Read, research, reflect and respond: Using visual arts based methods to teach about the

descriptive power of metaphor

Abstract

Metaphorical thinking competency (MTC) is fundamental to literacy development. It enables students to decipher, conjure, express and evaluate specific, multiple or subtle meanings in their written work and the writings of others. While looking *at* works of visual art is used in the classroom as a stimulus for oracy, reading and writing lessons to teach about rich description, making inferences and critical thinking, there remains missed opportunities to look *into* or create visual art to teach the descriptive power of metaphor. Consequently, this explorative case study evaluates the use of visual arts with regard to developing metaphorical thinking competence. It specifically explores how looking *into* metaphorical motifs in surrealist art work develops MTC. Adopting a visual arts-based approach, methods include qualitative content analysis of participants' personal artwork and related written 'ideation' boards with respect to metaphorical thinking. While appreciating that the findings are context specific, this paper will be of particular interest to classroom educators interested in the positive outcomes in using visual arts-based methodologies for metaphorical literacy development.

Keywords: Allegory, Integration, Literacies development, Metaphorical thinking, Visual arts

Introduction

Oracy, reading and writing are a constant focus in education today. While there is an understandable emphasis on teaching and assessing grammar, spelling and other key language conventions, far less attention is paid to what makes language beautiful, powerful and impactful. This includes the use of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. Yet, when students listen to songs, watch movies,

advertisements or browse the internet (figure 1), they frequently encounter language rich in figurative

speech (Forceville, 1994). Hence, understanding, appraising and creating metaphor is very important

from a contemporary multi-literacy development perspective. Current methods endorsed for teaching

about metaphor include eliciting students' understanding of metaphor, explaining about and identifying

metaphor in texts. Other methods include illustrating, demonstrating and creating metaphor with

students. Additional methods entail using images and photographs (Dennis & Votteler, 2013; Dunn &

Finley, 2010; Teachingenglish, 2018; Teachervision, 2018). Because metaphor is also expressed visually

through visual arts (Brandl, 2018b) this study explores extending current teaching methods to learning

about metaphor through *reading, researching, reflecting* and *responding* to visual arts. By *reading*, one

means looking at and deciphering meaning from artworks through *reflection* or contextual *research*. By

responding, one means creating a visual arts piece inspired by what one encountered. The visual arts

primary curriculum advocates using works of visual art by other professional artists as one of four

suggested practical starting points for creating work (NCCA, 1999a). This starting point enables

students to extend and apply their understanding of media, techniques, style and concepts such as visual

metaphor.
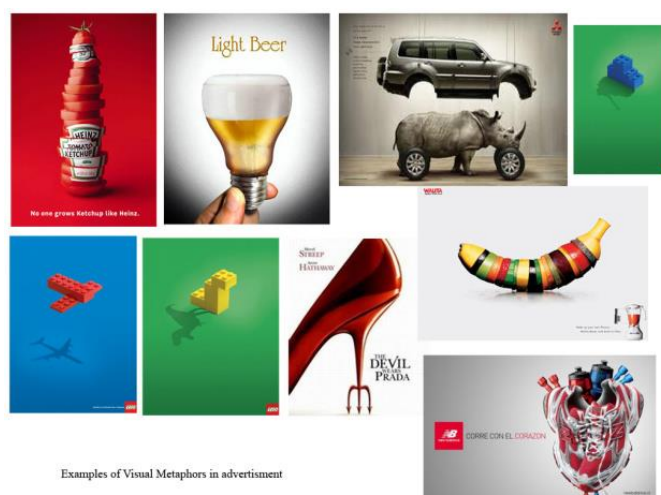
Figure 1: Screen-print of *Google images* search for visual metaphor

