

A Dirty Little Secret: Studying Imagination, Imaginatively, in a Leadership Education Graduate Program

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Abstract: This article describes my tumultuous journey as a course instructor and researcher investigating imagination in an educational leadership graduate seminar. I employ an arts-based pedagogy and research methodology known as Performative Inquiry. Sharing my experiences delivering this course informs my future teaching and can support colleagues interested in exploring imagination with their students. I accepted risks associated with arts-based performances and entered a shared space of vulnerability with my students. My struggles with resistance were real, and so too was the realization of the important role vulnerability plays in imagination-focused (leadership) education. I suggest that Performative Inquiry offers other (leadership) educators a powerful pedagogy and methodology for understanding imagination in their own lives, nourishing their imaginative capacities, and inquiring into their leadership education practices. Arts-based practices allow learners to feel their own imaginations and experience possibility by accepting invitations to be vulnerable and performing learning in a range of productive and generative ways.

Keywords: imagination, leadership, performative inquiry, vulnerability, arts-based pedagogy

“Performative inquiry invites us to reflect on what is, what has been, and what has yet to be imagined” (Fels, n.d.).

The cultivation of imagination is increasingly acknowledged as a vital capacity for leadership (Curtis & Cerni, 2015; Curtis, et al., 2017; Judson, 2020, 2022, 2023; Raptis et al., 2021). However, resistance and scepticism about its value in leadership remain strong. As a scholar who has dedicated my career to exploring Imaginative Education as conceptualized by Professor Kieran Egan (1997, 2005), I have observed first-hand learners’ ambivalent feelings towards imagination. My research and teaching over the past 17 years have revealed numerous challenges when it comes to teaching adults about imagination in the post-secondary context. A primary challenge is that many of the educators and leaders with whom I have worked, connect imagination with childhood fantasies; they argue that imagination exists in the realm of make-believe, not the practical and tangible world of schools nor educational leadership. A second challenge is that many adults are not comfortable identifying themselves as imaginative. Given the general misunderstanding that exists about imagination, this reluctance comes as no surprise. If one mistakenly associates imagination with the “greats”—great artists, scientists, or world-changers—rather than a capacity all humans have the potential to cultivate, inevitably, it is easy to say *I’m not imaginative*. If one associates imagination with infantile or purposeless pursuits, it is *safer* to say *I’m not imaginative*.

Finally, there is confusion about what imagination *is* and, thus, how imagination and creativity contribute to different professional contexts. For example, in the context of leadership, there is a lack of awareness among my students, many of whom are educators in the post-secondary context, of what leadership capacities and outcomes imagination makes possible in their everyday decision-making and relationships (Judson, 2020, 2023). Many students are unable to express any particular feeling or recognition of *how* they engage in their work and lives *through* imagination; they have not explored the terrain of their own imaginative lives.

In this article, I share my learnings teaching a graduate level course on imagination’s role in leadership. With increasing research on imagination’s roles in leadership, leadership education programs would be wise to transform their pedagogical practices and content in ways that support the cultivation of imagination. This research may support other leadership educators—and even educators outside of leadership education—in creating contexts and conditions conducive to encouraging the study and *experience* of imagination in (leadership) education. My experiences teaching this course—and the resistance and renewal I felt in the process—have taught me important lessons. I now understand that the vulnerability experienced when one engages in arts-based activities, when one “goes off script” of typical graduate learning norms and patterns, is a profound space for engaging, nurturing, and remembering our imaginations—as educators of leaders and as leaders ourselves.

Throughout this paper I share my learning and some of the emotionally significant “tug-on-the-sleeve” moments (Fels, 2012) that arrested me mid-flight and taught me the most. I also include a few of my own *performances*—examples of how I shaped my understanding in poetic ways:

My pedagogical comfort zone
 slowly disappears
 in the rearview mirror.
 I’m in new terrain.
 My stomach anticipates the unknown
 the unexpected, lies ahead.
 I wonder, *how will I navigate without my trusty map?*
 (Judson, Excerpt from research memo following first class)

On Leadership Education

Offering an overview of leadership education in the mid 1990s, Brungardt (1996) identified the main instructional strategies used in leadership education as lectures, discussion, role play, simulations, case study, modeling, sensitivity training, and mentoring. Little seems to have changed. According to Jenkins (2012) the “signature pedagogy” of leadership educators (in for-credit academic courses) is discussion (small and large group). In two additional research studies Jenkins (2018, 2019) reveals the same result: class discussion, interactive lecture/discussion, and small group discussion are the top three activities used by leadership educators. The most common assessment practices for leadership educators in these studies were research projects / presentations, short papers, and term papers. Other instructional strategies include activities like case study, role-play, story, debates, games, and simulations (Armstrong, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Jenkins 2018, 2019).

Despite radical changes in theories of leadership learning over the past 30 years, a relatively unchanged “set” of activities are employed in education. When Brungardt did his review of leadership education practices in the mid 1990s, theories of leading were leader-centric. Trait, behavioral, charismatic, or transformational leadership theories, for example, emphasized individual competency, and performance. Reflecting the aims of dominant theories at the time, educational practices—whether discussion, role play or other activities—focused on developing those traits, skills, behaviours that were believed to support individual development. Starting in the late 1990s, a shift began to take place from a focus on individual *leaders* to the relational process of *leadership*. By 2012, leadership studies had taken a “relational turn” (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, p. xix).

