

# Senses and Sensibilities

## Educating the Somatic Imagination

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### Imagination and the Neglect of Experience

**M**ANY CONTEMPORARY VOICES are calling for renewed attention to the role of primary experience in educational development. Some are motivated by environmental and ecological concerns: Books such as David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996), or Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods* (2008), build a case for the importance of direct contact with the natural world in order that we learn to love and care for it. In the context of curriculum theory, these concerns currently tend to be expressed in terms of place-based education (Grunewald, 2003), environmental education (Payne, 2006), or ecological education (Morris, 2002).

A second set of voices is connected with discourses on indigenous education and indigenous knowledge, emphasizing the necessity of direct contact with the land for the maintenance of local languages and cultures (Battiste & Barman, 1995; Maffi, 2001). A landmark curricular work in this tradition is Gregory Cajete's *Look to the Mountain* (1994), which emphasizes both individual and community engagement with nature and place as vital dimensions of education. Yet a third set of voices arises in the context of arts-based education, where dancers, actors, musicians and others highlight the role of the senses and embodiment in educating for freedom, self-reliance, and creativity (e.g., Bresler, 2004). And a fourth comes from the field of experiential and outdoor education, built upon the profound contributions made by direct experience to building one's self-understanding, relationships with others, and resilience (e.g., Beard & Wilson, 2006).

While all these diverse approaches invoke unmediated sensory experience as a fundamentally important dimension of learning, they do not necessarily rely on a common conception of what experience is. As Fox (2008) notes,

...experience from an individual perspective is a complex interaction between body, sensory input, and neurological processing—a relationship with the world as humans encounter, interpret, and shape messages. Experience is a multilayered phenomenon;

individuals make sense of experience through cultural, cognitive, subconscious, and personal interpretive layers, by negotiating norms and dominant values, attending to immediate human relationships, and through an individual's context within larger societal and historical positioning. Furthermore, these webs are interconnected with larger networks of culture, history, political economy, and power. (p. 41)

Imagination is a similarly protean concept in education. It is invoked by many different approaches and traditions including those rooted in the arts (Eisner, 1994; Greene, 1995; Willis & Schubert, 1991), social justice (Leonard & Willis, 2008), Jungian psychology (Jones, Clarkson, Congram & Stratton, 2008), and spiritually inspired traditions such as Steiner schools (Nielsen, 2004). Yet the underlying ontologies and epistemologies of imagination are complex and diverse (Brann, 1991; Warnock, 1978; White, 1990). Long regarded in Western philosophy as a kind of intermediary between the world of the senses and the world of thought, imagination has nonetheless been generally regarded as too unreliable, too bound up with emotion and fantasy, to play a foundational role in learning (Egan, 2007). Yet its influence can be seen everywhere.

There is a tendency in everyday language to associate imagination only with what is perceived as *imaginative*, that is, standing out from the mundane and imitative. Following the lead of cognitive linguists such as Lakoff & Johnson (2003) and Turner (1996), however, I am inclined to see the imagination as implicated in even our most routine interpretations of the world. As they convincingly demonstrate, our grasp on the world is fundamentally metaphorical: We encounter things not just as they are but as they might have been or they might become, and as they resemble or symbolize other things. These twin senses of possibility and connection are at the heart of what is meant here by imagination. Our cultures' habitual ways of using language and other symbol systems shape our everyday imaginative sensibilities to the point of making it extremely difficult to see beyond them, but there remains a certain irreducible power of invention that is key to human adaptability and creativity (Fettes, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2010b).

This dual implicatedness of the imagination, in our ability both to internalize collective habits of thought and to free ourselves from them, places it at the heart of diverse struggles over the meaning and purpose of education (Egan & Nadaner, 1988; Giroux & McLaren, 1997). Liberatory and critical educators of all kinds might benefit from insights into how to cultivate imagination in different settings and for different purposes. More fundamentally, theoretical accounts of the educational process that cast imagination in a central role may prove helpful to the realization of alternative educational futures, such as those based on the insights of feminist, indigenous, or spiritual traditions (e.g., Milojevic, 2005). The key question to be explored in this article is how such accounts might also give due weight to the role of experience, that is, to direct, unmediated sensory encounters with the world (Reed, 1996). I shall be arguing for the enlargement of Kieran Egan's theory of imaginative development (1997) along these lines, leading to a narrative framework for the design of imaginative, sensorily rich curriculum. This is part of a larger project to make "imaginative education" more responsive to place-based, environmental, ecological and indigenous concerns (e.g., Fettes, 2006, 2008; Fettes & Judson, 2011).

