

# Low-stakes reflections on learning as a tool for teaching theory through children's books

Reflexiones de bajo riesgo sobre el aprendizaje como herramienta para la enseñanza de la teoría a través de libros para niños

Reflexions sobre l'aprenentatge com a eina d'ensenyament de la teoria a través dels llibres infantils

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## Abstract

This study investigates the role of low-stakes reflections on learning in teaching literary theory through children's books. Through an inductive thematic analysis of empirical data collected in a college course in literary analysis, five themes were identified in such reflections: 1. appreciating the use of children's books; 2. recognizing the differences between adult and child perspectives; 3. successes and 4. difficulties with learning literary theory; and 5. the need for more examples of applying theoretical lenses to texts. Low-stakes reflections on learning were shown to be effective in teaching literary theory, with students expressing their appreciation for using children's books and feeling comfortable applying theoretical lenses to them. The study concludes that teaching literary theory through children's books makes difficult theoretical concepts more accessible and enjoyable for students. Low-stakes reflections on learning encourage students to self-evaluate their personal efforts; thus, they can help teachers gauge the students' level of comprehension and the efficacy of scaffolding high-stakes assignments, also providing opportunities to better intervene in student learning. The study suggests that this approach is not limited to English majors, can be combined with visual analysis, and is urgent given the current censorship of children's books in the U.S.

**Key words:** children's books, literary theory, low-stakes writing, reflective writing.

## Resumen

Este estudio investiga el papel de las reflexiones de bajo riesgo sobre el aprendizaje en la enseñanza de la teoría literaria a través de libros para niños. A través de un análisis temático inductivo de datos empíricos recopilados en un curso universitario de análisis literario, se identificaron cinco temas en tales reflexiones: 1. Apreciar el uso de libros para niños; 2. Reconocer las diferencias entre las perspectivas de los adultos y los niños; 3. Éxitos y 4. Dificultades en el aprendizaje de la teoría literaria; y 5. La necesidad de más ejemplos de aplicación de perspectivas teóricas a los textos. Las reflexiones de bajo riesgo sobre el aprendizaje demostraron ser efectivas en la enseñanza de la teoría

literaria, y los estudiantes expresaron su aprecio por el uso de libros para niños y niñas y se sintieron cómodos al aplicar a estas un enfoque teórico. El estudio concluye que la enseñanza de la teoría literaria a través de libros infantiles hace que los conceptos teóricos difíciles sean más accesibles y agradables para los estudiantes. Las reflexiones de bajo riesgo sobre el aprendizaje alientan a los estudiantes a autoevaluar sus esfuerzos personales; por lo tanto, pueden ayudar a los y las docentes a medir el nivel de comprensión de los estudiantes y la eficacia de andamiaje de tareas de alto riesgo, y también brindan oportunidades para intervenir mejor en el aprendizaje del alumnado. El estudio sugiere que este enfoque no se limita a los estudiantes de inglés, se puede combinar con el análisis visual y es urgente dada la censura actual de libros para niños en los EE. UU.

**Palabras clave:** libros infantiles, teoría literaria, escritura de bajo riesgo, escritura reflexiva.

### Resum

Aquest estudi investiga el paper de les reflexions de baix risc sobre l'aprenentatge en l'ensenyament de la teoria literària a través de llibres infantils. Mitjançant una anàlisi temàtica inductiva de les dades empíriques recollides en un curs universitari d'anàlisi literària, en aquestes reflexions es van identificar cinc temes: 1. Valorar l'ús dels llibres infantils; 2. Reconèixer les diferències entre les perspectives d'adult i infantil; 3. Èxits i 4. Dificultats en l'aprenentatge de la teoria literària; i 5. La necessitat de més exemples d'aplicació de perspectives teòriques als textos. Es va demostrar que les reflexions de baix risc sobre l'aprenentatge eren efectives en l'ensenyament de la teoria literària, els estudiants van expressar el seu agraïment per l'ús de llibres infantils i se sentien còmodes aplicant-hi enfocaments teòrics. L'estudi conclou que l'ensenyament de la teoria literària a través de llibres infantils fa que els conceptes teòrics difícils siguin més accessibles i agradables per als estudiants. Les reflexions de baix risc sobre l'aprenentatge animen l'alumnat a autoavaluar els seus esforços personals; per tant, poden ajudar els professors a mesurar el nivell de comprensió dels i de les estudiants i l'eficàcia de les tasques de gran interès, i també ofereixen oportunitats per intervenir millor en l'aprenentatge dels estudiants. L'estudi suggereix que aquest enfocament no es limita a l'alumnat d'anglès, es pot combinar amb l'anàlisi visual i és urgent donada la censura actual dels llibres infantils als EUA.

