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From Judgement to Discernment: Using Metaphors to Go Beyond Labels

Caryl Hurtig Casbon and Ruth Shagoury Hubbard

In our current school culture, we have become accustomed to hearing students described with words like attention deficit, learning disabled, developmentally delayed, passive aggressive, and so on. In this article the authors take a closer look at the ways we talk about our students, and some of the dangers involved with the use of these labels. A fresh approach for deeper appreciation of the complexity of our students' lives is offered through the use of metaphor.

'Nonverbal. Severe motor delay. Mentally retarded.' Labels. Labels that hurt. Labels plastered on the outside body of an incredibly strong and shining spirit. Some people look at Caitlin and see ... what? (Ann Potter, Caitlin's mother)

Ann knows what people see when they look at her seven-year-old daughter: a mentally retarded child who cannot yet walk or talk or feed herself. They see a child whose possibilities are bounded by her labels. To them, she is defined by what she cannot do. Yet Caitlin's family's eyes are not closed. Instead, Ann writes,

our family sees a little girl who literally doubles over with laughter when pleased; a little girl who hugs with such openness that you can physically feel the electricity when her heart is pressed to yours. ... Her world is filled with mystery and discovery, not definitions.

One of the perils of teaching is that it involves the complicated and unpredictable business of working with individuals in group settings, and inevitably students show up who challenge us to the core. A defense against these challenging students (or colleagues) is our use of labels. In the pages that follow, we take a closer look at the dangers of labeling—and offer the use of metaphors to help us step back, refocus, and see our students through a different lens.

The desire to find categories in human behavior is a natural one. We make sense of our world

through seeking out similarities and finding patterns. In the chaotic world of education, we want to recognize similarities, try out ways to work with students, and learn from our experiences to help other students we encounter in schools.

But there is an insidious side to these categories when the boundaries become rigid. The labels offer a quick fix and can cut off ongoing inquiry into the stories and lives of our students. Once a label has been slapped on someone, it's easier to distance him or her ... and, unfortunately, to blame that person. It is an intriguing paradox that if we really want to be effective with challenging people in our lives, what is really called for is **more** information, empathy, creativity, and realistic discernment of what is possible rather than to box a student into a convenient ready-made category.

Of course, the greatest concern about labels is what they might do if the student identifies with them. It is difficult for adults to use labels with their students and not have the students learn how they've been defined. In his profound book, *How Then Shall We Live*, Muller (1997) notes that psychology has permeated our culture to the point that individuals tend to identify with some of the diagnoses that have been placed on them. He makes a strong case that our lives grow out of how we name ourselves, and that if we name ourselves in terms of our problems, our identities can be fixed and limited. Muller notes:

Today, people come to me bearing their diagnosis: I am a child of a dysfunctional family. I am an alcoholic. I am a love addict. These names are worn like shields, psychological coats

of arms. They do not move, these names. They are cold and solid, like an epitaph. I am certain these names reveal little of our true nature. Beneath the stories, beneath the diagnoses, these are all children of spirit, beings fully equipped with the inner voices of strength and wisdom, intimations of grace and light. But their clinical diagnoses prevent them from believing in their own wisdom. (p. 16)

In our work with educators and counselors, we have seen the dangers of educational labels. In conversations about their students or clients, we overhear comments like, "Well, he's ADD, so what can you expect?" These terms tumble out of our mouths daily: LD (learning disabled), OCD (obsessive-compulsive), developmentally delayed, ESL, and on and on. We also hear labels coined from the counseling profession, such as narcissistic, paranoid, and passive-aggressive. And when we look closely at our own teaching journals and classroom transcripts, we see that we aren't immune from the dangerous effects of labeling our own students—and sometimes colleagues!—as well. When they frustrate us, it is often easier to box them in with categories that may explain some behaviors, but may also cut short our ability to listen or to think creatively about how to work together. They certainly do not help us see with fresh eyes.

