



Imagery and metaphor

Group Metaphor Development

Tom Kranz:

Okay I'm Tom Kranz, assistant administrator at NIP. This is my metaphor for NIP, basically NIP is a wheeled city. We travel round the landscape visiting stationary cities, building big new impressive buildings to go into their stationary cities.

Chris Vallé:

Hi I'm Chris, I'm one of the co-founders of New Information Paradigms and this is a metaphor I put together for our company. As you can see there's a mountain stream meant to be the kind of the ideas that people get, and you can see there's some little bits joining in here these are our partners or our or our customers - people we work with.

V/O Commentary:

NIP employees are used to approaching problems using both verbal and visual metaphors. But it wasn't always like that.

Caitlin Walker:

I was approached by a director, who said what we want to do is to be able to build group metaphors so that we have a common understanding of who we are and we can effectively explain that to other people.

I was very excited about doing this work. But coming down here I thought you know: this is an all male company, of marketers and programmers, and I was concerned when I first arrived, because I'm younger than most of the people here, certainly young to be coming into a company as a consultant. I'm pregnant so they've watched since October they've watched me get bigger and bigger and bigger. And I kept thinking: oh what are they gonna think I think I am, what are they gonna make of this stuff that I do, which is fairly nuts, erm...getting them to make images, getting them to draw things - I've got this huge box of crayons for them to draw the metaphors - what are they gonna think of me?

Simon Coles:

For me it was it was I mean initially it was like, oh cool, we get to play with crayons at work...

Rupert Edgar:

When I sort of was first presented with this I sort of thought of it with just about abject horror because the idea of having to draw strange diagrams that don't really mean anything seemed too remote and too unattached to what I do. I was really quite surprised when I got into it how easy it is.

Caitlin Walker:

I'd say probably by about my sixth day here, then what I found was that most people - I'd say by then 80% of the members of the company - found it a very useful tool. And what was great for me was that they were finding uses for it that I had no idea were gonna happen.

V/O Commentary :

Today they're going to develop a group metaphor. They need to be able to explain simply to their customers the complex technical implications of choosing between two different IT operating systems. ___ One system is currently perceived as the safe mainstream option, but may have some disadvantages. The other system is less well known, but NIP would like their customers to consider using it.

Robert Davis:

... that was from a technical thing it might be that we choose to put in something that's concerning the sort of technology versus the marketing...

V/O Commentary :

The group starts with a general, fairly technical, discussion of the issue. Gradually the language becomes more figurative, as ideas for metaphors get thrown in and are weighed up by the group.

Robert Davis:

... it's just that I would have a try and have a review of some of the words that have been thrown up to see if it is talking about, we've said about David and Goliath we've said about the getting sucked into something...

V/O Commentary :

And finally someone comes up with a metaphor that can encompass everyone's thoughts so far.

Tom Kranz:

One of two cities: one of the cities is very inviting on the outside, lots of people live there, there's a very organised central government. Once you actually move in you find it's like a really bad neighbourhood, you know the buildings are run down they look nice on the outside but you get in and you know the lifts aren't working...

Simon Coles:

Like Communism or something, you know everyone thinks they want to live there and, and there's lots of propoganda it's all very nice and so on but the reality of it is the buildings are falling down, nothing's been maintained in ages...

Group members:

Yeah. Yeah.

Tom Kranz:

And the other city tends to be a a fairly open plan sort of place it may be more plain, it may be not as attractive but once you get there you see that it's actually quite a nice place to live, there are parks there are trees, there's a city hall where you can go in and just discuss issues with all the___other residents, there's no real council or anything like that, and that for me provides the elements of you know safety in one city cos there's a central body that's in control and everyone knows their place and the other one can be quite a frightening place to live for some people simply because you know if, if their rubbish doesn't get taken away, they've got no one to shout at they have to take it away themselves.___

Robert Davis:

Well let's check, is anybody... hearing what Tom's said is there any aspect of what we've been speaking about that comes up that isn't quite covered by that or is there some other alternative way of looking at it from two cities?

V/O Commentary :

When everyone's satisfied with the scope of the chosen metaphor, it's time to start drawing or mapping it.

Tom Kranz:

That city, very impressive, very big buildings but it's always overcast it's always rainy and when you down to the street level it's a bit of a mess, basically that's, that's this city. ___The other one, not so impressive buildings they're all quite small, you might look at it and go well you know, it's... it's a bit of a naff place to live really - lots of small buildings there's a sort of meeting hall in there where there's very noisy meetings where people get together...

Caitlin Walker:

They've said that their meetings are shorter, that they arrive at a common understanding quicker. For example if they get together and they want to make a project, they want to decide whether or not to go ahead with a project, they can, they'll find a metaphor for it, and then they check in between each other and the metaphor – and we all think the same sort of information's here - and that's very much why mapping the metaphors is so important. For example if there's five people and they've all been talking about a metaphor, and then one of them goes off and maps it, if for two people that absolutely doesn't fit, then you've got a...it's another way of checking in that the information's shared.

