

Romantic Understanding

In her second article **Sue Lyle** continues to explore some of the practical implications of Kieran Egan's imaginative approach to teaching. The focus for this issue is the Romantic Framework and how it can be applied to children between the ages of 8-14 (Key Stage 2 and 3).



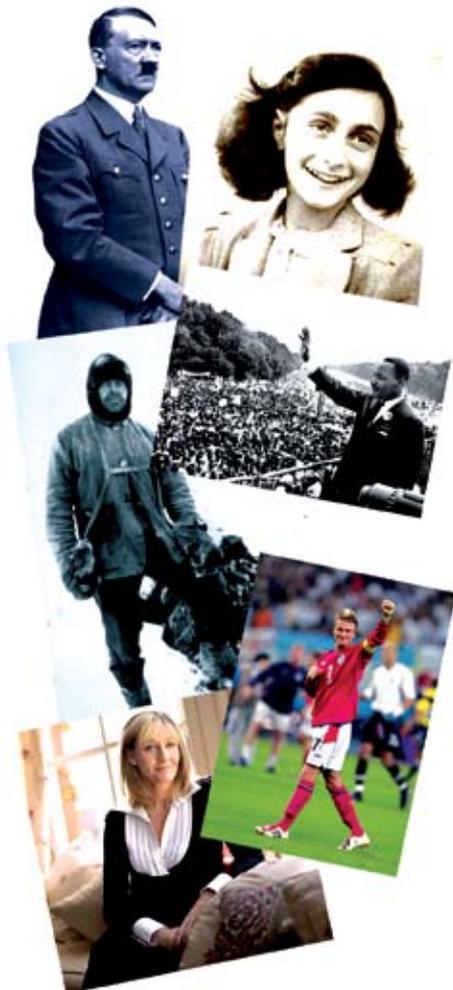
What I like about Egan's 'Romantic Understanding Framework' is that it feels right – as an experienced teacher of the 8-14 age group I find myself nodding my head in agreement. Let me try and summarise the key aspects of his framework before considering the detail and exploring how it can be applied in the classroom.

Anyone familiar with children as they turn from seven into eight knows that things really begin to change. One of the first things to notice is that they seriously question the existence of Father Christmas and the tooth fairy – they no longer accept magical explanations for

things without question, (but are happy to preserve the magic for younger siblings). They begin to take more interest in the 'real world' and start to ask different kinds of questions. Whilst younger children don't question the existence of heaven and only want to consider what it might be like, this age group start to wonder if heaven actually exists. They are interested in, and want to know about, the limits of the physical world – the coldest place, the hottest place, the highest point or smallest island; their curiosity about possible other worlds begins to grow – 'space, the final frontier'. When exploring our world they want to know what the people are like, how

they live, what they believe, their customs and habits, what the animals and landscape are like and what can survive where. This fascination with the distant and the different, the exotic and seemingly bizarre is extended to the past – the Egyptians, Aztecs, Native Americans – and the future – what kind of world will we live in? Is there life on different planets? All inspire a sense of wonder and awe for this age group as they develop imagination and rationality.

This age group is fascinated by what it means to be a human and want to explore the best a human can be as well as the worst. They are interested in heroes and heroines, villains and tyrants and wish to explore human characteristics such as love and hate, bravery and cowardice, cruelty and compassion, loyalty and betrayal – they want to measure themselves up against the heroes and villains, and consider what their own potential is for goodness or evil. The lives of such people as Martin Luther King, Hitler, Anne Frank, Ian Huntley, David Beckham, J. K. Rowling, Scott of the Antarctic, Amy Johnson – those larger than life figures that between them embody the whole range of human characteristics and experience.



As well as wanting to see the ‘big picture’, at this age children also become interested in collecting things; this is the time for collections of stamps, football cards, rubbers, glass animals, Star Wars figurines, bus and train numbers and so on. Fascination can grow as they become curious about the natural world and many children start wanting to know everything there is to know about snakes, birds or horses. Others want to find out everything about their favourite pop group, football or rugby team. Such curiosity can lead to intense research to investigate all that can be known about the child’s particular interest. This is why the Guinness Book of Records is fascinating to this age group. A sense of awe and wonder in the natural and human world is important to them.

