Literature: a road map to navigate life

In a speech given at the Paul Brock Awards for Excellence in the Teaching of English, MICHAEL COUTTS-TROTTER demonstrates the importance of English teachers’ work in developing the lives of students.

It’s a great pleasure to acknowledge the extraordinary recipients of the Paul Brock Awards for Excellence in the Teaching of English, and it’s a great pleasure to do so in the name of our friend and our colleague, Dr Paul Brock (the department’s director of learning and development research).

The award is based on four criteria economically described in 84 words. We could simplify it further: one criterion, eight words – recipients must be a lot like Paul Brock.

Paul knows and loves English language and literature; he expects a lot of himself and his students – and by the way he continues to acquire hundreds of new students each year including me. He’s recognised as an outstanding teacher and he is daily guided by the truth of John Donne’s admonition: “Never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.” By his teaching, by his work, by how he lives, Paul makes clear that anything that diminishes someone, diminishes him. And anything that enlarges someone, enlarges him.

Quite properly we spend a lot of time, energy and money to develop basic literacy skills – the necessary equipment to make your way in the world. But English is not at the heart of the curriculum, the only mandatory subject through to Year 12, simply because the economy needs workers who can read, write, speak and listen. We study English language and literature to live fully. As Andrew O’Hagan, the Scottish writer said while he was opening the recent Sydney Writers’ Festival. “We do not read to pass the time, but to inhabit time.”

Through literature we live other lives, experience different worlds or experience the same world differently, and above all we’re drawn or charmed or tricked or shocked to engage in life and not to retreat from it.

It’s been observed that literature has “the privilege of being unequivocal”. The growth of knowledge is a fact but literature offers a remedy against the dangerous belief that science or social science or economics or technology can and will lead to our perfectibility.

O’Hagan again: “Literature is the news that stays news … For his insight into vanity, history and the state – Shakespeare is the news that stays news.”

For telling us what human beings can do for evil and for good – Primo Levi is the news that stays news. For her examination of virtue, self-knowledge, consideration for others’ morality, delicacy, charity and disinterestedness – Jane Austen is the news that stays news.

These awards honour exceptional public school teachers who have opened the minds and hearts of young people to the news that stays news; and in doing so have afforded them a quality of life and a quality of solitude that will sustain them until they die.

Michael Coutts-Trotter is the department’s director-general.