

Emily Smith
6.1 Reflection

My Learning

I began the course very excited. While some of the book/films that were laid out for us were not high on my favorites, I knew they were stories that kids enjoy and I believe it is especially important for teachers to appreciate and know about all sorts of areas of child learning, even if it isn't their personal favorite. I also enjoy comparing books and movies. I do that in my 4th grade class with at least two movies a year as read alouds. I chose to do this because, one I think it helps the students dissect books that are just out of their comprehension abilities, thus pushing them farther as readers, and two because movies are a very real part of kids' lives and I think it is a disservice to not meet kids where they are at and try to help move them forward. I also appreciated that it gave the kids an opportunity to see how someone else "read" the story. It is a visual representation of how books can be read differently by different people, and that reading is an experience.

I began my journey in the course with *Charlotte's Web*. I had never read *Charlotte's Web* before this course and had only seen the older version when I was a child. I had not been particularly fond of the movie (I had a massive fear of spiders as a child) so, picking up the book to read or going to see the newer version when it came out was low on my priority list. The goal of the first module, and the use of *Charlotte's Web* was to teach us to read the books and movies together and as two separate entities. I was surprised to see how much I enjoyed the book and how disappointed I was in the 70's movie.

There is so much that affects a movie that is not part of a book. One of the biggest is sound. The music can affect the mood of the scene. It can affect the pace of the scene, or it can even tell a story. Also, the actors' voices are a large part of what and how we, as the audience, experience the film. The final bit of "sound" which affects the film is silence. Silence in reading a book is completely different. First, when reading to oneself it is a physically silent act. Your ears hear no sound. However, as you read a book there is constant "noise" in the imagination. Even if the text was to read "and there

was a long silence” you “hear” the author telling you as you read. You can not experience the suspense in the same way as when there is silence in a film.

Another major difference between a book and a movie is the visual of a movie. First, the descriptive wording in a book is not available, since we have the exact picture in front of us as a movie. For example if the book was describing a character and said he had long, shaggy brown hair. He had green eyes and a long nose. His mouth was too small for his face giving you the impression that he had sucked on a lemon as a chew toy as a toddler. As soon as the casting people cast a character for a role, the description is set to that person, and all the holes in the description are filled in. The holes is what is left to your imagination as the reader, and that makes it a different experiences for the film watcher than the reader. The other part of the visual is that you can see more in a shot than you can in your imagination. The shot is driven by lots of factors and can have a myriad of parts and close-up options, but no matter what there is a concrete (not necessarily stone, but concrete as in definite) background which is always present in the viewers eye.

The second module looked at fidelity to the original. While I liked *Polar Express* the rest of the reading/watching list was again not on my list of favorites. In fact I tried to avoid *Willy Wonka* (book, and both films) and *Wizard of Oz*. My dislike for the later was strong enough that for a girl who loved high school drama and was a three year club member in high school, I refused to try out for the play even though it was the final production of my senior year. (The person who became the Tinman quit two weeks into rehearsal and the drama instructor begged me to fill in, which I reluctantly agreed to, so ended up participating in.) It was interesting reading the book and the films to read the film makers interpretation. It was also interesting to hear how my group members reacted to the interpretations. Seeing how different people interpreted the different interpretations added a new dynamic to the story. Each interpretation and view added a layer to which ever story we were looking at.

Interestingly, *The Little Mermaid* was the story I was most excited to read, since it was one of my favorite movies as a child. What was interesting about it? It was the film/book combination I was the most disappointed in after finishing. Maybe it was my expectations that led to the disappointment, although I could not pinpoint for sure what

my expectation was, but I found myself reading the story and getting more and more discouraged. First, I was mad at Disney. Their “interpretation” was hard to even call that. It was so distant to the story by Andersen it seemed like it shouldn’t have the same title. Second, I thought the story was not great literature. It was hard to read in that it just seemed to be trying to pound lessons in my head. At the end of the story I felt as if I had been scolded for being sinful/bad. I suppose part of it is a “sign of the times” on both me (as the reader) and Andersen (as the author).

