

Overview:

Metaphors are signifiers of how a culture or language group conceptualizes a particular phenomenon. A conceptual metaphor—which uses one idea to understand another—is made up of a source and a target. The source is the concept from which the metaphorical expression is drawn while the target is the concept that is trying to be understood. Typically a source is more concrete, while the target is abstract. For example, in the metaphor “love is war,” war is the source while love is the target. These metaphors are not universal, and cultures will often have multiple metaphors illustrating the same concept.

In this activity, participants will develop self-awareness by breaking down and examining the metaphors that they commonly use. They will also compare their metaphors to those used by other cultures and discuss what they learn about cultural values based on those metaphors.

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Articulate relationships between components of metaphor theory, such as targets and sources.
2. Analyze common underlying cultural metaphors for abstract concepts (e.g., love, friendship, time).
3. Compare and contrast metaphorical understandings of the same concepts from different cultural perspectives.

Time:

30 minutes

Group Size:

Pairs

Materials:

A chalkboard, whiteboard, or flip chart.

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Denial
- Polarization
- Minimization
- Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Cultural Self-Awareness:

- To articulate insights into own cultural rules and biases (e.g., seeking complexity; aware of how their experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description).

Knowledge of Cultural Worldview Frameworks:

- To demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs & practices.

Activity instructions:

1. The facilitator should begin by defining and explaining conceptual metaphors, particularly focusing on sources and targets. They may want to provide several examples to demonstrate how cultures often have multiple metaphors for the same concept. For example:
 - “Love is war”: Love is the target and war is the source. This metaphor highlights the painful and tumultuous aspects of love while concealing the positive (Although some may consider war to be glorious or honorable, so it might not be negative in all contexts).
 - “Love is a journey”: Love is the target and journey is the source. While a journey is often long and can have periods of difficulty, it is typically used in a positive manner and is associated with growth. Describing love as a journey implies that any hardships within romantic relationships are worth it in the end.
2. The facilitator should then present a concept(s) that is typically understood using metaphors and write it on a chalkboard, whiteboard, or flip chart. The facilitator may use one of the following examples, or come up with their own:
 - Woman
 - Friendship
 - Career/Work/Profession
 - Time
 - Nature
 - The Soul
3. Next, crowdsource the metaphors that participants typically use to describe the chosen concept and write them on the board or chart.

Note: If the facilitator is working with a more culturally homogeneous group, they may need to present variations from different cultures using proverbs, literature, or various media sources like blogs or clips from newscasts. As an example, there are different animal metaphors for women used in English and Spanish: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/39085608.pdf>

4. Once participants have finished brainstorming metaphors, debrief using the following questions:
 - What are the key differences you see across these metaphors? What about similarities?
 - With each of these metaphors, what about the concept gets highlighted? Conversely, what aspects get hidden?
 - Are these metaphors generally positive or negative? Why do you think there are more positive or negative metaphors to describe this particular term?
 - What do we gain by considering metaphors across cultural contexts?
 - What do we learn about cultural values after examining these metaphors?

Related Tools:

Similar tools:

- [Metaphor/Feeling Cards](#)
- [Metaphors for Culture](#)