

**M**y classes are filled with first-generation college students whose cultural stories provide rich frames of reference as they explore and process the material of our teacher education program. In my final exam each semester, I ask my students to select and describe a metaphor whose characteristics as they know them best fit their perception of a classroom. This “exercise in

meaning “to bear.” This notion of using the metaphor as a “change bearing” agent helps my students transform what they know into new understandings. Dewey (1934, 272) expanded this knowing and changing to include the element of “imagination,” which he defined as “the conscious adjustment of the new and the old.” I think English Education candidate Dixie Thacker (class

you can never really take things away.” What a powerful message about how we as teachers must be sensitive to the affective weight our words and actions can bear on others long after the moment.

Huebner (1984, 112) discussed the metaphor’s power of heightened perception and its “way of shedding new light on an already existing phenomena, by looking at and speaking about that phenomena from a totally different perspective.

# Metaphors and Images of Classrooms



*Envisioning their future classrooms, teacher candidates use visual metaphors to gain perspective.*

*by Phoebe M. Levine*

metaphors” allows my students to stretch their thinking and refresh their conventional mind-sets about the kinds of classrooms they envision for themselves. The results provide a unique blend of past and present knowledge and experiences as these preservice teachers revisit the truths of their upbringing to inform their emergent teaching and learning philosophies.

## Why Metaphors?

The word *metaphor* stems from the Greek *metapherein*—*meta* meaning “to change” and *pherein*

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of 2000) was imagining new ways to view multiple learning styles when she chose the familiar scene from her kitchen window. The metaphor in which Dixie recalled “the wild flowers which grace the hillside below my home” is filled with rich images of poppies, jonquils, daffodils, pansies, and forget-me-nots, and at the same time pictures the personalities and emotional needs of her future students.

When Belenky (Belenky et al. 1986, 18) stated that “visual metaphors encourage standing at a distance to get a proper view,” she was referring to their ability to draw from the wisdom of retrospect and hindsight. I made a strong connection to Science Education candidate Rene Hill’s (class of 2001) metaphor of a science experiment and how it allows one to “add new things, but

In this way, we obtain a transfer of meaning, and thus an opening up of awareness.” Spanish Education candidate Pascale Guillot (1997) experienced this emergent awareness when she wrote about an extended family reunion. Her words interfaced the poignant reality of love and belonging with the acceptance of human imperfection and flaws. At the same time, Pascale’s metaphor opened my eyes to the random assortment of ages, backgrounds, and personalities of students in my own college classroom where all of us, regardless of our differences, are related and bonded by our common desire to be teachers.

## The Heart of the Matter

It is impossible for my students to separate their backgrounds from the substance of their thoughts,

writings, and actions. I catch glimpses of their hearts, and the spirit and tone of their words give me many insights into their upbringing. I've read about kaleidoscopes, snowflakes, circus tents, mountain forests, yard sales, potluck suppers, shopping trips, driving on interstate highways, baking cakes, and family cookouts—all written within a framework of life in a working classroom.

I have chosen the following metaphors to illustrate the different pictures that emerge when my students bring their particular experiences into the matter of their metaphors. Each time I read these passages, I come away with new understandings about my students and the kind of teachers they hope to become.

### Treasure Hunts

Through her writing, Science Education candidate Stephanie Helman (class of 2000) shared her insatiable need for surprise and unplanned discoveries—a wonderful disposition for a future science teacher to demonstrate. I steered Stephanie to the writings of Duckworth (1987), who shared her belief in the magic of “not knowing.” Stephanie’s metaphor illustrated Duckworth’s (1987, 64) words that “knowing the right answer requires no decisions, carries no risks, and makes no demands.” Stephanie’s treasure hunts also informed her future teaching practices, such as discovery learning, cooperative grouping, and project-based and problem-solving strategies, alongside her role of teacher-as-guide.

