

## Assessing Romantic 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: a book about the topic, 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.

“Romantic 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 the kinds of written language that are typical of mass (popular) literacy, not only in books and other kinds of texts, but also in the scripted language of television, radio, video games, and so on. 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 influenced by mass literacy, although different cultures may have different ideas and rules about the nature of heroism, what counts as beautiful language, the principles of classification, 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 the development of popular literacy, 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)
Heroic feats and quests	Who do you think are the heroes of this topic? Tell me a story about one hero, or about the kinds of things they do.	Unable to think of any heroes or heroic feats or qualities involving the topic.	Mentions one or two heroic figures, qualities, or feats, but unable to elaborate in detail even when prompted.	Can talk in some detail about at least one heroic figure or about the kinds of heroic feats that are important to the topic.	Describes in detail one or more heroic figures, qualities, or feats, and is able to invent fictional heroes or feats when prompted.
Beauty of written form	If you were designing a non- fiction book for kids about the topic, what would it look like? Describe a sample page.	Unable to suggest any kind of organizational scheme for the content.	Identifies some main content categories, but unable to describe their presentation in detail, even when prompted.	Can articulate a clear organization of content across pages and within a page.	Incorporates imaginative features in the layout, such as images, pop-up figures, quiz boxes, extraordinary facts, etc.
Lively description (written)	Try to imagine a scene involving _____, and describe it to me so I have the feeling I'm seeing it myself.	Unable to incorporate any vivid details in the description.	Provides some descriptive detail, but has difficulty in adding more detail (e.g. sound, smell, colour) when prompted.	Describes the scene in sufficiently vivid detail, and can add more details when prompted.	Enlivens the scene with surprising details that are emotionally engaging and effective.
Extremes of reality	What are some of the most amazing things you know about this topic? If you could have one wish to see or do something involving _____, what would it be?	Unable to think of more than one or two extremes that are relevant to the topic; shows little interest in using a wish.	Lists a few of the more obvious extremes, but cannot identify any less obvious ones, even when prompted; bases wish on an obvious or pre-scripted scenario with limited rationale.	Comes up with a considerable number of extremes, including some less obvious ones; uses wish in an original and well thought-out way.	Can supply an almost limitless range of ideas/facts about the extremes of the topic; uses wish to explore little-known extremes in order to find out more.
Collecting and organizing	If you were designing cards or dolls or something else you wanted people to collect on this topic, how would you do it?	Unable to supply any kinds of details that a collector would want to know.	Describes the overall concept of the collection and, with prompting, some basic features of individual items.	Without prompting, describes the overall concept of the collection and the distinguishing features of individual items.	Incorporates imaginative features in the design of the collection, such as extremes, personification, and competition.
Personification	If you were a _____, what would it be like? Tell me about your life, or a typical day.	Unable to provide any plausible personification.	Describes a few plausible features of such a personification, but unable to connect them into a narrative, even with prompting.	Provides a plausible narrative that incorporates key concepts of the topic.	Embellishes a plausible narrative with original details that contribute to making the personification more memorable and appealing.
Fantasy and formal play	Can you imagine a world where _____ made the rules? How would it work? What would a game based on that world look like?	Unable to suggest any basic rules, based on an understanding of the topic, for such a world or game.	Identifies a few features of such a world or game that reflect an understanding of the topic, but unable to elaborate into a full scenario.	Can think out loud to develop a progressively more detailed scenario or game incorporating many features of the topic.	Spontaneously incorporates imaginative features, such as extremes, personification, and competition, in the design of the scenario or game.
Revolt and idealism	Among _____, who usually wins or gets to boss others around? Is that fair? If you were on the losing side, what would you try and do?	Unable to identify with the underdogs in any way.	Describes the plight of the underdogs, but has difficulty suggesting any kind of alternative to their situation, even with prompting.	Describes the plight of the underdogs, and provides a rationale and guiding ideal for their struggle.	In addition to describing the struggle in general terms, offers several potential strategies by which the underdogs might seek to change the system.
Comedy	What about _____ makes you laugh? Can you think of a funny situation involving _____?	Unable to see any comic potential in the topic.	Identifies a few incongruities in the topic, but unable to elaborate them into comic situations even with prompting.	Readily identifies incongruities and comic potential, and can elaborate a comic scenario with some prompting.	With little or no prompting, develops elaborate scenarios incorporating incongruities and other comic aspects of the topic.