The Need for Imagination and Creativity in Instructional Design

Pat Gibson, Texas State University, San Marcos, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to explore the need for imagination and creativity in adult education instructional design both online and face-to-face. It defines both imagination and creativity as well as provides an overview of the history of instructional design. It provides an examination of imagination and its application in educational settings. Suggestions are presented for promoting creativity in instructional design as well as overcoming obstacles to creativity when creating classes. The article will also examine how creative activities in both online and face-to-face classes can contribute to successfully meeting learning goals in adult education.

Keywords: Adult Education, Creativity, Face-to-Face, Imagination, Instructional Design, Online

INTRODUCTION

All of us have done it, gone over in our minds what might happen in an adult training session or a class. We know how we want it to go but what if? What if those employees resent having to take this refresher course? What if those adults coming for that continuing education class know more about the subject than you do? What if the agency didn’t screen the students well and they do not have the skills to complete the tasks you are teaching? What if the equipment fails or the power goes out? What are you going to do then? Some call it unnecessary worrying, some call it day dreaming but it is really imagining. We are using our imagination to preview some of the possible scenarios that might play out in the activity we are about to preside over.

What is Imagination?

What exactly is imagination? A dictionary definition mentions “the faculty or action of forming new ideas, or images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses” (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.). The Merriam-Webster states “the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality” (n.d.). Egan (2005) defines imagination as “the ability to think of things as possible—the source of flexibility and originality in human thinking” (Egan, 2005, Glossary, Imagination). Robinson (2011) divides imagination up into three areas: imaginal, imaginative, and imaginary thoughts. He maintains that what we call to mind as mental images are imaginal, for example, a memory
of an old friend or a favorite place. Something imaginative recalls something we know but in a different context, such as a polar bear drinking a soft drink or a reptile discussing insurance. Imaginary thoughts take us to a different level, not only something out of context or out of reality, but new, never thought of before and quite possibly, impossible in reality, such as a cowardly dragon or a flying pig. According to Robinson (2011), with imagination, we can liberate ourselves from our current situation and have the possibility of transforming those circumstances as well as changing our future. Children seem to have an almost boundless imagination. Egan (2005) recounts being somewhat annoyed when asked to watch his two small grandchildren while working on his book, An imaginative approach to teaching. He was chagrined to realize that the requests for assistance demonstrated the very imagination he was trying to promote. The empty boxes in his office had become ships and planes for the two small boys. Sadly, both Egan and Robinson believe that imagination is not valued in our educational system so this childhood skill seems absent in many adults.

According to Egan (2005), imagination can be improved. Imagination is cognitive and fluid. To improve the ability to use imagination, Egan sets out certain cognitive tools. These are story, metaphor, binary opposites, rhyme, rhythm, pattern, jokes or humor, mental imagery, play, mystery, and gossip (Egan, 2005, Chapter 1, “Primary Cognitive Tools”). While many would consider gossip an egregious pastime, Egan believes it is a basic form of social interaction and valuable because the user must recount events in a coherent story or narrative. Each of these tools can be used to expand and enhance the imagination. While Egan’s emphasis is on instructional design in the classroom, the tools to enhance imagination can be employed by the adult education instructor or instructional designer to improve their own response to a new or novel educational experience. Robinson (2011) believes that if we are encouraged to believe we can be creative we can begin to rediscover our innate creativity. To develop independent creative work, we must:

- Promote experiment and inquiry and a willingness to make mistakes,
- Encourage generative thought, free from immediate criticism,
- Encourage the expression of personal ideas and feelings,
- Convey the understanding of phases in creative work and the need for time,
- Develop an awareness of the roles of intuition and aesthetic processes,
- Encourage the student to play with ideas and conjecture about possibilities, and
- Facilitate critical evaluation of ideas (Robinson, 2011, p. 179).

When we think of something that has not happened yet, for example, our scenario of the prospective class, we are being imaginative by creating imaginative thoughts. Egan (2005) writes of the necessity of using the imaginative story to promote learning and that is exactly what we were doing in the introduction. We were writing a story of “what if” for the class or activity we are about to undertake. We were taking what we know about a future situation and developing a story in our mind of what possibly might happen. We were, in the terms of Merriam-Webster, “forming a mental image…never before wholly perceived in reality.” But is it really “never before” or do we base it on experience? Of course it is not a “never before,” or it should not be based on what has never been. Our imagining of the “what ifs” helps us anticipate the activity. We use our imagination to create an instructional design and plan for possible contingencies. Egan and Nadaner state, “Stimulating the imagination is not an alternative educational activity to be argued for in competition with other claims; it is a prerequisite to making any activity educational” (1988, p. ix). Imagination in education has a role in the planning of the class or activity, the conducting of the activity, and the evaluating of the results. Cooper, Tindall-Ford, Chandler, and Sweller (2001) found that students who were asked to form a mental image of the solution to a problem did better on assessments and retained the information longer than those who studied
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