

Teachers as Wizards

The term “wizard” was derived from the Middle English word “wys,” which means, well, “wise.” This meaning has pervaded the modern definition of the word “wizard” to connote a person with magical abilities and (usually) the wisdom of a more experienced mentor. Wizards have become a staple in stories of fantasy, acting as a guide for the central protagonist as they embark on their hero’s journey. The wizard, as the mentor, often initiates the call to adventure and then accompanies the hero on their quest. The wizard as the mentor does the impossible – magic. They cast spells, see the future, and sometimes travel through time all while guiding and advising their young mage toward the ultimate goals of reward, atonement, or self-actualization. The path to this achievement is often fraught with challenges. The wizard must counsel their apprentice through hardships and trials, as well as the inevitable angst that comes from being “the chosen one.” The wizard must often sacrifice themselves so their student can advance on their journey.

While the wizard is confined to a world of imagination, we as composition tutors and teachers occupy a very real place for our students. We sit between the realms of fantasy and reality, acting as guides while our students embark on a journey of prose. The students who walk through our doors are simultaneously crossing the threshold into their college experience. They are entering into a new environment, where they will face many tests, create allies, and battle the enemies of deadlines and sleep deprivation. Some of these students are resistant to the call of college writing. They want to cling to their familiar five-paragraph essay structure. The new rhetorical situations they encounter present like beasts to be vanquished while our heroes are only armed with a pencil. We find ourselves in the unique situation of being not only teachers but also guides as our pupils attempt to navigate unfamiliar genres. This type of journey can leave students feeling vulnerable, and it becomes our job to instill confidence in our aspiring writers.

So we, like wizards, begin to do the impossible. We create syllabi and schedules and engaging writing activities, invention assignments to ensure our course builds on itself, all so our students are equipped with the skills necessary for successful college writing. We focus on the process, on the journey. Yes, we focus on things like outlining, drafting, and revising, but we also focus on the recursiveness of writing. We teach our students to re-read as they write; to pay attention to the feelings invoked by their topic. We teach them to trust their own feelings as they write; to believe that their inner voice will nudge them toward the words that will truly capture what they are trying to say and will reflect the feelings they wish to convey.

Part of the role of the mentor is realizing that our students are not perfect. If we can recognize this and acknowledge it from the start, we can create a space where failure is embraced and even encouraged instead of demonized and feared. But we must also recognize that we aren’t perfect either. We are on our own journey, crossing the threshold from students to teachers. In this way, we open the door to learn from our students and the knowledge that they bring to this journey.

And just as we should expect diversity in our heroes we should also anticipate the diversity among our students. Diverse students equate to diverse experiences and sometimes, if we're lucky, diverse Englishes.

One of the hallmark characteristics of the wizard is their ability to impart wisdom to their young mage. As educators, we have to acknowledge our own shortcomings in this area. Utilizing rhetorical listening can allow us to connect with and understand our students on a deeper level. To take on the mantle of mentorship does not mean that we ourselves are no longer mentored. Wizards continue to commune with other wizards. Likewise, we as teachers and tutors can consult with one another to hone our craft.

It might seem outlandish to suggest that a teacher or tutor occupies the same space as a mentor or wizard, but when something as simple as putting words to a page has the ability to change a life and a world, the importance of this position cannot be diminished.

We are not alone in our endeavors. We have the wisdom of all those who came before us in the world of composition. Whether they are teachers or writers or teachers of writers, we learn from them so our students can learn from us. If we can be successful as teachers, then our students can emerge from their journey victorious, a master of rhetorical analysis and decision making, confident in themselves and their writing ability.

With that, I encourage you to embrace your inner wizard; to acknowledge the power that you hold and the value of your position.