Harry (Rowling, 1997) was excited. Orphaned after a tragic accident that took his parent’s lives he was forced to live in a cupboard under the stairs at 4 Privet Drive in the town of Little Whinging, with his abusive Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon and his badly behaved cousin Dudley. On Harry’s eleventh birthday, a giant named Haggrid came to visit him and told Harry he had been born a wizard. He took Harry to The Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry where Harry, along with several other first year students, came to fulfill their destinies of becoming accomplished witches and wizards. All of the faculty at Hogwarts knew of Harry and were aware that he had no previous exposure to the wizarding world. All of the other students had grown up in witch and wizard households and knew the dark secrets, strange beasts and lore of the world of magic. The Hogwarts faculty had concerns because they would need to sharpen Harry’s skills quickly to protect him from the dark magic that seemed to follow him around from the beginning of his time at Hogwarts. Without any prior knowledge of this new culture he had entered, Harry was trying to absorb as much as possible. But there were too many things he just did not understand that were holding him back from learning his lessons.

He had lived in the muggle world up until now and was having a difficult time believing he actually was a wizard. Adding to this discomfort, the strange scar on his forehead would erupt in pain at random moments causing him great distress and distraction. He was becoming depressed and despondent, making dangerous mistakes with his wand in his classes. The very wise, old Head Master named Professor Dumbledore, had been reading a book by Dr. Mary Driscoll in his study one evening. He was well aware of Harry’s distress and came upon the concept of cognitive load. Driscoll (2005) writes, “Cognitive load refers to the strain that is put on working memory by the processing requirements of a learning task” and that, “When
learners encounter a task for which they do not have an appropriate or automated schema, they must hold in mind all elements of the task individually and simultaneously” (p. 136). With a twinkle in his eye Dumbledore pondered to himself, “Perhaps this is the ‘potion’ for our dear Harry Potter”.

Questions

1. What is Harry lacking that the other students at Hogwarts are not?
2. What can Hogwarts’ professors incorporate into instruction to help Harry’s comprehension of their course material?
3. What analogies could the instructors use to model an existing schema to fit this new situation that Harry is in?
4. How can Harry’s professors reduce the cognitive load that Harry is under?
5. How can Professor Dumbledore help Harry develop a schemata that can be used to help him work his spells properly?

Possible Solutions

Although not suffering any apparent psychological damage, Harry had been forced to live in a cupboard beneath a staircase for the past eleven years under the policing of a cruel Aunt, Uncle and cousin. Living at times as the Dursely’s slave, his cupboard and an occasional visit to the park or zoo was all he knew of life as a muggle. The other students at Hogwarts grew up exposed to the magic of witches and wizards all of their lives, having parents and siblings who are magical. Harry lacks this deep connection to the world of wizardry. He has no prior
knowledge on which he can pull from memory to help him understand this strange new experience. To help Harry, the faculty at Hogwarts will need to help him restructure new schema by recalling a schema from the muggle world that he can relate to the wizarding world.

For example, after questioning Harry if he remembers anything peculiar that may have happened while he was in the muggle world, he said he remembered wishing his cousin was trapped in a snake exhibit while at the zoo and Harry was astonished when this exact thing happened just seconds later. Harry also recalled that he was able to talk to and understand the snake from the exhibit. Using this event from Harry’s past experience, his instructors could help him discover similarities between, what he was thinking about the moment he wished his cousin into the tank and hoping to transform his cup into a rat in Transfiguration class.

Another way Harry’s Professors can help him, is to teach Harry self-analysis techniques. They can observe him doing magic, ask him to explain what he is doing and his reason for doing it, ask him to make predictions and then have him teach another student (Driscoll, 2005).

Through this process Harry will start to make a “mental model” (Driscoll, 2005, p. 146) that he can use consistently to help him analyze new concepts in developing his magic skills. Harry’s professors could also develop a comparative organizer to help make the new information understandable by comparing and contrasting the concepts he is learning in each course.

Professor Dumbledore, as Harry’s mentor and protector, can work with Harry to help him develop his understanding of wizarding demands through what Perkins and Unger (1999) describe as, “performances of understanding” (p. 97). Dumbledore will help Harry expand his
understanding of magic and wizardry through problem solving, making decisions and relating past solutions to his new situations.

Resources