How can we break the confines that restrict our thinking when we look at a person and see a label? As educators who work with teachers and counselors in our Graduate Program at Lewis & Clark College, we began to ask ourselves a series of questions: Is there another, more expansive way we might begin to think about our students and colleagues that invites connectivity rather than distancing? Is there another way that might move us from the judgmental language of labels to a discerning, open approach to describing students? Is there language that might encompass the gorgeous, messy complexity of the individual in her/his strengths and challenges, in the students' hidden wholeness? Is there even a way to frame the challenges differently, to invite a holding up of a person in their uniqueness?

One way is to turn to the power of metaphor. A strange, but perhaps inevitable beauty about human beings is that we can't communicate precisely and actually need to rely on metaphor and simile and even parable to really get across some of our ideas about the world and ourselves. Humanities teacher Donald Elliot (1985) writes about the importance of ambiguity in our education. "The things we most want to get across to each other defy precise language," says Elliott, "and the very attempt to communicate" (Section B, p. 3). As an example, he quotes a letter from his son, a college student struggling to understand Kant:

Kant uses language so precisely—he makes sure that none of his words has two meanings or more, and might therefore be misunderstood—that he is practically unintelligible at times. It leads me to believe that we require metaphor and poetic license to understand each other. Strange thing, that, but not so obscure. Algebra may well be the most precise language mankind has ever come up with, but imagine us all running around speaking algebra to each other. (Section B, p. 3)

Again, it is paradoxical that to say something in precise exact terms makes it more difficult to understand. And yet, the terms we have so precisely defined in education tend to make our students and clients less understood rather than their behavior and needs more intelligible.

While teaching a course called "The Informed Life: The Path of Creativity" to a group of graduate students, we decided to play with this notion of metaphorical thinking to see if we could find fresh ways to invite our teachers and counselors-in-training to describe their students or clients. Part of the course deals with creativity in the areas of communication, and this certainly fits that domain. Our goal was, as Emily Dickinson advises, to, "Tell the truth, but tell it slant" (Sewell, 1994, p. 147).

"Think of a student or client whom you have been struggling with lately," we invited them. "Just take about five minutes to describe that person, using the language of your profession." The room became

instantly quiet as we all brought those students to mind and put pen to paper. After five minutes, we interrupted the process to ask them to shift their perspective in their writing: "Now, hold this person in your minds and hearts and describe him or her, again for about five minutes—only this time, reach for a metaphor, an archetype, a parable ... what does this student remind you of? What or who is this client like?" Again, we all wrote, reaching for metaphor in an attempt to gain deeper meaning.

The change in perspective was quite astonishing. Elaine, an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teacher, described one of her students, Vilma, first in the kind of deficit model that we use so often in labeling our students. This description defined Vilma in terms of what she doesn't know and can't do.

Vilma is entering second grade and she is Hispanic. She has struggled greatly with basic literacy for three years. She has repeated kindergarten twice. She is in the ESOL program for two hours a day and gets assistance from our ESOL push-in Instructional Aide who is bilingual. Vilma has developed some BICS [Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills] and has just moved to the post-silent, early emergent stage on the Language Development Chart. Her CALPS [Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Skills] is the big challenge. Even with our ELD [English Language Development] staff assisting her constantly, she still seems to have major difficulties with social and self-esteem issues.

Notice the different tone and level of understanding that Elaine found in her metaphorical description of the same student:

Vilma is like a guitar. She is there, complete, ready to be taken and given the chance to provide beautiful music. She has all the components in herself. What may go wrong is that sometimes people who try to touch this guitar—saying they know music and therefore harmonious music will come out—are not

playing all her strings. They play one or two and expect good music. They don't know they have failed, and blame the guitar: The guitar is too out of tune, it's got metal strings, it's too hard to hold because it's the wrong size. It's the environment that's not appropriate. It's too bad that other people are playing too loud so I can't hear what music is coming out of this particular guitar. Oh, I know, this string is not resistant enough. It will break at any time with a hard movement. I'd better not touch it any more until it can be handled and repaired by a skilled workman.

