The Imagemaking Protocol

Purpose & Procedures

By Jacy Ippolito and Nancy King

Adapted from the work of Nancy King in Playing Their Part: Language and Learning in the Classroom

Description
This is a highly flexible protocol that uses imagemaking and storymaking as a way to explore texts and expand participants’ thinking. The imagemaking and storymaking processes can be initiated before a reading/discussion (as a pre-reading activity), in the middle of a reading/discussion (as a way of guiding reading), or after a reading/discussion as a way of consolidating and creating new understandings.

- “Imagemaking” is the process used to access feelings and ideas below the level of consciousness by using at least six colors of fingerpaint (red, yellow, blue, brown, black, green) and/or non-hardening clay by responding to abstract prompts in one minute or less.

- “Storymaking” is the process used to stimulate oral and written expression through the use of traditional stories that nourish the imagination and provide a metaphorical safety net, assuring participants that just as the story ends well, so too will their experience.

The essential elements of the protocol are described below, followed by suggested steps to take in facilitating imagemaking and storymaking. If using this protocol with a group for the first time, it is highly recommended that the following elements be shared with the group, in your own words, as both a rationale and as a way to build a shared understanding of the work. This also ensures that the group takes the process seriously.

Materials
This protocol requires fingerpaints (or if unavailable, washable poster paints) and/or non-hardening clay. Fingerpainting elicits a personal, experiential, and emotional response: red might represent anger, black—depression, yellow—joy, etc. Clay is useful when exploring relationships—characters in novels at a particular point, abstract relationships such as sculpting “right” and “wrong” in relationship. Participants will be asked to paint or sculpt an abstract image with their fingers in one minute, for several reasons. When we paint with a brush, or draw with a pencil/pen/marker/etc., we often activate years’ worth of anxiety about “not being artists,” or our inability to represent the world realistically on paper. In this protocol, the process of making an image, unmediated by planning, is what matters most. It is a way of knowing, not the making of art. The goal is to subvert our inner censor, to connect kinesthetically, to access first thoughts and responses, and to initially bypass the critical thought centers in our brains that often are most active when reading/discussing/analyzing. Some participants, perhaps due to sensorimotor or other developmental/cognitive reasons, may balk at using their fingers to paint or sculpt. In this case, facilitators can suggest they use a pencil/pen/marker in their non-dominant hand; or perhaps use thin, disposable gloves when painting with fingers or sculpting. Include as many colors as possible (black and brown are necessary) to allow for a full range of expression. Facilitators may put dollops of paint onto paper plates and ask participants to share. Small pieces of non-hardening clay are not only useful to make images, we have also seen participants smushing it to release tension. If using paints or clay with a regular group, ask participants to purchase their own sets of paints and clay. Paper towels or wet wipes are helpful to have on hand for participants.

Protocols are most powerful and effective when used within an ongoing professional learning community and facilitated by a skilled facilitator. To learn more about professional learning communities and seminars for facilitation, please visit the School Reform Initiative website at www.schoolreforminitiative.org.
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Setting the Tone / Comments and Responses
It is critical when creating and sharing images that there is NO judgment or comparison from the facilitator or from the group. This is a time to create trust and safety. Repeated sharing of images encourages participants to give voice to their ideas, thoughts, and feelings without worry that these will be judged or criticized. It is important that no one, except the maker, interprets or decides meaning. At times, the participant might not know what the image is about. In these cases, it can be useful for facilitators and participants to ask clarifying questions such as, “Could you tell me more about …” (a specific area), or respond personally to images: “When I look at your image I see . . . or feel . . .” It is crucial that each person’s response be a personal response, not a judgment. Since imagemaking is about the process, not the product, participants should be reminded that this protocol is not about creating high art. Over time the protocol can help participants learn not to judge/critique their own or each other’s work, which can be difficult since judgment is such an ingrained response, especially in educational settings.

Timing
Participants are given an abstract prompt and asked to paint or sculpt for only one minute at a time. If more time is given, participants start to self-edit, worry that their image is “incorrect,” or over-think their work. Again, the point is the immediacy of the process. There is no good or bad, right or wrong, result.

Abstract Prompts
Facilitators should give only abstract prompts, key words or phrases or important moments in literature/movies/etc. that defy realistic portrayal (e.g., “envy,” “revolution,” “tension,” “a telling moment from the story”). If we give concrete prompts (e.g., “paint Abraham Lincoln”) participants worry about being able to realistically represent the world. When participants are given abstract prompts, we subvert our inclination toward realism and open the door to symbolic representation of multiple meanings and associations.

