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education for peace and the selection of a literary canon for war remembrance

David Aldridge

'Peace forever' is a desirable curriculum aim for schools, and a legitimate principle for the selection of curriculum content. In this article I consider a tension between humanistic and hermeneutic motivations for the selection of a literary canon for educational purposes. I conclude that teachers do well to consider the selection of curriculum content within a broader context of moral and spiritual development, but this should be accompanied by letting go of the hope that a specific literary text or other curriculum object will transform a student in any particular or predetermined way. This insight applies to the presentation of war poetry but is also relevant to the project of character education more broadly.

Keywords: canon, literature, moral education, peace, poetry, war remembrance

This contribution begins from the assumption that education for peace is a legitimate curriculum aim for schools. In England this possibility is not foregrounded in current school inspection frameworks, which emphasise 'personal development' aims of developing the character traits of resilience, confidence and independence or developing 'responsible' and 'respectful' citizens who understand diversity and promote respect (Ofsted, 2022). Interestingly, the term 'moral' is scrupulously avoided by the current Office for Standards in Education's school inspection framework, which therefore ascribes no explicitly 'moral' development aims to schools. But any statement of intent for a curriculum that 'extends beyond the technical, academic or vocational' (Ofsted, 2022) must be grounded in an elaboration of the components of human flourishing (or other appropriate value scheme) that underpin the selection of curriculum content and will, inasmuch as they are normative claims, be controversial or questionable. 'Under these circumstances,' (Michael Hand argues) 'curriculum designers must adopt selection criteria on the basis of whichever non-compelling arguments they find most persuasive; on the basis, that is, of their best guesses' (Hand, 2012, p. 553). I won't devote much effort in the short piece that follows to advocating general acceptance of the curriculum aim of fostering a disposition towards peace, but this seems broadly consistent with Ofsted's principles (if not entirely unproblematically, such as in the event that a citizen's disposition to be 'respectful' to the state might come into conflict with their desire to criticise that state's involvement in an unjust conflict).

In earlier work (Aldridge, 2014a) I focused on the justification for schools' engagement in public events of remembrance (particularly those occurring annually in England on or around November 11th). I argued that a number of the posited educational justifications for requiring students to participate in such events – such as the claim that students should remember because they owe a debt of gratitude to the war dead – are untenable. I concluded (on the basis of a general commitment to the promotion to peace, as elaborated above) that the only acceptable justification is

to remind students of the horror of war. I acknowledged the phenomenon of the 'seasonal curriculum,' where, surrounding events of remembrance, curriculum material across academic subjects tends to converge for a week or two on related themes. But in focusing on schools' participation specifically in seasonal remembrance events, I did not consider how the 'top level' motivation to foster an aversion to war and a disposition towards peace ought to permeate and affect the selection of curriculum content, and its delivery.

One interesting test case for considering the educational implications of selecting curriculum content that will serve the promotion of peace is in the teaching of English literature, where the poetry of World War I has an enduring presence, not least because the achievement of a literary canon has developed hand in hand with more or less explicit efforts towards the moral formation of society. The emergence of a literary canon in its most general sense and the place of literature in schools were therefore in a close relationship of co-construction throughout the twentieth century. Davis (2018) has paid attention to this relationship specifically as it concerns the poetry of World War I (I am also indebted to Davis for drawing my attention to the two contrasting Penguin collections of World War I poetry that I discuss here).

Jon Silkin writes in his introduction to the first 'Penguin Book of First World War Poetry' that:

> … were we ever given the chance to erase war by using the poets' apprehensions, we'd be foolish not to take that chance. The question scarcely bears consideration; of course one would sacrifice the poetry to the pity and the compunction, if what were achieved by that were peace forever. For if the poet's message can be used effectively, then used it should be. (Silkin, 1979, p. 14)

This bold claim about the *legitimacy* of enlisting poetry instrumentally to bring about the educational end of 'peace forever' is accompanied by a hesitation about the *efficacy* of doing so that inflects the rest of Silkin's extended introduction. Nevertheless, Silkin presents a hierarchy of 'stages of consciousness' that underpins the selection of the poems in his anthology. While the account is intended to track the historical development of a collective consciousness, the implication is of progress towards a desirable moral end, which strongly suggests also a developmental journey that readers of this anthology might undergo. Poetry is discussed in chronological order as (1) a conduit for prevailing patriotic ideas (in evidence in the work of Rupert Brooke), to (2) an expression of anger or horror, through (3) compassion, to (4) expression of an active desire for change.

