

Imagination and Experience

An Integrative Framework

Mark Fettes

ABSTRACT

Three variations of experience identified in the educational literature entail different ways of thinking about and developing learners' imaginations. The relationship between these different imaginative modes resembles shifts between different kinds of understanding in Kieran Egan's theory of imaginative development. From this theoretical collision, a new framework emerges that gives greater weight to the connections between experience and imagination, and that may help to guide new forms of democratic educational practice.

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WE LIVE IN an age and in a culture when young people may spend more time interacting with electronic devices than with one another, let alone with the more-than-human world. Primary or firsthand experience risks becoming a dwindling resource in the face of the great flood of secondhand information that flows daily through the modern media. Learning to deal critically and intelligently with the latter is self-evidently an important facet of democratic education. But what of the former? What, exactly, is the educational value of experience? And are particular varieties of experience more essential than others for the building of a living democracy? How might we think strategically and creatively about the embedding of experience in the process of schooling? These are the kinds of questions I hope to shed light on in this essay.

My initial engagement with these issues arose from my work with Canadian indigenous organizations on the problem of language maintenance and revitalization (e.g., Fettes, 1992; Fettes & Norton, 2000). Around the world, local languages are being lost at an ever-increasing rate, with far-reaching consequences for human cultural diversity and development (Nettle & Romaine, 2000) and, more broadly, for ecocultural health (Rapport & Maffi, 2011). At the heart of what is being lost are locally sensitive ways of understanding human embeddedness in the more-than-human world (Abram, 1997). Responses to language loss that focus on language alone miss this key point: Indigenous languages derive much of their meaning from their responsiveness to ecologically and historically particular

shared experiences of place and being. The relationship between experience and language thus becomes an extremely important question for educators who see cultural diversity as a value and a resource, whether on grounds of equity, inclusion, critique, or sustainability.

Yet teasing out that relationship is a complex task. *Language* is a problematic enough term in and of itself (Fettes, 1997, 2003); *experience* is at least equally fraught with ambiguity, as experiential educator Fox (2008) observed in a thoughtful meditation:

What exactly is experience? Whose experience is heard? . . . Think for a moment: When does an experience begin—at the start of an activity? Does it include the planning and framing by leaders? What about the histories and political realities of the participants? What historical period will we choose? Once the “experience” begins, how does an individual, observer, researcher, participant, or leader identify “the” experience? How is an experience demarcated from the flow of

MARK FETTES is an assistant professor at Simon Fraser University, BC, Canada. His work concerns the role of imagination in language learning and cultural reproduction and in teaching and learning in general. He has led two major community-based research projects exploring how imaginative teaching might contribute to developing schools that are responsive to the places and communities around them.

life? How is any experience framed by the participant, leader, society, culture, or educational program? Who gets to say what is important about an experience? What if the leader and participant frame it differently? (p. 39)

The American pragmatists James and Dewey took *experience* to constitute the basic reality of human existence, more or less synonymous with *being*. But they fully acknowledged its complexity, James (1904) referring to “a quasi-chaos” (“Substitution,” para. 2) and Dewey (1916/2008) to “a single continuous interaction of a great diversity (literally countless in number) of energies” (p. 174). Such complexity emerges not only from the many different kinds of experience open to human beings but also to the countless ways such experiences can be understood, through what James (1904) called “substitutional experience” but we more routinely refer to as acts of interpretation. The meaning of experience is not simply given once and for all in the experience itself. Rather, experience feeds what Polanyi (1974) called “personal knowledge” (direct, tacit, embodied knowledge that develops through dwelling in the world) and “reflective knowledge” (explicit, linguified knowledge that draws on cultural/cognitive tools shared through our social discourse networks). There is, as philosopher Zwicky observed (as cited in Dickinson & Goulet, 2010), an “extraordinary tension” (p. 143) between these kinds of knowing—one that runs through all of the questions posed by Fox, above. The meaning of experience is never just individual and idiosyncratic but also profoundly collective and cultural. Because of this, it is always open to elaboration and contestation; and this process, as Dewey saw, lies at the heart of education in a democratic society.

From my initial interest in linguistic and cultural diversity, then, my inquiry has broadened to include more general questions. How do learners make sense of experience? How can they come, over time, to do so more richly, more insightfully, more productively? And how can educators guide such learning as effectively and inclusively as possible? In agreement with Fox, I see both theoretical and heuristic value in addressing these questions through “alternative taxonomic strategies” (Fox, 2008, p. 49)—ways of conceptualizing distinctive kinds of educational meaning offered by experience. Such strategies should point to different ways of structuring and mediating experience—that is, they should encourage new forms of educational practice—and they should also suggest new questions to ask about the educational process.

My approach is a somewhat circuitous one. I begin by introducing philosophical work on the role of imagination in education (Egan, 1997), which provides interesting insights into the reflective (making-sense-through-language) kinds of understanding we are concerned with. I then orchestrate a collision between this framework and Roberts’s (2008) notion of “variations of experience,” which speaks more directly to our tacit (dwelling-in-the-world) kinds of understanding. While this theoretical reconstruction occupies most of the available space, whenever possible I suggest how such a framework may serve to “enrich research and nourish practice” (Fox, 2008, p. 52), both inside and outside of schools.

