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Exploring the Imagination to Establish Frameworks for Learning

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Abstract This paper continues to explore the relationship between the imagination and learning. It has been claimed by Maxine Greene, amongst others, that imagination is the most important of the cognitive capacities for learning; the reason being that 'it permits us to give credence to alternative realities'. However little work has been done on what constitutes this capacity for the imagination. This paper draws on Husserl and Wittgenstein to frame a model of imagination that derives from the perspective of the 'transcendental phenomenology' of Husserl. The claim is made that by learning to be in the world in certain ways we must be able to construct imagined worlds with their own logics and presentations. This claim is supported by a discussion of the parameters required for owning and accepting to the self sensory and cognitive perceptions and beliefs. Imagination is also a necessary condition for the understanding of empathy; of grasping what it is like be another person. In this sense imagination can be better grasped through the category of ontology rather than epistemology. It can also, on the basis of ontology, be argued that understanding and acknowledging other cultures is a matter of being, imaginatively, in the other world. Some implications for approaches to teaching and learning are outlined.

Keywords Imagination · Learning · Ontology · Phenomenology

Introducing the Imagination

It can be argued that recent decades have seen a marginalisation of the imagination in education. This marginalisation is seen as a consequence of the rise of positivism and with it forms of instrumentalism in the curriculum. Thus, we find some educationists and philosophers of education such as Maxine Greene arguing for a 'rediscovery' of the imagination. She provides us with a passionate case for the reinstitution of the 'firing of the imagination' as central to the process of all learning and not quarantined to 'artistic' subjects alone. In fact her argument is that the arts should be given more centrality in the

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curriculum as a source of important learning which has more general application to other learning modalities. She points out that in the legacy of positivism 'children are perceived as human resources rather than persons.' And, she continues, that 'much of the time, they are spoken of as if they were raw materials to be shaped to market demand. They belong, as it were to a constructed category: beings who are to be shaped (benevolently and efficiently) for uses others will define.' (Greene 1995, p. 32) Against this reductive trend she calls on us, 'to imagine a democratic community accessible to the young [and] summon up the vision of 'conjoint experience,' shared meanings, common interests and endeavours described by John Dewey.' (p. 33) Greene then argues, drawing on a rich diversity of literary and philosophical resources, that imagination opens up a plurality of experience and access to Dewey's 'great community' (see Greene pp. 155–6).

Greene's discussion is full of passion and insight and rich in allusion to sources in existentialist philosophy. However, it leaves open the question of how we are to understand the imagination for a richer and more fully human education. In *Releasing the Imagination* Greene does not take much time to define the imagination and explore the concept, after all that is not her primary purpose in the work, which is aimed at detailing how teachers might release the imagination to promote valuable learning in all their students, particularly those who are marginalised by 'standard' curriculum. When it comes to offering a definition of the imagination Greene relies on John Passmore who states that in the process of learning the pupil may take steps that the pupil has not been taught to take, and that 'taking that step does not necessarily follow as an application of a principle in which the teacher has instructed him…the pupil has become in some capacity, inventive.' (Passmore in Greene p. 14). The important element for the imagination is that the pupil is not just able to 'go on' but to adopt a new principle, or a novel adaptation of a principle. This is the element in human learning that needs more exploration. How is it that pupils can move from a principle they have learned to a new principle that they have not been taught? This is the capacity that facilitates important human learning of the type that is much valued (at least in the rhetoric of progressive education) in current curriculum and learning theory, such as 'learning to learn' and learning to be innovative thinkers. It is certainly, for example, the sort of learning that is essential to rapid technological development or more demandingly cross-cultural understanding. This element, this inventive capacity, is what I want to uncover in this paper.

Greene's failure to fully explore the concept of the imagination shows in the final essay 'Multiple Voices and Multiple Realities.' This is a powerful and persuasive essay calling for 'a critical community to be opened in our teaching and in our schools.' (Greene p. 198) but at this point she is still arguing about the capacity to open the mind and imagine what alternatives—alternative values, perceptions and aesthetics—are possible. Where the argument is lacking force is that she does not have a framework for a more profound understanding of the imagination; one that crosses the boundaries from inventiveness of perspective to the capacity to imagine what it is like to be another. Her position is restricted to arguing what it is like to see things differently, to open spaces for the mind to move into but falls short of an argument that would allow one to experience the world as another person might.

