

Chapter 7

The Power of Literature Knowledge Organisers

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Abstract

This chapter builds on the arguments of recent critiques of educational orthodoxy to defend the importance of knowledge in the Secondary Literature classroom. Firstly, a brief survey of what ‘knowledge’ entails is presented via recent critiques of Bloom’s taxonomy of cognitive skills (1956) to show that knowledge and skills cannot be separated. Erickson’s Structure of Knowledge (2008) and Lanning’s Structure of Process (2013) further demonstrate the need for a knowledge-based curriculum. Next, such theories are applied to the Singapore context to consider how knowledge in the literature classroom is co-constructed, given that the 2019 *Literature in English syllabus* offers valuable material to build a ‘knowledge-based curriculum’. Following this, this chapter reflects on challenges that impede the process of knowledge acquisition: text complexity, time and inequality of prior knowledge. It also proposes that knowledge organisers offer a useful tool for literature teachers to concretise students’ learning. Leveraging on experiences working with my Upper Secondary Literature class of 2018-19, I elucidate the benefits and challenges of knowledge organisers, besides suggesting specific ways in which literature knowledge organisers can be used productively. Accordingly, the paper examines various misconceptions about such organisers, such as that they are boring, overly structured and rigid, or pointless because they are insufficient for learning. Lastly, I address the fallacy that students need not learn knowledge because they can just “look it up”, or that the mere act of offering knowledge organisers is a kind of indoctrination. In sum, knowledge organisers can serve as an invaluable tool for planning, learning and assessment in the literature classroom, even while acknowledging the inherent ambiguity and open-endedness of the subject.

Introduction

At the beginning of 2015, I asked my Secondary Three Express Literature class why they chose to study Literature at the upper secondary level. One boy memorably said: “Because for Lit, you don’t need to know sh**.” Naturally, I was taken aback, and I asked why. He replied with a smirk: “You don’t have to memorise stuff like for History or Geog. You can just ‘smoke’ your way through in Lit. EZ-game.”

I proceeded to bounce the question to the rest of the class (“what do the rest of you think about that?”). Fortunately, others’ responses (“don’t we need to learn quotes?”, “what about characters and themes?”) allowed for the boy’s severe misconceptions about the study of literature to be promptly corrected by the end of the lesson. We established that

literature is just as rigorous and demanding as any other O-Level subject, and that knowledge about texts is vital in order to do well in literature.

The aim of this essay is to build on the arguments of recent critiques of educational orthodoxy (such as Christodoulou, 2014; Fletcher-Wood, 2018) to defend the importance of knowledge and facts in the Secondary Literature classroom. I argue that the 2019 Literature in English syllabus offers valuable material to build a ‘knowledge-based curriculum’ (Hirsch, 2016), and that knowledge organisers offer a useful tool for literature teachers to concretise students’ learning. I examine various misconceptions about such organisers before suggesting ways in which such organisers can be used productively in the literature classroom.

A Brief Overview of ‘Knowledge’

As Bloom (1956) states, ‘knowledge’ is, at its most basic level, factual information: recall and understanding of a meaningful poem, for instance (p. 33). It has been said that almost every trained teacher has some knowledge of Bloom’s taxonomy (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017). First introduced in the 1950s, Bloom’s taxonomy delineates the skills needed by students based on a scale of various types of thinking (Bloom, 1956). In a revised version of Bloom’s taxonomy, devised by a team led by Lorin Anderson (who worked closely with Bloom on the original version), there were some slight modifications made to this hierarchy of cognitive domains (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). For instance, this version involved the substitution of ‘knowledge’ with ‘remembering’, and the prioritisation of ‘creating’ above ‘evaluating’ (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

But what many educators may not know is that Bloom’s taxonomy, in both its original and revised versions, has been subject to fierce critique. As Christodoulou (2014), Hirsch

Original Cognitive Domain (1956)		Revised Cognitive Domain (2001)	
Ascending Demand	Evaluation	↗	Creating
	Synthesis	↘	Evaluating
	Analysis	→	Analysing
	Application	→	Applying
	Comprehension	→	Understanding
	Knowledge	→	Remembering

Figure 1 Bloom’s Taxonomy
(Source: Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001)

(2016), and others have pointed out, Bloom's taxonomy implies that remembering is a lower-order skill, while creating and evaluating are higher-order skills. These lower and higher-order skills have resulted in two misconceptions: firstly, that skills can be separated from knowledge, and secondly, that knowledge is somehow less important and significant than skills (Christodoulou, 2014).

Yet recent findings of studies in neuroscience have pointed to the same conclusion: effective thinking demands a thorough knowledge of facts (Willingham, 2009). This conclusion is true not merely because students need something to think about but because the process of critical thinking is closely interwoven with factual knowledge, which is stored in one's long-term memory (Willingham, 2009). Better representations than Bloom's lower/higher-order categories have been offered. Christodoulou (2014) suggests the model proposed by her colleague Joe Kirby, where knowledge and skills are like a double helix, spiralling progressively from superficial learning to deep learning (Christodoulou, 2014). E.D. Hirsch (2016) also argues that the relationship between knowledge and skills is akin to a scrambled egg: just as one cannot unscramble an egg, one cannot unscramble knowledge and skills – as modern cognitive psychology has shown, subject content matter is intrinsically connected to thinking skills.

