

# Incorporating Egan's *Imaginative Education* into the Curriculum and the Culture at the Post-Secondary Level

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Creativity is conspicuously absent in the outcomes of liberal arts higher education institutions generally and Georgia College particularly. One strong candidate for rectifying this deficit is the incorporation of curriculum based on Kieran Egan's theory of Imaginative Education (IE, 1988). There is a dearth of investigation as to how IE might be used in colleges and universities by faculty and students to allow the "the unusual and effective to flourish" (IERG, 2008). This paper presents a component of the work of one grass roots faculty development group as it learned about and sought to implement aspects of IE into their undergraduate curriculum and university culture.

**Keywords:** Imaginative Education; Undergraduate Curriculum; Faculty Development; Higher Education

## Introduction

One of the strongest contemporary advocates for educating for creativity is Kieran Egan, an educational philosopher who for nearly three decades has promoted a theory of Imaginative Education (IE, 1988). As an educational theory that addresses philosophical questions such as the aim of education as well practical matters pertaining to curriculum and instruction, IE is difficult to summarize succinctly. The main premise is that cultural tools become individual cognitive tools when advanced through a particular type of understanding that people tend to undergo in a pattern of increasing sophistication. In applying this theory of education Egan urges teachers to incorporate pedagogical practices that align with the type of understanding of the student to foster acquisition of more complex tools for the learner's use. Egan (2005) describes characteristics of students who are exposed to the theory through certain pedagogical practices and argues that imaginative education enables learners to have heightened capacity for all mental functions such as flexibility, creativity, and foresightedness. Suffice it to say that Egan and other proponents of the theory intend to apply the many facets of imagination to remake education into to a "system that enables the unusual and effective to flourish wherever possible" (IERG, 2008). There is a considerable body of research indicating that both students and teachers benefit greatly from imaginative teaching and learning. However, the findings have largely come from schools with learners in Kindergarten through high school. Thus there is a dearth of investigation as to how IE might be used in colleges and universities to allow the "the unusual and effective to flourish" (IERG, 2008). This paper presents a component of the work of one grass roots faculty development group as it learned about and sought to implement aspects of IE into their university undergraduate curriculum and culture. In order to grasp the importance of this undertaking it is important to understand the context of the university, the grass roots faculty development group, and the potential for curriculum change to incorporate Egan's

theory of imaginative education.

## Antecedents to Incorporation of Imaginative Education

The mission of the authors' institution, Georgia College (GCSU), shifted in 1996 as it was designated the state's public liberal arts university. The demographics of the student population changed significantly as a more affluent and less diverse cadre of metro Atlantans were seated in place of what had been many first generation college students. No longer considered a regional institution with a large contingent of commuter students, almost immediately GCSU reflected a significant departure from the working class student body that it had long served. Accompanying the new mission emphasis, issues such as small class size, holistic development of students, and "learning beyond the classroom" drove the need for more professors. Over the next 10 years there was a massive influx of faculty and staff to address the goal of providing more personalized learning experiences for students so that by 2006 over 60% of teaching faculty was not tenured. This advent also created an inevitable situation in which professional development for faculty and instructional staff had to be addressed and in retrospect, provided an important pivot point for confronting the ubiquity of traditional pedagogical practice.

In that same year, three colleagues, two untenured and one tenured from the departments of Chemistry, Mathematics, and Middle Level Education, developed a series of learning modules to use to "redeliver" content on course design as a result of a professional development institute that we had attended, Science Education for New Civic Engagements and Responsibilities (SENCER). Central to SENCER pedagogy is the use of contested, capacious social issues to teach science content in an interdisciplinary manner with the purpose of sustaining democratic social ideals. As a public liberal arts institution, a major component of Georgia College's mission is to educate an engaged citizenry, which will have the continued capacity and

desire to participate in the democracy. And as professional higher educators we continually challenge ourselves to make our collaboration purposeful, sustainable, and to embody the integrity and agency we expect from others who join us in this enterprise. Those two dynamics together served as a catalyst for considering the construct of creativity through the work of Kieran Egan's Imaginative Education Research Group (2008), the process of which we embarked upon at Georgia College and which we elaborate in this paper.

