

DIANE CARACCILO

## 6. CRAFTING INNER SPACE

*Guided Visualizations for the Creative Classroom*

### INTRODUCTION

For contemporary educators, the creative imagination is perhaps one of our most urgently needed and underdeveloped tools. Embedded as we are in a highly visual age, it is ironic that working consciously with the inner canvas of the mind's eye remains a remarkably untapped source of inspiration. Crafting mental images demands strong powers of concentration and patient contemplation. Artists and scientists alike understand the role of imaginative consciousness in embodying their visions. Teachers as well can tap into this consciousness by exploring its playful and profound depths through the storytelling technique of guided visualization.

Guided visualizations are one means to coax forth our creative images, which can then be embodied through the crafting of spoken and written words as well as objects. Visualizations are most effective when they arise from the teacher's own awakened imagination rather than from a memorized or read aloud script. For this reason, teachers should take every opportunity to exercise and strengthen their own imaginations. The exercises in this chapter offer one avenue. They are adopted for classroom learning from the professional acting technique of Michael Chekhov (1991), who wrote,

For artists with mature imaginations, images are living beings, as real to their minds' eyes as things around us are visible to our physical eyes. Through the appearance of these living beings, artists "see" an inner life. They experience with them their happiness and sorrows; they laugh and cry with them and they share the fire of their feelings. (p. 4)

### STRENGTHENING EXERCISE

Strengthening concentration and memory help ignite the imagination. Even the most traditional teacher would have difficulty arguing that these capacities are

insignificant aspects of successful learning. They can be directly addressed through simple guided visualizations that serve as short warm ups to the more extended imagination work. The prompts delineated in the exercise boxes that follow are meant as examples. Teachers should feel free to create original wording, detail, and content to meet their needs. Try to speak slowly, clearly, and calmly, and to permit enough time in between prompts for students to complete the mental picturing being elicited. A natural flow of words and timing will come with practice. The questions are not meant to be answered out loud, but are presented to guide and focus the student's attention.

### **Concentration Exercises with a Physical Object**

Concentrate on a simple natural object such as an apple or a stone or a hand crafted object such as a mug, a scarf, or a glass ornament. The objects must be physically present for this exercise.

*Prompts:* (The word "object" below can be replaced with the name of the actual object being used for this exercise.)

Look carefully at the object. Try to memorize its details—its surface texture, color, size, and shape. Pick it up. How does it feel in your hand? Does it feel light or heavy? Smooth or rough? Is it cool to the touch? Focus with all your might on this object. Let no other thoughts interfere with your concentration. Now, when you are satisfied that you have taken in as much detail as possible about your object, put it down, and close your eyes. *See* it in your mind's eye. Try to call forth a picture of your object as clearly as though your eyes were open. Try to *grasp* your object with an invisible hand and *feel* its details imprinting themselves on the canvas of your mind. In your own time you can open your eyes and look again at the object and handle it with your physical hands. What details did you leave out when you were looking at the object with your mind's eye? What sensations did you forget when you were holding your object with your invisible hands? Close your eyes again and try to see and feel the object. You can go back and forth between your physical senses and your imaginary senses until you are satisfied that you have imprinted the object's details as much as possible on your mind.

*Challenges:* After the initial visualization, prompt students to allow the object to "speak" to them---to tell its story about how it was created and where it has been. Students can record their object's story through explorations with materials and/or creative writing.

### **Concentration Exercise with a Remembered Place**

Concentrate on a remembered place that is not physically present.

*Prompts:* Close your eyes and see your bedroom in your mind's eye. What does it look like? Did you make your bed this morning? What kind of cover do you have on your bed? What color are the sheets? How many pillows do you have on your bed? Is there a window in there? What's outside of the window when you look through it? Now try to find one object in your bedroom to concentrate on. Have you found it? It can be an object that you are very fond of or just something ordinary. Can you lift it in your hand and look at it closely? How large is the object? What color is it? How does it feel in your hand? Is it old or new? Is it a machine made or crafted by hand? How can you tell?

