

# Re-Modelling NLP: Part Eleven: Re-Modelling Metaphors *John McWhirter*

It is common to start an NLP training session with a metaphor, or at least a story. As this article is about metaphors it may come as a surprise that I am not starting with the usual type of story. Through modelling and re-modelling metaphor many other effective choices are available to encourage learning processes. One choice is to go beyond the known and the familiar. Metaphor has always been an effective way of making sense of what we don't yet know. Another choice is to withdraw from the novel into the familiarity of what we already recognise. As these articles are part of a story of my experience of modelling and re-modelling NLP it is already a metaphor for exploration, discovery and creativity.

*“Scientists, therefore, are used to dealing with doubt and uncertainty. All scientific knowledge is uncertain. This experience with doubt and uncertainty is important. I believe that it is of very great value, and one that extends beyond the sciences. I believe that to solve any problem that has never been solved before, you have to leave the door to the unknown ajar. You have to permit the possibility that you do not have it exactly right. Otherwise, if you have made up your mind already, you might not solve it”.*

Richard Feynman

We are born knowing nothing. As our culture expands and becomes more varied we need to learn even more effectively. How do you go into the unknown? How do you make sense of the unfamiliar? Do you feel safer staying with what you know? In every experience we make sense of new things. This article is one example of this process. As you read you will be making sense of what is here using your previous experience. You may recognise that some things are “like” others with which you are already familiar. Using one thing to make sense of another is a fundamental learning tool and is the basis for simile, analogy and metaphor. By using modelling we can improve the potential effectiveness of metaphor as a tool for change.

Recognition of the power of metaphor as an aid to human development is probably as old as civilisation. They have been used since to promote development and change, from the moral instruction of Aesop's fables, stories of Confucius, Buddha, and parables of Jesus to the helpful anecdotal analogy. Books, T.V. and films have continued to influence human development as role models, ethical codes and behavioural norms.

All forms of metaphor will influence the observer. It is therefore important to have an understanding of how metaphors work in order to use them effectively, to maximise the benefits and minimise any potential damaging influences. All too often the skilful use of metaphor has been the domain of poets and artists - the “gifted”. This is therefore a rich area in which modelling can contribute greatly. Can we make the power of effective metaphor available to everyone?

## CONSTRUCTING METAPHORS

In my last article I mentioned attending workshops by Carol and Steve Lankton in 1982/83. These workshops were mainly about using metaphors with Ericksonian trance work. A central element of the training was using metaphors that matched the client problem. In the practice groups it became clear that people could identify and/or construct matching metaphors with varying degrees of success. The training did not directly teach metaphor construction. So some people continued to struggle. After these trainings I puzzled over this, searched extensively, but found very little that was helpful in relation to this problem.

My experience in NLP was similar; there was no specific strategy for constructing matching metaphors. In the late 80's I taught Ericksonian approaches to family therapists and social workers. I wanted to use metaphor as a central element. I needed to create a way of teaching how to construct matching metaphors. By this time I had constructed the integrated language model (see article 2) using the three DBM modelling distinctions of Detail, Scope and Connection. I used these to create the metaphor strategy.

The benefit in using metaphors as a communication tool is that the listener makes use of them in terms of their own needs rather than having a set of behaviours imposed upon them.

Metaphors are influential at many levels. They can influence a particular behaviour in a particular context eg I'll take that on board (haulage metaphor). They can also underlie major portions of our behaviour for example responding to life 'as a game' - to be competitive, fair play, team work; or as 'a war' - to fight the enemy, go into action, battle and win through; or as 'a journey' - to explore, keep on the move. More awareness of these processes can free us from limiting metaphors and help us to identify more useful ones.

Metaphors have a very definite structure. This is sometimes not fully appreciated. To be a metaphor it is necessary that all the components in the metaphor relate in a one to one basis to the problem. In DBM we use the modelling distinctions of Detail, Scope and Connections to make this easier to achieve.

