

Teaching Life-Skills through Literature

Jinka Jyotsna¹, T.Dwarakanath²

¹Research Scholar, Dept. of English, VIT Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India

²Research Scholar, Dept. of English, SV University, Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, India

Abstract: Why should we teach life-skills to the students of twenty first century? If we observe the present scenario of the students at both the Post-Graduate and Undergraduate levels, they are good at securing grades and ranks. But they are unable to become employable. The recent statistics says that the only 15% of them are able to be employable. What about the remaining 85% of the students? Though they are good at their subject matter, they are not able for employability, to possess the required skills and qualities. If one wants to be employable, one should be skilled not only in one's subjects, but also one should be skilled in Behavioural, Attitudinal, and Character related aspects too. Besides, one should be able to intelligently deal with time, money and men in decision making.

As English teachers we have a lot of scope to develop our students not only in communication skills but also in life-skills. As per the present context, in the present generation/in the young minds there is no seriousness and proper caring about their lives and even lagging behind in maintaining or balancing the relationships properly with their own family members, teachers, friends, and even with the neighbours. I think the teacher is the right person in moulding their minds to keep them in a right track. In this process to overcome the imbalances we can use literature as an aid or an instrument to teach life skills and make them employable and real citizens of the nation.

Key Words: Life skills, Literature, Personality, employability, English Language.

What is Literature? Literature is a term used to describe a written or spoken material. Broadly speaking, "literature" is used to describe anything from creative writing to more technical or scientific works, but the term is most commonly used to refer to works of the imaginative & creative, including works of poetry, drama, fiction, and nonfiction.

Why do we read Literature? Literature represents a language that refers to people and culture and tradition. But, literature is more important than just a historical or cultural artifact. Literature introduces us to new worlds of experience. We learn about books and literature; we read the comedies and the tragedies of poems, stories, and plays by enjoying the latent skills of the poet/writer, by assimilating the ideas beyond the lines and by extolling the art of the writer and heart of the reader, and we may even grow and evolve through our literary journey with the books. Ultimately, we may discover the semantic value of literature by looking at what and how the author says. We may interpret the author's idea incorporated in his colourful words beyond the level of the readers' heart. In academic circles, this decoding of the text is often carried out through the use of literary theory, using a mythological, sociological, psychological, historical, or other approach.

Whatever critical paradigm we use to discuss and analyze literature, there is still an artistic quality to the works. Literature is important because it speaks to us, it is universal, because it involves and it is influential because it rules the change. Though it satirical, literature is beautiful.

"The difficulty of literature is not to write, but to write what you mean; not to affect your reader, but to affect him precisely as you wish." -- Robert Louis Stevenson

Why should we teach literature to the students?

Let me begin with a question, why should we teach literature? Literature is the food for mind. As a result, man explores the possibilities in the universe, with his diligent dexterity in the field of Art, History, Philosophy, Behavioural Science, Science and Science Fiction etc.

Why should we teach life-skills to the students of twenty first century? If we observe the present scenario of the students at both the Post-Graduate and Undergraduate levels, they are good at securing grades and ranks. But they are unable to become employable. The recent statistics says that the only 15% of them are able to be employable. What about the remaining 85% of the students? Though they are good at their subject matter, they are not able for employability, to possess the required skills and qualities. If one wants to be employable, one should be skilled not only in one's subjects, but also one should be skilled in Behavioural, Attitudinal, and Character related aspects too. Besides, one should be able to intelligently deal with time, money and men in decision making.

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As we are the language teachers and the students of literature we can identify some authors who are very influential and inspiring and some of their works can be adopted as classroom texts which may cover some of the genres like poetry, prose, drama, fiction and nonfiction. We should select

them in such a way that each and every writing should ignite and inspire the students and it should be an eye opener for them. Before we teach them we should have a comprehensible concept about the text and its context. We should be able to apply it to the present day. It should help them to know the resources of the past and opportunities of the present and with this we can guide the student to have a keen eye on their bright future. With this they can come to consolidate how best they can utilize them and acquire something from the plenty of resources and opportunities available in the present day.

As a teacher, we have the responsibility to mould the character, behaviour and attitude of the student and to persuade him to have a principled life and even to motivate him towards learning and acquiring knowledge and its application by hard work, farsightedness, determination, and discipline. Thus by gaining self-confidence to overcome the hurdles whatever he is going to face in this learning process. Even we should be the source of his/her motivation and personality development. To justify it we can teach literature to a student which acts as the best resource for both the teacher and the student.

The fact is that literature suits the best to inform, persuade, motivate and inspire the young minds which works as a fuel to their passion, work and lives.

To represent my perspective of necessity of teaching literature, in this paper I have taken some examples from the works of a few authors, like Hamlet by Shakespeare, the poem Ulysses by AL Tennyson, “If” by Rudyard Kipling.

If we take the Hamlet one of the famous works of Shakespeare who is a legendary in literature. He gives a message and direction to the young minds/students/readers through the character he created on the life skills. For example in Act I, Scene III, of *Hamlet* ‘Polonius’ gives an advice to his son Laertes, while he is about to embark for France to attend the university. Polonius’s advice to his son is full of practical wisdom. No doubt this wisdom itself is percolating from Shakespeare to his character and he is only using Polonius as his spokesperson.