I have been asking myself what I think would have made me happy to see, and I am having a hard time coming up with an answer. What was my expectation? I guess I was hoping that if I could enjoy the books of films I detested as much as I did (like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*), than the book of a movie I loved was going to be great. I think some of my frustration with Disney is that I partly blame them for my expectation.

The Wizard of Oz surprised me in lots of ways. It was amazing to see just how infiltrated the movie is and how little known the book is. The catch phrases that are part of everyone’s life (“There is no place like home.” “I’ll get you my pretty...”) are from the movie. It is amazing to me how popular the movie is, still as a classic, and how little credit the book gets. What I took most from this part of the module had little to do with the story, but rather, one of the articles we read surrounding the story suggested that Baum, not only would have been ok with his story being changed and interpreted, would have wanted it because it meant the story had achieved a higher status. I had never considered that before, and assumed that author’s would be offended that people were “abusing” their work. It was a great opportunity for my mind to open a little and to see a different view. It helped me to see that interpretation is not the negative association that I had always put with it.

The final module looked at *Harry Potter* and how a blockbuster is created even before the movie was cast. One of the things that really struck me about this module was that since it was at the end of the course I viewed the fact that it stuck so closely as possibly a negative. Before all the work we had done I would have said sticking straight to the story is the only way to be fair to the book. After doing the work, while I still feel it is important to be relatively similar, I do not see it as the only way to be fair. In many

cases I think it is a good way to be fair. Specifically, it was interesting to see some of J.K. Rowlings feelings as I did my internet research. I have always thought that authors have viewed their stories with a bit of a soft spot in their heart for each. None are the same, but they are creations of their work and creativity and something to be cherished. Based on some of the articles we read, and some of my own research it seemed to me that Rowling had allowed *Harry Potter* to become the blockbuster, but recognized the “monster” so-to-speak it had become. She attempted to keep the story’s integrity through charitable work, and keeping the kids who were reading the story as a major force in her works, rather than strict merchandising.

One thing that was new to me was looking more critically at the films and the books. Most of the time I judge a book and a film based on whether or not I like it. It is not very often I look at why I liked it or didn’t like it, or the specific things I thought the book or the movie did well or didn’t do well. Doing the course work helped me look at the whys of interpretation, especially, of a book to a movie. It asked me to think beyond, “well that didn’t follow the book, so therefore it was not as good.” Looking at the whys of the movie helps open up the story being told in either media type and expands my thinking as the audience.

It wasn’t until the end of the course that I realized all the stories we looked at were fantasy. I did not consider myself a fan of fantasy before the course began. However, after reading the books of the fantasy I didn’t like, I think it is important for me to consider that I may have been off in my assessment of the genre. I think that I am not a fan of fantasy as a movie genre. I do not like others’ interpretation of fantastical characters or themes. Of the films we watched, I liked *Harry Potter* and *Polar Express* the best, which I thought followed the books the best. I still would not consider myself a fan of the films *The Wizard of Oz*, *Charlotte’s Web*, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, or *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. I did find the books however very enjoyable, and am thankful that I read them. I will be much more open to reading the books of other movies I may not like because there is an element of creepy to them, which is how I felt about the movies before the course (and still do a bit). I may even pick up *James and the Giant Peach* this year to read during silent reading time at school.

For me, this was a revelation, I enjoy reading fantasy, I do not particularly like watching fantasy movies. I realized it isn't the story I disliked it was the film maker's interpretation that I was not fond of. I was blaming the story, which I had never read, not even considering the fact that it was an interpretation.

That then led to this thought: is how do the movies affect the books? I have spent many years avoiding a lot of fantasy books because of my early experiencing watching fantasy movies. I am a strong believer in the power of written word, not just the story that it tells, but how everything, author, illustrator, reader, and story work together to create a rich experience. I just hadn't anticipated that it would be this power that would overtake the ick-factors I had of the movies. I hadn't given it a chance, and as prejudice is famous for, it kept me from interesting and creative stories which I am a bit ashamed about now.

