



Mythic and Heroic Imaginations

and how to use them in teaching

Rod Cunningham explains the ideas of Kieran Egan, one of the world's foremost thinkers on creative education.

Teaching approaches which prioritise imagination and emotional engagement are not common. Kieran Egan has developed one such, which I have attempted to summarise below. I believe there are valuable insights to be gained from Egan's work which can inform our thinking at a time of National Curriculum review. In the later part of this article I discuss some of the implications of Egan's work for the revised curriculum in Wales. This also has relevance for the curriculum review in England where there is a similar move towards a more skills-based approach.

Egan addresses what he sees as the crucial issue of how young people at different ages engage with knowledge and learning. He believes that the thinking behind

present curriculum design attempts to reconcile three conflicting ideas and thus fails to engage young people in their learning. The first has been with us for over two thousand years since Plato set up his Academy. It is the notion of subject disciplines and the accumulation of formal knowledge. This is manifest in the divisions within the curriculum and the approach to the acquisition and testing of knowledge which has been established in the school and university system. The second is the importance of 'preparing students for life in society and the world of work'. The third could broadly be termed 'active' or 'experiential' learning.

All three of the above have merit, according to Egan. He claims, however, that they are strongly

contradictory and that being guided by these three ideas whilst designing a curriculum has led to irresolvable tensions. For example, although formal knowledge is important it is inaccessible to many in its present form. Preparation for life and citizenship is also important but leads to a narrow, provincial view which is incompatible with the development of critical thinking. Similarly, although learning by doing is an essential element in the development of pupils' autonomy, over-emphasis on this approach can conflict with formal knowledge and can leave the learner light on subject material to work with.

Egan cites two theories of learning and development which dominate present educational thought. He recognises, in the work of Piaget, an attempt to identify the influence of maturation on cognitive growth. It is clear that there is development over time. However, following a Piagetian model, according to Egan, can lead us to underestimate the abilities of learners at a particular age and to fail to recognise that the kind of understanding at a younger age is not simply an underdeveloped version of adult understanding. Vygotsky's ideas are a more central influence on Egan's thinking, particularly the idea of cognitive development being mediated by language and consequently by the socio-cultural surroundings. Egan claims to build upon this Vygotskian viewpoint to take account of the design of effective learning opportunities.

Underlying Egan's approach is the idea that the cognitive tools available to children within their particular culture and at their physical stage of development determine the 'kinds of understanding' which they can develop. Egan is not claiming to establish a theory of learning, but rather has undertaken a critical study which points to a range of practical teaching and learning ideas. In the long term the value of his contributions will be judged against the practical teaching frameworks that he has produced with colleagues.

Egan's work is essentially a support for teachers. The task of the teacher, as Egan sees it, is to assist in the development of cognitive tools appropriate to the particular kind of understanding relevant to learners. These cognitive tools, according to Egan, will provide the most effective means of engaging the learner both imaginatively and emotionally and of thereby promoting learning.

Egan claims that it is of fundamental importance to establish emotional and imaginative engagement with topics and not simply to use this a hook to get a topic started. He writes that:

'Engaging the imagination is not a sugar-coated adjunct to learning; it is the very heart of learning.' (2005, p36)

The cognitive tools at each stage

Egan identifies three frameworks which map development from preschool to upper secondary school. I have summarised these below showing the equivalent age ranges in the Welsh system.

Mythic	age 5 to 7	oral fluency	Foundation Phase
Romantic	age 8 to 14	Literary fluency	KS 2 and 3
Theoretic	age 15 plus	Theoretical fluency	KS4 plus

Egan suggests that in each age range a number of 'cognitive tools', as he calls them, are particularly effective when used to promote learning. The acquisition of cognitive tools drives students' educational development, according to Egan. All tools remain in use to some extent as children/young people mature and early tools can be utilised at later stages. Embryonic tools of later stages can be found in previous stages, hence the boundary between stages is not clear cut. The main tools in each stage are briefly summarised below and the frameworks to assist teachers with their planning are summarised in Appendix 1. These summaries do scant justice to Egan's ideas and interested readers are strongly encouraged to read the books in the bibliography and visit the web-site of the 'Imaginative Education Research Group', www.ierg.net. Examples of unit and topic plans at each stage can also be found on this website.

Cognitive tools for the Mythic Stage (Foundation Phase)

Children in the Mythic Stage readily respond to the world in terms of powerful and dramatic events. They accept 'magical' effects without question, classify by using binary extremes and are comfortable with the use of metaphors. The main cognitive tools to develop during this stage are as follows:

Story – a powerful tool for imaginatively engaging with knowledge.

