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Is there a Teacher in the Class? Active Teaching vs. Active Learning of Literature

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Abstract

Teachers of literature read life in its sundry manifestations. Therefore teachers of literature know so much. They teach and eventually preach so much. The question is do students of literature receive that much? And arguably should they 'learn' that much? Is literature not to be devoured by the readers themselves? In that case, do the literature classes really induce an interest in the readers to imbibe the myriad verbal shades painted by the master craftsmen? Can the teachers really wait for the learners to understand, leave alone enjoying, the prescribed piece of poetry or prose and respond by themselves? Will such an approach to learning literature cater to the demands of the exams? And if it cannot do so, is the very purpose of having literature at the degree level not getting demeaned amongst the rural lot if not everywhere?

It is but natural that the students of literature should be able to really get the nerve of the writer and express in exact terms what they have realized. And it is time to cart off the tracing sheets that have long been being provided to the rural, semi-urban Indian students of English literature to 'reflect' upon and respond to their 'subject'. It is quite blatant now that, in the indisputably sincere efforts to make threadbare analyses of the techniques and nuances that have gone into the making of a piece of prose or poetry, the essential joy of reading literature is given up and the obdurate retention of its taste for long is waning by day. This paper makes an earnest effort to disambiguate the common rural student's beliefs of taking up a degree in English literature for job purposes, which determine their learning modes. It reiterates the need to steer clear the path to achieving a blend of purposeful teaching, perfect learning, a prospective enhancement of the learners' aesthetic sense and a propitious acquisition of enjoyment of literature that is corollary. This paper also takes sides and projects 'active learning and teaching' techniques as the means to achieve this end and argues that these measures are not only constructive in making both the teacher and the learners participatory in the class but are also instrumental in making the literature classes rewarding for them.

Two decades ago, we considered ourselves to

be the most fortunate when we got admission in the Undergraduate English Course. It was indeed a stroke of luck that we, the rural lot, could get to do a degree in English Literature. Despite the belief that a B.A. or M.A. in English could win us a job, at least in the teaching area, English literature has always had an indisputable flair for us. In all the gorgeousness and attraction that it held, literature has made us giggle with the verbal ticklings and wail with the rhetoric onslaughts; we have felt life and death in their proximity and lived through the events and occurrences etched on the eternal pages of literature in endless words. There had been teachers who typified the heroes and villains from Shakespeare's quill, and was the lyre in the hands of Wordsworth and Shelley and the propaganda papers proclaiming the history of the English and their English. There were no pronounced teaching methodologies that claimed to be backing the classrooms and no concepts of educational psychology that dictated the teachers and the students of literature.

Now, in an era that is characterized by teaching methodologies and techniques, we cannot help looking back with anguish and regret that today we have teachers of literature, for most of whom transferring the vein of poetry or prose has become such an arduous task that the students see only the teacher inside the class and not

the text nor anything beyond. And this paper takes its point of departure here.

This is definitely not to undermine the earnest efforts put in by those aspiring teachers who aim at making every literature class an enlivening experience. They give their best to teach whatever has been prescribed in the syllabus. All the same, teaching literature deserves no less than the expertise of a cyclist riding uphill on a slippery road. Eventually, it is a challenge for the teacher to achieve creating a liking for literature, even amongst the disoriented crew. There is a seemingly hidden disproportion of power and efforts in the case of teacher vs. student, especially in a literature classroom. This is because the teacher of literature reads so much and is more knowledgeable and therefore takes a more dominant role in communicating that knowledge, which, at some point of time, becomes too taxing for the students who want to have their own contribution, right or far-fetched.

It is an undeniable matter of fact that there are certain stated needs of profession that the UG and PG students of literature need to satisfy and accomplish not only to get through their exams but also to secure a good occupation. As such, the curriculum is driven by the market demands though the delineation of papers does not always have a pronounced logic. Nevertheless, irrespective of the differences in curricula, there is a definite awareness among the teachers of English that the common goal is to create an autonomous learner, though ironically most of the literature classes are prevalently prosaic and lopsided all through the course.

Can Active be equal to Passive?

This is an era that talks about student-centered curriculum and student-centered instruction. The central and state governments of India have taken all possible measures like TBLT to materialize this concept. In this regard, for quite some time in the recent past, there had been great debates in the Seminars and Conferences of English as a Second Language (ESL) about the need for a change in the approach to the teaching and learning of English. It is worth noticing here that a vast majority of these methods and techniques have been regarding teaching English as a Second Language and not English Literature per se. Generally,

in India, literature is a crucial part of the curriculum to teach communication skills. But since the occupational needs directly imply that the graduates, irrespective of the discipline, should be good at communicative English, the easiest means to teach language is English literature.

This booming realization of the need to develop and/or improve the communication skills in English has had a regrettably marked change in the attitude towards teaching literature too. And supposedly that is where the common understanding of the concept of 'active learning and teaching' must have also digressed from its focal point.

But what actually is the idea behind active teaching and learning?

