

*Teaching Literature*

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## Introduction

The paper draws on this author's personal experiences teaching three undergraduate, Caribbean literature courses at the UWI. The courses are LITS 2510 – West Indian Prose Fiction: Short Narratives, LITS 2508 – West Indian Prose Fiction: The Novel, and LITS 2502 – Caribbean Women Writers. Focus is given to literature from the Anglophone Caribbean and not those of the Hispanic, Dutch and Francophone Caribbean. My aim as a teacher of literature in the twenty-first century Caribbean university classroom is to treat and teach literature, in Henry Widdowson's terms, as *both* subject and discipline. Also, having read Susanne Reichl's discussion of "Just what is literature anyway? Formalist, functionalist and pragmatic approaches" (Reichl 2009, pp. 69-79) I have realized that each has merit and can be integrated as I continue to search for ways to continually improve my practice (see Appendix I).

Students who enrol in the undergraduate programme to read for their BA degree in Literatures in English comprise a mixed cohort of those who have done literature at secondary school and others – albeit a minority – who are studying it for the first time since the three core introductory courses LITS 1002 – Introduction to Prose Fiction, LITS 1201 – Elements of Drama and LITS 1001 – Introduction to Poetry carry no prerequisites. However, most of the students the Literatures in English (LIE) staff teach are Majoring in the English Language with Literature and Education (ELLE) degree and so in addition to doing these three introductory courses are required to do particular core Levels 2/3 LIE courses since their programme comprises only compulsory courses and no electives. Many ELLE students do LITS 2510 as one of their compulsory LIE courses. LITS 2502 and LITS 2508 are electives and so are mainly subscribed by LIE Majors.

## Students' Pre-University Literary Knowledge and Skills

"A survey of teachers' perspectives on the status of literature in Trinidadian secondary schools suggests that the subject is dying" (James 2003, p.1). This alarming proclamation and introduction to Cynthia James's essay on "The Status of Literature in Six Types of Trinidad Secondary Schools: issues, implications, and recommendations" cites students' "problems with reading, critical thinking...lack of interest [and] poetry as an area of little competence" and teachers' need to improve their teaching strategies, embrace technology, and take cognizance of the diverse cultural make-up of the students in their classrooms. In 2013, a similar situation exists in the university classroom.

However, as regards the secondary level in one of the local newspapers, *Trinidad Newsday* dated 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2013, it was reported that: "The subject students showed most improvement in was English Literature (English B with improvements in all three profiles: drama, poetry and prose fiction)." This report was based on the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) results released by the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC). Hence, it bodes well for the competencies of future university students who would be entering the UWI in less than a decade. The CXC says this of its syllabus for the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE):

[...] The Caribbean experience has provided the context for a rich and varied literature which has earned a crucial place in the global family of literatures in English. The CAPE Literatures in English Syllabus aims to develop an understanding of the nature and function of literature and the methods of literary study. It seeks to encourage critical reading, interpretation, evaluation and an appreciation of, and an informed personal response to literature. On completion of the syllabus, students should understand, and be able to use the vocabulary of literary criticism and develop informed, sensitive, and balanced responses to the complexity of human nature as portrayed in literary works. (Caribbean Examinations Council 2013)

While an integrated approach to teaching English literature and English language is expounded in the CSEC syllabus, this principle is not conveyed in CAPE's. That is, although CAPE students do not sit two separate examinations in language and literature as they do for CSEC, there is still a lack of continuity as regards a stated inclusion of the linguistic analysis of literary texts in the CAPE syllabus.

The structure of the CAPE syllabus mirrors the Level 1 LIE programme at the UWI insofar as the CAPE modules focus on prose, poetry and drama akin to our LITS 1001, LITS 1002 and LITS 1201 introductory courses. As it is for CSEC, at the CAPE level students are exposed to Caribbean literature as well as to other literatures in English, much like what pertains for the UWI introductory courses.