From this initial foray into course design and effective teaching our inclusive collective, known as the Innovative Course-building Group, IC-bG, has grown to over 25 participants and expanded to foster faculty development for multiple issues related to teaching and learning. For instance we have facilitated workshops on our own and other campuses, sponsored a faculty discourse series, participated in ongoing collegial conversations to understand our context and our growth, have been invited speakers to a conference regarding ingenuity and change, and have recently successfully executed our first professional development institute that focused on innovation in teaching. Concurrent with the expansion of IC-bG, Georgia College has completed revision of the general education curriculum outcomes and introduced new general education requirements for freshmen that focus on developing critical thinking and cultural perspectives.

As founding members of IC-bG and newly returned from the SENCER 2012 summer institute we have had opportunity to investigate theories, frameworks, and models that will help realize our vision of liberal arts education that fosters democratic ideals and a well-prepared faculty to enact the vision. One such potent model is Imaginative Education, theorized, refined and advanced by Kieran Egan for more than 25 years. Over time he has thoroughly detailed the various reasons for, effective means by which, and uncovered nuanced meanings of imagination (Egan, 1988, 1997, 2005, 2008, 2011). In short he is one of the few who has developed a fundamental theory of teaching and learning that entails the intent of and processes for education grounded in understanding of humanity. In arguing for the significance of imagination for learning Egan has written, "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* (2005: p. 212, emphasis added). Regrettably Egan's theory, as well considered and potentially transformative as it is, is not well known or utilized in the United States and as far as we can determine, rarely considered for incorporation into post-secondary curricula. Indeed creativity of any sort is rarely an objective of educational endeavors in higher education. For instance, a review of the learning outcomes for 151 introductory courses in the Georgia College curriculum reveal that only two have learning outcomes even distantly related to dimensions of creativity and these are outcomes for arts courses in the field of theater. The outcomes for courses in theater include 1) to acquire basic components of imagination in Theater 1100, and 2) to exercise imagination in Theater 1310. If the graduates of Georgia College are to fulfill its liberal arts mission and become involved citizens in the democracy while the GCSU faculty become continuously better developed to teach in ways that will attain this educational aim then a transformative model such as Imaginative Education must become imbued in the curriculum and the culture. We outline our efforts to do so below.

## Need for Changes to the Curriculum

In order to engage students with the liberal arts and increase their ability to think critically and creatively to address important societal problems, faculty members of IC-bG have designed and developed a cadre of courses using important civic and social issues within a framework of realizing SENCER ideals as the impetus for course development (<http://www.sencer.net/About/sencerideals.cfm>). For example, issues of food security, biomedical concerns of young adolescents, public discourse, mathematicians on the fringe, and current environmental dilemmas are a few of the problems that have served as themes for courses. The unfamiliar nature of the pedagogies used in these courses often results in initial resistance from students however where these courses are taught to freshmen who are being introduced to a more rigorous college curriculum the "push back" can be particularly robust. Because imaginative principles such as tolerance for and capacity to view from multiple perspectives, awareness of one's learning *process* and product, and ability to critique conventional wisdom have been neither attended to nor attained in students' early education, freshmen resist the ambiguity that comes with imagining novel solutions to real problems as opposed to the certainty of identifying "correct" answers quickly, a practice to which most have long before habituated (Egan, 2005). To deal with this discomfort they assign responsibility for their uncertain performance to pedagogical practices to which many are unaccustomed, and give themselves "permission" to disengage. We conjecture that the very resistance students experience comes from their limited development in flexible and imaginative thinking.

An illustrative example of this lack of endurance to dwell within ambiguous realms occurred recently in an introductory course for freshman entitled, Critical Thinking: Chemistry & Climate wherein students are expected to learn of and use concepts from chemistry to critically analyze data related to climate issues. In the first class session students were asked to form groups and, from memory, construct a visual representation of an atomic model. From there they were instructed to use information in their textbook to identify evidence that would support or contradict elements of the model. After a gallery walk, where professors and fellow classmates provided comments and questions about the models, the students were encouraged to revise their models and develop a table of crucial experiments that helped develop modern atomic structure. This activity was met with behaviors suggesting apprehension, anxiety, and even defiance as one student encouraged others to withdraw from the course. Remarkably, over 40% of the students dropped the course after the first week, which we are inclined to think speaks to the low levels of intellectual discomfort students are prepared to undergo stemming from a lack of imagination.