Metaphor unpacked

A metaphor is one of four master tropes of rhetoric. While the other three tropes of metonymy, synecdoche and irony also enrich written and visual language, they are not the focus of this particular study. Very simply, metaphor is poetically calling a thing something else (Lewis, 2015; McEwan, 2007). It is a figure of speech that is used to make a comparison between two things that are not alike but do have something in common. Through metaphor, A is compared to B. For example, "the sea is shimmery glass" compares the sea to glass (Cameron & Low, 1999; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lazar, 2003). Metaphors are used constantly to help one make sense of the world and subsequently help shape one's mental model of reality (Schooliqdoodle, 2018). Furthermore, metaphors help one make more effective decisions and choices about life events and circumstances. They inspire and motivate one to progress on a daily basis (Schooliqdoodle, 2018). Effective metaphors help one to associate and demystify an obscure or challenging concept with something else that makes it easier to comprehend. However, one must ensure when composing and communicating metaphor to others that it can be universally understood, or otherwise it simply will not fit in with other people's mental models of reality. Famous metaphors attributed to famous people include

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances." William Shakespeare

"Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life." Pablo Picasso

"All religions, arts and sciences are branches of the same tree." Albert Einstein

"Chaos is a friend of mine." Bob Dylan

"Dying is a wild night and a new road." Emily Dickinson

"Conscience is a man's compass." Vincent Van Gogh

(Macmillan, 2018, para 1)

Visual metaphor and art

Similar to written metaphor, a visual metaphor is an image that the viewer is meant to understand as a symbol for something else because it shares an attribute(s) to the signified. It is the representation of a person, place, thing, or idea by means of a visual image that suggests a particular association or point of similarity (Katzin, 2016; Serig, 2008a, Serig, 2008b). Visual metaphor is also known as pictorial metaphor and analogical juxtaposition. Like the textual kind, visual metaphors can be obvious, subtle, funny, or scathing. Comparable to verbal or written metaphor, visual metaphors can be dissected into various sub tropes including, metaphor, metonymy, simile, synecdoche, hyperbole, irony or allegory (Brandi, 2018). Visual metaphor is utilized extensively and creatively in advertising, media campaigns and political satire. For centuries, visual artists have incorporated visual metaphor to engage, intrigue or provoke the viewer. One might suggest that it is the cornerstone of many contemporary conceptual pieces. Brandl, (2018, para. 2) notes that

> Art works are objects of perception (whatever the media) created (formed, presented, chosen, etc.) for multiple interpretations; ones which were furthermore wrought, offered or viewed as falling within the context or history of previous entities called "art." These are creations wherein the form and the content are inextricably interwoven, each mirroring the other in its own terms. This is primarily achieved through metaphor and metaphor(m).

Famous examples of metaphor in art include works by Pablo Picasso, Juan Miró, Damien Hirst, Banksy, Louise bourgeois, Alice Maher, Jack, B. Yeats and Leonora Carrington (see figure 2).
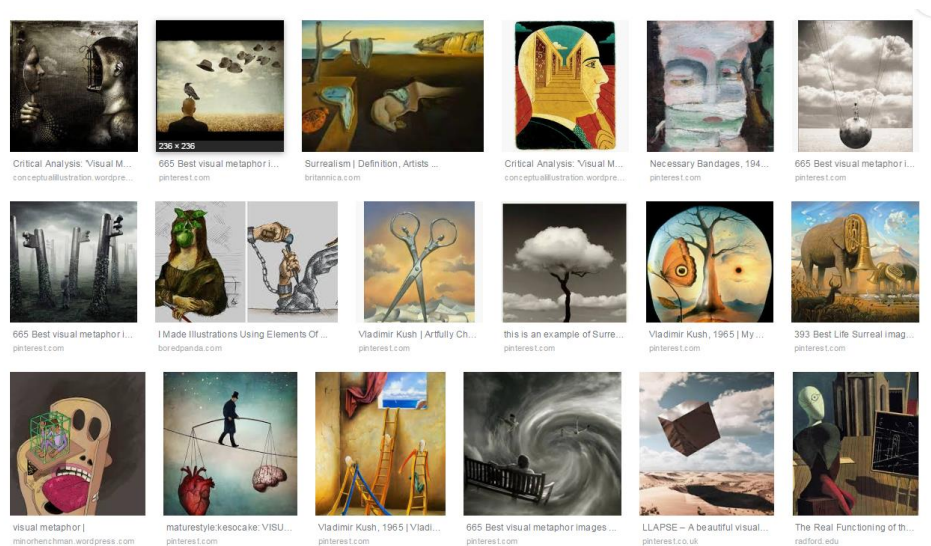
Figure 2: Screen-print of *Google images* search for visual metaphor in artworks

