Why you should ditch the canon

Placing too much emphasis on teacher knowledge fails to recognise the importance of the understanding each student brings to the act of learning, argue Marcello Giovanelli and Jessica Mason

Literary texts are relatively static objects. Regardless of which shelf in the world they're on, versions of the same work will tend to contain the same words in the same order. Of course, there are some minor differences – alternative covers, new editions, introductions and so on – but, in a broad sense, the fact rings true for all texts, whether they are by William Shakespeare, John Green, Charles Dickens or JK Rowling.

Readings, however, are not static, because reading involves not just the text but also the reader, and readers are different from one another. Readers bring different knowledge, experiences and tastes with them, which form an inextricable and fundamental part of their interaction with any text they encounter.

There are often common threads and broad agreements between readers, but our own interpretations, responses and evaluations are still unique to us: they are different because we are different.

Dynamic process

Equally, the same person's reading of a text will change over time because reading is a dynamic and interactive process.

The knowledge and experiences we bring to and have foregrounded in our minds vary and change, too. These are the central principles of how reading and the mind interact, and they raise important questions about why and how we read fiction with young people in school.

The knowledge and experience a person brings to the act of reading is often termed their "schematic knowledge". A schema is, in essence, an individual's dynamic understanding of a concept, object, event, person, place or thing. The schemas students bring to a lesson are relevant considerations across school subjects – their understanding of gravity before a science lesson is a schema they will consciously and unconsciously draw on in the same way that they bring their existing knowledge of texts, genres, and themes to their reading of a novel or poem in English. Regardless of the topic, the interaction of background knowledge with new information is how humans make sense of and negotiate new knowledge and experiences: it is how we learn.
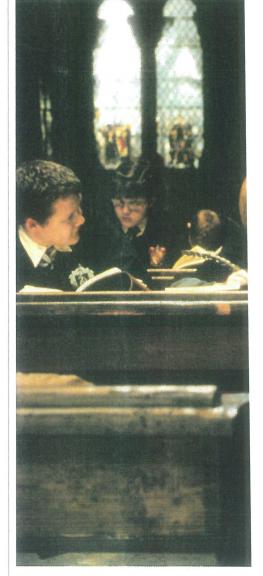
The role that the knowledge and expertise students bring to the classroom should play in lessons has been a near-constant source of debate among stakeholders in education. There has been a recent surge of support, in some spheres, for the didactic, teacher-led approach, which adopts the view that time is "better spent" in lessons focusing on maximising the articulation of teachers' schematic knowledge about the text and their "expert" interpretation of it – with a de facto framing of students' knowledge as less useful or valuable.

> Students' interest in hip-hop was a powerful resource

An unfortunate consequence of this view is that students' schematic knowledge is often downplayed, and their reading of non-canonical texts, in particular, maligned. For example, young adult fiction regularly receives heavy criticism from some quarters. Teachers who do choose to engage this knowledge can be variously accused of dumbing-down, lowering expectations or pandering to students' interests when they should (inferentially and sometimes explicitly) be teaching them about Shakespeare, Donne or Chaucer.

This fundamentally misrepresents the position adopted by most advocates for acknowledging student expertise who, by and large, suggest an integrated approach that involves the accrual of knowledge and "cultural capital", and atten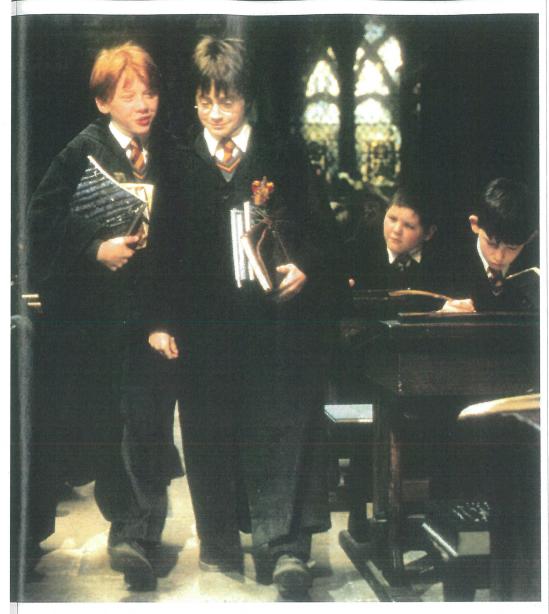ding to the wealth of knowledge that students bring to the classroom with them: the two are by no means mutually exclusive. As we have discussed, this either/or view is also utterly contrary to what we know about reading and cognition.

