

THE TIMES AND IMAGINAL EDUCATION

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I saw a television program recently on "Models." It illustrated the amazing degree of accuracy that models can have today due to the kind of technology available to mankind. The first model they discussed was one of what the space probe Mariner would see as it flew past Jupiter. With the aid of computers, and highly developed telescopes, a visual image had been compiled to approximate what cameras on the Mariner spacecraft would send back to earth when it finally flew by Jupiter. This approximation had been created more than a year before Mariner got to Jupiter. When Mariner's actual photographs and the year-old computer image were compared, there was almost no difference in them. They looked like the same picture, one just a bit less clear than the other. The narrator went on to say that models, which is what the computer image was, function in exactly the same way the large-scale reality will, only on a smaller scale. They allow you to see what will happen. They allow us to minimize risk in such ventures as space probes, and to maximize the learnings. I experienced wide-eyed amazement in watching that program, and realized that not a great number of things have the capacity to do that to me these days.

This seems significant because my reactions are probably like the reactions of other staff members of Training, Inc. But they are not the reactions most of our students will experience. At times I think our response to experience in life is as different as my experience of seeing the first man walk on the moon was from that of the children watching television with me. I was glued to my chair for hours, and wouldn't have left the television set for anything; the children quickly grew bored and asked when it would be over.

When your concern is how to make students employable, you have to be "inside" of, but also detached from the issues of their current situation. What does that situation look like? I want to use three articles to describe it. The first is in a computer magazine, and it talks about the semi-automated and the fully automated office. The article was pointing out that the day of full automation is just around the corner, and now big computer manufacturers have entered the market in an effort to outsell the small makers of office equipment. If you aren't training students for that kind of office, you aren't training them for the world in which they have to live. A second article is from Psychology Today, and is on a new book by Daniel Yankelovitch called New Rules. The title of the review, which takes up almost half the magazine, an unusual thing in itself, is "Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down."

The article talks about the changing family style, the new attitude toward work, the relationship to the business setting that is so new. They talk about the cultural revolution we in North America have undergone. They list the characteristics of what has happened to us, one of which is the breadth of the change. It encompasses the full sweep of American life, the private space of our inner lives, the semi-public space of our lives within the family, at work, at school, at church, and in our neighborhoods; and in the public space of our lives as citizens. The "semi-public" space is where we get involved with students. The second characteristic they call the self-fulfillment contradiction. They say that the goals of Americans seeking self-fulfillment out of the last decade or so are paradoxically fulfilled; the very ways people are seeking self-fulfillment these days are self-denying or self-contradicting. It's as if a person trying to get something gets on a treadmill, suddenly they arrive and have gotten something else. They say this is at the base of most of the psychological disturbances we are seeing today. The third characteristic is conflict and confusion. Everyone is involved. People are hungry to consume every plate on the smorgasboard of human experience, but find themselves among citizens who fear moral chaos. We'll look more carefully at the article, especially at the section on the relationship to work.

The third article is entitled "Schools you Deserve." It says the public schools participate in the results of a decision of the National Educational Association in 1918, when it published a set of standards for secondary schools across the United States. Experts call this the most significant happening in education in this century. It set a context, created a milieu, which forever changed education. Its content isn't startling and it sounds familiar where it talks about concern for the individual. But its impact was to take the focus off curriculum and put it on the person. One expert said it is the single most devastating thing that has happened to the public schools of this nation. The sub-title of the article is "Why Johnny Can't Read, Write, Add, or Think." The closing lines are interesting: "If we believe it's important to have a highly literate public, a public capable of understanding history, economics, politics, citizens who are knowledgeable about science and technology, to have a society where the powers of verbal communication of adults is systematically intentional, then we would know what we wanted for the schools; until we do, we get the kind of schools we deserve, which accurately reflect out confusion about our value system."

These are shocking things to read and see. But they are a part of the situation in which you train for employability. In Training, Inc. you operate out of a context where this is what the public knows. I doubt if any of the students are familiar with these articles, but their experience is where you observe what the articles imply. Their experiential wisdom as they bring it into the program is from things like this. So when you or I, out of values which are often leftovers from another time, talk and teach, we are using a base unfamiliar to the students. We come to this period of preparation for a new training program with an opportunity to look very seriously at what many educational experts are raising questions about -- what values do you use? Many of these experts are raising the question of the values the educational institutions of this nation will teach. This is a conversation which will not end. I think it's important to know that's what we're looking at, because behind anything you are teaching is some system of values. It is very difficult to stay alive and not convey one. People listening to you can perceive what your value system is.

What I want to do first is have us look more thoroughly at the situation you're walking into, what others see happening. We'll also spend a bit of time on what it means to have a program that responds to the situation we've been describing. You have some students in Indianapolis who have at best a sixth grade education. In Training, Inc., although we have said that we'd like to have high school graduates, in fact in the new school we have 12 or 13 who are not. Their counselors say they test much better than you'd expect, and they "really need a chance." They don't have a chance of getting employment without such formal education. There are too many well-qualified people looking for jobs. So what you face with students like that is an enormous leap in their imagination, and in yours, about what they will be able to do.

In designing curriculum for students like that there are critical areas to cover. You have to do basic skills. You have to teach reading and writing. Many companies are giving that kind of training. In-house training. They are doing it because they see no other way to get people who know how. You have to be at least middle-aged to have been taught basic skills in the public school system. Our program is not in the first instance designed to do this, but we have had to widen our horizons, work out ways to get it into the curriculum. If we don't teach those skills thoroughly, perhaps we give them the motivation to continue and get them on their own.