*Variations:* Places can be anything common to most students—a room in a house, an outdoor space, a shared space in the school, for instance. An interesting variation asks students to concentrate on a place from their past—such as an earlier home or a favorite place they no longer visit. Other, simpler variations include remembered objects without the setting. The point is to call forth the image without access to its actual physical presence. The strengthening aspect is to coax the image forth from the memory alone.

*Challenges:* Additional sensory prompts, such as smell, taste, and sound can be added to sight and touch. An extended guided visualization from memory work would lead into the area of emotional memory. In this case, you would continue to visualization of the physical place or object to include feelings associated with the place or object. A simple prompt, such as “How do you feel standing in this room? Is this a place of comfort or discomfort for you?” is one way to begin this additional process.

### CREATIVE IMAGINATION EXERCISES

Concentration on physically present and remembered objects relies on already created phenomena. When we move into the realm of the creative imagination, we begin to fashion unique mental pictures that are responsive to our own lived experiences, but also capable of taking on new and inventive forms. Exercises in this category are only limited by the ingenuity of the teacher performing the guided visualizations. The following prompts should not limit, but instead stimulate awareness of the manifold and rich possibilities of this domain. The first exercise develops flexibility in our crafting of mental images. According to Chekhov (1991), our images should “follow their own logic freely, inspiring, suggesting, and enriching us at the same time” (p.12).

### **Reversals and Transformation of Images**

Concentrate on transforming and reversing an image.

#### *Prompts*

*Reversing an image:* Imagine pouring tea from a teapot. First see the teapot in your mind's eye. What color is it? What is it made of? Is it delicate or sturdy? Chipped or brand new? Now see it tip gently over and allow the tea to flow out into a tea cup. What color is the tea? Is it steaming hot or lukewarm? Once the cup is filled, reverse the movement and watch the tea as it flows backward into the pot.

*Transforming an image:* Imagine a small hut transforming into a beautiful castle and back again. First see the hut in your mind's eye. What is it made of? Stone perhaps, or wood? How tall is it? What shape is the doorway? Does it have any windows? Now imagine that the hut is slowly being transformed into a beautiful castle. How do the walls grow and change? Follow the roof as it rises upward into the sky and grows into a magnificent structure. See how the door becomes a splendid entranceway to the castle. What shape is the final building? See all the details of windows and doorways and elaborate decoration in your mind's eye. And now imagine that the castle is slowly transforming back into the original small hut. See the walls shrink back and the roof move downward. What else changes along the way?

### IMAGINARY JOURNIES

Leading students on “imaginary journeys” offers one vehicle for inspiring the creative imagination. The journey motif is effective for guided visualizations because it offers a simple storytelling structure within which your listeners can freely create settings, characters, and challenges to overcome. Imaginary journeys can be a playful motivation for story creation, improvisations, and materials explorations. The following prompt models a basic format that can be endlessly elaborated upon. It begins by establishing a relaxing and receptive listening mode. As the journey continues, listeners are encouraged to create pictures of their own invention. As you revisit the initial structure, encourage your students to feel free to discard images that appear stereotypical or lifted from popular culture. There is no need to hold onto their first images. The creative process involves flexibility and revision. Gently guide your students to be inventive rather than imitative.

