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Little Red rides the hood: Teaching preservice teachers how to use children's literature by writing it

In this children's literature course, future teachers not only read stories, they write their own and share them with middle school students.

It is an ancient belief that when all the planets line up in the heavens and the moon is full, something marvelous is about to happen. That must have been the case one brilliant fall day in 1993 at Wells College, an all-women's college in upstate New York, USA. A poet, who for 20 years had been running a creative writing program, and an education professor, with an equal number of years of experience working with children and teachers, decided to create a new kind of children's literature course for preservice teachers.

The course would stress writing as well as reading children's literature; it would have real middle school children listening to stories written by college students, who themselves had listened to established writers such as Nancy Willard, David Budbill, and Cynthia DeFelice talk about their work; it would be a busy, noisy course that resembled a workshop more than a seminar. It would be small and conversational, a learning community that would draw on the strengths and the experiences of both teachers and students. It would look like a creative writing class, act like a literature course, and sound like an education workshop. It was definitely going to be different—fun to take and fun to teach!

The background

The study of children's literature as an academic subject is fairly recent; a few colleges in the U.S. began offering courses in the 1940s. Writing for children, of course, is much older than that. The tradition of publishing materials for children dates back almost 250 years. What began as a modest publishing endeavor in the late 1700s has grown so much that there are now more than 50,000 English-language children's book titles in print. Large publishing houses have departments that serve the children's market exclusively.

As a result of children's literature coming of age

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commercially, there has been a proliferation of such courses in colleges. Once a rare offering, the children's literature course has found its way into English departments at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and with the increase of courses and scholarly activity the subject has achieved academic legitimacy. It is not unusual now in colleges and universities across the U.S. to see a student roaming the halls holding copies of both *Winnie the Pooh* and *Elements of College Physics*.

Children's literature as text

The nature of "kid lit" courses varies with institutions and instructors. Generally, at the undergraduate level, a children's literature course is part of the English curriculum and often acts as a support for the education program. The format and goals resemble other literature courses: A close study of text and critical interpretation are the foundation. As Probst (1992) suggests, students of literature come out of a curriculum and a discipline organized around what we know about literature. Hence, the organizational scheme is either historical or by genre or theme.

By the same token, much time and energy is devoted to the features and structure of texts, often referred to as the elements of children's literature. Those elements represent the skeleton not only of children's literature but of literature in general. Students study such components as setting, characterization, plot, theme, point of view, and style. Texts are analyzed, compared, and contrasted with these components in mind.

While a traditional critical/analytical approach is invaluable, indeed essential, it is not the only way that texts in children's literature can be discussed. Students can explore such texts through a variety of approaches, including feminist theory and gender issues, social-political theories of scholars such as Jack Zipes (1983) and Ariel Dorfman (1983), or the philosophical/mythological perspective of Joseph Campbell (1968), to name only a few. An eclectic and fluid approach to analysis, which involves coming at the process from different viewpoints, can encompass what readers actually do with a text and how interpretation should, and perhaps should not, take place.

Rosenblatt (1938), for example, suggests the view that literary analysis represents a complex interaction between the reader and the text. This interaction includes the memories, perceptions, and values of the reader as they inform individual interpretation. A story's meaning, in other words, depends on the particular experience a reader brings to it. The text therefore is transformed by each reader, which in turn makes possible multiple and radically different interpretations of a single text. With such an approach, literary analysis becomes a flexible and relative endeavor. Although traditional literary/critical analysis should play a part in a children's literature course, what Rosenblatt describes is clearly closer to how youngsters read and how a teacher can present work most productively in the classroom.

Children's literature as educational practice

While college English majors are studying *Winnie the Pooh* (Milne, 1954) as literature, preservice teachers explore ways to make connections between stories and children. Despite a great deal of variability in the process, there are some constants. One is a teacher's belief that good children's books create a space of understanding for children. Another is that "authentic literature should be at the core of children's literacy experiences and that the opportunity to talk with others about that literature is critical. In short, [teachers] have come to value children's literary development as an important part of their literacy development" (Temple & Martinez, in press).

In preservice education programs, children's literature becomes an integral part of language arts and teacher practice. How readers bring meaning to stories is illuminated by developmental and cognitive perspectives, such as those found in the work of Piaget (in Gruber, 1977) and Appleyard (1990). Hence, how children talk about stories and what they say has been the subject of lively and informative research (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Lehr, 1995). Much has been written about how children can use literature to understand the most complex of social issues and the most immediate of personal

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events. The point is that the education classroom is focused on the interrelationship of children, literature, and classroom practice. Children's literature is seen as a way of promoting and improving reading, writing, and thinking skills. This perspective, in turn, fosters a "how to" methodology that is less likely to appear in the strictly literature classroom. The children's literature course for educators can, and often does, look very different from the children's literature course for English majors.