Metaphorical thinking competence (MTC)

Metaphorical thinking competence (MTC) enables readers to decipher and evaluate meaning(s) in the work of others (Littlemore, 2001 & 2006; Hashemian & Nezhad, n.d.). It prepares writers to conceive and apply metaphor to all writing genres to engage the reader. It also equips everyone to use and understand metaphorical expressions which are fundamental to communicating meaning and form the basis for much of our understanding in everyday life. Similarly, MTC in visual arts empowers artists to conjure and communicate constructs more expressively and artfully in their work. It permits viewers to decipher and derive greater understanding of, and thus appreciation for works of art from different artists, eras and cultures. *The New Language Curriculum: Progression Continuum* addresses MTC via progression milestone h (Oral language and Writing), whereby the child can use more abstract language including figurative idioms and metaphors (NCCA, 2017). Under the responding to poetry component of the *English primary school curriculum* (NCCA, 1999b), it notes that the teacher has an important role in initiating, encouraging, guiding and prompting children to recognise the effects of simile and metaphor.

Metaphors are also a tool for creative problem-solving. For example, they help designers to understand unfamiliar design problems by juxtaposing them with known situations. Retrieving concepts from metaphors demands creative thinking (Casakin, 2007).

Metaphorical thinking as a methodology for learning

Metaphorical thinking (MT) is a proven methodology for retention and recall. It is an excellent technique for introducing unfamiliar material. It opens students' eyes to see the similarities between dissimilar things. It can present a problem in a new light, which, in turn, may lead to solutions that might not otherwise be anticipated. MT is deemed an effective way to shake up thinking from a creativity perspective as it enables students connect new information with something they already know or have experienced - attaching it to existing "schema" of understanding. MT can be used to evaluate students' abilities to comprehend, apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate. It can also ascertain depth of understanding through metaphorical questioning.

Study description

Informed by theories regarding linguistic and visual metaphor (Forceville, 1994; Hume, 2018; NCCA, 199, NCCA 2018) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Bernacki, Lee & Loke, 2013 Nokes-Malach & Aleven, 2015), this explorative case study (Gillham, 2000) evaluated the effectiveness of using visual arts-based methods to teach about the descriptive power of metaphor. It specifically investigated if *reading, researching, reflecting* and *responding* to surreal artwork synonymous with visual metaphor improved MTC. Self-efficacy theory (see figure 3.) posits that self-efficacy in one's capacity to do something increases from (i) progressive mastery of related tasks, (ii) learning from others, (iii) feedback and (iv) emotional arousal (Bandura, 1997; Bernacki, Nokes-Malach & Aleven, 2015).
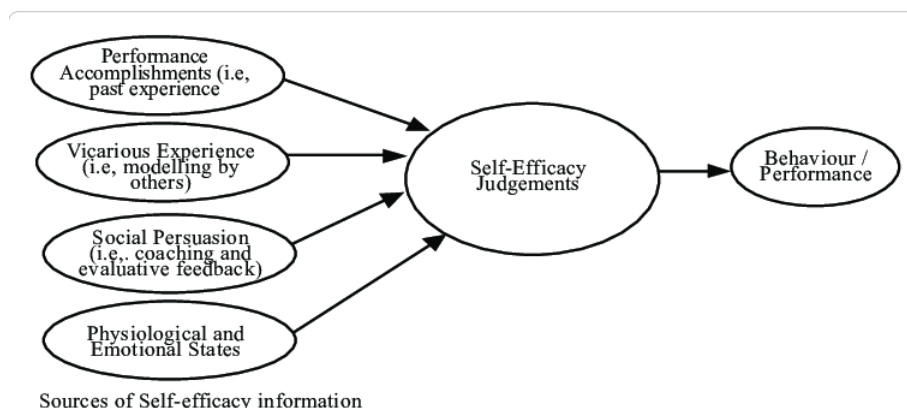
Sources of Self-efficacy information

