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Teaching the Harry Potter Generation

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Last fall I taught, for the ninth consecutive year, a freshman-year seminar in art appreciation. In many ways, the 21 students in the course seemed much like ones I had worked with in previous years: they were excited to be on a college campus; they brought a range of experiences and talents to the classroom; they struggled in crafting thesis statements and managing the intense demands of the last weeks of the term. In several senses, though, I was struck by a sense that they were also resolutely different from first-year students I had taught before. While they were unfailingly polite, they seemed unusually shy, or deferential: topics that had sparked lively debate in previous years now prompted a mere comment or two. Similarly, while they were quite punctual in completing assignments, their work often seemed a touch dutiful, as though crafted in rote response to the assignment rather than motivated by individual curiosity. Finally, where I had grown used to a steady stream of students during my office hours, I now sat behind my desk, weekly, in vain.

How, I wondered, to explain these seeming changes? Had the rising price tag of my college somehow resulted in a different sort of student? Had I somehow changed, in the way in which I was presenting myself? Or had the course, which I had retooled since last teaching it, somehow affected student response? For much of the term, I mulled over such questions, wondering how I could connect more meaningfully with the students – until, late in the term, the seventh Harry Potter film came to town. In chatting with a few of the students during break, I learned that virtually all of them were planning to see it that same weekend; moreover, I also learned that every student in the

class had read at least two of the Potter novels, and that the majority had read every single one.

In 2001, at the suggestion of one of my students, I read the first of the seven Potter novels. A few years later, I had seen one of the films, and I have certainly been aware of the series' spectacular success. But I had never realized, before last fall, exactly how universal the series had become, as a common point of reference, to current college-aged students. Might reading the books, I now wondered, help me to understand my freshmen in a meaningful way? Or, more specifically, given that the majority of J.K. Rowling's series is explicitly set at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, could her books have shaped, in some way, the expectations and habits of my students as they set out for a residential school for the first time in their life? I tentatively posed, near the end of our class break, a version of that question to the students who were sitting in the room snacking, or doodling. 'Sure', said one, and he described the formation of Quidditch teams at several American colleges.

What I would like to offer here, then, is a brief rumination on some of the ways in which the seven Harry Potter novels and the ensuing eight films may have influenced a number of today's college students. Clearly, this is hardly a rigorously designed or controlled research project, and it is not a report on a project executed in a classroom. Rather, it is an informal set of reflections on a group of texts that have enjoyed an exceptional popularity among an entire generation of students. Certainly, there should always be a place for focused research into pedagogy and the learning experience. But perhaps there is also room for lighter and more

subjective considerations of factors that shape our students' preconceptions about school – and, as a result, may shape their behavior and our classrooms, as well.

To be honest, though, I am hardly the first person to assume that undergraduates might be somehow united by an interest in Rowling's boy wizard. After all, the term "Harry Potter generation" has been widely applied to the teens and 20-somethings who grew up reading the books. Relatedly, the series serves as a common point of reference in thinking about college. Although Hogwarts is an academy for tweens and teens, rather than a college, that has not stopped American colleges from stressing during campus tours similarities between their intramural fields and Quidditch grounds, or college consulting firms from devising lists of colleges that most resemble Hogwarts. Such analogies are then perpetuated by undergrads, who turn to Wiki sites that offer advice on decorating their dorm room to resemble Hogwarts bedrooms (e.g., one recommends a stencil for painting an approximation of castle bricks), or post reviews on ratemyprofessors.com that compare college professors to faculty counterparts at Hogwarts. A student at Wisconsin writes, "Just couldn't get past his ego. He's a real life version of Harry Potter's Professor Gilderoy Lockhart." Like it or not, Potter's experiences are a lens through which teenagers view college life.

But what might this have meant, in more precise terms, for my seemingly restrained freshmen? Well, having now sat down with the books I can begin to see why my students might not have sought me out during office hours. Routinely, over the course of the 2,000 pages that make up the Potter saga, professors are villainized, caricatured, and lampooned. Admittedly, not *every* instructor at Hogwarts is contemptible, but most are – as we learn in no uncertain terms. In *The Goblet of Fire*, for instance, Professor Trelawney is characterized by Ron as "a miserable old bat," while Professor Snape is flatly labeled "evil." Thankfully, most Potter fans seem to understand that such characters are exaggerated cartoons, often drawn at least in part with a comedic intention. Nonetheless, the cool, polite reserve of my freshmen toward me during the first few weeks of school now makes

more sense; after all, politeness can be a defense mechanism as well as a sign of civility.

Rowling, though, does not simply describe a group of unpleasant faculty members. Rather, she also constructs a world in which informal conversation between students and teachers is usually fraught, and rarely goes smoothly. For example, when professors at Hogwarts ask pupils to their offices, it is usually not with a pleasant purpose in mind; instead, grave warnings or detentions are commonly issued. And even when professors do have hospitable motives in mind, their students are often terrified by the invitation. For instance, in the fourth book Professor Moody gently asks a student named Neville to tea in his office. The offer feels sincere, benign. Neville, though, is clearly unsettled by the simple fact that he is being addressed by his teacher and soon becomes "even more frightened at the prospect of tea with Moody." As I read on, examples like this multiplied, and my students' reluctance to take advantage of office hours made a new sort of sense. Sure, there are other factors at play, as well: e-mail, for instance, is often credited with having made traditional office hours on college campuses more or less moot. But Rowling's narratives are not doing much to help.

