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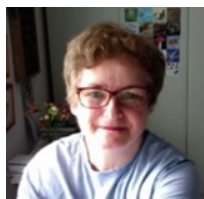
# The Power of Collective Imagination

## Chrissi Nerantzi with contributions from Ben Greenhalgh and Louise Batchelor



Chrissi Nerantzi is an academic developer in the University Teaching Academy at Manchester Metropolitan University and a National Teaching Fellow. She is the founder of the Greenhouse and the #creativeHE open community and cofounder of Creative Academic. To find out more about Chrissi, visit her blog at <https://chrissinerantzi.wordpress.com/>

Ben Greenhalgh is a Lecturer on the Foundation Art & Design programme at Manchester Met. He has recently achieved Fellow of The Higher Education Academy status and am currently completing my PGCLTHE this Summer. Ben has over 12 years industry experience as a Graphic Designer with expertise in design for print, branding and web. Designer on 'The Invisible King' project, he worked closely with academic staff and students to bring the illustrations, type and book layout together.



Louise Batchelor Is a Senior Lecturer on Foundation Art & Design at Manchester Met. Louise trained and worked as an Illustrator/Art Director before becoming an educator. She is the Art Editor for 'The Invisible King' project, working closely with the students and overseeing the artworks. Louise is a passionate tutor who believes in building confidence through encouragement and example. She is a bird watcher and shares a wildlife garden with all creatures great and small.

### The pandemic, lockdown and what followed

There is a tendency to go with the familiar, the traditional what we have always been doing while pushing away and often ignoring and ridiculing new and unusual ideas and solutions. This also happens within higher education learning and teaching practices. Nelson<sup>1</sup> (2018, 4) acknowledges this by stating that "there is a strong pedagogical impulse to eliminate haphazard approaches to learning and sadly imagination and creativity are a casualty." Imagination as a casualty is an uncomfortable and disturbing reality for all those who dream, explore, love adventures, are curious and inquire. Being marginalised because your ideas are different and unusual and perhaps don't fit with the status quo, is something that innovators often experience. Innovators, however, are imagining a different world. In their ideas and the stories they create, they inhabit alternative worlds that can become their reality.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a lot of conversation about the need for more creative approaches in learning and teaching in higher education to overcome the new challenges and generate imaginative ideas, approaches and tactics that will help practitioners, students and their institutions to engage in stimulating learning experiences that tickle their curiosity and feed their inner desire to learn and inquire. As Crawford<sup>2</sup> (2020, online) says "... the creative vaccine can work its magic on all our minds at this dreadful time..." And while his words relate to creativity within the arts, we see increasingly that we call upon creativity across disciplines and borders to help us move forward in a positive and imaginative way. Jackson<sup>3 p.7</sup> talks about the need for leaders to stimulate "the imaginations and inventiveness of people." Perhaps the time is ripe to make this happen now? Fullan et al.<sup>4</sup> talk about the disruption caused by the pandemic, how we learn to navigate through this new landscape, learn from this experience but also seize the opportunities to re-imagine education<sup>4</sup>. Jackson<sup>5</sup> talks about seeing problems as opportunities – perhaps this mindset is more effective in stimulating our imagination. For me these have been comforting words that have helped me and still do overcome adversity in a positive way. Perhaps as Kleon<sup>6</sup> says, with a positive and generative mindset, constraints and limitations can mean freedom. This definitely applies to how I feel and what I do. Absolute abundance and unlimited resources are probably more a tyranny than a blessing anyway.

During the pandemic I turned to crafting and storytelling. It happened naturally. These are not new activities that I picked up during the pandemic but I started engaging with them more regularly as I felt that they provided me with creative outlets and helped me feel better too. Also I reached out to different materials and techniques. Silver clay is something that I haven't mastered yet... The open invitation to dream, to imagine and to make was not possible to ignore, to forget. Despite being busier than ever before and working long hours to support colleagues in my role as an academic developer, I did feel that I needed to do something different. To find balance and hope, to make and connect with my inner self and also connect with others. To feel

better and help others feel better too during these challenging times. I wanted to help in any way I could and use my imagination, inner commitment and love for creative expression and making.