Accordingly, many have pointed out that the dichotomy between teaching knowledge and skills is a false one (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017). As shown earlier, this is indeed true. Knowledge and skills cannot be separated, as if they were at opposite ends of a spectrum. But many then often argue that both knowledge and skills can be taught; this is a fundamentally unsound claim, as Christodoulou (2014) has demonstrated. Cognitive psychology has shown that skills cannot actually be taught in an abstract manner; skilled performance arises only by accumulating units of knowledge in one's long-term memory and by using and practising the skills (Anderson, 1996).

The implications of such findings for the literature classroom are wide-reaching. As Christodoulou (2014) points out, if teachers divide their time between teaching knowledge and teaching skills, the time that is intended for teaching skills will be squandered on activities that do not actually improve skills. Time that students spend making sock puppets which represent characters in a drama text is time not spent learning important background information about the historical context of the author. Likewise, although some theorists endorse the teaching of strategies like skimming and scanning for reading texts, such theories have been established to be of very limited use because reading skills primarily depend on vocabulary acquisition (Anderson, 1996; Christodoulou, 2014). It would be far more productive for literature teachers to impart knowledge about new words, ideas, quotations, concepts and other literary areas of study (Christodoulou, 2014).

Such findings further relate to another renowned conception of what knowledge entails – Lynn Erickson's *Structure of Knowledge* (2008). Offering a clear and

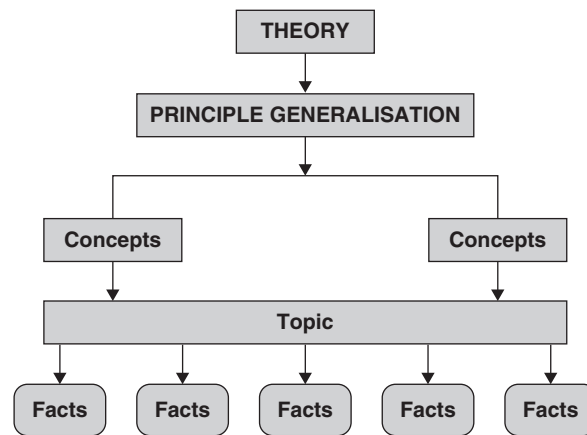


Figure 2 Erickson's Structure of Knowledge

(Source: Erickson, 2008)

straightforward graphic, Erickson shows how knowledge is structured by depicting the connections between factual knowledge and conceptual understanding.

In Erickson's Structure of Knowledge (2008), facts are at the bottom not because they are less important but because they are foundational. Conceptual understanding is only achieved by learning facts, allowing students to glean broader, abstract concepts, which then in turn contribute towards a deeper understanding of overall principles. Building on Erickson (2008), Stern, Ferraro, and Mohnkern (2017) offer examples from literature. When students learn key facts about the protagonist of *Hamlet*, for instance, it is only then that they can abstract their learning to the conceptual level by investigating the concepts of free will and fate (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017). Students can then apply these concepts to their own lives by reflecting on the broader principle that individual choice is crucial in determining one's destiny.

Hence, although facts and topics themselves do not 'transfer' (i.e., they cannot be usefully applied in themselves to new situations), they still need to be learnt in order for the transfer of concepts to take place (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017). Learning just one fact about *Hamlet* in itself may appear to be of rather limited use, but learning 50 different facts about the themes, motifs and symbols in *Hamlet* will be of considerable use, because it constitutes an overall schema of knowledge that is the basis of all "good conceptual understanding" (Christodoulou, 2014, p. 20).

Another model of how literary knowledge works is offered by Lois Lanning's Structure of Process (2013). Lanning highlights that there is a difference between traditional subjects taught in schools. Some, like mathematics and the sciences, are based on the discovery of concrete knowledge: they each have their own collections of facts

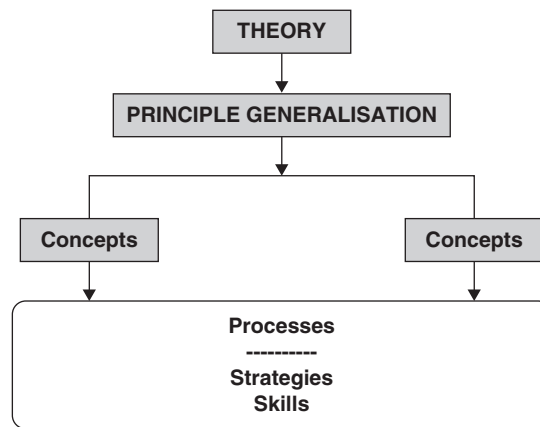


Figure 3 Lanning's Structure of Process

(Source: Lanning, 2013)

about the world, uncovered by authorities in their respective subject areas (Erickson & Lanning, 2014). But other subjects, like language and literature, music and the visual arts, are more process-based, in the sense that experts have enacted a complex process to produce a final creation (Erickson & Lanning, 2014). For instance, in literature, it is not only knowledge of the characters and plots of Shakespeare that is important, it is also the complex process that writers engage in which is crucial: “the writing process, the artistic process” (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, p. 18). Such a process is thus similar to what Anderson & Krathwohl (2001) have termed ‘procedural knowledge’, or knowledge of the methods and techniques needed for creating a new work (p. 18).

