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Creativity for 21st Century Classrooms

Metaphors and Analogies

(http://creativiteach.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/plantinconcrete1.jpg)Another strategy for generating flexible thinking is the use of metaphor and analogy. By comparing one thing to another, metaphors can help us see things from a new perspective. For example, what does hope look like? Is it a color? A person? A plant breaking through cement? Each of these comparisons will bring new ideas. Thinking of hope as a plant helps us see hope as powerful, continuing in the face of obstacles– an insight that might not otherwise have been obvious.

A strategy that was developed to use analogies for generating creative ideas is called synectics. *Synectics* is an original word coined to mean "the joining together of different and apparently irrelevant elements" (Gordon, 1981, p. 5). Synectic methods are metaphor- or analogy-based techniques for bringing elements together in a search for new ideas or solutions. They have been used by businesses, think tanks, and research organizations and have been the impetus behind the ideas for Pringles potato chips, magnesium-impregnated bandages, disposable diapers, dial-your- own-octane gas pumps, the space-saver Kleenex box, and a host of other innovations.

The basic processes of synectics are "making the strange familiar" and "making the familiar strange" (Prince, 1968, p. 4). To make the strange familiar, you combine something familiar with a new problem or situation to solve the problem or come to an understanding. To make the familiar strange, you also combine something new or strange with something familiar, this time to gain new insights into or perspectives on the already familiar idea. These two processes are facilitated through the

creation of various types of analogies. While the full synectics strategies are fairly complex, the basic types of analogies are straightforward and useful in a variety of school situations. They include the following.

- Direct Analogies: How is one thing like another? How is rain like a clock? What animal is like [story character]? What metaphor best describes the process of DNA replication? What does fear look like?
- Personal Analogies: What would it be like to be the thing? How would it feel to be an electron? What would life be like as an equilateral triangle?
- Compressed Conflicts: How can two opposites come together? Can we have trapped freedom? What does weak power look like?

Sample Lesson: Metaphor in Science (Starko, 2010)

Students studying elements, compounds, and mixtures can be challenged to create superheroes based on particular elements—or perhaps compounds or mixtures. Each superhero must be based on the nature of the element chosen, with powers reflective of the element's characteristics. Students can be challenge to persuade others that their element is the most super of the group. (Adapted from a lesson by Chelsee Harris)

Gordon, W. J. J. (1981). *The new art of the possible: The basic course in synectics*. Cambridge, MA: Porpoise Books.

Prince, G. (1968). The operational mechanism of synectics. *Journal of Creative Behavior, 2*, 1–13.

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