Facilitation Technologies in the Process of Understanding of the Writer’s Biography

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Abstract

The article presents the methodology of organizing educational activities to study a writer’s biography with the help of facilitation approach. A key aspect of the paper is the group work model, i.e., “The World Café” which allowed the authors to process and comprehend a large amount of information about F.M. Dostoevsky, share it with students, and plan further work on the study of his creative writing. In addition, the article identifies important concepts in the comprehension of the first part of the posthumous biography “The materials for the biography of F.M. Dostoevsky”. The compiler of the biography was O.F. Miller, a professor of literature in St. Petersburg University (Russia), critic, publicist, and a famous educator of the 19th century. Interestingly, “Materials for the biography of F.M. Dostoevsky”, published in 1883, were not fully republished and did not receive sufficient scientific understanding until 2010, even though the work of O.F. Miller remained the main source the experts studying F.M. Dostoevsky. Of much importance is the fact that some parts of “Materials for the biography of F.M. Dostoevsky” appeared on the Internet only after 2012. This paradox highlights the importance of the research describing the biography. In 2010, the personal history “Materials for the biography of F.M. Dostoevsky” became an integral part of the academic thesis by K.A. Okisheva “F.M. Dostoevsky and O.F. Miller: the history of relationships”. Our present study highlights the importance of biographies for the education of young generations. Our major concern is the methodology, according to which personal history’s information serves as an essential part of roundtable discussions which simultaneously target the acquisition of F.M. Dostoevsky’s biography and innovative classroom activities.

Keywords: facilitation technologies, the methodology of literary criticism education, educational activity, the systematization of knowledge, group work, the biography of the writer.

1. Introduction

The main concern of the paper is the theoretical and methodological problems of the biography genre in modern literary criticism. There is much evidence that the main problems of personal history genre have not yet been systematically presented. Of much importance are key issues which are as follows: the questions about the meaning and phenomenon of biography as a genre and the grounds for its popularity, features and contradictions associated with the novelization and interpretation of facts, the subjectivity and ethical standards of biographers, the typological problems of biographical works, the types of biographical sources, the principles of building a scientific biography of a famous person, etc.

Another target of the research is the integration of biographical material into educational framework. The main challenge faced by many researchers is successful personal history classes in educational process. It is now well established that the study of a writer’s biography in schools and universities still comes down to a brief reference to his life and work. The main disadvantage of such classes is the fact that the biographical information is limited to a brief overview. The major problem with this kind of practice is that teachers provide their students with a humble story (lecture) or an illustrative presentation with brief explanations. There is an increasing concern that the studies on a writer’s biography serve as a psychological and aesthetic preparation for the study of literary and artistic work. Obviously, such classes will not be effective if they do not instill in students the interest to the writer’s personality and creativity. A pivotal role here plays the type of biography presentation, a conscious selection of the necessary material and the method of its presentation in class.

This paper attempts to show practical educational activities targeting the study of a writer’s biography with the help of the facilitation technology called “World Café” [1]. To allow deeper insights we analyzed the literary material from the first part of the posthumous biography research “Materials for the biography of F.M. Dostoevsky”. The compiler of the personal history was Orest Fedorovich Miller (O.F. Miller), a Russian critic, publicist, the enlightener of the 19th century, the Professor of Literature from St. Petersburg University. In later life F.M. Dostoevsky established close personal and cooperative literary-social relations with O.F. Miller that is why this person was in the know of important issues of Dostoevsky’s life.

2. Methods and Materials

To conduct exploratory study we used historiographic, literary, and methodological resources and materials. A major advantage of this method is a comprehensive vision of different aspects of Dostoevsky’s life. To gain a detailed understanding of Dostoevsky’s biography, we relied on the idea of dialectical development, which was the basis of such principles of historical and literary research as historicism, objectivity, and system. To assess the class man-

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agement strategies, we employed modern methods of group work facilitation, the simulation of educational activity at the lessons at secondary comprehensive school. We utilized the interdisciplinary analysis of didactic, methodological, psychological and facilitation technologies. We also used several instruments available in the field of empirical methods, i.e., a methodological description, the statistical processing of research results and the hermeneutic methods of interpretation [2].

3. Results / Discussion

3.1. Methodological Aspect

To obtain further in-depth information about F.M. Dostoevsky, we employed the methodology for organizing educational activities in a classroom to study the writer’s biography based on the “World Café” facilitation technology.

Now we proceed to the description of the parameters of “World Café” technology in group work. We highlight such parameters as the objective of the technology, the group size, and the accommodation of the class.

Objective: to investigate / discuss a well-formulated topic or question / series of questions.

Group size: class (20-30 students).

Accommodation: a lecture hall in which it is possible to place students in groups of 4-5 persons at separate tables.

Now we proceed to the description of lesson models which help us understand how the facilitation technology “World Café” works. Lesson models.

Model 1.

Procedures.

1. Divide the main theme of the meeting into subthemes (according to the number of subgroups).
2. Distribute trainees into working groups (preferably equal in number, the division must consider the students’ interests).
3. Work in subgroups. Ask trainees to prepare the material on their subject and fix the material papers on a board or a flipchart sheet (time limit – 15-30 minutes).
4. Present the results of activities:
   4.1. Post the recorded results of the group activity in the lecture hall.
   4.2. Transform working groups in such a way, so that they could present their discussion results (for example, ask participants of working groups to count off by twos: the first numbers form a new group, all the second ones are the next one, etc.).
   4.3. Move groups across the lecture hall. The groups are moving from table to another, until they pass all the submitted materials.

The presentation of the results emerges from the representative of the group, the one who has taken part in the development of these results. Thus, each demo board will have a new separate presenter from the presentation group.

5. Reflection (summing up). Combine the initial groups to summarize the work done, outline a plan of action for the next class.

Model 2.

1. Identify the topics for a roundtable discussion (one topic per a discussion).
2. Invite one of the trainees to perform the part of “the host” of the roundtable discussion and to receive “guests”. Choose “the host” of the roundtable discussion from those students who are mostly interested in the topic and are ready to work over this topic during the lesson.
3. Divide the students of the roundtable discussions, according to their interests. Ask them to begin to discuss the issues on the topic. While doing this activity “the host” of the discussion records the results on the flipchart sheet (time limit – 15 minutes). After the discussion, ask the participants to move to other tables.
4. Having moved to another table, “the host” briefly introduces the results of the previous conversation to newly arrived participants. Based on the received materials, a new group discusses the application of the obtained knowledge. “The host” records the results.
5. Reflection (summing up). Each “host” of the roundtable discussion summarizes the discussion results of all participants.

3.2. Literary Aspect

Having defined what is meant by “World Café”, we will now move to the ideas, expressed in “The materials for F.M. Dostoevsky’s biography” by O.F. Miller. The practical application of this book lies within information domain which familiarizes the students with important milestones in F.M. Dostoevsky’s life. This book, in our opinion, is the first experience of a scientific approach to the study of life and creative writing by F.M. Dostoevsky. The book also played a pivotal role in the creation of a special literary genre, i.e., a scientific biography of a writer which later developed in a special category in the 20th century. Of primary scientific interest are the principles of the writer’s biography, which O.F. Miller intuitively revealed as an academic scientist. He collected, systematized, and generalized the factual material that was at his disposal during the work on the “The materials for F.M. Dostoevsky’s biography”.

A major area of interest here is the theoretical and methodological problems of the biography genre in modern literary criticism. There is much evidence that the main problems of personal history genre have not yet been systematically presented. Of much importance are key issues which are as follows: the questions about the meaning and phenomenon of the genre popularity, features and contradictions associated with the novelization and interpretation of facts, the subjectivity and ethical standards of biographers, the typological problems of biographical works, the types of sources, the principles of building a scientific biography of a famous person, etc.

There is a growing body of literature indicating that the second half of the 19th century was the period of “self-formation” of the genre. The time was a turning point in understanding its purpose and objectives. In the 19th century, biographical literature became a special area of literary criticism. The first symptoms of genre self-determination have actualized themselves at that time, although personal history genre is still in search of its own forms, traditions, laws of expression, passing the stage of formation and experimentation.

In this connection, on the one hand, the study of O.F. Miller’s work is an opportunity to study the nature of biography genre more deeply. And on the other hand, it is essential to determine the place and significance of O.F. Miller’s legacy in the scientific and biographical literature devoted to F.M. Dostoevsky.

3.2.1. Materials for Work in Groups

Now we proceed to the analysis of literary material necessary for the “World Café” activity. The cards with the material are distributed during roundtable discussions.

