

# Potter, pedagogy and professors:

## Teaching and learning in the Harry Potter Books

Before launching into lecturing mode, there are a few things I wish to say. First of all I feel a deep sense of gratitude to be standing here today. When I was little I dreamt of having an endless supplies of books and stories, and of being able to read and write and talk about them as much as I wanted.

I am living that dream.

I wouldn't do that if I hadn't had the enormous privilege of working in a supportive environment.

Personal commitment and inclination can only do so much; without encouragement and help you are drowning, lost at sea. The administration here, the academic life-support system, has unfailingly and cheerfully helped me with practical matters all along; my superiors – the captains and committees of this academic ship – have allowed me to pursue my research interests and steer my own courses, and go my own winding ways, and they have seen to it that there has been funding for conferences and publications – something that is not a given anywhere these days. Moreover, there is the rest of you in the crew: my colleagues in the faculty, and particularly, of course, at KSM – my daily bread and butter, indispensable. And then there is the inner circle, the English profs at KSM and my partners in crime. I am very happy to have you! Finally, there are the students, some of which are here today. Without you we are nothing. You are the reason we're steering this craft at all. Moreover, teaching and research go hand in hand. So much of my research has been inspired by things first tried out in the seminars, and prompted by input from you students; and so much of my teaching is the result of my own research. Thus, my thanks go out to all hands on deck – captains, crew, colleagues, comrades, students!

But as the frustrated and insane writer Jack (Torrance /Nicholson) writes again and again and again in *The Shining* "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy". So, I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my friends and family for being here today and share this moment. With you life is not dull for a moment. You do your best to teach me difference between work and play. And I hope you know what to do if I start writing the same sentence over and over again...

As some of you know my first survival impulse when this lecture came up was to recycle a presentation that I have given before (but not here). After all, "sustainability" is one of our watchwords and part of the ideological platform of Malmö University; if it is to include teachers we should be allowed to give the same lecture more than once. But although this would have been the

wise thing to do, other thoughts crept unbidden into my mind: the lecture ought to reflect my work as an educator of teachers, my research into English children's literature and the professorial nature of the lecture itself. In other words, the lecture should ideally be about education, English children's literature and professors.

2. I first thought of Terry Pratchett's Discworld-series. After all, some of the books in that series focus on Ankh-Morpork's "Unseen University," and its wizarding faculty. The professorial positions alone would merit a paper in its own right with job titles such as: Head of Inadvisably Applied Magic, the Egregious Professor of Cruel and Unusual Geography, the Chair of Experimental Serendipity, the Chair for the Public Misunderstanding of Magic, the Head of the Department of Post Mortem Communications, the Chair of Indefinite Studies, the Lecturer in Recent Runes, the Chair of Oblique Frogs, The Professor of Revolvings, the Professor of Extreme Horticulture, The Professor of Applied Anthropics, the Reader in Esoteric Studies, the Lecturer in Creative Uncertainty, The Professor of Dust, Fluff, and Miscellaneous Particles, the Lecturer in Vindictive Astronomy, the Professor of Recondite Architecture and Origami Map-Folding, and the Posthumous Professor of Morbid Bibliomancy.

But, to tell the truth, there is not a lot of teaching going on at UU – at least not as described in the books. So I gave up the idea, but decided that had I been permitted to choose my own title (as professors still do to some extent in Oxford and Cambridge), the "Chair of Indefinite Studies" would be close to my heart.

3. Instead I started toying with the idea of doing something about another magical place of learning: Hogwarts, in the books about Harry Potter by J. K. Rowling. The more I thought about it, the better it seemed. And it was enthusiastically supported by my closest family – in fact they told me I had no choice. In any case, the idea combined children's literature with education, and professors feature prominently, so it was ideal from many points' of view. There was just one problem – time. I would simply not have time to do it. Luckily, my family then reminded me of Hermione Granger's use of the so called "time turner necklace". This has allowed me to put in more work than time and life normally would allow. This could also explain if you have seen me in places where I could not possibly have been, since I have actually been in two places at the same time.

Having said that, I would not recommend using a time turner too often; it makes you snappish and you start fraying and greying at the edges of your being.

4. So, in this presentation I am going to talk about Harry Potter. My focus will be on what Harry learns and how, in and out of school, with and without the aid (or hindrance) of teachers. I am also going to examine some of the professors and their teaching methods. Ultimately, Hogwarts as an

institution of learning will come under scrutiny. Now and again I will draw comparisons with pedagogical thinking in the non-magical, muggle world, we normally inhabit.

5. It will be Dumbledore vs Dewey

6. Snape vs Vygotsky

7. McGonagall vs Bloom

8. But *not* Voldemort vs Piaget (we haven't got all day)

9. But let me first review some of the research that has followed in the wake of the phenomenal success of the seven Harry Potter books (1997-2007) by J. K. Rowling. And now I'm talking only about pedagogically oriented research, little else. This funneling is necessary since research into Harry Potter has grown exponentially over the last few years. This also applies to the many comparative lit studies which discuss Rowling's series as a development or offshoot of the British boarding school story. Finally, I should also add the proviso that I am not going to delve into the rich seam of work devoted to how to teach the Harry Potter books – the study guides, the lesson plans, the class packages etc.

What remains can be divided, broadly, into studies that are either about teaching or about learning. In other words, on the one hand articles that describe and analyze the teaching that Harry Potter is subjected to by the professors at Hogwarts; and on the other hand, texts that examine the learning and competence that Harry eventually acquires, and how this learning is produced. There is some overlap, of course, but not as much as one would assume.

The critical split between these two approaches also largely accounts for how the critics view Harry's education as a whole. Unsurprisingly, those who focus on the teaching bit tend to be negative, also to what Harry actually learns, whereas those who look at the learning side of things are positive to his education as a whole.

10. Renée Dickinson's approach is characteristic of the "teaching approach." She applies Benjamin Bloom's somewhat dated but still productive taxonomy to show that most of the teaching going on at Hogwarts stays on the basic level, and fails to guide pupils towards "higher order thinking skills". Dickinson first examines professor Binns' teaching. In the first book of the series, *The Philosopher's Stone*, this is how professor Binns and his teaching is described:

Easily the most boring lesson was History of Magic, which was the only class taught by a ghost. Professor Binns had been very old indeed when he had fallen asleep in front of the staff-room fire and got up the next morning to teach, leaving his body behind

him. Binns droned on and on while they scribbled down names and dates and got Emeric the Evil and Uric the Oddball mixed up. (99)

In the second book, *The Chamber of Secrets*, the sleep-inducing qualities of his teaching is further stressed:

Professor Binns opened his notes and began to read in a flat drone like an old vacuum cleaner until nearly everyone in the class was in a deep stupor, occasionally coming round long enough to copy down a name or date, then falling asleep again.

With these descriptions in mind it is hard to find fault with Dickinson's analysis. She writes:

Professor Binns' course requires students to primarily use only the first level of learning— knowledge—as his monotonous lecturing and exams ask them only to record and recall information. It also teaches them to become reliant on other students, shown clearly when Ron and Harry panic when Hermione threatens not to share her notes with them [in *The Order of the Phoenix*]. To be fair to Professor Binns and direct instruction, there are students who are able to be successful in his pedagogy. Unfortunately, Hermione is the sole Hogwarts example.

Through the more practical, hands-on approach experienced in most of the other classes, one could say that the teaching aims at the second and third level in Bloom's taxonomy: comprehension and application. Having said that there is very little in terms of discussion, problem-solving and experimenting. The focus is rather on demonstrating, imitating and naming.

11. When teaching reaches for the higher thinking order it invariably takes place outside the classroom. Dickinson's example here is professor Lupin. She writes:

Finally, the most thorough application of the principles of Bloom's Taxonomy and the most successful example of teaching from the professors occurs outside of the classroom when Professor Lupin guides Harry through the Patronus charm to dispel the *Dementor* wraiths in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* (2000). First, Professor Lupin explains how the spell works, what Harry must do in order to make it work, what a Patronus is, and how it works as an *antiDementor*. By focusing on a happy memory that will conjure a shield, and eventually a kind of avatar, against the *Dementor*, Harry is guided through the basic steps of knowledge and comprehension.

After Harry leaves the session, he continues to analyze and evaluate the lesson, and chooses to focus on the positive memory that will produce the *Patronus* rather than

succumb to the dementor and hear his parents' voices as they perished against Voldemort (*Azkaban*, 236–43). This episode not only shows how Professor Lupin uses each of the steps in Bloom's Taxonomy, but also how learning processes flow not simply linearly from one step to the next, but move around from one stage of learning to another and back again.

12. Another critic who has analyzed the teaching at Hogwarts is Megan Birch. In her article, "Schooling Harry Potter," she makes use of Pamela Bolotin's and Gail Burnaford's idea of "teacher types" (1994), which can be grouped according to "polarities," "complexities," and "paragons". The use of these concepts is not crystal clear, but the way I understand Birch's use of the terms is that that "polarity" refers to teachers who are unable to combine knowledge of and passion for a subject with actual teaching. Again, Binns is a good example, but so is Professors Trelawney, the aloof, new-age Divination teacher, and

13. Hagrid, who is responsible for the Care of Magical Creatures-class. All three of them take their subject seriously, and both Trelawney and Hagrid connect to some of the pupils on a personal level. But ultimately they are ineffectual as teachers.

In professor McGonagall, the Transfiguration teacher, and professor Snape, the Potions master, Birch recognizes "complexity," or, to be more precise, two teacher portraits that are more complex than those of Binns, Trelawney and Hagrid. McGonagall and Snape also identify with their subject, but they are more organized and keep a strict régime, if little else. According to Birch McGonagall can be seen as an embodiment of Hogwarts. Her loyalty to Hogwarts, to Dumbledore and to the students (particular of Gryffindor) is unquestionable, as the following quotation from the Order of the Phoenix demonstrates:

"You cannot pass an OWL" said Professor Mconagall grimly, "without serious application, practice and study. I seen no reason why everybody in this class should not achieve an OWL in Transfiguration as long as tey put in the work." Neville made a sad little disbelieving noise. "Yes, you too, Longbottom" said Professor McGonagall. "There's nothing wrong with your work except lack of confidence." (257)

Yet, for Birch, McGonagall's teaching approach and insistence on hard work, discipline "rather than exploding teacher stereotypes, simply affirms conventional images in more detail" (109).

15. Professor Snape is in many ways Professor McGonagall's shadow. Alike in many ways, but where she is benevolent he is malevolent; where she wants the students to succeed, he seems to want them to fail. Birch writes: "With the combination of his dress, his attitudes and behaviors, and even his classroom décor, Snape employs [a] pedagogy of fear and intimidation" (111). Instead of instilling

self-confidence in the students, like McGonagall, he takes it away. This is how he introduces the subject:

16. “You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making,” he began. He spoke in barely more than a whisper, but they caught every word – like Professor McGonagall, Snape had the gift of keeping a class silent without effort. “As there is little foolish wand-waving here many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don’t expect you will really understand the beauty of softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death—if you aren’t as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach” (102).

As if that weren’t enough to freeze most children in their tracks, he goes on to humiliate Harry quite deliberately:

“Potter!” said Snape suddenly. “What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?”

*Powdered root of what to an infusion of what?* Harry glanced at Ron, who looked as stumped as he was; Hermione’s hand had shot into the air.

“I don’t know, sir,” said Harry. Snape’s lips curled into a sneer.

“Tut, tut—fame clearly isn’t everything.” (102; emphasis in original)

Thus, Snape creates an environment in which Harry and many others are expected to fail— and therefore does.

17. Part of the complexity of Snape as a teacher – and one which Birch does not bring up – is that through him Harry actually comes to excel at Potions. It is after all his annotated potions book that gives Harry the edge when it comes to potion-making. When Snape’s class-room personality no longer is there to intimidate Harry, the written words of the Snape, the half-blood prince, prove to be a boon. As so many other failed or misunderstood teachers Snape’s true vocation should have been that of a writer of text books.

18. Finally, Birch examines Dumbledore as a “paragon” of teacher virtues. He is not vain like Lockhart, overly emotional like Hagrid, malevolent like Snape, strict like McGonagall, boring like Binns, aloof like Trelawney, nor seeking to be a well-liked friend like Lupin, nor creating “clubs” of favourites like Slughorn. Birch writes, “His ambitious and impressive persona tells us that great

teachers must be epic and superhuman. This image is unhelpful and problematic to a reader's understanding of the real work of a teacher" (114).

19. Birch concludes by stating that she is "struck by the series' mockery of schools and teachers and the suggestion that teachers have very little power to shape the instruction or the institution of schooling" (119). Birch also writes that she is "disturbed by the limiting idea that being a good teacher is about who you are as a person rather than what you know or who you have the capacity to become. Further, the series suggests that in order for teachers to have any impact on students, personality and personal relationships between teachers and students matter most" (119). She is also concerned about the "completely school-based identities of the teachers" (119).

It is obvious from this that Birch is no fan of relational pedagogy.

20. I also think that her conclusions follow somewhat illogically, both from what actually takes place in the books and in Birch's own exposition. I agree that the institution of schooling – whether in the magical or muggle world – tends to resist to change. But is that necessarily a bad thing? The only one who really tries to change things radically at Hogwarts is Dolores Umbridge, whose simpering, evil, technocrat persona makes makes Voldemort pale by comparison (if that were possible).

