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Ron Norman
Castlegar, British Columbia, Canada

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Ron Norman
Castlegar, British Columbia, Canada

Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of imagination in teaching and learning, and to explore how Kieran Egan's (1992) concept of "imaginative learning" contributes to adult education theory and practice.*

Introduction

The poet Archibald MacLeish (Williams, 1970, p.887) once commented at the height of the Cold War that the "real crisis" facing modern society wasn't nuclear holocaust, but the demise of imagination:

> To me – not many others think so – the real crisis in the life of our society is the crisis of the life of the imagination. Far more than we need an intercontinental missile or a moral rearmament or a religious revival, we need to come alive again, to recover the virility of the imagination on which all earlier civilizations have been based: Coleridge's 'synthetic and magical power' by which 'the whole soul of man' may be brought to activity and knowledge may be known.

Nearly 35 years later, Kieran Egan (1992) echoes MacLeish. However, the focus of Egan's concern is not society, but education. Egan argues that educators are not doing enough to foster imagination in students, that imagination has been relegated to the dusty cloakroom at the back of the educational classroom. Just as significantly, the failure to stimulate and develop the imagination in teaching and learning shapes education theory and practice. "So much of the focus on students' cognition is in terms of logico-mathematical skills that our very concept of education becomes affected," Egan says (1992, p.5).

In this paper I will examine the role of imagination in education and explore a framework for developing what Egan calls "imaginative learning" (1992, p. 53). I will also set out how imaginative learning fits within the broader goals of adult education. As well, I will identify and discuss potential problems with imaginative learning. Finally, I will look at imaginative learning's place within a philosophy of practice.

The Role of Imagination in Education

Egan contends that developing imagination is crucial in education. The question that must be asked is: why? There are a whole range of reasons. For instance, imagination helps transcend conventional thinking, or as Karen Hanson (1988, p. 138) writes: "Imagination is what allows us to envision possibilities in or beyond the actualities in which we are immersed." Imagination is the ability to consciously conceive of the unconventional, or, to paraphrase Coleridge, it is thinking unsubdued by habit and unshackled by custom. Imagination is also closely connected with creativity. Immanual Kant ([1790] 1952, p. 134) notes: "The imagination is a powerful agent for creating as it were a second nature out of the material supplied to it by actual nature." Then there is the role imagination plays in the development of what Brian Sutton-Smith (1988, p. 22) calls the "narrative concern". Sutton-Smith claims that people make sense of the world and of our experiences in narratives and that we recall items in narrative structures better than in logically-organized lists. Imagination is not only a vital component in the composition of narratives, but also in understanding narratives. As Northrup Frye (1963, p. 49) points out: "The art of listening to stories is a basic training for the imagination."

Egan has his own reasons for promoting imagination's importance in education. One is that imagination plays a key role in the learning process. There is a view common in both society at large and in the education system that the human mind is a sort of computer in which information is stored for later retrieval, such as on a test. Egan writes: "This has been going on so long and so ubiquitously in schools that the meaning of learning that is most common is this kind of mechanical storage and re-

trieval" (p. 50). Egan argues, and I agree, that the human mind does not work in the same way as a computer and that our memories are quite unlike computer "memories":

> The human mind does not simply store facts discretely when it learns. Perhaps it *can* do this, and we might occasionally use this capacity to remember a phone number or a shopping list in the absence of a piece of paper. More typically when we learn even the simplest fact – that Vasco de Gama set off from Lisbon to sail to Africa in 1497 or that spiders have eight legs – we do not simply lodge these as discrete data in our brains. When learned, they mix in with the complex of shifting emotions, memories, intentions, and so on that constitute our mental lives . . .Whether and *how* we learn and retain these particular facts is affected by the complex of meaning structures we already have in place, which in turn are affected by our emotions, intentions, and so on. (p. 50)

The point is that almost nothing emerges from human memory in the same form that it was initially learned. All kinds of associations are made with each new fact or bit of data, and these associations are constantly shifting and blending, being constructed, taken apart and reconstructed. And imagination is a crucial part of that process.

Another reason why Egan believes imagination is vital to education is related to Sutton-Smith's idea of the "narrative concern": imagination helps provide meaning to experience and understanding to knowledge. MacLeish makes this point when he says that imagination is important, in part, because it is how "knowledge may be known"(p.887). In other words, it provides understanding that goes beyond facts. Though he doesn't call it "logico-mathematical" thinking (as does Egan), MacLeish is clearly critical of the trend toward thinking that relies solely, or even heavily, on facts: "We are deluged with facts, but we have lost, or are losing, our human ability to feel them. Which means that we have lost or are losing our ability to comprehend the facts of our experience. . ." (p. 887).

