

A Genealogy of Metaphor

Grounding facilitating in metaphors

Why a facilitator needs to know any of this

Most facilitation training teaches technique. How to open a room. How to hold a silence. How to reflect a question back instead of answering it. Useful, all of it. But technique is the visible tip. I'll argue for the reasoning underneath: metaphor works as the material a group is made of. The fabric itself, whether anyone notices or not — and mostly, nobody notices. A facilitator who knows where metaphor comes from, what it did for our species, and what it quietly does to a room right now, carries a different kind of authority than one who only learned the moves. This chapter builds that understanding from the ground up. Ground, as we'll see, turns out to be the right word.

Genealogy names a family tree. This chapter traces one. The line runs from the body, through the first tool and the first throw, into words, then grammar, then machines and AI, and finally back into the room one facilitates. Each station ends where a facilitator can stand: something to notice, something to ask, something to do.

The body as source domain

Every abstract thing one can talk about — time, argument, mind, value, cause — borrows a vocabulary from something physical and a community. Linguists call the physical side the source domain, the abstract side the target. I call the language side of it the community domain. One borrows from a source one knows in the body, to think about a target one cannot touch. Listen to any meeting. An argument gets won or lost. It has weak points. It gets attacked and defended. **Argument is like war** — one of the oldest working metaphors one inherits. Time runs out. Time lies ahead, or trails behind. **Time is like space**. One grounds that metaphor (sic) in a simple fact: one moves through space as a body, and cannot help describing everything else the same way. This sits close to the mechanism of thought itself. Not decoration. No evidence shows humans reasoning about anything genuinely abstract without first borrowing a bodily, spatial or physical structure to reason with.

Crucially, the borrowing follows constraints. Try building a metaphor for time out of the taste of lemons. It means nothing, to anyone. Taste lacks the structure time needs: direction, sequence, distance. The body constrains which metaphors become available. It does not fix a single answer, though. Aymara speakers, famously, put the future behind them and the past in front — the reverse of English. Their bodily fact: one can see what lies in front of oneself, and only the past is known. So the known past occupies the visible space ahead. The unknown future sits behind, out of sight. Same body, same raw material — front, back, sight, motion — and two opposite, equally coherent solutions. The lesson for a facilitator: when a group's language forecloses an option — “we can't go back,” “there's no way forward” — that foreclosure got built, not discovered. What got built can get rebuilt. The body offers more than one direction. Never underestimate the power of habit.

Meaning before naming: metaphor-in-use

A body does something first. Only then does that doing become a metaphor. Pick up a stone. Before any word arrives, the hand has already discovered what the stone is *for*: a felt rightness between shape and grip, a use the arm found before the mind named it. Here sits the quietest and oldest form of metaphor. Something gets treated *as* something else — a stone as a tool, a hammer, a weapon — entirely in the body. No argument possible yet. Nothing

has been said to argue with. Heidegger called it *Zuhandenheit*, readiness-to-hand. A tool doesn't first exist as an object with properties and then, secondarily, become useful. Its place in a web of purposes constitutes its being. It only shows up as a bare “object” when the use breaks down.

I've watched this layer produce information nobody could explain. A stuck IT-program, three program managers deep — a Gordian knot of technical, personal and political issues. I asked a group of facilitators to represent the parties. They knew nothing of the case. Empty, not involved. I gave them attitudes, not stories: statements lifted from the actual e-mails, translated into stances. Standing left and right, in front and behind, far and near.

Soon they spoke the situation — in the same words the real parties used. “How can they know that!?”, asked a representative of the client. Then one of them said, about her position: “when cooperating, it is like I'm working towards my own bankruptcy.” That was the core of the issue. Nobody had ever said it out loud. The body carried what the words concealed.

Your body is always present. And in the present. Articulation creates order — and order is not an attribute of the present. First the stance, then the feeling, then the words. Being before Naming, staged.

The bodily layer runs evolutionary as much as poetic. Accurate throwing needs an expensive, tightly sequenced kind of motor planning. Most animals never developed it. Researchers including William Calvin have proposed that this circuitry, once evolved, got reused for something else entirely: the sequencing a sentence needs. Separately, neuroarchaeologist Dietrich Stout put stone-knappers in brain scanners. Knapping — shaping a stone tool by striking flakes off it — activates the same regions used in processing syntax. Broca's area, doing double duty. Throwing, toolmaking and language may draw on one underlying sequencing capacity: evolved once, reused three times. Biologists call that “exapted” — old machinery taking on a new job.

