

# Education that Changes Lives

by Ronnie Seagren, published Winter 1988

*"In the process of dealing with hard-core problems in inner city neighborhoods and the Third World, the ICA has had to, and been free to, develop some wonderfully creative approaches to "education that works."*

~~ Robert Gilman

WE ALL HAVE OUR SELF-IMAGE, defining our sense of identity and delimiting our potential as human beings. What would it mean for education to be a process of human development through revitalizing images of who we are and what we are capable of?

The Institute of Cultural Affairs has experimented with such an approach to education for over thirty-five years. Called "Imaginal Education", it has been adapted to diverse situations with well over a million people from all kinds of backgrounds in more than 50 nations.

Imaginal education is a whole-person approach to life and learning that can be applied to any subject matter. As an alternative to the present day functional emphasis on intellect and pragmatism, it creates a way to recover the dimension of meaning in the learning process, resulting in deep purpose and motivation. It aims to release the boundless potential of an individual, or the members of a group, so they can act creatively in their situations. People are assumed to be capable of operating intelligently and are given tools and practice that enable them to do that. Learning is seen as a life-long, every moment reality, including all dimensions of a person's life. The method is not expensive, but it does take an investment of thought and energy.

This article will present the imaginal education approach and illustrate its application in a program called Training, Inc., which uses an intensive simulation of the company working environment to prepare adults in several American cities for clerical and accounting jobs.

## Theory of Imaginal Education

The imaginal approach rests on Kenneth Boulding's understanding of images:

- Everyone operates out of images;
- images govern behavior;
- Images are created by messages that can be designed and communicated;
- Images can change; and
- Changed images lead to changed behavior.

Such images change through additional data that may simply clarify an old image, may add to it in a way that extends it, or may challenge it by conflicting with old information. A person's images are supported by a screen of values based on past experience through which new messages must pass. As any teacher can attest, it is not possible to change students' fundamental images for them. However, it is possible to send messages that enable people to become more aware of their own images and to make their own decisions.

## Curriculum Theory

In imaginal education, process and content are considered equally important. The curriculum is seen as an ever-expanding spiral, with material taught in an appropriate way for the age and learning-stage of the learner. Experience has confirmed Jerome Bruner's assumption that any person can learn anything if it is presented within the framework of her/his life experience so far.

To reveal the interrelated nature of life, curriculum disciplines are related to each other whenever possible (such as sociology and history, or psychology and art.)

## **Teaching Strategy**

The spiral journey of learning is carried on in several ways:

- 1) 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.
- 2) 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.
- 3) Beckoning participation by creating opportunities for active involvement. When ideas are connected with people's real life questions, meaning and motivation are awakened.
- 4) 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.
- 5) Touching the deeps in order to build self-esteem and release human potential. As Jean Houston put it, "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.

Imaginal education uses both right and left-brain modes and techniques to enhance the effectiveness of message reception and creation. It also systematically uses various teaching approaches to help the educator effectively communicate to learners with a variety of learning styles. Tools for doing this include imagery, metaphorical thinking, inclusive myth, specific learning techniques, and approaches suited to the various kinds of intelligence represented in an individual and in a group (for example, Gardner's work on verbal, visual, body, musical, logical, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences).

## **How imaginal education works in practice: Training Inc. case study**

The performance statistics place Training, Inc. among the best employment-training programs in the country. The Indianapolis site was the first job training program to rely on performance-based funding. Of candidates who start in the Boston program, for example, 90% complete the demanding 14-week schedule, and 85% of those get jobs soon after graduation. Their starting salaries average \$6.50 an hour, almost double the local minimum wage of \$3.35. A year later, 80% are still on the job and almost all have won a raise or promotion. Training, Inc.'s success can be traced to four factors: training site, training method, strong follow-up, and committed staff.

Training, Inc. typically operates from a suite in a large, busy downtown office building. Rather than training people in a union hall, church or community centre in the trainees' neighborhoods, the program purposely highlights the potential work environment. The professional office with beautiful rooms for the various departments tells the trainees clearly from the first that they are worth the investment. Most have never been able to imagine themselves being part of that kind of environment. As one director put it, "If you're standing on the corner of 16th and Nowhere, you'll never get an invitation to the business world."

The key factor in the method is having the trainees act the part. Their activities mirror the real

world six hours a day, five days a week. They are expected to dress for work, arrive on time, and interact professionally with the staff and fellow trainees. The office has departments, not classrooms. There are training sessions or tasks, not lessons. Every day one of the trainees rotates into the role of receptionist for the entire office.

