An Imaginative Approach to Teaching

reviewed by R. Keith Sawyer — 2006

Title: An Imaginative Approach to Teaching
Author(s): Kieran Egan
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Kieran Egan must be an incredible teacher, one of those teachers that we all remember decades later someone whose enthusiasm, creativity, and dedication could make any subject matter come to life. This book is filled with creative and practical advice that encourages teachers use stories to engage students’ imaginations. His first example is a lesson to teach primary school students about place value. The first step is to “find something important and emotionally engaging about the topic” (p. 41). Regarding place value, he suggests that teachers emphasize its “wonderful ingenuity” (p. 42); after all, it is an amazing human creation. The second step is to find binary opposites; if ingenuity is the emotionally engaging theme, then the opposition might be between ingenuity and cluelessness, or between imaginativeness and unimaginativeness. The third step is to organize the content of the lesson in story form—a story that is structured around the binary opposite. He tells a fairy-tale genre story about a king who wanted to count his army, and how the king’s daughter came up with an ingenious method using five bowls containing ten stones each.

The fourth and final step is to resolve the dramatic conflict presented in the story. Egan suggests that teachers ask their students how the king’s daughter came up with the idea, or how she would have counted the army if there were no stones available. Egan asks teachers to emphasize the incredible imagination of the king’s daughter, to develop the students’ sense of wonder at such a stunning accomplishment. Nurturing this sense of imagination and wonder is a key goal of Egan’s method: place value “isn’t just a routine bit of another textbook to be taken for granted; it is a product of someone’s wonderful ingenuity” (p. 46).

The book is filled with story-centered lessons in math (Pythagoras’s theorem, parallel lines and congruent angles), science (the transformation from larvae to butterfly, the air around us, life cycles), history (the industrial revolution, the French revolution) and literature (Hamlet). These examples are used to demonstrate a broader framework that teachers can use to develop their own
curriculum units. As I read about the story-structured lessons that Egan recommends, I often thought that it would take a dedicated, dynamic, and energetic teacher to carry this out. For example, in the lesson about the types of particles that are in the air around us (an elaboration of a lesson Egan first described in his 1997 book on pages 245-251), Egan suggests beginning with a guided discovery activity where “students close their eyes and imagine themselves getting smaller and smaller, till they were as tiny as a mote of dust floating in the air of the room” (p. 60). Then, the teacher is told to “introduce” the students to various other particles, like “Mr. Pollen out for a float,” and then to “invite them to be dazzled by the flashing colors of different gases, intersected by endless radio waves passing around them” (p. 60). Egan’s teacher must be a talented story teller and a dynamic performer.

This book is an elaboration of Chapters 7 and 8 from Egan’s 1997 book *The Educated Mind*. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 are more theoretical and describe a set of “cognitive tools” associated with three successive stages of learning: oral, literate, and theoretic; these correspond to what are called in the 1997 book mythic, romantic, and philosophic. Each chapter is followed by what he calls a “half chapter” that contains the lesson examples, elaborations of the practical advice given in Chapter 8 of the 1997 book. Teachers can probably skim quickly over the three main chapters outlining Egan’s cognitive tools framework and focus primarily on the “half chapters.”

I was not convinced by Egan’s “cognitive tools” framework nor by his three developmental stages, but to be fair this book is not meant to convince other theorists; it is breezily presented in a highly accessible tone that is clearly meant for teachers. The framework is loosely Vygotskian, and his emphasis on narrative is common in recent educational thought (e.g., Bruner, 1990). But this book does not connect Egan’s theory to contemporary traditions of Vygotskian, cognitive developmental, or sociocultural research. To take one quibble, I have trouble seeing how “primary cognitive tools” could include such wildly different mental phenomena as “story,” “metaphor,” “mental imagery,” and “play” (pp. 2-6). Stories and play are both at a much higher level of complexity than either imagery or metaphor; and mental imagery is likely to have a localized brain basis (Schwartz and Heiser, in press) whereas metaphor is culturally determined and developmentally shaped. Issues like this make me skeptical that all of Egan’s cognitive tools can be subjected to the same sort of theoretical analysis. In addition, I wonder what empirical evidence Egan would cite in support of his three developmental stages; in general, his account of these stages is more philosophical in style (e.g., Egan, 1997). But this isn’t a scholarly sort of book; Egan doesn’t cite studies, review research, or make theoretical arguments. For its target audience of practicing teachers, the book will provide wonderful practical advice.

Egan has many potential allies in the learning sciences community, with its emphasis on creativity and improvisation in teaching (Sawyer, 2004, in press). I believe that Egan’s creative classroom units are wonderful for teaching students a deep knowledge of content, rather than the superficial facts and procedures typically emphasized in classrooms. Like the learning sciences more broadly, “The task is not simply to teach facts and skills that can be reproduced when required. The trick is to tie the facts and skills to their deeper meaning in human experience” (p. 211). And as learning scientists have repeatedly discovered, intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement are necessary before students can develop deep knowledge (Blumenfeld and Krajcik, in press). Egan may finish
out his career by continuing to write for teachers, and that would be a gift to them. But as a theorist and scientist, I would also like him to submit his philosophical theory to a dialogue with empirical and theoretical work in developmental psychology and education, to situate his approach within what other researchers are doing, and to test and revise his theory in the face of empirical evidence. I believe this would result in rather radical revisions to the theory—a more sophisticated notion of cognitive tools, a revision of the hypothesized developmental stages, and a revision of which tools are associated with which stages. But fortunately for practicing teachers, none of the examples that Egan presents are critically dependent on these theoretical elements, so the book will be useful to them regardless.

References


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