*Prompt:* Imagine you are walking down a pleasant, sunlit path through the woods. The weather is just right. You can feel the sun's warmth on your face, shoulders, and back as you move further down the path. Perhaps a gentle breeze touches your cheek. Listen for the sounds below your feet and in the branches above you as you move on. What do you hear? Try to imagine the varied sounds and scents carried by the breezes around you. Are you near the ocean, or in the mountains? In a pine woods? What do the scents tell you about your environment? How does the path feel under your feet? Is it soft, pebbly? Damp or dry? Bend down and touch the surface with your hand. How does it feel? As you move further you will see a clearing in the canopy of trees before you. Looking through the opening you see in the near distance a house. Try to see in your mind's eye all of the details of this house. How large is it? How many floors does it have? Is it modern or old-fashioned? What do the grounds surrounding the house look like? Are they well-kept or overgrown? Try to see all of the details of the house and its grounds. Now walk further down the clearing and approach the house until you are standing right before the front door. Push open the door and go inside. What do you see? Take note in your mind's eye of the furnishings and decorations, colors and objects. There is one door across the way, which, in a moment, will open for you. As this door opens a person is going to walk across the room and exit through another door. Focus all of your attention on this person as she or he moves across the floor. Now the door opens. What do you see? How old is this person? What is she or he wearing? How does this character move across the floor? Does this person see you, say anything to you? Take some time and focus on this action, trying to see in as much detail as possible. (This prompt is adapted from Caracciolo, D. & Wallowitz, L. (2009). Reawakening a sense of play through theater. *Encounter*, 22, (3), 21-25.)

*Elaborations:* The above sequence can be revisited and elaborated upon. For instance, once the student has invented a single character, additional characters as well as settings can be created using the same process of guided visualization. A small village and cast of characters can be crafted from this exercise. Students can discuss various challenges and conflicts that can arise in their invented village and work out resolutions singly or in groups. The journey can take them through manifold landscapes, real and imagined and address a multitude of conflicts and challenges. You can follow up a series of guided visualizations that build one upon the other over a period of several days with an exercise in the embodiment of images. For instance, perhaps one of the characters in the village has a treasured object. Describe its appearance. Where did it come from? How was it acquired? Where is it kept? Is it on display or hidden away in a secret place? After guiding your students with a series of evocative questions about the object, you can ask them to sketch it and then embody it through materials explorations.

#### EVERYDAY CLASSROOM USES

It is not difficult to see how guided visualizations can lead to different creative avenues in the classroom. They can be as simple as opening lesson “hooks” to engage learners in a new topic. In an elementary science lesson, for instance, a simple guided visualization can be used to introduce the four seasons or the growth of a sunflower from seed through blossom and back again to seed. Any phenomenon that undergoes a process of unfolding through time is ideal for guided visualization. For this reason, social studies is a rich source of guided visualizations that can be structured as short narratives, such as pivotal moments in history, descriptions of locations, and events in the life of a person living in a particular era. Zazkis & Liljedahl (2009) point to the use of mathematical storytelling to captivate learners otherwise disenchanted by the bare bones of mathematical content. In their book, *Teaching Mathematics as Storytelling*, the authors emphasize the use of vivid imagery to add color and life to a range of classroom practices such as introducing a concept, explaining a rule, and solving a problem.

In language arts, they can be used as pre-reading exercises to introduce the setting, character, and/or conflict in a text about to be read. Such imaginative pre-reading work is particularly helpful when a text is difficult because it provides an experience that begins to render the unfamiliar more familiar. For instance, take your students on an imaginary journey to encounter the three witches from *Macbeth* or the enchanted forest in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Before they ever open the book, they will feel as though they have been there. Isn't this one reason many teachers turn to film in literature classrooms—to provide a more direct, visceral experience of a text when students have difficulty creating these images through reading alone. Evocative guided visualizations will show students how to awaken their own inner cinematographer and help them generate images while reading. One of the discoveries Wilhelm (1997) made in his study of struggling readers was that “reading is seeing.” (p.113).

Rather than addressing visual learners with PowerPoint presentations and video clips alone, you can help students craft their own mental images of the processes, settings, and stories they will encounter in a lesson. You will not only be supporting their content understandings, you will also be strengthening their capacity for concentration, attentiveness, mental picturing, and creativity. Guided visualizations in the classroom are also great stress relievers, allowing everyone, including the teacher, to breathe more deeply before transitioning to the next effort.

