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Thinking otherwise: Metaphor as framing, methodology, epistemology, and pedagogy in a time of polycrisis

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Abstract

In a time of polycrisis, researchers in theatre and performance education must reconsider how inquiry can respond to uncertainty, contradiction, and interdependence. This paper argues that metaphor is not decorative language but a cognitive and practice-based structuring principle that shapes research design, interpretation, representation, and pedagogy. Using a collaborative, self-reflexive, and retrospective longitudinal inquiry into our own scholarship as theatre educators, researchers, and practitioners, we trace how metaphor operates across four interrelated domains: as framing device, extended methodological architecture, epistemological orientation, and pedagogical strategy. Conceptual Metaphor Theory guides our interpretation of recurring metaphors as mappings that foreground particular relations and ways of knowing. We show how metaphor creates space for embodied, affective, and relational knowledge by situating ideas within lived experience. In theatre and performance education, metaphor therefore offers a way of thinking otherwise that is both methodologically rigorous and responsive to the conditions of polycrisis.

Keywords: arts-based research, metaphor, polycrisis, self-reflexive inquiry, theatre and performance education

Introduction: Thinking otherwise through metaphor in a time of polycrisis

This paper arose from our participation in the Self-Reflexive and Arts-Based Methodologies Special Interest Group at the November 2025 South African Educational Research Association (SAERA) conference. Its theme, "Mapping Metaphors, Making Meaning," made visible the methodological labour that metaphor had long performed, often tacitly, in our research.

This recognition matters because educational research now takes place amid the intensifying complexity of a polycrisis. For the purposes of this paper, polycrisis refers to interacting ecological, political, social, economic, and epistemic disruptions whose effects intensify one another and cannot be adequately understood in isolation. Educational institutions are shaped by these pressures, and in such a context, research approaches that depend on certainty, straightforward causality, or stable categories are often insufficient (Tooze, 2022). We suggest that metaphor offers one way of thinking otherwise within this condition of entangled educational and social disruption.

This collaborative self-study examines our theatre and performance education scholarship and practice. In our work, we use the term "drama" for participatory and pedagogical processes of role, improvisation, and enactment, and "theatre" for the framed, crafted, and performed forms through which these processes become public. As higher education drama and theatre educators, artists, and self-reflexive researchers, we work within a discipline structured by substitution, framing, and doubleness: a stage stands for a world, an actor for a character, and a gesture for an emotional universe. This constitutive "as if" makes metaphor central to the discipline rather than an analytical device. Dramatic meaning is relational, embodied, and depends on audiences dwelling in that doubleness. The discipline thus trains us to move between literal and symbolic registers, attend to embodiment and relation, and treat uncertainty as productive.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory provides the paper's primary theoretical framework (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). It defines metaphor as systematic mapping between source and target domains through which abstract experience is understood in embodied and relational terms. Metaphor therefore shapes thought and action, not only language, and can bring feeling, memory, tacit knowledge, and complex relations into communicable form within arts-based, practice-based, and self-reflexive inquiry (Barone & Eisner, 2012). We use recurring source domains across framing, methodology, epistemology, and pedagogy, asking what each metaphor foregrounds or obscures and how it structures relations among experience, research practice, and educational meaning. The SAERA conversation prompted us to ask how metaphor worked across our scholarship: which metaphors recurred, where they operated, what forms of understanding they enabled, and what knowledge they legitimised. These wonderings led to our central question: "How has metaphor functioned across our theatre and performance education scholarship and practice as framing device, methodological architecture, epistemological orientation and pedagogical strategy, and what does this enable in a time of polycrisis?"

Metaphor does not solve polycrisis, but offers a disciplined way to navigate uncertainty, institutional disruption, contested knowledge, and collective vulnerability. It helps researchers stay with complexity, articulate tacit knowledge, connect apparently separate domains, and keep contradiction visible. Such responsiveness and imagination are not alternatives to rigour but forms of rigour suited to the worlds under study.

