

# Prof. Rex Li's Writings

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**Title:** Summary of Chapter 2 of Egan: *The Educated Mind*

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**Summary/ Abstract:** Kieran Egan (1942 - ) is a Canadian philosopher of education. He proposed a cultural theory of human understanding (1997) which rivals with Jean Piaget's stage theory of cognitive development (1952). This is a summary of his *The Education Mind* (1997) – Chapter 2

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## Summary of Chapter 2 of Egan: *The Educated Mind*

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33 Language → Mythic

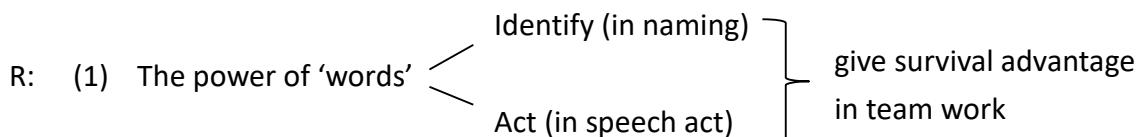
Egan: Language dictates mythic understanding and its characteristics in human thinking. (P.37)

Herde: word is magical / sacred / supernatural is cultural understanding

naming

34 Max Muller – Apollo chased Daphne (Homonyms in Sanskrit! See story below)

throws upon thought" (353). For example, Müller interprets the Greek myth about Apollo's pursuit of Daphne, who escapes by turning into a laurel tree, as a confusion begun long ago in Sanskrit. Primitive people could not give simple rational accounts of the world, according to Müller; they expressed themselves instead in poetic metaphors. Thus, rather than observe that "the sun rises after the dawn each day" they would say, "Apollo pursues Daphne across the sky." Now "Daphne," Müller shows, derives from a Sanskrit word, a homonym whose other meaning is—you guessed it—"laurel tree." Long after, and far away, the Sanskrit homonym is lost and forgotten, but mythical elaboration, this disease of language, generates the story of Apollo and Daphne. All that Greek, Renaissance, and nineteenth-century European painting and sculpture of the two of them—she sprouting branches and leaves as he reaches out to touch her—a consequence of a simple paronymial slippage in Sanskrit!



(2) 'Mythic / Magic' are words showing our ignorance of ancient life from our orderly / rational life; better use "early / primitive / ancestral belief"



(3) Power rests on the leader, with thinking, planning and strategy.

(4) Donald: "myth is the prototypal, fundamental, integrative mind and tool"



No! Myth is a belief system. Oral language / speech is a tool to make use of this somewhat successful / utilitarian belief system to mobilize the team / tribe to achieve surviving ends. Mythic is not mind-tool. Ancient Oral Speech is a life / surviving tool imbued with beliefs!

35 Egan acknowledged language ≠ thought = sense making / cf. Vygotsky: "Intelligence... independent of speech"

36 Egan's conception of language development and mythical understanding (p. 35 – 36)

(1) "Language development ... is genetically determined" and so a child learns it easily. (p. 35)

(2) Language-using environment is necessary for picking up language. (p. 36)

vironment. As we grow, however, we receive less precise genetic help and have to rely increasingly on a genetically encoded general learning capacity, which is not well differentiated for learning to read or to do mathematics. The educational trick is to make those kinds of learning easier and more effective by making them conform as well as possible to the weakening genetic dispositions still operative as we grow into childhood. That such genetic dispositions are operative may be inferred from the energetic development of language up to the age of seven; because development proceeds at a rate of word accumulation and sophistication of grammatical usage beyond what we achieve through teaching at any other period of life, it seems fair to assume some particular genetic influence is still active. So, the period of Mythic understanding is one during which weakening genetic influences merge with the increasing deployment of our undifferentiated learning capacity; learning consequently ceases to be effortless and begins to require deliberate work.

(3) We also have undifferentiated general learning capacity (GLC)

(4) Language development proceed up to age 7.

(5) Mythic understanding period: slow decrease in effortless language learning (because of genetic endowment) and increase use of learning capacity (GLC)

(6) Therefore by primary years: learning requires effort

R: (1) I don't dispute this, but he didn't propose much new.  
((1), (3), (4) are well-known)

(2) What's his GLC?

37-63 Characteristics of Mythic Understanding (MU)

- Binary structure
- Fantasy
- Abstract thinking
- Metaphor
- Rhythm and Narratives
- Images
- Stories and meaning

### Egan's Study of Binary Structure (p. 37 – 44)

38 Nietzsche attacks binary

sitions are a product of the phenomena rather than of their thinking. "There are no opposites: only from those of logic do we derive the concept of opposites—and falsely transfer it to things" (1968a, p. 298). Language, he insistently pointed out, is the source of oppositions whereas reality has only continua and infinite gradations of difference. So language falsifies the world to us, and our main intellectual task is to untangle the inadequate terms in which we represent the world, from the world itself. Nietzsche is wonderfully acute at pointing out "the misleading errors of language (and the fundamental fallacies of reason which have become petrified in it)" (1956, p. 178). p.38

39 Claude Levi-Strauss      4 Volumes on *Mythology*

Binary structure is basic to all myths.

