

FREE: A Critical Paradigm for Literature Teachers

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Abstract. This article covers the discussion of literature teaching, including pedagogical challenges. The authors trace the ideology of the FREE Paradigm back to Isagani R. Cruz and situate it in the contemporary literature teaching landscape. The discussion transcends a basic conceptual description of what a literature class should be by proposing a critical paradigm for more progressive and humanistic literature teaching. It further guides the readers to clearly understand the implications that this critical paradigm contributes to literature education.

Keywords. Critical paradigm, literature teaching, paradigm shifts.

Context and Concerns

The decades-long debate on literature pedagogy has yielded not only a wide assortment of teaching strategies that subscribe to various frameworks and contexts but also many features that have characterized an effective literature classroom and, by extension, an efficacious literature educator. Complementary and contradictory models and approaches collectively conform to contemporary views and question traditional (teacher-centered) modes of teaching literary texts. (Asimaki et al., 2020; Bustamante, 2022; Chong, 2021; Markušić & Sabljic, 2019; Towndrow & Kwek, 2017).

Perennially, every literature teacher is guided by the classic rhetoric of maximizing the teaching of literature to mirror the realities of life and is, therefore, important “not only in education but in life” (Showalter, 2002). It also underscores literature teachers’ role in the enterprise of reading as a liberating art. Teachers typically get caught in the interweaving dilemma of personal subjectivities against their institutional affiliations as the liaison between literature and institution. The choice of texts, the selection of writers, and the scope of discussion provide literature teachers with the confluence of interpretation and pedagogy. What baffles literature teachers usually lies in the tool articulating a “shared vision of our goal that can provide a sense of ongoing purpose and connection” in teaching literature (Showalter, 2002).

Some of the fundamental issues include:

1. Learner-centered and socially inclusive teaching strategies;
2. Contextualized (and localized) instructional materials appropriate to particular grade levels;
3. A well-structured and well-directed set of essential questions to guide classroom discussion;
4. Easily accessible and affordable digital literary libraries capable of supporting hybrid or blended learning environments;
5. Online technologies and applications that can help with instruction;
6. Knowledge of various literary and pedagogical theories; and
7. Long-term and research-based assessment strategies that can shed light on best practices.

Research endeavors utilizing evidence-based methodologies explore the various labels, benefits, and challenges of literature teaching. These concerns range from the justification of teacher-fronted lectures to (in) adequately addressing content required by the curriculum (Asimaki et al., 2020); the (re) shaping of the pedagogical relationship between teacher and learner, the traditional source and receiver of knowledge (Bloemert et al., 2017; Nishimuro & Borg, 2013); to the evaluation of awareness of and competencies in the use of different literary lenses and up-to-date research scholarship (Bustamante, 2022; Chong, 2021; Simene, 2014).

However, all these concerns converge on a common point. One that points to the fact that in the age-old practice of literature pedagogy, there is no need to “reinvent the wheel” (Cruz, 2009). If so, what is left for a literature teacher to do to navigate shifts in and traverse the fast-changing national and global education landscape? What looming imperatives need to be addressed to inform the teachers’ decisions in the literature classroom to reconcile their perspectives with the urgent needs of the 21st century application of 22nd century BCE professional practice?

FREE: The Indispensable Process of Teaching Literature by Dr. Isagani R. Cruz (1990)

“The more things change, the more they stay the same” (Teaching Literature, Isagani R. Cruz, Philippine Star, December 10, 2009). In the context of teaching literature, the paradigm introduced by Dr. Cruz almost a decade ago is still the paradigm that works in most literature classrooms, and rightly so. The basic premise states that nearly everything has already been written, even when it comes to lesson planning for a literature class. There may have been different labels, protocols, innovations, and revised curricula, but literature teaching is FREE at its core.

One who ventures to teach literature should be mindful of FREE:

1. Feeding the text “by talking about the author and the tradition to which the literary text belongs.”
2. Reading the text “in class, alone or with some oral of the learners.”
3. Enhancing the text, “which means giving learners an insight into the text that may be derived from literary theory, pedagogical experience, or current events.”
4. Enjoying the text “as they reread it with great understanding.”

FREE Critical Paradigm by Literature Educators Association of the Philippines Incorporated (2021)

Fueled by a common belief that literature teaching humanizes and should therefore be embraced and innovated if it were to fully and freely cultivate the “life of feeling and imagination” (Abad, 2014), the Literature Educators Association of the Philippines Incorporated (LEAP, Inc.) attempts to advance Dr. Isagani R. Cruz’s principles and at the same time include an extra layer of purpose, which is to say, propose emancipatory literature teaching. Through the FREE Critical Paradigm, we claim that this attempt may significantly contribute to providing literature educators with a fresh perspective on how literature teaching may be done in their classrooms.

