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Thinking outside the book: a point of departure for reflecting on learning

A Book Review of James, A. and Brookfield, S.D. (2014) *Engaging imagination: helping students become creative and reflective learners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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Play is a serious business, but it is most definitely not just for children. Championed as ‘a fundamental and lifelong activity’, James and Brookfield (2014, p.61) make the case for its positive role in education. Yet whilst play in the adult world continues to be most often defined by competition (or a self-conscious rejection of such; yet it continues to lurk), true, serious play, defined by Dewey (1933, p.218) as ‘the ideal mental condition’, is a meaningful way to ‘[understand] motivation and learning in a holistic way’ (Rieber, 2001, p.1). Part of the rise of play’s appeal in education is its emphasis on exploration and experimentation, its outlet for curiosity, its satisfying relationship to intrinsic motivation, and possibly above all, its requirement for active participation (Mann, 1996). Although James and Brookfield (2014) have concentrated their attention in *Engaging Imagination* on creativity and reflection, there is a clear overlap with all of these precepts. Play, and specifically the attitude of playfulness, is held by James and Brookfield to be at the heart of learning, and together they have produced a thought-provoking and engagingly written volume that aims to give educators the tools and the confidence to introduce a ‘multisensory’ approach into their classrooms by asking, ‘what if we are playful in our approach to learning?’ (p.xii).

So how do they do this? For them, the goal of good teaching is to ‘temporarily estrange’ (p.xiii) the students from what is familiar and encourage them to approach themselves and their studies from new perspectives, by jolting them into untrodden pathways. They believe that reflection can be a part of a whole range of events or learning situations, and argue that the common strategy of the reflective essay is unnecessarily restrictive. As such, the book as a whole is divided into three main parts, the first setting out the theoretical standpoint and discussing what reflection actually is, and how to recognise it in students.

By linking imagination – one of their three planks of reflective thinking, along with creativity and play – to engagement, the authors make a robust case for ‘[increasing] the number of imaginative moments that students encounter in contemporary classrooms’ (p.4), although claim that there is ‘a false dichotomy...between engagement and ‘real learning’ (p.5). The idea that this dichotomy might exist, that engagement is perceived by some educators as being at odds with learning, may be disputed by more than a few, but anything that works to increase student engagement generally can only be considered constructive.

Less constructive might be rather a favouring of the old trope that the left side of the brain is analytical and the right side is creative, with the resulting belief that the right side of the brain must be stimulated in order to tap into creativity. Unfortunately for these authors, and no doubt plenty of others, the brain doesn’t work like this (Nielsen et al., 2013). Even as a metaphor, it is not useful for advancing students’ understanding of the way they work. However, James and Brookfield go on to make the important point, adequate without the need to delve into the inner functions of the brain, that creative teaching (by which they mean good teaching) involves ‘using many pedagogic models’ as educators will have asked themselves ‘what different kinds of students they are dealing with’ (p.51). This is really the core of the book and its most valuable message: that creativity in learning does not require the educator or the educated to be inherently ‘creative’, but that creativity in learning is anything that helps a student to connect with the material and make it meaningful in a personal way; one of their three pedagogic axioms (p.6).

Part two of the book aims to support that goal. Headed *Engaging Imagination Tips and Techniques*, it sets out a range of activities and ideas to help encourage reflective (or imaginative, creative or playful) responses in students. Each of the six chapters it contains is devoted to a particular area of activity: visual methods, story and metaphor, Lego and labyrinths, using space well, questioning techniques, and community-orientated strategies (learning communities, rather than the community outside the university walls). Although in the preface the authors stress that the book can be used as a resource to dip into or skim through, the chapters do work best when read as a whole, as activities are not presented in isolation. Indeed, the writing is coherent and well-structured, and buoyed up well by in-depth research and discussion around the benefits of each approach, so the reader can understand the activities in context. The authors themselves have used these activities and so can speak with personality and authority on their efficacy, and have the effect of lending the book an air of collegial dialogue that can be missing and missed from many

other educational texts. In addition, rather than simply listing the task, and how to implement it, as a 'how-to' book might, James and Brookfield relate their own experiences in the classroom, presenting each activity or strategy anecdotally and allowing the reader to take from it what chimes with them and their own teaching situation. Activities vary from the technologically simple to the specialist; from individual or small group-based, to lecture-sized cohorts; from online to offline and the spectrum of blended learning techniques in between. The authors emphasise repeatedly that these are not just for the 'creative' subjects but could potentially be introduced to any course, at any level; the tutor is free to decide what would work best for their students, and what they feel most comfortable with as a teacher. And that is an important point: while some people 'welcome the unusual' (James describes herself this way, p.242), others, like Brookfield, can feel much more ambivalent about using creative techniques in class. Readers from both camps, and any position in the middle, will find themselves reassured and encouraged by the authors' tone.