Paul Watzlawick opened *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (1967, with Janet Beavin Bavelas and Don Jackson) with an axiom that follows directly from this: one cannot not communicate. Every behavior carries message value. Silence too. Stillness too. This account predicts the axiom rather than echoes it. A body threw, gripped and used tools before language existed to narrate any of it. Behavior communicated first. Communication never waited for words. The hand closing around a stone for a stable throw needs the fully opposable thumb — the precision grip that sets human hands apart from other primates. The same grip enabled Stout's knapping and Calvin's throw. Communication sits in the body before it ever reaches the mouth. Language, arriving later, works less like the origin of communication and more like metacommunication: talking about, framing, and sometimes overriding what the body already says.

I once met Watzlawick, at a conference called *Pragmatics of Human Organizations*. Every participant got addressed as “co-organizer” — and many never understood why they weren't simply participants. I talked with Paul for some time. I wanted to know how many languages he spoke, being born in Austria from Italian and Czech parents, having studied in Mexico and the US.

I noticed he was suffering from dementia, and mentioned it to the organizers. “We noticed it when we picked him up from the airport,” they said. “We were afraid for the conference. But nobody notices. This is so Watzlawickian.” One cannot not communicate — and still a whole conference read the message it expected to read.

The vocabulary one still uses for the mind carries this history. Once one notices, one cannot stop noticing. *Subject*: from Latin, “thrown under” — what lies beneath and bears the weight. *Object*: “thrown against” — what stands in the way. *Project*: “thrown forward” — a plan cast ahead of where one stands. The same root gives *eject*, *inject*, *reject* and *conjecture*: “thrown together,” a guess. Nearly the whole vocabulary of philosophy and grammar — the subject/object split itself — grows out of throwing a stone. A second family, unrelated, handles the same job differently. German *Darstellung* and Dutch *voorstelling*, from *stellen*, “to place, to set”: representation as a placing-before. There-placing, before-placing — a placing, where Latin throws. English does it too, with a Latin root: *represent*, from *praesentare*, “to place before, to make present.” A third family, from *capere*, “to seize”: *concept* and *comprehend*. Grasping an idea. Closing the hand around it. Even Descartes hides one. *Cogito* compounds *co-* (together) with *agitare* (to shake, to set in motion). James Geary rereads the famous conclusion accordingly: I shake things up, therefore I am. The usual translation, “I think therefore I am,” hides the metaphor and makes thinking precede being. This reversal suits authorities: it creates an indictment — let us do the thinking, and follow us. Language after language reaches for throw, place, grasp and shake to name the same abstraction: having a thought. Nobody coordinated Latin and Germanic on this. Or better: every body did — notice the space. Thinking names what an embodied nervous system does. Not something layered on top of it.

I always have been a big fan of Chris Argyris. Firstly because of his paradox: “learning in order to control behaviour, inhibits learning.” He goes on to show how, in an organisation, people try to find and prevent errors and thus stifle learning. I still remember where I sat, when I read those lines.

Having studied experimental physics and biophysics, I know how only experimenting and failing teaches you physics. And I've got an extended license to teach physics — or rather, I had, until they changed the law. Nothing to do with my abilities. Now I use them in my courses on facilitating. In 1979/80 I taught *computerkunde* — computer science, as it was then called — for two years at a *middelbare school*, Dutch for secondary school. So his statement was like kicking open an open door.

Secondly, his book *Strategy, Change and Defensive Routines*: one of the few books I keep on rereading. In it he uses theory-in-use versus espoused theory, Model I and Model II — people saying one thing, doing another, and denying that there's a difference, which ends the conversation about it. I treat a model as a metaphor, and a metaphor as a model of the world. The hard part is the structure of the model, and of the metaphor: what accounts for its usefulness. I'll repeat this over and over again.