Relational leadership theories focus on the contextual, emotional, and processual dimensions of leadership that exists *between* people and within community (Uhl-Bien, 2004, 2006; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Under the broad umbrella of relational conceptions of leadership, one finds theories that include authentic, servant, participatory, and shared leadership. The impact on leadership

educational practices is that instructional strategies explore context, interactions, emotions, and relationships within leadership processes (Ardichvili et al., 2016; Armstrong & McCain, 2021; Eich, 2008). Programs reflecting this *relational* turn focus on inclusion, empowerment, and social justice. Leadership education scholars seek to expand pedagogical practices to include holistic and emotion-focused forms of learning. For example, Hobson et al. (2019) advocate an arts-based storytelling approach for transformative, introspective, culturally-relevant, and critically reflexive leadership. Nakasone Wenzler (2022) advocates a (counter-)storytelling pedagogy to support gender and racial representation in leadership. Armstrong & McCain (2021) and Bratko (2022) propose storytelling or narrative as pedagogy for leadership education (versus just the use of story or case-study).

While largely absent from conventional leadership theory and practices, imagination is increasingly identified as necessary for leadership (Ardichvili et al., 2016; Anderson, 2023; Brandon, 2023; Judson, 2020; Paxton & Van Stralen, 2015; Raptis, et al., 2021). Imagination, it has been argued, helps people to survive and thrive in a “broadly connected, rapidly changing, and radically contingent world” (Pendleton-Jullian & Brown, 2018, p. 7). Imagination is necessary for change—to envision and enact the *not yet* (Asma, 2017; Pendleton-Jullian & Brown, 2018). Imagination supports and enriches relationships and thus enables relational leadership practices that emphasize and promote empathy and humanization of meaning-making (Judson & Dougherty, under review). Imagination supports the creation of ethical and socially just communities (Judson, 2022; Strom, et al., 2023; Thomas & Koscheck 2023).

I wonder, are current leadership education instructional strategies multi-dimensional or multi-modal enough to cultivate leadership imagination? How well will leadership education instructional strategies support this *imaginative* turn in leadership theory? And importantly, what theories of learning are available to support this imaginative pedagogical turn? Often a theory of learning is missing when it comes to leadership education (Jenkins, 2018; Murphy, 2003; Paxton & Van Stralen, 2015). Performative Inquiry is explored here as a pedagogy that expands common practices in leadership education *and* offers a theory of learning for leadership education. As an approach that supports learner’ engagement, meaning-making, and reflection with any subject matter, Performative Inquiry offers insights that may be employed in any learning context.

Imagination: Seeking Openings in Teaching, Learning, and Leading

“Transformation in the form of aesthetic experiences or experiences which spark wonderment or novel moments are very powerful. These aesthetic moments are those that are unique and affect us in ways we perhaps can’t even verbalize”
(Holland, 2021, p. 121).

I am curious about pedagogies that provide the emotional engagement that can address misunderstandings, reveal the meaning and function of imagination, and connect learners with their imaginative lives. Moreover, I seek to move leaders to invite imagination into their workplaces, to bring imagination practices that cultivate imagination into their professional lives. To support such action, leaders need to experientially feel imagination and its power for their practice. As affective neuroscientist Immordino-Yang’s (2016) research shows, knowledge alone does not move human beings to action; *feeling* does. And so I wondered: *What if* graduate students explored theoretical and practical dimensions of imagination and leadership through arts-based imaginative pedagogies? What learning opportunities would help leaders in a graduate seminar gain an understanding of what imagination is, learn how imagination contributes to leadership, *and* explore the terrain of their own imaginative lives? Inspired by these questions, I sought to engage learners in experiential and affective ways that would build an emotional bridge between knowledge and action (Immordino-Yang, 2016).

Holland (2021) suggests that art-based, aesthetic learning activities create wonder-full and ultimately transformative spaces. Drawing on Alva Noë's (2015) work *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature*, Holland describes art as a "strange [pedagogical] tool." Unlike learning activities that logically transmit information from teacher to student, art opens up possibility, invites uniqueness, and welcomes multiplicity of meaning. Unlike pedagogical tools that aim to "make the strange familiar", Holland argues, art is educative because it "makes the familiar strange" (p. 121). He asks: "How can we use 'aesthetic moments' to build even better strange tools for transformation?" (p. 121). In many ways, this course was an exploration of "strange tools" that would invite my leadership learners into spaces of imagination.

Imagination is an unsung educational hero. Although it enables the meaningful and memorable learning educators seek (Egan, 2005, 1997, 1992) and supports a range of leadership processes and capacities (Judson, 2023), outside of the context of arts-based education, imagination is rarely acknowledged as crucial for learning all curricular topics or leadership (Judson, 2020, 2023). I use the term imagination to refer to *the ability to envision the possible in all things; imagination is the generative feature of mind that enables understanding of the self, and others, and that fuels creativity and innovation*. This conception of imagination is rooted in the scholarship of those who sing the praises of imagination (e.g. Asma, 2017; Dewey, 1916; Egan, 2005, 1997, 1992; Greene, 1995; Stephenson, 2009; Wenger, 1999).

