



Using Imagination for Inclusive Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This short paper explores the transformative role of imagination in fostering inclusive teaching and learning within higher education. Drawing on practical examples from marketing education, it illustrates how imaginative pedagogies—such as storytelling, role-play, and scenario-based learning—can enhance student engagement, critical thinking, and professional identity. By integrating imaginative strategies with inclusive principles, educators can create dynamic, student-centred environments that accommodate diverse learning needs and prepare students for real-world challenges. The paper highlights how imaginative assessment, particularly through reflective and narrative formats making use of actual job adverts, supports deeper learning and empowers students to connect theory with practice in meaningful ways.



Introduction

In contemporary higher education, the dual imperatives of inclusivity and engagement demand innovative pedagogical approaches. One such approach—often underutilized yet profoundly transformative in any classroom context and for assessment—is the use of imagination. This essay explores how imagination can be harnessed to foster inclusive teaching and learning *in situ* and in assessments, drawing on conceptual definitions, pedagogical strategies, and practical applications from marketing education. The latter particularly concerns the context of the *Management of Marketing* (MKTG 327), a final year UG module at Lancaster University, where I have been, for several years, pondering on the questions of authentic and inclusive learning. This has been in the face of a theory glut that seems to flood our curriculums and distance ourselves from practical realities that our students will face in their workplaces (Ryder 2024).

Imagination as Pedagogical Tool for Authenticity

As a researcher on the role of narratives in judgements and decision-making, I have always been fascinated by the symbiotic relationship between imagination and narratives (Bruner 1986, Egan 1992). Both are built on our ability as human beings to form mental pictures of things (e.g., people, artefacts, places) and their relationships in time and space and express them. So, both can generate accounts on how things did (narratives) and might (imagination) unfold. As put by Egan (1992), imagination as an ability is not merely a whimsical or artistic trait; it is a fundamental aspect of human cognition and development, underpinned partly by the narrative mode of thinking and knowledge. Imagination allows individuals to voice knowledge, tinker with ideas, and engage with both experiential and non-experiential learning methods. Techniques such as storytelling, introspection, role-play, and simulation exemplify how imagination can be used to transport learners into new or recontextualized settings, thereby deepening their understanding and engagement (Egan 1992).

It is therefore not surprising to see that Sokhanvar et al. (2021), while writing about the merits of authentic assessments such as enhanced learning experience and employability skills point to the integral role imaginative tasks play in such assessments. By encouraging learners to grapple with real-world scenarios and reflect on their imagined actions, educators can foster critical thinking, adaptability, and self-awareness. Moreover, such an approach can



also help students deal with the theory glut in our curriculum by helping them critically evaluate theories' relevance to practice (Ryder 2024). Imagination, therefore, is not a peripheral skill but a central mechanism for knowledge construction and personal development with low access barriers. This is a key aspect of inclusivity in teaching and learning too, which I substantiate below.

Inclusive Teaching and Learning: What role for imagination?

Although the notion of inclusivity in HE has traditionally been more about access to HE (see Filippou et al 2024 for a review), another very important aspect of inclusivity concerns what happens when students are already in HE, and faced with a curriculum developed with concerns that might overlook individual differences in learners. Although inclusive teaching is predicated on recognizing and valuing individual differences in learners (CEDA no date), this is no easy feat to achieve given the diversity in student body in terms of resources, prior knowledge, learning preferences. While addressing this may require institutional measures across the board, an easier way to increase inclusivity in learning and assessment, at least at the module level, is encouraging student involvement and choice in content and assessment, and contextualizing learning and assessment content to enhance engagement (Filippou et al. 2024, CEDA no date). Yet, as the CEDA (no date) emphasizes, inclusive education is a dynamic and responsive practice. It requires educators to be reflective, empathetic, and imaginative in their approach to curriculum design and classroom interaction. Perhaps, it is this point about being imaginative that opens up space for imagination as a curriculum development tool (e.g., imagining the relevance of what I want to teach to my students' future careers) and as a classroom tool (e.g., helping students transport themselves to authentic situations via imagination). In the following, I discuss how I have tried to achieve these in my teaching.