<b>Problem</b>				<b>Metaphor</b>	
Details	P1	.....	M1	Details	
	P2	.....	M2		
	P3	.....	M3		
Scope	P4	.....	M4	Scope	
	P5	.....	M5		
	P6	.....	M6		
Connections	P7	.....	M7	Connections	
	P8	.....	M8		
	P9	.....	M9		
	P10	.....	M10		

The 'key' to therapeutic metaphors is the accuracy in the 'isomorphism'- match. Less accuracy will reduce relevance and therefore the usefulness of the metaphor. The strategy I created for organising isomorphic metaphors is presented below (fig. 1).

## **ISOMORPHIC METAPHOR STRATEGY (FIGURE 1)**

We will use the universal modelling principles to outline a strategy for producing isomorphic metaphors based on the structure and sequencing of language.

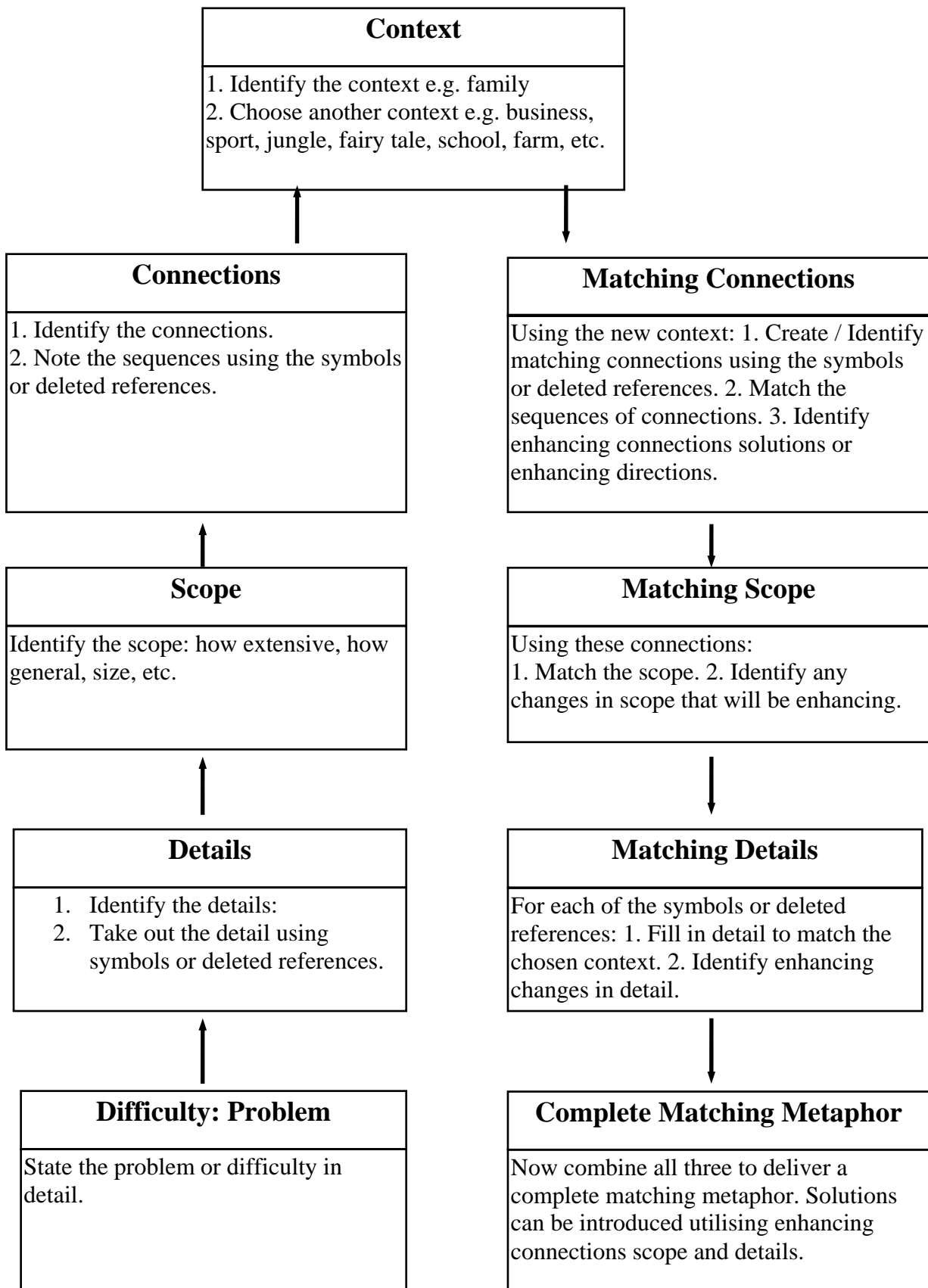
The 'Problem' situation is first identified. Next the situation is sorted in terms of the key “Details”, then the “Scoping” involved, and then the “Connections” between the details. The next thing to identify is the particular “Context” in which the problem is operating.

