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Why Study Literature?

Big Idea

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Teaching and Learning with Stories

The number of students studying Literature has been declining since the 1990s. Literature educators in Singapore are working hard to turn things around, and to show their students that more than ever, we need literature in our modern life.

“When I look back, I am so impressed again with the life-giving power of literature. If I were a young person today, trying to gain a sense of myself in the world, I would do that again by reading, just as I did when I was young.”

— Maya Angelou, American author and poet

How do the youth of today think of literature? Are they convinced of the “life-giving” power of literature, or are they perhaps asking, “Of what relevance is Shakespeare to my daily life?”

In 1992, 16,970 students took Full Literature an O-Level subject in school. Now, the figure is near 3,000. Many reasons have been offered to explain the decline in the numbers.

In 2013, Senior Minister of State for Education and Law Ms Indranee Rajah explained in Parliament that students now have more subjects to choose from than in the past. Also, many think that it is difficult to score well for Literature.

Another reason, suggests Dr Loh Chin Ee, an Assistant Professor at NIE, is that students may not see the relevance of Literature in pragmatically oriented Singapore.

“It’s better to, say, be doing Science or Math where there’re more practical returns. Literature is not seen as a necessity,” she says.

But is that really the case? Has Literature nothing left to teach our students, digital natives who are living in a globalized and hyperconnected world?



Literature is important, but the way it’s taught, that’s also very, very important.

- Loh Chin Ee,

English Language and Literature
Academic Group



An Institute of



In this issue



Citizens of the
World



Literature Festival
Turns 10!



Literature in the 21st
Century

RESEARCH within REACH

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Education

We understand the world we live in through the stories we hear every day, whether from other people, in the news, or in the books we read.

- Chin Ee on thinking through narratives and stories

Not true, says Chin Ee and the other Literature educators we spoke to for this issue.

By exploring the depth and breadth of the human experience through works of literature, teachers can help students understand themselves and others better in a multicultural and interconnected world.

Jerome Bruner talks about two kinds of thinking. The first is of the “scientific” kind that deals with logic, facts and evidence. It is also the kind our technology-driven society places a premium on.

“The other way of thinking is through narratives, through stories. We understand the world we live in through the stories we hear every day, whether from other people, in the news or in the books we read,” says Chin Ee.

This narrative approach to thinking is natural to us as human beings, which is why we often find stories more engaging than hard facts. Through stories, Literature encourages us to better understand and examine the world we live in.

Thinking Critically about Stories

But as a subject, Literature is not just about the story. What’s even more important is how we think about these stories.

“We could go into the classroom and introduce these stories, and just say, ‘Oh aren’t these stories great?’” says Chin Ee. But to her, good Literature teaching entails more—much more. It’s getting students to expand their thinking.

Good stories “pull” the readers in so that they become emotionally involved. But students must then take a step back and critically reflect on what they had read.

Teachers need to ask them questions. What are the possible messages of this story? What are the conflicting messages? Where do you stand on this, and why? Is it because of your own history and background?

Chin Ee gives an example from the short story *Mid-autumn* by Singapore writer Tan Hwee Hwee, about a mother who put her daughter through medical studies. The daughter eventually became a doctor and decided to leave her mother to become a missionary in Zambia.

Most readers would empathize with the mother and her loss because the story was written from her perspective. But this is where the teacher should come in to remind students to also think from the daughter’s perspective, as somebody who wants to be independent and help others in need.

The teacher can go even further to get the students to think about how their own individual experiences may predispose them to “read” the story in a particular way.

When students read such stories of conflicts and dilemmas and are asked to explain their stance, they get a chance to work out for themselves what their core values and principles are.

They will also begin to understand others who are different from themselves and learn to empathize while being critical at the same time.

21st Century Literacies

One defining feature of literature is the rich and intense language that writers use to weave their tales. “One of the things that the Literature subject does is that it exposes students to very rich texts, and how they can dissect the text and look at how things are being said,” says Chin Ee.

This ability to read and understand complex text cannot be underestimated.

The definition of basic literacy has changed over the years. In the earlier part of the 20th century, you would be considered literate if you could sign your name. It’s a different ball game now, says Chin Ee. “Just think about blogging—you need to be able to write, and write well.”

The English Language (EL) curriculum is beginning to adapt to

the new demands by including literary texts in assessment tasks.

“It’s a nod to how important it is to be able to read rich texts and to understand them,” she says. “In that sense, literature is very relevant and it ought to take a greater place in the EL classroom.”

