

Feeding the Imagination: Using Drama and other means to develop Learning.

Paper presented at the 3rd International Conference on Imagination and Education, Vancouver, July 2005.

Dr Geoff Ward,
School of Education, James Cook University,
Townsville, Australia.

If you were not at the workshop that this paper relates to, you will just have to use your imagination. I will try to feed it some information that will help it to get an idea of what we did and why we did it. If you were at the workshop, thanks for coming. This paper should provide you with an extension to your understanding of the activities and more food for thought.

That was not meant to read as a facetious start to an academic paper. It is a difficult task at any time to work out how to match a paper to a workshop that engaged the participants in a series of activities in addition to listening and viewing. Even the timing of writing the paper after conducting the workshop makes a major impact on the writing task. There's a danger in preparing a paper before a workshop in that the session then becomes more of a working through the paper itself, even to the extent that some of it is actually read out to the participants. On the other hand, when the workshop has already occurred, the danger is that the paper just tries to explain what happened instead of adding the background that couldn't be fitted into the activities, or that it seems to bear little relation to what actually happened.

So, a workshop paper is tricky at the best of times. But when the field is the role of imagination in education the complexities multiply. I want to argue that a significant part of our role as teachers is to imagine what it is like to be in the position of the learners who are working with us. To make a workshop effective, we have to engage the participants – and that term must be interpreted as equivalent to “learners” in this context – in activities that enable them to gain insights that they would not have, or might not have developed just from reading a paper. We have to capitalise on their intelligence, extend their knowledge, employ and stretch their skills, overcome their likely reluctance to actually get up and do things, stimulate

their imaginations, and teach them. When you look at it like that, it is easy to see why teaching is so difficult and why it can give us so much satisfaction. A wonderful set of people participated in this workshop. They joined actively in all the activities and their body language and some of their questions and comments showed strongly that they were engaged in thinking about why I was doing some of the things that I did and, more importantly, that they were thinking about how the ideas might relate to their own work. The workshop aimed to get them thinking about some vital aspects of how teaching works to make the imagination a more effective part of learning. This paper aims to do the same for you.

No one should argue against the role of imagination in education, least of all at a conference devoted to the topic. But it is important that we never lose sight of how imagination can run riot in a variety of ways: wasting the impact that it should have; applied to pointless activities; misdirected and feeble because it is imagination without substantiation; and imaginative but without any discernible outcomes in learning that will transfer to other situations. The workshop aimed to feed the imaginative applications of the participants, engaging them in things to do and to think about. It had a pragmatic theory base. Paradoxical though that description may be, it is intended to capture something of what takes place in teaching when we know why we are doing (not just using, but constructing) particular teaching strategies, when the moves we make are intended to change the ways in which learners interact and to give them ideas that they can carry away and apply to their own teaching situations.

I believe that too often students are expected to imagine for no real purpose, for no real gains, with no real basis for getting the imagination to change the way they see the world or the particular issue in question. We need to feed the imagination. When we do, we give it a better chance of focusing and of learning. When John Lennon asked us to “imagine all the people ...” it wasn’t just to develop some attribute that we would never apply but to enhance our ability to see what the world could be like if we took action. Sometimes we need the dream first and then to work on giving it substance. The Ford Science Teaching Project in England in the 1970s (e.g., Elliot, 1973) defined curriculum development as increasing the vision of what is possible, and teacher development as narrowing the gap between what is possible and what is happening in classrooms. I believe this is still a very productive way to view this interrelationship and furthermore that both kinds of development necessarily and intricately involve the imagination.

As teachers we have a vast array of possible teaching tools at our disposal, including many ways of developing effective imaginative activities in classrooms. Some of them are overused and of little effect. Others are underused but offer exceptional advantages. Drama, in its many guises, is one of the most underutilized instructional tools available to teachers. I have an Honours student at the moment engaged in a study of why teachers use or do not use drama as a learning activity. Clearly, many teachers simply don't realise how much drama has to offer them, and may feel unequipped to use it. My experience is that often, even when teachers have learnt something of the value of drama, they do not go beyond a rather limited view of it – perhaps little more than warm up activities – to actually use it as a tool for learning. We have to provide models that go beyond that level and we have to do it in a manner that makes drama accessible to those who need help to get started. Strangely, even though when something works well we might imagine that it would automatically encourage teachers to keep using and extending their applications of that process, there doesn't seem to be any guarantee that teachers will keep widening their applications of drama in classroom learning. There is a “comfort zone” beyond which it may be hard to get. We need to be realistic about what we try to do and recognise that some activities have to be scaled to fit the context. I have read in students' papers the “grab bag” idea that “the only limit is the teacher's imagination.” It is usually a line that is intended to encompass the notion that whatever they are discussing has a vast range of possibilities. The reality is that there are many other limiting factors in classrooms and that sometimes the teacher is imagining all too clearly what could go wrong.

