

WHAT IS IMAGINAL EDUCATION?

by OliveAnn Davis Slotta

Imaginal Education is an approach to curriculum design and instruction based on the idea that learning involves images or mental models, which are affected, by messages and experiences. It was inspired by Kenneth Boulding's "theory of knowledge" which states that:

1. Human beings operate through mental images.
2. Messages - verbal, visual or experiential - form the images.
3. Images affect behavior, which offers clues to the images.
4. Images can be changed by strategic messages.
5. Changed images change behavior.

Messages may be designed to strategically address both the desired and undesired mental models of students.

Imaginal Education is based on the understanding that the learner constructs understanding (Brooks and Brooks, pp. 4-5). Its classroom methods are all inclusive, involving every student in discussions or activities. Imaginal Education methods enable students to construct knowledge through meaningful learning experiences.

ORIGINS OF IMAGINAL EDUCATION

In the early 1960s, the staff of the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) moved from the campus of the University of Texas at Austin to the West side of Chicago to begin a community reformulation project later named "5th City." These dedicated persons, primarily educators and clergy families, spent two years analyzing the issues in this inner-city ghetto community. Their findings indicated that the key problem of the sixteen square block neighborhood was that the citizens "imaged" themselves as victims - victims of the political, economic and cultural systems of society. They concluded that these victim images began very, very early as the young children stayed at home with relatives - aunts, mothers, grandmothers - and acquired images of deep hopelessness from them. It was further recognized that this image of victim in the very young needed to be addressed or all other change efforts would be for naught.

The decision was made to begin a preschool, which at its peak enrolled two hundred and fifty students ages two weeks to five years. Soon a sister preschool was established in Hong Kong. The methods developed by these Chicago educators, who were significantly influenced by the writings of Kenneth Boulding, Paulo Freire, Maria Montessori, Gregory Bateson, Jerome Brunner, and Jean Piaget, birthed the entirely new and radical curriculum approach, now known as *Imaginal Education*.

The concepts behind Imaginal Education, were first articulated by Kenneth Boulding in his 1956 book *The Image*. This became the basis for a four session training course. In 1986, the Atlanta Teachers' Institute, a four-week summer symposium, was co-sponsored by the ICA and Spelman College. Its purpose was to redesign and rearticulate the four-session course, using a lab school format. The kaleidoscope teaching strategy was created at this time.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT OF IMAGINAL EDUCATION IN THE 1990S

These methods have now been applied in many different nations. Typically, this work has been performed in partnership with other agencies and school systems.

In 1991, I received The Disney Company's American Teacher Award in mathematics, bringing the effectiveness of these methods to national television. This award publicly recognized my work with an Imaginal Education (IE) curriculum now known as *The Project Approach*. Additional, representative examples of outstanding IE programs in this nation include:

- *Training, Inc.*, a career preparation program for urban unemployed adults
- *T.R.I.B.E.S.*, a bridge program between high school and universities for Native American youth, held at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque
- *Rites of Passage*, a summer outdoor challenge program for youth, headquartered in Seattle.

Peter Senge, in his 1990 book, *The Fifth Discipline*, uses the term "mental models" to expand the concept of mental images. He defines and then applies the concept of images to discuss how groups and organizations learn. Motivated by Senge and others, in 1991 the ICA designed the first Learning Lab, an expanded Imaginal Education training format. The Lab, a two-week series of instructional modules and team innovation, has enjoyed a variety of sponsorships including those of the Golden Apple Foundation (Chicago, 1994 and 1995) and the River Alliance (San Jose, 1996).

Just as the children in Chicago's 5th City were hindered by a debilitating victim image, so today's children are also blocked by negative images. Many of today's youth have an image of the future as bleak, of school as meaningless and boring, and of community as being a hostile environment. Many of these images are supported by children's actual experience at home and in the classroom. Clearly, strategies beyond improved textbooks, clearer and more rigorous standards, and regular assessments are needed if we are to reach authentic reform.