

Democratic Imagination in the University

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Abstract. With an eye on the context of the contemporary university, David Hansen attends in this article to the significance and cultivation of a democratic imagination. While the university is under pressure to put its long-standing educational purposes in service of the global economy and the state, faculty across the various disciplines enjoy considerable latitude to create classroom and other settings that can draw out students' imaginative response to the world. To illuminate this prospect, Hansen engages the American poet Walt Whitman's magisterial evocation of democracy, *Song of Myself* (first published in 1855). Whitman enacts three 'offices' of the poet which he shows are at the same time constituents of a democratic imagination: (1) to attend to potentially dynamic aspects of everyday life to which people are typically blind, (2) to project democratic arrangements that contrast with present practices, and (3) to provoke people to remember, which is to say make vivid once again, aims and ideals that have served people well but which are easy to let fall into the shadows in the face of pressure. Hansen suggests that university faculty retain the power to help activate in students, and in themselves, these imaginal proclivities. The results may not be overtly dramatic, but they constitute an ongoing 'quiet' revolution – a turning or 'revolving' toward genuine educational and democratic values.

Keywords: Democracy; imagination; dialogue; university; poetry.

[es] La imaginación democrática en la universidad

Resumen. Con la mirada puesta en el contexto de la universidad contemporánea, David Hansen aborda en este artículo el significado y cultivo de una imaginación democrática. A pesar de la presión que se ejerce para que la universidad ponga sus inveterados propósitos educativos al servicio de la economía global y el estado, los profesores de las diversas disciplinas disfrutan de una libertad considerable para crear aulas y otros entornos que puedan estimular la respuesta imaginativa de los estudiantes al mundo. Para iluminar esta perspectiva, Hansen recurre a la magistral evocación de la democracia del poeta estadounidense Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself* (publicada originalmente en 1855). Whitman representa tres "oficios" del poeta que, según muestra, son al mismo tiempo constituyentes de una imaginación democrática: (1) prestar atención a aspectos potencialmente dinámicos de la vida cotidiana a los que la gente suele estar ciega, (2) proyectar acuerdos democráticos que contrastar con las prácticas actuales, y (3) provocar que la gente recuerde, es decir, hacer vivir, una vez más, objetivos e ideales que han servido bien a las personas, pero que fácilmente, ante la presión, se pueden dejar caer en las sombras. Hansen sugiere que los profesores universitarios conservan el poder de ayudar a activar en los estudiantes, y en ellos mismos, estas inclinaciones imaginales. Los resultados tal vez no sean manifiestamente dramáticos, pero constituyen una revolución "silenciosa" en curso: un giro o "rotación" hacia valores educativos y democráticos genuinos.

Palabras clave: democracia; imaginación; diálogo; universidad; poesía.

Summary: 1. Introduction 2. Democracy as an Aspect of Everyday Life. 3. Cultivating Democratic Imagination. 4. Poetry and Democratic Imagination. 5. Democratic Imagination in Educational Practice. 6. References.

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We have our social imagination: the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets where we live, in our schools. ... [W]e acknowledge the harshness of our situations only when we have in mind another state of affairs in which things would be better ... [It is a mode] of thinking that refuses mere compliance, that looks down roads not yet taken to the shapes of a more fulfilling social order, to more vibrant ways of being in the world. Maxine Greene (1995, p. 5).

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1. Introduction

Universities today are under intensified forms of instrumental pressure. Powerful economic forces associated with globalization and what is often summarized as ‘neoliberalism’ press down on universities to instrumentalize what they do – that is, to reduce their function to job preparation for students or, put in general terms, to serve the interests of business and the state. More and more, it appears, many students come to the university expecting precisely this so-called ‘practical’ notion of higher education. Some students seem content with being treated as customers or shoppers, who are present on campus, or online, to purchase a university qualification with its associated skills and knowledge.

These students sometimes appear hard to reach with appeals to such things as a liberal education or a critical or reflective education. They seem to find puzzling, if not incomprehensible, the Socratic notion that an unexamined life is not worth living. We might recall that in several of Plato’s dialogues, among them *Alcibiades* and *Theaetetus*, people refer to Socrates as a ‘bizarre’ figure (Gr. *atopos*, denoting ‘out of place’) precisely for his pursuit of a self-critical orientation toward the world. I get the feeling, in darker moods, that a lot of students these days – at least in the United States – are quite satisfied with an unexamined life. Certainly, when they behold the ‘adult world’ in our polarized times, they can observe countless people who appear to be proud that they never question themselves.