Imagine yourself teaching at your best. Think of a time that you actually taught something really well, or imagine a time which could represent you achieving all that you would want to with a group of learners. What are the key points that a group of teachers who were watching you would take away from that session? List some key words that you would want them to get down.

That was the first activity in the workshop. I asked the participants to imagine this situation, with their eyes shut if they were comfortable doing that, or open if they preferred, and to jot down just those key words rather than trying to write full sentences. I didn't explain the purpose of this at the time and was pleased when someone asked me about it later in the session. It is a priming activity. It would be hard to identify just what effect such

activities have, partly because people are unaware of the effect, so it is no use asking participants whether or not it worked. The purpose was to get participants actively thinking positively about teaching, primed to expect to see good teaching, and making notes that would stimulate reconstruction.

Although I have used similar techniques before, my use of this activity in the workshop was stimulated by my reading and reflection on Malcolm Gladwell's (2005) "Blink" which fed my imagination in many ways. Books, conferences and professional interactions do this for us. Often these encounters could be seen in Stenhouse's terms as providing the curriculum development that our reading and reflection will turn into teacher development. In particular, "Blink" deals with expert knowledge – a theme of this paper. How do I know when I read a second-year Education student's planning assignment that the student teacher hasn't read a lot, and specifically hasn't read a lot of children's literature? Or hasn't been writing a lot. I doubt that I could always identify specific word choices, tell-tale signs in the writing, or concepts in the planning that justify that impression. And it probably has to be seen as an impression rather than as a conclusion. Gladwell describes several examples of how experts, for example, realise that a piece of art is a forgery even though scientific tests have failed to reveal that and even though they may have nothing more specific to go on than a feeling that it instantly made them feel uncomfortable.

To me, these experiences illustrate the idea that expertise lies in part in the field of the imagination, but an imagination that has a wealth of knowledge that enables it. I once met an international expert on remote sensing whose job included developing expert systems to provide technological ways of doing what skilled people had learned to do. For example, he might watch a smelting supervisor in action at an aluminium refinery. The supervisor would suddenly toss in a scoop of flux. "Why did you do that then?" "It needed it." I don't need to spell out the point. How does an expert know when to add flux and how much to add? Experience dictates the timing and the amount. In the famous words of Yogi Berra, "You can observe a lot by watching." The remote sensing task was to be gathering data that located the parameters of the decisions that the expert made so that the conditions could be identified and the action taken without needing a person with those subtle skills. The expert had made similar data gatherings in wine making and other fields.

Though I was fascinated talking about these kinds of events, I found it rather poignant that we should be attempting to replace such expertise instead of training it. Is it because it isn't readily quantifiable that we have to try to avoid relying on such skilled personal judgement? Is it a sign of our changed and changing times that we don't expect that there will be a continuing stream of people with the developing experience and skill to undertake these tasks? Do we not know how to teach the imagination to be an expert?

A man who was about to retire confessed to a friend that he had no real hobbies and interests to occupy him. His friend told him that he had been reading about jade and suggested that he took lessons on it from Professor Chang. The idea appealed to him and he made an appointment to see the teacher. Professor Chang told him that he would give him ten lessons for \$100 payable in advance. He arrived for the first lesson and was ushered into a room and given three small specimens of jade. The professor left the room. An hour later he returned and showed the man out. A few weeks later he met his friend who asked how the lessons were going. "It's ridiculous! I paid a hundred dollars and it's a complete waste of money. I have been five times now and every lesson is the same. He never tells me anything. He just puts me in a room with three pieces of jade and leaves me there for an hour. I am not learning a thing! He just gives me three pieces of jade for an hour. And last time one of them was a fake!"

