture, people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently and talk about them differently. But we would probably not view them as arguing at all: they would simply be doing something different' (ibid.).

To summarise and elaborate on this way of understanding metaphor, we can say that:

- metaphors mediate and structure our experience of the world
- metaphors constitute a necessary framework for creating meanings out of the constant flux of experience – they enable us to function by restricting the potentially overwhelming amount of information that constantly assails consciousness
- metaphors operate at the horizon of our conscious awareness - we are mostly unaware of their influence on the way we frame our experience of the world
- metaphorical frameworks function by highlighting certain aspects of experience and concealing other aspects - they construct our 'point of view'
- metaphors reflect and reproduce the culture they exist in and are culturally and historically specific
- individuals living in a particular culture have a unique relationship to metaphor which is personal and idiosyncratic and reflects all aspects of their personal history - their needs, desires, fears, aspirations and so on.
- metaphors are not only expressed in language, but also visually, aurally and as imaginative representations - sensed in the body and communicated through movement, gesture, tone of voice and so on
- we can explore the nature and influence of *the metaphors we live by*, by attending to our everyday use of language – both verbal and non-verbal.

What does all this have to do with creativity? Following the approach to metaphor pioneered by writers such as Lakoff and Johnson, we would like to explore ways in which the language people use to talk about creativity shapes their experience and understanding of creativity itself. Lubart (1999) suggests that, 'The Western definition of creativity as a product-oriented, originality-based

phenomenon can be compared with an Eastern view of creativity as a phenomenon of expressing an inner truth in a new way, or of self-growth' (page 347). With this idea as our starting point, we begin by drawing attention to some of the metaphors used in the language and literature of creativity with which we are familiar; and suggest how these metaphors might shape the way we understand creativity and the creative process.

De Bono (1995) compares the working of the human mind to rain falling on a landscape, which 'will eventually form streams, rivers, and valleys. Once these have formed, future rainfall is channeled along these rivers and valleys, which then affect the way future rain is collected and organised' (page 10). The purpose of creative/lateral thinking is to *side-track* the channels/patterns that the rain/experience creates over time. De Bono's methods are designed to help us 'to escape from the *main track* in order to increase our chances of getting to the *side-track*' (page 15). His main purpose is to bring about change. Lateral thinking is the '*set of systematic techniques used for changing concepts and perceptions and generating new ones*' (page 54).

Similar metaphors are used by other writers. For example, Von Oech (1983) says that creativity is released when you apply the necessary *tools* and *techniques* as a *key* to open the *mental lock* that prevents your natural flow. For Michalko (1998), creativity is something that has to be *cracked*. The *tools* and *techniques* will *generate* the *ideas* and *creative solutions* you need in your business and personal life. Others (e.g. McLeod and Thomson, 2002) regard creativity as primarily a *rational combinatory process*: that is one in which you combine previously unconnected ideas, information and elements to make something new. Many of these ideas stem from Poincaré's influential description of the creative process as having four stages: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification (Poincaré, 1908). In this model, creativity has a certain linearity, a beginning and an end, a producer and a product, presaging Henry Ford's production line. This cannot be said of some non-Western characterisations of creativity.

Broadly speaking, the Western concept of creativity is characterised by concern with what the creative process *produces*, and it requires that the *end products* of the creative process, the creative *output*, should be both useful and original. Not surprisingly, Western metaphors for creativity tend to be industrial, system-based, cognitive, solution-focused, systematic, individualistic, rational and functional. In a Western capitalist culture, it could be argued, the structuring metaphors for creativity present it as a tool, or set of tools, for originating innovative products that get the job done more efficiently and more profitably.

In many non-Western cultures the emphasis appears to be on *process* rather than *product*. Creativity is linked to enlightenment - it is about development rather than innovation. Lubart (1999) cites a number of studies suggesting that in many such cultures, creativity is about re-interpreting traditional ideas, and also about revealing and re-activating what is already latent in the unconscious.

Traditional artists often practise meditation in order to connect with the 'essence' of an object or an event and attempt to make manifest what they find within.

It has been suggested that a culture's concept of creativity may derive from its creation myth, in which case it would be interesting to look for parallels between the various concepts of creativity and their mythic counterparts in terms of the metaphorical structures embedded within them. There is no single Hindu myth of origin, but the many classic creation myths of Hinduism are all expressions of a belief in time as cyclical, with no beginning and no end. There is no first stage of primeval nothingness and no final end to come. Instead, there are four successive periods, called *yugas*, which deteriorate progressively until the universal deluge, after which a new golden age begins and the universe recycles itself again. This provides a marked contrast with the Judeo-Christian creation myth in which an almighty being creates order out of nothing (or chaos), completing the task in six days. It is surely no coincidence that the modern Western concept of creativity is also based on the idea of the production of something from nothing by an individual involved in a linear process with a definite beginning, middle and end. Equally, the Hindu concept of creativity appears to place far less emphasis on originality than the Western, and instead sees the artist as involved in re-creation and re-interpretation.

We live in a world where cultures - and their metaphors - clash, collide, cross-fertilise and mingle. So it is no surprise that the language of creativity increasingly reflects this and many Western writers, teachers and practitioners are adopting models and metaphors drawn from non-Western sources, such as Taoism and Zen Buddhism.