21. Further, for good and bad the teachers are shown to have great liberty and power to shape their instruction the way they want to do it. Through the books we encounter a diversity of teaching styles, and again the only one who really seems to care is Umbridge.

Moreover, the claim that it is who you are as a person that decides how good you are as a teacher seems to run counter to her own analysis of "polarities"-teachers. The reason why Binns, Trelawney and Hagrid fail as pedagogues has less to do with who they are than that they are rather inept at teaching.

22. Finally, for someone like myself who has grown up on a boarding folk high-school where both parents taught, I feel that the whole concept of "school-based identities" needs to be qualified. It is true that living on a school like Hogwarts or Kjesäter tends to blur the line between private and professional identity. With students at close quarters who can come knocking at any time, it is easy to see how the school-teacher identity can seep into the everyday. But it works the other way too, and this is something that Birch fails to see. The other identities flow back into the institution and you enrich it with your whole personality. By contrast, if you keep watertight compartments and geographical distance between your teaching role and your private identity, then, I would argue, is when you run the greatest risk of holding up a "school-based identity" persona when you are working, and then shedding it for a private identity on the bus home. So, I would of course agree that the teachers living at Hogwarts are affected by living in that grand magical rock pile, but at the same

time, what would Hogwarts be without them? Their personalities and identity markers are essential in producing and shaping the social environment of this place of learning, and they all bring with them different backgrounds, histories, competencies and eccentricities.

Don't get me wrong though – I am not suggesting that we should come and live here in Orkanen as one big happy dysfunctional family.

So far my talk has focused on texts that discuss the teaching at Hogwarts. As I said in the introduction, such analyses tend to be rather negative. But even if I don't agree with the drift of most of these studies, I think the subject important and believe that they are useful as points of departure.

In general, however, studies that are devoted to learning rather than teaching are more interesting. They are also frequently present an overly optimistic view of Harry's education. Because he learns a great deal over the course of his school years, some critics are led to conclude that the formal teaching therefore is of high quality. I think not, and am inclined to agree with both Dickinson and Birch on many, if not all, aspects of the mediaeval-like Hogwarts pedagogy.

23. Yet, the mistake is understandable if the starting point is learning rather than teaching. After all, here we have an eleven year old with a fantastic learning curve, annually stumping the biggest, baddest and evilest wizard ever in his attempts to take over the world and kill Harry, a boy who at the end of his school years defeats the same wizard, Voldemort, for good. With such a learning outcome, how can Harry's education be bad?

And it's not.

As Elisabeth Gruner writes:

At Hogwarts Harry learns about Quidditch, magical traditions, and the social structure of the magical world. But it is the threat of Voldemort, rather than the curriculum of Hogwarts, that motivates Harry and his friends' intellectual growth—they teach themselves what they need to know in order to defeat their enemy. And, like Fred and George Weasley, they leave school when they have learned enough to do this.

So, some of things that he learns are unrelated to the school's curriculum, but are essential nevertheless, and, it is by his own efforts that he learns. Add to this that it is actually Harry's deathly adversary that provides him with the main motivation to learn.

24. Having a learning perspective rather than a teaching perspective makes you realize that the main things to be learnt are not always the school subjects. In fact, as Gruner insists "the more children can direct their own education, the more they will learn. The Harry Potter books might thus be said to endorse what the educator John Holt has called "unschooling" or "autonomous education." The

clearest example of unschooling is perhaps DA, or “Dumbledore’s Army” (book five, *The Order of the Phoenix*), where some of the students take their education into their own hands and Harry becomes the teacher of his own schoolmates, teaching them Defense against the Dark Arts, since Umbridge “doesn’t teach them anything.”

25. Margaret Booth draws attention to Lev Vygotsky and the social context of learning. She notes that the Boarding School environment with “Houses,” such as Hogwarts, where students of different ages are mixed provides a situation where younger students are guided and encouraged by their older peers. In such a reading the Room of Requirement can become a veritable “zone of proximal development” where more experienced students help their peers to master new skills, while the instructor, Harry, of course also develops his mastery in the process. By the end of the book, Luna, Ernie, and Seamus and many more can conjure their own Patronuses, and many other spells, that they had not mastered before.