At the same time, my idea (you will find out about it shortly) would give me a new and exciting opportunity to work more closely with two colleagues from our Arts and Humanities Faculty and some of their students. A live project partnership model as an alternative approach to academic development?

## Imaging and creating the picture book

I love writing stories and during the pandemic and particularly after the nationwide lockdown in the UK started, I think it was on 23 March 2020, I found a new inspiration for picture book stories. Because everything was suddenly so different, material for stories popped into my head constantly. I captured them and often it only took me a few days to complete one and move to the next one. In the first few weeks I wrote five. I wanted to capture what I experienced, through my eyes using imaginative storytelling. The floating sofa, In love, How do you know, Leave me alone and the Invisible King are the stories I wrote. They live on my laptop at the moment, except one of them that escaped... and I will tell you more about it.

Le Guin <sup>6 p 110</sup> said about writing, *"It can be useful to think of writing as gardening. You plant the seeds, but each plant will take its own way and shape. The gardener's in control, yes; but plans are living, wilful things. Every story has to find its own way to the light. Your great tool as gardeners is your imagination."* My imagination feeds on the world inside me and around me and guides me to create, to write. I have to admit that I enjoy creative writing more than academic writing. Not because it is less of a struggle, because it can be equally challenging, but because I feel truly free to invent and imagine and create my own story worlds. Something that is not really acceptable in academic writing.

When I write stories, I visualise these while writing. They are picture stories using words. I like that but I am not an illustrator. And while I have not so long ago attempted to illustrate a story, I feel insecure and incompetent in this area. This skill is definitely something I want to develop in the future as I would love to illustrate my own stories especially as I feel so connected with them.

My own limitations in illustration skills could be seen as a problem with what I had in mind. I wanted to turn one of the stories into a picture book and raise money for those in need but also bring hope and fresh creative energy to young readers, their families and carers. The problem became an opportunity. And that opportunity involved others in a collaboration. I selected the Invisible King story, just 88 words. How can this be a story with just 88 words only? I think this is my shortest so far and I have learnt that in picture books less is definitely more. It was from conception an invitation to the reader to participate in imaginary storytelling. To bring their imaginative ideas to the story to add their own words if they wanted to.

Traditionally, picture books are written by one person and illustrated by another one, or the writer is also the illustrator. Picture books with multiple illustrators is not something that I have seen a lot beyond perhaps the example of the openly licensed picture book platform Storyweaver (<https://storyweaver.org.in/>), where illustrations can be selected from various illustrators who have made their work available on the platform to write a picture book. I flirted with the idea of creating a collaborative picture book. I decided to share the story and idea with two colleagues Ben Greenhalgh and Louise Batchelor from the Manchester School of Art and see what they thought and whether they would be interested in doing this together, with some of their students. They liked the idea and accepted my invitation and offer their perspectives below.

**Ben Greenhalgh:** *The Invisible King project provided an exciting, unique experience for academic staff at the University and students to collaborate on a professional 'live' brief that had the added incentive of being for charity. It would offer our talented Foundation Art and Design students an opportunity to showcase their illustrative ability and contribute as a team. I was keen to support and work alongside them, as design lead, in bringing a story surrounding a very current issue, the Covid-19 pandemic, into the form of a completed illustrated children's picture book.*

**Louise Batchelor:** *I was delighted to be involved in The Invisible King project for two reasons, first it was for charity and second I believed it would be an exciting and challenging 'live' brief for the Foundation Art and Design students to contribute to. I enjoyed the collaboration between author, illustrators and graphic designer. It was a challenge for me working with 11 other people. I was given the responsibility of art editor working closely with 9 students who needed instruction and encouragement throughout, I got a real sense of achievement from the experience seeing the illustrations progress into final artworks for the book.*

I was thrilled when I found out we could go ahead with the project and that students were interested to join us for this adventure and excitement filled me once again. Due to the pandemic and the lockdown our collaboration happened remotely, asynchronously via Facebook Group Messenger and synchronously in a Zoom room with all cameras switched on. This combination helped us get to know each other a little bit and make good progress quickly despite the complexity of the project and its novel approach. I also had the opportunity to see first hand and experience how learning and teaching looked like in this class and how students were supported. I was amazed by the care both colleagues showed to the students and how they helped them boost their confidence while also helping them to develop their illustration skills and bring the best out of them.

