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The Creative Imagination and Its Impact on 21st Century Literacies

Jeffrey Pflaum
Tenaflly High School

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The Creative Imagination and Its Impact on 21st Century Literacies

On television I saw a radical new program in education called “Massage Therapy” which is used as a technique to build new pathways for learning in children. On the screen was a close-up of a boy lying down while a woman rubbed his temples. The child seemed content. Afterwards, I said to myself: “Yabba, dabba, do! Dat’s what I wanna do. You know, soothe them into 21st century learning and literacy.”

--Author’s imaginary self-dialogue following a television promo for a report on “Massage Therapy” for kids, March 31, 1998

As an inner-city elementary school teacher for thirty-four years (NYCDOE) in Bedford-Stuyvesant and Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York, I have had great interest in teaching the prerequisite fundamental skills for learning how to learn, and also, teacher training, or what makes a “good” teacher. With a limited background in education, twelve credits in the Intensive Teacher Training Program at Queens College (NYC) in the late sixties, I came to the classroom with little knowledge of what and how to teach my fourth grade kids, so I listened and observed carefully at the school workshops on reading, language arts, social studies, and phonics. I used these experiences during my early years and found them helpful because they gave me enough confidence to stand in front of a class and teach. After my insecurities passed, and I became aware that there were students in front of me, I realized that they were not present mentally, emotionally, and psychologically.

Questions came to mind: How would the kids find the inspiration to learn? Where would the passion to learn come from if not from the teacher? How could I get my students into present time so they could be-with-me during the lessons? How could they develop self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-understanding to create their own desire to read, write, and search for knowledge? How could I teach self-reflection, self-discovery, and self-education where

responsibility shifts to the children and they create or re-create motivation from the inside?

I embarked on a 21st century skills journey into education, teaching, learning, knowledge, imagination, and creativity from 1968 to 2002. I made up curricula in reading, writing, thinking, poetry, creativity, vocabulary, and communication skills (emotional intelligence, character education, and values clarification). It became an experiment of progressive ideas initiated by my brief teaching experiences, negligible education background, in addition to psychology, English, creative writing, film, and photography undergraduate/graduate courses.

The 21st century skills movement wants children to: think critically, be creative, problem-solve, communicate, and innovate; however, many past education reform movements have failed. For example, in my school district, during the seventies, we had the More Effective Schools Program (MES) that reduced class size to twenty-two students max. After several years, even with the smaller class sizes, test scores in reading and math went down and it was subsequently dropped.

The skills movement will not sink like MES if we teach kids about the creative imagination. A key first step before instructing about the content areas, especially on an elementary school level, is practicing the fundamentals needed for learning and learning how to learn; ask any inner-city school teacher and I believe they will agree without too much hesitation.

The preliminary fundamentals, as I have empirically researched, tested, and discovered in my classrooms, are concentration, reflection, contemplation, meditation, visualization, observation, listening, speaking, critical thinking (analysis/synthesis), creative-thinking, creative writing, poetry reading and writing, emotional intelligence (intra- and interpersonal communication), character formation, values clarification, and vocabulary expansion and appreciation.

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But when, where, and how can the skills be taught? There are times and places in the schedule: for instance, they can be presented in mini-lessons during the school day, in before/after-school programs, summer school classes, or, in extended school days.

Concentration Exercises: Focusing the Mind

My project, called “Concentration Exercises,” helps adolescents become students, keeping them involved, centered, and focused, without asking them to “pay attention.” A fundamental skill like concentration is a tool for learning, and should not be taken for granted as it is in today’s educational system and national standards.

Some sample concentration exercises students practiced are the following: saying their name silently for two minutes and focusing only on the “name,” walking around the school block concentrating on everything they see, playing a game called “hit-the-penny,” where their concentration targets hitting a penny with a rubber ball (and nothing else) from six feet away, and eating a peppermint candy and concentrating on it for three minutes or until it’s consumed.