Robert Davis:

Okay, you mentioned about the rain, it would it would help me to see the weather in these two cities cos it's it's missing from the diagrams at the moment, but this whole idea of it being dark and overcast and rainy, so it would help if from my point of view of seeing what we're speaking about here if there was weather on the on the diagrams.

Tom Kranz:

Ok...

Caitlin Walker:

And another one is having it done two dimensionally is another perspective on the information, so that again stuff can just pop out of it. Many's the time when they... once they've drawn it up and they go - well hang on a minute there's a river here, how do people get across the river, and they gothere it is there's the problem!

Simon Coles:

What about if people were up in the mountains and coming down for some reason, and they had a choice...

Caitlin Walker:

... which city to go to.

Simon Coles:

Yeah and it's obvious that there's a crowd of unthinking people going into the... yeah, well people are coming down like this and... and there are two cities and they can make a choice and they're quite close to each other.

Rupert Edgar:

The mountain idea had sort of water flowing in the other direction.

Simon Coles:

No, no, no, it didn't have water flowing there, no... I had that there are some mountains up here somewhere, and people are coming down the mountain, are coming down from the mountain to go and live in a city.

Rupert Edgar:

Ok, so nothing to do with the water.

Simon Coles:

Nothing to do with the water no and they have a choice about which city they go and live in, or something like that, so so you know... Can I have orange people, is that alright?

Group members:

Yeah...

Caitlin Walker:

Right now I look at that and I go well obviously that's dark and that's great, and I want to know, I want if you're gonna explain this to me that it's that there's other things afoot, I want to know how I got bamboozled in the first place.

Robert Davis:

Okay well because what would happen is that when you come down from the _____ mountains you don't see the lemmings falling off the other side for example.
_____What lemmings?

Tom Kranz:

We haven't got any lemmings.

Caitlin Walker:

Get your lemmings in there!

Simon Coles:

Got no lemmings on there.

Robert Davis:

Can we have some lemmings Tom?

Tom Kranz:

How do you want to visualise that?

Robert Davis:

There's a cliff and people falling off but it's not...

Tom Kranz:

But where?

Robert Davis:

Well for me to the bottom right, cos what's happening is that the people who are approaching the city only see the see the big city, it's not until they get there they see what it's like to live in, and the consequences of the road that they're taking will lead them to the other side and off the cliff.

Simon Coles:

So, the bottom right of the dark city there's a cliff with a pile of bodies or whatever.

Tom Kranz:

So, you're looking at something sort of there. Let's get that sort of sense of it being a cliff really. A bottomless cliff. And ...

(Laughter)

V/O Commentary :

At the end of the session Caitlin asked the group how they would use their metaphor.

Tom Kranz:

If I walk into a customer site or something and I'm talking to someone at board level, I am a technical person, I will use technical language, and it will bounce off them it will go over their head they'll just sit there and go well, what do I care you know give me the bottom business line. ____ But using a metaphor I can say you know, what would it feel like, what what would happen if you were in that sort of space and they can use their emotions and really get to the real, underlying reasons why something is the way it is.

Rupert Edgar:

You can look at it far more objectively.

Simon Coles:

It's very emotional to them. So taking away the rain clouds could be a really____, sort of, you know, completely reorganise your department and fire half of them or something. If you said that to them they'd immediately go well I can't do that, but if you say well take away the rain clouds they go, well yeah take them no rain clouds nice and dry that's good, you know, and then go back into the real world...

Caitlin Walker:

____ They take it out to customers and they use it as a vehicle for explaining to customers vast amounts of technical detail in a way that they can understand. And further from that they've started then actually using the questions to encourage their customers to create metaphors themselves to help them get information back.

Robert Davis:

Whatever they say is always very informative, because it's something that points out whether they're empathising with this or whether there's some sort of gap, and if there is a gap they will say it in terms which are are profoundly revealing

Caitlin Walker:

Now I think that's extraordinary, I didn't expect that. I didn't expect this group to... to take on the language in such a way that they could then teach other people to do it I mean that's, I think that's wonderful that they've taken it on like that.

V/O Commentary :

During the feedback session, Caitlin also asked them how it felt to build a shared metaphor.

Simon Coles:

If someone added modifications to something I wrote that would be them sort of correcting me as it were. Whereas this, we all pile in together and build the city together as it were, and that's a more constructive, and and quicker.

Robert Davis:

For me it engages at a level where you where you you start to understand the important attributes that aren't described if you just choose words finally, and so the whole thing takes on some sort of shared space about what you're talking about.

Simon Coles:

Mm, and it's a shared area where we can we can all contribute, and nobody feels defensive about it and we all feel we can a