University and school for a European Literary Canon

Introduction

University and School for a European Literary Canon (ELiCa) is a project developed in order to shape a corpus of literary European works. The aim is to enrich the university and high-school education.

The project started in 2010 at the Kiel University and since then it has been developing in stages.

This project is promoted by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) and it's coordinated by La Sapienza University in Rome.

Five countries participated in this project: Romania, Portugal, Spain, Italy and Germany.

Here are presented the results of what we can call "the international questionnaire-stage", this consisted of handing questionnaires to university students of Romance studies or Modern Languages, to high-school students, as well as to teachers and lecturers.
Introduction

On these questionnaires participants were asked about their national literature, European literature, their reading preferences and the emotions related to them.

In the next slides we summed up the most important statistics and results as presented by each partner country during the International Conference of Literature and European Education at La Sapienza University.

Results of the Internacional Conference:

Literature and European Education

La Sapienza University
Rome, 16th -17th of March 2012
The questionnaires were handed to:

- University students of Romance studies enrolled at the Bucharest and Cluj Universities.
- 520 high-school students from 12 schools, 6 in Bucharest, 6 in other cities.
  - 159 boys and 361 girls.

On the following slides are shown the three most frequent responses given by the university students and they will be briefly compared with the results of the high-school questionnaires.
3. Who do you think are the 10 most important authors of European literature from the classics of the past through to contemporary times, not counting those of your own country?

1. Shakespeare 6. Goethe
2. Dostoevski 7. Dante
3. Tolstoj 8. Victor Hugo
5. Cervantes 10. Dumas Alexandre (father)

• The literary geography of Romanian students is based on French literature (4 out of 10 authors are French).
• The given list matches up with Bloom’s western canon (1994).
• Only a few changes are to be found among the selections made by both groups.

6. Of books by European authors that you have read, which are your 5 favourites?

1. The Red and the Black
2. Anna Karenina
3. The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of la Mancha
4. The picture of Dorian Gray
5. Les Misérables

• It’s surprising to find a work by Oscar Wilde, an author who hasn’t been included before by the students.
• Persistence of a "canonical taste".
• There are only a few coincidences between the first five canonical works quoted on question number 3 and the works that students consider a part of their personal tastes.
7. Which are your 5 favourite works overall, whether written by European or non-European authors?

1. The Idiot  
2. Pride and Prejudice  
3. The Red and the Black  
4. Wuthering Heights  
5. The Woman in the Dunes

- 4 out of 5 works belong to the European literature.  
- It's surprising to find a work written by a Japanese author among the first five answers and it's also important to mention that this novel has been made into a cult movie.  
- Tendency to appreciate works with certain Romantic aesthetic and with an emotional component.

Conclusions

- High-school and university students have practically the same “canonical taste”.  
- Both groups seem to stick to the “didactic canon” of national and European Literature.  
- The literary canon builds up during high school and it doesn’t seem to change much later.  
- In general there’s a predominance of authors who belong to the end of the 19th century.  
- Predominance of prose, followed by poetry.
- Oana Fotache says that neither high-school students nor university students are mature readers and that neither of them are ready to make decisions in order to build up their own literary canon.
Portugal
Instituto Politécnico de Leiria

Universidade Nova de Lisboa

Graciete Silva, Luis F. Barbeiro, Cristina Nobre, Maria J. Gamboa, Susana Nunes

Questionnaires handed to high school students:

• 521 questionnaires were handed among 8 high schools, 4 in Lisbon, 2 in Leiria, 1 in Porto and 1 in Algarve:
  
  • 233 boys
  • 288 girls

The Portuguese researchers contrasted girls’ answers with the ones given by boys.
1. Who do you think are the 10 most important writers in the literature of your country from the classics of the past through to contemporary times?

1. Luis de Camões (1524-1580)
2. José Saramago (1922-2010)
3. Eça de Queirós (1845-1900)

• There's a great parallelism between both groups, especially among the first places.
• In the first three places we find authors who belong to three different centuries. These results stand in contrast to the ones given by Romania, because we don't see a predominance of a certain period.

