The Nature of Literature Background Appropriate for the Beginning Teacher

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If one wishes to study carefully the preparation of the hypothetical beginning teacher of secondary English, he must consider several things before he is able to arrive at some sort of hypothetical conclusion as to what that beginning teacher’s “background in literature” should be in order to assure him of some sort of effectiveness in the high school classroom. Whether or not you, my audience, agree to the pertinence of my “considerations” to “literature background” will depend in great measure on what you consider are the qualifications of a good literature teacher. However that may be, I present my case.

To determine our beginning teacher’s needs, we must first consider the backgrounds with which and from which that teacher’s students may come. Students entering high school present as credentials for literary study as varied a tapestry as one with a fertile imagination can conjecture. Some are untaught; some are taught, but badly; some are excellently prepared—and our neophyte may expect all of the variants possible between these extremes. Some will have read widely; some will have read not at all. And the tapestry of the shades of difference will defy anticipation. In other words, our beginning teacher must expect not only the worst but also the best and an assortment of gradations between—none of which will simplify the “appropriate literature background” needed by our initiate.

To confuse matters further, there are other “considerations” which he must not overlook—the environments from which his students may come: their socioeconomic status; their caste, class, racial and/or national makeup; their vocational preferences or indifferences; their stability or mobility as community members; their social aspirations or lack of aspirations; and a multiplicity of other complications too numerous to catalog here. The beginner must ask himself, “Do all of these students present the same needs and/or desires? Will they all respond to the same literature, taught in the same way, with the same motivations, the same assignments both oral and written as outgrowths of their contact with that literature? Are their interests the same as mine were when I studied literature in high school or in college?” These considerations alone present almost insurmountable obstacles for the beginning teacher. He is not only surrounded by but also buried under the unreadinesses and unwillingnesses he will meet; the attitudes he must reinforce or change or nudge into realistic developments; the attributes he must create or crystallize in his charges before too many of them fall victim to that monster, DROPOUT, who reaps an already oversized crop of high schoolers—among them many who still attend classes though their
minds have been left elsewhere or depart when the teacher begins the usual
ritual. And he cannot wish those "considerations" away.

What "literature background" must our beginner have? At this point I am
tempted to ask myself and you, "Is it at all possible for our beginning teacher to
have 'background' appropriate to begin to cope with all of these complications?"
After more than three decades at the job of attempting to teach literature—and
the even more disturbing job of trying to prepare teachers of English for the
secondary schools—I find myself still gathering "background" appropriate to
the beginning teacher of literature; after each class the chill of inadequacy
haunts me. I know that I have lost some students because I did not know what to
say, what to assign, what to discuss or not to discuss, what to omit, what to let
alone. In my zeal to convert my disciples into appreciators of literature of the
highest order, I have somehow "goofed"; I have missed the boat because of
lack of "appropriate preparation"—for them.

So, what preparation? I will avoid at this point names and types of courses.
Those things do not really matter here. I would like to be able to simplify and
decree that our beginner should have read everything readable, including all of
the poems, plays, short stories, novels, essays, and what-have-you ever written;
all available literary theory; the histories of all the literatures of the world; the
biographies of all authors; all of the critical works about and all of the reviews of
everything ever written: everything. And, of course, he should continue reading
ravenously for the rest of his life. "How?" my saner self asks. "If after many
years you still have empty spaces in that super-idealistic, super-impossible, ludi-
crous phantasm which your unrealistic imagination proposes, what about your
neophyte? Who can hope to keep up with the deluge of the new freshman En-
glish texts alone which pour from the publishers to your desk at this time every
year? And that is only a small part of all the English books which inundate
you yearly. You may skim a very small number of them; but you merely look at
the tables of contents of a few others and take a quick glance at the jackets or
covers of the rest."

With that chastisement echoing in my head, I descend to earth and accept
the advice of a colleague of mine—an excellent poet, by the way—and propose a
mini-set of background appropriate for our hypothetical beginner. (My col-
league, himself an English teacher of several years' experience, added as an
aside: "Maybe you should begin your minimal preparations while your prospec-
tive English teacher is still in high school, or, better still, in junior high school,
if you expect to improve things." I am interested in your reactions to that sugges-
tion.)

After pursuing hurriedly the problem implicit in the topic we are discussing,
I propose, with understandable trepidation, that our beginner should have some
knowledge of

a. the major works of British and American literature,
b. major world masterpieces, oriental as well as occidental,
c. oral interpretation of literary works,
d. historical and biographical backgrounds when these are indicated,
e. literary theory and criticism—and terminology,
f. modern novels, plays, poetry, and the age for which they are written,
g. techniques for evaluating new works as they appear,
h. the kinds of works which appeal to adolescents—those dealing with problems adolescents consider realistic, solved in a mature manner.
In addition, he should be "wild about" literature; he must continue his avid reading and rereading as long as he lives; he must love to talk over his favorites with adolescents in a mature manner; he should heed the warning that even small successes can be highly rewarding; he must learn from adolescents daily of their dreams, their hopes, their disappointments, their happinesses—listening patiently, discussing seriously. But he must guide them, subtly but firmly, into young manhood and womanhood—through literature.