Metaphor – seeing one thing in terms of another.

Binary opposites – elementary form of organising and categorising.

Rhyme, rhythm, pattern – potent tools for giving meaningful and memorable shape to any content.

Jokes and humour – expose the basic ways language works.

Mental imagery – space to generate one's own mental images.

Gossip – a basic form of social interaction.

Play – enables learners to distance themselves from reality and experiment.

Mystery – builds fascination and interest.

Embryonic tools of literacy from the next stage.

Cognitive tools for the Romantic stage (key stage 2 and 3)

In the Romantic Stage children accept extraordinary events and powers but need some rationale for them. For example, they accept that superman can fly because he was born on another planet where such powers are commonplace. Children in this stage respond to exotic features and heroic achievements. The Guinness Book of Records is popular, as is making collections of objects. The main cognitive tools to develop at this stage are as follows:

A sense of reality – the development of disembedded, rational forms of thinking.

The extremes of experience and the limits of reality – exotic and bizarre examples.

Association with heroes – imbue aspect of reality with heightened importance.

Sense of wonder – key tool in initial explorations of reality.

Collections and hobbies – the urge to collect and classify.

Knowledge and human meaning – beyond the surface to the source of the knowledge in human emotion and endeavour.

Narrative understanding – making the best sense of things when the emotional impact is grasped (extended story telling.)

Capacities for revolt and idealism – beginning to see the limitations in the present.

Changing the context – importance of varying the context to add variety.

The literate eye – visual organisers.

Embryonic tools of theoretic thinking, the next phase.

Cognitive Tools for Theoretic Thinking (from about 15 years onwards)

In the Theoretic (in earlier work called ‘philosophic’) stage the child’s sense of being a causal agent in the world starts to develop fully. More generalised understanding develops as the interest of young people moves from ‘courageous people’ to ‘courage as an ideal’. The following cognitive tools should be prioritised in this phase:

The sense of abstract reality – making sense of the world in terms of ideas.

The sense of agency – recognising oneself as related to the world via complex causal chains.

Grasp of general ideas and their anomalies – ability to grasp more general theories and be aware of anomalies.

The search for authority and truth – testing the validity of general ideas and being aware of their status.

Meta-narrative understanding – shaping general ideas into even higher-level theories.



Some Implications for the Revised Curriculum

The revised curriculum in Wales features programmes of study for each subject which have two sections, 'skills' and 'range'. The skills section includes subject process, and the range, subject content. It is a statutory requirement to cover these programmes of study within the Foundation Phase (reception to year 2) or key Stages 2, 3 and 4 as appropriate. As well as programmes of study the Welsh curriculum documents now include a non-statutory 'skills framework' which comprises thinking skills, communication, application of number and use of ICT. This framework spans the period from early years to the end of schooling. The revised curriculum is an attempt to reduce the emphasis on content and maximise the development of transferable skills. To this extent the revised curriculum appears to be a positive step. Supporting documentation encourages teachers to consider the skills first when planning and to build more cross-curricular, embedded and experiential work into the school day. Guidance is not clear, however, about the nature of the learning and thinking skills and how these can best be developed over the short and long term. It appears that this is to be worked out by individual schools. In my view, this omission leaves the revised curriculum open to abuse and teachers without the clarity they need for effective planning. I offer below some speculative ideas about how Egan's cognitive frameworks could aid our thinking on this issue. I further suggest that action research by teachers will provide the most appropriate means for ideas to be developed further.

The danger, as I see it, is that skills will become the new content and that teachers will plan for the development of a skill over a lesson or series of lessons. This could potentially disadvantage pupils by devaluing important subject content and, at the same time, treating learning and thinking skills as discrete and disembedded entities. Further to this, the process could de-skill teachers by encouraging them to plan for discrete delivery and thereby having them fail 'to see the wood for the trees'. Egan's work provides a perspective on curriculum design that might assist us as we think through the practical implications of the revised curriculum. He notes the following which I think could be applied to more than the subjects named:

Mathematics, science and music are often taught as having a nature to which the child has to conform. Educational success is then measured in terms of the degree of conformity achieved. I am recommending a rather different approach here, one that seeks an accommodation between the 'nature' of those disciplines and the intellectual tools by means of which the young child can engage them. These tools, in Vygotsky's sense, mediate the child's grasp and understanding of them. Designing the Mythic curriculum, then, is a matter of

selecting that content within these disciplines that the mediating tools of Mythic understanding make accessible, meaningful and engaging.' (Egan, 1997, p216)

Without some clarity we may be in danger of substituting conformity within discipline knowledge with conformity to skills development. What Egan suggests is that the kinds of understanding are quite different at different stages in a child's life. Although elements of the prior and subsequent stage are recognisable in the child's present stage the change is dramatic. This contradicts the idea that a single, developmental taxonomy could provide a basis for planning and measurement of progress across the years from age four to nineteen. If Egan alerts us to the fact that the learning of young children might not simply be a junior version of adult thinking then he has done us a major favour. It is almost as if the kind of understanding undergoes a paradigm shift as the young person develops. Not understanding this may account for much ineffective learning and consequent disengagement.

