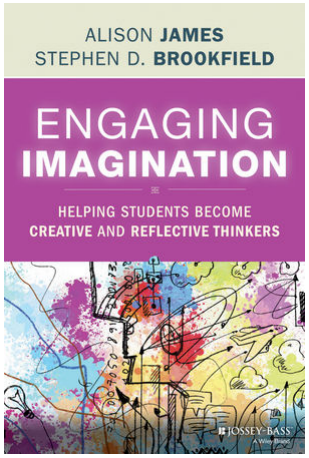


Engaging Imagination: Helping Students Become Creative and Reflective Thinkers

James, Alison; and Brookfield, Stephen D.
Wiley, 2014

Book Review

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Engaging Imagination: Helping Students Become Creative and Reflective Thinkers poses a challenge to educators across fields to reach beyond traditional teaching and learning methods. Authors Alison James and Stephen D. Brookfield ask, "Why are we not open to varied expressive modes – video, art, drama, poetry, music – to gauge students' learning? If there are multiple intelligences (Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* [New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011]), if students' diverse histories, cultural backgrounds, racial identities, and personalities mean teaching and learning is inevitably complex (Allen, Sheve, and Nieter, *Understanding Learning Styles: Making a Difference for Diverse Learners* [Huntington Beach, CA: Shell Education 2010]) then shouldn't our approaches to helping and assessing learning exhibit a similar variety" (4)? The book invites us to imagine "what if" (xii) students were given opportunities to explore their learning beyond lectures, discussions, reading, and writing. The authors do not intend to solve the institutional or assessment challenges of teaching more creatively, but to pose ideas for reflection and exploration. Each chapter provides websites to further engage concepts and activities described in the book.

Part I, "Understanding the Role of Imagination in Learning," argues in three chapters that students learn more effectively when they are given freedom to reflect. This is an engaged reflection, involving: creativity – where students are given ways to "unravel . . . question . . . ponder . . . clarify . . . demonstrate" (57); imagination – which focuses on possibilities; and play – learning engaged from new angles, leading to spontaneous insights.

Part II, "Engaging Imagination Tools and Techniques," forms the heart of the book and may prove to be a valuable resource to liven up syllabi and classrooms. In each of six chapters, a

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different way of teaching and learning is presented; two to eight activities are also described in detail, providing practical illustrations. Just one activity from each way of teaching and learning is included here. (1) Visual learning: Students create collages in response to a discussion question. (2) Story and metaphor: Students symbolize key learning experiences on a timeline. (3) Kinesthetic learning: Students use Legos or other concrete objects to construct models of their thinking-in-process. (4) Attending to physical space: A special space in the classroom (or an inflatable "pod") can serve as a place where students, alone or in small groups, can video their live reflections. (5) Asking non-leading questions: Students are guided to think more deeply about their own beliefs by questions that ask for analogies, opposites, or ways of recognizing certain qualities. (6) Community impact on learning: Students map the various communities in their spheres of life to observe how each shapes their perspectives.

Part III, "Negotiating the Realities of Engaging Imagination," provides activities for students to navigate energy levels and emotions while learning. In a final chapter authors share how their own imaginations were engaged through the writing process.

Engaging Imagination is not aimed so much at educators helping students to think creatively and reflectively about course content, but rather at presenting ways educators may help students to reflect on themselves as learners. Thus the subtitle can be misleading. However, most of the learning activities could be adapted for deepening student understanding of course content. The emphasis on student self-awareness contributes to the current pedagogical shift from teaching to impart information towards facilitating and empowering student-directed learning in a variety of classroom and online settings. Little is offered by way of guiding students towards a directed end; indeed doing so would negate the purpose of many of the activities. It is therefore significant that authors acknowledge their work as a complement to, rather than replacement of, traditional forms of teaching and learning. We are left with the same challenge students will have as a result of "engaging imagination": to appropriate the insights gained.

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