All too often in our classrooms, children are expected to write without a sufficient knowledge base. This applies particularly to the report genres. Whatever else it entails, a report is a text written by an expert. Unless the students have expertise, they shouldn't be expected to write a report. The teaching and learning that precedes report writing should be more about developing expertise in the field of the writing than about the generic features of reports. It is fine to begin with the simple recounts that are related to report writing, because these come from the children's own experiences and the learners must be considered to be experts in what they have actually experienced. Often recount writing leads on to imaginative recounts and thence to narratives (stories), rather than or as well as to report writing. I believe that both of these sequences have value, but the difference lies in the kind of learning that is needed to support the writing if it is to be effective. Learners need effective models of the genre, but especially for report writing they need information. Otherwise, they will not only lack substance in the writing, but they will not write well either. Writers make choices and those choices are systematic. Each choice makes it easier to make particular

subsequent choices. For example, once you have started a letter of complaint by choosing the word “outraged” over “angry” or “disappointed” you have set the tone of the letter in place. If the text is to be coherent, all the choices of wording that influence tone will be compatible with or extend the sense of outrage that was established in that choice. Of course, it may not be until we are writing the letter that we discover – through our choices – just how strongly we feel about the issue. In this case, we may also discover that we didn’t know enough about the factors that need to be taken into consideration.

Young learners may explore the genre of complaint letters in class. If they do, they need to understand the purpose of the letter, the grounds for complaint and the social context, in particular how their letters would be received depending on the tone. Dramatising the recipient reading their letter and trying to show how the reader’s facial expressions might change is one way of building that understanding. The imagination does not operate in a vacuum.

Another example of the need to feed the imagination for particular genres is the writing of procedures. You can learn the importance of sequencing the steps, the verb positioning in sentences of the imperative case, and all the other generic features of procedures, but if you don’t know how to make a good cup of tea or to operate an espresso machine, then writing the procedure is pointless. I have often seen students undertaking imaginative recipe writing, usually arising as an activity from the stimulation of a book in which one of the characters was cooking. But recipe writing is not the same as recipe following. It requires expertise. I love to cook and will certainly vary from the recipes that I read, but what I do is based on understandings gleaned from following many recipes and seeing the results. Too often teachers assume that it will be valuable for children to make an imaginative jocular attempt at writing a recipe after the focus has been on what the writing needs rather than on what the cooking needs.

Natalia Gajdamaschko (2005) related a fascinating example of the need for feeding the imagination from the work of Elkonin on play. Children who had been taken to see a railway station in operation did not incorporate this experience in their play. But after they had been again and had time to talk to the people about their jobs and see more of what they did, it all came readily into their play. Two of the most striking examples of drama in the classroom from my own experience arose as culminating activities for units

on bees and on ants with two different classes. Both sessions came when the students had developed a lot of knowledge in the field of study. Without talking, and without direction from me after the initial explanation, they took up the roles of the social insects in communities. I watched spellbound as they went on and on developing their roles. The kind of experience that marked their learning and the way in which the drama brought it into focus was epitomised by a couple of twelve-year-olds who clearly changed the roles they were undertaking during the session. When we talked it all through at the end and I asked them what they were thinking, one explained that she could see that there were larvae hatching and that they would need more nurse bees. She was a soldier/guard bee and there were already enough of them, so she changed her role because she knew from her studies that bees did that. I asked the other why he had changed too since they certainly hadn't talked during that time. He said, "I saw what Anne was doing. At first I wondered what she was up to. Then I remembered reading about the bees changing to do what had to be done and I thought, 'Oh, of course,' so I did it too."

Such moments last for ever in a teacher's memory. We must feed the imagination, but we need the tools to let the imagination of our students show what it contributes. Drama is one of those most valuable tools.

In the conference workshop, I followed the priming activity with a telling of Polly Greenberg's poem/story "Oh Lord, I wish I was a buzzard." It begins, as I do except that I tell it as a boy:

"When I was a little girl,
we walked out to the cotton field
early in the morning
with the sun shining pretty on the land.

My Daddy told us
if we didn't pick a lot of cotton
we were going to get a whipping.

My Daddy told us
if we did pick a lot of cotton
we might get a sucker."

Each section of the story has the child relating how hot it had been, how they had picked and picked and picked and then looking up with the water running off her face to see an animal – first a dog, then a buzzard, then a snake and finally a butterfly. Each time she wishes she could be that animal. Clearly, each is seen as having a life that is better than picking cotton. After each of these episodes, they finish picking – “on Saturday” – and Daddy gives them a sucker. The girl separates hers from the stick and holds it in her hand with the stick in her mouth so that “everyone could see we had candy, lots of candy.” The poem closes with a parallel to the opening: “We walked home from the cotton field late in the evening with the moon shining pretty on the land.”

In the months leading up to this conference I have told this story to audiences that include my own second-year teacher education students in Australia, eight workshop groups of experienced teachers in Tampa, Florida, two different classes of Year 11 Hispanic students in an inner-city high school in Texas while an audience of teachers watched on closed circuit television, and classes of 4th and 5th grade children in a Townsville, Australia school. In each case I have gone on to ask the same set of questions, discussing them one at a time.