This doesn’t mean the Mythic Stage comes to an end at 8, fantasy is still an important part of children’s lives, but in the Romantic Stage it tends to focus on the superhero: Batman, Catwoman, Spiderman, Buffy and others who have super powers. Fantasy stories that encompass adventure like Dr. Who and Harry Potter, The Hobbit and Lord of the Rings and different worlds created by authors like Terry Pratchett and Philip Pullman. These imaginative worlds often involve time travel and visits to outer space and other planets, the characters often have magic powers and use them for good and evil.

Children become hungry for knowledge, to understand how humans across the ages and in different places have made sense of the world. They are ready for enquiry and investigation and for developing the skills needed to read, write and calculate. By 8 the child’s fine motor skills are developed, they can write and draw and learn how to play a musical instrument. Their gross motor skills have developed and they can take part in sport and dance in creative and imaginative ways. The desire to test themselves physically and emotionally is strong, daring each other and taking risks figures highly with this age group.

Let us consider the implications of this for planning learning activities for these children. Egan (1990) argues that story telling and narrative understanding is still the overarching pedagogic tool for engaging this age group. In the Romantic Stage we add interest in developing a sense of reality, and help children explore the real world and consider the extremes of experience and limits of reality. The heroic in our topics are highlighted. Binary opposites are necessary to help plan our topics and to help children organise and categorise the world. Role-play and drama should be used so children can act out real-world events and create fantasy scenarios. Other characteristics of the mythic stage, metaphor, rhyme, rhythm and pattern, mental imagery, mystery, jokes and humour are still essential learning tools. Children’s urge

to collect and classify will demand an outlet. We must focus on supporting the development of the literate child, enable them to use the cultural tools of reading and writing, graphic representation, number, ICT, art, music, dance and drama to help them explore and represent the worlds they want to explore. Inspiration for developing these essential skills is derived from the richness of a curriculum planned with Romantic Understanding in mind.

Evidence to support Egan’s take on the 8-14 age group came recently when I was working with two Teacher Research Fellows on secondment from school for six weeks to investigate the impact of Philosophy for Children (P4C) on children. In P4C children generate questions they wish to discuss through the community of enquiry. The teachers visited lots of classes and schools who practise P4C every week, and asked the children what their ‘best’ question for enquiry had been that year. The questions come from years 4-11 (age 8-16). Overwhelmingly the children had chosen ‘real world’ issues, wanting to understand what it means to be human, for example:

- What does it mean to be a hero? (Year 5)
- Should Ian Huntley be allowed to commit suicide? (Year 6)
- What is justice? (Year 5)
- Is David Beckham a good person? (Year 4)
- How does anyone know what real love and hate is? (Year 11)
- How could you live a normal life with Tourette’s syndrome? (Year 10)
- Why does nature have to be a thing of the past? (Year 6)
- How does music affect your emotions? (Year 5)
- What is poor? (Year 4)
- What is bad luck and is it real? (Year 6)
- Convinced? As an experienced teacher of children from 8-14, I am. If we are convinced we have to ask what kind of curriculum organisation can best satisfy the children’s desire for a Romantic Curriculum and also what opportunities there are to develop such a curriculum.

Curriculum 2008

The new curriculum in England and Wales opens up an opportunity for teachers to once again be imaginative and creative and develop learning opportunities that really engage with the kinds of understanding that children in the Romantic Stage are not only ready for, but hungry for. If we plan in the way Egan suggests what do we get in return? Egan promises us motivated, engaged, curious pupils – something all teachers long for. We need therefore to put flesh on this framework and ask what kind of curriculum organisation can best satisfy the children’s desire for a Romantic Curriculum.