In education, Kieran Egan has developed a coherent theory of imagination that is paired with a detailed practice. This pedagogy is called Imaginative Education (See Egan, 2005, 1997, 1992). For Egan, imagination is a main workhorse of all learning by connecting knowledge with emotion and making knowledge more meaningful and memorable. The *emotional* component of imagination is key. John Dewey also acknowledges the central role played by imagination in all learning and its emotional dimensions (e.g., Dewey, 1916). For example, in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey identifies the role of imagery for conceptual understanding, for memory and for *appreciating* knowledge: "imagination is the medium of appreciation in every field. The engagement of the imagination is the only thing that makes any activity more than mechanical" (Dewey, 1916, p. 276). Imagination researcher Stephen Asma describes imagination as improvisational space—the emotionally-charged rehearsal space—for learning new ideas, skills. In Holland's terms, the improvisation of imagination is a *strange tool* that opens up possibility and broad meaning. What connects a diverse field of scholarship on imagination is the common theme that imagination is a powerful learning tool because it is emotional; when we imagine, we are *affected* (Asma, 2017; Egan, 2005, 1997, 1992; Weible, 2015).

In learning and enacting leadership, imagination provides a space for transformation and relationship. As a search for the possible supporting a sense of intellectual freedom, imagination broadens both the scope and flexibility of understanding and makes possible the transcendence of traditional ideas (Egan, 1992; Greene, 1988; Hughes, 1988). It is in our imaginative ability to transcend our personal situations and contexts and contemplate the "other" that empathy and relationality lie. As Greene (1995) famously said:

Imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible...imagination...permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions. (p. 3)

I design my courses to allow learners to *feel* imagination, I employ arts-based activities as "strange tools" to invite learners of leadership to explore possibility and be transformed. We actively engage our imaginations through the arts in a "search for openings"—as a means of exploring the gaps between the known/unknown, self/other, now/then, what is/what if (Greene, 1995).

Specifically, I employ a pedagogy called Performative Inquiry which offers educators in and outside the field of leadership studies multi-modal and multifaceted instructional activities that call forth students' creativity and imagination.

On Performative Inquiry: A Pedagogy and Methodology

*What if? What matters? What happens? So what? Who cares?
What is my learning in this moment here and now?
a tug on my sleeve
calls me to attention
stop moment in action (Fels, n.d.)*

Originally conceptualized and articulated by Professor Lynn Fels (2015, 2012, 2011, 2010, Fels & Belliveau, 2008), Performative Inquiry is both an arts-based pedagogy and methodology for research. As a pedagogical approach, Performative Inquiry involves inquiry and learning through creative encounters with others, personal and shared reflection on what arrives, and arts-based expressions of understanding. It offers an embodied, creative experience that engages learners in emotionally-charged ways with content (Fels, 2015).

In Performative Inquiry, learners are encouraged to notice and attend to stop moments (Appelbaum, 1995) or what Fels (2012) calls, “tug on the sleeve” moments of emotional resonance that call them to attention. A tug on the sleeve may be a moment of hesitation, interruption, uncertainty, resistance, curiosity, joy. These moments signal an opportunity for inquiry, reflection, and meaning-making. Challenging conventional practices of graduate leadership education, such as lectures and discussion, Performative Inquiry offered me, as the course instructor, a framework for opening an attentive learning space of creative play and imagination in the class. Performative Inquiry gave me “permission to interrupt habitual engagement, to question conventional expectations, to explore ideas, contexts, and situations, to challenge the status quo, to replay possibilities of engagement” (2015, p. 2). Through its explicit cultivation and creative practices of imagination, Performative Inquiry can enrich current practices in leadership education. It explicitly invites students and their instructors to employ imagination in documenting learning and engaging with course content.

Although Performative Inquiry has been applied in many contexts, I was inspired by Nilson, Fels and Gopaul's (2016) application of Performative Inquiry to teaching organizational theory in a leadership cohort. They suggest that Performative Inquiry offers an experiential pedagogical possibility for leaders: “Engaging in performative activities within the context of leadership and organizational theory invited metaphorical, symbolic, and lived-experience connections with the material students were learning and its application to the workplace and their lives” (2016, p. 181). And so, I shaped a course based on arts-based methods for week-to-week engagements in learning and key assignments for demonstrating understanding.

Course Context and Details

The course, entitled *Imagination's Role in Leadership*, occurred in the fourth term of a two-year Master of Education program in Educational Leadership. The cohort had a post-secondary focus, with 15 of 16 of the students employed in higher education contexts. Due to the pandemic, the three courses in the first year of the program, and my course at the start of the second year, were conducted remotely. We worked together weekly, on a Thursday evening, synchronously using Zoom and asynchronously using a CANVAS platform which housed readings, discussion threads, and course details.