My point is not to attack students, whose modes of agency are always a bit difficult for an older generation to recognize and appreciate. Moreover, I encounter many students, as do faculty everywhere, who relish the deep values in study and who aspire to be a force for good. I also acknowledge that many forms and modes of life are worth living, and neither Socrates nor scholars at the university are entitled to have the last word on the subject.

But university faculty do have a word, or I should say, many fine (Gr. *kalon*) words. There exists tremendous intellectual diversity as well as commitment among many faculty at universities. I do not mean there is agreement or concordance among faculty about specific educational aims and values. I am implying only the conviction, on the part of many, that the university remains an important, distinctively *educational* institution. There remains a robust commitment to its fundamental educational identity and value, and part of that value is sustaining, in whatever ways circumstances permit, the very grounds for examining its value, alongside colleagues and alongside students.

Put another way, for many colleagues there remains a deep meaning to the term ‘higher’ in the familiar phrase, ‘higher education’. It is ‘higher’ in the sense of a conviction that human beings can ascend meaningfully in their knowledge, their insight, their understanding, and their commitment to a more humane world. These are familiar values, often associated with what we call a liberal or humanist education understood not in an anthropocentric sense, but in a rich ethical sense that embeds humans in the company of all the entities in the world, and vice versa. What I want to suggest in this article is that to the extent we university faculty can help students cultivate these values – even or especially in the face of the instrumental pressures mentioned previously – we are at the same time helping our students, and perhaps helping ourselves, cultivate what we can call democratic imagination.

2. Democracy as an Aspect of Everyday Life

The perspective I draw upon here derives from ongoing work on what I think of as democratic-cosmopolitan thinking and its educational significance. I’ve been engaging a diversity of thinkers in numerous fields and consulting the work of a number of artists. I want especially to highlight the United States poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892). Whitman’s greatest poem is entitled “Song of Myself” and is part of a larger collection entitled *Leaves of Grass*. The poem is in fact a ‘song of ourselves’, a kind of cosmopolitan-democratic song, to echo its title. It was first published in 1855 in the United States when entrenched, clashing ideologies about slavery, combined with an almost complete breakdown in public communication between the opposing sides, led the country to its terrible, bloody civil war that began in 1861. Whitman expresses a tremendous sense of hope in his “Song” about the United States, though not optimism as such. Hope and optimism are not the same things. Whitman’s poem embodies hope, and I will be touching in what follows on this dedication on his part since I think it still speaks loudly to us today. I will suggest this hope infuses what I comprehend as democratic imagination, and that we have reason to hope despite the pressures of this era.

Whitman’s vision has had a worldwide effect, in that “Song of Myself” has been translated into every broadly spoken language in the world. In international Spanish letters, for example, Whitman has directly influenced figures such as Jorge Luis Borges (who undertook a translation of “Song of Myself”), Ruben Darío, Federico García Lorca, Jose Martí, Pablo Neruda (who also did translational work on the poem), Miguel de Unamuno, and César Vallejo. These artists have regarded Whitman’s poetry as politically prophetic, as breaking precedent in generating fresh modes of poetic form and style, as bold and enlightened on sexuality and the erotic, and as an encomium (or ‘song of praise’) to American vernacular and by extension to all vernacular languages.

My point of departure for addressing democratic imagination is the idea that democracy is more than a form of government, central as that institutional feature is. Rather, we can think of democracy as a mode of human association based upon mutual contact, active patience, and ongoing communication. Perhaps the most well-known thinker associated with this viewpoint is John Dewey. Interestingly, in this regard, Dewey owes a genuine debt to Walt Whitman, whom Dewey called “the seer of democracy” (1984, p. 350). Both Whitman and Dewey, in their distinctive ways, became profoundly committed to what they saw as the very realistic idea that democracy can be thought of and lived as a form of human relationship, a form always in the making. In other words, democracy is not solely

a name for a set of formal institutions and regulative procedures, important as they are. Dewey was particularly adamant that he was not setting up a mere ideal. He encouraged people to root their ideals *in* the real, to draw their ideals from some substantive aspect of everyday, ongoing life, rather than derive them from fantasy or an unrooted utopian frame. Here is where I think he was particularly influenced by Whitman's great imagination. Whitman is very much a poet of everyday life and is unusually gifted in helping us see how everyday life contains communicative practices amongst families, communities, friends, associates, and more, that can be enhanced, refined, enriched, and expanded through education. 'Education' here denotes not just formal institution-based work but the sorts of education that transpire in non-formal settings across a person's life.

To be sure, as Leo Tolstoy informed us at the beginning of his great novel *Anna Karenina*, families (like communities) can feature unique forms of unhappiness, which implies unique forms of miscommunication, noncommunication, or even anti-communication. All of this is true enough. Nonetheless, Whitman and Dewey alike sought to help us see how there are practices we should attend to – in the family, the school, the community – and, let us add, in the university – practices that hold the promise of widening human concerns.

