“It was worth it, lad, if you learned something from it”: Merlin in Disney’s Animated *The Sword in the Stone* as FYC Instructor

Among my first-year composition (FYC) instructor colleagues and me, there have been many conversations about the goals of FYC courses. We generally know the skills we should give our students,[[1]](#footnote-1) but how should these skills be framed? Should we be teaching our students how to use writing to better understand themselves or should we be teaching our students how to use writing as a technical tool? Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae, in their open debate, have these same types of questions. Elbow’s position in this debate is best summarized when he says, “Many happily proclaim that there is no truth, no right answer, no right interpretation[...]. But they won’t let themselves or their students write in language tainted with the ordinary or the presence and feelings of the writer” (152). Bartholomae, on the other hand, asks the question, “Should composition programs maintain space for, reproduce the figure of, the author at a time when the figure of the author is under attack in all other departments of the academy?” (70). These questions, I argue, can be answered with a dash of cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner[[2]](#footnote-2) and an image of Merlin as teacher[[3]](#footnote-3). In this paper, I suggest that the relationship between Arthur and Merlin in Disney’s animated film *The Sword in the Stone* is the kind of relationship Bruner would recommend as the model for student-instructor relationships. I will consider how Merlin begins his tutelage of Arthur as a Barholomae figure, then uses a version of Elbow’s believing game when he transforms Arthur into animals, and then exhibits Bruner-like teacher characteristics when battling with Madame Mim while Arthur watches. I argue that Merlin, with the help of his owl, Archimedes, shows a range as a teacher and a similar range is necessary for a FYC instructor.

In “The Functions of Teaching” delivered at Rhode Island College of Education in 1959, Jerome Bruner identifies himself as a source for instructors looking for theory to inform their teaching personas. He says that the teacher must recognize the individuality of the student in order to safely lead the student through error to real learning (31-2). Bruner advocates for an explanation of the logical structures that underlie the conventions that seem at first glance to be rote memorization. He applies this idea to spelling (32), but it applies equally to academic discourse. Bruner’s call, then, is to revolutionize schooling so that it is no longer a rote activity filled with drudgery. Instructors should not water down instruction but instead should attempt to internalize in their students “a sense of the instructiveness of error” (38). Elbow and Bartholomae are both satisfied, then. The individual is still important like Elbow wants, and the teacher teaches the student structures of discourse like Bartholomae wants.

Bruner tells of an experiment in instruction on fifth graders learning geography. The fifth graders were given a rough sketch of a map of the North Central states and asked to locate where the cities were most likely to be without “looking up the facts.” “To at least half a dozen children in the class it is not a matter of indifference that no big city is to be found at the junction of Lake Huron, Lake Michigan, and Lake Ontario. They were slightly shaken up transportation theorists when the facts were in,” Bruner finishes his account of this experiment (36).

When he introduces his idea of “instructiveness of error,” Bruner gives the example of a student learning about whether a mushroom is poisonous or not. “In short, the teacher states in one way or another that eating this particular thing will kill you or not kill you as the case may be,” Bruner writes (32). Merlin comes to mind as an instructor who allows Arthur controlled errors. When he transforms Arthur into a fish, Merlin does not provide Arthur with protection from predators. However, there is a general feeling that the danger from predators is not real because even when Merlin has not foreseen the danger, there are systems in place that protect Arthur (in this case, Archimedes).

Indeed, Arthur is a great analogue for students in FYC courses, and magic is an excellent analogue for academic knowledge.[[4]](#footnote-4) The film opens with Arthur boasting of his courage, saying boldly, “I’m not afraid [of wolves],” before going into a densely forested area to recover an arrow for Kay. This choice ends in Arthur stumbling into the home of Merlin who has foreseen that he will gain a pupil on this day (8:45). How is this any different than first-year composition courses? As an instructor of such a course, I know the day when I will begin to teach my students, but I don’t really *know* my students until the course begins. And some of my students come to my class courageously expecting a wolf that is the red pen taken to their writing. Recognizing the importance of the mechanics of knowledge, Merlin packs away many books and other utensils in order to teach Arthur and then follows him back to the castle where he lives and works (14:30). This action, then, is the extreme version of Bartholomae (and perhaps Elbow’s conception of his views)—that it is the job of the instructor (or Merlin) to disseminate to the student (or Arthur) all of the academic (or magical) knowledge the instructor contains. Indeed, Elbow, in a response to Bartholomae, says “this [academic writing] training isn't feasible or desirable in a *one* semester first year introductory writing courses” (87, emphasis in original, sic). Merlin cannot expect Arthur to read all of those books in one semester.

