

Thrills and Spills: Icarus and Daedalus in literature and life

Topic:	Risk-taking Motives and Meanings
Target Age:	15 to 18
Planning Framework:	Philosophic
Length:	3 to 4 lessons
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Description

These lessons explore the psychology of risk-taking and ask questions about human motivations to seek out risks or to be risk averse. The legend of Daedalus and Icarus calls attention to the famous Greek inventor who crafted wings for human-powered flight. These allowed him to glide to safety while his son soared then plunged to his death. To uncover layers of meaning in this classic tale, students apply insights from psychology, including Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the concept of 'peak experiences.' Ironic realizations arise as motivations clash and as triumph turns to tragedy.

Unit Outline

1. Identifying powerful underlying ideas

What underlying ideas or theories seem best able to organize the topic into some coherent whole? What are the most powerful, clear, and relevant theories, ideologies, metaphysical schemes, or meta-narratives?

The most powerful underlying idea or theory in this topic:

Teach or review the five levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, from physiological, survival needs to safety and security, then love and belonging, esteem from others and for oneself, leading up to self-actualization. The main idea is that throughout our lives human behaviour is motivated by unsatisfied needs. Higher order needs can only be met once basic needs are satisfied. The hierarchy is a pattern of steps or levels that applies to all our choices and actions.

Mythic figures such as Daedalus and Icarus work well as examples because students are free to speculate about needs and motivations. For example, by building wings, Daedalus reaches to fulfill needs at higher levels, while risking basic needs for safety, security and life itself. Is he driven by esteem needs to retain his reputation for wisdom, ingenuity and wizardry? Does he want all to admire his work and his clever escape?

Meanwhile, does Icarus at first satisfy long and belonging needs by joining in his father's project and following his lead? Then, when the wings allow him to soar, does he seek his own needs for greatness, for adventure, to surpass his father, to chart his own

course towards sun and stars? The story works as an application of Maslow's structured hierarchy, and challenges the formal pattern in surprising ways.

An alternative:

Maslow's work also contains a contrasting idea of "peak experiences." These are described as spontaneous moments of heightened perception that lead to intense, growing awareness of self, surroundings and others. Such vivid experiences often exude a sense of interconnectedness between all beings, of oneness with all nature.

Does Icarus enter a peak experience as he soars towards the sun? Does he respond to an inner voice that proves more powerful than his father's warnings? Is it important or imperative for each generation to seek to surpass their parents?

Another model of the Mind:

Sigmund Freud's three-part structure of consciousness may help to analyze this story. The adult ego of Daedalus seeks to succeed in unleashing the power of flight, extending human abilities, and proving that he is the wisest man, the master mind of the Greek world, more capable, clever and mighty than Minos will ever be. Yet his ego is not strong enough to manage the ID of his child, Icarus, who seeks freedom, adventure and exhilaration above all. The paternal superego of Daedalus, which preaches a cautious, middle course, fails to control the impulsive flight plans of the youthful ID. Freud would likely agree with the traditional moral of the story. A healthy, well-adjusted adult ego mediates between the energies of ID and the expectations of superego. Long life results from careful adherence to the middle path.

2. Organizing the content into a theoretic structure

Work with a pyramid drawing of Maslow's hierarchy. Encourage students to articulate and explain key points about each level. Note that the level of love and belonging is more often considered a basic need now. Newborns need touch and comfort as well as nourishment. Even with nourishment, lack of love leads to failure to thrive and proves fatal. Also note that esteem according to Maslow comes first from the praise and approval of others. Internalized self-esteem develops later. Collect adjectives to describe self-actualization, the process of growing and developing as a person towards self-fulfillment through creative self-expression and reaching out to others.

2.1 Initial access

How can the underlying theory or idea be made vivid? What content best exposes it and shows its power to organize the topic?

Content that exposes the scheme or theory most vividly:

Begin by asking students “Is it better to be safe or sorry?” Rather than quietly reflecting on this first before speaking, have them take a risk and voice whatever comes to mind. Is safety the only criteria when deciding what to do or say or how to act? Why do some people seek risks and thrills that threaten their safety? Why are extreme sports so popular? How important is it for parents (and teachers) to keep children safe?

