

LEARNING IMAGOS AS A MEANS OF REINVENTING THE TAE PRACTITIONER

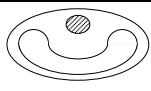
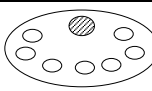
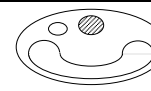
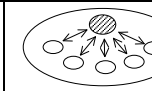
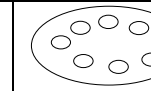
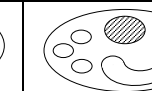
Introduction

Learning imagoes is a concept from the educational field of Transactional Analysis, a form of social psychology. Every TAE practitioner holds a learning imago in his/her subconscious. This learning imago is a mental picture of the learning group (Newton, 2003, 2014). It is influenced by the educational philosophy that the TAE practitioner subscribes to (consciously or otherwise). Each TAE practitioner's learning imago thus defines his/her view of what learning is about, his/her role in relation to the learners and how learning can be conducted. Raising this to the practitioner's awareness allows him/her to adapt more effectively by being able to intentionally build different learning dynamics in the learning space for greater effectiveness. This paper provides a brief introduction of different learning imagoes and the associated educational philosophy, along with guiding questions for the reader to apply these concepts to self through reflection. Finally, this paper provides a suggestion for how this concept can be applied to some newer modes of learning being introduced in the TAE industry now: classroom learning that is more learner-centric, technologically-enabled learning and workplace learning.

Learning Imagoes and Educational Philosophy

Philosophy can be defined as "A theory or attitude that acts as a guiding principle for behavior" (Oxford English Dictionary). Educational philosophy is therefore the theory or attitude that acts as a guiding principle for how the TAE practitioner behaves in relation to learning and the adult learners. Elias and Merriam proposed a classification of six main educational philosophical approaches in their book, *Philosophical Foundations of Adult Education* (Elias and Merriam, 2005). Newton built on this classification and derived corresponding learning imagoes for each educational philosophy (Newton, 2003, 2014). Each learning imago spells out the role of the teacher in relation to the learners, and the objective for learning. An extract, summarized from Newton's summary table, is in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Educational Philosophy and Associated Learning Imagoes

	Liberal (Traditional)	Progressive	Humanistic	Technological	Radical	Dogmatic
Learning is...	Filling the learners with knowledge / theory	Guiding the learner to be responsible and committed to society	Growing or developing the individual	Shaping the learner to obtain a competency	Setting the learner free from old mindsets or ideas	Handing down values and the truth
The Educator is...	The transmitter of knowledge. "You learn from me."	The guide. "I may guide you, and we problem solve together."	The support or farmer. "I support you in your search for growth."	The instructor. "I assess and accredit you when competent."	The catalyst. "We learn and change together."	The guru, or authority figure. "I will show you what is right."
Roots	Socrates, Plato, the Enlightenment	Social action and political movements, democracy	Person-centric ideas, e.g. Rogers and Maslow	Behavioural psychology, systems theory	Liberation theology, Freire, Illich	Cultural and religious models of law and authority
Imago						
	* The large circle contains the entire learning group. The shaded circle represents the educator, while the other shapes within the larger circle represent the learners in relation to the educator.					

Surfacing Your Learning Imago: Reflective Questions

Each TAE practitioner subscribes to one or two educational philosophies, and therefore holds a learning imago in his/her mind. This is shaped by the practitioner's early learning experiences (Barrow, 2009; Napper and Newton, 2000). Surfacing the TAE practitioner's learning imago is possible by having the individual reflect on his/her early learning experiences and how the practitioner sees his/her role in learning. I use the following list of reflective questions when I work with TAE practitioners to surface some aspects of the learning imagoes they hold in mind:

1. Complete this sentence to describe what learning is to you: Learning is _____.
2. My role as a trainer is _____.
3. When I facilitate a learning programme, my objective is _____.