From the information gathered:

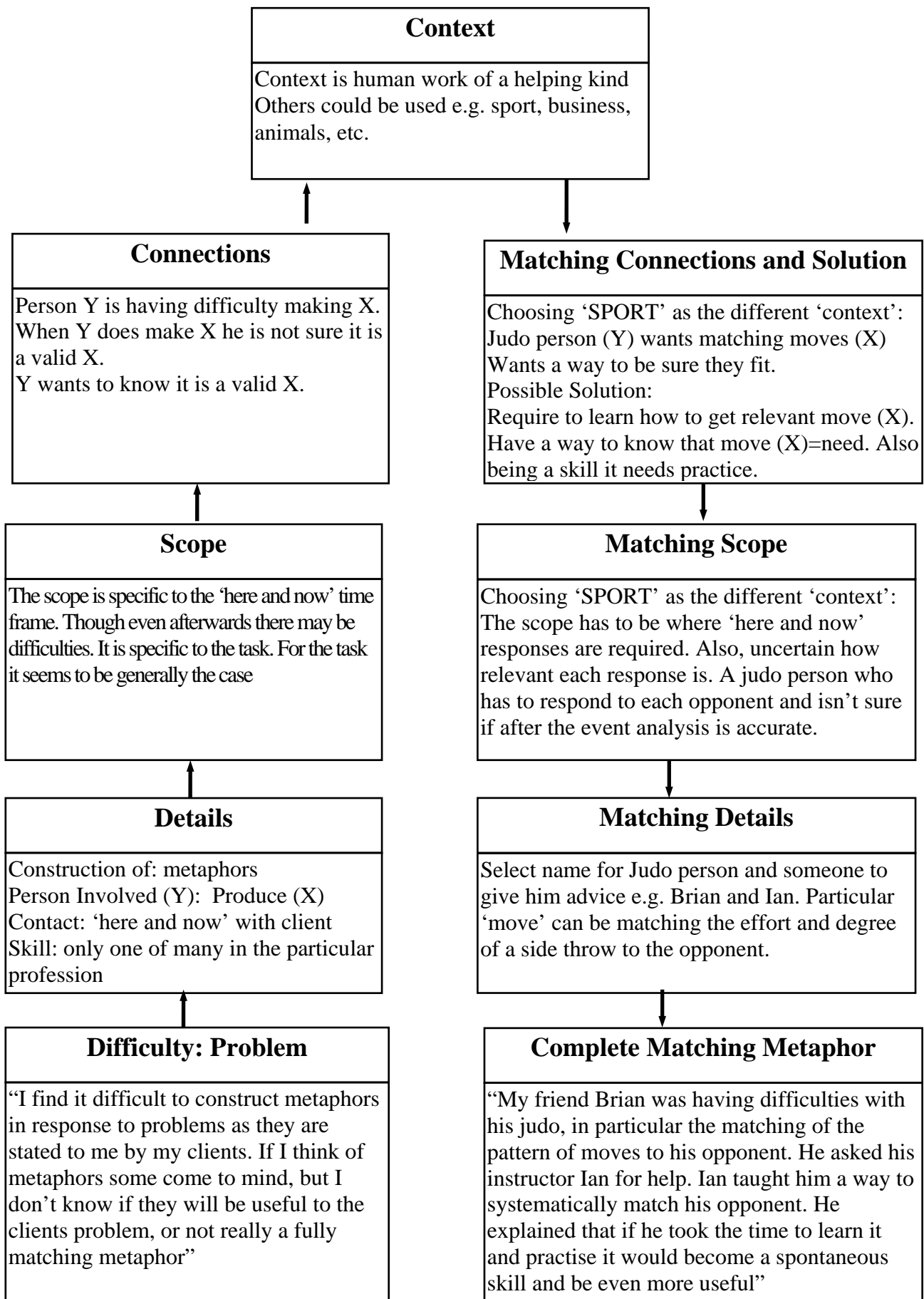
1. Identify the 'Detail' and list. For references to people and things label at a higher level of abstraction. For example label “George” as man.
2. Identify the different 'Scoping' (boundaries, sizes, amounts, etc.) and list them.
3. Identify the 'Connections' between the 'Details' for example sequences, equivalences, cause effect connections and list them.
4. Identify the context.
5. Identify three other contexts: a variety of different areas eg Workplace; family; jungle; garden; sea.
6. Establish matching 'Connections' in new context.
7. Establish matching 'Scoping' for the connections in the new context.
8. Add matching 'Details' at same level as the original, eg “man” now becomes Ralf.
9. Solutions can be explored or supplied by utilising the matching metaphor into a solution.

