

## Associations with the Heroic

### What are associations with the heroic?

Association with the heroic is the tool that enables us to overcome some of the threats involved in the new sense of reality. Remember what it was like when you were ten or eleven years old. You were at the mercy of bus schedules, teachers' requirements and school regulations, parents' commands, dress codes, and so on and on—in fact, while your own ego and sense of independence were beginning to develop, you seemed hemmed in by the endless laws, rules, and regulations of others. By associating with those things or people that have heroic qualities we can gain confidence that we too can face and deal with the real world, taking on those qualities with which we associate.

One trouble with the sense of reality is that, initially at least, the student has little sense of just what the world's limits are or how the world works. This can be, and usually is, disturbing, perhaps a little frightening. Many of us forget the insecurity of discovering an autonomous reality beyond our knowing and control. But the mind has strategies for dealing with this potential source of insecurity. Perhaps the commonest strategy employed to meet this threat is to make a mental association with someone or something that seems able to overcome the threats posed by everyday reality—anything from a sports team or star to a political leader or a popular icon like Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King Jr., or a local institution such as a school or company. The power of forming such associations is so versatile that the range of objects seems limitless: the tenacity of a weed on a stormy rock face, the ingenuity that has created an insulated plastic cup, the beauty and power of an animal, the elegance of a mathematical proof.

### How can we form associations with the heroic in teaching?

**Topic:** Literacy

**Subject Area:** English

**Cognitive Tool:** Associations with the heroic

One can focus on any object, or aspect of the curriculum, and project into it some heroic qualities. As students become literate and as we want them to engage with books, one could help students see what is heroic about books. In the case of the book, one might highlight the millennia of human ingenuity that have created this compact object crammed with tiny symbols that serve as an externalized memory, able to hold an endless array of information and convey the emotions and experience of other people in distant times and places. Stretched out the text of a book might cover twenty miles as a single long line. Human ingenuity has made the crammed pages hospitable to the eye by means of tiny punctuation marks and divisions within the text. These tiny marks helped to democratize reading, and have probably had more influence on human affairs than all the armies of history. Well, you can see how one can romanticize the object: highlight it, mark it off from its surroundings, making it an object with which students can form an association, associating themselves with that human ingenuity.

**Topic:** Ancient Egypt

**Subject Area:** Social Studies

**Cognitive Tool:** Associations with the heroic

With any great civilization there is at first the tendency to see it in terms of its grand accomplishments and advances and in Ancient Egypt, there were no shortage of those. The pyramids had been around since 2500 BC, the Egyptians had created a phonetic hieroglyphic writing, their religion was complex and their governmental structure very stable. But beyond the great architectural and societal accomplishments, how did the people live? What were the class roles? How was life for them? We might encourage our students to imagine they lived during these times. We might ask: If you had the chance to travel back in time to Ancient Egypt would you take it? Would you want the opportunity to stand at Luxor when it was new and breathe in the hot desert air? Watch caravans come into vibrant colourful markets and sail a felucca down the Nile? To explore of the unknown, the chance to observe and participate in Ancient Egyptian society, seeing it through the eyes of the people who lived there – what an adventure this would be! What would it be like to spend a morning wandering through an Egyptian dynasty of the past?

**Topic:** Pronouns

**Subject Area:** English

**Cognitive Tool:** Associations with the heroic

Pronouns are cool. But to engage with what is heroic about pronouns we might narrow the field down. General terms like “cool” or “interesting” don’t stir the emotions as deeply as the more specific and powerful ideas “seductive” or “unruly” do. We find personal pronouns magical: clever little magicians well practiced in the art of grammatical legerdemain. We hope our students will find them magical, too. They can make us see what they want us to see, whether pulling something close, holding it at a distance, making it walk, or making it be walked all over. The trick for students, then, is to learn to control these magicians, because it’s easy to imagine the havoc a disorderly magician can wreak. Given the ongoing Harry Potter mania, the image of a young magician just learning to control his latent powers is one that is familiar to many students.

Alternatively, if one is wary of anthropomorphizing the non-human, the creation and invention of a pronoun system is itself magical: How do people on desert islands figure them out? How did the early language users devise such an ingenious system? The idea that a human construct can be both nothing and anything boggles our minds and imaginations. Still, we prefer the anthropomorphizing for two reasons: (1) it more directly links the students to the material, and (2) it requires less preparation time spent in research, and, to our great embarrassment, that matters to us.

**Why does associating with the heroic engage our imaginations?**

What is going on when people make these kinds of associations with sports heroes, film stars, tenacious weeds, or elegant proofs? It is at least in part a response to the threats posed by reality. Students (and adults) form associations with those who seem best equipped to overcome the threats that hem them in. The hero is like us, or like what we would wish to be, hemmed in by the world but somehow overcoming it in a way we would want to emulate. The sports or movie star has the strength, power, freedom, money that the student lacks but desires.

A point to emphasize about this early literate ability to associate with great human qualities: students tend to focus on heroes, as we have here. But it is not the hero, the particular pop star or football player, or the idea or institution or whatever, that is the object of the association. Rather, it is the human quality that the hero embodies. At one level this may seem obvious, but it is important to make the distinction to be able to use this characteristic flexibly when teaching.

That is, there's no need to be constantly dragging heroic figures into the classroom to draw on the instructional value of this cognitive tool. Instead, be alert to the fact that great human qualities can be found in anything; in the tenacity of that weed on a rock face, the persistence of stones, the serenity of cats, the productive industry of worms, the rage of storms. Anything can be seen in human terms—such terms will not give a complete view of any topic, but they will give one engaging view, and onto that you can add others. And most imaginatively engaging among human qualities are those that promise us an enlargement of our powers. In the imaginative classroom we can use the cognitive tool of associating with heroic qualities to highlight almost any feature of the curriculum. It becomes a way to make things significant and to engage students' growing capacity to form such associations. You can "heroize" almost any element of the curriculum. Those earthworms your class is to study become heroic farmers, tilling the soil through vast labors; the punctuation marks are the heroes that democratized reading, making the page hospitable to the eye and easy for all to manage; details of the anatomy of the eel can be seen through the heroic ingenuity and persistence of the people who discovered them.