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A long time ago in a classroom not so far away...

Wes Dodgens and Thomas Riddle inspire educators across the world to use the Force

WORDS BY ANDREW MOORE PHOTOS BY WILL CROOKS

Thomas Riddle and Wes Dodgens have spent much of their teaching careers channeling one of the most revered educators of all time: Yoda, the tiny green Jedi master from the “Star Wars” movie franchise.

They’ve also followed some of his advice: “Always pass on what you have learned.”

Riddle, who is assistant director of Roper Mountain Science Center, and Dodgens, a social studies teacher at Mauldin High School, have been using “Star Wars” in their classrooms for more than a decade to make their lessons fun and meaningful.

But they’re also helping other teachers do the same. Dodgens and Riddle are co-founders of “Star Wars in the Classroom,” a website dedicated to helping teachers incorporate the popular science fiction saga in their lessons.



Wes Dodgens (left) and Thomas Riddle (right) have been using “Star Wars” in their classrooms for more than a decade to make their lessons fun and meaningful.

"We're not fans of the sit-and-get approach to education, which forces students to sit in a chair and listen to their teacher lecture," said Riddle. "We're using pop culture to engage our students in learning, and it's actually working."

YIN, YANG, AND YODA

Riddle discovered the benefits of using "Star Wars" in 1995 when teaching ancient world history at Mauldin High. Struggling to find a way to communicate the concept of yin and yang to his students, he introduced Yoda as a Taoist sage.

Eventually, Riddle formalized his loose references into a coherent curriculum centered around Mary Henderson's "Star Wars and the Magic of Myth," called "Star Wars and the Hero's Journey," that involved teaching the entire original trilogy as part of a study of ancient world history.

"One of my best assignments actually required students to apply each stage of the Hero's Journey to their own lives," said Riddle. "They also analyzed the three films and compared them to the mythologies of ancient civilizations."

Dodgens, who joined Mauldin in 2004, also began to notice connections to the "Star Wars" films. "During my first years of teaching, I would throw in references here and there, but I never showed the films," said Dodgens. "Thomas was the first to help me realize the full potential of using 'Star Wars' in the classroom."

In 2007, Riddle became a social studies curriculum consultant and accompanied

Dodgens to a professional development conference. Before the conference, the duo met each other to discuss travel plans and get acquainted.

Upon entering Riddle's office, Dodgens noticed a collection of "Star Wars" action figures on display. Dodgens, a lifelong fan of the saga, recognized "Blue" Snaggletooth, a rare action figure discontinued because it featured the wrong color scheme.

"I knew we'd be good friends from that point on, because he knew his stuff," said Riddle.

INSPIRATION FROM INDY

Bonding over their shared passion for "Star Wars," Riddle told Dodgens about the lessons he had created during his time at Mauldin. "I loved the idea and began looking for more ways to use 'Star Wars' in my own curriculum," said Dodgens.

Since then, the duo has used "Star Wars" to bring greater meaning to their lessons, such as Hitler's rise to power and the fall of the Roman Empire. They have also used the films to teach American westward expansion and Shakespeare.

But oddly enough, "Star Wars" wasn't their first collaboration.

In 2007, with permission from Lucasfilm, the duo launched "Adventures in Learning with Indiana Jones," a website helping teachers use "The Adventures of Young Indiana Jones" television series, which followed Jones on his coming-of-age adventures, where he meets historical figures such as Theodore Roosevelt and Ernest Hemingway.



Some teachers use "Star Wars" characters, including the popular droid BB-8, to teach lessons about aspects of literature, including character development and plot.

The site includes various resources, including profiles of historical figures, a chronology of events, and more. "It was meant to inspire students to learn about the historical figures and events featured in the series," said Riddle. "But the series lost traction after the release of 'Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull' in 2008."

In 2010, Riddle and Dodgens loaded up their families and ventured to northern California to tour Skywalker Ranch, the workplace of "Star Wars" creator George Lucas. "We bumped into George, and he knew about the Indy series," said Riddle. "He loved the fact that we were using the series, which was re-

ally cool to hear."

Inspired by the encounter, the duo started planning "Star Wars in the Classroom."

When Disney purchased Lucasfilm in 2012, the duo decided to launch the site. "We knew 'Star Wars' was making a comeback after the purchase, which meant more content for our site. But we needed a platform that allowed us to share ideas," said Dodgens.

OBSESSIVES ASSEMBLE

Riddle and Dodgens created the site and uploaded their own lesson plans, which included subject areas ranging from social studies to science. In 2013, they launched a professional

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REVENGE OF THE FACTS

3 things we've learned from 'Star Wars'

1

AN ELEGANT WEAPON... FOR A MORE CIVILIZED AGE?

Nothing is as iconic of the "Star Wars" franchise as the lightsaber. The weapon, using a blade of pure energy, exerts enough power to slice through everything from metal to flesh with a single stroke. Unfortunately, the reality isn't so simple.