I was also a big fan of Richard Feynman, Nobel laureate in physics, who declared that winning the prize only proved he was eligible for it. His *Lectures on Physics* are still in use, or so I hope, for the students. Two things about him: you have to be able to explain something to a thirteen-year-old. He did that. And: when you know the name of a bird in every language of the world, you know nothing whatever about the bird. Understanding something isn't theory. It's practice.

I needed both of them to tell you about metaphor-in-use — a word about something that exists before you've got a name for it — metaphor-espoused — the words a community settles on — and conceptual metaphor: what a community tells you to use for an object and, this is again the hard part, for concepts which are not actual objects at all.

A metaphor-in-use stays private: an exchange between every-1 — everyone, and, notice the figure this project keeps returning to, every 1 as well, the same numeral sitting at the centre of the triangle — and a thing, for lack of a better word, happening always, at once, everywhere. Some 1, before the beginning of time, started it with a requirement

and a stone. Perhaps in offence, but more likely in defence. Shouting didn't help. Throwing did the job. A stone, useless to anyone else, became useful.

I collect stones at the places I visit on our travels. Intuitively. Nowadays I assume it's in our DNA, as people say — not the stone, I've studied biophysics, and nothing codes for a stone. As a monkey has DNA coding for climbing, so ours codes for throwing. The conditions our ancestors lived under made us invest in throwing. We, and our conditions, made ourselves single-handed. I sometimes joke that our ambidextrous ape cousins laughed at us: climbing with only one good hand — destined for failure.

Wordlessly, every-1 makes a thing into the object through using it: a fact, from Latin *facere*, to make — not something found, but something done. This is the infant's mode: play as the earliest learning, communication running wordless, long before naming arrives to slow it down. The structure of a thing makes it useful before it has a name for that use — in Dutch, an object is a *voorwerp*, literally a for-throw, built on *werpen*, to throw: the same throw this whole account keeps returning to, independently rediscovered by a second language. If a thing turns out unfit, one makes it into a tool instead — a fact built out of a fiction, by commenting, by instructing, by showing someone else what it's for.

Sharing a tool means sharing its use, and sharing its use makes a toolmaker into someone who also shares the copy right — the right to say how the thing gets made and used again. Sharing, this way, means carrying over: the precondition for words, and the bridge into what a community eventually settles on calling the thing.

From private fit to shared word: metaphor-espoused

Facilitators who know Argyris will hear an echo in this pair of terms: theory-in-use versus espoused theory. The echo is meant. What a body does and what a mouth says can drift apart. The drift carries information.

“Translate” names the crossing literally: *trans* + *latus*, “carried across.” The exact same compound as “metaphor” itself: *meta* + *pherein*, also “carried across.” Naming translates. And translation always arrives a little late. By the time an experience becomes a word, it has already been carried into the past tense. Arguably why “a thought” takes the grammatical shape of a past participle of “to think” — a noun for something already finished — while feeling and bodily sense carry no comfortable noun of their own. They haven't finished yet.

Once several people use a word, it stops belonging to whoever coined it. It can travel faster than the skill that produced it. A community owns a shared word. And a community polices what it owns: using it right becomes a condition of belonging, and the people who could use it first find themselves holding an authority nobody applied for.

I use the name metaphor-espoused for the actual words a community settles on. A word about “espoused,” because the word deserves it — unfamiliar to non-native speakers, and half-forgotten by many who grew up in English. Espouse: from Latin *spondere*, “to pledge solemnly, to promise.” The same root gives *sponsor* (one who pledges), *respond* (to pledge back), and *spouse*. To espouse originally meant: to marry. To espouse a theory means, quite literally, to wed it — to stand up in public and say: this one.

And that makes Argyris's pair sharper than it first sounds. An espoused theory works like the official spouse: the one presented at receptions, named in speeches, pledged to in front of witnesses. The theory-in-use is how one actually lives at home.

The two can coincide. Often they don't — and nobody needs to be lying for the gap to open, any more than a marriage needs bad faith to drift. Notice the family resemblance to *condicio*: both words name a bond made by speaking. A pledge, like a condition, gets talked into being — and can be talked over again.

In Dutch the pair is sometimes translated as *beleden theorie*, from *belijden*: to profess, to confess — the word of the creed. That translation hears the same thing: an espoused theory belongs to what one professes. What one practices is another matter, and the space between the two is where a facilitator works.

