Teachers for the Knowledge Society

# Multiple representations in the Romanian literature class

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**Abstract**

My research was carried out with high school students from the Math and Computer science. The aim was to support them overcome their difficulties in the study of Romanian literature, to find a purpose for this study as well as to learn and read for pleasure. I tried to check if multiple representations, in the sense of Gardner in the Disciplined Mind, are able to enlarge the students' cultural understanding and to help them internalise the operational concepts in the literature curriculum. The results sustain the benefits of multiple intelligences-based approaches in literature teaching.

## 1. Once upon a time...

I had started my career as a teacher of Romanian in a high school and I was trying really hard to have a good beginning. But my students, who were enrolled in the Computer science strand, did not even attempt at reading literature. Understanding of operational concepts was beyond reach. Writing an essay was absurd. It all seemed hopeless as we were stuck in our routines – I was giving my best to teach (and failing it at its best!), whereas my students were reluctant at studying literature (whatever that meant to them). I first asked myself: What is going on? What is there so scary in learning about your own language? What is that which blocks the taste for literature? Why the hostility towards the school subject I was teaching? What is that barier between my students and the reading process?

I needed to find answers so I rephrased the questions, designed a first questionnaire and applied it to my students. My goal was to find out what their personal interests were so that I could relate to something that I might value during our classes. My students had to fill in statements by which they were communicating something important about themselves such as *My favourite TV channel is ..., when I graduate I will ..., If I had money I would buy ... , I am fond of...*

When analysing the data, I realised that even if my students are not interested in reading they are nevertheless very fond of discovering new things. This was an encouragement to go further with my questions. I designed another, more specific questionnaire to see if I can find out new ways they might try, in order to approach novelty in their readings. Basically the second questionnaire explored what they found difficult, what they disliked and would like to do during the Romanian class (I was looking for issues like whether they favour group work, whether they

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would try project work or would look for sources and specific information in order to solve a problem, what helps them better understand a text). What have I found out? The overwhelming majority did not want to be given definitions, instructions and textbook comments because „they are good at nothing". Most of them were quite open to develop projects and apply discovery learning. This is how I decided to give them the opportunity to learn by doing, to try projects in the Romanian class and to support them experiment a 'plural' reading to fit both the requirements of the curriculum as well as their various talents.

## 2. A theory in sync with our needs

In my attempt to do better in my teaching I related to Gardner's view of the multiple representations (Gardner 2004, 2006, 2007) which in the domain of philology rhymes with the multiple perspectives in the interpretation of literature. The theory of multiple intelligences (MI) is a good starting point to reinvent a plural literature in the very process of classroom practice. Why to reinvent? Throughout the years the Romanian class had reproduced the single standard of the self contained literary analysis. My students had been taught to recite the uniform view and repeat what the teacher thought was good for them in order to pass the exams. They disliked this profoundly. They found it irrelevant and boring. And they were right. What good it ever does to a computer specialist to memorize a distinguished comment to a 19th century novel by a reputed author?

The uniform view is an ineffective pedagogical perspective that does not value the students' various cognitive profiles (Singer&Sarivan, 2006). Similarly, the uniform reading imposed by the traditional teaching does not value the richness of meaning of the literary work. There is no understanding of the literature's depth when the reading track is already given or when students only refer to the literary analysis or comment in a book.

The multiple intelligences approach opens to discovery learning based on analogies, metaphors and individualized perspectives to the content. In the literature class, this is translated into students being guided towards representing the literary text within a set of core ideas by means of a symbolic code they are comfortable with. But how could a teacher support her students to think of multiple representations of literature if they did not want to read literature? The success of the MI-based approach can be obtained by a thorough planning so that students be motivated towards a gradual entrance in the space of the text.

I systematically applied the „three uses of the intelligences" (Gardner, 2004) by providing my students with *points of entry* (so that they can become curious about the text and have a taste of it), with *apt analogies* (so that what is unfamiliar in terms of the literary operational concept becomes better understood by referring to a known topic), with *multiple representations* (so that more ways than the verbal one can be used in order to express and to interpret literature).

My hypothesis was that if students use multiple representations in decoding the literary text they will develop interpretation and argumentation competences. The multiple representations train students to choose how to deal with the meanings of the text and that is the core of literary interpretation.

## 3. Learning to teach for deep understanding

The road was „bumpy" in the beginning. It was a challenge for me to open towards this multiplicity. I started to plan learning units by looking for various entry points other than a *story*, something new and powerful to attract my students and deconstruct their belief that literature is boring and of no use. This was not easy because I am a language teacher and my comfortable zone is the linguistic one. In the same time my pedagogical background was not so flexible. It took me a lot of time to find a good entry point for such an abstract concept as the „modern period" in literature. And I finally decided upon showing them Diego Velásquez' *Las Meninas* - a painting that suggests the main ideas of the specificity of the modern literature such as characters'features, caricature, the decorative art, influences, cosmopolitism. This proved to be an inspired entry point as it mobilized the students to use their abilities, to interact in discussing the image, to be aware of their reactions towards the topic and to learn from the explanations and views expressed by their colleagues. *Las Meninas* was the beginning of a challenging experience of perseverance on my behalf and of learning surprises for both my students and myself. The students do go deeper in the substance of the text if they are allowed to represent it in a personal way but they need guidance in order to do so. I observed them while in the process of transposing mentally what they read and learned. Guiding

them in the labyrinth of interpretations is trying to find the best metaphor to express a route that is not at hand and without which they might sink back to boredom and lack of meaning.

The general opinion is that students no longer read and learn. Partly, this is sadly true. The questionnaires I applied had showed that some of my students had never finished the reading of a book in their whole lives. My first step was to look for a reason and then to a solution to this situation. My research shows that despite the general opinion students get to deep understanding of the literary text if they are drawn towards the secrets of it and if they are offered keys to access it.

In the past, my students' school readings were excessively formal and I had to deconstruct this formalist approach to the text. The basic disadvantage of this philological excess is that it blocks the authentic encounter between the reader and his/her object. The formal perspective suspends the genuine intellectual and emotional participation of the reader in the act of reading.

My next step was to try and harmonize individual activities with pair work and team work in order to produce meaningful artifacts. The main activities I planned are the following: roleplay, poster design and poster presentation, development of booklets, the making of a magazine to illustrate the "news" and "depths" of their learning, case study and simulation of a literary trial.

These activities were very motivating and they gradually stimulated the reading and reflection of the whole class. (see in Fig. 1 the snapshot of one of those moments when interest in the matter starts to develop...)



Fig.1. The raising interest in the text interpretation

If students are invited to explain what they understand from what they read or studied they are by far more interested in producing multiple representations in a wide range of forms. Here is some of the feedback collected from them while referring to the magazine development. Students believed that: they were able to reveal "truths within the text", they got "into the mystery of the text", they were "taken by the text", "stolen by imagination", "welcomed in the creative realm...". Basically, the students replicated an artistic truth clearly stated by Plato - the fact that art is a copy of the Reality, a copy of the Idea, and that behind the ideas there is a Zeus of artistic creation. Nevertheless they perceive themselves as nothing else but a "new generation" (Generatia Noua) which is actually the title they chose for their magazine. (see Fig. 2 - the cover of their magazine).

Another activity the students enjoyed doing was the simulation of a literary trial. Comparing my own performance as a facilitator of the trial simulation to a previous (classical approach) to the same text, I have to also admit that I myself as an adult and teacher I clearly enjoyed the first! The trial was simulated on a canonic text in the curriculum (a short story by Caragiale, one of the most famous Romanian writers). For authenticity we invited a law

expert (thankfully one of the parents could fulfill this role!) in order to help us deal with the the genuine legal aspects. The students chose to belong to either the group of the defense or the one of the prosecution. In order to participate in the trial the students had the following working sheet to help them sort the information in the text.

*1. The short story starts with an item of information about the arrest of a gang who had terrorised a whole county. Identify the events that occur until the moment priest Iancu confesses before his brother that he is the head of the gang.*

*2. Order events according to their chronology.*

*3. Select the strange issues connected to the episode of the priest's being robbed*

*4. Show how priest Iancu managed to escape the authorities.*

*5. Explain the inn keeper's attitude when his brother confesses he is the leader of the gang.*

*6. Identify the deep meaning of the statement: "The devil's pushed him..." as compared to the priest's confession.*

*7. Explain the inn keeper's reaction when the person whe sat on the bed identifies himself as his brother. Select the elements that show the inn keeper's bewilderment and define their categorization: reasonable, emotional, behavioural.*

*8. Describe the inn keeper's behaviour as a reply to his brother's statements until the latter sits on the bed. Explain the lack of the verbal reaction of the inn keeper. Explain the meaning of the question : " You believed me dead. didn't you?"*

