METAPHOR, SELF-IMAGE AND THE WRITING TEACHER

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Donald McQuade, in *The Writer's Mind: Writing as a Mode of Thinking*, quotes Paul Ricoeur's work, *The Rule of Metaphor*: "Metaphor ... plays a vital role in enlivening and vivifying the surface of prose, but it can also function structurally at much deeper levels of thinking and writing." Ricoeur says that whereas writers can use metaphor to form images and concepts of one thing in terms of another, "metaphor also helps perceive new connections that can frequently lead to unexpected insights." This is what he means when he says, "Metaphor creates a new order at the expense of the old one." (p. 221)

I read this article while I was doing some random reading in the teaching of writing. Oddly enough, it was also at this time that I was giving some thought to the ways I had perceived myself as a writing teacher through the years and speculating on whether these self-perceptions had influenced my teaching. This writing activity for teachers was one of the steps in coming to terms with this issue for myself. It was also an effort to pull together some of the discoveries of teachers who have been part of the North Carolina Writing Project and to record insights to share with other writing teachers.

It seems to me that we writing teachers can borrow McQuade's advice (intended for our students) regarding metaphor in our own thinking/composing processes. We can use metaphor to help us restructure our thinking and radically change our teaching styles and the way we approach everything we do in the writing classroom.

And this sense of organic metaphor also affects how we self-evaluate and revise our own pedagogy from year to year and from moment to moment. We have all heard the expression, you are what you eat. The metaphor that we "choose" of ourselves in the classroom has this same sort of relationship to our teaching; we are what we think we are.

At a recent reunion, I asked the Teacher/Consultants to free-write for a while, looking for a sense of the metaphor under which they operate most of the time as writing teachers. If they have several, I asked them to think about whether these are complementary or conflicting. Are these metaphors working for them and their students, or against? What metaphor might they substitute to reconstruct their views of themselves toward a healthier image? I suggested that when they finished, they complete the following sentence: I frequently see myself as a _________ in the writing classroom. If I were to begin seeing myself as a _________ my relationship with students and their writing would change from _________ (describe) to _________ (describe).

Our choice of metaphor, although of course it is not a true choice, dictates corresponding metaphors for students and for student writing. For example, at the end of a hard day of student conferences a few years ago, I saw myself as "field hand." The corresponding metaphor was to see students as field supervisors, bossmen, slave drivers; the work as endless weeding and cultivating, a backbreaking
writes about metaphor in a piece rich with metaphor itself. She sees herself and her students joined in a journey:

The bug exterminator, weeder, planter, harvester of nine-month series of rotating crops that sometimes fail is really not a gardener. I would rather be a landscaper—specifically an illuminator. I want to take them from observing through the windows, to travelers along the writing path, active participants. Their paths need to be lit to make the way light, brighter, and safer—without moving the subtle shadows and patterns along the way. The lights need to be placed just so, never overpowering, but subtle, diffuse, indirect, often hidden. So perhaps it is not illuminator after all. Perhaps it is mapmaker and fantasy guide to the Universe of Discourse, to take them from neon lights to flashing, crystal prisms.

A colleague at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Lu Huntley participated last summer in the North Carolina Writing Project at this site. She wrote at length, groping toward answers to the questions posed in the prompt. As a start, she played with the ideas of “scullery maid,” a “tired clown,” a “coal miner,” and “brick mason,” but as she wrote, another metaphor began to take shape:

What work does a writing teacher do? Grade papers? Balony. That’s not it. Can’t grade papers, not talk about papers here. Pieces of student thinking. Loren Eiseley quoted Thoreau—“Mind Prints”—I like that—on paper—student’s thinking. Hard to get at that thinking sometimes—I try to name what a student does—too often I’ll want to say scrap it, save this sentence, start over, look at this space . . . But a student may not understand at all. What was h/s thinking when the writing went on? What does student writing tell me? I listen to it, look at it, look at it, look at it. I am a looker, want to look, want to understand what I am looking at—what do we call someone who looks? a searcher? a seeker? detective. Maybe this is my metaphor—detective.

What do I detect in their writing? Nose to the ground all the time—big spy glass—looking for a crumb, trying to make a breakthrough—crack the case—open up the writing—see the process at work.

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