Importantly, though, not every reported conversation between students and adults at Hogwarts feels awkward. Chats with professors usually go poorly, but throughout the series Harry, Ron, and Hermione find consistent reward in talking to Hagrid, the gamekeeper, and to various Hogwarts alumni, one of whom comes to act as a sort of guardian angel to Harry. It's not faculty, in short, to whom the protagonists turn in times of need; rather, it's to staff, and to former students. An interesting exception here might be said to prove the rule. In *The Goblet of Fire*, Professor Moody offers Harry some generic but well-intended advice about succeeding in an upcoming contest. The chat is notably positive, from Harry's point of view – but is then immediately followed by a much more productive talk with Hagrid, who lets Harry know in no uncertain terms that that contest will involve a fight with dragons. This atypical example of help from a well-meaning faculty member is quickly eclipsed by friendly advice from a very different adult confidant.

Reading about Hagrid's consistently informal banter with Harry, Hermione, and Ron, I was reminded of a moment late in the fall when, at lunchtime during a daylong class trip to D.C., I asked two students if I could join their table in the National Gallery cafeteria. They agreed and, while our ensuing conversation was not completely fluid, we chatted rather easily about what they had seen so far. I then asked how the registration process for the next term was going. Their eyes brightened. "Really well," came the answer; "after all," they added, "their freshman advisor was telling them exactly which professors would suit them, and which would not". Clearly beloved, this advisor was thus fulfilling a supplementary role that had long been played, in varying forms, by faculty members – but that has recently been shifted, at my school and at many others, to trained, full-time professionals. And since advisors do not normally issue grades or assign work, their office offers a very welcoming harbor for first-year students. Thus, much as Harry and his friends repeatedly knock on the door of Hagrid's cozy cabin but never think to pay their Divination instructor a voluntary afternoon visit, my students had been opting, quite understandably, for loose and assumedly non-judgmental talk over what they assumed might be a serious, academic (and deeply awkward) conversation in an instructor's office.

There's more, though. Rowling's novels also portray class meetings as dull and one-sided. The glimpses we get of classes in session repeatedly involve professors who drone on, oblivious to their unengaged pupils, or who exert a crushingly autocratic authority. A characterization of Divination class, in *The Goblet of Fire*, is typical of this attitude: "The perfumed fire always made [Harry] feel sleepy and dull-witted, and Professor Trelawney's rambling talks on fortune-telling never held him exactly spellbound." But other classes are hardly better. In *The Sorcerer's Stone*, the protagonists endure a tedious history lecture that is simply an endless litany of names and dates. In *The Chamber of Secrets*, a lecture in the history of magic strikes them as dull; another class sinks into its "usual torpor." The examples pile up: for a supposedly top-notch school, Hogwarts seems weirdly unable to offer a single engaging teacher. Or, for that matter, even a hint of spontaneous class

conversation. At Hogwarts, the professor usually simply holds forth, seemingly eager to establish his or her identity and inevitably foreclosing alternate points of view. Information is imparted, rather than discussed; quizzes and tests seem to involve regurgitation, rather than critical analysis. Furthermore, professors at Hogwarts don't anticipate or relish open conversation, and the evolution of individual positions is not an obvious goal. Consequently, the most vital student contributions are generally surreptitious whispers.

Given such a landscape, I can imagine that American teens, who have read hundreds and hundreds of pages about life at Hogwarts, might feel cowed as they sit down in a college classroom for the very first time. But look further still. In a very basic way, I think it could be said that Rowling's series works to undermine, or erode, academic ambition. In part, this occurs through references to homework as an uninspiring, requisite affair: quills out, the young wizards often moan about their latest assignment. At the same time, though, the novels repeatedly characterize library research as an arcane and futile pursuit, as a mundane drudgery, or as a last resort. In the first novel, for instance, the protagonists spend a few minutes trying to look up a subject in the library, but they are quickly overwhelmed, and end up simply pulling a few books, at random, from the shelves. In the fourth book, in the hopes of aiding Harry in the Triwizard Cup, the three heroes earnestly hole up, temporarily, in the library in the hopes of finding a spell that will aid him underwater – but all of their work proves fruitless. In short, the library at Hogwarts is for the most part a place to be used in times of desperation, rather than sought out – and even then it can fail.

