

Imagination Nourishes Dietetic Practice

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Abstract

Albert Einstein once stated that imagination is more important than knowledge. How important is imagination to the dietetic profession? What have been the imaginations of dietitians over the years? Where would we be today without these imaginations? Can imagination be fostered and developed? What future imaginations will shape the dietetic profession? This article explores the phenomenon of imagination and why it is important to dietetic practice.

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Résumé

Albert Einstein a déclaré que l'imagination était plus importante que la connaissance. Quelle importance l'imagination revêt-elle dans la profession diététique? Quels efforts d'imagination les diététistes ont-elles déployés au fil des ans? Où serions-nous aujourd'hui sans ces initiatives? L'imagination peut-elle être nourrie et développée? Quelles idées lumineuses façonneront l'avenir de notre profession? Cet article explore le phénomène de l'imagination et son importance pour la pratique diététique.

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A STORY

Once upon a time, a girl was born. Up to age one she did what most babies do: eat, sleep, pee/poop, cry, coo. As she grew, she became curious and more curious. She loved to explore, to pick up something and look at it, feel it, and often taste it, whether it was food or not. She would spend hours in gleeful delight finding out new things. She would imagine worlds and characters and ways of being. One day she could fly, another day she was Superwoman leaping tall buildings in a single bound, another day she was clinging to the building like Spiderman. Sometimes she was a dinosaur, other times a princess. She was a dancer, a singer, an actress. With the help of Lego, Tinkertoy and blocks she was a great builder of buildings and bridges. And then... the inevitable happened: she grew up. She was told to follow rules and order. She was told to accept things as they are, that that is just how things are done. In answer to her "why" questions, she often heard "That's just the way it is." As she grew older, she became focussed on knowledge and sharing this knowledge with others. She became a dedicated employee trying to do all that was expected of her. She dreamed less, she questioned less. She imagined less. She no longer thought of leaping tall buildings or building great things. She was often uninspired. Let's take a break from the story for a minute. I will finish it at the end.

INTRODUCTION

I believe that there is a little bit of all of us in the person just described. The literature does suggest that as we grow older we use our imagination less. The importance of imagination in dietetics cannot be overstated. It drives our profession and shapes our future. In fact, wonderful fruits of our imagination can be seen everywhere and in everything we do. And I am convinced that we all have imagination, but you and I both know that some dietitians are more imaginative than others.

So how imaginative have dietitians been? What have WE "invented"? What have WE imagined? Think about this for a moment. Can you name dietitians, past and present, who have been imaginative, innovative or creative? Can you name what they imagined? Can you state how that imagination has shaped our profession?

Lillian Massey had it (it being imagination) and created the first school of household science in 1896. Vera Wilson had it and influenced the welfare of WWII troops: she ran a course for army cooks in 1940 and taught them the fundamental principles of caring for and preparing army rations. Helen Reed had it and began the first dietetic practicum program in 1913; Violet Ryley had it and touched the lives of a generation of dietitians; Kathleen Jeffs had it and broadened the scope of the profession. Annie Laird had it and pushed for the formation of a national dietetic association in 1935! So too have countless dietitians over the years had these imaginations. And it is because of these imaginations that the dietetic profession has grown and evolved to where it is today.

Dietetic practice is all about imagination

Dietetic practice has no presence beyond that of the people who bring it to life. Thus, the people who do bring it to life – dietitians – must have imagination. In fact, dietetic practice is all about imagination. It's about imagining how we can help a person newly diagnosed with diabetes, a mother of preschoolers who won't eat vegetables, an employee learning to use a new computer program, or an organization in understanding standards and accreditation. It's about imagining how to implement different program management styles, or how to collect data, or how to advocate on issues. It's about imagining new ways of doing things, new technologies and techniques that will help our

clients and ourselves. It's about imagining both the exciting and the mundane. Albert Einstein once stated that imagination is more important than knowledge. I am only now beginning to appreciate and understand the depth of this statement.

I chose this topic because I am awed by dietitians, past and present, who have this imagination. I am inspired by their thinking. I am moved by their passion. And I am also humbled. They have made contributions great and small. They have discovered new ways of doing, of knowing, and of reflecting. They have challenged the status quo. They have raised new questions, dreamed new possibilities. They have imagined to help themselves, their clients, their colleagues and their profession. And I am also curious: what is it about these dietitians? Where do they find time to "imagine?" How do they imagine? Where do their ideas come from? How do they get their ideas? And why do they choose to push these ideas or act on them? And how did they overcome resistance or negativity to their ideas?