Integrating Imagination and Inclusivity in Practice

In my own teaching practice—particularly in my module MKTG 327—I have made use of imagination as a curriculum and classroom tool to be able to address the concerns I have had about the theory glut and curriculum authenticity. Thus, instead of trying to delve into the ideally institutional task of ascertaining individual learning differences, I have incorporated imagination-based learning and assessment in every possible aspect of the module. This universal trait among us (i.e., imagination) makes it an inclusive tool of learning



and assessment as it not only generates student-led learning activities but also encourages the teacher to imagine the relevance of taught material to students' future careers.

For example, through dialogue, supported by topical examples, I encourage students to “imagine the real-life applications” of what they are learning in classroom, which is at first glance abstract and theory-laden (e.g., transaction cost-based marketing management). Asking students to translate such an abstract concept into real-life situations through imagination, I then help them understand the concept's relevance to marketing planning (e.g., “outsource things that are costlier for you to produce/provide”). I do not confine imagination to dialogic lectures only. For example, I make use of scenarios in seminars where students often role-play as marketing professionals addressing marketing briefs I provide, while I assume the role of a CEO or venture capitalist—“Mrs/Mr Bottom Line”—challenging them with constraints such as limited time and marketing budget, and with questions on how their proposals will generate return on marketing spend. These role-plays prompt students to think critically and creatively, applying theoretical concepts (e.g., internal and external pressures on Marketing) to practical dilemmas (e.g., marketing planning with limited resources but increasing demands for accountable results [i.e., bottom line]). Scenarios and role play thus not only stimulate collaborative problem-solving (applied learning) but also foster a sense of student belonging and centeredness, with a bit of fun!

The 'Piece de Resistance': Imaginative Assessment

Perhaps, the most distinctive element of my approach is the final summative assessment—a 2,000-word essay framed as an imagined diary of a student's first month in a real-life marketing management job. I ask students to explain how they began fulfilling their job responsibilities, drawing on course content and personal reflection. The diary format allows students to transport their marketing knowledge to new settings, asking themselves: “How do I do things as a marketing manager?” and “What are the consequences of my decisions?”

As this is quite an “unusual” yet “very much applied” assessment in their curriculum- students make these two points in their otherwise consistently positive module evaluations, I provide substantive scaffolds. These include mock diaries and Q&A sessions in lectures and seminars to help students reacquaint themselves with what is very natural to all human beings, i.e., using imagination for action. These scaffolds show how various aspects of the essay can be



written while emphasizing students' creative license. These scaffolds and the diary format itself help students write outstandingly imaginative (realistic) yet individually authentic responses, blending their marketing knowledge applied to real-life tasks with humour, frustration, failure, and success – all of which will be parts of their future professional careers.

Conclusion

Imagination and inclusivity are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are complementary forces that can transform teaching and learning. Recognizing the diversity of learners can be achieved through student-led and authentic learning and assessment, making use of imagination as a tool. With that, educators can create environments that are intellectually rigorous, practically relevant, and emotionally resonant. The integration of storytelling, role-play, scenario-based learning, and imaginative assessment fosters a holistic educational experience—one that prepares students not only for academic success but also for professional and personal growth. Nonetheless, in applying such unusual pedagogical tools, educators should be aware of potential student discomfort or disorientation (Mezirow 1991), and help students in their journey of transformative learning with appropriate and dynamic scaffolds (e.g., written and oral feedforward, 1-1 sessions, class surgeries) addressing potentially diverse concerns and needs. As educators, our challenge is to continue imagining new possibilities for inclusive teaching—possibilities that honour the uniqueness of each learner and the transformative potential of education itself. Using imagination as a pedagogical tool is the perfect first step in addressing this challenge.

Declaration

During the preparation of this work, the author used Microsoft Co-Pilot (GPT-4 architecture) in order to improve the readability and language of the manuscript. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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