In its original form, Egan's theory highlights the influence of language on how we imaginatively grasp the world. In a number of works stretching from *Educational Development* (1979) to *The Educated Mind* (1997), he argues that Western cultural history has been shaped through a gradual coming to terms with the imaginative possibilities of language, with four dramatic cultural transformations playing an especially significant role. The first of these is the transition from pre-linguistic primates to language-using humans; the second, from oral language commu-

ities to societies shaped by the written word; the third, from systems of popular literacy to the intensive, specialized uses of language typical of a highly differentiated society (ranging from Ancient Greece to modern industrial civilization); and last, the development of a kind of systematic reflexiveness that employs language more tentatively, self-critically, and humanely. Reading his account with experience in mind, we can see each of these steps (except perhaps the last) as taking us farther from the primacy of direct sensory engagement with the world.

This process of cultural development, Egan argues (1997), is recapitulated in the development of the individual imagination. Growing up in the modern cultures resulting from this long, layered history, each of us must recreate (or rediscover) successive “kinds of (imaginative) understanding” in the process of acquiring the cultural tools specific to each mode of language use. Egan terms these kinds of understanding Somatic, Mythic, Romantic, Philosophic and Ironic. The task of the imaginative educator is to help the learner develop all of them as fully as possible, keeping the earlier ones intact and alive even as the later ones develop, although there will inevitably be some losses along the way (Egan, 1997).

In Egan’s scheme, finding meaning in sensory experience is the province of Somatic understanding. This, he suggests, is most vividly alive in the first two or three years of life, before oral language takes over as our main guide to interpreting reality; but if all goes well, it will remain active in our imaginative grasp on the world, providing us with “something beyond language, something foundational to all later understanding” (1997, p. 169). Especially in Ironic understanding, at the culmination of his developmental pathway, embodied experience provides a way to keep the ambitions of Philosophic language in check (1997). Yet there is a curious silence in his work regarding the deliberate development of the Somatic imagination. His books for teachers include a wealth of suggestions for the cultivation of Mythic, Romantic and Philosophic understanding (Egan, 1986, 1992, 2005, 2006), within an overall conception of “teaching as storytelling”—that is, engaging students with the material of the curriculum in the same way that a storyteller would engage them with the characters and events and deeper meanings of a narrative. Yet there is no experiential counterpart to all this, no suggestions for how our direct sensory engagement with the world might be guided by imaginative teachers, nor how it might grow and change in the course of our journey.

What I will outline here, then, is a way of extending Egan’s theory of imaginative development to take fuller account of our nature as embodied beings and our capacity for learning from experience. Many of the insights from his language-driven theory turn out to be applicable to the domain of experience as well. The result is a framework that helps us think in new ways about the process of making meaning through direct encounters with the world.

## Experiential Learning and Narrative Understanding

The first thing to be said about this process is that it can hardly be as unitary as Egan’s blanket term “Somatic” implies. Jay Roberts (2008), for instance, building on Martin Jay’s seminal *Songs of Experience* (2004), identifies three distinct “variations on the theme of experience” to be found in the literature on experiential education. The most influential of these is the pragmatic tradition, represented by John Dewey (1938/1998) and his interpreters (e.g., Kolb, 1984); its conception of experience emphasizes continuity and interaction, usually in a social setting. A contrasting “variation” can be found in the phenomenological tradition, championed by Romantics such as Emerson (1836, 1844) or, in the contemporary literature, David Abram (1996).

Characterized by a focus on individual experience, this tradition highlights emotional and perceptual intensity that goes beyond our everyday, typical ways of encountering the world. Third and most recent is the critical tradition, represented by Freire (1970, Freire & Shor, 1987) and others (cf. Darder, Torres, & Baltodano, 2002), and focused on direct engagement with the oppressive aspects of experience in the interests of emancipation and social change (Roberts, 2008).