**Paraules clau:** llibres infantils, teoria literària, escriptura de baix nivell, escriptura reflexiva.

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## 1. Introduction

As well as at the secondary-school level (Georgandis, 2003, pp. 1, 16-7), courses in children's literature are regularly taught in higher-education programs in the United States geared toward preschool and elementary education majors (Consalvo, 2017, p. 1). In these courses, children's books figure as a tool for teaching "social justice and critical literacy" (Ferguson, 2016, p. 1); "support[ing] children's multiple perspectives and empathy" (Salmon, 2019); and ensuring that preservice teachers "[a]ffirm diversity and exercise critical literacy" (NCTE, 2018). Whereas three decades ago, children's books may have been in "the domain of the educationists' more than 'a subject for literary studies'" (Schmidt, 1992, pp. 243-4), the vast number of critical readings of children's literature suggests that literary theory and children's books are no longer individually marginalized, nor is their combination met with as much skepticism by either academics or lay

readers (cf. Hunt, 1991, pp. 5-6). Library guides to children's literature comprise various critical resources, ranging from feminism and race studies to visual analysis (State Library Victoria, 2022). For example, Paul (1999) demonstrates how feminist theories in particular have worked to expand the archive of children's literature to reflect changing attitudes toward gender and sexuality (p. 114).

Because they are straightforward, familiar, and compact, children's books are perfect for introductory university courses in literary analysis as they can balance out complex and largely unfamiliar literary theory. Children's books can be especially attractive to college students, moreover, who are "hovering between maturity and adolescence" (Knoepfmacher, 1992, p. 1). The objective of this study was to investigate whether low-stakes, informal student writing could be useful in teaching literary theory through children's books. Based on the data collected from 12 students enrolled in a college literary analysis course, the study concludes that low-stakes reflections on learning are a useful teaching tool. By regularly reflecting on and self-evaluating their personal efforts, students can become more thoughtful about their learning process, and also feel more comfortable with and confident about learning and applying theoretical lenses to texts.

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Further, such low-stakes reflections can help teachers gauge the students' level of comprehension as well as the efficacy of scaffolding high-stakes assignments, like the literary analysis essay worth a significant portion of the overall course grade. By giving teachers "snapshots" of student progress, they also provide opportunities to better intervene in and assist student learning. Because students are not experts, however, such reflections may be considered subjective, so they should not be the sole measure of student success.

The study draws on empirical data from a course in literary analysis taught at a U.S. university in Fall 2021. Upon analyzing the low-stakes reflections on learning using an inductive thematic analysis method, a coding/tagging method developed by identifying "connections between ideas and words in the text" to describe emerging patterns (Clary-Lemon, Mueller, & Pantelides, 2022, 85), five themes were identified: 1. the students' appreciation for using children's books to study theory; 2. the differences between child and adult readings; 3. successes and 4. difficulties with learning literary theory; and 5. the need for more examples of applying theory

to texts. The study expected to confirm student resistance to critical readings, especially of cherished books from childhood, the kind of “sentimental distrust” Sadler (1992) underscores in student re-encounters of such texts (p. 145). Also expected was an awareness of the differences between child and “adult” readings (Knoepflmacher, 1992, p. 1), which requires that adults apply what Hunt (1991) has called a “childist” perspective to reading children’s literature (p. 191). Perhaps due to the selection of books, no serious resistance was noted. Rather, the thematic analysis revealed that the majority of students benefitted from using children’s books, though some did question the appropriateness of applying “adult” theory to texts meant for children.

