FORUM

How to Develop Students' Imaginations

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ABSTRACT: This paper will present a somewhat counter-intuitive argument on the way we may take imagination seriously in our educational practice; I will argue that the development of students' imaginative capacities is likely to be done by intensive study of specific details, rather than by so-called imaginative activities that are fun but lack rigor and content.

Introduction

In this paper, I will make a somewhat counter-intuitive argument on the way we may take imagination seriously in our educational practice; I will argue that *imaginative* education – the kind of education that not only engages students' imaginations but also contributes to the achievement of such crucial educational values as understanding, critical thought, and moral sensitivity – is likely to be done by intensive study of specific details, rather than by so-called imaginative activities that are fun but lack rigor and content.

The kind of problems that I will be speaking of below do not seem to apply to such extensive academic works on imagination and education as Egan (1992), Greene (1995), and Johnson (1993). However, I frequently find these problems in casual conversations, semi-academic articles, and conference presentations in which above-mentioned works are commonly referred to. I observe that, in such instances, imaginative education tends to be understood to mean, first, the abundant use of fun activities, and second, the abundant use of visualization and dramatization.

Concepts can be, when used well, a powerful tool of analysis – they expand our critical and imaginative capacities. They can, however, mislead and confuse us when used without due analysis, and we could end up with slogans which merely stir up emotional reactions without providing clear insight. In order not to make the concept of imagination another educational slogan, I will point out some of the problems with the popular versions of imaginative education.

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Why Specific Details?

Let me start my argument by asking a question; Do you think it important for us to have imaginations?

I bet that most of the readers will answer in the affirmative.

Then, what about this one? In what area(s) do you want to be imaginative, or, if you are a teacher, in what area(s) do you want your students to be imaginative?

My hunch is that some readers would feel somewhat perplexed. A response from those perplexed by the question may be a counter-question whether imagination is tied down to a specific area.

If my hunch is correct, I think that this is one of the problems we need to be concerned about. Many educators who think that imagination is important for education have a problem in the way they understand the nature of the concept, which in turn produces a misguided educational practice. The problematic assumption is the understanding of imagination as a general or generic capacity.

The Language of Imagination

We sometimes say that some people have stronger imaginations than others, or that children have more imagination than adults. Then, for example, people who believe that children have imaginations more abundantly make an educational argument that schools should not constrain their imaginations by imposing rigid practice or standardized content and method of education.

Here, I need to draw the reader's attention to the fact that imagination is commonly mentioned in the form of a *noun*, and that, consequently, it is discussed as if it is a thing or a substance.

It may be justified to say that someone *has* more vivid imagination than others, but I believe that we need to be careful not to be fooled by the way we speak of it. We may have imagination but we do not have it in the same sense as we have muscles or organs. Imagination is a concept which various people use in order to describe some aspects of our mental lives. While there are some shared grounds in understanding what imagination is or what it means, the shared grounds are much more amorphous than many people assume. Engell (1999) in his historical study of the concept of imagination writes that the concept of imagination is like a coral reef; the idea spread from various centres and merged to cover a vast area (p. 3).

We may be able to agree on the definition of imagination, for example, by consulting a dictionary. A dictionary may define imagination as a capacity to envision something that is absent, but this definition can imply a whole lot of things (what is the nature of things envisioned? – mental pictures? ideas?), and leave out a lot of meanings (Is imagination only a capacity? Does it not include something like a mood or an attitude?)

Because imagination is typically mentioned as a noun, people are led to think in the following way. Those who have *imagination* can do some *imaginative* work or can come up with *imaginative* ideas; for example, an artist who has vivid *imagination* can produce *imaginative* paintings. The language of imagination we commonly use is to think of the adjectival form (imaginative) as the derivative of the noun (imagination); therefore, we tend to assume that having imagination is the cause of doing something imaginative. We end up thinking that there is a causal power, that is imagination in us, which is comparable to having a stomach as a cause of digestive function. The implication of this way of thinking to educational practice is a belief that once we release, invigorate, or develop the imagination of the students, they can use it in any field or context. The popular forms of imaginative education, the use of fun activities and the use of vivid images, are the consequences of this line of thinking.

Imagination and Knowledge

Another way to consider the nature of imagination is to ask a question whether, say, an imaginative artist can always be an imaginative teacher of art. Some people can produce what would justifiably be regarded as imaginative, but not all of them would turn out to be equally imaginative in communicating their skill or thought. Therefore, we have to ask how general or context/content-specific one's imaginativeness is. One can be imaginative in cooking, but the same person can be least imaginative in writing a poem.

What I am trying to get at is that imaginativeness requires knowledge or skill that is largely specific to the field of activity. Artistic creation and teaching about artistic creation require somewhat different sets of expertise, and a part of such expertise is content knowledge. This is another reason why I think that imagination is to a large extent specific to the field of activity. This is why I believe that the contentless so-called imaginative education is a dangerous practice.

One of the most common claims among those who think imagination is important for education is that children are imaginative (or more imaginative than adults). This claim is, on the one hand, justifiable to some extent, but it is, on the other hand, misleading.

