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Versions of research works

The Mountains of Metaphor: a visual teaching resource

Association of Law Teachers Blog Post DRAFT

Have you ever supervised a researcher, knew they were struggling, but weren't quite sure why? Maybe they didn't want to share personal matters? Maybe there was a cultural divide, or they were just private? This blog post won't solve all your problems, but it might give you one tool for communicating differently with research students.

The Mountains of Metaphor project was written from the other side of the equation, from the perspective of a research student. It is a visual narrative of my PhD journey, developing a metaphor that I found kind, supportive, and helpful for keeping a sense of perspective and focus on what was, at times, a tough journey. You can read a bit more about why I created the piece here, and how it speaks to reflective and autoethnographic accounts of doing research. This post is slightly different. This is about *how* you can use the metaphor and the resource to communicate with PGRs, or any students, about their research, progress, ambitions, and other life events without the conversation needing to become too personal.

What is it?

Well, the resource is actually an online interactive game developed for Emily Allbon's TLDR site. Tldr.legal explores how we can make law more accessible and engaging through visual media. My project, the Mountains of Metaphor, applies this approach to my experiences of undertaking a PhD. There's a map with signpost hotspots, and clicking on each signpost takes you to a different digital painting of different views of my journey with narrative expanding the metaphor. Howard Richardson put it all together and added the magic of interactive web design, and voiceover artist Tegan Harris brought the narrative to life.

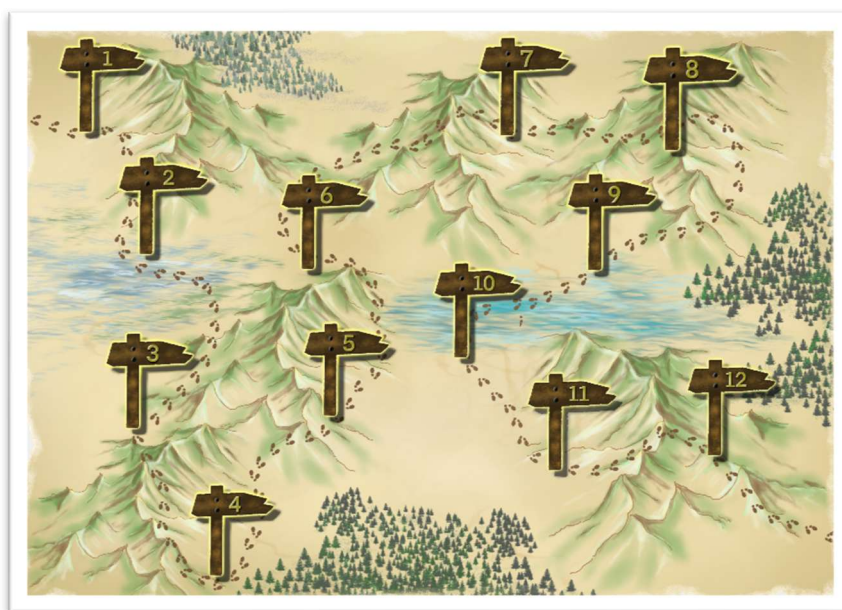*Figure 1: The Mountains of Metaphor is an online, interactive game. Each signpost hotspot takes you a different view from my PhD journey. Copyright Clare Williams, reproduced here with the kind permission of tl;dr.legal*

Ok, so what does it do?

It visualises my metaphorical journey of getting a PhD. Sometimes the going was good, and I could enjoy beautiful views, glorious sunsets, and full days climbing mountains and trekking through forests, generally making progress. Other times were tough, and I was caught out in storms, avalanches, and landslides. There were times when I got stuck in swamps, when I was lost in forests, and couldn't even see the mountain I was trying to climb. But the metaphor allowed me step back, ask where I was in the (metaphorical) landscape, ask what I could see, and then decide what I needed to do. Sometimes the only feasible answer was to hunker down, put up a tent, retreat inside, and wait for the storm to pass. But the metaphor meant that I stayed in my landscape. I might not be actively climbing the mountain, but I could still see it. I could plot out a new course while I was resting.
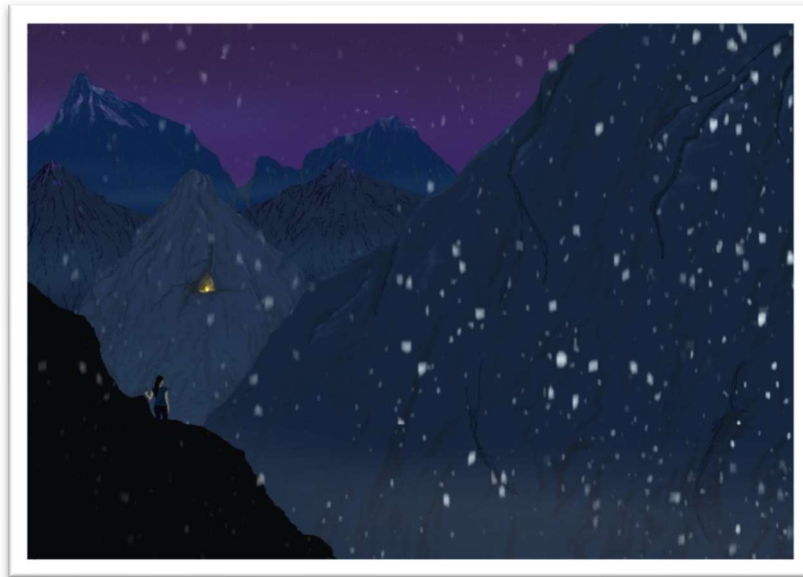

Figure 2: Sometimes the going was tough, but having a supportive working metaphor kept me focused. Copyright Clare Williams, reproduced here with kind permission of tl;dr.legal

Why should I take a look?

There are two immediate uses. A visual map of a research journey can be a helpful way of discussing the progression of a project clearly and concisely. For this, ask your student to download the blank map and elements included in the supplementary materials on the Mountains of Metaphor site and create their own metaphorical landscape. They can either use the map elements included, or they can draw their own. Artistic skill is not the aim of the game here, but rather communicating a journey.

Figure 3:Map elements and the blank "map" in the supplementary materials mean that your students can map out their own research journeys, noting the pitfalls along the way, but keeping their eventual goals firmly in sight. Copyright Clare Williams, reproduced here with the kind permission of TL;DR.legal

Then prompt them with some of the following questions:

Where are their start and finish points?

What is their trajectory, past and future?

Where are the hazards in their landscape and how will they approach these?

Where are the opportunities?

Can they create their own metaphorical language for talking about their research journey in a way that they can share with you?

Then, having mapped out their research project, ask them to pinpoint where they are in that landscape. Do you agree? Do you share the same understanding of their progress and direction? Can you see other issues or opportunities that they might encounter?

Figure 4: A metaphorical map of progress can be a great way of checking that you both have the same understanding of how the research is progressing. Copyright Clare Williams, reproduced here with kind permission of tl;dr.legal

Having a working metaphor up and running before any crisis strikes can be helpful later on, in the same way that "a stitch in time saves nine". You may have a research student who doesn't want to share details of their private life. They may be facing huge adversities at home, but don't wish to bring these to work with them. This metaphor, if shared, can offer an indirect way of communicating that doesn't need to be personal. It also offers a way for researchers to communicate about their respective journeys with each other, sharing experiences, and offering peer support in the process.

What's next?

Based on feedback, and working with TL;DR, I would like to develop the Mountains of Metaphor as a shared resource for research students and their supervisors. We'd love to know what works for you, and what doesn't. Why not send us a postcard?

Dr Clare Williams