

Imagination in the Middle Years: Developing application strategies to enhance student learning

Anne-Marie Dooner

with members of the Leila North Egan Study Project: Kirsten Andersson, Charlene Eckert, Verland Hicks, Nicole Kerbrat, Peter Obendoerfer and Darren Roy

My name is Anne-Marie Dooner and I'm a Middle Years teacher at Ecole Leila North Community School in the Seven Oaks School Division in Winnipeg, Manitoba. I am also a graduate student at the University of Manitoba.

I will begin this presentation with a general overview of the research study that I am implementing at Ecole Leila North. The research study focuses on a group of Middle Years teachers as they study and implement Dr. Egan's theory into classroom practice. After this overview, each member of the group will briefly present the changes that they plan to implement this fall, having integrated Dr. Egan's theoretical framework.

The purpose of the study at Ecole Leila North is to examine how a group of seven Middle Years staff members...

- comes to an understanding of Kieran Egan's theory of imagination and learning
- collectively develops individual philosophies and strategies that integrate the main ideas of Dr. Egan's work into their Middle Years practice
- actually applies these philosophies/strategies to classroom practice

The study also observes the on-going social dynamics of group members as they work together to understand, develop, and ultimately apply their philosophies and strategies to classroom practice. This aspect of the research relating to the social dynamics of the group will be framed by the structural, the relational, and the cognitive dimensions of the Social Capital Theory.

It is to be noted that the entire study will take place over a two year period, and will require approximately 250 hours of each participant's time.

History of the group

The group originally began in the spring of 2003, when Dr. Egan and the IERG applied for funding in order to systematically implement and test their theory in a number of diverse schools across Canada, one of which was Ecole Leila North Community School in Winnipeg, Manitoba. In response to Kieran Egan's proposal, a number of interested staff members volunteered to participate in the study and began to familiarize themselves with Dr. Egan's theory. After the funding for the project fell through in the fall of 2003, the staff members, always interested in reflective practice and now very interested in

Kieran Egan's work, began exploring alternative ways of studying and implementing his theory, independent of the original study proposal.

It should be noted that although I'm the principal investigator in the study, I am also an active member of the "Egan Study Group", as we are known at Leila North. It was only once the funding was denied and the group began exploring alternative ways of studying and implementing Dr. Egan's work that I began to examine the possibility of studying this unique experience with my thesis advisor, Dr. David Mandzuk. Presently, there are seven staff members in the study group.

The Research Study – Planning Stage

The first stage of the research began in October 2003, and ended in July 2004. During this time, group members became familiar with Dr. Egan's work, as well as other relevant literature. Group members also began to develop their individual philosophies and strategies, reflective of Dr. Egan's work. Throughout this process it became clear that group members wanted and expected this experience to change their underlying teaching philosophies, rather than simply providing them with a new list of teaching strategies. Members' journal statements reflected these desires: "I want this theory to shake up my view of Middle Years practice..." "This is more a way of being in the classroom..."

Throughout the planning stage, the group operated within a specific structure. Group meetings took place twice monthly, either in the evening or during "Educational Leave" days generously granted to us by the Seven Oaks School Division. As a group, we agreed to...

- attend meetings of 3-6 hours in duration, regularly
- complete prescribed readings
- write journal reflections after (and between) meetings
- collectively develop agendas for subsequent meetings

Data collection during the planning stage involved...

- subject journal entries
- one taped focus group discussion, which occurred in May 2004, facilitated by Dr. Mandzuk. (Since I am a member of the "Egan Study Group," I actively participated in the focus group discussion).

Focus Group Discussion

During this discussion that dealt primarily with the social dynamics of the group, the members identified three major factors that they felt contributed to the group's success so far:

1. The structural component of the group...
 - structured meetings with set agendas
 - rotating meeting chairperson to ensure equal time for all group members
 - fluid leadership within the group so that individual strengths can surface and be used as a resource by the entire group
 - division of labour within the group. For example, one member is the link to the School Board office, another member is the link to the University, etc...

2. The type of support that group members provide each other during and between meetings...
 - mutual respect for others' strengths and weaknesses - making group meetings a safe place to say, "I don't understand," "I don't know," or "I need more time..."
 - mutual support between group members - taking the time to help each other through the "rough patches" of the project.
 - expectations and obligations that group members will "push" each others' thinking. In the end, we are "critical friends", offering honest and respectful feedback to each other. For example, the group uses a "hot seat" process where members individually present and argue their practical applications to one another at different stages throughout the process. Members are expected to critically evaluate their work in a kind and sincere way.

