

Using Sound Language in the Classroom

I am very happy to find myself here, in this marvelous space filled with academics sharing a single mission, the intersection between imagination and education. I am still not sure whether this is my own dream or a collective dream woven of the dreams each of us holds. I am deeply moved by your presence in this fantastic space where imagination is the essence of not just education, but of life.

The double sided coin of imagination and education is an invitation to enjoy learning through imagination, or put another way, to transform the educational process into the pleasant process of acquiring knowledge. I am convinced that the learning process can be savored, enjoyed by the senses. Rather than an affliction, rather than a duty, it can be relished as the joy of learning. Shifting from the obligation to learn to a voluptuous learning where reason and logic are taken up by the protagonists of imagination and the senses to deliberately incorporate emotions and sentiments (which are present nonetheless, if only as intrusions) in the construction of knowledge significant to students.

I believe it is no happenstance that in my language, and in fact in all Romance languages, the word "know" (s-a-b-e-r) is derived directly from the Latin word for "to have a certain taste" (s-a-p-e-r-e), according to the Critical Etymological Dictionary of Spanish. This tie between knowing and tasting is no coincidence, as it is evident that to know, to construct meaning and, thus, to learn, deliberate use of our senses is necessary. Significant comprehension is that which joins reason with feeling, insofar as we are subjective beings, ones who know and feel. As Gurméndez wrote in 1989, "reason is not dispassionate. It feels the diverse experiences of joy and sadness. It collects these, shelters them, and conceives of them in diamond thoughts. We do not believe its logical activity analyzes from cold objectivity, separating thought from emotion. On the contrary, reason is to feel and reflect what we are feeling."

Know and feel, learn and enjoy, educate imagining, building unique, undetermined, unsuspected pathways that with specific ingredients construct imaginary representations that open the way to articulating meanings where the students reencounter themselves to construct from an inner urgency within the symbolic contexts they are part of. Emotions are no mere passengers in this learning process, they play a role of equal importance to reason.

A privileged role for imagination is indispensable to knowledge construction, a place imagination has by virtue of its own nature, due to its inevitable part in the process of perceiving and interpreting reality. We are symbolic beings who constantly interpret and construct meanings of that reality in which imagination plays a critical role. Without the presence of the symbol and culture — human creations — we are no different from animals. The difficulty lies in a tradition that aims to control this knowledge process through imposing a single meaning to the representations built upon reality.

Imagination's participation in knowledge construction forges relationships among unrelated contents, just as the mental means of concretizing the content under consideration. As Warnock said in 1981, "imagination has two united functions: giving shape by means of an internal power, and allowing us to feel."

Regardless of how much one attempts to impose single meanings, how hard one teaches to interpret reality in a pigeon holed, conventional view, no matter how one strives to delimit meaning to a single interpretation, indeterminacy in meanings is produced. Even when an additional utterance is included to place boundaries on and imprisoning meaning, a chain of connotations is produced, multiple polysemic meanings are added. In this inevitable, marvelous process lies the application of the imaginative ability which characterizes us as human, with our symbolic specificity. Imagination is an essential human faculty that has allowed humanity to create culture by instituting a symbolic world. In 1988, Lapoujade said "activity is no preprogrammed, preset, but rather the order emerges from the work itself, in function to the idiosyncrasies of the activity undertaken ... Difficult it would be to attribute an order of figures and modes to imagination's processes."

The classroom moves in the opposite direction. The student is expected to leave imagination aside so as to arrive at pre-established results through rational, systematic, delimited knowledge. Use of the imagination is methodically disqualified in the traditional educational process, despite the fact that imagination is a keystone to science. Without it there never would have been any scientific hypotheses and theories on reality

Imagination is present in the educational process whether we are conscious of it or not. At each moment a linguistic sign is used, the imaginative ability intervenes in the generation of the mental image, and it, beyond its

(established) canonical meaning, constructs a meaningfulness that escapes conventional dictionary use. This is what gives rise to the marvels of poetry, the creation of multiple readings, as many as there are readers in existence. Still further, a single reader will create different readings or interpretations according to his or her expectations, interests, moods.

An emotional linkage exists between imagination and feelings, a reciprocal bond. For students to construct knowledge, they must also make use of reason or intellect that includes affectivity, that is, student feelings and emotions. It would seem that students are unable to utilize a series of emotions and feelings that are inevitably present, but before the altar of a formal process, from a series of preconceived ideas of what an educational process is, students' imaginative ability has been excluded.

Along these lines, I recall an experience with fifth graders, nine to twelve years of age). We heard pieces of music and sound effects to foster writing and story-telling. My attention was arrested when a percussion series was heard. The students started to move to the music's rhythm, spontaneously and curiously. I remember the teacher's body language expressed how disconcerted she was by the unexpected behavior. Corporal motion that accompanies certain classroom songs is regulated, adhering to a series of instructions that establish the behavior expected. In other words, the body enters social regulation and is obliged to respond to a series of instructions established by school convention.

