



Teaching Middle-earth to Middle School Students in the Middle of Alaska

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I want to talk to you today about my experiences in teaching Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* to middle school students where I teach in Fairbanks, Alaska.

I would like to give you an idea about this place I have called home for the past 30 years. Fairbanks is a combination of wild Alaska and the inner city of Detroit. No, I am not joking. Central Fairbanks is a mish-mash of transient families who come north seeking either a better future or their last chance; families moving in and out of Alaska's native villages; homeless shelters of all sorts; and some of the wealthiest and most privileged families in the city.

Ryan Middle School has an enrollment of around four hundred students in grades seven and eight. The population is high in special needs students because there is a centralized program for the district housed in the building. We also have one of the highest enrollments of homeless students in the state.

We have students who have just transitioned from incarceration in prisons and mental institutions. We have some of the brightest math students in the state. They regularly kick butt in national competitions. We have students who are gifted engineers, winning robotic competitions time and time again against others in the district, and we have the most happily average kids you will ever meet.

We have a rare mix of young people, and these are the students who have travelled to Middle-earth with me.

This class started by chance, if chance you call it. We simply had too many students for the number of teachers. I was teaching a special education study hall and was content with my little class. But the administration needed to find places for the surplus of students, so I was asked to take a group of 25 and simply show them movies.

Well, I am not much of a movie person. I don't go to movies. I don't watch movies on TV. I am hopelessly out of the loop about what is in and what is out. The principal reassured me, though, and said, "Just show your favorite movies." So I became the movie teacher for a group of twelve to thirteen year old students.

My favorite movie at that time was Peter Jackson's *The Fellowship of the Ring*, so I decided to show it to my class. Since the school district requires teachers to inform parents and guardians if we are showing random, non-curriculum related movies, I sent out a letter to parents to comply with this requirement.

I got a response I wasn't expecting.

Now, remember, most of these children were toddlers when this movie came out, but their parents WERE NOT. Many parents responded to the letter and asked me to show the entire trilogy because they wanted their children to experience the fun.

The administration was not too happy with this. The very same people who had asked me to show movies to an overabundance of students were not much in favor of me showing so many hours of *The Lord of the Rings*.

My solution was direct: Connect the films to the curriculum by teaching a class that included the books as well as the films.

Their response was equally direct. "Teach a class on this, DMae," they said.

What had I done? A class on *The Lord of the Rings*! I was certainly confusticated and bebothered. I had to decide what to do and I had to decide FAST!

The very next quarter I was teaching a comparative literature class on *The Fellowship of the Ring*. I decided to model the class on the comparative literature classes I had taken as an undergraduate at Alaska Methodist University -in the previous millennium. The students would

study the basics of plot, characterization, how setting influences the story, and the motivation of various characters. We would read the book, see the movie, then talk about and compare the two.

I had no materials other than my copies of the book and a copy of the audiobook on CDs. I looked around my house and also picked out a stack of background books from the shelves in my home library.

I had to come up with a way to hold the attention of involved students and uninterested students alike; a way to get the students personally involved in the stories. In one frantic Internet search I found, on a themed wedding site of all places, fonts in dwarf runes and elvish script. I petitioned the school district to allow me to download the fonts onto my teacher computer. They agreed and all the students in the class got their name in either Elvish or Dwarven characters and I had them hooked!

Every student assumed a character persona as a Dwarf, an Elf, or a Hobbit. They made up a name for their character, designed their character's appearance, and their character's backstory. They decided on weapons, clothes, and why they were going on the journey.

The school bought 25 copies of the novel. The district printing department printed up little journal books for the students to use. Each page had a place for them to sketch their character in action and some lines to write down ideas.

Armed with their "My Journey Through Middle-earth" journal booklets and their Middle-earth personae, we left Bag End as companions to Frodo, Sam, and Pippin. They kept journals and tracked their progress on a map I drew and put up in the classroom. They drew their characters in action in their journals as they trekked along on the quest. We logged our journey on calendars and kept track of where and when we were at different locations in Middle-earth.

I found an old copy of Barbara Strachey's 1981 book, *Journeys of Frodo: An Atlas of J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings*. Since the pages were already falling out, I removed them and used them with a document camera to indicate where we were in Middle-earth as we read through *The Fellowship*.

At the end of *The Fellowship* they had a big surprise – they had to decide which set of characters they would follow! The students had lots of discussions about making choices on which path to take when we started reading *The Two Towers*.

Those students who decided to follow Frodo and Sam had to wait for their adventure to continue! That was quite a challenge for them. While we were reading about the adventures of the Three Hunters, and the trials of Pippin's and Merry's capture, some students decided to create their own fan-fictions and wrote many little stories about battling orcs to make Middle-earth a safer place.

The return of Gandalf was a huge surprise to even those students who had seen the movies. The descriptions of Fangorn Forest seemed to send chills across their adventuresome spirits, and then the questions started. Most questions were asking, "Who was Gandalf after all?" This one chapter opened up the questions so much that a hiatus in the reading was called for.

I brought in one of my volumes of *The Silmarillion* and read parts to them. I followed this with my 'now-famous' chart of who is who in the world of the Valar and Maiar. This chart consisted of a tree style flow chart with Erú at the top branching down to the Vala Melkor and Manwë to the left. Next to Manwë, I listed Varda, and then Aulë and Yavanna. Depending upon the specific questions, we talked about individual Valar and their areas of expertise. Then we talk about the Maiar. I just listed the main ones, Sauron, Gandalf, and Saruman. Then, in one class I mentioned Melian and that took some talking about! Now, I start each class with a chart, but more on that later.