### **Students' Level of Appreciation for Caribbean Literature**

Hence, students exposed to literary studies at the secondary level have encountered and engaged with Caribbean literature in its various genres. In a recent questionnaire administered to my LITS 2508 students as an orientation exercise, a mix of sentiments were expressed about the status of Caribbean literature in relation to other literatures in English. These are some samples:

**Student A:** *Literature is literature. I have read literature from other parts of the globe and there is nothing about West Indian literature that makes it substandard or inferior to these other forms (sic).*

**Student B:** *...I think there is merit in West Indian literature because they (sic) bring something to the reader. Something that one can identify with in terms of the space we live in....I believe also WI lit paints a picture that seems so real. As you read, you can imagine or you are drawn into what is happening.*

**Student C:** *My opinion of West Indian literature in relation to other literatures in English is that it only focus (sic) on history and the effects that came with it. It is very interesting but it only surrounds (sic) mental slavery and speaks of the landscape. Whereas other literatures in English explores various avenues and highlights many emotions such as Robert Frost's work. (sic) I am very appreciative of Senior's and Carter's work however.*

**Student D:** *West Indian literature seems to have an alternative purpose than (sic) other forms of english (sic) literature. West Indian literature seems to be more about*

*a question of identity and self whereas other literatures in English seem to be about other topics and themes.*

**Student E:** *It is not a matter of what is better or not, I do enjoy both types of literature (West Indian & English). West Indian literature has more impact in my thoughts and views since it can be seen as more relatable. English literature was something that set the foundation in earlier education (high school or leisure)...*

**Student F:** *I don't think that W.I. lit. is sub-standard to other literatures, however (sic) I do think that it is not widely recognized as other literatures. I think that more needs to be done on a national scale to get W.I. lit. more recognized throughout the world.*

For the most part, therefore, students' opinions of Caribbean literature are positive. However, outlined below are some of the wide-sweeping teaching / learning challenges encountered in delivering the three aforementioned courses – concerns that relate directly, indirectly or not at all to this particular genre but which impact course delivery and outcome.

It is not that student performance is particularly poor in these three Caribbean literature courses under study or in other courses related to this particular genre. One does not wish to over-generalize since, as it is with any other university, we do have above average and excellent students in the LIE programme at UWI. The title of this paper is to suggest more than what may be an apparent irony; it is also an indication of the reality that there are *general* challenges in teaching and learning related to students' attitude, competence and performance in our Literatures in English programme at the UWI.

### **What are the challenges?**

1. These challenges include apathy towards the study of literature; mediocrity in the quality of oral and written assignments produced; resistance to applying academic rigour; poor writing and reading skills and habits; plagiarism; and irregular class attendance on students' part; and a heavy workload, the need to revamp some of the courses to make them more relevant and interesting to students, on the lecturers' part; and at the institutional level, the semesterization of the academic year and timetabling clashes.
2. Some of these pedagogical and learning challenges exist because students find it difficult to manage the number of courses and contact hours required of them during the semester, so in order to manage and succeed a preference for surface learning takes place; they complain that five literature texts are too many to read and study; they were spoon-fed at the secondary level and have to be taught how to think independently and critically.
3. Because of the latter, certainly not all, but too many students do not like to talk and share ideas openly with their peers in the classroom setting or on a blog,

- especially if these are non-credit activities and have to be continually coaxed and encouraged.
4. Some students are more concerned with certification and not with education and learning.
  5. Too many of these students who do not excel at university, or are quite mediocre, join the teaching service and so it is akin to a vicious cycle because their secondary school students come to the university with weaknesses and gaps in their learning – that is, weak teachers produce weak students. For example, two years ago many ELLE students gained Pass and Lower Second Class Honours degrees – and many of them were able to gain employment in the service.
  6. Very few students voluntarily attend literary events on- and off-campus, such as Campus Literature Week, talks by writers-in-residence and other award-winning writers, and Bocas Lit Fest: Trinidad and Tobago Literary Festival because they are so consumed with their academic, work and domestic burdens. They miss these opportunities to interface with Caribbean writers outside of their rare visits to the classroom. The festival, for example, takes place in the city during the height of final examinations.
  7. For some students LIE or ELLE was not their first choice of degree and so they do not and cannot demonstrate enthusiasm for literature. This was also the case for some of them when they pursued the subject at CSEC and/or CAPE. My past experience at a secondary school in 2005/2006 plainly showed that the best literature students at CSEC level chose to do other CAPE subjects, in the sciences, for example; and most CAPE literature students were doing the subject as a last choice or were assigned the subject by school officials because their grades did not allow them to pursue their preferred choice(s).
  8. In our society, mathematics and the sciences are still valued more than literature and the arts. One is not expected to get a lucrative job if one has studied literature at the university; there is still widespread opinion that one's sole prospect is teaching. LIE students have recounted how their peers pursuing other degrees in engineering, medicine, etcetera, have condescendingly enquired of them as to what exactly they can do with a literature degree.
  9. This sentiment prevails in spite of the Caribbean region laying claim to two Nobel Laureates in literature: Derek Walcott (1992) and V.S. Naipaul (2001). As much as they are revered and celebrated in the region there are those who find Walcott's poetry, in particular, difficult and Naipaul is less liked by others who take umbrage with his sometimes scathing views of the region in his writing. Nonetheless, both are on heavy rotation in UWI's literary courses