Greene is not the only writer on education to reflect this limitation in their discussion of the imagination. Similar limitations can, for instance, be found in Schön where he discusses the structure of 'reflection in action' and notes that the development of professional practice is guided by *seeing as* and *doing as* which draws upon alternate ways of seeing and doing which are implicit in the professional's practice (Schön 1983, p. 23). It is only perhaps Dewey and Eisner who are able to reflect a more ontologically grounded view of

the imagination. Dewey is able to use a more consensus based view of the concept of 'truth' to reflect different communities of experience and Eisner is able to adopt a broadly post-Heideggerian perspective on the making of new things and new ideas by artists.

The issue of the relationship between the imagination and learning, indeed between the imagination and human life has been a theme that I have explored in a number of papers. Previous papers have taken a Kantian approach to the imagination. This paper still has its roots in such an approach but takes a rather different turn. It seeks to explore and adapt the ideas of Edmund Husserl about the imagination in order to better understand the process of learning. Wittgenstein is also seen as important in these explorations where I read him from the standpoint of a phenomenologist who is using language as a species of transcendental phenomenology.[1]

Two Imaginations

At this point it is necessary to say something about what is meant by 'imagination'. It is not a precise term but rather describes a loose set of connections describing cognitive states or mental activities. It is one of those words that is useful in large part because of its imprecision. It is however a term that needs some exploration to place the insights of Husserl and Wittgenstein in context. I argue, following Cornelius Castoriadis, that there are two distinct species of the imagination. These I refer to as the 'inventive' imagination and, following the term used by Castoriadis, the 'radical' imagination. This distinction is meant to be more descriptive than categorical but is meant to draw an important difference between forms of imagination. At its most basic the *inventive* imagination is the cognitive capacity to bring before the mind what (an image) is not present to it, but such a view of the imagination can be seen as rather naive in that it makes all manner of assumptions about reality and subjectivity. It presupposes the appearance and reality distinction and assumes that there is a real object of sensory experience and that the image is some sort of a copy of the object in the mind. This view of the imagination is predicated on the Cartesian, or more fundamentally Platonic view of the ego and its relation to experience; that the 'inner' ego is the subject of the 'outer' objects of experience. This is the inner-outer model that Hume refers to when he says in the *Treatise of Human Nature* that the imagination has the liberty 'to transpose and change its ideas' (Hume 1962 p. 52). This is the imagination that allows us to conjure up unicorns or pink elephants by transposing images in the mind. It is also the species of the imagination employed by Maxine Greene. This might not be the way things actually work in the processes of experiencing and imagining and in fact Hume does reflect in his discussion of the mind as a *tabula rasa*, a more complex view of imagination but does not move to a more fully considered view of a more radical imagination.

The other view of the imagination which I refer to, after Castoriadis, as the *radical* imagination, attributable to philosophers as disparate as Aristotle and Heidegger, claims that the imagination can bring into experience what is not just novel within experience but novel to the world of experience; it can actually create new experiences or *phantasia* not represented in any prior experience. Castoriadis describes this form of the imagination when he observes that Aristotle discovers the imagination twice in the *De Anima.* Castoriadis observes that first Aristotle discovers the conventional imagination, that is the

[1] I am aware that this is not a standard reading of Wittgenstein but it is one that to me provides a grounded coherence to his thinking.

capacity to represent to the mind what is not present, and then later discovers what Castoriadis calls the radical imagination, that is the capacity to bring before the mind totally new impressions. Castoriadis further says that this discovery by Aristotle recasts the whole basis of ontology, giving the imagination a role in the formation of being. And further that the discovery shifts the whole locus of philosophy from its emphasis on epistemology to an emphasis on ontology (Castoriadis 1997 p. 217).

This is a significant claim and is one that would need much further consideration than is possible within the scope of this paper. The statement by Castoriadis is an important development because it opens up the imagination as a vehicle for alternative ways of being and not just for alternative ways of experiencing. However, it needs more substantial and grounded elaboration than that provided by Castoriadis which, I contend, can be found in the development of transcendental phenomenology. A fuller statement of the metaphysical position again would go well beyond this paper.