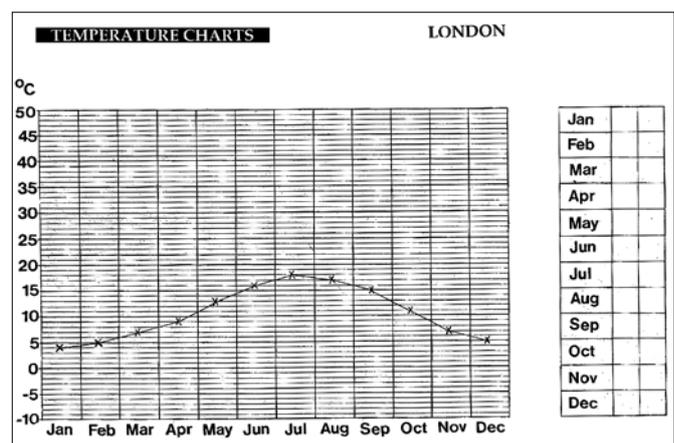
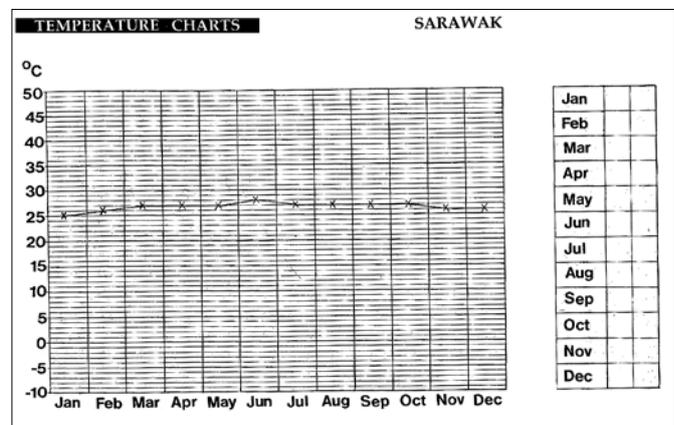
To illustrate how Egan’s ideas can be applied in planning a topic-based or thematic approach to curriculum planning

with this age group. I start with a short transcript from a group of 10-11 year olds who are embarking on the topic of tropical rainforests for the first time. I go on to outline in detail how the different aspects of Egan’s framework can be used to guide planning on this topic.

Finding Binary Opposites

Egan (1986) asks us to identify what binary opposites will best capture the importance of the topic. The overall binary opposites for the theme of Tropical Rain Forests are survival and destruction. A topic can have a number of subsidiary binary opposites and this particular activity considers the binary opposites of tropical and temperate climates. This is the starting point for the topic and we begin by joining the children who have been asked to compare and contrast two temperature graphs, one showing average temperatures in the UK and the other average temperatures in a tropical rainforest (see Figure 1). I have used a ‘think, pair, share’ approach to this task as follows: (NB: the skills that are built into the task of reading and constructing line graphs)

Figure 1





Task 1 Each child is presented with one of the two temperature graphs and asked to ‘read’ off the graph and complete the key.

Task 2 The children then work in pairs, each having filled in one of the two different graphs. Each child takes it in turn to tell their partner the information needed to complete the second graph.

Task 3 Each child plots the second graph on their original graph so that both children have a graph with average temperatures in Britain and a tropical rainforest (Sarawak in Borneo) on one sheet.

Task 4 Two pairs join together and are asked to ‘work out what life is like in a tropical rainforest’, using only the temperature graphs to help them.

I have found that it is important when planning collaborative work of this kind to start with individual work and build to pairs and finally to a group of four. In this way individuals get the chance to develop and practise essential skills in a collaborative context.

We now join one group of four, two boys and two girls in Year 5 to see how they tackle the task. The transcript shows that the children begin by making lots of suggestions about how to proceed with the task and decide to make a list of headings to guide their discussion and they draw up a grid. The headings decided on are clothes, food, houses, agriculture, work and leisure (see example grid below).

We join the children after they have discussed their first heading: ‘clothes’, where they have quickly agreed that clothes in the rainforest would have to be ‘cooler’, ‘light, not heavy’, ‘thin’, and ‘not wool’. (NB ... in the transcript indicates a short pause).