Looking at children's literature from the inside out

At Wells College, the English and Education faculties have joined forces to offer a different kind of children's literature course. Instead of coming out of a single discipline, this team-taught course takes threads from children's literature as text and children's literature as practice. Students do not simply read and discuss children's literature; they also write it. What they create is then critiqued not only by their peers, but by fifth to eighth graders.

This process might best be described as "learning children's literature from the inside out" and most closely resembles a whole language, integrated reading and writing approach that uses portfolio assessment. Since many, though not all, of the students in the course are preservice teachers, this approach offers a fine opportunity for them to (a) learn about children's literature, (b) learn how to use it to promote literacy skills in middle school classrooms, (c) gain an experiential perspective on what an integrated reading and writing process actually means, and (d) understand how the "teacher-as-author" model promotes this process.

This year's course highlighted genres of literature as well as the specifics of form commonly referred to as the elements of children's literature. The stories and genres chosen for this year were *Winnie the Pooh*, as a "classic" of prose fiction; traditional fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm and others; ancient works from the oral traditions of Homer, Beowulf, and Chaucer; poetry including works by contemporary poets such as X.J. Kennedy as well as the anonymous bards of the Child Ballads; novels for middle schoolers such as *Weasel* (DeFelice, 1990) and *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990); and last but not least, picture books.

The first order of business was for students to understand what children's literature is and how it is like other kinds of literature. For that purpose we chose *Winnie the Pooh* as a way to begin our discussion. The "bear" provided answers to the question "What is children's literature, and how is it the same as, and different from, other kinds of literature?" From this starting point, using a writer's workshop format, students began to look at structural elements such as characterization, plot, theme, point of view, style, and voice. As part of this process, students went on to read and discuss a variety of children's books, as well as to practice writing on their own.

Students played with these elements by participating in a series of writing exercises. Some of these exercises were done in class, where students got immediate feedback; others were done outside of class, and then critiqued by the entire group. For example, an exercise on setting invited students to choose from a list of possibilities such as a storm at sea, a museum, a hotel in the far East, and a closet. The purpose of the exercise was to expand on an initial idea and create a plausible setting for a children's story.

Another exercise in plot development offered a series of situational problems; for example, "An only child learns that she really belongs to another family." The students were asked to structure a plot outline around the problem they had chosen.

Students experimented with point of view by doing exercises in which they wrote about someone they despised and then rewrote the piece from the despised one's point of view. In order to understand the essence of theme, they tried their hand at fables. The brevity and conciseness of fables provided them with an immediate understanding of what a theme is and how it works in a piece of writing.

As students practiced these elements of literature, they were critiqued by their peers and read additional pieces by established writers. They also received "line edits" from an established writer and comments on classroom use and children's responses from a veteran classroom teacher.

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This process of reading, writing, and critiquing the elements of children's literature produced distinctive outcomes:

1. Students began to really understand how a piece of literature works. By creating characters and settings of their own, they gained direct insight into what goes into the process, the practical components of composition. By comparing their creations with those of their peers, as well as with those of the authors they read, they acquired standards by which to judge and choose good literature. What constitutes a good character in a literary work took on a whole new meaning once they attempted to create one.

2. As students worked through these exercises and materials, they began to see that what they were doing in a college setting could be done with young writers in a classroom setting.

3. Students gained an appreciation of the writer's craft. Once they had become writers themselves, they were better able to help children learn to write and were more sensitive to the actual classroom process that children experience.

Once students were well versed in the elements of children's literature, the course moved to the study and writing of specific kinds of literature—such as traditional fairy tales, poetry, short stories, longer pieces, and picture books. As each new type of literature was introduced, students read a variety of pieces, worked through a series of exercises that helped prime their imaginations, and then wrote examples of their own.

The reading/writing/critiquing process was extended and complemented by the weekly visits of youngsters from the campus-affiliated school. These children, age 10 to 13, listened to the newly crafted pieces and took part in the discussions, which were always very lively. The students also had the benefit of monthly visits from established children's authors and professional storytellers.

The role of traditional tales and storytelling

Traditional fairy tales offer students a good place to start writing whole pieces, as well as a place to begin learning how to discuss literature in a meaningful way. The advantage of starting with fairy tales, regardless of grade level, is that they are so accessible. Children like them, and they are an integral part of all cultures; hence it is possible to tailor the experience to the group and give credence to multiculturalism. Teachers of older children, including high school students, can use reading and writing of fairy tales to explore the cultural enigmas that plague us all. By actually writing these stories, students become intimately acquainted with their form and structure. Once one is personally involved in the creative process, the hero cycle and its appeal as story form begin to make sense.