1. How do you think that the author would explain the sequence of the four animals that were observed? Would you choose the same sequence? How could you justify a different sequence?
2. If you were going to edit this piece to make it shorter, which section would you choose to suggest that the author delete? If you would not accept shortening the text, why is that so?
3. In your opinion, when did they start picking the cotton? Why do you think that?
4. I love the idea that the child pretended to be eating a piece of candy while still having one left. Why do you think that she felt that was important enough for her to wait to eat the real candy? Would you have been able to do that, or to have wanted to do it?

There is not a “correct” set of questions for responding to this or any other poem. What my questions do is to go beyond the “Were you paying attention?” type of checking up questions and to invite the readers to engage

in more thought. I may have answers, but I'm interested in theirs too. I never ask learners to recall the sequence of the four animals in the story, but I get them to discuss the question in groups before we consider it as a class, so every group has always been able to reconstruct the sequence in order to engage in the first question. I watched a lesson once where a teacher who had just read a story to a Grade 2 class asked them a "What color was Mary's hat?" kind of question. One little girl looked up at her and asked, "Weren't you listening?" The question about the sequence puts students into the writing process. It stimulates some fascinating theories and helps to develop a realization that the author had a rationale for the order. As part of the discussion I often draw attention to the way in which I tell the episode of the butterfly, which incorporates a kind of desperation in the voice that carries beyond just, "Oh Lord, I wish I was a butterfly," to convey that I would even settle for being a butterfly knowing how short a butterfly's life is, because at least that would be better than cotton picking.

The second question takes on a different role and engages the learners in thinking about revision and about the impact of the episodes. I first asked this question because I believed that it would be quite demanding to hold the audience through each episode and I wondered whether it would work better if the poem were shortened. Most audiences argue against removing any episode.

The third question is designed to show the understanding that we have about textual resources and how writers work. The text does not say when the cotton picking started. But the "When we were finished, on Saturday," implies strongly that they did not start on the same day. Otherwise, there would be no reason to put the day in at all. Background knowledge leads almost inevitably to the conclusion that picking started on Monday morning.

In the workshop and in all of the other sessions in which I tell this, I asked the participants to get up and act out picking cotton. (In this case, I heightened the engagement by getting them to sing responsively to "I'm going to jump down, turn around, pick a bale of cotton.") This drama use is intended to do something quite different from the culminating activity of acting out the life of bees discussed earlier. In most of the groups that I have used this with there is nobody who has actually picked cotton. It is usually very obvious that most of the people don't know much about cotton picking. The first thing that stands out is that they don't know how high it is. So the drama teaches them that they don't know something and it makes it seem far

more important to find out and more likely for them to learn it than would occur from asking, “How high is the cotton when it is picked?” I have learnt a lot from the few participants who have actually experienced cotton picking and I can show participants how it is done if that seems appropriate at the time.

The workshop engaged briefly in another way of showing how feeding the imagination makes drama more impactful and effective. I asked participants in pairs to act out a bank robbery. (When they seemed to be struggling to work out how to do this, I asked whether there was anyone who had particular skills in this area that they could share, but I didn’t come up with anyone.) Then I added an extra dimension. I asked them to do the robbery with a nervous bank robber. It is intriguing how this additional demand actually makes the task easier. It seems to provide focus to the imagination so that how to act and what to say comes more readily than when the issue is more open. Similarly, acting out walking with a limp becomes more focused when the nature and location of the injury is stated.

The subtle differences among words are often hard to explain, but drama can be very effective in exploring the shades of meaning. In my book, “Something to Crow About” (Ward, 2001), I detail an activity in which learners act out pairs of words denoting ways of walking to try to show the differences between them. The activity is not a guessing game and needs to be accompanied with lots of talk.

To strut/to saunter

To stroll/to dawdle

To jog/to trot

To pace/to stride

To stride/to stroll

To stroll/to amble

To stroll/ to wander

To limp/to stagger

To limp/to stumble

To slink/to saunter

To steal/to dawdle

To trudge/to tramp

To wander/to plod

To lumber/to clump

To march/to tramp

To skip/to bounce
To prance/to bound
To scamper/to trot
To scuttle/to race
To creep/to slink
To meander/to wander
To straggle/to promenade
To limp/to hobble
To run/to sprint
To waddle/to totter
To creep/to tiptoe
To cavort/to caper

Often, when they start, learners don't know much about some of the words, but again and again I see them starting to draw out more understanding. A good example would be "to dawdle." Almost invariably learners go quite readily from seeing it as just a slow walk to one having a reluctance to arrive. It is important with such activities to remember that they are ways of feeding the imagination and building vocabulary. They are not tests of what learners already know but ways of bringing what they understand and don't understand into focus so that more learning can take place.

