**The Importance of Teaching Literature** by Haley Drucker

Most people assume literature is an important part of education. But not everyone really thinks about why that is. The importance of literature on teaching lies in its ability to foster critical reading, build valuable skills, and expand students' worldviews. In today’s fact-obsessed culture, the importance of literature on teaching and the classroom is sometimes questioned. Why bother having kids read stories, spend their time with books about things and events that aren’t even real? Why not just teach them what they need to know and send them on their way?

Of course, to most educators these questions seem ludicrous. Of course literature is important—why would it have such a central place in the curriculum if it wasn’t? But you may not realize in just how many ways literature really does contribute to a child’s education. Because education is and should be about more than passing on dry information; it’s also about fostering critical thinking skills and an understanding of the world around us.

**Cultural Value**

Stories have been of central importance to the human race ever since it began, as far as we can tell. Cultures are built on stories—histories, myths and legends, fables, religions, and so on. If students are to understand and participate in the culture to which they belong, they must first learn about the stories that culture has been built around. And while books aren’t the only kinds of stories out there, they are one of the most important.

Take the Bible, for instance. Despite concerns about religion in schools, it is commonly taught in some form or another because it has so heavily influenced our culture. References and allusions to biblical stories are all around us, so not knowing those stories puts you at a disadvantage. The same goes for Shakespeare’s dramas, and for the novels of early American writers. Current books and movies, among other works, often reference older texts. Without a working knowledge of those older texts, you can’t understand the new ones as fully as possible.

**Expanding Horizons**

Everyone has a tendency to get so caught up in their own lives that they forget what’s going on in the world around them. And children and teens are particularly prone to this. It’s a goal of education to expose them to ideas from other cultures, to teach them about the histories and peoples of other times and places. Literature is an ideal way to do this. Huckleberry Finn, for example, puts students into the mind of a boy living in the south in the 1800s, letting them experience his life firsthand. Through this experience they learn what it was like to live in that time period, how the people talked and thought and acted. The same goes for books about other countries, which teach students what life is like in other parts of the world. It’s more engaging to read a novel about another time or place than to learn about it in a lecture or from a textbook. The Diary of Ann Frank is a great example of this effect, since it exposes students American students to both a country and time period not their own (and most likely a nationality and religion as well).

**Building Vocabulary**

Having a large and wide-ranging vocabulary is essential for a number of reasons. It helps with both writing and reading abilities, of course, but it also allows for more complex discourse. The larger your vocabulary is, the more in depth and thoughtful discussions you can have on important topics and issues, both in and outside of the classroom. When people speak they tend to use a fairly limited vocabulary, so the best way to become exposed to new words is to read. And reading literature is a great way to build and enhance vocabulary. Due to the descriptive nature of a story, any novel will include plenty of words students have likely never seen or heard before. They’ll see those words in context, learning their meanings passively rather than having to drill. And because they’re reading a story and not drilling, they probably won’t even realize they are building their vocabulary (hence they won’t be able to complain about it).

**Improving Writing Skills**

Writing skills can be taught, to some extent. But the number one way to become a better writer is to read often. When you read you are being immersed in language, in the way it sounds and feels when put together in the right ways. Students who are encouraged to read have a more intimate knowledge of the ways in which language works, and so have an advantage when it comes time for them to write. This effect can even be made transparent by encouraging students to try writing in a particular book or author's style. Many older works of literature are still taught primarily because of their authors’ way with language. Novels such as *The Great Gatsby*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *The Catcher in the Rye* are noted for their unique style and creativity with language. And there are plenty of more recent novels that are just as well written. Literature serves as a valuable teacher and an example to students who are first learning to use written language to communicate with the world.

**Teaching Critical Thinking**

Education is supposed to give students the tools they need to become a valuable part of society, and one such tool is the ability to think critically. We want them to not just passively consume whatever is around them, but to analyze and criticize it as well. Literature serves this goal in a couple of ways. Many novels encourage critical thinking on their own, due to the issues and themes they explore. The kind of novel usually taught in the classroom is selected for its depth and for the way it transcends the obvious and the cliché. And educators often use literature to promote this kind of thought actively, by teaching students how to analyze what they read, understand others’ opinions about the text, and formulate their own views. You can learn to think critically about the events and characters in a novel, the themes it presents, the author’s purpose in writing it, and the ways it fits into a certain time period. You can also analyze its impact on society and the ways it compares and contrasts with other texts. Few activities give students’ critical abilities such a workout as the close reading of a work of literature.