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Gearing Education to Changing Students' Lives

Jo Nelson

How do people learn, and how does their behaviour change as a result of their learning?

Imagine what society would be like if students finished school able 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.

ICA has been an exponent of imaginal education from its beginning. When ICA moved to the 5th City community in Chicago's West Side, the staff founded a community preschool. The challenges of creating quality early childhood education in the inner city catalysed a new research effort. The staff wanted effective ways of working with young children, to provide a rich environment and a positive self-image that could make a lasting difference in their lives. Starting in 1965, public school teachers from across North America gathered in summer research assemblies with ICA staff and 5th City Preschool staff to study, learn and reflect on their experience in teaching. They called their developing theory of knowledge and learning Imaginal Education.

The key research question was "How do people learn, and how does their behavior change as a result of their learning?"

From this research came the theory of imaginal education, which has several basic tenets:

- People operate out of images. Everybody has images of who they are, of how the world operates, and where they fit.
- Images determine behavior.
- Messages that reach a person affect the images he or she has, reinforcing them, adding new data, conflicting with them, or changing them entirely.
- Images can change.
- When images change, behavior changes.

The research into the role of images in education was partly based on work by Kenneth Boulding. In *The Image*, Boulding explained how images underlie behavior, how they are created, and how they change or resist change. Also, Marshall McLuhan, in *The Medium is the Message*, proposed that images created by different forms of media have as much effect as the content carried by the media.

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This theory suggested that messages are carried by the style or medium of teaching as well as by the content that is taught.

Paulo Freire's work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, also had a profound influence. Freire demonstrated how the content of literacy training could have a powerful impact on the inner image of victimization students may carry, and give them a new capacity to change their lives.

Using messages as a teaching tool

Imaginal Education, as described by the Institute staff in the 5th City Preschool Manual, is "the process by which messages are intentionally directed to a human being's images, in order to give the opportunity for a change of image". As the teachers explained, the imaginal approach recognizes that the messages we receive from the world interact with the values we hold. Those messages that are in alignment with our values get through to us and affect our underlying images. Those that are contrary to deeply held values may have little or no effect on our images. Some messages directly affect the values themselves. A teacher conscious of how her actions send messages to her students becomes aware that she is working with the values of her students.

Messages can be consciously employed to influence positive images of students. 5th City Preschool teachers began each day with a strong message about the potential of their young students:

Teacher:	Students: (shouting in unison)
Who are you?	I'm the greatest!
Where do you live?	In the universe!
Where are you going?	To change history!

Sending messages with both structure and content

The research on changing images led to an understanding that content was only a part of the education a child receives. As Jerome Bruner says in *The Process of Education*, "The structure, not the content, of a discipline is the key to comprehension and retention".

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For example the structure of a school sends many messages. Lining up in straight lines when a bell rings conveys a message that the students are subject to external rules, and must subject their own needs to the group. When, on the other hand, children are allowed to run willy-nilly into the school at will, the message is that the individual's immediate wants are more important than group order. When active boys are continually reprimanded for not sitting still, the message is that their internal physical needs and feelings are irrelevant, and must be repressed in favor of order and quiet.

Many of the things that children learn in school are messages that are conveyed by process and structure, and these are often as powerful as the content that the school intends to teach.

Verbal messages may say one thing, and structures or environment may communicate another message. When the professed message says that education is about communication, yet children are not allowed to talk to one another, these messages contradict one another. When messages contradict each other, confusion or unclarity generate counter-productive behavior.

When we are unconscious of the messages our actions send, they may have unintended effects. A teacher I know told a mother after school one day, in front of her 6-year-old son, "He's lazy!". The message was very strong, and the boy's image of himself as a lazy person, who couldn't learn, became deeply embedded. After that, the boy consistently behaved out of that image in school. He rarely finished his work, and refused to try new things. At home, however, he worked hard at challenging tasks. In Grade 9, another teacher gave the boy consistent messages that he was smart and a hard worker by praising his work and his efforts, and his school performance took a major turn upward. Whether we intend to or not, we are communicating messages to our students that have an impact on their operating images. When we are conscious that our messages to students affect their operating images and therefore their behavior, we cannot reduce our role to transferring information alone.

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. 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.

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The structure of learning together gives the message to students that cooperative behavior in large groups is possible and preferred. 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.

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.

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 downloaded 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. 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.”

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,”

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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:

- Impingement, or initial impact (such as a dramatization of some sort)
- Awareness, or the beginning of rational understanding of content (such as a lecture or visual that communicates content)
- Involvement — an exercise or way for the students to participate
- Responsibility, getting the students to ask questions or begin to apply the content.

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 and individual to operate responsibly and independently.
- Touching a person’s depths, in order to build self-esteem and release human potential.

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.

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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. 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. 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.

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. 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.

*Jo Nelson is a senior facilitator for ICA Associates working particularly in the education sector. She served for several years as the Chair of the International Association of Facilitators. This article is excerpted from her recent book, *The Art of Focused Conversation for Schools*.*