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# How to turn the student into an active participant rather than a reticent receiver

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## Abstract

It is about time to invite students of various disciplines to become active participants rather than mere reticent receivers in the educational process of the twenty first century. Having taught English language and literature at a number of state as well as private universities in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, it is not entirely the students' fault to have a preference toward conventional in-class "spoon feeding". But with suitable encouragement, students could be evoked to adopt a line of critical thinking that will inevitably enrich their perception at large. A case study was executed for four weeks in which six students of both genders at the World Islamic Science and Education University (WISE) in Jordan were exposed to a popular novel in children's literature entitled Tom's Midnight Garden by Philippa Pearce. The purpose of this case study is to investigate how students in our region could become key players in the educational process if credited for original thinking. The principal results and major conclusions prove that with adequate instruction, students' analytical skills will sharpen. Consequently, student-centricity is maximized upon since it is one of the major corner-stones in the finding of a world-class university in our part of the world.

**Keywords:** Creative thinking; Student-centricity, Education, Children's literature

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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines the possibility of getting students genuinely interested and actively involved in their assigned literary material, which will inevitably and drastically improve their overall academic performance. Based upon my observations having taught English language and literature at a number of state as well as private universities in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, students are disillusioned and usually “obliged” to do what they are expected to do in terms of reading the assigned literary work and coming to class fully prepared for the mere sake of scoring satisfactory grades in a particular course.

But, unfortunately, instructors are in for a big disappointment in line with even these “modest” expectations. What students normally do is that they try to solely read the secondary critical materials or search for their summaries on the internet without really delving into the primary literary work itself. Therefore, what if we, instructors, try a different approach by introducing students of the B.A. level majoring in English Language and Literature to a literary text *without* offering them secondary references?

### 1.1. The main objective

The main objective of this case study is to explore how students could become key players in the pedagogic process in the lecture hall. Therefore, the reason behind conducting this case study is the belief that it is about time for instructors to devotedly assist their students in elevating their potentials through adequate supervision and instruction precisely by encouraging critical and creative thinking.

Some students may be daunted at times to voice their minds. This automatically turns them into mere passive recipients. In fact, passive recipients, who may only exist physically rather than also mentally in the lecture hall, are basically a burden not only on the instructor, but also on their selves. As a result, the approach of “spoon feeding” ought to gradually cease as students benefit more sometimes from both proving themselves in the lecture hall as well as from peer interaction.

## 2. The selection of the text and subjects

As an academic instructor of English literature at the World Islamic Science and Education University (WISE) in Jordan, I selected a novel entitled *Tom's Midnight Garden* by Philippa Pearce written in 1958 to be read by six of my students. These students were expected to finish reading the novel over a time span of four weeks without the provision of any secondary critical material that may grant them some insight pertaining to the justification of some events in the story. Secondary critical materials are considered to be very useful in relation to this particular novel due to the diverse ambiguities that are engaged in the construction of the plot. According to Yin (2009),

*“[f]or teaching purposes, a case study need not contain a complete or accurate rendition of actual events; rather, its purpose is to establish a framework for discussion and debate among students”.*

Pearce adopts a time-travel technique in regard to the present and the past times, she utilizes everyday objects to travel among different time periods, and she constructs alternative realities. As a result, in order to appreciate such a work, one has to suspend disbelief, to stretch his / her imagination, and to accept the constructed worlds of the novel.

The story of *Tom's Midnight Garden* revolves around an ordinary child of modern times, Tom Long, who is quarantined after the sickness of his brother, Peter, at the boring house of Uncle Alan and Aunt Gwen Kitson. Soon after Tom's arrival at the Kitson's, "[i]t seemed to him that his longing to be free swelled up in him and in the room, until it should surely be large enough to burst the walls and set him free indeed" (14). Obviously, Tom has no place to play in and the only thing that attracts his attention in the entire Kitsons' house is the old grandfather clock downstairs, which one night strikes thirteen!

He goes downstairs to check it out only to discover an imagined and enchanted garden outside the back door of the house, which no one could see except himself. He comes to enter imaginatively into the lives of characters two generations before his time through his new playmate Hatty, whom he becomes acquainted with in the midnight garden.

