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Student-Generated Allegory for Doctoral Supervision: The Case of Maritime Metaphors

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This reflexive essay explores metaphors as conceptual tools in pursuing a doctorate. We ask, how can incorporating student-generated metaphors in student self-reflection and supervision language lead to more manageable and enjoyable doctoral work? It is argued in the essay that the use of research area-specific student-generated metaphors in supervision communication can contribute towards cultivating a more inclusive and supportive supervisor–supervisee relationship and promote the doctorate as a process of learning to reflect self-critically. Through an autoethnographic case study on the use of maritime metaphors in supervision communication, we highlight doctoral supervision as a collaborative activity where the adoption and development of research area-specific student-generated metaphors support the intensification of the importance of one's research project and a sense of situatedness in and belonging to a research community. This essay hopes to encourage metaphor use in doctoral training to foster a supervision culture that nurtures academic softness, ease of communication, and student well-being.

Keywords: academic softness, critical reflection, learning, research process

INTRODUCTION

Metaphors of doctoral education

As much more than linguistic tropes, metaphors mediate between language and humans' embodied existence and sense of self in the world, allowing for a heightened understanding and appreciation of those abstract aspects of our lived experience that would otherwise go unnoticed (Kövecses, 2015; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). When it comes to the importance of metaphors for understanding our place in the world, doctoral education is no exception. As researchers are increasingly expected to reflect on their situatedness concerning the social and political effects of research and knowledge production (Brodin et al., 2016, p. 172), the development of metaphors as conceptual tools for critical reflection on doctoral thesis work and supervision is equally essential (Hallonsten et al., 2024).

A well-established discourse on metaphors exists in the literature on doctoral supervision. In published research, the potential of metaphor use is often explored from the viewpoint of the supervisor–supervisee relationship or the research and learning process. As pertains to the former, Lee and Green (2009) argue in their analysis of the three central archetypal metaphors of supervision – *authorship*, *discipleship*, and *apprenticeship* – that supervision itself is a metaphor for the Enlightenment and the modern university, thereby highlighting the indispensability of supervision to the very existence of doctoral training today. In addition to Lee and Green's archetypes, more specific metaphors that are commonly used to capture the nature, complexity, and development of the roles involved in the supervisor–supervisee relationship include, for

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example, that of a kitchen team or wilderness guide (Bartlett & Mercer, 1999), the fiduciary–beneficiary (Mackinnon, 2004), the master-slave (Grant, 2008), the pupil-teacher (Avison et al., 2013), and the client–professional relationship (Hollertz, 2024). Although the archetypal metaphors identified by Lee and Green (2009) can undoubtedly serve as root metaphors for more detailed conceptualisations of the personal dimensions of knowledge production, just like the ones above, they are nevertheless aimed at offering tools for reflecting on the many roles of those involved in the supervisory relationship rather than the general process of obtaining a doctorate (see, also, Sammon et al., 2024; van Laren et al., 2014).

In discourses on the metaphorisation of the process of pursuing a doctorate rather than the roles of the involved parties, the genre-oriented metaphors of story and journey are often used to describe its challenges and rewards (e.g., Barry & Batty, 2016; Carter & Pitcher, 2010). However, such general processual metaphors have also been heavily criticised. In an attempt to nuance the journey metaphor, McCulloch (2013, p. 56), has argued that "the notion of journey implies a known start and a known destination, that the terrain to be covered can be mapped out in advance, and that the only real issue for the traveller is how much they would like to pay, which route they would like to follow, which mode of transport they would like to take, how much comfort would they like to experience whilst travelling, and how long they would like the trip to take." In place of such all-inclusive journeys, McCulloch then offers "quest" as an adventurous metaphor borrowed from the literary genre of the same name and aimed at better conveying the complexities and uncertainties, the nonlinear nature, the different roles of the multiple actors involved, as well as the emotional ups and downs of pursuing a doctorate.

Hughes and Tight (2013, p. 771), on the other hand, have argued that such genre-oriented metaphors tend to portray the successful completion of a doctorate as a matter of "strength of inner spirit" and "personal motivation", both of which speak "strongly to neo-liberal values of individualism [...] where resilience is the key." In arguing for a more realistic alternative, Hughes and Tight opt for the less dramatic "work" metaphor, drawing attention to the specificities and practicalities of working towards a doctorate academically and professionally.