In the same drama, Shakespeare cautions young people twice on life skills to be very careful while conversing with others.

“Give thy thoughts no tongue,”

and

“ Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;”

Polonius advises his son Laertes to gain fame by constructive performances or goodness but not by the destructive actions or vulgarity. He asks his son to be friendly with everyone but there should be a limit for it and tells him to recognize true friends and treasure them. He warns him to be cautious and suspicious about new people who enter his life. He asks not to get in to any arguments, quarrel/dispute, if it is inevitable you should win it, or get respect out of it. He tells him to be a patient listener restricted himself to speech.

Because speaking on every subject to every one doesn’t make us wise, but leads us to troubles. Polonius tells his son that, *“Take each man’s censure, but reserve thy judgment.”* By censure means advice. A lot of people will offer you free advice, and you should make your own choices/decisions and you should be responsible for your choices. Even Polonius warns his son to neither lend nor borrow money, by lending money to a friend, the chances are you will lose both the money and the friend. Because borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry is that, if any one get in to the habit of living on borrowed money, he is digging a pit for himself, which is difficult to come out of it. Borrowing even tends to make a person careless about earning, saving, appending and budgeting. The best advice comes last and the hardest to follow. Polonius has just issued a series of precepts by which to live his life and he tells his son to be true to himself, to follow his own heart and instincts as the measure of how to live his life. This is hard to follow because it is hard to understand one’s own self. But it is worth of the effort to do so. If you understand yourself, you will make a better career directions, a better material choice, better friend and end up leading a mere satisfying and prosperous life.

With the above stated information I can say that the Shakespeare has given us a very important note on how to be with our life.

Even **Robert Frost** an American writer makes a choice between two diverging roads, in his poem *“The Road Not Taken”* he makes his own choice based on his knowledge of himself. There are many times in a life when we have to decide something for ourselves and no one can advise. We come to a lot of diverging roads in our lives..

Even **Buddha** quotes,

“Do not believe anything anybody tells you, including anything I tell you,

unless it agrees with your own experience and your own common sense”.

In his words Buddha advises his disciple how to lead life in the thorn-pricked world. We understand the value of life-skills preached by the sage Buddha.

Next, I would like to consider the poem *Ulysses* written by A.L Tennyson. To emphasize the importance of learning and seeking knowledge irrespective of age.

The poem represents the intention of the Ulysses when he returns to Ithaca, he was reunited with his wife Penelope and son Telemachus. He rules Ithaca for some time, but soon tired of leading a life without adventures and discoveries. So he decides to leave Ithaca and set sail for the farthest region of unknown world in search of further excitement and knowledge. He has enjoyed all his experiences as a sailor who voyages on the seas, and he considers himself a model for everyone who wanders and roams around the earth. His travels have exposed him to many different types of people and ways of living. Ulysses declares that it is boring to

stay in one place, and that to remain stationary is to rust rather than to shine; to stay in one place is like a frog in a well, whereas he knows that in fact life contains much novelty, and he longs to encounter this. His spirit yearns constantly for new experiences that will broaden his horizons; he wishes “to follow knowledge like a shining star” and forever grows in wisdom and in learning.

*“Tho’ much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”*

Through these lines the author represents that there is no end/limit for learning or to the learner in seeking/acquiring knowledge; though we have learnt/known much, still there remains ample. And through the Ulysses he wants to convey that the fate and time may make us weaker but we can overpower them if we have a strong will. We should be strong in will to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield. Although Ulysses and his mariners are not as strong as they were in youth, they are “strong in will” and are sustained by their resolve to push onward relentlessly: “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

It is one's unlimited passion to acquire knowledge unabated in one's life by following moral values, ethical discipline not only for himself but also to translate it for the future generations.

To intensify my concept on life skills, I have chosen the poem “If” written by Rudyard Kipling. It is one of the supreme poems and it is written as a Parental advice to his son John Kipling is a noble and worth life skill. It can aptly suited to all the generations of all the ages. It is a notable piece of poetry which has a lesson of value for almost every reader. It is something that can be perceived as a set of virtues laid down by the poet which are advantageous for the development of good human behaviour.

Kipling shows his readers the ideal way to act during times of dire crisis. He informs the readers to make themselves strong enough in a way that they can take responsibility for their choices and actions bravely and not indulge in blame game. As he says,

*“If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or, being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or, being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;”*

He advises the readers to study the value of life skills, because values of life in the modern world is necessary to continue the cycle of life moving around. The poet says the faith is the primary concept one has to hold for better life. He reminds us to be aware of hating and doubting. That are steps for going down to the bottom of hell.

Kipling also advises that the defeat is not a defeat, it is a step for success. Unless there is defeat, there is no perfection in life and we cannot analyze our capabilities in odd times. So he advises to invite defeat which is a lesson to learn another lesson. He asks his readers to be bold enough to face the failures in life. It is really a life skill we learn through studying the literature. He also advises that the success is never an easy ride, if one follows the precepts of life-skill, one will fit well with all the sections of the society. This is really a life skill which we can learn only by reading literature.

To conclude, literature will be a great resource to teach and inculcate life skills in the present generation to make them real citizens of the nation.

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