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ABSTRACT


The aim of this study is to gain a better understanding of how the conflicting demands of narrative and argument are negotiated in the literature essay in the context of secondary literature education in Singapore. The crucial ‘site’ for this study is the final year of secondary literature education which culminates in the ‘O’ level Senior Cambridge school-leaving examination, a high-stakes examination requiring extended writing such as the literature essay.

In Structuralist Poetics (1975) Jonathan Culler proposed the idea of literary competence as the ability to activate and make use of codes and conventions of signification and structuring of meaning in crucial practices within the literature community. In the present study, literary competence is operationalized as the ability to read a narrative literature text and to write about the text in an argumentative or expository essay. It takes the socio-constructivist position that such writing is realized within specific learning communities with their own curricular contexts and expectations. Such inquiry is best served using qualitative research design and method to examine aspects of the curriculum that bear on a study of literary competence.

Few studies on literature education address the curriculum in its entirety; especially, literature assessment has been overlooked. Educators had tended to valorize responsive and expressivist reading as an antidote to the aridity of formal critical analysis and neglected instruction on formal writing about literature. Such ‘eclectic melding’ (Applebee, 1993) can lead to ‘curriculum misalignment’ (Zancanella, 1992) when formal assessment requires higher-level skills of literary analysis and extended interpretive and rhetorical writing. This difference brings out the rival demands and promises of narrative and argument and is closely related to another important concern in literacy – students’ relative weakness in argument writing.
Argument is a particularly difficult genre for students to master and can be even more challenging in the literature essay where the interplay of imaginative experience in narrative and evidence-based argument becomes increasingly more sophisticated. The higher literacy skills of point-making, abstraction and elaboration (Applebee, Langer, Nyrstrand and Gamoran, 2003), to some extent equitable to argument and narrative, are the means for engaging in the various forms of knowledge, text structures and personal responses that are required in this essay genre. The study explores the demands of formal literature essay writing at the crucial juncture where pedagogical issues and national high-stakes assessment converge. To this end, it makes use of Purves’ (1992) model of the three sub-domains of literature, i.e. ideological preferences, literary skills, and forms of literary knowledge and content to inspect the curriculum. Further, the terms ‘knowledge telling’ and ‘knowledge transforming’ (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987) were used to describe qualitative differences in skills and content.

The study involved content analysis of curriculum and examination documents, transcript data of teacher interviews, students’ responses to an open-ended questionnaire and text analysis of students’ literature essays. The findings served to fill a gap in local research which had so far addressed literature education from Secondary One to Secondary Three. As a historical record of literature education in the republic it has an applied temporal-comparative perspective as it relates two sets of data collected in 1995 and 2003 to the most powerful policy directive in education in Singapore since 1992 – the ranking of schools based on their students’ results in national examinations. The 1995 study occurred when ranking was beginning to take effect but there were still no official curriculum specifications for literature. The 2003 study followed the introduction and implementation of the official curriculum with its emphasis on reader response for pedagogy and assessment, the compulsory ‘unseen’ question in the ‘O’ level examination and the two sets of grade descriptors for the set texts and the ‘unseen’.

To a great extent, local literature education has preserved its colonial heritage by inscribing the powerful Leavisite legacy of humanist moral-cultural values and the vaunted progressive aims of reader response into its enacted and official curriculum aims and goals. The strong Leavisite allegiance meant a profound and abiding faith in the hallowed practice
of practical criticism heavily underlined by constant reminders for “informed personal response” based on “textual evidence”. Findings from the two years of study showed that teachers’ humanist ideals of literature were qualified by pragmatic considerations due to the high-stakes nature of the ‘O’ level examination. In 1995, teachers favored the traditional approach of intensive line-by-line explication; reader response was perceived as more fun but less rigorous. In 2003, the weightage given to response and the compulsory ‘unseen’ question led to the ironically serendipitous emphasis on close reading – whereas in 1995 teachers doubted if students were capable of independent analysis, in 2003 it was necessary for them to be able to do so. For both years, teachers’ descriptions of essay writing instruction were linked closely with what they construed of argument. In 1995, in the absence of official descriptors, teachers had a relatively holistic approach which took in detailed knowledge of the text, analysis, interpretation and “originality of viewpoint aptly justified”. By contrast, in 2003, technical formulas for argument, e.g. PEE (Point, Evidence, Elaboration), became very popular and teachers found it more expedient to train students to provide evidence than to have an opinion. From 1995 to 2003, argument in the literature essay became less rhetorical persuasion and more the application of a text-type template.

Students’ perceptions were also heavily influenced by assessment for their first consideration for reading and writing was content mastery. There was some appreciation for literary analysis but most viewed it as a demanding task. Beyond analysis, responding to the text required “feelings”, patently to meet assessment criteria rather than to express the individual responses. In 1995, students were more conscious of trying to make their essays interesting or distinctive by interpreting the text with fresh and original insights to set their essays apart from others. In 2003, students focused on strong evidence and the use of the PEE formula. An effective essay could not be based entirely on a dispassionate presentation of points and evidence and the mechanical cultivation of feeling but from the data in 2003, such a technical approach appeared to have become the standard.

Results of holistic scores of students’ writing samples of narrative retelling and thematic elaboration showed that students were less able to engage with these tasks despite their
mastery of content. For both years, textual analysis showed that essays with more analytical
statements and complex statements and greater depth of argument gained higher scores
from teacher raters. Essays given higher marks spanned the whole range of factual,
analytical and complex statements whereas essays given lower marks had mainly factual
and narrative statements. This indicated that despite the differences asserted regarding the
value of one over the other, narrative and argument were equally important for the literature
essay. Personal response statements were too few to have an effect on scores. Further
qualitative differences in texture and density were found in the abstraction of text content,
text analysis, domain specific literary terms and conventions, and argument structure. The
main research question regarding narrative and argument has implications for instruction,
cognition and discourse processing. Teachers could do well to go beyond the teaching of
the PEE formula and address the abstractive and elaborative manipulation of text content
and structure and the purpose, context and audience aspects of process writing.

From the findings, one can infer an output-driven labor-intensive model of literature teaching
based on content mastery, guided by a formula for argument and reinforced with the use of
model answers and other tasks to raise students’ awareness of test requirements. Particularly
for 2003, the richer purposes of literature were traded for the immediate gain of examination
success through training and coaching in a streamlined approach to content and skills to be
tested. This compartmentalization of aims, skills and knowledge in the official literature
documents showed the reliance and faith in technical specificity in curriculum planning of a
piece with an existing Fordist education system imbued with “an entrenched utilitarian-
pragmatic mentality” (Wee, 2006). However, literature has to address its contribution to higher
literacy rather than dwell on its ideological moral and aesthetic virtues to shore up its narrower
assessment focus. The current official policy to transform rote-learning into a thinking
curriculum recognizes the need for students to engage in the information-rich environment
they inhabit. This inquiry into the advanced skills of reading and writing in literary
competence should contribute some insights and direction regarding the management of
knowledge and communication in literature, education and beyond.