Most importantly, however, Rowling's novels undermine academic accomplishment by closely tracing the process of marginalization that greets Hermione as a result of her earnest interest in learning. A virtual icon of applied intelligence, Hermione is cast, variously, as an annoying teacher's pet, as a bookworm, and, in the words of one caustic professor, "an insufferable know-it-all" – a term, our narrator adds, that had already been applied to her by every one of her classmates. Hurtful, sure – but perhaps also helpful in

explaining why seminar discussions might be less enthusiastic than they were a few years ago. Why hole up in a library, or assume a prominent position in class, if doing so means that one will be cast as an overzealous Hermione?

Or, finally, why worry too much about class when classes form a small part of one's educational experience? In reading Rowling's novels, I was struck by how much the students learn when they are outside the classroom – and how little, by contrast, they learn inside in the labs and lecture halls. Repeatedly, Harry, Ron and Hermione glean critically important pieces of information in random spaces. In the third book, for instance, the three overhear the back story of the death of Harry's parents while in a pub; later, they learn vital facts about the history of Hogwarts in a subterranean passage. In the fourth, a bath, a closet and a cemetery play a comparable role – even as, in the classroom, Professors Trelawney and Binn continue to impart virtually useless information. Given, then, that the most important points of his education actually occurs in extramural settings, can anyone blame Harry for being less than fully enthusiastic about his classes? Should we really be surprised to learn that Harry and his friends claim to prefer real-world experience to book learning?

A recent study shows that an average college student in 1961 spent 24 hours a week studying, while today students spend only 14. Notably, the authors of the study wrote that the drop is not easily attributable to changes in demographics, or to the advent of new technologies, like Facebook. Rather, they offered a different explanation: the traditional professor-student relationship, that is, had largely eroded. Where, in the past, professors set ambitious standards and worked closely with students in order to facilitate accomplishment, a sort of *détente*, seems to have evolved on many campuses: professors eager to conduct research are meeting less frequently with students, and assigning less work. Students, in turn, spend less time with their books, and more time working part-time jobs or exploring an ever-expanding range of activities and clubs – including, on many campuses, those recently formed Quidditch teams.

Certainly, I do not mean to suggest that Rowling's series is singly responsible for such a

trend. But it is worth noting that in Rowling's world, Harry's mediocre study habits and middling grades do not preclude real greatness. Indeed, that may explain the series' vast popularity. Presumably, it is feasible that young readers, uncertain of their own academic talent, might find a comforting example in Harry Potter, renowned despite his plainly mediocre academic accomplishments. And, in the process, those readers encounter something like the "soft bigotry of low expectations" once cited by George W. Bush, in a speech on the American school system. Study hard? Speak up in class? Attend office hours? Why try? Potter did none of these; he simply handed in average work, and then coolly held off the Dark Lord.

In other words, the books' particular tone and the ways in which they may dampen – or simply fail to ignite – today's students seems worth acknowledging. Or, at least, it is worth acknowledging in passing. In truth, I have noticed that by sophomore year my students are generally a chatty bunch, willing to venture opinions in class and interested in proposing independent studies. Which, in turn, also makes sense. When we do not know what to expect, we reasonably turn to familiar analogies, even if they can seem rather ominous. However, once we see a landscape for what it is, we can abandon such analogies. In *The Sorcerer's Stone*, when Harry is first preparing to set out for Hogwarts, he pores over his few books on wizardry, wondering what they can tell him about his future. Within a few months, though, the same books largely cease to interest; after all, what book can compete with the richness of reality?

To be sure, Rowling's books are only one in a constellation of points of reference (Facebook; standardized tests; the current presidency) shared by today's incoming college students. And surely, too, a rapid re-reading of Rowling's books, like the one offered here, is doubtless not the most convincing means of thinking about contemporary attitudes towards education: it is a subjective exercise that cannot compete with statistical studies, random surveys, or blind samples. That said, I would still argue that reading the seven Potter novels or watching the eight Potter films, with an eye cast especially towards their characterization of student-faculty relations, classroom experiences, and

campus life, can shed light on the assumptions and expectations of our students.

At the very least, such an experience helped me to understand, a bit more fully, the enthusiasm of the fourteen American students I met at the University of Cape Town this past summer, a day before the global premiere of the final Potter movie: all of them, in fact, were planning to see the film on its first day of release. I could now understand, as well, the reasons behind their comparison of the Fulton Hall cafeteria and the grand dining hall in the Potter movies: high, vaulted wooden ceilings and lengthy tables allowed the students to think of their daily surroundings in terms of Rowling's imaginative precedent. More significantly, I could now fathom my students' attitudes towards schoolwork,

internships, lectures, and conversations with faculty. It is a feeling that I will try to actively retain this fall, as I work with another group of freshmen who have grown up with a certain boy wizard. That is not to say that in class I will be referring explicitly to Harry, or to Hogwarts; doubtless, any such references would sound cloying, or desperate. But by the same token, merely ignoring such the influence exerted by Rowling's books is no better. Indeed, one might say that it is the equivalent of the dull, willful aversion to magic practiced by the Muggle family that Harry grew up. In other words, the pattern is visible to anyone who wants to see it. So, this fall, I'll be attempting to accommodate and to engage with attitudes that might be said to have spread from a series of successful novels to the series' most faithful readers.