We are less tempted to replace the journey metaphor, especially after reconsidering its affordances in a maritime setting, and we do so to highlight how a rethinking of commonly used and seemingly dead metaphors can lead to the creation of new metaphorical meanings. For example, Hans Blumenberg (1997) has observed that sea journeys differ significantly from land journeys. Whereas McCulloch's (2013) view of the rigidity of the journey is based on the practicalities of travelling on land, Blumenberg's journey takes place out in the sea where the traveller is immersed in a much more dynamic juxtaposition: the solid dry land versus the deep sea, or safety versus hazard, flotation, and floundering (Blumenberg, 1997, pp. 7, 10; see, also, Buhagiar, 2024). Compared to the beaten track on steady terrain, the metaphor of the sea journey requires the traveller to be more active and react to unpredictable conditions. Unlike a pre-mapped path on land, navigating the fluid and fluctuating watery environment can be seen as a metaphor for active problem-solving. Of course, a sea journey can be dangerous or even perilous (just think of the *Odyssey*), lead the sailor astray, or result in long periods with no wind to propel the ship, but it also evokes ideas of discovering completely new terrain. All this speaks to the power of not only maritime metaphors but also of further exploring allegorical meanings for describing, communicating, and reflecting on the risks, idiosyncrasies, and rewards of obtaining a doctorate.

Nevertheless, while the metaphors mentioned above can serve as starting points for reflecting on the process of working towards a doctorate on a general level and across disciplines, they offer very little in terms of understanding and communicating the idiosyncrasies of the research

process in specific fields of research or during different stages of pursuing a doctorate. Therefore, inspired by the abundance of maritime metaphors – strikingly absent in existing literature on the metaphors of doctoral supervision (for an exception, see Carter & Pitcher, 2010; Nehls, 2024) – and motivated to develop more precise use of metaphors in supervision language, what we offer in this essay is a case study on the use of student-generated research area-specific metaphors in reflecting on the process of obtaining a doctoral degree in maritime heritage studies.

Research design

The material for this case study derives from conversations during supervision meetings in 2023–2024 and one unstructured interview in the autumn of 2024 between the authors: a PhD candidate (the interviewee) and her co-supervisor (the interviewer). The PhD candidate's research concerns the use of maritime metaphors in cultural work and in exploring the therapeutic potential of maritime heritage in the context of creative participatory workshops (e.g., Vuori, 2024). Therefore, the background of both authors in maritime archaeology is important for understanding the focus of this essay on maritime metaphors. This field is deeply rooted in masculine and adventurous images of diving into wrecks with sophisticated technology and arriving at empiricist and functionalist interpretations of humans' relationship with water and the maritime environment (Gately & Benjamin, 2018; Ransley, 2005). In such an environment, creative research can be challenging, but it is precisely with the help of innovative methodologies that the field can be disentangled from its misappropriations. In terms of disciplinary reflection, metaphors provide tools for unpacking the history of the discipline and serve as starting places for reflecting on the processes of knowledge production and the situatedness of the researcher within a field.

The double hermeneutic – where the PhD student uses maritime metaphors in supervision meetings to reflect on her doctoral research on the uses of maritime metaphors in communicating the therapeutic affordances of maritime heritage – provides us with a setting for exploring the use of domain-specific student-generated metaphors in doctoral supervision (Ramsey-Wade & Cott, 2024). In this essay, we mainly concentrate on the usefulness of student-generated maritime metaphors for learning to reflect on the research process critically, but we will also touch on the development of a more inclusive and academically softer supervisor–supervisee relationship because, as evidenced by maritime metaphors, the two are connected concerns. On a related note, regarding our choice of research methodology, we connect with the tradition of autoethnography (Adams et al., 2015) and refer the reader to literature on its uses in educational research. In the context of higher education research, autoethnography is often highlighted as a means towards developing more reflexive and inclusive research education, for example, by including feminist, decolonial, and Indigenous perspectives (e.g., Anteliz et al., 2023; Nisa-Waller & Piercy, 2024; Sambrook, 2024).

