Imagining the Imaginative:
An Analysis and Its Implications
for Arts Education

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ABSTRACT: Artistic activities are frequently touted as being imaginative or valuable in helping develop the imagination of students. However, it is not always clear what is meant by the imagination. Is the imagination a faculty of the mind? Do some people have it while others do not? Is it something that can be developed? Or is having an imagination having the ability to conceive of ideas in a certain way? If having an imagination is an ability to conceptualize in a certain manner, can educators provide experiences which foster this ability? How does this ability differ from creative ability or the ability to fantasize? These questions, among others, must be dealt with if we are to come to an understanding of what we mean by the concept of imagination. Having a clearer understanding of what we mean by the imagination still leaves unanswered questions concerning why we should want to be imaginative and why being imaginative is important for arts education. These are the questions to be addressed in the following paper.

KEYWORDS: Imagination, imaginative, imagining, creative, aesthetic, philosophy, conceptual analysis, arts education.

The Imaginative Versus the Imagination

Beginning with Plato and Anstotte, the imagination had been considered a faculty of the mind, typically associated with sense or appearance. With Hume (1888/1978) and Kant (1781/1934) the faculty of the imagination became one of fundamental importance, lying somewhere between the faculties of impression/representation and ideas/understanding. A notable change in the conception of the imagination occurred with the analyses conducted by Sartre (1962, 1966) and Ryle (1949). Although Sartre conducts a phenomenological study of the imagination and Ryle’s approach is more behaviouristic, they seem to reach the same conclusion: that “there is no special Faculty of Imagination, occupying itself single-mindedly in fancied viewings and hearings” (Ryle, 1949, pp. 257-258). For Sartre, imagination is a type of consciousness; for Ryle, it is a
description of certain sorts of behaviour. For Robin Barrow (1988), the imaginative involves unusual and effective conceptualizations.

What are we to make of this historical account of conceptions of the imagination? Is one more accurate than another? Any proposed conception would have to take into account the fundamental differences between the imagination, imagining, and the imaginative. Plato, Aristotle, Hume, and Kant all conceived of the imagination as a faculty of the mind. In the accounts of Plato and Aristotle, the use of this faculty involved imagining. They conceived of imagining as involving image-making; thus, it was closely associated with the faculty of perception. Hume’s and Kant’s faculty of the imagination was more closely associated with the faculty of conception; a place where ideas were united. The issue of whether imagining involves perceiving or conceiving will be addressed in a later section. At this point I want to argue in favor of the conception of the imaginative rather than a faculty of the imagination.

Whether there is something called an imagination as opposed to something being imaginative is reminiscent of arguments regarding creative products. Bailin (1988) argues that creative persons can only be judged to be creative as a result of the products they produce.

Even if a creative capacity existed, how would it be possible to know whether a person possessed such a capacity? If someone produces valuable works, then we can, of course, say in retrospect that she was capable of producing valuable works, that she had the capacity to do so. If she has not done so, however, then what would lead one to attribute to her a creative capacity? (pp. 63-64)

Likewise, persons with a well-developed imagination can only be judged to have such a capacity as a result of their conceptions or perceptions. One cannot observe a faculty of the mind, only what results from its use. Thus, the accounts proposed by Sartre, Ryle, and Barrow may be perceived as more accurate than the account proposed by those advocating the existence of a faculty of the imagination. Furthermore, Barrow’s (1988) account would seem to supersede the other accounts since Sartre’s conception of the imaginative as a type of consciousness and Ryle’s conception of imaginative kinds of behaviour would seem to involve conceptualizing. Whether Barrow’s criterion of what makes a conceptualization imaginative is sufficient is the topic of the following section.

A Premature Dismissal of Imagining?

Although I have suggested that Barrow’s (1988) conception of the imaginative appears to be an accurate conception, I feel that there is an aspect of imagining which has been left out in his account. As Casey (1976) notes,