It is hard to do something like this with one other person. On the Invisible King project we worked with 9 illustration students and one 5-year old girl. What follows are some thoughts linked to how we approached the making of this collaborative picture book during the pandemic and how we worked together remotely using networked technologies. There was no other way.

First of all students were invited to provide sketches of the main character, the Invisible King and a particular scene. This helped me see the different illustration styles but also identify a visualisation of the king that I could relate to most. All king sketches had potential but one spoke to me particularly. It was almost as if this student knew what I had in mind. From these sketches we quickly agreed who would work on the king character. The draft scenes also helped us identify students for individual scenes. As I had visualised all the scenes in my head and on the tablet, we shared my ideas in a Zoom meeting and assigned the scenes based on the preliminary sketches and detailed feedback we provided to all students.

### ***A framework to aid reflection***

Harris<sup>7</sup> framework about creative methods provide a useful guide to reflect on the different ways that were used to create this book and particularly the illustrations.

- Evolution: new ideas from existing ideas
- Synthesis: combination of existing ideas
- Revolution: brand new ideas
- Re-application: existing ideas in new light
- Changing direction: new path when the old doesn't work

Below, we add some thoughts linked to the creative process relating to two specific scenes that show how we have brought together our individual imaginations in different ways based on the above framework. On the left hand side of Figure 1 is the scene as I, the writer, imagined originally and on the right hand side the final illustration that has been used in the book.

**Figure 1** Example scene from the picture book - left my sketchy idea, right the illustration produced by all the students

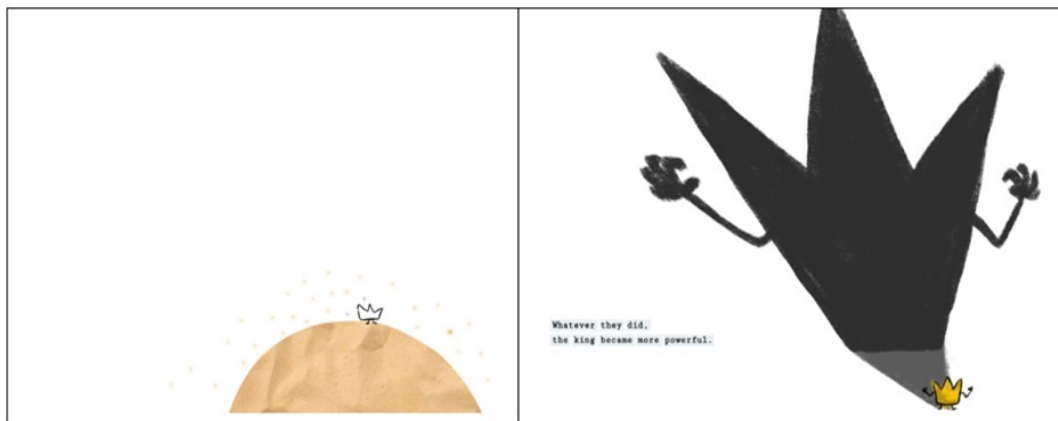


**Evolution:** Figure 1 shows a scene to illustrate that everybody was running away from the invisible king. I could see it in front of my eyes, I connected vividly with this mental image that I drew on the tablet. My idea was that one illustrator would be assigned this scene. It didn't happen this way. The idea about making it a truly collaborative scene came from a discussion we had with the students and a suggestion that was made by Louise. She saw an opportunity to unite all students on this picture and it was such a wonderful idea. As a result of her suggestion, all students contributed to this particular scene and brought their diverse styles

into this illustration. Not only did we use illustrations from all students, they also brought in diversity and therefore made it a truly inclusive one. I really like how my colleagues and students embraced the original basic visualisation and enriched it in such an imaginative way. For me the final output but also the creative process represents an evolution 7 where a new idea was formed based on an existing one.