A second arena we work with is organizational skills. The thing behind this is a way to think. What they need as much as

anything is logical ways to think. To get organized, to "get their heads together." You can think of it as organization because it begins to give them a hold on other things for if they do not have an ordered way to think they don't have a way to study or to listen. They can't tell what's being said. We have one student now who is deaf and sometimes you think he's psychotic because what you get in response to what anyone says to him is nonsense. He hasn't the slightest idea what is being said. Your experience of a lot of other people in this program is similar. This is no indictment of them. Life is chaotic. There is a great deal going on. They and you do feel off-balance, unsettled, not sure. The capacity to look at things and figure out what to do with them is a critical skill.

Another skill, the third, is relational skills. Some people have called these psychological skills or social skills. Many of our students need the capacity to get along with people. I don't they need to learn how to be nice. They often don't have basic social awareness. In order to get and keep a job, whether you present yourself as inside or outside the system, you're going to have to see how the business world operates. It does have a very clear set of values it uses. One of our teachers said "when someone asks me whether I have a degree or not, what should I say?" I said tell him you do. But then I reminded her that that person has never "made it" with anything he has tried except by conning people, and he knows that it's the personal relationships he has nurtured that have produced for him. She knew that. She had spotted him right away. I then suggested she ask him what he supposed a supervisor might say if he asked that on a job. There are supervisors who would fall apart before a question like that. It's just not appropriate. Social skills are at a premium these days. Giving people some exposure to the business norm isn't easy. Some say "how can you suggest students sell out to business' values?" Our response is that the first issue for these students is how to make them employable. They have to decide what "selling out" is for them. We're not asking, or suggesting that they change the way they dress, outside of business hours. You've got to look at the kind of decisions about your lifestyle that getting a job raise for you. You often have a conversation with a student about what it will mean to shift things in his life in order to be able to get a job and keep it. Finally, in sharing relational skills, they are the ones who have to decide what they will do. We can't do it for them. How or whether they will adapt is an open-ended question and fully their decision.

The last skill we try to share through this program is the imaginal skills. They have to do with having the opportunity to

self-consciously reflect on what is happening and offer people control of their own lives. Imaginal skills are taught as an underlying current for all of the classes. Imaginal skills are the methods we use to show the limits, the possibilities and the intelligent and responsible choices they can make. Imaginal skills are developed through use and what works best varies with the person and situation. I'm not a very good tennis player at all, but tennis does give me an image that helps to illustrate what I mean here. Have you seen tennis balls that bounce off in another direction instead of coming directly to you? You can see in the student's reaction to things in the course that their thinking is just like those tennis balls. Everything that comes to them comes into a court that is their head and it has nothing around it, no "net." It's as if the line that outlines it has been erased. What comes in misses or goes right by them, or hits them in the head, and there's nothing there that gives them a way to deal with what's happening to them. What a human being has the capacity to do is to decide what to do with what comes in, and we are seriously committed to giving the students a way to discern for themselves what's happening to them. They have the right to be able to decide whether they have the right job, what they need to do. They have to make up their minds for themselves. They have been doing that all along. Even when they decided to let someone else decide for them. Training in how to think is something we don't talk about to the students; it's very abstract, but everything you do in the program is designed to help them learn a way to think, a way to take what's coming to them and use it to their own advantage. We're constantly working on how to give them that imaginal skill.

The last skill we try to share through this program is imaginal skills. They offer the opportunity to self-consciously reflect of what is happening in your life and offer the opportunity to exercise control of that through decisional relationships. Imaginal skills are taught as an underlying current in all of the classes. They are methods we use to show the limits, possibilities and responsible choices open to anyone. Imaginal skills are developed through use.

The staff of Training, Inc. has used the methods of imaginal education in which they envision their basic task as bridging the gap between where the student is and the employment they seek. One of the staff has compared this task to what happens with the students who cannot read, but think they need to. All of the evidence supports their inability to read, making the learning

even more difficult. The teacher's job in this situation is to bombard the student with images that tell them they can be readers. Then you provide the practical tools and experience that make reading a real possibility.

A popular and long-standing theory suggests that motivation originates in "ideas." Imaginal education suggests motivation originates with images or pictures of the self. Additionally it's first premise is that people operate out of these images or that their action finds its motivation in these images.

The second premise is that images do determine behavior. You can have ideas in your head, but not operate on the basis of the idea. It's images that influence how you dress, perform on the job, etc.

Thirdly, images can change. They don't change on their own. An image change is painful so we resist it. To remove or shift anything that is "you" would be painful. Knowing this, the teacher is prepared to go to great lengths to make the change a possibility. You can compare the experience of such change to the experience of being arthritic -- you have "twinges" that call your attention to the fact that something new is happening. Anyone can think of things that have occasioned changes in their self-image. These changes often stand out in your mind because they were painful.

The last premise is that new images can be appropriated when "messages," new information, come to you that are powerful enough and subtle enough to bypass or topple your natural defenses, they can by decision become a part of your self-image. At Training, Inc., the students are constantly being bombarded with messages like 'you need to be on time.' The tactic of locking the door at 9:00 a.m. is necessary before some get the message. But messages like that call for, demand, some kind of decision. The only time a message really gets through is when the decision it calls for is really needed. As Friere said, "you can learn anything if you need to."

We'll be looking more thoroughly at the theory of imaginal education later, but you can remember these 4 premises on one hand. You might add: teachers can send messages. Teachers don't change images, but they can send messages that call for a decision.

This program has a reputation that rests on its capacity to release a new decision on the part of its students. You want

students to see that work is durable. What goes on in a business office is something they can learn to do. Secondly, you want them to see the business world as human, and as a place that needs what they have to offer. Third, you want them to be able to see themselves as capable, worthwhile people. You want to overcome the self depreciating victim image they have. Seeing yourself as worthwhile and able to perform on a job are what give self-confidence.

We'll work more on how you bridge the gap between the images of students when they enter the program and these images.