



An interview with Ondřej Hník: “For today’s school, I cannot imagine anything other than innovative literary education”

Entrevista con Ondřej Hník: “Para la escuela de hoy no puedo imaginar otra cosa que una educación literaria innovadora”

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Abstract

In the educational subject Czech Language and Literature, the present concept of literary education continues to be primarily based on the doctrinal approach reduced to literary history and frontal organizational form of teaching. Less class space is given to the use of innovatively conceived literary education: reading texts, especially artistic literature, and creative activity involving the pupils’ construction and re-construction of the texts and their reflection. Contemplating literature teaching in Czech schools is Ondřej Hník, Ph.D., Associate Professor of the Department of Czech Studies at the Pedagogical Faculty of Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem.

Keywords: Literature; Didactics of language and literature; Literary education

Resumen

En la disciplina Lengua Checa y Literatura, el concepto actual de educación literaria continúa siendo fundamentalmente basada en el enfoque de doctrina reducido a historia literaria y a la forma frontal organizacional de enseñar. Menos espacio en clase es dedicado al uso de educación literaria concebida de manera innovadora: lectura de textos, especialmente literatura artística, y actividad creativa envolviendo la construcción y reconstrucción por parte de los estudiantes de los textos, y sus reflexiones sobre los mismos. Ondřej Hník, Ph.D., profesor del Departamento de Estudios Checos en la Facultad de Pedagogía Jan Evangelista Purkyně, de la Universidad en Ústí nad Labem reflexiona sobre la enseñanza de la literatura en escuelas checas.

Palabras clave: Literatura; Didáctica de la lengua y la literatura; Educación literaria

INTERVIEW

Interviewer: Current Czech literary education is dominated by the traditional doctrine involving the teaching of historical and biographical contexts of literature. Do you think this is sufficient for obtaining the required reading literacy?

Hník: As you already suggest in your question, it is not sufficient. Although I don't particularly agree with the term reading literacy, I believe that the literacy-based concept of education is a fashionable trend; in short, instead of speaking of skills or skill sets in literary education or in the sphere of reading and literary education, there is a discussion – in accordance with fashionable trends that scholarly discourses are not immune to – of reading literacy. But back to the current Czech literary education. What is striking about the whole situation, to say the least, is that excessive factographicity of literature teaching or literary education has been the subject of polemical debates for at least 130 years.

These discussions have been intense and continual, with prominent personalities of Czech professional, cultural and political life engaging in them from time to time, among them Hubert Gordon Schauer (1862 – 1892), František Krejčí (1858 – 1934), Otakar Hostinský (1847 – 1910), Vilém Mathesius (1882 - 1945), Jan Mukařovský (1891 – 1975), František Götze (1894 -1974) and numerous others. Many of these personalities were teachers or professors at Prague's university; many taught at secondary schools. The participants of these polemics, therefore, addressed the issue of teaching literature not only as theoreticians, but also as long-time and experienced practitioners with empirical knowledge of the potential and limits of literature teaching based on literary history or, on the contrary, on aesthetics/aesthetic education.

Interviewer: What are the hypothetical causes of the persistence of the traditional doctrinal concept in Czech (or Czechoslovak) literary education?

Hník: In my monograph (*Literature Didactics: Challenges of the Discipline*. Prague: Karolinum, 2014), I attempted to identify these causes. I conclude that they are basically of two types, starting with historical causes. The problem is basically that the Austrian educational tradition has persisted here since the Austro-Hungarian period. This tradition is very strong, but in its time, in which there were different living and educational conditions and needs, it may have been effective or at least justified in its own way. Another cause is a certain combination of individual, societal and psychological causes.

