

Images Of Teaching And Learning
In Children's Literature

A Presentation by Karen Sue Grosz to the
LARC Conference, November 21, 1987
Santa Clara, CA

As some of you may know, I teach English, with special emphases on Remedial English and Children's Literature. As I pondered the topic given to me for this presentation today, "Improving Student Outcomes Through Faculty Involvement", I found myself thinking about images of learning and teaching in children's literature, and I would like to pursue some of those images today.

The first work that often comes to mind when people mention children's literature is Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and, indeed, that work does embody many of the images found in other works as well, and in some important ways represents the prevailing metaphor that permeates works we comfortably label "children's literature", for it presents the quest of the youngest child in search of maturity. In her search for adulthood the child Alice learns several important lessons and benefits from the superb instruction of some master teachers.

We first encounter Alice as she tumbles down the rabbit hole. During this protracted descent, Alice attempts to show off what she has learned in school. But as she recites her carefully memorized lessons, Alice realizes that all is not quite right:

Down, down, down. Would the fall never come to an end? "I wonder how many miles I've fallen by this time?" she said aloud. "I must be getting somewhere near the center of the earth. Let me see, that would be four thousand miles down, I think," (for, you see, Alice had learned several things of this sort in her lessons in the school-room, and though this was not a very good opportunity for showing off her knowledge, as there was no one to listen to her, still it was good practice to say it over) "--yes, that's about the right distance--but then I wonder what Latitude or Longitude I've got to?" (Alice had not the slightest idea what Latitude was, or Longitude either, but she thought they were nice grand words to say.)

Presently she began again. "I wonder if I shall fall right through the earth! How funny it'll seem to come out among the people that walk with their heads downwards! The antipathies, I think?"

The story is difficult reading for those students who don't catch the irony of Lewis Carroll's twists as Alice malaprops her way through Wonderland. But what intrigues me in this opening episode is her desire to show off, even when there is no audience. This image of showing off recurs in children's literature. It's seen when Mole grabs the oars from Rat in *The Wind in the Willow* to demonstrate that rowing a boat must be fun and easy, only to have the boat capsize. It's seen when Sparrowhawk in *A Wizard of Earthsea* learns more than the wizards of Roke Island have prepared in the wizard student's course of study so that he can upstage his older rival, the wise sophomore Jasper, and summon a spirit from the dead, only to have that spirit bring along a dark shadow that

claws and permanently scars Sparrowhawk's face.

I suspect that many of us in the classroom have caught that desire on the students' part to show off. While the desire may be more manifest in a foreign language classroom than in a remedial English class, still we have all seen the hunger students have to use their knowledge purposefully, and what purpose could be more immediately gratifying than that of demonstrating one's superiority? It strikes me that we don't always do enough to feed that hunger in ways that can work to students' benefit. We should strive to build into our classroom presentation time for students to show off what they know. This doesn't have to be a fully egotistical exercise. The simple practice of collecting student essays and then re-distributing them so that the author is far removed from the work and then asking the recipient to read the work in hand can be a powerful tool for involving all students in a non-threatening and non-egotistical way. The author need not identify herself/himself, but on occasions when I have used this paper exchange, I have found that as others become involved in critiquing the work, the author invariably pipes up with an explanation.

There is another dimension to Alice's experience which also recurs in children's literature: she proves to be her own best teacher. As the opening episode demonstrates, the formal learning comes out of Alice in oddly warped ways. She never quite gets the material right, and before her adventures are finished, she has covered all the disciplines from fractured multiplication tables to sadly distorted geography (Allen Bloom might have been concerned about the impact of education a century ago!) to inappropriate French phrases. It would appear that Lewis Carroll, himself an Oxford don, held formal education in low regard. But he is joined by other authors, such as Kenneth Graham, who portrays Toad as an obnoxious and insensitive product of the best that money can buy. Rat and Mole, on the other hand, are schooled by nature and learn extensively from their own mistakes.

Alice similarly endures a nightmare of frustration and rejection in Wonderland before she realizes that she doesn't need the approval of the King and Queen of Hearts to prove her worth. It isn't until Alice internalizes all that she has been taught and uses it to make her own independent judgment of the world around her that she is recognized as an adult.

