

Using the Wizard of Oz to Teach LOTS, HOTS, PLOTS and PLOTZ!

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It has been my pleasure to teach the advanced English class in junior high school for many years. I, therefore, am able to use a literature-based approach, which is stimulating for the students and myself. We discuss stories, poems, books and plays from different vantage points. I also have my students write book reports and I often tell them that I want to hear an analysis of the book, not a retelling of the story. Of course, before I can expect my students to “analyze” a story, I must teach them the methods to do so. For this, Higher Order Thinking Skills, or as we have come to know them, HOTS, are useful.

Higher Order Thinking Skills are cognitive strategies (reading and thinking skills) that are needed for the Bagrut Portfolio. However, if I use words like, “cognitive strategies” or “Bagrut” many of my students tune out or may become anxious. Therefore, to introduce these concepts, I choose a familiar story, like the Wizard of Oz. Instead of reading it, I show the movie since I find that a movie, which is also a musical, is an enjoyable and non-threatening way to present HOTS.

Before or while viewing the movie, I write questions on the board or on a worksheet, and explain that the questions are simply a way to focus their thinking. I allow the students to work together, to brainstorm answers and to discuss options.

‘PaRDeS’ (a Hebrew word for ‘orchard’) is a method of interpreting ancient Jewish texts. This method is similar to the way we teach HOTS. The P stands for ‘Pshat’ or the simple or literal meaning of the text. Its parallel in the literature program would be LOTS (Lower Order Thinking Skills) or the typical “who”, “what” “when” “where” questions. Without the proper guidance too many students seem to become stuck at this step, producing book reports that basically re-tell the story with no analysis whatsoever.

From the ‘Pshat’ (simple meaning), we move onto the R which stands for ‘Remez’ or “hint.” Here is where Higher Order Thinking Skills come into play as we look at Predicting or Inferring. This step opens up a world of possibilities, in which the students use their imaginations and previous knowledge to anticipate the story, and to predict possible outcomes as the story progresses.

We then arrive at the D or the ‘Drash.’ This is analysis and interpretation of a passage. Here is where the HOTS of Explaining cause and effect, Distinguishing perspectives, Uncovering motives, Problem solving,

Applying information, etc. come into play.

Finally, we arrive at the S ‘Sod’, which is the ‘secret’ message or, what is sometimes called, “THE BIG QUESTION.” One of the wonderful things about literature is that it is not black and white, with only one simple answer. Instead, it is multi-faceted with many different layers and as long as the answers can be “proven” from the text, they are acceptable.

Following are just a few examples of the PaRDeS/HOTS method, using *The Wizard of Oz* as our text.

The “simple” story of *The Wizard of Oz* is that a young farm girl longs for a different life. The early part of the movie is black and white but when Dorothy finds herself in Oz, the movie suddenly becomes alive with color. This striking change has lent itself to interesting discussions. For example, “When does life seem grey?” “What makes life colorful or vibrant? ‘Who’, ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘where’ are easily answered.

Then, in groups, the students discuss the hints (Remez.) If you didn’t know, what do you think the story is about? Who is it for? Is it a children’s story? Have you ever longed for something “over the rainbow?” What about the friends with whom you travel on your journey?” What were you looking for? ‘Predict’ and ‘infer.’

The ‘Drash’ may take the most time. At this point, we may introduce ‘Identifying parts and whole,’ ‘Compare and contrast,’ ‘Cause and effect,’ ‘Distinguishing different perspectives,’ ‘Uncovering motives’ etc. For example, we can discuss how each of Dorothy’s friends already displays the characteristics they seek. The scarecrow is very smart and thoughtful (find examples in the movie or text.) Nevertheless, he is searching for a brain and bemoaning the fact that he doesn’t have one. This leads us to ‘Uncovering motives.’ Why do people do what they do? Is it what we have in reality that determines our lives, or what we think we have (or lack?) Many enlightening and lively class discussions can result from these questions.

This leads us, very naturally, into a discussion of the “Sod” or “the big questions.” Do we already have what we seek? Do we need a wizard (guru, spiritual leader, expert) to give us the approval that we must, ultimately, seek within? Where is our locus of control? How important is our self-esteem to our functioning as human beings?

To answer these questions we (might) use the thinking skills of Synthesizing and Making connections, Applying information and Evaluating.

As the story of *The Wizard of Oz* may also be viewed as a “coming of age” story in which Dorothy, quite unwittingly, vanquishes her “enemy” and transports herself back to the home from which she longed to escape, the students, particularly in junior high and high school, may discover hidden insights by analyzing and discussing what may have previously been viewed as a simple children’s story. In addition, the enjoyment of the movie and the music help to create an atmosphere in which these somewhat difficult and sophisticated concepts may be learned more easily. As a trigger throughout the year, when discussing a concept, I may refer back to *The Wizard of Oz* and see an “aha!” sign of recognition on the face of a student.

In brief, this playful story is layered with meaning. Good literature usually has layers of meaning that can be discovered by applying the HOTS. Using a colorful musical may be just the way to teach these complex concepts in a lighthearted and easy to absorb manner.

Rittie Katz has been happily teaching in Israel for over 20 years. She teaches English and is also a Special Education teacher. In addition, she is a certified life coach and loves seeing her students and clients have life enhancing insights!

