Children's Literature Goes to College

We all grew up reading and listening to stories. The books containing these stories came in a variety of formats: poems, folk tales, modern fantasy, myths, epics, fables, realistic stories, historical fiction, biography, and informational writing (Sutherland, 1976). These stories frequently took us to distant places, engaged us in fantasy, gently forced us to think critically and make hard choices, and allowed us to stand in the footprints of real and imaginary protagonists. Fueled by corresponding cinematic productions (e.g., J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, and C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*), children's literature is now, more than ever, a cross-generational genre.

English (2000) makes the following observations about the unique contributions that children's literature can make to the learning environment:

> Not surprisingly, a cursory glance at any bookstore display reveals that children's literature captures succinctly a variety of life motifs, including fear, joy, death, and new life, and casts them in sharp relief. Children's literature has the unique ability to present simple plot lines and bipolar opposites of heroes and villains, … thus making most selections immediately comprehensible and relevant for a variety of adult education settings…. By beginning with a children's story, the adult educator can then invite adults to share their stories and to begin the process of continuously creating and writing their own lives. Children's literature helps in this process, innocently but effectively raising questions and provoking responses…(p. 15)

Children's literature offers the reader opportunities to experiment with differing perspectives on a variety of issues typically considered to be the purview of adults (e.g., relationships, racism, poverty, family dynamics, disabilities, gender roles, personal fears, war). Martino (2008) describes his own interactions with children's literature and the ways in which it captures the mystery and uniqueness of seeing "adult" issues through the eyes of a child:

> It would be a mistake to say that these texts are simplistic. They contain all the complexities we look for in any well-written narrative. Specifically, the books I was reading contained three attractive aspects: Most of the stories were told in the second person; every story featured a child protagonist; and most of the books began with the death or disappearance of one or both parents. The child protagonists were especially interesting because they reminded me that children see the world much differently than adults. For children, everything is an adventure; every blade of grass, every stone, every walk to the grocery store offers the possibility of an exciting, new, and worthwhile experience. (p. B28)

I am almost inclined to set up a canon that a children's story that is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story. The good ones last. Those of us who are blamed when old for reading childish books were blamed when children for reading books too old for us. No reader worth his salt trots along in obedience to a time-table.

(Lewis, 1966, pp. 23-24)

These observations by English (2000) and Martino (2008) provide a springboard for thinking about the application and benefits of using children's literature as a teaching medium, which include:

- Beckons readers back to earlier times in their lives and opens the door for connecting literary themes, instructional content, and personal narratives

- Forces the participant to examine issues and content from a different vantage point

- Offers a vast menu of motifs, styles, and content that can be directly linked to curricula in a variety of academic disciplines

- Breathes life and context into discussions and explorations of challenging academic topics

In this issue of *The Toolbox*, we will explore how we can capitalize on the unique capabilities and create strategies for inviting students to both read and write children's literature as a means of enhancing their level of engagement with course-related content.
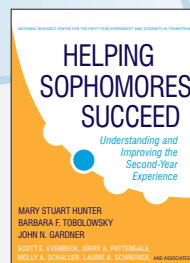
Reading Children's Literature in the Classroom

Much like Marc Prensky's (2001) claim that the world can be divided into two groups: Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants, we can also think about the consumers of children's literature as either Kid-Book Natives (i.e., children who are reading books written for them and adults who are familiar with the genre) or Kid-Book Immigrants (i.e., those who have a level of awareness that is limited to three minutes or less of meaningful dialogue on the topic). Natives know how to find quality books with ease. For Immigrants, it is necessary to tap available resources to make informed choices on the best books to read and include in the instructional process. Possible strategies to aid in this search include:

- Becoming friends with your public and campus librarians. They would love to help you pick out the most relevant children's literature texts.

- Making friends with the faculty in the education department who teach children's literature courses to teachers-in-training. Again, they are excellent resources and charter members of the Kid-Book Natives group.

- Visiting web sites that provide categorized lists of children's books by intended audiences, topics, and level of reading difficulty (e.g., http://www.childrenslit.com/ and http://www.lib.muohio.edu/pictbks/). The search process will probably require that you spend some time holed up in the library or an easy chair (perhaps in front of a fireplace with a beverage of your choice) reading some children's books to assure that you are making the best selections.

Once you have selected the books that will be used in your classroom instruction, reflect on the ways in which these texts can be effectively integrated into the instructional process. Consider the following:

- ☐ Perform a *read aloud* to the entire class followed by small-group discussions related to the book's theme, purpose, and applications or connections to course content.

- ☐ Divide the class into small groups, and distribute a different book to each group. Have the class rotate through a reading and series of brief discussions about the selected books.

- ☐ In small-group format, ask each group to study their assigned book and create a poster, song, or performance that captures the story line, the message of the text, and connections to course content.

Have fun with the books that you choose. You will be amazed at the ways in which your students will "connect the dots" between stories written for "kids" and the content that you are teaching them in other aspects of your course.

Writing Children's Literature: Students Create Their Own Books!

Another strategy for using this literary genre in the classroom is to ask your students to write their own children's book that relates to the course content. This learning activity requires students (a) take an important learning concept from class material, (b) simplify it, and (c) imbed it into a story that would be enjoyable and understandable for children.

There are several vendors on the Internet that sell books with a blank white cardboard cover and 16 empty 8.5" x 11" pages (e.g., http://www.barebooks.com/). The task for your students will be to create a story, complete with illustrations (e.g., hand-drawn art, clip-art, photographs, scrapbooking art materials), and organize their work to include the following components:

- ☐ Dust cover page
- ☐ Acknowledgements page
- ☐ Title page
- ☐ Story/content
- ☐ About the Author page

Students, like all of us, vary in their levels of creativity and resourcefulness in response to an open-ended assignment such as this one. You will be amazed, however, at the diversity of ideas and products that are created. As a final point of celebration and fun, invite students to participate in an authors' party where they share and read their books to one another—with refreshments, of course.

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