3. Flexibility within the structure of the group
 - group members are allowed to come to their own individual understanding of Kieran Egan's work, along with their own vision of what this might involve in their own classroom teaching.
 - Members allow the learning process to "take them" where they need to go, with no specifically mandated direction.

Guiding Questions

Although we allowed the learning process to "take us where we needed to go", there were some key questions that guided our learning...

- What is Egan's theory really about?
- What are Vygotsky's beliefs? Why does Dr. Egan embrace Vygotsky's beliefs and reject Piaget's?
- What exactly is imagination? How does it work? How does it develop? What does the effective use of imagination look like in a Middle Years classroom?
- How do you apply Dr. Egan's theory into practice?
- Are certain components of the theory necessary for application (binary opposites, for example)? What components of the theory can we comfortably apply in our classrooms?
- Why are metaphors important, and how do we nurture the use of metaphor in Middle Years students?

- What are our goals as Middle Years teachers in terms of “imagination” – What are we trying to achieve with Middle Years kids?

These questions have ultimately led to the development of our individual implementation plans, which will be presented shortly...

The Research Study – Implementation Stage

The implementation stage of this study will begin this fall and continue until June, 2005. During this time, group members will continue to meet approximately twice monthly to:

- identify the concepts and ideas most readily applicable and least easily applicable to Middle Years teaching
- collectively discuss our newly developed “philosophies” and to modify teaching strategies if necessary.
- discuss the perceived effectiveness of the adopted strategies
- provide group members with continued support.

Data collection during the implementation stage will include...

- continued subject journal entries
- three taped focus group discussions, facilitated by Dr. Mandzuk.

Members’ Projects

Peter Obendoerfer and Kirsten Andersson

Peter and I are planning to create subject-integrated units and begin with the curriculum topic of ecosystems using BEARS as our theme. We have determined the binary opposite of bears on one hand:

- As a symbol of comfort and security in fiction and/or fantasy
- As an object of ferociousness, fear and peril in the natural world

Our classes will explore the transcendent quality of bears in fiction including children’s stories, aboriginal spirit symbols and myths. We will then explore the other extreme of bears’ role in their ecosystems. In this realm we can explore some science/sociology themes such as harvesting bears’ organs, bears in captivity etc.

There are some interesting historical components such as the origins of the teddy bear and we intend to create opportunities for students to “collect” bear symbols and display our collections. The science and literacy activities are too numerous to count.

Peter and I have discussed and planned for the challenges of timetabling, our roles as a teaching team and our need to be seen as a teaching team with our students. We have significantly restructured our approach from last year. We determined the need to meet as a combined group at least once early in the year. We also spent some time strategizing the most effective way to schedule our classes taking into account things such as computer lab timetabling and library timetabling. We will implement these changes in the new school year.

We had originally planned to implement a science topic using the theme of structures but have since decided that ecosystems and bears is more accessible for grade seven students early in the year. We have not abandoned our original plan; only deferred it until later in the year.

Darren Roy

I am a second year grade seven teacher at Ecole Leila North in Winnipeg. I will be utilizing Human/Non-Human, Populated/Unpopulated, and Socialized/Unsocialized binary opposites to synthesize physical and human geography concepts within a Dream Island inquiry project. In the first few terms, fundamental content skills will be taught and regularly reflected upon by the students in metacognitive journals. These entries will be a place through which the students enter into the guiding metaphors for their culminating island. The students will become ‘world travelers,’ throughout the process of learning and reflecting. Their understanding of social studies skills and ideas should unfold as the world does for any curious traveler. The island in the final term should be a contextualized representation of the learned content as they understand it. Kieran Egan believes that Binary Opposites and Metaphors are fundamental in planning some imaginative lessons. It is hoped that each student will develop their island utilizing some aspects of Vygotsky’s “Reproductive” and “Creative” memory.

I foresee this year-long process as being a meaningful, integrative, challenging and active exercise in imagination. The content will become real and relevant to the students as they take ownership in their unfolding island through the mediating binary opposites. This emotional engagement with the content is something that Vygotsky believed was important.

The Dream Island project is an “attempt to create an internal experience for the subject, [an] attempt to elicit the conscious perception of internal organic change, led to a state reminiscent of emotion.”(Vygotsky’s *Collected Works*, Emotions, 330). In order for students to demonstrate this sort of engagement with any content they need to be provided with guided instruction, choice in the direction into which they take their island, time to complete the task, and feedback that is relevant to the individual and their work. These are things that I believe are at the heart of expressing true imagination in learning.

