Teachin' Books Episode 1.16 - Interview with Jordan Bolay / Dungeons and Dragons

[Music: "Homer Said" by Dyalla Swain]

Jessica McDonald 0:10

Hey! This is Teachin' Books, a podcast all about the ways people teach, learn, and work with literature and other things and like sometimes games! More about that in a second. First of all, I'm Jessica McDonald, if you didn't already know, and on today's episode I'm chatting with Jordan Bolay. Jordan holds a PhD from the University of Calgary on Treaty Seven territory, and currently teaches English at Pearson College UWC on unceded Sc'ianew territory on Vancouver Island. And yeah, today we are talking about Dungeons & Dragons, or D&D as we refer to it a few times in the episode, which is, If you're not familiar, a fantasy tabletop role-playing game that Jordan will describe in much more detail than that and very beautifully, I might add, in our actual chat. I was so excited that Jordan answered my unspoken dreams when I approached him to come on the podcast and he said he would be teaching D&D this semester. I hadn't told really anyone that I wanted I guess to have an episode on D&D but because I got really into it over the last year, virtually, of course, I have been thinking about and hoping for and dreaming for somebody to come on and talk about teaching D&D. So now my dreams have come true. So thank you, Jordan. If you're a D&D player, of course, I think you'll love this chat but if you're not there is a lot in our chat that applies to other things like games more generally, to teaching, to teaching with games and with play, role-playing in the classroom, and lots of other topics that I think that, and hope that, you'll find neat. So stay tuned.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 2:09

So usually how I start this is just getting, getting folks to tell the listeners about themselves. So, do you want to tell the listeners anything you like about yourself, introduce yourself.

Jordan Bolay 2:20

Yeah, absolutely. Um, hello everyone my name is Jordan Bolay. My pronouns are he / him. I'm currently living on the unceded territory of the Lekwungen People, which is in Victoria BC. And for me, education has sort of been a family business basically. Everyone in my family has been in education in some way, shape, or form. My mom was a teacher for almost 40 years. My dad was an educational assistant and also a language assistant in the school system for many years. My sister is an educational assistant with special needs students, and my brother is now also working as an educational assistant and thinking of going to school to go into education. So when I started off in the sciences, and then eventually wound up pursuing English and going into higher education, it was sort of just following the family business. I

have a BA and an MA in English from the University of Saskatchewan on Treaty Six territory. I hold a PhD from the University of Calgary on Treaty Seven territory where I focused on Canadian literature and archives working under Aretha van Herk, who's a fairly well known western Canadian author and literary critic. But also my sort of secondary research interests were new media and pop culture, looking at things like graphic novels and video games, and so that's how I got into what we're gonna be talking about today with Dungeons and Dragons. Now, I'm teaching English Language and Literature at Lester B. Pearson College, which is part of the United World Colleges. I can talk a bit more about that later. And that's on the unceded territory of the Sc'ianew people in Pedder Bay, just sort of outside of Victoria in BC.

Jess 4:13

Lovely! It's so nice hearing about -- I think I knew bits and pieces of that of that bio and your history and of course we have the Canadian literature connection, which maybe would make sense for us to talk about today but, because we both have studied CanLit and have been so you know wrapped up in CanLit as teachers and as grad students for a long time, but we're not, as we've said. I am so excited that we are talking about D&D Because I already told Jordan this in a previous exchange but I was just hoping like in my bones that I would find somebody to talk about D&D on the podcast because I got really into it last year over the pandemic. I've only actually played D&D virtually because of, essentially the pandemic, except for one single time, one session before sort of everything hit in Saskatoon. But I would love if you would tell us a little bit about this text I guess, if I can use that word liberally, D&D -- Dungeons and Dragons, sorry, I should say -- that we're going to talk about today because like I said, I'm so excited that you that you taught it and that you're willing to come on and talk about it.

Jordan 5:16

Yeah, absolutely, it's it's something I've wanted to teach for a long time and get people talking about in a textual sense. So yeah 100% agree with with your liberal use of the word "text" there. And that's something I actually got my students to debate is to what extent D&D is a text. So yeah, I'm going to be talking about Dungeons and Dragons, which is a medieval fantasy tabletop role-playing game. So for those unfamiliar, these are games that are played on a tabletop and they involve role playing. So you create a character in a given setting -- D&D is generally medieval fantasy -- and then you role play as that character. And so when you create the character, you have a whole bunch of things that you can choose from, like what kind of job they have, what kind of creature they are, because there are different fantastical races like elves and dwarves. And you can also choose things like their background, what they did before they went on an adventure, their personality traits, all of that kind of stuff can be customized, but there are also rules associated with all of this because it is a game. And so you have dice that you roll to determine outcomes for different decisions or actions you want to take, and you generally have what we call a Dungeon Master or a Game Master, or abbreviated a DM, and that's the person who's sort of the arbiter of the rules. They also, if we're talking in terms of texts, you can think of them as the "narrator," right, they're the person who sort of describes the setting, describes other characters you meet, provides dialogue for some of those characters. And then basically how the game plays out is the players say "this is what I would like my character to do," the DM decides, "Okay, what are the

parameters for actually succeeding at doing that?" and then you often roll some dice, look at some stats on your character sheet, and that determines the level of success or the outcome that happens, which the DM again describes.