The guitar metaphor moved this teacher's understanding of her student to a deeper level, and an element of empathy for the child enters in. Her description now points to the wholeness and completeness of the student, although the players must also be skillful in bringing out the music from her. The metaphor allows a sense of context of the child, that the child is not alone in the classroom, but there is an interaction between who she is and what is transpiring around her.

Jason, an intern school counselor, described the difficult client he had worked with in these psychological terms:

I had a client who broke into outbursts of anger and rage. He was near uncontrollable. I was afraid of having to restrain him physically. I was always concerned that his actions might harm others. His family system has a lot of problems. His father is alcoholic. His mother overcompensates for the lack of the father. The mother is enmeshed with her son. He is a quasi-conspirator son. This perturbation of the family relationship spills over into his interactions with others. It is manifested by oversensitivity. Mom is in denial and states that things are the fault of others.

When Jason turned to parable to describe this young man, he came to a different, more compassionate understanding:

This person is like the lion who had a splinter in his paw. He was frightened, angry, lashed out at others. All that he needed was to have the splinter be removed. In the story, a mouse did remove the splinter and the lion's demeanor changed dramatically. I tried to pull the splinter out, but could not quite reach it. I could see it, but could not get the tweezers on it well enough to yank that sucker out!

In Jason's first description, it is easy to discern the psychological language that he uses, and the student is framed in terms of his deficits, not to mention the deficits of his family! The description leaves the reader with a sense of hopelessness, whereas the metaphor offers the potential of change for the lion, that he will be calm if he can be seen and understood. This lion has innate strength and the ability to live differently.

Over and over again, as we shared our descriptions and metaphors, we saw glimpses of how we might go beyond labels to gain deeper insights about our students, clients, and colleagues. One of the beauties of this kind of writing is that it doesn't take more time, only a different perspective—a conscious decision to “tell it slant.”

Using meaningful metaphors to bring depth to difficult concepts is not new. John Gaughn, a high school teacher, encourages his students to select and explain a metaphor that describes themselves as a learner (Gaughn, 1997). With early adolescents, teacher Abigail Foss borrows Gaughn's strategy, asking her middle schoolers to turn a critical lens on themselves as learners and select a metaphor (Foss, 2002). One of her students, Breann, wrote: “I chose a brown, plain box. From the outside, everything is plain, even boring and uninviting. However, once you open it up, all sorts of things from my exceptional life come out. This is true of everyone” (p. 396). Breann even took the assignment a step further and created a brown box with objects that represented her true self in it, which she shared with the whole class.

While teachers have been using metaphors to help students see themselves with a different slant, it appears to be a new tool for educators—a tool that

will help us redefine our students' potential and possibilities. Counselors who are writing notes for a case book or teachers writing descriptions of their students in class to discuss with the other professionals at their school have told us that they enjoy this more creative approach to their writing on the job. They also find that their colleagues are able to see these students with fresh eyes and more compassion as they work together to seek sound educational and treatment options. One kindergarten teacher we know, Andie Cunningham, has set a goal for herself to write brief, metaphorical descriptions of one child per week to aid her in understanding the complexities of that unique soul in her care. She believes she will show through her actions the special understandings she is gaining.

Andie's work with children exemplifies the advice of Pablo Casals (Casals & Kahn, 1970), the gifted musician:

When will we teach our children in school what they are? We should say to each of them: “Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all of the world there is no other child exactly like you. In the millions of years that have passed there has never been another child like you. And look at your body—what a wonder it is! Your legs, your arms, your cunning fingers, the way you move! You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything. Yes, you are a marvel. And when you grow up, can you then harm another who, like you, is a marvel?” (p. 47)

Like Ann's daughter Caitlin, Jason's young man with a thorn in his paw, or Elaine's precious but out-of-tune Vilma, all our students are marvels. Metaphors can be a guide to help us see them in a new light, going beyond the judgement of labels to a brighter—more dazzling—understanding.

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