

Literature Teaching As Social Action: Why Reading Fiction Matters in an Age of Standardization

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This presentation makes an argument for the continued teaching of literature in the secondary school through critical examination of the ongoing “culture wars” between the humanities and the sciences, recent research in cognitive literary studies demonstrating the power of narrative reading, and an analysis of educational trends that have marginalized literature teaching in the US, including standards-based and scripted curricula. The paper concludes by synthesizing these various arguments for literary study in the middle and high school and providing sample lesson plans from practicing teachers exemplifying how literature can positively influence adolescents’ intellectual, emotional, and social selves.

In order to make this argument, I have organized this presentation into three main parts. The paper presentation begins with an overview of the argument and the theories and philosophies on which it is built: the co-called culture wars between the sciences and humanities, the nature of knowledge in the digital age, modern conceptions of objectivity and quantification as truth, and the literary experience as understood through scholars of narrative and theory of mind, the theory that reading fictional literature can help readers empathize or better understand the perspectives of others. The second part focuses on the literary experience, or “what literature can do,” for young readers by exploring the theory and research supporting how reading fiction can increase abilities of readers to identify and empathize with others, think critically, and even engage in philanthropic behavior. In this section, I also include a brief case study of a research project I conducted with middle school teachers during which the teachers were not able to engage in teaching literature to enhance students’ social imaginations as they were distracted by standards-based and standardized curriculum. The third part of the presentation summarizes and synthesizes the arguments in the previous sections, making connections among the philosophic discussions of truth and knowledge, US educational policy quantifying and corporatizing teaching and learning, and scholarship and research about the power of the literary experience.