Figure 3: Self-efficacy theoey (Lee & Loke, 2013)

In this study, learning from others entailed the *reading, researching and reflecting* on visual metaphor in artwork by the Celtic Surrealist artist Leonora Carrington (figure 4). In this case, progressive mastery of related tasks was the *responding* in terms of creating a personal artwork imbued with imaginative and effective metaphor. The research methods comprised of qualitative content analysis (Kohlbacher, 2006) of participants' art works and written ideation boards (figure 5). A convenience sample of sixty student-teachers participated in the study. Using an inductive analytical approach, themes were extrapolated from a process of examining, memoing, coding and categorising.

Key findings

Inductive content analysis of participants' visual art pieces and written ideation boards revealed five prominent themes regarding MTD. These included the inclusion and imaginative use of *hybridity, juxtapositions, magic, liminality* and the *cosmos* for metaphorical purposes. Firstly, many participants' work depicted and compared *hybrid creatures* with duality in personality and gender or binary opposites pertaining to good versus evil; sturdiness versus fragile; visibility versus invisibility; masculinity versus femininity and friend versus foe. Secondly, numerous participants' depicted and compared *juxtaposed landscapes* with binary opposites such as perfection versus flawed; fantasy versus reality; visceral versus virtual and ordinary versus extraordinary. Thirdly, several participants' pieces included *magical*

birds, fish, spiders and butterflies as metaphors for beauty, wisdom, empathy, adventure or fragility.

Fourthly, many depicted *liminal spaces* including mazes, arches, pathways, ladders and stepping stones

as metaphors for otherworldly places or journeys undertaken. Finally, *celestial objects* including stars,

cosmic shapes and moon phases were portrayed and compared by many with power, fate, destiny or

passing of time. Other noteworthy personal visual metaphors evidenced in participants' work compared

- Water, fire, wind and earth with alchemy and deities;

- Boats, rockets and birds with journey, growth and time;

- Contrasting colour and tone with specific emotions, feelings or mood;

- Trees and houses with protection, shelter, safety and strength;

- Cauldrons, smoke and flames with alchemy and danger;

- Eggs, feathers, leaves, blossoms, books with magic, power, wisdom, truth or innocence.

Interestingly, simple spirals, lines and circles analogous to ancient cross-cultural motif represented time

travel, adventures, multi-verses; beginnings and endings in several pieces. Importantly, from an MTC

perspective, the majority of participants cited in their written ideation boards how *reading, researching*

and reflecting on Carrington's use of visual metaphor inspired and scaffolded them to conceive their

own visual metaphors. In other words, the vicarious experience of looking *into* artwork by Carrington

with respect to how she employed visual metaphor progressed their understanding of metaphor and

capacity to create imaginative metaphor in their artwork.