Jess 7:15

The way that you just described it was such a amazing encapsulation of all of the complexities that D&D involves because I think that's one of the scary things for me and maybe from an administrative perspective is just how for me like how intimidating it was to start playing. It just felt like there was just a whole world of rules and a whole, well the handbook, the D&D handbook, which I actually only have an online copy, but it's like big and intimidating and... And yeah, I could see how, even just that aspect of, of thinking about teaching this text, could be could pose some challenges or could be intimidating just because it was for me. But you explained it in a way that was so clear. So, so thank you for that.

Jordan 7:57

No for sure. It's definitely like a huge learning curve, though right? Like we're dealing with, even in the core rulebook alone, like hundreds of pages of rules and then if you bring in other books, even more. And this is a game with, you know, 35, years of history. They're on the fifth edition of it, so there's there's that whole back catalogue to deal with. And then there's also the aspect of, of it being a game right? As soon as you say "game," people are unsure how to approach it, right? You said, you know, "with a liberal definition of text," right? A lot of people wouldn't necessarily treat this in the way we treat other texts, especially literary texts.

Jess 8:37

And if it is, I guess my next question to you will be about the class that you're teaching this in but if you do position a text like this in the middle of a class with other texts that are more conservatively texts, or more strictly texts, like written down books, then I could see how students would have to sort of negotiate and figure out what reading strategies or engagement strategies are going to be useful for them in this kind of a text, that's a game, versus in a novel or versus a play or a comic. Like, there's some sort of like negotiation of reading strategies or engagement strategies that probably needs to happen. So yeah, let me ask you that I know you said a little bit about the institution you're working within, but just very basically like what was the class that you taught this in or that you're teaching this in.

Jordan 9:25

Yeah, absolutely. So yeah, we do teach comics, which, which helps, and also Pearson... We're very big on experiential learning. And so that was actually the primary angle I approached this from is it's a way for students to engage directly with the text through, and with ideas of performance in a very hands on way because experiential learning is something that's often more challenging in English classrooms right? It's

like well we sit around and we read books, how experiential, can you get? So being able to perform a text and create the characters in the text was a big part of that.

Jordan 10:02

But yeah, so, like I said Pearson is part of the United World College movement. So this is 18 colleges around the world. And they are, they're college age, so these students are about 17 to 19 years old. So they're sort of end of high school beginning of university age. And these colleges have a movement for intentional diversity. So even though the colleges are all over the world, they take students from all over the world, and send them to each of the colleges. And the movement is very much focused on peace and sustainability. And so it's bringing folks together from all different backgrounds, people who are very involved in their communities as well as academically. So really, global citizens, if we're if we're sort of thinking in those terms. And so what we teach at Pearson is the IB, or the International Baccalaureate diploma program. And so this is again, sort of a very well-rounded but rigorous academic program, where instead of most high school programs where you can sort of say "okay I'm going to take all the maths and sciences and then as little of everything else as possible," or vice versa with the humanities, here, students are really required to take a wide range of courses. So you have to take some humanities, some languages, language acquisition, sciences, some arts, everything sort of gets incorporated in there.

Jordan 11:38

And so the course that I'm teaching right now is English Language and Literature. And so the important thing there is its language and literature. So we're not just looking at canonical literary texts. We're also looking at things like advertisements or speeches or Facebook posts or comics or games. So looking at really anything that uses the English language for creative or rhetorical purposes, and sort of looking at that in comparison with literature. So we have these non-literary texts or these bodies of work that we study, and we make connections between those and literary texts, through these intersecting global issues. So we'll look at things like technology and the environment. We'll look at things like race studies, right, and racial oppression. We'll look at things like gender and sexuality and we'll use each of those larger global issues as sort of a point of intersection to connect literary and non-literary texts.

Jess 12:44

That sounds amazing and like, D&D feels like a game that would really lend itself well to the kind of goals of that program and that, in that particular school because of it working, I want to say like interdisciplinarily -- I don't even know if that's a word but -- working on on the different social topics and the different sort of levels that you just described. Like, I think we'll probably get into this later, but just the way that DND encapsulates or helps people think about and engage with so many issues of identity across, and group decision making, and ethics, and all sorts of things like that, across disciplinary bounds. So it feels like D&D is such a perfect text for you in that context,

Jordan 13:28

Yeah absolutely. It led to a lot of great conversations about about identity, about representation, and like literally representation -- like in terms of drama or in terms of playing as someone else right. So absolutely.

Jess 13:44

I did want to make sure I asked, did you know if this group of students was familiar with D&D at the time or did you...?

Jordan 13:51

Oh yeah I can definitely talk about this, because it was, it was funny. So, as part of just sort of professional development and that I always, I try to do at least once per term, if it's a multi-term course, or twice per term, if it's a single term course, I always do an anonymous feedback form with my students to ask them you know what's going well, what's not going well, what could I improve on as an educator. And I'm teaching a longer course or multi-term course, I will often ask for some input of just, if there's some flexibility in terms of the order, we do different units in or different texts and I'll get a sense of is there an overwhelming majority on that front? So I asked my students you know okay these are the two main units we're doing next term, which would you prefer to start with? And there was an overwhelming majority that said, let's start with Shakespeare and performance and get that out of the way. And we have this thing called Block Week where, instead of the regular class schedule, we have these sort of larger blocks of three to four hours. And this is where mock exams can be run and that sort of thing. My students had already done their mock exams and so I said we've got this huge block of time, what would folks like to do? And I suggested we watch a film related to one of the pieces of literature we would be reading. And one of the things I suggested was D&D because I've always wanted to teach it this way, and there was a huge majority that voted in favor of D&D. And so I thought, "Oh, fantastic. A bunch of them must be familiar!" And that was absolutely not the case.