Methodological frame: A collaborative, self-reflexive, retrospective, longitudinal inquiry

This collaborative self-study adopts a self-reflexive, retrospective, and longitudinal design informed by arts-based and practice-based research. Conceptual Metaphor Theory supplies the theoretical frame, while self-study provides the methodological frame, treating our practice as a site of knowledge production and requiring reflexive accountability (LaBoskey, 2004; Samaras, 2011). Rather than seeking positivist generalisation, the inquiry makes visible the intellectual and creative habits shaping our research over time. Our corpus comprises traces of our teaching, making, research, and writing: journal articles, book chapters, conference papers and presentations, pedagogical artefacts, reflexive notes, and the recorded discussions prompting this paper. Viewed longitudinally, these materials reveal recurring metaphor clusters, their mutations and the continuities and shifts that a single study would not show.

Because the inquiry concerns our own practice, reflexivity is essential. Self-study is neither merely confessional nor autobiographical; it makes visible the assumptions and positions through which knowledge is produced (LaBoskey, 2004; Samaras, 2011). Our analysis developed dialogically through spoken reflection, mutual questioning, and testing language against experience. Critical friendship therefore formed both part of the corpus and a means of testing interpretation. We also used generative AI as a critical friend. ChatGPT produced a working draft from transcripts of our analytical conversations and rough notes, after which we discussed, revised, and recursively edited the text, using AI finally for copy-editing and word-count reduction. Engaging AI dialogically added layers of meaning to our analysis, but AI did not select the corpus, determine the four domains, or produce the interpretations; these decisions remained with the authors.

The corpus was assembled iteratively, beginning with work visibly organised by metaphor and expanding to studies in which metaphor shaped analysis, creative-research pedagogy, or the mediation of research, performance, and text through media and objects. This process resembled tracing a pattern through woven material rather than extracting data from a fixed archive. Analysis was interpretive and thematic. We read texts, objects, memories, and theoretical concepts through one another, tracing recurrent metaphors and the work they performed, while moving between close reading and cross-study reflection. Four interrelated domains emerged: metaphor as framing device, methodological architecture and analytical lens, epistemological orientation, and pedagogical strategy. These are porous rather than sealed categories, and metaphors may operate across and migrate between them.

Our methodology is also shaped by recurrent theatre and performance processes—rehearsal, improvisation, embodiment, responsiveness, and the crafting of form—which orient us toward relation, incompleteness, and emergence. The method therefore enacts the argument; like metaphor, it moves between domains and remains open to the unexpected. What follows then, is not an inventory of metaphors but traces how metaphor has enabled us to research otherwise.

Metaphor as framing device: Titles as conceptual, affective, and dramaturgical entry points

Across our theatre and performance education work, metaphor often first appears in titles, which act as thresholds and tonal cues rather than neutral labels. In polycrisis, images such as anchors, maps, tightropes, repair, and collective song can hold instability, interdependence, and contradiction before analysis begins. Like a performance's opening image, a metaphorical title acts dramaturgically, establishing the conceptual and affective frame through which the inquiry becomes thinkable.

Consider "Dancing With Others" (van der Walt & Meskin, 2023). At one level, the title points to collaboration and movement. Yet more importantly, it frames critical friendship as dynamic, embodied, responsive, and iterative. Dance is not static. It requires attunement to rhythm, space, timing, relation, and the movements of others. Through this title, critical friendship (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009) is displaced from the language of abstract collegiality and reframed as a creative, embodied practice. The title thus does more than decorate the article. It establishes the conceptual field within which the study can understand collaboration as motion, reciprocity, risk, and mutual responsiveness.

Similarly, in "Looking for Anchors" (Meskin & van der Walt, 2022), the title situates the study within instability. One does not look for anchors unless one is already drifting, navigating uncertainty, or facing rough conditions. In the paper itself, written in relation to experiences of teaching during COVID, the anchor becomes both metaphor and method: a figure for the stabilising resources of poetic inquiry and for the ways creative practice helped us hold ourselves within the disorientation of pandemic pedagogy. Readers are therefore invited from the outset to think not simply about technique, but about what provisional steadiness might look like in turbulent times.