The analyzed low-stakes reflections on learning were not themselves part of the scaffolding of the high-stakes literary analysis essay, but they provided valuable information about the efficacy of such scaffolding. Scaffolding high-stakes projects with low-stakes activities has been proven effective in teaching academic writing, as the purpose of low stakes “is not so much to produce excellent pieces of writing as to get students to think, learn, and understand more of the course material” (Elbow, 1997, p. 5). Other course activities, including lectures, class discussions, and quizzes, provided students with “component skills” to assist them with learning the “higher skills” of identifying and applying theoretical lenses, thus adapting to the college classroom the notion of “scaffolding” originally conceived of by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976, p. 89) and developed by others (Maybin, Mercer, & Stierer, 1992). The low-stakes reflections on learning provided “snapshots” of the students’ self-assessment of their personal efforts and comprehension of course material, and thus they could be used by the teacher to assess the students’ progress and, if necessary, to intervene to better meet student needs, such as for more discussion and models of applying lenses to texts.

Adding an element of reflection, moreover, can assist students in becoming more deliberate about their learning process. Engaging student writers in self-reflecting on their own work can help them better evaluate their personal efforts (Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991). The benefits of such writing are well-established (Rogers, 2001; Elbow, 1997, p. 12; cf. Bowman & Addyman, 2014). Reflective writing has also been shown to be an effective predictor of academic success (Tsingos-Lucas, Bosnic-Anticevich, Schneider, & Smith, 2017), making it a useful element not only in scaffolding a more sophisticated assignment but also in gauging the students’ comprehension of the material.

## 2. Method and Course Design

To investigate whether informal student writing could be useful in teaching literary theory through children's books, a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020) was performed on the low-stakes reflections on learning, or blog entries, submitted to the online learning platform (Blackboard) for a literary analysis course offered at a U.S. university in Fall 2021. Of the 15 students enrolled in the class, 12 consented to their data being used for the study; one consented, but withdrew from the class mid-semester; one did not consent, and another never returned the signed consent form.

No demographics were collected, as this was not deemed relevant to the study. It is worth noting, however, that the university has a traditional college-aged and largely homogenous white student population, most of whom are native speakers of American English. In terms of their major disciplines, eight of the students who consented to the study were English majors; one majored in Business Administration; one undeclared; and two double-majored in English and Biological Sciences. Three more students majored in English Education. The students also had a number of different minor specializations, including: one minor in Chemistry; one in Business Administration; one in Theatre Arts; and one double-minor in Journalism and Psychology.

### 2.1. Course Design

The course was organized in the following way: students were first introduced to a theoretical lens by reading and discussing a chapter in Klages' *Literary theory* (2017). In the informational class session, the instructor gave a lecture, with opportunities for student input and questions, accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation later made available on Blackboard. In the subsequent class session, students were asked to apply the concepts they had learned to a children's book: for example, applying a Marxist lens to Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax* (1971) or a queer studies lens to Richardson and Parnell's *And Tango makes three* (2005). This was followed by another session during which students gave 10-minute oral presentations to the class based on critical articles that directly apply the lens under consideration. Theoretical lenses were often combined in the articles, thus supplying students with "mentor" texts "to be studied and imitated" when writing their own intersectional analyses (NWP, 2013).

To prepare the students, most of whom were unfamiliar with literary theory, for a high-stakes literary analysis essay, several scaffolding activities were assigned throughout the semester, including two hour-long quizzes on theoretical lenses; one in-class presentation on an academic article analyzing an assigned children's book; and regular small group discussions with a note-

taking component and occasional individual writing activities, both shared in a Google Doc. The literary analysis essay was further scaffolded, broken down into several components: an informal proposal, including the chosen title and two or more relevant theoretical lenses; a draft, which received extensive comments, but no grade; and the revised final draft, which received both comments and a grade. These were all designed to meet the main course objective: becoming familiar with a variety of literary and cultural theories, theorists, and theoretical lenses and applying these lenses to textual and visual analyses of children's literature.