*9. Describe the fight. Pay attention to the inn keeper's attitude before the fight, the means of the inn keeper and the trick used by the former priest.*
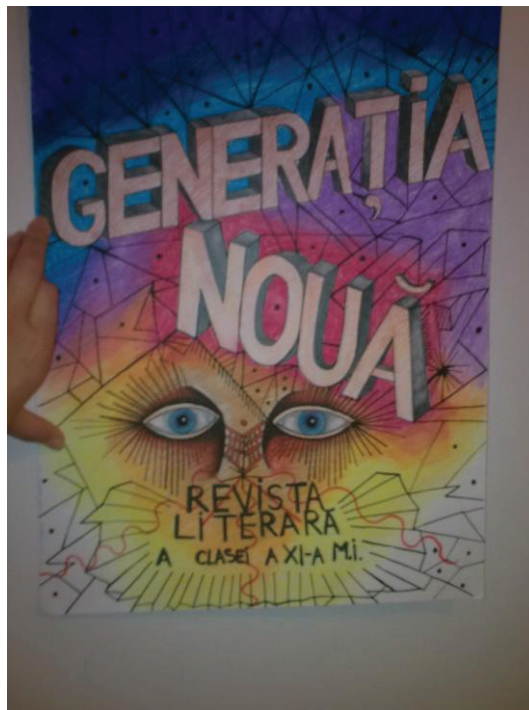


Fig. 2. The cover of the students' magazine

Last but not least, in many of the learning units, my students had the possibility to explore important concepts, the "big ideas" (Gardner, 2004) by making use of their varied talents. Here is an example of the MI-approach the way we adapted it to our particular context. It was a study of a famous work by Blaga, a famous Romanian poet. Students were allowed to form groups according to their strongest ability. Here are the tasks that oriented their choice: Linguistic - Identify phrases that belong to the semantic field of the lyrical ego as opposed to the *others*. ; Logic-mathematic - develop a scheme to show the relationship among the poet and the mysteries of the world;

*Musical* - find a tune that is adequate for the atmosphere suggested by the poem and/ or the emotional experience of the poet; Spatial - design a poster to reflect the atmosphere of the poem; Kinesthetic - mime the inner life of the poet as opposed to the *others*.

Poetry is always more difficult for the students' reception than any other type of text. As the above mentioned activity really stimulated them to analyse the poem from a personal perspective I could note the benefits of the MI approach. The multiple perspective on the difficult but important concepts for literary interpretation led students to better understand the artistic phenomenon.

## 4. Conclusion

The contextualized projects based on the multiple representations made my students to go beyond their former beliefs about literature study. They managed to connect their personal experience with the new learning experiences.

They kept on working with enthusiasm, curiosity and pleasure.

Gradually the Romanian class was no longer boring. Nor was it useless. They made sense of it and they were able to see the novelty in the interpretation of an "old" text (where "old" is a label for whatever is the canon!).

Beyond the succes of their motivation for reading and interpretation, the multiple representations we explored together brought about a number of bonuses: the exercise of critical thinking, decision making, looking for information and selecting the most appropriate of it, discerning among sources (Singer&Sarivan, 2009). All these put literature study in a broader perspective that gives meaning to the Romanian class for the needs beyond the pleasure of reading.

The MI approach also helped them gain confidence in their talents: they could make and appraise artifacts of high quality. In fact the results improved from one learning unit to the other, showing the progress they were able to make in internalizing the reading competence and the most important literary concepts.

After three semesters of MI-based learning units I can say that my research has been a success and that both me and my students find ourselves at ease within the approach. According to the feedback I received, literature is enjoyable now.

*"We like to use it* (n.a. Multiple representation*), it's relaxing. In the same time I could learn a lot of things that are useful. I like to read. It brings emotional balance."*

*"I've become a little bit of a critic - I learned how to go beyond the surface, look for meanings, step in the narrator's shoes. It is enjoyable to discuss with friends about what you read. I guess I am addicted a little bit. I mean the reading for understanding and its magic.. "* (Cristina)

*"To be honest - Yes, until this I never read for pleasure. When I got involved in the project I just took the book and I read. Actually without obligation. I think I just went viral with reading. The activity helped me discover even other books I would like to read in the future. I had never heard about those authors..."* (Vlad)

*"I loved it. I truly did. I've never thought I might get to love reading a book"* (Adriana)...

... Which truly indeed makes a delightful neverending story of our preference for multiple representations!

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