I find it useful for the TAE practitioners to write down their responses either on post-it notes or on separate sheets of paper. The next step is to compare their written responses with the concepts summarized in Table 1 above. Which learning imagoes or educational philosophies would be aligned with the responses written by the TAE practitioner?

As an example, here are some responses from previous reflective sessions:

"To me, learning is growing and expanding capacity"

"Learning is about growth and change"

"Gaining insight, knowledge and applicable skills"

"To me, learning is all about attitude"

The words "growing and expanding capacity" suggest an alignment with the humanistic philosophy, while "all about attitude" suggests a progressive philosophy. It is quite common that practitioners hold a mix of learning imagoes in their subconscious. The words "growth and change" suggest a mix between a humanistic and a radical philosophy. The phrase "Gaining insight, knowledge and applicable skills" suggest a mix of liberal and technological philosophies.

The reflections are a useful first step to surface awareness. What is frequently useful after the reflection is a facilitated discussion about how the practitioners work with adult learners, and the upsides and downsides of each educational philosophy. For example, asking each other questions like, "What do you mean when you say learning is all about attitude?", helps the practitioner elaborate further about what he/she believes about learning. No one educational philosophy is ideal or perfect in every situation or learning need. The awareness of the practitioner's own tendencies allows him/her to intentionally think about managing dynamics that work effectively in each learning project.

Learning Imagoes and Singapore TAE Practitioners

Many TAE practitioners in Singapore practicing today would have early learning experiences in the Singaporean education system in the 1970s to 1980s. In a workshop with my faculty team, the words that came up from reflecting on their early learning experiences included the Chinese words for

spelling, ‘听写’ (Chinese spelling) and ‘默写’ (memorized passage), which rely mainly on rote learning. Other words that came up included “homework”, “examinations” and “memorizing facts”. Still other words included “right and wrong” and “being the odd one out”.

Collectively, these suggest that many TAE practitioners lean towards the liberal and dogmatic educational philosophies instinctively. These would correspond with the approach to learning in Singapore schools during the 1970s to 1980s. Diagrams 1 and 2 shows what the learning imago in a typical Singapore classroom could have looked like adopting the liberal and dogmatic educational philosophies respectively. The educator is the leader of the learning. His/her role is largely to pass down information or theory to the students. In terms of the power dynamic, the teacher is the authority figure in the classroom, and very powerful. Academic learning is emphasized and valued.

Diagram 1: Liberal learning imago

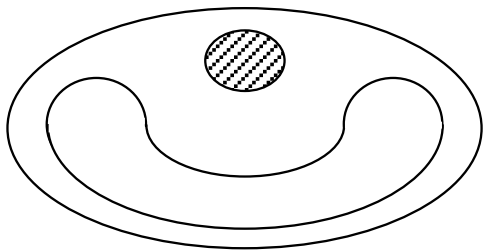
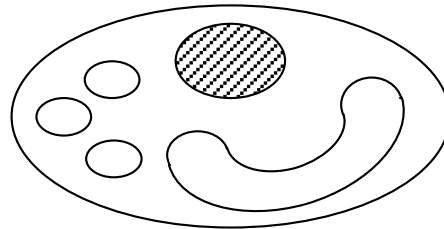


Diagram 2: Dogmatic learning imago



A TAE practitioner commented that diagram 1 reminded him of how he used to be confident that he could sleep during lectures unnoticed. The lecture hall was packed with so many students, and there was only one lecturer, whom he identified as the shaded circle. It was very unlikely that the lecturer could spot the individual sleeping student, let alone know his name. Diagram 2 brought out guffaws from some practitioners. First, there was identification with the looming figure of the teacher, sometimes being larger than life both in class and in memory. They also identified with the smaller circles, who were both the teacher’s favourites and those who misbehaved. One TAE practitioner shared that his former teacher could not remember his name because “Teachers tend to remember the good kids or the really naughty ones. The mediocre ones just blend into the crowd.”

