

Importance of literature education for the future

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WHILE the English language retains its paramount importance as a compulsory first-language subject in all national schools, English literature education occupies a more marginalised position. As the nation celebrates its 50th birthday, one key question to ask is: Will literature education have a significant public role in Singapore society in future?

Looking ahead, such a question calls for a renewed vision of literature education, one centred on the ideals of a cosmopolitan approach that can equip students with the sensitivities and dispositions for a globalised age.

Cosmopolitanism stems from the Greek term denoting citizen of the world. Therefore, a cosmopolitan literature education attunes students to what it means to live, in relation to others in the world.

Its main aim is for students to be exposed to, as well as to empathise and engage with, multiple and marginalised others in the world.

In order to promote a flourishing and sustainable literary culture, we would need to do more than just "grow" writers... It is clear that literature education in schools has a vital role to play as the breeding ground for readers and audiences, as well as other members of the literary and cultural ecosystem.

This does not mean that literature education should be utilised for didactic moral training. Instead, literature education provides a platform for critical discussions about what it means to live the good life, which is the just life, the meaningful life, and the ethical life.

Ethics was a significant aspect of education during the time of ancient Greece and China, with philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, Socrates and Confucius calling us to contemplate such essential questions about human existence and purpose.

The interest in virtue ethics contributed by key philosophers of the late 20th century has led to a shift away from the self's preoccupation with living a moral life to the question of how the self can be attentive to and responsible for others in the world, particularly those who are victimised, marginalised and oppressed.

In practice, a cosmopolitan literature education continues to emphasise equipping students with skills that enable them to critically appreciate and interrogate language. However, it perceives language not merely as a means for effective communication of meaning, but as a means to understand others. In this sense, it is committed to developing a critical and hospitable imagination.

One of the most common questions asked in the literature classroom is "What are your feelings towards xyz character in the story?"

Such questions tap into the affect, the sense of connectedness to another by sensitising students to other realities and by encouraging empathy towards others who are different.

Similarly, a question like "Whose point of view are we getting here?" primes students to consider voices that have been silenced.

There must be a more concerted effort to invest in literature education's capacity to interrogate and expand the imagination. As Columbia University's Professor Gayatri Spivak has argued, one fundamental role of aesthetic education is to test the limits of the imagination's capacity to perceive otherness.

This can be encouraged in three ways. The first is by developing the classroom as an inclusive space that encourages students to read literary texts (including translated texts) from diverse cultures, so that they can compare issues from different cultural perspectives.

The second is by deliberately introducing contemporary literary texts (even if alongside canonical ones) that allow students to engage with global issues, such as terrorism, modern-day slavery and environmental degradation.

The third is by providing opportunities for democratic participation in the classroom. The open-ended nature of aesthetic language facilitates engagement with literary texts through inquiry, debate and dialogue.

The push for a cosmopolitan literature education, as well as any other effort to strengthen arts education in Singapore, should be considered alongside the goal of the nation's wider culture policies to be a global city for the arts. The prevailing view is that cultural development is best thought of in ecological terms in order for policy to be most effective operationally. Indeed the discourse of ecology and ecosystem now pervades much contemporary discussion of arts and culture policy in many parts of the developed world.

An arts and cultural ecosystem suggests an organic whole of many interrelated and interdependent parts. In literary terms then, in order to promote a flourishing and sustainable literary culture, we would need to do more than just "grow" writers.

Writers cannot be thought of separately from readers, editors, literary agents, librarians, publishers and literature teachers. All these players should be intensively interlinked and codependent in many ways.

Stepping back to take a wider view of a larger whole, it is clear that literature education in schools has a vital role to play as the breeding ground for readers and audiences, as well as other members of the literary and cultural ecosystem. It is key to the continued development of the cultural and creative industries to ensure that standards of excellence are continually pushed by the larger reading public.

Indeed, the potential in Singapore for literature education to enhance students' imagination and allow them creative expression has not been fully exploited.

We need to adopt a coherent and integrated approach to encourage more students to study literature, with school educators working alongside the arts community, and the Ministry of Education alongside the National Arts Council.

With literature education policy as well as arts and culture policy working in tandem and moving in the same direction, we can foster a conducive environment for a thriving, vibrant arts and literature ecosystem.

The authors teach and research literature education at the National Institute of Education. This paper is a condensed version of a paper presented at the Institute of Policy Studies round table on literature education. The full report is at <http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/event/ips-sam-spotlight-on-cultural-policy-series-roundtable-on-the-state-of-literature-education-and-its-implications>