Jess 15:29

Oh, okay!

Jordan 15:31

So... yeah, despite the fact that the majority of students voted in favor of D&D, only two of them really had any familiarity, and only one of them had a lot of experience. Luckily this student had experience as a DM, and so I was able to rely on that and they were really helpful in terms of teaching basic rules and the like. But it was very interesting to see that that sort of enthusiasm for the unfamiliar, Right, watching, you know, watching a film adaptation of Shakespeare, that's a very easy thing to go to, especially if you know you're going to be studying Shakespeare in the coming term. So, it was very

interesting to see a large majority of students just sort of wanting to take that plunge into the unknown and try something really different for this sort of experiential learning project.

Jess 16:20

Yeah, that is awesome, like, so what do you think it was about, or maybe you got actually got a sense of what it was. Is it just like they were intrigued by playing a game in class, do you think that's what got these folks to vote for it despite having no real experience with it or...?

Jordan 16:36

I think, I think some of them thought, you know, this will be fun. Yeah, we're going to play a game in class. I think some of them did it almost as a gift to me because they could see my enthusiasm for that and they thought, oh yeah let's, let's throw the teacher a bone here he seems to want to really teach this, so let's give it a shot. I think a few of them might have even done it as a challenge, like, okay, I'm suspicious, how are you going to make this fantasy role playing game relevant to our diploma, relevant to the rest of the curriculum, so yeah let's let's see what you can do with this.

Jess 17:12

Yeah, that would make sense. It actually reminds me of another, another interview I did for an episode last year, it's actually an episode with Catherine Nygren, who I know you know...

Jordan 17:21

On The Stanley Parable, right? Yeah I've listened to it, it's fantastic.

Jess 17:24

Oh, okay. I was just gonna say that one of the things that came up in that episode, is the idea that sometimes it's hard for students to accept that play in a classroom can be learning -- that play could be, you know, a form of learning, and so it's almost like you're, you're giving an example that's a little bit different or adjacent to that where you had these students that were really enthusiastic about the possibilities of play in a classroom even without knowing what the heck that was going to look like so. Okay, I think we should get into the meat of it, which was I mean... My next big question is how do you teach this text, which is such a huge question, but I guess maybe if you could give a sense to the listeners have the way that you structured your teaching of this text because I, of course I read your teaching documents in your plans, and I know that you kind of structure it into like would you say three chunks or...?

Jordan 18:16

Yeah, I basically structured it into three weeks. The first week back at the beginning of term was just a standard week, and so I had about four classroom hours to work with. So I really used this time to just introduce the students to what D&D is, much like I just did at the beginning of this little talk, and gave them a few different quotes, gave them a little bit of background of like the history and the inspiration behind D&D, had a few discussion questions for them to sort of work through to just get their brains thinking in terms of actually a lot of the things that you've already brought up right. What are the effects of cooperative play rather than competitive play, right. What are some of the underlying values behind how this game works where no one is competing with each other. You have a facilitator, and then you have collaborators, right? What is the role of that decision making and working together to sort of work through different types of issues and challenges that we don't usually encounter in real life or even in some cases, you know, are literally impossible because they're reliant on magic. I had them thinking a little bit about the role of the DM and what kind of relationship there should be between players and the DM. And then also got them thinking about text types, because this is something specifically in the English A curriculum that we spent a lot of time talking about is all of the non-literary texts fall into some kind of category that is usually fairly easily identifiable, like a memoir versus a journal article versus an interview versus a Facebook post, and sort of what kind of reading techniques are associated with each text type. And I got them to think a little bit about the distinction between the rulebook, and the actual module or playing the game itself, you know -- can we think of the rulebook almost like an encyclopedia or some kind of instruction manual? Whereas the module and the game itself, is that more of a literary text? Is that more of a choose your own adventure type book? What are the overlaps with other text types they're familiar with? And of course, explaining the basic rules.

So because we only had four hours in the classroom, and it often can take at least that long to get new players sort of up to speed with the basics of D&D, what I did is I created a bunch of mostly randomized characters, and I kept things fairly, fairly simple. I didn't go through all of the extensive class and race options that exist in the D&D rulebook. I stuck with sort of six canonical roles within the group: you've got a wizard, you've got a rogue, you've got a ranger, you've got a fighter, you've got a dwarf, you've got an elf, you've got a halfling or a hobbit for folks who are familiar with Lord of the Rings, and then of course you've got your humans. And so I made these characters mostly randomized with a few with a few things sprinkled on top to make them work particularly well with the module I had created. And then I did give students the option to customize their characters, but only in terms of role playing only in terms of narrative, so they couldn't change any of their stats, because I wanted everyone to have sort of the same advantages and disadvantages going in, but they could change their alignment, which is how lawful or law-abiding you are, and how morally good or morally corrupt you are. But yeah, so I gave them the option to customize their character traits to an extent, and then think about what kind of effect their background and alignment would have on the way they roleplay, and the kind of goals they would have going into this encounter. And so that was a lot! But that was that was week one, and it was pretty fast-paced and a pretty steep learning curve for a lot of them.

Jess 22:31

So it sounds to me like week one is probably a lot of, I don't want to see a lecture because I don't know what kind of methods you're using, but like it's just, it's a lot of setup to really do something like this.

Jordan 22:41

Yeah, I, I always try to have a fair balance of discussion and info dumping because otherwise, folks fall asleep. So, what I did is I started with a few quotes, and a little bit of the history and background information, and then I gave them those discussion questions so that they could have some roundtable discussions. I have my classroom set up in sort of a horseshoe shape, so that everyone can see each other. It's about 15 students per class.