Several binary oppositions work as entry points to the story and related materials. Consider heights / depths; bound / free; triumph / tears; seeking/ avoiding; thrills/ spills.

An appeal to the mythic mind through binaries and to heroic characters in a well-known, romantic narrative help students feel initially at ease. From this foundation, they are set to construct theoretical frameworks and to wrestle with philosophical concepts.

Consider and discuss some of these quotations from Abraham Maslow.

- a. Man is a wanting animal.
- b. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself.
- c. We are not in a position in which we have nothing to work with. We already have capacities, talents, direction, missions, callings.
- d. What a man can be, he must be. This need we call self-actualization.

Alternative introduction

For a lively introduction, depending on your students, allow five minutes (or more) for folding and launching paper airplanes around the room. Try different sizes and designs. Invite commentary as they work and play about the enduring appeal, wonder and mystery of flight. Ask for names of some famous pilots and planes in aviation history. (note: such activities appeal to the somatic and romantic forms of understanding)

2.2. Organizing the body of the lesson or unit

What meta-narrative provides a clear overall structure to the lesson or unit?

Lay out the content that will present a strong meta-narrative of the topic:

Let the story of Icarus and Daedalus serve as a case study for Maslow’s theories of human needs and primary motivations.

Ask students to decide what needs are essential for each character in the story. What does the imprisoned father and inventor in exile most need? Why is he willing to risk the relative security of the island, even if he is held there against his will? Does he want renown and fame for the feat of human flight? Why not leave his son behind, rather than risk his life as well as his own?

Then ask what Icarus most needs? How do his motivations compare with those of his father? Do his motives change through the course of the story? Who or what do students hold responsible for his death?

3. Introducing anomalies to the theory

What content is anomalous to the general idea or theory? How can one begin with minor anomalies and gradually and sensitively challenge the students' general theory so that they make the theory increasingly sophisticated?

List the main anomalies to the meta-narrative:

Invite student to think of ambiguous situations to analyze according to Maslow's theory. For example:

- During war or facing a natural disaster, when basic needs become primary concerns, how do most people behave?
- Maslow said that very few people in the world will reach self-actualization? Do students agree with this? Do they know any self-actualized people?

Think of examples where humans act, excel and exceed beyond what Maslow might predict.

- Consider a challenging case study such as Nelson Mandela or Helen Keller. What might Maslow have predicted for each figure? What were they able to achieve?
- How might Maslow explain those who sacrifice their lives for others or martyr themselves for a cause? What higher needs are strong enough to overcome survival instincts?

4. Presenting alternative general theories.

What alternative general theories can organize the topic? What alternative meta-narrative can organize the topic? Which can best be used to help students see something about the nature and limitations of their theories and meta-narratives?

Indicate the alternatives theories or meta-narratives that will be used:

- a. **Sigmund Freud's** Three-Part Structure of the Mind (see above)
- b. **The Four Elements**

An intriguing connection that harks back to the Greek origins of the story invokes the ancient cosmology and world view of the Four Elements, Air, Earth, Fire and Water. These compose our planet and natural science, medicine, philosophy, astrology,

personality typologies and more were based on this four-part model from ancient times until the 1700s.

Review these elements with students and have them wonder how these elements operate in the world. Remind them that their astrological sign links them with an element through their birth day. Form groups according to the elements to find ways in which the element plays a part in their lives. Are water signs good swimmers (or deathly afraid of water)? Do air signs enjoy spring as their favourite season? Do they engage in sports that make them feel lighter than air (or do they fear falling)? Do those born with earth signs like to keep their feet on the ground? Do fire signs love long, hot summer days and campfires at night?

Note that this is a good time to listen for ironic questions and realizations. When does a pattern make sense as a universal explanation? When does wishful or purposeful thinking become a self-fulfilling prophecy? How much is mere coincidence after all?

