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“Something he could do without being taught”: Honors, Play, and *Harry Potter*

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In a 2011 essay in *JNCHC*, Annmarie Guzy expressed concern that her honors composition course, which includes reading and writing about J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, “might be considered unorthodox material” (Guzy 89). Humanities faculty who teach *Harry Potter*, she speculated, might scandalize “other faculty, administrators, students, and the general public” because the series constitutes “popular work” rather than highbrow or literary writing. She had, however, no need for concern. Not only was Guzy’s *Potter*-themed composition course continued, but scholars in the humanities and elsewhere continue to mine the riches of the *Harry Potter* series. Its academic status is no longer in doubt. What is more, the series’ widely recognized scope, character, and complexity make it an ideal vehicle for teaching students, both intellectually and affectively, in an honors program.

Years after the publication of its seventh and final volume in 2007 and the completion of the film series in 2011, the *Harry Potter* series is still studied and cited by professionals in fields ranging from science and economics to law and theology (for recent examples see Gierzynski and Eddy; Reagin;

Bassham). Its continuing popularity in the United States is evident in the multitude of courses, seminars, and extracurricular events offered in colleges and universities nationwide. This ongoing popularity is congruent with a general trend in the consumption, as well as teaching, of contemporary popular culture at the college level; series from J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* to Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* have proved to be attractive to the same student population.

One reason for the Potter phenomenon—and one reason, frankly, why the books are so easy to teach—is undoubtedly the parallels between Harry's eponymous story and the readers' own. Harry's extended *bildungsroman* is an ideal example of the Hero's Journey monomyth described in Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Like Campbell's hero, Harry is called to a world of adventure, endures numerous tests and trials, including being ostracized socially, and finally emerges triumphant. Yet the series does not lend itself to an uncomplicated indulgence in vicarious hero-fantasy, for protagonist Harry is not always heroic, and, even when he acts heroically, Harry's mistakes cause the death of loved ones. In addition, the books themselves poke gentle but unmistakable fun at the solipsism of youth, one example being Phineus Nigellus Black's declaration in *Order of the Phoenix* that he "loathed being a teacher! Young people are so infernally convinced that they are absolutely right about everything. . . . I have better things to do than to listen to adolescent agonizing" (495–96).

But there is, as the saying goes, something about *Harry*—something else besides the monomyth—that makes the books not only a favorite of readers but also a useful tool for teachers. In their 2011 assessment of learning and engagement, *A New Culture of Learning*, Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown identify the *Harry Potter* books in particular as a doorway to learning; without teachers, "readers engaged in deep, sustained learning. . . through discussions and other interactions. . . . Kids learned the story of Harry Potter by reading the books. They learned the *meaning* of *Harry Potter* by engaging with the material on a much deeper level. Just as important, they followed their passion" (44–45). While Thomas and Brown focus their argument on children's learning, these same elements of interest and passion make the series a useful part of an honors education at the collegiate level. A *prima facie* argument for this usefulness is the sheer variety of honors-related courses, seminars, and clubs built around the series; a Google search on "Harry Potter" and "honors" in the .edu domain yields nearly 24,000 hits. As Thomas and Brown point out, the *Harry Potter* series resonates with its readers because they, along with

Rowling, participate in the ongoing co-creation of a fictional world. As I'll explain below, this is a peculiarly encyclopedic world, one that offers high-ability students in particular limitless opportunities to explore their academic majors and other interests in a spirit of play.

"YOUR WORLD. MY WORLD. YER PARENTS' WORLD."

—Rubeus Hagrid, *Sorcerer's Stone*

Rowling is well-known for the detailed notebooks in which she meticulously planned out the story of what her novels call "the wizarding world." This fictional realm is coherent, as a well-constructed imaginary realm should be; in fantasy as in science fiction, "the concept of world-building is an intrinsic part" of a novel's construction (Seed 4). Of course, Rowling's plots are not entirely seamless, and she leaves a few holes unattended. For example in the first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the magical world seems to be wholly secret from Muggles, but by book seven, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, it is clear that many Muggle families have magical children and intermarriage between Muggles and wizards is quite common. Nonetheless, Rowling's fictional universe is largely consistent, a world, to use M. A. DeFord's term, of "plausible impossibilities" (qtd. in James 60). This fictional realm has been dubbed the "Potterverse," the totality of the characters, events, and settings depicted in the *Harry Potter* books and films. The sheer length of the series, with its single narrative arc, makes a few glitches unavoidable but also serves to draw readers deeply into its fictive realm. The Potterverse continues to develop via the activities of Rowling and her fans in the online community of Pottermore <<http://www.pottermore.com>>. This online element, which may be said to include similar sites like The Leaky Cauldron <<http://www.the-leaky-cauldron.org>>, allows *Harry Potter* fans to converse and collaborate as they explore everything from the organization of families to gender relations, history, geography, animal ecology, technology (or its absence), economics, government (and its corruption), education, transportation, sports, books, mass media, leisure time, and eventually religion and the afterlife.

Partly because of this online element, the Potterverse differs substantially from other well-designed worlds that invite readers to explore them. Many fictional worlds, for example the London of Sherlock Holmes, have attracted dedicated fans (a century of devoted Holmesians is clear evidence of this), but the differences between the world of Harry Potter and the fictional worlds of Sherlock Holmes or of Middle-Earth or of Panem make the Potterverse

exceptionally attractive to students and teachers and have led to the enormous secondary literature on Rowling and her creation. Even if we focus only on the books themselves, we find multiple attractions, so much so that some readers seem to have picked up the book of “some old witch in Bath . . . that you could *never stop reading*” (*Chamber of Secrets* 231).

One reason readers find the world of *Harry Potter* easy to enter is that its principal setting is a school. Its major characters are therefore largely young, curious, and untrained or, in the case of headmaster Albus Dumbledore and Gryffindor head Minerva McGonagall, highly gifted and trained. The school setting forges a natural connection to the topic of student learning. While Renee Dickinson is surely right in asserting that “Rowling creates a school in which self-teaching is encouraged and succeeds” (243), the author sketches scenes of many kinds of learning. These include direct instruction (as when Madam Hooch begins broomstick lessons in *Sorcerer’s Stone*), experiential learning (Harry learns to ride his broomstick in Madam Hooch’s absence), and peer-to-peer sharing (e.g., the lessons shared by Dumbledore’s Army in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*) as well as exceptionally good teachers (Remus Lupin) and truly horrible ones (Sybill Trelawney, Dolores Umbridge). If we read the entire series, we have no choice but to be absorbed in a world that emphasizes learning. In the world of learning outside the classroom, Harry, like the reader, has no knowledge at all of the wizarding world when he begins, but as the books continue Harry and his classmates, again like the reader, learn more about the wider world and the challenges that face all young people, magic and non-magic alike. For example, in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* we learn of the all-magic village of Hogsmeade and the fact that wizards have prisons, and *Order of the Phoenix* reveals the variety of career paths open to witches and wizards as well as the painfulness and errors of youth and the gradual broadening of horizons.

“A CIRCLE HAS NO BEGINNING”

—Luna Lovegood, *Deathly Hallows*

Rowling’s world of learning has an encyclopedic scope, which one can explore from virtually any perspective of Western culture. As an encyclopedia—literally a circle of learning, *kyklos+paedeia*—*Harry Potter* is especially suited to honors pedagogy. The term “encyclopedia” was coined in English by Thomas Elyot in his *Book of the Governor* (1531) to describe the knowledge that an excellent speaker must have or, as Elyot put it, “a heape of all maner of

lernyng: whiche of some is called the worlde of science, of other the circle of doctrine, whiche is in one worde of greke Encyclopedia." Elyot's term, which I think is a fine description of honors programs in general, aptly conveys the richness and detail of the Potterverse. One can enter it at any point, connecting one's interests and experience in medicine to St. Mungo's hospital, in sports to Quidditch, in journalism to the Daily Prophet. For honors students who, like Harry himself, may seem overwhelmed by how much there is to learn, the idea of a circle of learning, a safe place in which to explore, can be especially attractive.