A later World War I poetry anthology produced by Penguin (initially published under a different title, but later named identically so as to replace Silkin's anthology) includes an introduction by George Walter, which – while Silkin is not named – directly addresses the themes of Silkin's introduction, and implicitly argues for replacing his original selection principles with Walter's. Walter's argument is that developmental hierarchies like Silkin's appear to efface certain historical realities, such as the continued popularity of Brooke's work into the late stages of the war, and the virtual renunciation for ten years after the war of poets identified with Silkin's 'higher' three stages in favour of Brooke and others who allowed a grieving population to ascribe meaning to their loss. Walter (2006) cites Cyril Falls in arguing that, under a lens like Silkin's, …

> Every sector becomes a bad one, every working party is shot to pieces; if a man is

> killed or wounded his brains or his entrails always protrude from his body: no one ever seems to have a rest… The soldier is represented as a depressed and mournful spectre helplessly wandering about until death brought his miseries to an end. (Falls, 1930, p. xi)

We might say that Silkin's introduction appeals to our *humanistic* inclinations, whereas Walter's appeals to our *hermeneutic* sensibilities. What the contrast certainly brings to our awareness is the tension between any morally formative intentions we might have for selecting and presenting curriculum content, and other desirable aims of literary appreciation such as interpretive or aesthetic awareness. This is a tension not often appreciated by the 'character educators' who urge that literary texts can be 'put to use' in service of the formation of moral dispositions (see, e.g., Carr & Harrison, 2015; Pike & Lickona, 2021). The influential advocate of character education William Kilpatrick argues that certain artworks have such persuasive force that even 'twenty minutes of excerpts' of the behaviour of passengers and crew during the sinking of the Titanic in the film *A Night to Remember* is sufficient to consistently reduce the most blasé students to tears. The film (Kilpatrick argues) 'doesn't leave the viewer much room for ethical maneuvering' and '[w]e are not being asked to ponder a complex ethical dilemma; rather, we are being taught what is proper' (Kilpatrick, 1992, p. 139). The psychologist of character education Darcia Narvaez argues on the other hand (with reference to teaching the moral or 'point' of the story of the three little pigs) that 'when the text does not fit with the reader's background knowledge or schemas, readers will poorly understand … misrecall … and even distort memory to fit with their schematic form' and that 'theme extraction' even from simple texts proved difficult until age ten, and 'not automatic or fundamental generally unless the topic is familiar' (Narvaez, 2002, p. 162). Where the character educators seem to vacillate between claiming on the one hand that moral understanding is hard won, or on the other hand that great literature will simply 'work its magic' on an audience, in each case they underplay the responsive role of the student in the achievement of literary meaning. Kilpatrick's story, in my view, says more about the moral sensibility of his students than the literary merit of his chosen stimulus, and Narvaez in her concern that students 'misrecall' and 'distort' the 'theme' of the story completely misses the potential for varied imaginative response that is precisely the mark of literary merit; creative children will elaborate, continue and subvert stories; they will find other 'themes' than the one the teacher intended.

The importance of this digression into character education is the recognition that various artworks, including literature, do not provide a ready store of exemplars that can be presented to be 'read off' by students. Engagement with a literary exemplar is not simply a case of imitation, or even of emulation, but of interpretation (see, for a fuller argument, Aldridge, 2014b). An educator's efforts to 'drive home' the moral that underpins the selection of a literary exemplar is in tension with the interpretive ambiguity and fruitfulness that justifies its presentation as literature.

What does this mean for the compatibility of a curriculum concerned overall with fostering a disposition towards peace, with the selection and presentation of curriculum content in a particular subject, in this case English? I would want to hold on to the notion that 'peace forever' is a desirable curriculum aim for schools, and a legitimate principle for the selection of curriculum content. I would furthermore be prepared to consider with Silkin that even where there might be *other* aims informing the selection of content, if sacrificing the 'poetry' to the 'pity' would effect the desired morally formative end, we should give that option careful consideration – I have briefly implied, after all, that the endeavour of character education often willingly sacrifices the 'poetry' for a lot

less. But the reality (of literary interpretation, and of the creative responsiveness of children) is that literature simply does not 'work' on readers in this way. So we cannot expect a broad curriculum intention to promote peace to trickle down into an explicitness on the level of the curriculum disciplines. Teachers do well to consider the selection of curriculum content within a broader context of moral and spiritual development, but (and 'character educators' would do well to hold this principle more generally) this should be accompanied by letting go of the hope that a specific literary text or other curriculum object will transform a student in any particular or predetermined way.

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