Every group develops its own jargon — the staff walks the walk, but doesn't talk the talk of the management, and vice versa. Jargon gets developed to speed communication up, and ends up as a barrier: whoever gets misunderstood concludes they are not being listened to as a human being.

Here metaphor also becomes visible in its own theorizing. Michael Reddy showed in 1979 that a metaphor builds English talk about communication itself: the “conduit.” Ideas as objects. Words as containers. Meaning as something “sent,” then “gotten” — or lost. This metaphor produces our very theory of communication, including the theory that a listener who “didn't get it” bears the fault for a failed delivery, rather than taking part in an ongoing, uncertain act of interpretation. No metaphor-free vantage point exists from which to describe metaphor. Every account of metaphor — this one included — gets written in metaphor. Metaphors about metaphors are metaphors.

A conceptual metaphor runs on the same mechanism, aimed further out: what a community owns and polices not for a thing, but for a concept — for whatever was never an actual object to begin with. **Argument is like war** and **time is like space**, from the opening of this account, are conceptual metaphors in exactly this sense: not words settled on for a stone, but words borrowed for something that was never a stone, or anything else, to begin with.

Grammar, cooperation, and the conditions we made for ourselves

Somewhere in this history, language crossed a threshold. Yuval Noah Harari locates the decisive step somewhere unexpected. Practical information — “there's a lion by the river” — already sits within reach of other primates. The decisive step: language about things that don't exist at all. Gods. Nations. Money. Corporations. Rights. A chimpanzee troop tops out at a few dozen members. Even humans, on personal acquaintance alone, hit a ceiling around 150 — as many relationships as one primate brain can track. Humans blew past that ceiling by inventing shared fictions. Two strangers who never met cooperate perfectly well, provided they believe in the same currency, the same law, the same god. Subject-verb-object grammar, conceptual metaphor and shared fiction name three versions of one invention: a technology for holding an agreement in common, without holding a relationship in common.

The word for that kind of agreement rewards pausing on. Condition: from Latin *condicio*, *con-* “together” + *dicere* “to speak.” To talk together. To agree by speaking. A condition, at root, names not a fact about the world but the residue of a conversation. One invented conditions the way one invented tools — deliberately, out of the raw material of shared speech. Once invented, conditions could stack, get inherited, get enforced. Faster than the slow, blind editing of biological evolution could ever manage. One began running one's own accelerated evolution, through agreed rules instead of inherited traits. It succeeded spectacularly. A facilitator, note, makes conditions for a living. Every ground rule agreed at the start of a session works as a *condicio* in miniature: spoken together, and therefore open to being spoken again. The trouble — belonging to groups of people — starts here too.

Dutch offers an illustration. The Dutch for belonging: *behoren*. *Erbij horen* — to belong to a group — builds, literally, on *horen*, “to hear.” The word-family says it plainly. *Gehoorzaam*: obedient, giving ear.

Horig, in older Dutch: the serf, bound in hearing to a lord. To belong meant: to stand within hearing, and to heed what one hears. The prefix *be-* carries “by, about” — a weakened *bij* — so the compound reads: to hear one's way to one's place.

And English? *Belong* descends from *along*: what lies alongside, what goes with. The longing in belonging counts as folk etymology — the dictionaries are strict — but folk etymology works like a slip of the tongue of a whole language: the folk hear a truth the scholars file elsewhere. Smith and Berg would side with the folk. Their paradox of belonging runs exactly on longing: one longs for membership precisely because one only stands alongside.

So English longs to belong. Dutch listens. The name “Dutch” itself, by the way, comes from *diutisc* — “of the people,” the vernacular, as against the Latin of church and law. To English ears, everything Germanic across the water sounded the same, and the Netherlands got to keep the name. The people's language, named after the people: the tongue of *condicio*, of talking together — set, then as now, against a Latin that claimed to stand above negotiation.

The trapdoor: agentless grammar and borrowed authority

Grammar needs a subject. “It rains” supplies one anyway. Out of thin air: a placeholder standing in for a cause nobody can name, because none exists to name. The sky carries no agent. The same grammatical habit works just as smoothly where a cause *does* exist and simply goes unnamed. “The market decided.” “It had to happen.” “That's just how things are.” The construction that correctly describes weather quietly starts hiding human decisions behind the same shrug a language uses for rain.