To picture democracy as a form of life is at once to realize that such a form will depend, in turn, upon a dynamic constellation of human dispositions and sensibilities. These are marked by qualities such as reflective openness, curiosity about the world if not also a sense of wonder, and a willingness to share one's thoughts and to listen to those of others. To deploy an agricultural metaphor, without this 'soil' of everyday reciprocal encounter, democratic institutions are difficult to grow and sustain. At the same time, supportive institutions – which is what universities can be and indeed sometimes are – can help make possible the cultivation of this soil in the first place.

3. Cultivating Democratic Imagination

A pressing question that faculty have long faced at both universities and in schools is how to cultivate and support the qualities touched on here, such as openness to others, a commitment to sustain communication with different others, and the like. These qualities cannot be forced in from the outside. Students cannot be made to take them on. We all know that we cannot 'make' students (or colleagues) understand an idea. And while it is valuable to learn *about* these qualities – to learn about openness of mind, about the value of sincere dialogue, and so forth – alongside learning about the structure and the remit of democratic governance, none of this knowledge in itself guarantees actual democratic conduct in the affairs of life. I think here of the distinction in Spanish between *saber* – to know about things – and *conocer* – which denotes a kind of embedded or embodied knowledge.

In response to what I take to be these challenging realities, I think a significant educational question concerns what we can call the cultivation of democratic imagination, keeping in mind the close, organic association here with the human values of a liberal education. Importantly, as with the qualities of associated living I mentioned a moment ago, democratic imagination cannot itself be taught directly. It cannot be acquired through a formal or scripted methodology. There can be no separate course of study for supporting its emergence, because no form of imagination, including its democratic variant, occurs in a vacuum. Human beings don't 'imagine' – they always imagine *something* – and, with respect to both education and democracy, it can be important what that 'something' is.² In short, democratic imagination can be provoked and can be fueled and informed, but never forced. In a manner of speaking, it can only be caught, not taught.

However, democratic imagination, like many other forms of creative imagination, can be caught through interaction in many settings. The latter include the university classroom, meetings in seminars, one-to-one conversations, encounters over ideas in cafes, on long walks with one's associates, in online dialogues, and more. Through modes of mutual interaction, professors and students can all model, if not self-consciously, what an imaginative mind is like. They can do so through ways of working with specific subjects and themes, whether we're thinking of biology, architecture, or poetry. I'll come back to these claims in due course.

But what is democratic imagination? These are familiar terms, but what do they mean, or what might they mean in the face of contemporary circumstances at the university? Indeed, what is imagination itself, and why does it serve so many time-honored and beautiful roles in human lives? There has been a tremendous amount of writing about imagination across space and time. The term has been endlessly discussed and debated by philosophers, and it appears this state of affairs will continue as long as the human imagination itself continues. I cannot do justice to this spirited debate or to the topic as a whole in a single article like this.

However, I would like to begin by emphasizing the following: Imagination differs from the imaginary. Imagination differs from fantasy, wishing, daydreaming, or reverie, to name just a few other states of mind where persons, in effect, may turn away *from* reality with its precariousness, confusions, and uncertainties, rather than turning *toward* reality with the formative possibilities it contains if one brings imagination to bear. As Andrea English (2016) notes with reference to Dewey's position on the matter,

Unlike imagination, the imaginary strays too far from our lived experiences and so it does not deal with the material in the world that resists us and defies our expectations, that is, the material of learning and growth: the "mind stays aloof" toying with material that "does not offer enough resistance, and so mind plays with it capriciously" [quote from Dewey, 1989, p.

² This same point could be made about thinking. As John Dewey (1985) reminds us, "the material of thinking is not thoughts, but actions, facts, events, and the relations of things" (p. 184).

272]. Imagination, in contrast, takes up the stuff of experience, directly connecting the moments of resistance that are part of human experience. (p. 1052).

In other words, imagination is work, and it can be extraordinarily creative and generative work. But we know this is not always the case. Imagination can harden, or morph into what we often call a lack or absence of imagination. This condition freezes outlooks and points of view. In its worst forms, it can fuel violence and injustice.

