

Everything I Need to Know about Teaching I Learned from *Beowulf*

With wit and humor, frequent EJ author Ruth R. Caillouet draws on an ancient warrior to offer tips to new and experienced teachers on how to survive our battles—and even win some!

Beginning a school year with *Beowulf* seems to set things in their natural order. Begin with the beginning—or as close to a beginning of English language as we can. Students benefit from studying *Beowulf* in ways that their study of other ancient tales such as Greek legends and myths cannot compare. While Oedipus warns

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against trying to escape fate and sleeping with a parent and Medea against killing children, *Beowulf* has more practical connections with today's world. Not only does the tale provide students with an action-packed heroic adventure, but it also demonstrates the power of language and a rich tradition of storytelling.

Students can witness a story's transformation in response to oral and historical influences as well as the effects of point of view, politics, and religion.

My lessons on *Beowulf* always begin with art. I want students to see the multifaceted nature of the Anglo Saxons, a warlike people who loved beautiful objects. Using images of artifacts from the period, I can illustrate the tale's key points and explain the intricacies of several descriptive passages. Also through art I involve students in their own rich stories. I use a “life map” activity to encourage students to remember key moments in their own heroic journeys. They create simple illustrations of these incidents on paper and then share the experiences in small groups. Through the act of

these storytelling sessions, students begin to see the true nature of the tale and its oral tradition.

Even more important, however, than these obvious advantages and ideas for teaching the tale is *Beowulf*'s strength as a model for teaching. The story can help us understand some of the key guidelines to successful lives in the classroom, guidelines that serve first-year teachers as well as the more experienced educators. From *Beowulf*, we learn the lessons of a warrior—lessons that can lead to victory in fighting the dragons of a school day.

Lesson #1: Honor the King and Queen

Every good teacher needs a kingdom of her or his own where she or he can feel comfortable, confident, and courageous. And even though American schools are not literally ruled by kings and queens, there is a host of royalty in the form of supervisors and principals—administrators who hold tough jobs that most of us would not want ourselves. They protect us from evil or at least give us the chance to fight our own battles and sometimes save the kingdom. Like Hrothgar, they are the “ring givers,” the generous souls who share the fruits of victory with us. They deserve our respect, support, and honor. If we find ourselves in a kingdom with an unworthy king, then we should journey to a new land where there is a king or queen worthy of our service.

Lesson #2: Never Underestimate Heritage and Reputation

Beowulf has a clearly established reputation and good name even before he faces Grendel. If we establish a strong reputation as teachers who command

respect and believe in the power of learning, half the battle is won before we begin the fight. But respect works both ways. Beowulf is also suitably impressed by the long line of kings in Hrothgar's ancestral line. The lesson here is to learn and respect the school's community and our students. I have often advised my new teachers to follow the buses. If we take time to understand our students' environment, we can better serve their needs. This is of ultimate importance to the English teacher since we are asking students to pour their souls onto paper and out loud—a feat that requires trust and good faith. Before starting the fight, we should also take time to meet the other warriors and especially learn their unique and special skills (as well as who is married to whom). Like Beowulf, who has to gain the faith of Unferth before he completes the mission, we too must have respect for our fellow teachers before we can expect their respect. So, it is important to establish a professional reputation, but it's also important to drink beer in the mead hall (or at least eat sandwiches at the lunch table) with our fellow fighters.

Lesson #3: Beware the Grendels

Beowulf is a proud hero who is quick to tell anyone willing to listen that he is the strongest and most worthy fighter in the kingdom. We cannot all have Beowulf's superhuman strength and special abilities, but we all have unique strengths that make us powerful teachers. The Grendels in a teaching day can be an administrator, a troubled student, the paper load, or even standardized tests, but we cannot conquer any of these by abandoning the mead hall and living in fear. Facing the Grendels with strength, cunning, and confidence is the only way to succeed. Students, administrators, and fellow teachers respond to confidence and spirit. We need to avoid the negative energy that sometimes emanates from the bog in the teachers lounge. If we are to continue to teach English, we need to adopt Beowulf's positive force and even a little of his cockiness.

Lesson #4: Beware the Grendels' Mothers Even More

Everyone who has read *Beowulf* remembers that Grendel's mother proves to be a much stronger opponent than Grendel. She is a seasoned warrior

herself, and she has the protective wrath of motherhood on her side. Although she is vicious and deadly, most of my students have always sympathized with this poor creature who kills only to avenge the death of her son. That mother's passion did not die with the Dark Ages. Children are precious to their parents—even if they sometimes behave like monsters. We need to take that knowledge into every parent conference and every note home. The English teacher may face parental challenges as we demand more of students. Although parents may sometimes seem like ferocious monsters, we need to remember that we all truly want the best thing for the child. We can never calm the beast by becoming monsters ourselves.

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Lesson #5: Make Ready the Battle Gear

Perhaps the most important part of good teaching is preparing the battle gear. Just as Beowulf knew he needed different weapons for each opponent, so must we as English teachers. Carrying an iron shield instead of the usual wooden one when facing a fire-breathing dragon shows foresight and intelligence. Wearing mail to deflect the sharp claws of sea creatures is crucial to winning the battle with Grendel's mom. An English teacher's weapons are perhaps not so flashy or sharp, but they are equally important. Our battle gear consists of good resources, sound strategies, a breadth of knowledge, and a strong belief in the importance of what we are doing. We need the knowledge that brings confidence, and we need a clear rationale for the literature and writing that we are teaching—especially anything remotely controversial. We must choose literature and writing that is true to our hearts—literature we would stake our lives on.