Unlike other graduate programs I have been part of, this program did not have imagination as an overarching theme. These students had not chosen to learn about, discuss, or expend imagination. Therefore, I knew I was likely going to face entrenched misunderstanding about what imagination is, resistance to being imaginative, and skepticism that “this imagination stuff matters for me.” With many years of experience conducting professional learning with educators and educational leaders, I had observed this response many times before. Never-the-less, with some trepidation, I set out my intentions in our course syllabus:

This interactive course employs arts-based and imaginative practices to explore imagination in the context of leadership/educational leadership. It aims to deepen and expand students’ understandings of imagination and how it contributes to leadership theory, practice, and pedagogy. A central feature of the course is a personal inquiry: each student will be required to employ arts-based methods to investigate, as learner and leader, their beliefs, values, assumptions, and comfort-levels in relation to imagination. Course activities will require students to critically and creatively reflect on course topics and the educational issues they provoke in relation to their own educational and leadership practice.

The emotional significance of the topic—the *story*—that I wanted my students to understand in this course was that imagination in leadership offers a space for self-discovery and innovation. The course was designed to be experiential; it was shaped in a way that invited learners to explore scholarship around imagination, creativity, and collaborative play. To *feel* this story, we played and we performed *with* and *for* each other. Using Performative Inquiry as pedagogy, I invited students to consider the course a journey into the terrain of their imaginative lives, a journey of re/membering their hearts, minds, bodies, past, present, future, play/full selves.

Weekly Learning and Assignments

Each week we had a different *mode* of engagement: words and poetry, images and photography, gesture and movement, drawing and sketching, metaphor, play, storytelling, story-listening, role drama and improvisation. I had framed the class as scholarly play using weekly reflections as an opportunity to explore ideas in artistic ways. In addition to encountering course content through arts-based means, students were asked to demonstrate their learning through arts-based performances, such as drawing, writing poetry, and engaging in role play.

Students’ reflections of their learning in connection to the articles read, and in-class experiences, were invited in the form of what Fels (2012) calls *epostcards*—a multi-modal document that includes the narrative of a tug on the sleeve moment, imagery, critical reflection, and connection to course readings. As indicated in this assignment description from the outline, this scholarly writing was intended to capture moments of emotional significance on students’ course journey:

This course will be a journey, an exploration of your imaginative life in the context of graduate learning. Your scholarly writing this term will involve writing 3 “e-postcards” that represent different points on that journey. In each e-postcard, describe what Lynn Fels refers to as a “tug on the sleeve.” Each e-postcard will have its own narrative, its own story of how a particular moment called you to attention and impacted or influenced your understanding of your learning, your leadership, and/or life. Explore these moments with reference to readings in class and other reading that applies. These e-postcards should include both text and imagery or, if you prefer, audio. Include a quote that moves you. Aim to evoke in your e-postcard the affective experience of your tug on the sleeve moment and how, in that moment, you had a

stop in which, possibly, a new space for growth and learning opened up for you. (Excerpt from Course Outline)

I also wanted students' final performances to be an open invitation to play in whatever way they wanted to do so. I encouraged them to experiment, to let loose. I called this assignment "The Selfie" to evoke a play-full expression of learning:

Finish the course by providing us a snapshot (a "selfie"—but not of your face!) that captures a significant learning moment for you in this course or some aspect of how you have come to understand your imagination in the context of your learning, life, or leadership. Please *make* something—possibilities: a physical object or something audio or visual or a performance or...—you choose! Sharing this work will be the final performance of your course inquiry. Tell us: What topic, experience, or insight moved you to create? What affected you? What opening occurred for you that you aim to represent, evoke, or explore further through an arts-based, imaginative format? (Excerpt from Course Outline)

The course text was Stephen Nachmanovitch's (1990) book entitled *Free Play: Improvisation in Art and Life*. I used this text to set a play-full tone and to indicate the power and opportunity of improvisation. Not only did I want my students to understand the value of play for adults, I wanted them to actually *play* in this course—with ideas, with limits, with demonstrating their learning. Nachmanovitch's text conveyed this message powerfully. To encourage this playfulness, I made *playing with* concepts a central part of the course. Each week we explored a different form of artistic engagement. We played. For example, during the second week of classes, to investigate two scholarly articles about the pedagogy of Performative Inquiry, we created found poems¹ using text from the articles. I invited students to create a poem that represented something of what they were understanding or feeling in that moment. (I share my own poem later in this article). Later in that same class we created headlines—imagine you are a reporter giving the story on Performative Inquiry. What's it about? What metaphor—visual, auditory, somatic—captures the meaning of the tug on the sleeve? These kinds of arts-based and exploratory activities continued each week. To support this play-full learning, students took an active role in evaluating their own work and I welcomed students to revise and resubmit anything, without penalty, based on our learning, feedback, or discussion.

Overall, Performative Inquiry served both as a pedagogy for teaching and a vehicle of inquiry for my own investigation of my practice. As my students accepted invitations to *perform*—play with arts-based methods of engagement and learning throughout the course—imagination was invited into our community of learning. We were learning in emotional ways that created the experiential space needed to address misconception, grow understanding, and come together as a community of learners.

Next, I offer the unfolding narrative of my experience teaching this course. Excerpts from my research journal are italicized and right-justified in the text that follows. Through my stories I invite readers to consider the pedagogical power of inviting imagination into leadership education through creative practices and to recognize that possible uncomfortable feelings of resistance, uncertainty, and vulnerability are central to new learning.