Lanning's graphic portrays how skills and strategies constitute complex processes, which (when learnt about and practised) then contribute to conceptual understanding. For example, if students have a sound knowledge of different characters in their literature texts (like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) and the characters' attributes, it is more likely that they will be better able to ‘transfer’ the skills and strategies of writing about character, and by extension, generalise conceptually what ‘character’ entails. Just as Erickson's Structure of Knowledge clarifies the links between facts and conceptual understanding, Lanning's Structure of Process elucidates the connections between skills/processes and conceptual understanding (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017). Given how knowledge and skills are intimately intertwined, as “skill progression depends on knowledge accumulation” (Christodoulou, 2014), we can see how Erickson's Structure of Knowledge and Lanning's Structure of Process allow us to build a strong case for the need for a well-defined ‘knowledge-based curriculum’ (Hirsch, 2016).

The Singapore Context

How then can we apply such theories to our context in Singapore? At first glance, the MOE *Literature in English Syllabus 2019* does not proclaim itself to be specifically ‘knowledge-based’, but the introduction to the syllabus does feature an opening section about ‘Knowledge Construction in the Literature Classroom’ (CPDD, 2019a, p. 7). In this section, the syllabus employs most of the buzzwords of 21st-century educational orthodoxy. It argues that students and teachers should “actively engage with texts and collaborate in the meaning-making process” (p. 7). Furthermore, it emphasises that teachers must “take up the mantle of facilitator of learning in place of the traditional roles of information dispenser and opinion provider” (p. 7). In effect, the syllabus seems to be advising literature teachers not to speak too much and not to give too many facts to students, but rather to encourage students to engage in active discussions and self-discovery.

Does this emphasis on active discovery mean that knowledge is not important in the Singapore literature classroom? A closer inspection of the literature syllabus reveals that this is not the case. Instead, every Learning Outcome (LO) in the syllabus is pegged with a set of Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions (KSDs) that are mandated for inclusion in the school-based curriculum. KSDs are featured at introductory and advanced levels, covering all five areas of study: Plot, Character, Setting and Atmosphere, Style and Theme (CPDD, 2019a). In the accompanying *Literature in English Teaching and Learning Guide 2019 Book 1* (‘What We Teach’), key facts (described as ‘features’) of the three genres (prose, poetry and drama), as well as of the five areas of study, are explained (CPDD, 2019b). As if directly nodding to Erickson’s Structure of Knowledge and Lanning’s Structure of Process, the syllabus foregrounds all the key ‘concepts’ associated with the three genres and the five areas as well (CPDD, 2019b). Such conceptual similarities suggest that the knowledge aimed for in the literature syllabus is not only important but foundational: this knowledge is not abstract or nebulous; it needs specificity and ‘concreteness’ (Fletcher-Wood, 2018, p. 26). Erickson & Lanning (2014) have proposed that good curriculum plans feature the following specific elements, all of which can be found in the 2019 Syllabus and its four accompanying guidebooks:

- Suggestions for unit titles and unit webs
- A conceptual lens, concepts and sub-concepts
- Generalisations that explain relationships between concepts
- Guiding questions
- Critical content and key skills that students will need to master
- Learning experiences and lessons
- Assessments: performance tasks and corresponding scoring guides

Stern, Ferraro, and Mohnkern (2017) also advise teachers who are creating unit plans to start with the *bottom* of Erickson’s Structure of Knowledge: topics and facts. What exactly would students need to know? Why would they need to know it? After determining this

knowledge, teachers can then spiral upwards towards broader concepts so that students can make connections and gain a more sophisticated understanding of ideas progressively.

Hence, within the Singapore context, ‘knowledge’ in the literature classroom refers to the kind of knowledge that is ‘co-constructed’ (CPDD, 2019a, p. 32). As explained in the Literary Response Framework in the syllabus, the study of literature centres on literary response – “the negotiation of meaning between readers and texts” (CPDD, 2019b, p. 6). In order for students’ responses to be informed and sensitive, students need to connect their prior knowledge and personal experiences to their texts, besides learning to “collaborate and co-construct their understanding of texts together with their peers, teachers and other commenters” (CPDD, 2019a, p. 32). For this process to take place, teachers need to guide their students actively in “constructing knowledge” (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, p. 24). In this way, students can effectively deepen, challenge and expand upon their understanding of facts and concepts learnt throughout the year (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017).

Challenges in Knowledge Acquisition

Now that we have considered the broader theories of knowledge and an overview of how such theories relate to the syllabus, I would like to focus my discussion on the challenges that students face when acquiring knowledge. Back in 2015, as a beginning teacher, I first taught Pure Literature to an Upper Secondary Express class, and I felt quite overwhelmed by the sheer range of challenges that I faced. Here are some of the main challenges that many other literature teachers may also have experienced.