Material card 1. It contains the materials from the posthumous omnibus edition of the works by F.M. Dostoevsky, undertaken by the writer’s widow, Anna Grigoryevna. This edition was a significant event in the literary and public life of Russia in 1882-1883. In its first and last volumes (the latter was published in December 1883), the published materials created a holistic view of Dostoevsky’s creative path (letters, excerpts from the author’s notebook, etc.). The publication also included the full biography of the writer, consisting of two parts, i.e., “Materials for the biography of F.M. Dostoevsky” written by O.F. Miller, and “Memories of F.M. Dostoevsky” compiled by the philosopher-critic N.N. Strakhov.
Central to the entire idea of the publication was brilliant reputation of O.F. Miller who was known as a conscientious scientist-collector, "a zealous admirer" of Dostoevsky's talent and the popularizer of his creative writing. It was the philosopher-critic N.N. Strakhov who recommended the candidacy of O.F. Miller to the writer's widow Anna Grigorevna. She in her turn asked O.F. Miller to compile the first part of the F.M. Dostoevsky's biography.

Interestingly, O.F. Miller decided to collect all the materials available at this stage, he also agreed to reconstruct the life of the writer from his birth up to the moment of his release from an exile and his return to St. Petersburg in 1859. N.N. Strakhov resolved to highlight his acquaintance with F.M. Dostoevsky and their joint journalistic activities until the day of the death and funeral of the famous author.

Thus, the first biography of F.M. Dostoevsky consisted of two parts, the compositional unity of which O.F. Miller indicated at the end of the "Materials for the biography of F.M. Dostoevsky", "... my task was to bring the story about F.M. Dostoevsky to this time (1859-beginning 1860). I'm passing the pen to the nearest ... colleague of F.M. Dostoevsky. He was a direct participant and eyewitness of the further time in the life of Fedor Mikhailovich"

The idea of dividing the biography into two parts was not new. The biographers of A.S. Pushkin, D.I. Fonvizin, N.V. Gogol highlighted the same principle. It should be noted that the biography of the writer in the 19th century was understood as a coherent, chronologically consistent description of the life and activities of the celebrated personality and was viewed as a collective work of contemporaries, calculated to satisfy the needs of future researchers.

Material card 2. The card describes O.F. Miller as a hard-working biographer, entirely dedicated to his duty. He enthusiastically began his work on the biography of F.M. Dostoevsky. What strikes as important is the frequency of his letters to Anna Grigorevna in the summer of 1881 and their impatient tone. One letter to Anna Grigorevna dating back to July 28, 1881 most eloquently illustrates the impatient spirit of the professor, "... I have already read some Siberian letters of Fedor Mikhailovich to Wrangel. Who is Wrangel? Is he alive? Is it possible to get more materials from him in the latter case? How many letters do you have before his 60th jubilee? And when will you send them to me? It would be nice, I think, to print in newspapers an appeal to everyone who could have letters from Fedor Mikhailovich with a request to send them to my address (since Strakhov is leaving before October) ... If there is no delay in the delivery of materials, I will certainly end my part of the biography to the return of N <kolya> N <kolaevich Strakhov>. Do you have any poems by F <edor> M <khylovichy> composed for the coronation of the deceased sovereign? The poems were mentioned in the letters to Wrangel, a children's Fairy-tale was also mentioned in the same place, was it a journalistic article about art? Have you read the letters to Wrangel? Can they be printed in full? (there is more about the relations between Fedor Mikhailovich and Maria Dmitrievna Isaeva, and about the unknown lady X. and Wrangel's relations to her. X. is portrayed by Fedor Mikhailovich in an unfavorable light, and Maria Dmitrievna is given in the most ideal way, before marriage. After the marriage she is given differently, but I've just tortured you with the questions, but without your answer I cannot go on..." [4].

From the context of the first letters (summer 1881) it was clear that O.F. Miller was not going to "put off or delay his part of work ..."; the biographer had expected to finish the compilation of his part of the biography in a short time, by October 1881. However, the work on the biography of F.M. Dostoevsky dragged on until the fall of 1883.

The main challenge that O.F. Miller had to face from the first stages of his work on the writer's biography consisted, firstly, in the scarcity of factual material (letters, notes, memoirs, etc.) about Dostoevsky's adolescence, and the Siberian period of life. Second-
revna. “Much has been written down from the words of Comrades of Fedor Mikhailovich connected with the so-called Petrashevsky case: the late N.A. Seshnev (A.G. Dostoevskaya), then N.S. Kashkina, N.A. Mombelli, A.I. Palma and I.M. Debu.” [3]. O.F. Miller attracted not only the acquaintances of F.M. Dostoevsky (A.P. Milukov, A.N. Maikov, S.D. Yanovskii, D.V. Grigorovich, etc.), but also some outsiders who sympathized with the individuality and the creativity of the writer, including his students “I am grateful to my student-philologist Kühn ... for various clipings from the newspapers ...” [3], “for the cuttings I received ... I am grateful to the student B.B. Glinski” [3].