Shan OK. Next... Food
Rowena Um... rice?
John They eat much more interesting food like ... bananas, oranges...
Ben Yes
John Food we can’t grow here
Shan No, but that would come under a griculture. What about spicy curries?
John Organic
Ben It would most probably be cold because it’s hot
Shan Hang on, they’d have organic food, I don’t think they’d be eating beefburgers and stuff...
John Yeah, that’s what I just said
Ben Yes, organic cold food
Rowena Anyway, they would get all their food from the forest
John They probably hunt for their prey
Ben Yes, not bought
Rowena They wouldn’t have Tesco
John Not bought meat or food
Shan Hunt... hunt
Ben Hunt for their food
Rowena What about agriculture then? (This signals a change of topic and the children move onto their next heading, agriculture).

The children are able to work with the symbolic representation of temperatures in Britain and Sarawak and use their imaginations to consider what life would be like in a hot climate.

Let’s consider what is happening between these children. The cognitive tool of binary opposites has helped them structure their thinking as they compare and contrast extremes of experience – life in a temperate climate and life in the tropics. Egan argues that children of this age are interested in the distant and the different – and they are certainly engaged by the topic. He further argues that this age likes to classify their experiences, which

Clothes	Food	Houses	Agriculture	Work	Leisure

is supported by their decision to generate headings to guide their discussion. Classification involves comparing and contrasting which depends on the ability to identify similarities and differences and this thinking tool clearly supports the children's discussions.

Shan seems to draw on her personal understanding of the kind of food eaten in hot climates and suggests the food is 'hot and spicy'. Ben challenges this and suggests people in tropical climates would probably eat 'cold food'. Shan takes up John's suggestion that food would be 'organic' and supports her point by offering what she regards as evidence: 'beefburgers and stuff' – which she probably regards as the opposite of organic. All the children draw on personal knowledge and experience and use it to speculate on life in a hot country. Through the discussion they gradually build a picture of characteristics they associate with rainforest food. It is 'hot and spicy', 'cold', 'organic', and 'not bought', but 'hunted'.

This short extract comes from a discussion that took place for nearly an hour (for full transcript see Lyle 1998). It is an interesting example of collaborative learning as children seek to construct meaning out of graphical data. They are able to make use of graphical representation of temperatures in a meaningful way. Through their talk they use what they know about their own climate and way of life as a point of comparison with a tropical climate. They draw on their own experiences of hot weather and begin to hypothesise what food would be like in a climate that is hot all year round. Their ideas about food in the unknown climate are generated from their experiences. Throughout the whole transcript they make tentative and provisional statements as they think aloud and see how their ideas sound.

Later on, having discussed the other headings, they return to their conversation about food and make more explicit the fact that they are comparing and contrasting different ways of life.

- Ben** (referring to our food) It's mainly packed isn't it?
- John** Yeah. Right, packed food
- Ben** 'Cos we don't go out hunting and say, 'right we'll have... um.. some of that tonight', do we?
- Shan** Well they might say, 'let's catch a deer and have it for supper'...
- Ben** They'd have to eat it within two days or they'd have to throw it to their animals... if they had any...
- John** Yeah, they would, 'cos they couldn't cool it

Here the children are hypothesising and use a high level of language to indicate the tentativeness of their speculations. Note the assumption that a society living in a tropical rainforest would be a non-monetary society where barter might be used, a society without the benefits of refrigeration.

In these transcripts we see children using talk to create understanding. They were not merely learning facts about comparative temperatures; they were working to make meaning out of the graphical data in front of them. In this process they drew on the meaning structures and experiences they already had and combined this with their ability to imagine what kinds of world might exist in very different temperatures. What makes this possible is the use of their imaginations as they draw on their knowledge of the world to interact with the graphs and speculate about the lives of people in other worlds.

