

Title: On the teaching, learning and study of literature: a Reflection

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Summary: The essay discusses the prescribed method in teaching literature. The paper claims that effective literature education should consider the level of difficulty of the text, the suitability of the content, and the exploitability of the text.

On the teaching, learning and study of literature: a Reflection

"By study I mean enquiry without implication of performance, the pursuit of knowledge about something by some kind of rational or intuitive enquiry; something therefore, which is given separate third-person status. By learning I mean getting to know how to do something as an involved first-person performer. Study, in this sense, is action which leads to knowledge and extends awareness, whereas learning is knowledge which leads to action and develops proficiency."

H. G. Widdowson

The noblest of all professions as often quoted is teaching, which is the molding of the human being into a significantly valuable individual for himself and for his fellow. True enough, it really is, for teachers are called, separated and set apart to mold the mind, inspire the heart, equip the body, shape life and empower the individual to enjoy and to conquer life through the most potent of all weapons-- *education*. However, what is all about its nobility, its loftiness and its amazing power if learning fails to take place; if it is alien and inimical; if students barely accumulate great amounts of knowledge and information? Nowadays, it is a common knowledge that students have changed tremendously with regards to the attitude towards learning. Gone were the days of diligent reading of books, writing of reports and conscientious studying of lessons. Indeed, classroom endeavors are screaming out for attention, for meaning, for sense.

When I was barely twenty one years old, teaching for the first time and in a literature class just roughly two months after graduation my mindset was that the "study" of literature was all that has to take place. I thought cognitive involvement of the students as manifested in their articulation of their thoughts, ideas, sound interpretation and analysis of literary texts for discussion was enough. The teaching of "significant human experience" was also a regular part of the lesson and not just a seasonal guest during some inspired interactions. Apparently, all these classroom activities and attempts frustrated me towards the end of the course for I realized my students didn't really "learn" at all from all those discussions and interactions we had in the class.

Furthermore, learning is also much more important than plain knowledge and awareness. Acquiring the knowledge, getting involved or engaged in a text and owning the experiences of the text makes literature significant and meaningful to the students. The students are active readers. They interact with the text by bringing themselves into the

heart of the text itself and finding common ground or “shared assumptions” that cement the ground for the reader, the text, and the author.

Through the years, as I get myself informed of the world’s wisdom as shared by well-known linguists in the theories and practices of teaching and learning language and literature, I realized the paramount role of learner-involvement, of engaging the students with the text not only for study but for experience and appreciation. I discovered that something very important takes place in the whole being of the reader as he reads, which a few of us teachers often fail to recognize. Henceforth, literature or texts, which are brought in the classroom, should be carefully selected based on some worthwhile considerations. Nuttal’s (1982) criteria for selecting a text for a literature class are very much appropriate: the text’s 1. readability 2. suitability of content and 3. exploitability.

Indeed, it is very important to consider the level of difficulty of the text. It should be difficult enough to challenge the students but not too difficult or too easy to frustrate or de-motivate them. It is also helpful to consider the interests and background knowledge of the students in relation to the content of the text. Lastly, it is also good if the text can be manipulated to suit the needs of the students. It develops their competence as a reader and it also assists them to gain sensitivity to the language of a text to focus them on certain aspects that can lead to the text’s meaning.

The text likewise plays a central role in the literature class. It should not only match the students’ cognitive level but also meet their motivational needs. As teachers, we should not be too product-centered and impose the meaning of the texts on the students (Elliot, 1990). Likewise, literature teaching should not also be a test for accuracy where learning is measured by whether the student can get the “right” meaning because there is “no single meaning” and that “meaning is in the text.” Instead, the teacher should be an *enabler*. She should be creating opportunities for the students to learn and discover the wonders of the text on their own. On the other hand, students are viewed as *responders*. They are not mere receptacles of learning. They are highly involved in creating meaning, in finding common ground in discovering the “shared assumptions” so reading would become a worthwhile act, which every student anticipates to behold. Literature therefore is interesting and enjoyable.

References:

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