Although the five low-stakes reflections on learning submitted on Blackboard were not part of this scaffolding process, they provided valuable opportunities for students to reflect and self-assess, and also information to the teacher about their learning. The students were asked to write "a snapshot of your learning process, progress, or challenges" every three weeks. As the instructions were open-ended, these blog entries ranged from reflections on external factors, such as job pressures and mental health, to more focused assessments of personal efforts in the class or reactions to individual assignments or grades. The students were informed that their blog entries would be viewable by their peers as well as the teacher, and though there was no requirement for others to read or respond, such interaction was appreciated. Everyone got full credit simply for completing these reflections on time; they were not graded, but did receive brief comments from the teacher. Occasionally, one or two anonymized reflections were shared in the class PowerPoint to provide "models" and/or inspiration.

## 2.2. Method

For the purposes of analysis, the low-stakes reflections on learning were anonymized, with letters A-L assigned to students instead of names. Through an inductive thematic analysis, two initial codes and five common themes were identified. Student responses coded as "children's books" were found to engage with two themes: 1. appreciating the use of children's books, perceived as familiar and/or simple; and 2. recognizing the differences in understanding between an adult and a child perspective (imagined or recollected). Student responses coded as "literary theory" engaged with three themes, two of which were the opposite sides of the same issue: 3. successes with learning and applying literary theory; 4. difficulties with learning and applying literary theory; and 5. the need for more examples of applying theoretical lenses to texts. Coding something as "children's literature" was not meant to bypass the challenges of defining "children's literature" (Gannon, 1992, p. 59), nor the critical questions this genre entails, such as "the child-adult response," the social function of children's literature, multiculturalism (and ethnocentrism), and censorship (Sadler, 1992, p. 145). These and other issues were addressed throughout the course, but not explicit in the collected data.

### 3. Results

Using representative quotations from the anonymized student data, the following offers a report of how the researcher interprets the role of low-stakes reflections on learning in teaching literary theory through children's books. A synchronic thematic analysis reveals that, on average, students engage with one of the themes in any given reflection; those entries which engage with two or more themes are of special interest and are, in turn, analyzed diachronically below.

#### 3.1. Synchronic analysis of reflections on learning

##### 3.1.1 Appreciating the use of children's books

Of the 12 students, nine mentioned their appreciation for children's books. More precisely, the students wrote about how they "appreciate looking back on children's literature, especially stories which I was read during my childhood" and "appreciated as a kid" (B), also noting that, contrary to their expectation, "we would [not] have to move up in our reading level and try to analyze books that probably I would not even understand," but rather "go back to the basics and read these children's stories and find theories within them" (E), adding that it was "really cool to [...] begin to make connections to something that seems so simple and easy" (F). One student felt "a lot more comfortable and prepared for the class" as they<sup>1</sup> "had a previous background with children's literature exposing me to racism, feminism, depression, etc." (J); echoing this, another student commented on their increased level of comfort due to "prior knowledge" of both children's literature and theory (L).

In some instances, the students' entries combined the appreciation for children's books with other themes, such as the difficulty of comprehending academic discourse (4.): "I do really enjoy the children's literature portion of the course, and I like analyzing those generally, but it is the academic style of language that I can't seem to connect with" (I).

##### 3.1.2 Recognizing the differences between an "adult" and a child perspective

Five students commented on the differences between "adult" and child perspectives, noting that theoretically-informed interpretations offer "an interesting take" on a familiar text (G); are "much deeper than I originally thought" (A); suggest that children's texts are "so deep in [ideological] controversy" (C); and also "that children's books could be analyzed in ways that a child wouldn't quite understand yet" (L). Perceiving children's books (but not children) as simple, one student expressed their curiosity "as to how literary analysis (analyses) could possibly be

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<sup>1</sup> The pronoun "they" (in the singular) is used to refer to the student so as not to reveal their gender and potentially compromise their anonymity, and also to minimize any gendered assumptions.

applied to a format designed to use simplified storytelling as a tool in childrens' education"; describing theoretical interpretations as "pretty deep subtext," the student wondered, "can a child's brain development grasp such things?" (D). Yet, this student also conceded that "adults often underestimate the capacity for understanding within a child," and that certain "short" texts may offer "a lot to unpack" (D). Similarly, in their discussion notes on psychoanalyzing Sendak's *Where the wild things are* (1963), the students alleged that a "deeper" interpretation "takes away a child's imagination."

