

The Humanities in a Local Context: Developing Critical Thinkers for a Diverse World

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THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES (UWI), MONA, THROUGH the Faculty of Humanities and Education, invests highly in the teaching of writing. In this local context, the programmes in the faculty are designed to do what all academic institutions should do for their students: equip them with the writing and critical-reading skills required for meeting the demands of the world of work.

The UWI Humanities programmes aim to guide students to think critically, pose questions, and communicate with peers and leaders within and beyond the academy. Once students in the humanities embrace the opportunities being provided through various courses to enable them to draw on critical-thinking principles, including evidence-based analyses, they are likely to be excellent employees, leaders, and citizens who can investigate and debate issues, analyse language, and organise writing in a coherent manner. They will emerge as citizens who are capable of writing and communicating well at all levels of society, both locally and globally.

Within the Caribbean, the graduate of an institution such as the UWI will be better prepared for world citizenship through, for example, our solid foundation writing programmes, which aim to equip them to exhibit high levels of competence in the English language. The fact that English continues to be in a second-language position for many Caribbean students makes this even more indispensable.

The study of poetry, prose, and drama in the Faculty of Humanities and Education is designed to help students think analytically and uncover levels of meaning in different literary styles. For some citizens and employees, the idea of reading from sources besides the newspaper or materials directly related to one's interest or career is met with scepticism.

In contrast, students in the literatures programmes at Mona are guided into understanding the advantages that reading more widely can bring, including immersion from time to time in poetry, prose, drama, and important essays. The broad aim of our local UWI Mona programmes in literatures, whether in English, French, or Spanish, is to help our students expand their understanding and knowledge of the world beyond Jamaica and the Caribbean. In the process, they also come to develop deeper insights into Caribbean life with its complexities through the various texts that they must read.

Literature is without question about life, and students who study the discipline are led into a deeper understanding of humanity. For this reason, we encourage students to move literature out of the narrow sphere of studying for exams to value reading and literary analyses as training in interpreting details, probing for hidden meanings, exercising judgement, and evaluating opposing views and ideas. All of these are important for functioning in any career. We expose students to a broad range of significant trends in literary writing and, in this way, provide them with the opportunities to learn about other societies, regions, histories, and cultures and to write about them as well as they engage with complex ideas related to issues of identity, ethnicity, media, gender, and class, among others.

Finding Balance

Despite the tendency to undervalue one of the most important attributes of literature, it must be said that it helps our students to nurture their emotional selves and find a better balance in life. It is of note that many employers in the region and globally are increasingly inclined to employ persons who have studied literatures and languages because they recognise that these and other humanities disciplines prepare them to think with greater clarity, coherence,

and sensitivity, as well as exhibit the analytical skills necessary for making good judgement and becoming better employees and leaders in whatever sectors they work.

Graduates of The University of the West Indies are expected to play central roles in the social, economic, and political development of their respective Caribbean countries. Indeed, the humanities help students to be even more teachable and to develop knowledge, as well as core values of integrity, civic responsibility, respect, and an understanding of human freedom. I, for one, advocate the study of the humanities and education, as they are offered in our local UWI context as being critical to the development of a broad range of skills for interacting, working, and living in diverse communities within local and global contexts.