
Modelling the curriculum through metaphors: One programme's approach

Sarah Nixon and Caitlin Walker

Background

Understanding the intricacies of a degree programme and its curriculum is difficult enough within a staff team, never mind then explaining it to students. How much thought do we ever really put into the whole package of experiences students are receiving rather than just our own modules?

As part of exploring Personal Development Planning (PDP) across the Sport Development programme we decided to gather the views of staff on the programme to see if we could agree on a common model, philosophy and message. This approach, called Metaphors at Work (Walker 2007), allows individuals and groups to explore their own thoughts and perceptions on a subject, in this case the degree programme, through the development of metaphors and their associated meaning. The process has a number of stages which we went through (documented below) with the overall objective being to get to a jointly shared view amongst staff.

Stage 1: Preparation work to enhance metaphorical thinking

The staff team were asked;

Thinking about the Sport Development Programme as a whole; modules levels & themes: The Sport Development Programme is like what?

Thinking about the students and the programme, currently the student experience of it is like what?

If the Sport Development Programme were working just the way you'd like it to it would be like what?

Stage 2: Individual coaching to develop and define the models

Each member of the team was coached individually to help them elicit and develop their metaphors and individual models of the programme, the student experience and the programme as they would like it to be. Each member of staff then drew their model of the programme onto paper working just the way they would like it and these were collated and shared between the team. Ten members of staff completed the process and their individual models were very diverse.

A team member comments, "My graphical model resulted in my personal thoughts about what I felt about the programme. This in itself forced me to question and reaffirm what I felt in order to describe and justify to others my feelings and thoughts. By doing this I now have more conviction, motivation and passion for what we are trying to do."

For one member of staff it was like a Greek Temple (the writing at the side of the images is the individual's written explanation of their model)

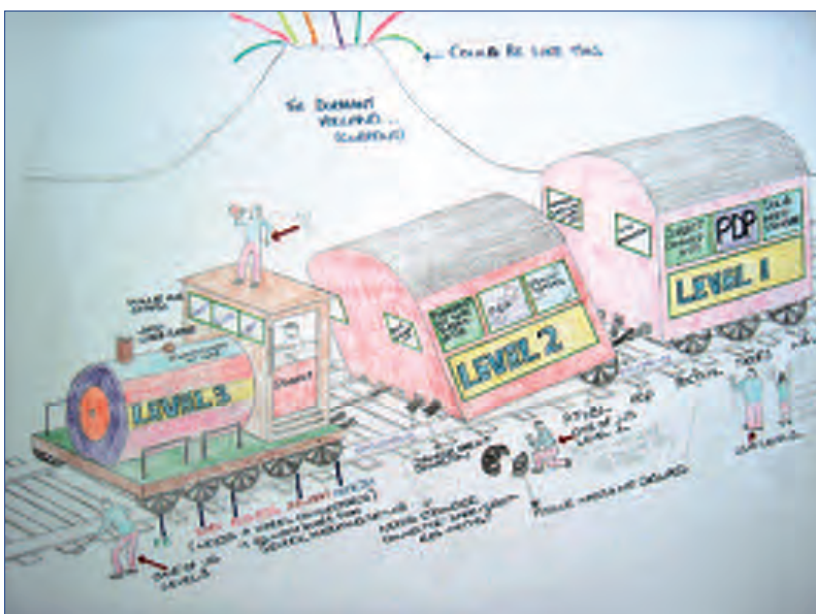
1 Temple one all students have similar experiences which are given to them by us.



3 Level 3 is a bigger space - the path doesn't just stop there, the journey the student is on goes from temple to temple to whatever they want to do next

