

Layers of Historical Understanding

Kieran Egan focuses on different types of historical understanding in outlining strategies for teaching history that draw upon the “sense-making techniques students have available to deal with history” (282). Egan believes it is important to consider differences in historical inquiry in order to best incorporate students’ developmental levels and interests and create effective history instruction. As such, the author identifies four major types of history, each with its own purposes and “distinct kind of historical understanding” (280). These are:

1. The Mythic, which includes “mythical accounts” which help to cement national or group identities;
2. The Romantic, which involves “dramatic historical narratives” that emphasize emotional content and affective involvement;
3. The Philosophic, which is characterized by “pattern-seeking” history that generates sweeping theories about possible “underlying...laws of history;” and
4. The Ironic, which represents “interest in the details of history for their own sake” (280-282, 292).

Egan indicates that these types of history constitute layers that build upon each other, both in terms of historiography and students’ abilities to create meaning within each tradition. Specifically, he suggests that the first or “Mythic” layer is well suited to stimulating historical understanding in young children, and that the second or “Romantic” layer can do the same for adolescents from about age seven to fifteen.

The author observes that “until children have internalized literacy in Western culture they live in an oral culture, and they have available for use the techniques of orality” (283). These young, pre-literate children often use stories involving binary structures such as good and evil and composite creatures like “middle-class talking bears” in their play and other activities; the author proposes that teachers capitalize on children’s predisposition to “Mythical” elements and the story-form to “stimulate the development of historical understanding” (284). Similarly, Egan believes that teachers can draw upon older children’s growing interests in the extremes of reality, heroes and heroines, and the search for details about various topics to actively engage students in “Romantic” historical inquiry. Egan’s approach differs from most research on historical understanding which “tends to focus on [students’] logical or logico-mathematical capacities;” instead, it emphasizes “those imaginative capacities, in which we see students’ intellectual activity at its most engaged and energetic” (286). To more fully activate students’ imaginations in historical inquiry, Egan advocates incorporating the following characteristics in the teaching of history:

1. Affective orientation, which involves “shaping the factual content into a story shape;”
2. Abstract binary opposites, which “provide access to the content...[while teachers] can then mediate between them and make understanding more sophisticated;”
3. The heroic, which calls for “emphasizing those qualities of the chosen content that transcend the everyday and conventional sense of them;”
4. Detail and distance, which relies upon shifting perspectives;
5. The exotic, wonder, and awe, which proposes “beginning with the most exotic and least familiar,” piquing students’ curiosity, and pointing out “mysterious” qualities “underlying the everydayness of things;” and
6. Humanizing knowledge, which “by locating [content] as meaningful in others’ lives, [helps] students [to] gain a better imaginative sense of its meaning” (286-287).

Egan also provides “heuristic frameworks” for lesson planning using these principles; he asserts that these templates are “derived from educational considerations” rather than from “industrial, ...assembly-line...procedures” that underlie the traditional objective-instruction-evaluation lesson model (288). He believes that this type of instruction would not only improve students’ engagement with historical content but also would facilitate their mastery of the “most sophisticated kinds of historical understanding” represented by the “Philosophic” and “Ironic” layers (292).

Egan, Kieran. “Layers of Historical Understanding.” Theory and Research in Social Education 17.4 (Fall 1989): 280-294.