And because I am a professor, I also wonder how I can encourage, if I can at all, imagination in the students I teach. In fact, imagination seems to be a goal of most university programs. I searched the Internet on imagination using many combinations of words – one such combination was imagination and dietetics. What would you have expected to come up? I wasn't sure what I would find and was surprised at what I did find.

Using Google, 7,800 sites came up. Scrolling through the first 50 sites, most were about university dietetic programs that referred to imagination in a variety of ways – their programs would enhance imagination, would enable students to use their imagination, and would prepare students for careers only limited by their imagination. We seem to be enamoured by this concept of "imagination." But do we really understand it?

What is imagination?

So what exactly is "imagination?" We use the word frequently and I suspect we take it for granted that we know what we mean. But as I have looked at this concept beyond my own original thoughts and understanding of the word, I have come to realize that it is a complex concept.

The word imagination has different shades of meanings, reflected in several distinct definitions in the Oxford Dictionary. These range from the formation of mental images (usually assumed to be visual), to states of mind such as daydreaming, characterized by fantasy and the spontaneous flow of thought from one idea to another, to the mental activity of considering or planning possible courses of action, to creative imagination – the power of framing highly novel or original ideas and cultural products. Ilona Roth, a writer and thinker on imagination, states that these meanings may seem, on the face of it, quite distinct (1). A key element that they share is a reference to the human mind's capacity to consider and work with concepts, ideas and actions that are not being currently sensed or physically enacted. It is this that enables humans to operate feasibly and adaptively in highly complex social groups, to contemplate intricate plans for possible (and impossible) future action, and to revisit both plans and actions themselves. Without the creative part of this faculty, human society, stripped of works of art, literature, poetry and music, and devoid of scientific and technological

innovation and discovery, would be quite unrecognizable and very dull.

Imagination is, in its broadest form, thinking outside of yourself – outside your time frame, your feelings, and your body. It is projecting yourself into the future and, in turn, creating a future for yourself, for your workplace, for your profession. It is creating mental images, circumstances, and feelings in order to create, plan for the future, or cope with current circumstances. Without imagination, it is hard to learn almost anything. Without imagination, we have no passion, no empathy, no deeper understanding; we only skim the surface of people, ideas and things. Depth and vision require imagination.

There is no doubt we live in a highly imaginative world. Much of the world around us is the product of our imaginations. Consider, if you will, that someone, somewhere at some point in time, imagined...

- Q-tips – Leo Gersztenzan thought of Q-tips when he saw his wife trying to clean their baby's ears with toothpicks and cotton.
- The outboard motor – Ole Evinrude got angry when the ice cream in his rowboat melted before he got to his island picnic spot. His solution was to invent the outboard motor.
- The automatic toaster – Charles Strite was fuming at the burnt toast in the factory lunchroom where he worked and thought up the automatic toaster.
- Popsicles – In 1905, 11-year-old Frank Epperson was mixing powdered soda and water to make soda pop. He accidentally left the mixing bucket outside; during the night the mixture froze solid with the wooden stirring stick standing straight up. The frozen pop tasted great and he started selling them for five cents.
- Chocolate chip cookies – Their birth was in 1930 when Ruth Wakefield was making chocolate cookies at the Toll House Inn in Whitman, Mass. When she ran out of baking chocolate, she broke a bar of semi-sweet chocolate into little pieces and added them to the dough. When the cookies were baked, the chocolate hadn't melted. Instead there were little chips of chocolate throughout the cookie. Ruth was soon selling chocolate chip cookies. What you might not know is that Ruth was a dietitian.

Fostering imagination

All of the products I just named required, at the beginning, imagination. How can we foster and develop our imagination? How do we do this? It's fine to say "Be imaginative" or "Use your imagination," but is this really useful information or advice? I myself am guilty of this – I cringe when I think of the times I have said to students "use your imagination," assuming they know how to do so. There is much written on imagination, creativity and innovation. And there is no shortage of advice on how we can be more imaginative. Here are some of my favourite pieces of advice:

- Don't accept the status quo – I know this is easier said than done and I can think of a million reasons for accepting the status quo, but sometimes we do have to try new paths and to think beyond what we are used to.
- Associate with other imaginative and creative people.
- Be on the lookout for new innovations that you can improve on. Think about the automobile. Since it was invented over

100 years ago, it has been constantly improved upon with thousands of new innovations added. There is always room for improvement. Even if you come up with a crazy way of solving a problem, it may turn out to be a good idea.