The all-important principle of the FREE Critical Paradigm rests on the notion of liberty. Paulo Freire (1970), famous for the groundbreaking work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, said that “education cannot be neutral; it is either an instrument of liberation or an instrument of domestication.” This notion provides the theoretical backbone of the FREE Critical Paradigm. Kincheloe (2004), in his primer on *Critical Pedagogy*, maintained most of Freire’s thesis—that “education had as much to do with the teachable heart as it did with the teachable mind.” It is central to the operationalization of the FREE Critical Paradigm.

Where Critical Pedagogy is “grounded in a social and educational vision of justice and equality,” so is the teaching of literature. The social, political, and cultural role in shaping significant human experience is fundamental to this pedagogy. It puts a premium on what humans can achieve. It also acknowledges the political nature of education. bell hooks (1994), in her *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, asserted that the “classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academe.” The FREE Critical Paradigm functions to empower literature teachers imbued with a vibrant spirit that ultimately emancipates. It assumes a practice that could respond to questions of this nature:

How do learners learn about the inequities between women and men around the world?... look to create pedagogies that allow learners to see the complexities, singularities, and interconnections between communities of women such that power, privilege, agency, and dissent can be made visible and engaged with (Mohanty, 2003, p. 523).

Ultimately, at the core of the FREE Critical Paradigm is a call for all literature teachers to help alleviate human suffering—to nurture empathy and promote understanding of the human race and its needs. It asks literature educators and practitioners to move towards a genuine critical consciousness.

How can we exploit our freedom as principal authorities in our classrooms?

Literature teaching should be:

- Freeing the mind
- Radicalizing the classroom
- Encouraging scholarship
- Ensuring love for learning

Table 1

Essential Features of FREE Paradigm and FREE Critical Paradigm

FREE Paradigm		FREE Critical Paradigm	
Feed the text	Author and literary traditions	Frees the mind	Need for rethinking, reframing, and reconceptualization
Read the text	Reading	Radicalizes the classroom	Critical pedagogies and reflective practice
Enhance the text	Deepening literary theory, pedagogical experience, or current events	Encourages Scholarship	Integration of research
Enjoy the text	Rereading with a greater understanding	Ensures love for learning	Intertextual referencing and use of creative spaces

Table 1 presents the features of two FREE Paradigms.

Literature Frees the Mind

Inarguably, every act of reading literature is an opportunity to be free— free from the tyranny of everyday life, from the oppression that stems from tradition, from the stigma that cripples the right to choose, from a cancel culture that decries one-track thinking, from the politics that paints democracy as good and all else evil, from the bondage of capitalism, from such times when Sappho, Virginia Woolf, and several nameless women were considered second-class citizens, from when authors are mostly he, from when poets are persecuted, and their ideas considered dangerous, from so much more than only the power of letters dares to wrestle against.

Every act of reading literature is an invitation to re/design the classroom that encourages talk:

1. About the life and times of the author;
2. About significant human experiences that define a particular generation;
3. About the techniques employed in the text, including the style of writing and the use of figurative devices;
4. About the intersection of language and style as a literary aesthetic;
5. About universal ideas and themes fostered by the literature-- the struggles, the evolving conflicts, the modernizing villains; and
6. About questionable values systems that suppress contemporary identities, and so much more.

Literature Teaching Reinvents the Classroom

The literature teachers’ decisions should allow learners to step into the world of the text—that is, into the fictional world of the characters. The activities and the questions should be woven tightly to stimulate learners to use their imagination and step into the action inside the text. But it should not stop there. Good literature teaching practice should also provide the learners with a way out of the text.

Learners should be able to step out of the fictional world into the real world by virtue of critical thinking and reflection.

Literature Teaching Encourages Scholarship

Nothing best characterizes scholarship nowadays more than research. Anyone who aspires to be a scholar has once engaged in a systematic inquiry about a specific field of knowledge. A more fulfilling kind of research has an emancipatory nature, as suggested by Jocson and colleagues (2022) in this issue. The literature classroom is not alien to this pursuit. As a science, pedagogy is constantly subject to constant inquiry, exploration, and reorganization. It makes any classroom a gold mine for potential literary topics that could be undertaken at any given time. In a literature class, a research endeavor may be best categorized as classroom-based research. This research could cover anything, from instructional materials to assessment to strategies. Even a learner's simple output or a teacher's anecdotal record could inform the data that may be used to calibrate and improve the quality of literature teaching.

