

Sense of Abstract Reality

What is a sense of abstract reality?

A sense of abstract reality is a tool that enables us to make sense of the world in terms of ideas. The developing mind begins to construct an abstract world of general concepts that represent reality in a new way. It permits understanding of the processes by which nature and society work and of our increasing control over these processes. It takes shape as part of the development of disembedded, rational, logically structured forms of thinking. Visiting our hilltop Italian town as a Philosophic thinker, one doesn't seek the landmarks as one might with Romantic understanding, one refers to a map.

This new abstract theoretic world can come to appear more real and reliable than the everyday particular world from which it is abstracted. Our senses and our feelings can deceive us, as becomes evident when we look at the astonishingly divergent accounts witnesses commonly give of the same event. Our theoretic world can thus seem to be more "objective." (We might feel that the castle is further north and not so far, but what we feel is irrelevant compared to where the reliable map says it is. The photograph's evidence that you wore a blue dress is irrefutable by your memory of having worn a Spiderman outfit.) The transition to this new kind of thinking can be very exciting for students who access it quickly and thoroughly. They believe that they are at last able to understand how things really are and how the world works. The world thus becomes re-seen as made up of vast processes – historical, social, psychological, anthropological – governed by laws and rules which abstract theoretic thinking alone can discover.

How can we engage students' sense of abstract reality in teaching?

Topic: Social Studies

Subject Area: Revolutions

Cognitive Tool: Sense of abstract reality

The purpose of our study here is to examine a variety of kinds of revolutions to come to conclusions about the nature of Revolution. The whole discourse of such a unit is designed to encourage the development of an abstract understanding of the topic. We are constantly developing a language of abstraction, derived from the study of particular revolutions, but constantly aiming to create an image of revolution in general abstract terms.

Topic: English Literature

Subject Area: Hamlet

Cognitive Tool: Sense of abstract reality

The A useful way to work at developing students' sense of abstract reality is to engage students in the theories about the play that have hovered around it for hundreds of years. The teacher

could ask the students to imagine what the first audiences of the play might have seen in it. Several earlier “Hamlet” plays had been staged, including a recent one by Thomas Kyd, and the story appears in chronicles that Shakespeare and his audiences would have known. But Shakespeare changed the old revenge formula into something amazingly more complex and engaging. What about the notion of a thriller, in which the gripping part of the plot is not our fascination with Hamlet’s psyche, which we can indulge because we know what is going to happen, but rather, for the person who sees the play for a first time, who is going to kill whom first?

Some argue that the play’s power to grip people is due to masterful alignment of the elements to make a seamless whole. The teacher can thus ask the students to think of flawed works of art that nevertheless have a power to grip their imaginations, and ask them to reflect on whether “Hamlet” isn’t the most successful failure ever to be performed. Then there are aspects of the “What’s Hecuba to him?” question. The teacher can solicit students’ views on this, and ask them to compare their ideas with Hamlet’s own musings in his “O! what a rogue and peasant slave am I” speech. Why should the player weep for Hecuba and we for Hamlet? Then there’s always the “It’s just all a bit too much” theory; that a sensitive person under the array of stresses that pound Hamlet just finds his brain whirring as he tries to deal with it all. Life, death, love, and intense fear—enough to make a lad long for the days playing with Yorik. The aim through all these discussions of the play is to develop the general and abstract vocabulary required to generate an abstract world. What is *Hamlet* basically about?—is the question that can drive students to look at the play in this new and powerful dimension of thought.

Why does abstract reality engage our imaginations?

A sense of abstract reality changes how one understands the world. So, what had previously been houses and buses and shops and people and politics and money, and so on, becomes “society.” And the current state of society can be thought of as “post-industrial,” “narcissistic,” “alienating,” “multi-communitied,” “cyberspacial,” or whatever – and these stratospheric generalizations are seen as meaningful. Such a state of society, in turn, can be fitted into historical schemes, in which “progress” is evident, or “decline,” or “cyclical chaos,” or “going to hell in a handcart.” The danger is in becoming so intoxicated with its abstractions and their manipulation that one loses touch with “reality,” (another of those grand generalizations whose particularity can get lost). That is, in one of those unfortunate old human equations, increased power entails increased risk. One common problem is that students can develop excessive confidence in their generalizations, patterns, theories, ideological, metaphysical schemes, and the other inhabitants of the abstracted realm. We see the victims of this danger all around us – the convinced, the dogmatic, the certain – and each of us is likely to become one of these victims if we aren’t careful, and even if we are. The excessive conviction that is a danger of immature “philosophic understanding” seems even to be an advantage in modern politics, appearing as the “passionate intensity” we might sensibly be wary of. But the great gift of “philosophic” thinking is that it enhances the brain’s capacity for creating order in complexity,

for seeing patterns within variety, for generating theories that account for events, things, and behavior. It can deliver a much more powerful mind to those who develop its cognitive tools.