"Knowing in Our Bones" (Meskin & van der Walt, 2018) offers another example of framing through metaphor. Knowing "in the bones" has become one of the most resonant phrases in our shared vocabulary because it names a visceral, embodied, tacit knowledge that is difficult to legitimise within academic discourse. The title immediately indicates that the article will not privilege detached cognition alone. It points toward interiority, embodiment, memory, and forms of understanding that are lived before they are theorised. In doing so, it contests hierarchies that position artistic or embodied knowing as secondary to explicitly propositional knowledge.

In "Singing the Songs of Freedom" (Coetzee et al., 2014), the echo of the Bob Marley (1980) lyric is deliberately dissonant against stories of war and collective trauma. The title holds violence and liberation, memory and hope, and solo voice and collaborative polyphony together. It therefore compresses the chapter's theatre-making inquiry, becoming a way of thinking about stories of war, memory, collaboration, and the possibility of peace without resolution.

Knitting, too, has been a particularly generative metaphorical frame in our work. In our SAERA presentation, the title "Strung Along" (van der Walt & Meskin, 2025) initially suggests continuation, being pulled, and vulnerability. Once connected to the sustained knitting vocabulary used in the study, however, it opens a rich conceptual field: tension, thread, patience, repetition, pattern, error, unravelling, repair, and gradual construction. As a title, it helps readers imagine knowledge as something assembled over time through touch, craft, and revision rather than as a fixed object waiting to be discovered.

The playfulness of "Academics (Un)Anonymous" (van der Walt & Meskin, 2024) has a serious framing function. By echoing Alcoholics Anonymous, it establishes an extended metaphorical world that evokes confession, dependence, support, and the refusal of anonymity. The altered term "(un)anonymous" suggests a refusal of invisibility and a claiming of situated identity, especially within tensions between creative practice and academic institutional norms. The title therefore announces that the study will explore academic identity not through detached description but through a metaphorical structure that exposes affective tensions and institutional pressures.

Other titles across our work do similar things in different registers. "Holding the Mirror up to Nature" (Meskin & van der Walt, 2024) draws on theatricality while also suggesting reflection, mimesis, distortion, and layered seeing. "The Director's 'I'" (Meskin & van der Walt, 2014) leverages a pun to bring subjectivity and perception into productive tension. "Frontlines: Cartographies in/as/of Action" (Meskin & van der Walt, 2010) and "Cartographies of Becoming" (Meskin & van der Walt, 2026) frame research as spatial, processual, and ongoing rather than fixed. "The Artists' Tightrope" (van der Walt & Meskin, 2022) and "To Boldly Go . . ." (Meskin & van der Walt, 2025) invoke balance, risk, traversal, and futurity. "*Ibhodwe*—Stirring the Pot" (van der Walt et al., in press) uses the pot and recipe not only as a memorable image, but as a frame for multilingual, polyvocal devising methodology. Across these examples, the title functions as a dramaturgical hook (Kiely, 2016), positioning the reader conceptually and affectively before the argument unfolds

These titles foreground relation, process, embodiment, and tension, making associative thinking part of the inquiry. As methodological acts, they signal what matters and how the work should be encountered. Titles invoking dance, anchors, songs, fabric, maps, cooking, balance, or bones are especially valuable in arts-based and self-reflexive research because they frame complex experiences—collaboration, tacit artistry, pedagogical uncertainty, and identity formation—as interpretive encounters rather than neutral reports.

Metaphor as methodological architecture and analytical lens

If titles are thresholds, many of our studies go much further: metaphor does not remain at the edge of the work but becomes its methodological architecture. It shapes data generation, interpretation, representation, and the movement of the paper itself. "Academics (Un)Anonymous" (van der Walt & Meskin, 2024) was structured through the extended metaphor of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting rather than merely borrowing its language. The form enabled confession, dialogue, vulnerability, and collective recognition while exploring institutional pressures that divide academic, educational, artistic and research identities. The unexpected arrival of the character Stanislavski (a key figure in theatre history) created a meta-metaphor—theatre within recovery—through which dependence on academic norms and the uneasy relation between creative and scholarly identities could be examined. The sustained metaphor made analysis occur within tension and irony, enacting rather than merely describing the instability under investigation.

