

Imaginal Education and Project Based Inquiry

Jo Nelson, from Edges 1990

1. The early development of imaginal education happened in the real-life “lab” of a crowded inner city, where the luxury of teaching small groups was a pipe dream, and the need for working together was clear. This required a focus on how to teach large groups of students effectively.
2. The teachers made use of cooperative learning methods developed by Johnson and Johnson, which have a strong affinity to the methods of imaginal education. In this approach, students work together to create a product using the gifts and wisdom of each individual, thereby learning team skills. The structure of learning together gives the message to students that cooperative behavior in large groups is possible and preferred.
3. The use of a reflective conversation method enables this, in that it encourages listening to all perspectives. It guides participants toward deeper thinking and consensus, rather than encouraging the development of conflicting positions. The conversation method also works well to help clarify assignments and to make group decisions.
4. Kenneth Boulding is careful to point out that authentic image change is not a matter of forcing people to change their images. We can send messages, but it is up to the other person to change their own images. From this perspective, the teacher is a guide of learning, but cannot force a student to learn. The conversation method can be used to bring self-consciousness to what messages a student is deciding to accept. In this way, a student is encouraged to take responsibility for his or her own learning.
5. In such an approach to education, the job of the teacher may become easier and harder at the same time. In many ways, guiding the students to build their own knowledge through reflection relieves the teacher of the burden of knowing all the answers. However, it also removes the “cookbook” approach of teaching, where there is simply data to be down-loaded from the text and the teacher, into the student. Instead, the teacher becomes a catalyst to a three-part dialogue (or triologue) process between the information, the student, and the teacher.
6. When students and the teacher reflect together, everyone learns. As OliveAnn Slotta says in *The Image-Based Instruction Workbook*, “This ... approach offers a change from curriculum-driven to inquiry-driven classrooms, a change from the teacher role of “expert” to that of “guide”. ... We have noticed that when students see teachers excited about the connections that emerge among the various disciplines, they get excited, too. And surely no one among us would mind if the next decade in education became the decade of truly involved students.”

7. Planning curriculum events With thoughtful planning of lessons, the concepts and tools of imaginal education can be applied in highly motivating curriculum events. In a 1981 lecture on the topic of “comprehensive design in lesson planning,”

8. Kaye Hayes outlined the use of the four levels of the Focused Conversation Method process in lesson planning. She suggested four levels for a lesson plan format: 1) *impingement*, or initial impact (such as a dramatization of some sort); 2) *awareness*, or the beginning of rational understanding of content (such as a lecture or visual that communicates content); 3) *involvement* — an exercise or way for the students to participate; and 4) *responsibility*, getting the students to ask questions or begin to apply the content.

9. In 1986 the “kaleidoscope teaching strategy” was developed at the Atlanta Teachers' Institute led by Keith Packard, OliveAnn Slotta, and others. Ronnie Seagren summarizes the goals of this teaching strategy in *Approaches that Work in Rural Development*, Volume 3: The spiral journey of learning is carried on in several ways:

- • Expanding the context beyond the self as the primary frame of reference. A perceived connection to the broadest possible perspective of time, space and relationships enables the learner to operate out of hope for the future rather than fear.
- • Stimulating the imagination, by encouraging the learner to view a situation from a variety of opinions and perspectives, and to “see” reality not yet created.
- • Beckoning participation, by creating opportunities for active involvement. When ideas are connected with people’s real life questions, meaning and motivation are awakened.
- • Encouraging critical thinking, by guiding the learner to relate information to inner resolve, will, and values. Ethical reasoning empowers an individual to operate responsibly and independently.
- • Touching a person’s depths, in order to build self-esteem and release human potential.

10. A lesson that stimulates imagination, beckons participation, expands the student's context, encourages critical thinking, and builds self-esteem, is one that produces highly motivated students. Teachers can incorporate these five elements into their lesson plans using the Focused Conversation method as an integral tool.

11. For example, one year I taught four sessions on Australia to a Canadian grade two class. One lesson was intended to give students information on the settling of Australia by Europeans. I had them imagine they were people living in “olden days”, who were so poor that they had to steal bread to feed their children, were arrested, and thrown into jail. They were put on a ship to the prison colony of Australia, leaving their families behind.

12. Then I had all the children lie down on the carpet, tightly packed together, imagining that they were packed into the convict ship for several months, seasick from

the waves, with only runny oatmeal to eat, and no way to move. When they arrived in Australia, they had to find food to eat and build shelter in an unknown land, with red soil, strange gray-green plants, and people who looked like no people they had ever seen before.

13. I then led a focused conversation on the experience, drawing out their feelings and their imagination. We explored what impact that would have had on them. Not only did they have a physical sense of the beginnings of white Australian settlement, but also they had very interesting thoughts on crime and punishment. The boys of the class, who were usually disruptively noisy, were attentive and creative in their participation.

14. I like to imagine what society would be like, if students finished school with the capacity to observe events around them, to connect new information with their previous experiences, to interpret the impact and meaning of their experiences, and to act on their insights. Imagine the release of potential.

15. As psychologist Jean Houston put it in 1987, “We’re living in the attic of ourselves. We don’t use the first three floors, and the basement is locked, until it wells up in an explosion”. Imaginal teaching gives tools to unlock the basement and relate inner and outer space. The possibility of using a much larger part of our consciousness in an effective manner is an awesome vision.