We begin with the first class and the pleasant level of excitement that emerged:

Sometimes there can be a "heavy" feeling during a first class, digesting what lays ahead, anticipating the work to do, silent questioning of one's ability to succeed.

¹ A "Found Poem" is a "literary equivalent of a collage" (<https://poets.org/glossary/found-poem>). The poet employs and reorganizes words, phrases, or whole sections of other texts to create a poem and evoke new meaning.

*The students came to class after a week of working.
5:30 PM.
Possibly hungry. Distracted.
When we discussed the “final selfie” the mood changed.
As soon as I introduced this final activity, the class erupted in conversation and question.
“Do our videography skills matter as much as the content?” a student asked.
“No,” I replied, “Just play!”
I paused.
People visibly digesting the possible.
“Make anything you want,” I said. “Maybe a Rick Mercer Rant,” I suggested.
The students clapped.
Yes! One exclaimed.
“Play,” I repeated.
“Be play-**full**.
This is a journey into the terrain of your imaginative life, so go where your heart leads you.”
“Can we make something edible?”
wondered a student.
“Yes!” I exclaimed.
“Though being on Zoom will make taste-testing difficult.”
We laughed.
I sensed excitement and anticipation as we discussed The Selfie.
I wondered,
Was this the most open, the most play-full of all their course assignments to date?*

My Journey: Resistance and Renewal

Right from the start, I was all butterflies, excited with the anticipation of beginning and nervous of how it would all unfold. On the evening before the first class, I wrote:

*Class starts tomorrow.
I feel tense. Anxious. More than my regular first-class jitters.
How will these students respond to my invitation to play? To draw? To create?
I feel like some will resist.
I assume that post-secondary educators—even more than my colleagues in K-12 education—have deep set
misconceptions about imagination.
Imagination is make-believe.
It is child’s play, and, thus, a course on imagination must be non-scholarly.*

One of the feelings I immediately experienced in this course within myself was resistance. It did not help that this was my first course as a newly hired Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and here I was going off-script. In many professional contexts, embracing imagination can be a risk (Hopkins, 2019; Judson, 2020). And curiously, 17 years of post-secondary experience and overwhelmingly positive reviews of my teaching, disappeared from my immediate memory.

Looking back through my course notes—memos I wrote detailing my feelings going into each class, my plans for the class, and my evaluation and description following class—I questioned if I was doing it right or doing enough—was I being imaginative enough? Was this course different enough to have students feel imagination? An excerpt from my notes: *My inner critic whispers in my ear: How can*

you lead an arts-focused class as a self-professed terrible drawer, non-painter, and generally “not an artist”? Moving from well-known scripts caused me anxiety.

My sense of vulnerability, worrying, *am I (doing) enough* thinking is reflected in a poem I wrote, in week two, as we studied Fels’ Performative Inquiry. Using key lines and words from her scholarship I wrote this found poem:

How will you improvise your life? (Fels, 2015, p. 1)
I ask my students this
 And yet
 I wonder
 What do I do
 To push PAST
To *question conventional expectations* (Fels, 2015, p. 2)
To *challenge the status quo* (Fels, 2015, p. 2)
STOP
Which of my *habits of engagement* as a teacher and learner need to be
Interrogated?
In that stop is also a go.
(Appelbaum, 1995, as quoted in Fels, 2012, p. 57)

My notes reveal how I doubted myself, I doubted my choice to take on this arts-based pedagogy. I was uncomfortable going off the map, exploring this new terrain of teaching, now off the script, unsure of my role in arts-based inquiry. I was concerned how seriously the students would take the course and by extension, me, as their professor. All the while, my vocal, inner critics clamored, “*This isn’t what we do here! This isn’t enough! You aren’t enough!*”

Leafing through my students’ pre-course comments, I noticed they reflected the same anxious feelings. For me, teaching in this performative and unfamiliar way was emotional, and it required me to be vulnerable. My students also needed to be vulnerable, accepting risks in this unfamiliar terrain of performative learning. We were all travellers, all entering a vulnerable co- space of learning that we co-created together (Thomasson, 2017).

Would they be willing to journey with me?

I noticed that my own hope and anticipation for what was possible were reflected in my students’ pre-course writing. I resonated with their feelings of fear and excitement at the prospect of learning in unconventional ways in this imagination-focused graduate course. As the instructor, it was valuable for me to recognize that my students shared these concerns, these hesitations, these anxieties reinforcing what I had learned about imagination through research: imagination evokes mixed emotions, both fear and reverence (Hopkins, 2019; Judson, 2020). My experience engaging imaginatively with my students reinforced the importance of creating and holding open a respectful, caring, compassionate space of learning for all students, both in how we interact, and how students are assessed on their learning. It also brought into focus how these feelings can and do impact the instructor as well as students.

Reading of students’ fears and feelings of resistance added fuel to my own. I corresponded with Lynn Fels, creator of the Performative Inquiry approach, early in this experience—was I doing *it right?* Perfectionism joined the dialogue in my head. Another source of resistance brought me to a space of vulnerability. Lynn responded by telling me that engaging in Performative Inquiry is about being curious and having a “beginner’s mind.” She wrote:

there is no expertise *per se* in engaging in performative inquiry, it's a way of being present, of noticing what matters, of exploring metaphor, materials, body, play through artistic modes of inquiry and seeing what matters, what emerges.....and, Gillian, you are uniquely bringing Performative Inquiry into being through your shared explorations of leadership, and *your* learning, questions, and *resistance* (a great place of inquiry), is more important than someone coming in as “the expert.” (Fels, 2021, personal correspondence; italics added)

Reading this email from Lynn, my feelings of self-doubt and concern were temporarily assuaged. Perfectionism sent out of the room. I felt renewed in my conviction that I was doing *enough* and that I should take this journey with my students.