"Holding the Mirror up to Nature" (Meskin & van der Walt, 2024) used playwriting and dramaturgical form to generate and represent data. The data-play (Meskin, 2021) reflected higher education performance experiences through the layered positions of writer, participant, reader, audience, researcher, and character. The mirror therefore conceptualised reflection as perspectival and potentially distorted, enabling the study to theorise how dramaturgical representation produces multiple knowledges.

In "Dancing With Others" (van der Walt & Meskin, 2023), metaphor again becomes method. The paper explored critical friendship as a form of creative collaboration, mapping the dynamics of friendship against a framework for creative collaboration (van der Walt, 2018). To describe such work through the metaphor of dance is already to shift analytic emphasis. Dance foregrounds movement, embodiment, timing, mutual responsiveness, and iterative process. It suggests that critical friendship is not merely a static supportive relationship but a practice of co-composition in which each participant responds to the other, to context, and to the evolving work.

"We're Completely the Same Kind of Lunatic" (van der Walt & Meskin, 2020) makes the infrastructural role of metaphor especially tangible. The proposed critical friendship toolbox was materialised through object inquiry—a teapot, wine, chocolate biscuits, and maps—where each object is literal and more than literal. Tea stands for hospitality, shared time, and the social conditions of thinking together (John-Steiner, 2000). The map represents navigation through confusion. The wine stands for release, risk, and the loosening of thought that collaboration can invite. Here object inquiry becomes metaphorical method. Similarly, in "Shoes, Suitcases, Stones" (Meskin et al., 2017), objects functioned as mnemonic and material devices. They did not cease to be literal; rather, they exceeded literalness, activating memory, affect, and historical association. In this way, the object became a compressed image able to carry experiences otherwise difficult to hold.

"Looking for Anchors" (Meskin & van der Walt, 2022) likewise demonstrates how metaphor structures method. The anchor was not merely a title image; poetry itself became the anchoring process. By writing separately and then bringing the work together, the study enacted both solitude and dialogue, drift and connection. The metaphor enabled the analysis to move beneath surface description and attend to the fear, isolation, resilience, and creative persistence of that time. The study thus shows how metaphor can operate as both method and mode of analysis simultaneously.

"Strung Along" (van der Walt & Meskin, 2026) offers one of the clearest examples of sustained metaphorical methodology. In this paper, knitting terminology was used not only in the title but across the sectional structure and argument. Concepts such as casting on, checking tension, and casting off provided a through-line for discussing pedagogy and the cultivation of creative research capacity. Knitting as method foregrounds slowness, repetition, error, and repair, all-important to learning. Through that structure, pedagogical work becomes legible as craft rather than mechanical transmission.

Other projects extend this methodological pattern further. In "*Ibhodwe*—Stirring the Pot" (van der Walt et al., in press), the very act of stirring performs the argument that theatre-making is an additive, processual, relational practice. The use of an actual recipe for practice at the end of the paper extends the argument, translating methodology into a form that can hold sequence, improvisation, and combination. In the cartographic papers, maps and borderlines become analytic tools for thinking about practice, process, and identity. In "The Artists' Tightrope" (van der Walt & Meskin, 2022) and "To Boldly Go . . . " (Meskin & van der Walt, 2025), balance and venturing into new space explore precarity and possibility. These works share a refusal to treat metaphor as a simple analogy. Instead, metaphor functions as an internal logic that holds the study together, operating like the spine Richardson (1994, p. 519) describes: "it bears weight, permits movement, is buried beneath the surface, and links parts together in a functional, coherent whole"—organising complexity without over-simplifying it.

Metaphor supports lateral rigour: disciplined comparison through resonance, contrast, and recurrence rather than unstructured association. Sustained metaphors must carry conceptual weight and remain generative; and when they do, they provide methodological architecture suited to identity, embodiment, pedagogy, collaboration, and practice-based knowing. In relation to polycrisis, this architecture connects fragmented experiences across personal, institutional, and social scales while allowing contradictory interpretations to remain visible.