I use my own responses to elements of text construction to highlight ideas about reading and writing. Every text that I work with stimulates a multitude of choices for possible teaching. We can never undertake all of the possible activities that might occur to us, but if we see ourselves as having what I think of as a series of "drop-down menus" we can see that at any moment in our teaching we might be a teacher of spelling, of numeracy, of the author's craft.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to learning is an unwillingness to recognize what we don't know. We have to see what it means when a learner doesn't know something and when they are holding fast to inaccurate understandings. I asked the participants in the workshop to draw a spider. Then I asked them to draw a spider the way that a five-year old child would draw one. A number of people laughed at this, saying that it would be just the same as the one they had already drawn. Perhaps this is one of the great indictments of education worldwide that so many people grow up without any satisfaction in their ability to draw well. I showed a series of drawings by five-year-olds illustrating what happens when a teacher gives lots of opportunities to revisit

a task and asks questions about the number of legs, where they come on the body, etc. It shouldn't amaze us how dramatically a child's or an adult's drawing can progress when they actually start to observe more thoughtfully and equip the imagination with more to feed back to the drawing process.

I don't attempt to explain how the imagination works, but the next and final demonstration in the workshop highlights another aspect of the way that it does. I put on the screen:

Mary shook her piggy bank. There was no sound. She burst into tears.

I then asked, "Is there anyone who doesn't understand why Mary is crying?" The interesting thing about this is that no one ever asks, "Do you mean why she burst into tears?" So automatic is the inferencing in reading that no one notices that they effortlessly connect my question with a quite different way of expressing the idea. Then I asked what other inferences have been made to understand this text. You will see that there is quite a few. Now I asked what we know about what is going on here, but rather than field suggestions I put up the text:

The ice-cream truck started to ring its bell. Mary ran inside.

Without dwelling on it much, we can see that this leads easily on to the other text and provides a rationale. If we wanted to we could form a fairly clear picture of the scenario. We could imagine the scene. At least part of what interests me in this is that we quite likely don't have a clear image as part of our reading process, but we have an understanding that itself implies images that may or may not have actually been formed.

Then I changed the ice-cream truck text to this one:

"I'm tired of financing these futile gestures. If you want to help these stupid people you'll have to fund it yourself," he stormed.
Mary ran inside.

Wow! Suddenly, Mary is a completely different person. Even the piggy bank takes on a different aspect.

Most of the time we are unaware of how much our imagination is being continuously fed by the texts we are reading and how much it feeds into our

comprehension. When we become conscious of some of the ways in which background knowledge filters and extends learning, understanding of how authors work in constructing texts gives us a basis for strengthening our grasp of their meaning and learning to do more ourselves, noticing more of the world around us so that we make more and different connections amongst ideas and information, we become better learners and better teachers.

In an assignment earlier this year, one of my fourth-year education students included this statement in his negotiated contract project: “While on prac. If a student asked me how they should spell a word, I would say, ‘Sound it out,’ even though I knew this wasn’t an effective method without instruction, but it was the only strategy I knew. I then began to explore the topic and try different strategies and noticed that they had a better result.” As his teacher it was rather disappointing to have him say he didn’t have other strategies, but how can we miss the point that what we teach has to actually be put into practice and that unless learners can see – through modelling or in their imagination – what they are learning actually at work, they are unlikely to carry it into effect. Drama and other ways of feeding the imagination increase the impact and transfer of learning.

References

Elliot, John, (1973) *Developing Awareness and Perception: The methodology of teacher development*, Paper presented at the conference on the “Study of Curriculum” University of Sussex, England, July 1973. Mimeographed Ford Teaching Project Document.

Gajdamaschko, Natalia (2005). *Play revisited: Lessons from Vygotsky*. Paper presented at “Engaging the imagination in Education and Learning” 3rd International Conference on Imagination and Education, July 2005, Vancouver, Canada.

Gladwell, Malcolm (2005). *Blink* New York: Little, Brown

Greenberg, Polly (1968). *Oh Lord, I wish I was a buzzard*, in Bill Martin Jr. and Peggy Brogan, (1974). *Sounds in the Wind*, New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston.

Ward, Geoff. (2001). *Something to Crow About: Connecting with “That Kookoory!”* Commerce, TX: Bridge Publishing.