This is usefully achieved through the use of a worksheet at first. Once practised it streamlines and 'instantaneous' production is easily possible. Figure 2 provides an example of this strategy.

## ISOMORPHIC METAPHOR STRATEGY (FIG. 1)



## ISOMORPHIC METAPHOR STRATEGY: EXAMPLE (FIG. 2)

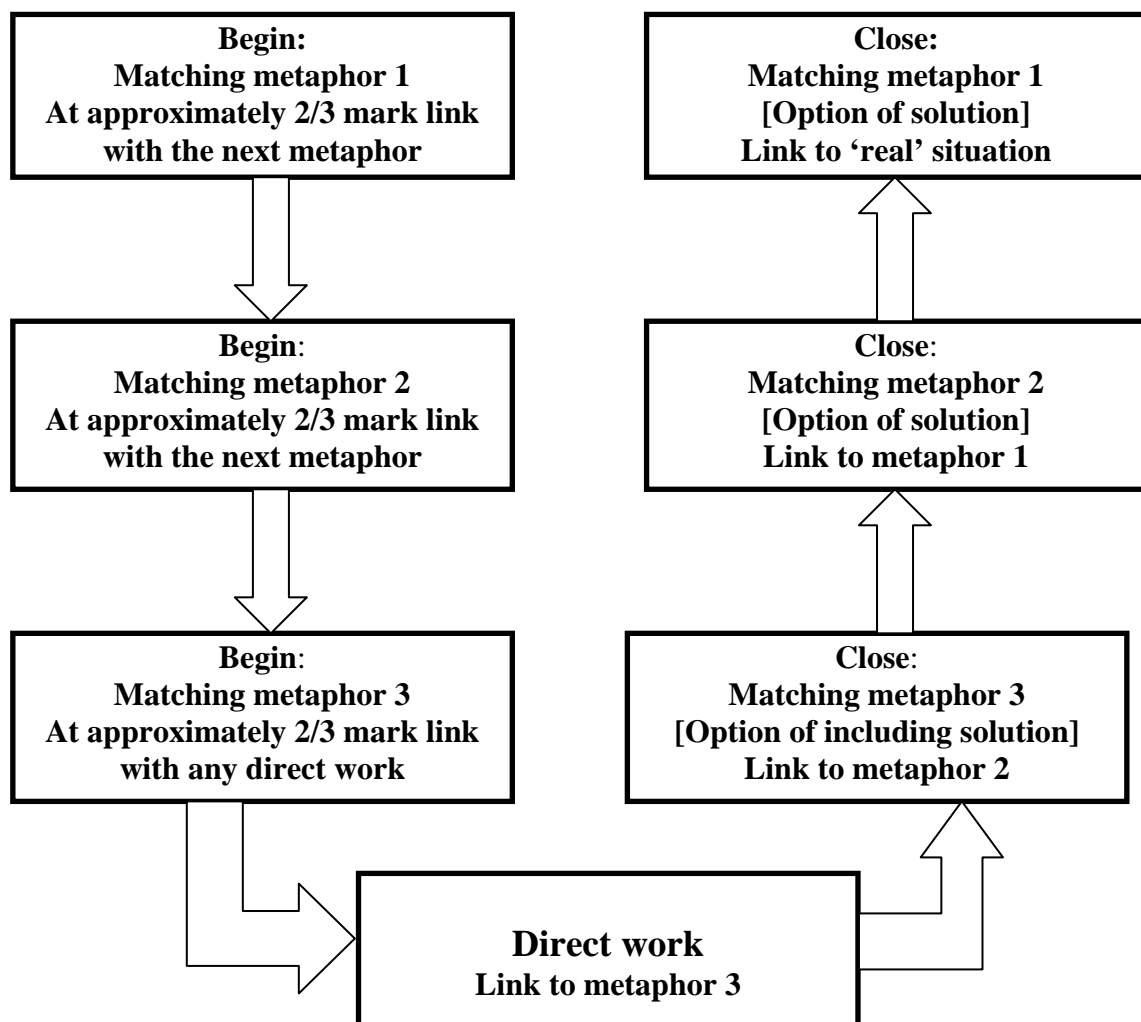


## MULTIPLE- EMBEDDED METAPHOR BASIC SEQUENCE

Using the Isomorphic Metaphor Strategy it is easy to build an infinite number of matching metaphors. These can be used in the following 'embedded metaphor' format (Figure 3. ref. Lankton)

This sequence builds a deeper awareness of the problem structure as each of the three (or more) additional matching metaphors clarify what is necessary about the structure rather than what is particular in any one of them. On its own this assists the therapist and client to test their understanding of the problem. Another application is to extend the matching metaphors into appropriate solutions before returning to consider the 'real' problem. Sometimes the understanding is left for the client's unconscious to continue working, making no direct connection to the 'real' situation.

### MULTIPLE-EMBEDDED METAPHOR: BASIC SEQUENCE (FIG.3)



For the isomorphic metaphor example (fig. 2) other matching metaphors could include “creating a meal that a friend would like”, “matching the colours for a landscape painting”, “while ballroom dancing; not knowing the right dance and how to follow”.

## ACTIVATION AND METAPHOR

Metaphors activate our conscious and unconscious minds. They activate not only the content in the metaphor but also the processes and patterns in the metaphor. This is the key to their usefulness.

This has a number of benefits.

- It sets the client up with a new content that is not connected to the problem content (which may have negative emotions that get in the way of thinking about it).
- This new content can be unconscious as a further protection of their conscious mind.
- The metaphor provides a content to explore, problem solve, facilitate useful insight, and to play with new alternatives, options and choices.
- The feeling of success as well as the specific new choices in the metaphor can be transferred back to the problem content.
- They can activate useful resources directly and indirectly.
- The client and the therapist can use the metaphor to test their understanding of problems and possible solutions.
- The therapist can check the congruence between the client's conscious mind and unconscious mind with regard to the problem and possible solutions.

## LEVELS OF ACTIVATION

Activation operates in three levels. All require some kind of irritant that disrupts a steady state. The irritant is news of difference. A difference that makes a difference is activation.

The first is some kind of irritation of our nervous system that stimulates. The second is that this stimulation also stimulates behaviour. The irritant has now activated behaviour. The third results from this behaviour irritating a response to the behaviour. The result will be a motivation toward or away from it.