*Classrooms are like treasure hunts. Each is preceded with great anticipation and planning without guaran-*

*teed success. Great amounts of study are necessary to create a detailed map, as it will be used to guide others. The successful guide will need to consider the makeup, input, and findings of his or her crew, overcome obstacles, and constantly adapt to changing environments.*

*Treasure hunters are mindful that there are no guarantees. It is this thrill of the hunt, the challenge of the unknown, which taunts the treasure hunter to continue searching until all of worth is brought to light.*

### Cabinet Stew

Another Science Education candidate, Kathy Kress (class of 2000), blended the ingredients of her makeshift stew with the random nature of a public school classroom. She welcomed the trial-and-error mode of some of her past experiences as a framework for building learning communities. Kathy’s rich description of her ingredients reflected how planning for diversity would guide her future classroom practices. Preservice teachers like Kathy demonstrate their awareness and acceptance of exceptionalities as an opportunity for imaginative teaching.

*Just like ‘cabinet stew’ is made of many ingredients that come from totally different plants, and different ingredients every time, a classroom’s fate lies in the hands of the veggies, spices on hand, and the cook. The stew will consist of vegetables that have been fertilized and cared for and spices that have puny stalks and have never been watered. Even though the ingredients make an unlikely mixture, in the end the cook*

*will make it seem as if it were planned and tastes perfect.*

*Somehow the cook has to get the plump tomato to fit into the mixture, and the overbearing zucchini to stop overpowering the flavor. You can spot those spicy peppers right away. If the flame is too high, it will cause the stew to boil over and explode onto the stove. If there is no heat, the ingredients won’t mingle. How do you know? It’s just like with real cabinet stew—trial and error. Take what you have and work with it.*

### Patchwork Quilt

Lois McPhail (class of 2001), an Elementary Education major, reminded us of the holistic nature of the learning community when she shared her love of quilts and the rich family history they hold. Like Kathy’s cabinet stew, this metaphor touches closely on the need to welcome and work with diversity in the classroom. Lois accepted the challenge to mix and match the strengths and weaknesses of her students with many different forms of collaborative groupings and peer tutoring.

*Classrooms are patchwork quilts. Each student is a piece of the quilt, contributing his or her own form of beauty and poise to the whole. All of the pieces are sewn together in a way that they will never lose parts of the whole. When finished, the quilt is a beautiful piece of art that has been put together and taken care of by a dedicated and caring quilter. Though each piece has its flaws and problems, each piece also has some aspect of perfection that deserves to be included.*

*A classroom is full of students who all have different abilities and advantages. Though some may not be perfect, they all have something to contribute and share. The teacher brings all of the abilities and disabilities together so they can benefit one another.*

### Lots of Gardens

Gardens crop up most often in my metaphor exercise perhaps because the growing process lends itself so well to teaching and learning experiences. In the following three garden metaphors each student focuses on one particular aspect of her growth as a preservice teacher. I am pleased that each student allowed her metaphor to touch upon proactive teaching concepts and thinking that travel well beyond the overused, traditional ways of doing things in the classroom.

When the perennial rituals of her flowerbeds were disturbed and altered, Kathy Given (class of 1999), Elementary Education candidate, discovered other varieties that helped her see new possibilities in her old and familiar picture of a classroom.

*I plant flowerbeds every spring. I always plant marigolds, impatiens, and begonias. I plant these flowers because my mother does and because my grandmother did. I plant in patterns with repetition. I sometimes get daring and mix up the colors, but the variety never alters. Many classrooms are like this—three levels of students performing the same repetitive tasks day after day. Why is it done this way? Because it always has been.*

*Last spring I was not home from Arizona until June, so as a good deed the teen Sunday school class planted my beds for me. When I came home I didn't expect much, but I was horrified. My carefully cultivated dirt had been filled with wildflower seed. Weeds! As the summer wore on, my weed patch grew and flowered until I had to admit that it was pretty. The flowers grew taller than I wanted, waist high. And they were so full they draped*

**“A classroom is like a vegetable garden in that it takes so much preparation before even the first seed is planted.”**

*onto my sidewalk. But they were easy to care for. No Weeding! I found myself cutting them for friends and myself. Some classrooms are like my 'weed beds.' They don't force children into a classification but let them grow and be what they are . . . beautiful.*

Elementary Education candidate, Mary Okin's (class of 1999) vegetable garden yielded a rich resource she could use to tend to the special needs and gifts of her students, with careful planning to provide lots of space for individual growth.