Insofar as autoethnography provides a heightened sense of the researcher's situatedness in the world and an understanding of the linkages between self and society or research and its politics, autoethnography is also a call for more ethical research. We acknowledge the ethical implications of writing about and reflecting on our research supervision practice together and want to remain transparent about the relational aspects of such an endeavour (Edwards, 2021). In staying true to autoethnography as a method of promoting a more transparent and more just research culture, both authors declare full and informed consent when it comes to the identities and opinions exposed in this essay. Furthermore, we acknowledge any possible problems arising from the representativeness and generalisability of autoethnographic research results.

The examples discussed in this essay have allowed us to develop better supervision during our supervisory relationship over the previous two years, but they might have limited applicability for others. We discuss the challenges and limitations of metaphor use in doctoral supervision at the end of the essay, and in doing so, we hope to inspire the reader to explore metaphor use that serves their supervision needs.

What we do not offer in this essay is a detailed definition of thesis work, knowledge production, or the learning process, nor do we define reflection or reflexive practice as distinctly epistemological, social, or political or specifically confined in terms of time, depth, and content (c.f. Bolton & Delderfield, 2010; Machost & Stains, 2023). Instead, we adopt a sort of instrumental obscurity, a standpoint guided by the conviction that the abundance of metaphors and the denseness of language used to describe and reflect on the process of pursuing a doctorate – individually and socially – is "symptomatic of a space marked both by complexity and ambivalence, and by a peculiar and intense investment on the part of participants – academics, supervisors and students – evidence of an incitement to discourse around the relationships and practices of supervision that eludes easy categorisation" (Lee & Green, 2009, p. 617).

As to what we mean by metaphor, we do not make a clear distinction between metaphor, allegory, and analogy, and we use the terms interchangeably (c.f. Wearing, 2022). Nor do we discuss the importance of metaphors to reasoning and epistemology or imagination and fictioning as modes of thought helpful to doctoral work (c.f. Loewenberg, 1978). We follow the somewhat conventional view of conceptual metaphors having the comparative-contrastive capacity of bringing together two domains of knowledge: a source domain and a target domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In our case, the maritime environment provides metaphors connected to specific practices such as the sea journey (the source domain) which can be contrasted with the process of obtaining a doctorate (the target domain), resulting, for example, in potentially novel insights on how to tack the early stages of the doctoral research process. In other words, in belonging to two domains of knowledge, conceptual metaphors are not simply carriers of meaning but also function as heuristic tools for discovering similarities and differences between the domains of knowledge, leading to a heightened level of understanding that could not have been reached by studying either domain independently (Haynes, 1975). Therefore, metaphors connect to the research process in very pragmatic ways. By actively paying attention to the metaphors used in supervision situations and student self-reflection, we explore the deeper potential of metaphors in pursuing a doctorate and go beyond the use of metaphors in everyday language.

MARITIME METAPHORS FOR FLUID LEARNING ALLIANCES

Water is central to human existence. Therefore, it is not surprising that watery and maritime metaphors are extremely abundant in our used language. On the one hand, root metaphors such as flow and fluidity are central to human cognition and culture, pointing towards a kind of conceptual common ground for much of social sciences (Alonso-Población & Niehof, 2019; Bachelard, 1983; Costlow et al., 2017; Frank, 2022; Hillman, 2009; Omstedt, 2020; Peifer & Engeser, 2021; Tilley, 1999). On the other hand, the importance of maritime metaphors to human communication is exemplified by the finding by Okonski and Gibbs (2019) that, even when pushed toward a literal reading, people tend to interpret the word "wreck" through allegory. Okonski and Gibbs then contend that such "allegorical impulse," arguably shared by all humans, allows us to relate to the actions described in language in a bodily manner, resulting in a heightened sense of empathetic connection with others (c.f. Gibbs, 2011).

Regarding the research process, metaphors involving water are often used to understand and reflect on the process of knowledge production and, for example, when attempting to creatively imagine novel research topics and methodologies (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2021). Metaphors such as beachcombing, archipelago, island hopping, and drift can help imagine the multiplicity of methods relevant to research and education (Dening, 2002; Gates, 2010; Lawrenz & Huffman, 2002; Stratford et al., 2011). For instance, through the metaphor of archipelago, it is possible to understand the connections between seemingly different and contrasting approaches in interdisciplinary settings or mixed methods research, but archipelago, island hopping, and beachcombing also afford reflection on the research process as adventure or exploration as well as an appreciation of the detours and ultimate dead-ends in research and the learning process (Marila, 2019, pp. 105–106; see also Marila & Ilves, 2022, pp. 45–47). This is why we see metaphor use as important for "learning to reflect" rather than consider reflection a template for introspection (Tilley, 1999, p. 8). Therefore, incorporating metaphorical language can be beneficial in the early stages of the doctoral research process.