It was important for them to find their concentration within themselves, and once they did, and understood and appreciated it for what it is, they would jumpstart fresh self-motivation. I wanted students to know concentration through their own capabilities and to empower their lives. Doing so is a beginning step to the creative imagination, and also, to focus on that part of the inside world. A dedicated teacher may get students’ attention, but what happens when they leave that classroom? Will they still be attentive and motivated if the next teacher is not as effective?

Before teaching any subject, kids have to be present—they must be entirely focused—and that can be done, first, through the power of concentration. To do that, one must employ learning through fun, novel, and challenging ways. If these efforts are made, there will be changes in the kids and in the classroom environment; at least, that has been my experience after years of teaching prerequisite fundamental skills for learning, and learning how to learn.

Contemplation Music Writing: Introducing Inner Experience

Taking a step further into the mind and creative imagination, I made up “Contemplation Music Writing,” an original form of writing, which leads students on peaceful journeys of self-reflection and self-discovery via music, contemplation, writing, discussion, and assessment. Typically, kids listen to ten minutes of music from pop to classical and write whatever thoughts, ideas, feelings, experiences, images, and memories come to mind (no themes or prompts are given). After listening, reflecting, contemplating, and writing, the responses are read orally (and anonymously) to the class, and discussed via basic questions on mind-pictures visualized, feelings and thoughts triggered by the images, and main ideas or messages conveyed by the writer.

A plethora of combined 21st century academic, social, and emotional learning skills came as a result of Contemplation Music Writing: reflection, meditation, visualization, feeling, critical and creative thinking, creativity, contemplation, listening, observation, perception, communication, writing, as well as self-expression, -awareness, -knowledge, -understanding, -motivation, -efficacy, and -empowerment.

The project became a foundation for other types of innovative writing formats, from non-fiction to fiction writing: “Here-and-Now Contemplation Writing”—kids are given an activity, in which they contemplate what happened, and write about it; “Experimental Contemplation Writing”—quirky experimental activities done at home (similar to “Here-and-Now” lessons); “Reflections”—prompted activity where students write non-fiction narratives using contemplation themes from past writings; “Portraits”—same procedure as “Reflections,” except kids use old contemplation themes for fiction or creative writing.

Themes from the student contemplations demonstrate the effectiveness of a non-prompt style of writing, which, in my opinion, works well with the independent natures of preteens and teens. Sample themes describe how children build their own pathways to the creative imagination: Drifting Away into a Peaceful World; Dream of Speeding Out of Control; Fantasy: The Double Reflection; Nobody Wants Me! Or Becoming a Snicker’s Bar; Songs and Remembrance; Letting

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Go; Life is Short; Neglected Child; Fantasy: Drain Pipes and Rice Krispies; Bad Vibes; Flutes, Whales, and Peace; Schoolmates, Vampires, and Ghosts; Dream: Frozen, Can't Talk; Future Shock: BMW or Tin Cup; End of the Family; Bright Lights, No Exit; Depression; Reflections: I Hate Therefore I Am; Prejudice; Memories: Death of a Friend; Fighting and Blame; All Alone; Streams of Thought: Modern Mind-Pictures; Boredom versus Spontaneity; Mother Nature; "The Heart is a Lonely Hunter"; Conflict Resolution: Father and Daughter; and, School Fantasy.

Reading-and-Imagining: Language as Art

Take another step into 21st century, and literacy skills and the creative imagination overcome the ability to visualize—an important ingredient in the art and science of reading that leads to greater understanding and pleasure in this magical process. In "Reading-and-Imagining," students practiced changing words into images.

The lessons began with single words, mostly nouns, like apple, dog, room, sky, rainbow, clouds, parrot, pencil, and rose—and progressed to two-word, real and absurd sentences: from Children play, Frogs hop, and Birds fly to Children float, Trees jump, and Ducks skip. From there we went to four-, six-, eight-, and ten-word sentences, and onto paragraphs, whole page passages, short stories, and poems. I added the absurd sentences for visualization effects because it shows kids what their imaginations are capable of creating. They visualized, described, and drew exactly what they saw in their own minds. The unit ended with "charting" or "mapping" passages—finding all the triggered images, feelings, thoughts, and ideas.

