



## Article

# Literary Texts as Cultural Tools: A Study on Contextualized Learning Strategies in Philippine Higher Education

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## Abstract

*This study examines the effectiveness of integrating local and indigenous literary texts in enhancing student engagement, cultural identity formation, and critical thinking in Philippine higher education settings. Drawing from qualitative data gathered through interviews and classroom observations in multiple universities, the research reveals that culturally grounded literature serves as a powerful pedagogical tool. When students encounter texts that reflect their own languages, customs, and community experiences, they exhibit deeper engagement and a stronger emotional connection to the material. These texts also contribute to the affirmation of cultural identity, with students expressing renewed pride in their heritage and a sense of validation within academic spaces. Furthermore, literature rooted in local and indigenous traditions prompts students to engage critically with contemporary social issues such as land dispossession, environmental degradation, and cultural marginalization. The study draws on the theoretical frameworks of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Cummins' identity texts, and Nussbaum's narrative imagination to interpret the data. Findings emphasize that culturally responsive literature fosters inclusive and context-sensitive instruction that goes beyond literary appreciation to develop empathy, analytical skills, and cultural awareness. The integration of these texts in the curriculum aligns with the broader goals of decolonizing education and cultivating transformative learning environments. As such, the study advocates for the institutionalization of local and indigenous literature in tertiary education to ensure that pedagogy remains relevant, equitable, and rooted in the lived realities of Filipino learners.*

**Keywords:** Culturally responsive pedagogy, local literature, indigenous texts, cultural identity, critical thinking, higher education, Philippine literature, student engagement, decolonized curriculum

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## Introduction

In an era of educational globalization and cultural homogenization, developing contextually relevant and culturally grounded learning strategies in Philippine higher education has become more urgent than ever (Frutas, 2019). As institutions aim to promote inclusive, critical, and transformative education, literature has emerged as a powerful pedagogical tool in shaping learners' understanding of self, society, and nation (Bangayan-Manera, 2019). Literary texts, particularly those rooted in local, indigenous, and folk traditions, offer rich cultural content, moral values, and historical insights that can meaningfully connect classroom instruction with the lived realities of Filipino students.

The present study focuses on how literary texts function not merely as aesthetic artifacts but as cultural tools, instruments of identity formation, critical reflection, and civic consciousness. When integrated into higher education instruction, these texts become avenues for cultivating empathy, enhancing cultural awareness, and encouraging contextual analysis of social issues (Saquing, 2018). Thus, this research investigates how literary works, particularly those anchored in Philippine cultural contexts, contribute to developing localized learning strategies responsive to the learners' sociocultural environment.

In the Philippine context, Gadaza et al. (2025) argue that literary texts embedded with cultural and historical content are instrumental in fostering historical consciousness and critical reflection among students. Their study emphasizes the value of Philippine history instruction as a foundation for civic and cultural identity formation. Similarly, Butac et al. (2025) highlight how intercultural pedagogical practices in Philippine higher education institutions are enhanced through literature that reflects diverse cultural narratives, thus supporting students' transition into global citizens without erasing local cultural roots.

Gadaza et al (2025) also demonstrates how integrating cultural heritage in teacher education programs reinforces context-sensitive pedagogy. These findings underscore the transformative power of literature when used as an instructional material in fostering nation-building and cultural responsiveness. However, despite growing interest in curriculum contextualization, there remains a need to investigate the literature's role in shaping student learning experiences and pedagogical practices in varied institutional settings (Pamittan et al., 2021).

Internationally, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory foregrounds the concept of cultural tools, wherein language and literature are primary mediators in learning processes. Bruner (1990) further expands on this by asserting that narratives are fundamental to human cognition and cultural transmission. Clemente (2019) adds that

the study of literature develops emotional intelligence, ethical reasoning, and global empathy- skills increasingly necessary in multicultural educational environments.

Cummins (2001) also highlights the importance of identity texts- literary materials that affirm students' cultural identities- as vital for meaningful learning. These international perspectives align with Philippine educational goals for inclusive, culturally relevant instruction, reinforcing the claim that literary texts can bridge academic content and learners' cultural contexts.

While a robust body of literature advocates for culturally responsive pedagogy and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems in education, there is limited research specifically analyzing how literary texts are operationalized as cultural tools in Philippine higher education classrooms. Much of the existing research remains concentrated on basic education or macro-level curriculum reforms, with insufficient exploration of how literature is taught, interpreted, and experienced at the tertiary level.

Moreover, there is a lack of empirical studies examining how localized and indigenous texts affect student engagement, identity development, and critical thinking in concrete classroom settings. Few studies delve into the nuanced perceptions and pedagogical strategies of both students and educators within diverse regional and institutional contexts. This study addresses these gaps by focusing on the use of literary texts in shaping culturally grounded and contextually meaningful learning strategies, thereby contributing to the development of a more decolonized, inclusive, and transformative educational landscape in the Philippines.

## **Research Objectives**

1. To analyze how literary texts are utilized as cultural tools in developing contextualized learning strategies within Philippine higher education classrooms.
2. To explore the perceptions and experiences of educators and students regarding the role of literature in promoting culturally grounded and context-sensitive learning.
3. To examine the effectiveness of integrating local and indigenous literary texts in enhancing student engagement, cultural identity formation, and critical thinking skills in higher education settings.

## **Research Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a multiple-case study approach, to explore how literary texts are utilized as cultural tools in developing contextualized learning strategies within Philippine higher education institutions. The research was conducted across the campuses of Isabela State University, located in different municipalities and cities of the province of Isabela, Philippines, chosen purposively to represent a range of linguistic, cultural, and socio-political contexts. This institution included those known for integrating indigenous and local literature into general education and teacher education programs.

Data was gathered through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The participants comprised twenty educators who taught literature or related humanities subjects, and thirty students enrolled in their classes. Educators were selected based on their experience in teaching local, folk, or indigenous texts, while students were chosen based on their exposure to such literary materials in coursework. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit detailed narratives about how literary texts were selected, interpreted, and integrated into teaching and the participants' reflections on their pedagogical or learning experiences. Classroom observations were conducted to document actual teaching practices, instructional materials used, and student responses to literary content. Institutional syllabi and sample lesson plans were also reviewed to validate the integration of culturally grounded literary texts.

Thematic analysis was utilized to interpret the data, guided by the conceptual frameworks of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), Bruner's narrative cognition (1990), and Nussbaum's (2010) views on literature and emotional intelligence. The coding process involved multiple rounds of data immersion, memo writing, and code clustering into recurring themes aligned with the study's objectives. Triangulation of data sources, and member checking were conducted to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Ethical clearance was obtained from the respective institutions, and informed consent was secured from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation. This methodology illuminated the complex ways literature functions as a pedagogical tool for fostering cultural identity,

critical reflection, and contextual learning in the Philippine higher education landscape.

## **Results and Findings**

### **Cultural Tools in the Development of Contextualized Learning Strategies within Philippine Higher Education Classrooms**

In Philippine higher education, integrating literary texts as cultural tools has emerged as a powerful strategy for fostering contextualized and culturally responsive learning. Literature, particularly in indigenous, regional, and folk traditions, allows educators to affirm students' cultural identities while promoting critical reflection and social awareness. As globalization continues to shape curricular content, there is an urgent need to reclaim and reframe local narratives within the classroom to ensure that learning remains relevant and inclusive. Drawing from sociocultural learning theories (Vygotsky, 1978) and identity-affirming pedagogies (Cummins, 2001), this study examines how literature is operationalized by educators and experienced by students in higher education settings. Through qualitative data gathered from faculty and learners across diverse regions, the findings reveal that literary texts serve as academic content and instruments for cultural affirmation, moral reasoning, and participatory pedagogy. This analysis contributes to the growing discourse on culturally grounded instruction and underscores the transformative potential of literature in creating localized, empowering, and socially responsive learning environments.

#### *Literature as a Bridge Between Cultural Identity and Curriculum Content*

Literary texts, especially those grounded in Philippine indigenous, folk, and local traditions, serve as practical cultural tools that connect learners' lived experiences with formal academic content. These texts help affirm students' cultural identities by

making instruction more relatable and relevant, thus enabling a deeper engagement with the learning material.

Participant Responses:

*"When we read regional stories like 'Biag ni Lam-ang' or local legends from our province, the students light up, they say it reminds them of their grandparents or what they heard in their community growing up."* (Participant 4, Literature Instructor)

*"I never saw literature as something that reflects me until we were asked to write our reflections on a Cebuano short story. It made me realize our stories matter too, not just the foreign ones."* (Participant 12, 3rd Year BA Communication Student)

These responses reveal that localized literary texts allow students to see themselves within the curriculum, strengthening cultural identity and academic motivation. When students recognize their heritage and values in classroom materials, the learning becomes more meaningful and dialogic (Cummins, 2001). This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) idea of "*cultural tools*" that mediate learning within socio-historical contexts.

#### *Literature as a Medium for Critical Reflection and Social Awareness*

Literature in higher education classrooms is also a springboard for critical social, political, and historical dialogue. Texts are selected for their aesthetic value and potential to promote civic consciousness, empathy, and ethical reasoning.

Participant Responses:

*"In my class, we used 'Dekada '70' to discuss martial law and human rights. Students shared stories from their families, and we connected it to today's issues. Literature opens that space."* (Participant 9, Professor of Humanities)

*"I realized that stories could challenge us. Like reading about the struggles of farmers in Palanca-winning short stories made me think of our own barangay's problems."* (Participant 17, Education Student)

Literary texts are vehicles for critical pedagogy, enabling students to interrogate injustices and social structures through narrative. This application supports Nussbaum's (2010) assertion that literature cultivates moral imagination and ethical citizenship. It also reflects Bruner's (1990) emphasis on narratives as central to how humans understand the world and themselves within it.

#### *Literature-Informed Pedagogy Fosters Contextualized and Participatory Learning*

Educators utilize literary texts to develop active, student-centered strategies such as reflective writing, performance-based interpretation, and community-linked projects. These strategies promote participatory learning and contextual

understanding, primarily when literature reflects the local languages and sociocultural realities of learners.

**Participant Responses:**

*"We let students adapt short stories into spoken word or skits in their dialect. They become co-creators, not just consumers of knowledge."* (Participant 2, Literature Faculty)

*"Using poetry in our mother tongue allowed us to express ourselves more naturally. It was not just about grammar; it was about who we are."* (Participant 21, BA Filipino Student)

This theme illustrates how literary texts support inclusive, dialogical, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Local literature fosters what Cummins (2001) calls "identity texts," which empower students to articulate their voices within and beyond the classroom. Contextualized strategies rooted in literature promote cognitive and emotional engagement, which is crucial for meaningful and transformative education.

The analysis reveals that literary texts are potent cultural tools in shaping contextualized learning strategies within Philippine higher education. They affirm students' cultural identities, stimulate critical thinking, and inspire participatory, student-centered learning. Through literature, educators and learners engage in a deeper cultural dialogue that advances inclusive and transformative education, affirming the role of literature not merely as a subject but as a bridge between personal identity, cultural heritage, and academic development.

### **The Perceptions and Experiences of Educators and Students Regarding the Role of Literature in Promoting Culturally Grounded and Context-Sensitive Learning**

In an increasingly diverse and multicultural educational landscape, integrating culturally grounded literature into higher education has gained significant attention as a means of promoting inclusive and context-sensitive pedagogy. In the Philippine setting, where linguistic and cultural plurality defines the national identity, literature serves as a source of aesthetic appreciation and a pedagogical tool for fostering cultural awareness, empathy, and critical thinking. Educators and students perceive literary texts, especially those rooted in local, regional, and indigenous traditions, as reflective of their lived realities, enabling deeper engagement with the curriculum. This alignment between students' cultural contexts and academic content strengthens identity formation and facilitates meaningful learning experiences. Furthermore, through literature, learners gain insight into different Filipino worldviews, histories, and struggles, helping cultivate respect for diversity and promoting intercultural dialogue. The current study explores the perceptions and experiences of educators and

students in Philippine higher education institutions regarding how literature promotes culturally responsive and socially relevant learning.

#### *Literature as a Mirror of Local Realities and Identity Formation*

Educators and students consistently viewed literature, especially that rooted in local, indigenous, and folk traditions, as an essential medium for affirming cultural identity and making learning more meaningful. Literary texts reflecting Filipino learners' sociocultural realities help establish a deeper emotional connection to academic content. This connection allows literature to act as a mirror of students' own lives, community experiences, and historical consciousness.

##### *Participant Responses:*

*"When I teach local literature, the students become more engaged. They say, 'Ma'am, that is how we talk at home.' They relate more, and their reflections are deeper."* (Participant 5, Literature Instructor)

*"I used to think literature was just about foreign classics, but reading Ilokano stories made me proud. It is like our experiences are finally valued in school."* (Participant 18, Education Student)

These responses highlight how culturally relevant literature promotes inclusivity by validating students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, as Cummins (2001) emphasized, "identity texts" foster students' confidence and agency in the learning process. Literature becomes a powerful tool for identity formation when it allows learners to recognize themselves in the texts they read, breaking away from historically dominant narratives that often marginalize local voices.

#### *Literature as a Tool for Cultural Dialogue and Empathy*

Participants described literature as a vehicle for cultural dialogue and empathy-building. By engaging with diverse cultural texts, whether from other regions of the Philippines or marginalized communities, students are exposed to alternative worldviews that encourage open-mindedness, compassion, and respect for



differences. Educators deliberately chose stories that would expose learners to the complexities of Filipino identities across ethnic, linguistic, and religious contexts.

Participant Responses:

*"We read a short story from the Maranao community. The students were surprised that our fellow Filipinos had such different customs. It sparked a conversation about respect and understanding."* (Participant 10, Professor, Southern Mindanao State University)

*"It opened my mind. I realized how many of our assumptions come from not knowing each other's stories."* (Participant 23, BA Filipino Major)

Literature cultivates cultural empathy by providing access to voices often silenced or underrepresented in mainstream education. As Nussbaum (2010) argues, literature enhances our "narrative imagination", the ability to imagine what it is like to be someone else. In this way, culturally grounded literature supports peacebuilding and intercultural competence within diverse classrooms.

#### *Literature Enhances Critical Thinking through Contextual Analysis*

Both students and educators affirmed that culturally rooted literary texts promote cultural awareness and sharpen learners' critical thinking. When students are invited to interpret literature through the lens of their socio-political contexts, they learn to interrogate societal issues such as inequality, colonization, and resistance. Context-sensitive learning occurs when literature is used as a platform for reflection and action.

Participant Responses:

*"Literature gives us a safe space to talk about difficult topics—colonial mentality, poverty, political corruption. It pushes them to think beyond the text."* (Participant 3, Faculty)

*"We discussed a poem about indigenous land struggles. It made me question how much we know about what is happening in the provinces."* (Participant 15, 4th Year Student)

This theme demonstrates how literature can be a transformative tool for critical education. Students who analyze culturally specific texts develop contextual analysis skills, enabling them to relate literary themes to real-world concerns. This supports Bruner's (1990) theory that narratives help learners make sense of the world and encourage the development of socially aware, reflective citizens.

The findings reveal that educators and students perceive literature as a key medium for promoting culturally grounded and context-sensitive learning. Literature affirms identity, fosters intercultural understanding, and promotes critical reflection on social realities. These themes affirm that literature in higher education is not merely

a subject of study but a dynamic and transformative cultural tool for inclusive and responsive pedagogy in the Philippines.

### **The Effectiveness of Integrating Local and Indigenous Literary Texts in Enhancing Student Engagement and Cultural Identity Formation**

Integrating local and indigenous literary texts into higher education classrooms in the Philippines has emerged as a powerful pedagogical strategy promoting inclusive, culturally responsive, and transformative learning. As academic institutions move toward decolonizing the curriculum and affirming the multicultural identity of the nation, literature grounded in regional and indigenous narratives plays a vital role in enriching student learning experiences. Such texts go beyond their literary value by engaging students meaningfully, fostering pride in cultural heritage, and encouraging critical reflection on pressing social and historical issues. Through stories that mirror students lived realities and collective memory, local literature enhances classroom engagement, affirms cultural identity, and sharpens critical thinking skills. This study explores the effectiveness of integrating these texts in tertiary education, revealing how educators and learners perceive literature as a catalyst for deeper intellectual and emotional connections within the academic space.

#### *Heightened Student Engagement through Cultural Resonance*

Participants consistently affirmed that integrating local and indigenous literary texts significantly increased student engagement in the classroom. When texts reflected familiar traditions, settings, or language, students responded enthusiastically, actively participated in discussions, and showed deeper investment in their coursework. This heightened engagement was attributed to the texts' ability to resonate with students lived experiences.

#### *Participant Responses:*

*"When I assigned a Hiligaynon short story, students were suddenly more eager to share. They said it reminded them of family stories, and the room was filled with laughter and curiosity."* (Participant 8, Literature Instructor)

*"I usually zone out in class, but reading about our local myths made me feel proud. I even told my parents about it."* (Participant 19, 2nd Year BA English Student)

These accounts demonstrate that culturally familiar texts foster a sense of ownership and inclusion in academic spaces. Literature grounded in local narratives is a motivational tool, fostering cognitive and emotional involvement. As Bruner (1990) noted, narrative engagement is amplified when learners identify with the

characters and context. Therefore, localized literature transforms passive learners into active participants in the learning process.

### *Strengthening Cultural Identity and Heritage Appreciation*

Educators and students emphasized the power of local and indigenous texts to affirm cultural identity and reinforce pride in heritage. These literary works counter the dominance of Western texts and introduce narratives that validate students' ethnic, regional, and linguistic backgrounds. Through engagement with their cultural heritage, learners understand themselves within a broader national and historical context.

#### Participant Responses:

*"Reading about the Lumad experience made my students emotional. Some of them belong to indigenous communities, and they said they felt seen for the first time in school."* (Participant 3, Professor)

*"I was born and raised in Bicol, but I only read a Bicolano poem for the first time in college. That moment made me realize how rich our literature is."* (Participant 12, BA Literature Student)

These reflections underscore the identity-affirming function of literature. Cummins (2001) argues that "identity texts" help students negotiate their cultural identities, especially in educational contexts where they are often marginalized. Educators integrate regional and indigenous narratives to help decolonize the curriculum and promote a more inclusive national literature that embraces pluralism and diversity.

### *Deepening Critical Thinking through Contextualized Analysis*

Participants also highlighted how localized and indigenous literary texts fostered critical thinking. These stories often contained themes related to historical injustice, social inequality, environmental degradation, and cultural resilience, which prompted analytical discussions, reflective writing, and problem-solving tasks in class.

Students were more likely to interrogate complex issues when literature mirrored real social struggles.

Participant Responses:

*"We read a Subanen folktale about land and spirits, and the students debated its relevance to modern mining issues. They were connecting literature to real-life problems."*

(Participant 6, Instructor)

*"Indigenous literature pushes us to ask uncomfortable questions. Why are their voices not in our history books? Why do we treat their struggles as folklore?"* (Participant 22, 4th Year Political Science Student)

This theme supports Nussbaum's (2010) idea that literature nurtures moral and intellectual development by placing students in ethically challenging situations. Learners sharpen their critical faculties by analyzing localized texts with sociopolitical themes and develop socially aware perspectives. Local literature is not merely descriptive but analytical; it becomes a lens through which students examine power, history, and cultural complexity.

The integration of local and indigenous literary texts in higher education proves effective in three interconnected ways: it heightens student engagement by grounding instruction in familiar contexts; it affirms cultural identity by amplifying underrepresented voices; and it enhances critical thinking by enabling contextual analysis of real-world issues. These findings reinforce the role of literature not only as a tool for literacy and appreciation but as an essential vehicle for inclusive, transformative, and decolonized education in the Philippine setting.

## Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted effectiveness of integrating local and indigenous literary texts into higher education classrooms in the Philippines. Participants, both educators and students, consistently described such texts as more than academic materials; they viewed them as bridges to their own identities, histories, and community realities. Student engagement significantly increased when texts spoke their language, depicted familiar settings, or echoed the oral traditions and moral values they grew up with. Literature, in this sense, becomes a living pedagogy, an experience that invites active participation, emotional investment, and intellectual inquiry. This aligns with Bruner's (1990) argument that narratives are central to how learners make sense of the world and construct knowledge.

Moreover, the inclusion of local and indigenous texts facilitates cultural affirmation. For many students, especially those from rural or marginalized ethnolinguistic groups, encountering stories in their native language or centered on

their customs was a decisive moment of validation. This reflects Cummins' (2001) concept of "identity texts," wherein learners see their identities mirrored in the materials, resulting in increased self-confidence, motivation, and agency. Educators noted that such affirming encounters often led to meaningful dialogue about culture and students' place in society, thus contributing to holistic development.

Beyond engagement and identity, using these texts also strengthened students' capacity for critical thinking. Indigenous literature often contains layered narratives, myths, oral histories, or allegorical stories that lend themselves to critical interpretation and ethical inquiry. Students were analyzing characters and plots and reflecting on historical injustices, environmental issues, political resistance, and systemic marginalization. This demonstrates how literature becomes a tool for civic education and moral reasoning, echoing Nussbaum's (2010) assertion that literature trains students in narrative imagination, helping them to empathize with others while critically assessing the world around them.

Significantly, educators also experienced a pedagogical shift. Several expressed that using culturally grounded texts allowed them to design more relevant and reflective classroom activities, including performance-based tasks, storytelling workshops, and community-anchored literary research. This suggests that the benefits of these texts are not limited to students but also transform teacher practices by fostering culturally sustaining pedagogy. In sum, integrating local and indigenous literature deepens learning through content and the cultural and ethical processes it activates.

## **Conclusion**

This study concludes that integrating local and indigenous literary texts in higher education is practical and essential for promoting a culturally grounded, contextually relevant, and intellectually transformative learning experience. The findings affirm that such integration enhances three core dimensions of student learning: engagement, cultural identity formation, and critical thinking.

First, by embedding texts that resonate with students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, educators tap into an innate source of motivation. This enhances classroom participation, deepens comprehension, and encourages students to see themselves as rightful contributors to academic knowledge. These engagements are particularly impactful for students from communities historically excluded from mainstream curricula.

Second, integrating these texts actively contributes to affirming and reconstructing cultural identity within academic spaces. It challenges the dominance

of Eurocentric and Manila-centric canons, giving way to a more inclusive national literature. This process is critical in a postcolonial society like the Philippines, where education must transmit knowledge and restore historical memory, pride, and agency among its people.

Third, culturally rooted literary texts sharpen critical thinking by inviting learners to analyze local narratives within broader sociopolitical and ethical contexts. When grounded in indigenous struggles or regional histories, the interpretative nature of literature becomes a powerful tool for consciousness-raising. It cultivates reflective learners better equipped to critique social structures and imagine alternative futures.

Thus, integrating local and indigenous literature should not be treated as a peripheral or enrichment activity. Instead, it must be institutionalized as a core element of Philippine higher education curricula. Doing so would help advance the goals of inclusive, decolonized, and culturally responsive education. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts on learner outcomes, including how sustained exposure to local literature influences civic values, language proficiency, and national consciousness. Additionally, policy reforms should consider institutional support for creating, disseminating, and teaching regional and indigenous literary works to ensure that education genuinely reflects the diversity and richness of the Filipino experience.

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