Egan makes a similar point when he says that education--by which he means the formal process of teaching and learning within an established structure--is not only about the accumulation of knowledge, but also about the meaning that knowledge has for the individual. He argues that what is absent from what he calls the "neo-conservative curriculum", which stresses knowing a lot, is "attention to, and a clear sense of, how knowledge becomes meaningful in the lives of learners; how we can ensure that students engage, in the sense I am developing the phrase here, in *imaginative learning*" (p.53). Teaching and learning which ignores the imagination--or what Egan calls "imaginative learning"--ignores a central component that will help learners to make meaning of their experience. Put another way, ensuring that knowledge and skills are meaningful requires engaging the imagination in the process of learning.

A Framework for Developing Imaginative Learning

Egan provides a framework, or model, to help teachers plan lessons or units in such a way that students' imaginations will most likely be engaged. However, the framework refrains from establishing learning objectives. Rather, taking a cue from Sutton-Smith's emphasis on the narrative, the curriculum is set within a narrative structure. Egan (p. 64) points to the primary role that narrative can play in making meaning of experience:

> The development of the narrative capacities of the mind, of its ready use of metaphor, of its integration of cognitive and affective, of its sense-making and meaning-making, and of its overarching imagination, is of educational importance because these capacities are so central to our general capacity to make meaning out of our experience.

Barbara Hardy (1968, p. 5) goes even further in detailing narrative's role in individual lives: "We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate and live by narrative." The development of the "narrative concern" is, arguably, educationally relevant to any teaching practice. (By narrative, I don't mean fictional narrative, but rather the narrative shaping of content).

The narrative, then, forms the basis for the framework. But what must be included within this narrative? Certainly, we must include characteristics that engage learners' imaginations. Egan sug-

gests several, among them: transcendent human qualities that are central to the topic (and the affective images they evoke) such as romance, wonder, awe, heroism, revolt and idealism. Egan then suggests pursuing the content through details and by humanizing the knowledge. All are designed to stimulate the learners' imaginative lives

Egan's concept of imaginative learning is not without flaws. The paramount problem for teachers of adult learners is its focus on students within the Kindergarten to Grade 12 education system. In particular, Egan structures his planning model for teachers of students aged eight to 15. The question that those in adult education must ask is: can the model serve adult learners? Egan acknowledges that adult learners and adolescent students are not the same: "As the imagination goes through age- and experience-related changes, so too do the characteristics of the narratives that students find engaging" (p. 71).

Clearly, there are differences between the way an eight-year-old responds to narratives and the way a 48-year-old responds to narratives; differences based on age and experience; and differences not just of degree, but of kind. For instance, the eight-year-old is still in the early stages of forming and shaping meaning, while the 48-year-old may have many meaning-structures already in place. As well, developments in literacy bring with them other intellectual tools for making sense of knowledge and of experience – tools like analysis, reflection and reason.

However, such differences do not negate the value of imaginative learning, with its meaning-making capacities. Nor do such differences negate the role that narrative can play for adult learners. Rather, teachers of adult learners have to ensure that they construct narratives with characteristics that will engage their students. That may require some experimentation. And though the framework has been structured to engage the imaginations of younger students, it can still make a valuable contribution to adult education.

The Role of Imaginative Learning in Adult Education

That contribution may be glimpsed, in part, in imaginative learning's capacity for meaning-making. As Stephen Brookfield (1986), Jurgen Habermas (1971) and Jack Mezirow (1990) point

out, meaning-making is a crucial element of adult education.

Brookfield says one of the goals of adult education is assisting learners in the creation and re-creation of their worlds:

It is likely that most facilitators will sooner or later fall unthinkingly into patterns of facilitation that supports structures of organizational convenience and confirm learners' patterns of dependency learned in the school classroom but have little to do with assisting adults to create, and re-create, their personal, occupational, and political worlds. (1986, p. 297)

Brookfield's comments are remarkably like those of the poet MacLeish. In fact, MacLeish uses the very same word – "re-create" – to describe imagination's role in helping people to understand the world about them when he says that imagination provides a "re-creation, in terms of human comprehension, of the world we have" (p. 887).