Teaching Literature

The challenge for Literature educators today is to constantly think of ways to connect the subject to real-life issues for their students, or risk being seen as teaching a subject of outdated tales.

One thing that they can do is to be more adventurous about the texts they choose for their class. It is sometimes tempting to stick to the “safe” choices that we’re familiar with.

“We think students should be exposed to certain texts, say, something by Shakespeare or *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which was first published in 1960,” says Chin Ee.

“They’re good books. But I think that at particular times of students’ lives, and given particular students’ profiles, I might prefer to choose a text that engages them and which is also sufficiently rich so that they can delve deeply into it.”

To become more adventurous in choosing texts, teachers would have to read widely, be it canonical works, young adults’ novels or popular fiction. Chin Ee says, “My big emphasis would be on reading. We don’t read enough when we’re teaching. We’re often too tired to read!”

Teachers can in turn encourage their students to read outside of the assigned works. Book clustering, or suggesting books, both fiction and non-fiction, and movies that are related to the Literature text, is one way to encourage students to get students interested in reading.

“Literature is not about reading that one text closely in the classroom. It’s about reading many texts and being able to analyse books, movies, novels, TV shows and even ads,” explains Chin Ee.

Some teachers are also using technology, social media and pedagogical approaches such as Socratic questioning to change how Literature is being taught in schools.

For example, teachers in Crescent Girls’ School encouraged their students to use interactive digital media tools such as online forums and blogs for Literature and other subjects. (Read more about strategies that Literature teachers are using in the book *Teaching Literature in Singapore Secondary Schools*.)

As Chin Ee puts it, “Literature is important, but the way it’s taught, that’s also very, very important.” And the work that teachers do today will ensure that Literature will continue to inspire our students of today and tomorrow to find their place in the world.

Useful Resource

Loh, C. E., Yeo, D., & Liew, W. M. (Eds.). (2013). *Teaching Literature in Singapore secondary schools*. Singapore: Pearson.

Loh Chin Ee is the Guest Editor of this issue. She is an Assistant Professor with the English Language and Literature Academic Group in NIE. Formerly a teacher, she has taught at Raffles Girls’ Secondary School, Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) and Yishun Town Secondary School. Her research interests are in Literature curriculum and instruction, reading and teacher education.

Research

Citizens of the World

How can Literature education continue to remain relevant in our time? For one Literature teacher educator, the answer lies in how we can harness it to teach our students to care about what’s happening in the world today.

Literature students in Singapore are trained to know the studied literary text inside out. Want to test this out? Randomly pick a passage from the text and show it to them. A good student would likely be able to tell you what it’s all about and dissect for you the plot, and analyse its characters and their motivations.

This is because our Literature curriculum encourages students to read “deeply” into a work.

This emphasis on depth is important, says Dr Suzanne Choo from the English Language and Literature Academic Group in NIE. It is not just about reading a book, but critically appreciating how it has been constructed.

While Literature education has been very effective in inculcating such skills in students, perhaps it can offer even more. Through its connection to cosmopolitanism, Literature can educate students to be responsible citizens of the world.

Cosmopolitanism: Rooted in Responsibility

Decades of rapid globalization have led to increased movements of people and goods around the world, and there have been concerns about the effects of consumerism and



Suzanne believes that Literature will always be relevant in our lives



The literary text should be seen as an entry point to the world.

- Suzanne Choo,
English Language and
Literature Academic Group

immigration. As Suzanne describes it, interest in cosmopolitanism by academics may be seen as an ethical response to such effects.

Students who have a cosmopolitan outlook may more readily empathize with others, even those who are physically or culturally distant. They may feel a greater sense of shared responsibility towards what is happening to their fellow global citizens.

As consumers, when shopping for a smartphone, for example, students may pause and consider how much factory workers in a developing country are being paid to produce such phones, and whether they are being treated fairly.

When students read in the news about a bombing that has taken place in a neighbouring country, they may be concerned about how lives are lost or affected through such acts of violence.

The Internet has made it possible for students to know in an instant what is going on in the world today, but Literature has the potential to make them *care*.

Empathy for Others

What is it about Literature that lends itself to cultivating a sense of empathy in students?

“Empathy requires you to look at things from someone else’s perspective. Literature often zooms in on individual lives as opposed to examining abstract ideas or information,” explains Suzanne. Literature cultivates a concern about the lives and experiences of other people.

Also, a good work of Literature doesn’t tell the reader what to think. “It invites you to watch and listen to the ways lives unfold in particular cultural contexts,” describes Suzanne.

