

## Literature's Significant Role for Critical Values Education in the Twenty-First Century

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Once the most central subject in schools in Britain and its colonies during the age of Empire, English Literature has now lost its place of prominence. This phenomenon is apparent in the case of Singapore.

That it is not a new occurrence but evidence of a steep decline over the past two decades is obvious from figures released last month, showing a fall in enrolment for 'O' and 'N' level Literature since 1992.

One can trace Literature's decline to the period following Singapore's independence when more emphasis was placed on the communicative aspect of English through policies such as bilingualism.

English was positioned as a first language, the language of business and a bridge language connecting different races while the study of mother tongue languages was essential to ensuring that citizens would remain rooted to "Asian" values and traditions.

Effectively, this contributed to a gulf between the study of English Language and English Literature so that the former was a key national priority while the latter was marginalised since its problematic ties to colonialism meant that English was not to be the avenue through which culture and values would be transmitted.

What the state astutely recognised then was English Literature's inherent connection to values education. Indeed, when English Literature was first constructed as a school subject and introduced into the national system of education in Britain during the late 18th century, it was primarily a platform for the cultivation of bourgeois English values.

One way in which the Ministry of Education in Singapore sought to distance the subject from its colonial roots was by renaming it Literature in English so as to include a broader range of literary works from Singapore and other parts of the world.

To fully address Literature's decline, however, there is a need to return to Literature's foundational role as a platform for critical values education in the 21st century.

In contrast to values education that is didactic, involving the transmission of values in a top-down and fact-based manner, Literature education equips students to negotiate the multiplicity of values and belief systems of diverse cultures.

In my studies of Literature classrooms in Australia, Singapore and the United States, I have observed, for example, how a teacher "interrupted" his students' reading of William

Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* by getting them to compare and contrast the taming of women in other societies through various stories and plays by Jamaica Kincaid, Kyoko Mori, Maxine Hong Kingston and Stella Kon. Through this, students gained insights into the oppression of women across cultures.

In another class, the teacher had students read Shaun Tan's graphic novel, *The Arrival*, centered on the experience of immigration, followed by various short stories on human rights. After that, students conducted research and simulated a forum in which they discussed various social issues from the perspective of the state, the citizen and different marginalised groups.

In both these cases, students engaged with a form of values education that was not about the acquisition of a set of normative principles but rather the cultivation of dispositions including the ability to examine issues from multiple perspectives, to appreciate ambiguity, and to make informed evaluations of values and their consequences.

While Literature education does foster aesthetic appreciation and a taste for good writing, what we often forget is that when students are asked to respond to questions such as "What makes us sympathise with Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*", "Is justice served at the end of *Macbeth*", or "How does the writer develop the sense of irony in the poem *Dulce Et Decorum Est*", they need to consider the underlying beliefs determining a character's intentions and behaviour, the different social-cultural values influencing how concepts such as justice are perceived, and the ways in which literary techniques contribute to the implied author's philosophical proposition in the text.

In short, these are questions requiring critical engagements with values.

The reality of cultural clashes and mixings as a result of our globally interconnected world has meant that it is now difficult to sustain any singular, universal value system.

Through exposure to literary texts from around the world, students gain access to the consciousness and lived realities of other communities; they apply critical reflection and ethical reasoning as they navigate various cultural and moral ambiguities conveyed vividly through the struggles of various characters in literature and, in the process of experiencing other worlds, they develop an imagination hospitable towards the powerless and the foreign.

Far from being an impractical subject, Literature education has become even more vital in our porous, networked societies today.

In her book *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs The Humanities*, University of Chicago professor Martha Nussbaum observes that economically advanced nations tend to invest their systems of education in equipping students with useful and highly applied skills suited to economic development.

"If this trend continues," she says, "nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticise tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements."

There is a need for policymakers and educators to restore the centrality of Literature education in Singapore, but this can only occur when the significant role Literature education can play in promoting critical values education is first recognised.