The argument of the rest of the paper builds upon the idea of the radical imagination and the idea of Husserl's transcendental subjectivity and the transcendental ego, in contrast to the Cartesian ego, to provide the key to how imagination leads to an important new understanding of learning. It also draws upon Wittgenstein's critique of the inner/outer distinction to lead to a similar position. In short, the argument of this paper is that a Cartesian theory of the self and subjectivity is insufficient to support any other than the conventional 'inventive' view of the imagination, to recall to the mind what is not present or to reconfigure experience in novel ways, e.g. a unicorn. The Cartesian ego is not sufficient to support the second 'radical' view of the imagination; that is to bring into consciousness what is not represented in any prior experience. In Passmore's and Greene's terms this is equivalent to adopting a new principle which has not been previously thought. It is here that a new model of the self and subjectivity is required to support the radical view of imagination required for advanced human learning. I believe this can be found in a version of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and particularly his account of the transcendental ego. This view is also implicitly present in Wittgenstein who, through the 'private language argument' and many other discussions, wishes to deny the priority of the 'inner'[2]. He shows the stark anomaly that whilst all experiences are conscious, we have no experience of consciousness itself. This position has resonance with Husserl, although Husserl's path to a non-Cartesian stance is very different in that he establishes the transcendental ego as a phenomenological reduction of experience.

Next I turn to a phenomenological approach in considering the imagination to attempt to understand learning as the process of transformation, not just of understanding, but of being. It is that part of the process of learning that transforms the consciousness of the learner such that he or she becomes a different person as a result of the learning. One way of expressing this is to say that it is not just a way of 'seeing as' or 'doing as' that is transformed but that the standpoint of the learner that is transformed. Providing an account of how such a transformation of the learner can come about is fraught with difficulty. The difficulties are multiple but I consider the most formidable to be that of how one can give an account of the transformation of reflective self-consciousness. Such an account cannot be given without an account of how the imagination can make the leap from the 'I' of the present to the 'I' of the transformed learner. I contend that the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl provides us one fruitful path to understanding the transforming imagination (Husserl 1962, p. 112). I also add that a sympathetic reading of Wittgenstein would augment this account.

[2] See for instance *Zettle* paras 638–634.

Phenomenology and the Process of Reflection

The following discussion respects the distinction drawn by Husserl between pure and transcendental phenomenology.[3] The distinction in Husserl's writing is extremely complex and subject to some major restatements. And like many distinctions, Husserl's should not be accepted as marking an absolute or categorical demarcation but rather taken as guide, in this case to ways of thinking, first about experience and second about being. The category of 'pure phenomenology' for the purposes of this discussion is in the category of raw or unmediated experience, something akin to, or starting from Hume's 'sensations'. This is perhaps closer to the phenomenology of Heidegger who maintained that Being is a form of 'presencing' and of 'unconcealing'. Here of course Heidegger's underlying concern is with the authenticity of experience and thereby of being. The path of 'pure phenomenology' is also that of existentialism and is close to both Merleau–Ponty and Sartre.

The category of 'transcendental phenomenology' is the category of the conditions for experience leading to existence and can be likened to the 'intuitions' of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* but conditions of intuition that both inform experience and reveal the structure of reality[4]. Transcendental phenomenology is of interest here because it is through this category that we can explore the possibility of experiencing the world as different to what is present to immediate or unreflected experience[5]. Essential to this understanding leading to the importance of the imagination for learning is Husserl's conception of the 'transcendental ego' with it profoundly non-Cartesian stance or perhaps better called *post*-Cartesian. Husserl would claim that at best Descartes' original cogito would establish the presence of consciousness in general. The more advanced levels of consciousness, in which consciousness can become intentional, can only be grasped through the process of transcendental reflection. Such a process of reflection reveals that the transcendental ego, the ego of intentional acts and understanding is a reflection of the contents of perception of the world and not the source of such contents and understandings.

Husserl's path to the transcendental is through Descartes and Hume rather than directly from Kant. Husserl does not wish to detract from Kant's achievements but is critical of Kant's transcendental philosophy and its subsequent influence. He regards Kant's transcendentalism as too subjective and claims that this is the result of the influence of Christian Wolff who was one of Kant's teachers and mentors. Husserl does not reject Kant but is more strongly drawn to spare and more logically rigorous transcendentalism that stems from the reductions of Descartes and Hume (Husserl 1970 pp. 94–96). The problem, as Husserl sees it, is that Kant is still trying to find foundations for a form of objective truth from within 'pure reason' or 'pure intuition'. To this extent Husserl's claim that Kant misunderstood Hume's 'problem' (possibly because Kant never read Hume directly) seems justified. As is his claim that Hume was well aware that there were more fundamental issues at stake regarding the grounding of truth and experience. Husserl claims that the true

[3] Husserl is not fully consistent in the use of the terms 'pure phenomenology' and 'transcendental phenomenology'. He also refers to basic system as one of 'pure transcendental phenomenology'. This is not the result of confusion on his part, it is rather both a reflection of the evolution of his thought and of the novelty and complexity of the ideas themselves.

