

Magnon Ariel King

Hearing Voices: The Art Of Teaching Literature

“The purpose of art is not just to show life as it is but to show life as it should be.”—Paul Robeson

There are private schools, pilot schools, and parochial schools which have narrowly- focused curricula, so the mission of *public* schools should be to provide a diverse liberal curriculum that offers a wide range of possibilities for learners. If combining the best of the old with the best of the new is not the purpose of education, why have teachers at all?

Students know how to download facts from the Internet. Teachers are supposed to guide students toward connecting other people’s ideas to their own. Human guides teach good life habits.

Through their exclusion from traditional liberal arts curricula, many students learn not to believe in achieving human excellence; they assume that some kids are born to succeed, others are not. I had students at the college level who thought that liberal arts are for so-called smart kids. Such students did not consider getting into college a huge achievement. They did not congratulate themselves for choosing to fill out the application, to learn more after school had ceased to be mandatory. One business major considered college “just a higher high school” that intensifies the business training received in public school. She was resigned to being the highest-paid secretary she could be. When I took typing in high school I did not think doing so meant I was destined to be a secretary or that a secretary was less intelligent than a school teacher anyhow.

Another student complained that most of her female peers seemed to feel the same way and that it was all the school’s fault for pointing them in one limited direction, then labeling the path the way for losers. I totally agree. She had expected, she said, to discuss *topics* in college, not listen to her professors “still just [lecturing on] their opinions because business students are considered too stupid to have any of their own.” One wonders how businesswomen who like to discuss complex topics other than those required for work feel when surrounded by women who could not care less. It is clear that teenagers are not necessarily

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disinterested in learning and intellectual growth; rather, they have lost faith in the humanization of work, have turned to focus on material gain, because their education lacked a human element, the idea that intangible personal fulfillment is also a reachable achievement.

The study of literature in traditional curricula encourages students to focus on what is generally described as “common human dilemma”. There was something comforting to me about discussing ideas that lurk in most people’s subconscious in one form or another; it made me feel deeply connected to my species. Schooling should socialize, but without a spiritual human focus too, students might as well be computers or androids. Exploring potential for human excellence needs to be higher on the educational agenda than acing standardized public school exams. Reading liberates individual ideas while connecting young minds to facts, statistics, and the wisdom of the past. It helps shape the future.

Of course we need common standards of education. Who is capable of fairly, competently, reasonably, realistically, setting these standards is the question. Who determines current and future goals? What are the mistakes of the past? How can they be avoided in the future? What about damage control? So far, answering these questions by tweaking standardized tests has been so bad for students.

It is wonderful to want to change students’ lives, but somewhere between considering schooling successful merely because students across the entire country can pass the same test and the opposite end of the spectrum—attempting to change the whole world in one fell swoop—is a realistic happy medium. Well-intentioned teachers who attempt to transform the macrocosm often doom themselves and their students to failure. As Robert Hutchins states: “If a society does not wish to change, it cannot be reformed through the educational system.”* In other words, changing schools, assisting students by teaching that the self is the basic building block, is a noble cause, but presuming to ignore that family and community are units if one does not respect or approve of said units is high-handed. Too many educators ascribe to a specific world order and attempt to prescribe to students a regimen through which they can, or *must*, fit into this order. What does society mean in a multicultural country? Whose definition of society counts? Who voted on our official culture? There is no “American Society”, regardless of how the majority

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pressures the many to become the one. Ours is a collection of cultures and societies.

The best a teacher can do is change the microcosm of the classroom by encouraging all of the selves in it to come forth, to build themselves and their peers up. This is no small lesson, but teaching individual judgment and responsibility simultaneously with tolerance of difference is truly transformative. Increasing student capacity for active intellectual give-and-take is indeed the responsibility of educators; and the side-effect might be a self-actualization that causes the student to want to help others, to become part of a more cooperative planet. It might be difficult for teachers to sign on to make an eventual difference, to know that they might not ever see the results of their efforts, but that is part of the job description.

Maybe today some kid is a better parent because ten years ago I said part of the reason I love books is that my father used to read to me, so now the former student reads to his kids too. I will never know, but it is rewarding to suspect that I made a difference somehow. Teachers have to have active imaginations sometimes to make the work rewarding for years to come. It is part of their own self-actualization process. Like many things in life, teaching involves continual balancing of conflicting desires, needs, and responsibilities. It is a fool's errand to try to bear up the world on one's shoulders; it is also irresponsible to disclaim, "My job is simply to teach literature, not tolerance, responsibility, et cetera." An English teacher who considers literature and humanity separate ought to have her library cards revoked.

One of the most volatile debates among English teachers continues to be whether they are responsible for teaching reading and writing for English classes only (English as a subject), or interdisciplinary reading and writing skills (English as a language). I believe that teaching high school and undergraduate English as a subject encourages elitism by training a fraction of the population to communicate in an academic language that is deliberately inaccessible to the rest of the population. English as *just* a subject should be reserved for graduate school and beyond.

Teaching English as a language is not politically advantageous to the

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tenured elite who are afraid that a higher level of required literacy will enable the masses to batter down the doors to the ivory towers. This debate filtered from higher education into the realm of the public school sector. One result of this nonsense is that in attempting to keep the masses from reaching a specialized level of literacy, many administrations hinder competency at the level of common literacy. Unfortunately, textbook publishers have buckled to “teaching down” trends. And they teach bad stuff. Like it’s okay to use conjunctions at beginnings of sentences 24/7. Plus, casual writing and fragments? Not a prob. Yep, even in formal exercises, contractions and all all the time, and other places where you’d figure somebody might maybe have some higher standards or something like that. Don’t laugh. It’s, like, lame.

If the practice of teaching down to students persists, the issue of the relevance of traditionally-taught literary works will become entirely moot. The variable but timeless, universal usefulness of literature makes little difference if the average student is not trained to read it. Academic determinism will outweigh social determinism in deciding which literary works are or are not passed on, and most important, to whom they are passed.

Unfortunately, the efforts of many cultural politicians in academe to favor multi-cultural texts is backfiring because too often sub-dominant literatures are being taught instead of, not *with*, dominant canonical literature. Even the author does not own his or her own work once it is published. Many teachers as well as school administrators discriminate against students by deciding from a superficial, and often extra-cultural, vantage point which texts will appeal to which students. (i.e. Who *owns* the text?)

Through liberal education students are exposed to as many good texts as possible, allowed to make connections for themselves—essential for building moral character and developing empathy for others. Age-inappropriate material overwhelms the student; underestimating his intelligence robs him of the opportunity to grow intellectually and inter-culturally. Especially odd is that the very educators who advocate matching “relateable” texts to underprivileged students of color do not stop to think how discouraging tales of downtrodden poor, urban people might be to their students. Can you imagine being a migrant farmer

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reading nothing but Steinbeck?

Art and language have many functions; one primary function is to recreate gritty human realities and tragedies; another purpose is to encourage dreams and hope by reflecting positive aspects of the human experience such as triumph over life's obstacles and the resilience of the human spirit. Passion is contagious, common sense can be instilled early, and subject knowledge alone is not enough qualification to teach.

Updating, expanding, and customizing book lists without maintaining some connection to the past--beginning with trust for teachers—is rarely beneficial to students.