Literature is Reading

It cannot be said enough. Literature teaching is an art inasmuch as it is a science. Most teachers grapple with strategies when the best strategy is and always will be reading. Dr. Venancio L. Mendiola of the Philippine Normal University, one of the most prolific literature educators in the country, would always say that one cannot call themselves a literature major (in this context, teacher) if they are only one step ahead of their learners. Learners look up to their teachers as role models. Seeing their teachers enjoying reading is a step closer to encouraging reading among learners. It is a mighty step towards raising a highly literate nation.

Embodying FREE Critical Paradigm in Literature Teaching

Any literature teacher equipped with the FREE Critical Paradigm is essentially at liberty to interpret it in ways that serve personal goals—with the hope that every decision made—from the choice of text to use to the literary concept to focus on and highlight, is informed after intimately engaging with literature, both as a discipline and as a subject. Engaging with literature as a discipline provides teaching with aesthetics that emanate from the power and nobility of excellent writing, discoverable only through the art of letters—the matter of which typically presupposes language, expressed more succinctly by this excerpt:

The matter of literature is language, subject to human experience.”
Through this subject matter, a new reality is created—yes, of course, a fictive reality. This new reality is sponsored by language; although it is rooted in human experience as imagined, it is yet itself a new experience, as the word experience (from Greek *experiri*) suggests, a testing, a trial, a judgment of reality” (Abad, 2014, p. 54).

Understanding the above could spell the mechanism that primarily defines the teaching objective most suitable and relevant to the literature in focus. On the other hand, engaging with literature as a subject should inform teaching decisions on strategy, learning outcomes, and different curricular agenda that have been identified to improve literacy.

LEAP, Inc. FREE operates on two interconnected layers: The FREE paradigm, introduced in 2009 by renowned literature educator and columnist Dr. Cruz, and the critical ideologies that center on a transformation that challenges power, interrogates inequality, and promotes change. It is embodied in the Contextualized Worktext for Literature Teachers, developed by LEAP, Inc. It includes the following elements:

Figure 1

Essential Elements of FREE in FREE Contextualized Worktext in Literature Teaching

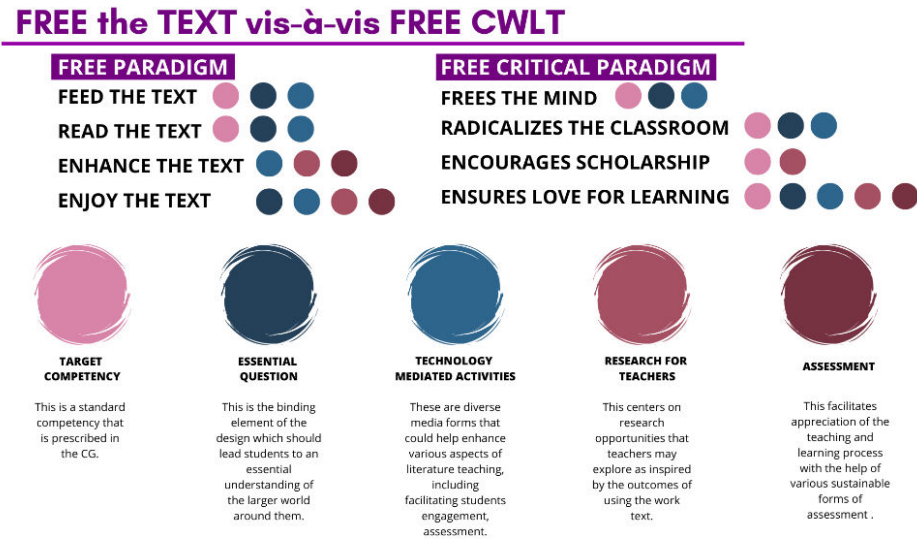


Fig. 1 illustrates the essential elements within the FREE Contextualized Worktext for Literature Teaching developed and proposed by LEAP, Inc. in 2021.

Implications/Directions

There is no denying that the pandemic has profoundly affected education in the country and transformed the teaching and learning landscape for the rest of the world. As learners come to terms with these changes, it is expected of literature teachers to be the ones to steer education toward significant initiatives in the new normal.

We must view the new normal as an opportunity to devise strategies for adapting to the ever-changing climate and educational contexts. Numerous pedagogical implications can be drawn from the FREE Critical Paradigm. The validation of the FREE framework, as utilized in developing the Contextualized Worktext for Literature Teaching, should be carried out to account for a consistent application of its principles. Aligning the paradigm’s salient features with the expectations and demands of post-pandemic education realities must also be undertaken. With FREE, literature educators position themselves at the forefront of change. They should remain at the vanguard in developing novel ideas and innovative models to ensure that literature teaching is humanistic and more progressive.

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