40 Children's stories in binary values

[their] world by dividing everything into opposites" (1976, p. 74). The most evident structural feature of children's stories or self-generated narratives is that the surface content very commonly rests on such underlying binary sets as security/fear, good/bad, brave/cowardly, love/hate, happy/sad, poor/rich, health/sickness, permitted/forbidden. The story of Hansel and Gretel, for example, is articulated on a powerful security/fear structure. p.40

40 From opposites to intermediary position

Hot	vs	Cold
Warm	vs	Cool

Related to body, i.e. somatic

41 Quoting Egan

nation easily to be sorted out. What is beyond argument is the fact that binary structuring is found universally among human groups and is commonly used by children today. If this much is granted, what is the educa- p.41

42 "Binary structuring is a feature of language and minds, not of the world, as Nietzsche so insistently argued"

43 Egan challenging Dewey

Binary opposites ... "these conceptual bases for sense-making maybe more important than how-to-do skills. [proposed by Dewey]"

R: Yes, binary structuring is good / make sense, but Egan didn't seem to have a deep theory, he merely picked from Nietzsche and Levi-Strauss. Let me pick of few most prevalent binary opposites and think of transcending them:

Good – bad	Love – hate
Safe – danger	Happy – sad
Healthy – sick	Obey – rebel (Chinese)
True – false	Moral – wicked (Chinese)
Right - wrong	

One problem is that even adults have difficulty distinguishing the three sets:

True / false	Right / wrong	Good / bad
↑ Knowledge and reality 真偽 是否	↑ Value / imposing reality 對錯 是非	↑ Moral, legal sanction 好壞

## Fantasy (p. 45 – 47)

- 45 Children enjoy fantasy

Egan thought it was an intermediate between binary opposites

Human	↑	animal
	Peter rabbit	

R: My explanation:

- (1) Children like novelty
  - (2) Children are egocentric
  - (3) Children like to imitate and internalize
  - (4) Sometimes fail to distinguish real / fantasy  
(not yet conceptual fixation)
- 
- Hope that can be explanation

## Abstract thinking (p. 47 - 53)

R: Egan argues, much like me, that language necessarily gives abstraction.

“Language creates distance between the self and the object; language generalizes, transferring a unique perception into a common one; language transmutes realities into abstractions” (Coe, 1984, p. 253). That is the sense p. 47

- 49 Language = mythic invention = offer conceptual models of human universe.

- 50 Egan criticizes Piaget (with Gardner quotes)

## 51 The counting story

R: children may know / like the story but don't understand its meaning. "They had the experience, but missed the meaning" (p. 53)

## Metaphor (p. 53 – 58)

In this section, Egan quoted many people:

- 54 Levi-Strauss – metaphor as “fundamental mode(s) – a primary form of discourse”
- 55 Gardner and Winner – the young are better than the old in metaphor (R: again fixation of thought)
- 55 Ricoeur – “deviant naming”
- 55 Nelson Goodman: Metaphor “participates fully in the progress of knowledge”
- 55 Quine
- 55 Max Black – “All Sciences began in metaphor and end in algebra”
- 55 Aristotle – “get hold of something fresh”
- 56 Egan: “metaphor becomes a key tool in aiding flexible, productive learning”
- R: It's good that Black (p.55) points to “Metaphor creates the similarity”, not “similarity antecedently existing”

In other words, metaphor expands the power of language through thought from just representing, describing to creating by seeing much more. And it's interesting that

Metaphor develops earlier and more easily than logic, both historically and in our individual experience. Metaphor and logic represent points on a continuum of language uses; in any productive, generative thinking, we are likely to find the two at their somewhat distinct, but properly cooperative, work. Lakoff and Johnson's assertion that metaphor “unites reason and imagination” and “[m]etaphor is thus *imaginative rationality*” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 193) may be somewhat arcane; it does, however, capture the sense in which metaphor is not some logic-less rambling but a vitally productive feature of our constructive thinking. It also echoes Wordsworth's observation of nearly two centuries earlier, that imagination “is Reason in her most exalted mood” (*The Prelude*, XIV, line 192).

p. 56

R: Egan and others challenged Piaget for neglecting children's metaphorical thinking.