Rowling's narrative is much richer, however, than simply a set of superficial allusions or references; it contains and offers Elyot's "heape of all maner of lernyng." To outline one example in detail, we can consider the possible links between the *Harry Potter* books and twentieth-century history. Early on Rowling reveals that Dumbledore "is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 102–03). As we learn in books six and seven, after the return of Voldemort, violent events in the wizarding world are accompanied by disaster in the wider world as well; the massive duel between Dumbledore and Grindelwald ties the wizard world to actual world history. Grindelwald is a place name in Switzerland, but the name calls up echoes of the Buchenwald concentration camp, which was liberated in April 1945. The connection to World War II is further strengthened when Rowling reveals that, once defeated and brought to justice, Grindelwald was imprisoned in Nurmengard, a name in which one hears an allusion to Nuremberg, site of the trials of Nazi war criminals. The connection is complicated still further in the final volume, which reveals that Dumbledore and Grindelwald had a brief, intense friendship during which they agreed that Wizards should rule Muggles "for the greater good," a phrase smacking of fascism.

From this outline one can easily construct an entire *Potter*-infused course on World War II, and, drawing timeline parallels to Dumbledore's youth or to Voldemort's era of power, one could construct a course on twentieth-century history more broadly. This connection is only one of innumerable entry points to the stories for both child and adult readers. To offer just one further example, *Sorcerer's Stone* in particular abounds with wordplay and puns. Magical stores are located in London's Diagon Alley; Professor Sprout teaches herbology; Arsenius Jigger is author of *Magical Drafts and Potions*, a textbook that can be purchased at Flourish and Blotts. Sometimes this wordplay grows more complex as the narrative unfolds; for example, we learn in *Chamber of Secrets* of Diagon Alley's sinister side street, Knockturn Alley. (Many students

in my *Harry Potter* seminars never recognize this pun until they read the phrase aloud.) Professor Sprout's first name turns out to be Pomona, the name of the Roman goddess of agriculture; this name, which is revealed late in the novel, also increases the significance of Professor McGonagall's given name, Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom (and magic). Astute readers of *Prisoner of Azkaban* know right away that Remus Lupin is a werewolf, for his surname means "wolf," and Remus, a founder of Rome, was suckled by a wolf. From these and many other puns and allusions one could easily construct a course on vocabulary-building or on Roman mythology.

In my view, the greatest benefit of using the *Harry Potter* series as a medium for learning is the way it rewards, and almost requires, not just reading but careful re-reading. As students spend time reveling in the world of wizards and magic, they can find both personal and academic connections in the text, and as my experience in several years of teaching honors seminars on *Harry Potter* can attest, these connections provide low-risk and creative pathways for students to learn from the Potterverse in a spirit of play. Here I draw on the thinking of Conrad Hyers in claiming that knowledge is not just a matter of creating structures of understanding but of playing in a way that makes learning an ongoing process. According to Thomas and Brown, this process comes naturally and organically, and it is something that, like Harry on a broomstick, students can "do without being taught" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 148). Hyers emphasizes the playful aspect of learning in warning that "insofar as the sense of play is lost, education becomes work [and] ceases to be what it literally is: re-creation and recreation" (134). Play also occurs in the training of college students and even graduate students. According to Hyers,

... there is an element of training involved in learning. To learn to play a Beethoven sonata one must develop various technical skills. But if the spirit of play is not the basic motivation, if the sonata is not intrinsically worth doing, then one will never succeed in playing a single sonata. . . . A part of the play is the risk, the intellectual challenge, the sense of adventure, the feeling of achievement. (137)

"AMAZING! THIS IS JUST LIKE MAGIC!"

