

# Children's Literature-- A Tool for Improving Teacher Education

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In *A Celebration of Neurons*, Robert Sylwester (1995) contends that storytelling, as a broad concept, is the best vehicle to help students identify relationships among random facts or experiences. Memory theory suggests that stories (in the form of conversations, role plays, games, films, literary works, etc.) improve students' long-term memories by creating new personal events and images, stored as episodic memories (Schank, 1990).

Children's literature provides one excellent way to include the element of storytelling in any classroom. Appropriate children's literature exists for nearly every subject, every genre, and every developmental level. It is engaging for its simplicity, humor, dramatic elements, and wonderful illustrations. It is a great way to introduce new themes or concepts, to promote student interest, to spark creative thinking, to explore social issues, or to show the application of selected concepts and principles. It also appeals to multiple areas of intelligence (Gardner, 1993) and to multiple learning styles (Dunn & Dunn, 1987).

As an example, consider the use of Rathman's (1995) Caldecott Award winning picture book *Officer Buckle and Gloria* in an Educational Psychology course for preservice teachers. The book is about the friendly police officer/educator Officer Buckle, who makes presentations on safety at all the local schools. In auditoriums full of children, Officer Buckle lectures to kids who find his lessons boring and who learn nothing about safety. One day the Napville Police Department acquires a new police dog named Gloria. Gloria begins to accompany Officer Buckle on his safety lectures. Unbeknownst to him, Gloria is acting out or demonstrating each safety tip in a humorous way. Suddenly, Officer Buckle's safety lectures become enormously popular. Everyone wants to see Officer Buckle and Gloria perform, and students are practicing safe habits. But when Officer Buckle discovers he has been upstaged, he decides to give up teaching safety tips. Napville seems destined for its worst accident ever. The conclusion speaks to the need for teamwork and friendship.

At first glance, this children's picture book seems to be just an amusing dog story, one that kids love. But in an Educational Psychology course in which the primary goal is to study research-based elements of effective instruction, this book has proven useful in stimulating discussion about what makes a good teacher. Officer Buckle's delivery serves as a springboard for discussion about direct instruction and about the techniques that make it effective or ineffective. Students love to compare the dull lectures by Officer Buckle to the many dull lectures they have experienced, and then to discover elements (such as the use of humor, visuals, and real-

life demonstrations) that can improve the appeal and the impact of presentations. This discussion can lead to a deeper discussion about learning—what it is, what facilitates it, and how to apply principles of learning in real-life settings, as Officer Buckle and Gloria did.

As a second example, let's examine the use of Ed Young's (1992) Caldecott Medal picture book *Seven Blind Mice* for use in a Learning and Cognition course. The story is the Indian fable about seven blind mice who attempt to identify a strange object by touch. Each of the six blind mice explores only a portion of the object and makes an erroneous proclamation about what it is. The seventh mouse explores the entire object and then combines the partial information from each mouse to form a complete picture of the whole object, an elephant.

This tale is a wonderfully vivid way of introducing and discussing the concept of perception, of how our memories affect perceptions, and of the Gestalt principle of perception that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The story typically precipitates other stories by students about times they have likewise misperceived events or people due to incomplete information or distorted memories. The story is a great prelude to discussions about how perception affects learning and cognition. It can also stimulate discussions about stereotypes and how they form, or about the effects of culture on our memories/perceptions. The above are but two examples of the richness and appropriateness of children's literature for improving teacher education. Children's literature can help us bring an element of authenticity into the classroom, or it can help us create an extended metaphor, or it can facilitate understanding and memory of important pedagogical concepts by using the element of story. But reading children's literature in teacher education classes has an additional benefit, one that may supercede others. It permits instructors to model something we hope becomes a habit for all educators—reading for pleasure. We can read children's literature (or anything else) just for the fun of it.

It also models something we hope becomes a habit in every classroom in the nation—teachers reading aloud to their own students.

For educators interested in finding appropriate children's literature to incorporate into lessons, the Huck et al (1997) text *Children's Literature in the Elementary School* is a fantastic resource book. The endpages list 150 age-appropriate read aloud books (up through age 14), while the appendices cite selection aids for every need. The text is a wonderful source of reviews, illustrations, genre groupings, award information, subject groupings, teaching ideas, and much more.

Using the right resources makes teaching with children's literature easy.

#### REFERENCES

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## Teaching Simulation: Mock Trial at Kennesaw State University

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It has become trite to point out that learning takes place in multiple settings. The traditional situation in which the teacher professes and the student ingests is no longer viewed as the only way or even the primary means of instruction in all instances. But, in our rush to embrace new methods, we must be careful not to "throw out the baby with the bathwater." Lectures and "professing" continue to have a place in the learning environment. Supplementary and complimentary modes of teaching and learning, however, frequently fill gaps and reinforce the learning process. One such mode is found in co-curricular activities, where students engage in active learning with the teacher acting as coach. Simulations of trials and legislative bodies offer such opportunities for learning. At Kennesaw State University, we offer Mock Trial and Model United Nations simulations. This note focuses on Mock Trial

Each year, the American Mock Trial Association (AMTA) furnishes a fictitious case for the competition - one year a civil case and the next year a criminal case. There are six roles, three attorneys and three witnesses. A team is composed of no more than eight persons and each team is required to present both sides of the case, i.e. prosecution or plaintiff and defense. Each team is required by AMTA to have an educator-coach and an attorney-coach. In regional qualifying tournaments, teams are selected to compete in the national tournaments, one in Des Moines, Iowa and the other in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Prior to the Qualifying Tournaments, numerous Invitational Tournaments are held throughout the country.

To participate in a Mock Trial Team at KSU, students must enroll in a class held in the fall. Class time is spent in

instruction in trial techniques and court procedures, defining roles, developing theories of the case and role playing. Students enrolled in the course are not required to participate in competition, however, most do. Teams are selected from members of the class and continue to participate in regular practice sessions through the Qualifying and National Tournaments.

The benefit to students from this activity include both *knowledge* and *skill enhancement*:

**Skill Enhancement.** The skills enhanced are: 1. listening - attorneys must listen to witness responses and witnesses must listen to questions asked by attorneys; 2. articulation - the ability to speak with fluency, to be clear and intelligible; 3. conceptualization - to comprehend a chain of events; 4. participation - success of teams depends upon group effort, strong peer pressures for substantive participation; 5. evaluation - peer evaluation is significant in role assignment, team assignment, final grade and evaluation of relevant facts to develop a theory of the case; 6. demeanor - stresses formality, civility, respect required in courtroom and poise in presentation.

**Knowledge Enhancement.** Includes the following: 1. adversarial process; 2. role of procedure, law, facts, witnesses, attorneys; 3. self-knowledge.

The pedagogy includes the use of a variety of teaching tools including textual materials, lectures, discussions, role play, group activities and modeling. Student response to the program is exemplified in the following quote, "Mock Trial gave me my voice." What more could a teacher ask for?