Jess 23:09

Oh okay, I see.

Jordan 23:11

Sorry, I should have given some of that context. Um yeah these are, these are fairly small classes. And so yeah it's a horseshoe shape where everyone can see each other, so you can have those fairly in-depth roundtable discussions. In terms of the rules, what I did is I handed out the character sheets, I asked people, you know, I gave them a basic description of each of the roles, and then had people vote on their first pick and second pick. I tried my best to give everyone something that they wanted, had sheets that were fully filled in and some with a few blanks depending on whether or not they wanted to customize their character. And so then I handed that out to them and went through basically the character sheet to explain the basic rules where I said, okay if you look at the top left, you'll see your character's strength and dexterity and constitution. Let's talk about those terms, make sure everybody understands what those terms mean. Because Constitution means fairly different things in D&D compared to, you know, real life. And we have a lot of students who are learning English as an additional language, some of them are, you know, speak 3, 4, 5 languages and are still taking English as their primary language at this college, so just making sure that everyone is at the same level in terms of understanding these key terms in the game.

And then in terms of teaching, the basic mechanics in terms of describing an action rolling dice and resolving it, I just handed out a ton of dice, and we practiced this because I think D&D is very overwhelming, if you're presented with all of the rules all at once, or even just a character sheet with everything on it, so I created a simplified character sheet that toned things down a bit. And then we just did a lot of practice for learning, learn by doing, where I had students just describe different actions. And then we sort of talked about okay yeah, do we think that would be an acrobatics check, or do we think that would be an athletics check? Why do you think it's one or the other? Okay cool roll some dice. And they learned very quickly that the game is quite malleable right. A lot of the rules are very situational or dependent on context. And so an activity that you think of as athletic could be acrobatic depending on how you're going about doing it and a lot of that can really come down to how you go about describing what your character does and how you go about incorporating your, your character's features into, into your, your play of them. So that was my general approach for for yeah, teaching the basic rules and give it getting everyone sort of the gist of their characters.

Jess 26:02

Right. Yeah, forget everything I said about like lecturing and passive, that sounds super active. Like even your week one setup is like really, and with a group of 15, I could see how this would work very well, but really it seems engaged and active and like they're learning by doing, even while there's a lot of setup to be sort of ingested and that sort of thing. Oh I was just also thinking about the I guess the possibilities of using D&D as kind of a language-learning game as well, when you were talking about making sure everybody knows the language because it's like... I still had to look up dexterity, like, just not even for the game, but just in my own life because I wasn't really clear on that term, probably several times over the course of last year because I'm like, what does that really mean again? And like, why are we using dexterity for these kinds of actions? And so I can totally see the possibilities of teaching D&D Or even just playing D&D as a kind of language-learning game, vocabulary-learning game. I'm pretty sure my DM, Myles, he listens to the podcast -- Hi Myles! -- I'm pretty sure he probably has taught me a lot of words through this, and I'm a native English speaker, so to speak. So, I was just thinking about that's a way that I've never thought of D&D, which is as like the kind of game that could teach like literal language so.

Jordan 27:23

Yeah and it was a bit of a wake up call for me as well because I've been playing D&D for quite a few years now, and so all of these words are just a part of my vocabulary. Even outside of the game like my friends and I will, I'm a fairly clumsy person and so my friends will joke that I'm "fumbling a dex check" anytime I, you know, knock something over. So that's just become sort of a part of my, my normal diction. And so this was a definite wake-up call for me right where even native English speakers don't necessarily know all of this terminology and it's important that we slow down and take some time learning these terms.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jordan 28:07

So week two was actually playing the module. So like I said this was a block week, so I had a three hour block with all of my students together in a space. And I actually borrowed a different teacher's space, because I knew they were going to be noisy. And so I didn't want them disrupting other students who were potentially studying or writing exams, and I needed a space that was large enough that I could have two tables going at a time. And that were far enough apart that they wouldn't disrupt each other too much.

Jess 28:38

I was just gonna say sorry when you say two tables, so do you basically just split your group into two D&D groups?

Jordan 28:45

Yeah so, I had two classes of about 15 students each. And so each class I split into two groups, and so I had two students DMs who... Big kudos to them if they're listening! You know, that only one of them had any prior experience, and so not only did they learn all of the basic rules, but they actually learned how to run a session in a very short amount of time.

Jess 29:07

Yeah, that's amazing.

Jordan 29:08

So, huge kudos to them. And so yeah, each class was split into two groups. And so I had two tables running for three hours, and then the next day I had the other two tables running for three hours. And so the module was a pretty, pretty classic just like high fantasy short adventure. There's a group of folks who are walking through a forest, and they come across a clearing. They've heard rumors that there's this massive tree that has been enchanted and can restore people's youth. And so they find the tree, and then it turns out it's actually cursed and the tree tries to defend itself. There are all these sort of plant-like creatures that defend it. Inside the tree, there's a Dryad for folks who aren't familiar with fantasy, this is sort of almost like a druidic or shaman-like creature, who is humanoid but very much like also plant-like, has sort of green skin that is very plant-like, and often has like roots or vines growing out of them, that sort of thing. And so the Dryad, if the players play nice can inform them, oh yeah, by the way, this tree is cursed, could you please deal with that? And so, they go through some some various challenges, and, and, different, different just skill-testing moments, but at the end of it they find in the roots under the tree that there's this cursed dagger that has been stabbed into the roots that is cursing the tree. There's a fun sort of challenge with that where it can only be seen in reflections, and so the students had to figure out, first off, how to see it or find this dagger and then second off. How do you like, pull something out of a tree when you can see it by using like either a mirror or a reflection pool or something like that. And then when they removed the dagger, whoever possessed it was significantly aged by it. So, the dagger has the ability, not so much to take away years, but rather to grant them. And so then they were left with this sort of moral dilemma of what do we do with this dagger right? Does one of us sort of become a martyr and is very, very old. Do we put it back and say sorry we've solved the problem but we can't actually deal with it? Do they try and pass it off to the Dryad and, you know, throw her under the bus?

