

THE DON'T "DO-IT-YOURSELF" OF EDUCATION:  
TEACHING AND LEARNING LITERATURE AS  
PRODUCTION OF COLLECTIVE KNOWLEDGE

**Clarissa Menezes Jordão**

**Some Assumptions**

There has been some uproar about the canon, what constitutes it and what it constitutes, how it is instituted and its validity in the teaching of literature.<sup>1</sup> As important as thoughts about what literature should be taught are discussions on *how* it could be taught. Techniques on teaching reading and foreign language in general have a lot to tell us, but not enough. When we come to the study of literary texts, textual linguistics, discourse analysis, theories of interpretation, all are found wanting; hermeneutics and reader-response criticism have investigated the production/discovery of meaning, problematised the locus of significance, questioned the limits of interpretation, the roles of the reader, of the author, of culture, history and society in the process of reading comprehension/interpretation. All this has a lot to do with literature, but the teaching of foreign literature and what happens in literature classrooms still lacks careful study.

*How* literature is taught/learnt<sup>2</sup> has not been a very trendy aspect of literary studies or education, perhaps because of its constituent

Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 37	p.049-059	jul./dez. 1999
------------------	---------------	-------	-----------	----------------

“alterity”, its necessary relation with personal/cultural values, since in order to discuss literature teaching/learning one states and perhaps even revises her/his own beliefs, and consequently sees her/his own attitudes to life brought to the fore. How literature is taught/learnt involves the formation of identities, concepts of the world and society, education and literature, culture and ideology, knowledge and power. The way literature is taught/learnt is related first of all to attitudes rather than techniques, to world views rather than teaching/learning strategies; such attitudes and views will determine the choice of texts, the importance of canonical and non-canonical works, the approach to interpretations, the validity/recognition of critical efforts made both by students and teachers of literature.

### **Knowledge as a Social Construct**

Parallel to language and the subject, knowledge is also a social construct. The literature classroom is a place where knowledge is, or could be, socially under construction. Rather than merely re-producing readings, students and teachers might find, in the meeting of identities in the classroom, unique opportunities to produce knowledge. If, according to postmodern thinking, our identities are multiple, constituted in the interplay I/Other; if meaning is dynamic and can only be perceived in the relation between signifiers<sup>3</sup>; if knowledge and power are situated, historical and partial, then the classroom can be seen as the locus of a dialogic relation that produces, as well as reproduces, meanings and identities.

Derrida’s chain of *différance* (different + deferred) for the production and perception of meaning, Lacan’s subject (who only perceives itself in Otherness, in an endless play of signifiers), Foucault’s power/knowledge formations, do constitute the teaching/learning process and are manifest in the classroom. Like any other social group, the classroom establishes a dialogical conflict where each of the participants “seeks the response of the other”.<sup>4</sup> In such a conflict,

relations of power are produced, maintained, tested; limits are verified, meaning is recreated and produced. Fragmented subjects coexist in the classroom, in a heterogeneous social group made up of multiple identities in an on-going process of identification, in a never-ending movement for the recognition of self and other. The clashes of values, conceptions of truth and truths, reading experiences, beliefs, world views, life stories, produce fertile ground for exchange, creation and re-elaboration of meanings, for re-workings of knowledge, for creation and re-creation of truths. Nevertheless, profitable as such a heterogeneity can be, teachers and students usually strive for the elimination/negation of difference — a suppression of one's own otherness, of the Lacanian unconscious in each of us — on behalf of an illusory certainty, a utopian security which the apparent mastering of instituted knowledge is assumed to bring. Thus determined by a humanistic concept of science and education, teachers and students conform to their social roles as transmitters and receptors respectively, dealing with the idea of knowledge as merely information, objective and exterior to subjects, not to be *produced* at school, but reproduced and passed on to the students by the teacher, neutrally and objectively. This widespread view of knowledge and of the role of teachers, students and school reinforces knowledge as a given, reached by a few privileged persons, and detached, safe from the contamination of praxis:

... gaining school knowledge is seen as severing one's personal connections with the object of study. In this view, school knowledge comes in hard, neat, and morally neutral packages that, once possessed, can be used for thinking, which is largely a procedural and individual rather than communal matter.<sup>5</sup>

The postmodern concept of subjectivity, however, challenges systematic knowledge<sup>6</sup> and shows knowledge and identity from a different angle: individuals and meanings, socially determined and

perceived through their referentiality in an endless relation among signifiers, are always in a dynamic process of signification, provisionally constituted rather than absolute; subjects and knowledge are positioned by and in discourses as historical and therefore cultural, social, political, “communal” constructs, and as such, collectively formed, constituted in a relational interplay between self and others. Knowledge and subjectivity are fragmented, impossible to be known in their totality, for they are in constant transformation.

Consequently, the desire for mastery, for complete control over meaning, for absolute truth becomes utopian, resulting in frustration before an impossible *dream*: unattainable, because knowledge is neither total, since due to its historicity it can never be found in a state of static completeness, nor is knowledge foundational, that is, it cannot be found in universals that once mastered, guarantee an absolute, ever-present truth. Meanings are perceived in the relation among signifiers: one signifier relates to others, which in their turn relate to others, and to others, in an endless chain that can never be completely mastered or controlled – Godot never comes.