Merlin, then, just like instructors of FYC, struggles with the fact that his pupil is in no way a complete blank slate. Jerome Bruner observes this struggle when he theorizes about the “reader” in his essay “Two Modes of Thought”[[5]](#footnote-5): “As our readers read, as they begin to construct a virtual text of their own, it is as if they were embarking on a journey without maps—and yet, they possess a stock of maps that *might* give hints, and besides, they know a lot about journeys and about mapmaking” (36, emphasis in original).

Merlin is surprised to learn that he has misjudged what experiences and knowledge with which Arthur has entered his tutelage. When he sees Arthur’s excitement observing his foster-brother Kay joust, Merlin realizes that he has to break out heavy artillery—magic—if he hopes to teach Arthur (26:00). Here, Merlin transitions from a Bartholomae-like figure to an Elbow-like figure. He begins playing Elbowian games with Arthur. Merlin transforms Arthur into a fish, a squirrel, and a bird.

These transformations are extreme versions of Elbow’s “believing game.” Indeed, in Elbow’s Appendix Essay in *Writing without Teachers*, he writes when you play the believing game, “try to put yourself into the skin of people with other perceptions” (170). Merlin literally places Arthur into the skin of organisms with different perceptions. When Merlin is getting ready to make Arthur become a fish, he asks Arthur if he can imagine himself as a fish and Arthur answers, “Oh, that’s easy. I’ve done that lots of times” (27:52). This reliance on imagination reminds one of Elbow’s conditions for the believing game: “Though the listener’s knowledge seems new, it is also not new: the meaning may be thought of as structures he never had in his head before, but he had to build these new structures out of ingredients he already had” (152). Arthur, then, both becomes a fish for the first time and returns to being a fish after many times of imagining.

In his commitment to this kind of believing game, Merlin casts his previous bookish teacher persona to the side. When Arthur is fired from being a squire to Kay, though, Merlin doubles down on his desire to give Arthur a “real education” (54:00). He commands Arthur to read all of the books he packed in the beginning. When he finds out Arthur cannot read, Merlin leaves the job of teaching Arthur to his owl, Archimedes (55:51). Archimedes, in this moment, becomes the Bartholomae to Merlin’s Elbow. Archimedes will instruct Arthur in the mechanics that will help Arthur gain the knowledge Merlin expects him to gain from the believing games.

Interestingly, when Merlin is inspired to turn Arthur into a bird, Merlin reverts back to a Bartholomae figure and Archimedes takes on the role of Elbow (57:35). Merlin wants to teach Arthur the “mechanics of a bird’s wing.” Archimedes, on the other hand, argues that flying “is a delicate art” (58:16)—one that is best learned by doing. When Bartholomae and Elbow are personified in front of Arthur, the potential for great learning is the highest.

Even after all of these experiences, though, Arthur is still steadfastly sure that he wants to be a squire. Jerome Bruner has an answer to this problem of frustratingly static students when he notes that “It is not just that the child must make his knowledge his own, but that he must make it his own *in a community* of those *who share* his sense of belonging to a culture” (emphasis added, 127). Arthur is not learning the lessons Merlin teaches him because he is not experiencing these lessons in community with those who share his desire to be a squire. Therefore, he is unlikely to either retain or apply these lessons to his life. For Arthur these extremely literal believing games are, in the end, only that—games.

It is not until Arthur can observe Merlin in *his* community that Merlin’s teachings begin to take root. By accident, Arthur gets to watch Merlin engage in a wizard battle with Madam Mim. For the first time, Arthur observes Merlin in Merlin’s community. Amazed at the violence of this battle, Arthur compliments Merlin: “You were really great, Merlin, but… you could’ve been killed.” “It was worth it, lad, if you learned something from it,” Merlin responds. Arthur has learned something from the battle—the lessons Merlin has been trying to teach Arthur all along: “Knowledge and wisdom is the real power,” Arthur observes (1:10:00).

