

Literary Skills in the Knowledge Society

This paper investigates the role of literary skills in the knowledge society. It argues that literary skills play a substantial part in the conception of responsible citizens capable of critical reflection and of humanistic engagement. Further, it suggests that the significance of literary skills goes beyond both the notions of cultural conservation or claims for measurable economic benefits.

The term 'knowledge society' refers to the growing importance information and knowledge has in our present time. It stands for a society in which the main focus of production methods are based on the generation, availability and distribution of knowledge. Present times thus differ from previous epochs, in which the production methods were first mainly agricultural and later industrial. Knowledge was stored in oral form or was held at specific institutions, which often had elitist features, such as universities or churches. Nowadays this type of knowledge is not bound to these places anymore and is thus available to larger segments of population. Despite this expansion of knowledge the term 'knowledge society' is at present often associated with workplaces, for instance with the management of knowledge within a company. Cultural knowledge, of which literary skills are a part, is not considered to be essential for the functioning of the economy. During the twentieth century the place of cultural knowledge was often debated, as Charles Snow's discussion of scientific and literary culture in the 1950s suggests.

The use of cultural and literary knowledge in present society is often either contested or instrumentalised to serve economic goals. Thus, *reading* skills and knowledge about the ways in which messages from the media, such as advertisement, can be assessed, are considered to be useful because they help the individual to function in society. *Literary* skills, on the other hand, go beyond reading skills, since they include, among other features, the aesthetic element of art. An essential feature of art, and therefore literature, is to be produced outside commercial considerations. This is why many people who appreciate literature refuse to consider in what ways literature could be useful for a society that sets great store by economic benefit. To look for a place for literature within a system that is mainly occupied with economic productivity can indeed seem paradoxical. In this line of thought the sense of literature is to give a counterweight to a technology and commerce driven society, providing entertainment as well as reflection on present cultural patterns.

In this view, literature has the function to build and conserve the cultural memory of a society and individuals are expected to acquire knowledge about literature. This means that they accumulate facts about works, authors, circumstances of production, and the artistic worth of these works, in order to situate their present condition within an historical perspective. This conception shows parallels with the use that was attributed to literature during past centuries, when it was often supposed to support the development of a feeling of national identity. Reading literature about one's own or a foreign culture was a way of imaginary participating in a nation. While concerns about the construction of a national identity have become less urgent in a globalized world, the importance to supply a means for reflection about cultural identities remained. The ways in which this can be achieved, however, have changed. Books are just one out of many medias capable of transporting imaginary worlds to its consumers, television and the Internet being others. Literature is therefore in need of justifying its claim to occupy a major place in present society, especially in the domain of education.

An aspect about literature that to date has not yet been sufficiently explored is its potential to provide citizens with literary skills, nor have these skills been precisely defined within existing typologies of skills or contextualized in reference to knowledge society. Some of the skills individuals acquire when reading and discussing literature can be characterized as follows. The most common skill thought to develop when an individual engages with literature is the skill to read printed matter, it is therefore a linguistic skill and closely related to literacy in its traditional sense, which, however, can also be achieved by other media, such as newspapers or books with purely factual knowledge. A more specific skill that engagement with literary works is likely to advance is of a psychological or emotional nature.

Often literary works investigate the psychological profile of one of the characters presented. Given the increasing demand in the world of business to improve the so-called 'soft skills' of their employees, the engagement with literary works seems to provide a means to develop these skills. A further literary skill has already been mentioned is the cultural skill, which allows readers to evaluate present cultural patterns within a wider historical and geographical framework. This skill, too, seems to be of particular relevance nowadays considering the increasing importance of cultural diversity in society. Finally, reading and discussing literature requires cognitive skills, so that situations, contexts and motives presented can be analyzed and assessed within their respective environment.

None of the skills mentioned above can be found exclusively through engagement with literary works; separated, each of them can be practised in another specific domain. What makes literary skills interesting for the knowledge society is the effect that results from their combination. Engagement with literary works thus offers individuals a set of skills that enables them to acquire knowledge, evaluate patterns of behaviour, reflect on personal as well as social developments while at the same time responding to a human need for entertainment and contemplation of cultural artefacts.

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