### **Mobility in the Constitution of Knowledge and Identity**

Literature discusses the production of meaning in and by literary texts; literature lessons potentially produce meanings in interpersonal relations where texts, authors, professors, students, literary criticism, educational institutions, cultures, societies, histories, values, attitudes and so on play their roles simultaneously: the elements that form and are formed by our attempts at sense-making cannot be left out of the classroom, but have to be taken into account when we try to understand it. The collective knowledge produced in the classroom is not a special kind of knowledge, better or worse than other kinds: it is knowledge in its constituent aspects as a social construct, as a situated process of sense-making, subject and subjecting to history, society, interpretive communities, discourses, individual and collective agency.

Teachers and students as producers of knowledge are not opposing ends of a hierarchical series, but positions occupied according to the role one believes to be assuming at different moments. Such positions, though, cannot be exclusive: playing different roles simultaneously is a way of experimenting our alterity<sup>7</sup>, of recognising our being constituted in/by the other, of perceiving the multiplicity in our identities, which are realised in the movement between signifiers. In order to actually understand ourselves, then, we have to know we are others and ourselves at the same time; we must assume our multiplicity as an "absolute presence". Multiplicity means complexity, fluidity, movement, and as such, it does not imply positions, but relations, that is to say, being fragmented in a holistic way: each fragment does not have an intrinsic identity on its own, but only in its relations with all the other fragments. Being a teacher or a student is to assume one or the other identity, as if each of the two positions could be whole, identifiable in itself; but neither is complete, they cannot be assumed as full identities, except in the contingent positioning of subjects by society. A mere change of perspectives would not result in an inner change of attitude, simply because our identities are not in one or another perspective, but in the way each perspective is formed by its very connections, associations, relations with others. Therefore, the simple adherence to a different role now and then would only represent a change of positions, an exchange of places without actual challenge of the hierarchy or attitudes of the individuals involved. If we understand that we are positioned in and by discourse, in relations of power, assuming one or another position is simply to conform to expectancies and assumptions from one position or another, without questioning them in their conventionality, in their constitutive social nature; it means simply acting now as a teacher, then as a student, according to whether we want to conform or rebel against the institutionalisation of our roles, or according to the freedom we are allowed to exert. Playing the role of teacher *and* that of student simultaneously is abandoning hierarchical conventions and diving into knowledge, it is not only being aware of

the heterogeneity inside as well as outside ourselves (outside and inside being in their turn conventions didactically “severing one’s personal connections with the object of study”<sup>8</sup>), but also living, experimenting such a heterogeneity.

Yet, mobility in the constitution of knowledge and identity does not mean that there are no certainties, that each interpretation is as valid as any other. Deconstructivist readings, through their “inversions”, question the logos of truth, shifting the focus of concern to “authorising presences”. As Jonathan Culler puts it,

what such inversions [deconstructive readings] do (...) is displace the question [of whether notions of meaning, value, and authority promoted by our institutions are threatened], leading one to consider what are the *processes of legitimation, validation, or authorization* that produce differences among readings and enable one reading to expose another as a misreading. (p.179; my italics)

What counts in the postmodern attitude is not “truthfulness in its essence”, but how *effects of truth*<sup>9</sup> are produced and institutionalised.

### **The Production of Meaning in Literature Lessons**

The classroom, seen through a postmodern perspective, becomes a forum for considerations about authorising presences at play in the Discourse of the University, one of Lacan’s fundamental discourses, which moulds subjectivities by positioning teachers as transmitters and students as receivers of systematic knowledge,

... a knowledge which is an end in itself. It is its own justification. It is *totalised* because it is pre-given and *totalising*, because it seeks to embrace within its compass all that there is to know. It is *dominant* because it brooks no

challenge to the authority of its claims, and *dominating* because it positions learners as completely subject to it. (Usher & Edwards, p.76)

As subjects with agency, able to subvert this kind of discourse, students and teachers of literature can resist alienation: dialogue, and discursive resistance, can take place in the literature classroom, a fertile ground for challenging conventions, for reflecting upon representation, for questioning from within. The classroom seems ideal for such a dialogue to happen: traditionally a place for the teaching and imposing of social hierarchy, obedience and conformity to conventional rules, it can be subverted from the inside and become in practice the locus of questioning and the starting point of change, as it is, in theory, claimed to be. That is not the end of discipline, the death of authority: that is simply arguing for a broader understanding of the "hidden agenda" of education, of the motivations and power/knowledge formations which lie at the heart of institutions; that is to claim something similar to what Lather & Ellsworth define as situated pedagogies, about educators

creating responses and initiatives out of a space between both the histories and legacies of oppression and privilege that they [educators] draw on, consciously and unconsciously, and the often contradictory complexities of the local situation in their attempts to make sense and act within such moments.<sup>10</sup>

