

Finding a Narrative

Heroic Qualities

What “heroic” qualities or values are central to the topic? What makes the characters in this story full of wonder?

In order to help students connect emotionally to the material, teachers need to first identify their own emotional attachment to it. What heroic human quality or emotion — courage, compassion, tenacity, fear, hope, loathing, delight, or whatever — can we identify in the topic?

These “romantic” qualities help us — and our students — see the world in human terms and give human meaning to events, facts, and ideas in all disciplines. “Romance” invites us to view the world in human terms: not to confuse but to infuse the world with human meaning. Again, this first task is the most difficult part of planning the lesson or unit. We are asked to feel about the topic as well as to think about it; indeed, we are asked to “perfork” about it.

Heroic Image

What image captures the heroic qualities of the topic?

Images can be visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory or olfactory. The central image for the unit should represent the transcendent quality that guides the unit by moving the story forward.

Organizing Content into Story Form

What “heroic narrative” will allow us to integrate the content we wish to cover?

This is the trickiest part, and the part requiring the most imagination.

“Think of the content of the curriculum more as great stories to tell than as objectives to attain. We might, then, think of “story” much in the sense a newspaper editor asks a reporter “What’s the story on this?”” (Egan, Arts as Basics)

Reflect on the whole unit or lesson and think of it in terms of some overall narrative structure. You want to select and highlight content that will make clear to students that one is not simply relating a sequence of facts or events but that one has a story to tell them and that the set of facts and events have a unity of some kind.

If you have listed a dozen possible heroic qualities, chose one that is central. Decide which elements in the content fit best into the narrative and fit with the central heroic quality or value and disregard the rest. It is often hard to let go, but it is crucial to remove unnecessary items that are not within the context of the story.

Developing Cognitive Tools

Exploring Human Strengths & Emotions	Extremes of Reality	Collecting & Organizing	Teacher-led/structured  Student-led/open-ended
<p><i>How can students understand the human hopes, fears, passions or struggles that have shaped our knowledge of this topic?</i></p> <p><i>Think of how a good movie or novel makes aspects of the world engaging. Obstacles to the hero are humanized in one form or another, almost given motives; they are seen in human terms. To do this, we don't need to falsify anything, but rather we highlight a particular way of seeing it — because this is precisely the way students' imaginations are engaged by knowledge.</i></p>	<p><i>What extremes of reality are related to the topic – biggest, hottest, oldest, richest?</i></p> <p><i>Children of this age are very engaged by the types of information that can be found in the <u>Guinness Book of World Records</u>. By finding the greatest and the least of something they are establishing the limits of reality and thus establishing a scale to measure with.</i></p> <p><i>There are extreme examples within any topic. Perhaps when studying spiders it is best to first establish the largest spider, the most minute, the most poisonous and so on before examining those that are less impressive.</i></p>	<p><i>What parts of the topic can students best explore in exhaustive detail? How can students present their knowledge in some systematic form?</i></p> <p><i>While it is easy to give students a project to do that is part of a topic, it is a little harder to think about what aspect of the topic they might be able to <u>exhaust</u>, i.e. be able to find out nearly everything that is known about it.</i></p> <p><i>But there are such parts in every topic, and the security and sense of mastery that comes from knowing nearly as much as anyone about something is a great stimulus to inquiry. Think of something that is intriguing, that can be seen from a variety of different perspectives, or that is alluded to but not examined in detail in the content or in your teaching of it.</i></p> <p><i>Ensure that the topics which students explore in exhaustive detail relate back to the heroic quality. Otherwise, the humanized meaning will potentially be lost.</i></p>	

Looking Forward and Concluding

Towards Further Understanding	A Celebratory Ending	Assessment
<p><i>How can the unit develop embryonic forms of Philosophic and Ironic understanding? What cognitive tools characteristic of the disciplines or embodied self-awareness can be introduced here?</i></p> <p><i>Consider questions one might ask about the topic from a Philosophic or Ironic point of view. These might be presented to students as “brain candy” throughout the unit or towards its end, or they might become more substantial areas of inquiry. Remember that students do not “graduate” from one layer of understanding and move suddenly into the next. Rather, they are probably more likely to experience a gradual shifting of a tendency towards or a proficiency in using particular cultural tools.</i></p> <p><i>(A unit at the Romantic level, however, will consistently emphasize and develop the cognitive tools of literacy even when some later tools are being introduced.)</i></p>	<p><i>What is the best way of resolving the dramatic tension inherent in the unit? What communal project or activity will enable the students to experience and share this resolution?</i></p> <p><i>We will want to make sure that the unit ends on a positive note. One way to do this is to have students work communally on a project which resolves the dramatic tension of the unit. If we want the conclusion to lead towards Philosophic understanding, we might consider re-examining images we started with and reviewing the content through the lenses of other heroic qualities, which can give an opposite or conflicting image of the content.</i></p>	<p><i>How can one know whether the topic has been understood, its importance grasped and the content learned?</i></p> <p><i>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 -- how far they have successfully made a romantic engagement with the material.</i></p> <p><i>Concluding activities can also be evaluative in nature. Remember, when evaluating, that the heroic qualities are what give us access to the content. These transcendent qualities are tools, and do not themselves have to be evaluated.</i></p>