In this light, and with respect to the social world in which human beings dwell, democratic imagination embodies a moral and ethical dimension. The moral aspect has to do with learning to imagine the reality of other people and their situations. It is to get on the road to awareness of, and responsiveness to, this human reality. We can think of this as social or moral imagination (cf. Fensmire, 2003). It implies getting off the fence and joining the world: to stop being a spectator or bystander and to become a participant in democratic life. This engagement does not mean, in the context I'm portraying, necessarily becoming a political activist and fighting overtly and directly for particular causes. Certainly, as both history and contemporary affairs illustrate, there is profound value in such conduct. However, in the context at hand participation means approaching one's everyday contacts with others, especially those who are different in their values, identities, and outlooks, in a communicative, open-minded spirit. It is a spirit that fuses being loyal in a reflective manner to one's own values and commitments, if not also, on a broader scale, to one's cultural inheritances, with being open – again, in a reflective rather than uncritical manner – to others with their diverse backgrounds, identities, ways of being, and inheritances (Hansen, 2011).

This point echoes the image I deployed a moment ago, having to do with the necessity of tilling and nurturing the soil in which democratic institutions can grow and ideally thrive. Activism and working for causes are invaluable for building such institutions, or for shoring them up. However, without an underlying ground of mutual contact, mutual interaction and communication, and the like, they may not be sustainable. Moreover, the demand for activism can become dogmatic, overriding awareness that not everything in the human world is broken and in need of replacement. This observation points not to political conservatism but to a kind of ecological conservation – preserving *reflectively* values and practices that can become springboards for when people see that change is needed. The quasi-dogmatic elevation of change – or 'innovation' – in our time over everything else should be challenged. This mindset mirrors the ideology of unrestrained economic 'development' in which other values, such as conserving the health of the environment, are pushed aside.

The ethical dimension of imagination has to do with the person's willingness to work on themselves in order to maintain their imaginal energy and commitment, and not lapse into those other modes I touched on, such as fantasy or mere wishing, which is all too easy to do when faced with challenge. The term ethical in this sense conjures images of self-cultivation, a sense of imagining the person one can become through interaction with others and the world. In his poetry Walt Whitman fashions countless images of a person, in effect, standing on their tiptoes to see the person they can become and will become depending on their present conduct. He anticipates Dewey's powerful images of continuous self-transformation through experience. Dewey suggests that every new situation presents an occasion for the self to 'lose itself' – the self that *was* a moment ago – and to 'find itself' – the self it now *is* through reflective openness to the influence of the new situation (1985, pp. 131-132, 361-362). All this involves what we can call ethical imagination: conjuring images, and acting upon them, of the involved person one can be.

This mode of 'acting upon' constitutes a form of activism in its own right. As mentioned, it differs from the familiar political understanding of activism as the mobilization of people to work against and/ or for a particular policy or program. But *active* remains the watchword. Democratic imagination is not a matter of images alone, but also of heeding them: that is, responding to them through a change in outlook and conduct, however microscopic the transformation may be in a given context. It bears repeating that imagination can denote something far different than the imaginary. Imagination brings persons further into the real world; the imaginary further removes them. The very best science fiction demonstrates the difference. *The Time Machine*, *Brave New World*, 1984, and *Fahrenheit 451*, among other works, conjure 'imaginary' worlds. But the *imagination* behind and in their construction, manifest on every page of the texts, grips us with the full force of reality. We close these books with a fresh, perhaps urgent perspective on the world we inhabit. Our imagination is fueled.

4. Poetry and Democratic Imagination

The cultivation of imagination is typically associated with the arts, including poetry, though there are certainly excellent reasons to speak of such things as having a scientific imagination (science having its own artful qualities). In any case, in my ongoing work on democratic-cosmopolitan thought I've been turning to poetry because it has historically had a provocative function in culture, as in provoking thought and indeed imagination itself in readers and listeners. Poetry has also had a prophetic role in culture, as in pointing to as yet unrealized human possibilities. Recall how Dewey referred to Whitman as the seer of democracy.

Like other arts, poetry opens people to truths of the human condition that cannot be rendered, and thus grasped, in any other form. This large claim has been much discussed and boils down to two closely connected ideas: that poetic imagination is irreducible to a fixed or contained method, and that truth comes in multiple forms. Truth does not reside solely in logical, propositional form, valuable as such truth can be. The truth of a friendship, the truth of a marriage, the truth in being a parent, a teacher, a social worker: many people appreciate that to perceive such truth requires something other or more than propositional logic, and that it cannot be grasped through formal argumenta-

tion as such. Rather, it requires emotional responsiveness. As Richard Moran (1994) points out, in a clarifying statement worth quoting in full,

Imaginatively adopting a perspective on something involves something different from the sort of imagination involved in ordinary counterfactual reasoning. Hypothetical reasoning involves seeing what would follow from the truth of some proposition. It does not involve either feigning belief in that proposition or determining what would follow from the fact of one's believing it. There need be no reference to oneself, either as believer or as any sort of psychological subject, and one does not determine the truth of a counterfactual by imagining "what it would be like" to believe the antecedent. By contrast, imagination with respect to emotional attitudes may require such things as dramatic rehearsal, the right mood, the right experiences, a sympathetic nature. It thus says more about a person that he is either able or unable to imagine something in this way, and he bears a different responsibility for it. More is revealed and given of oneself than in the case of ordinary counterfactual reasoning, where one only needs to be provided with the proposition in order to reason from the assumption of its truth. By contrast, imagination with respect to the cruel, the embarrassing, or the arousing involves something more like a point of view, a total perspective on the situation, rather than just the truth of a specifiable proposition. And imagining along these lines involves something more like genuine rehearsal, 'trying on' the point of view, trying to determine what it is like to inhabit it. It is something I may not be able to do if my heart is not in it. (p. 105)

Talk of 'rehearsal' brings to mind Dewey's repeated claims that imagination just is a form of rehearsal, of 'trying on' as Moran puts it. Imagination positions people to picture possibilities, to *see* them play out in the mind's eye. In so doing it widens, dramatically, the scene of life. Dewey also foregrounds the necessity of emotional response in imagination. He calls this responsiveness sympathy, or sometimes "intelligent sympathy" (1985, p. 127), which incorporates attentiveness, first and last, yet also a measure of reflection, of humility or modesty, and sometimes of serious self-examination. As he remarks about friendship:

Friendship and intimate affection are not the result of information about another person even though knowledge may further their formation. But it does so only as it becomes an integral part of sympathy through the imagination. It is when the desires and aims, the interests and modes of response of another become an expansion of our own being that we understand him. (1989, p. 339).

For Dewey, truth, imagination, and sympathy work in concert in all human practices and relationships. He points to people's capacity to work with propositional truth yet also to intuit or to see into the truth *of* things as well as the truth *in* things.

Patience and concern, for example, are built into practices such as teaching and nursing. We require no formal proof of their value, though we may need to argue for it from time to time, especially in the face of rationalistic, narrow measures of teachers' or nurses' 'effectiveness'. We *learn* the centrality of patience and concern organically as students and as patients. We *live* by such truth, and can suffer or even die in its absence. Teaching and nursing would fall apart without this truth; we would have to create new terms and undertakings other than teaching and nursing. This truth is more than epistemic alone, but is infused with moral and ethical considerations. A person who fails to see such truths is not 'wrong'. Rather, the person is inexperienced with the aspect of reality in question, or lacks perspicuous grounds for adequate response and judgment, or may be locked at present in a dogmatic orbit.³

Like so many poets, Walt Whitman points the way here. In the lines of his poems – and in the 'lines in between' the lines of his poems – we can detect his conception of poetry, supplemented by a few short writings he undertook about it (see Whitman's introduction, 1986). And we can detect his sense of democratic imagination, which does not take conceptual form in his work – he composes poems, not formal arguments – but which does stand out dramatically in the ethos of his craft. As I interpret Whitman, he perceives or, better perhaps, enacts three purposes of poetry, all of which have a direct bearing on the meaning and cultivation of democratic imagination. I use the verb 'enacts' rather than 'perceives' since it's important not to reduce his poetry to predetermined instrumental purposes on his part. Like every great poet, Whitman follows what we might call an existential 'summons' (or calling). He is not applying a theory. Rather, he is discovering realities about the human condition, about the world, and about himself. And he is discovering – as he composes word by word, line by line, stanza by stanza – a form in which to render those discoveries.

Let me summarize these three roles that poetry can play in culture as follows, again mindful of how they ramify into democratic imagination.⁴

(1) First, the poet generates images of lived reality to which people are often blind or simply overlook. Most people (me included), most of the time, are too preoccupied with their obligations, interests, and worries to pay much attention to their surroundings, which tend to blur into an undifferentiated background. Though all too understandable given human needs and limitations, this habit constitutes an immeasurable moral, ethical, and aesthetic loss. It fosters a habit of inattentiveness and indifference that undermines, if not impoverishes, people's capacity to pay attention, with imagination and with tenacity, to things that profoundly matter: from caring for loved ones to broader concerns such as democracy, justice, and the well-being of all entities in the world. The point is not that persons must be attentive 24 hours a day. Such a posture would be exhausting, even for a poet, and would interfere

³ For discussion of truth in poetry as compared or contrasted with conceptions of truth in philosophy, see, for example, Barfield (2011), Gaynesford (2017), Hamburger (2022), Heidegger (2001/ 1971), Inizan (2018), Simecek(2022) In this vein Dewey also observes: "Truth telling is a duty for all, but it is not the duty of all to tell the same truth, because they have not the same truth to tell..." (1971, pp. 317-18).

