

New avenues and challenges in today's classrooms – teaching literature in a digital age

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1. Abstract

This paper attempts to unpack and understand the challenges faced in teaching literature to today's digitally advanced students and the new avenues that can be explored to make teaching literature more compatible with the demands and the needs of our present time. The traditions that can be interspersed with the modern when thinking about teaching literature to a globally aware digitally advanced learners is a joy as well as a challenge in a traditional classroom with limited resources. This paper discusses the changing demands in teaching English Literature in a Sri Lankan setting and the possible avenues to explore in an effort to use more 'digital' friendly means.

2. Why do we teach literature

One of the most pertinent questions of the day is "Why do we teach or study literature?" This is of importance if a workable and a sustainable solution to teaching and learning literature with the modern demands is to be achieved. A recent diagram published by Norton Anthology provides a convincing argument for the larger question of why study literature.

The question that arises from the previous preamble is if teaching and learning literature, and with reference to this paper, the teaching and learning of English literature ushers in such benefits, why is it still a challenge to convince the students that learning English literature is an enjoyable, or a smart endeavour despite the hazard of reading printed words?

The challenges of teaching literature

The challenges and the reason for such challenges in teaching English literature in a Sri Lankan classroom, lies in the methods that have been used to teach English literature, across generations and over the years. While reading has been established as the most touted way to enjoy literature, because of the private nature of literary enjoyment, the rapid changes in technology and access to technology has brought with it a new set of challenges in engaging the digital age students. Teachers are constantly faced with the daunting task of enticing and encouraging our computer literate internet savvy students to read and respond to literature.

Another challenge faced by the practitioners is how much technology should one incorporate into the traditional classroom? Is there a specific balance one needs to strive to maintain or should technology be favoured as the *modus operandi* when engaging students to study English literature?

The new and the not so new avenues to explore

Self-reflexivity is one of the pathways through which the teachers can assess their role in teaching English literature. English, which has enjoyed an esteemed position among the other vernacular languages especially within the postcolonial setting in Sri Lanka, was taught to be a language that will give the proverbial wings to the user. Thus, the teaching of English literature has been rarely challenged, due to the exclusive nature of its subject matter, at least during the early 20th century. Nevertheless, the times are changing, with more students expressing their desire to learn English literature and more teachers are coming into the profession. The challenge now is to include everyone in the new changes the discipline has undergone over the years and updating and adapting oneself to suit the needs of the modern-day world.

The close readings and textual analysis of literary texts, which used to be the preferred method to learning English literature, has not been enough to sustain the interest of the modern tech savvy learners. Therefore, it is essential to think about moving beyond the reading of texts and responding to the text to using and exploring literature through other digital friendly means. It is also of paramount importance to change the assessment systems to reflect our changes in the teaching methods. These simple yet impactful changes will bear important results, changing the way English literature is perceived among the learners.

3. Recommendations

One of the few ways of changing our interaction with literature, is to think of literature beyond the written word. There are multiple platforms where English literary texts have been converted to either audio or visual productions. There are innovative platforms where the beloved, canonical texts have been made into interactive audio-visual content. These platforms and content can and should be explored to think beyond the written word, and most importantly as an enticing avenue to introduce the learners to the written word. These same platforms will allow teachers to explore different means of assessing their students. New technology enhanced with the mobile telecommunication technology is one such mode to explore to change the traditional assessment systems. Video recordings, dramatizations that are recorded, voice overs, animations are but a small sample of how one can exploit digital trends among the

students. Writing too can be improved through blogs and wiki entries which can be incorporated to the assessment criteria, thus encouraging students to become more analytical and expressive.

E- learning and assessment platforms such as Mentimeter, Kahoot, slide casts, gamification of lessons and even the traditional PowerPoint presentations can be used to encourage and empower the students, to take control of their own learning process. Learning needs to be thought of as a process rather than a means to an end and thus should be taken control of, by the learners and not controlled or dictated by the teachers. Therefore, 'digital' friendly learning methods should be encouraged and actively pursued in an attempt to encourage English Literature as a discipline that is enjoyed and loved.

4. References

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