This carries a theological twin. “And God said, let there be light: and there was light.” The identical move, at the largest possible scale: speech that founds a state of affairs with no interlocutor, no second party who could have talked back. So nothing that ever counted as *condicio* in the word's own sense — no dialogue produced an agreement. An unconditioned first cause names a cause nobody talked into being. Which means nobody can talk it out of what it has decided, either. The conversation that could reopen it never happened. “It rains” and “let there be” do the same grammatical work. They place a cause outside the reach of negotiation, while everything downstream stays negotiable. One can argue about the forecast, the rent, the deadline. Nobody ever gave one a seat at the table where the founding condition was set. Grammatically, no table existed.

Bayes' theorem not incidentally uses the same “conditional” clause, in a precise mathematical and opposite way. It inverts a conditional probability: the probability of a cause, given an observed effect. It can only do this by treating every cause as provisional. Today's best estimate becomes tomorrow's starting point, revised the moment new evidence appears. In plain terms, Bayes keeps asking: given what one just saw, what most likely caused it? And the answer stays open to the next thing one sees. No end point. No first cause where the process bottoms out. Bayesian reasoning formalizes *condicio* itself: a standing negotiation between hypothesis and evidence, which nobody gets to close alone — a dialogue instead of a monologue. One tradition of thought keeps causes open to inquiry forever. The other places certain causes permanently out of its reach.

Hans Vaihinger gave this problem its sharpest name in 1911. *The Philosophy of As If*: a great deal of what one treats as literal fact — causation, the unified self, scientific laws, God — works better understood as a useful fiction. One acts *as if* it were true. Not because it corresponds to reality — because acting on it produces results. We act *as if* a metaphor is true, while only the source part is real. As all our concepts are conceptual metaphors, we tend to treat

the target part as real too. Science's own idealized models stay formally false and indispensable. Vaihinger thought these fictions often necessary. His warning: don't forget they are fictions. Treat them as literal, unconditioned truths, and the trouble begins. This trap runs through the whole account. A metaphor, taken literally, doesn't just hide the far side of the domain it borrowed from. It hides the fact that borrowing happened at all.

And here uncertainty becomes the lever. Life stays genuinely unpredictable. One does not know what the future holds, in either direction, until it's too late for the knowing to help. Ernest Becker argued in *The Denial of Death* that human culture as a whole works as a defense against exactly this: a symbolic system built to manage a fear no one can out-argue. Terror Management Theory, the research program his work inspired, has run over a thousand controlled studies confirming the mechanism. Bring death and uncertainty to the front of people's minds, and they grip their own group's worldview harder — and turn more hostile toward anyone who doesn't share it. Irvin Yalom adds the piece closest to a facilitator's actual job. Much of what looks like an ordinary group problem — won't disclose, won't trust, can't get close, regresses under pressure; Smith and Berg's paradoxes of Engaging, the knots of trust, disclosure and closeness — plays out as displaced anxiety about death, freedom, isolation or meaninglessness. It wears the costume of a smaller, more arguable complaint. Nobody says “I fear dying alone in a world without inherent meaning” in a stand-up meeting. They say: “I don't trust the plan.”

Put the pieces together and the trapdoor comes into view. Uncertainty stays real and constant. Metaphor and shared fiction give a species that cannot resolve that uncertainty a way to act anyway. Useful — genuinely, in Vaihinger's sense. But leadership, ancient and modern, keeps facing one recurring temptation. Borrow the authority of an unconditioned cause: a law, a rule, a market, a founding decision nobody present got consulted on. Then use the ordinary, universal fear of an uncertain future to make the borrowed authority feel like it was never a metaphor to begin with. Gregory Bateson's double bind — contradictory demands, plus a ban on naming the contradiction — needs two things: a rule one must obey, and a prohibition on naming the rule as a rule. Agentless grammar supplies that prohibition for free. A sentence with no subject gives one no one to address the objection to.