Conclusion

Informed by self-efficacy theory, this study concludes that the *vicarious experience* of looking at visual

metaphor within Carrington's work and the *mastery experience* of conceiving metaphor in personal

artworks impacted positively of participants' MTC development. Its aided their understanding,

appreciation and creation of visual metaphor. Analysis of participants' artwork and ideation boards evidenced rich and highly personal metaphor using imagery pertaining to *hybridity, juxtapositions, magic, liminality* and the *cosmos*. While acknowledging that the rendering of metaphor may be particular to each subject domain and that the transfer of learning from arts to non-arts modes can be overstated, there is broad agreement that the conceiving of imaginative metaphor across disciplines entails the same cognitive, affective and expressive processing. Notwithstanding the limitations of this case study, this practitioner research posits that *reading, researching, reflecting and responding* to visual arts can demystify metaphor for learners and aid MTC. In addition, the results do provide a premise and impetus for additional research regarding the use of visual arts and arts-based methods to teach about what makes language beautiful, powerful and impactful – metaphor, symbolism and allegory. The next anticipated phase of this research is to test this approach with children of primary school age in the classroom.
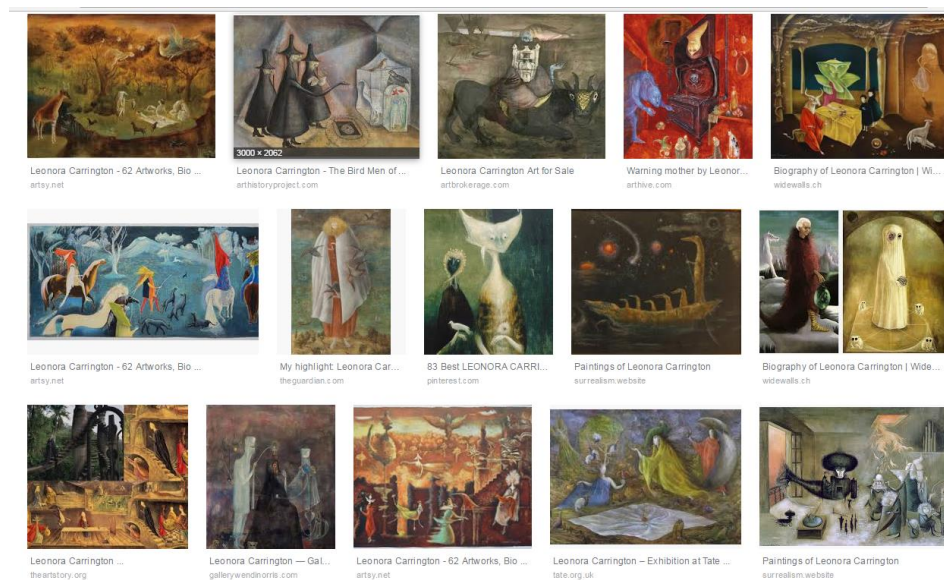

Figure 4: Screen print of *Google images* search of Carrington's artwork

Figure 5: Samples of participants' artwork and ideation boards

Reference list

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: the exercise of control. Learning to toot your own horn: Preservice teachers integrating music into a childhood classroom*. New York: W. H. Freeman.

Bernacki, M., Nokes-Malach, T. & Aleven, V. (2015). Examining self-efficacy during learning: variability and relations to behavior, performance, and learning. *Metacognition & Learning*, *10*(1), 99-117.

Brandl, M. (2018a). *Metaphor and Art: The linguistics and embodiment of metaphor and visual art.* Retrieved from http://www.metaphorandart.com/articles/examplemetaphor.html.

Brandl, M. (2018b). *Metaphor and Art: Definitions of art in light of metaphor.* Retrieved from https://www.metaphorandart.com/articles/artdefinitions.html

Cameron, L. & Low, G. (1999). Metaphor, *Language Teaching*, 32(2), 77-96.

Casakin, H. P. (2007). Factors of metaphors in design problem-solving: Implications for design creativity. *International Journal of Design, 1*(2), 21-33.

Dennis, L. l., & Votteler, N. (2013). Preschool Teachers and Children's Emergent Writing: Supporting

Diverse Learners. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *41*(6), 439-446.

Dunn, M. W., & Finley, S. (2010). Children's Struggles with the Writing Process: Exploring Storytelling,

Visual Arts, and Keyboarding to Promote Narrative Story Writing. *Multicultural Education*,

18(1), 33-42.