Chapter 4, looking at visual learning, opens with the argument that where reflection is concerned, less is more; specifically with regards to guidance and instructions. The trick is in the student learning to see what is important. Techniques underlining this idea range from paper folding and tearing to taking an urban walk, all bolstered by a review of the literature around visual intelligence, visual literacy and the power of visualisation. They also underpin a belief of James and Brookfield's that one of the best ways to get students to engage with a task is for the tutor to model the behaviour and demonstrate the desired outcomes. Students certainly benefit from having models to scaffold their own work, what Wittgenstein (1967, p.60) refers to as criteria and symptoms, arguing that 'if [the process of understanding] is hidden – then how do I know what I have to look for?'. The problem with framing reflection in terms of imagination and creativity, though, is that it is very difficult to model those kinds of personal and internally-meaningful behaviours. It is acknowledged by the authors that sometimes any diagrams, collages or images will not serve on their own, as the viewer may not share the same worldview or semiotic codes as the creator. Yet equally, how does an educator show a student what imagination looks like, and then get that student to reproduce their own version? However carefully defined terms like creativity and play are, the common thread running throughout the whole book is essentially helping students take a new perspective and see things in a different way. Performing a Beach Boys song for students, as Brookfield did (p.10), may be entertaining (or dreadful!), but perhaps could get in the way of this simple message.

Metaphor is invoked as a vital and powerful learning strategy, and is the subject of chapter 5. The authors highlight that metaphor is everywhere – indeed, this review has already made use of several ('the heart of learning'; 'the core of the book') – and narrative can be a useful way to structure a concept or a process, for both teacher and student. Although this chapter is more discursive around the benefits of metaphor, or examples of their use seen in student writing, it can still give the practitioner pause for thought in terms of how they might introduce a task or assignment. Again, the aim is to help the student to see something familiar in an unfamiliar way, and metaphor can be ideal for that, even one that might appear frequently such as 'rollercoaster', as everyone will have their own interpretation. A more physical example of metaphor is represented by Lego Serious Play, a now-open source official training programme developed by Lego (James and Brookfield, 2014, p.116), fitted rather awkwardly by the authors into chapter 6 alongside labyrinth walking. As a method of 'metaphorical meaning making' (p.121) it appears to be highly effective, although as a means of reflection, by any standard definition, it might perhaps struggle.

Engaging Imagination takes us on from metaphor and into chapter 7 on space, and specifically the use of the Reflective Pod, a large inflatable 'beehive' (p.142) that offers students room, literally, to talk through their feelings and impressions. Given the specialist nature of this equipment it is hard to imagine that it could be directly applied in other institutions, but the principle holds true. Similarly, the University of Kent's 'Quercus genius' (p.153) is not something that many learning developers will be able to organise themselves, but the principle behind it – that of having a space, and an unusual one at that, to facilitate reflection, is valuable. And what to do in that space? Chapter 8 deals in Powerful Questions, introducing ideas from Psychology and configuring them in a creative way, which can be asked of students by a facilitator, or offered as prompts to thought. While some of these techniques need more expertise than is offered by the text, they are a worthy contribution to the field of reflection. This chapter particularly exemplifies well why it works best to read this book through, in full and in order, as it draws usefully on some of the ideas around metaphor introduced earlier. While it is argued by the authors (p.xiv) that this linkage 'permeates' the chapters via 'recurrent issues, approaches and theories', it feels much more cumulative than a simple commonality, so a standard and non-creative way of reading a book still applies.

As emphasised in the Preface, identity is also one of those commonalities, which is appropriate for a text on imagination and creativity, inherently personal qualities. However, its foundation for reflection passes without question. Can reflection be about more than personal identity? Is it generally understood as such in academic contexts? James and Brookfield concentrate here exclusively on reflection as a means for students to develop their identity as a learner and understand better how they learn. This is useful, to be sure, but reflection can be more: seeing from new perspectives can encompass more than the individual; what they term creative reflection, 'the process by which we help students to look behind the doors, and under the stones, of their usual ways of learning, thinking and acting' (p.55) can be about more than the person doing the thinking. Even the well-trodden ground of Wenger's Communities of Practice in chapter 9 is directed towards guiding students in mapping out their membership of different communities, since 'creative and reflective thinking rarely happens entirely alone', but does community membership equate to reflection? And does reflection necessarily equate to emotion? Part 3 is dedicated to 'the emotional realities of engaging imagination' and, as before, include some useful resources (with more to be found in the many web addresses peppering the text and in the reference list), but the appearance of identity and emotion throughout the whole text makes this section seem almost redundant. The sticking point raised above – what could be considered rather a narrow definition of reflection – might undermine what is otherwise a stimulating and thoughtful book, by trying to do a little too much and make more of a case that could otherwise be warranted.

Nevertheless, learning developers have much to gain from this book, despite many activities relying on more time with classes than perhaps many of us get to spend. The inclusion of some exercises for developing creative solutions would have been welcomed, but it is easy to see how many of the activities and techniques discussed could be adapted for a range of settings and levels of tutor confidence. We all need shaking out of our habitual paths and usual comfort zones from time to time, and there is likely to be something in here to suit everyone in doing just that.

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