

Assessing Mythic Understanding

The following page contains a rubric designed to be used in conjunction with an oral conversation with a child about a given curriculum topic, at any stage of the learning process. The conversation begins with the educator presenting the child with some kind of an imaginative stimulus: the beginning of a story, an art work, an image that evokes something important about the topic, or something else along those lines. Prompts are then used to invite the child to elaborate on this starting point.

“Mythic understanding” refers to a person’s ability to make sense of a topic using “tools for thinking” that are developed primarily through their exposure to oral language in particular cultural contexts. The rubric groups such “tools for thinking” into nine categories of “tools of imaginative engagement,” or TIEs; these are categories which should have some validity across cultures, although different cultures may have different ideas and rules about how narratives are structured, what counts as beautiful language, which binary contrasts are significant, and so on. Educators need to be alert to the possibility that children may have ways of expressing an imaginative understanding of a topic that rely on different cultural rules and resources; interpreting and providing feedback on their ideas is an important part of the mediation process, that should eventually enable the child to make use of the imaginative resources of the school’s world as well as those of their community.

This approach to assessment is related to the Vygotskian concept of “dynamic assessment,” in which an educator presents a child with a task that the latter cannot complete unaided, then supplying hints little by little until the child can make the leap to a new understanding. This process yields a measure of the child’s “zone of proximal development” (ZPD), which provides useful insight into the kind of classroom setting and pedagogy that will be most appropriate for that child. Similarly, the Imaginative Learning Conference should involve an interaction between educator and child that establishes what the child can do unaided and what he or she is capable of with various forms of assistance.

If imaginative learning is taking place, in the course of the lesson or unit one should see a child progress through one or more of the performance indicators on the TIEs the teacher has used to explore the topic. The levels of performance indicated are not grade- or age-specific, although clearly the expectations for vocabulary, conceptual development, etc will vary according to age. This form of assessment is therefore intended to be used in conjunction with assessment tools for these other aspects of learning.

Taken together, the TIEs may not cover all of the different ways imaginative understanding can manifest itself in oral language, but they do offer quite a broad measure of a child’s ability to engage with the subject matter of education using head and heart together.

TIEs	Possible prompts (to be adapted depending on initial stimulus)	1 not yet meeting, even with support (limited)	2 meeting at a minimal level or with support (partial)	3 fully meeting with little or no support (proficient)	4 exceeding expectations (highly imaginative/ insightful)
Wonderful stories (emotionally engaging and original)	How do you think the story might continue? / Tell me a story about this picture.	Unable to develop character and plot any further, even with help.	Some attempt to continue with character and plot, but lacking coherence and detail.	Continues character and plot development consistently, using content knowledge to provide detail and colour.	Introduces new elements that fit within the given characters and plot, make use of content knowledge, and lead in unpredictable directions.
Music of spoken language (rhyme, rhythm, onomatopoeia)	What are some favourite words you might use to talk about ____?	Unable to suggest any words related to topic except for the most commonplace.	Small number of words related to topic; limited use of or reference to the sound qualities of words.	Identifies several words related to topic on basis of their quality of sound and meaning, and uses them appropriately.	Can identify both common and unusual words related to the topic, and use them in ways that are surprising and effective.
Vivid imagery (use of oral language to describe and evoke the worlds of experience and fantasy)	Tell me in as much detail as you can the images that come into your mind when you think about ____.	Can describe images only in terms used by interviewer/ prompter; no independent detail or elaboration.	Images related to topic but usually lacking in detail unless prompted; mostly limited to common visual and aural experience.	Describes clear images with appropriate details that show understanding of the topic; can incorporate full range of senses when prompted.	Describes and elaborates on vivid images, incorporating a range of sensory detail that can be extended with little effort when prompted.
Binary contrasts (using abstract qualities and values to characterize objects and events)	Tell me some of the most surprising / interesting / unusual things you know about ____.	May offer a fact or two about a topic, but unable to explain why they are interesting or unusual.	Limited ability to identify contrasting qualities in a topic, usually in physical terms (e.g. big/small, hot/cold, strong/weak)	Readily identifies both concrete and abstract contrasts in a topic (e.g. neat/messy, scary/safe, familiar/alien)	Identifies concrete and abstract contrasts and can use them to explore the topic further (e.g. the smallest sea vs. the largest lake, the most aggressive vs. most nurturing dinosaurs)
Naming and characterizing (use of oral language to distinguish classes of objects and events)	What are some different kinds of ____? What makes them different from each other?	Unable to produce precise terms for different kinds of thing, preferring to use one general term with simple modifiers (size, colour, etc)	Can recall some specific terms when prompted, but tends to use general terms with simple modifiers (size, colour, etc.) most of the time.	Uses many specific terms to name and characterize particular kinds of thing, e.g. animals, plants, colours, cars, words, clothes, etc.	Uses many specific terms and invents new ones to describe real or imagined new kinds of thing or event.
Metaphor (finding and expressing connections between different objects and events)	What other things does ____ remind you of? Can you use metaphor to describe something about ____?	Unable to use metaphor intentionally, even with prompting.	Uses metaphor mainly in response to prompting; limited stock of common metaphors.	Uses metaphor confidently and without prompting; occasionally uses original or uncommon metaphors.	Consistently favours original and uncommon metaphors; able to build extended metaphors by stringing two or more related metaphors together.
Gossip and make-believe play (exploring a topic through imaginative play and conversation)	If you were playing a make-believe game involving ____, what would it look like? / What would happen in the game if ____?	Can only suggest games with a ready-made script, e.g. from TV, movies, stock scenarios; unable to change in response to prompting.	Suggests play scenarios with familiar, simple roles and plots; has difficulty accommodating disruptions or new elements without prompting.	Suggests play scenarios that have some original elements based on content knowledge; accommodates disruptions or new elements without assistance.	Invents play scenarios that are original, coherent, and display insight into context; willingly accepts disruptions or new elements and elaborates them further.
Conflict and resolution (expressing the dynamic qualities of a topic in terms of struggle, success, and risk)	What are some risks, difficulties and dangers associated with ____? How do you think they can be overcome?	Unable to suggest any kind of struggle, conflict, or risk related to the topic.	Suggests simple kinds of risks and struggles (e.g. death/survival, loss/victory, failure/success), but unable to elaborate further.	Incorporates content knowledge and psychological understanding into descriptions of risk, struggle, and success.	Offers complex descriptions of risk, struggle, and success incorporating different possible paths and outcomes.
Jokes (deliberate humour based on inconsistencies or unintended coincidences)	Is there anything about ____ that you think is weird or funny? Do you know any jokes about ____?	Unable to suggest anything funny about the topic.	Identifies incongruities and/or simple puns related to the topic, typically with some prompting.	Retells and invents short humorous anecdotes and jokes related to the topic.	Develops extended humorous scenarios incorporating incongruity, puns, and other forms of language play.