[play TRACK 1: DRUMS. TIME:37"]

Use of sound language is a specific medium for fostering the use of imagination in the educational process. Unfortunately, it has not been incorporated into the classroom. It has only been utilized in some musical pieces schools traditionally employ it for limited ends: forming lines, passing doorways, civic holidays, or to accompany playground fun.

Yes, the classroom has had and has sound, but understood as sound characterized by the voices of students and teachers in their diverse intensities (loud or quiet), distinct timbers (sharp or flat), properties of human voice (gender, age, mood); the noises of furniture, nature impinging on the classroom. In contrast to the wealth and variety of sounds and feelings of daily student life, the classroom is silent — not because sound does not exist, but because acoustic reality of life is not taken advantage of pedagogically. Such is why the traditional classroom is ascetic.

The Greek legend of Amphion charming stones into place with his lyre to help build the walls of Thebes gives testimony to the magical power of music, which for our purposes translates into its imaginative power. This legend metaphorically expresses the importance music has on human lives, and we would extend that imaginative power by speaking of sound language which, as stated previously, includes music but also encompasses sound effects, voice, and silence. Despite being the absence of sound, silence — precisely through that absence — produces meanings.

Sound language is seductive, free sound, symbolically interpreted on the basis of the cultural context and personal experience. The etymology of *experience* is curious, indicating travel events, an imaginary voyage aided by sound, that voluptuous sound which on its way provokes emotions and feelings.

Sound language magically transports us to any place, age, situation or unexpected object, without having to buy a ticket or waste any time. Without turning to visual images, using only sound language, through imagination music, voice, sound effects, and silence create innumerable representations, feelings, and emotions internally, which are products of a culture, of social representations, which nonetheless respect their creator's individuality. Social and singular, they gestate in this dialectic nexus of the social and the singular where the individual constructs significance by taking up the social meanings of the culture in which he or she is a participant, but where individuality, personal history, is the touchstone that cements it to forge a unique, personal and social meaning, thus significant learning.

[play TRACK 2: FRAGMENT "THE OTHER STORY OF SLEEPING BEAUTY " TIME: 32"]

Through imagination and using sound language we can promote sumptuous knowledge, knowledge tasted through sound. The results are ineffable, practical, take from private life, experience, the events of the imaginative journey of sounds. We are aware that sound is waves that travel and that we travel in it.

Through sound we recall, which is derived from the Latin *re-cordis*, which means to "pass again through the heart." The heart of feelings, of affect, of emotions, for which there is no room in the spaces of traditional schooling as a teaching approach, as explicit educational aim. Nevertheless, and despite being disqualified, censored, negated, the imaginative ability

resists, the creator of unique, individual representations, this generator of new meanings. The imaginative ability is inevitably present in children. The sole difference is that when a teacher does not foster a student's imaginative process, it shrinks to an individual process and lacks enrichment from socially intentioned group learning. If we do not take advantage of students' imaginative abilities in the construction of knowledge, we reproduce innocuous, mechanical, non-significant, memorization knowledge — devoid of significance.

Sound language is like imagination: immeasurable, invisible, weightless, yet perceivable by other senses. If we wish to catch imagination, hold it, strap it down, we find ourselves in a similar quandary with sound: bound, we find nothing.

Most likely the disrespect for sound language and music has to do with our living in western culture that gives preference to the material, the observable, the measurable. This is why we feel an absence, a void, silence when we stop a CD or cassette — unlike a celluloid film or DVD where we have an image to contemplate. This is what is interesting in considering sound qualities. Unlike images, where sight is directed through space, sound envelops. It holistically includes the various features of sound, music, voice, silence. Sound effects are perceived globally, in their entirety.

As Storr pointed out in his book, *The Music and the Mind: Auditory Phenomenon and the Reason for the Passions*, we humans cannot turn off our hearing the way we can close our eyes to avoid seeing.

When listening to music I feel its effects, albeit unseen. The combination of sound and imagination enables conversation on educational content in a godly ambrosia to be savored as flavorful learning. Such a combination generates desirable sound that motivates creation of meaningfulnesses in knowledge construction.

Sound language may be used to learn diverse classes of content. An option is to close one's eyes and let oneself be enwrapped by sound, intentioned sound, that takes one to pleasure, enjoyment of the imagination and the emotions of constructing knowledge.

In Mexico, lessons on Pre-Columbian history usually require students to learn numerous facts shorn of any meaning for them. Yet the aid of sound language permits imaginative recreation of historical moments and events,

and experimentation with feelings and emotions. Imaginary time travel thus becomes possible, to return to the past of the pyramids of Teotihuacán or Chichén-Itzá.