A related note:

Henry Alexander Murray (1893-1988), a leading American psychologist from Harvard University attached the phrase “an Icarus complex,” to a personality disorder, involving intense desires and actions to take physical risks involving flying, falling, playing with fire or plunging into water. Such people are prone to take risks in various ways: through extreme sports and daredevil stunts or through addictions, substance abuse, gambling, reckless sexual behaviour, etc. Should you wish to risk taking your class into these topic areas, students will find an array of celebrity figures whose choices may be described as Icarian.

5. Encouraging development of students’ sense of agency?

What features of the knowledge will best allow us to encourage the students’ developing sense of agency?

List areas in which students’ sense of agency can be engaged and encouraged:

The lesson leads, of course, to the obvious application ... where do students see themselves in terms of these needs? Maslow would expect them to be operating between love, belongingness and esteem. Do they agree with this? Imagine what might happen in their lives that would cause them to rise above or fall below these levels.

Academic Risk Taking

Margaret Clifford from the University of Iowa, and others study the power of risk taking as a motivator for academic progress. Students could develop their own scale of degrees of willingness to take risks and chart their own place, along with their peers, on the spectrum. Consider categories such as non risk-takers, reluctant risk-takers, dependent risk-takers (who will take risks with their friends) and eager, uninhibited risk

takers. Discuss the teacher's role in promoting risk-taking, the type of class and learning activity that promotes risk-taking, and the benefits and drawbacks of taking / not taking academic risks.

Find tests and questionnaires online to identify risk-taking personality types. Or encourage students to write their own questions and collect data from friends and family members. Financial advisers collect such information about clients' willingness to take risks with investment funds. Ask students to think of other situations or occupations where knowledge of who is a risk seeker and who is risk averse could be important.

6 . Conclusion

How can we ensure that the student's theories or general ideas are not destroyed but are recognized as having a different status from the facts they are based on? How can we ensure that the decay of belief in the Truth of theories or general ideas does not lead to disillusion and alienation?

What concluding activity will help to both support and show problems with students' theories, ideas, meta-narratives, ideologies, etc.:

Art has the power to express psychological and philosophical truths in transformative ways. The ideal would be to encourage students to write, draw, paint, design or dance their own visions and versions inspired by Icarus and Daedalus. Showcase students' growing understanding of literature, history, psychology and self-expression. Student creations will be in fine company with works by many great artists through the ages. Set up a stage or a gallery, design a setting, add lights, music and invite an audience.

7 . Evaluation

How can we know whether the content has been learned and understood, whether students have developed a theory or general idea, elaborated it, and attained some sense of its limitations?

What forms of evaluation will give adequate evidence that the students have learned and understood the content and also have developed and used some theory or abstract idea:

Evaluate engagement with and learning of this material by have students write or debate or discuss in an evaluated learning conversation a story of risks taken by (or imposed upon) a young person. The life story of Jessica Dubroff comes to mind, a seven year old aiming to be the youngest person to fly across the United States. Her plane crashed in April, 1996 shortly after takeoff during a storm, killing her along with her father and flying instructor. There is much information online and varied opinions

about the role of the media and parental responsibility. Comparisons with Icarus and applications of Maslow's theories will surely inform discussions and written responses.

Resources

For a useful summary of Maslow's theory of needs, consult this website, among many others:

<http://psychology.about.com/od/theoriesofpersonality/a/hierarchyneeds.htm>

For an excellent collection that juxtaposes short stories, poems, artworks, non-fiction and more in ways that spark imagination, see Arthur Haberman, Fran Cohen. *On the Edge: Literature and Imagination*. Oxford, 1994. These lessons on Icarus were inspired by this volume.

For modern wings that flew from Crete to Greece see: Langford, J. S., "Triumph of Daedalus," *National Geographic*, Vol. 174, August 1988, pp. 190-199

Websites:

Find Ovid's version of the story in translation at this site:

<http://etext.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/trans/Metamorph8.htm>

Find a gallery of art inspired by Icarus at:

<http://www.island-ikaria.com/multimedia/ikarosart.asp>

Find articles on mythology, psychology and more at:

<http://hubpages.com/hub/Myths-to-Live-By-Icarus---The-Pitfalls-of-Excessive-Self-Indulgence-The-Middle-Way-is-Best>

http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/fairytales_myths_fables_&legends/110770/1