



The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding

Kieran Egan

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The Educated Mind offers a bold and revitalizing new vision for today's uncertain educational system. Kieran Egan reconceives education, taking into account how we learn. He proposes the use of particular "intellectual tools"—such as language or literacy—that shape how we make sense of the world. These mediating tools generate successive kinds of understanding: somatic, mythic, romantic, philosophical, and ironic. Egan's account concludes with practical proposals for how teaching and curriculum can be changed to reflect the way children learn.

"A carefully argued and readable book. . . . Egan proposes a radical change of approach for the whole process of education. . . . There is much in this book to interest and excite those who discuss, research or deliver education."—Ann Fullick, *New Scientist*

"A compelling vision for today's uncertain educational system."—*Library Journal*

"Almost anyone involved at any level or in any part of the education system will find this a fascinating book to read."—Dr. Richard Fox, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*

"A fascinating and provocative study of cultural and linguistic history, and of how various kinds of understanding that can be distinguished in that history are recapitulated in the developing minds of children."—Jonty Driver, *New York Times Book Review*

The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding Details

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Dan says

This book greatly influenced how I view learning and helped me develop as an educator.

Volkan says

This is a socio-political and historical review of competing theories of education and human understanding rather than a work of technical depth. Might be a better idea to look at Vygotsky and Piaget for deeper insights on the process of understanding through cognitive tools.

Eric says

Quite interesting stuff. Picked it up off that Brett Victor humane computing talk (BV sold it quite well, I seem to remember)

Tension between ideas about what education is for: socialization (ie. into present society), Truth About Reality (Plato), natural development of child (Rousseau) [sorry if painting w/ very very broad strokes here, was a while ago].

New idea: develop/recapitulate different ways of understanding. Process of recapitulation, start from stage 0, go in order, work your way up, partly tied to brain maturation, partly tied to stages that open up to others. It's not all improvements or building out; you lose things going up to a more "advanced" way of understanding things (and also you don't ditch pre-existing ways; they're still around to an extent)... but in modern society it's still useful to Pokemon them.

- * Somatic - very physical sense stuff, infants/toddlers, feely stuff...
- * Mythic - binary contrasts (eg. fairy tales), human qualities (eg. counting tied to ingenuity)
- * Romantic - fascination with amazing (eg 10 year olds and records), transcendent, Great People, human struggle
- * Philosophic - ideas, models [think of your standard "smart" teenager who... sigh... discovers Ayn Rand...] (over time you learn about models breaking, and pick up new models)
- * Ironic - embracing the models not as absolute truths so much but as useful tools

Found the Q&A section rather irritating, could have been written in a much more straightforward and dry manner (have to admit, it was funny in places). Seems like the author is super established and respected in education circles (?) so have no idea why they'd have so "self-conscious" a thing going on there.

The practical examples section at the end showing how we might apply this stuff was really helpful, kind of clarified how exactly this sort of framework could be applied.

Would love thoughts from people who actually do teach...

Pete Welter says

I read *The Educated Mind* because after it was recommended by Bret Victor in one of his talks. Victor is truly one of the most original thinkers on cognitive tools - in particular technically based ones.

Egan starts with the observation that there are three primary drivers for school: socializing the student to cultural norms, exposing them to academic truths, and developing the individual student. The rub is that these goals are often at odds with one another, resulting in an uncomfortable combination which does none of them well.

His approach is based on the cognitive tools that are used to approach topics, mirroring the development of those tools the history of human culture. The power behind this approach is that it integrates the reasons WHY these were developed in our history, with their actual use in the curriculum. Most of WHAT is taught in schools, and HOW it is taught, is disconnected, abstracted, and purified from how that knowledge actually came into being in the first place.

One might think that using a highly edited version of our knowledge in our classrooms is a good thing, because the process learning - as a culture or a species - is messy, confusing, and sometimes even contradictory, and we'd want to keep that out of the way for our students. However, the ragged edge of progress is also where the great people, the great stories, and the real excitement of learning happen, and we cheat our ourselves and our students when we over-sterilize and decontextualize that knowledge.

Most of Egan's approaches require the teacher to really focus on emotional and motivational drivers for the topic, even if that ends up not covering the topic in the most "complete" or "logical" manner, something I found satisfying. In our current educational system, we spend quite a bit of time on WHAT our students learn, with very little thought as to its long-term stickiness. Because there is no emotional buy-in, the knowledge of even [especially] good students is quite brittle and short-term for most topics.

It's an intriguing perspective on education, and worth checking out. The book is written in a relatively academic style, which I sometimes found a slog, but overall, it's reasonably accessible to anyone interested in educational research.

As with many books on philosophies of education, one missing component is the evidence that the approach works. I'm not talking about standardized test scores, because that's just one way of measuring (and probably an anti-effective one at that). What I'd like to see from writers of these books would be a description of what their educational goals are - however they want to measure them - (Egan does this to some degree in his last chapter), followed by some evidence of how using their approach allowed students to meet those goals. Or even better, what they learned in using their approach in an actual learning situations, and how that changed what they did.

Kara Lewis says

Egan provides theory and practical application in this book about the ways we could design curriculum to help students be more engaged -

Chris Beiser says

This is an interesting one. I can't decide if I agree with the author's conclusions. That said, neither can the author. It's full of digressions about the inadequacy of his theory, its vague leanings towards a privileging of the Western Literary Tradition, and several other notable facts. I'm even more skeptical about Egan's claims of its utility in a classroom setting. That said, I find it more convincing than other books on the topic, and believe that it has a legitimate place in informing curriculum. I'd like to see firsthand large-scale implementations of its recommendations.

I do think, and this is not a bashing, because I believe this is a fact of the genre, it fails to propose an approach to the different rates at which people come to possess kinds of understandings. I believe that the act of consistently teaching for a specific level of understanding that may not match that of the listener could have ill effects, and that the existing schooling system, through its 'incoherence,' doesn't face this problem in the same way. In other words, the theory may be vulnerable to the same issues as many other authoritarian high modernist planning regimes.

Emily says

This book helped me understand and characterize the different phases of my own education. It gave me perspective about why I struggled with my faith in my mid twenties and why that may not have been so atypical. It also gives a rich vision about what being an educated person really means. This book embraces many forms of understanding the world around us, including some we may have mistakenly set aside as unsophisticated. However, Dr. Egan argues for the value in all of these forms of understanding. He advocates for development and appreciation of all of them.

This book also helped me realize how boring I have become. It has motivated me to reconnect with many of the things I loved as a child - imagining, listening to stories, wondering about the world.

Toby Newton says

Egan's suggestions re. the 5 cognitive dispositions are very helpful guidance. Understanding the somatic, mythic, romantic, philosophic and ironic engagements with information/knowledge/learning would seem to be an important part of working sympathetically with young people.

A big influence on my thinking on education.