Text Complexity

First of all, batch after batch of students managed to confuse characters’ names (e.g., An-mei and Jing-mei in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*), themes, symbols and about every other area of study. When students confused plot details, for instance, they were naturally unable to explain it adequately, much less analyse it as part of a 25-mark essay. Such instances of confusion relate to what has termed as subject-specific misconceptions, which can significantly hinder learning (Fletcher-Wood, 2018).

Time

Given the pressures of the national high-stakes assessment system in Singapore, time is always a factor (Towndrow & Kwek, 2017). I was hard-pressed for time to cover the curriculum when struggling to prepare for lessons, while my students also needed to juggle between different texts even just within literature class (in addition to demands from other subjects or activities). In the process, opportunities for in-depth learning could have been missed, and it was easy for a key idea to “fall through the cracks between lessons” (Fletcher-Wood, 2018, p. 22).

Inequality of Prior Knowledge

In my 2017 literature class, I once showed a picture of Da Vinci's Mona Lisa as a lesson starter, and while one girl instantly recognised it (she had toured the Louvre while on holiday with her family in Paris), another boy was oblivious to its significance ("where got woman look like that?", he quipped). Most of the class had never even stepped into the National Gallery of Singapore. In an age of "high-stakes educational competition", the systemic inequality of Singaporean students' prior knowledge has already been well-established (Teo, 2018, p. 109). Students from more privileged backgrounds would have been exposed to more sources of information and experience (e.g., books, newspapers, libraries, learning journeys, family tours) that grant them an advantage in terms of language ability and cultural capital (Smith, 2012). Such an advantage has been shown to play a significant role in academic performance (Smith, 2012).

Introducing... Knowledge Organisers

In response to the challenges above, I suggest that knowledge organisers offer a useful tool, not to solve the above-mentioned problems but to mitigate them. As a type of graphic organiser, knowledge organisers are not new (Brunskill & Enser, 2017). Yet, given that there has been rigorous research demonstrating the effectiveness of graphic organisers in various subjects as an aid for students to consolidate information and establish connections (Barton-Arwood & Little, 2013; Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017), it is fitting to consider how knowledge organisers in particular could be introduced to the literature classroom.

The following discussion is also informed by experience: my Upper Secondary Literature class of 2018-19 worked with me to create knowledge organisers about Haresh Sharma's *Off Centre* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. Working in pairs on Google Sheets, members of the class drafted the content, which I later edited. Finally, the class also completed a Google Form survey which asked them to reflect on their experience of creating and using knowledge organisers.

What are Knowledge Organisers?

A knowledge organiser is a document, usually no longer than two sides of an A4 page, comprising all the key facts and information that students need in order to have a basic knowledge and understanding of a topic or text (Pudner, 2018). Featuring information categorised under specific sections, a knowledge organiser lays out the core details of a subject or topic in a structured and easily accessible way (Brunskill & Enser, 2017). In recent years, knowledge organisers have become popular across schools in the UK, US and beyond, with many intricately crafted organisers shared on social media platforms like

Twitter (Brunskill & Enser, 2017). Literature knowledge organisers could focus on plot summaries, character lists and themes (Fletcher-Wood, 2018, p. 22). An excerpt from an organiser on *Off Centre*, which was created with the help of my Secondary Four Literature class, can be found in Annex 1.

How do we decide what to include in knowledge organisers?

It can be challenging to decide what to include – and exclude – when restricted to just two sides of an A4 page. When drafting the content of the *Off Centre* organiser, the class found that it was tempting to ‘dump’ everything they knew about the topic. Soon our document ballooned to an unwieldy length; the students and I had to focus more on cutting than writing. As one student put it:

“One challenge was not knowing how much was too much information. We would write long paragraphs to describe something instead of writing to the point, so there would be chunks of information that [were] probably not very important.”

Students often included what was *interesting*, rather than what was *essential*, which is a tendency that is common amongst many beginning creators of knowledge organisers (Sayers, 2019). Instead, one useful criterion proposed by Brunskill and Enser (2017) is to include only ‘liminal’ or ‘threshold’ knowledge: the knowledge that one needs for subsequent learning to make sense. Such “powerful knowledge” (Fletcher-Wood, 2018, p. 21) means that “everything that was not concrete and essential” (p. 22) had to be ruthlessly cut. Sayers (2019) suggests asking one key question when including information in an organiser: “Must pupils be aware of this?” If the answer is no, it can be safely excluded. The brevity demanded by organisers is thus helpful, because it compels us to reflect on what we need students to learn. As Mary Myatt puts it, “The real power of knowledge organisers is that they make us think hard about what we are going to teach” (cited in Pudner, 2018).

How can we make and use knowledge organisers in the classroom?

Even the process of creating organisers can constitute an enjoyable series of lessons in itself. My Secondary Four students, working in pairs on Google Sheets, had a blank table provided in the online document (with only the first row of information that I had filled in as a sample). To draft the content of their organisers, they referred not only to their set texts but also resources such as *Off Centre* guidebooks, like the one by Ruth Tan and Abdulattif (2007) and *A Necessary Guide* (2019) by the Necessary Stage. With reference to the organiser, I could identify knowledge gaps and discuss with the class how best to address them, as recommended by Pudner (2018).

