

A tale within a tale: learning through metaphor

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Version: 1.0
Dated: 7th December 2003

Reference: 20031031-NLPMET-01V10

A nesting tale to learn by

I really enjoyed working at Penrhos. I was perhaps 13 or 14 when I started really helping out. Of course, we'd been going there for years to look at the bird hospital. To gaze in awe at the Eurasian Eagle Owls and the seemingly benign elegance of the female Snowy Owl – yet we knew that she'd eaten her male partner one summer night and we treated her with real respect after that.

Local planners insisted that something be done to protect the environment and made it a condition that a nature reserve be built when granting planning consent for a great Aluminium smelting plant. The land was split into three areas: the plant itself, a private reserve amounting to several square miles of beach surrounding the 'inland sea', and a public part of the reserve where you could visit and buy gifts or mementos to remember your time there.

The A5 causeway links Anglesey to the Holy Island. When building the road, highway planners decided to take the road across a section of the sea, building up where necessary and leading you to your destination. This formed a natural area that was protected from most storms and it became an ideal area for endangered species to nest and grow.

Away from the public gaze, I used to patrol these enclosed beaches, ensuring that the reserve remained private. I used to watch Red Kites flying overhead, hovering for a moment or two before plummeting downwards, re-emerging a few moments later with something caught in that deadly embrace.

One spring, we were warned that a major storm was heading for the island. The Terns were nesting and, as they build their nests on sandy beaches, there was a reasonable chance that the storm would destroy them,

We called our friends. Our friends called their friends. In a few hours we had amassed an army of volunteers to fill sand-bags and line them along the beach formed by the causeway water inlets.

The wind picked up. It started raining. We could feel the wind in our hair, the smell and taste of salt in the air, the rain battering into our clothing, forcing us to lean forward as we walked into the storm.

It's similar to starting up a computing project. We begin by analysing who is going to use the system, then find out what they want to do, and then we start programming. It takes a little time to learn which questions to ask and when to ask them. But when we know who is providing information and what is done with it, then we understand what needs to be programmed taking into consideration what is already there.

I did a fair amount of broadcasting at one point in my life. I understood the technicalities of it all. Making sure that the content is understandable and knowing what it was that needed to be understood.

A radio show needs some planning. The format needs to be defined in such a way that it appeals to its audience. It's all a question of state. What state do you need to be in to convey happiness, confidence or motivation? How do you know when you're really in a state? How do you know that you're not?

Metaphors need a similar level of planning. What state are you trying to elicit in your client? What state are they already in? Once you know these, you can start to build the intermediate states and then lead from one to the other.

Life experience is one of the best things to draw from. It's likely that you haven't had to build sandbag walls on a beach and yet, you're likely to be able to experience it through my (brief) description. You'll have built your own representation of my experience – and, if truth be known, it will be flawed because you will have already distorted my story to match your own experiences.

You may have specified computer systems, even if it's only to a retailer to purchase a PC. Your requirements will have been defined and this means that you have already gone through the process of determining who will be using the machine and you might have known what you want to use it for.

Inserting the hidden messages becomes an easy task when you know what states you're eliciting. If you were depressed or out of luck at some stage in your life, you'll be able to associate with the concept of building sandbag walls, calling your friends and being able to construct a way to solve your problems.

For live radio broadcasts planning can disintegrate – things happen – we react to them. More importantly, we survive them. Through humour, there are many ways to resolve issues. Humour becomes a great weapon as does a sense of confidence and capability.

When you build a metaphor, use a few life experiences and chain them together. They can be dissimilar – I've taken a story about a nature reserve, a computer system and broadcasting. The states I wanted to obtain were curiosity (what the hell is he rambling on about?), impatience (get on with it) and, perhaps a little 'huh?' too.

Then I deliver the content.

