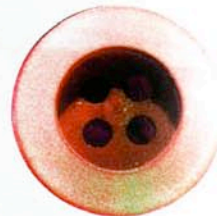
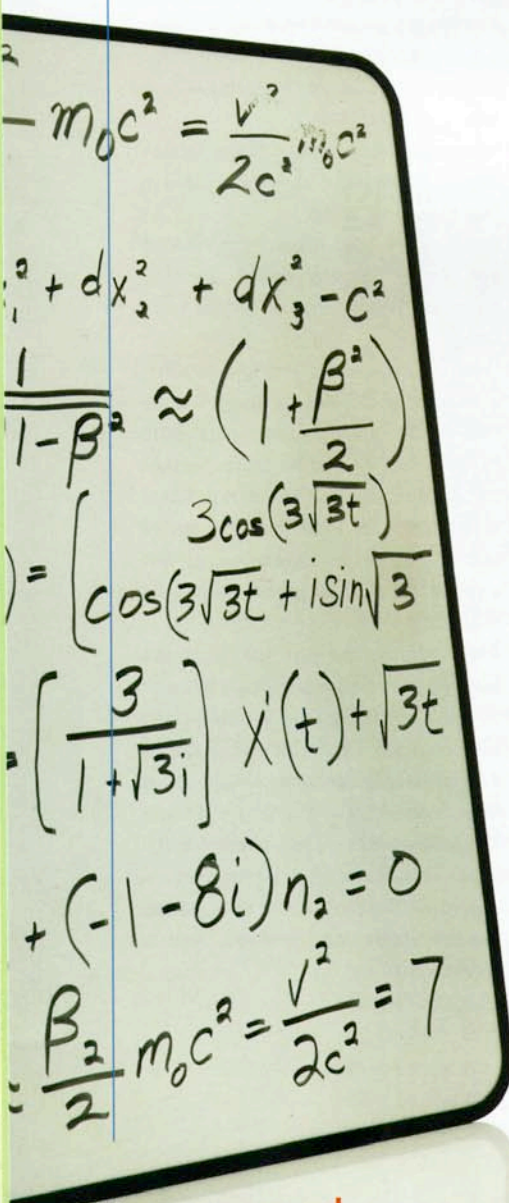
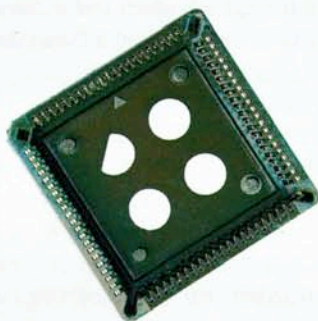


GETTING SERIOUS PLAY: LIFE SPAN CAREER EDUCATION



PHIL JARVIS AND HOWARD ESBIN



CANADA'S \$76.5 BILLION ANNUAL INVESTMENT IN EDUCATION is paying dividends.¹ A recent international survey ranked Canadian students *second* in reading literacy, *fifth* in mathematics and *fifth* in science.² For nations and individuals alike, such mastery is intrinsic to success in the new knowledge economy. Yet, mastering these academic skills in isolation is insufficient preparation for meaningful lives and livelihoods.

Tellingly, most high school students are unsure why they are learning what they are learning. Nor do most feel prepared for further schooling or employment. Too many high school grads don't have goals to which they are emotionally committed. About a third go directly to university or college, erroneously hoping to discover their vocation through further study.³ Too few select apprenticeship or trades training.⁴ Moreover, this essential lack of self knowledge and vision often continues well into adulthood. Among working adults, 69 percent acknowledge that they did not know enough about their original work choices. No wonder that 70 percent are not fully engaged today, with all this implies for these individuals and for society as a whole.⁵

A number of innovative educational initiatives around the world are addressing this imbalance between students learning *what and how* but not *why*. One significant trend called 'serious gaming' involves group-based simulation games. These games are designed to enable students to develop the very skills and competencies needed, beyond literacy and numeracy, to flourish in a knowledge society. The work of the Serious Games Institute is typical. Established by the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, its goal is "to develop games to help explore public sector management and leadership challenges [in education, training, health, and public policy]"⁶.

Another important initiative, involving some 100,000 schools internationally was started in Canada and is now based in New Brunswick. This non-profit organization's innovative learning tools and games are helping young people (and adults) everywhere gain much needed perspective about themselves and their lives. The following examines this distinctively Canadian initiative, explores its two related learning tools, and explains the intrinsic role that imagination tacitly plays throughout the serious game process.

PERSPECTIVE IS EVERYTHING

Canadian educators and educational counselors are at the forefront of an international collaboration called *Life Span Career Development Education*. For the past decade they've been helping students to better understand themselves, their aspirations, and their possible future pathways. Practitioners are not advocating a new educational model. Rather they want to foster a *new kind of perspective*, one

that enables students to see their lives whole and in context.⁷ This, in turn, helps students to better understand who they are, what assets, capacities, and skills they have, and where they might like to go in life.