My Classroom

One of the things I love about being a teacher is that I am always a student at the same time. Everything I do can have an immediate impact on the students I teach. I can adjust the activity to fit the needs and abilities of my students. I can share my experiences in a real way and hopefully positively influence my students' minds and in turn their action and eventually their actions become their character. The same is true for this course.

One of the things I will continue to do, but tweak a bit, is to do a better job of asking the kids why. As I stated earlier, I do *Tuck Everlasting* as a read aloud and then have the students watch the movie and write a compare and contrast essay of the two. What I am looking toward doing this year is going one step farther. I will be asking the kids to pick one difference and think about why the movie makers decided to change it. Then I will have the students decide on something they could do differently in a well known story, (i.e. fairy tale) and ask them what their reasoning for changing it is. We can then discuss what interpretation means and why it is important as a reader (and as a film critic).

Following this I am going to have the students do literature circles or book talks with a book that has been turned into a movie. They will follow the same process, and look and what is different and why. After that they will be doing a different book and movie combination of their own. One way these activities are helpful is to teach the students how to critique a piece of work. First it reinforces the parts of a story, characters, setting, plot/events, solution, and themes. It forces them to look at the different parts in order to compare them. Second it asks them to make judgments on why and back them up. By having book talks, or literature circles the students are in a safe environment to take chances at reasoning beyond surface text. Reading is great because there is a grey area. Learning to navigate within that is one thing we try to do as teachers. This can be advantageous in many ways. The first is to help them see that there are other ways to see a story. One way we attempt to mature children is to get them to see another person's point of view. Asking them why someone did that helps children work their brain around these ideas at a higher level of thinking than just what color was the main character's hair? Critiquing someone else's work can also make theirs better. Understanding what makes something good or poor helps students in their choices as readers and writers.

Along with those very specific examples of how the students will directly be affected, there are many ways that I will be a better teacher because of the lessons of this course. The first and probably most important was that it opened fantasy as a genre back up to me. I will, at least, think twice about skipping over the fantasy section of the library. This course pushed me outside my comfort zone in children's literature, and it helped me see how important that is for me to do with my students. I need to help them understand that just because you don't like something doesn't mean you need to throw the whole thing out, the key is to find what is good and what you didn't enjoy and then explain why, but at the very least be able to specifically identify some good and bad. Things are very seldom all good or all bad (take the characters in *Harry Potter* for example). I view one of my main jobs as a teacher is to help kids see that there is usually more to something than what meets the eye.

Secondly it has opened my mind to different possibilities and texts for the children to engage in. Just having read three stories I had not previously read is a help in

that area. I teach 4th grade, and *Charlotte's Web*, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* are very popular reads still in my classroom, and it was very hard to help the kids understand the stories when all I had was a movie version to go on. Also being exposed to Hans Christian Anderson, actually reading it, gives me a better understanding of the curriculum I am supposed to be teaching. One of the points of writing in 4th grade is fantasy/fairy tale. The exposure to the original can only enhance my understanding as a teacher and my background knowledge which can translate to many different things in my classroom.

I have also learned how to appreciate different interpretations better than I had before. First and foremost I need to keep in mind that children interpret differently than adults, and so I think I can do a better job listening to the kids' interpretations, rather than just looking for how they follow the book strictly. I had always wanted the kids to give me the *Harry Potter* version after they had read (one which followed exactly to the book) and maybe if I ask for more they can give it, or at least maybe I can be a little more flexible in listening to their interpretations.

