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Thinking through literature

There is considerable potential among teachers of literature and their pupils in Finland. Through appropriate guidance it is possible for schoolteachers to strengthen and develop their own literary interest at the same time as they make creative and focused use of literature so that they and their students may acquire the life-enhancing benefits of focused literary study.

An Introduction to Literary Studies

At the end of May I will be retiring after about 20 years as a Lecturer at the University of Jyväskylä in what is now called the Department of Languages and Communication. My main interest is in literature, and over the years I have had the privileged good fortune to be able to design and give a wide variety of literature courses – on Shakespearean drama, The Romantics, The American Novel and the American Short Story among many others – at Basic, Intermediate and Advanced levels.

Prior to coming to Finland I had a career teaching English – language and literature – in the UK, mainly in Independent secondary schools teaching pupils from 13 to 18, including post A Level coaching (i.e. age 18 +) for the Oxford Entrance Examination. My responsibilities included organising the detailed ‘moderation’ and ‘standardisation’ of the written assignments for GCSE Key Stage 4 English Language and Literature that we submitted – about 10 for each of the 120 candidates each year – to the NEAB examination board, whose assessment criteria were of course in line with the national curriculum. (Though Scotland has a different educational system from England and Wales, literature forms a major part also of the Scottish National Curriculum. so it is accurate to refer to the study of literature ‘in the UK’.)

My teaching here may be at university level, but my course ‘An Introduction to Literary

Studies’, acting as a bridge between school and university for all our 80 first year students, has provided information about what our students know about literature and what their experience of literary study has been before coming to us. Each week there is a topic, some explanatory reading, and a literary text with some topic-related questions to be answered before the class, in which students negotiate an agree group answer before we move on to a whole group discussion of them. The selected topics are basic critical tools – useful practical ways that may be applied as appropriate to analyzing any literary work: narrative point of view, narrative tone, register, figures of speech such as metaphor and irony, and the effect on the reader, among other topics. I introduce the selection of twenty poems gently, and only half way through the 12 week course. I give them the opportunity to read and discuss their responses to them quite freely before we move on to exploring technical aspects such as stanza forms, rhyme schemes, metre and sound effects, syntax, word choices etc. that have contributed to the effects on them as readers that we had already started to discuss and refine. I seek to help them to perceive and articulate organic connections between form and meaning. Many of the topics are already covered by the end of Key Stage 4 in the UK (i.e. by the age of 16) and at Sixth Form level all of them should be.



Students understandably find this course very challenging, not only because of the new concepts, but also because the texts have that unique concentration of meaning and form of imaginative literature, further because some of the texts are not modern, and moreover they are all in a foreign language. In the case of poetry their difficulty is compounded by not having read much poetry in *any* language in classes at school, let alone in a foreign one, prior to coming here – hence the need to introduce the poetry *gently*, and the need to encourage them to connect with authentic personal responses by getting them to consider simple questions like *What did you like about this poem? Which part had the most impact on you and what was it? What did you find interesting? How does the poem make you feel?* Simple questions, seemingly, but once the answers start to be discussed it is soon seen that some of the answers may not be easily articulated accurately – or agreed with by others.

It is clear that many – dare I say what I really mean: *most?* – of the students have not been accustomed to reading and discussing literature *closely*. Some find the process of having their opinions challenged very difficult to take, and sometimes can make the mistake of assuming that being asked by me to provide evidence for a particular interpretation they have proposed is being told *what to think*. *I am not telling you what to think*, I sometimes say, *but rather how to think, and how to support your views with evidence from the text – if you can*. These are sensitive matters, so I am usually at pains to point out to them that I welcome all responses and that any response at all gives us something valuable to work with to get discussion going. The process does show them though that they have to learn to work with different opinions of student colleagues – or myself. Do we find the evidence that has been adduced (if any) in support of a

particular view convincing? This heuristic process of mutual discovery of a text and its meaning and effects, of carefully, subtly, weighing up the evidence, and articulating other complex issues, such what is implied and to what degree in a densely phrased metaphorical passage, is for many a new and daunting intellectual activity. But it is at the *core* of literary critical discussions, and students taught in schools in the UK to examine literature in the ways stipulated in the National Curriculum for England and Wales will have had experience of the process.

The *critical tools* that I teach them constitute a great deal of the literary critical language of literary discussion, so it is hardly surprising if students, not knowing that language, are not used to examining texts and their meanings and effects closely. The fact that sometimes students admit, when I go over with them what the forces are that may work against us, that they are afraid of being wrong, itself may suggest that they have not been much accustomed to the exchange and assessment of one another's ideas in the classroom – the neutral to and fro of reasoned argument, which can appear to them instead like painful personal cuts and thrusts. They have often in fact explicitly stated that this way of discussing literature is a new – and at first daunting – way of thinking about literature.

In conclusion, first, my students here have studied considerably less literature in Finnish schools, and especially poetry, than their counterparts in English lessons in the UK. I am referring here mainly to Finnish Yläkoulu at Grades 7–9 and to some extent to Lukio, Grades 10–12, that, respectively, correspond broadly to Middle or High schools in the UK i.e. up to GCSE Key Stage 4 at age 16, and to Sixth Form up to 18.

Second, school students in Finland are less familiar with those 'critical tools', and are less accustomed to literary critical discussion that



makes use of them. They tend not to be accustomed to the process of assessing the merits of one another's responses through a rigorous focus on the evidence of close reading of the text. So as well as being given a lesser *amount* of literature in classes here, the *type* of study of it is different.

