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“Anything Goes”...
Connecting Children to Literature: A Personal View

In a recent article in the weekly Times Educational Supplement, Roger Knight attacked some of the various “kits” and “packages” which are currently on offer to support teachers and children in preparing for examinations in English literature. Compilers are accused of trivializing the study of literature and distracting teachers and children away from a “proper” concern with the language of the novel or poem. Some aspects of the compilations are seen by Knight as being akin to “party games from a Christmas cracker,” and in becoming involved, “the teacher for whom literature matters as literature is likely to feel . . . superannuated, disregarded and excluded from the party.” “Such compilations numb the texts and numb the understanding,” Knight continues, “. . . and the mentality they so fully express derives partly from the erroneous and fashionable belief that any response to a work of literature is valuable.”

In this paper, Michael O’Hara offers a personal view on literature teaching in British schools and takes issue with Knight’s view that certain approaches to the teaching of literature can be ruled out a priori. He suggests that in the right hands all kinds of approaches are possible. In short, in the teaching of literature, and as long as imagination and judgment prevail, anything goes!

Several commentators have recently, by implication, held up to ridicule the pedagogical practices of many English teachers. Not only does there seem to be a general worry that literature "qua" literature
is under threat in some of our schools, but there is further a particu-
lar fear that the recent spate of publications for the support of
English literature teaching reflects pedagogies which are no more
than "trivial pursuits," and therefore represent "a growing ten-
dency to emasculate literature" (Knight, 1989). Such purist lines on
perceived trends in the teaching of English will no doubt bemuse
many teachers whose classroom practices are focused through di-
verse, imaginative, and creative methodologies designed to allow
all pupils access to the rich realms of the written word. Literature,
however, is once again in the United Kingdom in danger of being
seen as essentially a cognitive activity reflected through a "cultural
heritage" model of teaching embedded in a preoccupation with the
"civilizing" effect which comes from contact with great literature.
The concern clearly is that literature qua literature becomes a sec-
ondary consideration when teachers are preoccupied with "what
can be done to it or with it!"

So what is the problem with teachers trying to "do things to it or
with it" in their efforts to "connect" children to literature? For
many teachers there is no issue here. Literature is seen both as a
resource to be utilized in any possible way in the pursuit of curricu-

um goals and as a subject which invites pupils to respond to the
novel, poem, and play through the prompting of surrogate experi-

dence and the "shock of recognition." Such experiences are gained
from empathizing with feelings, moods, characters, contexts, con-

licts, and situations drawn from good and even not so good litera-
ture. (The development of discriminatory powers is still seen as
important to those of us who from time to time indulge in "trivial
pursuits.") But in pursuit of these aims, surely anything goes!

There are compacted issues in this discussion which need separat-
ing out, and it must be assumed that worries about the "emascla-
ung of literature" are not isolated but do represent problems for
some people. The breadth of the discussion between literature qua
literature and literature as a resource, and the "purity" of the
methodologies permitted by those who see themselves as both the
guardians of the subject and the speakers for the community of
discourse, cannot fully be rehearsed in this paper. Certainly at least
part of the discussion has to do with the relative merits of close-up
encounters with literature between teacher and pupil involving for
the most part reading, discussing, analyzing, and exploring and, on
the other hand, the searching out of imaginative ways in which to
draw pupils into the sort of engagement with texts which involves
the heightening of sensitivity to language forms and the creation of
a receptive psychic backdrop against which literature can be gently
and receptively pressed. But the apparent polarity in this crude
distinction doesn't work because the "anything goes" lobby, far