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Resources: Put a spell on your class

Amanda Yesilbursa explains how Harry Potter's boarding school Hogwarts could hold the key to better classroom interactions



Two years ago there were a series of events in my life that inspired me to devise some slightly unusual teacher-training techniques.

First, my twins had reached the age where they began to 'get into' J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, both the books and films. Repeated readings and viewings ensued during the winter break. Revisiting the series as a teacher-educator, I noticed the depictions of the highly ritualised school environment and the teachers in particular.

The second event was the sad loss of Alan Rickman and the effect it had on my prospective English language teachers. January 2016 witnessed many gloomy faces in the department and laments on social media over the passing of 'Severus Snape'.

It struck home what an important place the series had in the lives of some of my student-teachers. Indeed, many of them had been motivated to learn English in high school because of Harry.

Third, while all this was going on, I was preparing the schedule and material for a course on classroom interaction skills that I was to teach for the first time.

Why not incorporate the interest in Harry Potter and the images of teachers into my new course? Why not support academic readings on teachers' beliefs and classroom interaction patterns with striking and engaging images of familiar teachers?

This way, it would be possible to tap into shared conceptualisations of teachers. Video clips provide concrete, objective records of behaviour and its effects on others.

Moreover, asking individuals to reflect on the behaviour of fictitious teachers, such as the Hogwarts teaching staff, can be less fraught with emotion than asking them to talk critically about real teachers who have had a significant role in their education.

OK, I know. Hogwarts teachers teach magic, not English.

But teachers of all subject matters display their beliefs about content, learning and teaching in the way they set up interaction in the classroom, and in the discourse they choose, often unconsciously, to bring about learning.

Anyway, who wouldn't love to be able to cast an *Accio Lingua Anglica* spell and have their students fluent in English at the wave of a wand?

Although I originally had prospective English language teachers in mind, the activities I have developed are just as relevant for teachers of all levels of experience.

So, exactly how do the Hogwarts teachers help us to reflect on beliefs and classroom interaction patterns?

First, there are plenty of them, and they are varied and exist together within a single context, which provides continuity.

Second, the depictions of the teachers at Hogwarts are very stereotypical, even clichéd.

Their behaviour and way of dressing, and their subjects and methods of instruction fit in conveniently with other images of teachers in popular culture and literature.

The teachers I generally choose to focus on are Severus Snape, the potions master, Sybill Trelawney, head of the divination workshop, Gilderoy Lockhart, defence against the dark arts professor, and Dolores Umbridge, high inquisitor.

These characters provide sharp contrasts – Snape is severe, Trelawney a little dizzy, Lockhart narcissistic and Umbridge authoritarian.

Hogwarts Teachers: Pedagogical Profiles

»**Name:** Severus Snape
Position: Potions Master
Appearance: severe, long, black hair, dressed in black
Strengths: has a commanding classroom presence
Weaknesses: doesn't believe in the capabilities of his pupils, teacher-centred approach, discourages interaction



»**Name:** Sybill Trelawney
Position: Head of Divination Workshop
Appearance: unruly, long hair, thick-rimmed glasses, long and baggy clothes.
Strengths: believes in learning by doing, sets up authentic, interactive activities, learner-centred approach
Weaknesses: lacks an authoritative presence, doesn't always listen to her students, appears to be incompetent in her field
»**Name:** Gilderoy Lockhart
Position: Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts
Appearance: blond hair, sparkling smile, superficially charming
Strengths: attracts pupils' attention Weaknesses: self-important, boastful, showy, starts activities that he is unable to control, incompetent



»**Name:** Dolores Jane Umbridge
Position: High Inquisitor, Headmistress
Appearance: always wears pink, neat and tidy, dresses formally, superficial sweet appearance covers her cruel nature
Strengths: is organised, has a commanding presence
Weaknesses: believes in teaching to the exam, doesn't give importance to putting knowledge into use, intolerant to challenges to her authority



⇒Working with video clips

Activity 1: Look
This draws attention to the visual aspects of the videos only.
The participants take notes on the following points as they watch the short clips of the first lessons of each Hogwarts teacher:

- The layout of the classroom
- What the pupils are doing before the teacher arrives
- How and from where the teacher enters the classroom
- The appearance of the teacher
- How s/he uses the classroom space

- The pupils' reactions to the teacher

These points act as a springboard for guided observation, reflection and discussion, with participants comparing notes on each teacher.

Activity 2: Listen

This focuses on the discourse of each teacher. Participants are given the scripts of each clip, and are asked to highlight the words and phrases that reveal the respective teacher's beliefs about subject matter, learning and teaching.

For example, Snape storms into the classroom roaring, 'There shall be no silly wand-waving or incantations in this classroom.' He remarks that potion-making is a 'subtle science and an exact art' that he doesn't expect many to 'possess the disposition' to master.

Taking this together with his severe appearance – long black flowing robes – and his intimidation of Harry with questions about wormwood and bezoars, we can infer that Snape is an authoritarian figure who takes his subject matter very seriously.

In fact he sees it as superior to any other school subject.

He doesn't believe that every child is able to learn how to make potions.

This causes the pupils to be afraid of him and unwilling to speak out.

At this point, participants can be led to think about a hypothetical authoritarian English language teacher who tells his/her students that some have the aptitude to learn a foreign language while others simply do not. S/he deliberately asks difficult questions to trip students up and corrects everything that the students dare to utter. What would the atmosphere be like in his/her classroom? How would language learning be helped or hindered?

Activity 3: Connect

The final activity helps the participants to connect what they have seen and considered to the 'real' world of teaching. Prospective teachers are encouraged to pay attention to the points outlined above in the classrooms of teachers they observe during teaching practice.

Critical discussion can be encouraged on the wider issues – teacher favouritism, reward and punishment, the effects of examinations on teaching and learning, and even the stereotypical representations of teachers in popular culture.

In this way, teachers can develop skills of observation and reflection in what Umbridge calls 'a secure, risk-free' environment.



Amanda Yesilbursa works as an English language teacher-educator at Uludag University, Turkey. This article was adapted from a talk originally presented at the 18th International INGED Conference in Istanbul, Turkey, in October 2017.

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