

Emotional Connection and Personal Investment in Literature

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One year when I was about eleven years old, my family and I traveled down to Florida during my school's spring break. My stepdad, being the habitually punctual person he is, always insisted we arrive at Mitchell International Airport three hours prior to our actual flight, despite the fact that Milwaukee's airport is hardly a bustling hub. We waited in line at the check in counter for what seemed like eons (at least to my younger brother and me), until finally it was our turn to haul our oversized suitcases onto the scale.

My mom helped me hoist my suitcase up, and to her and my stepdad's dismay, it appeared that my suitcase was somehow several pounds over the limit. "You'll need to remove some items," the airline worker told us.

"How could this possibly be over 50 pounds, Sarah? What did you pack?" my mom asked, frazzled as she handed me back my bag and began pulling my brother's onto the scale. Eleven-year-old me, being a practical kid, had decided I should bring some reading material for the beach. The books I chose? The third and fourth *Harry Potter* books, which likely weighed about 10 pounds.

While I generally loved reading as a child, there was no series that compared with *Harry Potter*. I packed these books on vacation, I attended midnight book releases, and I sat for twelve straight hours with my brother the following day, so we could finish the entire book before any spoilers could reach us. And while I know that they are not considered by many as the epitome of literary excellence, these books were my entire childhood – my friends and I quite literally grew up alongside Harry, Ron and Hermione. I first began reading the series when I was 8, and the final book came out when I was 16. When Gryffindor won the House Cup, I was vicariously thrilled; I bawled like a baby when Dobby died; and I doubt that there will ever be a literary character I will despise more than Dolores Umbridge.

The *Harry Potter* series is not only a bit of nostalgia, a connection to my childhood so positive and deep I wish I could experience the entire series again for the first time; it is also the series that showed me the power literature can hold. To use words to create such a fully realized world, and to make readers care so deeply? For me that was – pardon the pun – magical.

My emotional connection to literature has certainly colored the way I teach it now to my middle and high school students. Teaching at an IB school, I am fortunate that a curriculum is not simply handed to me, nor am I horribly restrained by standards. Despite my general freedom to teach what I like, literature is still seen as a fairly analytical endeavor. In fact, one of the four criteria used to assess students in the course I teach, Language and Literature, is “Analysis.” This approach to literature does, of course, have its merits. It teaches students ways to think critically about a text and delve deeper into more complex concepts. However, this was never the aspect of literature that intrigued me, and I doubt it does much to engage many of my students. As pointed out in Juzwik’s text, “This treatment of reading— both literary and informational— as a vehicle for analysis aligns the domain of reading and literature with the primary aspiration of the Common Core: college and career readiness” (Juzwik et al., 2017). Though this quote applies specifically to Common Core Standards, the sentiment is the same. Analysis, as previously stated, does have its benefits; however, centering all student-literature interaction around this process generally only serves to make students detest literature courses.

When my students read a book in their free time or a novel we’re studying in class, I want them to be emotionally invested in the story. This is part of the reason why my students always have a book of their choice checked out from the library. While I do often choose the texts we read in class, I believe it is so incredibly important for them to find books on their own that they enjoy as well. Students need to see that reading can be a personal and engaging

experience. In order to blend the need for analysis with my desire for student-developed connections to texts, I also try to incorporate as many creative summative assessments in my classes as I can. I will rarely assign an “analytical” essay to my students. Instead, I prefer to see that they can analyze and think critically about a text by demonstrating it in creative ways. For example, during a recent novel study, my grade 6 students and I focused on characterization while reading *A Long Walk to Water* by Linda Sue Park. For their assessment, I gave my students a hypothetical scenario: our school’s administration had decided to remove the book from the English curriculum. It was their job to write a letter to our Head of School defending the teaching of the book, using important traits the main characters demonstrated and the lessons they taught readers as evidentiary support. While in many ways students were analyzing the novel’s characters, they enjoyed being given a real-world situation in which they could creatively express what they knew.