The most successful traditional stories were either rewritings of classic tales, such as "Little Red Riding Hood," or creations of new tales. For example, one student's retelling and modernizing of "Little Red Riding Hood" began:

> Little Red has done it again—won another skateboard contest. This time there was no money. Instead the prize is a gleaming black CD player. Little Red, 11 years old and not particularly generous, is going to give the player away. He's giving it to his brother, "Urban Surfer," who taught him everything he knows. Surf —the nickname to his nickname—is laid up in bed after a car cut him off on the corner over near the west end of Central Park. Surf didn't break any bones, he is just beat up. Now he is staying with their grandmother over in Riverdale. Mom says it's because she has to work and can't get Surf what he needs. Little Red and Surf don't pretend to believe that!

In her retelling of "Rapunzel," another student wrote the story as a silly exercise in advanced vocabulary as well as a splendid example of satire. The intent of her story was to get youngsters to listen to and understand "big" words by using the context and to understand how satirical writing can be used effectively. Her story began:

> Once upon a time, in the tiny kingdom of Thuh-Rheelwurld, there lived a blacksmith named Geof. Geof was so enamored of the Princess Carolyn that he couldn't concentrate on his work. Unfortunately, Princess Carolyn was betrothed to the evil Count Donald, a notorious pyromaniac, who had burned down several villages, numerous castles, and two shopping malls. It is rumored that his genealogy can be traced to Nero, and that his descendants include General Sherman and Miss O'Leary's cow.

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Both of these stories benefited from input from children and established authors, whose comments were reflected in the multiple drafts.

A third example of traditional tales from the class was an original "moral tale." This story began:

> Once upon a time there was a rich man searching for a wife. He was buying cabbage at the farmer's market one day when a young woman approached and tenderly greeted the farmer with a kiss. The rich man was touched by the affections of the fair lady and decided that she should be his wife.

The story turned out to be a great exercise in prediction. As the rich man offers one spectacular option after another to the lady, the audience, which included children, tried to figure out her response, until the surprise ending where it is revealed that the fair lady is really the farmer's wife, not his daughter! The entire tone, language, and rhythm of the tale was reminiscent of very old stories. A spirited discussion followed about the presumption of the "rich man" that the "fair lady" would want to be his wife, as well as about the elements that made this story so appealing.

As each new writer tried out her piece on the group, after benefiting from the discussions and input from the adults as well as the children, students learned how to carry out lively, relevant, and useful discussions about stories. Having their own works as the center of discussion helped them understand the process of discussion, bringing clarity to the importance of the issues of language, imagery, and understanding. They learned the crucial lesson of how to ask questions and what to ask.

To get in touch with the classical realm and see its possible application in the classroom, the Wells students were asked to read and "redo" or "tell" a piece from any of the following: *Beowulf*, Chaucer, the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad*, the Old Testament of the Bible, or any classic piece of literature with roots in the oral tradition. Storytelling is halfway between conversation and reading. It requires the teller to engage the listener in specific ways that are not part of the process when we read silently or aloud. Hence, storytelling is a way for students to experience firsthand the power of classical pieces that rarely find their way into the middle school classroom.

For example, one student took on the challenge by reading aloud a Chaucer tale in original Middle English. Another chose *Beowulf*, and a third attempted to recreate an *Arabian Nights* tale. In every case, students found themselves immersed in "story" in a way that fits the human mind and engages the audience. Suddenly these stories were not so remote from our experience; instead, they gave students a chance to make characters real through voice and gesture. The students had the opportunity to paint pictures with words as they dramatized and spun out stories, some as old as time itself, embodying the constants and the frailties of the human condition.

The novel as art and a vehicle for experience

Several novels were chosen for this class in addition to *Weasel* and *Maniac Magee*; for example, students read and worked with *Tuck Everlasting* (Babbitt, 1975) and *Bones on Black Spruce Mountain* (Budbill, 1994). Two special events made this portion of the course particularly interesting: First, middle-school-aged youngsters also read the books and participated in discussions; second, two of the authors, Cynthia DeFelice (*Weasel*) and David Budbill (*Bones on Black Spruce Mountain*), were present to discuss their work and talk about writing. Their input was incalculably valuable.

As the Wells students worked with the materials, discussed the stories with children, and wrote their own sample chapters and outlines for longer works, several important understandings emerged.