What I roughly mean by it is that teachers, especially in the time-pressed conditions of Czech schools, not very favorable to pedagogical innovation such as experiential and activity-based learning, are moving away from innovative efforts and sliding into the familiar stereotypical teaching, i. e. in the case of literary education into the frontally communicated literary history. Moreover, everyone has at least a latent tendency to teach in the way they themselves were taught. In the conditions of a particular school, which may operate quite differently from the ideals of novice teachers, the teacher has to be very balanced and resilient, both physically and mentally, in order to withstand all the pressure and to justify for him/herself the concept s/he stands by while also carrying it through among his/her colleagues, the school's management and the parents.

Interviewer: So how do you explain the failure of most Czech schools to introduce innovatively conceived (in terms of reading or interpretation) literary education, which has become tradition in Western countries or in the USA?

Hník: Many other countries have a less strong factographic tradition or a completely different tradition. In some countries, they don't really worry about how many authors they manage to cover, or, more precisely, in some countries it has been the norm for decades or perhaps even centuries (across the school levels, including the university) to cover fewer topics than in the Czech school, but more in depth. Therefore, fewer authors and texts are taught, but using a single text, teachers can demonstrate or otherwise communicate the context of the author, work and period while making a detour to other texts. And this is not just the case of literary education; in numerous countries, this is how subjects such as geography or history, which are integrated into one subject in France, are taught.

In the Czech Republic, the Austrian tradition is very deeply rooted. What's more, it is being conserved by primary and secondary schools, as well as universities. When I speak of universities, I also mean teacher training faculties. At many pedagogical faculties, numerous specialized courses, including literature, are taught purely factographically, without emphasizing the discipline's orientation to education. Later on, therefore, the students in the role of teachers cannot imagine they could do it differently and better. By orientation to education in strictly specialized subjects I don't mean didactics as such; courses in didactics for future teachers naturally exist in our university curriculum.

What I'm hinting at, however, is for instance the concept of university learning content (literary content included) as a whole, the structuring of university subject matter with a view to the students' future teaching practice, the purposeful transformation

(not only reduction!) of this learning content, again with regard to the students' future teaching practice, etc. The methods used to teach morphology, syntax, lexicology, world literature or 19th-century Czech literature at philosophical faculties, which don't prepare future teachers, should be different from the methods used at faculties that do prepare them. And by no means whatsoever do I mean the practicum and utilitarian reduction of knowledge; I'd like to emphasize that. A major untapped potential of the Czech education system, therefore, consists in university didactics or the didactics of teaching specific disciplines at universities, especially at pedagogical faculties.

Interviewer: When (and under what conditions) do you think the reading-based and interpretative approach in literary education will become fully established in Czech schools?

Hník: When today's framework educational programs (hereinafter, the FEPs), whatever they are called in the future, are reworked in favour of the innovative approach. The way I envision this is that teachers will no longer have to interpret the expected outputs (whether we call them this or something else, e. g. expected learning results) as requirements to communicate a lot of information and achieve completeness.

But even that is not enough by any means. The journey must also be personal and internal. As I see it, real change will happen when teachers get a chance to understand that they don't have to teach within the quantity of the former curricula; when they get a chance to understand that they are raising and educating their pupils and students for life, not for the school-leaving exam, secondary school entrance exams or large-scale testing. When they get the chance to understand that mere recitation of facts makes them regurgitators, not teachers. When they get the chance to understand that mere recitation of facts is not helping their students to get ahead or develop their personalities, and that they therefore aren't good teachers and guides on their path to literature, to reading, to art.

I would like to remind you in this regard that if the FEP is reworked after all, the catalogue of requirements for the school-leaving examination (*Catalogue of requirements of the common part of the school-leaving examination*) will have to be reworked as well, in accordance with the law. But even that doesn't have to be followed by teachers; the catalogue of requirements for the school-leaving examination is not a mandatory document for them (nor a mandatory list of the educational content for their subjects); the only mandatory thing is the School Educational Programme, which teachers draw up themselves and innovate according to the FEP. I'm not saying this to criticize

the teachers. I consider myself to be a teacher, having taught at a primary school and in a children centre, and I value the teachers' work. I regard the teaching profession in the 21st century – at least in the Euro-American civilization – as the most demanding occupation in the world.

