

Why Are Difficult Texts So Necessary?

“Manageable Gaps” and Why They are Important as Hooks

Jacqueline Wilson gives her number one tip for writers as, “*Read lots, because it teaches you how to create.*” By ‘lots,’ she implies a wide range of texts, from simple to challenging. However, some teachers deny that their students would ever ‘get into’ the great works, because these texts are so far removed from their disadvantaged real lives. Others question why some writing is thought to be ‘better’ than others and what the point was of students starting books that they didn’t or might not yet understand.

To address these concerns head on, there is no requirement that students have to understand texts the first time that they read them. **They don’t have to ‘get it’.** Not yet. In fact, there is a strong argument that not getting it may be the very incentive that drives further investigation and exploration. The additional depth and variety that other minds, through their writing, can bring to the customisation of meaning for students is vital. There have been numerous studies, most notably perhaps the Bristol Study of Language Development, to support the idea that children’s vocabularies increase in domains that are rarely the

subject of everyday talk and that children learn that books are sources of interest and enjoyment that can introduce them to real as well as imaginary objects, and places and events that they do not encounter in their immediate environment.

Words as Possessions

The language that we use, the words we have at our disposal don’t just reveal our identity. They actually influence how we think and even what we may become. Our words shape our ideas and alter how we see our world and voice our insights. Our perceptions and our communications are all expressed through our language.

As Stephen Fry commented, “*We may be what we eat, but we most certainly are what we say... It seems most certainly to place us in the world like no other property or quality we possess.*” Words that we learn become our possessions, and literally become a part of the way we piece the world together. They have been called a fantastic filament that stretches between all of our minds and that connects us not

just to each other but also to our own past and future. They matter. Fitzgerald noted, “*That is part of the beauty of all literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you’re not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong.*”

Yet, how rarely are our students taught which words and which texts matter most? Which ones punch well above their weight and why? And even more rarely, are they given the opportunity to play with words, doodle with language and discover that meaning is a highly negotiable process? What makes meaning meaningful? What brings our words alive? What do we need our words to do for us?

Words need to help students as they start on the lifelong process of defining how they see the world, ideas and most importantly, themselves. Words should *require* them to understand concepts that matter now or will matter soon to them and to put them in a position where they need to take a viewpoint. They need to see wild words in action for, as Keynes noted, “*They are the assaults of thoughts on the unthinking.*” We live in a world of stories and we are surrounded by learners who are often mesmerised not just by plots, uncertainties, problems and a longing to know how it all turns out in the end, but also (if we let them) *by the way the writer writes.*

Great Texts Withhold Immediate Meaning

Stories are a key tool of education. They incite a desire to know more, to turn the page and of course, to learn. Curiosity is at the heart of learning.

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It’s what drives people to want to learn more about something. William James (1890) pointed out that the *brain responds to an inconsistency or a gap in its knowledge.* This is supported, slightly more recently, by Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development theory – that we need to push students slightly out of their comfort zone for them to learn. Once





that initial spark of curiosity happens, the next step is to investigate more thoroughly. That investigation then leads to wanting to wholly understand it – to *unravel the mystery* of it. And of course, that's where learning comes into action. The blurred boundaries within a text are an invitation to explore the unknown or the untested. They are an open, rather than a closed door. The haziness allows for the possibility of finding something unexpected and even unlooked for. We might uncover new possibilities within that misty ambiguity.

Great texts withhold immediate meaning. They have to be worked on. Students of all ages get too few chances to pick on them, examine them, stick sharpened matches between their pages, interrogate them and question them about what they are for. They are difficult. Puzzling over them *requires engagement*. When students have to immerse themselves in a text (such as when they are asked to write a parody or rewrite key passages in the style of a particular writer) they are required to think and explore new perspectives, to look skeptically at approaches and devices and to examine their own craft and intuitions.

If they are asked to try to write like Austen, Angelou or Amis, Faulkner, Frame or Fitzgerald, they are effectively hooked into authorial intention and impact through their empathy. They begin to

hear the music in other writers' words and are encouraged to find their own. Jeanette Winterson pointed out that if we want to explore what a writer is saying and what we understand that writer to be saying, then the links aren't telepathy, they are language: "*Learn from everything you read and understand how to learn from everything you read.*"

It's too safe for students to spend much of their time in just one world; it's our job to make them take a look at other worlds and to introduce them to the possibilities and excitement of alternative existences. One easy way to do this is through reading diverse, challenging texts with them. In our encounters with such a text, we might begin with an exercise involving *becoming* one of the characters and then go on to talk about how we would feel facing similar problems or experiences. So what begins as an exercise designed to uncover a text's implications (why does that character feel and act as they do?) leads to a deepening of the students own understanding of their own values and emotions.

In truth, opening our minds to these other worlds, to their incongruities and ambiguities, often leads to *more mess than mastery*. But it is how we help them handle the mess that helps to encourage further exploration, and thereby, development. If on that messy journey we can also offer our students some inside

track on informative and transformative insights on language, and get them prying into everything, we will have succeeded. We all need to escape from the prison of ourselves. 📖



Ian Warwick

Ian Warwick founded London Gifted & Talented as part of the groundbreaking London Challenge, which has transformed education across the capital city since 2003. He has co-written 'Educating the More Able Student' and 'World Class' in 2016 and has two new books on 'Redefining More Able Education'. He has recently completed a book on learning called *Unfinished Perfection*, which focuses on Da Vinci and explores strategies for improving creativity and innovation.

For more information contact him at:

ian.warwick@londongt.org