

AN IMAGINATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING HISTORY

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Imagine teaching historical topics in a way that leaves students *feeling* something about what they are learning. This is when teaching becomes story telling. Engaging students imaginatively with what they are learning is a primary objective of Imaginative Education (IE). IE, a socio-cultural approach to learning based on the work of Egan (1997, 2005), is centrally involved in teaching students in ways that tap into their emotional and imaginative lives (www.ierg.net). It is certainly not new to point out that children's thinking is most deeply and energetically engaged when their imaginations and emotions are active. IE suggests that the most suitable ways to emotionally and imaginatively engage students in learning is to base our teaching around the ways our students make sense of the world at certain stages in their lives.

For students who are literate, there are certain learning or “cognitive” tools provided by written language that shape their sense-making and engage their imaginations in their use. These include: the narrative format, the extremes of experience and limits of reality, association with heroes, the sense of wonder, and a number of others. This article provides a brief example of how just a couple of these tools—the narrative format and association with heroes—can influence teaching about history in a way that leaves students emotionally and imaginatively engaged. For further information about IE and to view a range of historical topics shaped in imaginative ways visit: www.ierg.net.

Two Cognitive Tools of Written Language

The *narrative format* or *narrative understanding* is a tool related to our ability to best make sense of things when we can grasp their emotional meaning. A narrative context for knowledge can establish its emotional importance while also conveying the knowledge—about physics or mathematics no less than about history. Teaching in a narrative format involves asking oneself (like a reporter would) “what’s the *story* on” historical content.

Associations with heroes gives us the ability to imbue any aspect of reality with heightened importance. By associating with things or people that have heroic qualities or exceptional traits, we may overcome some of the threat of alienation involved in the realization of a vast real world whose limits are unknown to us. We make sense of the world in part by connecting with some transcendent human quality (courage, strength, agility, insight etc.).

So, when one shapes a topic in a narrative or story format, one brings out the emotional force of the topic. For example, one could find something within the

content that lends itself to brief vivifying by means of an anecdote or a personal detail. Looking for a heroic quality within the content and bringing this into focus in teaching is one way in which we can convert events or content that is normally taught without bringing such traits to the fore into something immediately more engaging by putting it into a human context or imbuing it with human characteristics.

In the imaginative classroom, we will expect to see ongoing use of narrative format and “heroizing” of content. All teachers know that if they pause and tell the students about some weird event or accident that they saw on the way to school, attention is immediately enhanced; if the event is well told, one can feel the intensity of interests among the students. The trick is to think about whatever historical topic one is teaching, and introduce items of interest to students that will enhance understanding and engage students’ imaginations, not simply as a “hook” but as something that is central to the meaning of the topic to be taught. The lives of mathematicians, scientists, explorers, and writers are chock-full of incidents that are not the usual focus of teaching, but which can enlighten and enliven a great deal of the world students are learning about. History is even more richly full of such characters and characteristics. IE suggests using them more frequently and systematically.

An Example: Rome

How might we make vivid in a brief narrative something about the power of Rome? How can we personalize that power so students can get a sense of it? We might begin to talk to the students about a very hot day in the desert long ago, about four miles from the city of Alexandria in Egypt in 168 B.C.E. Ahead is a huge army led by King Antiochus IV who intended to conquer the city. But a small group of men approached the king on horses. They were a delegation from the Roman senate, headed by a typically proud and tough Roman senator called Popillius Laenas. The king allowed the Roman to approach him, and held out his hand in greeting, not wanting to antagonize Rome as well as the Egyptians. Popillius refused to shake it, and instead thrust into the king’s hand a tablet on which the Senate’s resolution that Alexandria not be invaded was written. The king and his council were outraged at this treatment. “Read that before you take another step,” said Popillius. The king said he would discuss it with his friends and advisors first. Popillius slid from his horse and with his rod drew a circle around the king and his horse in the sand. “Before you move out of that circle, tell me what I am to report to the senate of Rome about your intentions.” The king hesitated, astounded by this treatment. But he also knew that facing the wrath of Rome was something no mere king could any longer dare. “I’ll do what the senate decrees,” he said. Only then did Popillius take the king’s hand as an ally, and the army began its long march home.

You don’t mess with the Roman senate because behind that tablet with the decree were the Roman legions. You really don’t want to mess with them. Within a little over a hundred years Rome changed from a city-state that governed a part of central Italy to a super-power that destroyed ancient empires and brought all the countries from Spain across North Africa and into Asia under its control. Popillius demonstrates in this brief narrative the courage and pride that made it possible.

So what can IE contribute to teaching history? IE offers teachers a way to imaginatively and emotionally engage students with all historical topics. IE suggests that everything we have to teach in history has embedded within it different “cognitive tools”; by using them in our planning, we can routinely engage students’ imaginations in learning. As a result history becomes more meaningful and memorabl

References

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Biographies

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