Because the process of writing a doctoral dissertation is often a doctoral student's first foray into independent research, considerable time is spent reflecting on how to navigate the work. As mentioned, the metaphors of journey, quest, and work are commonly used in conceptualising the research process, but they are not necessarily successful in communicating that there are very different types of academic work and styles of organising it (Tedder & Lawy, 2013). As a maritime alternative for reflecting on and communicating her stage on the learning journey, in one of our conversations, the PhD student brought up the metaphor of shoreline for positioning herself between subjective and emotional personal life on the one hand and objective and insensitive academic work on the other. As a mediator between life on land and life on water, the shoreline becomes a metaphor for liminality, allowing the student to reflect on how they are currently positioned between the familiar and the yet unknown:

> Where do I stand in relation to the shoreline: firmly on dry land or adrift in open water? Due to the academic intolerance of insecurity and playful wonderment, I sometimes feel that becoming an academic requires faking it, that you must pretend that you are suddenly an intellectual, a shark. That you know what you are doing, and that your journey will be successful.

Importantly, the same metaphors that have allowed the student to reflect on her academic career development and comfortability in becoming an academic (e.g., adopting the academic language or other social conventions) have also helped her to connect with the people she participates in her research. Part of the student's doctoral research concerns work with homeless people who often have little patience for academic jargon or interest in research in general. In connecting with her research subjects, the PhD student reports that the use of certain metaphors made her research aims understandable and relatable to the participants:

> Metaphors work because they connect vernacular language with that of academia. Metaphors simplify complexity. Metaphors link the poetic with the literal, which has made it possible for me to communicate my research interests and objectives with homeless people and other marginalised individuals.

One of the PhD student's participatory workshops with homeless people was designed around the theme of adopting a ballast stone. Ballast stones were used as balancing material in wooden

ships when they sailed with little or no cargo. Sometimes, ballast stones are found thousands of kilometres from their natural source, turning them into material metaphors for drifters with historical baggage. In a homeless shelter, participants were given a chance to meet and discuss in the company of ballast stones, adopt one if they so desired, and come back later and share their experiences of living with the stone. One of the participants adopted a stone, came back to another meeting, and was inspired to share his traumatic experiences of failed relationships and a history of living with an abusive father. After reflecting on spending time with a stone, the person admitted that, while his ballast stone had given him lots of support, it was ultimately neither big enough to represent his emotional baggage nor heavy enough to provide him with the needed balance.

These therapeutic affordances of metaphors lead us to ask, what might be the usefulness of similarly domain-specific metaphors in navigating the fault lines between supervision and therapy in a supervisor–supervisee relationship? The fittingness of the therapy metaphor in supervision contexts is questionable, and this is highlighted when comparing the relationship between supervisor and student as a "learning alliance" with that of the "therapeutic alliance" between a patient and a clinician (Halse & Malfroy, 2010, p. 83). Whereas therapy implies a pursuit of recovery from illness, the learning alliance is characterised by the practically rather different activity of protecting the supervisee's research interests (Halse & Malfroy, 2010, p. 83; Hollertz, 2024). As observed by our PhD student, the protection of interests is illuminated by the metaphor of the maritime pilot:

> Rather than that of the therapist, a more fitting metaphor for the supervisor's role is that of the maritime pilot. As a beginning researcher, the supervisee is entering unfamiliar waters, so they need help from a person who knows the local currents and hazards and can navigate the ship through the archipelago even under heavy wind or in a storm. The maritime pilot becomes especially important when the student receives a nasty peer review or other non-constructive feedback. That is when the maritime pilot can come to your aid and help you make sense of things.

The sentiment expressed in the above quote leads us to treat the maritime pilot style of supervision as a subcategory of academic softness. What we mean by academic softness in this context is a sort of sensitivity to the therapeutic affordances of metaphors, that metaphors are often connected to ease of speech and that sometimes it is preferable to use poetic or allegorical expressions instead of conventional academic language in research supervision communication. This is particularly important when the student's research-related ideas are still taking shape or when the trust-building process between the supervisor and the supervisee is still ongoing. Such use of metaphors can lead to a heightened sense of compassion, which in turn can be a relief to the student and thus increase the well-being of a student struggling with expectations of academic and scientific formality (Sullivan, 2024). In other words, metaphorical language contributes towards developing a support rather than a supervision system.