and Naipaul is still a favourite subject of study especially among East Indian students.

10. A colonial legacy still exists in which the image of the Caribbean and what it produces is perceived to be inferior to what pertains of North America and Europe.
11. Some students enter the university with a myopic view of Caribbean literature, thinking that it focuses narrowly on issues of identity, history, and exile, for example.
12. Fewer students enrol as LIE Majors because of its dwindling importance and study at the secondary school resulting in a “lack of exposure to sustained literary material”, as noted by James (2003, 25), and because the Faculty of Humanities and Education of which the LIE programme is a part, in recent years has offered newer, more competitive programmes that entice students away from the study of literature.
13. The UWI literature classroom comprises a diverse student population that include: those who are mature, working and part-time; younger, full-time and unemployed; Caribbean residents and those on exchange programmes from other parts of the world; various learning styles; and some who never did literature at secondary level or whose exposure to literary studies at that level was limited.
14. Caribbean people are not a homogenous group, we are similar yet different, and our language situation and oral-scribal traditions are rich and diverse because of the social, cultural, political and linguistic history of the region. The nuances and cadences of Caribbean creoles and also the Creole continuum which comprise basilectal, mesolectal and acrolectal varieties are captured by regional and diasporic Caribbean writers of prose, poetry and drama. Barbara Lalla, Maureen Warner-Lewis, Jean D’Costa, and Merle Hodge are among the scholars who have explored the implications for speech representation arise for the writer. Issues of accuracy, legibility / illegibility, glossing, selection, ambiguity, ambivalence and plurality of meaning, clarity, code-switching, precision, ideology, and semantic density (Lalla, 1999), for instance, are among these because there is no standardization with regard to orthography, etcetera, an international readership and access to publication have to be considered. While for most Caribbean students their creole language is their first language or mother tongue, the writing conventions with respect to spelling, vocabulary, grammar and punctuation taught to them at school are of the Standard English tradition. Hence, there is Creole interference in students’ academic writing at school and university even though such writing is expected to be in formal, Standard English.
15. Although not as prevalent in the past, in society at large Caribbean creole languages tend to be stigmatized and labelled inferior to the standard languages. Some students mistakenly consider the Creole to be ‘informal’

English. However, many other students have embraced their creole language as part of their Caribbean identity and heritage and do not ascribe any negativity or inferiority to it. Additionally, ELLE students, as well as LIE students who have subscribed to linguistics courses, have acquired informed knowledge of these languages and are less likely to make erroneous judgements about them.