Interviewer: At the Pedagogical Faculty of UJEP, you educate future teachers of the Czech language and literature. What do you emphasize in literary education didactics? What is your experience?

Hník: My students undergo specific text-based activities or other activities which arouse their interest in text and its levels, in literature and its contexts, in reading. Using that, they learn to understand that they don't need to regurgitate data. When they themselves undertake the experience of reading and creating text (which also includes, for instance, the transformation and complementation of text, searching for the lost order in text) and realize what and how they are learning from it and that their knowledge is organically linked to experience, thus being long-term or permanent, they slowly begin to understand that the mere training for the secondary school entrance exam or the school-leaving exam is both intellectually and spiritually insufficient for them as future teachers as well as for their pupils, that it pushes them away from the knowledge of literary art, the world and themselves.

That genuine education towards literature, art and reading is somewhere else entirely. My experience is that students get to experience a bit of a shock. But many finally come to realize that there is indeed another way of doing it, involving not just someone lecturing them, but also enabling them to make an empiric experience. This means that I don't serve them a cookbook, a methodology or the only so-called correct way; instead, I show them possibilities of thinking about literary education and how to really "do" it with their pupils. I always emphasize that teaching is the search for one's own way

Interviewer: What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of the innovative concept of literary education?

Hník: I find it impossible to imagine anything other than the so-called innovative literary education for today's children and youth. That is to say, if we put the so-called innovative teaching in contrast with the factographic, doctrinal, literary history-based teaching of literature. For me personally, literary education (which should also include literature teaching at secondary school), is genuine artistic education, as the name reminds us. Sadly, just reminds us, as far as today's secondary schools are concerned. And the

frontally communicated literary history (a form evidenced by various recent research findings concerning the school practice of literary education), has, in my opinion, nothing in common with artistic education, i. e. neither with education towards art, towards literature, nor education by art, by literature.

The disadvantage of labelling (I emphasize, labelling, not the concept itself!) of literary education as *innovative* is that many people, including literary scholars, will erroneously assume that it is a concept that weakens or even cancels knowledge in classes. This is a grave error. Furthermore, many people can infer from this label that the concept belongs to the wider context of (excessively) liberal upbringing and education; however, that is grossly incorrect as well. Innovative, or possibly also interpretative, interpretational, reading-based or experiential approach to literary education is a purposeful concept, already well-defined and elaborated in today's literature didactics. So, I believe that the enormous advantage of the innovative approach is that, at the very least, it weakens factographicity, which is causing secondary-school education to unravel. That pupils and students, rather than being passive listeners, note-takers and reproducers of isolated facts or parroted phrases on the meaning of the literary work, are given a chance to become active and think for themselves.

Interviewer: How should literary education ideally be taught?

Hník: I'm not sure whether this question can be answered; different things are ideal for different teachers and pupils. In the situation of the Czech school after 2020, I believe it is the following: (1) teach substantially less and in deep context; for instance, only a third of the names, a third of the texts currently taught, but to use this reduced material to show more; (2) use literary texts and contexts to teach how to think about the world, about life, about oneself, to go deeper within; and (3) entirely fulfil the concept of literary education as full-fledged artistic education. This means to fully educate through literature and, simultaneously, towards literature.

From the point of view of the teachers, this involves educating the child to become a better reader, a better perceiver of literary art and a better human being, rather than regurgitating names, dates, trends, making lists and pigeonholing, and demanding these lists and pigeonholes back in the form of memorized isolated facts. For me, the real ideal is when the teacher understands that children have the foundations of all disciplines inside them and all that needs to be done is to bring these out and develop them. And when this understanding is so strong and irrefutable that the teacher won't be coerced by anyone and anything into the senseless regurgitation of facts.

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