—Gilderoy Lockhart, *Chamber of Secrets*

One of the most enjoyable elements of teaching *Harry Potter* is witnessing the variety of ways students can interact with the text. In my seminar, the students' final assignment is to create and deliver a presentation on some aspect

of their interest in the series, and, while a connection to an academic or career interest is not required, it is encouraged. Thus, while some students have created videos, reconfigured board games, or researched star names (like Draco and Sirius) in *Harry Potter*, many others have engaged in the sense of play identified by Hyers and by Thomas and Brown. Many students expend enormous effort for a single pass/fail credit, which of course is the point: this work is not being done for the credit but as the students' personal entry into the encyclopedia of learning. Not all presentations have been stellar, of course—since the advent of Pottermore, it has become far easier to collect information than to imagine and create it—but most projects have been nearly as amazing as Diagon Alley itself.

Among my first students' efforts was a physics major's attempt to determine the maximum speed one could travel on a broomstick before G-forces made such flight impossible (the number was depressingly low for any would-be witches and wizards). Another student composed a song for each of the four Hogwarts' houses, with a march for hardworking Hufflepuff and a dirge for crafty Slytherin. A forestry student created a presentation on wand woods; an animal-science student identified the books' owls and where they come from; and a design student examined the fonts used in *Harry Potter* (both the famous lighting-bolt title font and the fonts used for characters' handwriting) and created one of her own. The presentations can become quite technical at times, e.g., reports of scientific speculation about teleportation and post-Mendelian investigations of the genetics of Muggles who give birth to magical children. A particularly memorable presentation was one I scarcely understood: a computer science student created an artificial intelligence program and trained it through multiple iterations to perform as a Sorting Hat for the students in my two course sections.

These projects (other examples are included in the Appendix) offer students the opportunity to engage in what Hyers calls “re-creation,” enjoying a relaxed atmosphere while taking an unusual tack in exploring their fields of interest. By playing, acting re-creatively, with the subjects they are learning, students take their studies in a new direction or, rather, in a complete circle. In the font-design example, for instance, the student first enters into a low-pressure academic environment, engaging with what she has learned about typefaces and creating a font of her own; she then demonstrates and explains the results of her efforts to students who are not majors in a design field. This peer-to-peer sharing of results is a crucial aspect of the students' learning in this seminar; students learn best when they can articulate their ideas and knowledge to others (Leamson 25). In addition, the genetics student who

explains post-zygotic mutation to fellow honors students has gained practice in speaking about the subject to a non-specialist audience, a skill with important applications. Finally, the opportunity to play allows students to return to their disciplinary classrooms with a refreshed and re-energized approach to learning.

In my experience, the world of *Harry Potter* matches well with the academic world my honors students inhabit and allows them a moment in their frantically busy schedules to play. Even as many corporations pursue the idea of a culture of fun in the workplace (cf. Bridges), educators hear calls to move away from the liberal arts and to heed market forces, elements that take teaching and learning further from the notion of play. Given the tempo of change in technology and social structures, though, our students cannot possibly succeed by simply being taught what they should know. Imperative is learning how to know and, even more important, how to communicate knowledge. *Harry Potter* offers educators what we have long known our students need; it lets students build their professional skills while maintaining, in Linda Rutland-Gillison's terms, "the foundation of 'liberal arts,' the basis of American higher education" (38).

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APPENDIX

Additional Examples of *Harry Potter*-Themed Projects

Iowa State University, 2001–14

Analytic

- Fanfiction database
- Money, schooling, games, medicine, geography in *Harry Potter*
- Comparisons of the films and books

Synthetic or creative

- Heraldry and color symbolism
- Rap, video, poetry, speculative fiction
- Potions class reenactment
- Booklet of medical charms
- Adapted games: *Harry Potter* Monopoly, *Harry Potter* Cranium

Career exploration

- Museum studies
- Interior design
- Computer modeling
- Lesson plans
- Product designs