The name "lightsaber" implies a technology that uses a laser, which produces a directional light beam, but there are several problems. The first problem with such a blade is that the blade must stop short after a few feet, which isn't easy since light continues to travel unless it's reflected or absorbed by something (i.e. a mirror).

Another problem is that the lightsaber will need a lot of power to slice through metals and flesh. Lasers used in industry can do that, but they require several kilowatts of power. The power supply for these lasers is huge and wouldn't fit in a tiny lightsaber hilt.

Also, the lightsabers would simply pass through one another with no effect.

The lightsabers in "Star Wars" are actually made of plasma, a gas so hot that its atoms are broken into their more fundamental components, namely electrons and nuclei. But trust us, that method has plenty of problems, too.

2

SORRY, BUT YOU PROBABLY WON'T EVER PILOT THE MILLENNIUM FALCON

Traveling at light speed is a staple of science fiction. In "Star Wars," Han Solo implies the Millennium Falcon can fly 1.5 times faster than the speed of light, which would be 279,000 miles per second. But don't count on traveling to distant galaxies anytime soon.

According to Einstein's theory of relativity, light travels at the same speed everywhere in our universe. His theory, which was published in 1905, permanently tied mass and energy together in the equation $E=mc^2$.

This equation predicts that nothing with mass can move as fast as light, or faster.

If humans attempted to move as fast as light, the acceleration would turn them into mush, according to Les Johnson, deputy manager for NASA's Advanced Concepts Office at the Marshall Space Flight Center. They'd also experience a deadly dose of radiation, according to a paper published in *Natural Science*.

3

CAN WE CREATE A CLONE ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC?

While we're not going to see a clone army anytime soon, the concept isn't impossible.

Cloning is best defined as a number of processes used to create genetically identical copies of a biological entity. Scientists first cloned a tadpole in 1952 and have since cloned more animals, including sheep, mice, cows, and goats.

While the ethics are blurry, scientists can clone humans. However, to date, there are no records of an actual fully developed human ever being cloned. The closest they've come is the cloning of a monkey in 1997. Scientists have also created human clone embryos from the skin cells of both infants and full-grown adults. But none were allowed to mature fully.

Despite scientists being able to clone humans, it's unlikely the process will become an accepted practice due to ethical reasons. Cloning has a high death rate, with 1 out of 100 attempts ending in a viable animal. Also, animals are usually born with large organs and as a result they often die early or need to be euthanized.

For these reasons, many scientists are opposed to researching the controversial subject. —Andrew Moore

NEWS



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learning network that allowed other teachers to share their "Star Wars" lesson plans.

They've since found similarly obsessed teachers in classrooms across the country.

The network, also known as "The Rogues," now includes 700 teachers in 30 countries who are either using "Star Wars" or hope to. "Our goal was to foster collaboration and discussion amongst educators," said Dodgens.

"One of the best moments is when you throw an idea out there and a teacher uses it from the other side of the world. You don't know the teacher or kids, but you're touching their lives through 'Star Wars,'" said Riddle.

Danielle Lopez, a fifth-grade teacher at Davis Magnet School in Southern California, has used "Star Wars in the Classroom" since 2014. Lopez, who decorates her classroom

with posters and toys, organizes her class into "Star Wars" planets and uses droids to break down engineering concepts for math and science students.

Lopez said the site is a great resource for teachers to trade ideas and build a community from their shared passion. "I love connecting with other teachers that share my love of 'Star Wars.' ... 'Star Wars in the Classroom' has the focus of 'Star Wars,' but has people that specialize in so many different areas."

Kevin Tiller, a physical education teacher in Massachusetts, discovered "Star Wars in the Classroom" in 2014 and created a "Star Wars" gym for his elementary students. It includes themed decorations and activities designed to engage students. For instance, students can create lightsabers from pool noodles and use them to keep floating balloons in the air.

"I've sprinkled 'Star Wars' throughout my lessons here and there but never tried a themed curriculum until I found 'Star Wars in the Classroom,'" said Tiller. "It sort of validated my interest and made me feel more comfortable about taking it on."

A FORCE FOR GOOD

But "Star Wars" does more than educate students, according to Riddle.

In 2014, Riddle and Dodgens launched the Serve Like a Jedi campaign to encourage

teachers and students to participate in community service. "Star Wars' fans are known for being generous," said Riddle. "We wanted to bring attention to that."

Lopez and her students participated in 2015 and raised more than \$750 for relief efforts in Nepal when an earthquake killed thousands of people. Students earned the money by doing extra chores, selling candy, putting up lemonade stands, and more.

As for the future, Riddle and Dodgens plan to create and publish lessons for "Star Wars in the Classroom" as additional films and shows are released. They've also talked about incorporating other popular film sagas in the classroom.

Dodgens said he's previously considered "Harry Potter" and other popular film series.

"I've purchased domain names, but I'm not sure if it's going to happen. We'll have to wait and see," said Dodgens. "Star Wars' really offers a treasure trove of ideas for teachers and has the potential to last much longer than other films."

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