

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 7 : 6 June 2007

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

K. Karunakaran, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

LITERATURE IN THE CURRICULUM FOR ENGINEERING STUDENTS

Devika, M.P., Ph.D.

LITERATURE IN THE CURRICULUM FOR ENGINEERING STUDENTS

Devika, M.P. Ph.D

TEACHING THE “OTHER KIND OF TRUTH”

Through this paper I wish to make some observations regarding the curriculum design for the students of engineering and technology with regard to the teaching and learning of the English language.

In my view, there is an urgent need to balance the learning of technical skills in English with the studies in Literature. This will definitely serve the purpose of providing life-long and value-based learning. I quote Cleanth Brooks et al., to further my point. They say,

“Literature gives a picture of life—not the picture that is actually (historically) true, but a picture that has its own kind of truth—a ‘truth’ that includes important elements that science from its very nature is forced to leave out. The truth of literature takes the form, not of abstract statement but of a concrete and dramatic presentation, which may allow us to experience imaginatively the ‘lived’ meanings of a piece of life”. (492)

LITERATURE FOR THE STUDENTS OF ENGINEERING COLLEGES

It is my aim to discuss certain issues centering on the design of a curriculum with regard to the teaching of English in Engineering colleges in Tamil Nadu, South India.

The key areas that will determine the success or failure of any institute of higher learning in reaching its goal are the quality of its graduates and the extent to which ideas generated by faculty and students are transplanted over time into the products that have impact on society. My concern is on quality education for our youth.

There is a general agreement of what needs to be done to achieve this. The objectives are clear and ideals are beyond reproach; we hope to equip the students with the ability to do independent thinking, to be creative, and to develop a passion for life-long learning. These are qualities that every institution tries to achieve. However, the increase in the sophistication of engineering and technology presents new challenges to engineering colleges and educators. Worldwide, there is an urgent need to make engineering education more relevant, exciting and intellectually rigorous. The effectiveness of teaching impacts not only what is actually learned but also the quality of the people attracted into the profession.

Having taught technical English to students in an Engineering college for the past four years, I strongly feel that incorporating Literature into their curriculum can enhance the quality of the students. A college student is subject to various influences and his personality and character undergo a sea change in this most turbulent period of his life. He is called upon to perform

intellectually at all times allowing no room for emotions or excuses. Very many a bewildered student drops out of college or suffers through bouts of depression and sometimes he even takes drastic steps to end his life. Counseling is the need of the hour but not every student is privy to this. My suggestion will, I feel, alleviate the predicament of the student to a certain extent.

LITERATURE AND THE MENTAL WELL-BEING OF ENGINEERING STUDENTS

Students enter Engineering colleges right out of school, they are just “babes in the woods”. There is so much happening around them— it is a dramatic change for some and a drastic one for some others. These young minds are either forced to sit in a room and listen to lectures on heavy, technical topics for about eight hours a day or they are in labs, where it is mandatory that they work quietly and correctly. Recreational hours are few and the English class is counted as one among them. If the teacher is a little lax the students tend to use that time too for completing records and so on.

THE ENGINEERING SYLLABUS AT PRESENT

The Syllabus is not very inspiring, if I may put it that way. It is divided into four parts under the headings of Listening, Reading, Writing and Grammar. The writing does not allow for much creativity. Students write letters, checklists, safety instructions, reports and the like. The context of most of these is technical too. The comprehension passages and grammatical structures too, are related to technology.

Thus there is absolutely no chance for inculcating the spirit of humanity in a student, which can be done by the introduction of literature in their study. In this context it would be relevant to include a small anecdote from my personal experience.

TO MARVEL AT

During one of my conversations with a colleague, a senior professor of Engineering, I was absolutely shocked to hear him say that he was allergic to poetry. He was otherwise a very nice person and I don't believe that what he said is true. The only probability was that he either had had a very bad teacher or he hadn't studied or even read a good poem (I don't mean to be disrespectful) but how can one not be moved by

**To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.**

(William Blake)

This is exactly the point that I'm trying to make. The students work hard during the prime four years of their lives just making sure that they get their degrees and perhaps marks which are decent enough to get them jobs. What about the human soul inside each one of them? Wherefrom

will it get its nourishment? The students often end up feeling hopeless and inadequate when dealing with the crises in life, emotional and otherwise.

LITERATURE OF ALL SORTS

There is a lot that a child can learn from literature – Literature does not mean ‘English literature’ or “serious or high literature”. It also includes literature from other cultures, children’s literature as well as popular literature.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A LITERARY WORK

The Work as an Imitation of Life – Aristotle called the art of writing “a tragedy mimesis; the imitation or re-creation of an action that is serious and complete in itself.” From this comes the view that a work of literature imitates the world or society that produced it. Shakespeare’s characters reflect the Elizabethan times and also makes the point that human beings have always had their individuality, their strengths and weaknesses. The beliefs and attitudes of people in different societies, as depicted in books are a source of revelation that leads to a better understanding of human nature.

The Work as Expression - The work expresses the feelings of the person who wrote it and therefore helps one to identify with the characters and situations. The knowledge and truth that literature affords are different from the knowledge and truth provided by history or Science. “The artist” said Tolstoy in a famous pronouncement “hands on to others those feelings he himself has felt, that they too may be moved and experience them” (Read 185)

The Work as Influence - From this perspective, the literary work is one that affects people. It stirs certain responses in them, raises their emotions and perhaps argues for their ideas that change their minds. I quote Tolstoy once again-“ part of the function of art is to enlighten and to lead its audience into an acceptance of better moral attitudes” (Read,185)

A PRIVILEGED FORM OF HUMAN ACTIVITY

Literature is thus a privileged form of human activity or discourse because no other activity or discourse brings out, so fully or precisely, the variety, possibility or complexity of human life.

Should we be depriving students of all this just because they have opted to study for technical training? Should we allow them to become totally mechanical like the gadgets they work with? It is a point worth pondering!

References

Blake, William – To see a World in a Grain of Sand pg. 492. In *Literature—An introduction to fiction, poetry and drama*. (2nd ed). Editor: X. J. Kennedy. Little Brown & Co.(Canada) Ltd.

Brooks Cleanth, John Thibaut Purser & Robert Warren .1942. *An Approach to Literature*. New York: Crofts.

X.J. Kennedy. (Ed.). *Literature—An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry and Drama*. (2nd ed). Little Brown & Co., (Canada) Ltd.

Proceedings of Second TLHE Symposium (4-6 Sept.2002) CDTL, National University of Singapore.

Read, Herbert. *The Meaning of Art*. Great Britain: Penguin 1950.

Study Materials on Literature . PGCTE Course. CIEFL, Hyderabad. 2002

Devika, M.P., Ph.D.
Department of English
Tagore Engineering College
Chennai- 600 048
Tamilnadu, India
drdevikaa@yahoo.com