Impact on TAE Styles

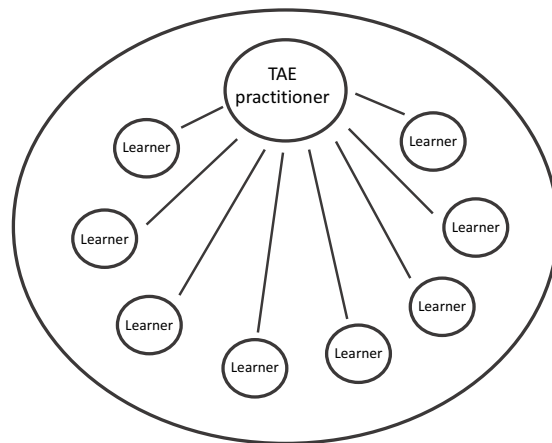
These early learning experiences shape the learning imagoes that TAE practitioners hold when they lead learning. A TAE practitioner shared that his response to the reflective questions included “helping learners find the right way to manage their staff”, and “Learning is values-driven”. When discussing the impact of these on his role as a TAE practitioner, he suddenly chuckled that “I have to have a right answer when participants discuss airy-fairy topics”. He then connected this with feedback given to him by clients that he tended to be very directive in classroom training, with very little emphasis given to facilitating discussion with learners.

The fact that many Human Resource (HR) managers and adult learners emphasise that that they don’t want academic learning in adult programmes suggest that this was partly the situation in the past for TAE, i.e. academic concepts were “taught” by TAE practitioners who hold liberal or dogmatic philosophies with regards to learning. Such practitioners design the learning curriculum with a focus on theoretical concepts. Practical application suffers as a result. The method of delivery also reflects the liberal and dogmatic learning imagoes. The TAE practitioner lectures on the concept, perhaps

he/she shows a video, and the learners listen and absorb. The liberal and dogmatic imagoes are sometimes literally played out in the physical learning space. Learning takes place in “classrooms”, where chairs and tables are arranged to face the TAE practitioner and projection, and the learners are referred to as “students”.

The early WSQ framework moved learning towards competencies and skills, and therefore more aligned to the technological (behaviourist) educational philosophy. The corresponding learning imago is in Diagram 3 below.

Diagram 3: WSQ Technological Learning Imago



In this imago, the TAE practitioner has greater clarity of specific learners, because each learner is assessed in terms of his/her competency in the skills being learnt. WSQ curricular includes opportunities for practice of skills and of observation of competence. However, the TAE practitioner is still the powerful figure of authority in this learning dynamic. The WSQ framework is arguably more suited to technical skills than soft skills, since competency in the former is more easily assessed. Yet, TAE practitioners very easily fall back into the liberal or dogmatic learning imagoes in the WSQ framework. Assessments invite a tendency towards a right versus wrong dogmatic approach. A TAE practitioner was known among his peers for rejecting written assessment answers that did not contain the “right key words”, even though the essence of the answer displayed the competency being assessed. Similarly, a WSQ auditor from SSG once returned an assessment plan for an application of where the learner was on an interpersonal spectrum (from passive to assertive and to aggressive). The training organization was requested to provide a model answer in a question where the learners were asked to demonstrate their capacity to reflect and apply this spectrum to themselves.

Learning Imagoes for New Learning Approaches

The WSQ framework has changed significantly in recent years. In a speech delivered in 2016, then Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung reportedly noted that deep technical skills and essential soft skills have to be acquired at the same time (Ministry of Education, 2016). The TAE Sector Transformation Plan (TAESTP) put forward that the market needs just-in-time, relevant learning that is integrated with work practices, learning that is impactful and translated to performance outcomes, and learning that creates value, enhances one’s performance and improves business outcomes (SkillsFuture Singapore, 2017). To accomplish that, the role of the TAE practitioner will have to change. The TAESTP suggests that TAE professionals will need to possess

pedagogical skills with deep domain expertise, possess new skills that are industry relevant, embrace lifelong learning and innovation, and share best practices, collaborate and co-create. Blended learning is a key new learning approach, which comprises a mix of classroom learning, technology-enabled learning, work-based learning or workplace learning. Even in classroom learning, learning design and delivery will have to change to become more relevant and work-related.