Mezirow (1990) also points to the role of meaning and understanding in adult education. He defines adult education as a process of reflection and action, adding:

From this vantage point, adult education becomes the process of assisting those who are fulfilling adult roles to understand the meaning of their experience by participating more fully and freely in rational discourse to validate expressed ideas and to take action upon the resulting insights . . . Rational thought and action are cardinal goals of adult education. (p. 354)

Again, one of the key reasons for teaching imaginative learning is to give meaning to experience and understanding to knowledge.

As well, Habermas (1971) identifies meaning-making as a key to adult learning. He describes three types of knowledge that are critical to adult learning: instrumental knowledge, practical knowledge and emancipatory knowledge. His definition of practical knowledge refers to making meaning of knowledge.

Patricia Cranton (1996) points out that all three forms of knowledge are valid and necessary. However, like Egan, she says that instrumental knowl-

edge has been pervasively applied to inappropriate domains, such as adult education: "For adult educators, there is important instrumental knowledge, and we should not trivialize this. On the other hand, what we cannot do is view all of learning about teaching as the acquisition of instrumental knowledge" (p. 21).

Imaginative learning clearly has a role to play in developing meaning, which is in turn a key element of adult education. But imaginative learning can also play a crucial part in two other aspects of adult education: critical reflection and transformative learning. Cranton notes that the components of Brookfield's critical thinking are: "identifying and challenging assumptions, exploring and imagining alternatives, and analysis and action" (1996, p. 80). The ability to identify and challenge assumptions involves stepping outside conventional thinking, which is clearly the domain of imagination, as Hanson (1988) indicates. But even more directly connected to imaginative learning is the component that Brookfield calls "imagining alternatives", which requires that people "break with existing patterns of thought and action" (1987, p. 117). Cranton says this feature is "one of the characteristics of critical reflection that makes it central to transformative learning" (p. 91). She also suggests how adult learners might go about "imagining alternatives". All of the suggestions involve the imagination. For instance, she suggests (paraphrasing Brookfield):

> Immersion in an aesthetic or artistic experience can lead to imagining alternatives, especially for people who normally think in linear problem-solving ways. Brookfield (1987) suggests writing poetry, creating fantasies, drawing, photography, songwriting, and dramatizing problems or situations as some media for stimulating imagination of alternatives. (p. 91)

It is plain that imagination is a key part of critical reflection, which in turn is central to transformative learning.

Imaginative learning is connected to adult education practice in Egan's (1992) comment that engaging students' imaginations is not simply a matter of technique. Teachers must themselves be imaginatively engaged:

No doubt someone could, as it were, fill in the blanks by answering the framework's questions in a routine and dull way. But the call on teachers to construct affective images requires primarily that they vivify their own *feelings* with regard to the subject matter. This framework cannot be adequately used if planning is seen solely as a conceptual task; it has to be *also* an affective task. (p. 113)

The problem for many teachers is that we are not sufficiently attentive to our own feelings with regard to the subject matter. We are often unaware of the affective images. Too commonly, we focus on the concepts or the content that we want to get across to students. Becoming better attuned to the affective components of our subject matter is clearly an area of professional development that deserves further exploration[1]. Egan even suggests that learning how to engage students' imaginations should have a "central place in teacher-preparation programs" (p. 114).

If engaging the imagination is to be more than a skill or technique, and if teachers themselves are to be imaginatively engaged, then imaginative learning requires a place within a teacher's overall philosophy of practice. Cranton (1992) and Brookfield (1986) suggest that educators develop a broader view of professional practice. This broader view should include an awareness of the educator's own philosophy and beliefs about working with learners. Brookfield writes: "Technique is, after all, only a means to broader ends" (1986, p. 289). And Cranton points out that if adult educators accept, even in part, that transformative learning for emancipatory education is the business of all adult educators, then "we must go beyond techniques--or minimally, we must think about and question the techniques we use and the bases for them" (1992, p. 3-4). That said, I believe that teachers need to understand why they are using imaginative learning and how it fits within their own practice.

Summary

I have tried to show the contribution that Egan's idea of "imaginative learning" can make to adult education theory and practice. In particular, I have explored how imaginative learning relates to several key concepts in adult education, such as making meaning out of experience and knowledge, critical

reflection, and transformative learning. This does not mean that there are still not problems with Egan's framework, which is designed for younger learners. However, it is clear that the concept of imaginative learning fits well within the sphere of adult education.

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