

Eclectic topic teaching as the larger set

An approach based on main aim teaching and the teacher playing a direct role in teaching (in other words, more Vygotsky than Dewey)

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Topic teaching is the usual way children are taught in a particular grouping of curriculum areas - notably science, mathematics, social studies, technology and health. This grouping is defined by the characteristics of the information drawn on for the curriculum areas - it is information that can be confirmed by logical means and be definable in language; as against information the validity for which comes directly from experience and feelings, and which may or may not be expressed in language - in other words, curriculum areas such as art, dance, music.

In the discussion that follows I am going to use the expression *topic teaching*, though the full expression should be *topic teaching and learning* - teaching being what the teacher does, learning what the children do, and all different from what the teacher intended, and all different from each other (constructivism).

The eclectic topic teaching approach I am advocating is seen as the larger set within which the various other approaches to curriculum teaching can be used to contribute, for instance, enquiry, integrated, behavioural, developmental. (Please note: in New Zealand, developmental is an expression of what might elsewhere be called progressive education.) Because classroom teaching appears from observation and research to be very much an eclectic experience, I am confident that the eclectic approach to teaching advocated will come to be recognised as the most logical for the larger set. My overall intention is to make topic teaching more straightforward so it can achieve more depth in children's learning, and in achieving more depth, be more satisfying.

In eclectic topic teaching, after the topic has been chosen, the next step is to develop the main aim to be pursued, for instance, to develop in the children a sympathetic and valid understanding of Aztec life, or, to develop in the children a willingness and ability to understand triangles and their place and function in the mathematical world (it should be noted that both these main aims have a reference to the affective -*sympathetic, willingness*; and knowledge and skill - *valid understanding, ability to understand*). The major remaining task is to decide the best way to move children toward that main aim. In the eclectic topic teaching approach, that should be the sole criterion for deciding activities to use. This pays due deference to the characteristics of the curriculum area, the particularities of the topic, and the interests and abilities of the children.

An important matter for teachers to decide within topic teaching generally, is whether topic teaching is there for children to gain a grasp of process, or the understandings available. The difference in practice between the two can be fine, after all, process leads to understandings, and to gain understandings you need process, but where the emphasis lies does matter. I come down firmly on the side of valuing knowledge over process - my main concern in topic teaching is developing children's understandings, with process a by-product of achieving that end. *Understandings cannot be developed without process, therefore it is not being overlooked, just being assigned its proper place.*

It is fashionable in these post-modern times to say that knowledge is transient and unstable, therefore we should concentrate on the process of gaining knowledge, rather than on the knowledge itself. In my view, though, we are what we know and knowledge is a lot more constant than many acknowledge. People act on the basis of what they know - in everyday life, we do not undertake research projects before making decisions. What we know, and don't know, has important affective implications for our attitudes to our world, our values, and our actions. As well, in learning, children are better prepared for their next

learning journey if their point of departure can tap into successful prior knowledge. The more relevant and valid knowledge the children have, the better they will be able to undertake whatever process is employed, and the more motivated.

I am a definite supporter of both enquiry learning and developmental learning (the two are closely related), but I do not advocate their use in all parts of a topic, all the time, as a matter of course. (Though developing the enquiring mind should be a constant.) The eclectic topic teaching approach being advocated requires that the approach to be used not be prejudged – teacher decisions needing to be based on what is the most effective and efficient way for children to learn given the nature of the curriculum area, the topic, the children, and general classroom circumstances. (While this paper concentrates on commonalities amongst curriculum areas, to make these commonalities dynamic, careful attention needs to be given to particularities.)

How to move children toward the main aim involves the choosing of a series of activities which, as part of the eclectic approach, will be from a number of approaches - enquiry, developmental, behavioural, integrated, and so on. (In respect to integration, for motivating children, and furthering their perspective and insight, teachers will look across curriculum areas in choosing activities, as well as within them.) The next task is to place these activities in a topic planning structure based on a view of the best pattern for children's learning within topics – *Introduction*; *Developing understanding* (that is gaining knowledge); *Expressing understanding* (that is using knowledge – knowledge, though, is used throughout, this is more a matter of emphasis); *Conclusion*.

The following is a fuller description of the unit planning structure suggested:

Introduction – motivates children and introduces them to a number of the key ideas to be considered in greater detail later in the topic.

Developing understanding – helps children gain control of basic knowledge for the topic – the key to successful topic teaching. This knowledge held in common by a class provides the groundwork for a dynamic class atmosphere to develop, and for children to learn off each other.

Expressing understanding – encourages children to use the knowledge gained confidently and flexibly. A number of small enquiries will have been undertaken earlier in the topic (often as home study) – this is where major enquiries will occur. The early part of the structure should have provided children, in an efficient, insightful, and powerful way, with the necessary information, allowing the emphasis to shift to transforming that information in response to challenging questions.