Reinventing the role of the TAE practitioner in this new landscape will require an intentional move away from the commonly held liberal and dogmatic learning imagoes. In many instances the TAE practitioner is no longer the subject matter expert. What is being learnt is no longer something final or fixed and may take place in various new venues, including a virtual learning space or the learner’s workplace.

Table 2 shows some suggestions for learning imagoes that might be more effective in three components of blended learning; namely a more facilitated classroom learning, technology-enabled learning and workplace learning.

Table 2: Suggested Learning Imagoes for New Learning Approaches

	Learner-Centric Classroom Learning	Technology-enabled Learning	Workplace Learning
Learning is...	Driven by the learners Relevant, applicable, skills-based Co-created and emergent	Easily accessible Bite-sized Relevant, applicable, skills-based	Part of the work process Tailored to work Bite-sized and just-in-time
The TAE Practitioner is...	A guide for the learning journey A facilitator of discussions	Not present at times, or not present at all Moderator of the virtual group	A consultant A guide A facilitator
Learning Imago	Humanistic Progressive Technological (behaviourist)	Progressive Technological (behaviourist)	Person-centric ideas, e.g. Rogers and Maslow

How can a TAE practitioner adopt a new learning imago for a new learning approach? Acknowledging the need for new dynamic and articulating the new learning imago is a helpful first step. A TAE practitioner expressed some concern when asked to deliver a blended WSQ programme that contained an e-learning component. His concerns about delivering the technology-enabled component stemmed from a misfit between the liberal philosophy and a more progressive dynamic more suitable. For example, he felt uneasy that he would not be online at the exact same time as the learners, and asked if he was required to “mark” every comment on the discussion forum board. There was also a slight resistance to the time requirement outside of normal classroom learning time. In the liberal learning imago, learning is contained within the classroom. Delivering the online component effectively meant he had to take on a more progressive learning imago. His role in the online space was a guide and moderator. He came to understand that in the progressive learning imago, the learners have an equal part to play in their own learning. This meant respecting that learners would go online in times suitable for them. It also meant acknowledging that the content

on the discussion forum boards depended on the learners, and that he would have to work with what emerged.

Some Qualifications

The thoughts laid out in this paper have taken the perspective of the TAE practitioner in discussing the concept of learning imagoes. Learners have learning imagoes too, and these are also developed from their early learning experiences. Moving into new modes of learning requires both the learners and TAE practitioner to co-create new and different kinds of learning imagoes. Because the TAE practitioner is frequently tasked with the delivery of the learning experience, the onus falls on him/her to intentionally invite the learners into a new dynamic together with him/her for the new mode of learning to be successful. In some cases, it is also the TAE practitioner's role to reject invitations by learners to fall back into less suitable learning imagoes with which they are more familiar. For example, many adult learners have a learnt passivity in the learning imagoes associated with the dogmatic and liberal philosophies, where they are spoon-fed concepts by their teachers. Some adult learners may fall back into these familiar learning imagoes during a technology-enabled learning experience. The TAE practitioner will have to invite these learners into the new dynamic, by explaining and managing learner expectations of what is required.

In the move to promote newer modes of learning, it is also important to be mindful that we can become dogmatic about the reinventing the role of TAE practitioners. There are upsides and downsides of each branch of educational philosophy, which are also more effective for different content. This too with each new mode of learning and the corresponding role of the TAE practitioner. It might be more useful to allow TAE practitioners the freedom to navigate these new developments and changes in the industry rather than dictate, by means of policy and funding, that certain modes of learning should be used uniformly across the board.

Conclusion

What TAE practitioners think about learning impacts the way they design and deliver learning experiences. Understanding our existing learning imagoes helps TAE practitioners become aware of some inherent barriers or challenges in reinventing themselves. Understanding other learning imagoes enables them to intentionally choose to operate in new ways, design new formats and deliver new learning experiences that will support adult learning for the future.

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