Merlin’s teaching takes a strong turn toward Bruner here. In “The Language of Education,” Bruner writes of the ways knowledge is most often transferred from teacher to student. Citing work done in teacher talk by Carol Feldman, he writes, “The world that the teachers were presenting to their students was a far more settled, far less hypothetical, far less negotiatory world than the one they were offering to their colleagues” (126). When Merlin battles Madam Mim, Arthur faces the reality that although Merlin presents the world (and magic) as a settled and calm thing, Merlin is not always in control of the world (and magic). It is in this moment that Merlin achieves the kind of education for which Bruner advocates: “[Education] is the forum aspect of a culture that gives its participants a role in constantly making and remaking the culture—an *active* role as participants rather than as performing spectators who play out their canonical roles according to rule when the appropriate cues occur” (123). Arthur performs as spectator for Merlin in his battle with Madame Mim, yes, but it is a more active spectating—one for which Arthur does not know “the appropriate cues”—than the kind of performing Arthur had been doing in his lessons with Merlin.

Indeed, this more participatory format allows Arthur to learn the lesson, then, but despite all of this, he still leaps at the chance to go be Kay’s squire in London. Frustrated that his time with Arthur has not resulted in noticeable changes, Merlin leaves for Bermuda (1:13:00). The FYC student can do all we ask and still remain extraordinarily similar to the student with whom we began the term (and often does). But that’s alright. When Arthur goes to London, he pulls the sword from the stone and is thrust onto the throne. Scared and unsure of what to do next, though, Arthur fervently calls upon Merlin to come help him (1:17:00). Arthur knows the wisdom and knowledge (and magic) Merlin has to share is important to his life.

Diligently and patiently, Merlin has led Arthur to this realization. He has done so by allowing Arthur to *do* things. He has neither lectured Arthur nor commanded Arthur to imagine these lessons. Merlin physically changes the body of Arthur so that the boy may experience the lessons. Merlin does not expect Arthur to learn to use magic in his everyday life, but he does expect that the medium of magic will allow Arthur to gain the message of education.

The FYC instructor can draw lessons from Merlin. Although we may be privy to knowledge that our students do not have, we should proceed with caution before attaching normative claims to that knowledge—whether our students *should* know this knowledge. Merlin, at first, believes that if Arthur only knew the things Merlin knows, then Arthur would go out and do great things, but ultimately, Arthur becomes king by ignoring Merlin. Arthur succeeds in being king, one surmises, though, by remembering the lessons Merlin has shared with him. Just like the viewer of *The Sword in the Stone* does not definitively know Arthur’s level success in his rule of the kingdom, often, we do not definitively know the success of our students beyond our classes. Indeed, we do not have the privilege of Merlin’s clairvoyance to know how our students may or may not use the knowledge we helped them acquire in the lives they lead after our class.

The best a FYC instructor can do, perhaps, is to follow the map of teaching and learning that Merlin provides. Like Merlin packing all of his books before leaving to tutor Arthur, the instructor can foreshadow the depth of knowledge that her students will need to learn. Then, though, it may be wise to follow Merlin’s lead and let students play Elbow’s believing games so that they will begin to understand the importance of all of that knowledge. Next, the instructor should reintroduce the depth of knowledge that may have seemed overwhelming to the students at first and make sure that the student has the necessary tools with which to engage with that knowledge like Archimedes and Merlin do when they teach Arthur how to read. Like Archimedes and Merlin, a successful FYC instructor should be able to put on Elbow and Bartholomae caps when appropriate for the student. And finally, the instructor should begin to allow the students to observe the academic world she moves through (like Arthur observes Merlin in his wizard battle) once the students have obtained the knowledge and know the importance of that knowledge. Following this Merlin-inspired map, students have the opportunity to be enraptured by the thrill of writing while still obtaining the skills necessary in a first-year composition course.

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1. The WPA Outcomes Statement is a good inventory for the kinds of knowledge with which we should be sure to leave our students [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Both Elbow and Bartholomae make mention of Jerome Bruner in important writings around the time of their public debate—Elbow in “Reflections on Academic Discourse” and Bartholomae in “Writing with Teachers” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I rely here on the work of Harvey Kail in “Narratives of Knowledge: Story and Pedagogy in Four Composition Texts” where he writes of the “master-narratives” of composition textbooks. I am suggesting a Merlin master-narrative. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I am thinking of the student I most struggle with when teaching FYC—the student who is head-strong and is committed to beliefs that do not necessarily mesh with the academic world. There are many exceptions to this kind of student. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bruner, in the Preface to *Actual Minds and Possible Worlds* says, “‘Two Modes of Thought’ began as an invited address to the American Psychological Association” (ix), creating interesting connections between psychology, reading, and learning. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)