Important for understanding supervision as a support system is how similar reliance on metaphors is commonplace in clinical or arts-based therapy settings where metaphors are routinely used to convey ideas and emotions that would be difficult or impossible to verbalise using literal language (Borbely, 2004; Rizutto, 2001; Siegelman, 1993). Equally important to learning that research is a gradual process is the idea that metaphors are key to perceiving our whole lives as continuous, purposeful, and meaningful precisely because they allow us to connect two

seemingly unrelated concepts or systems of meaning (Landau, 2018). Because our rationality and sense of a meaningful and valuable life are to a large degree organised through metaphors (c.f. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Tilley, 1999), it is not surprising that metaphors are central to organising academic work as well as to developing a more supportive supervisor–supervisee relationship.

STUDENT-GENERATED METAPHORS FOR A MORE REFLEXIVE LEARNING PROCESS

In the beginning of a doctoral dissertation work, the journey ahead – when understood through the sea journey metaphor – is unknown. The student faces a vast, unfathomable body of fluidity, unknown depths, changing weather conditions and a vaguely discernible horizon, but what is exactly between the shoreline and the horizon remains unexplored. In a well-conducted and evolving dissertation supervision and research process, the doctoral candidate gains experience and confidence to take increasing responsibility. We can compare this process to navigating with a sextant. First, you position yourself vaguely with the aid of the sun. Then you use the stars to get more fixed points, which enables a more precise location:

> Metaphors are like the sun, rising and setting, you have a faint idea of the direction. If the supervisor is listening and capable of allegorical speech, he or she can help you move forward. In my experience, a metaphorical approach gives the mind room to organise the subject matter more organically and playfully. Metaphors have this heuristic function. They can help you to identify problems. Through metaphors, we can discover new levels of learning and understanding that would otherwise go unnoticed.

The heuristic function of metaphors to gain increasing levels of conceptual clarity and to make sense of a wealth of information (McCulloch, 2013) underscores the importance of developing domain-specific and student-generated metaphors. Ramsey-Wade and Cott (2024) report their development of positive experiences from working with the method of incorporating student-generated metaphors into supervision. Their process involves instructing doctoral students to prepare for supervision meetings by bringing metaphors that capture the current stage of their research project. These metaphors are then shared and discussed with the supervisor during the meeting, which gives freedom from rigid thinking and can lead to innovative and unexpected solutions to the student's challenges. According to student feedback reported by Ramsey-Wade and Cott (2024, p. 6), the method helped the students to manage the multiple stages of the research process and understand how their research was connected to their personal feelings. Another equally important finding was that incorporating student-generated metaphors in conversations made the supervisory relationship more inclusive, democratic, and culturally sensitive. Similar aspects came up during our meetings, as expressed in the following statement by the PhD student:

> In the early stages of my dissertation work, I experienced huge feelings of frustration, confusion, anger, and sadness. I had a co-supervisor who spoke 'academic', and I felt handicapped and inferior for not being able to communicate my research questions or hypotheses. I keep a process diary of my dissertation research where I have used many words like 'running aground' or 'feeling wrecked'. When I look back, I understand that I tried to force my ideas down to the level of 'proper' academic jargon. With a new co-supervisor, it was natural to speak 'metaphor', and suddenly, my research took a new direction. Now, after two years, the metaphors give a gentle and inspiring start to supervision sessions. If I run aground, we speak

> 'metaphor', and I get going again. This recurring cycle of abstractness and concreteness runs through the whole process, and it is exciting to see how ideas change form and character. If I become a member of a research team, I hope to find a project leader with an inclination for metaphorical thinking. I think it is even more important in group work. It gives room to thinking big, weird, and stupid, and a sense that everybody is seen and heard as equally valuable.