The cognitive tool of binary opposites worked well. By comparing a temperate with a tropical region the children can mediate the two concepts. The meaning of the term 'tropical' makes sense as it relates to the term 'temperate'; this helps embed the concept in the children's own experiences. The temperature continuum is an empirical reality represented in an abstract form. To truly understand the graphs, the children have to 'embed' the numerical representation of temperature in a context which makes 'human sense' to them. In achieving this they create narratives to speculate on the way of life of people who live in a different region of the world; in doing so they get a greater understanding of their own climate. We don't notice temperature when it's temperate because that's what we are used to. It is only by calling attention to the opposites of temperate that the children are able to develop a firm grasp of the whole concept. By comparing and contrasting graphs of their own and an 'opposite' climate, the children have a tool to help them mediate their understanding and increase their conceptual grasp on reality by imaginatively speculating on things which are very far from their everyday experience.

To sum up: through this task the children engaged with extremes and limits of reality by comparing a tropical climate with a temperate one. The task satisfies the urge to classify by setting up a task that requires them to compare and contrast. By asking the children to work out what life would be like in a tropical climate we ask them to create hypothetical narratives about life in a rainforest. I go on to consider all the other aspects of Romantic Understanding to illustrate how this approach can be applied to planning the topic of Tropical Rain Forests.

Romantic Understanding: Principles and Implications for Practice

I have used the temperature graph example to illustrate how the cognitive tool of binary opposites can support children's learning in the Romantic Stage. Let's look further at the principles Egan has laid out to help guide our planning for this stage and consider how the topic of tropical rainforests can illustrate them.

Using the story form

Egan argues that students in the Romantic Stage are readily engaged by curriculum embodied in story form. A study of rainforest people provides ample scope for applying the story form. The story form helps us to plan our curriculum in terms of a narrative structure which will include characters, setting, plot, rift and resolution. At this stage Egan wants us to consider what content most dramatically embodies the binary opposites to provide access to the topic.

Selecting topics than can best be articulated in terms of binary opposites

Egan says we should seek out those limits and those extremes that can best be articulated in binary terms. This principle guides us to search for clear means of access to knowledge; in this case the whole topic is guided by the binary opposites of destruction and survival. A further binary opposite that can mediate the impact of forest destruction on the animals is extinction and survival. The temperature graphs provided the binary opposites of climate: tropical and temperate. The binary opposites selected provide a way of organising the children's access to the content.

Including knowledge of the scale of reality

Egan wants us to search for material that will give children a sense of the contexts of the everyday world and to look for the extremes of the real world. In our example the temperature graphs fulfil this principle by comparing the extremes of a temperate and tropical climate where real people live.

Including knowledge about the limits of experience

This principle guides us to seek out aspects that can make the content more humanly meaningful by focusing on the limits of human experience within it. As Egan says, 'the focus on other lives and the extremes of experience is perhaps the most important way in which we begin to know ourselves'. (Egan 1990:213) By speculating on the implications for way of life of temperatures in a tropical rainforest we establish a context for children to go on to explore the human experience of living in a rainforest.

Enabling students to form romantic associations

When considering how to select content we should

draw on human qualities that can best engage romantic associations. A study of rainforest people who still live traditional lifestyles today can open this up. It should alert children to the power the world has to destroy the rainforest and the courage of rainforest people to fight for their way of life.

Providing a strong affective component

We should select content that engages the emotional life of the children and this should be a major feature of all aspects of the curriculum. We want to know why children should care about the content we include in our curriculum. Egan argues that the cognitive and the affective are not separate and that emotional engagement is required for cognitive development to take place. A study of rainforests fulfils this principle very well: the binary opposites of survival and destruction immediately engage the affective. Further activities can focus on the human qualities of bravery and determination on the part of rainforest people against exploitation and greed from those wishing to destroy the forest.

Stimulating wonder and awe

Egan directs us to select content that exemplifies the extremes of human achievement and natural phenomena. We should bring out the wonder of the everyday world for our children. A study of rainforests where 50% of the world's flora and fauna reside with all their extremes and differences meets this principle well. In addition, the achievements of the rainforest people who have developed cures for diseases from the plants of the rainforest and today's search for cures for AIDS and other diseases can also inspire awe and wonder. It is not difficult to think about what is wonderful about the study of rainforests.

