

Larger Than Life: Learning Through Metaphor

“Metaphor translates well across cultures,” says Duke CE’s Cheryl Stokes, an executive director on the Learning Innovations Team. “There’s been a lot of research done that shows that culturally, metaphors have deep meaning. So when you can reach people metaphorically, you can reach them at a level that goes beyond the cognitive and is enduring and compelling.”

Duke CE’s Metaphoric Experience™ learning method forces participants to experiment with new behaviors, skills and perspectives in an unfamiliar but compelling context, outside their traditional environment.

One of Stokes’ favorite experiences – and one that illustrates the cross-cultural appeal of metaphor – centers on America’s pastime – baseball. Called “The Art of Biography,” it was designed to help senior leaders understand how to create trust and build relationships with clients whom they

perceived to be very different from themselves. Participants needed to learn to engage with clients, to become part of their working circle, and to really understand what was on their minds.

Stokes and her team realized that the skills the executives needed to practice were akin to those used by a biographer researching his subject, so they enlisted the help of author Craig Wolff, who was researching baseball great Willie Mays, for a book that will trace the player’s life from segregated Birmingham, Ala., to the Negro Leagues and the integration of the Major Leagues, and finally to the Hall of Fame.

Wolff conducted extensive interviews with Negro League players who either competed with Mays or mentored him. In the Art of Biography experience, the participants act as his research assistants, charged with capturing the story

of the Negro League ballplayers. Participants walk into a festive atmosphere, surrounded by assorted baseball and Negro League paraphernalia, with baseballs and trading cards sitting on each table. They watch a video about the history of African-Americans in the sport and the formation of the Negro Leagues, and then are given their assignment. After receiving some background information and tips from Wolff, the research assistants meet their subjects.

“We bring in these four gentlemen who are between the ages of 70 and 85, and they are walking history,” says Stokes. “There’s almost an audible gasp when people see them walk in the room, because they’re walking in with these storied jackets and hats on. So the participants get a chance to go in depth and interview these folks and get to know them.”

The conversations start off with general questions, usually concerning baseball – favorite players, earned run average, batting average, the Negro League experience – but then something shifts. Participants start to understand that they are talking to ballplayers, yes, but more importantly, talking to people.

“You just realize in a very real, tangible way that lives can’t be simply reduced to a caricature,” says Wolff. “You might carry expectations into it – I know I did – but any notions you have are dispelled very quickly.”



Ultimately, says Stokes, the participants uncover stories about people. “It’s just a very moving way to understand how to see beyond the surface of someone, and see where there are commonalities and things that you can treasure about people who you may perceive to be very different from yourself,” she says.

Duke CE's Schon Beechler participated in an Art of Biography experience. “At the beginning, the interview was all focused around what we as interviewers wanted to know,” she says. “It was driven by our own need for information, our own values, our own sense of what would be interesting.

“What we came to learn through the process of going through the experience was to approach the conversation a very different way, and to really discover the story that the person we were interviewing had to tell – what was important to them, what were the events in their life that really carried meaning for them, made them who they were as a person.”

Recognizing the shift in point of reference – from what the interviewer wanted to know to what the subject wanted to tell – made an impact. “It’s something that’s really stuck with me,” says Beechler. “Through that new mindset, you are able to open up your ears and listen in a way that you’re unable to when you’re being driven by your own assumptions, your own values, your own agenda.”

The metaphor has been a resounding success, even when baseball is unknown in participants’ home countries.

“As Duke CE grows globally, part of my role is to think about developing learning methods around the world,” Stokes says. “I didn’t know how well The Art of Biography would work with a global audience. Because baseball is pretty American. But what the participants find out is that this experience is not about baseball. And so it has worked extremely well with largely international audiences. It reinforced why we designed it.”

“The Metaphoric Experience™ learning method works well because we use real people.”

Even when the metaphors work, Wolff stresses the need to be flexible. “It’s not predictable,” he says. “A participant once said to me, ‘Participating in one of your experiences is like riding on the back of a motorcycle. You’re lurching left and lurching right, but you’re always staying upright.’ What that means, to me, is that a good program allows for serendipity, so each program is different, depending on the people. You’ve got to allow for that so you can have a little magic.”

And that magic leaves a lasting impression. “It affirms for me what a teacher can do – highlight the connection between this living legend and you – a young, up-and-coming businessman,” Wolff says. “You’re connected. What I take away from it is people’s desire to span the chasm that’s created by geography, by race, by interests. For me, as an educator, it’s amazing to watch that happen.”