[play TRACK 3: ZEPEDA MUSIC. TIME: 47"]

In a way analogous to text, sound language is incomplete — and in this lies its symbolic potential. The student's imagination is the foundation on which the sounds are reconstructed, by complementing it, giving shape to its reconstruction with new meaning. Thus with a single emission of sound each student, based on imagination, reconstructs a singular history, unique, that takes specific features — and is not individual but, on the contrary, emerges from that process of group listening which forms the foundation of the educational process, sustained by symbolic elements particular to the shared culture. The joy of the senses, listening to music and the diverse elements of listening, based on the creation and articulation of new personal meanings sustained by society, favors the construction of knowledge.

[play TRACK 4: MUSIC. TIME: 1' 04"]

Curiously, sound language has had a precarious position throughout the history of education. With the invention of some audiovisual media like TV, sound language has been pushed aside to a lesser role in the educational process. Audio was used and set aside, without taking advantage of its educational potential. It must be recognized that much remains to be explored and so uncover new uses for the medium and sound language in this marvelous imagination-education duo.

While there are crucial, specific educational materials, the teacher's creative imagination — due to its nature as symbolic creator of culture — has the potential to convert and transform any material into teaching material, by appropriate incorporation into a group's features, needs, and interests.

Audio is an economical, available, dynamic medium that permits fostering students' imaginative abilities. It favors construction of personal mental representations from hearing an auditory emission of any one of many varieties: recorded tales, musical pieces, sound effects, and so forth. In this sense, the approach does not propose a particular way of employing sound language. Multifarious possibilities exist, depending on a group's cultural context, interests, musical tastes, and — most importantly — the teacher's sensitivity, beyond his or her rational, theoretical, and practical knowledge

for the selection of teaching materials and approaches.

Finally, of greater importance than excellent approaches and plans, in the daily classroom it is the students who accept, reject, or oblige mixing of our methods.

The *recorded tale* is a special format that has narration with sound effects. It is inspired by the literary genre of “radio tales” and recorded only in audio formats, where the entire story is told in a succinct episode.

In this recording you can hear the tones and intonation of the voices, and the necessary sound effects.

[play TRACK 5 PASSAGE FROM THE RABBIT. TIME: 33"]

The foregoing considerations help us to understand the importance of storytelling and narration in the articulation of meanings, as Egan expressed in 1986. We can forcefully argue that recorded tale are a teaching medium that fosters student imagination by virtue of its unique rendition of a narration by having established an affective articulation, despite its uniqueness yet due to features inherent to the auditory medium, that permits recreation of meaningfulness without imposing specific representations. As Egan said in 1992, "the intersection with affect is also the intersection with narrative. Whenever our emotions intervene, there is a narrative, a story or story fragments that set the context and sense of meaning."

Reflection on Egan's 1986 book *Fantasy and Imagination: Their Power in Teaching* led to the idea of demonstrating absence for significant comprehension of presence, the transcendence of something. This was the inspiration to create the recorded tale *The Moon that Wanted to Be the Sun*. It is aimed at demonstrating the Sun's importance to Earthly life. A narration was drafted with the elements of fantasy to relate the Moon's frustrated attempt to trick the Sun into leaving so it could shine without being outshined.

[play TRACK 6: THE MOON THAT WANTED TO BE THE SUN. TIME: 50"]

The audio book is designed to create meanings by transcendental signage that makes the invisible visible. To cite Egan again, "we achieve our teaching objective by making the familiar strange."

The recorded tale aspires to be a dish tasted by the ears, seasoned with music, sound effects, pertinent silence, and dramatized speech. Listen to a passage of the story, *Around the Sun in 365 Days*. It is a dialogue between two main characters, Sun and Earth, in which the latter complains about going round and round the other.

[play TRACK 7: AROUND THE SUN IN 365 DAYS. TIME: 27"]

Aware that the affective relationship is crucial to the pedagogical process between child and content, if the content is unable to arouse feelings then significant learning cannot be produced in the child. The *Always Together* recorded tale was made for the significant learning of Math among first graders. An attempt at affective meaningfulness is made by providing evidence for the relationship between the inseparable pairs that add up to ten. Seven and three, or instance, are inseparable friends, tight buddies. We can visualize inseparable pairs and imagine them dancing.

[play TRACK 8: MALENA MUSIC. TIME: 39"]

Infinite possibilities exist to create meaning through recorded tales and sound language. We students and teachers can turn into chefs of our own learning to savor knowledge. In the creation of new meanings — new, special meaningfulnesses — is where the joy of learning dwells.

To conclude, I wish to cite Castoriadis's invitation to creative exercise of the imagination. "It isn't what exists, but what could be and should be, that needs us."

[play TRACK 9: PASSION MUSIC. TIME: 39"]

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