### 3.1.3 Successes with learning and applying literary theory

Six of the 12 students self-evaluated their personal efforts as being successful. They described theory as "making a lot more sense" and themselves as "feel[ing] more confident in my abilities to speak on each of the lenses that we have covered" (G). Echoing the feeling of "comfort," another student added, "I have a better grasp and understanding of these theories and lenses than I have ever before" (B). Along similar lines, one student admitted to expanding their horizons: "I am doing better at keeping an open mind and really focusing on the content" and gaining "a great handle on all of these lenses" (I). Moreover, students expressed their confidence about applying theory beyond children's books to "adult literature as well" (C) and "anything you come across in life [to] obtain a deeper level of understanding" (H).

### 3.1.4 Difficulties with learning and applying literary theory

Nine of the 12 enrolled students also mentioned their difficulties with learning and applying theory, finding theoretical lenses "[a]s of right now, [...] to be a bit confusing" (G); "get[ting] confused when we have multiple people describing the same theory differently" (K); "get[ting] lost" when identifying specific theories that had been applied to a text (E); "struggling to really connect with the content of the course, despite reading and re-reading the texts" (I); and "feel[ing] confused about applying the concepts" and (following a quiz) "doubting if I completely grasped what we've been learning" (A). One student had trouble "grasp[ing] a concept without a concrete definition of a term before talking extensively on this topic," and so they "decided to take my peer's advice (from the last informal blog) and conduct contextual research on my own before completing the upcoming assignment. This helped tremendously with my confidence" (H). This is evidence of student collaborative learning and confidence building from reading their peers' reflections.

### 3.1.5 The need for more examples of applying theoretical lenses to texts

Four students thought that the teacher should offer more examples of theoretical applications. One wished that different texts had been assigned (D); another requested "more time" for



discussion, application, and questions (A); and two—more examples of “how to apply” the various lenses (J, G). The students’ anxiety about misapplying theoretical lenses to texts was corroborated by an informal midterm assessment survey, wherein they mentioned “applying” or “using” theories or lenses eight times in response to three different questions: what has caused the most difficulty, what questions they had about the next assignment, and what they were still hoping to learn. Only one student explicitly questioned the relevance of theoretical approaches—“why we use them” (G); hence, this initially identified theme (6. relevance) was removed for lack of incidence and frequency.

### 3.2 Diachronic analysis of reflections on learning

A diachronic analysis of reflections on learning suggests a traceable trajectory in student learning. Two examples were considered in which four or five of the coded themes were identified; entries from the beginning of the semester were compared to subsequent ones, noting any growth in learning and confidence building.

#### 3.2.1 Student G

Student G’s five entries evidenced such a trajectory and were exemplary in their comprehensiveness, as all five coded themes appear at least once. In the first reflection, Student G engaged with four of the five themes: unfamiliar with theorizing literature “much deeper than” for enjoyment or information-gathering, the student found theoretical lenses “a bit confusing” (4.), adding that “it will help to be shown more examples in class about how we use these theories, and also why we use them” (5.). The student also acknowledged the accessibility of children’s literature (1.): “I am glad that we are learning these theories through children’s literature, at least I have familiarity with those.” By the third blog, the student felt more confident: “The theories are making a lot more sense and the ways that we use them as lenses for literature have become clearer as well” (G). By the fourth, they were also learning to appreciate the differences between an adult/child or expert/lay perspective (2.), noting that the critical article “had such an interesting take on the story that was so different from how I have always seen [Rey & Rey’s] *Curious Goerge* [1941]” (G). In the final blog, the student self-evaluated their progress as meeting the course objectives: “I feel confident in my abilities to speak on each of the lenses that we have covered. [...] I understand the basic principles of each and also how I could apply them to a reading,” thereby recognizing their success in applying theoretical lenses to children’s books (3.).

