

Discussion on the Purposes of Literary Education in Contemporary China

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Abstract: The purposes of education, both immediate and in the future, are an issue to be pondered. A number of scholars have responded that education has different aims, including the cultivation of citizenship, a flourishing life, and powerful knowledge. This paper aims to explore whether these different general goals accurately fit literary education and attest to them in the form of questions. Under each section, the paper begins by outlining the theoretical analysis and proceeds to present the author's judgment and reflections based on experiences related to the context of contemporary China.

Keywords: Literary education; Purpose; Contemporary China

Online publication: August 27, 2024

1. Should the cultivation of citizenship be a purpose of literary education?

The powerful role of literature lies in developing citizen's thinking. The civic imagination is the subject of Chapter 3 in Nussbaum's book *Cultivating Humanity* ^[1]. He proposed that the goals of world citizenship "are best promoted by a literary education" as it conjures up an image of people around us and then shapes our sympathetic understanding of them. Literature, as depicted by Aristotle ^[2] in Chapter 9 of *Poetics*, alludes to the knowledge of possibilities and this is a vantage point of political life. As such, it could be suggested that literature is able to illuminate the invisibilities, such as vulnerabilities and marginalization in life, to which wealthy people rarely direct their attention, and to awaken its spectators to imagine what those suffering people went through, thereby developing abilities of compassion of the public. To cultivate a compassionate understanding of diversity, as proposed by Nussbaum, civic imagination plays a mediating role in significantly enriching and broadening citizens' sensitivity and judgment through literary education.

To access universally moral capacities, Nussbaum placed considerable emphasis on the marginalization of people. It seems that if one group takes care of the silenced, the disadvantaged, and the minority, and provides them with generous support materially and mentally, this would be considered as empathy. Based on his statement of literary education in terms of the formation of decent citizenship, it is possible that literature will offer us merely realist novels, especially tragedies. On the one hand, this approach enables people to feel common weaknesses and needs, which is "conducive to general human understanding" ^[1] allowing people to cross

social boundaries. On the other hand, their understanding of people from different backgrounds also generates different perceptions. As Nussbaum claimed ^[1], the differences in religion make the task of understanding harder, so it could be argued that students may have multifarious attitudes toward suffering groups, which may be referred to as subjective reflections in understanding literary texts.

Chedzoy ^[3] offered some insights into why literature education can be an account of reality by suggesting that the value of literature lies in affirming something of this world, otherwise, it would “certainly not be educative.” This means that true literature exhibits an isomorphism with real experiences in our lives and then presents the reader with a natural human response in spite of its fictitious nature and poetic language. The way of generating general forms of treatment of all its members is consistent with “an exercise of the compassionate imagination” which is subconsciously shaped by literature ^[1]. Other than simply realistic subjects in literary works, it is incumbent on literary education to cast a brilliant light on our daily lives, including invisibilities, possibilities, and vicissitudes. In this way, amid a vast array of knowledge, literary education has the ability to combine universal membership with universal values, which refers to moral sentiment and social awareness. Overall, it helps students become active and informed future citizens; citizenship needs to be cultivated in the spirit of literary education.

As a student previously majoring in Chinese Language and Literature, it is felt that the civic function of literary education is in opposition to test-oriented education—a typical Chinese learning system. The examination-oriented mode is an educational phenomenon derived from the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) in the era of social transformation ^[4]. By sitting thousands of examinations, Chinese students have become accustomed to examinations growing up. Influenced by this traditional exam culture, students are taught to rely on memorization and imitation as the main learning approaches. This leaves limited space for analyzing, evaluating, and reshaping ^[5]. This is a culturally determined attitude to knowledge that considers teachers as intellectual authorities. This is a dominant tendency in formal teaching in China and does not positively maximize the civilizing role of literary education. To resolve this issue, it is wondered whether critical thinking and creative expression should be consigned to students through literary education, not only in education but also in life. There is also doubt as to whether being an independent learner should be a purpose of literary education, contributing to a flourishing life.