In the classroom this independent judgment is the critical element that frees the student to begin to explore and experience the joy of knowledge. I suspect that we might, in our Title 5 jargon, apply the term "critical thinking." But I want to point out that Alice and the other protagonists of children's works emerge as critical or independent thinkers only after enduring the despair of having failed. I sometimes wonder if we don't go too far in protecting students from the very failure that might be their springboard to success. Just as Alice must have the freedom to show off, she must also cope with the rejection that accompanies her insensitive remarks to various Wonderland creatures. Gradually she recognizes that being adult means being herself, not some other character whose words she might mouth in an attempt to sound impressive. Similarly, students arrive at an academic maturity when they stop mouthing their professors' ideas and dare to apply their own ideas.

It is at this stage of student application of knowledge that assessment is especially sensitive, and it is at this stage that I suspect many of us unwittingly let our students down by not being honest with them and grade them for effort rather than for what they produce. It's not easy to be honest with

students who are making those first attempts at independent thinking, when they're so anxious to be accepted, but, like Alice, aren't yet quite right. Alice needs to be set straight, and she has the Cheshire Cat, a symbol for Lewis Carroll himself, to guide her in that stage of her learning development.

As a master teacher, the Cheshire Cat recognizes the necessity for Alice to be informed when she's wrong and to be patiently nurtured so that she will persist in her quest:

"Cheshire-Puss," she began, rather timidly, as she did not at all know whether it would like the name; however, it only grinned a little wider. "Come, It's pleased so far," thought Alice, and she went on. "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where?" said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

"--so long as I get somewhere," Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."

Alice felt that this could not be denied, so she tried another question: "What sort of people live about here?"

"In that direction," the Cat said, waving its right paw round, "lives a Hatter, and in that direction," waving the other paw, "lives a March Hare. Visit either you like; they're both mad."

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.

"Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat, "we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."

"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.

"You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."

This interchange could serve as a model for academic advisement. A professional can assist the student who has a clearly defined goal, but the goal must be one of the student's choice. Whether the student pursues an idea through a written composition or an idea related to career goals, there must be a goal. How many of us have labored through essays that had no clear goal? Patience is truly our trademark.

As far as the madness, well, I've often thought that Lewis Carroll must have taught a few remedial English and freshman composition courses along with his mathematics and logic classes.

One last point that impresses me in my examination of learning and teaching images in children's literature is the recognition of learning as a continuum. At the age of seven, Alice may have reached the mature stage of independent thinking and thereby earns a crown, but that

doesn't mean that she has learned all there is to know. As Alice shrinks and grows all out of proportion to the creatures around her, Lewis Carroll provides a graphic representation of the emotional shrinking and growing that is part of the maturing process. It is mirrored in the frustrations students encounter as they go through the learning process; there too they alternately experience the belittlement of their occasional mistakes and the exhilaration of their successes, shrinking and growing emotionally.

But as the Cheshire Cat advises Alice, it doesn't matter which way Alice goes in her quest through Wonderland. To put it in Lewis Carroll's terms, for he favored childhood over adulthood, all children are condemned to grow up, regardless of their own desires, and those who desire adulthood before their time, struggling as Alice does to intrude upon the mad, chaotic world of adults, won't necessarily get there any faster. The individual matures at that moment of independent thinking, and no one, not even the individual, can just make that happen.

I suspect that the same is true of students in the learning process. And in this context, I suggest that we need to be cognizant of the learning continuum by knowing what students have learned before entering our classes (and that means knowing what is happening in our disciplines at the high school level), as well as what will be expected of them after they leave our classes. Each student matures academically at an individual pace, and there will be ups and downs in the gradual movement toward independent thinking. I always love the point in the semester when I can almost see lightbulbs flash among remedial English students as they suddenly understand relationships among nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs. The lightbulbs don't always flash at once, and I know I can't make them flash. Like the Cheshire Cat, like Sparrowhawk's master teacher Ogion, like Rat as he guides Mole through the river world of *The Wind in the Willows*, I can only be a guide, carefully pointing out mistakes and patiently pointing out the choices. But my students will learn, just as Alice will mature. The choice is in the quality of the learning, and I would prefer to produce student Alices who ultimately learn to think for themselves, rather than pompous, self absorbed Toads, reciting endless strings of unrelated information and serving only as mouthpieces for my own limited ideas.

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