Conclusion – provides children with the opportunity to reflect on understandings developed.

Some parts of the structure, I suggest, should be seen as having more importance to children's learning than other parts. *Developing understanding* (gaining a base of knowledge about the topic) is central to successful topic teaching. Children need to gain a sufficient grasp of the knowledge concerned to be able to use it flexibly in the topic parts to follow. And it is in the gaining of knowledge that the crucial affective part of learning is acquired. (The role of the teacher being to guide children toward the kind of knowledge that is affectively significant to the main aim.)



The affective can be considered to have two parts to it – a feeling for whatever is being studied; and a feeling for the nature of the curriculum area as a curriculum area. For instance, children in science might be helped to develop a feeling for people affected by some environmental issue; and, as a by-product of this, developing scientific attitudes – curiosity, a respect for evidence, and so on. The *Developing understanding* part of the unit structure has, for me, continued to hold its centrality in topic teaching, however, as a result of experience, the *Introduction*, has become significantly more important.

The *Introduction* provides an opportunity for various key topic ideas to be introduced in a relaxed way to the children. When these key topic ideas are approached later in the topic, this will make these often complex ideas more accessible to the children. The following, for instance, is the way a denarius, Caesar and Brutus, and Shakespeare, are referred to in the *Introduction* in a *Social Studies File* unit on money.

- Photocopy the accompanying Blackline Master picture 6 of Caesar and Brutus coins, and give to groups of children to discuss.

Describe what you see.

About when do you think the coins were minted, and in what culture?

There is a connection between the two coins – what do you think it is?

Ask the children to do drawings of the coins and to take them home for voluntary home study.

What can you find out about the connection between the coins?

- Next day, read two or three selections from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar.

Discuss with the children the assassination of Julius Caesar, and Brutus's justification that it was because of concern about Caesar's autocratic behaviour. Also discuss how Brutus issued the coins with the dagger design as an expression of that justification.

The *Introduction* should set the tone for the topic. It should be active, varied, challenging, and fun. As well, the children can be involved in small home study tasks that have elements

of enquiry learning (asking adults, using the internet and libraries), all the better if they are voluntary ones. For instance, the topic might be the seventies, and the children asked to investigate for voluntary home study, the music of the period. Next day, the children could share with the class what they have found out - establishing a co-operative atmosphere, and a common fund of experience to the benefit of subsequent class activities.

My strong suggestion, then, for successful topic teaching is giving solid attention to the *Introduction* as a support to the *Developing understanding* part to follow. As well, especially in the *Introduction* and *Developing understanding*, there is a strong case for a consistent use of particular activities in which all the children are engaged. There will be plenty of opportunities for individual investigations later on, indeed, the intention of the early part of the structure is to set children up for successful and insightful investigation work subsequently.

There are many advantages in concentrating on a series of shared activities early on in a topic. I am not advocating here a lot of teacher direct talk to the class, though I'm not against it if it is effective. I am advocating a series of activities in which children can work on their own, in pairs, or in small groups, at a pace that suits them, at a level of response appropriate to them, but working at an activity in common. The idea is to develop the knowledge base for the topic as efficiently as possible so the children can concentrate on the use of that knowledge in flexible ways later in the topic.

My justifications for this advocacy are:

- 1 Children are in classes, why not use the power of class interactions to make children teachers of each other.
- 2 The time available for any particular topic is usually limited, so developing children's control of knowledge in this way is an efficient way to proceed.
- 3 In relation to initial motivation, if children are highly motivated, the source of that motivation, whether by those from the immediate environment, or by design from the teacher is immaterial. What is material is the efficiency of that motivation in leading to significant areas of knowledge and affective challenge.
- 4 The class activities provide teachers with an opportunity for teachers to use their cohesive world view to provide a learning framework for children, to deepen their insights, and to take a topic where it might otherwise not have gone.
- 5 It is democratic, because all children, whether young or old, with reading and writing difficulties, or with difficult home circumstances, have a fair opportunity to gain the basic knowledge required for successful participation in a topic.
- 6 It mitigates against topic learning becoming, as it sometimes does, one long knowledge-recording, old-style project (but in swept up terms). Enquiry learning should be about exploring issues, wrestling with dilemmas, not just recording knowledge prettily. An effective prior part of the topic structure should clarify the issues to be enquired into, and provide children with the knowledge and motivation to want to be involved in exploring them.

In this consideration of topic learning, there is significance in what isn't suggested for direct inclusion: learning styles, whole brain learning, multiple intelligences, and so on – do we really have access to the complexity of children's thought processes? What should be provided, I suggest, is variety in teaching and learning which is at the heart of the eclectic topic approach being advocated. It is an approach that empowers teachers and motivates children.