Visualization is a fundamental prerequisite skill that grows the creative imagination, but is not given enough attention in the national standards. Readers, from remedial to gifted, have to get this skill down to an advanced science in order to see what they read, which is a lot of fun, especially when the images are rich with detail and can, potentially, become three-dimensional, holographic, virtual realities with kids-as-avatars.

It's funny, but initially in primary grades, we teach words (reading) via pictures. Students "translate" the pictures into words. The pictures, of course, are on the outside. Yet, when children move to intermediate, and upper, elementary

grades, or from picture to chapter books, they are not given enough practice on how to reverse the process—to change words into mind-pictures. Students don't get past the lavish illustrations of primary books and fail to understand that, because of their maturity, they must now make up the beautiful pictures in their imagination. The curriculum pays only cursory attention to the vital process of image making and the creative imagination. The situation becomes problematic if you look at current standardized reading tests, where numerous passages require strong visualization skills.

Word-Bridges: Words to Live By

Children need rejuvenation in reading and writing because they don't have that inside feel, or an understanding and enjoyment for the building blocks of these subjects: words. Words are just black print on a white page; they mean more testing, stress, pain, and less pleasure and passion. "Word-Bridges" demonstrated that words don't live alone in the mind and imagination, but in clusters, and have lives of their own. My students realize they are one enormous human dictionary and thesaurus with thousands of words creating meanings, ideas, thoughts, emotions, images, dreams, experiences, memories, and worlds. Words have purpose, significance, and intention. Words became catalysts for other words in these creative, critical thinking activities.

For example: "What happens to the word 'hurt' if you read or say it to yourself? Does the word vanish after you read it? What happens to 'hurt' if you put it inside your head? Does the word make you think of something else? Do you picture or visualize anything in your mind? Or, is 'hurt' just hurt and nothing else? What other words come to mind if you hear or imagine the word 'hurt'?"

The Word-Bridges Project started with this simple procedure. After the introductory lessons, it was understood that words trigger other words and associations, as well as accompanying feelings and thoughts. Words don't live alone but in clusters, with unknown paths, until we explore them. Word-Bridges are motivational exercises for reading, writing, and thinking. What surprised me was that it stimulated vocabulary expansion. Eventually, students sat at their desks and constructed bridges with a thesaurus and dictionary in hand.

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Squares, pyramids, diamonds, word-wheels, free-bridges, and free-wording are different forms of bridges that became compelling, thought-provoking puzzles, labyrinths, and entanglements for students to solve by finding connecting words to a given “spark word” using their vocabulary and a dictionary/thesaurus to discover new words.

Experiencing words is a fundamental skill that should be taught on the elementary level. Don't we want kids to enjoy the feast and deluge of words coming their way from morning until night? In the 21st century, making kids experience words themselves helps them see the connections, associations, and families of words in the mind and imagination. This is a true skill—taking students to creative, three-dimensional word worlds, and letting them be touched by their infinite nuances is an experience they'll never forget.

Word-Bridges energized the imagination via structured and unstructured word unions. Students learned and increased their knowledge of prerequisite fundamental skills—visualization, creative thinking, and creativity—that made reading, writing, and thinking organic, creative, and fun. Words exploded into other words, forming groups from the “debris.” At the onset, kids were unaware of the myriad of internal word labyrinths. Words now left trails to new words, meanings, and imaginings, generating resonances that rang true for everyone. The words, images, thoughts, ideas, associations, and feelings triggered by the Word-Bridge exercises breathed a new vitality and creativity into words.

