

# EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP: THEORY AND TEACHING PRACTICE

## Session 7: Implementing Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights

### Education (EDC/HRE) in literature teaching in secondary education

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#### **Introduction**

Literature is a subject that is taught in all secondary education curricula, independently or as a module of language teaching. It is crucial in promoting the skills, values attitudes, and critical knowledge of Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (EDC/HRE), because it enables identity formation, encourages cultural participation and intercultural understanding and cultivates empathy (Pieper 2015: 52).

Nevertheless, the role of literature in national curricula and the methods of literature teaching have been debated in recent decades, due to a shift to a more utilitarian character of secondary education on one hand and to student-oriented teaching. Being the core of Humanities education for centuries by teaching the classics or the national canon, literature has been connected to ethnocentric education, since it has been regarded since the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the expression of the *Volkgeist* (the spirit of the people) (Lambropoulos 1988). This romantic concept of the national role of literature shaped the literature curricula in secondary education in the past, which focused on established poets and writers of the canon and national subject matter, aiming to introduce the students to cultural heritage and high culture (Fleming 2007: 31. Pieper 2006: 6).

The concept of the autonomy of literary discourse was questioned by the poststructuralist literary theories, and literary discourse was regarded as a type of semiological system similar to others, such as historiography, cinema, television, advertising etc. (Barthes 1968). Thus, literature teaching in many curricula is regarded as a module of language teaching and literary texts are examined along with pragmatic



texts. (Slager 2010). More recently, reader-response theories placed the emphasis on the texts' reception by the reader, rather than the conditions of its production and its relation with other literary texts (Iser 1978). This constituted a great shift in literature pedagogy, because it allowed literature teaching to focus less on in-depth literary analysis and more on the students' engagement with the text and to creative writing based on the text. This was also connected to student-oriented learning. On the other hand, the emphasis on the canon and the objective of cultural literacy is still explicitly present in the curricula of most European countries, especially in upper secondary education (Witte & Sâmihăian 2013: 13-15).

Book selection is also an issue connected to student-oriented learning in literature, since it defines the literary texts taught. The question is whether the texts should be chosen by the education system (national, regional or the teacher) or the students and to what extent. In most European countries the texts are prescribed by the curriculum, with emphasis on personal and social criteria in lower secondary education and aesthetic and cultural criteria in upper secondary. (Witte & Sâmihăian 2013: 16). There students are expected to acculturate themselves with genres, narrative techniques, literary movements and the literary context, so as to become competent readers of literature. A debate that exists in most countries is whether youth literature or popular genres of literature should be introduced in class and to what extent. Here the student-oriented approach clashes the objective of the development of the students' aesthetic criteria, which is present in certain curricula. The presence of hybrid and multimodal texts (journalistic texts, literature published on the internet, films, comics) is a relevant issue.

A more recent development in literature pedagogy is critical literacy, based on the concept of discourses, developed by the poststructuralist Michel Foucault. According to Foucault, power structures shape discursive and institutional frameworks, which define language and every type of discourse. It is these structures that define the subject; the subject does not express itself through language, it is rather shaped by language and the discursive frameworks (Foucault 1984). Thus, literary discourse, as



any other, includes ideological concepts, viewpoints, privileged views and stereotypes embedded in the text. Literature teaching, according to critical literacy, should question these elements, highlighting the ideological perspectives existing in the text. (Borsheim-Black, Macaluso and Petrone 2014). The complexity of the interplay of discourses in literary texts and the ways in which these come into dialogue with each other is the challenge the critical literacy approach faces.

### **The impact of the teaching paradigm**

Based on the developments in literature teaching, research has outlined four different teaching paradigms, according to the objectives they aim to achieve: the cultural, the linguistic, the social and the personal (Witte & Sâmihăian 2013: 6-9).

- The **cultural** is the most academic approach, aiming at cultural literacy and associating the text with its literary context and literary movements. The students are expected to familiarize themselves with the cultural framework and to associate and compare the text with other texts of the canon.
- The **linguistic** is more text-oriented and formalistic. The students are expected to focus on the content and form of the text, its literary techniques and style, its structure and formal aspects, so as to heighten their aesthetic awareness and to become competent readers of literature.
- The **social** regards the text as a product and representation of its times, which enables the students to approach social, political and ethical issues. Literary texts are examined in comparison with relevant pragmatic texts or other cultural texts, such as comics, photographs, films etc. The aim of this paradigm is to promote social awareness, connecting the text with the students' experience.
- The **personal** paradigm believes in the ability of literature to promote the students' personal development, in enabling them to know themselves and others and to enrich their view of the world. Beginning as an elitist objective of literature in the past centuries, in contemporary literature teaching this aim is considered as related to the values connected to European culture (Aase,



Fleming, Pieper, Sâmișăian 2007: 8). Emphasis is placed on the process of learning and creative writing is often included in the evaluation process.

Each paradigm is connected with different teaching practices. While the first two approaches are more text- and content-oriented and more based in the teacher as the source of knowledge and interpretation, the two others are more student-oriented and hence the teacher becomes the facilitator of the peer discussion.

### **The value of teaching literature**

Despite the debates regarding the content and form of literature teaching, literature constitutes an integral part of linguistic education. Literature is considered 'a field of practices that contributes to the development of the individual, its socialization and enculturation' because it engages its imagination, emotional response and critical thinking (Pieper 2020: 117). This happens due to the character of literary discourse, which is intentionally ambiguous, unlike pragmatic texts. This polysemy leaves gaps for the reader to complete and invites multiple interpretations. The reader is thus implicated in the reading process and may identify himself with situations, sentiments or characters described in the texts. This aspect is very important in education, because it enhances student involvement, provided that the teaching process succeeds in student motivation. The ability of students to identify themselves with the characters and their feelings and to adopt their perspective is crucial for the development of empathy.

The multiple interpretations also allow students to formulate and present their own view on the text, based on content and form, which can be equally valid to a different interpretation, thus developing their analytical and critical thinking skills and their ability to debate and respect different opinions. Literature is one of the most highly codified discourses in our culture. By acquiring the skills required to decode literary discourse, students learn skills which promote critical knowledge of language, communication and cultural practices in general. On the other hand, the ambiguity



permits different creative approaches to the literary texts, through other texts or other media. Few modules in secondary education allow such intellectual or creative freedom.

Another characteristic of literary discourse is that it uses language differently from everyday communication and thus creates a different and unexpected perception of the world, both on the lexical and the thematic level. This defamiliarization enables the students to have new experiences, seeing the familiar from different perspectives which challenge their perceptions. This enhances their tolerance of ambiguity, a key attitude in EDC/HRE education.

Moreover, narrative, an integral part of most literary genres, is crucial in identity-shaping but also gives the students a glimpse of experiences they do not have in an experiential manner. Thus, it provides them with different behavior and communication models and allows them to have cultural encounters with the past, their culture and other cultures. (Aase, Fleming, Pieper, Sâmișăian 2007: 8-9). This is crucial for the cultivation of their linguistic and communicative skills.

All these attitudes, skills and values that are connected to the characteristics of literary discourse are key in EDC/HRE education. Nevertheless, teaching literature does not necessarily mean that the students acquire these.

As research in literature curricula has shown, the teaching paradigms coexist in literature teaching reality (Witte & Sâmișăian 2013: 6-8), often creating tensions, since their objectives are in some cases incompatible (Pieper, Irene 2020: 122-128). For example, studies have shown that emphasis on the structuralist approach of literature, i.e. on morphology and literary techniques, subverts the student engagement and motivation (Witte & Sâmișăian 2013: 20). On the other hand, students have to learn how to engage themselves in literary discourse.

Thus, to promote EDC/HRE values, attitudes, critical knowledge and skills, one has to reshape the content and form of literature teaching. CDC/HRE goals are not connected



only to the way the text is approached and the teaching paradigm adopted but also to the way the teaching is organized.

### **How to include EDC/HRE goals in literature teaching.**

As has already been suggested, the teaching paradigm more suitable for the promotion of EDC/HRE goals is the personal one, where the focus is on student engagement and the reception of the text by them. Unless the student is emotionally engaged with the literary text in some way, interpretation remains a technical process.

**Text selection** is very important in this case, within the limits allowed by national curriculum. Ideally, the students should be permitted to choose the texts that will be taught, since this allows the subject matter to follow their interests. Most importantly, this promotes democratic values in practice, since students propose certain texts, debate on their choices by presenting their rationale and decide. Moreover, by choosing their own reading material, students promote their self-efficacy and take responsibility for their choices, along with the confidence that they can achieve the goals they collectively set. (Boatright & Allman 2018).

Even if the cases of countries where national curricula and text selection is defined centrally, the teacher can propose to the students to choose a text as parallel to a canonical text included in the curriculum, or as a text taught beside the curriculum. Especially in the case when the texts taught include excerpts from novels, student engagement is much more difficult to be achieved, since the students cannot follow the narrative from the beginning. Therefore, the choice of unabridged literary texts, not only canonical, but also adolescent fiction, song lyrics and non-fiction should be welcomed to ensure student engagement. To cover curriculum demands, the teacher can combine the two types of texts.

In the case when the books of adolescent fiction chosen is not considered aesthetically adequate by the teacher, the students can learn to question authorial choices in form and content. (Boatright & Allman 2018), provided that the teacher does not reject their choice but guides them to reflect critically on the text's characteristics. Is the



presentation of characters and situations stereotypical or idealized? Are there aspects that the text silences? Thus, their critical thinking is developed.

Moreover, if there are students from immigrant backgrounds in the class, they should be encouraged to introduce texts from their own culture. In the case when they are reluctant, such texts could be the teacher's proposal. It is very important for students from minority backgrounds to find characters or situations they can relate to, especially in curricula with strong emphasis on the national canon and the national self-knowledge. It is equally important for all students to accept different cultural perspectives.

**Teaching organizing** is also very important in promoting EDC/HRE goals. Working in groups allows the students to develop their communicative and adaptability skills. Groups of four is a preferred number. The teacher functions as a facilitator. A set of questions can function as a scaffolding that guides the students in approaching the text. These questions refer not only to the text's content, but also its structure and style, on a metalinguistic level (Campbell 2019). Working in groups may seem slower in terms of progress regarding the textual interpretation, but this happens because the students acquire these cooperation skills. Students need guidance on how to work in groups, resolve their differences, include all members of the group, adopt different roles, but these skills are valued EDC/HRE goals.

### **Approaching the text.**

Literature is a crucial subject in promoting EDC/HRE values, skills, attitudes and critical knowledge. The personal teaching paradigm is student-oriented and based on the engagement of the students' emotions. The following teaching techniques facilitate this:

- To ensure student engagement, before reading the text, the students can be invited to remember experiences, feelings, situations relevant to the text's subject and to present it to their group. Each group should write down these memories and present them shortly.



- Then the text can be read, aloud or in groups. If the class is reading a novel in installments at home, the preparation activity can be to ask a question regarding the key issue of the part of the text they had to read, without any other introduction.
- Different interpretations of the motives, behavior, attitudes of characters should be encouraged. Debate on different interpretations should be based on content and form.
- Dramatization techniques are key in engaging the students and enabling the development of empathy:
  - interview with the character in the classroom, where one student pretends to be a character and the other students ask him/her questions regarding his actions and motives.
  - tunnel of consciousness, where the character is in a dilemma and the students stand to his left and right, whispering his thoughts. He reaches a decision at the end of the tunnel
  - dramatizing a scene,
  - trial, where the students have to decide if a character is guilty or innocent
- Literature teaching should encourage the students to see the familiar, the normal from a unfamiliar perspective. Thus, it should not only focus on interpretation but also on creative writing and other versions on different art forms (painting, making videos, songs).
- Experimentation with language, re-writing the text in different forms, registers, genres enables the students to see how content and form create unfamiliar perspectives.

As has been already mentioned, literature teachers have to reconcile formalist approaches, required by evaluation-oriented curricula, with the personal teaching paradigm and this is a challenge. This tension however should not discourage the teachers from experimenting with the techniques mentioned. These should be gradually introduced, so that the students familiarize themselves to them. The EDC/HRE values and attitudes are taught in practice when the students engage





themselves in such activities. The objective should be not the exams, but the students' ability to empathize, respect and be able to know themselves and others, while enjoying reading literature.

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