I think that imaginativeness (for an aesthetic reason I usually use the term imagination) is a composite of various traits, and child-like uninhibitedness is a very important part of it. So, to the extent that children are, generally speaking, uninhibited compared to adults, I think it justifiable to call them imaginative. As they grow up, socialized and schooled, many of them lose it along with such other traits as lively curiosity which children seem to have more abundantly than adults. To keep these childlike characteristics alive is one of the crucial tasks for educators, but they have other tasks too, one of which is to make children's imaginations as an integral part of such educational values as social, scientific, and aesthetic understanding, by allowing and encouraging them to experience rich cultural resources. Children's imaginations and, say, Einstein's imagination may share some common ground but they are not the same; the latter's imagination is supported by deep and extensive understanding of the subject. Einstein may have disliked schools and many instances of instruction in academic subjects may be stifling to possible Einsteins, but it does not mean that schooling cannot be improved, or that intellectual, moral, and aesthetic content of schooling is irrelevant to the development of imaginative capacities.

Arts, Fun Activities, and Imaginative Development

Many supporters of imaginative education emphasize the use of fun activities, particularly the use of artistic or creative activities. The problem is that when fun activities are claimed to engage students' imaginations and employed in academic lessons, such activities tend to be separated from the content of the subject.

The use of fun activities as an instructional method (for developing students' imaginations) implies a similar rhetoric with so-called faculty psychology in the 18th and the 19th centuries. Faculty psychology assumed that the human mind consisted of several distinct powers or faculties, such as memory, judgment, and imagination, and that the task for education was assumed to train students' faculties so that they would be utilized later in various contexts (the ideas of mental discipline and of transfer of learning). With regard to the training of the faculties, people did not think that the acquisition of content knowledge matters; for example, mathematics was encouraged in order to train the faculty

of reasoning, and studies in history were justified because it was believed to train the faculty of memory. Today's rhetoric of using fun activities in order to develop children's imaginations is based on a similar assumption; it assumes that once imagination is developed, by whatever means or with whatever contents, the student will be able to use it later in other contexts. Just like, say, mathematics sharpens the mind, fun or artistic activities are claimed to release students' imaginations. Thus the following examples:

Example 1: In an article titled, "Art Education Means Business" (1994), Carol Sterling writes:

> Art education builds the skills businesses need in their employees. The world of work has changed dramatically in the last two decades. Routinized behavior is out, and the ability to adapt, diagnose problems, and find creative solutions – even at the most basic levels of production and service delivery – is now crucial. (n.p.)

Then, she continues that the "skills" which businesses these days need, and art education can build, are "how to imagine and how to apply [the] imaginations to real business problems." This argument seems to overlook the distinction between art and business, and also is not explicit or clear about what imagination means.

Example 2: In her article on *BBC Education Online*, Brenda Casey (n.d.) says:

> Very young children are fascinated by their fingers and toes. Old favourites like "Two Little Dicky Birds," "Round and Round the Garden," and "This Little Piggy" are guaranteed ways of engaging the imagination.

She concludes the article by saying, "Remember, the child whose imagination is fulfilled will grow to be resourceful and creative adult."

Though she says that "imagination is not something that children are born with" (and hence need education), what her view virtually implies does not differ from such a view as faculty psychology which

assumes that we have the power of imagination that awaits to be developed or released.

I do not think that the development of creativity (whatever she means by it) is guaranteed by fulfilling the child's imagination (as she conceives it). The question to ask is whether there is such a person who is imaginative in general.

A Warning Against the Use of Image

Some educators seem to use fun activities because they assume that academic subjects are not intrinsically engaging; others seem to overuse visualization and dramatization because they doubt students' capacity for understanding through careful examination of data and information.

I think it a bit dangerous to use images too abundantly or too easily. The use of visual materials sometimes helps students better than mere text reading or lecturing; for example, for ESL students, the use of visual aids such as TV is much more efficient than reading texts, or using dictionaries. Many other contents that need to be taught in classrooms, however, are too complex to be understood readily by the use of images. For example, it might be important to have some image of what the Japanese did in Asia during the World War II, but if the image is fixed on a few pieces of pictures that happened to be found in the textbook, it is too simplistic and dangerous as an instance of historical understanding.

If we as teachers want to develop students' historical knowledge, understanding, and imagination, the process of instruction for such a purpose must be done more carefully. Images may catch students' attention more readily than teachers' chalk and talk, and pictures may enrich information which, without them, would seem somewhat lifeless. However, we should bear in mind that visual presentations of the material can be positively misleading when used without caution.

Imagining and imaging are different. Imaginative education is not the same as *providing* images abundantly to students; it should rather mean to enable students to *construct* their own images and interpretations of the content being dealt with in the class. If the use of images fixates the students' image or interpretation of the content, the teaching method would be very unimaginative.

Some General Comments

In many cases besides the examples above, imaginative educational practices seem to me to be "dumbing" down of students. Teachers sometimes resort to catchy images because they doubt students' capacities for understanding, sustained attention, and imaginative grasp of complicated information. When they do this, they are also disrespectful of the intrinsic use and pleasure that various subjects can offer.

To respect students' intelligence, imagination, and so forth does not mean that they are knowledgeable or imaginative enough as they are. The respect rather means to me an acknowledgment of the students' potential; a potential for the development of their imaginative capacities closely associated with the acquisition of cultural tools human beings have developed over a long period of time – mathematics, history, natural sciences, fine arts, and language arts.

It is true that academic subjects are taught poorly in many classes for various reasons, but it does not necessarily mean that they are inevitably meaningless or uninteresting.

To question the legitimacy of including a subject or a topic, say to have history classes constructed from dominant culture's perspective, is a different issue. If history is one of the powerful intellectual tools for understanding the world and ourselves, it is a misguided path to historical understanding and historical imagination to use fun activities that have little to do with acquiring historical content, bypassing the torturous process of examining seemingly incoherent historical data by resorting too easily to vivid images.

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