When speaking about students establishing a connection with a literary text, teachers must also consider the backgrounds of their students. When I hear, for example, someone who says they do not like the *Harry Potter* books, I can’t help but feel shocked. How can this person not love this thing that was so essential to my childhood experience? However, this feeling of shock also reminds me that everyone’s reaction to a specific novel is different. These differences are colored by personal tastes and preferences, of course, but they are also related to our backgrounds and experiences. A student’s ability to emotionally connect with a text wholly depends on their ability to engage with it in the first place. I do want to exercise some caution here – I am not saying that the only books we should be able to connect with are those that perfectly reflect our own life experiences; in fact, some of the novels I have connected with the most have been written by and about people with whom I do not share many similarities. What I

do believe is that teachers, especially teachers of reading and literature, are given a unique responsibility. The texts we present to our students illustrate certain viewpoints and ideas to them, whether we intend to or not. Educators “must take into account people’s backgrounds and individual experiences,” noted Petrone, Sarigianides, & Lewis, especially those of the adolescent, whose beliefs and passions are often diminished into a singular, misunderstood mass (2014). It is easy as teachers to get bogged down in students understanding a text “the right way” or to lead students to what we believe is the “correct” interpretation of a novel. In my classroom, I have been reflecting on this tendency as of late, and one of my professional goals is to ensure that all of my students’ points of view are heard and valued. We cannot expect students to fully engage with a text if they believe their own feelings about it are wrong.

As a high school student, I was exposed to many of the texts one might expect: *The Catcher in the Rye*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Hamlet*, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, to name a few. These are texts that I personally enjoyed immensely as a reader; however, it was not until I got to college that I realized there were huge gaps in my literary experience. My sophomore year of college, I took a literature class that focused on the works of Richard Wright, reading books like *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. Having grown up in a predominantly white, middle-class suburb in Wisconsin, race was not a topic with which I was often confronted. Though there were discussions in this class that felt difficult and uncomfortable, the works of Richard Wright opened up an entirely new way of thinking in me, and I began not only to reflect on the institutionalized racism that runs our country, but also to understand my place as a white woman in upholding that institution. My mindset was further broadened by a postcolonial literature course I took during my final year of school. With novels such as Chinua Achebe’s acclaimed *Things Fall Apart* and Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*, I could see through

the eyes of groups that had faced oppression around the world. These novels also helped me unlearn much of what I had previously been taught in history classes. Ultimately, it was university literature courses like these that informed the novel selections in my classroom.

Every English teacher is familiar with the phrase “Dead White Guy Curriculum.” It is a curriculum that was placed on a pedestal for decades, if not centuries, up until recently. I’d like to reiterate that I truly enjoyed many of the “dead, white guy” books I have read in the past; however, after having experienced so many important and perspective-changing novels that fall outside of this category, I make a conscious effort to include them in my classes. Including authors in my curriculum that are women, LGBTQ, people of color, people of different religions or people of different nationalities is one of the best ways to expose students to literature that will challenge their own opinions and perspectives for the better. While some might deem it “tokenism,” I believe that oversimplifies the complexities behind literature and author selection. Having experienced it firsthand on numerous occasions, I can safely attest that reading different types of literature has broadened my mind in a way no history textbook ever did. If I can help my students experience this, I can also help them learn a very important skill that schools often overlook: the ability to empathize. This generation of students is experiencing a connected world in a way that no other generation has before; learning to empathize and understand others is not just something that will make them successful in the future, it is also going to help make them better people. As Westheimer and Khan discussed in their text “What Kind of Citizen?”, it is the justice-oriented citizens who critically assess social, economic and political structures and know about how to effect change (2004). Being able to effect change and become involved in global issues requires a person who can see from outside their own point of view, a person who can

walk a mile in someone else's shoes. In order for students to grow into those kinds of people, I firmly believe they need exposure to literature that can instill empathy and compassion.

Ultimately, the empathy I hope my students learn from literature returns us once again to my hope that they will create a personal and emotional connection with the books they read. My goal as an English teacher is that I can contribute to a student's love of reading, similar to the kind I have had since I was a child. Luckily for my students, with today's e-readers their love of reading won't even get them stopped at the airport check-in.

References

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