[4] The term 'transcendental' can be somewhat misleading. In this case as it refers to the conditions for experience or being in the world rather than to some supernatural state. For the purposes of the discussion that follows the term refers to the level of experience that transcends the immediate experience and provide the conditions for experience and ultimately being.

[5] A full account would go well beyond the limits of this discussion but such a discussion can be found in *Ideas* Chapter 8.

legacy of Hume is, 'a philosophy that must be called *transcendental subjectivism* (Husserl 1970 p. 97). In a complex statement regarding the concept of the 'transcendental' Husserl claims that his transcendental philosophy can establish 'knowing subjectivity' as 'the primal locus of all objective formations of sense and ontic validities…'(p. 99) not by the process of introspection, but by the process of transcendental reflection.

If we were to follow through Greene's view of the imagination we would be stuck with learning endless versions of what already know rather than being able to take the leap so essential to important learning from what we do know to what we don't as yet know.

What is at stake here in the context the philosophy of education is the right model of learning. If we follow through the Cartesian view of the self we are condemned to have the model that the ideas we have are the possession of the subjective ego, and thus that the role of education is to supply the content and means of such an internalisation. The knowledge which a person has on this limited model is the mental possession of their internal self. Knowledge on this model becomes an elaborate ownership of private inner objects which have been acquired through the mental disciplines associated still with traditional ways of learning. The pupil has to be able to lay down in his or her mind endless items as images which could be summoned into consciousness as the situation demands. The more they can internalise and rapidly recall the better educated the person.

The images that they lay down are first drawn from experience and then from various texts and organised under the rubrics of the various disciplines of thought. The imagination is here highly structured and regimented. The imagination can only operate in the space of the reconfiguration of the items of ideation opened up within the structures.

However, this picture of learning is inadequate to account for important processes of learning in a post-modern environment. It is not so difficult to see its shortcomings but it is difficult to offer a more adequate alternative. The difficulty is largely that of shedding philosophical prejudices that are ingrained in our ways of thinking. These prejudices are those of the conception of the inner *daimon* run back to at least Socrates and have been regularly reinforced over more than two millennia by so many significant figures such as St Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Rene Descartes. It is only with Husserl and Wittgenstein (and a nod to Hume) that we start to overcome these ingrained prejudices and form new paradigms of understanding and thus new models of learning. My contention is that there is no privileged inner and that the life-world is a construction of the shared imagination and that language is central to the shared imagination.

Transcending Descartes

The picture of learning that follows is rather different to that based on the standard Cartesian model. And because it goes against deeply ingrained philosophical prejudices it is difficult both to describe and to grasp. It is one that privileges action, feeling and community over introspection and traditional ways of thinking about reason and knowledge. Perhaps a clue to understanding the basis of this more reflexive view of learning can be taken from Wittgenstein,

> The characteristic sign of the mental seems to be that one has to guess at it in someone else using external clues and is only *acquainted* with it from ones own case. ... But when closer reflection causes this view to go up in smoke, then what turns out is not that the inner is something outer, but that the 'outer' and 'inner' now no longer count as properties of evidence. 'Inner evidence' means nothing, and therefore neither does 'outer evidence' (Wittgenstein 1992 p. 62).

This passage is typically cryptic but what Wittgenstein is clearly getting at is there is no useful divide between the mental 'inner' and a non-mental 'outer'. The idea that images or feelings are somehow exclusively inner and other things such as seeings or objects of experience exclusively outer is misguided.

This is brought out in one of Wittgenstein's rare splashes of humour: 'Imagine an unconscious man were to say 'I am conscious'—should we say 'He ought to know.' These remarks and Wittgenstein's whole approach to the problems and methods of philosophy demonstrate a fundamentally non-Platonic and non-Cartesian standpoint.

The model of teaching and learning to be enlisted here is much more of doing, sharing and practicing than one of mentally possessing. The idea of laying down mental items or images as knowledge does not get a look in. It is an entering into a community, call it a community of knowledge or community of practice, but it is one of coming to be in a group and as a result locate one's understanding as part of the group. Wittgenstein uses the example of the practice of learning the colour red to illustrate the point. It is not by being taught that *this* is the experience of the colour red but rather joining in the language game with people who call this colour red; or rather agree in their practice that this is the colour red (p. 75).

