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APPROACHING LITERATURE FROM A DIFFERENT METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Why does literature seem to lose ground among the youths in our country? Does it have to do with the teaching method or with the Internet providing easily accessible and assimilable, ready-to-use information? Is it the teacher the one who bears responsibility or is it the syllabus to blame for the decline in learners' interest in actually reading (quality) books from cover to cover? Could it be because of the use of technology or the lack of it? The present paper tries to offer some viable answers to these questions (a few out of many) whilst approaching technology-enhanced environment as furthered within the Erasmus+ project ELSE.

Keywords: literature, innovative methodology, flipped classroom, technology, E-voli

One of the objectives set within the Erasmus+ Project *Eco/logical Learning and Simulation Environments in Higher Education* (coordinator: prof. Alba Graziano), as listed in a previously published article (see Han & Nicolae, 2019), is the development of innovative technologies with a view to increasing learner-teacher interaction, focusing on student-centered pedagogies and making use of digital devices, at the same time stimulating students' interest, boosting competence and facilitating assimilation. Taking this objective into account, the UMFST G.E. Palade team designed a two-sided approach: on the one hand, it would delineate a certain methodology in teaching literature, on the other hand, it would cover methodology in teaching linguistics.

The research I have conducted focused on the methodology for teaching literature to students and the implementation of what they perceive as innovative and effective methods; it included two directions that will be detailed on in this article: the former ("Teach Literature Yourself") required that students should experiment different methods of teaching literature, the latter focused on the use of a tool ("E-voli") as an alternative that would increase effectiveness in teaching literature (supporting the flipped classroom approach).

I. Teach Literature Yourself (2018-2019 academic year)

This was a three-stage activity carried on in the academic year 2018-2019 (briefly presented in the aforementioned article, published in the volume *Humanities in the Spotlight*, 2019: 201):

1. The pre-practical stage: questionnaires were distributed to BA and MA students (anonymously answered);

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2. The practical stage: MA students in Anglo-American Studies (AAS) were asked to make use of what they regard as innovative and efficient methods of teaching literature;

3. The post-practical stage: feedback questionnaire distributed to MA students (anonymously answered).

For ***the pre-practical stage***, certain variables were taken into account, later to be used for statistical analysis (202): faculty, department, Bachelor's/Master's degree programme, year of study, studies in rural areas, studies in urban areas, teaching methods used in middle school/high school/faculty, suggested teaching methods, use of technology.

The questionnaire on literature listed the following (202):

- In your opinion, why have pupils/students become less interested in literature? Do they read less than in the past? Name demotivating aspects/elements/agents.
- Advantages of reading/studying literature.
- Is literature perceived the way it deserves to be? What is it to you? Would you agree that literature is an eye-opening, creative even therapeutic way of imagining and (re)living life? A means of constructing identity in itself?
- Describe the methods through which you have been taught literature in middle school, in high school, at university (→ several methods were listed here and the students could add some others, if the case: conversation, explanation, exercise, demonstration, case study, problematisation, simulation, algorithmisation, textbook work, reading, exposition, games, teamwork, brainstorming, other).
- Which of the ones mentioned above would you label as effective and which ineffective? Give arguments.
- If you were to teach literature yourself what approach would you use? What innovative methods would you suggest? Correlate your answer with question 1.

The findings provided interesting information that not only helped in framing an overall picture of the process, but it also proved helpful in identifying some of the root causes for students being tempted to label literature as rather static, monotonous, unappealing, etc.

For the purpose of the present article, I have selected just the findings referring to the demotivating aspects, teaching methodology, effective versus ineffective methods, as provided by BA students in Romanian-English (all three years of study) and second-year MA students in Anglo-American Studies (some of them already employed as middle school teachers; hence, in providing the answers, they took into account their pupils' attitude to literature as well). At the same time, we need to draw attention on the fact that the students' answers obviously implied a certain degree of subjectivity, therefore there is no pretense for full objectivity and comprehensiveness.

Among the demotivating aspects, the students enumerated the following:

- length (reading summaries and magazines instead),
- uselessness on the labor market,
- literature seen as boring and replaceable by the movie industry (more dynamic, less time consuming),
- "most students simply don't enjoy reading",
- long compulsory list – "where's the fun?",
- "obsolete" and overstudied readings – "do not apply to today's generation",
- need for more practical subjects (pragmatic worldview),
- clichés,
- literature does not keep up with technology (i.e. reality),
- the Internet and the focus on social media,
- hard to understand,
- the student's background,
- 21st century lifestyle and rush for everything,
- not interactive - the students cannot contribute ("the video game industry allows the students to have an impact on the setting [...], they no longer follow the adventures of a hero, they become heroes themselves"),
- teaching methods.

The students also mentioned the increasing tendency to read less of everything (not just books), doubled by the tendency among the youth to consider literature unnecessary - these are not limited to quantity, but they fail to cover the quality definition and requirements as well. In what regards the way literature might impact the reader, the students added the following to the list (again with no claim to be comprehensive):

- "it gives new perspectives on life",
- it is "a means of escapism (reimagining the world and the self)",
- it offers "a mosaic of universes waiting to be discovered",
- access to cultures (past and present),
- open-mindedness,
- creativity,
- shapes personality,
- improves/enriches vocabulary,
- a means of constructing identity, yet "not the Means",
- therapy (meditation and relaxation).

A very interesting distinction was made when discussing the methods through which the students had been taught literature in middle school/high-school, or were taught literature at university level. Not only did they emphasize the discrepancy in the approaches, but they added a further distinction to be made in the way literature was taught in their two working languages, Romanian and English, respectively.

On the one hand, the methods used in middle school ("a more rigid approach") and high school included: reading and being asked to learn summaries by heart, worksheets, PowerPoint presentations ("sometimes with full texts to be read in class"), discussion, essay writing, dictation (!), explanation, exercises, reading comprehension exercises, individual research, watching book adaptations instead of reading the books, regular testing ("making sure pupils read"), role-play, conversation, etc. On the other hand, teaching literature at university level involved: use of technology ("students prefer screens nowadays"), interactive methods, watching book adaptations, discussion, argumentation ("the professors would actually listen to us"), deductive methods, recordings, explanation, providing schemes, PowerPoint presentations. Out of all these, the students labeled as ineffective the following: dictation, memorizing, theory learning, teacher-centered approach ("the teacher's monologue"), compulsory reading. The effective methods the students pointed out were: role-play exercises, using a wide variety of materials/methods, introducing and explaining the background, portfolio, interactive approaches, debates (focus on communication skills), deductive methods, worksheets, PowerPoint presentations, recording, text interpretation, and – my favourite – "only the university methods".

On being asked which methods or activities would they use, were they to teach literature themselves, the students listed the deductive methods, the interactive ones (workshops, discussions, games, competition), book adaptations, short videos, documentaries, role-play activities, PowerPoint presentations, making use of visual aids, transforming the text into images and vice-versa, being allowed to read and analyse one's favourite book, analogies/correlations with other arts. They also stressed out the fact that a priority would be to work with all students/pupils, not only with the "gifted" ones.

Which brings us to the second step of our activity "Teach Literature Yourself", that is, ***the practical stage***. The *ELSE* project furthered a line of work/study framed by the technology enhanced environment, suggesting (among others) that we experiment the flipped class, E-CORE "Serious Games", and the use of the video tool E-voli in order to test students' responses to this kind of approach and see whether it proves effective, or better said, more effective than the traditional one. However, due to the pre-existent, faculty approved syllabi, I could not introduce the 100% flipped class experience to my students but rather adapt it and generate a student-centered approach to teaching literature.

This second stage involved only the master's degree students in Anglo-American Studies, second year of study, and was implemented throughout a number of class sessions within the course *Identity and Alterity. Literary Exile and Expatriation*. Basically, what the students were required to do was to act not only as researchers, but also as teachers in charge of the educational activity, meaning that they had to teach literature themselves following some requirements/organizational criteria:

- learner-centered approach,

- technology enhanced environment,
- innovative and efficient methods (as specified in their answers to the questionnaire),
- teacher's evaluation criteria to be taken into account,
- 1 presentation: assigned author and book,
- 1 presentation: author and book of their choice.

The evaluation criteria they had to comply with applied to the presentation, as well as to the researched paper they were required to hand in. The methods and activities they used added variety to the subject, increasing the listeners' attention, stimulating curiosity and triggering their active participation.

The ***post-practical stage*** required that AAS students anonymously answer two further questions –feedback questionnaire – as follows:

❖ Enumerate/name the (innovative) methods through which you have been taught English literature within the course *Identity and Alterity. Literary Exile and Expatriation* (by AAS students/colleagues).

❖ Which of the ones mentioned above would you label as effective and which ineffective? Give arguments.

The answers to the first question were quite varied, emphasing the wide range of choices that the AAS students retorted to in delivering their presentations: brainstorming, video analysis, initiating dialogues and including the listeners in the analyses (thus, avoiding monologue), game-based methods (complexity varying according to the audience), quote analysis (group discussion), worksheets, mind maps, video presentations, inductive and deductive learning, text interpretation, various types of exercises, fast-learning circle, plus one more answer worth mentioning here: "Just because it is not in some book about teaching, it does not mean it would not work in a classroom. Besides, I think, it is the class at hand that defines the technique and method used by the teacher. Anyway, in no circumstance, should the teacher be the defining factor".

Selecting from their answers, we learn that the following are labeled as "effective"in teaching literature:

- student-centered learning,
- interactive presentations (= active learning),
- quote and symbol analysis,
- welcoming students' opinions/opinion exchanges and debate,
- use of visual support,
- flipped classes,
- brainstorming,
- group work (presentations followed by group discussions),
- game-based methods,
- no imposed annotated bibliography (students' choice),
- demonstration,
- argumentation,
- role-play,
- text interpretation,
- character analysis,
- identifying and encouraging students' creative abilities,
- "all methods are effective as long as students can express their opinion",
- "All of the methods [...] could be effective provided that they are used to a balanced extent throughout the class. On the other hand, literary analysis and text interpretation should be focused on specific literary aspects clearly formulated in a task."

As to the "ineffective" approaches, the students provided just a few answers: the teacher's monologue/teacher-centered approach, presentations ("students are rarely active participators"), fill-in exercises, Q&A sessions (with the comment that this depends on the type and complexity of the questions used; redundant, open-ended questions to be avoided), learning by heart, rigid teaching. I believe that one answer stands out, drawing attention not on the method but on the one using it, that is, the teacher himself/herself and their pedagogical skills: "I believe that there are no ineffective methods,

only ineffective approaches or incapacity of transmitting the information."

To sum up this activity, giving the students the freedom to choose whatever methods they thought efficient and innovative for a specific type of audience proved quite a challenge to them, yet a rewarding one as most of the presentations turned out to be really dynamic, engaging, interactive, original and useful (practical application as one of the evaluated criteria) not only in terms of scientific content but also from the point of view of the delivery (effective presentation skills), which would provide precisely the ingredients that would ensure the efficiency of the teaching-learning process.

II. Experimenting with E-voli (2019-2020 academic year)

One of the outputs of the *ELSE* project is directed at innovative teaching practices in the digital era, that is, on redesigning Higher Education by creating "an integrated curriculum where the delivery of academic content is coterminous with, and enhanced by, the acquisition of competences and transversal skills appropriate for the digital age"[1]. However, as stipulated in the Application Form:

> technology remains a toolkit used to deliver traditional content, rather than a means to drive a process of radical pedagogical innovation, and is largely limited to the implementation of e-learning. Although embedded to a variable extent in everyday teaching and in curriculum design, technology and digitalization alone do not generate innovative teaching and learning.[2]

The application form mentions various aspects meant to trigger change, one being the very process of stimulating "teachers' appetite for an innovative learning environment based on learner-centered pedagogies (holistic, constructivist, connectivist approaches), which can activate students' learning process through problem-solving, learning-by-doing, gamification, or digital information research" (idem). In what regards the technology enhanced environment, the project sets as one of its goals designing a cloud-based E-learning platform to host the flipped classroom "eco-system" that would be extended to university level as well; furthermore, it is imperative that we should mention here the production of E-voli (a video tool designed by Politecnico di Milano, Italy), and "Serious Games" (E-CORE; an interactive simulation environment /educational game designed by Entropy Knowledge Network, Italy), both within the *ELSE* project.

The flipped class (literature-wise) will be experimented by UMFST students (Petru Maior Faculty of Sciences and Letters) in the second semester of this academic year (i.e. 2019-2020). Nevertheless, what needs to be emphasized is the fact that the higher education system in our country is not designed to support syllabi based mostly or entirely on the flipped-classroom approach, but rather have it used several times throughout the semester/academic year (perhaps as an additional activity; flipping several class sessions, not the entire course) since, except for the practical courses, most of the subjects include a course part (lecturer-centered) and a seminar part (student-centered). The online learning that the flipped class implies furthers the digitized information, the student-centered learning, and the removal of all-size-fits-all lecture while allowing more collaboration, a self-paced lecture outside classroom and differentiated learning.

In a TED 2011 talk ("Let's use video to reinvent education"), Salman Khan, the well-known founder of Khan Academy, spoke about the advantages of flipping the traditional classroom script, consequently of having the "automated version" of a teacher that the students can watch at their own time and pace (self-paced, individualized online learning), repeat, pause, do the most of the video lessons while at home and use the actual time in the classroom to interact, do assignments, handle the theory put to practice. The mindset change based on technology made the teachers who adopted it "humanize the classroom", to use Khan's words:

> they took a fundamentally dehumanizing experience: a bunch of 30 kids with their fingers on their lips, not allowed to interact with each other, a teacher, no matter how good, has to give this kind of one-size-fits-all lecture to 30 students – blank faces, slightly antagonistic –

[1] http://www.elseproject.eu/mission/

[2] https://moodle.unitus.it/progetti/pluginfile.php/7958/mod_resource/content/0/04%20-%20ELSE%20-%20Submitted%20Application%20Form.pdf

and now it's a human experience, now they're actually interacting with each other.[3]

It is precisely this idea of 'humanizing' the classroom that seemed appealing to the UMFST students who were introduced to such an approach. However, the Khan Academy lessons do not address the university level (for which we have MOOCs, Coursera, edX – relying on a different implementation approach: more of a virtual experience of a course/classroom than a flipped class; Knowledge Clips, Open CourseWare, Moodle), but rather younger learners, plus the focus is not on Humanities. Nevertheless, the flip is definitely worth experiencing at university level as well.

The *ELSE* video tool (video tagging), E-voli, was designed by the team at Politecnico di Milano, Italy (P5) (HOC-LAB) and it targets the process of teaching-learning by means of technology enhanced environment, supporting the flipped classroom approach. By registering and using it, the students are given a specific code generated for each video and are then presented with the videos that have been selected by their instructor/teacher for analysis. While watching the video(s), students can express their own opinion in the form of "I get it" (if/when the information is clear), "I don't get it" (if/when the information is not clear) or "Comment/question" (posted for the instructor to see); at the end, students get a summary of their feedback, which they can edit and then submit as evaluation of the video. The instructor can view the students' feedback (notes and details), and then can structure/tailor the following lectures/courses depending on the received feedback, on the data and analytics generated.

Experimenting with E-voli in the field of literature (academic year 2019-2020, 1st semester) so as to see its effectiveness and impact on learners, meant that I have selected two videos that the UMFST students should watch and use: Virginia Woolf's recorded voice in "Words Fail Me" (for MA students in Anglo-American Studies, first year of study, course *Identity and Alterity*) and an interview with Angela Carter (for BA students, Romanian –English, 3rd year of study, course *Magical Realism*). The videos were used to support one of the objectives of the mentioned courses: framing the Writer's identity; not only did the students receive information that they could (re)watch at their own pace, but this methodological choice saved time on presenting theoretical material and allowed us to focus on practical application – debate, group discussion, clarification of the information that the feedback pointed out to be problematic. Besides, the students considered it an interesting approach that would add variety to any lecture.

The subsequent discussion on E-voli also provided important information as to the usefulness of such a tool. Some of the advantages that the students enumerated: easy to handle, adds novelty, makes use of technology ("a must in this century"), time saving, allows self-assessment, flexible, learners do not feel afraid/embarrassed to answer. As to the disadvantages, the students emphasized a few: lack of interaction, increased number of working hours for the teacher, assessment might be problematic, the students might just think they have understood the requirement while in reality it might turn out not to be the case. Subsequently, they made some suggestions that would improve the tool: the teacher should always check back instead on relying completely on the analytics/statistics provided, the requirements should be clearly stipulated, the tool should include the possibility of interacting online in real time (either with the teacher or with other students in their group), the teacher should be able to access the video at the indicated minute directly from the feedback.

All in all, technology and digitization should no longer be regarded as optional but as compulsory in the process of pedagogical innovation since the implementation of e-learning is an attribute of tomorrow's university as well as of today's teaching and learning. In what literature is concerned, technology can bring its valuable contribution and increase students' awareness of the importance and vibrant beauty of this art, adding variety, stimulating and facilitating critical thinking, arising curiosity, and triggering active participation/response. Technology enhanced learning, such as the flipped classroom, E-voli, "Serious Games" – if we refer to the *ELSE* project – marks the transition from a teacher-centered process to a student-centered one where both student and instructor/trainer are beneficiaries. *ELSE*, as an Erasmus+ project focusing on strategic partnerships in higher education, mirrors precisely this ambitious goal of today's education.

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[3] https://www.ted.com/talks/sal_khan_let_s_use_video_to_reinvent_education

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