“At the same time, the literary text does not tell you how to judge the other. Rather, it presents room for interpretation to allow the reader to participate in its world.”

The “openness” of literary language leaves room for students to interpret, dialogue among themselves and construct meaning from the text.

Making Interconnections

Something Literature teachers can do is to help students make connections between the literary text they are studying and other texts. This will help students see how the key concepts and ideas they learn in the Literature classroom play out in other cultures and contexts.

As Suzanne explains, “The literary text should be seen as an entry point to the world.” Teachers can highlight to students particular moments in their Literature text that can be complemented and disrupted by texts from different cultures. These can include non-fiction texts such as documentaries, memoirs and news articles.

Teachers can encourage students to:

- read *against* the text by critically evaluating its aesthetic construction and the ideological values tied to this;
- read *across* texts by thinking about how a text connects to networks of literary texts in the world; and
- read *around* the text by tracing how its ideas connect historically with other literary and non-literary sources.

Rethinking Literature Education

The number of students taking up Literature as a subject at the upper secondary level has declined in recent years. Some see it as a cause for concern. But to Suzanne, it is also an opportunity for educators to rethink the Literature curriculum.

She thinks that literary texts currently taught in Singapore classrooms often deal with themes such as colonialism, apartheid and American race relations.

Suzanne often challenges her teachers to think about this: How can our Literature curriculum connect more closely to what is happening in our world today? For example, what do the

Online Extras!

Read about examples of cosmopolitan pedagogies online.

literary texts have to say about terrorism, immigration, human rights, human trafficking, global warming and the effects of transnational corporations?

A cosmopolitan Literature curriculum that emphasizes deeper empathetic understanding of other cultures will help to foster “hospitable imagination”, in which one responds out of ethical responsibility towards others different from oneself.

A hospitable imagination is becoming increasingly important in Singapore, says Suzanne, because we need to learn how to work, live and study alongside immigrants and foreigners.

“If I’m communicating with someone from another culture, I cannot just communicate intellectually. I need to have particular dispositions, such as openness to learn from and not just tolerate someone from a different race or culture, as well as the capacity to negotiate and appreciate ambiguity,” she points out.

Literature education plays a vital role in preparing our students for the globalized world. It opens up space in the classroom for our students to think deeply about not just the stories they read, but also essential questions about what it means to be a human being and to relate to the others in our interconnected age.

Suzanne Choo is Assistant Professor with the English Language and Literature Academic Group in NIE. She is interested in issues related to education for global and cosmopolitan citizenship, particularly in relation to Literature education. Recently, she published the book *Reading the World, Globe, and the Cosmos: Approaches to Teaching Literature for the Twenty-first Century*.

Classroom

Literature Festival Turns 10!

The teacher organizers share with us stories of how their students both learned and had fun at the festival that celebrates all things Literature.

Students from Chestnut Drive Secondary School attended the Literature Festival for the first time last year. And it certainly won’t be their last.

“They didn’t know Literature could be so fun!” shares their teacher Ms Michelle Lim. “And they’ve been asking me when they can start preparing for this year’s festival.”

A record number of 82 schools took part in the festival held at Dunman High School last year, compared to just 30 when it first started in 2005.

In the face of a decline in the number of students taking N- and O-Level Literature, the festival organizers find such enthusiasm very promising, because their “mission statement” has always been to keep the flame alive for Literature.

“It’s always been about enthusing students in what Literature is and is about,” says the festival founder, Dr Suzanne Choo from NIE.

Learning Beyond the Classroom

Mrs Rupa Beng Choo, a Literature teacher at Crescent Girls’ School, explains that the Literature Festival aims to bring learning beyond the classroom. Every activity is an opportunity for students to apply what they have learned during their lessons.

“It’s like bringing what they learned in class alive,” she notes. “It’s one way of making learning of Literature exciting!”

For example, students from different schools pitted their knowledge of a literary text against each other in the set-text debate. They not only had to argue for their own stance, but also question their opponents in the rebuttal rounds.

“It gives the students the ability to not only criticize each other but summarize and reiterate for themselves what they have learned,” notes Ms Chong See Hwei from Paya Lebar Methodist Girls’ School (Secondary).



Suzanne Choo (far right) and the team of teachers organizing the Literature Festival

The same goes for the book parade, where students promoted the texts they were studying to their peers from other schools. “It’s another avenue to allow students to express what they know about the text in whatever way they want to put it, be it a poster, using Information Technology or other artefacts. They can even come dressed up as the characters,” Beng Choo explains.