- Build upon the ideas of other people. Improve and refine their ideas. It is the fundamental reason for human progress. Isaac Newton once said “If I have been able to see further than others, it is because I stood on the shoulders of giants.” Human progress, and dietetic progress, is a step by step process.
- Be willing to make mistakes and take some risks.
- Don’t practice negative self-talk.
- Play the “what if” game. Ask yourself “what if” questions. What if we had three legs? What would life be like? What if we had three arms? Or wings? Although this exercise may seem pointless it can help us to be more creative and to think differently.
- Stay away from negative people, as they can kill your imagination or creativity.
- Think outside the box.

I am going to borrow from Kristen McNutt for some thoughts on thinking outside the box. She regularly wrote for *Nutrition Today* and in 1997 she wrote an article entitled “Thinking outside of the box... but acting within it – strategy for improving innovative thinking” (2). She suggests several thinking outside the box activities, but I won’t share them here.

What I found interesting is how she categorized people. She suggests that some of us are already experts at thinking outside the box, having a track record of proposing a solution no one else could see. Others have observed and respect thinking outside the box thinkers but have never really tried to do it themselves. Once new ground is broken, they are comfortable in giving suggestions for adaptations. Another group wants nothing to do with thinking outside the box. To them, proposing ideas that have no rational basis is irrational. Playing games is silly. Dumb ideas are dumb ideas. Imagining things that conflict with reality is a waste of time.

It reminds me of a cartoon I recently saw. A cat is sitting in a litter box. His paws are crossed as he stubbornly says: “I don’t care what anyone else says... I do my best thinking INSIDE the box.” The main point that the author was trying to make was that we need all types of individuals – that we can’t all be expected to think outside the box and be successful at it. However, she does suggest that we try.

This is not rocket science. However, I think in our busy everyday lives we often forget to follow this advice.

Earlier I mentioned dietitians from the past who have helped shape the dietetic profession. Now I would like to focus on the dietitians of today and of the future. That’s all of us, and all of the individuals that come after us.

I have come to know a lot of imaginative dietitians in my 30 years as a dietitian. I will not name them here because if I name all of them, it will take too long; if I name only a few, some might wonder, “Why didn’t she name me? I’m imaginative.” I also know that there are many imaginative dietitians that I haven’t met. So as not to offend anybody, I’ll name nobody.

What will the dietitians of the future discover? What will their ideas be? Only time will tell, of course, but I decided to

do a very informal, unscientific survey of children. Here’s what they told me they would like:

- Candy and chocolates with the same good things in it as carrots, peas, spinach, broccoli
- Robots to empty the dishwasher, sweep the floor, scrape the plates, put the dishes away
- Something that will automatically tell Mom (me) that we need food in the house
- When there is nothing to eat in the house, saying what you want will make it magically appear
- All foods being the same nutritionally so it didn’t matter what you ate
- Teeth that didn’t have to be brushed or flossed
- Parents who listened to you – you’d tell them to do the dishes and they’d do it
- To say a spell and ingredients would mix themselves up to make something, like a cake
- Being able to change foods they don’t like into foods they like by a touch of the finger

You laugh, as I did. But beware, because some imaginative individual will come along some day and find a way and means to do any or all of these.

Back to the dietitian of the future. Think about this question: What have we never done before in the dietetics field? The question is not “What have we never done before that we can afford, that we know how to do, that people will accept, that we can get away with?” Look again: “What have we never done before in the dietetics field?”

Think of something that people would need that doesn’t exist now. Something that would make people live better, or help you to do your job better, or transform your place of employment or the dietetic or health industry. Or think of something that would make you rich. Did anything pop into your mind? You may have thought of something in the realm of zany science fiction – an anti-dying pill, a pill to replace our need for food. Or perhaps you thought of something more practical: a better way to manage clients or information on clients, a new tool or technique. Perhaps you thought of something quite whimsical (think Inspector Gadget). Perhaps you have thought of something that sounds impossible but that’s actually under development. For example, related to our field, we will see (3,4):

- flexible, general service personal robots appearing in homes by 2010.
- memory-enhancing drugs reaching clinical use by 2010.
- surgeons working via the Internet, routinely operating on patients in remote areas, using robot manipulators; might dietitians use robots as well?
- by 2025, the first nanotechnology-based medical therapies reaching clinical use. Microscopic machines will monitor our internal processes, remove cholesterol plaque from artery walls, and destroy cancer cells before they have a chance to form a tumour.