If imagination is involved with each of these forms of educational experience, the details of that involvement must surely differ substantially, since each variation is based on different values and assumptions. Nor can the complexities of these relationships be understood from within any one experiential tradition, since each has difficulty examining its own biases. Seaman (2008), for example, argues that the constructivist perspective that has come to dominate the pragmatic tradition “has evolved from a set of practice-driven models with historically specific purposes into a broader belief system underwritten more by liberal-humanist ideology, folk psychology, and administrative interests than by a scientific or epistemological foundation for learning” (2008, p. 9). Likewise, the critical approach has been accused by Bowers (2006) of undermining non-Western cultural traditions by framing an essentially individualist and modernizing critique of experience as the primary route to emancipation. Roberts (2008) uses such contrasts and limitations to argue for developing “a more inclusive and diverse intellectual ancestry” that can “strengthen (and trouble) representations of experience in connecting curricular traditions” (p. 32, see also Fox, 2008; Seaman, 2008). Any account of imaginative experience must therefore address these kinds of tensions.

Because imagination is inextricably bound up in our systems of sense-making (Brann, 1991), including signs and symbols of all kinds, imaginative experience is never just an individual, idiosyncratic cognitive process, it is also profoundly collective and cultural. To paraphrase the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1986, 1987), our everyday experiences and interactions take place against a shared imaginative background that is rarely made explicit, but is embodied in the ways the tools and symbols (including language) are constantly shared and used around us. As Glassman (2001), in a comparison of Vygotsky’s views with Dewey’s, pithily summarizes: “It is the object’s history within the group that helps create meaning in the mind of the child... [T]he mind is essentially a living catalogue of historical incidence” (p. 7). The relationship of language and culture to experience therefore becomes an important issue in imaginative experiential education, a point taken up in more detail later on.

A further level of complexity is introduced when we consider the broader cultural patterns that shape the nature and educational role of experience. All of the theorists of experience mentioned above were writing in the context of advanced industrial societies, whose education systems give far greater emphasis to factual accounts and analyses of experience than to direct sensory experience itself (Smith, 1990). Modern schooling not only privileges linguistic representation, it deliberately separates children from their normal social and natural environments for a large part of their growth towards adulthood. Even in school subjects such as science, where experience (in the form of observation and experimentation) is a key part of the curriculum, it is tightly circumscribed by second-hand accounts of what *should be experienced*. This state of affairs differs radically from that in indigenous cultures, particularly non-agricultural societies, which place great emphasis on learning from the world itself both through observation and through practical and spiritual engagement with it (Brody, 2001; Cajete, 1994; Ross, 1992). Thus an inclusive theory of imaginative experience will necessarily challenge some fundamental assumptions and practices of modern Western societies, and be informed and enriched by

indigenous modes of connection between people and place—perhaps as a contribution to a shared decolonization project of indigenous *métissage* (Donald, 2009).

A key step in the building of such a theory is to find an organic, integrative metaphor for the structuring of educational experience. The dominant metaphors in modern school systems stem largely from the “machine paradigm” in the psychological and behavioral sciences (Kohler, 2010). Perhaps the most influential of these is what Egan (1988) calls the “assembly-line” model, which portrays the task of teaching and curriculum as consisting in moving students in a systematic way towards the achievement of pre-set objectives. There is a logic to this way of thinking that has become ingrained in industrialized societies to the extent that it can be difficult to imagine any other rational way of organizing a complex process. Assembly-line thinking also fits neatly with imagining teaching as a process of knowledge transmission, or what Paulo Freire (1970) derisively called the “banking model” of education—a conception that is still widespread, both in popular discourse and in the structuring of schools, classrooms, and pedagogy. One practical consequence of assembly-line logic is to limit and control the range of experience available to students, in order to make outcomes as predictable as possible. For related reasons, imagination likewise tends to be kept on a short leash in an assembly-line curriculum, if it is not suppressed entirely.

Egan’s eloquently argued alternative is to think in terms of stories (1986, 1988) or, more broadly, narrative (Bruner, 1991). Given their role in every known society, stories evidently fit with some deep predilection of the human mind; they work not only with the rational, logical side of our minds, but also its emotional and symbolic dimensions; they have their own internal structure and rationale, but are adaptable and expandable to virtually any need. Applied to education, the story form, Egan (1988) argues, helps us focus on what is educationally important—that is, what is most meaningful and accessible to the student. It would be a poor storyteller who focused only on getting his listeners to the end of the story as quickly and efficiently as possible; it is important to linger, to build pictures and characters in the audience’s mind, to play with expectations, surprise and humour (Zipes, 1995). Thinking of teaching as a kind of storytelling is a way of encouraging this attentiveness to imaginative experience.