—that is, later stages encompass the achievements of the earlier stages. They recognize only gains in cognitive competence, not losses. In particular, they do not recognize that in recapitulating the process of Western intellectual development, children might be paying an intellectual cost that we as a civilization have paid. But so long as this cost goes unrecognized, we can't ask whether it is worthwhile or necessary. p. 57

Given the close connection between language development and metaphor, and the importance of fluent and flexible metaphoric control for nearly all forms of thinking, it would be prudent to emphasize support for metaphoric fluency in early education. p. 57

R: In fact, metaphoric thinking don't decline when we get older. We all use metaphors in thinking and language, in poetry and science It is like a distorting-magic mirror / glass (哈哈鏡), giving us more material and flexibility in thought. Science as metaphor / Newtonian physics as metaphor are common views.

Again, how far can it go? When something like metaphor being so natural, how or should we teach?

## Rhythm and Narratives (p. 58 – 60)



Barbara Hardy

observation: "We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and live by narrative" (1968, p. 5). p.59

## 60 Egan suggests learning from self-centeredness

These might seem like mystical extravagances as against the common sense of assuming that children's exploration of the world must start with themselves, perhaps modifying their sense of self and the meaning of their local environment as learning proceeds. More commonly, however, the schooled exploration of the self and its locality leads to local and immediate experience being impressed on the child as the norm, as the proper, as the given, as "natural," and the different and distant and the "other" as knowable or acceptable to the degree that it conforms with the first known locality and self. Such a procedure of early education is, that is to say, a recipe for provincialism, for inflexibility, for ignorance. My point is that if meaning is established in rhythm and narrative by first grasping the whole and then making sense of its parts, we would do better to begin with general accounts of the world, its place in the cosmos, the variety of forms of life, and so on, than with the routines of the local world. Those will, after all, be learned by simple everyday experience; their meaning can be exposed by placing them in larger contexts.

p.60

R: I doubt if his ideas can lead to anywhere or learning programs

## Images (p. 60 – 62)

### 60 Guided imagery by cassette-taped voice describing 5 senses

Earthworms

R: Modern I.T. technology exploits all our senses

### 61 Extending our grasp of the world

## Stories and Meaning (p. 62 – 65)

Stories give affective meaning

We "storify" events in order to understand in a particular way.

R: There's some kind of simple story like a good-guy-bad-guy script. Point is to overcome them.

## Conclusion (p. 65 – 70)

66 Egan seems to argue for 'orality' against the predominant 'literacy' culture of our time; the latter may defeat recapitulation of orality.

67 Then he finds support in Wertsch (1991)

Ours is, for much of the time, a peculiar *languaged* understanding of the world. "A defining property of higher mental functioning, one which is unique to humans, is the fact that it is mediated by tools and by sign systems such as a natural language" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 21). While we are, willy nilly,

p. 67

Each of us is born with a unique consciousness, with a unique "take" on reality. Language is a conventional, shared, limiting shaper of our consciousness. The first educational task, then, is to ensure that children learn fluid and flexible language use so that it can become a means of expressing their unique perceptions and consciousness. The associated first educational dan-

p. 67

68

## Language as extending and enlarging experience.

The second educational task is to ensure not only that language serve as a tool for expressing one's perceptions and consciousness, or for communicating them, or for reflecting reality, but that the child recognize that language has a distinct, dynamic life of its own. It is not only a medium into which or through which our experience can be expressed, but is itself an extension and enlargement of our experience. It may have begun as a utilitarian tool, but it has far-reaching potential for enlarging our understanding and aesthetic delight.

p. 68

69

## Language from natural learning to teaching

My scheme of introductory education offers as an alternative a recapitulation of the human construction of language and the kind of understanding of the world and experience that stimulation and development of language capacities entail. Some level of language development occurs "naturally" by children being brought up in a language-using environment, but fuller development of language and its associated intellectual capacities requires deliberate teaching. The most important, dramatic, and vivid stories of our world and of human experience can provide an appropriate curriculum for the earliest years.

p. 68

R:

## My thinking over Egan's chapter

### (A) Embodiment Theory

- (1) Human brain embodies reptilian brain
- (2) Human written culture embodies primitive oral culture
- (3) Human body embodies physiology + psychology + culture

### (B) Value and Validity of CRT

- (1) RT is invalidated in biology (fetus growth ≠ human growth process)
- (2) CRT

Children's quick mastery of language is a fact, epigenetics? 200,000 years of linguistic survival advantages / cultural advantages?

- (3) Its significance is not to inform curriculum, but to inform / enrich our human understanding. We keep coming back to mythic understanding (binary opposites, imagery, metaphor) when doing higher-order thinking and understanding.