Forceville, C. (1994). Pictorial Metaphor in Advertisements. *Metaphor & Symbolic Activity*. 9(1),

1-29.

Gillham, B. (2000). *Case study research methods*. London: Continuum.

Hume, K. (2018). *Teaching through metaphor and analogy,* Retrieved from

http://teachmag.com/archives/3432.

Katzin, M. (2016). *Exploring Personal Symbolism and Visual Metaphors through Artistic Inquiry.*

Thesis, Georgia State University, Retrieved from

https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/art_design_theses/21.

Kohlbacher, F. (2006). The use of qualitative content analysis in case study research. *Forum*

qualitative social research. 7(1), 1-30.

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Lazar. G. (2003). *Meanings and Metaphors (Activities to practise figurative language).* Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press.

Lee, R. & Loke A. (2013) A Quasi-Experimental Intervention to Improve Self-Efficacy for Eating and

Exercise Weight Management: Short-Term Effects. Journal of Nutrition Disorders and Therapy 3(1), 1

7.

Lewis, R. (2015). *What's a Metaphor?* Retrieved from https://www.education.com/lesson-plan/whats-a

metaphor/

Littlemore, J. (2001). Metaphoric Competence: A Language Learning Strength of Students with a

Holistic Cognitive Style? *TESOL Quarterly, 35*(3), 459-491.

Littlemore, J. (2006). Metaphoric Competence, Second Language Learning, and   Communicative

Language Ability. *Applied Linguistics*, 27, 268-294.

MacMillan, (2018). *Famous metaphors*. Retrieved from

http://www.macmillandictionaryblog.com/famous-metaphors

McEwan, A. (2007). Do Metaphors Matter in Higher Education? *Journal of College and Character,*

8(2), 20-28.

NCCA, (2017). *Primary Language Curriculum,* Dublin: Government of Ireland, Retrieved from

https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/524b871d-1e20-461f-a28c-bbca5424112d/Primary

Language-Curriculum_1.pdf.

NCCA, (1999a). *Visual arts primary school curriculum*, Dublin: Government of Ireland. Retrieved from

https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/0e0ccff3-97c4-45c8-b813

e7c119a650c3/PSEC04A_Visual_Arts_Curriculum.pdf

NCCA, (1999b). *English primary school curriculum*, Dublin: Government of Ireland. Retrieved from

https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/5b514700-e65c-46a7-a7d0

c8e05e115bf9/PSEC01a_English_Curriculum.pdf.

Hashemian, M. & Nezhad, M. (n.d.). The Development of Conceptual Fluency & Metaphorical

Competence in L2 Learners, *Linguistik online* 30, 1-6. Retrieved from

http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.830.1112&rep=rep1&type=pdf

Nikolakouli, A. (2018). *In what ways visual metaphor is expressed in contemporary art.* Retrieved from

http://manoeuvresto.blogspot.com/2012/03/in-what-ways-visual-metaphor-is.html.

Schooliqdoodle, (2018). *Using Metaphors to Think Visually.* Retrieved from

https://school.iqdoodle.com/framework/core-principles/metaphors-analogies/

Serig, Dan. (2008). *Visual metaphor and the contemporary artist: Ways of thinking and making.*

Retrieved from

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281032383_Visual_Metaphor_and_the_Contemporar

_Artist_Ways_of_Thinking_and_Making

Serig, D. (2008). Understanding the Conceptual Landscape of Visual Metaphors, *Teaching Artist*

Journal, 6(1), 41-50.

Serig, D. (2008). *Visual metaphor and contemporary artist: ways of thinking and making.* New York:

Simon & Schuster.

Teachingenglish, (2018). *Exploring metaphors in the classroom.* Retrieved from

https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/exploring-metaphors-classroom.

Teachervision, (2018). *Metaphors and Analogies.* Retrieved from

https://www.teachervision.com/metaphors-analogies.