Evidence of Learning: You've Got Mail!

We were three weeks into the course when the first scholarly epostcards were due. I was eager to read them (Fels 2012). Harkening back to the 1998s rom-com when email was a novelty, I asked students to send me their scholarly e-postcards with the subject heading *You've Got Mail*. How many students would be play-full with this first assignment?

The first epostcard arrived in my inbox, the subject heading reading: postcard one. Feeling a bit disappointed, even discouraged, I opened it up. A striking image of charred, black wood appeared on my screen. I saw wooden remains lying in the bottom of a fire pit. The grooves and lines of the would-be charcoal, the shades of black through grey and white filled the space. Within this pit of charred wood two vividly green plants sprouted. New life from death. Fertility. The cycle of life. Encouraged by this striking image, I anticipated the story to come.

The author of this epostcard quoted Fels: *the edge of chaos where something new is created* (Fels, n.d.) She spoke of improvisation and how, for her, it brings her *to the edge of chaos*. She noted that we are all story tellers and wondered what stories we tell ourselves, what internal narratives shape us when faced *with the edge of chaos*? I am drawn to the image and the narrative. It was profound. It was serious play.

But what of leadership? She doesn't mention leadership directly. But I *feel* a leadership lesson, a leadership belief here. I realize that teaching with Performative Inquiry requires me to read through a metaphorical lens, to be open to the emotional moments that move my students. I realize that a student's meaning-making, experience, and/or expression of leadership may not be explicit in the writing, but may emerge in the spaces between the words, ideas, and images. I realize that *play* leads to a variety of forms of writing and emotional response. As I ponder this first epostcard, I get another email.

Ping! A new email. *You've Got Mail*, the title reads. I smile. As I open this document a collage of images, colour, and careful design appear before me. In this scholarly piece of writing the student brought me back into her experience when we discussed play in class two. She notes the uneasiness in the class—what she was feeling as we moved toward the risk of “exposure”—play? In graduate school? Play, she says, makes her think of children, specifically, the silliness and smily-ness of her young daughter. But Nachmanovitch's quote has tugged on her sleeve: “We have no art. Everything we do is art” (1990, p. 19). And “Play is an attitude, a spirit, a way of doing things” (1990, p. 430). *Perhaps*, she ponders, I, *too, play?*

I see images of an intricately decorated cake, the dome of a crusty loaf of bread cut in half on a board dusted with flour, and cans of preserves lined up to next to a bowl overflowing with vividly red and green tomatoes. This student shares her realization: I, too, am an artist. I, too, play. Her postcard describes this *stop* on her journey of discovery in which she suddenly remembers imagination

and play and investigates the implications for her leadership. I feel relief; a break from my worry that students are not engaged. I feel excited by the two epostcards I have received.

As the term went on, I noticed my students playing more, relaxing into the course structure. Student-led seminars about key concepts in the Nachmanovitch (1990) text became increasingly arts-focused and play-full as the term went on. Students engaged their peers in collaborative drawing activities, poetry writing, drawing, storytelling, and concept scavenger hunts. Students' second and third epostcards became increasingly vivid in their stories, increasingly reflective and personal. Students' learnings about leadership were evoked explicitly in some cases, but more often, implicitly, embedded in that interpretive space between the words, the chosen image(s), and the ideas that emerged as I read their work.

Mid-way through the term, during one of our classes, I invited the students to use our online space differently: I asked them to use a gesture to express a key idea in an article they had read on the meanings of creative leadership. As we go around the Zoom room, different groups show me coordinated movements and gestures. Hands raised over brows looking in the distance: *seeking*. Thumbs touching pointer finger form imaginary glasses: *perspective*. And then, suddenly a ball passes through time and space. Bal holds the imaginary baseball in his hand. His fingers curve around the ball, against the leather stitching. He pulls back his arm, bringing the ball-in-hand to shoulder height before launching it forcefully to his right. Across time and space, ready, waiting, anticipating the ball, Ching waits, then jumps to action, lurching forward to catch the ball: *connection*.

An imaginary ball breaks the time, space, Zoom continuum.

I vividly remember this small moment in time, on Zoom, when I do not see a ball, but I *do* see a ball, thrown across time and space. This moment stopped me in my tracks. It was play-full and it showed students accepting the invitation to take a risk, to play. Following this experience, I felt anxious excitement heading into an activity that I knew would push us all into new terrain: a role play.

Near the end of the semester our class hosted an imaginary international conference on Creativity in Leadership. My students had been previously assigned to attend in role as different creativity scholars. I was the host. I had created a Zoom background slide with the conference title, date, and name of the host, the esteemed, Dr. Lillian Hudson and invited everyone to use this slide as their Zoom background. That evening as I transformed into Dr. Lillian Hudson, *I thought I was ready*. My Zoom background named the conference. I had music playing. My hair was piled on my head in an unusually large bun, as gigantic earrings pulled on my ears. I wore monstrous glasses and a flashy scarf, ready to launch the conference *as* Dr. Lillian Hudson.