In fact, the biographer conducted an enormous amount of time-consuming and scrupulous work on collecting the documentary base of Dostoevsky’s biography. He played central role in writing the life of a great writer. O.F. Miller rightfully can be called the first biographer-researcher of the author of “The Brothers Karamazovs”.

**Material card 4.** This card highlights the significance of the literary heritage of F.M. Dostoevsky. The last version of “Materials for the biography of F.M. Dostoevsky” O.F. Miller handed over to the printing house apparently in the second half of September 1883. Interestingly, after September 18, 1883 O.F. Miller did not mention any advancement of his work on the biography in his letters. In subsequent letters he only reported that at the request of N.N. Strakhov at the end of September 1883 he wrote short memories of his last meetings with F.M. Dostoevsky. These memories were included into the chapter “The Last Minutes” of “Memoirs of F.M. Dostoevsky” by N.N. Strakhov. Before October 25 he was busy with the selection and addition of passages from the writer’s notebook for the appendix to the first volume.

The “Materials for the biography of F.M. Dostoevsky” represent a chronologically consistent description of the time which he spent before his hard labor in exile and Siberian periods of the writer’s life. The first chapter “Childhood and the academic years” covers the early stage of F.M. Dostoevsky’s life, i.e., the description of the childhood years spent by the writer in Moscow in Bozhedomka street, where he was born and lived with his family up to his incomplete sixteen years (1837). Then the materials of the book describe his years of study in St. Petersburg, i.e., first in the preparatory boarding house named after K.F. Kostomarov, and then in the Engineering School.

In the second chapter, “The Beginning of the Literary Field” (1842-1849), O.F. Miller describes Dostoevsky’s resignation, the literary debut of the writer and the publication of his first works, his acquaintance with the circle of V.G. Belinsky, the families of the Mikovs, the Beketovs, and others.

The third chapter of the “Catastrophe” outlines the writer’s participation in the Petrashevsky affair, his arrest, his execution, and the transfer of F.M. Dostoevsky to hard labor exile (1849). The fourth chapter, “Exile and Release” examines F.M. Dostoevsky’s stay in hard labor exile, then his transfer to Sempalatinsk, moving with his first wife M.D. Isaeva and his stepchild Paul after his liberation to Tyag and then the writer’s return to St. Petersburg at the end of 1859.

Distributing the biographical material according to the chapters, O.F. Miller distinguished four milestones in F.M. Dostoevsky’s life, the culmination of which, judging by the symbolic title of the third chapter (“Catastrophe”), was the time of enthusiasm for the ideas of socialism and participation in the Petrashevsky circle, which he described as the “circumstances, which were destined to produce ... a decisive and a long-term shock” [3] in the life of the writer.

One can identify the main problems and topics that O.F. Miller outlined in his part of the biography: the first literary experiments, enthusiasm for utopian socialism, the socialization with the Petrashevsky circle and V.G. Belinsky, the role of hard labor in exile for the future fate of the writer, its influence on his world view. Of primary importance is the beginning of Dostoevsky’s disease (epilepsy). His attitude towards Slavophilism and common people also emerges descriptively in the chapter.

The current study found that the grouping of facts and events of the biography, the conceptual idea of the personal history and the image of the character emerged in the narration. Proclaiming the writer as “the ruler of our thoughts”, O.F. Miller emphasized F.M. Dostoevsky’s prophetic gift, his great love for the Russian people and Russia. The results of the study show that the writer was advocating the religious and moral ideals, he was rightfully considered “a long-suffering writer” whose actions were filled with heroism and selfless devotion.

**Material card 5.** This part of the material outlines the main principles of biography introduced by O.F. Miller. With meticulous conscientiousness of the true scientist, the biographer presented all the materials he had. Realizing that the biography of the writer, compiled on a scientific basis, should be based on reliable facts, Miller as much as possible tried to confirm all the facts documen-

Tary. The current study found that although O.F. Miller identified the genre of his part of the biography as “Materials for the biography of F.M. Dostoevsky”, in fact, he expanded their framework, because he proceeded from his own principles of work, which remained important for the genre as a scientific category.