The Creative-Thinking-Picture-Series: A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

To get to the crucial skills of critical thinking, problem solving, and innovation, what young people of the 21st century will need is the tool of creativity: creative thinking. If we want students to learn about cerebration, deliberation, reflection, and meta-cognition, we need to guide them to having fun-in-thought, and to enjoy the self-amusement park called the creative imagination. The “Creative-Thinking-Picture-Series” is a collection of photographs, pictures, and advertisements from newspapers and magazines, along with absurd questions that have no right or wrong answers. This strategy really took the pressure off the kids “to be correct.”

To introduce creative thinking, I used an opaque projector to show 6” x 6” photographs and pictures that turned into 6’ x 6’ images on a screen. Sometimes I projected a photograph entirely over the front wall of the classroom and we were suddenly at the still movies. The class brainstormed a stream of responses—thoughts, ideas, associations, and feelings—to the given question. Ideas became stimuli for other ideas, starting phenomenal creative interchanges during our discussions. Children became aware of, and got in touch with, their creative thought and feeling processes.

In the series, students created something from nothing—isn't this the function of the creative imagination?—after looking at a photograph/advertisement of, for example, two cups of tomato soup with a square of melting butter in each with these possible questions: What are the butters thinking? Imagining? Saying to each other? Where do the butters want to go and why? List the words going through the butters' minds.

Any object came to life in creative thinking. “You gotta make things up!” I told the kids. So they became-the-object and identified with the butters, and let their creativity take them deeper inside their imaginations—How would you feel if you were a piece of butter melting in hot tomato soup? What would you be thinking and feeling? Would your thoughts be serious, humorous, or something else? When students removed the “think-like” quality of the butter and personified its nature, they extracted themselves from reality into fantasy and a surreal world—a common one we see in many television commercials, only now they made up their own “shows.” Brainstorming augmented creative thinking and enabled them to see the mind as theater where a play of thoughts, associations, meanings, and feelings could entertain and educate them. Traveling inside became an exhilarating cruise to an expansive life in the mind. Regular weekly practice with the series allowed children to establish a permanent link to their creativity, and a new, potential 21st century skill that comes from the pictures: a sense of humor.

The Inner Cities Poetry Project: Journey's End into 21st Century Literacies

Keeping in mind the previous skills-building projects, it is not a coincidence that

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poetry became the end of my journey into the world of 21st century learning and literacy. After my curricula in creativity and imagination, this subject came naturally. Key to experiencing poetry is the perception of imagery, feelings, thoughts, and language. Poems can spin readers into a variety of inner adventures if they have practiced the fundamental skills leading the way.

The subject of poetry challenged students to work harder to discover the magic and solve the mystery of words, language, feelings, thoughts, and ideas, as well as real and imagined experience. All the skills essential for learning, and learning how to learn, came together in poetry: reading, writing, critical and creative thinking, visualizing, concentrating, contemplating, meditating, feeling, listening, experiencing, analyzing, synthesizing, brainstorming, reflecting, observing, perceiving, and communicating.

Using what I called “The Poetry Reading Sheet,” children either (a) visualized images in a poem; (b) connected feelings to the images; (c) brainstormed thoughts, ideas, meanings, and connected real-life experiences; (d) found the poet’s message or main idea; (e) selected favorite words, phrases, and lines and explained why they enjoyed them; or (f) created new, possible titles for the poem by brainstorming and preparing for future poetry lessons.

A variety of poets and poetry were read orally to the class: Gary Soto, Shel Silverstein, Langston Hughes, Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Frost, and Edward Lear’s Limericks. I also read to my classes Japanese and Western Haiku, Chinese/Japanese poetry, and Native American poetry.

After several weeks of poetry reading, I switched to poetry writing by taping pictures and 20” x 30” posters on the board. Students described what they saw and brainstormed potential titles for poems they would eventually write. I filled the board with dozens of the kids’ titles and they selected their favorites and wrote poems. Most wrote several during the period and completed more poems at home on their own. I reviewed, critiqued, read aloud, and discussed their original poetry with the class. Poetry reading and writing lessons were mixed in with our regular reading and writing assignments throughout the school year.