*A classroom is like a vegetable garden in that it takes so much preparation before even the first seed is planted. Every plant needs special attention and has different requirements. The pole beans need a teepee-style frame to grow, similar to the student that needs a structured system to be successful. The crooked-neck squash, on the other hand, like to grow freely and require only a circular fence as their boundary—similar to students who will work and create on their own while staying within the limits of the class.*

*The tomatoes grow on a stake but have some pretty big burdens to overcome. They have what are called 'suckers,' which are limbs that grow but never produce fruit and need to be eliminated. Even the weight of the tomatoes themselves requires the tomato plant to be tied to the stake to hold up its own weight—similar to the child who carries too much baggage and can't just be a child. Many times this child depends on the teacher for support that he or she doesn't get elsewhere.*

*The corn grows straight and tall and doesn't have a lot of requirements other than an occasional spraying to keep the worms away—similar to the high achiever. The pepper plants hold their own and will surprise you with a bit of spice. These may be the mislabeled 'underdogs,' who win in the end.*

*Like a vegetable garden, a classroom has many different personalities represented. It takes a dedicated teacher to*

*nurture each plant so that each student can grow to his or her fullest potential.*

English Education candidate Emily Papadopoulos (class of 2000) was a proactive gardener and preservice teacher whose metaphor mirrored her belief in positive change and professional growth, both of which focused on enriching the context of her teaching environment. Emily would prepare proper grounding to accommodate as many variables as possible along with a healthy dose of pragmatic acceptance.

*As the gardener, it is my job to learn as much as possible about gardening and keep apprised of new developments in plants, fertilizers, and gardening techniques. I must plan, learn from my mistakes each year, and save seeds, as well as take notes in my journal of successes and failures, and the conditions which led to each. Realistically, I must realize that the success of the garden is not entirely within my control. Excessive heat, late frost, insects, and lack of rain can damage the plants. However, I must do everything I possibly can to help my plants and offset these conditions. This might include installing a soaker hose and using insecticides.*

*Like the plants in my garden, my students are rich in variety, color, texture, and flavor. Some are very hardy while others need lots of TLC. I must keep weeds out of my rows*

*and try to arrange my garden so different plants can help each other. For example, I plant my corn next to my lettuces so the corn can shade the tender lettuces. I also plant marigolds and garlic among my tomatoes to keep away insects. Plants can really help each other if the gardener allows and facilitates it.*

### My Studio

Elementary Education candidate Patti Groves (class of 1996) submitted what is now a well-worn metaphor that I return to often to remind me that I am

**“Like the plants in my garden, my students are rich in variety, color, texture, and flavor.”**

responsible for giving my best to these precious lives who have been placed in my care for only a short time.

*Every autumn, about 20–25 people drop off a piece of art for me to highlight, detail, frame, or repair in my studio. I work on their pieces about 30 hours a week until spring. When you visit my studio, you will notice all the pieces are unique and different. You also will notice that what I do to each piece is very different. Of course, it has to be this way.*

*Every piece demands me to*

*evaluate its needs to become a well-developed masterpiece. The pieces that require so much of my whole being are the damaged ones. I have only run into a few. Sometimes, it is impossible to cover up the rips or snags. Often, I spend extra time on these pieces. However, the astute viewer can still spot the scar.*

*I know that my nine months with each piece is only a moment in a lifetime. Yet, I hope that I add beauty and worth to every piece that will never be taken away.*

### Lessons Learned

My original intention with this exercise in metaphors was to broaden my students' concept of what goes on in a classroom. Over the semesters, however, their multiple images and playful interpretations have provided fresh insights for me to consider in my own teaching. I find myself responding to my students' past lives, present ideas, and future hopes; and the blend of these layered conversations produces fertile ground for new thoughts and fresh language about the art of teaching. The metaphor becomes a timely connecting tool that bridges past to present and theory to practice. It helps all of us select paths that impact our practice and spark our passion for the teaching and learning process.

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