

# A reply to Laura Dean

Kerr Inkson

**So:** Metaphors used in education have disadvantages. Did Laura Dean imagine that I was unaware of that fact?

In my book *Understanding Careers: The Metaphors of Working Lives* (Sage, 2007), which is referenced in my NICEC article, I state: "Metaphors can be used to induce us to see things that aren't there and to force other views into the background. Philosopher John Locke railed against metaphor as 'the artificial and figurative application of words ... for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move passions, and thereby mislead the judgement...' In considering metaphors, retain some scepticism, seek evidence to support the metaphor, and recognise that every metaphor has its limitations" (page 13). In relation to each of the eight core career metaphors that constitute the body of the book, some of which are included in the NICEC article, I constantly draw attention to their weaknesses as well as their strengths. Notwithstanding this, my experience in research and education continues to persuade me that the advantages of using metaphor outweigh the disadvantages, provided attention is drawn to the limitations.

In relation to the cross-cultural limitations of metaphor mentioned by Laura Dean, it is not so much metaphor as the notion of career itself which may be flawed. On page 5-6 of my book I note that the concept of career explored by the metaphors I use is that of an individual long-term project, and that this may make the notion of "career," let alone "metaphors for career," inappropriate in collectivist cultures. I also list a wide range of political and economic factors which are taken for granted as a backdrop to career studies in Western democracies but may not apply elsewhere. In such cases, not just

my metaphors but much of career studies may be rendered irrelevant. For elaboration of this view, see David C. Thomas and Kerr Inkson, 'Careers across Cultures' in H. Gunz and M. Peiperl, *Handbook of Career Studies*, pp. 451-470. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007.

I am sorry if I did not make these caveats explicit in the short space accorded to me by the editors of my NICEC article. I suppose my contacts with careers educators and indeed many students have persuaded me that the limitations of metaphor, and of each specific career metaphor, quickly become self-evident in any discussion. Laura Dean's method of metaphor analysis based on Anderson et al. strikes me as of use not so much, as she says, "to assess whether you should use a metaphor to aid teaching," but as a classroom tool to assist students to see the strengths and weaknesses of each metaphor, and thereby to gain insight into the nature of careers. Her own analysis of the familiar but nowadays largely discarded "career ladder" metaphor, for example, would provide an excellent basis for classroom discussion of career forms, especially if accompanied by an equivalent analysis of another metaphor, that of the child's climbing frame, as discussed on page 131 of my book.

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