

# The Traveller, the Miner and the Gardener: Metaphors for Making Teaching and Learning a Meaningful Process

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## Abstract

Engaging students in active participation and collaborative learning is an important pedagogical component of teaching and learning in higher education. Teachers use a variety of activities to engage students, such as interactive lectures, presentations, group activities, and projects. A metaphorical understanding of the teaching-learning process may help in the implementation of innovative and ground-up constructivist pedagogical approaches. A ground-up (or bottom-up) constructivist approach helps and engages the learners in constructing their understanding as they observe, experience and interact with their surroundings. Using my anthropological research background, I will present three metaphors that can make the teaching-learning process more meaningful, ground-up, and accommodating to students' diverse learning styles. A traveller metaphor presents the learner as a traveller to both familiar and unknown places. A miner metaphor describes the learner as a miner who digs deep to get the desired minerals. A gardener metaphor represents a gardener who cares for the garden from sowing to reaping. The gardener is also responsible for maintaining the garden by trimming and eliminating weeds. All three metaphors are about discovering, uncovering and cultivating knowledge.

The interesting thing about these metaphors is that the teacher and students are on the same journey together. In this short paper, I will reflect on these metaphors through the lens of a qualitative researcher (anthropologist) and relate them to the teaching-learning process.

## Introduction

During my first ethnographic research on the social value of the child and childcare belief practices, there were three methodological challenges that I faced (Qamar, 2019, 2021): First, how to explore the social and cultural world of the community I was studying. Second, how to find and understand the knowledge that exists in the multi-layered social and cultural environment. And third, how to interpret and contextualise the knowledge according to the research questions. The three strategies that I used are known as the traveller, the miner and the gardener metaphors. By metaphor, I intend to describe the understanding of one concept employing another while connecting the underlying meaning relevant to the under-study process. For example, as a traveller, I explored the social and cultural lives of the participants during the fieldwork through participant observation. As a miner, I used unstructured in-depth interviews to understand the participants' experiences and the meanings and perspectives they attach to their experiences. As a gardener, I elaborated and interpreted the knowledge through follow-up interviews and observations emphasising comprehensive and interconnected information about the phenomenon.

As a qualitative researcher and using my anthropological research background, I am inspired by traveller, miner and gardener metaphors to lead teaching and learning as a meaningful process. The three metaphors are usually used in qualitative research (particularly ethnography) to conduct an in-depth investigation. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) describe the role of the interviewer in qualitative research as a traveller and a miner. As a traveller, the interviewer explores the unknown world along with the interviewee. As a miner, the interviewer discovers the hidden meanings as an outsider. Both metaphors help the interviewer to understand the nature and value of knowledge and production and co-production of meaning through mining and travelling simultaneously. In my study to investigate the value of the child and healthcare belief practices, ethnographic

fieldwork was used to explore the social and cultural context of the study area. I accessed and created connections with the people who were key participants (interviewees) in my study. The pre-interview meetings opened a co-exploration of village life with the research participants. They accompanied me to visit places like shrines, mosques, healthcare centres, and schools. This exposure (as a traveller) to their social world provided me with an insight into the inquiry that I was going to conduct in my interviews. Later, I used my previous knowledge and knowledge gained during fieldwork in the interviews, during which I dug down into the meanings of the specific social phenomenon (related to belief practices) that was my primary research target. The gardener metaphor is about asking the right question (as planting the seeds), probing sensibly to 'cultivate' the information/knowledge gained through questions, and 'fostering' the growth of information during the process (Salmons, 2014). While during the fieldwork I also grasped the contextual information and complex and sensitive areas of my investigation, I used this knowledge to formulate right and contextually appropriate questions. I focused on the questions that can help me find the broad description of the phenomenon and help the participants voice their experiences in their narratives. Hence, as a gardener I formulate and used questions and verbal and non-verbal probing to enhance the conversational depth and flow of information.

