

Essential Question and Enduring Understanding as a Means of Freeing Trese

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Abstract. The authors establish the significance of the essential question (EQ) and enduring understanding (EU) in unpacking a text’s multiple layers of meanings. Using both EQ and EU, they argue that literature teachers can provide their learners with opportunities to connect their experiences and knowledge base with the various layers of meanings embedded in a text. The learners, in turn, may anchor their interpretations of the text and relate these to real-life scenarios. The authors demonstrate this connection through *Trese*, a graphic novel serialized in print and by Netflix, one of the world’s most popular streaming sites. Language and literature teachers are enjoined to discuss other texts that appeal to learners and use a wide array of strategies that will allow them to interpret and appreciate texts in multiple ways.

Keywords. Essential question, essential understanding, literature, *Trese*.

Context and Concerns

The potency of literature lies in its ability to explore and address the multiple facets of human experience. For one, it is often considered both a representation of history (Gohrisch, 2007) and, from a new historicist standpoint, an interpretation of history (Tyson, 2006). Moreover, it is also a realm wherein readers can vicariously experience the lives of characters and personas, thereby allowing them to reflect on the ethical ramifications of specific actions and play out several versions of themselves (Miller, 1995; Harpham, 1995). As a result, it is not surprising that Matthew Arnold, who considered literature to be the “best that has been thought and said in the world,” regarded literature, not religion, as a means of instilling values in society (Eagleton, 1996). As the practice of literature teaching spread worldwide, it also assumed the role of a language teacher, providing second and foreign-language speakers with a linguistic model that can help them improve their overall proficiency (Afsar, 2011). Carter and Long (1991) contended that there are three main ways to study literature: linguistic, cultural, and personal growth models. It is because literature serves different purposes in academia and people’s lives.

Consequently, when reading Camus’ (1991) *The Plague*, one considers not only how its narrator unveils the sequence of events, from the beginning until the end of the epidemic, but also the impact of a disease on society, the measures that may be taken to prevent such an outbreak, and even the resulting existential and psychological crises that accompany such a tragedy.

In the same vein, when studying Golden’s (1998) *Memoirs of a Geisha*, one does not only look at the artistry of language and the development of Sayuri, its protagonist. The piece itself becomes a representation of the struggles and triumphs not only of a geisha but also of other women around the world who may find themselves in an analogous situation—one where emancipation from economic and social struggles can only be achieved through the exercise of their sexuality and with the help of a male figure from the upper classes. Our examples illustrate how literature covers a wide array of disciplines. It is not just art or language but a consolidation of human experiences, encompassing individual and social levels, which can be better appreciated from a multidisciplinary lens.

For this reason, using essential questions (EQ) and enduring understanding (EU) in studying literature becomes vital as it allows the readers to explore its various facets, which may be left unknown if analyzed using only one disciplinary lens. An EU is a statement that enables learners to summarize crucial insights and apply

them to various situations, even outside the classroom (iTeachU, 2021). Furthermore, it allows learners to create interdisciplinary ties and, more importantly, take the lessons they learn in school through adulthood.

In addition, an EU is the foundation of a conceptual curriculum wherein synergistic thinking is promoted (Erickson et al., 2014). Traditionally, a curriculum is grounded in bits and chunks of knowledge and skills. In a concept-based curriculum, these are integrated into one overarching concept, allowing learners to appreciate the connections among tidbits of content and transfer learning to other contexts, hence, the role of the EU (McTighe & Wiggins, 2012).

In this article, we demonstrated how the EU could be used in the study of *Trese*, a graphic novel that has recently been reinvented as an anime series and shown on Netflix, where it ranked as one of the top 10 shows in 19 countries in June 2021 (Ichimura, 2021; GMA News). *Trese*, either a graphic novel or a series, is an excellent resource to use in the language and literature classrooms in the Philippines, especially in the senior high core subject, 21st Century Literature from the Philippines and the World. It is a Philippine text produced within the period prescribed by the course, and it infuses several elements of Philippine folklore and society. Its popularity makes it a good fit for many learners.

Essential Question and Enduring Understanding in *Trese*

The featured worktext uses this EU to guide learners' inquiry in exploring *Trese*: Philippine literature should be valued, preserved, and shared since it significantly reflects the Filipino identity and its unique culture. This statement about literature and culture unfolds in the award-winning comic book, depicting a world where Philippine mythology's creatures and monsters exist within the human world. The two EQs are about the unique Filipino culture and identity and the reasons why Filipino literature should be valued, preserved, and shared:

1. How does Philippine literature reflect its people's unique culture and identity?
2. Why should a nation's literature be studied, shared, and preserved?