The National Life/Work Centre (NLWC), a New Brunswick-based leader in the field, has developed two related learning tools to help students develop this “whole life” perspective. The first, The Blueprint For Life/Work Designs, provides a conceptual map. The second, The Real Game Series, provides a simulated exploration of this map. Both make crucial use of imagination.

IMAGINATION

The *Encarta World Dictionary* defines imagination as “the ability to form mental images and ideas, especially of what has never been seen or experienced.” A winged horse, for example, does not exist in the biological world. Yet from time immemorial humans have depicted such creatures in painting and story. To imagine and give form to what does not exist is an innate faculty and capacity that has not changed much since our early ancestors first envisioned raw stone as a hand tool. In this expansive light, it becomes apparent that every thing that underpins and defines human existence, from the theory of relativity to shirt buttons, from digital technologies to children’s cereal, is the result of applied imagination. No wonder Einstein said imagination is more important than knowledge.

EVERY THING THAT UNDERPINS AND DEFINES HUMAN EXISTENCE, FROM THE THEORY OF RELATIVITY TO SHIRT BUTTONS, FROM DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES TO CHILDREN’S CEREAL, IS THE RESULT OF APPLIED IMAGINATION.

Yet, we still don’t fully understand or appreciate just how important it is. We’ve been traditionally taught that imagination is somehow in opposition to reality. We’re also taught to suspect and fear its irrationality. This is somewhat understandable. The airy world of imagination manifests itself mentally in myriad mercurial ways through flashes of genius, dreams of hope, flights of fancy, nightmares, hallucinations, and delusions. There is often, therefore, a fine line between inspiration and madness. How can one rationally evaluate something imagined for the first time? For example, Da Vinci’s design for a helicopter must have seemed fantastical to most people of his time. This inherent irrationality of imagination has led to a largely unconscious bias within Western society for centuries. As a result, Western schools have generally favoured logic, analysis, precision, and quantification over imagination, intuition, and creativity.

Children enter school brimming with imagination. Most leave bereft. In the process of formal education, young people have been cut off from a vital complementary source of learning and knowledge creation. Life span career education is helping to change this picture through its strategic use of imagination.

BECOMING IMAGINEERS

Half a century ago, Walt Disney described the design process for his unique multimedia animation exhibits as *imagineering*. We believe this term has much wider meaning. In our expanded application, *imagineering is what people do when they envision something and then bring it to life.*

EN BREF La plupart des élèves d’école secondaire ne savent pas exactement pourquoi ils apprennent ce qu’ils apprennent. Plusieurs projets scolaires innovateurs dans différentes parties du monde tentent de combler cet écart entre l’apprentissage et sa raison d’être. L’une de ces initiatives s’appelle « serious gaming ». Il s’agit de jeux de simulation en groupe dans lesquels les joueurs utilisent leur imagination pour élaborer les aptitudes et les compétences dont ils ont besoin pour réussir dans une société du savoir. Dirigés par un facilitateur, les scénarios et modèles de jeu permettent aux participants d’imaginer et de simuler en toute sécurité les issues possibles à des problèmes et à des situations du monde réel. Les jeux leur permettent aussi d’essayer de nouvelles identités, de nouvelles aptitudes et de nouveaux comportements. Ils les aident enfin à aiguïser et à élargir leur perception de ce qui est possible dans telle ou telle situation.

It may be done individually or in groups. Imagineering makes extensive use of picture making, story telling, play, and games.

The serious games simulation model used in strategic planning is a good example of imagineering in action. Scenarios are like story plots and simulations are like stage plays. Facilitated scenario-simulation models safely enable participants to imagine and act out (role-play) possible alternative outcomes related to ‘real world’ challenges and opportunities. Participants are also able to experiment with new identities, behaviours, and skills. These experiences help to enhance and enlarge perspectives about what may be possible in any given situation.

Both NLWC’s learning tools – Blueprint for Life/Work

Designs and The Real Game Series – also use imagineering principles and practices. The first tool takes its name from the technical drawings used in architecture and engineering. A blueprint depicts something that does not yet exist, such as a bridge. Moreover, it does so in precise detail, often three dimensionally, to scale, and from various perspectives. A blueprint provides a would-be builder with an accurate guide for making the imaginary real, step-by-step, stage-by-stage. Photographic copies of these technical drawings traditionally had a blue tint, hence the name.

Like its namesake, the *Blueprint for Life/Work Designs* also illustrates something that does not yet fully exist. It too is a guide for helping student-imagineers to picture their lives and livelihoods, the whole and parts, in context. More specifically, it “maps out...competencies... need[ed] to proactively manage” this whole life building process.⁸

The programs of *The Real Game Series* help bring this conceptual map to life for students through simulated, multi-player learning processes, or *games*.

THE REAL GAME SERIES

Over a million students around the world now play Real Games Series programs annually.⁹ This includes almost half of Canada’s primary and secondary school students who play in both official languages. Bill Barry, a Newfoundland writer and teacher, was inspired to create these games a decade ago after his daughter Mara, then 12, observed that she couldn’t see the connection between her schooling and her career aspirations. The *Real Game*, as Barry aptly called the original program in the series, provides middle



school students with an opportunity to make that connection in a highly engaging scenario simulation.