**Revolution:** Figure 2 shows an example of departure from the original visualisation. The student illustrator who was assigned this scene took the initiative to design something very different based on their own imagination and the key message of this scene, which was that the king became more and more powerful. Comparing the two it is clear that my imagination linked to the visualisation of this scene was weak. I was the first to admit it and I embraced what I saw. It is that letting go, and being open to something that is different and potentially better that is important, I felt. And acknowledging the strength of the imagination for others and how it can alter our own potentially too. The illustrator’s vision really shows how they connected with the story and created a strong image in a very different way, something that I didn’t have in mind at all. I am so pleased this student had the creative confidence and used their imagination to put forward a very different scene, that is much more powerful and effective than my idea. They ditched the original idea and coming up with a brand new one bringing about a revolution.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 2** shows an example of departure from the original visualization (left) and final illustration (right)




## A COLLABORATIVE PICTURE BOOK PROJECT

Openly licensed, an extra curricular collaboration between 3 academic staff, 10 students and one little girl

Illuminating the power of storytelling to bring hope

Coming together as a community to connect, problem-solve and co-create during the pandemic

Raising money for the Greater Manchester Mayor’s Charity







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Written by Chrissi Nerantzi


Art Edited by Louise Batchelor, Designed by Benjamin Greenhalgh

Illustration Contributions by the following The Manchester School of Art, Foundation Art & Design students: Evie Hurst, Lucas McCoy, Lucy Waterworth, Ellie Kilshaw, Lisa Silva, Will Fairbrother-Clarke, Marianne Storer, Georgina Moore, Ted Bain Smith, Luisa Ventisei & Phaedra Maria Chatzidamianou



# THE INVISIBLE KING



A survey shared with students who participated in this project provided useful insights. For the students while it was a new experience and they seemed to enjoy working with others for a good cause, they also found it challenging to follow a brief. Some mentioned particularly the difficulty of using the writer's visualisations and translating them into images. Others felt that they should ask more questions to better understand the brief and requirements. All responses show that students felt that it was a worthwhile activity and that they have learnt something about themselves as an illustrator.

## What we learnt

**Chrissi:** The journey of putting the book together was an adventure. I learnt so much. I don't know if anybody else has attempted to create a picture book with so many collaborators working exclusively remotely in very challenging times. A picture book is usually the work of a writer and an illustrator or a writer-illustrator and they work on a book over a much longer period of time. We did it intensively over a few weeks. I feel that the book brought different styles and ideas together in imaginative ways. But that is not all. It also gave me valuable insights into how two of my colleagues, Ben and Louise, work with their students during very challenging times. Their commitment to and care for their students is exemplary! And that was a really useful insight to gain from the experience as an academic developer: knowledge I can use in my role as the faculty link.

**Ben Greenhalgh:** It was initially difficult to envision how a collaboration of this size, including 10 students with varying creative styles, an author, art director and designer, would come together. However, the students were dedicated, committed and imaginative in answering the brief – it was fabulous to see the initial story evolve from written form to initial sketches to beautiful finished illustrations. It was a pleasure to be able to bring all the visual and written elements together in a designed, formatted and illustrated children's picture book – communication and a clear vision was key in enabling this to happen.

What I found most impressive, was that the students were able to engage with and complete the project under extraordinary circumstances, at the end of a very long, demanding academic year. Although the situation wasn't ideal with all involved being fairly new to remote working, I felt that the final illustrated children's picture book came together incredibly well. All collaborators involved should be proud of the accomplishments, in particular considering the tight timeframe to work with!

**Louise Batchelor:** I feel very proud of my students, at a particularly strange and stressful time in their lives they chose to engage with this extra-curriculum project. I really enjoyed the creative decision making and seeing the book evolve from the original idea into a lovely, gentle illustrated children's story book that deals with this unprecedented difficult time in history. Sometimes it was frustrating not being able to sit down with the students and physically sketch out what was needed in a language we are more used to using! Distance learning can be difficult but it was a learning curve which I can now take forward!

**If you would like to read *The Invisible King*, you can access it at <https://zenodo.org/record/3924437#.Xvzb1ihKg2x>**  
Through the book we would like to raise money for the Greater Manchester Mayor's Charity at <https://www.justgiving.com/mayorofgreatermanchesterscharity> to support the most vulnerable during this pandemic. Be generous if you can. Thank you.

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