Metaphor as epistemology: Knowing through multiplicity, embodiment, and relation

Beyond framing and method, metaphor in our work functions as epistemology, moving the discussion beyond questions of style or procedure and into the terrain of what counts as knowledge, how knowledge is produced, and whose ways of knowing are legitimised. To think metaphorically is to accept that one thing may be understood through another, that knowledge may emerge through relation rather than reduction, and that understanding can be layered rather

than singular. Such an orientation sits uneasily with traditions that privilege linearity, detachment, and explicit propositional clarity. Yet it is profoundly productive for arts-based, practice-based, and self-reflexive inquiry.

"Knowing in Our Bones" (Meskin & van der Walt, 2018) is central here. The metaphor names a kind of knowledge that is often difficult to theorise because it is not easily separable into an abstract concept. It is visceral, accumulated, embodied, and often tacit. Artists, educators, and makers often work from such knowledge; they know when a moment is right, when a performance breathes, when a pedagogical gesture lands, when a piece is unresolved, when something is ethically askew. Yet, this can be difficult to articulate within academic discourse because it is not always conscious, fully verbal, or easily measurable. These knowledges may later be analysed and articulated, but they are not reducible to explicit rules. The metaphor of bones gives such knowing a conceptual body. Metaphor provides a bridge: One cannot literally know in one's bones, but the metaphor gives form to the lived experience of internalised knowledge. It makes the felt thinkable. In doing so, it grants epistemic dignity to what might otherwise be dismissed as intuition or mystery. It refuses the assumption that only what can be immediately verbalised is intellectually legitimate (Conquergood, 2002). This matters because our work repeatedly moves at the edge of what can be straightforwardly stated. Critical friendship, artistic decision-making, collaborative trust, pedagogical risk, rehearsal knowledge, and affective memory are not reducible to simple causal propositions. They are emergent, embodied, and relational. Metaphor does not simplify them; it offers a way of holding their complexity.

"The Director's 'I'" (Meskin & van der Walt, 2014) makes a related point from another angle. The paper's play on "I" and "eye" allowed us to examine dialogically how self-study in artistic practice involves both subjectivity and perspective, being and seeing, insider and observer. Here, metaphor opens a way of thinking relationally about the self—not as a fixed interior essence, but as a position continually mediated by what it can see and by how it is seen. Knowledge does not arise from a singular, stable vantage point; it emerges through layered acts of perception, dialogue, reflexivity, and representation.

The papers that reference cartography extend this epistemological work. Mapping is never neutral. A map selects, marks, scales, omits, frames, and orders. To think of practice through cartography is therefore to understand that knowledge is positioned and provisional, and to recognise that borders are made rather than given. This has important implications for our understanding of relations between the arts and theory, practice and research, teaching and making. When borderlines are understood as constructed and porous, the seemingly stable divisions that organise academic life become open to critique. Metaphor does not simply describe those divisions; it helps unmake them by showing their contingency. Knowledge, in this view, is navigational rather than absolute. It is made through movement, crossing, reorientation, and remapping.

Metaphor also aligns strongly with embodiment. Drama practice constantly reminds us that knowledge is not only cerebral. Gesture, rhythm, timing, posture, space, breath, and sensation are all forms of thinking. Performance is semiotic and sensorial at once. Boal's (1995) notion

of metaxis is apt here because it names the capacity to inhabit more than one reality simultaneously. That condition is foundational to drama, but it is also epistemologically important for research. It permits doubleness: being both participant and observer, self and other, maker and analyst.

The object-based studies also reveal how metaphor supports epistemologies of materiality and memory. Shoes, suitcases, stones, maps, teapots, and other objects become sites where knowledge is condensed and activated. They show that understanding does not reside only in abstract language or detached cognition. It can be carried materially, sensed through touch, association, habit, and atmosphere. Metaphor is the mechanism that enables this movement from thing to significance without erasing the thingness of the thing.

This epistemological role of metaphor is especially important in a time of polycrisis, a condition that resists simplification. It demands forms of thinking able to hold simultaneity, contradiction, layered causality, and interdependence. Metaphor is well suited to this because it is inherently multi-layered, permitting several meanings to coexist, overlap, and remain in tension. An anchor can signify stability and weight, safety, and immobility. A map can orient and constrain. A song can carry memory, resistance, mourning, and hope. A tightrope can suggest danger, discipline, spectacle, and precision.