The inquisitive literary minds should be encouraged to be both *inquisitive* and *literary*, in that they challenge representation by making their own *misinterpretations*, not simply re-producing those elaborated by authorised literary criticism. Every reading being limited, positioned in its own cultural and social background, subject to history and its temporality, to certain interpretive procedures, it follows that we may say all readings are in fact *misreadings*, for one cannot predict how

long their validity will be in terms of authorised literary interpretive conventions<sup>11</sup>: the feminist readings of canonic literary works were unthinkable before the first half of this century. Jonathan Culler justifies the claim that all readings are misreadings by explaining how an interpreter can show that what was said before about a text might have been the result of misreadings, and that this person's own reading may also be considered a mistake by future readers, "who may astutely identify the dubious presuppositions or particular forms of blindness to which they testify. The history of reading is a history of misreadings, though under certain circumstances these misreadings can be and may have been accepted as readings."<sup>12</sup> Culler defends the idea of "true readings" as "only particular misreadings: misreadings whose misses have been missed".<sup>13</sup>

Classroom "*misinterpretations*" are thus constituted as such not by a central humanistic truth, but in contrast to the interpretive conventions authorised by the institutionalised academy. It is therefore not a matter of relativity, where anything goes, but, since "classrooms are always sites of concrete and cultural struggles", it is a matter of recognising "the paradox, complexity, and complicity at work", as pointed out by Lather & Ellsworth (p.71).

What is here said of education in general can be said also of the teaching of literature: the conventions at play in literary periods, works, texts, as well as the exclusions made by the institutionalisation of a determined set of interpretive/ creative procedures have to be brought to the fore in the literature classroom, with teachers and students authentically and dialogically interacting and contributing to the production of knowledge to create opportunities for things to happen, be such things acceptance or resistance to norms; understanding must be the aim, and not to arise conformity or resistance, not to mould individuals to revolution or apathy, but to expose them to multiplicity and contradiction, so that the different is welcomed as a positive possibility for creation rather than a pernicious enemy to be destroyed.

## Notes

- 1 Cf. Harold Bloom and his *Western Canon*, and also Arnold Krupat's *The Voice in the Margin*.
- 2 I believe teaching and learning to be two sides of the same coin, so in order to remind myself and the readers of their complementarity with no implications of hierarchical oppositions, I'll be using the two words throughout.
- 3 Cf. the Derridean *play of différance* (1978, *Writing and Difference*).
- 4 Lacan, quoted in Usher, p.71.
- 5 Johnston, Peter H. & Nichols, John G. *Voices We Want to Hear and Voices We Don't*, p. 96.
- 6 Cf. later in this article for comments on Lacan's "systematic knowledge".
- 7 Wilson Harris claims for the necessity to occupy "concurrently the position of the subject and the position of the other, so that the limiting frames which impede the acceptance of alterity can be broken. The simultaneous occupation of both positions leads to the recognition of alterity in the construction of identity." (translated from Souza, Lynn Mario T. Menezes de. "O Fragmento Quântico: identidade e alteridade no sujeito pós-colonial." 1997, forthcoming).
- 8 Cf. quotation on page [36].
- 9 Foucault, M. *The Order of Things*.
- 10 Cf. *Theory into Practice - Situated Pedagogies: Classroom Practices in Postmodern Times*, p.70.
- 11 Cf. Fish, Stanley. What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable? In: Fish, S. *Is There a Text in This Class?: the authority of interpretive communities*.
- 12 Culler, J. *On Deconstruction*, p.176.
- 13 *ibid.*, p.178.

### References

- Bloom, H. *O Cânone Ocidental: Os Livros e a Escola do Tempo*. Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 1995.
- Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Derrida, J. *Writing and Difference*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Fairclough, N. "Michel Foucault and the Analysis of Discourse". In *Discourse and Social Change*. Harlow: Longman, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Language and Power*. Harlow: Longman, 1989.
- Fish, S. *Is There a Text in this Class?: the Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995 (9th ed.).
- Foucault, M. "What's an Author?" in Harari, J.V. (ed.) *Textual Strategies*. England: Methuen, 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Ordem do Discurso*. São Paulo: Loyola, 1996.
- Johnston, Peter H. & Nicholls, John G. "Voices We Want to Hear and Voices We Don't". *Theory into Practice - Learning from Students Voices*, 2, (Spring 1995): 94-100.
- Krupat, A. *The Voice in the Margin*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.
- Lather, Patti & Ellsworth, Elizabeth. Introduction. *Theory into Practice - Situated Pedagogies: Classroom Practices in Postmodern Times*, 2, (Spring 1996): 70.
- Mailloux, S. "Interpretive Conventions". In *Interpretive Conventions: the Reader in the Study of American Fiction*. London: Cornell University Press, 1984, pp.140-158.
- Marshall, Brenda. *Teaching the Postmodern: Fiction and Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Orlandi, E. *Discurso e Leitura*. Campinas: Cortez, 1996.

Souza, Lynn Mario T. Menezes de. *O Fragmento Quântico: identidade e alteridade no sujeito pós-colonial*. (1997, forthcoming)

Usher, R & Edwards, R. *Postmodernism and Education*. London: Routledge, 1996.