⁴ This section mirrors a discussion in Hansen & Dwek (2023).

with the necessity of practical action. But it does imply cultivating a habit of trying to perceive truly what is right in front of our noses but which too often passes by unremarked.

In this respect, and in distinctively dramatic ways, the poet can bring important values and practices out of the shadows and help us keep them visible. The poet can in effect ‘name again’, almost like a Biblical Adam, these values and practices, so that we hear them and thus can think them in a fresh manner. This naming differs from the taxonomizing characteristic of the natural and social sciences because its prime impulse is not epistemic, as such, but moral and ethical. These remarks point to why imagination fuels not just possibilities, as I’ll touch in a moment, but is needed to truly see what is already there *in* our human reality, especially in its everyday taken-for-granted aspects which can be so influential and expressive of underlying values.

(2) My second point, as anticipated a moment ago, is that poetry can assist us in imagining possibilities and prospects. Whitman, like any number of other poets in their respective eras as well as today, imagines what *could* be in a highly affective manner. The 19th Century orator, writer, and abolitionist of slavery Frederick Douglass captures this manner well: “Poets, prophets, and reformers are all picture makers, and this ability is the secret of their power and of their achievements. They see what ought to be by the reflection of what is, and endeavor to remove that contradiction” (in Slate, 2012, p. 235). For Whitman, poets do not generate images out of nothing, and their endeavors are not manipulative or expressions of a will to power. In a very real sense, they must wait for reality to come to them. But their waiting is intensely active. They think, recall, and connect things seen and heard, and they experiment endlessly with poetic form. Their purpose is not to build institutions or to lead causes in a direct manner. Rather, through their capacity for active waiting, they catch signs and symbols in everyday life that already point the way to how to realize (make real) generative human possibilities.

(3) Finally, in addition to seeing what people may be blind to or overlook, and to picturing possibilities based on present circumstances, the third point is that, for Whitman, poets imagine what people have long known but are apt to forget and to neglect, sometimes at great cost. Foremost here, for Whitman, is his strong provocation to readers, in the images and sounds of his poetry, to remember – that is to say, to hold in consciousness – the potentially powerful, creative expressions of mind, heart, and spirit of which they are capable – of which any person is in principle capable – and how all this can help enact and strengthen democracy on the ground (thinking again of the idea of democracy as naming a mode of human association). For Whitman and many other poets, their hope crystallizes in what they have seen: that human beings can and often do participate in the affairs of life in a democratic spirit even if they never use those words and even if their conduct would not be regarded as dramatic and would never appear in the news media. Whitman does strongly esteem public action by individuals and communities. But that is not the only place where democracy lives and potentially grows. It is not always the most important place where democracy lives, as compared with the nature of people’s everyday lives: the rhythms and vicissitudes of ordinary life and the communications that transpire therein.

A key point here, which echoes what I said earlier about ethical self-cultivation, is that the phenomenon itself of imagining that one is capable of more can immediately influence the quality of what one is actually doing in the present moment. It is not that when I imagine possibilities, it’s always a matter of ‘Oh, good, that’s for later’. No, sometimes imagining possibilities *instantaneously* infuses what one is doing, *in* that very moment, with greater thought, sensitivity, commitment, questioning, and more. Thus, a person can generate, especially with the support of others, their own morally and ethically ‘upward’ or ‘higher’ gravitational pull. They can use what *could be*, generated through imaginative work, as a point of departure for helping to transform what *is*, including their fundamental orientation toward the world.

The presumption that individual transformation, including self-transformation, is as possible as social transformation is immanent in the idea of democratic imagination. Neither persons nor societies have fixed ‘essences’, no matter how hard some may try to freeze self-understandings in place including through hiding from major dimensions of reality. The sheer act of attempting to hide *changes* the person or community. They may become *more* hardened against responding to reality, and thus more brittle and volatile when confronted with difference. Alternatively, and more hopefully, people may discover the futility of hiding in the very attempt to do so. They may realize that more empowering, and more lasting, options are worth entertaining, including the view that human diversity is never a threat in and of itself. Whitman’s oeuvre demonstrates time and again the composite, dynamic nature of persons and communities. In the same lines of poetry, he illuminates what many other thinkers and artists have contended: that the recognition of how *internally* diverse human beings and communities are helps create conditions for more peaceful, respectful relations *externally*. As George Kateb (1990) remarks, in his reflections on *Song of Myself*:

If honest, one becomes almost another to oneself. By far the most important result would be that the passion to judge, condemn, and punish others is reduced and replaced, to a major degree, by the desire to accept or empathize or sympathize with them. If an individual is composite, it should become greatly more difficult to equate a person with any of his or her deeds, no matter how awful – perhaps, also, no matter how good... I believe that the direct and the indirect lessons of the poem are great democratic lessons in connectedness. The ideas of the individual as composite, and of the individual as honestly unfamiliar to itself, are ways of awakening all of us to human equality on the highest moral and existential plane. To admit one’s compositeness and ultimate unknowability is to open oneself to a kinship to others that is defined by receptivity or responsiveness to them. (p. 556).