James Geary counted: one utters about six metaphors a minute. His subtitle calls it the secret life of metaphor — and a good question hides in that phrase, one Geary raises but leaves open. What turned something done six times a minute into a secret, guarded by an active denial that any metaphor is in play at all? The trapdoor answers. Admitting a metaphor means admitting a condition: something spoken into being, by someone, that could be spoken differently. An expert's authority often leans the other way — on words that claim to touch the world literally, directly, without borrowing. I've talked with scientists who maintain that the words they use have to be taken literally. And they are certainly metaphors. The denial protects the borrowed authority. It also protects face: conceding the metaphor feels like conceding the expertise. Expect exactly this resistance when training experts, and read it kindly. It is the sound of the trapdoor defending itself — and a signal that the expertise matters enough to defend. The ones who do speak the uncomfortable truth resemble Cassandra in ancient Troy: they are committed. Else they wouldn't say anything.

From tool to machine: losing the thread

Tools extend the throw. Reach, force, precision — beyond what the unaided body manages. Machines extend tools again, and somewhere in that second extension something changes. A hand-thrown stone still reads as the act of a particular body. A machine doesn't. Especially the infrastructure machines need in order to run at all: the roads, the grids, the pipelines, the systems that make an economy possible while staying almost invisible to the people living inside it. It runs on its own logic, its own schedule, its own maintenance demands. Whether or not any human attends to it. Tools once served the throw. Increasingly, human effort serves the machine's requirements instead.

And the felt sense — the *Zuhandenheit*, the bodily fit that started this whole chain — gets harder to locate anywhere in the process. One reasonable description: this is what it means to feel one is losing one's soul to one's own tools. A structural claim, not a mystical one. The tool was supposed to extend the body. When the relationship reverses, and the body starts organizing itself around the tool's demands, something real gets lost. Exactly the embodied, felt-sense layer this account started from. One hears the reversal in any room where a team says: “the system won't let us.” A sentence worth pausing on. Somebody once spoke that system into being.

The buried metaphor of computing: the loom, not only the calculator

This account began, at its very first question, with the computer as calculator. What attributes did one inherit with that metaphor? Arithmetic. A single correct answer. A closed device. A user who submits input and reads off output. That metaphor was never the only one available. An alternative stood there from the beginning — and got buried.

In 1804, Joseph-Marie Jacquard built a loom controlled by punched cards. Swap the cards, and the same loom weaves an entirely different pattern. No rebuilding. Around 1830, Charles Babbage adapted exactly this mechanism to control his Analytical Engine — the first design for a general-purpose computer. Ada Lovelace, working directly with Babbage and now generally credited as the first programmer, chose her words deliberately: “the Analytical Engine weaves algebraical patterns just as the Jacquard-loom weaves flowers and leaves.” Computing's founding metaphor, from its first programmer, skipped calculation entirely. It named weaving.

The image runs deeper than even Lovelace could have appreciated. It hides in the vocabulary. “Text,” “textile,” “texture” and “context”: all from Latin *texere*, to weave. A text names, etymologically, a woven thing. So does a textile. A context names what gets woven *with* something else. Meaning-making and cloth-making share a root, because for as long as there have been words for either, making sense of something and weaving something have counted as the same act: taking separate threads and interlacing them into a single, load-bearing structure. The strength comes not from any one thread. It comes from how they cross.

Had “loom” won out over “calculator” as computing's governing metaphor, much of what the arithmetic framing hid — relationship, pattern, structure held by many crossings rather than a single number — might never have gone missing in the first place. It's not too late to notice it stood there all along. And the image pays its way in the room. A session weaves. Separate threads — experiences, interests, words — get crossed into something that carries load. A facilitator works like a weaver. And gets woven in as a thread at the same time.

Where AI actually fits

Set against all this, an honest account of current AI systems reads more precisely than the breathless and the dismissive versions manage. Mechanically, training teaches a language model to estimate a conditional probability: the likelihood of what comes next, given everything that came before. At a scale no human could hold in working memory. A genuine, formidable capability. These systems produce fluent, grammatically immaculate, formally correct language faster and more consistently than almost anyone.

Language lacks a grasp, a throw, the embodied experience underneath both. No actual body found a felt rightness in a stone before any word existed to name it. No stakes attach to any output the way stakes attach to a human who might be wrong about where the lion is. No community had to fight its way to agreement on what a word should mean. The word arrived pre-negotiated, statistically, from a vast corpus other people already argued over. The formal fluency holds up as real. The metaphor-in-use layer underneath it — Being before Naming, the bodily fit that

makes a metaphor motivated rather than arbitrary — doesn't show up the way it does for a human speaker. Whether it ever could remains a genuine, open disagreement.