Training, Inc. is an intensive employment-oriented program which takes an approach different from traditional vocational classes. The curriculum helps the trainees develop competence in a number of areas that will affect their future employment: office skills, job search strategies, and handling personal, family, and on-the-job problems. It aims at entry level jobs and above, where "people skills" can help a person advance.

About 800 women and men graduate from six Training, Inc. programs every year; two more sites will open shortly. Each location represents a strong partnership of government, business, neighborhood and educational organizations who provide funding, administration and practical curriculum support. The original Training, Inc. was set up as a program of the YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago in Oak Brook, Illinois and soon expanded to include a downtown center, as well. The Indiana Vocational Technical College program has a site in downtown Indianapolis and one in rural Sellersburg. The Greater Boston YMCA is the primary sponsor of the Boston program, and Essex County College is the contracting agent for the Newark Training, Inc.

The same "partnership principle" allows the program to work with the trainees to help them achieve their goals. In a typical group, most of the candidates are single parents with children under 18, at least half are on welfare, and many have no significant work history. A few are manufacturing workers dislocated by changing technology or plant closings, trying to move into the business world which has a totally different "culture". Yet future success does not depend on past success.

The trainer/supervisor role is to empower each trainee to be a self-directed learner. There are no grades. The question is simply: Is this letter mailable? Do these accounts balance? Would this be acceptable in a job setting? If not, the trainee goes back and does it again or figures it out, using hints from the trainer on how to improve. The criteria for excellence are objective, and, often for the first time in their lives, the trainees find themselves satisfied with nothing less than 100% excellence – and achieving it. Participants usually decide to focus on developing particular skills, depending on their preferences and propensities. To get more practice in on the machines, they often come early and stay until the staff leave.

Many of the trainees have dropped out of one or more programs before they come to Training, Inc. Or they have put in time in school or adult ed, eking by without really learning anything they can use. In order for them to learn how to learn, the staff find they have to restore their belief in their ability to learn. This requires helping them to see, for example, that math phobia is usually inexperience combined with dislike because they think they won't understand. Once they get a practical understanding of basic concepts, such as seeing how a fraction measures a part of a pizza or a year, they begin to take it step by step.

Four or five weeks into the program, following a half hour interview with his or her supervisor, each participant receives a performance appraisal as a carefully worded written memo praising progress and suggesting areas for further work. For example, "On the adding machine, you have improved from 10 to 20 KDPs per minute. Relax and work on accuracy." Staff prepare for this by spending several hours discussing in depth the learning journey of each trainee.

Simulated work projects provide the feel of the professional world. In a typical site, 36 people work on typing, word processing, data entry, filing or bookkeeping in learning groups of 12 or 13, using materials that simulate business content. Each person works independently to improve speed and accuracy, with the trainer acting like a supervisor, offering suggestions and

encouragement. Relaxation and visualization techniques are used in learning skills and during tests.

Later in the program, trainees are assigned to the various departments of Lester Hill, a simulated hotel-motel supply corporation. During the intense two weeks of the simulation, in which each day represents a week, a trainee General Manager enables the accounting, billing, sales, bookkeeping, and warehouse staffs to earn their imaginary company a substantial profit. Meanwhile, all kinds of conflicts and problems surface as they would in an ordinary job situation, and the trainees figure out how to deal with them. The team of managers meets almost daily, finding inventive ways to motivate their staffs; in the last cycle at the Newark Training, Inc., they introduced a newsletter, daily cartoons, and awards at the office party celebrating the end of the exercise. The simulated company provides an active setting that draws the trainees to apply the skills they have learned to that point, and to experiment with a professional styles. Sometimes a clear shift in image is visible from an "I can't" to "I can" as a person plays the various roles. The trainees begin to imagine a place for themselves in the business world.

Learning how to handle personal, family and on-the-job problems occupies a substantial part of the curriculum. The intent is for trainees to realize that they're in charge of their lives and can decide what happens to them. Seminars are held on financial planning, time management and goal setting. The trainees are encouraged to look beyond entry level jobs to plan realistic career paths. They envision other dimensions of their personal futures as well, and work to deal with blocks they perceive in their way. Every encounter becomes an opportunity for learning; even a call from a student to say she can't come becomes a chance to review the situation, alternatives, and how to make sure the same thing doesn't happen again. In a weekly reflection, participants are asked to think through the events of the week. Questions like "Where did you feel like giving up? Why didn't you?" provoke them into naming their experience. The surface-to-depth discussion method is used dozens of times a week. After so much practice, people form a basis for making smart choices.

