

The Power of Literature

Driving Learning One Word at a Time

What Does Literature do for us as Learners?

The role of a writer is to make the reader hear, feel and see, be transported into other worlds, projected into another person's experience, and to think and feel outside of ourselves. Through literature we try to come to terms with and 'try on' a world lived differently than our own. When we read, someone else's internal world transports us and can even become more important than our own. By seeing through another person's eyes, we can attend and notice more and perhaps discover our own strangenesses and similarities. We begin to see that the world inside our heads is not so unique. We invest in someone else's interior voice. In this way, books activate our compassion, lead us into alternative experiences that may change us. They offer us the opportunity to try out other people's lives and connect with other humans through the exercise of imagination and empathy. Fitzgerald commented that this is the beauty of all literature. "You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you're not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong."

Literature is there to help us to examine our loves and relationships, our hopes and our fears and nearly everything else we do. By reflecting our life back at us, texts don't just help us to see ourselves more clearly in all our universality, they lead us (crucially) towards an understanding of others. We are invited into a story and become, in the process, agents, narrators and audience. Perhaps our compulsive need to be understood may also be gratified. 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. 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.

Knowing things, in Saul Bellow's phrase, allows us to "open the universe a little more." Imparting contextual knowledge through literature is highly significant. We can't give learners shortcuts to cultural capital, but we can teach them how to decode. Unless they are exposed to a wide variety of reading experiences, students are unlikely to get such knowledge in a way that influences how they write and think for themselves.

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Introducing students to texts that require them to become used to dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty, to engage with and experience moral dilemmas is also significant in building their ability to situate and understand texts within other texts.

We develop a readiness through reading to break from our familiarities and to find in Michel Foucault's words, "What is strange and singular in what surrounds us." By studying literature, we can support an intelligent contact with that otherness that writers and their stories offer to us. How can we make those other realities of the human condition mean more to our students? In a world that can seem haphazard, we all strive to find patterns to cope with perceived chaos and meaninglessness. What we need to do is to create and transform what seem to be random events into a shareable plot. In some senses, our lives are lived in search of a narrative, our own story, which may begin to allow us a sense of control.

Writers find ways of transforming seemingly random events into a narrative that we might have a degree of agency over. The belief that art can simply mirror nature is not sufficient. We need stories that invite us to see the signifying meanings and hidden causes of things. Our life needs to be narrated, as a narrator allows us space and poetic license. Only then are we allowed to release our self-censors and to say things that otherwise we might deny having felt. Too many of our thoughts and feelings dare not say their name out loud, so we need to bypass our denial mechanisms, which perhaps enable us to more fully engage with our lives as they are lived. Perhaps we cannot tolerate too great an exposure to reality, as Eliot suggested in 'Burnt Norton,' but through the literature we expose them to, we can transform that reality by lifting students out of their existing conditions of mind and frames of reference.

How Does Literacy Support Diversity?

Literature needs to help students as they start the lifelong process of defining how they see their world, their beliefs and most importantly, themselves. It changes the way we understand the world around us and unconsciously reinforces the power of Wittgenstein's assertion that, "The limits of my language are the limits of my world." Simply stated, literature can offer our students a more genuine and open diversity than their real-life neighbourhood may. It is impossible for children to fully appreciate and live lives they themselves have never witnessed.





This is supposed by Tim Gillespie when he says that although many youngsters' lives are unfortunately circumscribed by issues such as poverty, discrimination or cultural insularity that may render them unable to see beyond the limits of their immediate horizons. Literature cheaply offers a vision of other lives and other vistas, and it enlarges a reader's sense about the many possible ways to live . . .

The question of how to tailor the texts we use in class to meet cultural needs and develop potential in all students is key, and that must mean offering all students, regardless of background, the opportunity to be challenged. This involves introducing students to texts that require them to become used to dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty, to engage with and experience moral dilemmas. We need to ensure that the texts must offer complicated problems and tough choices being lived through by characters they have engaged and perhaps identified with. In this way, we will always be moving their learning forwards, and not just offering them 'more of the same' texts that they feel comfortable with. Richard Wright makes the point well in *Black Boy* when he says that he, "Hungered for books, new ways of looking and seeing. It was not a matter of believing or disbelieving what I read, but of feeling something new, of being affected by something that made the look of the world different. . . it was nothing less than a sense of life itself."

How Does it Benefit Learners who are Disadvantaged?

Many highly professional and personally well-read teachers we have worked with still question the point of students starting some books that they might not understand. They fear confusion and putting learners off reading, and deny that their kids would ever 'get into' the great works because these texts are so far removed from their disadvantaged real lives. This seems to suggest that only more advantaged students are capable of looking at material further distanced from their immediate 'reality.' Surely it is patronising of the very learners that it is somehow meant to protect. We all understand that people are not born into equal circumstances, but isn't the purpose of education to open up opportunities for all, regardless of their background? As Alan Bennett comments, "Literature helps us all to feel." Here is someone who knows what it is like to be me. Someone who is reaching out their hand across cultures and centuries. Literature offers a vision of other lives and other vistas.

One of its potential benefits is therefore to enlarge a reader's sense about the many possible ways to live. But sometimes teachers can unwittingly restrict their students through the tyranny of alleged relevance. When Penelope Lively wrote that books freed her from the prison of myself, she seems to be suggesting that all of us need to be delivered at some point from the tyranny of ourselves, too.

The likelihood is that we can read ourselves out of a poverty of expectation. This also may be the precursor of working our way out of the world that we are born into. In truth, opening minds to these other worlds, to their incongruities and ambiguities, often leads to more mess than mastery. But it is through literature that we help our students handle the mess and encourage further exploration and development. 📖



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