## Need for Changes to the Culture

Currently, through the collaborative efforts of the members, IC-bG is on the cusp of transformative change that moves beyond work that has been done at the individual course level. These faculty members and teaching staff have already faced the difficult task of critically analyzing the quality of the learning experience in their own classrooms and have made changes that have led to incorporation of activities that promote acquisition of higher-order thinking skills. This analysis has naturally fed their desire to see these experiences reinforced in courses

across the university and in every discipline, which likely would require an unprecedented dispositional change in the faculty as well as a vigorous scrutiny of the curriculum as a whole. While we have witnessed the effects of close examination within several departments across the university (mathematics, sociology, chemistry), wherein faculty have reviewed program curricular goals and evaluated the capacity for their courses to bring students to meeting those goals, we recognize that scaling up the process will require delivering considerably more compelling reason for many faculty members to undertake such work. Providing a well-grounded theory such as Egan's Imaginative Education could serve as intellectual grist for many university faculty members to consider the benefits of designing curricula to develop flexible, imaginative thinkers and cultivate the effective and the unusual in meeting GCSU's mission. Therefore as we move forward we intend to transform student learning through the curriculum and the means for designing and implementing said curricula by creating new cultural norms for the faculty. The first steps for this transformation will be development of a two-course sequence for freshmen focused on imaginative, self-directed learning to be offered by members of IC-bG, who will collaborate to learn about Egan's theory of Imaginative Education. Although we are moving on two fronts, the goals for each approach are essentially the same.

### The Audience

The outcomes for our proposed course series have two distinct audiences: 1) the students, and 2) the instructors. In many ways the nature of the outcomes for both groups are identical; to take ownership and responsibility for their own learning. As IC-bG has evolved we have seen faculty and instructors grow substantially as they recognize that they are supported and encouraged to make changes in their own teaching that will lead to more pervasive improvement across the institution. By purposefully offering a meld of the personal and the professional to teaching faculty we have created a third space for community building (Oldenburg, 1991) that provides a safe yet potent area within which to make change. Through participation in this satisfying community experience, faculty members have become self-directed learners, which is precisely the outcome we seek for ourselves as well as the students.

### Our Plan

In order for university faculty and students new to the college experience to acquire dispositions that are likely to result in self-directed, flexible, and creative learning for life we are proposing a series of two courses for undergraduates that apply Egan's principles to foster imaginatively engaged learning. Throughout the design and implementation of the courses, faculty and students alike will be provided experiences in contexts that emphasize the importance of flexibility and imagination for enduring learning. These courses will blend theory and real-world practice to illustrate the substantial and on-going benefits imaginative thinking offers in terms of advancing cognitive tools for individuals and society. Learners in the first of the two-course series will analyze their approach to learning within the context of the theories, principles, and practices of imaginative education by selecting a learning experience where they view themselves unsuccessful. Through scaffolding with case study analysis and engagement with the theory of imagina-

tive learning, students will apply these principles to their own learning scenario. For example, a student analyzing an essay written in an English Composition course will identify the degree to which she used invention and novelty or relied on literal descriptions in the writing. Another student might analyze a series of images from his art history course to identify the hopes, fears, and intentions of the artists in order to understand that imaginative learners incorporate affect and emotion as a part of the learning process. A third student who may be struggling with research methods might be instructed to analyze the source of invention and novelty in a number of studies presented in his course looking for patterns and insight into the origin of "generativeness". The first course will be designed to focus on individuals and their use of imaginatively-engaged education to become more self-regulated learners as freshman new to the college experience.

The second course of the series seeks to move learners to place their own learning in relational context to imagination in global cultures and history scaffolding them to consider how cognitive tools are acquired in other societies where language may be of a different degree of importance than in the Western world. In this experience the point will be for individuals to move outside of themselves to view and value the variable in any context rather than to seek standardization. We hypothesize that these two types of directed self-analysis and reflection at the micro and the macro levels will lead students to develop the flexibility, intentionality, and agency characteristic of an imaginatively engaged learner—an explicit learning outcome for each of the courses.

The courses will be collaboratively taught by several faculty members from a variety of disciplines, which will allow each individual to bring her/his unique perspective on imagination informed by a disciplinary framework as well as to use interdisciplinary factors for creating unusual and effective approaches to address social concerns. While becoming informed of Egan's theoretical foundation, and learning about and through the practices of imaginatively engaged education, we intend for students and faculty to acquire and enact those enduring dispositions that will contribute to their own success, the success of Georgia College, and our society as a whole. We intend for this to be an initial examination and implementation at the post-secondary level to help us determine whether one university can transform the curriculum and the culture through imaginative education and further the growth of "the unusual and effective" by addressing the development of the faculty as well as the students (IERG, 2008).

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