16. Students still need to be aware and have to be taught how Caribbean writers employ particular speech conventions that are characteristic of the Creole continuum situation and that are also culturally conditioned, such as: oral techniques (e.g. set formulae for opening & closing narratives, recited genealogies, songs, chants, repetition, mimicry, parallel linking, dramatized dialogue, onomatopoeia, tonal exaggeration and contrast, and rhythmic control [e.g. tense shifts and eliminating punctuation]); code-switching; contrapuntal conversation and argument; ambiguity and word-play; boasting; “mouthing” (borrowing from the folktale & picong); and tracing (O’Callaghan 1983). Having been schooled in a Standard English tradition, it cannot be taken for granted that they can easily identify these sociolinguistic features in literary writing even though these are part of their everyday reality and many ELLE students profess to find linguistics a difficult discipline to grasp.
17. In addition, the UWI teacher of literature on the St. Augustine Campus has to be cognizant of the fact that while not all Caribbean writers represent creole speech in narration and dialogue, because there are indeed Anglophone writers whose works are entirely in Standard English, some of the exchange students in our classrooms are studying Caribbean literature for the first time or have had limited exposure to it; Trinidadian/Tobagonian lecturers – like me – have to not forget that Caribbean students from other islands do not always relate to references about Trinidad and Tobago and that a wider selection of texts from across the Caribbean is necessary. For example, at a recent staff-student liaison committee meeting, two student representatives from Belize and St. Vincent reminded staff that students from other countries in the region need to be considered. Trinidadian/Tobagonian lecturers, too, are not always knowledgeable in the speech patterns, culture and other relevant aspects of other islands and their literature. At present, of the Literatures in English staff everyone is Trinidadian except four who were originally from Jamaica, Nigeria, USA/UK and India, respectively, and another Trinidadian who lived in Ireland for almost twenty years.

### **How to confront them?**

Widdowson (1975, p. 85) defines **literature as a subject** as “the study of the communicative potential of the language concerned and the manner in which this is realised in literary and conventional discourse. The subject can thus be described as an application of the stylistic approach to literature [...]”. He also says of literature as a subject that it “has as its principal aim the development of the capacity for individual response to language use [and that the] purpose of literature as a subject

[...] is not to provide information about the particular pieces of literature in the syllabus but to get the learners to recognise how these particular pieces exemplify more general principles of communication” (Widdowson 1975, pp.76, 84 - 85). Having taught two literary linguistics courses, LING 2404 – Structure and Meaning in Literary Discourse and LING 2702 – Point of View and Meaning in Literary Discourse, which were designed by Barbara Lalla, Professor Emerita of Literature and Linguistics at the UWI, I tend to transfer particular concepts from these courses to the literature courses I teach, drawing students’ attention to writers’ use of language and to linguistic criticism. This is especially pertinent to Caribbean literature in which the strong oral tradition of the region is represented and writers skilfully move back and forth across the language continuum in narration and dialogue representation. These literary linguistic courses are highly recommended for LIE students, and ELLE students must choose one as a compulsory course. Cynthia James (2003, p.8) quotes statements and page references from Trinidad and Tobago’s Secondary Enhancement and Modernisation Programme (SEMP) English curriculum when she says that “language and literature are integrated in a philosophical thrust that combines educating for literacy and for personal and intellectual development, with educating for Caribbean cultural relevance and the cultivation of moral values (pp. 1.6-10). Similarly, educating for aesthetic expression exists side by side with educating for “citizenship” within “local and global contexts” (p.17)”. Hence, students entering the UWI should have had some prior benefits to an integrated approach expounded by Widdowson.

Reichl (2009, p. 199) observes that in “Widdowson’s sense, discipline refers to academic study, theories, principles and a sense of professionalism. A subject, on the other hand, has an educational purpose and a pedagogical objective. While the distinction might be debatable in its application at university level, it is obvious at secondary level...”. Indeed, this author agrees with Reichl that subject and discipline cannot be differentiated at the university level and would go a step further by affirming that the affective domain of learning and tapping into students’ creativity are important aspects of literature being a subject in Caribbean literature courses.

In assigning theoretical approaches to literariness, Reichl (2009, p. 71) notes that the formalist approach “maintains literariness as a manifestation of particular textual features, whereas the other, a functionalist view, sees literariness as the product of a specific reading aim: a text that is categorised as ‘literary’ will be read and understood as such”. A pragmatic approach involves “the (quasi-) theories that readers share about reading in general and literary reading in particular are crucial for their reading behaviour and reading outcomes. Moreover, by inviting students to participate in a meta-discussion about the nature of the literary, we provide an opportunity for them to interrogate their own epistemologies of reading literature and help them to become more aware of what they have been thinking and doing” (Reichl 2009, p.79). This will ultimately lead them to being, in Reichl’s terms, a ‘professional’ rather than a ‘novice’ reader; she defines professional literary reading as “a nexus of awareness, knowledge and strategies that the reader draws on actively to engage successfully in complex reading tasks. This professionalism also enables the reader to critically monitor the processes and the outcomes of reading tasks” (Reichl 2009, p.140).