Given that it was a Secondary Four Express class, the organiser also served as a handy revision tool to prepare for the O-level examinations. By just modifying the organiser

selectively, I found that it could offer a revision timetable, homework and test of prior knowledge; in 60 seconds, I could devise a fun, low-stakes quiz, for instance by deleting scenes and asking students to recreate the flow of events, or deleting the names of characters, and asking students to map out character relationships, as suggested by Fletcher-Wood (2018, p. 25).

How are knowledge organisers beneficial?

If implemented well and used correctly, knowledge organisers can accelerate students' progress, reduce teacher workload and help to level the learning playing field (Sayers, 2019), thus alleviating all the problems raised earlier. Students from my 2019 class no longer mixed up names like An-mei and Jing-mei, but more importantly they were better able to view the broader picture by drawing connections between disparate parts of a complex set text. As they commented about their organisers:

"It keeps everything organised; all the characters, points and themes are clearly written and it will not be a mess when we try to study the text."

"Very useful. The knowledge organisers allow us to recap on everything we've learnt without re-reading the book. It allows us to summarise every chapter and character effectively and efficiently, and yet still have some space left for our own thinking as themes are only stated but not explained."

"It allowed [me] to access the information of the whole book in one shot, for example if I'm looking for any specific information I know exactly which part of which chapter I can find it. It also stimulates active recall [of] the respective themes and examples in the text."

As Brunskill and Enser (2017) point out, organisers render knowledge explicit: even if students are unable to attend a class, they can refer to the organiser to track what they have missed; likewise, the fact that every student has access to the same organiser means that there is more of a 'level playing field' of knowledge (Brunskill & Enser, 2017). Of course, organisers cannot equalise the playing field, but at least students who lack the cultural capital of their more well-read and well-travelled counterparts will be alerted to the need to enrich their knowledge and understanding. Over time, these organisers can become cherished resources, to be enhanced and re-used year after year (Sayers, 2019). For planning purposes, teachers can also use organisers to aid and even direct the content of each lesson: I found that I could shape my teaching around it so that I would not neglect essential information, and I could assess knowledge-based outcomes that would indicate whether students have mastered the "pared-down essential knowledge" (Brunskill & Enser, 2017) they need to learn.

What are some challenges involved in creating and using knowledge organisers?

Like any teaching resource, knowledge organisers offer their own share of challenges, mainly in terms of how they are made and used. First and foremost, the process of creating polished organisers is intensely time-consuming. Decisions about the relevance of content can be difficult, and even colleagues may disagree about what to include and what to omit (Pudner, 2018). Teachers can choose to create organisers on their own, which might be faster and more efficient than involving students, but this arrangement would run counter to the aspiration for students to join in the process of co-constructing knowledge.

Personally, I chose to involve students in the process. After asking my literature class if they would like to help in this knowledge organiser project, they enthusiastically agreed. Students were assigned to draft different sections of the organiser via Google Sheets. Soon, I realised that the students' differing language skills and knowledge of the set texts meant that while some entries in the Google Sheet fulfilled my requirements with only minor modifications needed, other sections were too verbose. Whole paragraphs had to be cut to just one or two sentences. Active discussions about the merits and drawbacks of certain key pieces of information ensued. As one student reflected about the organiser:

“[One] difficulty was having to pick out specific evidence and inferences from each chapter to summarise every character.”

Students' work often needed extensive editing for language and factual accuracy; it would have been appalling if students learnt the wrong facts. Students had to be reminded as well not to copy and paste information from online sources unthinkingly. They needed to adapt and paraphrase from reputable print sources, such as *The Necessary Guide* (2019) when writing about *Off Centre*. Appropriate pitching of information was also a challenge, as one student recounted:

“Some of the challenges I faced [included] having a hard time putting my words down, I had to make sure the words I used would be able to aid myself and my classmates should they need it, not too easy a word, to score in [terms of] vocabulary, but not too difficult so that we all can understand.”

Nevertheless, despite such challenges, I would contend that this difficulty experienced by students is productive. In the process of creating organisers, students become ‘critical readers’ and ‘creative meaning-makers’ – they learn how to “actively and creatively construct their understanding and interpretations of texts” (CPDD, 2019a, p. 9). For instance, my class asked whether their *Off Centre* organiser would be shared with future batches, as they were troubled about whether they should include the fact that the protagonist Vinod committed suicide: they feared it would be a ‘spoiler’ that would “give

the game away” by dampening future students’ curiosity about the play. In the end, they decided to include this fact because I assured them that future batches would not be given access to the organiser until they had covered enough of the play and thus their experiences would not be compromised. What this discussion showed was that my class was capable of “demonstrating attention to detail and sensitivity to nuance in the selection and analysis of textual evidence” (CPDD, 2019a, p. 25); they also developed a sense of ownership over their organiser, suggesting that the time and effort needed to involve students in the process is worthwhile.

How knowledge organisers are used is also crucial. If inadequately explained, students may find organisers overwhelming or even confusing (Sayers, 2019). It may be tempting to assume that merely issuing copies will suffice, but students need active guidance in order to engage with an organiser in a sustained manner. Teachers need to ensure that the content in their organisers are relevant and aligned to the curriculum, and suitably pitched for students of all backgrounds (Pudner, 2018). In the course of the year, teachers also need to return to the organisers regularly, assessing whether students are engaging with the content (Brunskill & Enser, 2017).