Similar reflexive affordances of participant-generated metaphors were reported by the PhD student from an autobiographical writing workshop that she organised by the sea for participants recovering from various mental health illnesses. Again, working with ballast stones and prompting her participants to generate maritime or sea-related metaphors that conveyed their emotional baggage, the PhD student reports that:

> The participants first exhausted the usual metaphors like harbour (safe, unadventurous), storm (personality), drift (lost), and lighthouse (guidance), but quickly turned to more specific ones that they felt better reflected their personal life history and current situation. Many of them used the metaphor of a seashell to communicate feelings of isolation and alienness. At the same time, some pointed out that the valuable pearl inside the shell is precisely the reason for the isolation. One participant used the mermaid metaphor to communicate that they may be a bit weird but have an interesting personality. What is striking here is that all participants felt that sea-related metaphors work much better than those derived from nature on land, such as trees and mushrooms, because sea-related metaphors are more abstract and fluid. They are like our subconsciousness, hidden and invisible, but still pointing towards something more concrete and specific.

In this participatory workshop context, the metaphors functioned not only as lifebuoys for addressing emotions or as starting points for autobiographical reflection in the group, but they also helped in communication between the researcher and the volunteer group. With these participants, it was important to interact understandably while giving room for their authentic and spontaneous perceptions instead of setting narrow or dictating frames. The above example shows that the same metaphor can express or reflect different subjective meanings. This highlights the heuristic function of metaphors. Instead of choosing or holding onto specific pre-decided meanings of a metaphor, it is important to let the metaphor suggest possible courses of action within the research process or possible connections between, for example, theory and data. In other words, what we propose is a type of faith in the power of metaphors to simultaneously offer a platform for a liberal exploration of ideas and their capacity for creating connections, both conceptual and social.

DISCUSSION

In this reflexive essay, we want to highlight the abundance and usefulness of maritime metaphors for doctoral supervision needs. As evidenced by our examples on the use of maritime metaphors during supervision meetings between the authors of this essay on the one hand and experiences of using maritime metaphors in participatory therapeutic workshops on the other, it is evident that the use of student-generated metaphors provides a foundation for the development of more inclusive communication in supervision settings and a platform for learning self-reflection during the doctoral research process.

As with participant-generated metaphors in the participatory workshop contexts, the adoption and development of student-generated metaphors point towards their capacity to foster

deeper levels of connection between a student's personal and academic life and a better ability to deal with the ambiguities of the research process. What the use of discipline-specific metaphors in particular could afford is the cultivation and intensification of a sense of importance and meaningfulness of pursuing a doctorate as a specific mode of knowledge production and learning. This, in turn, could lead to more accurate reflection on the doctoral student's situatedness and the social and political effects of their research. Additionally, incorporating student-generated metaphors can support the development of a more inclusive and culturally sensitive supervisor–supervisee relationship.

Naturally, there are limits or at least open questions to using student-generated metaphors in supervision. One set of questions is connected to people's ability to understand metaphors. Firstly, not everyone may share or experience the allegorical impulse. For example, individuals with autism spectrum disorder can be more prone to challenges in understanding metaphors (Kalandadze et al., 2022). Secondly, the meaning of metaphors can be highly dependent on an individual's life experiences, as was highlighted by the case of defining the character of the journey metaphor (Tedder & Lawy, 2013). Furthermore, despite their diagrammatical or visual nature, some metaphors are highly language-specific. This could create problems when the supervisor and supervisee do not share a native language or when the ambiguity of metaphors leads to challenges in communicating and understanding expectations (Bégin & Gérard, 2013). Correspondingly, metaphors can depend highly on cultural contexts and conventions (Kövecses, 2015). For example, part of the allure and impact of maritime metaphors is undoubtedly connected to – and therefore limited by – understandings of the mystical and romantic connotations of maritime environments, traditions, and professions. The same applies to how maritime metaphors, regardless of their capacity for eliciting positive feelings of fluidity and excitement, can also be daunting and disconcerting. This stems partly from the ubiquity of the wreck metaphor and partly from the colonial history of seafaring (Blumenberg, 1997).

We see these limitations and challenges as evidence of the need for further exploration and perpetual development of metaphors that fit the needs of a given doctoral student or a supervisor–supervisee relationship. What we hope to have shown with our example on the uses of research area-specific student-generated maritime metaphors is how the practice can support ways of redefining the conventional meanings of a metaphor. As a way forward, poetry, fiction, and bibliotherapy – where metaphors are used as an alternative way to express emotions and thoughts of subjective existence in this world – can offer tools for unpacking the historical baggage of metaphors on an individual and social level. Finding out what a metaphor means and what kind of historical processes it represents is the beginning of a learning and knowledge-making process, both as a personal and a disciplinary endeavour.