According to Egan (1997), “There are no neat logical formulas for determining how to construct a story; no program exists that would allow a computer to distinguish between a successful story and another kind of narrative made up of characters and events” (p. 63). Throughout his work, however, he offers examples that involve a journey from an initial source of tension or mystery in a topic to some kind of resolution: “We know we have reached the end of a story when we know how to feel about the events that make it up” (p. 63). Yet it is one thing to engage and satisfy an audience in the telling of a story, where all the devices of language are under the control of the storyteller, and quite another to accomplish it in the world of experience. Egan never really comes to terms with this fundamental distinction, and as a result his ideas about teaching are both inspiring and liberating and curiously constrained. The “planning frameworks” that are central to his more practically oriented works (e.g., Egan, 2005, 2006) encourage teachers to be thoughtful and imaginative in dealing with the *content* of the curriculum, but they have relatively little to say about how to work in the world of movement and sensation and social interaction.

This is not an inherent limitation of the narrative metaphor, however. Three qualities of narrative, present though underemphasized in Egan’s work, seem especially relevant to the imaginative structuring of experience. These three themes have also emerged repeatedly in my work with teachers, as qualities of the imaginative curriculum units they value most highly.

The first is *the importance of lived experience extending through time*. In narrative there is no way to fully appreciate what a given moment means without knowing how it connects to what came before and to what is to come. Of course, one's knowledge is imperfect, and sometimes misleading. Storytellers play with this aspect of narrative to create effects of suspense, mystery, comedy and so on. But this only works because we are trying to anticipate how the narrative will play out from the start of the story based on our growing understanding of how the situation and the characters develop over time. Thus, to see learning as a kind of experiential narrative is to always be looking for connections across time, backwards and forwards, inside and outside the classroom. Meaning is never located only in the moment or in the activity at hand; it arises from how those moments and activities contribute to an ongoing journey. The longer the time scale involved, the deeper that meaning can potentially be.

A second educationally important quality of narrative is *its dialogic, multivocal nature*. The characters in a story reveal themselves, develop and change, and find frustration or fulfillment through their interactions with others. A story is never about just one person, even if it appears to be: Even the most interior of monologues is filled with the echoes of other voices (Bakhtin, 1981). And the way we hear and understand stories is similarly many-layered. With each character we feel different degrees and kinds of connection, and these can change as the story advances—or, indeed, as *we* change, so that coming back to the same narrative on different occasions awakens different responses. All these various dialogical relationships contribute to the meaning we draw from a story.

Here too there are two main implications for the teacher. One is perhaps more obvious, the one so close to Dewey's heart: that individual learning flourishes best when the learning experience is socially meaningful, a point of convergence for various viewpoints and purposes. There are, however, many ways of bringing this principle to life beyond Dewey's emphasis on practical tasks, including projects involving parents and the broader community, having students teach other classes, joint dramatic or artistic presentations, and so on. The second lesson, however, is subtler. It is that the *subject matter* of learning needs to be filled with many voices and diverse personalities (cf. Hogan, 2009; Oakeshott, 1962). If a teacher or a textbook or an experience offers only a single point of view, the story remains flat and lifeless, shorn of drama and dialogue. Effective imaginative units invite students to explore some of the range of perspective, voice and being present in places, topics, artifacts, texts and the like. Role plays of many kinds are enormously helpful in making this happen.

A third quality of narrative that holds important implications for teaching and learning is *richness of composition*. Stories are composed by bringing together diverse elements: description, action, dialogue, interior reflections, authorial comments and other devices, underpinned by tension, mystery, surprise, humour and other deep currents of human existence. One also learns to build narratives within a tradition, such as fairy stories, detective novels, scientific papers or philosophical essays. Between the demands of the genre, the story one has to tell, and one's capacities as a storyteller, each instance of a narrative takes on a particular form. In similar ways, teachers draw on a wide range of strategies to keep an imaginative unit lively and moving forward, while keeping students in touch with underlying themes and tensions that need resolution. The kind of artistry this requires is quite different from the efficient production model of the assembly-line, although it could plausibly be cultivated in teacher education programs and other forms of professional development (Chodakowski, 2009; Fettes, 2005).

## The Narrative Mediation of Somatic Experience

The Vygotskyian concept of mediation is central to understanding what such artistry involves. Unlike the assembly-line or transmission metaphors of learning, which portray the learner in a passive role, the concept of mediation emphasizes the active roles played by the learner (and his or her peers), by language and other symbol systems (within their cultural-historical context), *and* by the teacher (together with the social and institutional context) in the complex process of psychological development. The art of mediation consists in arranging these various means so that they nudge learners towards an active and productive engagement with what they do not know or do not understand. Ways of grouping students, arranging the physical setting, organizing and guiding activities, offering conceptualizations, giving feedback and so on all play a part in such mediation.