#### 3.2.2 Student L

A second diachronic analysis of Student L's reflections on learning revealed a similar trajectory. In the first reflection, Student L admitted the difficulty of understanding literary theory and deconstruction in particular (4.), but also conceded that applying a deconstructionist lens to a familiar children's text made it less intimidating (1. and 3.): "However, trying to do a deconstruction of a book like *The Cat in the Hat* is easier to accomplish because the writing style is more digestible, even though the potential for analysis is similar." In the second entry, the student expressed more confidence about participating in discussion due to prior knowledge of the children's text and the theoretical lens: "I was able to participate more in the analysis of [Silverstein's] *The Giving Tree* [1964] because I had a prior knowledge of both the children's book AND feminist theory." By their fourth entry, Student L's comments seemed enthusiastic, describing unfamiliar children's books as "more interesting to me, as they were ones I hadn't heard of or read myself before, which made them more exciting," thus confirming their appreciation for children's books (1.). The final blog exemplified both (3.) successes with theory and (2.) differences in perspective: "this class has taught me so much more about English analysis and ways it can be applied than I ever thought; I didn't realize that children's books could be analyzed in ways that a child wouldn't quite understand yet" (L).

## 4. Discussion

In this section, the results are contextualized by relating them to larger issues at the intersection of children's literature and literary theory, including lay and academic skepticism about applying theory to books for child/younger readers. The researcher's initial assumption that college students would resist applying theory to their cherished books from childhood is discussed, along with some implications for forging student agency and collaborative learning.

### 4.1. Applying theory to children's literature

In *Teaching children's literature*, Sadler (1992) wrote, "children's literature—as an academic discipline for instruction and serious research—is no longer just for children" (p.146). The first seminar on children's literature at the Modern Language Association was held in 1969 in Denver, Colorado, though courses in the field had been offered much earlier (Sadler, 1992, p. 144). Yet three decades later, "children's literature" still seemed "a contradiction in terms," with some objecting to the extension of the value of "literariness" to "books designed for an audience of limited experience, knowledge, skill and sophistication" (Hunt, 2001, p. 2). It is "a non-subject" for many academics, deemed unfit for scholarly inquiry, whereas to those outside of academia, it is a sacred space for educating and entertaining children to be shielded from pleasure-denying theorists (Hunt, 1991, pp. 5-6). The former informs the opinion that anyone, regardless of

training, can be an “expert” in children’s literature, the latter—that children’s books are “all on the side of the angels,” innocent, “ideologically neutral,” and not to be meddled with (Hunt, 1991, p. 142). However, “far from inhabiting some unworldly, unfallen plane, children’s literature is not only *necessarily* infused with and part of the ideological structure of our world, but it is more prone to manipulation than most” (Hunt, 2001, p. 20).

Theory is equally fraught. It is often perceived by academics and laypersons alike as riddled with pretentious jargon, needlessly complicated, and impractical at best, while at worst—unpatriotic, dangerous, and inappropriate for classrooms. The current onslaught of bills censoring critical race theory and the teaching of gender and sexuality across the U.S. (ACLU, 2022) is an extreme example of the suspicious, and often paradoxical, attitude toward literary theory and children’s literature. Although many people deny that they were shaped by their early reading (“I read xyz when I was a child, and it didn’t do *me* any harm”), they also consider childhood an important life-stage and children, “vulnerable, susceptible, and [to] be protected from manipulation” (Hunt, 1999, p. 2).

This paradoxical attitude toward children’s literature—that it is “important—and yet it is not” (Hunt, 1999, p. 2)—makes it an engaging subject for college students, who are figuring out what is meant by “literature” and “theory,” and what makes their study worthwhile.

Informal reflections on learning are telling in this regard; combining the appreciation for children’s books with the difficulty of comprehending academic/theoretical discourse, these data instantiate what Hunt (1999) identifies as the tensions at the intersection of theory and children’s books.

To quote Student I’s reflection, “I do really enjoy the children’s literature portion of the course [...] but it is the academic style of language that I can’t seem to connect with.”