I thought I was ready.

But then, a sense of vulnerability overwhelmed me. What if the students were not in role? I panicked. I suddenly felt like that person who goes to a costume party *in costume* only to find it is a costume party of the un-costumed.

I was about to "open the room". It was a moment of truth. The Super Awesome Creativity Conference was about to start. *Glasses on? Glasses off? Scarf on? Scarf off?*

My finger lingered on the Zoom "Admit all" button. In a moment of fear, I could not bring myself to admit my waiting room guests.

In the end, I was not the only one in costume—but it was close. Only two of the students, donned mustaches, glasses, hats. The others laughed and applauded but did not have such props themselves. About half of the students had uploaded our conference slide as their Zoom background. As class started, I felt grateful for those students with the fake mustaches. Such a small material item, with such meaning for me. Initially, I was disappointed in the other students for not taking up props and felt a pang of worry that this activity would not go well. However, as I engaged with the students present in their roles, I realized just how prepared they were, just how closely they had studied the material and *practiced* speaking about the ideas—their ideas. All but two of the students stayed in role

all evening. Keynote speakers included Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Chrissi Nerantzi, Keith Sawyer, Scott Barry Kauffman among others. As the night went on students relaxed into their roles. We engaged with each other by asking and answering questions in role. We all joked about meeting for drinks in the hotel bar, after the conference ended.

Doing this particular activity—feeling *nerves* and feeling *worried* I would look foolish—I felt very vulnerable, more vulnerable than any other moment in the course. I was not alone in my feelings of vulnerability doing this role-play activity. My students told me at the end of the course how much this particular activity pushed them out of their comfort zones—taking on a role, being an actor required them to really get to know the character they were playing, they said. They felt this vulnerability intensely in the moment too. There was a spotlight on each of them. Drama. They indicated that it was the activity that made them the *most* uncomfortable. At the same time, they identified it as the *most* impactful for their learning.

My notes reveal that I continued to worry beyond this role-play: *Will imagination be taken seriously in my workplace?* This course *was* my workplace and I was hyper-focused throughout our semester together on *why* students were so often saying they enjoyed it. As a professor I am wary of students *saying* what they think I want them to say, for the grades, if in the end they finish my course no closer to genuinely appreciating what imagination offers them as educational leaders.

Are they enjoying the course because they feel it is a break from learning?

Are they enjoying the course because they feel it is profound for their own learning?

One day, I learned that I was not alone in this worry of professional credibility. One student seemed to me to be very open to learning and expanding her understanding of leadership. She shared with me a realization: though she felt she was not imaginative, her morning ritual of running through possibilities for her day showed she woke up *with* imagination. She learned to revel in that imaginative time and appreciate its value. But she also revealed the same worry I had: *will imagination be taken seriously in my workplace?* She described our course as a secret—a dirty little secret—that she did not (or would not? I’m not sure)—share with others. The words hit hard:

Dirty? Secret?

I just don't know how to process this.

Is this a wonderful experience and/or one that might lead her to be ridiculed?

Because we, I, feel like imposters?

Does it tarnish the look of our professionalism somehow?

I stop.

Does she not consider this course serious scholarship?

Final Assignment: Leadership in Imagination at Play

We arrived at the end of the course. The students’ selfies—images of themselves taken with their artistic creations—demonstrated diverse examples of imagination at work. They illustrated how students played with the course’s ideas, materials, concepts, and experiences to represent their journey. There was a cake that, when cut, released a cascade of colourful candies; a painting composed of images created at the end of each class; photographic collages; free verse poetry with hidden haikus within; a conspiracy theorist’s whiteboard connecting leadership practices and concepts back to imagination; a song performed on guitar; a tiny rock garden; an altered book full of images, hidden pockets and blackout poems; a macrame representing emotional moments in the course; an Indigenous drum; and narratives. As students shared their selfies in this final class, I felt a sense of renewal. This culminating activity showed layers of meaning, personal experience, and insight I could

not have predicted. There was an intimacy to this final class, a sense of the personal mingling with the possible. My renewal—emergence from a feeling of self-doubt and worry—and confidence blossomed as I witnessed my students’ imaginations in actions. I saw that they had accepted my course offerings to risk, to explore their imaginative lives and create something from that exploration, and in turn, offered me their imagination in play.