Debunking Misconceptions

Here are some misconceptions about literature knowledge organisers that can be debunked.

“Knowledge organisers are boring.”

This is a charge frequently levelled at knowledge organisers. Naturally, as Christodoulou (2014) points out, any learning method or resource can be boring in the wrong hands, but if adapted adequately for learners, students will not get bored (p. 41). If students are engaged in the process of creating and using organisers, they will feel a sense of satisfaction upon realising that they are capable of creating a useful learning resource for the benefit of their own classmates and juniors. As long as the tasks given (e.g., summarising plot events for inclusion in the organiser) are not so difficult as to be unachievable and not so simple as to be mundane, students will experience not boredom but the thrill of success, and “pupils enjoy succeeding” (Christodoulou, 2014, p. 41). Even after an organiser is completed, teachers can conduct fun activities like mini-quizzes (with little prizes) to test whether students have mastered the knowledge that they themselves have co-constructed.

“Knowledge organisers are too structured and rigid.”

Some assume that organisers do not cater for creativity, because of their structure, especially for subjects like literature, which demands that students engage with “ambiguity and open-endedness” (CPDD, 2019a, p. 6). Yet even for a subject like literature, students still

need structure and guidance in order to make sense of the content. As Christodoulou (2014) notes, effective learning does not result if students are given only “minimal guidance” when encountering new information; rather, “minimal guidance” gives rise to “confusion, frustration and misconceptions” (p. 39). Teachers need to provide adequate scaffolding. Wright (2005) notes that even in literature classes, “the provision of a simple table to complete is powerfully focusing; it generates purpose and concentration” (p. 7). Furthermore, I have found that students find the task of drafting the content in the organiser a lot more manageable when they work in pairs. In this way, they can engage in “exploratory talk” (CPDD, 2019a, p. 33) that allows them to articulate and discuss their ideas before concretising them on a Google Sheet. Far from being overly rigid, knowledge organisers offer much-needed structure while granting students a platform to co-construct meaning together.

“Knowledge organisers are pointless because they are insufficient for learning.”

It is true that knowledge organisers alone are not enough for students to craft arguments, much less to write essays. But organisers were never meant to be exhaustive but complementary to other important resources and teaching strategies. As a springboard for students to extend their learning, organisers should serve as just one of many tools in students’ resource kit, and not as an end in themselves (Pudner, 2018). Of course, students need to develop a body of knowledge much wider and deeper than that outlined on an organiser (Pudner, 2018). In order to facilitate this learning, teachers would do well to provide the various scaffolds suggested in the *Literature in English Teaching and Learning Guide 2019 Book 2* (‘How We Teach’), such as class discussions, read-alouds, debates, presentations, journaling, creative writing and, of course, essay-writing (p. 57). In any case, we need to accept that students cannot have profound knowledge of everything, and shallow knowledge is still preferable to zero knowledge (Willingham, 2009, p. 49). Organisers allow students to build on a strong foundation of rudimentary knowledge, which they can then explore and deepen over the course of the year.

“There is no point learning information from knowledge organisers because students can always look it up.”

Aside from ignoring the obvious fact that students do not have their set texts with them in the examination hall, this criticism is particularly insidious: it disregards the beneficial effects that acquiring knowledge has on students’ long-term memory. Cognitive science has shown that learning facts builds the foundations for problem-solving and analysis, allowing for complex thought processes that transcend the limited capacity and duration of one’s working memory (Smith, 2012). Furthermore, even in an age of Google, “looking something up actually presupposes an awful lot of knowledge” (Christodoulou, 2014, p. 64). It has been estimated that when one reads a new text, one must know the meaning of 95 per cent of the vocabulary in the text to comprehend it (Laufer, 1997). Any less than that and confusion arises because conceptual errors prevent understanding (Christodoulou, 2014,

p. 65). Consider how difficult the vocabulary is in many of the texts that students encounter online. Google (via the Oxford English Dictionary), for instance, offers the following definition of ‘schizophrenia’ (a condition depicted in *Off Centre*):

- a long-term mental disorder of a type involving a breakdown in the relation between thought, emotion, and behaviour, leading to faulty perception, inappropriate actions and feelings, withdrawal from reality and personal relationships into fantasy and delusion, and a sense of mental fragmentation.
- (in general use) a mentality or approach characterised by inconsistent or contradictory elements. e.g., “Gibraltar’s schizophrenia continues to be fed by colonial pride”

While this definition may be helpful for teachers, students are likely to be bewildered. Since they do not know what ‘schizophrenia’ is, they would probably not know what ‘faulty perception’ or ‘mental fragmentation’ is either. Some students may not even know that the word ‘disorder’ here means ‘illness’. The dictionary entry’s explanation of the meaning that is ‘in general use’ is also counter-productive: phrases like ‘contradictory elements’ or ‘fed by colonial pride’ would be downright baffling. One student who found this definition online even asked me: “Who is Gibraltar?” Hirsch (2000) rightly observes that looking things up involves a Catch-22: one already needs to know something about a subject in order to understand it effectively (p. 2). Knowledge organisers offer a useful starting platform for students to accumulate a basal level of knowledge that allows them to conduct independent research.

