Contribution

Literature at secondary school: Contrasting urban vs non-urban contexts by comparing a Spanish romantic play and an American modern film

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General context

Economic, cultural and political development of western societies is linked to the urban context, a basic sphere of social organization. The industrial revolution leads these societies to modernity, where urban contexts become scenario of great dynamism and massive migration. The Romantic imaginary projects over the countryside ideas of purity, peace and understanding in contrast with urban hard living conditions, and in the literature of this period we can find characters that represent the “noble savage”. One of these characters is Manelic, from the Catalan master piece “Terra Baixa” (English: "Martha Of The Lowlands, German: “Tiefland”) written by the Spanish playwright Àngel Guimerà in 1895. Manelic, a good-natured shepherd that lives in the mountains in a complete isolation, is required by his employer to get married with a good-hearted girl from the Lowland, Martha, but he soon finds out it is a masquerade and tries to escape from social hypocrisies back to the mountains. Urban tensions have also been a topic for modern films, like Thelma & Louise (dir. Ridley Scott, 1990). All these characters (Manelic, Thelma and Louise) escape from the urban society and what it represents: pain, harassment, oppression, lack of possibilities for a personal development... The play and the film explore the need to understand modern society’s complexities and tensions, with democratic values living together with dehumanizing tendencies.

Research question

How can we explore the tensions between urban and non-urban contexts?

How can we do it comparing a play with a contemporary film?

How can we work on literature interpretation beyond national borders (a Spanish and an American creation), time periods (19th and 20th centuries), languages (Catalan and American English) and boundaries between literature and other arts (a play and a film)?
Objectives

(1) To read the play in class and to discuss its symbolic oppositions.

(2) To compare the play with a film.

(3) To explore how literature lets us know about the human nature.

(4) To validate a learning and instruction model for literature education at secondary school.

Conceptual framework

(A) Learning and instruction model. We follow the model of Didactic Sequence (DS) created as a result of the research conducted at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain) (Camps, 2003, Camps & Zayas, 2006, Bordons, 2009; Zayas, 2011). This model is inspired by project work, cooperative learning and metacognition studies.

(B) Literature education. We adopt the notions of field and habitus (Bourdieu, 1995) to explore literature phenomenon from a sociological perspective and the notions of intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980; Even-Zohar, 1990) to let us take a broad and dynamic perspective on literature phenomenon. We follow Colomer (2005) and Lluch (2002) for a change in school transmissive practices.

(C) Didactics research. Classroom is seen as the natural context to focus didactics research (Bronckart, 1989 & 2007; Dolz et al., 2009). Learning is seen as a process for sharing discursive contexts (Coll, 2004) through an exploratory dialogue (Mercer, 2004, Chambers, 2001). We adopt a qualitative perspective and an action-research method (McKernan, 1996), where the teacher himself is guiding the student’s learning process as well as her own process of learning and research.

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used

We use different research instruments.

(0) Intervention model: that of SD with its three parts: phase 1, phase 2, phase 3.

(1) Recording: we elaborate semi structured interviews in order to let the students explain the project they are involved in and the results they may attain. These interviews provide the teacher data for exploring student’s ideas about literature purposes and about comparing 19th and 20th works.

(2) Student’s and teacher’s log. A learning log is held by students in order to reflect on the project by questioning it. The teacher keeps reading these comments all along the experience and gives a feedback. Regarding the research, it helps understanding the problems that arise when working in a collaboratively manner.

(3) Oral exposition. The students have to move to the University to expose the results of their work. They are asked to develop different texts to prepare this exposition and this
lets us collect data of how important is to focus on the different genres we ask the students to elaborate (resumes, concept maps, dissertation, essay, interviews, etc.).

Conclusions / Findings

Students show an increasing understanding of the play and the film, as well as an increasing commitment with the project. They also show interest on the literature as a phenomenon that goes beyond the actual works explored, and they learn to look at literature as an instrument to better understand human nature; an important condition for this to be achieved is to follow an active methodology in the classroom (student’s statement: “I really didn’t like the play but I did enjoy working in discussion groups to analyze it and compare it with a film”). This makes us think that de model of Didactic Sequence (SD) has been validated. The research shows us that contrasts between urban and non-urban contexts are of major importance to understand many literature masterpieces, and that working with an international perspective contributes to the student’s broad understanding of literature.

References