Jordan 31:47

So, yeah, the, the sort of tie-ins for this, where I wanted something with a bit of an eco slant, or eco-critical slant. In first term we read a lot of speeches and other non literary texts by Greta Thunberg, and so we've been talking a lot about the environment and a lot about ecological issues. The moral dilemma was also something that we talked a lot about both in terms of rhetoric, and in terms of environmental issues and issues of like intersectional justice and things like that. So I wanted there to be a moral dilemma. I wanted there to be sort of this ecological component. And then of course, decision-making, problem-solving, and just negotiating different alignments and ideologies right? Seeing, okay, can these students, can these students stay in character and make the decisions that they believe their character would make rather than following sort of their own morality?

Jess 32:48

So I have a couple of questions coming off of that. First of all, just kind of zooming out here, it just seems to me like the workload, the prep load for you, would be a lot for this, but maybe it's the same as for any other texts. I'm not sure, but it just sounds like this involves a lot of prep work for the instructor. Did you experience it as more than your usual kind of workload or?

Jordan 33:14

Yes. In a word, yes. It was definitely a lot more work than I would usually put in. Like we did get three weeks of of education out of this because there was the prep week, the module itself, and then the reflection that I'll talk about after. But it definitely was a lot of work. I spent a good chunk of my winter break working on this, so it was certainly a passion project, to an extent. But also a lot of a lot of it was facilitated by the internet. I used I used websites for randomly generating characters, and then was able to just make slight modifications to those. So that was pretty handy. It was just randomize a character. There are some great tools on the internet where you can actually specify like okay I want a dwarf who is a cleric who has this alignment, and then give me just a generic stat sheet randomly assigned everything else. And then you can save that as a PDF or you can print it off. So that facilitated a lot of the work. I was not writing 30 character sheets out by hand over my winter break. And the module also was based on a module I found online. I found this great collection of 100 Short D&D modules that can be used for like a single session, or that can be used as like a stepping off point for a larger campaign, or it can be just sort of shoehorned in if you know if your players go off in a completely unexpected direction, or if one of your players is sick and you don't want to pursue the main narrative in your campaign, you could choose one of these 100 Short Modules and sort of shoehorn it in -- it's like oh you stop at an inn and plot happens for a four-hour session. So, I found one of those that sort of suited the themes I was looking for, and then made some modifications to it, to just sort of really tweak it toward the the kinds of decisions that I wanted my players to be faced with.

Jordan 35:28

So I decided to sort of categorize my DMs based on their alignments that I personally think I observed in how they ran the game. So the first group had a chaotic, but good DM. They broke a lot of rules and they were very off book, but they were very much there to prioritize having a good time for everyone. They, they actually didn't end up doing the first step of the module until about 45 minutes in, and I was panicking at that point. I thought oh my gosh, like, they're, they're going to be completely off book. Where is this even going? But they did come back around and take sort of a sideways approach to the module, eventually. Part of this was because the DM realized they really just wanted to get to roleplay a character, and I only had put the Dryad in as a really playable character, and the rest were various types of challenges, so they just created a character that the party happened to cross in the forest, so that they could be in the game and roleplay alongside their peers, which was really cool. There was also a lot of off-book magic that led to all sorts of shenanigans, but eventually they got on track and, and they got through the tree which was great. And so in that group, the human fighter was the one who grabbed the dagger, mostly because they were the tough guy, so to speak, like, oh yeah I can, I can handle this curse, and then immediately passed out and started aging rapidly. And I had, and this always happens when you're creating a module or when you're working as a DM, you come up with all the possible solutions that you think players could possibly have. And then they of course come up with something new, which is so fun and exciting to see. And so the players reacted instantly. And they went for The Walking Dead approach, so they they amputated the arm of the character who grabbed the dagger. And the DM rolled for it, and then the fighter had to roll a whole bunch of dice to make sure that they didn't bleed out. And the person survived, and the curse was confined to just their severed arm.

Jess 37:47

Wow, that's a really creative. That's amazing.

Jordan 37:50

Yeah, they it was it was a little bit, you know, brutal, but. But it was very creative and it was, it was really on the fly so that was exciting. Then I had the group whose DM I describe this lawful good, who really followed the modules step by step, but also prioritized fun. They were they were there to just like, like followed all of the steps, fairly closely, but definitely wanted everyone to just have a good time. And in that group, it was a rogue who took the dagger, because that's often how things go -- the person who is sneaky and good at stealing things is the one who is likely to grab an object -- and this player was was fantastic. They, I gave them huge kudos after because they stayed really in character. They had this trade where they believed that the innocent should never be allowed to suffer. And so, in their view, you know the Dryad was truly innocent, she was only there protecting the forest, and so it was completely unfair that she had to bear this curse. And so this rogue decided to bear the burden so that, you know, this this innocent creature would not be suffering as a result of it. But as a rogue and as somebody who is a bit wily, they certainly planned to "return the dagger to its rightful owner" in scare quotes right.