Charlene Eckert

My name is Charlene Eckert and I am a grade 8 teacher at Leila North School in Winnipeg, MB. I will be teaching a Science unit on Water Systems. My scope is narrow right now because I will be going on maternity leave in November.

I have chosen to mediate the material with binary opposites, chiefly focusing on the idea that water is both life-giving and life-threatening. My students and I will be visiting the Red River Flood Museum in Sainte Agathe, MB., where the story of Manitoba flooding will be presented in a narrative format. I am leaving room in my program for exploring the use of metaphor, which is a concept that I am continuing to explore.

I chose to focus on the concept of binary opposites because of the limited time that I will spend with my class in the coming year. This particular pair of opposites came directly from a student's journal last year so I have confidence in this tool as a means of engaging student imagination.

Nicole Kerbrat

I am a Grade Six teacher at Leila North. The unit I developed focuses on the theme of myths and legends. This is an interdisciplinary unit that focuses on the historical component in grade 6 Social Studies that relates to the study of the First Nations, with a connection to English Language Arts. Storytelling will be highlighted throughout this unit, which focuses on myths and legends. I agree with Egan that it's important to "...think of a lesson or a unit as a good story to be told rather than as a set of objectives to be achieved".

We will explore a variety of Aboriginal legends related to how the Earth was created. We will then explore different gods/goddesses in Greek literature, as well as mythical creatures that were believed to exist on Earth at one time.

The binary opposites in this unit are good vs. evil. The heroic transcendent values in this unit will include caring, healing, and forgiving. Within the extremes of good and evil, students will explore transcendent qualities and learn different elements of a story, such as plot, setting, and theme.... A special focus will be placed on the use of metaphor in storytelling. This unit will include a number of learning activities, including the development of each student's very own legend or myth, created in both a pop-up book format and a clay art piece.

In closing, I will quote Paley, who states "The classroom that does not create its own legends has not traveled beneath the surface to where living takes place".

Anne-Marie Dooner

For the past two years, I've begun teaching Grade Seven French Immersion Natural Science with a unit on "Forces and Structures." I will be doing the same this September, while attempting to integrate Dr. Egan's theory. The most fundamental change will involve the mediating of content through the binary opposites of construction versus destruction and life versus death. Within these two extremes, I will be teaching content with a focus on humanizing knowledge and exploring transcendent values with the use of amazing and "out there" narratives, and through the use of metaphor.

The use of metaphor is going to have a special place in my teaching of Science this year. It was during our Vygotsky readings that I became intrigued with the notion of "private thinking"... I thought that it would be wonderful to create one's own "private world" in Science. This year, whether I'm teaching the Natural or Social Sciences, I will be integrating Dr. Egan's theory and helping kids to create their very own personal and visually creative "private world of Science." This means that at different times throughout the year, students will "pull out" the project and explore ways of visually and creatively representing key scientific concepts. By the end of the year, the students will have created a world of images reflecting their individual learning of the sciences. It is to be noted that the relationship between the kids' visual representations and the scientific concepts taught in class will be further developed in French Language Arts.

Currently, I am working to further develop my understanding of the notion of metaphors, and how to encourage the thinking associated with metaphor use in Middle Years students. As well, I am developing the concept of a "visually creative" representation of the sciences. I plan to meet with Dr. Ann Stinner during the summer to explore appropriate visual media for the project. I also plan to learn strategies that will help me to teach kids artistic skills, allowing them to be more comfortable with the creative process.

Verland Hicks

As the school administrator, my focus has been different from the other group members, who have been focusing on classroom practice. I have been studying philosophical understanding with the goal of making connections to professional development in teaching.

In "The Educated Mind" (chapter 4, Philosophical Understanding), Dr. Egan emphasizes that philosophical understanding requires a sophisticated language and literacy that needs to be developed. In order for an institution to support and sustain this level of understanding, it needs to be nurtured on an ongoing basis. With this in mind, I have decided to focus on two specific areas in the upcoming year: ongoing dialogue and creating a safe environment. Anyone who has worked in a school environment knows

that time is limited and many demands are placed on a staff. Throughout the year, I will look for ways to restructure already existing times scheduled, such as professional development, staff meetings and grade level meetings with the goal of nurturing an ongoing dialogue.

It is important to understand that a staff's "ongoing dialogue" needs to take place in a safe and trusting environment. In any classroom, teachers have many different strengths and interests. As well, they are in very different "places" on the continuum of professional development. Throughout the year, it is my intent to connect the mythic and romantic to the philosophical understanding through the use of narrative. By using such tools as metaphors and binary opposites, it is my hope that we, as a staff, can make the connections to the philosophical understanding that will ultimately help us to reflect on our classroom practices.

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