Imagination and Understanding

Educators interested in experience have rarely shown much interest in the imagination, and vice versa. This is somewhat curious, since the imagination has long been regarded in Western philosophy as a kind of intermediary between the world of the senses and the world of thought (Brann, 1993; Jay, 2004). The transformation of experience into meaning represents a kind of alchemy that imagination should, somehow, be involved in. Yet the imagination has not been a welcome guest in the institutions of classical or “solid” modernity. If one thinks of education in terms of desired and reliable outcomes, as our industrial civilization tends to do, one is likely to gravitate toward pedagogies that avoid surprises. So it is that imagination has rarely made an appearance in writing on formal schooling outside the domain of the arts (e.g., Greene, 1995).

In the last few years, however, imagination has emerged as an educational concern for scholars grounded in mythopoetics (Leonard & Willis, 2008), Jungian psychology (Jones, Clarkson, Congram, & Stratton, 2008), Steiner schooling (Nielsen, 2004), and creative approaches to mainstream classroom teaching (Blenkinsop, 2009; Egan, 2005; Egan & Madej, 2010; Egan, Stout, & Takaya, 2007; Judson, 2008; Nielsen, Fitzgerald, & Fettes, 2010), among others. These various approaches are only loosely connected with one another, but share

a view of thought and understanding as necessarily embodied, emotional and contextual as well as linguistic, logical and abstract; a view of education as necessarily encompassing spirit and mystery as well as reason, collective consciousness and culture as well as individual nature; and a view of teaching as a kind of art, to be cultivated in much the same way as the other arts, involving both the mastery of medium and technique and the ineffable workings of intuition, serendipity, and talent. (Fettes, Nielsen, Haralambous, & Fitzgerald, 2010)

Unique among these diverse approaches is Egan’s cultural-historical theory of imaginative development. In a number of works, stretching from *Educational Development* (1979) to *The Educated Mind* (1997), Egan has suggested that we view human history as a process of coming to terms with the imaginative possibilities of language. He picks out, in particular, four dramatic cultural transformations: the development of oral language, the rise of literate societies, the establishment of communities of theoretic discourse and, most recently, the emergence of deep epistemic doubt. Each of these cultural discoveries, he argues, provided a new set of tools for engaging the imagination in making sense of the world; from the use of those tools, four distinctively languaged kinds of understanding emerged (in order: Mythic, Romantic, Philosophic, and Ironic) that continue to shape our cultures and our minds today. Child development recapitulates this process through the gradual, sequential appropriation of these different sets of cognitive tools. This is, however, far from an automatic or unproblematic process, and schools in their present form tend to be more of a hindrance than a help. As a remedy, Egan has offered a number of principles, frameworks, and examples,

most recently under the label of “imaginative education” (e.g. Egan, 2005), intended to help teachers foster the development of Mythic, Romantic, or Philosophic understanding—the kinds of greatest relevance for the years of schooling (Egan, 1986, 1990, 1992, 1997, 2005, 2006).

I turn in a moment to the role of embodiment and experience in Egan’s theory, but it may be helpful first to summarize these practical aspects of his approach. My take on it is based not only on Egan’s own published work but on a decade of working with teachers in workshops, courses, and research projects to put his ideas into practice. Here are what I see as the most distinctive features of imaginative education, Egan-style:

- Conceptualize the learning experience as a narrative co-created by the learners (Egan, 1988, Spring). Typically this involves a journey from an initial source of wonder about or mystery in a topic toward some kind of resolution that the learners themselves discover or create. Elsewhere I have described one particular narrative model that I have found useful in helping teachers plan this process (Fettes, 2011).
- Build each curricular narrative less on a logical sequence of ideas than on a central emotional tension (or imaginative theme) that helps dramatize the topic. Egan typically describes this in terms of “binary opposites” (if the object is to develop Mythic understanding) or “heroic qualities” (Romantic)—for instance, basing a unit on properties of the air on the binary empty/full (Egan, 1997, pp. 244–251) or a unit on the life cycle of eels on the heroic quality of persistence (Egan, 1992 pp. 93–102).
- Look for vivid, dramatic images, metaphors, and stories that connect with the central imaginative theme. Plan a variety of ways in which students can engage with these throughout the unit, actively as well as passively.
- Look for ways to incorporate cognitive tools that are likely to engage the imaginations of your particular students when you’re planning learning activities. Egan lists numerous examples of such tools in the context of the different kinds of understanding; for instance, the playful use of rhyme and rhythm can be useful in developing Mythic understanding, while the urge to collect and organize sets of things is equally characteristic of Romantic understanding (Egan, 1986, 1992, 1997, 2005; Fettes, 2010).
- Work to keep each kind of understanding active. Mythic understanding tends to dominate up to about age seven, Romantic from eight to fourteen, but the point is neither to remain content with these nor to leave them behind; rather, they should be seen as essential underpinnings to the development of Philosophic understanding through the teenage years and Ironic understanding through adulthood.

Egan’s emphasis on planning frameworks can give the misleading impression that they alone lead to imaginative teaching and learning. A better way of putting it is that they can help teachers see new imaginative possibilities in what they do, that we can make imaginative engagement a central aim of classroom teaching, allowing teachers and students alike to tap into the emotional and intellectual energy it provides. The actual work of teaching remains a difficult, multifaceted challenge, but it becomes more exciting, successful, and rewarding when it works with the

imagination rather than ignoring it or, worse, treating it as a problem.