Jess 39:21

Right.

Jordan 39:22

So the other two groups. One of them, I will call lawful neutral, where they followed the module and the rules like to the letter. It was like no, no, these are the rules and like they need to be followed. And their party was very clever. They were almost pacifist. They, they used stealth, they used persuasion, and they used magic to overcome almost every obstacle without any combat, which was impressive because some of the creatures they faced like couldn't even understand human language. So they used spells like communicate with plants and and stuff like that, and used stealth to get through. And they retrieved the dagger using a spell called mage hand, so they created like an ethereal hand that literally removed the dagger, and they tried really really hard to get around the whole curse, but eventually, their bard exhibited their bravery trait and decided to take one for the team. And then the last group, I'm going to call the DM neutral good. They sometimes bent the rules in favor of narrative or in favor of just the role-playing experience. This was the most experienced DM and so they had a really good sense of like which rules are, you know, safer to bend and which rules are those slippery slope rules that players might abuse. And in that group, again, it was the bard who grabbed the dagger, and this was interesting. This was a little bit more of like an impulse because they had the background of being a criminal. And so they were just used to like, oh there's a thing of value, like I grab it without thinking about the consequences. But because they were a reformed criminal and were now morally good, they decided, okay, well, you know, I screwed up, I grabbed it, so I guess I'm dealing with this until we find another solution. So it was really interesting to see four slightly different styles of running the module, and also four relatively different solutions to the dilemma that the students were presented with.

Jess 41:32

Yeah I'm imagining, and maybe this is where we'll end up getting into the reflections or the debriefing or the discussions that you had about them, because I'm imagining that once the group started hearing about or if they did hear about what other groups chose, I could see there being so many possible discussions about the implications of those choices. Like, oh, you were the pacifist group ish, well, that's interesting, does that relate to our focus on ecojustice at all? Or like I just feel like there's a lot of implications to the choices that the students were making in these four groups that are all coming from the same class but are clearly, or two different classes, but are clearly making these choices in much different ways so.

Jordan 42:10

Mmhmm, yeah and so in the third week, I gave each class a brief summary of what the two groups from the other class did, just so that they had a sense about that and could could talk about it a little bit. And what I did is I pulled a few short readings from this great book I found Dungeons and Dragons and Philosophy, and got them to just have first larger roundtable discussions around some of these quotes. I

gave them a little bit of terminology to help them out because I could see they were talking about things that we have terms for in the literary world. So "psychic distance" was one of those, like the distance between an author and the character they are writing. There was also a lot of debate and disagreement around some quotes that had to do with canonicity and some heated discussions about, you know, what makes a text worth reading? And who should be allowed to decide who reads which texts?

So the quote we talked about how "all fiction is a game of make believe. So the first narrative to make that connection explicit, as role-playing games do, is necessarily worth exploring." And so students got into a lot of debate over that, about whether or not all fiction is just a game of make believe. A lot of students took issue with that because you have fiction based on history, and so while the characters might be fictional, the events are not. And the term "game," interestingly, a lot of them took issue with that, right? Like they said you know I don't think historical fiction about World War Two survivors should be thought of as a "game." I think that's, you know, inconsiderate, which was really interesting to to hear them, you know, take that approach. They also, you know, said are RPGs, like, the first narrative to even make that connection explicit? Was there no other playful media prior to D&D, which of course yeah, they're onto something there. And then finally, that question of "worth exploring," right? They said, Oh yeah, like I think I think learning about performance and learning about literature through play or through like embodying characters or through creating characters is valuable. It's a great way to do experiential learning. But should they, does that mean it should be a mandatory part of like an English curriculum? Right. And that led them to should any thing be a mandatory part of an English curriculum? You know, yes, we absolutely need to learn about, you know, about rhetoric about moral dilemmas, about literary devices, but is there any like single text or text type that is necessary for, for that? Which was really interesting because we're discussing Shakespeare right now, and so a lot of them have carried over those arguments into this unit and are raising questions of, like why do we still discuss and teach Shakespeare? What are the values behind that? To what extent can we question those, those values, or those reasons? Which is really interesting.

Jess 45:32

Oh I love how they this like lesson on D&D and your readings and the quotes that you pulled out actually led them back to discussions that are quite literary or at least relate to literature and textuality and canonization. It's just such a good example of the ways that D&D can be tied to all of these other texts and reading methods and issues of literature and literary studies that, that we might more conventionally deal with in a conventional literature classroom.

Jordan 46:02

And so, so after these big round table conversations, then what I did is got them to get into small groups, where basically the two DMs sat together, and then the two fighters sat together, and the two clerics, and the two wizards, and they compared the decisions they made, and they compared how they role-played their characters. And so it was, again, really interesting to sort of hear, to get them to directly hear from one another, you know, oh, I bent the rules here because I thought it'd be more fun to do this, oh I really stuck to the rules there because I thought it was important that they only have this

information going into this part of the module, and then again having the like the two wizards say oh yeah I just shot fireballs at everything, if it moved I shot a fireball at it, whereas the more pacifist group who said oh no I used all of my spells in a utility sense you know, I don't think I even cast magic missile a single time, it was like Mage hand for this, identify that item, talk to plants over here, very little combat. So I thought it was great for them to get that comparison.

Jordan 47:14

And then I ended with a just short writing assignment where I got them to write one to two pages, and just a short reflection, not particularly formal, didn't have to be overly structured. I had a bunch of sort of leading questions or guiding questions that they could choose to talk about, such as just discussing the decisions their character made and how those were informed by their background and alignment. How did that differ from the decisions they think they would have made if presented with the same challenges? How they negotiated those differences between their values and their characters? How they role-played their character differently from other students who had the same role or a very similar character, and then more broadly just, what are your thoughts on like the relationship between a character and a performer, or between the author and the performer? Because D&D is that sort of really interesting space where, with the exception of a completely pre-generated character, you, you are to a certain extent like the author and the actor.

Jess 48:28

So there I guess there's two main questions I have coming out of all of that debriefing sort of week three stuff, the written reflection, the discussions that they had with each other. I guess the first one would be from all of that, all of that kind of debriefing week, did you get a sense of what the challenges were, of, of either the students' challenges I guess is what I'm thinking, like what were their challenges in playing D&D, or what were your own experiences of the of the challenges in the end of playing D&D in the classroom?

Jordan 48:57

Yeah, absolutely. Um, so some challenges for them were just the learning curve, of course. It was a lot to learn in a short amount of time. Another thing that students commented on frequently was just the challenge of, you know, role playing a different background or a different alignment from your own, especially the students who went for the fully pre-generated ones. The alignments were randomly generated. And so some of them were like, Oh, I'm playing a character who's lawful evil. I don't think of myself as evil... That's, that's a lot of psychic distance between me and my character right. And then some of them you know, trying to catch themselves when they were role playing, like, oh, I realized my own personal biases or my own values were really bleeding through there, and so I had to make note like no no no, don't go along with this, that's not what this character would do. So So, lots of those kinds of challenges that a lot of new players face right. Most people who are new to D&D tend to when they create their first character, they create a character that is often quite similar to themselves but plus

magic or plus, you know, medieval armor. And so I encouraged my students to try and actively work against that, try to actively choose a background or a trait that is quite different from themselves -- mostly, mostly just to get even broader senses of perspectives, right. Like I said, it's a school where there's a lot of intentional diversity, where they are really put in dialogue with folks from completely different backgrounds, completely different cultural and religious practices. And so here, I wanted to just sort of take that a step further and rather than just encountering others who have different values from you, it was seeing, an you like directly empathize with other values by role playing?

Jess 51:07

Yes, makes total sense.

Jordan 51:09

Other challenges that came up... well those were those were the main things that students talked about. Challenges for me were time. Oh time, just like, there's never enough of it. And I know I know all teachers feel that, really no matter what the unit is. You're reading a literary text and you say, man, I wish we had one more lesson to have more discussion on this particular topic. But yeah, time enough to teach the basic rules, and get students to learn the basics of character creation, and then actually play and have reflection. A lot of students in their reflections brought up really fantastic questions about the relationship between like author and character and role player that I would have loved to then have a follow-up discussion around in the classroom, have a second round table where we can really just say like, okay, so and so brought up these kinds of questions, what do you all think? So and so brought up these other issues, what do y'all think of that? So, more time, always a factor. And for other teachers wanting to like try this out, also noise, right? Especially if you have a bigger class, like if you have 20-some students in your class, you're probably going to be running three or four tables. And so you need the space for that, and it also can get quite noisy with dice rolling and with many people speaking over each other simultaneously. So just, there are some pragmatic concerns for that.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 52:54

So you've talked about a few of the themes that you hoped to come up in the, in these three weeks of D&D, and it sounds like they did, you know, ecojustice, morality, like that sort of thing, and you've also talked about other texts that you situate around this text, like Shakespeare's play some -- which play are you doing, by the way?

Jordan 53:17

We're doing Othello.

Jess 53:19

Oh Othello, okay yeah so that's a good connection here. And the other texts that you've dealt with. So I guess my question is just... after you got the reflections and after you heard how the students sort of felt about this module, did you get a sense of the ways that those themes that you're trying to pull through or into D&D came out for them? Themes of the class or themes that have been part of the other texts that they... I'm not I'm not phrasing this well, but I hope you know what I mean, I'm just wondering how those themes that you were hoping came out in their gameplay of D&D, how they did end up coming out?

Jordan 53:54

Yeah, absolutely. Um, so yeah I've already talked about the the sort of eco-critical slant and the moral dilemmas, and all of that. So the the last one I'll really talk about is identity. That's something we talk a lot about in our contemporar education, and it's something that is very central to D&D. D&D has you know a long history of like having issues with sexism, having issues with representations of race, and the whole trick of like in D&D "race" is more species right? Elves and dwarves are actually like biologically distinct from humans, but they use the word "race" right? And so you can't not talk about that. So we talked a lot about identity and about playing characters who were different from ourselves, not just in terms of alignment or background, but also things like like gender identity and gender representation. And interestingly, most players said like gender really didn't come into play at all in the module. They were just, it was a fantasy world where generally speaking in D&D, like gender is a non-issue in that like women can be knights, unlike you know medieval Europe where that was very much not the case. So issues like that have been sort of buried. And so the students had some interesting conversations about like, like does gender even exist in terms of our social construct of gender, within the game world? And then they said, you know, had it been a much longer module than quite possibly yes. And the question also came up of can we really create a fantasy world of true gender equality, given the real world biases that we carry with us? And students talked about, you know, how can you go about, respectfully, role playing a gender identity that is different from your own, right? Because there is of course much more of that psychic distance, but there's also more just intellectual and social labor that has to go into that. And that was really interesting.