2. Should a flourishing life be a purpose of literary education?

In regards to the fundamental aims of schools, as proposed by Reiss and White ^[6], “each learner [...] leads a life that is personally flourishing and [...] help[s] others to do so too.” A flourishing life refers to “a life filled with whole-hearted and successful involvement in more worthwhile pursuits,” therefore preparing students for a life of autonomy and simultaneously aiding others to do so. This, nevertheless, seems a little romantic and idealistic by confusing direct relationships between these two goals. However, in other words, it needs to be set forth on how to distinguish worthwhile relationships, activities, and experiences from complex attributes through schooling, which helps every learner to make decisions independently. During this, literary education weighs a lot with respect to rational autonomy ^[7].

With the purpose of developing rational autonomy, literary education helps dissect our living practice. To experience what is constructed as worthwhile, Reiss and White ^[6] suggested that students could typically utilize the exercise of direct involvement and imagination, between which the latter is more defensible and appropriate as it produces a tacit assumption of possibilities of lives resulting from literary forms. Moreover, what a literary education seeks is a series of integral interpretations of why and how all our practices work ^[8], which could be

interpreted as powerful knowledge; theoretical knowledge beyond the generalizable principles^[9]. In line with theoretical knowledge, literature would be in itself a component of worthwhile wisdom and it offers “unlimited scope for the pursuit of interests, satisfaction being the greater the more one progresses,” hence having a rich bearing on the rest of their life wholeheartedly and directing the fields of one’s practical action. Compared with merely the notion of pleasure, this worthwhile activity is more important in reasoning effectively to provide possible occasions for the exercise of enormous competence and potential understanding of the world^[6,7]. To spell out, it could be claimed that this is a built-in value of literary education to develop rational autonomy as a means, and the appropriateness of a flourishing life at one’s disposal could obviously be advocated.

From the author’s perspective, the purpose of a flourishing life would prove to be a strong contention for which it is hard to refute its power and to naturally find its counterargument on the grounds of the literary knowledge accumulated. Despite this, it is interesting to note that, at this level, in order to liberate students from exam culture, Chinese educational institutions call for quality education^[10]. In fact, literary education aims to equip students with as much autonomy as possible. Admittedly, in China, since the thirteenth century, success in public exams was primarily pertinent not only to acquiring great wealth and gaining a promising career at individual levels but also on behalf of “the family’s well-being and reputation”^[11]. Gradually, this presents a utilitarian tendency and the failures of their own initiatives and self-regulation in schooling, even for their own lives. This seems to be counter to Bereiter’s^[12] position that education is a matter of purpose and focus to influence one’s development as a whole person. If education is far away from the shaping personality, equally it fails to formulate acceptable educational acts. Therefore, according to the unique property of literary wisdom and its civilizing effects, it makes good sense to see that students are able to pursue worthwhile activities and make decisions independently, leading them to personally fulfilling lives.

An alternative to this is that Chinese institutions execute liberal education for the sake of literary education. After the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the historical records that science education was privileged in the educational system were not wiped out until the 90s, when educational organizations started to give priority to literary education, promising to imbue science education with humanism. However, it is questioned whether humanistic concepts are supposed to be involved in literary education with the purpose of achieving disciplinary balance. Could the overarching role of science subjects be undermined? Is this done for the sake of all-round quality and the development of human beings?

3. Should powerful knowledge be a purpose of literary education?

Before moving to humanistic emphasis, two types of knowledge should be first considered as there seems to be potential for contradictions when it comes to liberal education. As for liberal education, Standish^[7] sketched out that it orients to ways of knowing and understanding approaching the common heritage. In other words, liberal education embraces every category of knowledge in the world without distinction and gives equal treatment to intellectuals. However, Young^[9] differentiated between two types of knowledge in which powerful knowledge goes beyond one’s daily experience and is acquired in specialist educational institutions and from professional staff. Consequently, Beck^[13] agreed that this is artificially setting up a fixed gulf between common-sense knowledge and disciplinary knowledge. Beck^[13] also implied that disciplinary knowledge encompasses abstract concepts, extending human understanding beyond normal awareness and making knowledge “more powerful but also more esoteric and therefore separated off from ordinary experience.” This is probably and partly formulating the existing subject-based curriculum in schools, and it is relevant to notice the opposite tone adopted by Reiss and White who outlined the core knowledge in school should comprise “background

understanding” by blurring the lines between traditional subjects and admits “how difficult it is to pigeon-hole knowledge into discrete school subjects”^[6]. Despite the fact that powerful knowledge leads students to transcend the purview of regular life, the reason why the extent to which it bears upon a subject-led curriculum cannot be attributed to the power only in the social aspect, but also concerns epistemological access as powerful knowledge endorses a critical understanding of the natural and social world, being exposed to emergent properties such as arts, literature, and drama^[14].