#### PROJECT-BASED WORK

In addition to serving as opening hooks and transitions, guided visualizations can inspire more fully realized projects that extend over several weeks. Students can work in collaborative groups to embody their invented characters and settings through improvisation, script writing, storytelling, music, movement, and materials explorations. A combination of these activities can speak to the needs of different

learners if the teacher creates a variety of roles that address diverse learning styles and interests. Some students become performers, visual designers, script writers, directors, or record keepers, for instance. Students and their teachers can conclude storytelling units with a culminating festival where students perform and exhibit their creations, embracing the wider community in a celebration of the fundamentally human capacity for imagination.

## RESOURCES

What follows is a list of texts that offer resourceful teachers springboards for using story to inspire their own guided visualizations and other creative activities.

- Booth, D. (2005). *Story drama: Creating stories through role playing, improvising, and reading aloud*. Portland, ME: Pembroke Publishers.  
Storyteller David Booth offers a wealth of activities to engage the imagination through role-playing and story. Filled with specific examples from children's literature.
- Chekhov, M. 1991. *On the technique of acting*. Revised and edited by M. Gordon. New York: Harper Perennial.  
Acclaimed actor and director Michael Chekhov's classic text for actors. The first chapter is called "Imagination and Concentration" and contains specific exercises for developing the creative imagination.
- Collins, R., & Cooper, P. J. (1997). *The power of story: Teaching through storytelling*. IL: Waveland Press, Inc.  
An engaging and practical description of the educational potential of storytelling. The second half is filled with specific classroom exercises, including guided visualization, which the authors term "guided fantasy."
- Fennessey, S. M. (2000). *History in the spotlight: Creative drama and theatre practices for the social studies classroom*. NH: Heinemann.  
Wonderfully readable and detailed examples of how to incorporate creative dramatics and literacy into the study of history. The second chapter includes imaginative ways to incorporate objects (artifacts). Excellent resources included.
- Heard, G. (1989). *For the good of the earth and sun: Teaching poetry*. NH: Heinemann.
- Heard, G. (1999). *Awakening the heart: Exploring poetry in elementary and middle school*. NH: Heinemann.  
In these books, poet Georgia Heard offers sensitive, practical and detailed ways for teachers at all levels to engage with the world of poetry.
- Henig, R. B. (1992). *Improvisation with favorite tales: Integrating drama into the reading/writing classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Organized by popular fairy tales, Henig provides a range of imaginative exercises and related activities.
- Matthews, P. (1994). *Sing me the creation: A creative writing sourcebook*. UK: Hawthorne Press.
- Matthews, P. (2007). *Words in place: Reconnecting with nature through creative writing*. UK: Hawthorne Press.  
Written by a poet and creative writing teacher, these expressively written books with their wealth of ideas and exercises contain treasures for those seeking to unlock the doors of the imagination.
- Mellon, N. (1998). *Storytelling and the art of imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Yellow Moon Press.  
Storyteller Nancy Mellon provides a wealth of exercises to encourage the imaginative exploration of ancient archetypes and symbols for healing and self-development.
- Perrow, S. (2008). *Healing stories for challenging behavior*. Gloucestershire, UK: Hawthorne Press.  
Written by a "story doctor" this book provides guidance in the understanding of stories as healing arts forms. Many examples and instructions.

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Polsky, M.E. (1980, 1998). *Let's improvise: Becoming creative, expressive & spontaneous through drama*. NY: Applause

This book is filled with imaginative exercises. The first chapter has extended examples of guided visualizations combined with creative movement exercises—the “fantasy trip.”

Zazkis, R. & Liljedahl, P. (2009). *Teaching mathematics as storytelling*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

A book filled with mathematical stories and a series of techniques for using storytelling in the mathematics classroom.

#### REFERENCES

Caracciolo, D., & Wallowitz, L. (2009). Reawakening a sense of play through theater. *Encounter*, 22(3), 21–25.

Chekhov, M. (1991). *On the technique of acting*. Revised and edited by M. Gordon. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

Wilhelm, J. D. (1997). *You gotta BE the book*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.