We haven't gotten quite into it yet but I'm definitely planning on bringing it up with our unit on Shakespeare, because in Shakespeare's time, there were young men and boys playing Desdemona and Emilia in Othello, right. It was not women on stage. It was young men in drag playing women. And so these conversations we had about, like, imaginatively role-playing a different gender, compared to like actually physically role-playing them on a stage, and then of course with Othello there is also the the issue of like for a lot of its history, blackface was used. Right. And so that's a very difficult topic to negotiate. But I think the fact that I primed them on it with D&D and with these discussions of identity, and these discussions of like playing a role different from your own and the politics involved in that,

really has them thinking about that in a critical way before we get into the much heavier conversations of how that translates historically in real-world performances.

Jess 57:17

Last, last question was just if, if there's any literally anything that you haven't mentioned yet, or that we skipped over that you wanted to chat about regarding this game your teaching of this game, your experiences, anything.

Jordan 57:30

Yeah, just, overall it was fantastic. I know some of my students are probably going to be listening to this, so huge shout out to all of you. You were, you were fantastic. You put in a lot of work, learning how to play this game, put a lot of work into the reflections, and yeah just huge kudos to them. There were so many good discussions, especially around like when I taught them that word psychic distance, like a lot of them were like, Oh, I'm really focusing in on this, especially in their reflections talking about like emotional empathy, talking about you know, using role-playing to try and experiment with different expressions of self right? As how it can be a safe space where you can experiment with different concepts that you might be struggling with internally, or a place where you can empathize with experiences that you personally don't have. One student talked about how, you know, playing a character who loses faith in their friend, because their friend betrayed them, should feel the same as if you witnessed your best friend's betrayal, things like that. Like, just some really, really fantastic emotional engagement and so... My students already know this about me, and so do the people I play D&D with and they're probably also listening but, I'm one of those people who who wears their heart on their sleeve, and so for me like D&D is very much about like empathy and catharsis. So seeing some of my students have similar experiences with that was was really positive and meaningful.

Jess 59:06

Yeah, that sounds like there's so much work involved in it's a big workload, but there's so much payoff. Like even just one of the last things you were saying about the emotional aspects of the game and getting and having responses from students that very clearly show that they're engaging with empathy and also just feeling emotions about this game. I love that this is a game and a text that brings emotion into the classroom in a deliberate way and in a critical way and in a way where students can think, am I acting evil, or am I acting neutral good, or whatever? And those things become the object of study and a welcome part of the classroom and sort of instead of sort of being shunned away like like no emotions are, you know allowed in this classroom. Because I don't know about you but I grew up in undergrad, having professors that were very resistant to any emotional readings of texts or emotions being part of the learning process, and I'm so like against that now or I'm not I'm not okay with that as a default mode so to me, I'm really inspired to play this by you because of that aspect -- because of the fact of it being a game that invites emotions as part of critical inquiry and not antithetical to critical inquiry. So thank you for that. Thank you for all of the... Thanks for, basically....

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 1:00:32

Thank you so much to Jordan for coming on the podcast and making my D&D meets Teachin' Books dreams come true.

This episode was recorded on Treaty Six territory and the homeland of the Métis. I wanted to tell you today, as a kind of follow up to last week's episode on public poetry and public art, about a billboard project that was recently put up in Saskatoon on Treaty Six at PAVED arts, done by emerging artist Morning Thompson. Like I say, the billboard is an art project which is displayed at paved art 424 20th Street West in Saskatoon. And it's called "Illusions of Peace." It's a really striking and powerful piece, I'm going to link to the Facebook page where you can find an image of the billboard, and from what I understand, it will be up until April 30, if you do live in Saskatoon and want to go see it in person. So let me read the description of the piece to you from PAVED arts.

> "This work first appeared as part of the Chokecherry studios inaugural exhibition entitled, 'REDSILIENT.' This collaborative, youth-led initiative aimed to honor the lives of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and was presented as a multimedia exhibition in 2019. Thompson's striking photographic work dramatizes the urgency of this contemporary issue, depicting the figure of the Indigenous girl in a red dress with power and dignity." It goes on to say, "mainstream society is privileged with the option of being able to look away. That is not an option for Indigenous people who endure intergenerational trauma, and continue to be systematically forced into circumstances that normalize and perpetuate violence against our women and girls. 'Illusions of Peace' is a mirror. It forces us to look. This photograph demands that we confront the ways in which we are complicit and commands us to see the truth."

So as that description said, Chokecherry Studios facilitated the first showing of this piece, and Chokecherry Studios is quote, from their Instagram, "a youth-founded nonprofit organization offering arts-based programming and mentorship to young and emerging artists in inner city Saskatoon." So they support and facilitate the work of emerging artists like Morning Thompson featured on this featured through this billboard, I should say. And so I'm going to put the link to where you can find Chokecherry Studios if you want to find out more about them and also how you can support their organization, for example you can become a monthly donor.

Thank you to Dyalla Swain for the podcast music. You can find more of their work at soundcloud.com/dyallas. Thank you to Jade McDougall at muskrat-hands.com for the awesome podcast graphics. You can follow the podcast on Twitter and Instagram @TeachinBooksPod, no g, or get in touch via email at teachinbookspod@gmail.com.

Alright, goodbye for now, but please join me again next week on Teachin' Books. Yep. That's the sign-off today. Every single sign-off that I try sounds terrible when I say it, so I just guess I can be like the other cool podcasters with the cool signups because it's just not happening for me yet. Maybe my favorite and

most successful is just the usual goodbye.... This is getting really long, I don't blame you if you already left me, but... Okay, bai!

[Music: "Homer Said"]