Michelle shares how her students were very worried that they would embarrass themselves because they didn’t spend much on props for the parade. “But they did well!” she says. “Upon reflecting, they realized, ‘Literature is like that—we don’t need the fancy stuff!’ It’s about what you interpret from the text.”

Learning from One Another

Students who took part in the festival gained a deeper appreciation of Literature. But even more valuable is their experience of interacting and competing with peers from other schools.

The students of Ms Maria Vanderstraaten from River Valley High School first attended a 3-hour workshop on how to write a poem, and then presented their own compositions at the festival.

“We had students who performed in front of total strangers for the very first time in their whole lives,” shares Maria. “At first, they felt very jittery but in the end, they emerged more confident than I had ever seen them.”

Beng Choo agrees and recalls how students from Queenstown Secondary School debated against her students last year and won. “You should’ve seen their thrill and excitement! I think they did a wonderful job. So if you ask me, that kind of encouragement is sometimes better than getting 80 marks in a test.”

For those students who did not win, all is not lost. Ms Grace Kanai from Greenridge Secondary School shares that her students lost a debate last year, but not their spirit of learning.

“They were still enthusiastic, and said they knew why they lost,” she recalls. “They said it wasn’t because they didn’t have the content knowledge. It was because they were not articulate in presenting their arguments, but they would work on it. They were really taken away by the insights of the opposing team.”

A Literature Identity

Ms Junaidah Abdul Wahab from Nan Hua High School agrees, and thinks it is because the festival provides a safe, informal environment for them, away from grades and pressures.

“Even if they lose, they’ll feel bitter for an hour, and then they’re OK because it’s fun.” she explains. “Also, they made friends with other students from other schools and teased them: ‘I have lesson notes that you don’t have!’”

And through such friendships and interactions, some students start to feel a sense of belonging.

Junaidah notes that there are very few Literature classes in her school. Because of that, her students feel like they are a minority group in the school.

“When they went to the festival and realized they were not alone, some of them told me, ‘Teacher, we finally see people like us!’” she says.

“The best part is when they come back to school and instead of feeling different, they feel proud of themselves. They announced to their peers that they had fun learning. They now have a Literature identity.”

Keeping the Flame Alive

This year will see the Literature Festival celebrating its 10th anniversary, and the organizing committee hopes more teachers will join their ranks.

“The festival is purely teacher-run and dependent on volunteers,” says Suzanne. “Every year, we’ve more enthusiastic teachers who volunteer to serve out of passion. It’s very encouraging!”

However, she notes that they are always looking out for more schools to offer to host the festival, and for more Literature teachers to serve as judges.

Suzanne’s wish is for all Literature educators in Singapore to see the Literature Festival as their “project”. In the meantime, this group of committed educators continues to keep the flame alive by working together to make the festival bigger and better. And if they had their way, Literature will never become a “sunset subject” in Singapore schools.

Useful Resource

More information about the Literature Festival can be found at <http://nationalschoolslitfest.wikispaces.com>

Suzanne Choo is an Assistant Professor with the English Language and Literature Academic Group at NIE. **Grace Kanai** is a teacher at Greenridge Secondary School. She has been teaching for 2 years. **Rupa Beng Choo** is a teacher at Crescent Girls’ School. She has been teaching for 30 years. **Junaidah Abdul Wahab** is a teacher at Nan Hua High School. She has been teaching for 12 years. **Michelle Lim** is a teacher at Chestnut Drive Secondary School. She has been teaching for 2 years. **Maria Vanderstraaten** is a teacher at River Valley High. She has been teaching for 12 years. **Chong See Hwei** is a teacher at Paya Lebar Methodist Girls’ School (Secondary). She has been teaching for 3 years.

Literature in the 21st Century

Why do we study Literature? Educators and past and present students of Literature tell us what the subject means to them and how it can continue to enrich the lives of students in the 21st century.

Literature seems to be a subject that both befuddles and captivates students. There are usually no “right” or “best” answers. But at the same time, some students credit it for inspiring them and opening up their minds to new worlds and perspectives.

We ask several educators and students of Literature, including Professor Tommy Koh, Singapore’s Ambassador-At-Large, to share with us their personal experiences with Literature and why it remains relevant to students to this day.

Q: What do you think is the value of Literature and Literature education in the 21st century?

