Imagination in the Rational-Classroom: Considering Alternatives to Capitalism

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The function of schools goes beyond supervising individuals as they develop biologically and instinctually. It involves assisting and modifying how individuals develop to meet societal standards. This makes schools social institutions.¹

Twenty-first-century schools reflect the current state of the economy. Canadian schools have a curriculum and structure based on capitalism and consumerism.² Like many schools, worldwide, they usually emphasize individual success—the common thread in capitalism. Individuals are not valued for their own sake, but only to the degree that their successes bode well for the capitalist state.

Canadian schools follow a neoliberal logic—a logic which Stephen Vassallo sees as perpetuating the creation of capital. That is, the school’s main function is to “promote the accumulation of human capital.”³ Human capital refers to the knowledge and skills that one needs to develop to be valuable to society—and such value is almost always understood in economic terms.⁴ In spite of this dominant paradigm, there are possible teaching techniques that can be used to counteract the neoliberal function of education.

Within mainstream schooling, using one’s imagination is often perceived as a bonus—a “nice touch” rather than a vital requirement.

Neoliberal, consumerist education is problematic because it limits thinking within capitalist ideals and, therefore, allows for extremely minimal social and political change. Neoliberalism calls for an education system that is inherently static: students are taught to conform to capitalist ideologies without considering alternative ideals. In this way, imaginative activities can be used as tools for students to consider alternatives to their capitalist and neoliberal realities.

Within mainstream schooling, using one’s imagination is often perceived as a bonus—a “nice touch” rather than a vital requirement. Activities and lessons that tap into students’ imaginations are often underestimated because their ability to be politically potent is overlooked. Imaginative activities have the potential to assist teachers in redefining their students’ value to society.

In this essay, I argue that imagination is an educational tool that can be used to counteract the dominant Western economic and political ideology: capitalism. As a Bachelor of Education student, and like other upcoming teachers, I feel a bit trapped in the many rules that come with practicing teaching. Learning about imagi-

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¹ John Dewey, Democracy and Education (Champaign, Ill: Project Gutenberg, 1990), 10.
⁴ Dianne Gereluk, Questioning the Classroom: Perspectives on Canadian Education, 63.
native activities as defined by Maxine Greene was freeing because I learned they could be used in our classrooms to push against dominant ideologies and create change.

Especially as an upcoming secondary English teacher, it is important to me that tapping into one’s imagination, whether it be through reading fiction or writing creatively, not be continuously undermined. Indeed, utilizing one’s imagination can be a means to considering real-world issues through various lenses.

What is Imagination?

Maxine Greene defines imagination as the ability to think of alternatives to known reality that are rational and grounded. Greene has suggested that educators encourage their students to use their imaginations to work through real-world problems while still exercising logic.

Imagination, in this sense, is not (just) imagining alternate endings to a favorite fairy tale. Instead, the uses of imagination that Greene describes would involve students picturing how they might implement a recycling program in their school or help vulnerable members of their community—and ultimately shape a better future for their community and planet. Greene is suggesting a revolutionary use of imagination that is grounded in rationally reconsidering the real world.

To counteract capitalist values such as individualism through the school system, students need to be able to do more than criticize within neoliberal boundaries. They need to be able to identify issues that are related and non-related to capitalist values, recognize what changes should be made, and imagine possible plans of action for those changes to take place.

While neoliberal discourses situate imagination as a method of resourcefulness in a capitalist society, imagination can also be used as a way for individuals to visualize scenarios that are not dependent on consumerism or market values. Having students be aware of their own thinking and how it is influenced by previous knowledge, in addition to teaching them to use their imaginations to reconsider the world, can be seen as a level of metacognition. Students begin by thinking about the ways that political and social structures (and the elites produced by them) have influenced their thinking, and recognize how their own values and perspectives are altered and shaped by a capitalist environment.

After making progress with this form of metacognition, students are better equipped to reimagine their reality. Classroom activities, on their own, cannot be considered educative experience. Experience involves acting upon what one is thinking about. Thinking and experience are too infrequently associated. When students think metacognitively and take part in imaginative activities, thinking is (re)grounded in experience.