Pedagogically pertinent is the general agreement among the students about the benefits of applying literary theory to children’s literature, with 75% of the students registering their appreciation with phrases like “appreciated as a kid” (B), “really cool” and “so simple and easy” (F). That familiarity with children’s literature made more than one student “comfortable” (J, B) and even “excited” (A, I, L) suggests that there is value to introducing theory in this way. Admittedly, being non-experts, students might overestimate their

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own progress; however, at the introductory level, comfort and confidence in applying literary theory could be considered more important than the precision with which such application is made. This builds on Hunt's (1991) "Anyone can be an expert" attitude: "Adults who would feel unqualified to express even an opinion about a peer-text feel free to talk about children's books because they do not have the shadow of the schoolteacher's 'right answer' hanging over their heads" (p. 144). The attitude is corroborated by the student data, and it is not necessarily bad. The perceived accessibility of children's books can be turned into learning opportunities, especially for majors other than in English Language or Literature.

In the notes to their small-group discussions, students similarly commented that applying theoretical lenses to children's books made the literary theory less confusing and the children's books more enjoyable, because theory opened familiar stories up to multiple new interpretations. When applying a deconstructionist lens to Dr. Seuss' *The cat in the hat comes back* (1958), for example, one group wrote: "Once you've read the book a few times, the entire basis of it (or the structure) gets boring. As you add in more possible theories and meanings that you can apply, its more enjoyable because you can almost turn any part of the book into something else." The students also stated: "Used as a lens, readers can see stories in a different light." When discussing Andersen's *The little mermaid* (1837), one group shared: "A feminist reading gives the little mermaid's sisters more value in the story when they give up their hair for her. It also makes it more entertaining because it allows you to look deeper into the story by giving the women goals and their own identities."

Moreover, in their literary analysis essays, students approached children's literature as complex, ideologically rich, and multivalent. Although some reiterated the texts' more obvious didactic purpose, largely, though with varying degrees of sophistication, the students' thesis paragraphs reflected their awareness of how children's books and films shape kids by introducing them to diversity, adversity, and other mature issues. For example, feminism and queer theories helped one student interpret Disney's *Mulan* (1998) as "a much bigger movie than we thought it was" (C); a focus on gender and race added "an additional element to the story" of *Cinderella* (1809) (G); race, postcolonialism, and animal studies offered "different perspectives [to] unearth a deeper understanding" of *Kung Fu Panda* (2008) (F); structuralism, feminism, and race studies similarly offered "a powerful critique of several social problems like discrimination and prejudice in today's society" in the film *Zootopia* (2016) (H); and feminism and Marxism "show[ed] how the inequality of the characters is developed and created throughout [*The lion king*, 1994]" (J). Combining feminism with ecocriticism, one student re-read *The giving tree* as "a layered criticism of chauvinistic, privileged mentalities and borderline-hedonistic consumption of

natural resources" (D); another student applied the same combination to the Disney film *Moana* (2016) to trace "a theme of women's empowerment [...] while also highlighting and advocating for environmental change" (L).

The cognitive dissonance around children's texts—as both influential socializing forces and too simple to contain ideological messaging—is also evident in the data. One student contrasted the "pretty deep subtext" of literary analysis, presumably a sophisticated adult enterprise, with the "simplified storytelling" meant for child/younger readers (D). Another student described the question of influence as "still to be decided" (C), thereby reiterating the opinion that children's books are simultaneously important and unimportant. But this could also be used pedagogically to introduce students to the differences between adults' and children's reading experiences: the child's might be analyzed in terms of the reception of the work and its psychological implications for a specific reader/listener, whereas the adult's would include matters of literary history, genre, trope, and a close reading or *explication du texte* (McGillis, 1996, p. 5).

#### 4.2. Resistance to "adult" perspectives on children's books

Contrary to the literature on the subject, the re-encounter of texts familiar from childhood did not produce much resistance. Knoepfmacher (1992) anticipates that, when re-encountering children's books, the "new" interpretation "amends, complicates, and even disturbs the memory of earlier perceptions," forcing the student "to recognize a conflict in reader positions that need to be accommodated" (p. 1). Sadler (1992) warns prospective teachers of "the student's frequent sentimental distrust of taking any critical approach at all to the subject"; due to their deep affective bonds, "[s]uch students often find themselves trying, emotionally, to hold on to their own childhood dreams as they are being asked intellectually to confront issues they would rather not be told exist in *their favorite children's book*" (p. 145).