Content that links everything together. When you re-read this text, you'll also become more aware of the deliberate choice of language patterns. Linking sections of an unconscious learning to ensure that the content is installed prior to the enlightenment when, in the middle of everything, I provide the conscious access to the information already installed.

Every part of the metaphor can be used – the female snowy owl eating her partner one summer night, becomes the knowledge consuming everything where metaphoric uncertainty was; the aluminium plant and its three parts becomes the subconscious (private), conscious (public) and the external interfaces (information particles being processed to provide understanding), all working together now to provide you with a deep understanding; the causeway becomes that link between where you were before reading this article to the understanding you know you have. Now even the endangered species has a purpose – the inner self needs to be protected and can grow when given the right resources and understandings.

So, we produce our radio programme. We know what states we need to elicit and now we know how to provide the links between them. You have had so many experiences in life – use them. Let your mind pick an event and then follow the natural link your mind makes between events. You'll be amazed at what pops into your mind, and even better, you'll know you can describe them in all representational systems because it's your event.

Radio presenters find it easier to work from fact. Fact! In fact, it's not that fact is easier to describe than fiction. It's nothing more than fact becomes a better base because you can follow the non-fictional links easily. Fictional metaphors are better scripted first – or at least outlined – and the state is still the primary driver. Write nothing that isn't usable.

If you were to think about a complex situation – something you weren't sure about – and build a state of utter confusion around it, how would that benefit you? Confusion becomes the state and it is unlikely that you will understand until the state shifts. Pop that confusion and add a state of learning and understanding and the whole concept changes. This is the purpose of this metaphor. Learning through stories is easy. Building the story from life experience is easy too because, after all, you have all those stories to tell.

I've delivered all the content in the middle of these stories. I've provided the conscious links to those stories and the meaning now becomes apparent. Now I'm closing the stories down. Just like envelopes, each requires its own closure. People often forget the middle section where the content lies, but that's ok because the subconscious has already learned from it and has taken all this information onboard. Metaphors are useful like that, aren't they?

So, the radio broadcasters get the content out. It's in an easily understood form and takes no effort to obtain (you simply listen to what was said). Inside each broadcast there will be information that you can use when you want to. Now the broadcast comes to an end, the broadcasters and production crew can relax. Knowing that their job is done and that the content has been delivered – right?

The computer system gets build too. It's turned on and begins to process the information. It may distort some – but that's OK because that's the way it understands things. We know who needs to use the information and in which way. Know we know how to present it too, don't we?

The computer system was built with the agreement of all parties. There is nothing to be argued about, nothing to disagree with. Metaphors, based on fact, should do the same. Unlike the computer system, generalisation helps here – you know what it's like when people generalise don't you? You can't disagree with statements like that because, generally, there's nothing specific enough to disagree with, don't you agree? That's the agreement state. And it works, doesn't it? And you know how to do things like this now, don't you? Just agree, it's easier!

So, back to the reserve: the storm broke. We had many people all working together as a team. Filling sand bags, building the walls to protect the nesting Terns. Watching the tide as each wave breaks, hoping that the walls protect that new life. Building the walls in our mind, constructing them such that new learning will grow too. The knowledge that we can use these stories to install understandings, just like inside that wall, we have the new information (eggs) and have safely contained it all (nests). That new life, that new understanding, ready and able to grow and develop into a wonderful thing and, at the right time, it will fly beyond any boundary and it will feel simply amazing to be soaring through it all. Just like the Red Kites, able to swoop down and grab exactly what you need – even better, you'll know where to look.

When the storm passed, summer returned. Storms always pass and Summer is always there, right behind the storms. There's certain calmness and it's easy to imagine that deep sense of well-being in such a place. A private place, my place – you have your own. While your place will be different, those happy, contented learnings will probably even make you smile. And while you feel the change of pace, perhaps even a confident relaxed feeling (and no, I don't care where you feel it first) you might even feel compelled to invent a metaphor or two of your own.

Welcome to the most powerful resource you have at your disposal – life!