As implied by the discussion so far, thinking of mediation in narrative terms may help teachers weave these various “tools” into a coherent and meaningful learning experience. It is not enough, however, just to single out some of the key qualities of that experience; one needs a sense of how it is structured across time. This can likely be done effectively in an endless variety of ways—one of the most certain things about the imagination is that it will always elude our attempts to pin it down. But an example may be helpful for thinking about the nature of that teaching artistry we are looking for, and how it applies to engaging students with direct sensory experience in imaginatively meaningful ways. The narrative framework I have found most useful in working with teachers is the “Creative Process Instructional Model,” invented by Native American educator Gregory Cajete while reflecting on the variety of human learning styles (Cajete, 1999). Consisting of four phases, Cajete’s model has a strong narrative quality to it, although he doesn’t use the term himself. Perhaps it is not surprising that a framework designed to integrate different styles of learning about the world should end up taking a narrative form. The following description is based less on Cajete’s brief account (1999, pp. 169–171) than on my own observations of how the model plays out in the context of a focus on imaginative learning. Neither his version nor mine is intended as prescriptive; as he cautions, “In reality, learning situations and students’ reactions to learning are highly variable and inherently creative. It is therefore important to improvise when necessary on the implementation of any model according to the requirements of each situation and its creative possibilities” (Cajete, 1999, p. 169). Within this spirit of creative improvisation, a narrative version of the model provides a useful counterpoint to the original focus on learning styles.

The first phase of Cajete’s model he calls First Insight, but in the narrative framework I have come to describe it as “imaginative orientation,” or simply Orientation. The purpose of this phase is to introduce students to the topic or field of study in a way that engages their imaginations and already hints at the way the narrative will unfold. Egan, who also emphasizes the importance of an artful beginning, recommends looking for images that encapsulate something dramatic or deeply meaningful about the topic. Artworks, photographs, dramatic enactments, evocative descriptions are some of the forms such images can take. It is preferable that there be little attempt to explain their meaning at this stage by the teacher or anyone else. The students should feel themselves to be in the presence of something wonderful or mysterious that invites further exploration. The teacher selects the content of this phase in the knowledge of what is to come, much as a storyteller will prefigure themes in the initial minutes or pages of a story.

Cajete’s second phase is Preparation/Immersion, or what I like to call Complication. In this phase, the original generative event(s) or image(s) are made more complex and multi-layered; in

narrative terms, multivocal. Throughout this phase, which may be the longest of the four, students are enriching their knowledge and perceptions of the topic in a variety of ways characteristic of the kinds of understanding the teacher is trying to develop. It is important, though, that the original imaginative themes not be lost, and so this enrichment needs to be given form and purpose by the students' developing vision of what they are aiming for—where the whole narrative is taking them. There is also a sense in which this phase needs to unsettle students' assumptions as advocated by both Vygotsky and Dewey (Glassman, 2001)—to challenge them increasingly to think for themselves.

Both the sense of imaginative purpose and the challenge to think originally are intimately connected to Cajete's third phase of Creating/Inventing, or what I would call Transformation. This is the phase where students "take ownership" of their growing understanding of the topic by applying it to create something original, both as an individual and as part of the larger group, and where the narrative's richness of composition is manifested in the quality and diversity of the students' work. Usually the teacher will have had the outlines of this phase in mind right from the beginning, but it is common for details to change as the narrative unfolds and the students begin to contribute their own ideas and purposes to its elaboration.

Finally, in what Cajete calls the stage of Evaluation but I prefer to call Integration, students come together to make their learning visible and explicit, assess its merits and shortcomings, and look ahead to what more could be learned. In an imaginative narrative, this also involves mediating or resolving the tensions that have run through the unit from the beginning. The Integration phase is particularly significant for evoking lived experience through time, as it deliberately engages students with the meaning of the narrative as a whole and as a part of larger, ongoing narratives in the world around them. It also tends to have a celebratory quality that plays a significant role in the overall emotional arc of the unit. Although this may be the shortest of the four phases, it is important not to skip it or treat it casually, any more than a storyteller would omit the tying up of ends, lesson-drawing, and looking ahead that mark a story's end.