In incorporating Reichl’s approaches and Widdowson’s concept of literature as both subject and discipline, in addition to stylistic analysis I use teaching / learning strategies and tools such as interactive lectures, graphic organizers, posters, online



forums, video blogs, web pages, reflective pieces, portfolios, and playback theatre, for example, to engage students even in the face of, and to confront, the challenges faced in the literature classroom.

Important in confronting these challenges is to bear in mind Widdowson's (1985) distinction between the *study* of literature and the *learning* of literature. In terms of the former, he means "action which leads to knowledge and extends awareness, whereas [the latter] learning is knowledge which leads to action and develops proficiency" (Widdowson 1985, p.184). This is also based on his premise that the "task for literature teaching [...] is [...] to develop a pedagogy which will guide learners towards an independent ability to read literature for themselves, as a precondition for subsequent study"; he concludes, in other words, that "Literature learning...preludes not precludes literature study" (Widdowson 1985, pp. 186 and 194).

Albeit there are limitations in confronting the challenges outlined above, an eclectic approach to teaching / learning using different aforementioned strategies is required in the Caribbean university classroom to meet its unique difficulties. Also paramount are:

- a. a more active learner-centred classroom,
- b. the recent formation of an LIE staff-student liaison committee in which students get a forum to air their views and suggest improvements to course design and delivery,
- c. students being taught to properly utilise their various styles of learning, for example, their cognitive learning styles; sensory learning styles that comprise perceptual, environmental and sociological styles; and their affective / temperament learning styles (Reid, cited in Reichl 2009) and to become professional readers,
- d. a revision of my own teaching philosophy as regards the teaching of literature whereby I am more accepting of the introverted reader who does not like to engage in class discussion - remembering what Reichl (2009, p. 138) says about the good learner not necessarily being the extroverted learner, "given that the actual reading process is dependent on a degree of introversion and reflection, whereas participating in a discussion requires some degree of extroversion",
- e. remedial courses in writing to supplement the Writing Centre that already exists at our UWI campus,
- f. the design of new, and the revamping of old, literature courses to cater to the diverse interests of students and,
- g. the inclusion of a wider range of Caribbean writers in the curriculum

## Conclusion

In spite of the challenges, there are also successes and there is the realization that in various ways this author's attempts pay off in identifiable ways as indicated in students' creative output in engaging with the texts and in their testimonials (See Appendix II). The cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains of learning are all incorporated even at this tertiary level. Conceptually approaching the teaching and learning of Caribbean Literature as subject and discipline allows for the rigour and scholarly output expected of students at the undergraduate level as well as providing the opportunities for them to have fun while they learn and gain a deeper appreciation of the literary material.

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## Appendices

### Appendix I - My Philosophy on the Teaching of Literature

These are some selected statements from my teaching portfolio that specifically apply to my philosophy with respect to the teaching of literature:

*I use small group and whole group discussion; the university's myeLearning (online) resource that facilitates a blended learning approach; and different strategies to break the monotony of my Literature assignments. I prefer an atmosphere of interactivity and discussion in the classroom, be it the lectures or tutorials, and so I am always encouraging students to talk. I think my discipline, Literature, allows for those kinds of exchange. I believe a Literature class should be filled with constructive argument and debate, and with some humour, especially since I have fond memories of it being like that when I was a secondary school student. I like very much to use questioning as a tool so that my students can think and arrive at their own conclusions. I allow them the opportunity at times to contemplate those questions even beyond the classroom, so that they do not feel pressured into having to give me an answer right then. I also do this so that they can ruminate on ideas that I, too, may be trying to figure out. It is as though we are doing it together, but at our own pace and in our own time. The most enriching consequence of this is that they consider things that might never have occurred to me, and this gives me immense pleasure and contentment because it openly reveals their potential to me and to them.*