3. Who do you think are the 10 most important authors of European literature from the classics of the past through to contemporary times, not counting those of your own country?

1. Shakespeare
2. J.K. Rowling
3. Cervantes
4. Homer
5. Saint-Exupéry

1. Shakespeare
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5. Homer

• It’s important to say that there were less answers given to this question than answers given to question 1 (national authors) (521 vs. 411).
• Among the 10 first places we find two authors who belong to the popular literature: J.K. Rowling y Dan Brown.
Portugal

6. Of books by European authors that you have read, which are your 5 favourites?

- Harry Potter
- The Little Prince
- Romeo and Juliet
- Don Quijote
- The Da Vinci Code
- The diary of Anne Frank

- Great coincidences in the first places.
- Portuguese researchers contrasted the responses of the students according to their reading standards and this showed that pupils with a low reading level could quote not only less works, but shorter works.

Portugal

Conclusions

- Great coincidences between the answers given by both groups.
- The reading level as well as the number of books possessed by each student determined their answers.
- Portuguese pupils seem to have more difficulties to talk about European literature than to give references of their national literature.
- High-school plays a very important role in the construction of the literary canon.
Spain

Santiago de Compostela University

Mariña Arbor Aldea

Mariña Arbor Aldea examines the responses of Spanish high-school students and compares them with the reading suggestions that teachers make to their pupils.

In Spain 560 questionnaires were handed among 7 high schools, 5 in Santiago de Compostela, 1 in Madrid and 1 in Castellón.

- 254 boys
- 306 girls

Enclosed on this web page you will find a complete presentation of the Spanish results made by Mariña Arbor Aldea.
Spain

Conclusions

• There’s a dichotomy of the school canon that teachers expect the pupils to read and the pupils’ private reading.
• Even thought, high school plays a very important role in the construction of the official “school canon”.
• Contrasting the results of the five countries Spanish pupils seem to be more influenced by mass media.
• Pupils included Galician works in their national canon.
• Teachers identified certain Latin-American works written in Spanish as part of their “national works”.
• Here we find a widening of the meaning of “national canon” which is not only based on the geography, but also on the language.
• In general, it seems that the barriers of “European canon” do not depend on the geography anymore, but on the language, even thought the canon that we have as result of this widening is still too occidental.

Italy

La Sapienza University

Gioia Paradisi

SAPIENZA
Università di Roma
Paradisi examined the responses of Italian high-school students. The questionnaires were handed to 512 pupils, of which 35% are male and 65% female.

Some other statistic information:

Portuguese and Italian high-school students declare to read from 1 to 5 books per year.

Spanish and Romanian pupils say that they read between 4 and 8 books a year.

The majority of German high-school students declare to read 9 or more books per year.

4. Which do you think are the 10 most important works of European literature from the classics of the past through to contemporary times?

1. *Romeo and Juliet*
2. *The Portrait of Dorian Grey*
3. *Hamlet*
4. *The Odyssey*
5. *Pride and Prejudice*

- The presence of a work by Jane Austen ranked very highly is also due to the girls.
- The primacy of works by Shakespeare is shared by all European High school students, especially *Romeo and Juliet*.
- In questions number 3 and 4 Italian pupils as well as Romanian pupils did not include in their top ten works or authors that belong to the popular literature as the other groups did.
Italy

Conclusions

Italian along with Romanian Pupils seem to distinguish very well between popular literature and high literature.

Paradisi consider in her analysis of the Italian results that the canon that school transmits, concerning the national literatures and the European literature, still works as instrument of evaluation and as a critical resource. This helps students to decide which works and authors are worth to be consider as part of the European canon and which works and authors don't.

Germany

Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel

Javier Gómez Montero, Frank Nagel, C. Ebner, S. Hönig, Beke Sinjen...
The questionnaires were handed to 491 pupils, 244 students, 5 teachers and 5 lecturers.