Lesson #6: Choose Your Battles

Dragons can be deadly. It is important to recognize our limitations. Even Beowulf lost warriors and died himself in the end. Not all students are ready to be warriors and not all dragons can be killed. We need



to focus our energies on the battles we can win. It does not help the profession or our students if we allow society's many problems to distract us from the mission. That does not mean we should not fight for better schools, better tests, better communities, but we have to continue the battle at hand while doing so. We have to remember that we *can* change the world, but we must do so one classroom—or even one student—at a time.

Lesson #7: Gather Thirteen Warriors

Teaching is a lonely profession. The demands on a young English teacher can be particularly stressful. New teachers, in particular, often feel isolated from

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the rest of the school community. When we shut the classroom door and face our students, it's easy to feel cut off from all support. We experienced teachers should not allow that to happen. English departments must embrace their fellow warriors and welcome the new recruits. After all, they are the future Beowulfs. If this does not happen, then new teachers must sometimes find their own support system. Remember that Beowulf took thirteen of his bravest warriors with him to Hrothgar's kingdom. If the welcome committee does not arrive, I have always reminded my new teachers that they are still not alone. Their university support system and fellow rookies are always willing to share the trials of the day. We have even been known to buy the mead.

Lesson #8: Be a Good Leader

We do not know much about Beowulf as a king, but we do know that he takes full responsibility for his kingdom. Although he did not steal the treasured cup that woke the fearsome fire dragon, he still absorbs the blame. As English teachers we must shoulder the full responsibility of our precious mission and face each quest with courage and conviction without worrying about who woke the beast. But good leaders must also realize that they should not carry entire burdens themselves. If we are the only warriors heaving the book bags at the end of the day, then we are missing a crucial part of the battle plan. We must inspire students to take on the fire dragon of learning, too. I have always felt that Beowulf's crucial mistake in the end was believing that he was the only one who could save the kingdom. Our job as good leaders is to pass on the heroism to all our charges.

Lesson #9: Know When to Quit


Perhaps Beowulf could have lived if he had faced his limitations. Perhaps he could have survived if he had retreated and gathered his forces again. All warriors have limits. As much as we might enjoy thinking it, we are not invincible. We cannot push ourselves to the breaking point, or we will lose the fight every time. English teachers need to remember to take control of the paper load and not try to fight every battle at once. If we vary the due dates of the incoming essays and projects, we can keep up the good fight. We also must know when to take a break. Teachers will last longer in the profession if they keep their weekends precious. We must take the time to rest our minds and bodies. More than anything else, we need to save some time for ourselves, some time to read and write and do all of the things that drew us to this profession to begin with.

Lesson #10: Find Your Wiglaf

Perhaps the most important lesson we take from *Beowulf* is in the character of Wiglaf. Wiglaf is the only member of Beowulf's troops who stays by the hero's side in the final battle. He is the faithful companion who braves the flames and venomous fangs to fight the dragon with Beowulf. More importantly, he is Beowulf's cheerleader. When

Beowulf begins to feel certain defeat against this fierce enemy, when he is at his lowest in morale, and when the old king is ready to give up the fight, in steps Wiglaf. Wiglaf shouts to Beowulf about his great deeds and reminds him of his true heroism and bravery. His words inspire Beowulf to continue the fight, but Wiglaf does not stop with mere words. He joins in the battle and strikes the crucial blow against the dragon. Without him, the battle could not have been won. We all need a Wiglaf in our day. We need someone to cheer us on and remind us of our strengths. We need the friend who will work the long hours with us on those special projects, the person who can help heal our battle wounds and share in our struggles. And when that person is not available, we need to be able to find our inner Wiglaf, the voice that spurs us on. Without it, we cannot win the battle.

These are the lessons from *Beowulf* that have inspired me and my preservice and first-year English teachers over the years. Those of us who grew up in rural Louisiana in the 1960s did not have the benefit of kindergarten—where Robert Fulghum

claims he learned everything he really needs to know—so we were forced to get our inspirations elsewhere. I know that some will shy away from choosing a warrior for their inspiration, but the harsh realities of teaching in today's classrooms require courageous souls. In a world of school shootings, drug searches, metal detectors, and senseless acts of violence complicated by the pressures of high-stakes testing, this has become the job for superheroes. So, with apologies to Robert Fulghum, I pass on the strength of a warrior. 

We need someone to cheer us on and remind us of our strengths. We need the friend who will work the long hours with us on those special projects, the person who can help heal our battle wounds and share in our struggles.

Works Cited

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Ruth R. Caillouet has recently accepted the quest of establishing a new program for secondary English certification as associate professor of English at Clayton State University and so will leave her home and Southeastern Louisiana University to journey to the faraway land of Morrow, Georgia. After developing her superpowers teaching grades 7–12 for 20 years in rural Louisiana high schools, she now enjoys sharing her passions for adolescent literature, the novels of Toni Morrison, women warriors, and teaching peace in times of war with her preservice teachers. She may be reached at ruthcaillouet@mail.clayton.edu.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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Caillouet begins her teaching of *Beowulf* with art, including the activity of creating a “life map.” “Graphic Life Map” further explains this idea. Students brainstorm as a whole class and define pivotal moments in their lives. Once items have been recalled, students focus on details of these events by choosing graphic symbols for these moments, people, and places, narrowing their lists to eight to ten items, and then ranking and graphing the items so that the overall connections and patterns are revealed. The graphic life map not only gives students specific events to write about but also includes a graphic for each memory that will help bring the events to life. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=74