The logic of Cajete's (1999) model, whether in its original circular form (p. 171) or in this narrative version, is clearly different from that of the assembly line, and different again from Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984), which relies on a very restricted range of tools and tends to be monologic rather than multivocal. On the other hand, it fits many of Egan's examples of imaginative curriculum units (1986, 1992, 1997, 2005), which are based on a similar progression from a starting point, characterized by some kind of incompleteness or disruption in the order of things, to an end point involving some kind of resolution and transformation. Cajete's third phase makes it evident that students are active participants in this transformation—it is not done *to* them, rather they undertake it themselves, as a necessary aspect of the search for meaning. As long as students remain merely passive recipients of whatever experience is provided and mediated by the teacher, little imaginative growth will be going on; it is when they are drawn to *play with what experience provides* that deeper learning can take place.

### Tools for Building Somatic Narratives

Much of Egan's work on imaginative teaching focuses on what he calls "cognitive tools," a variation on the Vygotskian concept of psychological tools (Egan, 1997; Fettes, 2010b; Fettes & Judson, 2011; Kozulin, 1998). In a narrative teaching framework, we might think of these tools as akin to the various devices at the disposal of a storyteller. This suggests it is worth asking



whether particular kinds of tools are needed to build a four-phase learning narrative of the kind just described; and, in particular, how those tools might be deployed in order to enhance the meaning of direct sensory encounters with some aspect of the world.

In the Orientation phase, we need to get a sense of what this unfolding narrative is about: What is at stake here? What is the range of possibilities waiting to be explored? But this need will hardly be met by a plot summary—what kind of storyteller would give the climax or the ending away in advance? Rather, from the beginning the student needs to feel an active curiosity, a sense that they are contributing to the building of the story. The most powerful cognitive tools—“tools of imaginative engagement” (Fettes, 2010b)—for accomplishing this are those that evoke *contrast, conflict, and flux*. The Orientation phase needs to awaken such imaginative tensions in the students themselves, drawing out their emotional investment in the focus of the narrative. One of the teacher’s purposes here can be the heightening of uncertainty and ambivalence, of puzzlement and anticipation. Orientation should leave students with the sense that there is much more to come, and that the journey will offer imaginative rewards.

To take a straightforward example: suppose that we want to develop students’ Somatic understanding of an ordinary patch of woodland, easily visited for an hour or so each week or fortnight. There are a number of imaginative themes we might choose for a learning narrative, but for our illustration we will opt for the familiar dichotomy of life and death. Our goal is to have the students come to *feel* the presence of this struggle, or dance, in their encounters with the forest. The task of Orientation is therefore to make vivid a few of the ways in which life and death are made manifest in this patch of woodland. This could involve as simple an exercise as having the students scatter and bring back one living and one dead object each, which can then become the focus of contemplation and discussion. Or students could be asked to pick one living thing and try to imagine, on the basis of what they can see and feel and smell, what it would be like to be that thing: What would it need to keep on living? What threats would it encounter to its existence? These are the kinds of exercises that help the student begin to experience the woodland as a place of silent drama to which our senses provide vital clues.

As the second phase of Complication unfolds, these initial themes and struggles need to become multivocal, in the sense described earlier: That is, students need to develop a sense of the diverse ways in which they manifest themselves in concrete and vivid particulars of experience. Tools that build awareness of *regularity, composition and detail* are particularly useful for this purpose (Fettes, 2010b; Fettes & Judson, 2011). Thus on one visit to the woodland, students might be asked to attend to the relative sizes of different living things present in a particular patch of forest; on another, to the presence or absence of water and sunlight in different places within the woodland; on another, to signs of dynamic change, of new life emerging and old life decaying, and so on. With each succeeding visit, students enter a little further into the drama of life and death, even as they gain a fuller and more detailed experiential knowledge of the woodland as a whole.

As the narrative moves towards the phase of Transformation, control needs to shift gradually from teacher to students. In the orthodox Vygotskian account, the tools initially used by the teacher to guide students’ physical and imaginative engagement should little by little become part of the students’ own repertoire. Yet the essential step in an imaginative narrative is for students to go beyond what they have seen modeled for them to accomplish something *new*—new at least for themselves and their peers. In order to prepare the way for this, an imaginative teacher will engage students throughout the narrative both with the *disorder and incompleteness* of our understanding—for example, through glimpses of incongruity, unpredictability, irony,

humour—and with *possibility*, or a sense of how things could be other than they are. These tools are what give learning narratives their playful quality and encourage students to take the creative risks that are necessary for deep learning to occur.

