
Teaching Literature through Challenge-Based Learning: A Pedagogical Framework for Deep Engagement and Critical Thinking

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Abstract: *In contemporary education, literature teaching faces the challenge of remaining relevant to students' lived experiences while fostering critical thinking, creativity, and civic engagement. Challenge-Based Learning (CBL), a student-centered and inquiry-driven pedagogical approach, offers significant potential for transforming literature instruction. This paper explores the theoretical foundations of CBL and examines its application in literature education. By aligning literary analysis with real-world challenges, CBL encourages deeper textual engagement, interdisciplinary learning, and the development of 21st-century competencies. The study argues that integrating CBL into literature teaching enhances both cognitive and affective learning outcomes, positioning literature as a meaningful tool for understanding and responding to contemporary social issues.*

Keywords: *literature education, challenge-based learning, student-centered learning, critical thinking, active learning*

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1. Introduction

Literature has long played a central role in education, contributing to students' linguistic development, cultural awareness, and moral reasoning. However, traditional approaches to teaching literature—often centered on teacher-led interpretation and rote analysis—have been criticized for failing to engage students meaningfully (Rosenblatt, 1995; Appleman, 2015). In response to these challenges, educational research increasingly emphasizes **active, student-centered pedagogies** that connect learning to real-life contexts.

Challenge-Based Learning (CBL) has emerged as an innovative instructional framework designed to bridge academic content with authentic societal challenges (Nichols, Cator, & Torres, 2016). While widely applied in STEM education, its potential in humanities—and literature teaching in particular—remains underexplored. This paper aims to address this gap by examining how CBL can be effectively integrated into literature education.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Reader-response theory conceptualizes literary meaning as a dynamic construction emerging from the interaction between the reader and the text, influenced by individual experience and social

context (Rosenblatt, 1978). From this standpoint, meaning is not embedded solely within the text but is generated through the reader's active engagement with it.

Consequently, literature instruction informed by reader-response theory prioritizes dialogue, interpretation, and reflective practice over the transmission of fixed or authoritative meanings. As Dudău explains, there is "a certain kind of connection of the words in a sentence" (Dudău, 2020). The importance of logic in ordering words in a sentence is transposed in communication and of course in the pedagogical process. Classroom discussion becomes a central pedagogical tool, allowing students to articulate personal responses while negotiating interpretations within a community of readers.

This pedagogical orientation closely aligns with constructivist learning theories, which maintain that knowledge is actively constructed through experience, interaction, and inquiry rather than passively acquired (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1996). By emphasizing meaning-making as a collaborative and experiential process, literature teaching grounded in these theories supports deeper cognitive engagement and interpretive understanding.

Challenge-Based Learning is grounded in well-established educational theories, drawing primarily on experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), as well as principles of problem-based and inquiry-based education. These theoretical foundations emphasize learning through experience, reflection, and active engagement with meaningful problems, rather than through passive reception of information.

The CBL framework is organized around three interconnected stages that guide the learning process. The Engage stage focuses on identifying a broad, meaningful idea and formulating an essential question that captures the core of the challenge. This phase is designed to spark curiosity and connect learning to issues of relevance to students' lives and communities.

During the Investigate stage, students conduct research, gather information, and critically analyze the challenge from multiple perspectives. This phase encourages inquiry, collaboration, and the development of analytical skills, as learners explore possible interpretations, contexts, and implications related to the problem at hand.

The Act stage involves designing and implementing a solution based on the knowledge and insights gained through investigation. Through this process, CBL positions students as active agents of learning who collaborate, apply theoretical knowledge in authentic contexts, and develop transferable skills such as critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving (Nichols et al., 2016). All this process is possible due to the focus on the essential role of language. As Manasia explains, "language is the fundamental mechanism of human interaction" (Manasia, 2020). The language is the key for integrating CBL in the process of teaching literature.

3. Integrating CBL into Literature Teaching

Literary texts frequently address universal themes such as identity, justice, power, freedom, and social conflict. Themes have always represented the initial challenge. Feminism in the Victorian era could be an example in this sense, as this theme led to "revolutionary shifts in thinking" (Manasia, 2021). Through CBL, these themes can be reframed as contemporary challenges. For example, a novel addressing social inequality may lead to a challenge focused on community awareness or social advocacy. This approach moves literary analysis beyond textual boundaries and situates it within real-world discourse.

Within a Challenge-Based Learning framework, students actively formulate guiding questions, engage in research, and collaboratively interpret literary texts. This process shifts the focus from predetermined interpretations to inquiry-driven exploration, allowing learners to construct meaning through dialogue, investigation, and shared reflection.

In this context, the teacher adopts the role of facilitator rather than sole authority, guiding learning processes, supporting inquiry, and scaffolding discussion. Such a role encourages student

autonomy and creates a learning environment in which diverse viewpoints are valued and critically examined through structured debate and collaborative analysis.

This pedagogical orientation aligns closely with dialogic models of literature teaching, which prioritize discussion, interaction, and interpretive plurality over fixed textual meanings. By embracing multiple perspectives, CBL supports deeper engagement with literary texts and reflects contemporary approaches to literary pedagogy (Appleman, 2015).

Challenge-Based Learning fosters interdisciplinary learning by situating literary study at the intersection of multiple fields, including history, ethics, media studies, and civic education. Through this approach, literary texts are not examined in isolation but are contextualized within broader social, cultural, and historical frameworks, enabling students to develop a more comprehensive and informed understanding of literature.

Within a CBL framework, students are often encouraged to create multimodal outputs that reflect both analytical and creative engagement with texts. Products such as digital stories, podcasts, or public presentations allow learners to express literary interpretations using diverse media, thereby expanding traditional forms of literary response and assessment.

Scholarly research supports the educational value of such multimodal practices, indicating that they enhance student engagement and comprehension by aligning learning with contemporary modes of communication (Kress, 2010). By integrating multiple forms of representation, CBL not only deepens literary understanding but also equips students with skills relevant to modern academic and social contexts.

4. Educational Benefits of CBL in Literature Instruction

Empirical studies on active learning suggest that student-centered approaches improve critical thinking, motivation, and long-term retention of knowledge (Freeman et al., 2014). Applied to literature teaching, Challenge-Based Learning promotes deeper textual analysis by engaging students in authentic inquiry rooted in real-world issues. Literary texts become starting points for investigation rather than objects of passive interpretation, encouraging learners to explore themes, characters, and conflicts through critical questioning, research, and discussion. This process supports higher-order thinking and a more nuanced understanding of literary meaning.

Furthermore, CBL significantly increases student motivation and ownership of learning. Another important result of this type of pedagogical method is the development of critical and ethical thinking (Loga, 2025). By involving learners in the selection of challenges and the design of solutions, this approach positions students as active participants in the learning process. As a result, literature classes become more engaging and relevant, fostering a sense of responsibility and personal investment in both the learning outcomes and the interpretive process.

In addition, the integration of CBL in literature instruction supports the development of key transversal competencies, including communication, collaboration, and digital literacy. Through collaborative projects and multimodal outputs, students enhance their ability to articulate ideas, work effectively in teams, and use digital tools critically. At the same time, engaging with socially and ethically relevant literary themes contributes to heightened civic awareness and ethical reflection, reinforcing literature's role in education for responsible citizenship. The most important positive outcome of using CBL in the education process could be related to the fact that it may be considered a shift of the "educational coordinate" (Loga, 2022) in order to prevent school dropout through the active involvement of students in classroom. These outcomes align with the broader goals of 21st-century education and competency-based curricula (OECD, 2019).

5. Challenges and Considerations

Despite its recognized benefits, the implementation of Challenge-Based Learning in literature education is accompanied by several challenges, notably rigid curriculum structures, difficulties in aligning assessment practices with inquiry-based outcomes, and varying levels of teacher preparedness. These constraints may limit the effective adoption of CBL within traditional educational systems.

To address these issues, successful integration of CBL requires careful instructional design, the articulation of clear and measurable learning objectives, and the development of assessment strategies that capture both process and product. Equally important is sustained professional development to support teachers in adopting facilitative roles and managing open-ended learning environments.

Future research should therefore prioritize empirical classroom-based studies that systematically examine the impact of CBL on students' literary comprehension, engagement, and skill development. Such evidence would contribute to a stronger theoretical and practical foundation for the integration of CBL in literature education.

6. Conclusion

Teaching literature through Challenge-Based Learning (CBL) represents a promising pedagogical shift from traditional, teacher-centered models toward active and student-centered learning. Instead of focusing solely on passive interpretation and textual analysis, this approach encourages learners to engage critically with literary works by framing them within meaningful challenges. As a result, students become active participants in the learning process, developing interpretative skills through inquiry, collaboration, and problem-solving rather than rote analysis.

By connecting literary texts to real-world challenges, CBL revitalizes literature education and reinforces its relevance in contemporary society. Literary themes such as identity, power, social justice, and ethical responsibility are no longer treated as abstract concepts but are explored in relation to current social, cultural, and global issues. This contextualization allows students to recognize literature as a living discourse that reflects and interrogates real human experiences, thereby increasing motivation and fostering deeper emotional and intellectual engagement.

Moreover, this pedagogical approach not only deepens students' understanding of literary works but also empowers them to apply critical insights beyond the classroom. Through challenge-based tasks, learners are encouraged to synthesize interpretation, critical thinking, and creative expression in order to propose solutions or responses to authentic problems. In doing so, students develop transferable skills such as critical literacy, ethical reasoning, and civic awareness, positioning literature education as a powerful tool for both academic growth and active citizenship.



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