The class continued on for the rest of the year. Students transferred in and transferred out. It seems like I printed just about every student's name in the school in either dwarf runes and/or elvish script. Kids stopped me in the hall and asked how they could get into the class. The answer, by the way, was to pass your classes because if you don't, you will be moved into a study hall until you do!

An activity I developed was a chart to compare the various characters – personal histories, relations to one another, motivations, and heroic attributes. One of the favorites was a

chart on the Ring's influence on the various bearers. We also had a chart to compare specific scenes in the book to scenes in the movie.

The last quarter winnowed down to movie time. I didn't plan *The Return of the King* correctly and my timing was off by a class period. This meant that there was no way we could finish the film by the end of the school year. On the last day of school kids are usually outside, playing kickball, flying kites, running around in the warm air. I said I would show the end of the movie and anyone, whether they had been in the class or not, could come in and watch. The turnout was humbling. Here I was, sitting in a room on the last day of school thinking that no one wanted to be inside on such a beautiful day. After all, the movie was available just about everywhere!

The room filled up and many of the students were not even from the class. We closed out the year in good style.

There were several lessons to be learned in that first year of the class. I saw that students crave fantasy and faerie stories. They also want to feel like they belong somewhere and they are contributing to something. The little journals really helped with the need to belong.

I also learned that students hunger for depth and back-story. I cannot tell you how many parents contacted me to let me know how much they learned from their child who was talking about the background of the books.

For references in the classroom, we looked at Karen Wynn Fonstad's 1992 *Atlas of Middle-earth*. I have discovered that her direct and simple drawings appeal to the imaginations of the students. As I mentioned earlier, I use my old copy of Barbara Strachey's *Journeys of Frodo*. As I went on with the class I found a huge, nine-piece map of Middle-earth on eBay. It arrived, all the way from Scotland. Let me tell you that it fascinates the students even today. I also had in my classroom a set of movie books by Jude Fisher and Gary Russell. Another favorite was a map book by Brian Sibley and John Howe. For inspiration, the class library included examples of illustrations inspired by Tolkien's works such as the 1996 Harper Collins book, *Realms of Tolkien*.

I located an old, discarded 'standee' of the hobbit actors from *The Fellowship of the Ring* movie. I propped that up in my classroom. I like it there because it gives a great visual on the size of the hobbits. One former student still brings her little brother by to measure himself against the hobbits. Since he is now about five feet nine inches tall I rather think he will outgrow the hobbits on the standee.

Earlier, I talked about my famous 'flow chart.' I had to come up with some way of explaining the hierarchy of the Valar. As I mentioned earlier, one time I wrote Melian on the chart because some of the girls wanted to know if there were any female Maiar. Now, I had some explaining to do. This brought us into the world of the elves and their histories. I purposefully kept all the information at an outline level, as the focus of the class was not in that direction; however, the classes always have questions, so I do my best to answer them. I used *The Silmarillion*, illustrated by Ted Nasmith. One student was so interested he came in at lunch to read the book. I gave him a lot of encouragement, but also warned him that *The Sil* was a complicated book. He just kept on reading, and asking questions.

I also learned that I needed to step up MY game if I was going to ever do this again! I began to research in earnest in bookstores and in our borough library. Pickings were slim in our little town. Turning to the Internet, I found I had to learn to separate the 'grain from the chaff' in a hurry. There is a lot of great stuff out there, and a lot that is not so great.

Digging around, I discovered The Tolkien Professor and his lectures on *The Lord of the Ring* trilogy. I was relieved to have discovered a source that was both reputable and reliable and as I planned for the next school year, many of the things I discovered in Corey's classes filtered into the information I shared with my students.

That was seven years ago. The class has evolved into one of the most popular elective classes in the school. The format and the arrangement of the books and movies has shifted according to the latest plan the school district deems best for children of this age. At one time I was teaching one novel each quarter, starting with *The Hobbit*. Then I was teaching *The Fellowship* twice a day to a standing room only class. Actually, they sat on the floor.

I requested one hundred copies of the little journal from the printing department and they sent three hundred copies. Even the district printing department saw how popular this class had become.

Things change from year to year. I got the news last spring, at the end of the school year, that there would be no elective classes offered – only study halls. I was saddened by the news. At the end of the year, I packed up all my reference books and trudged home with the little library I had established in my classroom. I told myself that it was the end of an era and it was good while it was going on. I had inspired a few hundred students and their families!

In late July this year I was teaching special education summer school and one of the counselors from my middle school wandered into my classroom. He told me that there were a lot of requests from families and would I please teach the classes again.

I was quite happy to do so, even on a much-reduced schedule. Given free rein to teach what the students wanted, I thought about going through all four books again; however, with less than two hours a week, I finally settled on the challenge of investigating *The Hobbit* in the time we were allowed each quarter.

This year has been a challenge – but so has every year – from the first showing of *The Fellowship* movie to the current configuration.

No matter. What I have learned is that Tolkien's secondary world was and continues to be alive at Ryan Middle School.

Thank you for listening to my story!

DMAE BINKLEY is a teacher who is currently specializing in special needs students. She has been teaching various subjects for more years than she cares to acknowledge in various locations around the state of Alaska.