There are three main processes of activation:

1. Stimulate: Initial irritation, e.g. "Beach..."
2. Activate: Initiates a response, e.g. "...Walking..."
3. Motivate: Initiate interest, e.g. ".....Relaxing".

These operate as part of our interaction with ourselves and between the world and ourselves.

Irritation	Activation	Behaviour	Example
Irritable	Stimulate	Senses	"Beach"
Responsible	Activate	Behaviour	"Walking"
Sensible	Motivate	Process	"Relaxing"

## **METAPHORIC ACTIVATION OF BEHAVIOURAL PROCESSES**

In addition to direct activation and de-activation, metaphors can also activate behaviour in three main ways:

1. To more efficiently maintain behaviour cycles. These are Respirational Process Metaphors. These include Breathing, eating, cycles of rest and activity. Many traditional stories outline cycles of leaving home and returning (eg Ulysses, Jesus staying 40 days and nights in the desert). This application of metaphor is useful for balancing and alignment and particularly useful as a through time ecology instruction.
2. To activate the best from the current behavioural possibilities. These are Inspirational Process Metaphors. These include behaviours within the clients repertoire but not currently active, for example engaging in learning, taking on a new challenge. These include metaphors of early learning for curiosity and wonder, games for playfulness, healthy competition and determination, reminders of enjoyable interaction and intimacy. Popular stories, anecdotes are often a source of inspiration metaphors.
3. To activate a new behavioural possibility. These are Aspirational Process Metaphors. These include introducing new behaviours and ideas. Erickson was particularly adept at this and it forms one of his favourite elements in his therapy. He would talk of climbing Squaw Peak (a hill local to Phoenix), camping in the desert. Often Erickson would present a general category together with a less than enjoyable example which his clients would later "spontaneously" continue with a more enjoyable example (one client was told to go camping in a tent in the desert, didn't like the tent and later continued camping with a camper van. More than stories are required when going beyond.

## **UTILISATION OF METAPHORS**

Metaphors can be utilised to help clients from a number of sources:

1. Utilise the clients own metaphors
2. Encourage the client to create metaphors
3. Utilise cultural generalisations and universal experiences
4. Create metaphors for the client

### Utilise the clients own metaphors

In NLP and DBM we aim to meet the client at their model. A basic application in metaphor is therefore to utilise the metaphors that the client is currently using. This is evident in the work of Milton Erickson and has also been outlined in the work of David Groves (detailed in various articles in Rapport by James Lawley, Penny Tomkins and Philip Harland).



### Encourage the client to create metaphors

Some clients will not be using many metaphors or don't spontaneously use them. Another application is therefore to encourage the client to construct some.

For example if they are experiencing a family problem it might be useful to ask them:  
*"What kind of situation does this remind you of?"*

If they still have difficulty creating metaphors then contexts or situations can be supplied to search with in:

*"If this situation was happening in a small business [or football team / kitchen in a restaurant / mountain climbing expedition / etc. what would be happening?"*

Relevant issues can now be explored within the metaphor:

*"What would be most important to you? What would benefit from being changed? How would the other people respond to these changes?"*

### Cultural Generalisations and universal experiences

Another useful source of metaphors that will be familiar to the client, or at the least easily understandable to them, are culturally universal experiences. These include all the main rites of passage, cultural stages of development, and life cycle stages.

### Providing metaphors for the client

Another option is to supply relevant metaphors for the client. This is particularly important as an additional source of creativity for all clients and especially important for clients whose problems are beyond their current abilities to solve and when the use of trance work is employed. Trance is generally a very useful state for utilising metaphors as clients tend to be more fully engaged while following suggestions. In my next article I will outline some re-modelling of trance inductions and utilisation of trance. One recent addition that was initially developed for use in trance and later extended to conscious states is what I call Performative Metaphors.