In contrast to the other countries Germany included in the presentation the results of the questionnaires filled in by teachers and lecturers.

The German results are divided into four categories, each of them corresponding to each target group.

**University lecturers**

The university lecturers suffer from what Beke Sinjen called *canonphobia*, meaning "a common averseness to the notion of Canon".

Therefore they had to be convinced to fill in the questionnaires by bringing forward the argument that the evaluation might initiate a canonical flexibility.

Some of the final questions caused controversy over the pertinence to ask for emotions transmitted through literature:

13. What are the most important feelings you have recognised in European literature?

14. What are the most important emotions you yourself have experienced when reading European works?

In Germany these questions were generally perceived as hard to grasp and not science-based, while in the other countries were accepted.
Germany
University students

There's a widening of the meaning of the literary Canon, some borderline works that lie between fictional literature and philosophical, spiritual or political texts are quoted on the answers given by the students.

E.g.: Gallus Anonymus (Benedictine monk from 12th century)
         Hannah Arendt (political theorist)
         Maitreyi (philosopher from ancient India)

Germany
High school teachers

The idea of a subject “European Literature” was widely well received among school teachers. They considered it a chance to revalue minority languages and literatures.

Although they considered that filling in the questionnaire was highly time-consuming.
Germany

High school pupils

They don’t seem to read a complete work, but excerpts from different works and they read more and more at the computer.

They don’t seem to distinguish very well between popular literature and high literature.

Among their personal tastes are included works that belong to popular literature, e.g.: books made into movies.

Pupils could hardly differentiate between the original language version of a book and its translation into German, e.g.: they cited *Harry Potter* as an example of their favourite German books.

Germany

Conclusions

The university lecturers have an averseness to the notion Canon.

The questions related to emotions were generally hard to answer.

There’s a widening of the meaning of the literary Canon among university students, because they considered some works that don’t strictly belong to the fictional literature as literary works.

The idea of a subject “European Literature” is conceived as a way to revalue minority languages and literatures.

Pupils don’t seem to distinguish between popular literature and high literature and their habit of reading seems to be fragmentary and to be influenced by the technologies.

There’s a limited historic perspective, the statistic canon expires about 1800. The answers that quote authors and texts before 1500 are an exception.
General conclusions

• There are only a few differences between the quoted works and authors among all the partner countries referring to the European literature.

• The primacy of works by Shakespeare is shared by all European High school students, especially *Romeo and Juliet*.

• High school plays a very important role in the construction of the “official canon”.

• After high school the conception of canonical works and authors does not seem to change much.

• There’s a dichotomy of the school canon that teachers expect the pupils to read and the pupils’ private reading.

• The canon that school transmits, concerning the national literatures and the European literature, must be an instrument of evaluation that help students to decide which works and authors are worth to be consider as part of the “European canon” and as part of their own literary canon.

• In spite of the importance that school canon seems to have among pupils, they don’t seem to distinguish very well between popular literature and high literature.

• The decisions that pupils make as readers seem to be strongly influenced by the mass media.

• That’s why Oana Fotache considers that neither high school students nor university students are mature readers and that neither of them are ready to make decisions in order to build up their own literary canon.

• Even thought there’s a certain canonical flexibility: on one hand, some university students include works that don’t strictly belong to the fictional literature in their literary canon and, on the other hand, it seems that the barriers of “European canon” don’t only depend on the geography, but also on the language.

• But there’s still a limited perspective of European literature, because the responses generally focus on Central European literature and the statistic canon expires about 1800.
General conclusions

• In order to enlarge the idea of European canon we stand at a good starting point, because school teachers consider that a subject "European Literature" it's a chance to revalue minority languages and literatures.

• It’s important to reconsider that at the universities the questionnaires were handed only to students of Modern Languages or Literatures and this gave us a narrowed perspective of the students’ private and official reading. It’s very likely that if we had handed the questionnaires among students of all faculties, the responses would have been different.

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