

Join The Discussion

October 2018: From a philosophical perspective, what is imagination's role in learning?

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REPLIES



Stephen Hurley (Edit)

November 13, 2018 at 7:08 pm

Love this idea for a deeper dive into imagination. And I very much appreciate this opening provocation.

My first thought is that we may need to separate the idea of learning from the idea of schooling. In thinking about this, I'm thinking about learning in both school-based and non-school contexts. I say that because I believe that, quite often, schools don't always provide the space to exercise their imaginations.

In my own learning, imagination has allowed me to play with multiple possibilities without having to enact them in the physical world. In this sense, imagination can be a type of virtual playground for ideas. It has allowed me to become curious, play with emergent choices and even role play scenarios. (There have, in fact, been times when I don't have to show up for the party that I've planned because I've had several versions of the event in my imagination ahead of time. The actual event could never be as exciting!)

I'm going to open with that idea and look forward to the discussion!

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Keiichi (Edit)

November 14, 2018 at 9:52 pm

Thanks Stephen for the first posting, and welcome to the discussion board.

I agree with your distinction between learning and schooling. But this leads me to a further question; is schooling inherently anti-imagination?

I don't think it necessarily is, but some aspects of schooling are quite inhibitive of students' exercising imagination. (I, again, agree with your point that schools don't often provide the space to exercise imagination.)

Imagination, as you say, enables and encourages us to play with multiple possibilities. But learning in school typically requires us to adopt a specific way to approach a question, accept one definite answer, etc. As such, it does not give us room to entertain multiple possibilities, and it is not quite accommodating our willing suspension of belief (the opposite of S. T. Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief").

An example. When I learned in 7th grade (in Japan) that a negative times a negative was a positive, I felt odd, or didn't feel it make sense (a positive times a positive is a positive, and a positive times a negative is a negative – they made sense to me). I didn't, however, linger with that question at that time, and just figured it was much easier simply to accept it as a fact/rule. And my simply accepting whatever was taught by my math teacher worked for the moment, but I fell behind in time. I suppose it was because all I did was to memorize equations, etc. to get by (to survive homework and exams) without understanding the reasoning and logic behind them; simply stated, I didn't learn to think mathematically. But the way things are taught and learning is evaluated in school somehow forces students to take my type of approach; in many cases, it is much easier to simply accept whatever is given by the teacher or the textbook than to live with questions.

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Kieran Egan (Edit)

November 30, 2018 at 7:40 pm

I agree with Keiichi's point about the way our interpretation of imagination implies nothing very precisely for education in terms of the binaries he suggests. I think CIRCE focuses on the imagination (as well as many other components of our thinking and education, of course) because nearly everyone who articulates what they mean by imagination points to the sense of originality, of being untied from tight conventions, of the ability to think of alternative possibilities. Robin Barrow some years ago wrote about imagination as combining originality with effectiveness in dealing with some particular topic. That is, merely being original can be idle unless it concerns dealing with something particular in an effective way, and being effective without originality is what distinguishes crafts from arts, and without some specific object of thought or action neither has much meaning.

So I suppose, to pick up on the recent discussion between Stephen and Keiichi, any institution is likely to be both enabling and constraining of imagination at the same time—in the sense that a frame both enables and constrains a painting. The practical questions are what can we do to discourage excessive constraint of imagination in schools, and how can we determine what is an ideal balance between enabling and constraining imagination for an institution like the school. Just to make life more difficult for us, we cannot, of course, expect any clear general answer to the question because that ideal balance will likely be different for different students. We have to go with our intuitions, which may not be such disabled instruments once we recognize that our problem is to find such a balance, and then ensure the institution is sufficiently flexible to allow for that balance to be somewhat flexible to accommodate different students. That task is what many of us in CIRCE have been trying to address. In general my view has been that schools today influence teachers generally in directions that commonly favor more constrain of imagination than is ideal, and I think the task is to work out how to equip teachers best to be able to offer a counter to this tendency. The first big tool is simply to increase awareness of the dilemma, to recognize that schools can both constrain and enable imaginative development in students—and Keiichi is helping us do that here.

Imagination's role in learning is, of course, a slightly different matter, even though the constraint/enabling dilemma is important to it too. As Keiichi mentions earlier, one important contribution imaginative engagement in learning contributes is recognition of a greater range of possibilities for our use for whatever knowledge is learned. Also imagination seems always, as Mary Warnock argued, tied in with our emotions, and emotional engagement with what is being learned greatly enriches the experience for students, ensures the knowledge is richer in meaning, and so on. But I am sure others can add much more to here—and it's time to go and make some cookies for some visitors coming later!

[Reply](#)



Keiichi (Edit)

December 21, 2018 at 1:40 am

To continue somewhat Kieran's point about the connection between imagination and creativity/originality, and also his reference to Mary Warnock:

It is interesting to note that Warnock does not find it particularly helpful to discussing the importance of imagination in education in terms of originality. And I tend to agree with her, particularly when I think of learning such traditional subjects as math and social studies – it seems a bit unrealistic to expect students to create or discover something absolutely new or something both “unusual and effective.”

Then, I have to clarify what I mean by encouraging students' imaginations and why doing so seems important. Here, I agree with Kieran, and with Warnock, that engaging students' imaginations means encouraging more emotional engagement with whatever they learn, which would likely lead to enriching their learning experience. In this context, I tend to think of imagination in terms of imaginativeness, and by being imaginative I mean being serious and playful at the same time. What might be missing, and consequently being constraining in the classroom, is the lack of playfulness.

Apart from the point above, I might mention a couple of Warnock's points.

First, she says that solitude is important for imagination to work.

“It seems self-evident that the imagination works surreptitiously and quietly, in the contemplation of its objects and in the reflecting on them over and over again.” (Schools of Thought, Faber, 1977, pp.162-3)

“If it is necessary, therefore, for the growth of imagination, that children should be able to be alone, and enjoy solitude, this possibility must somehow be preserved at school, even though actual physical solitude is most unlikely to be achieved there.” (p.163)

I find this interesting because, nowadays, interactive lessons and activities tend to be encouraged as a means to engaging students' imaginations. (Of course, she wrote it many years ago, but it is still an interesting point.)

Second, Warnock also appreciates, at least to some extent, what tend to be considered “constraining” aspects of the classroom, such as rules, routines, etc.

“But, more, the familiarity and the safety of accustomed rituals can allow great freedom to the thoughts and feelings, and act as a source of refreshment.” (p.163)

So, it seems, according to her, allowing greater freedom to the student does not necessarily help encouraging or enabling students to work imaginatively...

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