*[Also] I constantly remind my students that when they are analyzing a literary text and the writer's craft, they must always remember to focus on how and not only on what. Similarly, I am particularly interested in the teaching of Literature at university level in terms of the various methodologies that can be applied. Much like what I have observed in my teaching experience at the primary and secondary levels, at the tertiary level nothing can be taken for granted with respect to students' knowledge, capabilities, expectations and needs. This has been one of my more vivid revelations during the time I have taught at UWI. Therefore, how I teach will always be as important as what I teach, especially in a discipline like Literature where a lot of higher-order thinking, such as making judgements and evaluations, is required.*

## **Appendix II – Example of Student Feedback and Poster Assignment for LITS 2502 (Oswyn Johnson & Nadja Nabbie)**

*Another exercise that I found beneficial was creating a poster which had been an option in other courses but was made mandatory for Caribbean Women Writers. In order to create a 24" x 36" poster that explored the life and works of Olive Senior, my partner Nadja Nabbie and I decided to create a poster that was exactly like a Facebook profile. We were drawn to how concisely social media (especially Facebook) tells our stories and so this format fit our purposes easily. In the poster, Senior's "likes" became themes and interests; "status updates" became announcements of her first short story collection and novel; her "friends" became other members of the female Caribbean literary establishment and we even used Dr. Jennifer Rahim's analysis of Olive Senior's work as one of her wall posts. Doing the poster propelled me further into Ms. Senior's work than I ever thought possible. It took a surprising amount of reading to figure out what were her most common recurring themes, what made her work special and even what her peers thought about her. Also, because our poster was to be mostly visual, it fell upon Nadja and I to sift through a lot of information to decide which fact was more important and which would help our classmates get a rounder view of Olive Senior's work. Just like the websites, this also drew upon my image editing skills. By the time the date for our formal presentation of the poster rolled around, this knowledge of Olive Senior was so ingrained in us we had our presentations entirely in our heads... It is also good that you insisted that we participate during class. We had to read the texts in order to do this. However not everyone feels comfortable sharing in class so apart from larger projects like websites and posters, I appreciate your use of other smaller and more frequent methods in your teaching. We've done mind maps, blogging, flow charts, graphic organizers and mnemonic exercises on a weekly basis. All of these have helped me to better appreciate and remember the subject matter better as they have given me more handles on the works. In the same way that we had to read the work in order to contribute to class discussions, we had to read the texts in order to do the tasks. (Oswyn Johnson)*



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**About**  
Born on December 23, 1941  
Studied Journalism at Carleton University  
Worked at The Daily Cleaner  
Lives in Toronto, Canada  
From Trelawny, Jamaica

**Friends** **Interests**

**Post**

**Olive Senior** September 7, 2011  
**My First Novel!!**  
  
[Like](#) . [Comment](#) . [Share](#) 71

**Jennifer Rahim** Your power seems to lie in your presentation of childhood in relation to the questions of faith and innocence. [Like](#)  
[Like](#) . [Comment](#) . [Share](#)

**Olive Senior** September 28th, 1987  
**My first collection of short stories. I hope you like it!**  
  
[Like](#) . [Comment](#) . [Share](#)

**The Commonwealth Foundation** Please accept our inaugural Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best Book. [Like](#)

**Likes**  
   
**Children** **Nature** **Anansi**

**Olive Senior** August 26, 2006  
I think what we really do as writers is fill a niche. Like all other artists, we ferret out desires and try to express them in whatever way we can.  
- Reluctant Interpreter  
[Like](#) . [Comment](#) . [Share](#)  
 **Nadja Nabbie** and **Oswyn Johnson** like this.

**Olive Senior** April, 1 2005  
**"Allspice" - Over the Roofs of the World**  

```
O
yes. So true,
Your Majesty. Round as
we know God's world to be, O Queen,
without a doubt, Columbus fumbled. Isabella
gingerly taking in her hand his latest gift, the
black pimento grain brought from her new-found land
rolled one between thumb and finger, inhaled, then
imperiously crushed it, setting free all the spices
- Cinnamon Nutmeg Clove. It totally bowled
her over. Her Exchequer quickly took control.

Spices worth their weight in gold
Worlds to be crushed for
their spices their gold.
O
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[Like](#) . [Comment](#) . [Share](#)