Active learning may mean getting the students involved in utilizing their abilities in the classroom to the fullest. It also involves the students' practising important skills and applying new knowledge to the known facts. And active teaching is direct instruction, wherein the teacher constructs contexts within the framework of the learners' experiences and their existing knowledge and makes sure that learning takes place. Educational research has shown that academic achievement is positively influenced by the amount of active participation of students in the learning process (Gardner et al., 1994). The implication is that in order to maximize the impact of the curriculum, it is a must to abandon the traditional lecture method which is dictated by the obsolete course books. So active learning should be a solution to the problem. Backed by the theories of education and cognitive psychology, plenty of activities have been tested and testified in the actual classroom situations. This does have an affective impact on the teaching of literature too. Nevertheless, arguably the concept of Active teaching and learning has been understood as the teacher's and the students' being physically active in the class. Practically speaking, most of the actions in the literature classes are confined to the students' involvement in role plays or reading out a prose text or poetry so that the teacher can give the paraphrase. The teachers are so active in note-making that they do plenty of references and load the students with lots of details including the biography of the author, whereas the students are so active in note-taking that they do not want to miss

out any of these details provided by the teacher lest they should secure poor marks in exams. Thus, when there is a poetry class the students are sure to receive a paraphrase of the poem, summary and a glossary of unfamiliar or difficult words. So to say, the assessment is also by and large based on whether the students have understood the critiques and views.

Some teachers resort to acting out the characters of literature with the dialogues that sound absolutely obsolete. On the other hand, there might also be teachers who will justify their objectivity in teaching literature by stating that literature is 'unreal' - that it is not close to real life, and so need not be given an emotional tinge. And thus taking the cue from their motivators, most of the learners have only realized literature as some sort of aesthetic artifact and so not realistic and not even remotely relevant to daily life. This is the main factor that denies and deprives English literature of the attention that it actually deserves. But all said and done, learning the mechanics of driving is never the same as driving a car right? So how does active teaching and learning really get active? How do the students get to 'learn' literature, if not acquire a fervour for reading literature?

Drive it...

It is only logical and morally right to argue that the objectives of teaching literature to English graduates should not stop simply with creating a love for literature. As Frye says, "It is clear that the end of literary teaching is not simply the admiration of literature; it's something more like the transfer of imaginative energy from literature to the students."

In reality, the language aspect of teaching literature is considered to be more crucial than the need for a comprehension of the piece and the need to respond, pro-act or react, to that piece. It needs to be seriously looked into as to whether they are given an opportunity to create their own poetry or prose, or even if they do how it is received and what parameters we (can) have to gauge their ability to create.

In the Western countries, there is a popular belief that the study of literature should not need to justify itself in terms of vocation and that it should remain aloof from the demands of employers. Nevertheless as Gweno Williams states:

"...the best future employment opportunities...particularly in changing and unpredictable times, are most likely to be provided by a combination of the lifelong intellectual resources generated by the breadth and depth of English studies, together with flexible employment oriented skills and attitudes" (Day, 2010:2)

True. As far as the Indian job placement scenario is concerned, communicative competence in English is as crucial as subject knowledge. And as far as the rural students are concerned, English literature can definitely provide the students with an excellent basis for a career that invests on communication. It can foster amazingly profound thoughts in the reader and will thus lead to an enhanced communication and expression of ideas. Better communication begets elevated self-confidence and a brighter profession will naturally come as a corollary. But in fact, getting a job is only one aspect of literature. Beyond the objective of developing one's communication skills, it is even more important that they should be able to think in that language.

Taking the students that are newly exposed to literature, in all its vastness, the primary duty of the teacher is to create in them an inclination to read literature. And the fact that they are thinking in that second language itself is an achievement for both the teacher and the learner/s. But to achieve this end, mere description and/or explanation of the subject matter of the prescribed pieces of literature are taken up. There is no way open to enter the world of literature and get lost in it eternally. The anguish of any enthusiastic student of English is that teaching English literature has not received the attention that has been being given to English language instruction in the last one decade or so. There may be so many factors that contribute to the lack of interest in learning literature for its own sake. Absence of clearly spelt out objectives is but one of them. What students need is, as Robert Scholes (1985) rightly puts, "...the kind of knowledge and skill that will enable them to make sense of their worlds, to determine their own interests, both individual and collective, to see through the manipulations of all sorts of texts in all sorts of media, and to express their views in some appropriate manner" (p.15). In reality, it is

conveniently forgotten that the study of literature has the potential to make students 'more discerning users and consumers of language' too. As such, to understand literature the students make a careful and conscious reading and this helps them to have a vast and clear idea about the different forms of language. And learning happens only then. To make it happen is in the hands of the teachers who can be said to have already become what I would like to call 'Litzens', citizens in the world of literature.