For Whitman, my recognition of my diverse nature positions me to recognize the same in others – that is, that they cannot be reduced to some essence, but that we are *all* human rather than some of us being closer to that cate-

gory than others. But more than this, awareness of internal diversity can provoke me to *seek out* different others, precisely so that I might learn from them fresh and perhaps better ideas about how to conduct my life humanely.

The three points addressed above about poetic-democratic imagination – to imagine what is right before our eyes but to which we may be blind; to imagine how human realities could be transformed for the better; and to imagine, or reimagine, forgotten values, purposes, and capacities – all connect with pedagogy. I turn to this connection now.

5. Democratic Imagination in Educational Practice

There is an extensive literature on the relationship between imagination and becoming educated. Both research and teacher testimonials demonstrate the indispensable place of imagination in positioning a student – and teacher – to move beyond routines of recitation and regurgitation of material, and to really engage questions that call for thinking, inquiry, analysis, and discovery (see, for example, Blenkinsop, 2009; Egan et al., 2007; Egan & Madej, 2010; Halpin, 2008; Hogan, 2011; Jagla, 1994; Nielsen et al., 2010; Steiner, 2003; Weible, 2015). These studies echo one of Dewey's summary remarks in his ever-timely *Democracy and Education* (1985/ 1916) about the centrality of imagination in genuine educational experience:

An adequate recognition of the play of imagination as the medium of realization of every kind of thing which lies beyond the scope of direct physical response is the sole way of escape from mechanical methods in teaching. The emphasis put in this book, in accord with many tendencies in contemporary education, upon activity, will be misleading if it is not recognized that the imagination is as much a normal and integral part of human activity as is muscular movement. (p. 277)

Kieran Egan and Dan Nadaner (1988) elaborate this statement while also providing a snapshot of the themes found in the extant literature:

[I]magination . . . is the heart of any truly educational experience; it is not something split off from 'the basics' or disciplined thought or rational inquiry, but is the quality that can give them life and meaning; it is not something belonging properly to the arts, but is central to all areas of the curriculum; it is not something to ornament our recreational hours, but is the hard pragmatic center of all effective human thinking . . . 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. (p. ix)

The authors' reference to imagination as the "heart" of education mirrors Pádraig Hogan's (2011) book-length elucidation of what he calls "imagination's heartwork" in bringing into being genuine educational experience.

However, there is considerable evidence that reveals how contemporary educational policy, with its largely engineering orientation toward pedagogy, is almost completely silent about the cultivation of imagination. Vasco d'Agnese (2017), Nielsen et al. (2010), Hogan (2011), and others show how this negligence can narrow students' classroom and school experience. Indeed, it can compromise the fundamental meaning of education itself as a process of holistic aesthetic, intellectual, moral, and ethical formation. This process requires both the use and the steady cultivation of imagination. But "[t]he eclipse of imagination becomes," d'Agnese warns, "the eclipse of education; nurturing imagination is about nurturing education" (p. 443).

D'Agnese fleshes out the latter claim through a careful, full-blown encounter with Dewey's work on the imagination. Dewey echoes Whitman in highlighting how imagination positions people to see beyond their immediate circumstances as well as expectations. The imagination can generate new possibilities, including new and more demanding – and more rewarding – aims and aspirations. As d'Agnese writes,

In Deweyan understanding, these 'new possibilities' are a matter of fact because it is through their function and employment in the actual situation that the present is shaped. Perhaps no philosopher has expressed in such a clear manner how the future and new possibilities constitute the leading force of the present. If we stress the question, in Deweyan understanding it is not so much that the present determines the future; instead, it is the imaginative vision of the future that shapes the present. (p. 450)

Imagination 'lacks hands': it does not construct or build materials, tools, or instruments directly. But it builds in a different sense, and it provides materials of a different sort. It helps people conjure images and provisional accounts of what they hope to fashion in the first place, as well as why they would want to do so in the face of alternatives, including those that reflect conventional rather than imaginative thinking.

As mentioned at the start, imagination cannot be inculcated directly, as if faculty could open students' minds and hearts and rearrange their constituents. But students can slowly build habits of imagination through any number of experiences faculty can create – if the latter are mindful of the nature and place of democratic imagination as outlined here. Happily, this mindfulness does not require undertaking a formal course of study or preparation, or following a preset protocol. The last thing we want in these busy times is to burden faculty with yet another task or duty.

