

Sense of Agency

What is a sense of agency?

The sense of agency is a tool that enables us to recognize ourselves as related to the world via complex causal chains and networks. We become more realistic in understanding how we can play roles in the real world, and understand ourselves as products of historical and social processes.

Theoretical thinking develops in students the ability to see themselves as agents in the vast processes they have come to recognize. Their very sense of their own identity shifts as they begin to discard or distrust the “romantic” associations that had earlier contributed to their sense of self, and instead they recognize themselves as constructed by these vast historical, social, etc. processes of which they are a part. They are who they feel themselves to be, not as a product of their association with heroes, but because they have been born at a particular time and place within particular social conditions.

How can we employ a sense of agency in teaching?

Topic: Satire

Subject Area: English

Cognitive Tool: Sense of Agency

Satire refers to the use of humor, irony, exaggeration or other forms of ridicule to expose and criticize stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of politics. In learning about satire in a senior English class, students’ sense of agency can be engaged by giving them the opportunity to satirize people in their own community or in the wider political context in which they live. They could be encouraged to create political cartoons for local newspapers or write satirical pieces to address community issues.

Topic: Mosses

Subject Area: Biology

Cognitive Tool: Sense of agency

Students’ sense of agency can be engaged in the study of the ecological significance of mosses. Students will be able to see that these small and seemingly insignificant plants are in fact very significant in a variety of moist land environments and as pioneer species. Environmental awareness is fostered through this stress on the ecological interrelationships of all living things with the hope that students will understand the importance of sustaining the delicate ecological balance on our planet. Once students are able to grasp the significance of organisms such as algae (50-75% of all photosynthesis done by algae!) and mosses to sustaining life itself, they are more likely to base their future actions on the ethical imperative of providing a sustainable future for subsequent generations of all living things. The economic importance of

mosses to humans will also be analyzed so that students are aware of human activities that are directly related to this group of organisms. For example, sphagnum moss, which decomposes into peat moss over time, is used extensively by gardeners to help the soil retain water and to decrease soil pH. Other types of mosses have been used for medicinal purposes (Native Americans used them to treat burns and bruises), still others (“peat”) have been used as a fuel much like coal, and sphagnum moss is also burned by brewers with the smoke produced giving Scotch whisky that “smoky” flavor.

Topic: Conflict Resolution

Subject Area: Psychology/History

Cognitive Tool: Sense of Agency

The story of Saul, David and Goliath vividly personifies varied approaches to conflict and invites students to identify with one or more of the characters. They may also imagine themselves to be bystanders, spectators or reporters who observe contests from the sidelines. Students can be encouraged to think about their options and choices in similar situations. Ask students to think of things they habitually take into conflicts. What are practical opportunities to mediate conflict in your community?

Topic: Revolutions

Subject Area: Social Studies

Cognitive Tool: Sense of Agency

In a unit in which the students have studied a number of different kinds of revolutions—say, French, Industrial, religious, economic—the teacher can draw attention to the role of individuals in each of our revolutions. We can encourage students to see that there was nothing inevitable about their actions or the effects of their actions: that dramatic changes are often brought about by people in circumstances that are not special. That is, a study of revolutions can help students feel that they too can have major effects if they apply themselves in some specific way. The teacher can take opportunities to draw students into thinking about what they would or could have done in the circumstances of each revolution.

Why does a sense of agency engage our imaginations?

Using the “romantic” operating system, students’ were a bit like tourists, attending to the heroic and the exciting and exotic bits of the world, past and present. But once the “philosophic” system takes hold, they become caught up in the great theoretical processes they are learning. They become agents – directed by their theories of history and society how they should behave, and directed by their ideology what steps they should take to improve society. It gives a person a sense of direction, of belonging, and of purpose.