First, this is the principle of direct quoting. Outlining and evaluating the facts and creativity of F.M. Dostoevsky, the biographer gives unconditional priority to the testimonies of the writer himself. A few biographical memoirs of the writer become almost indisputable with the argument given by O.F. Miller, “If he wrote so, then, of course, he thought so” [3]. Secondly comes the principle of contextual reconstruction. Often without having the necessary factual material, O.F. Miller tries to disarticulate from the context of existing letters, diary entries, memoirs of contemporaries the information that could fill in the gaps in the biography of the writer. He clarifies some names, dates, etc. If he fails to find out certain facts and events in the writer’s life, he leaves the unresolved issue open.

Thirdly comes the principle of classification of facts by the degree of their reliability. With great care using a variety of sources and stressing that some information is recorded from the memoirist’s words, O.F. Miller notes his subjectivity, tries to verify the information. Considering the limits of the narrator’s competence and the level of his judgment about the life and work of the writer, the biographer distinguishes between conscientious delusions, when the described facts are shown in a simplified or mistaken manner, and deliberately conscious distortions.

The fourth principle of Miller’s work is the completeness of the presentation of biographical material. The scientist understood that all facts of Dostoevsky’s life and creativity should be preserved without neglecting anything. He had to withstand the strong pressure of Anna Grigorevna who did not let O.F. Miller print the materials concerning the personal and family life of Fedor Mikhailovich. Anna Grigorevna considered it impossible to publish his letters to her. She deleted the information concerning Dostoevsky’s stepson, and, particularly, the information, related to the widow of M.M. Dostoevsky – Emilia Feodorovna, and most importantly, the first wife of the writer – Maria Dmitrievna Isaeva.

**3.2.2. Materials for Reflection (to the Conclusion of the Lesson)**

Our mostly interesting finding is the fact that O.F. Miller quite fully and accurately conveyed the then known facts of the writer’s biography. Inaccuracies in the cases, obvious misprints usually emerged in the areas connected with the life dates of the writer (for example, F.M. Dostoevsky, after completing his full course of studies at the Engineering School, was released to active service in the Engineering Corps not on August 12, 1843, as O.F. Miller pointed out, but on August 6; he had begun to attend the meetings at the place of his friend Durov (a Petrashevsky circle’s member) not since the beginning of March 1849, but since the end of 1848; the wedding with M.D. Isaeva was not on March 6, but on Febru-
ary 6). These inaccuracies with the dates can be accounted for the first attempt to compile the biography of the writer.

In general, O.F. Miller’s work was favorably received by contemporaries (E. Garshin, V. Solovev, K. K. Arsenev, and others). K.K. Arsenev, in reviewing the first biography of the writer, has noted that, despite the author’s subjectivity in covering certain facts of life and the personality of Dostoevsky (for example, the mutual influence of the young novelist and V.G. Belinsky, the beneficial effects of hard labor in exile on the writer’s further work, etc.), “Materials for the biography of F.M. Dostoevsky “contain” factual data of unquestionable value” [8]. Anna Grigorevna, the widow of F.M. Dostoevsky, highly appreciated his first biography. The publisher V.V. Rozanov in a quarter of a century, on October 27, 1907 wrote that “in my opinion, this first biography will always serve as the basis for all works on this subject” [4].

4. Conclusion

The results of the study indicate that O.F. Miller’s dignity, mainly, lies in the idea that he was magnificent as a collector and commentator. The mostly interesting finding was that the undoubted merit of O.F. Miller should be considered the identification of several unrealized and lost ideas of F.M. Dostoevsky. The life dates given by O.F. Miller were perfect, the correctness of them in most cases was confirmed by later scientific research [9]. N.M. Perlina rightly noted that O.F. Miller “the first within the history of Russian literature of the nineteenth century dwelt on the problem of the real autobiographical and empirical “I” of the author” [9]. O.F. Miller rightly can be called the first F.M. Dostoevsky’s expert.

The history of the biography becomes an additional motivator to study the biography and creativity of the writer. Learners, making the transition from one “roundtable discussion” to another, bring with them the “thread” of the previous conversation and discussion and “weave” it into the canvas of conversations of other “guest-travelers”. Each new round makes the discussion deeper, more meaningful. The actual information accumulates, grows with “alive history”, it is supported by the empathy of the participants themselves. The “master” of the roundtable discussion discovers that with each arrival of the new subgroup, more and more new facts “open” in the novelty and variety of comments. Discussions at the same table reflect the integrity obtained during the conversation at another table. The last phase of Café involves creating an image of the overall integrity that is available to each participant. For this, the subgroups receive time for a generalized conversation. During this conversation the participants systematize all the material they received. To do this, one can prepare sheets with questions that can function as the vectors of reflexive activity. The participants record the obtained generalizations and present them during the general audit conversation.

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