At the same time, metaphor humanises research, placing thinking in relation to lived experience. To know through anchoring, mapping, dancing, knitting, cooking, or balancing is to know through embodied and recognisable processes rather than through abstraction alone. This does not make research less serious; it makes it more accountable to the realities of human practice. It also has ethical implications. An epistemology grounded in metaphor tends to foreground relation and care because it acknowledges that knowledge is situated, felt, and co-produced. In this respect, metaphor aligns with broader calls for affirmative, relational, and ethically responsive approaches to inquiry (Braidotti, 2013).

There is also a temporal dimension. Metaphorical epistemologies often understand knowledge as becoming rather than arrival. Knitting happens row by row. Cartographies are revised. Recipes are adapted. Songs are learned and sung collectively. Tightropes are crossed moment by moment. These metaphors position knowledge as ongoing, provisional, and processual. This is crucial for self-study and arts-based research, where insight often emerges through repetition, rehearsal, iteration, return, and re-seeing.

To say that metaphor is epistemology, then, is to say that it structures not only how we present knowledge, but what kinds of knowing become possible. It legitimises the visceral and the tacit, supports plural understandings rather than singular explanatory claims, and brings cognition into relation with embodiment and feeling. In our work, metaphor has repeatedly allowed us to theorise from within practice rather than against it. That capacity is one of its most powerful contributions.

Metaphor in pedagogy: Drama, metaxis, and the mediation of learning

Metaphor is not only a scholarly strategy in our work; it is a pedagogical condition. The pedagogical examples discussed below arise from our theatre and performance education practice in higher education. Drama itself is inherently metaphorical. The actor stands in for the character, the stage for the world, the prop for a larger symbolic economy, the action for a set of social and emotional relations. This reinforces the pedagogical usefulness of metaxis (Boal, 1995)—it captures the simultaneous inhabiting of the real and the imagined, the actual and the represented. This doubleness makes metaphor not an optional tool but a signature feature of the discipline.

This matters pedagogically because it shapes how students learn to think. When students work in drama, they are constantly required to translate between registers: concrete and abstract, literal and symbolic, personal and collective, present and imagined. They learn that meaning can be carried through image, gesture, object, rhythm, and spatial relation. They also learn that interpretation is active. One must decide how a prop will function, what a scene stands for, how an audience may read a sign, or what emotional and political resonances a performance image might hold. These are deeply metaphorical operations, even when they are not named as such.

Our pedagogical work with Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (Meskin & van der Walt, 2007) provides a vivid example. In that project, students engaged Shakespeare not only through conventional literary analysis but through mediating devices such as a crime scene investigation via the TV show *CSI*, a courtroom drama, television talk-show formats, board games, and audience participation. These were not gimmicks; they were metaphorical and theatrical strategies that enabled students to encounter a canonical text through forms closer to their own cultural frames. *CSI* had nothing literally to do with Shakespeare's play, but when placed in relation it opened new ways of thinking about motive, culpability, evidence, and interpretation. The trial format reconfigured questions of guilt and responsibility. The talk-show format gave voice to characters otherwise marginalised. The audience's role as jury and participant further complicated the meaning-making process.

We see similar processes in our teaching of research more broadly. Students often arrive with a narrow understanding of research as rigid, linear, and disembodied. Working metaphorically helps to shift that perception. When students create rituals, invent languages, devise performances, or render abstract ideas symbolically, research becomes something they can make, test, reflect on, and revise (Meskin & van der Walt, in press). This is especially important in creative disciplines, where students may feel that their artistic sensibilities are unwelcome in academic inquiry. The phrase we have often used in our research pedagogy—"use what you know and who you are"—becomes meaningful here. Metaphor allows the creative within the rational, and the affective within the cognitive, to enter the research frame without apology.

In our broader pedagogy, metaphor also enables students to locate themselves within knowledge. The work on invented language and ritual is important here. A ritual is already symbolic action; it carries meanings beyond its immediate gestures. An invented language foregrounds that meaning is made, negotiated, and embodied rather than simply given. When students create such forms, they encounter research as an act of translation and invention. They begin to see that knowledge can be generated through performative, visual, and embodied processes, not only through expository prose. This does not negate academic writing; it enriches the paths through which students arrive at it.