This concept is best explained to literature learners through applications such as Jamboard, Padlet, and Mentimeter, where they can freely share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences about the mythical creatures believed in the Philippines. Buena (2022) discussed these applications in this issue. Each learner's unique experience reveals the rich culture and nuanced understanding of Filipinos and connects the lesson to their own lived realities, thus involving them in the process of meaning-making. It helps the process of semiotic mediation, in which the learners and the teacher negotiate to understand and interpret the symbols, which in this case are mythical creatures from the Philippines (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

Moreover, a short, animated video clip of Philippine myths may be shown to expose further the various superstitions embraced by the Filipinos and the reasons for upholding these beliefs even now. It could be done by a think-pair-share activity where learners can freely write their thoughts with their classmates and interact through breakout rooms in the Google Workspace for Education platform at a set time. The teacher may give the rubrics for grading their pair work and then allow them to enter their rooms. Then, the teacher may visit the learners in their breakout rooms to observe and entertain possible queries and clarifications. After that, the learners can return to the main room, where they are allowed to share their significant considerations. The teacher then helps them process their diverse thoughts or understanding of Philippine folklore.

To activate the learners' prior knowledge of the comic book, the teacher asks them to describe it and show and tell its features. Everyone is free to respond. Then, the teacher presents an illustration of the parts of the comic book and explains their significance. They can also show a short documentary video history of its development and the need for the comic books to be preserved and shared as cultural artifacts. Such activity allows them to hone their close reading skills, which involve unpacking a text's multiple layers of meanings through careful and methodical scrutiny of its elements (Boyles & Scherer, 2012). By doing this, learners learn how to make meaningful connections between different text parts and how these parts relate to the lesson's main point.

Further, the teacher introduces *Trese* as a comic book that preserves Philippine culture, rich with mythical creatures and superstitious beliefs reflecting Filipino identity. As a motivating activity, the teacher presents the *Trese* Trailer: The Acclaimed Filipino Horror Comic Becomes A Bloody Netflix Animated Series on the screen of the Google Classroom and then asks them their ideas about the story. Learners may post their

questions on the Q & A feature of Google Workspace. The questions that get the highest number of likes or are the most frequently asked would be given a chance to be answered first. With this activity, learners are freeing their minds and revolutionizing the e-classroom. They are given the agency to examine the text from their perspective. Likewise, the teacher may allow the learners to freely read the text or the story, *Trese–Pilot*, at the intersection of Balete and 13th Street, for 10–15 minutes. After that, an overview or background knowledge of the authors, Budgette Tan and Kajo Baldesimo, is unveiled to appreciate their literary styles and better understand the story.

Then, a dramatic dialogue of the story according to the plot illustrated in the comic book is done to internalize the story’s message. This process is done first by the learner volunteers, who willingly share their talents and insights into the story’s meaning through interpretative reading. There is no rubric yet to be shown to the learners to help them release their potential without restrictions, and it is based on their understanding, which may then be connected to the lesson’s EU.

In addition, the learners can also be grouped according to the elements of fiction: the theme, characters, plot, and literary devices used. They will discuss the assigned elements and fill out the worksheets with their group members. They will do this in the breakout rooms set for them by their teacher and complete it in 25–30 minutes. The teacher will explain the rubrics for grading their collaborative work before joining their groups. There will be an assigned presenter/s from the group to share their findings after the group activity. Again, the teacher will monitor the progress of the learners’ collaborative work by joining their rooms and welcoming their queries and clarifications. In the presentation proper, the teacher facilitates the discussion and may ask additional questions to deepen their understanding of the story and help them process their answers into a more meaningful one.

Conclusion/ Directions

As observed in the sample worktext and the discussion above, literature is best taught when addressing linguistic, cultural, and personal growth dimensions (Carter & Long, 1991). These are not treated as separate parts but are connected through an essential understanding, which can be unpacked through several strategies discussed in this article and the Contextualized Worktext for Literature Teaching. Furthermore, it is critical to use material that is both appealing to learners and rich in cultural meanings. It is evident in *Trese*, which is exceedingly popular locally and internationally. Such a material allows learners to connect their individual experiences with the textual elements and unpack these through an essential understanding and related questions. In the future, language and literature teachers may talk about other texts that learners find interesting and use a wide range of methods that help learners unpack and make sense of multiple layers of meaning.

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