To create readers, thinkers, problem-solvers, communicators, and innovators out of

our students, the education establishment should invite kids to the self-amusement parks of mind, imagination, and creativity. The source of motivation lies within: It is not enough to talk about 21st century skills and objectives; we must demonstrate the processes of the imagination. Adolescent inner space has an excess of psychic, visual, and visceral baggage, which clutters, blocks and causes a lack of imagination. The chaos, confusion, and opaqueness, resulting from the overabundance of media-driven imagery, force us to work hard to clear the mind and imagination so children can see their originality, their mind-pictures, and their inner lives. My creative-skill building projects remove the debris and get to the source—the tabula rasa of their inside worlds.

When I worked on concentration, contemplation, visualization, creative thinking, and brainstorming with my classes, my purpose was to develop a supplementary approach to the traditional curriculum in reading and writing that would lead to activating the adolescent mind. A long-range goal was to show that reading, like writing, is an art—a creative, imaginative process by which they are born into the story. Whether it was reading or writing fiction or non-fiction, they should find themselves in the middle of their creative imaginations.

“Concentration Exercises” built up attention spans, while “Contemplation Music Writing” introduced inner experience and visualization skills, increased self-awareness, and improved self-expression. “Reading-and-Imagining” also advanced the ability to visualize, in this case, the words they read, connected feelings and thoughts triggered by the imagery. “Word-Bridges” took words and bridged them to other words, finding associative paths that led us deeper into the mind’s dictionary and thesaurus. Words not only created images through visualization, but also created a pulse, feeling, and vibe that came from the beat of other connected words. “The Creative-Thinking-Picture-Series” helped kids find more new connections with words, sentences, ideas, thoughts, feelings, experiences, and meanings. This evolved into an exercise to rejuvenate and motivate imagination and creativity. The series gave students a purpose for digging inside their minds and having a good time doing it. By introducing complementary projects to a standard curriculum, children learned the prerequisite fundamental skills for reading and

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writing prose and poetry as well as other academic subjects.

The 21st century literacy and emotional intelligence skills discussed here should be taught separately from core subjects like social studies, science, math, and language arts. They are the tools that will affect, change, and improve students' school and real lives. The fundamentals built a passion for reading, writing, and poetry. My students' poems were published in writers' college, gifted high school, and children's literary magazines and newspapers across the country.

To support the idea of separating skills learning from the core subjects, think about the way kids learn how to play organized sports. Basketball, baseball, tennis, soccer, and lacrosse all develop the "fundamentals" before "playing games." For example, in basketball, players learn how to shoot, pass, and dribble by being taught and practicing repetitive skills-drills. They learn moves, actions, and patterns—the needed skills that will come up in game situations. Practice in basketball means drills and skills, which help win games. The learned basketball skills become part of, and are mixed into, games—call this the "core subject." Most practices end with a scrimmage, where players have a chance to apply previously learned skills. The sports analogy, in my opinion, compares favorably with academic life, where students should first be taught the skills for learning and then apply them in a "game," or in a core subject.

The 21st century skills movement will raise, as I propose it, some questions as to its feasibility: Can teachers who believe they are "uncreative" teach creativity? Can creativity and the creative imagination be taught? Why did earlier creativity movements fade away and die? Does learning creative skills enhance student learning? What new college education courses can teach the skills advocated here? What methods, strategies, and approaches will be employed? Which techniques are user-friendly for teachers? Can teachers communicate the new skills to students? To answer the questions, I suggest the following undergraduate/graduate courses for teachers:

- 21st Century Literacies and Emotional Intelligence
- Critical Thinking, Problem-Solving, and Innovation
- Emotional Intelligence and Intra/Interpersonal Communication Skills
- Group Dynamics: The Teacher as Communicator
- Prerequisite Fundamental Skills for Learning and Learning How to Learn
- Social and Emotional Learning: Character, Values, and Society
- Mindfulness, Meditation, and Contemplation for Teachers and Students
- Poetry Reading and Writing for Teachers and Children
- Journal, Memoir, Personal, Diary, and Autobiographical Writing
- The Socratic Dialogue: Educators as Discussion Leaders
- The Creative Imagination and 21st Century Learning and Literacies
- The Creative Educator in 21st Century Schools

My ideal prescription for 21st century education would give teachers the strategies and tools they need for developing their own self-awareness, -knowledge, and -understanding, and also, the skills in creativity, critical thinking, imagination, visualization, concentration, reflection, contemplation, creative writing, and self-expression, including the background and ability to teach it.

If drilling-and-killing students with test prep materials diminishes student motivation, shouldn't we consider experimenting with the prerequisite fundamental skills that will last kids a lifetime, and turn them into lifelong learners, enjoying what they do best—learning? Igniting and growing the creative imagination helped my kids learn how to fly. Call this a form of "Massage Therapy," where new channels of learning were opened up by soothing young minds with gentle, creative brush strokes. Yabba, dabba, do, dat's what I do!

Jeffrey Pflaum worked as an inner-city elementary school teacher for thirty-four years (NYCDOE) where he created original curricula in reading, writing, thinking, poetry, creativity, emotional intelligence, and vocabulary expansion. He has published an inspirational book about adolescent reading lives titled *Motivating Teen and Preteen Readers: How Teachers and Parents Can Lead the Way*

(Rowman & Littlefield Education, August 2011). More information about Pflaum's projects can be found on his website, www.JeffreyPflaum.com, the BAM Radio Network blog, www.bamradionetwork.com, and www.Edutopia.org/blog.

High School in Reverse

Blue sky rains black mortarboards,
orange tassels like the tails of rare birds,
and the flat caps boomerang back
into two hundred some-odd hands.

Matching hands lower diplomas.
Eyes look away. All through the crowd
brief flashes zip back at light speed
into Canons and Fujis, Minoltas and Sharps,
into Razrs, iPhones and Curves.

Black-robed teens, their smiles
flat-lining, their pulses dying down,
regress up and across the dais, and hand
back the calligraphic square, thinking

how they don't really deserve it:
how in English class they always read
the endings first and made their points
before formulating a viable thesis;
how in Social Studies they scribbled

their notes in disappearing ink
and retracted every thoughtful thing
they ever said; how in Bio they built
from vivisected parts perfectly whole
frogs and earthworms and squids;

how in Geometry they found reasons
before proofs; and how on weekends,
breaking Newton's third law,
they unpuckered lips and refused to kiss,
unclasped hands and kept their distance

from the girl or boy they were feeling
steadily less in love with. And now,
back in the crowd, beneath the black robes
their young bodies absorbed sweat

and their bladders no longer felt the need
to pee. The summer seemed to be growing
further and further out of reach.
And June became May, and May April,
and in their yearbooks, the sentimental

notes of friends erased themselves one by one,
and on a certain day they handed the yearbooks
back to the yearbook staff, who boxed
them up and shipped them off to the printer
to be unbound, unset, deleted.

Before they knew it, senior year had started,
and they all would have been stressed about
applying to colleges, except that summer
was coming, and then junior year.
And they all wished they could stay on that path,

back and back, through middle school
and elementary school and kindergarten,
all the way to the warm, dark womb
and the great unknown, because life,

as exciting as it was, was scary, too,
and time never stopped and they'd learned
there was a thing at the end of it all
that might be full of promise or empty of it,
and once they were there they could never go
back.

- Gary J. Whitehead

Gary J. Whitehead teaches English at Tenafly High School. His third book of poetry, *A Glossary of Chickens*, was recently published by Princeton University Press. New work is forthcoming in *The New Yorker*.