

# You are now leaving Flatland

Why we need imagination  
in education

It's time that teaching and learning penetrated deeper than surface intellect, and recognised the power of imagination to enable that, say **Bronwen Haralambous, Robert Fitzgerald and Thomas Nielsen.**

**IMAGINE.** What does it really mean to imagine? Is it just the ability to picture – from the Latin, *imago*? Is it, at the other extreme, about dreaming impossible dreams of never-to-be-realised utopias, like a dream of ‘all the people living life in peace’ as John Lennon put it in 1971? Just imagine if these words referred not only to the self-confessed counter-cultural dreamers of the 1960s and '70s, but to the mainstream reality of the postmodern world of the new millennium. According to the educational futurist, Richard Slaughter, the only way to avoid a ‘future dystopia’ is to take our ability to imagine more seriously. ‘There are indeed real and vibrant alternatives to the kind of limited rationality that is currently driving the global system toward a diminished and dystopian future,’ Slaughter wrote in his 2004 book, *Futures Beyond Dystopia*.

Slaughter grounds his futures study on a framework inspired by Ken Wilber’s extensive philosophical writing that strives to perform what Slaughter

### **Flatland: Population six billion**

*According to Ken Wilber, Western culture has mistakenly privileged rationality, recognising as 'reality' only that which is external, objective and measurable, and thereby rendering the external world into mere resources, in so doing stripping individuals and cultures of their interconnections, leaving merely the disengaged ego in an environment where the emphasis is on span and expansion horizontally – hence 'flatland' – rather than depth, or vertical layers of existence recognising an 'other world' above or below.*

describes as an 'epistemological rescue operation' to avoid the 'imperilled fate of the human experiment on Earth,' argues Slaughter. To do that, according to Wilber, we need to address the misconception on which the world of modernity was built, namely, that the external, objective, measurable part of reality – what Wilber calls flatland thinking – is adequate to describe the whole of reality.

The conflict between reason and imagination is not a new one. Flatland thinking, the heritage of the rationalism of the Enlightenment, eventually won out over the imaginative faculty, despite the fierce defence of imagination in the following period by the Romantics. In many ways, the markers of that conflict persist in the connotations carried by the word 'romantic' today: one's argument is thought to be weak if one relies on sentiment, idealism, fantasy or fiction. The world of romantic, candle-lit dinners is not 'the real world.'

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This conflict between reason – and what's real – and imagination – and what's not real – is well served by dictionaries that set up a powerful binary. Here's the way *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines imagination:

'The act of imagining is the forming a mental concept of what is not actually present to the senses; the result of this, a mental image or idea (frequently characterized as vain, false, etc.)...scheming or devising..; that faculty of mind by which we conceive of the absent as if it were present (frequently including memory); the "reproductive imagination"..; the "productive imagination"..; the creative faculty; poetic genius.'

It gets even worse when you go from 'imagination' to 'imaginary': you can imagine what is 'imaginable,' that is, 'what is possible to be thought of or believed,' and what is 'imaginary,' that is, 'existing *only* in the imagination,' according to the *Reader's Digest Wordpower Dictionary*.

The history that opposes the Enlightenment to Romanticism, of course, also tends to make us place rationalism and imagination in opposition, but is there another way of conceiving of them? Is imagination another way of knowing?

It's not just an academic question. Another way of knowing would be handy, since the bias against 'unreal' fantasy and for forms of 'real' knowledge that can be validated contributes towards what Jon Wagner, writing in 'Ignorance in educational research: or, how can you not know that?' describes as 'blind and blank spots' in our research into the vital relationship between the rational and imaginative functions of our minds. Wagner offers us a way out of the binary by suggesting that deeper understandings and more useful knowledge come from asking not only how we know things but also how we come to not know.

Since the second half of the last century, as Patti Lather noted in 'Critical frames in educational research,' the field of educational research has been adjusting to changing paradigms, shifting away from the hegemony of science to other ways of generating and legitimating knowledge. Qualitative researchers over the past three decades have gradually been reclaiming narrative pathways as acceptable alternative or additional discourses.

The landmark research of Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule, published in 1986 in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, which focused on women's self-reports of their cognitive styles, contributed to the revival of interest in stories as a knowledge pathway that has spread into other disciplines. Likewise, Michael White and David Epston have, since the 1990s, explored the use of story metaphors in narrative therapy in psychotherapeutic situations with positive outcomes. In 1996, Maryhelen Snyder extended their research further by investigating the difference between narrative and poetic experience. Snyder describes the quality of attentiveness that is an integral aspect of poetic imagination in the following manner: 'In poetry.., in the actual immediacy of consciousness that poetry describes and reflects, we experience freedom from fragmentation, from conditioning and from the internalisation of oppressive discourses.... In the fullness of attention, we experience a sense that "reality" comes to us in clear acts of recognition.'

