

A Guide to the Mythic Planning Framework

1. Locating importance

What is emotionally engaging about this topic? How can it evoke wonder? Why should it matter to us?

In order to help students connect emotionally to the material, teachers need to first identify their own emotional attachment to it. A sense of wonder about something is usually connected to this attachment. Everything that we teach can evoke some kind of wonder and produce some emotional response in us. A sense of wonder and an emotional response to material are important in engaging students' imaginations. So this first question asks the teacher to feel for what is wonderful about the topic. This can be difficult if the topic is something like the use of the comma! The trick, though, is to try to re-see the topic through the eyes of the child, to catch at what can stimulate the sense of wonder about even the most routine topics. Especially when teachers have been taught to become expert at organizing classroom activities and structuring topics into instructional units, this can be hard. It is asking the teacher to do something that is, for most of us, quite unfamiliar—to begin by feeling about the topic. Try to indicate for any topic you plan to teach what is wonderful about it, and what can provide an emotional engagement to it by the child.

Sources of wonder:

Sources of emotional engagement:

2. Shaping the lesson or unit

Teaching shares some features with news reporting. Just as the reporter's aim is to select and shape events to bring out clearly their meaning and emotional importance for readers or listeners, so your aim as a teacher is to present your topic in a way that engages the emotions and imaginations of your students. To do so, consider which of the following dimensions of your students' emotional and imaginative lives can be used to shape your lesson or unit—all related to the skills the good reporter works with:

2.1. Finding the story:

What’s “the story” on the topic? How can you shape the content to reveal its emotional significance?

If you imagine for a moment that you are a news reporter, you will think about events/information in terms of human interest and engagement. Remember, everything is potentially wonderful. In order to be a good reporter, one needs to think this way about whatever it is one has been sent to report on. That is, the reporter writes about or talks about an incident in a way that is interesting, or that somehow engages the reader’s/listener’s imagination and emotions. And so too the teacher. Ask yourself what the “story” is on your topic; identify what is wonderful or interesting or engaging about it and how you can discuss it in a way that reflects this.

Sketch of the story structure of the lesson/unit:

2.2. Finding binary opposites:

What abstract and affective binary concepts best capture the wonder and emotion of the topic? What are the opposing forces in your “story”?

Now to the work of locating the best binary oppositions on which we can construct the “story” we are going to tell. It should be possible to select the one that seems best, though you might want to note some alternatives, in case you find the first set chosen doesn’t quite carry you through the lesson or unit as well as you might have expected. The binary opposites provide the cognitive and emotional framework of your story. Remember, all good fictional stories are built on a conflict or puzzle; the only difference here is that the “story” content is the curriculum content.

Main opposition: /

Possible alternative: /

2.3. Finding images:

What parts of the topic most dramatically embody the binary concepts? What image best captures that dramatic contrast?

Here the goal is to identify the drama inherent in the topic. Remember, every topic has some kind of dramatic conflict in it. Which conflict best illustrates the binary opposites we've identified? Again, trying to feel the drama is as important as thinking about it—and, of course, these are not such distinct activities. This task, too, can be quite difficult at first. (It does become easier as we begin to recognize that there is something almost natural about thinking in these terms.) The drama of commas may not be so obvious, nor how one might break up one's lessons about commas into binary opposites. But everything has within it something dramatic, and, as we'll see, everything can be broken down into binary opposites. We are so accustomed to thinking about content, and about concepts, that we often forget that every topic also has a wide range of images attached to it. And the image, remember, can carry the emotional meaning of the topic and can also make the topic much more memorable—if we find a good image, of course. Look for a core conflict, contradiction or drama that seems to best convey the wonder and emotion of the topic.

Image that captures abstract binary opposition:

Content that reflects abstract binary opposition:

2.4. Employing additional cognitive tools of Mythic understanding:

What kinds of activities might employ other tools in your students' cognitive toolkits?

Our students have many cognitive tools with which they make sense of the world. It would be wise to employ as many as possible in one's teaching if one wants to make learning meaningful for students. While we are not suggesting that everything you do in your classroom must include all of the following tools, it would be useful to consider how to include as many as you can in teaching. Whether as part of your direct instruction or through student-directed activities, there are many tools that can engage students' emotions and imaginations with what you are teaching. Consider how to teach in a way that includes the following

or think about some activities students might do that engage these cognitive tools:

- **Puzzles and mystery:** *How could students explore some aspects of the mystery attached to the topic? What puzzles might they wonder about?*

Teaching strategy:

Student activity:

- **Metaphor:** *How might students employ metaphor in deepening their understanding of the topic?*

Teaching strategy:

Student activity:

- **Jokes and humor:** *Could students learn – and create their own - jokes about the topic? How might they expand their understanding through play with what is humorous about it?*

Teaching strategy:

Student activity:

- **Rhyme, rhythm, and pattern:** *Are there patterns in the topic students could play with? What activities might draw attention to rhyme, rhythm, and pattern?*

Teaching strategy:

Student activity:

- **Games, drama, and play:** *How can students engage in games, drama, and play in learning about the topic?*

Teaching strategy:

Student activity:

- **Embryonic tools of romantic understanding:** *Consider ways to engage students with the heroic and human dimensions of the topic. What kinds of activities might reveal its extremes? How can these aspects draw students forward in their thinking about the topic?*

Teaching Strategy:

Student Activity:

2.5. Drawing on tools of previous kinds of understanding:
Somatic understanding - *How might students use some of the toolkit of Somatic Understanding in learning the topic? How might their senses, emotions, humor, musicality, and so on, be deployed?*

Teaching Strategy:

Student Activity:

3. Resources

What resources can you use to learn more about the topic and to shape your story? What resources are useful in creating activities?

List of resources:

4. Conclusion

How does the story end? How can the conflict set up between the binary opposites be resolved in a satisfying way? Alternatively, what new questions emerge as students make sense of these opposing forces? What aspect of the topic might draw students forward in wonder?

Every story has an ending in which the conflict is in some way resolved or at least explained. For younger students a simple resolution may be appropriate; for older students an exploration of the opposites and the dramatic space between them can be explored. The conclusion can therefore take on many forms; from students' presentations, to displays, to a story that shows another form of the opposition being worked out, to dramatic presentations of the story with visuals, and so on. Remember, the conclusion is another opportunity for students to feel the drama of the story and internalize the material while expressing their understanding of it in imaginative ways.

Concluding activity:

5. Evaluation

How can one know whether the topic has been understood, its importance grasped, and the content learned?

Any of the traditional forms of evaluation can be used, but in addition, teachers might want to get some measure of how far students' imaginations have been engaged by the topic. Remember, various kinds of information evaluations, including discussion, debate, art work, journal writing, experiment analysis etc. can be done as the unit is being taught. You can also note the amount of time and degree of commitment students bring to the topic beyond what is required.

Forms of evaluation: