

Collections and Hobbies

What are collections and hobbies?

Collecting and hobbies provide another route for students to gain some security within the real world they are learning about, but whose limits and dimensions they remain uncertain of. Gaining intellectual mastery of something gives assurance that the world is not limitless and can be mastered, in some significant degree. The normal profile for hobbies and collections is that they begin about the time literacy becomes fluent, reach a peak of intensity around age 11 or 12, and die out around 15.

How can we engage students' interest in collections and hobbies in teaching?

Topic: Personification

Subject Area: English

Cognitive Tool: Collections and Hobbies

This tool taps into students' desire to collect things as a means to get better grasp on reality. There are many taken-for-granted examples in language where inanimate objects are personified—that is, they are given human qualities—that students can collect. Take for example gender associations. Unlike some languages such as French and Spanish that identify objects as masculine and feminine, we do not do so explicitly in English. That said, common items are often personified as “he” or “she”. Students can be encouraged to collect examples of this. “She’s in the driveway.” Who, your mother? Your grandmother? No, the truck. Moreover, inanimate objects can be assigned the attributes of human beings—take, for example, the computer. I recently heard someone say their computer was “thinking” while it was processing a command. In what other ways are inanimate objects personified?

Topic: The Halifax Explosion

Subject Area: Social Studies

Cognitive Tool: Collections and Hobbies

What aspect of the topic can students collect? What can they learn in exhaustive detail? When it comes to the Halifax explosion students could collect the following types of information: Why did the ship blow up? How much ammunition and in what conditions, to create such massive devastation? There are statistics and records that can be consulted – to find out exactly how many were blinded, how many children died, exactly what were the contents of the ship that exploded. What were the extent of the damages? What survival stories exist?

Why do collections and hobbies engage our imaginations?

It has always struck us as odd that we hardly ever see in educational texts much concern about students' hobbies and collections. The activities involved in these related and sometimes overlapping self-chosen tasks clearly engage students' intellectual energy like hardly anything else. What is going on? Why are they doing it? And why don't educators focus more attention on these activities and learn from them?

Well, what is going on? One part of the drive to collect and engage in some hobby seems clearly connected to the insecurity mentioned already about the growing recognition of an indeterminately large reality. Students can develop one kind of security by associating with those qualities that seem best able to overcome its apparent threats. Another kind of security can come from learning that reality is not infinitely large. A common route to the latter kind of security is to get an exhaustive understanding of some part of reality. By collecting "the whole set," as commercial interests suggest you do as they exploit this urge, you recognize that the world is manageable, limited, understandable.

Even if you never collect the whole set, of comics or stamps or dolls or action figures, you gain a curious satisfaction in learning what constitutes the whole set. The security of knowing all there is to know about however small an area of knowledge is immensely satisfying. Even though a student will not collect all the songs of Ani de Franco (because there are always unreleased and bootlegged tapes somewhere) or own all the Victorian postage stamps produced in Canada, there is great satisfaction in the search and in collecting whatever parts of the set as possible. The drive to collect and develop a hobby seems to begin typically with literacy, reaching a peak in puberty, dying out or losing a lot of its energy with the development of theoretic thinking. No doubt there are other psychological mechanisms in play in collecting and hobbies, but the one identified here has some clear educational implications. Once the imagination is caught up with some area of knowledge in a way that provides the student with the chance to "collect the set" or know exhaustively about it and "become an expert," then great energy can be released in learning. The trick is in isolating aspects of a topic that are exhaustible in a manner that can allow the student to learn nearly everything about it.

Teachers might be reasonably skeptical that the enthusiasm that students bring to collecting songs by their favorite pop-stars or learning about motor-bikes cannot be so easily harnessed to learning about algebra or science. As an experiment, teachers might try asking their students what they collect or what hobbies they pursue. We ask the students in our education courses this question regularly, and the students are usually astonished by the range of things collected or the kind of hobbies others have. Often, by their comments, they indicate they have no understanding of why other students would collect some of the range of things they do, or why some have the hobbies they developed.

One crucial trigger is "Collect the set!" in order to provide some area within a topic which the students can learn exhaustively. This is different from allotting chunks of a topic for students in

groups to do a project on. They may well be encouraged to work in groups, but the trick is for the teacher to locate something exhaustible within the topic.

Crucially this cognitive tool drives the student to focus on detail, on the details of reality. Consequently in planning and teaching it will be sensible to include some opportunity for exploring some aspect of each topic in exhaustive detail.