On "Anything Can Happen" Wednesdays, tailored to the needs of each cycle, other approaches are taken. A consistent highlight is the party for students with birthdays during the program, which celebrates the unique, unrepeatable gifts of people who have often never experienced such care. In one program everyone wrote the blocks they had to overcome on cards and released them tied to helium balloons. On a field visit they may go to an insurance company to tour the departments, meet with personnel, see the flow of work, hear about the experience of a Training, Inc. graduate, and eat lunch in the corporate dining room. They begin to imagine how they would operate in that setting. Various opportunities to talk informally to business people break down the barriers. One day a panel of business people discusses written and unwritten policies for surviving in the working world. By graduation, the group members have usually melded into a large family. Blacks, whites, Hispanics, and Asians have developed enduring ties.

The preparation for job search involves individual work through a manual and seminars on wardrobe and first impressions, followed by all kinds of mock interviews: by pairs, before a panel of peers, on videotape, with outside interviewers, with professional human resource people, at a job fair, and in other offices.

When it comes to actually looking for a job, however, trainees do it on their own. A job developer may help with leads, but the trainees set their own appointments, and get the job (or not) themselves. They debrief after every interview, with a staff person and sometimes a team of other trainees, and constantly sift through their experiences for learnings that will help the next time around. Funding agencies have sometimes pushed Training, Inc. to find jobs for their trainees, but this way each person develops the courage and confidence to not only get hired once, but to continue to upgrade later on her own. Whenever someone gets a job, their placement is added to the "job board", a bell is rung, and work stops so everyone can hear

about what happened.

For many of the trainees, the supportive atmosphere is as important as the technical skills. People are trained in how to sort out a situation, reflect on the consequences and make effective choices. They have the opportunity to change their own images, to reflect on their values. Early in the cycle, trainees organize an Open House at which they host usually over a hundred family and friends. This has helped build family respect and support for the training effort, often easing personal pressure on the trainees. Children, who often resent their mother not being home, gain respect for what she is doing when they see her in this role. Parents who previously felt they didn't have much to contribute to their children's education, find they can help them now. Richard Rule is a suburban alcoholic who came to the Boston Training, Inc. after deciding he was well on the way to an early grave. He said he was immediately impressed with the peer relationships and the atmosphere of trust pervading the program. "If someone got frustrated filling forms, for instance, another trainee would jump in and spend time helping her out. It's the way things were done. People talked to one another about all kinds of problems, like getting daycare for their kids."

Typically about a third are hired before the program ends, and job developers continue to work with the others after graduation. Training, Inc. has a strong follow-up component. Graduates feel free to come back, rejoice over their victories, discuss their failures, and seek advice for further career steps. "There's so much support for the people who come out of TI," said Sarah Herman, assistant employee manager at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital, which has hired seven graduates. "It gives them a kind of safety net."

To develop this dimension even further, ICA in Indianapolis has started a peer mentor program. Graduates who have been employed at least a year volunteer their time to work with current trainees during the program and during their first three months on the job. A Life Methods Training Program is also available for grads who've worked for one to six years. The program focuses on developing life management skills for upward mobility – economic planning, supervisory skills, meeting facilitation, public speaking, presentation skills, parenting, and family conflict management. Other supplementary programs are in the planning and pilot stages. In addition, ICA India is researching the potential applications of Training, Inc. to a transitional area on the fringes of Bombay where clerical skills are needed in a recently industrialized area.

Training, Inc. is an intense, two-way learning experience. The staff report learning skills in storytelling, relating, and in mutual support from their students, and they are continually inspired by the sheer courage of the trainees.

### **Other Examples**

Imaginal education is being pursued in quite varied settings. In the Egyptian villages around Bayad El Arab, preschool and health caretaker training programs illustrate the potential for imaginal education to change women's roles in a very traditional setting. A Residential Learning Center on a farm near Seattle involves some ICA staff youth and others interested in a global education experiment with the concrete objective of overseas work experience and recovery of rites of passage. In rural Spain, a personal growth program for elders struggling with issues such as alcoholism is enabling people to decide what behavior they want to change and how they can work with their own images to accomplish it.

Imaginal education applications to social change are being explored in a collaborative program for training of rural development workers in southern Africa. A support group of educators in Caracas meets regularly to clarify their vision for widespread teaching of critical thinking in Venezuela. Consultations with school boards and community and business leaders in Wisconsin and Illinois are utilizing consensus methods to mobilize a new community interest in education.

In Korea new applications of the surface-to-depth conversation method are being developed in regular meetings of groups of people from many walks of life who share their thinking with each other. In London young people are developing a global context for their work, and some are preparing for practical village development internships. In these and other programs, and in dialogue with an informal network of educators in many places, the theory and application of imaginal education is being developed.