Egan’s work encourages thoughtfulness and innovation in dealing with the content of the curriculum, but he has relatively little to say about how to work in the world of movement and sensation and social interaction. His principal interest is in the way that modes of language use influence our general imaginative take on the world. This linguistic bias is apparent in his developmental scheme, where Somatic understanding—the kind of understanding I referred to earlier as tacit, embodied knowledge—is relegated to the earliest years, before oral language takes over our processes of meaning-making. Of course, Egan is aware that this mode of understanding doesn’t disappear, and in *The Educated Mind* (1997) he highlighted its importance for the flexible, reflexive understanding he called Ironic: the acme of his educational theory. Yet its role in the crucial years of schooling has been largely ignored.

Nonetheless, if we are looking for a theory of educational experience, there are some promising features of Egan’s account. By situating educational development within culture and history, it helps us avoid the trap Fox pointed to, of treating experience as if it were somehow sealed off from all our inherited baggage of meaning-making. More specifically, Egan’s framework suggests—in agreement with Vygotskian psychology (Kozulin, 1998; Vygotsky, 1986, 1987)—that our ways of thinking about the world undergo significant transformation as learners pick up, use, and internalize the cognitive tools of our culture. If Egan’s kinds of understanding represent different stages or aspects of this restructuring, perhaps our ways of making sense of experience undergo similar shifts. This holds out the appealing prospect of a developmental theory that doesn’t keep language at arm’s length from our physical and ecological embeddedness in the world, but embraces both as essential, interlinked aspects of the unfolding of our human selves.

Pursuing this idea, I was struck by echoes of Egan’s kinds of understanding in the three educational variations of experience identified by Roberts (2008), following up on insights in Jay’s pioneering cultural study *Songs of Experience* (2004). According to Roberts, there are three distinctive conceptions of experience that have been influential in the development of Western educational traditions: “interactive experience, drawn from pragmatist philosophy; embodied experience, drawn from Romanticism and phenomenology; and experience as praxis, drawn from critical theory” (p. 21). As I dug deeper into the educational thinking underlying each of these variations, I came to see them as representing somewhat distinct imaginative modes of meaning-making, related to each other in the same fashion as Egan’s Mythic, Romantic, and Philosophic kinds of understanding relate to one another. Table 1 depicts the general set of relationships involved.

In the following sections, I work upwards through the table, locating each mode of engagement and kind of understanding in the educational literature, explaining its relationship to Egan’s development theory, and tracing some practical implications of the framework.

Table 1. Modes and pathways of imaginative development

<i>Mode of Engagement</i>	<i>Encounter-Driven</i>	<i>Language-Driven</i>
IMPLICATION	Endemic: Imaginative understanding through situated engagement	Philosophic: Imaginative understanding through disciplined inquiry
REALIZATION	Harmonic: Imaginative understanding through purposeful engagement	Romantic: Imaginative understanding through popular literacy
PARTICIPATION	Somatic: Imaginative understanding through bodily engagement	Mythic: Imaginative understanding through oral storying

Imagination and Embodied Experience

Of Roberts's three variations of experience, the first one I tackle is exemplified by certain kinds of wilderness education, notably solos, vision quests, and other highly individualized and transcendent encounters with the more-than-human. We see its imaginative dimension eloquently expounded by Emerson (1906a, b), perhaps the most influential North American proponent of this way of encountering the world. Here is how he put it in his widely read essay "Nature" (1906b):

To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. . . . Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. (pp. 6–7)

For Emerson (1836b), however, such direct and intense experience of nature was good not only for its own sake; it was also a source of intellectual depth. "We know more from nature than we can at will communicate. Its light flows into the mind evermore, and we forget its presence. . . . Every object, rightly seen, unlocks a new faculty of the soul" (pp. 29, 33). In short, he concluded, "The Imagination may be defined to be, the use which the Reason makes of the material world" (p. 50).

This conception, and the language in which it is expressed, bear clear affinities with the thinking of English Romantics such as Wordsworth and Coleridge. All of them saw education as leading, in general, to a shuttering of sensibility, a closing of the doors of perception, which could best be combated by imaginative encounters with living nature: "To me the meanest flower that blows can give/Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears" (Wordsworth, 1919, lines 207–208). To this school of thought, imagination is necessary for depth perception; it provides a bridge between the "inward and outward senses" (Emerson, 1836b, p. 7) that yields not only delight but understanding. And this depth is to be found primarily in the world of direct experience, toward which poetry and other forms of language merely gesture.

As Roberts (2008) noted, a contemporary (and philosophically sophisticated) version of these ideas can be found in Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1997). Abram referred to the imagination only briefly in this book, but it is enough to confirm the affinity between his thinking and Emerson's:

The perceiving body . . . gregariously participates in the activity of the world, lending its imagination to things in order to see them more fully. . . . Imagination is not a separate mental faculty (as we so often assume) but is rather the way the senses themselves have of throwing themselves beyond what is immediately given, in order to make tentative contact with the other sides of things that we do not sense directly, with the hidden or invisible aspects of the sensible. And yet such sensory anticipations and projections are not arbitrary; they regularly respond to suggestions offered by the sensible itself. (p. 58)

For Abram, citing the phenomenological philosopher Merleau-Ponty, "all of the creativity and free-ranging mobility that we have come to associate with the human intellect is, in truth, an elaboration, or recapitulation, of a profound creativity already underway at the most immediate level of sensory perception" (Abram, 1997, p. 49). It follows, of course, that when we cut ourselves off from direct immersion in the natural world, in rich sensory experience, we cripple our ability to think creatively and well.