Unsurprisingly, these aspects of imaginative teaching also make the greatest demands on teachers' own playfulness and creativity. For example, a teacher might place various objects around the woodland and on the trees, making them look as natural as possible. After the challenge of locating these “dead” things, students could be asked to imagine (and describe, or draw, or enact) a world in which they were actually part of the living forest, tracing their part in the cycle of life and death. On another day, a tag game might use living things (different kinds of trees or plants, fungi, moss, etc.) to protect players from “dying” or to “revive” them once caught. Students might use instruments and sounds of various kinds to create an “orchestra” for the wood, trying to capture as many tiny details of its living dance as possible. They could be asked to perform a scavenger hunt or a tour blindfolded, relying on senses other than sight to guide them. As students become accustomed to being asked to notice and explore the themes of the narrative in unusual ways, they will begin to bring their own inventiveness to bear on how it unfolds.

In this way, the Complication phase already holds the seeds of what will become the Transformation and Integration phases, but in a different sense from most forms of project work, in which students are expected to make steady progress towards completing a large and meaningful task. “Meaning” in an imaginative unit goes beyond the usual facts and concepts that students might integrate into a written report or oral presentation, to include what I call the “transcendent” and “narrative” levels of meaning—a sense of why the topic or experience matters, and how the fundamental imaginative tensions in it can be resolved or held in balance. The multivocality and compositional richness of the Complication phase provides students with the imaginative resources to come up with their own responses to this challenge. In the case of the woodland narrative, these resources add up to a detailed, complex and nuanced sensory grasp of the dance of life and death in this one small corner of the world.

Thus a possible activity for the Transformation phase would be to have students draw or photograph or write a description of the “secret dance” of their own small personal area in the woodland. “Dance” is used here as a metaphor for the dynamic, interconnected relationality of being, as it is elsewhere in this text. Ideally, they would do this on the spot, noticing and incorporating myriad small features of form, colour, texture, smell, movement, and so on. Through this exercise in close awareness, they would build up a rich inner picture of that small area, loaded with sensory detail. Then, in the Integration phase, students might take part in an imaginative recreation of the woodland in the classroom or playground. With each one sharing the details of their own small area, together they would build a picture of the diversity and intertwining of life and death in the woodland as a whole.

To accomplish these ends, a range of mediational tools can be employed. Some tools may be physical, such as the objects or instruments brought into the woodland from outside; they can provide a focus for awareness, or extend our range of sensory possibilities. Some tools may take the form of bodily movements modeled or guided by the teacher, helping students find new ways of interacting with the world around them. It may even be the case that as teachers become more accomplished at nurturing Somatic understanding they will prefer to use these kinds of tools as much as possible. Inevitably, though, language will be involved in these teaching situations; and this raises vital questions about its role in developing, shaping, or shutting down the embodied imagination.

## Making Sense: The Inclusive Imagination

The pragmatic tradition in experiential education, generally the dominant influence on educational practice as noted above (Roberts, 2008), tends to treat language as a more or less neutral tool. In encouraging students to reflect on and conceptualize experience, it rarely asks them to be self-critical about the words they choose. In this respect it differs both from the phenomenological tradition, which favours the use of poetically heightened language to capture the transcendent aspects of experience, and the critical tradition, which views language as an essentially dangerous medium filled with political and cultural struggle (Roberts, 2008). Where, then, could we situate the language used to guide the development of Somatic understanding?

In Egan's original scheme (1997), as previously noted, Somatic understanding is treated primarily as a precursor of Mythic understanding, in which language tends to supplant the senses as a means of grasping the world. This linear framework makes it difficult to think constructively about language in a Somatic context, since it portrays the two as essentially antithetical, or to picture the ongoing development of experiential understanding through subsequent kinds of understanding. Suppose, however, we think of language and experience as parallel sources of imaginative enrichment and transformation. Such a framework would suggest that Somatic and Mythic understanding need to be encouraged to develop *in tandem* with one another, in opposition to our culture's tendency to leave the body behind in the rush to language. Of course, the tension between the two is not to be ignored, but we are freed to explore areas of similarity and synergy as well. We might also ask whether the shifts between kinds of imaginative understanding reflect something more than different modes of language use, which are identified as *the* motive force in Egan's theory (1997).