Rather, the key point is that any classroom, in any subject from art to science, that features dialogue about questions and topics in the subject is already a fertile ground for inviting students to cultivate democratic imagination. This condition is so because dialogue can lead people, often unawares and perhaps even despite themselves, to heed one another's reality. 'To heed' is a powerful verb with rich moral and ethical meaning. To heed others' reality is to apprehend not just *what* they are saying about the subject matter, but to take in, in the same moment, the reali-

ty that they are singular beings who embody important similarities *and* differences. This consciousness walks hand in hand with a democratic imagination or, better perhaps, is an enactment of democratic imagination. Faculty can help activate it by inviting students to examine their actual experience of discussion. Did discussion help them understand the subject at hand better? Did it lead them to see dimensions of it they had not thought of before? Did it lead them to change their minds about one or another aspect? These questions can pave the way for the following: What was it like to listen to others? What did they think and feel while so doing? Do they feel a bit differently about their peers at this point? What ideas do they have about how to conduct themselves in the next discussion?

These processes of fueling democratic imagination indirectly can complement more direct or overt efforts. What comes to mind immediately, for example, would be studies in literature, history, philosophy, and other humanities where engaging writers like Whitman can provoke thinking about democracy's vicissitudes, its vulnerability, and its promise. These inquiries could accompany the study of exemplars of democratic imagination, ranging from familiar and beloved individuals such as Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Mohandas Gandhi, to contemplating a student's grandmother or sister, or professor they had previously, who enacts or enacted this kind of imagination, if not in so many words. These studies can fuel what José Medina (2013) calls "resistant imagination": the forming of images of how to work against narrowing if not oppressive ideas and practices in the human world. In the same breadth, Medina argues that resistant imagination must be juxtaposed with "meliorist imagination," viz. images of creative, constructive possibilities that take full advantage of people's degrees of freedom in fashioning meaningful practices and lives. For Medina, who engages pragmatist thought as expressed especially by William James and John Dewey, this fused mode of democratic imagination positions people to conjure "relational possibilities [across and through difference] that have been lost, ignored, or that remain to be discovered or invented" (pp. 298-299).

Another promising pedagogical step is to incorporate discussion, whenever circumstances permit, of the very terms touched on in this article. Again, this step can be undertaken in virtually every subject. What is imagination? Why is it so important in human affairs? What is democratic imagination? Why can it be something engaging and joyous rather than a mere task or institutional requirement? Why does democratic imagination differ from other valued dispositions, such as empathy? Why is it useful to distinguish empathy from democratic imagination? The latter, in my view, conjures not so much walking in another's footsteps – something not only literally impossible but potentially paternalistic or patronizing if one is not cautious – but rather learning to see the reality and the singularity of others and their lives, as well as how to cultivate communication with them. These processes constitute the work that democratic imagination itself makes possible. They illuminate why, as mentioned previously, democratic imagination can constitute a mode of action rather than a mere preparation. Put another way, it funds action with direction and commitment.

In sum, the main pedagogical lesson I take from poets like Whitman has to do with appreciating, more than might meet the eye, what faculty can *already* do given the affordances of being with students on a regular basis. The lesson for the teacher would not be: *do this*. Rather it would be: *reimagine* how well-placed you are to provoke and to help your students, indirectly as much as directly, to move in the world in an imaginative, inquiring, and humane manner. As touched on at the start of this article, we can see all this as a point where the values of a liberal education and those of democratic imagination intersect.

The fresh perceptivity and the underlying commitment to shared communication that a democratic imagination has always helped generate can serve our university life well. This life, as I also mentioned at the start of these remarks, is threatened by what can sometimes feel like a tidal wave of instrumental pressures. As we perhaps all know personally, these pressures create new challenges in opening up communication with students, and indeed perhaps with ourselves. More strongly, the pressures can undermine the sense of hope that is a fundamental constituent, or ground, for the very engagement we call education. And these difficulties can lead us, unawares, to forget to imagine what we know. So let me close with two notes. One is that, as some of our contemporaries keep reminding us, pessimism, much less fatalism, about our circumstances are luxuries we can ill afford. To paraphrase the great African-American thinker W. E. B. du Bois (2017, p. 156), we can live by a hope that may not be hopeful but is also not hopeless. The other note is to acknowledge that our everyday educational engagement with students and colleagues lacks the drama of revolutionary change. Yet it seems to me it constitutes an ever-present 'quiet' revolution. It involves a 'turning', as in 'revolving', which is a root term of revolution: a continuous turning toward genuine educational values. Cultivating educational and democratic imagination can fuse in the ongoing work we do.

6. References

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