

Search for Authority and Truth

What is the search for authority and truth?

The search for authority and truth is a tool that helps assess the worth of general ideas, testing their validity so that meaning can be derived from them. This takes on a particular shape and importance with the development of abstract theoretic thinking, which seeks an objective, certain, privileged view of reality. Among the historical products of this cognitive tool at work have been dictionaries, encyclopedias, and textbooks—repositories of secured knowledge.

How can we employ the search for authority and truth tool in teaching?

Topic: Hamlet

Subject Area: English Literature

Cognitive Tool: Search for authority and truth

It is the most celebrated play in the English language, yet also one of the most argued about. So the theories that have been debated intently can form a framework to engage the students in the play itself. This is one of the most celebrated dramas ever written yet people endlessly dispute what it is about and why it is so celebrated. We can focus on why this story of revenge becomes so complicated, and why some think it is a dramatic failure and others a success. What is the truth about this?

And behind this question lies the larger problem of what is drama, and why pretend-action on the stage can grip us so: “What’s Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba / That he should weep for her?” Many theories offer themselves as bases on which to structure this unit. The teacher might begin by suggesting the theory that Hamlet is successful as a drama because it shows the central character driven by a variety of competing impulses and forces that would propel him to action if any one of them became dominant at any point; the audience is caught by the tension of whether and when he might break free, and what he might do.

The students can also be encouraged to see it as a Renaissance thriller—will Hamlet kill the king first or will the king kill Hamlet?

Topic: Revolutions

Subject Area: Social Studies

Cognitive Tool: Search for authority and truth

Let us return to our example of a unit on Revolutions. In most human activities things carry on according to a set of rules and conventions, but at irregular intervals someone who promises to make things better initiates radical change. This happens in history, religion, science, and every area of sustained activity we can see. Is revolution a law of human affairs? Is there a pattern to revolutions? If we focus on this last question as we look at various kinds of revolution we will be

drawing our students' minds towards establishing the truth about whether or not there is a pattern to be found in all revolutions. In addition to the major revolutions in history, science, religion, and so on we can then ask the students to describe other forms of human activity, and ask them if they see a similar pattern in forms of music, drama, entertainment, sport, and so on?

Why does seeking authority and truth engage our imaginations?

One sees in students developing theoretic thinking, the drive for some bedrock of truth, reality, reliability, authority, certainty. This is subject to disapproval, suspicion, side-long glances, and distrust by many today. It is seen as part of the Enlightenment project that led to overconfident claims to have located truth in self-interested social, political, and religious movement. The drive to sort out knowledge in more reliable forms than existed in societies where dogma was unquestionable led to our modern world of energetic inquiry. While many of the products of this search for authority have been questioned, other products – like dictionaries, encyclopedias, textbooks – are accepted as important sources of authority. Though subject to revision and correction, like any theoretical abstracted account of the world. Even if some ideal absolute certainty is inaccessible to us, claims that can be made with greater confidence than others can be sorted out. The fact that we can't be sure how our universe developed doesn't mean that the Big Bang theory has to take equal status as the claim that it was made as it now is –with our memories and all – ten minutes ago by Puff the Magic Dragon. The “philosophic” search for security and authority keeps intellectual inquiry constantly alert, giving it both energy and a sense of direction.