Communicating Technical Ideas
To a Non-Technical Audience
Metaphor

• What is a metaphor?
• What metaphors have been added to the popular IT lexicon recently?
• What metaphors are you dealing with in your scope of work?
• What other meaning(s) of the word does the metaphor borrow from?
Metaphors can be graphical

• What is this?
Icon Metaphors

• What is this?

• What is this?
Icon Metaphors

• Hourglass

• Shiva's Drum

• The sui (needle) became a damru (Shiva's drum) when the "thing" (computer) was doing something.
Evaluating metaphors

• Useful
  – Is there a need for it?
• Clearly understood
  – Is it rooted in common understanding?
• Close
  – Is the inference simple?
• Clarifies the target
  – Does it make the concept clearer?
• Acceptable
  – Not annoying or offensive?
• Economical
  – Brief, succinct?
• Memorable
  – Easy to remember?
Which characteristic did it break?

- Useful?
- Clearly understood?
- Close?
- Clarifies the target?
- Acceptable?
- Economical?
- Memorable?
Communicating Technical Ideas...

1) OBSERVE:
- What questions or misunderstandings might a non-technical person have about the concept?
- What problems might they run into?
- Where could they get stuck in planning, managing, or sustaining a solution in terms of this concept?

2) SYNTHESIZE:
- From a technical perspective, how would you define the concept? (Try to define it in your own terms, without Google or Wikipedia.)
- What are the relevant design and implementation issues / tradeoffs / problems?

3) DESIGN COMMUNICATION:
- Explain the concept using NO technical jargon. (Write as if for someone with no formal technical background.)
- Use analogies, metaphors, physical models or other means to get across the concepts.

Why bother?
Why bother?

• For your client
• For you:
  – Synthesize IT knowledge
  – Build skills to communicate with non-technical colleagues
  – Good for interviews
  • A Bank of America interview question: “Discuss a situation where you had to describe a complex technical problem to a non-technical person.”
Communicating Technical Ideas...

• We will focus on DESIGN:
  – Explain the concept using NO technical jargon.
  – Use analogies, metaphors, physical models or other means to get across the concepts.

• What technical concepts did you explain?
  – Group them
    • Topics beyond the list?
  – Present
Evaluating metaphors

- Useful?
- Clearly understood?
- Close?
- Clarifies the target?
- Acceptable?
- Economical?
- Memorable?