

Imagine That!

Re-imagining Education



an article by Leigh Melander, Ph.D.

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Education is failing in this country. By saying this, I know that I join the ranks of the self-appointed Cassandra's who hurl our hands up to our foreheads and sing the doom of a nation. But it's true.

And most of the wailers miss the point. Underlying the political agendas, funding battles, culture wars, and the simultaneous disrespect for and outrageous expectations of teachers, there is a much deeper failure.

Think of a moment in your life when you were completely caught up in learning something. In that moment, learning wasn't about facts, tests or grades, succeeding or failing. Instead, it was an all-consuming, joyful burst of energy and pleasure at finally discovering something. Of understanding something. To borrow from Shakespeare, it was an instance of god-like apprehension, comprehension of our place as partners in a creative universe.

How often have you had a moment like that in your educational process? If you're like most people, pretty rarely. Somewhere along the line, education became a consumerist contest of amassing skills and factoids and spewing them back to the world like game show geeks. But when we become glorified databases, we lose the analytical abilities that keep us from being engulfed by systems (be they political, religious, societal, or media) without bothering to ask if they should exist at all. We have all of the pieces out of the puzzle box and arrayed on the table, but we don't have a picture to follow.

And that's what we're missing: the picture. The image. The imagining. Our failure is a failure of imagination, both in what we teach and how we teach it, but also, far more importantly, a failure to understand that education is ultimately about imagination itself.

When we become imaginal learners, we move beyond passive collectors of information into creators. We find the enchantment, the poetics of learning, and we can imagine entire universes into being. Learning becomes a spiraling generative process that invites us to continue to learn and to shape ourselves and our worlds.

So what would an imaginal education look like? Part of its beauty, and admittedly, its complexity, is that there isn't one answer. It is an invitation for each learner to understand herself and the world around her as a classroom. It is about inviting wonder to be your partner, and continually asking "why" and "how" and "what if" about everything and everyone that crosses your path.

Since it is so vast, let me try to sketch out an example from a very small, prosaic beginning point: the number 32. I have a painful memory of standing in a classroom with flashing cards and spots before my eyes, trying to spit out multiplication tables. But in spite of that (mostly because I count on my fingers), I know that eight times four is thirty-two.

In an imaginal learning context, the flash cards are gone.

The walls of the classroom are gone, replaced by a hillside on a quiet night where the stars seem made for counting, and infinity has a tangible and richly mythic presence.

So I lie on my back, and imagine a life for the number 32. A combination of eight (a sideways symbol of infinity) and four (of the four elements) make up the sinuous and stable combination of thirty-two. I imagine its colors, its own suggestion of infinity when turned sideways like three mountains and the beginnings of a fourth.

And then I begin to count. Eight constellations, each of four stars. Sixteen pairings of two.



I remember the stories of the constellations. I make up poems with four stanzas of eight lines each, and drum out rhythms in 4/4 and 2/4 time.

And then I explore 32 as a leaping point into other thoughts, other disciplines, awareness of myself and those around me. For example, in the Buddhist tradition, there are 32 body parts. How many can I count? And what lies underneath a philosophy that identifies the body this way?

Or, I look to language. Balagtás Tagalog, one of the indigenous languages of the Philippines that is being replaced by a state sanctioned combination of Filipino and English, has 32 letters.

What letters would I add to the English alphabet?

And can I understand the despair of losing my language and the identity that goes with it?



As philosopher and mathematician Gaston Bachelard writes, imagination is “a voyage into the infinite.”



Education is the most powerful when its goal isn't overtly focused on what it will achieve for us, but instead when it is an open process that seduces us into searching for what we've not been able yet to see. It helps us not only to fit the puzzle pieces together, but to turn the pieces into the image that we have created.

In that voyage, we become infinite ourselves. And education stops being a metaphorical key to a brand new refrigerator and dining set that you vie for because you want to be a good consumer, but instead truly becomes something that is good for the entirety of the soul.



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