One such writer is Claxton (1997) who advocates the cultivation of a state of what Buddhists call 'mindfulness' in order to allow the 'undermind' to deliver up its riches. He explores the phenomenon of 'incubation' - the effect of leaving ideas 'on the back burner' or 'allowing the mind to lie fallow'. Here we have metaphors taken respectively from the life-cycle, from cookery and from agriculture, all attempting to convey the same thing: the idea that creativity involves an element of trust in the natural course of events. Each metaphor carries with it a separate set of entailments, which both enable and limit its meaning. Putting an idea *on the back burner* entails turning down the heat, leaving the pot alone, turning the attention away. However, it requires that there is a cook taking the decision and a heat-source that can be controlled. Cookery is a deliberate human activity involving knowledge, practice and the following of some basic rules. Similarly, *lying fallow* could be said to entail a deliberate intervention in the natural process of soil fertility, but it also implies a return to the natural state and perhaps a more radical potential for the germination of new life. The metaphor of *incubation* carries different entailments: like cookery, incubation involves the application of heat, but unlike it, the heat is usually gentle body heat and the outcome is new life. There may be no human or conscious decision involved: bacteria and diseases can incubate all by themselves. While each of these metaphors has distinct entailments and

implications, they also have much in common. The emphasis in all three is on leaving things alone, on letting things happen by themselves - a notion quite at odds with the industrial process metaphor for creativity which is employed by many in today's 'creativity industry'.

Cameron (1995) employs an eclectic mixture of metaphors drawn from a wide selection of cultures and religions. One of her central tenets is that 'creativity is our true nature, that blocks are an unnatural thwarting of a process at once as normal and as miraculous as the blossoming of a flower at the end of a slender green stem' (page xiii). In Cameron's model, blocks can be 'dissolved' through the 'willing use of the tools' provided by her book. But despite the use of metaphors associated with chemistry and plumbing, Cameron's is not a mechanistic or scientific model. She also believes that 'creativity is a spiritual experience' and that 'when we open ourselves to our creativity, we open ourselves to the creator's creativity within us and our lives' (page 3).

Interestingly, the link between these two metaphorical themes is provided by the underlying structure of her approach, which is based on her experience as a recovering alcoholic. Like the programme offered by Alcoholics Anonymous, Cameron's book offers a twelve-stage process, each described as an aspect of creative 'recovery', with prescribed 'tasks' for the reader to perform along the way and a 'check in' to end each stage. Here are metaphors of detoxification, of the sacred and of tool kits, all rolled into one package - which we might perhaps call *spiritual plumbing*.

This brief foray into the literature of creativity can only give a limited taste of the different ways in which the idea of creativity is characterised and experienced within Western society. In our view, for example, the success and appeal of de Bono's *lateral thinking* in the corporate environment is clearly linked to the development of his method within a framework of Western business and organisational metaphors. In contrast to more esoteric and artistic approaches to creativity, de Bono *gets down to business* by avoiding 'semi-mystical' approaches and being logical, serious, systematic and deliberate. He writes:

I regard creative thinking (lateral thinking) as a special type of information handling. It should take its place alongside our other methods of information handling: mathematics, logical analysis, computer simulation, and so on.

There need be no mystique about it. A person sitting down with the deliberate intention of generating an idea in a certain area and then proceeding to use a lateral thinking technique systematically should represent a normal state of affairs.

(op. cit. Introduction).

De Bono is obviously operating within a metaphorical frame very different to that of Claxton or Cameron. He wants his readers to think of the creative process as something practical, measurable and systematic – quite the reverse of the

mysterious, even magical associations called upon by Cameron through the metaphors she chooses.

As we have already seen, each metaphorical frame brings its own set of entailments, which put constraints on the kinds of meanings that can be produced. An example of this is the metaphor of *problems and solutions* which poses a specific – and limited – way of thinking about creative problem solving. Many practitioners of ‘corporate creativity’ talk in terms of *problems and solutions*, and in doing so risk limiting the scope of their endeavours. An analogy helps to demonstrate this: if your kettle is broken and you want to work out a way of either repairing or replacing it, the metaphorical frame of *problems and solutions* will serve you well. But if you decide to use the broken kettle as a starting point for thinking about wider questions such as ‘do I really need a kettle?’ and ‘what would happen (to me, the tea/coffee industry, the world...) if I changed other aspects of my life so that I no longer use a kettle?’, then you would have moved beyond an everyday concern with *problems and solutions* and begun to explore and challenge the metaphorical frame of *problems and solutions* itself. You would have set in motion an experiential and cognitive process that results in your having a fundamentally revised understanding of both yourself and the world. This level of creative thinking is open-ended, playful, often risky. It moves beyond the realm of simple creativity and learning to one where learning and creativity can be described as *generative*. This wider perspective enables an exploration of the limitations of the metaphorical frame itself, and this in turn can lead to changes in world view and self image. Generative creativity moves us into new areas of thinking; everything is open to question, nothing is taken for granted.

It could be argued that commercial constraints prevent certain questions (such as ‘should we be doing this at all?’) from being raised within a corporate metaphorical frame, and that generative creativity should perhaps be applied with caution in the corporate context. However, we believe that because of the accelerating speed of change in today’s world, it is even more urgent that we focus on generative creativity and learning in all walks of life. All the approaches to creativity we have looked at here are concerned with change and difference - whether it be changed states of being or transformative change in the material world. Creativity is essentially concerned with these things, and it is vital that we keep our options open. The forces of globalisation threaten to homogenise cultures and differences, and we risk ending up in a world in which the range of metaphorical frames is diminished and our creative choices are curtailed as a consequence. However, like the rainforest, which contains countless unclassified species of flora and fauna with the potential to cure disease and transform our lives, the diversity of our cultural and linguistic heritage provides us with a rich resource and repertoire of survival strategies, which, if lost, would diminish the creative potential of humankind.

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