

Top Ten Reasons Why Students Need More Literature (Not Less)

By Jane Robbins and Joe Mack

One of the many problems with the federally coerced Common Core State Standards is that they greatly de-emphasize the study of literature — in favor of studying "informational texts" such as government documents, computer manuals, etc. (A cynic might suspect that Bill Gates, whose foundation is funding Common Core, needs entry-level workers who have been trained to read computer manuals rather than employees who are educated in the English language.) If schools move to this approach via Common Core, they will be shortchanging their students. Dr. Steven Lynn, Dean of the Honors College at the University of South Carolina, addresses the folly of reducing our students' exposure to literature:

Top Ten Reasons Why Students Need More Literature (Not Less)

In uniquely powerful ways, literary study prepares students for richly rewarding and meaningful lives. No other reading experience or learning activity duplicates this preparation.

1. **Imagination:** Reading literature cultivates the imagination. That's one reason why tyrants and dictators hate literature, banning or strictly controlling it. From the ancient Greeks to the present day, cultures steeped in literary study have thrived on creativity and innovation.
2. **Communication:** Writing and talking about literature helps prepare students to write and talk about anything. Not only are they working with words, with carefully considered language, but they are also considering how different kinds of people think and react to and understand words.
3. **Analysis:** Literary works—whether fiction, poetry, drama, creative nonfiction—challenge readers to make connections, to weigh evidence, to question, to notice details, to make sense out of a rich experience. These analytical abilities are fundamental life skills.
4. **Empathy:** Because literature allows us to inhabit different perspectives (What's it like to be a teenage girl, a Jew, in Nazi Germany? How would you feel if you thought your father had been murdered but no one else believed that?), in different times and places, we learn to think about how other people see the world. We can understand and persuade and accept and help these others more effectively and fully.
5. **Understanding:** We think in terms of stories: this happens, and then that happens, and what's the connection between these events, and what is going to happen next? People who've experienced more stories are better able to think about actions and consequences. Experience is the best teacher; literature is the best vehicle for vastly enlarging our possible experiences.
6. **Agility:** Literary works often ask us to think in complex ways, to hold sometimes contradictory, or apparently conflicting ideas in our minds. As brain imaging has shown, this kind of processing helps us to be more mentally flexible and agile—open to new ideas.
7. **Meaningfulness:** Literary works often challenge us to think about our place in the world, about the significance of what we are trying to do. Literary study encourages an "examined" life—a richer life. It provides us with an almost unlimited number of test cases, allowing us to think about the motivations and values of various characters and their interactions.

8. Travel: Literature allows us to visit places and times and encounter cultures that we would otherwise never experience. Such literary travel can be profoundly life-enhancing.

9. Inspiration: Writers use words in ways that move us. Readers throughout the ages have found reasons to live, and ways to live, in literature.

10. Fun: When students read literature that is appropriate for them, it's intensely fun. Movies are enjoyable, but oftentimes the written version, readers will say, is more powerful and engrossing. Students who don't find literature to be a whole lot of fun are almost certainly reading the wrong things (too difficult, too removed from their interests), and not reading enough (perhaps they are slogging line by line, week by week, through a text beyond their growing capabilities). When students do discover the fun of literature, they will read more and more, vaulting forward in verbal skills and reasoning abilities, and becoming better readers and writers of other kinds of texts (letters, memos, legal briefs, political speeches, etc.).

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The South Carolina Senate Education Committee is pondering whether to rescind the state's adoption of the Common Core. They –along with legislators across the country– should consider how the Common Core will affect children. And they should consider what we lose as a society, as a culture, when we decide to settle for training students rather than educating them.

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