## **METAPHORS, APPLICATION AND CHANGE**

I have outlined a number of ways in which metaphors can be utilised as part of a process of change. There are obviously other applications as metaphors can be utilised across the whole spectrum of life activities, assisting us to re-model understanding and behaviour. In therapeutic applications they can be used to thoroughly test our understanding of the clients problem and also the clients understanding; supply an "objective" description and a safer "subjective" experience of their problems; offer a safer content to explore, play with, change and practise. Metaphors can be used for all four types of change outlined in article nine, Remedial Change, Generative Change, Developmental Change, and Life Learning Change.

These seemingly universal applications can blind us to their limitations.

## LIMITS AND LIMITATIONS OF METAPHOR

About fifteen years ago I was visiting a family with a Social Worker. There had been a history of serious fighting between the parents and between a seventeen-year-old daughter and nineteen-year-old son. Our immediate concern was the welfare of a thirteen-year-old daughter. As part of my colleague's interventions she used the following metaphor. I had been modelling metaphor in some detail at that time and this particular metaphor both concerned and fascinated me.

*“Two friends of mine had a little business and got on really well for many years. Eventually they started to seriously fight and realized that for their benefit of the business and their own well being they should consider going their own way”.*

As the whole family heard the metaphor what effect might it have on them? For the parents it prescribes separation. This was certainly one potentially useful option given their anger and violence to each other but not necessarily useful or the only option. The metaphor did not supply other options or guidance (though they were included at a different time in the visit). For the older children it was definitely a potentially useful direction as it directed them to the next stage in their development, leaving home. In the longer term though it might not be so useful for them. If they follow it now what happens later in life if they argue with their partners – the solution of separation has already been practised and so may be followed prematurely! What happens to the thirteen year old whom we were trying to prevent being taken into care? The metaphor prescribes the opposite!

Many potentially useful and harmful possibilities could have been activated through this metaphor. At the time I re-stated the metaphor adding details about trying every possibility including seeking outside help before the final option of separation. My additions were designed to make the metaphor potentially useful to the whole family at that time and in their future.

The experience greatly stimulated and increased my motivation to use metaphors more accurately. The social worker was well meaning but that does not prevent unintentional damage. Over the years sadly I have witnessed other such examples. It continues to motivate me toward ever more precision.

I once heard an NLP trainer advise the group to use metaphor if they didn't know what else to do. It couldn't do any harm he said. Well if it can't do any harm it also can't do any good! Metaphors are potentially very powerful in their influence. We need to be responsible for the influence we have through them.

1, 2, 3 is a simple metaphor for A, B, C until you get to 10 when two numbers are now one letter and when you get to 27 when you run out of letters. There will always be limits to the accuracy of metaphors. It is very important to remember that the map is not the territory and definitely the METAPHOR IS NOT THE TERRITORY.

There will always be some differences between reality and both the clients and our own metaphors. This means that sometimes metaphors might add something less than useful or actually harmful. If we are sensitive to our clients, and ourselves, flexible

and creative in our responding, this need not become a problem. If we blindly supply well-meaning stories it surely will at some point.

## **CONCLUDING EXERCISE: PERFORMATIVE METAPHORS**

Performative metaphors are a recent DBM addition to the application of metaphors. Performative metaphors are not isomorphic stories or content but isomorphic performances. I will explain more about them in the next article on hypnotic induction's.

This article can be a performative metaphor for exploring and learning. The following questions link the performing of the metaphor (article) to your performing your reading of it.

- What was it like for you to read through this article?
- What was it familiar to?
- What was it different to?
- What other new experiences do you react to in a similar way?
- Where do you react less usefully for you?
- Where do you react more usefully for you?
- What did you model?
- What did you re-model?
- What things does it inspire you to do more of / less of?
- What more could you aspire to?

## **METAPHORS ARE NOT ONLY STORIES**

Fundamentally nothing is ever totally like anything else. We make it so in order to make the world and our lives easier to manage. This amazing ability to make metaphors can distract us from what is really there in the world, the uniqueness, the new and the different. While we feel the need to close the door on the chaos of the world beyond our understanding, in the words of the children's word play, it's never a door when it's ajar.

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