Wittgenstein struggles to both communicate his view of what a radically non-Cartesian outlook would be and ground it any shared understanding. It is however necessary to follow his thought as far as possible to grasp a new framework for understanding the place of imagination in this model of learning.

Consider the following from *Zettle*:

> 387. I want to say: an education quite different from ours might also be the foundation for quite different concepts.
> 388. For here life would run on differently. –What interests us would not interest *them.* Here different concepts would no longer be unimaginable. In fact, this is the only way in which *essentially* different concepts are imaginable. (Wittgenstein 1967 p. 69)

It is not precisely clear what Wittgenstein means by education (*Erziehung*) and he does not elaborate it elsewhere, but the intention of the remark is clear. It is that the education we have is the foundation for our concepts and not that the concepts are the foundation for our education. In case this sounds a little like an advocacy for indoctrination, my interpretation of this remark, based on other comments, is that we have to be in the world before we can make the mental leap to conceptualising the world we are in. We do not learn the concepts of each colour and then go about naming the colours in the room. If anything we learn we live in the room before we can name the colours.

But the next remark is even more intriguing for my purposes. If life runs differently then essentially different concepts are imaginable, but without life running differently different concepts are completely foreign. In following passages Wittgenstein remarks that men with different interests and a different run of life might be more foreign to us than a dog! Because we would not be able understand them at all. Their actions, gestures and way of being would be completely incomprehensible: incomprehensible that is unless we shared a life-world with them.

It is difficult to move beyond the inner/outer picture of the oppositions between consciousness and the world, or the private and public, or the self and the other, but this is what both Husserl and Wittgenstein are trying to achieve although each is coming from different directions. Husserl is pointing us in the direction of the transcendental conditions for consciousness which constitute 'meaning and ontic validity in the broadest manner'

(Husserl 1970 p. 152). Wittgenstein is using the method unique to him which might be described as a solution through dissolution of philosophical problems.

The imagination is important in both cases because it is the unique human capacity to constitute the life-world for each person that gives us the framework to conceptualise that world within the framework. But it is the capacity to transcend the framework and move to a higher level of conceptualisation (or reduction in the case of Husserl's phenomenological reduction) that allows us to be who we are. It is, if you like, the capacity to join different communities of practice with their different imaginings that provides the capacity to constitute at any particular moment our being in the world. This is the importance of the radical imagination because it constitutes the ground for different ways of being. This is the element that Heidegger refers to when he says that cultural differences constitute different ontological states and not merely epistemic states. It is the capacity to imagine what it is like to be another in the sense of live in another life-world that signifies the importance of the radical imagination for being human and learning to be human; it is the core of empathy.

Transforming Teaching and Learning

The account of the imagination that as been mapped out in this paper provides a pathway to understanding the transformative quality of learning. It is that quality of learning with which we are familiar that leads us to see the familiar in new and previously unimagined ways. At the same time, it is the quality that transforms the learner to have an expanded capacity for new dimensions of experience. We might say that it is the capacity to become a new person through the imaginative learning process. Good teachers at all levels already appreciate this dimension of learning and imbed it in their practice. The purpose of this paper has been to provide an account of how this personal transformation is possible.

Both the *inventive* and the *radical* imagination are important to learning. But, as has been argued, the radical imagination gives a new dimension to understanding the importance of the imagination for learning. It is the account of the radical imagination, as amplified through the discussion of Husserl and Wittgenstein, which leads to an account of how learning can be a transformation of the learner. Radical imagination transforms not just the person's experience but their state of being as an "experiencer". It is not just the content of experience that is changed but the whole quality of experience, and possibly of understanding and feeling as well. It is that quality of learning that transforms not just knowledge but the knower.

The implications for teaching reinforce many of the familiar paradigms that stress the importance of constructing new worlds of experience for the students, such as mentoring and learning by experience which allows for large measures of self-directed activity. But also the radical imagination offers the potential to use new forms of learning and teaching aimed in an open ended way at personal growth and transformation. The window is open not just to the epistemological but to the ontological dimensions of learning. As such it becomes important to "think with", and "think beyond" the teacher and to move from "seeing as" to "being as".

In this sense Maxine Greene is correct in emphasising the importance of *releasing* the imagination and, for instance not just "promoting" or stimulating the imagination. What this paper has attempted to do is to put an ontological underpinning to an account of how the imagination might be released.

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