And the grandfather clock still went on striking, as if it had lost all count of time; and, while it struck, Tom, with joy in his heart, drew the bolt, turned the door-handle, opened the door and walked out into his garden, that he knew was waiting for him. (35)

Furthermore, *Tom's Midnight Garden* offers a diversity of dichotomies; the two Toms: "Sometimes he would doze, and then, in his half-dreaming, he became two persons" (10); linear time and imagined time: "Only the clock was left, but the clock was always there, time in, time out" (42); the smooth blending of fantasy and reality: "Upstairs, again, in bed, he pondered more calmly on what he had seen in the hall. Had it been a dream?" (24); a visible and an invisible world: "I tell you! The garden's there! He flung the door wide open, and blinked into the morning sunlight." (30); as well as the inconsistency of aging: "She [Hatty] had certainly grown a great deal since those early days in the garden" (162).

Due to all of these obstacles, the reading of each subject in the case study is extremely essential in constructing an understanding of the novel based upon the key roles of Tom and Hatty along with the other characters. This presents what Bakhtin (1981) calls a carnival of realities. According to him, this diversity of voices by different characters paves the way for a fragmentation rather than a complete and unified perspective of the events in the novel. This fragmentation leads to the permissibility of various views, which eventually leads to a multiplicity of 'truths' (263).

Three males and three females were chosen as subjects of the case study to serve as a sample; taking into consideration that one of each gender is of the poor, average, and excellent levels in an attempt to come up with a roughly comprehensive view in accordance with the objective of this case study. Since the aim of this case study is basically to focus upon students' centrality and the encouragement of their involvement through the initiation of their creative thinking according to section 1, all students were notified and made aware of the importance of *their* critical opinions without making use of any soft or hard copies as secondary materials. This had been underscored by the fact that none of these subjects will be graded for his / her

performance in our concerned meeting sessions because the reading of each is crucial to the comprehension of the novel itself.

In accordance with Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, each student was notified that he / she is entitled to his / her own reading of the text. Waugh (1992) states that having more than one reading of a certain literary text is described as deconstruction by Derrida because language could be attained at various levels of perception (72). Consequently, each subject was encouraged to stretch his / her imagination based upon the primary source, which was given to them ahead of time for reading and understanding.

In this regard, Webster (1996) argues that according to structuralist Roland Barthes, fragmentation gives a more comprehensive insight by offering more than one point of view in terms of a certain issue (26). Barthes states that the author of such a literary work is no longer the voice of authority or the one in control. He announces "the death of the author" and "the birth of the reader" as various interpretations of the same work could be reached by different readers (18). In other words, there is no one imposed truth but rather a multiplicity of suggested truths that are formed due to the numerous narrative voices in a novel and the diverse interpretations of different recipients of the same work of art. That is why the actual reading of the novel had been stressed time and again to the subjects within their selection stage.

### 3. Setbacks

Nonetheless, all of the subjects in our first introductory session gave various excuses for not having been able to read up to the one hundred assigned pages. Their mutual pretext was that they had not enough time. So, I tried to rationalize with them by decreasing that number to fifty pages stressing the fact that all of them are majoring in English language and literature and that they would be required, one time or another, to read literary works that would very much exceed the approximately couple of hundred pages, which *Tom's Midnight Garden* consists of.

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I was left, at this stage, with no option except to fuse my remaining three male subjects with the passion of learning literature, to make them aware of this opportunity which allowed them the exposure to such a work that was awarded the distinctive Carnegie Medal for its outstanding literary quality, and to make them understand that the success of this case study really depended on their devotion, commitment, contribution, and interaction.

At this point, it seemed that the subjects began comprehending the amount of responsibility laid on their shoulders because after that “small” discussion of ours, a drastic change started to take place as the subjects began to devotedly read not only the assigned pages, but also more ahead of time. When asked about the reason behind reading more pages, all of them agreed that after reading the first fifty pages they became really interested in learning the development of events in the plot.

#### 4. Challenges

Embarking on such a project may seem challenging to students. The reading of such a literary text may appear to be such an ordeal to some especially the weak ones. But here lays the proper choice of the text itself. Literature becomes both interesting and engaging when it mutually delights and instructs. In addition to the reasons stated in sections 2.1 and 2.2, *Tom's Midnight Garden* had been chosen for this case study because the story is not typically traditional and, therefore, unpredictable. *Tom's Midnight Garden* suggests a mysterious mood in light of the actions that move quickly within Tom's adventures in his magical garden. Moreover, the story introduces a number of contradictions.

