Restorative Literary Inquiry: Preliminary Data

By Natasha Akery, IIRP Class of 2025

1. Introduction to Restorative Literary Inquiry

Restorative Literary Inquiry is an approach that uses a restorative lens to examine literature. Restorative Literary Inquiry strategies include modifying Restorative Questions to analyze characters and their conflicts and using the Compass of Shame to determine their responses to conflict. I designed the Restorative Compass to help students imagine how characters could address conflict in their relationships restoratively. I identified restorative topics for students to explore in any text. The purpose of my research is to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies in helping students analyze and connect more deeply with literature.

Restorative Questions for Literary Analysis:

- Who was affected by the character's behavior?
- In what ways were those people affected?
- Did the character make things right with those they harmed? Explain.
- What did you think or feel when you read what the character had done?
- What impact would the character's behavior have on you or people you know?
- What do you think the character needs to do to make things right?

The Compass of Shame and Restorative Compass for Literary Analysis:

- Use the compasses to determine the following:
    - How did the character react to the situation or event? Include as many "directions" as possible from the Compass of Shame.
    - How could the character restore the situation or event? Include as many "directions" as possible from the Restorative Compass.

Restorative Lens: Topics and Questions

- Harm and Conflict
    - What harm occurs in the story, and who is affected by it?
    - How do different characters respond to harm or conflict?
    - What systemic or societal factors contribute to the harm experienced by the characters
- Healing and Restoration
    - What steps do characters take toward healing or reconciliation, if any?
    - Do characters seek forgiveness or attempt to repair relationships?
    - How do characters take responsibility for their actions?
- Relationships and Community
    - How are relationships impacted by conflict, and how do they evolve as the story progresses?

    - How do characters support one another's growth, healing, or understanding?

2. Quantitative Data Overview

I introduced sixty-six of my ninth-grade students to the strategies involving the restorative questions and compasses in a single 90-minute class period. They filled out a Google Form at the end that prompted them to respond to two statements using the Likert scale:

- Restorative strategies are helpful for analyzing literature.
- Restorative strategies deepen your understanding of literature.

Key Points:

- **Helpful for Analyzing Literature:**
    - Strongly agree: 50 responses (82%)
    - Agree: 11 responses (18%)
- **Deepen Understanding:**
    - Strongly agree: 32 responses (52%)
    - Agree: 27 responses (44%)
    - Neutral: 3 responses (4%)

Interpretation: The vast majority of students found restorative strategies both helpful for analyzing literature and deepening their understanding. This positive response provides a strong foundation for further exploration of qualitative feedback.

3. Qualitative Themes from Open-Ended Responses

A. Ease of Use and Accessibility:

- Many students found the approach straightforward and easy to apply: *"It's a simple method and easy, as long as you understand the piece of literature."*
- **Key Theme**: Students felt comfortable with the approach as long as they had a clear understanding of the text.

B. Challenges in Empathy and Perspective-Taking:

- A recurring theme was difficulty in imagining other characters' emotions or putting themselves in the characters' shoes: *"It was difficult to imagine what other characters would be feeling because it's not directly stated in the text."*
- **Key Theme**: Some students struggled with perspective-taking, suggesting a need for further support in building empathy during analysis.

C. Complexity of the Restorative Framework:

- A few students found the framework difficult to apply to certain texts, especially when character motivations or emotional states were vague: *"It's hard to apply it to characters with vague emotional states, like Gilgamesh."*
- **Key Theme**: While many found the method straightforward, there were challenges with applying the framework to more abstract or less detailed works.

D. Collaboration and Discussion:

- Students valued the debates and conversations that arose from using restorative strategies: *"There were some 'spicy' conversations, but it was fun to debate."*
- **Key Theme**: The approach fostered rich discussions and critical thinking, leading to deeper engagement with the material.

4. Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Insights

Overall, the students' responses show that restorative strategies are highly effective in enhancing literary analysis. 82% of students strongly agreed that the approach helped them, and 52% felt it deepened their understanding. This was echoed in open-ended responses, where many students appreciated the framework's simplicity and found it useful in sparking rich discussions. However, some students encountered difficulties, particularly with texts that lacked clear emotional details, or when asked to empathize with characters. This suggests that while the method is broadly accessible, further scaffolding could help students who struggle with perspective-taking or applying the framework to more abstract literature.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The data suggests that restorative strategies are a powerful tool for enhancing student engagement and comprehension in literary analysis. However, incorporating additional supports for empathy-building and handling more abstract or complex texts could improve the experience for students who found these aspects challenging. Moving forward, I plan to develop supplemental activities that help students better step into the shoes of characters and deal with more nuanced emotional states in literature.

6. Next Steps or Action Plan

My next step is to guide my students to analyze Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* using a restorative lens. Assignments will be based on the restorative questions and the compasses. The students will analyze relationships between characters in the play, characters' reactions to the shame response, and imagine different outcomes if characters made restorative choices.