Another set of questions concerns the domain-specificity of student-generated metaphors. In this essay, we have aimed to highlight the use of metaphors derived from the doctoral candidate's field of research or, in other words, a source domain that is well known to the student. Since the student's doctoral research relies heavily on the use of maritime metaphors during participatory workshops, we acknowledge that our example – and the ensuing double hermeneutic of using in supervision settings metaphors sourced from a domain that is the topic of the student's doctoral research – presents a rather rare and in some sense idealised setting for exploring the potential of student-generated metaphors. This leads us to ask whether metaphors derived from the student's area of research are better and more accurate in providing tools for addressing and answering their supervision-related concerns than metaphors sourced from a domain of knowledge that the student is less familiar with.

In answering this question, we can, for instance, again compare maritime metaphors to dry alternatives. As expressed by the PhD student:

> I believe that the mind finds the most suitable metaphor to describe thoughts or an attempt at a thought, whether maritime or something else. However, if I consciously compare wet metaphors to dry ones, in many ways, the maritime environment offers metaphors that can deepen our understanding of the flow and vividness of thought. A tree, a mountain, or a factory all seem too rigid in comparison. In my case, maritime metaphors keep my focus on my research topic, orienting me towards active problem-solving. Metaphorising allows emotions, hesitations, inaccuracies, and intuitions to flourish, and as my research is participatory, the material I deal with is also emotional and highly subjective. Then, at some point, you will just have to condense your ideas into something publishable. For example, we had a supervision session where I tried to verbalise the big picture of my dissertation. We started toying with depth because I felt far out in too deep waters. However, instead of attempting to reach shallower waters, we ended up with the notion that, indeed, article by article, my research evolved to deal with deeper levels of participatory engagement with maritime cultural heritage. With the help of this newly discovered meaning of depth, it was easier to see the connections between the individual dissertation articles.

What these reflections point to is that more crucial than using metaphors derived from a specific domain of knowledge is what the metaphors do. In this case, spending time with and reworking the depth metaphor provided practical and at least tentatively satisfactory solutions to the challenge at hand. However, even if metaphors native to the watery environment offer the sort of plasticity needed for exploring the intricacies of intellectual processes or the nature of thinking in general, when looking at the applicability of domain-specific metaphors across the sciences, for example, between natural sciences and the humanities, the answer is more complex:

> The language of research varies greatly. In some disciplines, it is more numerical, quantitative, and technical. Yet, there is a long tradition in the natural sciences to approach phenomena through poetry and allegory. I would imagine that using metaphors in fields of research where it does not feel natural or necessary can also lead to acquiring new perspectives. Metaphorising – wet or dry – can activate the brain in unexpected ways, enabling new thoughts, observations, and forms of knowledge-making.

These reflections point towards not only that metaphors can be particularly discipline-specific (Wuppuluri & Grayling, 2022) but also that the use of metaphors may not come naturally in all research fields. Another implication is that, depending on the field of study and the corresponding research culture, the usefulness of metaphors may differ at different stages of the research and learning process. It can diminish towards the end of the doctoral research process as the student acquires skills to cope with the challenges of their work tacitly or when trust and good communication have been established in the supervisor–supervisee relationship. Alternatively, metaphor use may become increasingly important towards the end of the research process, for example, when communicating research results to non-expert audiences. In any case, we see that the question of discipline-specificity speaks to the need to explore further the potential of student-generated metaphors in thesis and supervision work.

In conclusion, the use of student-generated metaphors in reflecting on thesis work and the learning process shows great promise. These promises should be explored through comparative qualitative research on the long-term effects and advantages of incorporating student-generated

metaphors in supervision throughout the doctoral research process across different disciplines in the sciences and humanities. The role of metaphors in this respect could be documented and demonstrated by including autobiographical and autoethnographic writing and other creative methods in the learning process since these practices might, in turn, help us to identify those metaphors – maritime or not – that are crucial to promoting reflexivity, but they might also afford additional avenues for exploring the indispensability of metaphors to human understanding. In general, then, we see metaphor use in doctoral training as a way towards developing a supervision culture that nurtures academic softness, ease of communication, and student well-being.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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