In this light, language does not appear simply as a modest handmaiden to such "profound creativity" (Abram, 1997, p. 49) but as its potential enemy. "The map is not the territory," as Korzybski (1958, p. 750) famously observed; if we come to base our understanding of the world on how we talk about it, we may well lose touch with what that world really feels (and smells and tastes and sounds and looks) like. Egan (1997) is alert to this tension, which he has discussed in terms of the gap between Somatic and all subsequent forms of "languaged understanding" (p. 170). Yet his proposed resolution—an eventual return to the Somatic in the context of Ironic understanding—does not go far enough for educators such as Emerson and Abram, who are at pains to stress that language can and should be kept in responsive contact with the world of experience, all the way through the process of language development and intellectual growth. Emerson (1836b) referred approvingly (if somewhat quaintly, to modern ears) to "the conversation of a strong-natured farmer or back-woodsman, which all men relish" (p. 27) and to the eloquence of "the poet, the orator, bred in the woods, whose senses have been nourished by

their fair and appeasing changes, year after year, without design and without heed” (p. 29). Abram (1997), writing a century and a half later, placed greater emphasis on the oral cultures of indigenous peoples, in which “the solidarity between language and the animate landscape is palpable and evident” (p. 87). The educational ideal, in each case, is the same: If life is lived in close connection with the natural world, the living language will reflect that, to its speakers’ lasting benefit.

What characterizes this experience-proximal language? Rich and precise imagery, according to Emerson; stories and songs “that have the rhythm and lilt of the local soundscape,” according to Abram (1997, p. 273)—that is, language that works with the body’s recollection of sensory encounters with the world. In many respects, this is the language Egan (1997) viewed as central to the development of Mythic understanding, a language of embodied kinship, of embeddedness in the rhythms and contrasts of daily life:

When teaching about the earthworm, for example . . . it is not so much a matter of seeing the earthworm in terms of our senses as performing the imaginative act of recognizing earthwormness in ourselves. The task is imaginatively to incorporate the world rather than simply learn facts about something “out there.” Similarly, when teaching about flowers, one could imagine emerging from the cold ground, pushing towards the light, bursting with a kind of ecstasy in the warmer air, turning with passion towards the sun, feeling the rush of sap, then experiencing the horror of the returning cold, and shriveling back underground. (pp. 61–62)

For Egan, as for Emerson, this kind of vivid use of language underlies our ability to think powerfully and clearly about abstract topics, an ability that will later be greatly extended through the tools of literacy and theoretic reasoning.

If, then, we drop Egan’s insistence on placing Somatic and Mythic understanding in a developmental sequence and regard them instead as two aspects of a particular imaginative relationship with the world, we arrive at an educational ideal much closer to Emerson’s and Abram’s. In this case one might see all three theorists as contributing to a theory of *imaginative participation*, in which language and experience (or reflective and tacit knowledge) play contrasting but not incompatible roles. Mythic understanding, in this alternative interpretation, emerges in response to our desire to participate fully in our cultural milieu, just as Somatic understanding arises through our wholehearted participation in embodied experience. In these imaginative modes, our sense of self readily extends into the world around us: We are, momentarily, the wild flower nodding by the path, or Little Red Riding Hood venturing off into the forest; we feel in ourselves the beauty and fragility of the one, the innocence and courage of the other. The kind of delight felt in each case, and the intellectual enrichment associated with it, is much the same.

In a recent paper (Fettes, 2011), I spelled out some of the educational implications of this idea. One, obviously, is that Egan’s recommendations for the development of Mythic understanding (e.g., Egan, 1986, 1988, 1997, 2005) need to be complemented by a deliberate cultivation of vivid sensory experience,

whether the learners are young children (as Egan envisioned) or older students (including, crucially, preservice teachers: Chodakowski, 2009; Chodakowski, Egan, Judson, & Stewart, 2011; Fettes, 2005). Perhaps less obviously, the framework also implies that experiential educators can greatly enhance the meaningfulness of such firsthand experience by deliberately enriching and developing the oral language used to describe it, using Egan’s tools of Mythic understanding. The possibility that the narrative structuring of educational experience advocated by Egan can be fruitfully applied in experiential education settings is also worth exploring (Fettes, 2011).

Imagination and Interactive Experience

The second of Roberts’s variations of experience is found at the heart of Dewey’s educational (and ethical) theory (Pappas, 2008) and most concisely articulated in Dewey’s late work *Experience and Education* (1938/1998). Influenced initially by Hegel, but later and more deeply by James, Dewey developed a distinctively North American brand of radical empiricism that tied all knowledge to our lived encounters with reality. “Gone were the reliance on foundations, universal truths, and a quest for certainty. In its place was a deeply contextual, action-oriented epistemology that allowed for the contingencies of a changing world” (Roberts, 2008, p. 22). Fairfield (2009) summed up Dewey’s conception this way:

It is the nature of experience to be at once passive and active, nor merely to receive sensory input but actively to interpret, categorize, and transform it in the manner of an experiment directed toward a pragmatic end. . . . Experience in this sense is life itself, the growth or being-in-motion of a worldly subjectivity. It is an experience that is temporal and adaptive, that adjusts itself to objects in the world while simultaneously transforming them to suit its own purposes and that is continually growing and expanding. (pp. 65–66)