No Words at First in the Images
Facilitators should ask participants to refrain from painting “symbols such as the cross, or smiley faces, or words” in their images — there will be an opportunity to reintroduce language later in the process.

Paper
Often one prompt/image can be given per sheet of paper. However, if the point for participants is to compare two big ideas (e.g., the juxtaposition of “tension” and “release” in literature, art, mathematics) then facilitators can ask participants to fold their paper in half and paint an image of each prompt on each side.

Reintroducing Language
After images have been created, then participants can be asked to look at their images, and jot down a few words, phrases, or sentences that come to mind. Too much time to think encourages self-censorship. By delaying the introduction of writing until this stage, participants are given the freedom to express themselves nonverbally and respond kinesthetically first. Often we have found that more, and different, language emerges after having painted (as opposed to when participants respond in writing before painting).
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Time
Varies depending on the purpose of the imagemaking — can range from a 15-minute pre-reading activity to a full hour with multiple imagemaking sessions punctuated by reading/discussion.

Group Format
Can be used one-on-one, with small groups of 5-6 participants, or with large groups. When using with large groups, it is recommended that participants reflect on the images, readings, and discussions in smaller subgroups, trios, or even pairs before having a large-group discussion.

1. Initial Prompt (10 minutes)
We recommend starting the session, especially the initial session with a world story or other text that relates to the topic of discussion. This helps to create community and provides a common experience for all participants. It also nourishes the imagination. The facilitator introduces the process (and mentions the critical elements/caveats above if this is the first time the group has painted/sculpted together — quick reminders may be needed thereafter). The facilitator then provides an abstract prompt (a key word, phrase, image, or moment in a story/text). If selecting a key moment, sometimes participants are asked to choose a “telling moment/image” from a text that is most important or meaningful to them. This helps subvert business as usual where participants might worry if they have chosen the right moment. Selecting a moment that is personally meaningful provides an opportunity for participants and facilitators to explore point of view, personal responses to texts, and content free from “correct answers.”

2. Painting/Sculpting (1 minute)
Participants are asked: “Please dip your fingers into the paint and begin.” For participants who are stuck or who freeze when the prompt is given, gently suggest they choose a color they are drawn to and begin painting. When using clay, it is necessary to use non-threatening words like: “Sculpt an image of…” If participants don’t respond, ask them to imagine the abstract prompt and just smush the clay. We often say: “Trust that a part of your brain, not connected to language or planning, will know what to do. Then we can make meaning of the image afterwards.”

3. Individual Reflection on Images (2-3 minutes)
Ask participants to look at the image they created and then to write a few words, phrases, or sentences that come to mind in order capture initial thinking.
4. **Group Reflection and Discussion** (10-30 minutes)
This stage of the protocol can be facilitated in many ways depending on your current goals and purposes. Often, this stage can be tackled in two very different ways:

1) Ask participants to share their image(s), their words, and their thinking one at a time (inviting discussion, collaborative questions that cannot be answered yes or no, positive responses and connections after each sharing, or simply moving on to the next participant without comment and then holding a larger discussion after all participants have shared).

2) Ask the entire group to place their images on a table and to step back and survey the collection. Facilitators may ask participants to actually move images around, with images that reflect or “speak to one another” touching. Then facilitators may ask the group to notice and share any major patterns: colors, shapes, patterns that repeat. Finally, the facilitator may ask the group to point out images they are curious about, which ones they want to know more about. Then one at a time, images can be noted, and the creators (if they wish) can share their thinking. Discussion can be tightly controlled or free-flowing depending again on goals/purposes.

5. **Next Steps** (Time varies widely depending upon purpose)
At this point, the facilitator may make several moves, depending on whether the imagemaking is meant to precede, guide, or follow a reading/discussion. If used as a pre-reading activity, with a key word/phrase/image that leads into the reading, then the facilitator may simply hand out the reading and ask the group to continue to reflect on the images/ideas as they read. If during, or following a reading/discussion, then the facilitator may ask for a final round of discussion connecting the imagemaking activity to larger understandings of the topic/reading/discussion/etc.

6. **Debrief/Reflection: All participants** (5-7 minutes)
What was it like to use this process? How did we do? What might we do differently next time? What was it like for you? What questions are you left with after the session?