I cannot obviously have all of you share your thoughts, but I would like to hear them sometime. In fact, here’s an idea. Perhaps we could start a discussion group dedicated to ideas, innovations and inventions in the dietetics field. A place where we can discuss “What have we never done before in the dietetics field?” A place where we can let our imaginations soar without

worrying about the “bitters or creativity killers.” Who knows what might arise from these discussions?

CONCLUSION

We need imaginative and inventive dietitians to nourish dietetic practice, to move it forward. We need to think outside of the box, to take risks, to challenge the status quo. If we don't do it for our profession, our practice, ourselves, who will? We are the ones who need to think imaginatively about dietetics and the work we do. We are the ones who must, **MUST** take a lead role in our profession.

In 1949, a group of imaginative dietitians presented the following recommendation at the Canadian Dietetic Association, the precursor to Dietitians of Canada: “That the Canadian Dietetic Association establish a joint memorial to Miss Violet Ryley and Miss Kathleen Jeffs, who devoted their lives to raising the status of the dietetic profession...” The first memorial lecture was given in 1951. Fifty-four years later I am the beneficiary of this group of imaginative, forward-thinking dietitians. Thank you to them. Thank you to my colleagues who nominated me to deliver today's address – you are some of the most imaginative people I know. And thank you to DC for giving me the privilege of addressing my fellow dietitians at this conference. When I was working on this speech and was lamenting about what to say, my 17-year-old son said to me: “Mom, I will make it easy for you. This is what you do: you walk up to the stage, turn around, look everyone in the eye and say forcefully “Imagine – just do it!” Then sit down.” Well, that would have been simpler, but not half as much fun.

THE END OF THE STORY

This once imaginative child watched in wonder at the imagination of her small nieces and nephews. She wondered if she could recapture some of this imagination. She began to ask herself “What if...” questions. She started to take time to daydream. She started to question the status quo. She imagined that she could imagine and to believe that she was the one that could imagine great things, big or small. Some of her imaginations she acted on and some of them came to fruition. Some influenced dietetic practice. And although she didn't marry a prince, she did live happily ever after. THE END

References

1. Roth I. Imaginative Minds: an overview of themes and perspectives. Available from: <http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/imagination/resources/imagination.htm>; accessed May 22, 2005.
2. McNutt K. Thinking outside of the box... but acting within it – strategy for improving innovative thinking. *Nutrition Today* 1997;32:174-9.
3. Cetron MJ, Davies O. Trends now shaping the future: Technological, workplace, management, and institution trends. *The Futurist* 2005; 39:37-50.
4. Cetron MJ, Davies O. Trends now shaping the future: Economic, societal, and environmental trends. *The Futurist* 2005;39:27-47.

Dietitians of Canada 2005 Annual Awards

Undergraduate Awards:

- Kraft Canada Inc. – \$2,500: Amy (Yuen Fun) Yiu
- Mead Johnson Nutritionals – \$1,500: Melanie Aileen Wilkie

Graduate Awards:

- DC Memorial Fund – \$2,500: Janine Woodrow
- McCain Foods (Canada) – \$2,500: Melissa Zirk
- Dietitians of Canada – \$ 1,000: Sobia Khan

Judy Van Tilburg Memorial Dietetic Intern Bursary:

- Kathleen Brennan
- Yuka Asada

Dietitians of Canada and Kraft Canada Speaking of Food and Healthy Living Award:

Award of Excellence:

- **Alberta:** M.O.V.E. (Making our Vermilion Energized) – unique approach to positive influence on Canadian families' healthy living habits

Certificates of Merit:

- **British Columbia:** Cooking for Your Life! (Canadian Diabetes Association, Pacific Area)
- **Central and Southern Ontario:** Living School (Ophea)
- **Quebec, Northeast and Eastern Ontario:** Eat Well, Play Well – Nutrition Month 2004 (Chateauguay Valley High School)
- **Atlantic:** Healthy Kids Club (Grenfell Regional Health Services)

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