Egan's enticement to select content on the basis of the kind of understanding prevalent has to be tempered by the fact that teachers have to follow a statutory programme of study. They could, however, consider distinguishing between short-term and long-term objectives. Egan notes the importance of intellectual content for the cognitive tools to work with. The 'big subject ideas', the range, could form the basis of short-term lesson objectives, and the skills, the basis of longer-term objectives. Higgins et. al. (2003) note that 'the development of metacognitive approaches, and teaching for transfer... are exceedingly difficult (if not impossible) to achieve in the short term.' This division of objectives might avoid the excesses of daily and weekly checklists for learning skills. Furthermore, Egan's approach provides a rationale for shifting the focus of planning from a series of discrete skills to development of skills over time through the cognitive tools.

If Egan's cognitive frameworks have validity then the development of thinking and learning skills should be greatly enhanced. It is unlikely that teachers and schools would be willing to take the work on cognitive frameworks on trust. They could, however, form the basis of a very powerful tool for professional development. The frameworks for planning (outlined in detail on the IERG website) are easy to use. In using them teachers are focussing on three elements identified by Higgins et. al.(2003) as being highly important for effective teaching:

- Knowledge of content.
- Knowledge of how particular children learn.
- The combination of the above – the way to teach particular content to particular pupils.

By starting in a small way with a few lessons in one particular subject the value of emphasising the cognitive tools as suggested by Egan should become apparent (and has done according to teachers reporting on the IERG website). Clearly it will be valuable if teachers work collaboratively on the development of 'teaching scripts' relevant to a particular stage.

The value of Egan's work, as I see it, is that it resonates with much of what teachers already know about the way pupils learn. It helps to explain and put in the form of testable hypotheses, why particular approaches to engagement with learning work better than others with children of different ages. It might also provide the fresh perspective which overcomes the inadequacies of present curriculum design.



Frameworks for Planning

Egan has produced planning frameworks for each of the three stages. He sees these as aids to 'help teachers lay out a lesson plan or a unit of study for imaginatively engaging students' (2005, p39) using the appropriate cognitive tools. More detailed support and examples of plans are available on the website of the 'Imaginative Education Research Group', www.ierg.net. I have summarised the frameworks below but these mean very little unless practical examples are studied.

The First Planning Framework (Mythic)

- 1) Identify importance in a topic, why it should matter to students and what is emotionally engaging about it.
- 2) Find binary opposites to best show the importance of the topic.
- 3) Organise the content in story form including the binary opposites in a coherent story.
- 4) Provide opportunities for organizing and thinking in a more literary way in preparation for the next stage.
- 5) Conclude by resolving the dramatic conflict inherent in the binary opposites in an appropriate way.

- 6) Evaluate the impact of the planning on students' learning.

The Second Planning Framework (Romantic)

- 1) Identifying heroic qualities of the topic along with emotional images.
- 2) Organizing the content into a narrative structure which defines the heroic qualities central to the topic articulates some of the extremes and more bizarre attributes and defines attendant human hopes and fears.
- 3) Focus on aspects which inspire awe and wonder.
- 4) Provide opportunities for pupils to pursue some aspect of the topic in exhaustive detail.
- 5) Provide opportunities to develop logical and rational thought in preparation for the next stage.
- 6) Conclude by bringing the topic to a satisfactory closure while pointing to further dimensions or other topics.
- 7) Evaluate the impact of the work on students' learning and ability to operate with the cognitive tools.

The Third Planning Framework (Theoretic)

- 1) Identify powerful underlying ideas including theories and meta-narratives.
- 2) Organize the content into a theoretic structure to make the theories vivid and show their power in a way that engages students in them.
- 3) Introduce anomalies to the theories above. Sensitive challenge students' understanding so that they are forced to develop more sophisticated understanding.
- 4) Present alternative grand theories, other ways of explaining the ideas along with the limitations of these theories.
- 5) Encourage students' sense of agency and personal involvement in the ideas.
- 6) Conclusion: ensure that alternative views are preserved and acknowledged along with their limitations.
- 7) Evaluate the impact on students' grasp of theories and ideas and knowledge of their limitations.

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Bibliography

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