It was only in a few cases that the students objected to a theoretical (mis)interpretation. For example, in their discussion of *The little mermaid* through a disability studies lens, they noted that, as children, they felt empathy for the (Disney) mermaid, but "didn't necessarily label her with a disability." The students added that, rather than disability, they "thought of [the mermaid] as a completely different species, so for her losing her tail and learning to walk is going to be difficult [...] Similar to a toddler learning to walk." Objections were also raised to psychoanalytical interpretations as "reading too much into it." Cases like these can be transformed into teachable moments for instructors and students to "participat[e] in a creative tension that reproduces an adult author's own activation of a latent child self in fashioning a text simultaneously addressed to child and grown-up" (Knoepfmacher, 1992, p. 1).

### 4.3. From self-reflective to collaborative learning

Along with providing opportunities for the instructor to gauge the students' level of comfort and familiarity with theoretical lenses from their self-assessment of their personal efforts, in at least one instance the informal blog provided an opportunity for collaborative learning; it also led to a student taking agency over their own learning process based on something their peer had mentioned in their reflection. Commenting on struggling with literary theory ("It was difficult for me to grasp a concept without a concrete definition of a term before talking extensively on this topic"), this student "decided to take my peer's advice (from the last informal blog) and conduct contextual research on my own before completing the upcoming assignment. This helped tremendously with my confidence" (H). Although the students were not required to read others' entries, this demonstrates that some did and put that reading to good use by learning collaboratively from others and thereby empowering themselves.

## 5. Conclusions

This study suggests that teaching literary theory through children's books can engage college students in their learning and assist in the comprehension of difficult theoretical concepts, such as literary theories and theoretical lenses. Low-stakes reflections on learning provide opportunities for students to reflect on and self-evaluate their successes and struggles with course content, and for instructors to gauge and adjust for student comprehension.

Furthermore, a teacher could use informal reflections on learning to model and improve reflective writing skills (Ryan, 2011).

Because demographics were not collected for the current study, further research is

**Low-stakes reflections on learning provide opportunities for students to reflect on and self-evaluate their successes and struggles with course content, and for instructors to gauge and adjust for student comprehension.**

recommended to investigate whether class, gender, race/ethnicity, ability, and other identity factors, along with the students' previous exposure to literature, aid in their comprehension of literary theory. The number and types of children's books students were exposed to in childhood might also influence their appreciation of or resistance to theory upon re-encountering those texts as adults.

One area for development is visual analysis. Especially when analyzing picturebooks for younger readers, one must consider both the words and the illustrations, as well as the often complex interrelationships between them. Nodelman (1999) points out that picturebooks are "inherently ironic" and in

need of “decoding,” effectively “turn[ing] readers into semioticians” (p. 79). With half of the students choosing popular films to analyze in their final course essays, a number that is likely to increase given the decline in literary reading over the past several decades (NEA, 2002) and the appeal of digital media among teenagers (Twenge, Martin, & Spitzberg, 2019), the visual becomes integral. Although visual elements were not mentioned in the reflections on learning, at least one informal writing activity addressed it by asking the students to focus on the illustrations in Love’s *Julián is a mermaid* (2018), a visually rich yet verbally economical book about a gender non-conforming child. Such activities could assist students in exploring the intricacies of children’s visual perception, such as how young children learn about hierarchical valuation: who is at the center, who is named and therefore, who is important, and the intriguing implications of this for children assuming “subject positions” and acquiring cultural assumptions (Nodelman, 1999, p. 73).

To conclude, the researcher invites other teachers to entertain this approach to teaching literary theory and to use low-stakes reflections on learning as a tool for students to reflect on children’s literature. Consider it an imperative even, given the widespread banning of children’s books, like *And Tango makes three* (Peters, 2016), in secondary-education facilities across the United States. This way, even those students who do not encounter diverse children’s books prior to college can be exposed to them, while teachers-in-training can bring the insights of literary theory, if not the books themselves, into their future classrooms.

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