My final stop moment of the course happened after class, when I was reviewing the students’ final feedback. While I was still enjoying the positive feelings evoked by seeing students’ final performances, two words led me to stop. I had asked students to anonymously provide some final feedback. One question asked them to describe the course in just two words. I was honestly thrilled—but not surprised given the performances I had just observed—to hear the course described in overwhelmingly positive terms: exciting, engaging; eye-opening; thought-provoking; inspiring, playful; challenging, expressive; empowering, compelling. Two students described the course emphatically as “The. Best.” and “Required. Learning.” But one student’s response stung—re-evoking my initial worry of professional credibility. They said the course was “surprisingly educational”—revealing their preconceptions of imagination. I wonder:

*How much has their understanding changed? How much have they changed?
Surprisingly educational
But then how much have I changed?*

After reading those two words, my heart heavy, I created a found poem as a way to navigate my feelings of both pleasure at hearing the positive feedback and disappointment at having my ongoing worry reignited:

What two words describe this course? I ask my students.
 Two students respond with
 Mind. Blown.
 Period. Period. Capital. Capital.
 The. Best.
 Period. Period. Capital. Capital.
 Another writes,
 Engaging, expressive
 And another,
 Exciting, empowering
 And another,
 Challenging, engaging.
 Streams of body-minds in motion through new terrain.
 Play/ing, Play/FULL
 Compelling, inspiring,
 Meaning/FULL, Eye-opening
 Thought-provoking, STRETCH/ed/ing
 This course is
Fun learning, another student emphasizes.
Required learning, declares another.
 Amidst all this positive feedback, however
 one student’s words sting—
Surprisingly educational.
 I wonder, has their understanding of imagination changed?

And then another student's poetic response band-aids my hurt:
Imagination and creativity, this student replies,
are more than the boxes we label and put them into,
stored with children's toys.
They are power tools needed in every leader's toolbox.

My Learnings

Through this experience I learned that Performative Inquiry inherently invites instructors and their students to traverse, together, uncharted territory. We were all travellers here. We all explored concepts through the arts. We all played with different arts-based ways of learning and demonstrating understanding. We moved away from traditional papers to scholarly writing that combined text and imagery. We role-played rather than recited. We drew and dialogued. Students had completely open criteria for showing final learning. These are all examples of arts-based practices that instructors in any context can employ to open up spaces for imaginative exploration of their course content.

My stories reveal all the resistance and self-doubt I was feeling throughout this course. I now realize that my resistance was rooted in my sense of vulnerability. Moving from assigning traditional academic papers to scholarly epostcards made me feel vulnerable—*what will my colleagues think?* Inviting play and playing with imagination in a graduate course of post-secondary leaders made me feel vulnerable—*will these experiences result in real learning or continued misunderstanding? Will this course create new understanding or deepen misconceptions? Will students invite in or dismiss the importance of imagination from their understanding of leadership?* And then *performing* myself made me feel vulnerable—*Is it really that good? But is it a poem? Is it (creative, imaginative, scholarly) enough?* Through my own performances I saw myself as struggling and hopeful. Ultimately, I was brave. I was not only employing new practices, but I was also critically engaging with the kinds of expectations—the scripts—that shape how we teach in post-secondary.

I now understand that I have misunderstood the importance of vulnerability for my teaching. Like many people, I have mostly considered vulnerability as a source of potential wounding, or pain—being exposed. But Amy Thomasson's (2017) research on the educational value of creating spaces for vulnerability changed my outlook. She suggests a feeling of *exposure* is not the same as vulnerability. Whereas exposure is a weakness, vulnerability is a strength—it is the origin of community-building, of empathy, of personal growth—exposure is weakness. According to Thomasson (2017), we must accept vulnerability—we must agree to risk—as this is when vulnerability becomes a space for positive growth, learning, and change.

I have realized through this experience that vulnerability is *required* for imaginative learning and learning about imagination. Rather than understanding vulnerability as a problem, I now understand vulnerability to be a place of surprising educational potential. I have realized that the arts-based practices, performances on which this course was based, offered me and my students ongoing “access points for vulnerability” (Thomasson, p. 126). “Choosing to engage in performance activities is an acceptance of risk and a willingness to *step into* the space of vulnerability created by that risk-taking action” (Thomasson, p. 152). By accepting and allowing myself to engage differently, I entered a space of vulnerability that allowed me to deepen my understanding of my own imagination and expand my pedagogical capacities.

This is what we can do as instructors if we want to invite imagination into our courses: we can invite students to engage in ongoing access points of vulnerability which infuse imaginative learning. We can invite students to agree to risk, individually and collectively, in a learning space. We agree to vulnerability, too, as instructors, and can/must shape the learning/evaluation context so that risk-taking is encouraged and not penalized (e.g. Encouraging revisions to assignments, opening iterative

cycles of student learning and feedback from the instructor/others so each “assignment” is a work in progress until the student decides they are “done”). Employing the instructional strategies of Performative Inquiry expands what is possible for leadership education and can be employed by educators in other subject areas to support imaginative engagement with course content and growth of imaginative capacities.

My two goals for this course were to encourage self-exploration and to connect imagination to leadership in experiential ways. Based on student feedback, my intentions for the course appear to have been successful. More importantly, so has been my journey of pedagogical exploration through Performative Inquiry and my increased confidence and steadfast commitment to imagination in what I offer my students, no matter their cohort. I have realized that Performative Inquiry invites instructors and students to accept the risk and to see what is possible when we learn about imagination, imaginatively. I have come to realize the necessary journey one must take through wide spaces of vulnerability and uncomfortable resistance to get there. I finish the course with a new question: *What if we cultivate creative spaces of vulnerability in leadership education so learners can explore, engage, and grow their imaginations in practice?* And I invite you, reader, no matter what course or area of research you are engaged in, to consider: *what if you cultivate creative spaces of vulnerability with your students? What is possible?*

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