Dewey’s thought is famously difficult to encapsulate in a paragraph or two. However, Fairfield was surely right to emphasize the purposefulness of experience in Dewey’s formulation. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938/1998) observed:

All of us have desires, all at least who have not become so pathological that they are completely apathetic. These desires are the ultimate moving springs of action. . . . The intensity of the desire measures the strength of the efforts that will be put forth. But the wishes are empty castles in the air unless they are translated into the means by which they may be realized. The question of how soon or of means takes the place of a projected imaginative end, and, since means are objective, they have to be studied and understood if a genuine purpose is to be formed. . . . In an educational scheme, the occurrence of a desire and impulse is not the final end. It is an occasion and a demand for the formation of a plan and method of activity. (pp. 82–84)

Here, then, we find a clue to Dewey’s conception of imagination’s role in directing experience. As for the Romantics, it draws its energy from our deepest emotions and desires, but Dewey conjoins this with conscious intention: The imagination engenders

meaningful experience by conjuring up a wished-for state of affairs that motivates subsequent action. Of course, for imagination to perform this role, it must also be intimately connected with our knowledge of reality, on which we must call to form and carry out a plan of activity. With this in mind, we can find fresh meaning in the following points from Dewey's (1897) famous "Pedagogic Creed," four decades distant from *Experience and Education*, but never disavowed:

I believe that the image is the great instrument of instruction. What a child gets out of any subject presented to him is simply the images which he himself forms with regard to it.

I believe that if nine-tenths of the energy at present directed towards making the child learn certain things, were spent in seeing to it that the child was forming proper images, the work of instruction would be indefinitely facilitated.

I believe that much of the time and attention now given to the preparation and presentation of lessons might be more wisely and profitably expended in training the child's power of imagery and in seeing to it that he was continually forming definite, vivid, and growing images of the various subjects with which he comes in contact in his experience. (The Nature of Method section, para. 7)

If we understand "image" as referring to the active contents of the imagination, Dewey seems to be conceiving of education as a kind of imaginative stocking up of firsthand information (Reed, 1996) or personal knowledge (Polanyi, 1974) that enables learners to discover more possibilities for purposeful action or, conversely, a process of purposeful action leading to imaginative growth. Dewey, it must be said, did not use the term *imagination* extensively or consistently (Fairfield, 2009, p. 118). He did, however, in the period of his most mature thought, emphasize that it "animates and pervades all processes of making and observation. It is a way of seeing and feeling things as they compose an integral whole" (Dewey, 1934, p. 267). In this statement we see the two sides of experience, the active (making) and the passive (observation), brought together under the one quality of mind. "There is always some measure of adventure in the meeting of mind and universe," Dewey added, "and this adventure is, in its measure, imagination" (Dewey, 1934, p. 267).

This, then, is a more directed and purposeful conception of imaginative experience than that of Emerson and Abram. The goal here is not imaginative participation but *imaginative realization*: the pursuit of consciously planned activities for preconceived ends. The educational adventure consists not in letting one's awareness be taken up and shaped by the external world but in grappling with that world to bring something new into being (something material, perhaps, but also something intellectual, a new insight into how that world can manifest itself in our experience). As is well known, Dewey's guiding model for the educational process was based on experimental inquiry, with its rationalist and systematic approach to discovering deeper patterns and meanings in experience. *Art as Experience* makes it clear, however, that he did not see this as

opposed to an aesthetic mode of understanding. Rather, "intellectual experience . . . must bear an esthetic stamp to be itself complete" (1934, p. 38). For Dewey, the achievement of an end was integral and necessary to that completeness.

Perhaps curiously, there is nothing in Egan's theory of imaginative development that corresponds to this productive and goal-oriented conception of imagination, even though it is clearly relevant to many kinds of educational activity. Yet if one thinks of it as the experiential side of an imaginative mode called Realization, its connections with Egan's Romantic understanding become apparent. The world is seen by the Romantic imagination as a vast stage for the enactment of human hopes, fears, passions, strivings. Its concern is with the limits of possibility, with great deeds and heroic figures, with rebellion and idealism. It is an imaginative style passionately preoccupied with *doing*. According to Egan, it develops out of Mythic understanding in large part because of the way in which literacy reorganizes our thinking. But we might also see it as part of a new imaginative project of the self, one that seeks greater agency and autonomy in the world. As Egan (1997) observed:

When we are ten, we are very much at the mercy of the world around us. We are typically subject to endless rules and regulations—parental, societal, and, not least, natural. . . . The tension characteristic of romance comes from the desire to transcend a threatening reality while seeking to secure one's identity within it.

A characteristic of Romantic understanding, then, is its ready association with transcendent human qualities, or human qualities exercised to a transcendent degree. This observation is important for the education of children from about eight to fifteen because almost any curriculum material can be made understandable if students can associate "romantically" with such qualities within it. This is, I might note in passing, not a matter of manipulating students to learn the knowledge we "privilege," but rather a matter of having the courtesy to attend to how they can best make sense of any knowledge. (p. 90)

Under this theme of "transcendence within reality," Egan grouped such typical adolescent preoccupations as hobbies and collecting, extremes and limits (such as sporting statistics or the *Guinness Book of World Records*), pop culture heroes such as film or music stars, trivia contests and reality TV shows, and so on. It is evident that this phase of imaginative development tends to find its contents in popular culture rather than in the process of formal education. Similarly, the kind of experiential engagement Dewey saw as most valuable (that is, goal-directed, socially mediated, imaginative activity motivated by genuine interest) tends to take place in informal educational settings: sports and physical recreation, art and craft classes, music, theater, and dance, and so on. This too grows in importance as children enter adolescence, becoming for some a vital and lasting source of meaning in their lives.