In fact, hidden within Egan's language-centered scheme is a second developmental trajectory that has to do with the achievement of increasing agency and self-awareness. Romantic understanding reflects not only the cognitive impact of literacy, but also the adolescent's search for a meaningful role in the world. Philosophic understanding is not only about grasping that world in theoretical terms, but about understanding oneself as a part of the complex systems of causality and relationship that make it up (Egan, 1997). If we take *this* process of self-development to be the fundamental one, we can see Egan's "kinds of understanding" as picking out three important phases of the journey towards an integrated consciousness of who and where we are—limited and fallible (and hence Ironic) though it may be. Taking each of these phases as a kind of imaginative project undertaken by the developing self, we can ask how experience might serve the same ends as language; that is, how our imaginations might seek out different kinds of meaning in experience, depending on where we are in our life's journey, or simply in our relationship with that small part of the world we are experiencing directly at any one time.

In such a vision, Somatic and Mythic understanding appear as two aspects of an imaginative mode that we might call Participation: A state in which our sense of self readily extends into the world around us. The personal and the impersonal blur together: We are, momentarily, the wild flower nodding by the path, or Little Red Riding Hood venturing off into the forest; we feel in ourselves the beauty and fragility of the one, the innocence and courage of the other. This inner imaginative landscape is shaped in our first decade by experience and language combined, through the narratives of the body as well as those of the word. To weave these realms of understanding together, so that they enrich and strengthen one another rather than competing for primacy, is a key educational challenge of these early years; to re-awaken and revitalize them is a

task often faced in adulthood, when they can help us confront and transform the tyranny of the mundane.

There are some clues here, then, to the kind of language most suited to guiding and shaping Somatic understanding. Think of the language of the accomplished oral storyteller, filled with the internal music of rhythm, alliteration, rhyme and half-rhyme, conjuring vivid images in the minds of the hearers through adept use of simile and metaphor, using memorable names and qualities to raise characters and places to a kind of timeless status. This is quite different from the language of goal-directed action, with its emphasis on performance and outcomes, that many educators may be tempted to use to organize experience. Nor is it the language of modern science, though science can be the source of deep insights that can be taken up and played with in the language of Participation. The language of Somatic understanding needs to tap into our willingness to enter imaginatively into the world as we encounter it through the senses, blurring the boundaries between the human and the more than human.

This conclusion echoes themes in the phenomenological tradition of experiential education. David Abram (1997), for instance, emphasizes the ways in which indigenous cultures use language to evoke “the expressive sounds, shapes, and gestures of an animate earth” (p. 178), and he suggests that “a story must be judged as to whether it *makes sense*.”

A story that makes sense is one that stirs the sense from their slumber, one that opens the eyes and ears to their real surroundings, turning the tongue to the actual tastes in the air and sending chills of recognition along the surface of the skin. To *make sense* is to release the body from the constraints imposed by outworn ways of speaking, and hence to renew and rejuvenate one’s felt awareness of the world. It is to make the senses wake up to where they are. (p. 265)

We might say that the phenomenological tradition of experiential education aims to enhance our imaginative Participation in the world. As such, it offers valuable insights into the development of Somatic understanding as defined and explored here. Language can aid this development in so far as it helps awaken the imagination to the narrative and transcendent dimensions of experience. Conversely, language which reinforces taken-for-granted ways of experiencing (or failing to experience) the world, and particularly that which positions the learner as separate and distinct from whatever is experienced, will tend to deaden Somatic understanding. Artistry is therefore needed, not only in planning experience itself, but also in choosing the words to accompany and interpret it—an insight that complicates the teacher’s task considerably, but may also inspire new adventures and experiments in Somatic learning.

Nothing has been said as yet of the role of experience in the other modes of imaginatively encountering the world—those tied to the agendas of agency and interconnectedness. To see Somatic understanding as vitally important, indeed foundational in some sense, is not to deny the educational significance of these other kinds of understanding. Anticipating an argument to be elaborated elsewhere (Fettes, submitted), they may be thought of as corresponding, roughly, to the pragmatic and critical traditions in experiential education. That is, the Deweyan tradition works with a conception of experience that balances, in useful ways, Egan’s notion of Romantic understanding, while the Freirean tradition seeks to develop a kind of experiential consciousness that is allied with Philosophic understanding. Of course, the correspondences are more complex and in need of critique and reformulation than this brief description implies. Yet it points to the possibility of a more productive and inclusive conversation among theorists and practitioners

from all three “variations” of experiential education, by taking seriously (and playfully) the centrality of imagination and narrative to the process of meaning-making—not only through language, but through the body and the senses as well.

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