Another area I feel I have grown in is being able to critique a book (and a movie). This is important as a reader. Being a reader is important as a teacher because you are constantly looking for quality literature, so knowing why and what features are being used as you read, and what is more compelling than others is a very useful too. The other part of being a critic of literature comes back to the "discussion" between Dahl and Cameron. Now, there were LOTS of things I thought were rude in the Cameron article, for instance I do consider myself fairly capable of knowing what is out there to read to children, however I believe her goal to be noble. I think what she wants is for kids to have great literature to read, and she feels it is getting watered down. She is afraid that we are not pushing children to read quality. I think there is some truth to this. It is a tight-rope I am still learning to walk. How much do you sacrifice quality in order to just get kids to read anything? I am not trying to sound like Cameron, but *Captain Underpants* does not hold the same literary merit as *Tuck Everlasting*. (I wonder what Cameron would think of *Captain Underpants*, and even *Harry Potter* considering she wrote that article in 1972.) At the same time reading should be fun, at least some of the time. One of the books she mentioned was *Little Women*. I really like the story.

However, when I recently read the book for a different children's literature class I had to fight my way through it. It was tedious to read, and while I am ashamed to admit I felt that way, because I believe it is a great work, I can not imagine today's 4th grader attempting to read it. I was born in 1983, so maybe I am just Cameron's fear coming to fruition. Perhaps if I would have been forced to read it as a child I would have moved to harder texts and be farther along in my reading maturity. All that being said, for better or worse, kids are what they are currently and they would struggle reading *Little Women*. As much as I believe *Little Women* is a worthy book I also believe that kids should be engaged in their reading because they enjoy it. However, kids should also be pushed as readers, so there are times they need to be challenged and reading might be more laborious and more challenging. In my classroom I am not providing enough opportunity for the challenging kind. I am not sure what this will look like yet, but I do know I need to ask more of my students.

One thing that I need to remember as I am choosing books for my students (or even films to watch) is that adults are generally in charge of books and movies. They write them, they produce them, they market them (and let's face it they are very successful marketers to children). Children are the audience, but the adults are guessing at what the kids want. It is important to remember not to get caught up in the marketing myself. I think about *The Hunger Games* books. My step-daughter had read them when they first came out and raved about them, but it wasn't until the movie was being previewed that I finally picked one up (and couldn't put it down). I was susceptible to the marketing. I need to be careful not to fall into that trap. I need to look to places other than main stream media for new books to read and add to my library.

It is important to remember that kids are taking their experiences into the readings of the book and those are very different from that of the adults who are reading the book or making the movie. For example, the one review of *Harry Potter* I read that was done by a kid. He spent most of the article talking about how cool Quidditch is. I can almost guarantee that is not what the movie maker's wanted the main highlight of the film to be. How that helps me as a teacher is not only in choosing books, but in creating lessons. It is very hard as a teacher, teaching something for the first time to be able to anticipate what kids are going to take from it. One of the reasons veteran teacher's are better than

new teacher is that they have a better understanding of how a child will interpret a lesson on anything and can counter that by picking better, more appropriate teaching materials. The difference is the teacher is teaching a kid on his level rather than using the teacher's experiences to control the lesson.

Teaching a book is a different type of interpretation. Authors write giving way to lots of interpretations, film makers are taking one interpretation and making it come to life on a screen using actors, cameras, sound, editing, and lighting. Teaching reading in many ways is teaching interpretation for meaning either scientific, or figuratively. Teachers must dissect the book differently in order to teach from it. They must help kids learn to dissect the book as well in order to take meaning from it.

On a grander scale teaching itself is ultimately reading students and interpreting what they are learning. Teaching is trying to get the students to see something out of a story, whether that be an actual literature story, or the story of American history, that is very specific. Actually, great teaching is anticipating the interpretation and being able to design a lesson around the interpretation so to clear up misconceptions and highlight points that need to be made based on the goal of the lesson.

Overall, I have a lot to take back to my classroom as a teacher and a student. Most importantly, as a teacher I need to keep my audience in mind at all times, my students. As a student I need to remember to keep my mind open to new interpretations by others and push myself into different interpretations that I may have never considered before.