We can read Dewey and Egan, then, as urging that formal education make greater efforts to tap the upwelling of physical, emotional, and intellectual energy associated with the transition to

adulthood and the growing importance of agency in the process of self-development. Consistent with their differing philosophies and sources of inspiration, Egan has emphasized how this can be done through language, while Dewey placed the emphasis on experience. Writing in the postmodern era, Egan is more at ease with the notion of there being differences, tensions, and even ruptures in our ways of grasping the world; for him, Romantic understanding is just one facet of our intellectual development, to be appreciated and applied but not transformed into a single foundational idea. This was not Dewey's project; he was after a unified system, a single epistemology, and this led him to place more faith in one particular conception of experience than it could reasonably bear (Jay, 2004). Yet at the center of his thought was a vision of imagination actively and creatively engaged with the world, and this helps us to see what is missing in Egan's emphasis on language as the engine of imaginative development. Taking our cue from the earlier pairing of Somatic and Mythic understanding, we might think of Romantic understanding as complemented by an experiential partner, a kind of understanding that develops when the imagination is involved in visualizing the consequences of purposeful action. I propose to call this Harmonic understanding.

This of course is not a concept intended to encompass all of Dewey's own philosophy or educational vision. Rather, I seek to distill what he has to say about the relationship between imagination and experience that is educationally most insightful and useful, setting this within the context of a process of imaginative development characterized by losses and gains (Egan, 1997). Harmonic understanding does entail a greater sense of separation between self and world than Somatic understanding does, a tension that can be threatening, daunting, frustrating, but also intriguing, adventurous, exciting. Like Romantic understanding, Harmonic understanding encourages a focus on human agency, on the particularities of individuals and situations, on the limits of possibility and the quest for excellence, and on the shaping of islands of order and purpose in a world that resists human intentions. Like Romantic understanding, it has the potential to drift toward the trivial, unless it is guided by real social interests, the accumulated wisdom of a tradition or discipline, and the considered judgment of teachers, mentors, or users (Dewey, 1938/1998). But if it is routinely neglected, as is common in formal schooling, any skilled task can descend into humdrum imitation or meaningless drudgery.

Referring back to Table 1 may help set these new ideas in the context of those we have already covered. It is now apparent that the left-hand column of the table represents a kind of hermeneutic developmental process: what I have elsewhere called "growing into the world" (Fettes, 2012). I am suggesting that Participation and Realization are two of the most fundamental modes we have of engaging with the world, that this engagement necessarily involves the imagination, and that it engenders kinds of understanding that are both tacit/embodied (Somatic and Harmonic) and explicit/linguified (Mythic and Romantic). Egan has written of the tension between Mythic and Romantic understanding, as well as the tension between Mythic and Somatic, and this point can be made more generally: Every kind of understanding is somewhat at odds

with all the others. So what we are after, educationally, is not a gradual ascent toward a single unified understanding of the world. We are trying, instead, for versatility.

If fully implemented, this would lead to a very different approach to teaching the later elementary and early high school grades. A focus on human agency would transform much of the curriculum into dramatic explorations and reenactments of invention, discovery, and development; concomitantly, significant resources would be invested in helping each student develop skills in one or more areas of handicrafts, physical labor, artistic creation, or athletic performance. Compared to the Somatic/Mythic curriculum, these units of study would last longer and place a greater emphasis on meaningful improvement over time. The goal would be, by early adolescence, to endow each student with a broad understanding of human capacities and achievement in general, and personal confidence in his or her own abilities in one or more valued areas of endeavor.

Imagination and Experience as Praxis

Although Roberts (2008) portrayed "experience as praxis" (p. 21) as a third (if uncommon) variation within experiential education, his discussion was more concerned with "the ways in which experience can be employed for hegemonic purposes" (p. 27) than with the conception of experience central to the critical tradition. I shall argue, however, that this conception is indeed distinctive and educationally relevant in ways that go beyond critique. Of course, in a tradition as diverse as critical pedagogy (cf., Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003), to use a metaphor that invokes a center is to invite immediate rebuttal, and I would not expect this formulation to please everyone. Nonetheless, if we take Paulo Freire's ideas and writings as a basic source of inspiration for a variety of critical theorists, we can endeavor to trace in them his thinking on the respective roles of experience and imagination in "the educational practice of a progressive option" (Freire, 1994, p. 1).

A good starting point is the following key passage in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

Since people do not exist apart from the world, apart from reality, the movement [i.e., the process of educational development] must begin with the human-world relationship. Accordingly, the point of departure must always be with men and women in the "here and now," which constitutes the situation within which they are submerged, from which they emerge, and in which they intervene. Only by starting from this situation—which determines their perception of it—can they begin to move. To do this authentically they must perceive their state not as fated and unalterable, but merely as limiting—and therefore challenging. (Freire, 2000, p. 85)

Freire presented "the situation"—the normal state of affairs in which most people live—as something static, confining, working against the existential process of becoming that he equated with authentic education. It follows that for him, the normal range of experience that characterizes "the situation" is not truly educational; indeed, because people are "submerged" in it, it is in a sense antieducational because it normalizes oppression, whether one is

on the giving or the receiving side of it. The kind of experience that educators should be aiming for is one that “engages people as beings aware of their incompleteness” and teaches them “to apprehend [their] situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation” (Freire, 2003, pp. 84–85).