#### 5. The questions

After the reading of the assigned pages, the subjects were presented with a number of critical questions at the beginning of each session, the aim of which were to trigger their creative thinking and sharpen their critical perspectives. Four challenging questions were focused upon per week while the last week was specified for the subjects' additional reflections and impressions in an attempt to wrap up their findings. The questions are stated in the attached appendix in chronological order.

Interestingly enough, most of the answers to those questions were usually correct and sensible by all of the remaining subjects, who attempted to visualize with their minds' eyes the developments of Tom's adventures in light of their own personal experiences of childhood and based upon their previous educational knowledge in literary theory and criticism. For instance, the subjects agreed that there must be a kind of mental telepathy between Tom and Hatty, that the garden functions as an outlet for Tom's playful urges, that Tom constructs imaginary time in order to preserve his sanity at the prison-like Kitson's residence, and that Pearce is basically trying to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood through the friendship that Tom maintains with Hatty at various stages of her life.

Frankly, I was impressed with the subjects' performance and somewhat creative explanations. They exemplified the ability to suspend disbelief by stretching their imagination that is mentioned in section 2.3. In actuality, at the time that *Tom's Midnight Garden* may be difficult to read even for some Westerners, the remaining three subjects proved to play a key role in the understanding and appreciation of this literary work.

## **6. Findings**

Based upon this case study, there are a number of essential factors that are to be properly employed in order to attain the sought didactic benefit for students as well as to reinforce their centrality.

The first factor is the instructor. The approach of the instructor within the lecture hall about a certain theory, literary work, or subject at large should be inviting, encouraging, and above all understanding. This may be endorsed as the instructor would initially welcome all points of view in a neutral manner presented by his / her students of all levels.

At a second stage, the instructor may try with all the students to find suitable justifications for their reflections based on their reading of the primary source. This way, students of far-fetched ideas or of mediocre performance could be put on the right track rather than to be left with hesitation, uncertainty, shyness, and basically reticence. Only then, all students would begin to satisfactorily engage themselves with the text leading to their proper interaction with not only their instructor but also among their peers resulting in a brain storming kind of session.

The second factor is the selected text for examination. The work ought to be interesting to students. The issue of interest is very crucial. Students will start to originate an interest in a particular work if there is a cause that is relevant to their own reality, which will draw them to the work itself. This cause may be, for example, psychological, social, political, economical, or humanitarian at large.

The third factor is the student himself / herself. Despite the fact that I had fears at the beginning of this case study pertaining to the reaction of the subjects regarding the length and probable complexity of the novel addressed in section 4, yet there had always been faith in students in general, who proved that with sincere obligation, their worthy engagement and contribution can be attained in a proper environment that secures the first and second factors mentioned earlier.

## **7. Recommendations**

Therefore, in order to support and further promote students' centrality, I recommend the specification of approximately 30 percent of students' overall assessment for in-class participation as well as critical and original thinking in both our state and private universities. This way, students will gradually become committed by coming to class more prepared than before since a considerable percentage of their total average is determined by their in-class performance. This, in its turn, will turn them into better active participants in every course, which would inevitable highlight their centrality and increase their pedagogic benefit as a whole.

## **Appendix**

The questions on which this case study had been constructed:

- I. What are your initial impressions about the novel?
- II. What do you think are the challenges in the story so far?
- III. In reference to the opening scenes, how could you describe Tom psychologically?
- IV. In your view, is there a rational behind his actions?
- V. What do you think of the grandfather clock?
- VI. In your opinion, why is it only Tom who could see the garden?
- VII. What do you think is the significance of the garden?
- VIII. Could you discuss the dichotomies in the story?
- IX. Do you find the title of the novel to be a suitable one in accordance with its overall events?
- X. In your point of view, what are the reasons behind Hatty's revisiting the garden at various stages in her life?
- XI. How could you justify the incidents in the novel as a whole?
- XII. Do you think that the novel eventually offers its readership with a pedagogic lesson?

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