In the context of learning, learners should be engaged in first-hand experience to explore and discover knowledge. A participant-centred approach is always central to the philosophy of acquiring and disseminating knowledge. Students participate in academic activities as individuals with diverse learning styles and previous knowledge backgrounds. To bring them together to achieve the intended learning outcomes, it is crucial to initiate a collaborative teaching-learning process (see Hardy, Edwards-Groves and Rönnerman, 2012) that can engage students by utilising their differences as learning resources. Engaging students in active participation and collaborative learning is an important pedagogical component of teaching and learning in higher education. Teachers use a variety of activities to engage students, such as interactive lectures, presentations, group activities and projects. A metaphorical understanding of the teaching-learning process may help in the implementation of innovative and ground-up pedagogical approaches. A ground-up (or bottom-up)

constructivist approach helps and engages the learners in constructing their understanding as they observe, experience and interact with their surroundings. Primarily based on Vygotsky's social constructivism, ground-up learning takes place through learner-environment interaction where the learner is actively engaged in meaning-making and constructing knowledge. Hence, the quality of learning emerges from the first-hand experiences and perceptions of the learners (Michelle et al., 2017; Pritchard & Woollard, 2010; Skedsmo & Huber, 2019).

Regarding the above-mentioned metaphors, the teaching and learning process includes the experience of learning through the direct engagement of the learners with exposure, discovery and production of knowledge. In this short article, I present these metaphors that can make the teaching-learning process more meaningful, ground-up and accommodating of students' diverse learning styles.

## The Traveller: Learner as Explorer

Travelling theory is one of the personal theories of teaching given by Fox (1983) that Fox refers to as a developed theory, closely related to the learning process. According to this theory, education is a journey that learners take through diverse landscapes under the guidance of teachers. Whereas teachers as guides are familiar with the journey, they are also explorers to find something new along with learners on this journey (Fox, 1983; Said, 2000). In this connection, a traveller metaphor presents the learner as a traveller to both familiar and unknown places. The learners should explore and bridge the 'known' and 'unknown' through discovery and direct exposure. The learners should expose themselves to the unknown while using the information and knowledge that is known to them. Here, the three skills and/or characteristics that prepare the learners to travel through the (known and unknown) knowledge, are: being adventurous, curious and a keen observer. The teachers make sure to ignite and satisfy the learners' curiosity as travel guides who accompany the travellers without interfering with their self-directed journey to the unknown. The teachers help the learners to understand where they are now and where they are going. For example, when I was teaching an introduction to anthropology

course for undergraduate students, one of the group activities was to create photo essays about different cultures, each presenting something unique to them. It was a kind of virtual tour to other cultures and societies, where they had never been before. Students searched the internet for images and came up with several fascinating belief practices that they found in these cultures. The interesting thing about their virtual travel stories was their descriptions where they were able to find ‘surprising’ connections between their culture and other cultures either in contrast or in similarity. As a teacher, I ignited their curiosity and helped them to read symbols in different cultures that gave meaning to their virtual travel experience and translated it into knowledge.

### The Miner: Learner as Discoverer

A miner metaphor describes the learner as a miner who digs deep to get the desired minerals; yet the miner may obtain more than desired during the process. Miners, when digging to find the minerals, occasionally find other things that they are not targeting in their search, yet it may be an important discovery. In other words, the targeted or non-targeted ‘out of sight’ knowledge buried deep needs to be unearthed. “The miner should dig the uncontaminated nuggets of knowledge that may be understood as objective real data (information/knowledge) or subjective authentic meanings (directly derived from the knowledge)” (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 47-48). What does a miner need to dig out the minerals? The answer is the tools and an understanding of which tool is used for what and how. It means that learners must acquire the skills to identify and use the tools for digging deep. Here the curiosity of the learners is as imperative as it was described in the metaphor of the traveller, because the intrinsic motivation should be driven by the learners’ interest in the knowledge that is out of sight. The teachers join them by providing help and guidance to uncover the knowledge, help them to focus on their goals, and facilitate sources and resources to dig deep and extract the knowledge.