Professor Tommy Koh, Singapore’s Ambassador-At-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rector of Tembusu College, Special Adviser of the Institute of Policy Studies, and Chairman of the Centre for International Law, National University of Singapore.

One of the subjects I studied for my O-Level examinations in 1955 was English Literature. Fifty-nine years later, I consider the study of Literature one of the best investments I have made. Why?

First, through Literature, I acquired a love of books and the joy of reading. Reading is a joyful, educational and liberating experience. You are transported from your circumstances into another world, another time and another civilization. Reading is the key that unlocks the door to the treasury of the world.

Second, reading literature helps you to think clearly, write clearly and speak clearly. Clarity of thought and expression is a virtue which should be cultivated.

Third, reading literature gives one a better understanding of human nature and the complexity of the human condition. It makes one less judgemental and more sympathetic. Literature can also be more insightful than non-fiction. For example, I find Aravind Adiga’s novel, *The White Tiger*, very informative about the dark side of contemporary India. In the same way, I find the Chinese novelist Yu Hua’s book, *China in Ten Words*, a brilliant commentary on contemporary China.

Mr Jeffrey Low, Principal, Bedok View Secondary School

Whenever I teach Literature to a new class, I usually start by asking them why we study Literature. The answers from students can range from the comically obvious to the vaguely profound: from “because it is on the timetable” to “it teaches us about the human condition”.

Often, there are the utilitarian values placed on Literature. It helps develop students’ critical thinking skills in the quest for the ubiquitous 21st century competencies. Linguistically, it gives students the opportunity to analyse and appreciate good language use by highly regarded wordsmiths. It helps students gain a better understanding of the societies which produce the literature to foster greater empathy for others.

To me, above all that, Literature education is about teaching young people to appreciate what it means to be human. It is about what it means to care for someone or something and what it means if we lose it. It is asking what is important to us as a person as we relate to the world around us. Through the novel, the poem, the short story, the dramatic text, we explore with students different contexts which all deal with what it means to live and to live well.

Davyd Tan, a Secondary 4 student who is studying O-Level Literature as a private candidate

Many students who struggle with Literature often ask these questions: “Why do we need to study Literature? How is it important for us?”



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- Professor Tommy Koh,
Ambassador-At-Large,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs



To me, above all that, Literature education is about teaching young people to appreciate what it means to be human.

- Jeffrey Low,
Bedok View Secondary School

Literature teaches us humanity—to be sensitive and empathetic towards others.

- Davyd Tan,
Secondary 4 student

Has literature finally fallen out of favour since the dawn of the 21st century? After millennia of growing, thriving and adapting, will it finally die out, succumbing to the new interests of the current generation?

When I was first introduced to Literature in Secondary 1, I had problems engaging with the subject. My grades were either borderline passes or fails. But as time went by, I learned to appreciate what I read and respond appropriately to different works. My interest in the subject has grown so much that I am now taking Literature as an O-Level subject on my own.

Although many people today may not have as much interest in reading literature, preferring to engage in new forms of entertainment such as computer games, I believe that literature remains relevant to all of us. It teaches us about life by exposing us to the lives of different people through their stories, and from these vicarious experiences, we learn important lessons and values.

Literature teaches us humanity—to be sensitive and empathetic towards others. It also provides us an outlet for our thoughts and emotions and imagination. All these can help address the problems that our world is facing now, such as increasing intolerance and stress in life. Above all, Literature teaches us language and the power of communication, a skill we cannot do without in the 21st century.

Mrs Deborah Tan, Davyd's mother

To me, Literature is about good writing. Literature education teaches one to appreciate various forms of writing and hopefully, trains one to write well. In the 21st century, forms of communication have multiplied, making the written word all the more important. After all, we all message, email, blog, post on social media in our daily lives. Hence, the ability to write well and also to appreciate good writing by others can only enhance our experiences.

My father was a journalist and this has probably shaped my attitude towards the art of writing. Naturally, I am very happy to see that my son enjoys reading and writing from a young age.

He is studying Literature on his own as the school timetable was unable to accommodate the subject combination that he wanted, but he could approach the Literature teacher outside of curriculum time for notes and assignments, and sit for the school examinations.

I am glad that he has the chance to read Literature as I believe that it is a subject that opens the mind and the heart, which is so relevant to the global society of today.

To me, Literature is about good writing.

- Deborah Tan,
Davyd's mother

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Online Exclusives



Literature for Every One



Literature in the English Language Classroom



Journeying with Literature



Connecting with the Past



The Importance of Being Earnest (about Literature)