



Kaleidoscopes, Jazz, and Rivers: Alternative Metaphors for “General” Education

Stephen Biscotte and Paul Hanstedt • May 8, 2023

“The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius.”

—Aristotle, *Poetics*

“Gen Ed is crap.”

—Student, senior exit survey

General education has a PR problem. No one gets excited about generalities. The very name denotes vagueness and connotes boredom.

There are, of course, other things wrong with general education: it can be poorly taught, foisted on faculty with the [least experience](#) or more interested in advanced studies in a narrowly defined major; it can be poorly designed, trapped in a never-ending cycle of [turf wars](#). Done well, of course, it can be majestic, even transformative (Biscotte, 2015); we all know people who've found their passions after enrolling in a required course. But even then, gen ed has an uphill battle: no one wakes up in the morning and thinks, *Today, my goal is to be more general*.

Some of the other language related to gen ed is equally problematic. There's at least one school in Tennessee whose board has told it to avoid the terms "liberal arts" and "liberal education" because, well . . . you know. Some schools refer to their general ed programs as a "core," but as often as not, the term—originally used to indicate a list of tightly scripted universal requirements—now signifies a broad menu of only vaguely related courses (O'Banion, 328). Consequently, the molten center of necessary learning upon which our civilization rests often seems more like the inedible part of the apple, mindlessly discarded after we've consumed all the tasty (read: major) bits. The major, meanwhile, doesn't suffer the same PR challenge; after all, it's *major*!

Of course, we all know that general education is important because, without it, none of us will be "well rounded." Another deeply motivating concept. A clear call to action . . . and . . . honestly, does anyone even know what that phrase *means*? And don't get us started on the idea that gen ed is all about exposure. Anywhere you take that metaphor, you end up in a bad place.

What something is called matters. Even if we set aside higher education's obsession with "branding," we're all aware that words land heavily. Students understand on a resonant, visceral level the difference between an "opportunity" and a "requirement." And they respond accordingly. So, incidentally, do instructors. Walk into a room carrying the sense that the course we're about to teach merely lays the "foundation" for more advanced work, and that will have consequences for how we teach, how we assess, how we think of our students. As for the students themselves, they will, apparently, complete 16 weeks of strenuous effort in an unfamiliar field, only to walk away having simply laid a slab of concrete. Is that our goal? Really?

With all this in mind, we tried an experiment. At the American Association of Colleges and Universities Conference on General Education, Pedagogy, and Assessment in San Diego in 2022, we asked attendees to propose alternative metaphors for general education: How did they see it? How *could* they see it? How would they *like* to see it?

The list that was generated was long and deep. At the more obvious end, it included words and phrases such as "a toolkit," "the tip of the iceberg," "open doors," and "pathways." At the more exotic end? Well, what comes to mind when you think of university education as

- a prism;
- jazz;
- the night's sky, with no light pollution;
- a kaleidoscope;

- a river;
- cooking without a recipe;
- finding the why;
- the aurora borealis;
- a spiderweb;
- the Feast of Seven Fishes;
- a playful romp; or
- the Hubble telescope?

Let's take arguably one of the lightest, simplest, some would say even most frivolous of these suggestions: "a playful romp." It's doubtful that you will see this in your program mission statement with the current tireless call for skills-focused career development. But professionals understand this. They unleash creativity and outside-the-box thinking as they explore, try and fail, and "play" in the sandboxes of their fields. They have fun. And they grow. Students need the same opportunity to pursue joy wherever it may take them—and indeed, where it takes them might well end up being their career.

Or consider general education as a kaleidoscope. Students should have opportunities to see and experience the world differently. To take some new raw materials and familiar colors and shuffle, collide, connect into new patterns . . . and repeat. It's disorienting and uncomfortable (even nauseating?) before it reveals its beauty and understanding just before it jumbles again.

If general education is jazz, then it is *not* a set menu or recipe. There is room for improvisation and exploration for the instructor as well as the students. There is an intentional curriculum but with flexibility for teachable moments and impromptu inquiry. Learning outcomes are (and we know we're mixing our metaphors here) guardrails, not speed limits. You can hear and feel the history, culture, science, and expression fusing into a shared sound. Sure, some students may ask for and seek out "pop songs" (read: easy As) with the familiar melodies and earworm hooks of their Spotify playlists, but that's exactly why we must challenge them with the unfamiliar, the syncopated, the chromatic, the polyrhythmic, or the avant-garde.

Picture this: the student as spider, spinning a web that connects all the disparate fragments of their educational experience. Their web seeks to reconcile the natural with the man-made, the beautiful with the pragmatic, failure with resilience. They are capturing and devouring new knowledge, new perspectives, and the new skills they came to higher education to find (whether they know it yet or not). It's a brutal image, yes, but also invigorating, dynamic, engaged—and engaging.

Or a more innocuous metaphor: general education as a river. Here, gen ed is an ecosystem of the living and nonliving, struggling against the current or being swept away, recognizing all that has come before and moving thoughtfully toward what can't yet be known. We can dam up the wonder into neat tidy textbooks and siloed disciplinary pools. Or we can unleash our students' power to shape, mold, and amaze. Once they—and we—stop avoiding the rapids and waterfalls, all of us can go over the edge, struggle, succumb, struggle some more . . . and come up gasping for air, forever changed. And then we continue to move forward.

Of course, every metaphor breaks down at some point. That's just their nature—metaphors are not the thing, but a clarification of the thing. Nevertheless, they matter. And the alternative metaphors we've included here take general education well beyond images of meaningless checklists and concrete slabs. They conjure opportunities for joy and growth, struggle and wonder. They urge students to participate not as passive objects shaped by programmatic whimsy but as active agents in their own lives, building a multistory understanding of self and the world.

Like gazing upon the aurora borealis or a clear night sky, students should experience a sense of wonder and awe in their academic pursuits and their place in the universe.

And so should we.

References

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