For those teachers who have the amateur readers of literature, this is exactly what the 'activeness' in 'active learning and teaching' should mean, wherein the teacher makes the students 'participate' in their own education and 'do' active things that result in learning. For instance, in teaching a play, one popular method that is being followed to keep the students alert is to ask them to take turns in playing the roles of the characters by reading out the dialogues. Sometimes the teacher herself enacts the characters. The drama eventually becomes visually perceptible but philosophically vague. In his discussion of active approaches to teaching literature in English, Andrew Green (2011) quotes Byron (1986:67-8) saying "...behind the use of drama to animate or enliven the text is the idea that reading is somehow passive and drama active...one can be actively learning without much or any physical activity. And it is quite possible for students to be physically active, yet passive as learners." (p.67).

On the other hand, the poetry classes invariably involve a recitation by the teacher or students and a paraphrasing of the same. And fiction gets discussed and dissected in terms of its vital components. Here the students cannot be expected to get trained in developing concepts of literature as such because, in methods like this, the transmission of knowledge is done by the teacher and she continues to be the only source for it. Thus in all the classes where the so-called 'active learning and teaching' is said to take place, it is only the teacher's presence that is highly felt rather than the absence of the author of the text. Nevertheless it is sort of 'accepted' now that this cannot be helped. Now it is not a sin to 'tell' students beforehand what their interpretation should be, when the situation is under pressure to 'teach/learn to the test'.

Mel Silberman (Active Learning: 101 Strategies, 1996) and John Holt (How Children Learn, 1967) make clear the fundamental differences between passive (didactic, infusion, lecture, or "direct teaching") and active (inductive, discovery) teaching and learning. According to them, Passive learning, where the students never get to play any role, reveals several limitations as follows:

- Student attention decreases with each passing minute
- It appeals only to auditory learners and emphasizes memory
- It tends to promote lower level learning (factual content)
- It assumes that all students need the same information at the same time. On the other hand, Active learning, where the students are involved in the learning process, challenges the students to:
 - Learn how to state information in their own words
 - Illustrate ideas with their own examples
 - See connections between previous and present knowledge
 - Learn how to ask real questions (that have the element of doubt)
 - Seek information to solve problems outside meaning

Considering the above as a comprehensive list of attributes of active and passive learning/teaching, it is high time that the teachers had reviewed their techniques of teaching English literature to the interested lot. With the sole view to making a difference in the literature classes and doing justice to the discipline as such, this paper puts forth the following for the teachers to consider:

- Literature classes need not always be in the conventional lecture/chalk and talk mode. Sometimes the teacher can switch on to the silent mode and leave the text in the hands of the students to respond to. They can be given activities that will make them speak, discuss and report back and respond to the other points of view. To achieve this end, it is important to concentrate on building the capacity of the students for individual study. Their reflections can be made in the form of questions, arguments, seminars and written assignments, wherein the questions are answered to building the individual's knowledge of the text and not a collective understanding

➤ It should be remembered that there is no fixed meaning for any text. Meaning is something that can be generated anew by every reading and every discussion of a text. Therefore the students can be asked to explain how the particular text appealed to them and to reflect upon it.

➤ The regular Seminar presentation can be made special by asking the students to make a personal reflection on a particular text, which actually gives them great scope to be original and authentic.

➤ Creating a blog or website may sound impractical but it does work in that it makes one feel elated and greatly satisfied to see her words online. Their contribution can be in any form, for instance, a poem, a short story, a review of novels, poetry, films, etc.

➤ An electronic anthology of students' favourite poems with photographs, illustrations and links to further reading can be created (Knights & Dawson, 2006). This can be maintained by the students themselves.

In-class activities may also include some or all of the following:

➤ The students can be asked to find a brief passage in a novel or short story that describes a specific event and rewrite that event from a complete stranger's point of view. This can be a pair or individual work and the different versions can be discussed in the class. Points of view do change the perspective and understanding of the story too. The nuances of story weaving can thus be easily taught through a discussion on how the different versions provide them with different shades of understanding of the same story.

➤ The same can be modified where the students

are asked to write a conversational dialogue between two minor characters and view the events of the story from their shoes.

➤ The students can read out the text themselves and delineate the key words that they think help them understand the text. Later, they can share their list of words with their neighbours and discuss how these words contribute to the overall comprehension of the text. As a zero hour activity the students can be asked to write a poem or a short story with the key words that they have picked up from the text. Or as Knights & Dawson (2006) suggest, these words can be formed into a short poem that is imaginatively related to their text.

➤ The students can be divided into groups and can be asked to convert a short story into a play by writing the script.

Therefore

The ability to think cannot be imparted but can only be developed. As such, what literature offers to the students is the opportunity to increase their self-awareness; it helps them analyse their experiences. As Moeller & Moeller (2013) points out, reading literature on their own, with the guidance of the teacher, "...enables students to have new thoughts, perceptions and affective experiences that can benefit them greatly. It can also validate affective experiences, particularly painful ones that are often repressed. This can help them to realistically cope with negative aspects of reality. They can be used to cultivate empathy as they bring readers into the experiences of various others..." It is not just a change in the attitudes that literature enables, it is also transformation in their minds, which ultimately can be the highest objective of any course of study.

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