



Multi-Subject Teaching – Future of Literature in School

Mindaugas Grigaitis¹

Abstract

Contemporary students are called 'Generation Z'. Generation which is highly influenced by modern technologies. However, modern existential philosophers, such as Karl Jaspers, wrote that technological progress brings advantages but also creates technocratic ideology, which becomes a challenge to Humanities and human relations. Literature as school discipline also experiences this challenge: traditional reading and text understanding skills changes, neo-liberal economy creates attitude that literature is non-practical and unnecessary subject. This paper deals with this problem and aims to show innovative teaching and learning methodologies of literature. The purpose is to show that 'Generation Z' can be engaged in learning various literature aspects by transforming teaching process into multi-subject teaching. Two multi-subject lessons based on literary works will be introduced in the paper. These examples are provided in order to show that curriculum integration help generation of multi-functional devices understand literature as a discipline which is not separable from others disciplines. This teaching methodology also reveals literature as discipline which plays important role in teaching critical thinking.

Keywords: *literature, multi-subject teaching, critical reflection, humanistic education;*

1. Humanities in era of neoliberalism

1.1. Humanization vs technologization and marketization

In the middle of 20th century the understanding of the power technologies bring changed. Prominent existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers claimed that reckless technological progress is hazardous. A human being is changed by machines and bureaucratisation of human relations concludes in alienation. As Jaspers states, "the horizon of man's life becomes extraordinarily restricted in respect of the past and the future; he loses his cultural heritage and his quest for the final goal; he lives in the present alone. But this present becomes increasingly empty" [1]. According to philosopher, human individual becomes a function controlling machines and is controlled by machines, such as bureaucratic institutions. Existential philosophy claimed that individual human is not a mere data in table of statistics, individual human is a living being which is free and valuable. Existentialistic notion of human nature had huge impact on psychological and educational theories and influenced humanistic psychology [2] which became a basis for humanistic education [3]. The core of this educational theory is to humanize educational system. Humanization can be reached by emphasizing that student is a unique world and education must be organized in a way that can help student understand him/herself as unique unity of thought, feelings and emotions [4]. As Nimrod Aloni states, "humanism, both as a worldview and an ethical code that places human wellbeing, freedom, development and dignity as the ultimate human end, is beyond all political, religious, ideological and economic ideals and interests." [5] According to Stevick, humanistic worldview concentrated on individuality is "characteristic to Western culture" [6].

Educational philosophy based on humanistic ideas aimed to change Western educational system and reduce influence of technocratic attitude towards teaching and learning practices. Although such ideas could humanize society and broaden the horizon of human being but fast evolution of smart technologies changed orientation of Western civilization to neoliberal economy and technocratic ideology became even more aggressive. As Lithuanian philosopher Leonidas Donskis states, "we got accustomed to regarding a human being merely as a statistical unit. It does not come as a shock to us to view human individuals as a workforce." [7] Following these ideas we can conclude that humanistic worldview could humanize technocratic understanding which has been rooted in Western civilization since industrial revolution of 19th century when new technological possibilities constructed concept that educational system should be connected with economical needs and prepare individuals for participation in market. Evolution of modern smart technologies accelerated this process. Neoliberal ideology sees education only as mechanism to make profit or accelerate economy and constructs understanding that education system should be centred on more productive economy. Free individual who is creative, inventive and able to think critically is irrelevant or even dangerous because can rebel

¹ Knowledge Economy Forum, Lithuania



against dehumanising ideology and refuse to be an abstract function of economical manipulation [8]. In other words, neoliberal economy needs education to be “marketized” and humanist perspective emphasizes that education needs re-humanization not further marketization.

1.2 Humanities: to be or not to be?

If we go to the roots of humanistic education we see that Western education system until industrial revolution of 19th century was based on ancient humanist believe that Artes Liberales is much better way to educate individual than practical sciences. As Western societies turned to technocracy Arts and Humanities had been devalued. Neoliberal ideology sees these subjects as irrelevant. Professor Toril Moi emphasizes that “in today’s technocratic and business-orientated world humanities are under threat. Bureaucrats all over the Western world wonder why they should continue to fund disciplines that appear so unworldly, so incapable of bringing in money.” She defends humanities by stating that “the humanities are connected with history, meaning, and values. The humanities study this historical records of human experience and the myriads ways human beings have found to express that experience. Humanists interpret signs and decipher the traces of lost cultures” [9].

Moi’s words correlate Jaspers’ idea about technologization as “restriction of horizon” and correspond concept that technocratic ideology causes devaluation of historical heritage and emptiness of human existence. This leads to conclusion that we can not abandon humanities if we want to educate person able to understand importance of historical heritage, freedom and democracy. Returning to basis of humanist education does not mean that modern smart technologies must be abandoned. Teaching and learning of humanities should be modernized and one direction of modernization is interdisciplinary or multi-subject teaching. The idea of interdisciplinary connections are found in humanistic theory [10]. Humanistic worldview emphasizes human individual as unity of thought, feelings and emotions and separate disciplines are not able to give holistic view about oneself. As Russell and Zembylas states, “the boundaries among disciplines and subject areas are artificial and limit students’ access to broader meanings in life” [11]. Crossing boundaries of disciplines and joining aspects of different subjects leads to understanding culture as complex unity and oneself as a unique unity. This paper aims to show one strategy how literature lessons can cross discipline boundaries and become basis for holistic education.

2. Literature as multi-subject discipline

Before presenting examples of multi-subject lessons a short context should be delivered. The purpose of lessons was to examine if strategy of multi-subject teaching when literature becomes centre subject is useful in humanist sense. “Usefulness” means that fragments of various subjects are joined into holistic unity and result deeper understanding of culture and self. Any reckless turn from “one-discipline” teaching to “multi-subject” teaching can be harmful. The process should be carefully analysed in order to avoid situation when revolution ends in disaster. The process of learning before the lessons was organized in traditional way. Teacher of history explained students causes of WWI before first multi-subject lesson and traditions of Olympics before second lesson, teachers of music and art organized traditional oral lectures about totalitarian art and music styles for first lesson etc. As literature engages student in various analytical practices (searching for signs of historical and sociopolitical context, analysing authors choices of constructing narrative, searching for links between personal experience and human experience revealed in literary work) in these precise lessons exactly literature opened wide possibilities to unify fragments of separate subjects into holistic unity and “broaden the horizon”.

2.1. To understand past is to understand oneself

First multi-subject lesson “War in art and history” was held in War museum. Humanists aim to educate human’s individuality and individuality can not exist without memory (not only personal, but “collective” as well). Student should understand what reasons have caused biggest tragedies of mankind. The lesson aimed to show that historical events is not only outdated facts and dates, it is also dramatic experiences of individuals who dreamed, loved and suffered as contemporary people do. To reach the goal two novels of German novelist Erich Maria Remarque (“All quiet on the western front” and “Three comrades”) were analysed. By comparing the novels students could get full image of process how romanticism of war turns into devastating experiences. Students first read about young men who idealize sacrifice for nation, then by comparing different narrative techniques of novels experienced how individual feels in battle and how brutal experience grows to disillusionment and alienation. Integration of music and art was fundamental to understand propaganda techniques of war. Students used knowledge gained during history lessons to analyse how German imperial ideology created



image of great nation and prepared society for war by manipulating historical narratives. Information about totalitarian music and art helped students to understand that imperial ideology reinforced its aggressiveness by nationalistic music and posters. Such multi-subject strategy gave possibility not only to understand connection of historical and personal dimensions, but also opened the importance of personal responsibility and critical thinking. Reflection of lesson concluded in idea that if individual becomes influenced by manipulations of imperial ideology and approves it as his own ideology he/she becomes responsible not only for personal, but also for national and even global disaster. As lesson was held in War museum students could feel authentic atmosphere by touching authentic guns and reconstructed uniforms of WWI. This can be presented as good example that cooperation of educational and cultural institutions can reinforce humanistic education.

2.1. Multi-subject teaching and critical thinking

Second lesson "Sports as historical and cultural phenomena" was held in stadium of athletics. The aim of the lesson was to show students that each discipline covers separate rubric of human experience but altogether help to understand human as integral being of flesh, spirit and cultural habits. Before the lesson students had studied articles about history of the Olympics, also had oral lectures about Ancient Greek culture, Homer's epics and image of Greek hero. Biology teacher had several lessons about respiratory system and impact of stress for physical endurance. Book 23 ("Funeral Games for Patroclus") of Homer's epic poem "Iliad" was chosen as background for the lesson. Guided by teacher of physical education students were engage in similar sport activities as written in the poem: javelin throw, 400 m running and discus throwing. Results were summed up and rated. Before each activity students had to measure their heart rate and count frequency of breathing. After "active stage" students were involved in reflection about their experience during the lesson. Firstly problem of competition was discussed. Students wrote short reflective statements about their feeling experienced in competition and had to express opinion how much we are influenced by social environment which requires to be better than others. Discussion about sports and mass culture was opened. Box fights priced hundreds of million dollars were discussed in light of Greek Olympic spirit. Students had to reflect mass culture and neoliberal ideology changed concept of sports. Also manipulations of "Greek-hero-like" image (athletic, successful, strong, fearless) of male in mass media were discussed. Similarities and differences between Greek hero and contemporary male ideal were reflected. Discussion concluded in idea that beauty industry by emphasizing psychical beauty eliminates ancient concept of psychical and spiritual unity. During such multiple activities and reflective practices students improve academic knowledge and get opportunity to understand that such phenomena as sports can ignite critical thinking and give holistic view of culture and oneself.

3. Conclusions

Although this paper might sound either apocalyptic or utopic, it reveals new perspectives for humanizing Western educational system. Literature as discipline is strongly connected with other subjects and opens wide opportunities for multi-subject lessons. Such lessons reveal Humanities as disciplines explaining meanings of human experience and cultures. Separate subject should be taught in schools because contemporary society needs various specialists but there is need to "rehumanize" Western educational system and socio-political environment. Lessons unifying fragments of various subjects broadens horizon of understanding and improves critical thinking which is mandatory to secure individuality of human being from technocratic neoliberal ideology.

References

- [1] Jaspers, K. "The origin and goal of history", Yale University Press, 1953, p. 111.
- [2] Colman, A. M. "A dictionary of psychology", Oxford University Press, 2009. Oxford Reference Online. Seen 05 May 2018, link: <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20111017142622407>
- [3] Stevick, E. W. "Humanism in language teaching. A critical perspective", Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 25.
- [4] Lei, Q. "EFL teachers' factors and students' affect", US-China Education Review, 4(3), 2007, p. 60.
- [5] Aloni, N. "Enhancing humanity. The philosophical foundations of humanistic education", Springer, 2007, p. 62.
- [6] Stevick, E. W. "Humanism in language teaching. A critical perspective", Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 25.



- [7] Donskis, L. "A new technocratic revolution or the end of modern nations?", personal website of Leonidas Donskis. Seen 05 May 2018, link: http://www.donskis.lt/a/lt/13/1_/2205.
- [8] Hill, D. "Educational perversion and global neoliberalism", Neoliberalism and Education Reform Cresskill, USA: Hampton Press, 2007, p. 117.
- [9] Moi, T. "Access to the universal: language, literature, and the humanities", The Critical Pulse: Thirty-Six Credo's by Contemporary Critics, Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 186.
- [10] Sicherl-Kafola, B. Denac, O. "The importance of interdisciplinary planning of the learning process", Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences 2, 2010, p. 4695.
- [11] Russell, J., Zembylas, M. "Arts integration in the curriculum: A Review of Research and Implications for Teaching and Learning", International Handbook of Research in Arts Education, The Netherlands: Springer, 2007, p. 288.