



Developing a More Effective Teaching Approach to ENG 3850 Special Topics in Literature (The Child and Literature)

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Abstract

I taught the course ENG 3850 Special Topics in Literature (The Child and Literature) for the first time in semester I of the academic year 2002-2003. My overall average teaching evaluation for this course was 5.047. I sought ways to improve the quality of delivery and content of the course, proposing to establish a website and to experiment with alternative teaching methodologies. I speculated that a more thematic and critically oriented approach to the course, backed up by internet and other resources, might prove more successful than the rather staid text-based teaching approach I had used for the first implementation of the course.

Key Words

Thematic approach, child and literature, use of internet in literary studies

Introduction

The application related to a course being taught by me during semester I of the academic year 2003/2004, namely *ENG 3850 Special Topics in Literature (The Child and Literature)*. In the only previous teaching of this course, I had received a satisfactory teaching evaluation (overall average 5.047), with many supportive comments.

However, some observations indicated that the class was less than gripping at times:

Sample observation (a):

“well, the pace is too slow; reading out paragraph by paragraph does not help us realizing the elements or the important features of the book”

Sample observation (b):

“To be frank, I don't like the selected texts. Many of them are very boring. The distribution of time in each novel should be more balanced. I agree that Harry Potter should use more time.

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However, the Wonderful Wizard of Oz is a very easy novel. I think we should spend less time on it."

Sample observation (c):
"What is so special or important about children's literature? Why should we pay special attention to it?"

Sample observation (d):
"More criticism and theories could be introduced."

It was clear to me that a more innovative and energized approach was needed on my part. This would involve a reassessment of suitable texts coupled with a more technologically oriented approach to the course. The anticipated duration of the project would be 12 months from 1 August 2003. In the longer term, it was hoped that the course would provide a dynamic forum for future students (both teacher trainees and others) to engage literature for children and the representation of children in adult literature. This is an important critical area, for childhood is at once perhaps the most fascinating and yet the least understood developmental phase of human life.

Aims and Objectives

The project sought funding for the following intentions:

1. continuous and terminal evaluation of the process of *ENG 3850 (The Child and Literature)*;
2. the acquisition of specialist resources for the course and
3. the construction of an internet site intended to offer supplementary resources and guidance to students following future offerings of this course.

Methodology

The project was planned to run from 1 August 2003 until 31 July 2004.

The intention would be to approach the course from a thematic rather than a set text point of view. In my previous teaching of this course, the teaching pattern followed this broad outline:

- Introductory sessions;
- Set text A — discussion and analysis;
- Set text B — discussion and analysis;
- Set text C — discussion and analysis;
- The Role of Illustration in Children's Literature
- Set text D — discussion and analysis;
- Concluding and revision sessions.

This set text approach, in my handling of it at least, did not succeed fully in capturing the life and essence of literature for and about children. Hence, in the second teaching of this course (semester I, 2003/2004) I adopted a stronger thematic approach. A broad outline of the course was as follows:

- Introductory session;
- Children's literature through the internet;
- Literature as visual experience: from text to film (Harry Potter et al.);
- The role of illustration in children's literature;
- Representations of the child in adult literature;
- Concluding and revision sessions.

This stronger thematic approach was open to some negotiation on the part of students. The regular monitoring of the subject enabled me to adjust the direction and emphases of my teaching in order to achieve more effective outcomes. But, additionally, students had greater choice in what texts they actually followed. For example, groups of students offered a presentation during the course of the semester. They were able to select the texts and resources that they felt were most relevant to the topic they had chosen. Close records were kept of the effectiveness or otherwise of teaching materials and approaches; and students were also given opportunities to use the internet to develop presentations on particular authors or modes of publication.

All this helped to inform my teaching pedagogy for the *Child and Literature*, but also facilitated the electronic resourcing of the course. During the process of *ENG 3850*, and largely based on the advice and opinions of students, an internet website was developed containing materials

relevant to the course and links to other helpful sites.

Results/Findings

The overall average teaching evaluation of 5.91 showed a substantial improvement on the performance in the first teaching of the course. In addition, there were very few negative comments from students in the evaluations. Here is a sampling of positive comments:

"This course increases my interests"

"good set text"

"Theories of children literature are explained thoroughly and precisely."