The Limitations of Conforming to Institutional Mandates

One critique of neoliberal thinking and learning is that they do not represent “real” thinking and learning because students are learning to conform to institutional mandates. Students are

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8 John Dewey, Democracy and Education, 108.

9 Ibid., 108.

10 John Dewey, Democracy and Education, 118.

encouraged to be knowledgeable, yet without having the opportunity to imagine beyond that knowledge—which is to be treated as static and unquestionable. The thinking and learning skills typically taught in schools essentially teach students to internalize the desire to follow orders and become a source of human capital: “The good thinker and learner has become the correlate of the good worker and student.”

Although students of neoliberal schools are strongly connected to institutional mandates and consumer identities, students could be taught to imagine life “outside the box” or, in this case, life “outside institutional mandates.” If students do not question why capitalism exists, they risk never imagining a better societal structure. They risk not being given an opportunity to consider a more community-based, environmentally-focused, or equitable version of society.

For example, if students are challenged to imagine what society might be like if it drastically increased its consumption of locally-produced goods and decreased its consumption of foreign goods, after in-depth imaginative thinking, they are likely to start considering how a community-oriented society might differ from an individualistic society. According to Greene, when people imagine the current state of society differently, they understand how change can be possible. They then begin to consider ways for change to be implemented.

If students are not taught to use their imagination to conceive alternative possibilities, educators ensure the status quo. Teachers should seek to create learning environments where students can realistically reimage their reality—understanding that realism can be far from limiting.

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**Individualism as a Neoliberal Ideal**

While it is important to think outside of institutional mandates, it is also important to think outside of individualism. In twenty-first-century Western schools, teachers often emphasize learner-centered pedagogies where students engage in personalized learning and goal setting. However, if learner-centered teaching leads to self-centered students, then schools are fulfilling a corporate agenda. As Dianne Gereluk has noted, “increasingly, economic progress is one of the central aims of education, and education that doesn’t contribute to economic value and economic growth is considered less important and worthwhile.”

Increasingly, schooling trains students to think that prioritizing their own interests is a responsible method of ensuring personal benefit. This is especially disheartening because self-prioritization, being a neoliberal ideal, disempowers the vast majority of people while continuing to empower capitalist elites. As long as students are being trained to become obedient workers and consumers, they are benefitting

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17 Dianne Gereluk, *Questioning the Classroom: Perspectives on Canadian Education*, 71.
people in high-ranking positions of power more than they are benefitting themselves.

While schools claim to be motivated to empower individuals, because they do not generally respect student autonomy or empowerment, they tend to actually do the opposite: individuals are passively made into servants to the economy and the privileged. As we have seen, imagination is a starting point for change. Again, students must be taught to see patterns in their thinking. They must come to ask who is influencing these patterns and how these effect their education and worldview. If students do not recognize that their values, such as individual achievement as a measure of hard work, benefit elite members of society significantly more than they benefit themselves, then future change will not be possible.

It is not only important for students to re-imagine institutional mandates. It is also crucial for students to develop an awareness of the people who create, support, and benefit from institutional mandates. To see patterns in one’s own thinking, to trace those patterns to social conditions, and to re-imagine other conditions—these are conditions for social change.

**Moving Towards Solidarity and Social Change**

Neoliberal schooling and capitalism both propagate individualism. Imaginative activities can counteract that notion. Stephen Vassallo notes how schools within capitalist societies seek to shape students who are competitive and aim to be more academically successful than their peers. Even when students collaborate and work in groups, their focus tends to be on how they will each benefit from working in a group, and what skills they can personally contribute to the group. That is, even in group work, the focus remains all-too-often on the self.

When students use their imaginations to practice perspective-taking, they move away from individualism and towards solidarity. They become part of a classroom community that is actively trying to obtain a better understanding of the differences between individuals. Imaginative thinking activities could be the difference between a student displaying empathy over apathy.

By having students consider the perspectives of others, teachers are valuing a thinking technique that is not often prioritized by capitalists, but that could be a source for positive societal change. For example, students might reconsider the knowledge they have obtained in relation to Indigenous rights and learn to recognize their urgency if they imagine the point of view of local first nations peoples. This becomes a catalyst for social change.