Regardless of these strengths, there are risks for both teachers and learners. As powerful knowledge remotes disciplinary worlds from students’ ordinary experience, obviously leading to a tension for literature teachers who question what useful knowledge is, and what sorts of teaching of literary works should be promoted. In explaining this mismatch, there is an old Chinese proverb that states that “literature comes from life and above life.” No matter whether we create or analyze a piece of literary composition, we are trained to universally attribute our actual lives, emotions, and thoughts to explore and stretch life’s possibilities. If we accept Young’s^[9] definition of powerful knowledge, it seems feasible that we are devaluing our empirical evidence inherited in the real world while lifting dominating literary theory and its use due to its abstraction and universality. Then specifically, there are questions about whether those writers have become marvelous and outstanding in acquiring what is called abstract and universal knowledge in academic institutions. Of particular interest here is the fact that, for instance, a Chinese writer Yan Mo won the laurel of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2012. He capitalized a volume of free time on reading and experiencing folk culture, rather than on specialized and systematic knowledge, to refresh the literary concept of the “native folk”^[15]. It would be probable to cite numerous examples of those who receive literary education without sufficient theoretical knowledge. Therefore, in literary education, it is unnecessary to precisely disengage the breadth of life from the specialization of knowledge according to Young’s^[9] powerful knowledge, otherwise it may prove to be absurd. By implication, shaping and accumulating various folk attitudes and daily communication conceivably could be rendered as one of the most informative and effective sources for literary education^[15].

However, fortunately, the National Higher Education incrementally perceives its weakness since it seriously places limitations on students’ imagination and creativity, especially for an interdisciplinary way of thinking. Claxton^[16] reminded us that knowledge presented in the hyper-precise language of practical subjects is often (over)valued within our contemporary culture of speed at the expense of devaluing emotional dimensions, but emotional intelligence could be believed as an effective mode of learning^[1,17] and it is delighted to see for students that imaginative learning has been accepted and empowered in the admission criteria of Hong Kong tertiary institutions^[11]. Therefore, previously it was often acknowledged that precisely scientific interpretations are an exclusive method of understanding but currently, it has begun to take an issue with abstract ways of knowing primarily expressed in literary education.

4. Conclusion

The question remains: what are the purposes of literary education? It refers to different stakeholders such as the community, students, parents, and cultures, each purpose has strengths and weaknesses for different reasons. Firstly, the purpose of cultivating citizenship should be involved in literary education but not for children in their early years due to their uncontrolled fantasies and whimsical notions. In relation to contemporary China, the civic function of literary education is in opposition to the test-oriented system for which there arises a need for developing independent learners with autonomy. Although it is hard to find a counterargument for the aim of a flourishing life, it could be regarded as an effective way to liberate students from exam culture in China

for the sake of quality education. To improve students' comprehensive quality, the National Higher Education is piloting liberal learning. However, this action, emphasizing the general understanding of each piece of knowledge, comes into conflict with the purpose of powerful knowledge as it remotes disciplinary worlds from students' daily experience by suggesting a hierarchic knowledge, hence leading a tension to literary education of what is valued and worthwhile. More importantly, it is strange to say that knowledge should not be boundless. As a receiver of literary education, "learning to do" is as important as "learning to be." Finally, influenced by cognitive learning deriving from Confucianism, the purpose of humanistic education suggests an affective influence on students' souls and wisdom and prompts them to be highly educated individuals, thereby stimulating an educational transformation into a quality-oriented mode.

Fortunately, the Chinese government is elevating the status of literary education by redefining its purpose. As a student of literary education, different walks of life are perceived through books, sharpening their intellect and cultivating intelligence. After examining numerous classic literary works, it is proposed that the more valuable purpose of literary education lies in providing enlightenment to current communities and inspiring future generations to become accountable citizens (citizenship), autonomous learners (a flourishing life), and authentic human beings (humanistic learning)—the "3As framework." Additionally, the journey of learning to be, learning to choose, and learning to know is being undertaken.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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