



# English: Literature and Faith

## What if studying a novel included looking at faith journeys?

Debra taught English and wanted to include exploring faith journeys as part of the development of character where it was appropriate to a text.

“We did lots of work on character, but I felt that a character’s faith did not get the same degree of attention as other aspects. I think this is partly due to the way society views faith, and partly the students’ own lack of understanding of the different ways in which a person’s faith may form and develop; they tended to think only in terms of belief and unbelief; you either have faith, or you don’t.

“I asked students to trace their own faith journeys privately. I gave a presentation on how faith can form and change. I wanted a more formal style and less interaction, as many of my students feel threatened talking about their faith (or lack of it) openly. I asked students to relate what they were learning to their own experience as the lesson progressed. Students did this privately, but could ask questions throughout the presentation.

“We then developed a tool together that consisted of a range of questions that allowed us to interrogate a text concerning a character’s faith journey. The questions allowed for much more subtlety than our past discussions of characters’ faith had showed. They included the following:

- What factors in the faith community work for/against the character’s faith?
- What factors in the wider community work for/against this person’s faith?
- What changes in faith do you see across the text?
- What crises in faith are there? What causes them?
- What faithful living can you see?”

## What's going on here?

Debra **saw** her English lesson as a place to explore faith as a crucial element of being human and to raise big questions.

She **engaged** students in relating the content of a presentation to their own experience, developing questions to bring to a text, and using these questions to connect faith and literature.

She **reshaped her practice** by focusing on a particular group of questions and making a tool to continue asking them, guiding the interaction of the students (with a focus on private response, then developing questions together), to connect with student experience and make explicit connections with faith (focusing on faith, presentation).

## What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

**Faith** is about assurance and trust; it is putting a growing and changing trust in God. This is usually based on evidence of God's character and our experience of him. Faith in Christ is the means by which people come into this close relationship with God. Faith is not just individual; it is something that the Christian community holds in common and affirms in its way of life, worship, and creedal statements. Reason is not the opposite of faith; rather, reason and faith can go hand in hand. Asking questions and probing issues can be a sign of a growing faith.

## What difference does it make?

Debra made a difference by giving students information and questions that enabled them to think about how faith forms and changes in a nuanced way. This in turn gave them a tool for interrogating a text at a deeper level in relation to questions of faith.

## Where could we go from here?

There are other issues around character where we can give students an ability to question at a deeper and broader level. For example, a Christian understanding of the unity of a human being (body and soul, mind, emotions, and will) can change how a character is viewed.

## Digging deeper

It is not only believers who have faith. Faith and trust are required in all aspects of life. We have to trust people with expertise and have faith in their ability: doctors and nurses, architects and teachers, the people we work with. Without some level of trust, we could not function or form relationships.

*It is impossible to go through life without trust: that is to be imprisoned in the worst cell of all, oneself. Graham Greene*

Having faith does not mean we become passive; Christians are called to work in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. The combination of relying on the Holy Spirit plus effort on our part creates an attitude that “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). Faith in God should lead to a compassionate way of life, since faith cannot be separated from action. Faith that does not express itself in action is dead faith (James 2:14-17). Trust helps to build the Christian community. Trust is not abstract; it is the daily placing of life in God’s hands, relying on him.

We can have faith in others, encouraging them and trusting them. Trust is built by honesty and kindness, and trust should be based on our experience of people’s character. Learning to trust appropriately is difficult, for trust makes us vulnerable and requires wisdom. We are to place our ultimate trust and faith in God alone (Psalms 62:8).

*Do not trust all men, but trust men of worth; the former course is silly, the latter a mark of prudence. Democritus*

Reason is the gift of God that he expects us to use. Doubt does not have to be destructive of faith; it can be a part of a struggle to believe within a framework of faith. Everyone starts with a view of the world—a way of seeing things—and we reason and ask questions from that standpoint. As Christians we start with a Christian worldview and reason from there.



**Previous:** Literature and Choices  
What if a literature class helped stu...

**Next:** Poetry and Hope  
What if a poem helped students to...