The work of the Imaginative Education Research Group (IERG) at Simon Fraser University in Canada, and others, is part of a groundswell of interest in imagination and the way in which it influences creative and emotionally engaging education. In the last 15 years, brain research by the likes of Antonio Damasio on 'the feeling brain' and Joseph LeDoux on 'the emotional brain' has confirmed the importance of engaging affective domains in learners, showing that to do so increases levels of attention, retention and enjoyment in the act of learning.

Research into how our brain works, as LeDoux explains, has also shown that emotional engagement is closely related to images and the imagination. When we imagine, the part of the brain associated with emotions, the amygdala, is activated together with the cortex of the brain, where logical processes mainly take place.

According to Kieran Egan, author of *The Educated Mind* and a keynote speaker at the sixth International Conference on Imagination and Education hosted by IERG and IERG associates at the University of Canberra at the beginning of 2008, children learn more deeply and more profoundly through interacting with what they can imagine. Imaginative education is a means of engaging children emotionally in learning, Egan explains, because, 'Rationality is not simply a set of computing skills; the mind works as a whole, and its whole includes our bodies and our emotions and imaginations.'

Egan grounds his theoretical approach with practical 'cognitive tools' to engage children emotionally in learning – tools like storytelling, metaphors, binary opposites, jokes and humour, and association with heroes and the like – which become progressively more sophisticated as the child develops. It's a philosophical and methodological approach that provides both a conceptual framework for understanding the imagination and a practical pedagogy.

Philosophical and methodological approaches to teaching and learning, as Alduino Mazzone points out, typically address 'why' questions on the one hand and 'what' and 'how' questions on the other, and it's the human-centred 'why' question in the Rudolf Steiner or Waldorf tradition of education that receives initial focal attention. As Steiner put it in *Kingdom of Childhood*, 'What we must bear in mind is that with the very little child the intellect, that in the adult has its own independent life, must not yet really be cultivated, but all thinking should be developed in a pictorial and imaginative way.' Cutting across the definitions of imagination cited earlier, Steiner conceived of imagination in relation to reality in this way: 'The intellect never penetrates as deeply into reality as fantasy does. Fantasy can go astray, it is true, but it is rooted in reality, whereas the intellect remains always on the surface.'

This view of surface intellect takes us back to Wilber's flatland thinking and his view of imagination as a creative capacity as well as a faculty of awareness. Joseph Chilton Pearce, author of *The Biology of Transcendence: A blueprint of the human spirit*, offers a similar view: 'A human nurtured instead of shamed, and loved instead of driven by fear develops a different brain and therefore a different mind – he will not act against the wellbeing of another, nor against his larger body, the living earth. As a child we know we are an integral part of the continuum of all things.... We can and must rediscover that knowing.'

Dystopia can, says Richard Slaughter, be avoided if we recover our 'oft-observed inner dimensions' and in this way 're-spiritualise' the world, not only for our own completeness of being but for global reasons as well. Whatever 're-spiritualising ourselves' might mean for different people, since the 'spiritual' understandably has different connotations to different groups of people, we need to be in touch with and understand more deeply our emotional and imaginative dimensions in order to become grounded in the wholeness of human experience – in more than surface intellect and flatland thinking. To this end, yet in a climate of measurable outcomes, a conference on imaginative education in Australia seems overdue.

*The 6th International Conference on Imagination and Education: 'Imaginative Theory, Imaginative Practice,' to be held in Australia from 29 to 31 January at the Rydges Hotel by the Lake, Canberra. Hosted by the Imaginative Education Research Group (IERG) at Simon Fraser University, Canada, and IERG associates at the University of Canberra, the conference will address imaginative education and its applications in all sites of learning to ensure that educational experiences are imaginatively engaging for both teachers and learners.*

*LINKS: For more information, visit <http://imaginativeeducation.org/conferences>*

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*Photo pages 38-39: 'Loneliness is one tree on a windswept plain.' Copyright John Schilling.*

**For references go to [www.acer.edu.au/professionaleducator/references.html](http://www.acer.edu.au/professionaleducator/references.html)**