Of course, one would not expect that two different countries and cultural including literary traditions would have the same approach to the study of literature in schools. None the less there are of course many shared goals related to the study of literature, and I think the approach to literature teaching and learning that I am recommending not only fits into the existing core curricula here, but can fulfil some of the stated objectives even more effectively than existing practices do. For example the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 states:

Objectives related to the learning environments and working methods of mother tongue and literature in grades 7–9

Working methods are selected to strengthen the pupils' command of strategies for reading comprehension and to allow them to develop more fluent processes of text production. (15.4.1)

Developing more effective *working methods to strengthen the pupils' command of strategies for reading comprehension* is precisely what I am advocating here. And there are other stated objectives that what I am advocating is in line with.

In December 2019 I gave a questionnaire to that semester's teaching group. Their responses broadly confirmed what I have found from my experience, that literature could have a bigger role, that there could be more variety including in

particular poetry, and more actual study of literature. They added that there could be more use of literature in second language teaching, and that there could be more continuity in the study of literature between Yläkoulu and Lukio.

Literature in the Classroom

If you were not provided with properly guided study at school, it is not easy to give it to your own students. The trainee teachers in my 'Literature in the classroom' course that I created two years ago to help to overcome that problem are all aware of frustrated potential in their literary interest and are strongly motivated and receptive. The course aims to develop that interest at the same time as they explore ways of sharing enthusiasms with future students by creating focused and inspiring work.

The right kind of guidance combined with motivation and receptivity can transform understanding of literature remarkably quickly. Early on I share some of my own interest and enthusiasm via closely examining one or two short literary masterpieces and engage my students in focused conversation.

They regularly bring their own texts and regularly discuss how they can be made use of in teaching situations to develop focused disciplined thinking. The creative focus of these discussions invariably produces more ideas than most individuals would manage on their own, and helps them to become more adept at creating productive approaches.

Further, there is a noticeable collective camaraderie which stems from shared commitment to literature and teaching, shared unfulfilled potential, and the shared responsibility and challenge of their future in the classroom. Sharing experiences, interests, enthusiasms, frustrations, fears, doubts, uncertainties, ambitions and hopes leads to the growth of trust, respect



and support, generating a powerfully positive atmosphere, full of the energy of common purpose, helping them to develop and flourish.

The books to support the process are perceptive, inspiring and practical – and importantly short, as there is as much emphasis as possible on the practical. In fact the course as a whole is more work-focused than work-related. The poet Ted Hughes' *Poetry in the Making* (1979) provides expert guidance on how to get children to write, and Jill Pirrie's *Apple Fire* (1993) is an anthology of poems by her own pupils at Halesworth Middle School. Those two books show what is possible. Her *On Common Ground* (1994) and Paddy Creber's *Thinking Through English* (1990) provide a wealth of information about how to connect with children in class and different ways of generating focused thinking. Instead of *English*, Finnish or other mother tongues could be substituted.

During the 12 weeks of the course they produce two 'schemes of work'. They design with careful focus and in considerable detail practical usable lessons plans for individual lessons and also longer work that is usually theme-based. They do this working together in small groups. Their schemes have to conform to the National Core Curriculum for a grade level that they expect to be teaching, and relevant matters such as multiliteracy are taken into account and included as they consider appropriate. The creative range and quality of focus of work they produce is often very impressive, and bears eloquent testimony to their ability and commitment – and how they have expanded during the course. The other formal requirement is to produce a substantial essay answering the question *Why study literature?* which requires them to articulate the theoretical rationale for what they are doing, and they produce many reasons that show their insights and passionate convictions. Not only do they need to be clear in their own minds about why the study

of literature is important, but the reasons need to be at hand in their careers. And there are likely to be times in the world at large when they need to be able to justify it persuasively. Some secondary material on the rationale for the teaching literature is provided but it is important that their own convictions are at the core here too.

In his poem 'Thrushes', Ted Hughes contrasts *the bullet and automatic purpose* of the thrush with the need for human beings, except for rare geniuses, to have to strive hard to concentrate on achieving something and to ignore *the distracting devils*, those forces that work against focused concentration. Today there are so many distractions for everyone including school pupils, and not least the distractions of that ubiquitous and addictive tyrant the mobile phone, and the hypnotic power of social media. Teachers need to have strategies for dealing with these live issues, so we identify the various forces that work against what they will be trying to achieve and consider practical strategies for countering them.

Trainee and working teachers

Students were presented with little or no poetry in their Finnish lessons at school. I maintain that this matters because poetry, being the most concentrated form of verbal expression, is a uniquely useful resource for developing critical thinking. It presents the most complex and rewarding challenges for discussion about form and meaning. Kalevala is there, but devising varieties of verse suitable for use at different school levels could be considered, including the flexibility afforded today by multiliteracy, so for example appropriate music lyrics could be included. Further, expanding the use of literature in second language teaching could be considered. Overall, more literature in general could be studied.

If there is to be a more focused use of literature for developing thinking through literature,



training will be required, and in teacher training departments. In order to transform practices, sufficient resources will need to be allocated. But short duly focused training courses of two days or even one could make a valuable difference. There are already training days for working school teachers that could be used for developing this important area. Online courses involving students and their teachers could be convenient and effective – but they will have to be created. However, there can be no effective substitute for that guided close reading together in classrooms that generate the discipline of the focused interaction that develops thinking. That is what our students most need in literature classes in their schools.

One additional remark. It ought to be clear from the kind of study that I am advocating that

it is empirical practical criticism – analysis, discussion – based on the evidence of the text. So a body of theory about Finnish verse is not needed for disciplined critical thinking to take place. And even if there were one, it would be a bad idea to use it prior to Lukio to interpose it between the students and their responses.

Though I will be retiring from the University I will be continuing to seek ways to promote successful guided study of literature in the classroom. I would gladly discuss ways of helping individuals or organisation to develop teaching practices.

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Esillä sääntömääräiset asiat.

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Johtokunta