Focusing on human motives, intentions, and emotions

Egan wants us to address the question of what forms the human background of the topics to be taught. In the struggle for control over the use of the rainforests between, for example, the original peoples, their governments, multinational corporations, and environmentalists provides the stuff of drama to exemplify all the above.

Stimulating students' sensibility

We should seek to stimulate students' sensibility by embodying ideas like courage or grief, fear or excitement, cleverness or stupidity in our planning to bring out what these ideas can mean in real lives. Developing sensitivity to the suffering of others because of events in the world can help students see the impact of such events on themselves. In learning about how others feel they learn about themselves. A study of rainforests can certainly lend itself to the cultivation of children's sensibilities, for example the bravery and determination of the rain forest

people pitted against the exploitation and greed of those who wish to log the forest.

Providing knowledge of other styles of life

Knowledge of other lifestyles is at the heart of a study of the rainforest. Egan points out how important it is that children come to understand that their lifestyle is one of a vast number of legitimate styles. Children need to develop respect for the value of other lifestyles and to question the domination of the Western way of life and its often presumed superiority. The study of the rainforest provides an extreme example of lifestyles that are totally self-sufficient which contrasts with our own lives which are so dependent on others. If children are to be engaged in considering different ways of life this must include exploration of values and the worth and dignity of other lifestyles.

Providing opportunity for detailed study

Egan points out that children in the Romantic Phase frequently become interested, even obsessed by collecting things or finding out the most about a small topic. It is not for nothing that the Guinness Book of Records is so popular with this age group. He wants us to provide opportunities for children to explore some aspect of topics in detail. Again a study of tropical rainforests provides plenty of scope for detailed study. Children love to find out that scientists have not yet 'discovered' all the species that live in the rainforest and imagine what it would be like to discover one.

Stimulating the imagination and literal thinking

Egan has placed these together to bring home how often these two aspects of teaching are seen as separate enterprises. He wishes to emphasise that stimulating the imagination can provide the effective drive for the development of literal thinking; that is developing the essential skills of literacy, numeracy and scientific understanding. Planning for literal thinking must be an integral part of what we do. The temperature graph activity provides a concrete example of how focusing on the skills of constructing and interpreting temperature graphs can be harnessed to the Romantic Curriculum project. We see children developing the ability to work with disembodied, rational forms of representing data in the form of the temperature graphs. Temperature graphs are visual organisers that engage the literal eye.

Conclusion

I have tried to show how the topic of tropical rainforests can be used to help us become familiar with Egan's Romantic Framework (1990) and provided an example of children's work with temperature graphs to provide a concrete illustration of how one of the basic tools in the

model, the use of binary opposites can be used to plan a task. Once the tools associated with the framework have been mastered they can be applied to any aspect of the curriculum. 'Teaching Thinking' would love to hear from teachers who decide to put these ideas into practice.

Links with the Mythic Stage

The Mythic stage and the Romantic Phase have much in common. Egan still wants us to think of the curriculum as a story to be heard and a story to be told (Egan 1986). In the Romantic Phase the power of story to imaginatively engage children with knowledge is strong in both phases. The embodiment of the story changes from myths and fairy tales to real world stories and lives as children's rational selves develop.

Binary opposites retain their power to organise and categorise content, but their role expands to focus on real world examples. The affective and the cognitive retain their importance, and the adage 'no cognitive gain without affective engagement' remains true.

Drama and role-play should retain their central role in the curriculum, but a focus on real world dramas would supplement fantasy as children explore the lives of real people and events.

Getting Started

We suggest you start small and work your way up and in this issue we provided a detailed example for you to draw on, experiment with and use. The activities come from 'Arctic Stories' (Lyle & Roberts, 2008, in print) and reproduced for this issue (pages 40 - 58). We have taken Egan's guidelines for Romantic Understanding and applied them to tell the story of the 19th Century Inuit people whose lives depended on the whale, and their encounters with the sailors who sailed on the British whaling ships. Give it a go! Teaching Thinking would love to hear of your progress - send us your ideas for the magazine.

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