What to make of that gap remains unsettled, and this account shouldn't pretend otherwise. One reading: use it or lose it. If fluent, correct, formally impressive language becomes cheap and instantly available, the specifically human skill this account has been tracing may simply get exercised less. Reaching past the practical. Feeling a fresh metaphor before it has a name. Noticing which conditions were spoken into being — and could be spoken differently. Any capacity atrophies once a shortcut appears. A harder reading doubts the erosion would even show up while it was happening. Metaphor-in-use, by its own definition, doesn't announce itself. Formal fluency counts as exactly the thing modern institutions get built to notice, measure and reward. If that's right, a facilitator may be one of the few remaining roles whose job it is to notice a capacity going quiet — precisely because nothing about its absence shows up on a dashboard. Both readings agree on where the stakes sit. Not in whether AI can out-argue a person. In whether people keep practicing the thing that made the argument worth having in the first place. Reason enough to treat this as a live, open question for a room to sit with. Not a conclusion to hand it.

The facilitator's stake in this

Everything above cashes out in the room. A group under pressure reaches for agentless grammar — “it just happened,” “that's how the process works,” “leadership decided” — precisely when uncertainty runs highest and the temptation to borrow an unconditioned authority runs strongest. The facilitator's task doesn't involve winning an argument against this grammar. It means reopening the *con-dicere* it quietly closed. Asking, plainly: who actually decided? What was the actual causal chain? What could have gone differently? The Two-Column Move does exactly this. Name the metaphor behind a stated limit. Separate what it makes necessary from what it hides. Hand the choice back. And resist supplying a new, equally unconditioned frame to replace the old one.

It also explains why embodied, spatial exercises earn their place as more than a warm-up before the real work starts. An object placed in a circle. A relationship read off a distance. A future named before anyone moves toward it. They *are* the real work, because they return a group to metaphor-in-use before metaphor-espoused hardens back into unquestioned condition. A group that has just placed its own objects in its own circle cannot easily say “it just happened” about the pattern it is looking at. It watched its own hands make the pattern.

One warning, from experience. I once ran such an exercise with a management team — successful, mostly, except the managing director felt caught by what the circle revealed, and rejected the whole process, results and all. The exercise worked. That was the problem. Co-author the container with the sponsor beforehand, so nobody ends up standing in the room as a specimen.

And it explains why Cassandra Information — the deliberate use of confusing, resisted, uncomfortable data — matters structurally rather than just tactically. Comfortable, agreed truths carry no real information. They've stopped counting as *condicio*: nobody negotiates them anymore, people simply repeat them. Information, Bateson said, is a difference that makes a difference. Confusion often signals a genuine, still-open condition. Smoothness often signals one that has quietly closed.

None of this makes the paradoxes of group life — belonging, engaging, speaking — solvable. They aren't meant to be solved. Smith and Berg's whole point holds: the paradoxes run structural, built into what it means to be a self inside a group at all. Not personal failures to be coached away. A facilitator trained in this genealogy can recognize the paradox for what it is when it surfaces, resist the pull to hand the group a new unconditioned fiction to replace

the one that just broke, and do the slower, harder thing: hold the room in the conversation long enough for a genuine, mutually spoken condition to emerge in its place.

Practical pointers for the room

There are three important things in facilitation: preparation, preparation and preparation. Then, in the room, a few practices carry this theory into an actual session.

Ask participants to write their answer down before anyone speaks. Writing slows thinking down. It gives a person time to notice which conceptual metaphor they are reaching for, and room to change their mind before committing out loud. And it frees the listeners: nobody has to rehearse their own answer while someone else is still talking. People hear each other, instead of waiting for their turn.

Clean Language, David Grove's method of questioning, keeps a facilitator's own images out of someone else's felt sense. "What kind of stone is that stone?" "Where is that stone right now?" The speaker's own words, borrowed back — rather than translated into the facilitator's metaphor. The same instinct favors concrete terms. Concrete as in the building material: solid, load-bearing. "The delivery date moved" carries more than "the timeline shifted." A date one can point to. A timeline is already a metaphor about a metaphor. Abstraction hides the metaphor doing the work. Concreteness leaves it visible enough to question.