“Whose knowledge is it anyway?”

Some critics fear that the mere act of offering knowledge organisers is a kind of indoctrination. Like many misconceptions, this one rests on part of a real truth. Towndrow and Kwek (2017) note that “when a teacher conducts most of the interpretive work in the classroom and the mastery of facts is a key skill for development, it is likely that knowledge will be conveyed or presented as true and non-contestable from a fixed epistemic standpoint—the teacher’s” (p. 13). One danger in the literature classroom is that the teacher’s perspective is seen as indisputable. But as explained earlier, it is possible to involve students in the process of co-constructing knowledge through platforms like Google Sheets. It is entirely viable for students to engage in more of the ‘interpretive work’ without compromising on the importance of ‘mastery of facts’ (Towndrow & Kwek, 2017). As one student in my class reflected about their Google Sheet platform:

“It helps with the thought process as well and everyone has the chance to check and correct each other.”

The process of creating organisers together promotes mutual accountability, preventing the teacher from monopolising the flow of ideas, while empowering students through knowledge acquisition.

Critics might respond that because the teacher has the final say over the knowledge that goes into an organiser, this is somehow oppressive or undemocratic. Yet teachers are teachers for a reason. They have mastered the “largely identifiable body of core knowledge that children should be exposed to if they are to be successful later in life” (Brunskill & Enser, 2017). It is the knowledge needed to read advanced texts for a non-specialist audience (Christodoulou, 2014, p. 116). Empirical analyses of newspaper texts show that such knowledge is a lot less ephemeral than often assumed; while it shifts at the edges, its core is largely stable (Christodoulou, 2014, p. 117). What is this core? We may be uncomfortable with this inconvenient truth: “much of what writers assume their readers know seems to be touchstones of the culture of dead white males” (Willingham, 2009, p. 47). Even Singapore writers are no exception. Haresh Sharma’s *Off Centre* is replete with allusions to texts like T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, W.B. Yeats’ “The Second Coming” and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, to name a few (Sharma, 1993/2000).

I am not suggesting that literature teachers advance a narrow, ‘Western’ worldview when constructing organisers. But not teaching the ‘great books of the Western world’ will just guarantee that students have little to no knowledge about their culture in relation to a broader conversation, which will effectively prevent them from participating in discussions about it and from accessing other texts that demand knowledge of it (Christodoulou, 2014). If a text assumes readers’ knowledge of Eliot, Yeats and Conrad, not to impart such knowledge would be a disservice to students as it would hamper their cultural literacy. One’s education would not be complete without at least some knowledge of Shakespeare or Yeats. Through organisers, teachers can outline the fundamental knowledge necessary for students to read with the depth of comprehension that their more well-informed schoolmates can (Willingham, 2009).

Conclusion

As Christodoulou (2014) memorably puts it, “If we fail to teach knowledge, students fail to learn” (p. 129). I am not claiming that all learning should be based on rote memorisation, but that there is substantial evidence showing how students who are explicitly equipped with knowledge learn much more effectively than those who are not (Smith, 2012). Knowledge organisers thus serve a dual purpose in the literature classroom. On the one hand, it is a vital learning tool for students, because the very process of creating and using it obliges them to review their set text and make sense of it by summarising, categorising and compartmentalizing information (Pudner, 2018). On the other hand, organisers are also a helpful planning and assessment tool for teachers, who can better sequence content besides identifying and addressing learning gaps (Brunskill & Enser, 2017).

Knowledge organisers may seem overly structured, didactic and even prescriptive. They appear at odds with the reason many of us teach literature in the first place – a love of the

subject's "ambiguity and open-endedness" (CPDD, 2019a, p. 6). Yet I would agree with Strang (2018) that there is a "healthy natural tension between the subject [of literature] as a discipline and the subject as part of the school curriculum" (in Fletcher-Wood, 2018, p. 45). As a school subject, literature needs to offer structure in order for students to cope with its demands. Perhaps further studies could investigate how organisers can be used as a tool in "direct instruction in writing about literature" (Zou, 2007, p. 49), so as to bridge the gap between knowing about a text and writing effectively about it.

Using knowledge organisers, I have found it much easier to plan, teach and assess students on what they are expected to learn. Aside from promoting greater clarity and consistency of content across classes, organisers have also allowed me to develop more confidence in my students' abilities to co-construct knowledge (CPDD, 2019a, p. 32). When mastered, this knowledge permits students to develop the so-called 'higher-order' skills of critical analysis and evaluation (Christodoulou, 2014, p. 129–130). Or, as I would retort to the boy in my 2015 class: "Because for Lit, you *do* need to know sh**."

Questions for Discussion

1. Would you agree that knowledge cannot be separated from skills in the literature classroom? Why or why not?
2. What challenges in knowledge acquisition do you foresee in your literature class? How would you respond to those challenges?
3. Would you use knowledge organisers in your planning, teaching and assessment? If so, how would you ensure that these organisers are effectively used by students in your Literature class?

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ANNEX I

Knowledge Organiser: Off Centre						
Acts / Scenes	Plot	Characters	Character Description	Themes	Symbols / Motifs	Context
Prologue	Vinod speaks to the audience as they enter; he hints that he is somewhat different from them. Saloma speaks only to Vinod before shying away, off-stage.	Vinod	A confident, eloquent high achiever; top debater in JC; idealistic; suffers from depression; eventually becomes suicidal.	Mental Illness	The bird / aeroplane / flight [freedom]	Hareesh Sharma – Singaporean playwright (1965–); wrote <i>Off Centre</i> (based on research, interviews, improvisations with actors and discussions).
Act One Scene I	Vinod meets Saloma at the Oasis Club and befriends her. His friendliness contrasts with her intense shyness. While Saloma avoids Vinod initially, she later warms up to him. First mention of Azman .	Vinod (Narrator)	Commentator on Vinod; shows contrast between his public and inner selves; not always obeyed by Vinod; finally leaves.	Stigma & Prejudice	The void deck [safe zone, site of rehabilitation, but also prison/cage]	Depression – a mental illness: symptoms include a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest in activities once enjoyed; affects Vinod.
Act One Scene II	Vinod calls Saloma ; their friendship develops. Saloma mentions Mak and tells Vinod about the voice that she hears. Vinod and Saloma reveal differing opinions about help and medicine. They agree to listen to the same radio station. First mention of a 'centre'.	Saloma	An initially timid girl; suffers from schizophrenia; attended VITB (i.e. ITE); befriends Vinod; eventually becomes stronger and reintegrates into society.	Marginalisation & Oppression	Radio dedications [companionship; same emotional wavelength]	Schizophrenia – a mental illness: symptoms include false beliefs, confused thinking or hearing non-existent voices; affects Saloma.

Knowledge Organiser: Off Centre						
Acts / Scenes	Plot	Characters	Character Description	Themes	Symbols / Motifs	Context
Act One Scene III	Vinod brings Saloma to a restaurant for their three-month anniversary. Saloma breaks down; reveals more about Azman . Vinod and Saloma discuss views of medicine. He expounds about God; first mentions their being ‘off-centre’. Saloma speaks about Emily Gan .	Saloma (Narrator)	Commentator about Saloma; speaks to the audience on her behalf; more vocal about her feelings; more reflective about her actions; provides support to Saloma.	Religion	Disconnecting the radio and telephone [social alienation / isolation]	Early Morning Awakening – an inability to get back to sleep after waking up early in the morning; associated with depression; affects Vinod.
Act One Scene IV	Mak enters Saloma ’s room. Declaring her distrust of medical professionals, Mak advises Saloma to dispose of her medicine. Mak reveals her faith in religion and traditional rites.	Mak	Saloma’s mother; suspicious; religious; resilient; determined; widow who raises Saloma; fiercely independent.	Independence / Freedom	Bird cage and window grilles [entrapment]	Class 95 FM – a 24-hour English radio station; it plays comforting, feel-good music; offers a radio cash draw that Vinod and Saloma participate in.
Act Two Scene I	Flashback to Vinod ’s past at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Vinod feels intimidated in this environment; he meets former JC classmates who remind him of his history; Charlie responds with tentativeness towards Vinod, Denise with fear.	Charlie	Vinod’s JC classmate who expresses concern; nervous about saying the wrong thing; apologises five times; unsure of how to respond to mental illness.	Power & Authority	Dancing [desire for freedom; but for Vinod, also descent into chaos]	T.S. Eliot – American-born British poet (1888–1965); wrote <i>The Waste Land</i> (1922), which is quoted by Emily Gan: “Datta. Dayadhvam. Danyata. Give. Sympathise. Control.”

(continued)

ANNEX I (continued)

Knowledge Organiser: Off Centre						
Acts / Scenes	Plot	Characters	Character Description	Themes	Symbols / Motifs	Context
Act Two Scene II	Flashback to the halfway house. Saloma has spent three months at Woodbridge. She meets Emily , who teaches her the mantra 'I am strong, nothing can destroy me' to empower her. Saloma also meets Nirmala. Mak , who visits Saloma, is clearly uncomfortable.	Denise	Vinod's JC class-mate; previously close to him but became wary, distant and fearful; screams when Vinod scares her at NUS.	Class / Social Hierarchies	Baby-blue hanger [instrument for self-abortion / death]	W.B. Yeats – Irish poet (1820–1939); wrote "The Second Coming", which Vinod quotes: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre ... Things fall apart ... Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."
Act Two Scene III	Three months after Saloma's distressing experience at the restaurant, Vinod and Saloma meet at his void deck. First appearance of Razali . Saloma and Vinod discuss Woodbridge / public opinion of mental patients. Vinod shares about his parents.	Emily	Patient at halfway house; takes on the role of a big sister; assertive and strict, but shows care and concern to Saloma and Nirmala; encourages them.	Achievement & Success	Gestures (sang kancil / mouse deer; viper) [friendship]	Joseph Conrad – Polish-British novelist (1857–1924); wrote <i>Heart of Darkness</i> (1899); Vinod quotes from the novel ("work gives a person reason to live").

Extract from Knowledge Organiser about *Off Centre* (by BBSS Literature Class, 4A1/A2, 2019)