

Meta-Narratives

What are meta-narratives?

Meta-narrative understanding is a tool that orders facts or events into general ideas and allows us to form emotional associations with them. That is, we don't just organize facts into theories, we shape even our theories into more general meta-narratives that further shape our emotional commitments.

As stories help us to organize facts and events into emotionally meaningful patterns, so meta-narratives help us to organize generalizations, theories, metaphysical schemes, ideologies and other abstract conceptions into emotionally meaningful patterns. What binds theories together is a meta-narrative. It is a very general, and very powerful, tool which prominently uses our emotions to create coherent responses to varied phenomena. Meta-narratives are clearly tied to complex higher psychological processes and their purpose is to create for us emotional satisfaction with regard to the complex inhabitants of our abstract realm. Like all of our tools, we may misuse it or not develop it very adequately. But its proper use allows us great facility in bringing together in emotional harmony an array of abstractions.

How can we employ meta-narrative structuring in teaching?

Topic: World War II

Subject Area: History

Cognitive Tool: Meta-narrative Structuring

A meta-narrative framing the study of World War II might examine this war as part of a series of cataclysms that rocked the 20th century and its basic views of how the world works. Prior to this war, one notes what might be described as an ameliorative view of history—the world was obviously getting better, progressing in terms of scientific knowledge, economics, politics and so on. World War 2 and the massive destruction of human life, the natural world, architecture and other cultural artifacts, rocked this sense of progress. How could this kind of devastation be explained?

Topic: RiskTaking

Subject Area: Psychology/History

Cognitive Tool: Meta-narrative Structuring

In the fateful contest of fully armed versus disarming, one story stands above all. Have students read and discover anew the dramatic story of the mighty man-of-war, Goliath, as he confronts David, the boy-hero of Israel. The plan is to read closely, paying attention to contrasts, binary opposites, dramatic tensions, descriptions of Goliath, motivations of David and symbols in the story. In discussion students can consider the following questions: What kinds of binary oppositions come to play in the story? How does fear, power mongering, pride or bullying

influence decisions for these men? How are outward appearances misleading in this story? Students could be asked to think of historical conflicts and current disputes that parallel the confrontation between David and Goliath. What accounts for the enduring appeal of this story?

Topic: Revolutions

Subject Area: Social Studies

Cognitive Tool: Meta-narrative Structuring

Here we will want to engage the student in reflecting on Revolutions in a way that explores how they work—what narratives, first, do we find in them, and then how we can generalize towards a meta-narrative. We can start by reexamining the French Revolution, which most students will have studied in their history program. In this case we will direct students to focus on finding what caused the sudden change, why it should have happened then, and, in following its progress, what events were crucial in making it “revolutionary.” What was the main dynamic of the revolution?

We will begin to shape a theory of the revolution, which will be stimulated further by asking students to compare the French Revolution with other revolutions. Different theories will begin to emerge as students identify different dynamics at work. The students can be asked to try to decide what is the essence of a revolution—what elements must be necessary for some change to be considered revolutionary? We will direct students to focus on finding what caused the sudden change, why it should have happened then, and, in following its progress, what events were crucial in making it “revolutionary.” What was the main dynamic of the revolution?

We can at this point revisit the discussions about the nature of revolution. As they become more refined, and perhaps as disagreements become clearer, we can turn to a scientific revolution, such as that resulting from Einstein’s theories of relativity. Why did they appear so revolutionary? What was the state of science before Einstein’s work, and what was it about his theories that changed many physicists’ views of the world and how they could study it. We can look in detail at the changes that occurred, and at the broad range of new ways of conceiving the subatomic and cosmic views of matter that resulted. We can consider how far the theories’ association with such technological products as the atomic bomb led to Einstein’s becoming an iconic figure of “the scientist,” and how far that is responsible for his work’s being considered revolutionary. We can then revisit our discussions about the nature of revolution with this further example, and we can bring our new ideas to bear on it, elaborating students’ developing meta-narratives about the course of revolutions.

Topic: Calculus

Subject Area: Mathematics

Cognitive Tool: Meta-narrative Structuring

Differential calculus was the first mathematical tool invented to measure change itself. Until the invention of the calculus in the late seventeenth century, mathematicians had been able to

model only static states of affairs, or at best variable rates represented by functions. Calculus is the first tool to take change itself as an object of study, giving change a central place in our understanding of the universe.

