Humanization of Meaning

What is humanization of meaning?

Humanization of meaning is the tool that enables us to see beyond the surface of any knowledge to its source in human life. Knowledge is part of living human tissue; books and libraries contain only dead codes. The business of education is enabling new minds to bring to new life old knowledge. All knowledge is human knowledge, and the imagination is enlivened by understanding the human emotional core of the knowledge the student is learning.

Instead of representing knowledge to the newly literate as a given—telling them the rules for comma use or mathematical operations and making them do exercises till they get the rules right—you can make the knowledge memorable and meaningful by re-embedding it in the contexts of its original invention or human uses. When students learn a mathematical algorithm, for example, by seeing who invented it and for what purpose or how it is used for some dramatic purpose today, they absorb it more easily, understand it better, and remember it.

How can we evoke humanization of meaning in teaching?

Topic: Properties of fabrics/yarns
Subject Area: Textiles
Cognitive Tool: Humanization of Meaning

To examine the properties of fabrics and yarns students can be encouraged to learn about specific people involved in the production or use of material of various kinds. Who have pioneered the cultivation of organic cotton? What makes this a modern day fabric of choice? Have students ever heard about *The Hempest*? The world's largest outlet for hemp clothing and accessories? What are the properties of hemp-based fabric and yarn that make it appealing to an increasingly large market? The study of fabrics and yarns would also be an excellent way to engage students in investigating the extremes of experience and limits of reality. One website I visited listed 269 kinds of fabric, from "aba" (a garment of camel or goat hair), to "galatea" (striped cotton), to "zibeline" (soft piled wool). There is a crazy variety of fabrics and yarns each with properties that make it more or less appropriate for different kinds of garments. (It is interesting to note, too, that what on the surface looks like great variety in types of fabric—all are variants or blends of just four basic fabric types (silk, cotton, linen, and wool).)

And where do the names of fabrics come from, and what features of human life are involved? The denim many students will be wearing derives from a cloth made by the Andre family in Nîmes, France. The cloth was called *serge de Nîmes,* which was then shortened to denim.) Its use in making trousers first happened in Genoa, and so denim trousers became known as "jeans" (from the French name for Genoa, *Gênes*).

Why does humanization of meaning engage our imaginations?

Imagine standing at night among the stacks of a large library. Imagine also that you are the only person in the building. It would be easy to feel as though the odd noises you hear are whispers from the books, and that, as the night goes on, the whispers will get louder and louder, becoming deafening. Wandering past row after row of books, you may feel a bit daunted, or frightened even, by all the knowledge that people have accumulated. In fact, for anyone in the knowledge business, such an experience can be a bit depressing, making brutally clear how minuscule an amount of knowledge any one of us can accumulate. But it is useful to recognize that the only knowledge in that vast library is what is in your head. What is in the books is merely desiccated code, not voices. Knowledge is not symbols—symbols are just reminders of knowledge: hints, pointers. Knowledge is a function of the living tissue of our living brains. Obvious as this point is, we often forget it. We can easily forget that learning the symbols in which knowledge is encoded is no guarantee at all of knowing. All knowledge is human knowledge; it is a product of human hopes and fears and passions. The primary trick in bringing knowledge to life from the codes in which we store it is through the emotions that gave it life in the first place in some other mind. Knowledge, again, is part of living human tissue; books and libraries contain only desiccated codes. The business of education is enabling new minds to bring old knowledge to new life and meaning.

Scientific knowledge, especially as stacked in textbooks, has an aura of objectivity; it is secure, uninfluenced by what readers might hope or fear, a solid assertion of what is true. Or, at least, that is what we are supposed to think. That kind of security and objectivity has commonly been seen as one of the great products of the development of literacy. But literacy had been employed for a great variety of tasks before it was used in the development of science. We might do well to focus on the kind of knowledge that was found engaging and meaningful by people during the early years of literacy's use. The educational trick is to show knowledge as the product of human beings' ingenuity, energy, passions, hopes, fears, and so on. People like us made it, invented it, discovered it, formulated it for human purposes, with human motives.

In the imaginative classroom we will bear in mind that everything we teach has a human source—the comma was invented by someone and has had astonishing effects in human history, the life cycle of the eel was discovered by someone and fascinates those who learn about it, geometric theorems were invented by someone and used by people to achieve amazing things—and that bringing to the fore the human emotions, ambitions, intentions, fears, and so on, we can expect to engage our students' imaginations in learning. The imaginative classroom will be full of people, past and present, and full of their voices, hopes, fears, and passions. By using this cognitive tool in our teaching we will in turn help students develop it further, enabling them to see human emotions behind and below the surface features they have to deal with. Such a tool simply enriches life.