"Strung Along" (van der Walt & Meskin, 2026) speaks directly to this concern. By using knitting as an extended metaphor for developing creative research capacity, the paper conceptualises learning as processual craft. Students must cast on, choose materials, manage tension, learn patterns, correct mistakes, and eventually cast off. The metaphor honours slowness, repetition, frustration, and support. Rather than positioning inquiry as instant mastery, it presents it as a crafted practice developed over time.

Pedagogically, metaphor functions as a vital tool for engaging complexity, particularly within a context of polycrisis that places increasing pressure on education to move beyond the transmission of stable content. Students are confronted with entangled, affectively charged problems that resist straightforward solutions, requiring them to think with contradiction, uncertainty, and multiple perspectives. Metaphor supports this mode of learning precisely because it is inherently multilayered: it invites the holding of more than one idea at once and is never exhausted by a single meaning. Instead, it opens space for interpretation, contestation, layering, and relational thinking. To work with metaphor, then, is to cultivate non-linear thought, fostering students' capacity for complexity thinking, self-awareness, and creative problem-solving, while also enabling a greater tolerance for ambiguity and a heightened sensitivity to connections across domains.

There is an ethical dimension too. Metaphorical pedagogy often foregrounds voice, relation, and collaborative meaning-making. In the *Macbeth* project (Meskin & van der Walt, 2007), the collective and participatory structures mattered. In "Singing the Songs of Freedom" (Coetzee et al., 2014), the notion of singing together rather than alone became central to thinking about collaboration, memory, and peace. In the critical friendship work (van der Walt & Meskin, 2020), tea, wine, and maps materialised the relational conditions under which collaborative thinking becomes possible. These examples suggest that metaphor in pedagogy can help build communities of inquiry rather than merely transmit information.

Theatre and performance pedagogy is therefore one of the clearest places where the argument becomes socially visible. Metaphor helps students interpret texts, make performances, analyse experience, and understand creative research as relational and embodied. To teach through metaphor, then, is not simply to illustrate difficult concepts. It is to invite students into forms of thinking that need not be severed from imagination to be rigorous.

What metaphor enables in a time of polycrisis

The overarching question is how metaphor has functioned across the four interrelated domains and what this enables in a time of polycrisis. Looking across these studies, what becomes most striking is not only the frequency with which metaphor appears, but the kinds of work it consistently performs. Certain patterns are clear. Metaphor creates conceptual movement. It helps us navigate transitions between personal experience and scholarly analysis, between material object and conceptual insight, between pedagogy and research, and between embodied practice and theoretical articulation. It allows us to dwell in the in-between space of these positionalities and also enables compression. A single figure—map, anchor, dance, toolbox, mirror, song, thread—can hold multiple layers of meaning at once, allowing complexity to remain visible rather than stripped away.

This is particularly significant in the context of polycrisis, which names not one crisis but the entanglement of many. It resists approaches that isolate variables too quickly or assume that one explanatory frame will suffice. Metaphor does not solve this difficulty, but it offers a way of staying with it. Because metaphor is multi-directional, relational, and layered, it can register complexity without being paralysed by it. It can hold the cognitive and the affective, the individual and the social, the material and the symbolic, and the present and the historical. In this sense, metaphor helps research become more commensurate with the worlds it studies.

Another pattern is that metaphor repeatedly assists in making the implicit explicit. So much of arts-based and pedagogical practice depends on tacit judgement, embodied memory, atmosphere, timing, and relational sensitivity. These are often difficult to legitimise in academic discourse because they do not present themselves immediately as codifiable knowledge. Metaphor does not magically solve that problem, but it provides a bridge. It gives language to what is sensed before it is named, and creates enough conceptual distance for reflection to occur.

A further pattern is that metaphor is frequently collaborative in its emergence. Many of the metaphors examined here were refined in conversation, rehearsal, co-writing, or shared teaching. This matters because it suggests that metaphor is not only cognitive or representational; it is relational. It gives collaborators a shared object of thought. One can test a metaphor, extend it, contest it, or discover its limits in dialogue. In this sense, metaphor functions as a social technology of inquiry, allowing thought to be handled collectively and collaboratively.