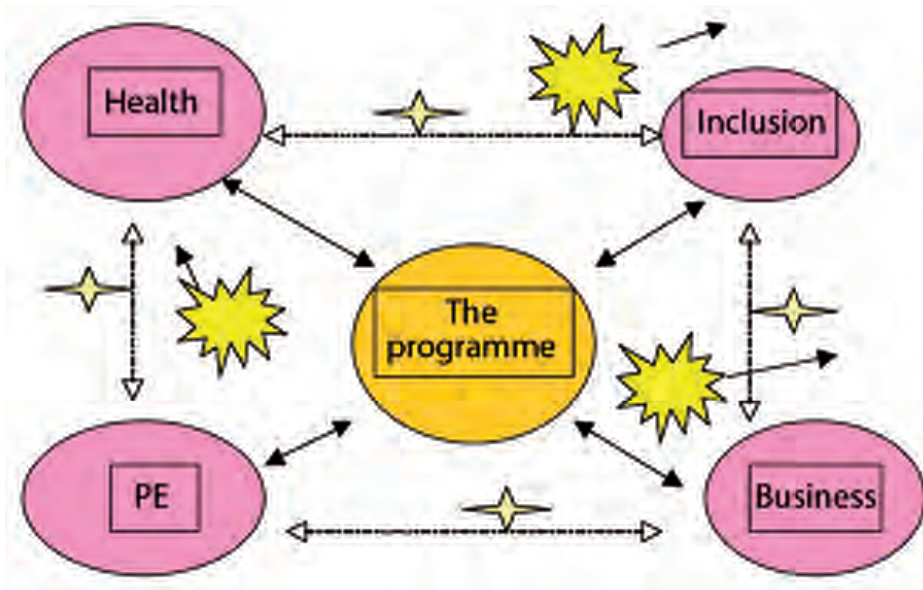
2 Then in temple 2 are your work based learning, option choices, core modules etc where you begin to make decisions about what you'll do at level 3.

For another it was like a train



The engine is the 3rd year student driving their own train - we cannot drive the trains for them (which I think some expect) we are all too busy fixing the points on the track - but if the train connectors and carriages are more secure, the driving of the train will be smoother and more defined in where they are going.

For a third it was like a solar system



Students sit on the sun and look at the planets, they play on all as tasters and decide where to set up home, the stars (staff) will shoot about interacting with the student, but the student will be in control of their own destiny and destination

Stage 3: Sharing and negotiating between the individual metaphoric models

Over the period of three months each person shared their model of the programme, using an approach called 'clean questions' (originated by David Grove), to develop their understanding of the similarities and differences that exist within the team.

One member of the team comments, "by discussing each other's models or perceptions, my own perceptions and interpretations of how others think or believe has been changed. Often what you thought someone felt was wrong or misinterpreted. This helped not only our understanding of the programme but of each other."

Stage 4: Negotiating a shared metaphor.

Once everybody had talked to each other, small groups worked to pull out the key concepts and then the whole group came together to agree a shared metaphor / model for the degree programme. This involved a lot of discussion and debate as we agreed to some of the points and discarded others. Out of this came the things that were really important to us as group of professionals which informed both the way we work to support our students and the eventual model we have produced.

"The process although not without its challenges, disagreements, and much soul searching has been tremendously useful. We now have a joint projection of what we perceive our model of the programme to be. There is still scope for different descriptions of the model i.e. We can still all explain it slightly differently (which is good) but that now there is a more consistent approach to what we perceive to be the "golden threads" running through our programme." (Team member)

Stage 5: Confirmation and communication

After much debate we agreed on a superstore model, where you go in through the front door and then follow the floor map as you put credits and experiences in your basket (Level 1), trolley (Level 2) or cart (Level 3). At the end of each floor there is a cash register that allowed you access to the lift to the next semester or level, with staff available on each floor to support and advise on the students' progress

We then wanted to make this into a physical building and contacted the University architecture department for support. We commissioned two of their Level 2 students to help, interpret, design and build the model. After a number of meetings they took our ideas and helped us mould them into something much more architectural. They created a very different type of building for us which was far better than anything we had envisaged in design, layout and functionality.



Each semester is represented by a floor in the building and is built as a drawer that can be removed. All the modules are cubes that are housed within each drawer and are colour coded based on whether they are core or options and themes run through the programme. The students can pick out the cubes and get the basic module details from them and arrange their own study path. Each level has World of Work (WoW) windows to represent the external environment and lifts take you to the next level with a helicopter launch pad on the roof for graduation as the students go on the next stage of the journey.

This physical model has had some really un-expected benefits for us beyond its original purpose. It has been used by staff with potential students and with groups of students choosing their options and deciding on their pathway through the programme. It has been used with individual students who not sure whether this is the degree for them. One student commented *"I can really see where I am going now, before I didn't get what you were going on about and using the model I have mapped my pathway through the whole degree, it's fantastic."*

Overall this has been a very interesting process to go through and the final group metaphor in its physical shape is the icing on the cake. The process allows for thinking, discussion, debate, understanding and the pulling together of a collective identity. If you would like more details about the process, to undertake something similar with your programme team or to have a look at the model please contact a member of the sport team or visit www.trainingattention.co.uk/

Sarah Nixon is a Principal Lecturer in the Centre for Sport, Dance and Outdoor Education and Leader of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

Caitlin Walker is Director of Training Attention and a Consultant to the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning