

Literary Studies and the Questions we Ask: On Reflection as Cognitive Core Competence

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Abstract

Trapped in a contemporary educational twirl, generated by a public management inspired definition of educational quality as something measurable and assessable, the teaching of literature in school faces major difficulties in terms of both performance and justification. At the same time reading and talking about literature reveal some profound shortcomings in the current tendency to make education secure and predictable. These are apparent against the backdrop of a long history of treating literature reading as a main aspect of education, of becoming educated. In our paper we focus on the core competence of reflection as central to all education regarded as an essential practice in the forming and upholding of a democratic society. To reflect is to critically-ethically engage yourself with the notion of something and someone Other. Reflection, then, is fundamentally dialogical and of an indefinite nature, i.e. a process of reciprocal estrangement – seeing yourself in the other, and the other in yourself – making space for the becoming of liable subjects. We suggest that reading and talking about literature in school by necessity must open up for such events. Reflection as a pedagogical activity must be defined as using thought processes to produce answers of a non-definite nature. To reflect is synonymous with considering, contemplating, deliberating, etc. If reflection systematically could be taught, modelled and given time and centrality in teaching, and thereby be a counter-discourse to the focus on speed and quantity in contemporary schools much would be gained. And what it all comes down to, in a teaching perspective, is the questions we ask.

Keywords: *literature didactics, educational philosophy, reflection, generic competences.*

1. Introduction

Trapped in a contemporary educational twirl, generated by a public management inspired definition of educational quality as something wholly measurable and assessable, the teaching of literature in school faces major difficulties in terms of both justification and performance. At the same time the reading of and talking about literature highlights some essential shortcomings in the current efforts to make education secure and predictable. [1] These limitations are apparent against the backdrop of a long history where literature reading is considered a main aspect of education and of becoming educated, i.e. becoming a citizen.

This paper is a theoretical exploration of one central concept in education in general and specifically within literary studies. Our investigation is concentrated around the core competence of *reflection* as fundamental to all education, and on how questions posed in the classroom accordingly mirrors how we define *reflection*. Using Benjamin Bloom's classical taxonomy, we define reflection as an educationally desirable *higher-order of thinking*, which takes place on the basis of lower-order thinking skills. [2] In its core, *reflection* as activity is a meta-cognitive competence, where the subject brings together utterances of knowledge from various spheres and puts herself in relation to these expressions. When turning to the reading of fiction, it is according to J. Hillis Miller fundamental to experience and immerse in the depicted universe, characters and events. [3] However, the pedagogical activation of reflection in the classroom requires complementary approaches, where the literary work as aesthetic expression and performance is highlighted. How may we define the activity of reflection in the stance of literary education and what kind of questions should we as teachers accordingly ask in the realm of the classroom?

2. The nature of reflection and the questions we ask

Reflection is often regarded as the tool by which a student might reach specific learning objectives. This poses a pedagogical problem to many students in the sense that the actual ability to reflect is vague to them. Even if teachers ask questions aiming at reflection, there is always a risk of students guessing for an imagined correct answer. This explorative study therefore asks what kind of activity *reflection* premises and how that may be made transparent and modelled to students.

To reflect is, we propose, to critically and ethically engage yourself with the notion of something and someone Other. Reflection, then, is fundamentally dialogical and of a transformative nature. It is a process of reciprocal estrangement, seeing yourself in the other, and the other in yourself; a process making space for the becoming of the subject as someone liable. We suggest that engaging with fictional narratives can be a way of highlighting reflection in education in so far as it makes it possible for the student to take the position of an addressee, rather than emotionally immerse in the characters and happenings of the depicted world. For reflection to take place, the *voice* of the literary text, as content as well as form, has to be heard and mused upon. [4]

Reflection as a pedagogical activity must furthermore be defined as using thought processes to produce answers of a non-definite nature. As opposed to many other school tasks, reflection means that the student is able to ponder and reason over several possible outcomes and not expect a given. Both teacher and student must be able to communicate around large scopes of problems without succumbing to matching questions with given answers. Synonymous with *reflect* is to consider, to contemplate, to study, to deliberate, ponder, meditate, etc. It means brooding in between answer and question and by using patient thinking take the time to consider many perspectives to educate your mind – alone with yourself or together with others. There is an element of time here which highlights what is known as *slow education*, counter-acting the speed in today's classrooms. [5] This is also connected to the amount of tasks students are given. The questions we ask, the amount of questions we ask and the qualitative level of the questions asked define what education is to a student, to a teacher and to a society.

Many a teacher of literature would probably claim that their work includes many a reflecting task. However, to ask of students to give a review of or opinion on a narrative doesn't necessarily mean the kind of reflection we are dealing with here. This is why modelling the characteristics of reflection is of essence in the hope of giving room for deeper and dialogical levels of understanding. To ask questions without modelling and teaching what is expected on this next level of understanding is neither fruitful nor fair. This involves how students, and for good reasons, normally understand school activities: as a situation where there are given answers which they are supposed to reproduce to the teacher.

Could we then state that any kind of reflection is of essence or are we aiming for something specific? If a more complex understanding of literature as a performance of knowledge is defined as important, how might we pave the way for such a relational understanding in the classroom? How may the pedagogue guide students to move from a restricted *use* of literature as a means, to an *event* of responsible and elaborate reflection on the literary text as the evocation of something Other?

What, then, characterizes a question which both models and opens up for a reflective answer? In this limited context we will give just one example applied to literary studies. We propose, along the lines of Stanley Cavell and Toril Moi, the establishment in the classroom of an inquiry around *why* a specific author has chosen what to tell us, and how to tell it. [6] "*Why* does the story begin/end in this way (and not in another)?" "*Why* is the story set in this place and time (and not in another one)?" "*Why* is the protagonist characterized in this way (and not in another)?" "*Why* is the focalization made in this way (and not in another)?" What this kind of alternative *talking about narratives* actually has the power to do is to performatively transform the textual matter of facts (whether it has to do with form or content) to rhetorical *doings* and *choices*, a process of amplified *artifaction*, i.e. a procedure where the text is put to the fore not only as something made, but is also given agency as communication.

3. Conclusion

If *reflection* systematically could be taught, modelled and given time and centrality in teaching, and thereby be a counter-discourse to the speed, quantity and sometimes reproductive activities in contemporary classrooms much would be gained. In literary studies the questions and assignments we put to the students mirror what we demarcate as essential and worth knowing. Our vision of education, of knowledge, of students as well as of, in this case, literature, is encased by the questions we ask. Even if our overall intention perhaps carries aims of a higher order, of a complex understanding of literature, the bottom line when measuring a student's achievements tends to focus on lower orders of thinking.

We would like to emphasize such competences which are not so easily measured but of utmost importance when it comes to becoming educated in the most profound sense of the word, that is to, as a liable subject, step into the world of others. (We are fully aware of this emphasis going against the recent shift in modern Western educational systems from being a public good to being a private good... [7]) In this context we are not presenting an array of empirical evidence, but have in this paper instead focused on our personal field of teaching – literary studies – and the matter of reflection in

relation to the questions we as teachers pose to our students in the classroom. We find that the core competence of reflection first of all needs to be actually taught, i. e. activated in the classroom. Secondly, we propose that reflection as activity should be modelled and carry value when competencies are assessed. Exactly *how* this is to be enacted is one of the many questions we must ask and reflect on in the future to come.

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