This process, or movement, brings imagination and experience together in a characteristic way. We can’t begin to see reality clearly, in the Freirean account, until we have a sense of how it could be different. This awakening of the imagination, on the other hand, can’t take place at a remove from experience, for example, in abstract analysis or rhetoric; it has to be situated as clearly as possible in the material particulars of people’s lives. This means, in practice, that education involves dialogue, because ultimately no one can speak authoritatively on behalf of another’s experience: Each person must name the world for himself or herself but have the humility to listen to and learn from others’ acts of naming as well. And this naming is never just concerned with how things are, here and now; it reaches toward what utopian philosopher Bloch called the “not yet” (Giroux & McLaren, 1997, p. 146) and Freire (2000) called “untested feasibility” (p. 113).

Few have noted how central this imaginative movement is to Freirean pedagogy (McLaren & De Lissovoy, 2002):

The transformation of social conditions involves a rethinking of the world as a particular world, capable of being changed. But the reframing proposed here depends upon the power of the imagination to see outside, beyond, and against what is. More than a cognitive or emotional potential, the human imagination, in Freire’s view, is capable of a radical and productive envisioning that exceeds the limits of the given. It is in this capacity that everyone’s humanity consists, and for this reason it can never be the gift of the teacher to the student. Rather, educator-student and student-educator work together to mobilize the imagination in the service of creating a vision of a new society. (p. 902)

Yet it is equally important to visualize the Freirean imagination as embedded in experience, so that this utopian project is from the beginning an active and particular one, rooted in “a concrete engagement in mundane reality” (Giroux & McLaren, 1997, p. 151). Going beyond Participation and Realization, the mode of understanding that Freire was striving for might be termed *imaginative implication*. It involves coming to understand both how one’s own situation and customary actions are implicated in broader social relations (of oppression or liberation) and what different futures may be implied by changing one’s actions in the present. The principal tools for bringing this about are one’s fellow human beings, who by bringing their different life experiences, perspectives, and specialized knowledge to the dialogue help to create new understandings and possibilities for action.

Those familiar with Dewey will immediately recognize some familiar themes here, notably in the emphasis on dialogue as a cardinal principle of genuine education—dialogue that engages teachers as much as students (Fairfield, 2009, pp. 42–43). Yet Freire was willing to go much further in asserting the transformative

potential of education. Where Dewey thought in terms of a gradual adjustment of the students’ understanding, Freire was more interested in qualitative shifts, when reality is suddenly viewed through new eyes. For Dewey, our grasp on the world grows through the accumulation of many particular insights, solutions to concrete problems we are confronted with. For Freire (2000), the concrete problems are only instances of something much more profound, which he termed “revolutionary praxis” (p. 131) and which requires a deeper insight into the underlying structures of experience:

People will be truly critical if they live the plenitude of the praxis, that is, if their action encompasses a critical reflection which increasingly organizes their thinking and thus leads them to move from a purely naïve knowledge of reality to a higher level, one which enables them to perceive the causes of reality. (p. 131)

The movement that Freire described closely resembles the transition, in Egan’s scheme of imaginative development, from Romantic to Philosophic understanding. Noting Warnock’s (1976) remark that “imagination can stretch out towards what imagination cannot comprehend” (p. 58), Egan (1997) argued that the powerful urge to build causal models of reality “follows the stretch of the imagination and the subsequent construction of the linguistic and conceptual tools required to secure the mind’s hold on what the imagination grasped towards” (p. 123). Such a move, he suggested, is inherently reflexive:

The romantic perspective on history or on the social or natural worlds focused the younger student’s mind on the extremes, on the more fascinating facts, on vivid true stories, dramatic events, heroes, and so on. The Romantic student recognizes, of course, that all these bright bits and pieces are parts of the one real world, but the connections between them are not particularly interesting. The new theoretic language [of Philosophic understanding] helps to generate, or is a symptom of, a significantly different perspective in which the bright bits and pieces are seen increasingly as parts of general wholes, systems, and processes. History, for example, is no longer perceived primarily as a set of vivid events, styles of living, and heroic characters but rather as a single complex process, a continuum of styles, examples of the possible range of human behaviour and human nature. The connections among things come increasingly into prominence, and the Philosophic students’ connection with things comes increasingly from the realization that they themselves are parts of the complex processes and systems that make up the world. (pp. 120–121)

The utopian urge in Freire’s conception of experience finds its equivalent, in the Philosophic imagination, in the quest for the perfect theory, the great explanatory principle: “Establishing the truth about history, society, and the cosmos is serious business. When Philosophic understanding dominates the mind, it can work with powerful intensity” (Egan, 1997, p. 125). An important dimension of educating for Implication, then, is to challenge the inevitable weaknesses and limitations in our understanding, giving rise to an endless process of imaginative growth in which no truth

is ever fixed or immutable, but overarching visions and theories of reality still play an essential role. Both Egan and Freire may be termed critical realists in this sense (see Morrow & Torres, 2002, on Freire), even though neither goes to great lengths to justify his epistemology or ontology.