"Students are given chances to discuss questions in lectures."

"The whole course is very well-planned."

"The chosen texts are interesting"

"Children's literature is an attractive course to study. I never expect to have a chance to investigate deeply the texts that I've studied since I was a kid!!"

And here are the indicative negative comments:

"don't have enough time on teaching and explaining the text in a more detail way"

"More interaction in class would be better" "sometimes professor is too fast in syllabus that I find hard to follow."

"Room for improvement? Not really? But... found it quite a big challenge to complete the 2500 [word] essay."

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The second teaching of the course showed a substantial improvement in student attitudes and motivation. This fact was validated also by the built-in monitoring mechanisms of the course. The progress of students was monitored through designated assessment procedures, including:

- an initial short answer assignment to establish some indication of entry knowledge and conceptual proficiencies (this did not count towards overall grade assessment);
- a terminal short answer assignment (to test exit knowledge and conceptual acquisition);
- a term paper (to evaluate argumentative capabilities and conceptual grasp within a specific learning domain);
- a two-hour written examination (to assess students' conceptual grasp of key concepts and issues).

In addition, students were questioned at regular intervals on the course, and several were informally interviewed on completion of the course. The feedback from questionnaires was used to revise/upgrade subsequent teaching activities.

Discussion

Literature for and about children has not found a niche near the centre of the English literary canon until fairly recent times, and the idea of children's literature as a separate genre has been extant only since the nineteenth century. Whether

literature seeks to "educate" children or not, it needs to be entertaining in order to capture the imagination and the notoriously limited attention span of its young readers. Similarly, courses on children's literature and on literature about children should seek to capture the energy and interest that permeates the best of children's literature. My first teaching of *ENG 3850 Special Topics in Literature (The Child and Literature)* had failed to engage fully the imagination of my students. This was largely because I had adopted the kinds of approaches that one might adopt in teaching adult literature - where such approaches are valid because the content of adult literature is more intellectually challenging and intrinsically interesting for university level studies. Dealing with children's literature and literature about children demanded a new and more enervating approach.

Through internet resources, a stronger focus on theoretical interplays in children's literature, and a more prudent selection of texts for study it has been possible to enhance the impact and effectiveness of the course in question. In addition, the grant has allowed the collation and evaluation of a significant number of relevant texts and electronic resources (CDs, VCDs, DVDs and so forth). These will play an important role in pushing pedagogical effectiveness further in the years ahead.

Enhancement on Teaching and Learning

The project has made me think much more carefully than I ever have before about the relationship between pedagogical strategies and the intellectual level of content. Practices entirely valid (such as close reading) for the study of adult literature are much less effective for children's literature (and, by children's literature, I am using the broad sweep of 0-16 yrs as my age parameter). This was true even of adolescent literatures. To some extent the differences may be explained by the fact that children's literatures tend to focus more on story line than on the intricacies of character or imagistic development.

Additionally, I have come to appreciate more that internet resources bring a new dimension to the study of literatures. Some of the group presentations focused on this very issue, showing how the customary considerations for a hard-copy children's book (page size; the relationships between text and pictures; font sizes) are necessarily modified, downplayed or even rendered irrelevant in the context of web-literatures (where animations, sound support, and technical customization are not only possible but commonplace). As a teacher of children's literature, one has to some extent to let students control at least a part of the syllabus themselves. The new frontier of the internet makes us all learners and new interpreters in a sense and that, in itself, is an exciting development.

Limitations/Difficulties

I have had some technical difficulties with my internet site, and have had to rely on my student helper to put this right. Unfortunately for the project, this helper transferred to The University of Hong Kong almost as soon as the website was established and obtaining her technical services after that was not always easy. The website is currently being revamped by a different student using private funds.

Conclusion

The project was allocated a grant and all the money was spent. I have come a long way, I believe, to turning this course into a quality learning experience for my students. Of course, there will always be new challenges and complacency is never an option. But I do feel that my revised approach to *ENG 3850 Special Topics in Literature (The Child and Literature)* provides a very strong platform for continuing pedagogical development of the course.