The recurrence of certain metaphors across time suggests something else as well: metaphors become companions in thinking. Mapping, anchoring, dancing, balancing, singing, and knitting return because they continue to generate insight. They are not exhausted by one use. This recurrence is not redundancy; it is evidence of depth. Over time, a metaphor may shift register. Mapping can move from literal cartography in a theatrical project to the mapping of becoming in identity work. Knitting can move from personal craft to a pedagogical language for research development. Song can move from performance to collaboration to political hope.

At the same time, our retrospective view also reminds us that metaphor is not innocent. Every metaphor foregrounds certain aspects of experience and backgrounds others. A toolbox suggests utility and modularity but may underplay mess or vulnerability. An anchor implies stability but may also imply weight, stasis, or attachment. Mapping can orient, but it can also impose borders. Dance can evoke fluidity but may obscure power relations if used uncritically. For this reason, metaphor must itself be handled reflexively. This reflexive caution follows Conceptual Metaphor Theory's recognition that metaphors highlight some features of experience while backgrounding others; analysis must therefore attend to both their generative possibilities and their exclusions.

This becomes especially important when metaphor is used pedagogically. Students may find metaphor liberating, but they also need support in recognising that metaphor is interpretive rather than self-evident. A trial, a game, a talk show, a recipe, or a ritual does not automatically generate deep understanding. Its pedagogical and research value depends on how it is framed, discussed, and critically reflected upon. Metaphor invites associative thought, but that thought still requires analytical discipline.

What metaphor perhaps offers most powerfully is an affirmative orientation. In conditions of polycrisis, research can become overwhelmed by diagnosis. While diagnosis remains necessary, it is not enough. Researchers and educators also need ways of imagining, connecting, and creating. Metaphor contributes to this work by making alternative relations thinkable. A map can suggest routes not yet taken: a tightrope can be crossed, a fabric can be made from scattered threads. Such figures do not deny difficulty. They orient us within it toward possibility, care, and relation.

Conclusion: Making the implicit explicit

This paper has shown that metaphor structures our arts-based, self-reflexive research across four interrelated domains: framing, methodological architecture and analysis, epistemology, and pedagogy. Metaphorical titles establish conceptual terrains; extended figures such as recovery meetings, mirrors, toolboxes, recipes, maps, and knitting organise inquiry and representation; and metaphor legitimises embodied, relational, affective, and tacit knowledge. It thereby supports rigorous, critical, and humane teaching, learning, and creative research.

In a time of polycrisis, the question of how metaphor functions across these four domains extends beyond our own work. Educational research is increasingly required to engage worlds marked by entanglement, instability, and contradiction—conditions captured by Horth's (2019) formulation of rapid, unpredictable, paradoxical, and tangled (RUPT) environments. What is required here are forms of inquiry that must engage complexity, multiplicity, affect, and embodiment, without reducing or romanticising experience. Metaphor is not a solution, but a means of inhabiting these tensions responsively and rigorously.

Drama and theatre have long taught us to think metaphorically: to recognise doubleness, read complex signs, inhabit uncertainty, and value what is sensed alongside what is articulated. Our retrospective inquiry shows that these processes have shaped how we think, know, teach, and

research. Naming metaphor's role clarifies why particular forms have felt intellectually necessary and how practice-based knowledge can be theorised from within. It also invites arts-based researchers, theatre and performance educators, and practitioners to examine how metaphor may already quietly structure their inquiries, perceptions, and possibilities.

In our work, metaphor organised collaborative interpretation, made embodied and tacit knowledge visible, and mediated how we engaged texts, objects, and performance-making. It therefore enabled a form of creative and educational research commensurate with the complexity of the questions we asked. It has allowed us to think otherwise and to make visible ways of knowing that drama and theatre had already placed in our bones. Metaphor is not merely a way of describing the world but a way of inhabiting creative educational research; it enables us to think, teach, and know otherwise and, in the face of contemporary educational and social complexity, constitutes an essential rather than a marginal capacity.

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