

TEACHING 'DIFFICULT' LITERATURE: ENGAGING MINDS AND HEARTS

Embracing Complexity in the Classroom

In today's educational landscape, teaching 'difficult' literature presents a unique opportunity to engage students with complex, real-world issues in a safe and supportive environment. This approach not only fosters critical thinking but also encourages empathy and lifelong learning.

What Makes Literature 'Difficult'?

'Difficult' literature encompasses a wide range of texts that challenge both students and educators. These might include:

- **Formats:** Uncommon formats like graphic novels or verse novels.
- **Content:** Sensitive topics such as gender/sexuality, First Nations perspectives, trauma, and dystopia.
- **Complexity:** Texts with intricate language or themes.
- **Censorship:** Books that have been banned or challenged.
- **Historical Context:** Older texts with outdated or problematic language.

Why Teach These Texts?

Engaging with challenging literature can be immensely beneficial for students:

- **Discussion and Engagement:** Provokes thoughtful discussion and critical analysis.
- **Empathy and Understanding:** Books serve as windows and mirrors, helping students understand diverse perspectives, as well as their own lives.
- **Real-World Connections:** Literature reflects the complexities of the real world, offering a safe space to explore difficult themes.
- **Lifelong Reading:** Encourages a deep love for reading through exposure to diverse narratives.

Overcoming Resistance

Resistance from parents, colleagues, or the broader community is common when introducing challenging texts. To address this:

- **Communication:** Send letters home, provide detailed background and context, and use trigger warnings.

- **Support and Resources:** Utilise resources like "You Can Teach That" by VATE or the Reading Australia units.
- **Leadership Buy-In:** Ensure that school leadership supports the inclusion of diverse texts.
- **Text Selection Policies:** Develop robust policies that support diverse text selection.

Effective Strategies for Teaching

To effectively incorporate difficult literature into the classroom:

- **Scaffold Learning:** Provide contextual support and preparatory materials.
- **Use Visual Texts:** Employ picture books, graphic novels and multimedia to make complex topics more accessible.
- **Interactive Activities:** Facilitate discussions and activities that allow students to express their thoughts and reflections.

Final Thoughts

As educators, embracing the teaching of 'difficult' literature not only enriches the classroom experience but also prepares students for the complexities of the world beyond school. By thoughtfully selecting and delivering these texts, we can create a more inclusive and empathetic learning environment.

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