Tapping into students' schematic knowledge is also important since it means that students are likely to see the materials studied as relevant to them. Research in social psychology has demonstrated that personal relevance plays a key role in enabling students to become critical readers, and other studies have shown that making text and task choices personally relevant to students is important.

Personal relevance

For example, Richard Gerrig and David Rapp demonstrated that people were more likely to think and use previous learning in a critical way when they studied a text that had a clear personal relevance to them. In their must-read account of working in urban classrooms, Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell show how teachers can draw on the wide range of literacies and cultural activities that form part of students' lives outside of the classroom. They explain

How to teach tolerance

TOLERANCE IS problematic, so I don't w
to teach it blithely. I want children to grap
with its inherent tension of whether you
should tolerate an intolerant person.

So I asked a Year 4 class to imagine a pla
called the Tolerant School on an alien pla
with the motto "Where every opinion is
tolerated". One day a green alien called Z
says: "Red aliens aren't as clever as other
ones. They shouldn't be allowed here."

I asked my learners, "Should the teacher
stop Zed from saying this?"

It's not an easy task. If she stops Zed,
she isn't upholding the school motto,
but if she lets Zed continue, then she
is allowing intolerance in the school.

Some pupils said they would rather go t
the Nice School, with the motto "You are
only allowed to say nice things". I asked t
class if they thought this was a good idea

"You'd never learn anything in the Nice
School," one child said. "The teacher
wouldn't be able to tell you when you'd
spelled something wrong."

As you can see, they had moved beyond
a superficial grasp of tolerance to a
closer examination of values. This can
be embedded in the classroom culture.

My colleagues and I at the Philosophy
Foundation have a teaching strategy calle
the Imaginary Disagreer. The child gives
opinion, eg, "It's wrong to stop Zed." The
teacher then tasks the child with imagini
what someone who disagrees with them
might say, eg, "It's OK to stop Zed."

I would then ask the child: "Is there a
good reason why they would think that?"

This encourages children to become
comfortable with ideas that conflict with t
own. Tolerance is about accepting differe
not pretending it doesn't exist or that pec
are never in tension with each other.

Children have to accept the value of
tolerance. As shown in the story of Zed,
I want to give children the responsibility
to apply their own tolerance or intoleran
as and when, in a particular situation.

Tools like the Imaginary Disagreer prov
the conditions that allow children to bec
more tolerant, should they see tolerance
as a fit value. 🍎

how their students' interest in hip-hop music
became a resource that they were able to
use in a powerful way to encourage students
to see learning as meaningful to them and
to make connections between so-called
canonical and non-canonical texts.

This discussion inevitably brings us back
to the concept of a "challenging text", since
relevance is often unfairly equated with
lacking challenge. The inaccurate conflation
of these ideas can, we think, lead to
approaches to English pedagogy that claim
that units based around non-canonical texts
are not academically rigorous and that units

on "the classics" are valuable regardless of
their actual content.

In other words, it results in a false logic
that suggests that the most valuable use
of English lessons is to load students up
with this "better", "more valuable", "core"
knowledge, at the expense of engaging and
developing the schematic knowledge the
students bring to the classroom. At best,
this risks divorcing the study of fiction
from students' other narrative interests and
expertise. At worst, it presents students
with a sense that their own knowledge is
useless or deficient; that to be educationally
successful requires an abandonment of their
home identity in favour of the better one
offered at school. 🍎

References

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- **"Psychological processes underlying literary impact",** *Poetics Today,* by Gerrig, RJ and Rapp, D (2004).
- **Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know,** by Hirsch, ED (1988), Random House.

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