1. Writing novels that appeal to middle-school-aged readers, especially boys, is harder than it might seem. At least two of the college students decided to write longer pieces that featured romantic themes. These were summarily dismissed by the youngsters with remarks such as "boring," "mushy," and "nothing happens." Another student attempted a bucolic story that took, in the words of one 12-year-old critic, "forever" to get going. Students quickly learned the need to plunge the middle-school-aged reader into the plot and to pose provocative problems that pit the young hero or heroine against difficult odds.

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For example, in a lengthy classroom discussion by children and adults of the novel *Weasel*, participants tried to determine whether the main character, Nathan, made the best decision when he did not shoot Weasel while he had the chance, and whether the whole topic raised by the novel was "beyond" children and, hence, "too hard." What students discovered as the group explored issues of revenge and justice was that they had underestimated the capacity of youngsters to come to terms with, and consider the ramifications of, ethical issues. The insightful comments of a sixth grader, "he did the right thing because it was right, not because his Dad said that it was right," summed up an understanding of the complex situation that surprised most of the class.

2. Students learned how to assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of subject matter and voice; as one student discovered, irreverence and black humor, if done well, can be a good thing. In this particular case, her naturally irreverent writing style was a favorite among the 11- and 12-year-olds. Her ability to poke sharp-edged fun at some of the sacred cows of religion, parental and governmental authority, and the like hit them exactly where they lived. Her stories were greeted with laughter and served as writing examples middle schoolers could enthusiastically relate to and copy. Suddenly the appeal of authors such as Roald Dahl, with his sense of the outrageous and the naughty, made perfect sense.

Picture books: the most difficult of all

Picture books provide a whole new set of problems and writing opportunities for students. As a genre, they are as short and simple-seeming as they are deceptive and, hence, are enormously difficult to write. Picture books have been described by authors such as Nancy Willard as poems. The economy of language and the tightness of plot pose constraints on the writer that other forms of literature do not.

As with the other genres, students read and critiqued a large number of picture books before they tried to write their own. The picture book provided an opportunity for students to collaborate with one another and, again, to use the children as critics. Several students went to the affiliated school and read their works in progress. The feedback they received was first-rate and practical. The middle schoolers commented on plot development, use of language, description, and style. They were quick to point out that a young child might not "get it," or that the vocabulary was too flowery, or that the story "didn't do much." Further, the youngsters, intrigued by the idea of writing and illustrating a picture book for still younger children, also began to write and, in turn, tried out their picture books on the Wells students. A real community of writers was born.

Assessment

As in most academic endeavors, final assessment of student overall performance in the course was an important issue. Rather than using a conventional grading method including research papers, critiques, reports, and exams, this course relied on portfolio assessment. During the semester, students had written, critiqued, read, and discussed a great deal of children's literature. As a way of bringing closure to the course, each student was required to compile a portfolio of materials she had written, along with comments on books she had read.

In addition, each student was given about 15 minutes of class time to present her portfolio and receive written feedback from the rest of the class and the two professors. Students could opt to read new works or present a revision of a work in progress. Or they could discuss a book or books they found particularly interesting or stimulating.

The general requirements for the portfolios were laid out by the professors, but students had enormous latitude within those parameters. For example, one student, who had struggled most of the semester with the creative writing part of the course, used her artistic talents to illustrate three Aesop fables. Her final presentation was a display of her artwork, combined with a discussion of the difficulty of writing for someone whose talents lay in other areas.

From the inside out

The mark of a good educational experience is when everyone looks sad when it comes to an end. There

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is a slight reluctance to leave and an air of wistfulness that something good and out of the ordinary is over. This is every teacher's dream, and it is a rare occurrence.

The class in Reading and Writing Children's Literature had become a community of readers and writers. Students had learned what "whole language" really was all about, and how it worked and felt and operated in a classroom. They learned how to talk and think about children's literature, not only as a group of adults but with the input of children. They gained firsthand experience in story meaning and a new realization of the impact of stories on how we understand one another, ourselves, and the general predicaments brought on by human frailty.

Students learned how their own values and politics shaped their choice, interpretation, and use of children's literature. As Temple (Temple & Martinez, in press) points out, "If people were goldfish, society would be the water. The social arrangements we live by and the cultural aspirations we share are all but invisible to us." As students worked with stories and books while writing pieces of their own, their own social arrangements and cultural aspirations became visible. What they valued and believed evolved into characters whose temperaments and actions were a reflection of those beliefs. The problems that they faced and the solutions that worked and rang true were ones that were part of the writer's own culture and background.

Finally, students learned how to listen and how to critique, constructively yet gently, the works of others. In short, they had experienced children's literature and the literacy process from the inside out.

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