In order for schools to be healthy social environments rather than restrictive social institutions, it is necessary for students to be given opportunities to consider others and how their needs are prioritized within their community. Through imaginative activities, teachers can create a stronger sense of community—one which can offset both individualism and marginalization.

**Critical Thinking is Not Enough**

To encourage more opportunity to think beyond institutional mandates and individualism, teachers need to provide thinking activities that

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go one step further than critical thinking. The tragedy of neoliberal schooling is that students are encouraged to imagine, yet only within certain boundaries.\textsuperscript{25}

As has been mentioned, imagination for rational, political purposes does entail a boundary; imaginative thinking must be grounded in reality. Neoliberal schooling persuades students to think within a specific political boundary, the capitalist one, rather than allowing students to consider how they might transform it in line with existing conditions. In Western capitalist societies, people have personal freedom—but only if they conform to institutional mandates.\textsuperscript{26}

This tension translates itself into the process of critical thinking as generally encouraged in neoliberal schooling. Neoliberal schools encourage their students to be critical if and only if their thinking still reflects capitalist values.\textsuperscript{27} Imaginative activities, as defined by Maxine Greene, are limited to reality, yet unlimited within reality. Critical thinking can be considered more limiting, because students are taught to be critical of a reality observed through the lens of capitalist values. The act of imagining goes one step further than the clichéd call for critical thinking. After analyzing possible changes to be made in society, students imagine ways for change to be implemented.\textsuperscript{28}

Teachers and schools can push back against capitalism by empowering their students with the ability to do more than criticize within boundaries. While schools, being social institutions, will always be influenced by society, it is the responsibility of teachers to introduce productive imaginative thinking that allows for students to consider, criticize, and re-imagine the powers and structures that influence them.

Imagination as an Authentic Learning Activity

Imaginative training needs to be recognized as an authentic learning activity. It is, perhaps, more beneficial than limited exercises in critical thinking. Unfortunately, imagination is not generally recognized as a legitimate educational tool because it is not associated with authentic learning activities.

Opportunistically, imagination does have a place in the rational classroom. Imagination, as outlined by Greene, is a method of considering the reality of the world as formed by “conformity and unexamined common sense,” so that students can think about alternate values and ways of life.\textsuperscript{29} Once students have determined how their thinking is influenced by capitalism, they can begin to reshape how they consider the world, as well as imagine how they might change the world.

Paradoxical at first sight, exercising students’ imagination can actually be a way for teachers to engage students in the real world.

Conclusion

\textsuperscript{25} Stephen Vassallo, \textit{Psychology in Education}, 158.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}, 158.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid.}, 156.
\textsuperscript{29} Maxine Greene, “Imagination, Breakthroughs, and the Unexpected,” in \textit{Releasing the Imagination}, 23.
In a world highly motivated by consumerism, it is crucial for teachers to encourage metacognition so that students become critical of what they understand to be reality, how they question reality, and how they interpret the various realities that others perceive.  

Neoliberal thinking and learning have a predictable set of goals and sequence of events to achieve those goals. Such predictability is particularly appealing to consumers, who only buy if they know and like the product or service they are going to receive. Since imaginative thinking pushes students beyond their comfort zone, the use of imagination in the rational classroom is not only a method for reconsidering consumerism, but also a way for teachers to establish non-consumer driven habits within their students. 

While teachers should encourage students to aim towards fulfillment and success, they cannot ignore the fact that consumerist values motivate students to achieve a definition of fulfillment that is not necessarily their own—as definitions of achievement have been constructed for students through neoliberal schooling and capitalist living. 

In opposition to the individualism perpetuated by capitalism, communities are formed when people work together to improve and shape democracy. Regularly incorporating imagination into authentic educational activities is a way for teachers to engage their students with the world, to imagine changes that will create improvement, and to help students take a step away from conformity and towards democracy.

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31 Dianne Gereluk, Questioning the Classroom: Perspectives on Canadian Education, 79.
32 Maxine Greene, “Social Vision and the Dance of Life,” in Releasing the Imagination, 64.
33 Ibid., 66.