Again, reflecting on my teaching experience, one objective of teaching is to help students learn the skills/knowledge that prepares them for ‘how to do things’. For example, while teaching gender psychology, the key

question was ‘how do we do gender’. One way to understand this complex social phenomenon was to discover gender and its meaning as embedded in its socio-cultural context. I asked students to watch relevant movies and documentaries and write commentaries. Later, I engaged these students in group discussions where they conceptualised gender as an unfolding process in their commentaries. This activity helped them to dig out the social realities and their meanings.

## The Gardener: Learner as Cultivator

According to the gardener theory, proposed by Fox, teaching is about the growth and production of knowledge that teachers help and encourage students to cultivate and retain. The teacher is a gardener, and the student’s mind is a garden (covered with concepts). Here the gardener’s job is to facilitate the flexible growth of these concepts (Fox, 1983). While Fox’s gardener theory is more relevant to learners’ personal growth and development, I use the gardener metaphor to shape learners’ knowledge and skills as they advance in the learning process. Unlike the traveller and miner metaphors, where the teacher was a co-participant (guide, facilitator, resource person), a gardener metaphor represents the teacher as a gardener who cares for the development from sowing to reaping. The gardener is also responsible for maintaining the garden by trimming and eliminating weeds. Here, eliminating weeds does not mean interfering with the freedom and flexibility of the learners’ conceptualisation; instead, it is about helping learners to unlearn or hold back something that may interfere with their new learning. Hence, the teacher (as a gardener) guides and trains the students to cultivate and manage their knowledge and skills. For example, with reference to my previous example of teaching gender psychology, it was my job to help students to bracket their presumptions and biases while conceptualising gender and doing gender in different cultures. Hence, I encouraged them to enlist their perceptions about gender and record their experiences of doing gender so that they can relate to their exploration of gender in other cultures (as mentioned in learner as a miner).

## Discussion

The social aspect of frame learning is an interactive process in which learning occurs through interaction, participation and collaboration (Lin, 2015). To make teaching and learning a meaningful process, it is important to engage learners in active participation and social interaction. The learners should be able to contextualise their understanding in relatively complex scenarios. In this article, I present three phases of teaching and learning, that is to explore (the unknown), to discover (the hidden), and to cultivate (the knowledge). I situate these three interconnected phases in the metaphorical frames of traveller, miner and gardener. These metaphorical descriptions (as described above) demonstrate the position and relationship of teachers and learners in the teaching-learning process. After studying these three metaphors (as presented in qualitative research, see Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Salmons, 2014), and from my experience as a qualitative researcher, I see that a learner and a qualitative researcher seek knowledge that is comprised of facts and objective and subjective realities. The objectives and purposes may be different; however, the process to learn about the required knowledge shares similarities in terms of systematic learning that situates the journey from known to unknown, familiar to unfamiliar, and obvious to hidden knowledge. Hence, the pathway to acquiring knowledge leads the learning process through exploration, discovery and realisation of knowledge.

Competence, autonomy and relatedness are the three psychological needs that Ryan and Deci (2000) mentioned as facilitating social development and well-being. In this connection, the three metaphors (the traveller, the miner and the gardener) are the social roles of the teachers and learners that engage the learners in fulfilling these psychological needs. All three metaphors are interconnected and engage learners in discovering, uncovering and cultivating knowledge. The interesting thing about these metaphors is that the teacher and students are on the same 'journey' together, which also yields the co-construction of knowledge. The meaning-making process is also shared by the teachers and the learners, as both are interested in unfolding the stories of their journeys together.

## Conclusion

Thinking about my qualitative research experience and teaching philosophy, my pragmatic approach toward teaching and learning is focused on creating a participatory environment where teachers and learners collaborate and interact together. Following a ground-up constructivist pedagogical approach to learning can help in the co-construction of knowledge. Fox's (1983) theories of teaching (travelling and growing) and metaphorical frames discussed in this paper situate learning as a social process embedded in experiences and practices. The three metaphors, if practiced in pedagogical strategies, can allow students to contribute to their learning by doing. In a nutshell, knowledge, practice and theory may be interconnected by inspiring learners through engaging them in experiential and observational exploration of knowledge. Hence, the three metaphors discussed in this paper may provide a conceptual road map to plan learning as a meaningful process.

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