Since critical realism is also a viable philosophy for the natural sciences (Bhaskar, 1997), it is perhaps not surprising that there are resonances between Freire's conception of experience and that which holds for the wildlife biologist, the expert naturalist, the field geologist, and so on. For people immersed in the more-than-human world, each encounter with reality speaks of a web of connections that can only be grasped through extensive direct experience, in which intuition and imagination may be aided by all kinds of descriptive and theoretical tools. Developing such understanding is part and parcel of developing a kind of rootedness or at-homeness in the world, reflected in the way Freire emphasized people's rootedness in their families, communities, and "situations." Accordingly, I propose to call this kind of imaginative engagement with experience Endemic understanding. In its most common biological meaning, *endemic* refers to a species that is native to a particular area, with an etymology that goes back to Greek *demos*, "people (of a place)." But we might also read it as *end-emic*, that is, as a term describing the understanding that comes with such "insiderness" (*endos*). Endemic understanding, in this sense, develops through the effort of the imagination to grasp the deep structures underlying experience and how one is implicated in them—not just in Freirean pedagogy but in all forms of endeavor that entail a long-term experiential engagement with wholes, systems and processes. Fesmire's (2010) conception of "ecological imagination" and Ingold's (2000) discussion of the role of imagination in developing a "dwelling perspective" are examples of contemporary writers (a philosopher and an anthropologist, respectively) grappling with closely related ideas.

Both Freirean and Deweyan pedagogies have been sternly criticized for their supposed lack of appreciation for local identities and traditions, and hence anti-ecological bias (Bowers, 2006). The perspective developed here is more positive. In so far as those pedagogies contribute to the development of Harmonic and Endemic understanding, by insisting on the value of learners' direct engagement with purposeful action and situated dwelling-in-the-world, they are compatible with the development of a deep ethical relationality with that world. But this is a more complex task than affirming people's right to name the world for themselves or nurturing their involvement in collective action. It is necessary to strive to understand the Philosophic ideas and principles that underlie present social and economic realities, in order to develop ecologically informed alternatives that can compete for people's hearts and minds. There is no getting around the importance of Philosophic understanding for grasping how the world might be different than it is. On the other hand, Philosophic understanding in and of itself can be deracinated and deracinating, and there is no substitute for a Freirean-situated existential praxis in bringing it down to earth. This is the function Egan attributed to Somatic understanding in *The Educated Mind*; the framework in Table 1

implies a more robust set of educational strategies to accomplish the same end.

As in the case of Realization, the development of imaginative Implication requires significant changes to our educational institutions. For one thing, a different time scale is involved. Just as the development of Harmonic and Romantic understanding takes place over longer time periods than are needed for meaningful Somatic or Mythic development, Endemic and Philosophic understanding need longer periods still, measured in years rather than months or weeks. Rather than carving up the high school curriculum into small chunks defined by their disciplinary content, it would make more sense to treat it as a voyage through intellectual history and at the same time an exploration of place, community, and identity—with the tension between the two made explicit and problematic, as a defining feature of democratic schooling in the 21st century. The framework also calls into question much of what currently passes for environmental education: Without a commitment to Freirean dialogue about daily lived experience, and ultimately to "the plenitude of the praxis" (Freire, 2003, p. 131), understanding of our ecological Implication remains fragmentary and shallow rather than Endemic—confirming rather than reforming our unsustainable and unreflective ways of living in the world.

An Integrative Framework

We know that ethnicity, class, gender, location, and other social factors have a major impact on educational outcomes in the formal school system. Experiential educators have long seen one of their roles as leveling the playing field—making meaningful educational opportunities available to marginalized learners. I want to suggest that they accomplish this, in part, by mediating the growth of imaginative understanding and that such growth is not restricted to outdoor and other nonformal educational settings. Within the broader framework outlined above, phenomenological, Deweyan, Freirean, and imaginative educators might find common cause with each other and with other traditions barely touched on here: ecological, indigenous, arts-based and spiritual, among others.

This kind of general integrative scheme should not be taken as a substitute for these individual traditions. There is a depth of understanding that comes with particularity, for instance in the Waldorf school tradition inaugurated by Rudolf Steiner, which ranges across all of the kinds of understanding described here and goes into areas that I have left unexplored. What I hope to do is create a more fertile ground for conversation, collaboration, and mutual enrichment among communities of scholarship and practice that often display little awareness of or interest in one another. Egan's work, for instance, though recognized through various scholarly and professional awards, is rarely seriously critiqued or engaged with in the context of other educational traditions. This is not a situation that helps us address the urgent need for new models of education and schooling in an unsustainable (and undemocratic) global civilization.

The framework I have proposed is a fiction, of course. Establishing these different categories of tacit and explicit understanding is a way of getting a handle on the "quasi-chaos"

(James, 1904, “Substitution,” para. 2) of human life, of thinking more systematically and strategically about what we are trying to achieve as educators and how we go about it. The way to approach such a scheme, in my view, is to see what kinds of questions and practice it provokes—that is, to put it to an experiential test. I have found Egan’s work very useful for teachers and schools, albeit with some modification and elaboration; I hope that this extension of his ideas proves generative for others. Underlying it is the same tragicomic sensibility that has always impressed me in Egan’s work. Rather than a triumphant journey up and up to some gleaming summit, education becomes a tale of gains and losses, struggles and imperfections, while holding out the possibility of a deeper and more joyful engagement with the world for any learner at any age. In the end, to my mind, that is what democratic education seeks to achieve.

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