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Abstract

A story is often better than abstract theorizing; and the best stories provide opportunities for readers to reflect on their own lives. J.K. Rowling's portrayal of Professor Lupin's first class with Harry's group of Gryffindor third years in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* embodies some useful pedagogical orientations and practices. It is particularly insightful about the importance of teachers working to understand their students. In fact, this pedagogical focus on the student is so central to the nature of teaching that Rowling's story is a sort of fairy tale of pedagogy.

Additional Keywords

Pedagogy; Rowling, J.K.—Characters—Remus Lupin; Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

that I could hear it in his voice. The Inklings believed that Christopher read his father's work better than the Professor himself could, and we have plenty of evidence that this is so. None of those of us lucky enough to hear him read 'The 1960 *Hobbit*' at Marquette or 'The New Shadow' at Oxford (both unpublished at the time) could henceforth doubt it.³ I wish we had the entire *Lord of the Rings* in Christopher's voice, but I am grateful for all he has done over the years, all that we do have thanks to his efforts.

JOHN D. RATELIFF is the editor of *The History of the Hobbit*.



LUPIN'S FIRST LESSON: AN EXAMPLE OF EXCELLENT TEACHING

JOSHUA COLE

IN *HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN*, our author J.K. Rowling presents us with Professor Lupin's first Defense Against the Dark Arts (*DADA*) lesson (on how to defeat a boggart by laughing at it) as a model of sound pedagogy.⁴ Lupin is aware of the students' learning and experience with previous teachers, connects theory to application, engages students with an activity, and tries to understand the character of each student. I'd like to suggest that reflecting on the model offered by Lupin can help teachers, including college professors (and that's my own profession: I teach math).

In addition to the usual difficulties facing a new teacher, Lupin must deal with a class that has lost its previous *DADA* teachers from their first two years. Their first-year teacher, Professor Quirrel, had turned out to be in league with Voldemort. Their second-year teacher, Professor Lockhart, was all glitter and no substance. This was perfectly illustrated in Lockhart's first class, described in *The Chamber of Secrets*. Lockhart released pixies (who seemed interesting and not too dangerous) and asked the students to sort them out. The pixies turned out to be difficult to control and attacked the students, and Lockhart was incapable of helping. So that first class ended in chaos.

³ Not to mention his recordings of excerpts from *The Silmarillion* he made for Caedmon Records or the introductions he provided for some audiobook adaptations of his father's work, or interviews he gave at the time of the Centenary and afterwards.

⁴ Almost every incident mentioned in this article is in chapter seven, entitled, "The Boggart in the Wardrobe." I am using an American edition, in which the chapter is pp. 123-140.

The upshot is that Lupin faces a class that has known more trauma than learning in their *DADA* lessons. The particular weaknesses of the students must be overcome as well. Neville Longbottom, for example, is always afraid of failing; Hermione, conversely, is a know-it-all, and these students can be bored by poorly motivated bookish learning, as we will see when Professor Umbridge takes over the class in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*.

It is no coincidence that Rowling precedes Lupin's first class by a Potions class in which Snape gives an example of poor pedagogy, although Snape's actions are a result of malevolence, not ignorance or poor teaching ability. Neville is afraid of Snape's severity, and it doesn't help that he knows Snape is intentionally cruel. Neville fears to fail, and this causes him to fail. He cannot compose himself enough to think through the directions for the shrinking potion, and to implement them correctly: "Neville regularly went to pieces in Potions lessons; it was his worst subject and his great fear of Professor Snape made things ten times worse. His potion, which was supposed to be a bright green, had turned [orange]."

As usual, Snape's reaction is not intended to have a consoling effect on Neville. "Tell me, boy, does anything penetrate that thick skull of yours? Didn't you hear me say, quite clearly, that only one rat spleen was needed? Didn't I state plainly that a dash of leech juice would suffice? What do I have to do to make you understand, Longbottom?"

Hermione is her usual compassionate self, and wishes to use her mastery of the lesson to help Neville: "please, I could help Neville put it right—" Snape, certainly because he is mean, and perhaps partly because he feels threatened by the brilliance of a student he dislikes, forbids Hermione to help Neville: "I don't remember asking you to show off, Miss Granger."

Lupin holds his class on this day in the staffroom, and Snape is there when the class arrives. In a nasty mood he says to Lupin, "Possibly no one's warned you, Lupin, but this class contains Neville Longbottom. I would advise you not to entrust him with anything difficult. Not unless Miss Granger is hissing instructions in his ear." Lupin has the perfect comeback: "I was hoping that Neville would assist me with the first stage of the operation, and I am sure he will perform it admirably." For the moment that makes Neville more nervous, but it chases Snape from the room without further ado.

After informing the class that the rattling of the wardrobe indicates a boggart's presence, he asks what a boggart is. Hermione, as expected, raises her hand and gives a perfect answer: "It's a shape-shifter. It can take the shape of whatever it thinks will frighten us most." Lupin then pays her a compliment grounded in truth, an affirmation of her ability that Hermione needs. Rowling writes, "'Couldn't have put it better myself,' said Professor Lupin, and Hermione glowed." Lupin elaborates, and leads into his next question with,

"Nobody knows what a boggart looks like when he is alone, but when I let him out, he will immediately become whatever each of us most fears."

Lupin's next question kills two birds with one stone. He needs to get an answer out of a student other than Hermione, so that the class does not assume that Hermione is the only one smart enough to answer questions, and to remind Hermione she should avoid being an "insufferable know-it-all" as Snape will later call her. What is more, Lupin believes the boggart will turn into Voldemort if it approaches Harry; so he won't let that happen, which means Harry needs to answer a question so that he can participate in the class.

So Lupin proceeds: "This means that we have a huge advantage over the boggart before we begin. Have you spotted it, Harry?" Rowling continues, "Trying to answer a question with Hermione next to him, bobbing up and down on the balls of her feet with her hand in the air, was very off-putting, but Harry had a go."

It's a risk to put a student on the spot like this (especially the first day of class), but Lupin has set up the question so that the logical answer will be the right one. Harry gets it: "Er—because there are so many of us, it won't know what shape it should be?" Rowling continues, "'Precisely,' said Professor Lupin, and Hermione put her hand down, looking a little disappointed."

Using Neville as an example, Lupin then explains how a student should use the *Riddikulus* charm, which vanquishes the boggart with laughter. Neville can barely talk in his embarrassment and fear, but tells Lupin that Professor Snape is what frightens him most in the world. Lupin then suggests that when the boggart comes out as Snape, he think of Snape dressed up as his grandmother. Lupin also asks the other students to imagine what frightens them the most, and to prepare a funny way of looking at that thing so as to be able to laugh at the boggart when it turns on each of them.

A jet of sparks shot from the end of Professor Lupin's wand and hit the doorknob. The wardrobe burst open. Hook-nosed and menacing, Professor Snape stepped out, his eyes flashing at Neville.

Neville backed away, his wand up, mouthing wordlessly. Snape was bearing down upon him, reaching inside his robes.

"R—r—*riddikulus!*" squeaked Neville.

There was a noise like a whip crack. Snape stumbled; he was wearing a long, lace-trimmed dress and a towering hat topped with a moth-eaten vulture, and he was swinging a huge crimson handbag.

There was a roar of laughter; the boggart paused, confused, and Professor Lupin shouted "Parvati! Forward!"

After that the students take turns facing the boggart and defeat it with their hilarious transpositions of what they fear most. It's quite fun for all the students. Rowling tells us about a mummy whose bandages begin to unroll, a banshee who loses her voice, a rat that chases its tail, a snake which turns into a bloody eyeball, a severed hand which walks around but becomes trapped in a mousetrap, and, finally, a giant spider that loses its legs.

Neville finally has another go at the boggart and finishes it off. "‘Excellent!’ cried Professor Lupin as the class broke into applause. ‘Excellent, Neville. Well done, everyone . . . Let me see . . . five points to Gryffindor for every person to tackle the boggart—ten for Neville because he did it twice . . . and five each to Hermione and Harry.’"

When Harry complains that he didn't do anything, Lupin points out he and Hermione had answered his questions. To end class Lupin asks the students to read the chapter on boggarts and hand in a summary next time. After being introduced in an exciting way to real boggarts, reading a chapter on them will not be hard for the students. They will be motivated to learn and have a base of experience to contextualize what they read.

From the way Lupin handles the class, it is clear that he either has strategies prepared ahead of time for both Hermione and Neville, or that he improvises very well on the fly. If the former is true, perhaps Lupin has been briefed by Dumbledore, or other teachers, about the strengths and weaknesses of students in this class of third-years.

If the latter is true, Lupin has an incredible gift for judging character from slim evidence. Perhaps when Snape criticized Neville in front of the whole class when talking to another teacher, Lupin realized that the best solution for any bashfulness is a starring role in some significant activity. It must be a starring role to confer confidence; it must be in something significant, so that it does not appear that the only purpose is to condescend to a poor student who obviously needs help. In such cases, one must be careful that success is the result; boggarts seem to be the sort of things that can be defeated on the first try by almost anyone who is well-instructed. (In contrast to the pixies Lockhart had started with, which were worse than they looked.)

In Hermione's case, one could guess that Lupin knows that most classes have at least one brilliant student; from the way she answered, Lupin might also have been able to guess that she would want to answer every single question he asked (also, Snape tipped him off that she was a know-it-all). Hence it makes sense that he asked a particular person his next question, so as to avoid an embarrassing scene that happens often in other classes all throughout the series: Hermione is the only person raising her hand to answer a question, and the teacher is desperately looking for someone else who knows the answer while pretending not to see Hermione.

It is worth noting that Lupin's wisdom and shrewd guessing were not entirely correct in this episode. Harry's greatest fear was not Voldemort, but dementors. As a general lesson about teachers, this exemplifies that no teacher is perfect; teachers merely must strive to do their best, and leave the rest to providence. It was actually for the best that Lupin skipped Harry, because Harry had not figured out how to make dementors laughable.

Snape is actually not far behind Lupin in his teaching technique. Just as Lupin interests the students with exciting material (a boggart in the wardrobe), Snape starts with a shrinking potion, which sounds interesting, if not quite as alarming as a boggart. Just as Lupin encourages learning by doing (the students take turns facing the boggart), Snape asks the students to make their own potion. Just as Lupin takes notice of the character (including both strengths and weaknesses) of his students, Snape notices the strengths and weaknesses of Neville and Hermione; however, he uses this knowledge against them, rather than for them.

What are the implications for teaching in the real world? Originally, a few thoughts on this question were to be the conclusion of the article—however, it is precisely the wrong (or rather, a boring) question. For the viewpoints and strategies embodied by Lupin are not novel. They are well-known and once stated may even seem common sense. The art of teaching lies in applying what is commonly known to a particular classroom.

Nevertheless, it is helpful to be reminded by a story of what we instinctively know to be true about teaching. (Here, I am speaking as a teacher.) We easily get lost in the complexity of issues facing our classrooms, and turning a story like this into a metaphor can create space to find some self-awareness and clarity.

For example, what part of me is my inner-Snape, tempted to make teaching more about showing off my knowledge than helping the students to learn? When does selfish Snape usually try to come out when I teach? Maybe for me it is when I am afraid of ever admitting to being wrong or to the slightest mistake.

What are the boggarts my students are afraid of—the abstractions of mathematics, trigonometric functions, being wrong, being viewed as stupid? How can I get students to laugh at their fears? Some answers include graciously accepting it when I make mistakes, pointing out to students how much we learn from our mistakes, and keeping the classroom atmosphere light.

Lupin has a plan for his class (the boggart which was already in the cabinet and needed to be dealt with suggested it) but also worked in everything he learned right up until class started, including Neville's trouble with Snape. And paying attention in class with the presence of mind for reflection allowed him to deal with Hermione the know-it-all. Am I prepared for my classes?

Whenever possible, are they based on what is going on around us in school? Do I adapt to the big football game coming up? Well, yes, because I like football. Do I adapt to the big things happening that aren't on my radar at first? Do I notice the students who are not paying attention in class (and find ways to help them)? Am I composed enough to adapt to the know-it-alls, the student lacking confidence, and whatever else I see?

These are just a few examples of the self-awareness and reflection that can come from turning a good story about teaching into a metaphor for our own classrooms. The metaphor should be individualized and can lead in unexpected directions. In this situation, the debate over whether a story's meaning can go beyond the intention of the author is surely won by the affirmative side.

From a literary standpoint, the value of a story like this one lies in the simple and pleasant way it embodies the principles of good teaching. Reflecting on this story is a more enjoyable way to consider how we teach than re-articulating the abstract principles underlying it. Or, rather, the story provides a valuable opening into such a rich discussion.

The last distinction to be made is about the type of literature the story of Lupin's class should be considered. Granted, it must be contextualized in the novel in which it resides. But the student of Rowling's novels realizes her chapters are not merely convenient divisions of material into bite-sized pieces. Rather, each has its own unity and furthers the plot in a particular way. In fact, precisely the nature of this unity and contribution to the plot of the overall novel (and, indeed, of the entire series) are usually reflected in the chapter's title.

If Rowling's chapters are able to stand on their own, Lupin's first class can be seen as a kind of simple fairy tale. It embodies a universal human experience in a fun story that is easily turned to metaphorical understandings. Its theme is perhaps a bit different than the themes of ultimate meaning (love, life and death) usually embodied in a fairy tale—but its form and purpose are the same. And thinking about teaching is rather important for teachers!

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JOSHUA COLE is currently an Assistant Professor of Mathematics at the University of Findlay. Beginning in Fall 2020 he will be an Assistant Professor at Benedictine College in Kansas. His area of expertise is mathematical logic, and he enjoys teaching the various mathematics courses in the college curriculum. Reflection on teaching is important to him as a means for continual improvement. In reality he is more of a Tolkien fan than a Harry Potter fan. His wife Elizabeth, who is the opposite, vows to write something on Tolkien soon to get back at him.