Like the hero of the 80s film, *Real Game* players visit the future. And like the hero, they return to the present with a much better appreciation for who they are and how they can realize their dreams. Students get to choose and act out adult occupations and adopt related lifestyles. During the game experience, players purchase homes and cars, create their own business cards, settle into neighbourhoods and communities, budget money and time, juggle work, home and leisure responsibilities, plan business travel and vacations, deal with moral and ethical dilemmas and much more, always linking adult realities to their school subjects. One parent observed that the game has given her daughter "tools and foresight about what is down the road."¹⁰

ANTICIPATORY REALITIES HELP MAKE GROUPS COHERE; THEY HELP TRANSFORM WHAT IF INTO WHAT IS.

From start to finish, the game is an act of imagination and play. The more a student imagines the simulation to be *real*, the more engaged she or he becomes. It sometimes happens that players will cry if they lose their imaginary livelihoods. Such whole person and whole group engagement tends to foster significant transformative learning outcomes. This was the concept of *Back To The Future* and related films such as *A Christmas Carol* and *It's A Wonderful Life*. Because of these imaginary experiences, students become naturally primed for life long learning and further self-actualization.

Now used in ten OECD countries, these two tools help students to learn:

- How their many literacies and skills can be used in concert;
- The many pathways open to them throughout life;
- The relevance of their school subjects to future life and work roles;
- How things fit together within the "bigger picture";
- The value of team work, communication and interpersonal skills in an increasingly interdependent world;
- That their lives will be "marked by accelerating complexity and non-linearity";
- To expect continuous "multiple transitions between learning, working and living".¹¹

A multiplier effect is at work here as well. That is, while each student gains individually, the synergy from all these students learning together generates even greater societal gains. In good part, this is because this collective learning has a distinct 'heliotropic' quality.

CONCLUSION: THE HELIOTROPIC EFFECT

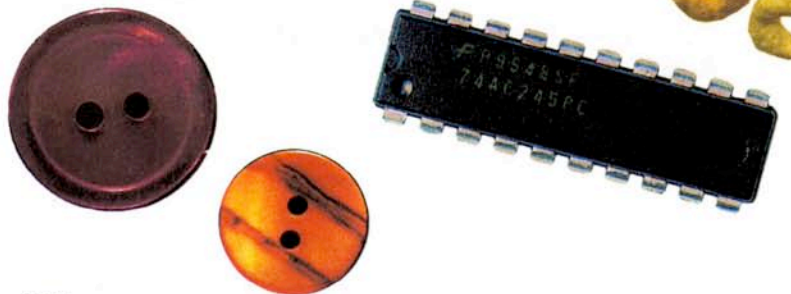
"Like a plant that grows in the direction of the light source, individuals and groups strive to grow towards the positive image they hold."¹² This has been called the *heliotropic effect*.¹³ It becomes very powerful when groups "imagineer" their futures together. Anticipatory realities help make groups cohere; they help transform *what if* into *what is*. There is a growing literature on 'imagined communities' and 'social imaginaries' worth examining in this light.

One of the most compelling of all the NLWC pioneering concepts is the *1% Change Factor*. If even one percent more of the population actualized life-career aspirations, the human and socioeconomic gains would be felt in commu-

nities across Canada and other participating OECD countries. The more students experience life span career education and learn imagineering principles and practices, the more we will see a social awakening, a sharing of dreams, and a pooling of energies to create a better, fairer, and more sustainable world. |

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Notes

- 1 Statistics Canada, *CANSIM II, Consolidated Federal, Provincial, Territorial and Local Government Revenue and Expenditure* (December 2005). <http://www.statcan.ca>
- 2 *Education at a Glance: 2004 OECD Report*. <http://www.oecd.org>
- 3 P. Jarvis, *The Changing Face of Career Development* (National Consultation on Career Development (NATCON), 2006). <http://www.natcon.org/natcon/>
- 4 *Skills Competences Canada* (Conference Board of Canada, Human Resources and Social Development, 2006).
- 5 *National Survey of Working America* (National Career Development Association and The Gallup Organization, 1999). <http://www.ncda.org/pdf/gallupwhitepaper.pdf>
- 6 www.seriousgames.org
- 7 M. McMahon, W. Patton and P. Tatham, *Managing Life, Learning and Work in the 21st Century* (Subiaco, Western Australia: Miles Morgan Australia, 2003).
- 8 www.blueprint4life.ca
- 9 There are five Real Games programs available for students in Grade's 3 through 12. Each program is played a few hours weekly over two to three months. The National Life/Work Centre [NLWC] coordinates the development, testing and implementation of these programs as part of a broader mandate, which is "to help people of all ages become self-reliant, make informed choices and find satisfying and fulfilling work and lifestyles in today's rapidly changing labour markets" [www.lifework.ca].
- 10 www.realgame.ca
- 11 NLWC website: www.lifework.ca
- 12 S. Srivastva, D. Cooperrider, 1990. appreciative inquiry. org
- 13 Cooperrider, Sorenson, Whitney, and Yager, *The Mentor*, August 29, 2002. www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/