We can appreciate the power of calculus by understanding the revolutionary impact it had on the science of its day, and how it was in many ways the centerpiece in a more general revolution in human beings' understanding of the cosmos and their place in it. The infinitesimal calculus was developed by Newton and Leibniz (the conflicting claims to priority by these two figures, and the ensuing controversy, might also make an interesting topic of discussion) as a means of expressing change in mathematical terms. For the first time, scientists could study change in a rigorous and formalized manner, facilitating a whole new view of the universe as dynamic and changing rather than as static and fixed.

We can begin by looking at the medieval conception of the earth as fixed at the center of an ordered and harmonious cosmos. We might consider Aristotle's assumption about inertia, taken for granted for many centuries, that everything will come to rest unless some force is constantly and actively keeping it in motion. That is, Aristotle and his medieval successors saw rest as the natural state of things. We can also look at the various ways in which this conception of a universe at rest was tied to the sociopolitical arrangements of the medieval world. For example, we could show how this conception of a fixed cosmos reflects the fixed social hierarchy of the day, placing kings at the top of a Great Chain of Being that allowed for little social mobility.

To better appreciate the historical place of the invention of calculus, we can consider the general change in the West's understanding of the world that came about during the Renaissance, setting off the development of the printing press, the discovery of the Americas, the Protestant Reformation, and so on. These developments set off in turn a series of new developments in the sciences, from Copernicus to Galileo to Kepler to Newton. The world ceased to be a fixed entity at the center of a universe whose natural tendency was toward rest, and came to be seen as one moving element in a dynamic and ever-changing cosmos. To make sense of this new cosmos, it was important to develop tools that could measure and quantify its nature. Enter calculus as the meta-narrative knight in shining armor to make sense of our dynamic universe.

Why do meta-narratives engage our imaginations?

Meta-narratives have been unpopular beasts of late, especially when they have been recognized only in their debased and unsophisticated forms –such as in the construction of male/female differences as part of a meta-narrative of related active domination and passive submission which in turn becomes tied into social and economic theories. “Philosophic” thinking came to a kind of maturity in the Enlightened project – in which reason and calculation were to be brought to bear on the social, physical, psychological, historical problems that beset us. Because many Enlightenment thinkers announced their project as in contrast to the undisciplined, emotional, mythic, impressionistic, poetic thinking that preceded their entry to

the intellectual state, “philosophic” forms of thinking have tended to be seen as bloodless, overly-rational, calculative, and dry. The methodologies of the sciences, for example, seem designed to remove anything connected with human values and emotions from their operations. Yet the use of the meta-narrative tool is to engage our emotions with out abstract theoretic thinking appropriately.

That “appropriately” is the hard part, of course. A proper use of our meta-narrative tool will not lead to determining our experimental methods by how we feel that day, or constructing our economic theories based on our self interest, or devising cosmologies on the basis of what would be most comforting, or forming ideologies on the basis of our emotional responses to the activities of a few members of an identifiable grasp of people, or any similar injection of emotion or value into out theory construction or calculations. If we do see examples of the above it is due to inappropriate uses of meta-narratives. The appropriate use is to enrich our emotional engagement in the pursuit of understanding, to recognize the social dimensions of the products of our inquiries and research, to keep proportionate human values in mind as directors of our inquiries and framers of policy for their use, and to embed particular discoveries into wider contexts that shape their meaning. This is, while scientific research might seem, at some level, properly value free, an appropriate use of meta-narratives would influence the choice of topic to explore and the expectation of uses fro the resulting knowledge, the scientist’s hopes and fears would guide decisions, the passion to know would dictate the pace of the work, and the meaning of the results would be made more complex by being fitted to value-rich meta-narrative contexts.

A conservationist meta-narrative, for example, could direct a scientist who holds it to focus on the issue of global warming, and especially to locate as a topic of research something that might provide important evidence for or against some claim about climate change being done to human activity. The meta-narrative would not influence the research itself, but would, as it were, stand alert guiding the scientist to the problem and further guiding the way the results could be interpreted and disseminated. Without such meta-narratives, no field of research would likely make any progress, and it is hard to imagine how science itself would have developed. Similarly, all fields of inquiry that draw on the tools of abstract theoretic thinking require meta-narratives to set their work in contexts of wider human meaning.