26. It is also worth mentioning that Harry’s teaching is effective because, as Bruner reminds us, “it matters in the moment.” Like Harry with the DA-meetings, Professor Lupin and even the false Mad-Eye Moody also teach things that matter in the moment, whereas “the less effective teachers, on the other hand, fail in just the way John Dewey suggests:

I believe that much of present education fails because it . . . conceives the school as a place where certain information is to be given, where certain lessons are to be learned, or where certain habits are to be formed. The value of these is conceived as lying largely in the remote future; the child must do these things for the sake of something else he is to do; they are mere preparation. As a result they do not become a part of the life experience of the child and so are not truly educative. (23–24, quoted in Bruner)

Learning about the magical world and mastering spells are important parts of Harry’s education. But it is perhaps even more for him to learn as much as possible about Voldemort in order to be able to defeat him, something that Dumbledore helps him with in the *Half-blood Prince*. But a learning process that takes place through all of the books is Harry learning his own story, piecing some things together himself and being told other parts of it by Dumbledore mainly. So, one could say that Harry learns his own story while making it.

27. I began this exposition by dusting off Bloom’s taxonomy with the help of Dickinson and relating it the teaching that went on in the classrooms. The result was not very impressive. If we instead apply it to learning we see that Harry acquires all the higher order thinking skills necessary. He learns to evaluate outcomes, to assess theories, to compare different ideas; and on the basis of what he has

learnt he is able to teach others and to be creative. A good example can be found in sixth book of the series. In that book Harry is using an old copy of the text book *Advanced Potion-Making* with notes by the half-blood prince (aka Snape).

28. So, when Harry is unable to understand Golpalott's Third Law and reads the line "Just shove a bezoar down their throats" across the list of antidotes, he fetches a bezoar from the cupboard and presents it to Professor Slughorn as the antidote to the poison he was supposed to be analyzing. Already this shows that Harry is able to process knowledge in an independent and creative way. This gains Harry Slughorn's admiration and ten points to Gryffindor for "sheer cheek." But the real test comes a little bit later when Ron is poisoned

29. his extremities jerking uncontrollably. Foam was dribbling from his mouth and his eyes were bulging from their sockets.

"Professor!" Harry bellowed. "Do something!"

But Slughorn seemed paralysed by shock. Ron twitched and choked: his skin was turning blue.

"What – but –" spluttered Slughorn.

Harry leapt over a low table and sprinted towards Slughorn's open potion kit, pulling out jars and pouches, while the terrible sound of Ron's gargling breath filled the room. Then he found it – the shriveled kidney-like stone Slughorn had taken it from him during Potions.

He hurtled back to Ron's side, wrenched open his jaw and thrust the bezoar into his mouth. Ron gave a great shudder, a rattling gasp and his body became limp and still.

(373)

Always at his best under duress, Harry acts promptly when Slughorn is paralyzed by shock. Harry is able to put into practice what he has only read and then, controversially, presented in class. It is an exhibition of life-saving higher order thinking and acting.

In this presentation I have not focused much on the role of Dumbledore. One could probably devote a whole article on just the way in which Dumbledore prepares and orchestrates Harry's education so that he will be fit to meet and defeat Voldemort. Typically, we never see him in a classroom teaching situation. Rather, as Dickinson writes "it is through Dumbledore and his trust in his students and their abilities to learn and teach, [that] Hogwarts becomes a place in which more learning happens because of the self-teaching and the explorations and adventures he permits and encourages.

[Dumbledore] walks Harry through each step of his process of discovery. Although the content of these sessions is to teach Harry about Voldemort's history and his creation of *Horcruxes*, Dumbledore teaches Harry much more. Through these sessions, Rowling presents an example of independent intellectual inquiry through hypothesizing, experimentation, testing, and discovery.

Dumbledore continues to give Harry the tools to learn and teach himself, and to discover on his own, creating an independent student and person in Harry.

30. Most remarkably, perhaps, Dumbledore is able to use his own weakness, imminent death and post-mortem apparition in King's Cross to finish Harry's education. After the ordeal in the Horcrux cave, Dumbledore is so weakened that Harry has to guide and half-carry him back to the mouth of the cave. Dumbledore acknowledges that he couldn't have done it himself. And when Harry says that he "can apparate us both back," something he has never done before, Dumbledore answers "I am not worried Harry...I am with you" (540). Then, in the lightning-struck tower, he uses his last moments to gain knowledge about what has been going on. More importantly, he shows that Draco is not a murderer – something that is of great consequence to both Harry and Draco. And mystical experience of the King's Cross chapter suggests that a strong relationship with a friend and mentor can resonate in us even across the great divide.

That is a message that points to an education that goes beyond knowledge and skills and is towards a mystery we cannot know.

The rest is, as we know, silence.

Björn Sundmark