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Common Core: The Death of Literature? Hardly

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"It is rare in a working environment that someone says, "Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday but before that I need a compelling account of your childhood."

-David Coleman, one of the authors of the Common Core State Standards

I love Coleman's quote, and I fear it.

In the coming months, you can expect to hear about how the Common Core standards, educational guidelines that have been adopted by almost every state, are raising hackles from English teachers like me because they crowd literature out of the curriculum.

That is a misreading. The Common Core doesn't call for the death of literature. It's the rest of us I'm worried about.

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First, let's talk standards. The [Common Core](#) is pretty clear that the onus for teaching informational texts, especially in the upper grades, is on non-English classes. They tell us what we've [known for years](#): science, social studies and the arts are not supplemental to reading instruction, they're [vital](#) to it.

No one is suggesting we drop Shakespeare. Instead, the Common Core says that we're all reading teachers now. That's why I love the Coleman quote.

Here's why I fear it.

As we try to implement the Common Core's recommendations, I worry that the pendulum may swing hard against literature anyhow.

As Coleman's quote seems to imply, narrative fiction may no longer feel urgent to educators as we prepare students for a decidedly information-based world. I recently spoke to a former student who told me that in her first semester at college she didn't read any literature at all.

That strikes me as a dangerous miscalculation, since teaching literature allows us to develop skills that teaching informational texts does not.

Literary and informational texts can be equally complex, but they are not equal. Non-fiction's purpose is generally to transmit information directly; fiction's is to transmit it indirectly.

And because they have different purposes, these different types of text demand different analytical skills.*

For instance, when James Madison writes, “if men were angels, no government would be necessary,” we can certainly analyze his comparison and consider why he might have chosen those particular words. We can break down his essay’s structure and argumentation technique. These are rigorous endeavors.

But let’s contrast that to a literary selection: Gabriel García Márquez’s “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings.”

In Márquez’s story, an angel arrives to a small village filthy, near death and speaking an unintelligible language. People are unsure what to make of him; he is rejected by the Church and ultimately treated as a carnival attraction. One day he flies away. The end.

When I teach this story, some of my students want to shrug and say it’s just strange.

Well, maybe.

But as an English teacher, I can push this strangeness into productive class discussion. We can read this text as a satire of the Church. Or we can explore it as a comment on provincial selfishness. Or maybe we decide it’s a critique of our desire to live according to certain beliefs, even when they don’t match reality.

Márquez doesn’t say what the angel represents, so my students have to. That requires a fundamentally different type of analysis than Madison’s essay. Both are rigorous, and both are valuable.

All this is not to say that informational texts don’t often have implicit or obscure purposes. Dissecting them can be extremely rigorous and is a vital skill for adulthood.

It’s just not the only important skill. Analyzing the multiple levels of meaning in literature is worthwhile, since it teaches us how to understand complex themes and symbols that can shift, change or even double-back on themselves.

Literature requires us to be comfortable with uncertainty and to create meaning from it. It forces us to defend arguments about concepts that authors have left deliberately unresolved.

In the end, educators don't solely turn to literature because we hope it will instill a love of reading. We don't solely turn to it because it proffers cultural knowledge or expands our capacity for empathy.

We turn to literature because it offers a chance to venture deep into analytic territory, to explore unconventional structures and ultimately to exercise ways of thinking that might otherwise atrophy. And despite the growing demands of our information-based culture, we believe those skills are worth preserving.

I suspect the Common Core authors feel the same.

Literature is far from dead. So please take care not to kill it.

** I realize there are slippery but productive distinctions between literature, fiction, non-fiction, narrative and informational text. But what I think is really occurring is a debate between the time spent on narrative fiction and everything else, and that's what I'm addressing here.*

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