When someone asks "do you mean this or that," a useful answer is often simply: *yes*. Both readings can carry something true. Choosing one too early closes off the other before the group has tested it. If pressed for a single answer, hand the question back to the room. And some "how" questions hide an objection. "How would that even work?" Answer the how directly, and one skips past the objection instead of addressing it. Look first for the object blocking the question — the unstated condition making "how" feel unanswerable.

One word earns a permanent ban from a facilitator's own mouth, and it is worth naming once, here, so it can be avoided everywhere after: "why." It asks for a cause and lands as a demand for a defence, and the person answering has no reliable way to tell which one was meant — so they guess, in front of the room, under pressure. Pressed for a cause, or cornered into an excuse: either reading shifts weight onto the very person a facilitator is there to make things lighter for, not heavier. The failure compounds on repetition. Five rounds of the same question, chasing a single root, corner a person five times over rather than once — whatever gets uncovered that way, a group rarely survives the method that uncovered it, and the method belongs to an interview room, never a group session. When the question comes first from a manager's mouth, treat it as a signal rather than a genuine opening: a defensive routine wearing the costume of curiosity, Argyris's pattern exactly. A facilitator's own questions run the other direction on purpose — toward what happened, what changed, what would need to be different — anywhere but toward the one word that makes a person explain themselves.

People tend to speak their real, working metaphor early in a story. Often without noticing it themselves. Then they spend the rest of the telling explaining themselves around it. Let someone finish. Then go back to the beginning — that's usually where the load-bearing metaphor sits, stated matter-of-factly, before self-consciousness catches up with it. I've trained myself to write the opening down. My own metaphors tend to take over otherwise: hearing someone else's stone, a facilitator starts throwing it.

A few further habits follow the same logic. Note agentless grammar as it passes — "it just happened," "the process decided" — without correcting it in the moment. A live correction lands as an accusation; a note kept for later works better. Let silence stand after a concrete question. The first answer after a pause often carries metaphor-in-use,

where the instant, fluent answer carries rehearsed, espoused language reaching for the exit. And when a word arrives with no actor inside it — “alignment,” “engagement,” “leadership” — ask for the verb hiding in the noun. Who is aligning, engaging, leading? Toward what? A nominalization — a verb frozen into a noun — hides its actor the same way agentless grammar does.

One habit works on grammar itself. Notice when “to be” quietly asserts an identity across two domains — “the market is difficult,” “our roadmap is broken” — and offer “is like” instead, out loud if it helps: “the market is like a difficult negotiation.” That small word restores the comparison a bare “is” was hiding, and reopens what a flat equation had quietly closed. The same caution applies to attributing a single fixed quality to a person or a group. “She is resistant.” Add a second, different attribute: “she is resistant, or perhaps cautious.” The observation stays. A verdict becomes a question. A question opens a dialogue, where a verdict closes one.

Last: resist the urge to supply a tidy new metaphor once a group's old one breaks. The value sits in the room building a replacement together, live, in its own words. A metaphor the facilitator hands over arrives just as unconditioned as the one that just failed. Where possible, bring an object rather than a question. Objects don't yet carry the group's rehearsed vocabulary — which is exactly why a stone brought to a meeting, or an object placed in a circle, gets under metaphor-espoused faster than discussion does. And when a client asks, “so you're the one who's going to write our plan (!)” — the answer stays: that depends on whose plan one is talking about. The group does the work. The facilitator makes it easy. Facile, not futile.

A closing thought

Geary walks metaphor through the world a chapter at a time — thought, etymology, money, mind, advertising, brain, body, politics, pleasure, children, science, innovation, psychology. Read this account as the chapter his list still misses: metaphor and IT.

This account has, at every stage, described metaphor using metaphor. Thrown, placed, grasped, woven, carried across. No way existed to write it otherwise. No way exists to facilitate otherwise either. The honest position for a facilitator: standing inside the same condition as everyone else in the room — not outside metaphor, correcting a group's illusions from some clear vantage point. Simply better, through practice, at feeling where the thread was woven and where the stone was thrown. And at asking, out loud: who agreed to this? And does one still?

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