Made in Class. Literary Education in Nineteenth- and Twentieth- Century Europe

Conference 3-5 December 2025

Literary and Cultural Studies Research Unit, Arts Faculty, KU Leuven
MDRN Research Lab KU Leuven

Many of our ideas about literature – what counts as a literary text, how it should be read – are produced in classrooms. In *The Teaching Archive* (2021), Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan claim that "If it were possible to assemble the true, impossible teaching archive [...] it would constitute a much larger and more interesting record than the famous monographs and seminal articles that usually represent the history of literary study." Both in the field of literary studies as in in the larger public perception this is an uncommon point of view.

Nonetheless, when general school education gradually became a reality in nineteenth- and early twentieth- century Europe, there was a remarkable consensus across linguistic, national and social contexts on the central role of the vernacular languages and literatures in the curriculum. Literature was not only important for the advancement of basic literacy skills, it also fostered cultural and national socialization. Literary texts and writers fulfilled different didactic functions as part of the *Bildung* and socialization of the young citizen (Mathieson 1975, Hunter 1988, Johannes 2007, Lahire 2008). The school likewise became a central *literary* institution, "[overseeing] the transmission of the literary heritage and regulating the population's access to the cultural capital with which that literary heritage was freighted" (Lynch 2015).

Yet while literary education at school was key to the production of the modern national citizen, modern(ist) literature fashioned itself increasingly as the aesthetic medium of the crisis of the modern subject and its flawless integration into society. This other perception of the relation between school and literary culture, which stresses antipathy, or even mutual exclusion, is a dominant narrative in literary discourse and still resonates today: "Far from harmonious, the relationship between the formational protocols of the novel and schooling remains perennially vexed" (Chalk 2024).

The aim of the conference "Made in Class. Literary Education in Nineteenth- and Twentieth- Century Europe" is to entangle and chart the complex, various and indeed often contradictory interactions between school education and modern literature in Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth century. How did literary education contribute to the making of modern literature (and *vice versa*)? We invite researchers from different disciplines such as literary history, literary criticism, cultural history, history and sociology of education to share their knowledge on the intertwining of the world of education and the world of literature, by tracing and analyzing the role of literature at school and/or the importance of school for the production, circulation and consumption of literature in its many forms and functions.

We are particularly interested in contributions that address one of the following questions:

- How was literature and literary reading taught or brought into practice in different (semi-) institutionalized educational contexts in Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?

- What uses and functions were attributed to literary texts in different educational contexts? How did literary texts circulate, how were they selected, adapted, interpreted, and used in schools and other institutions concerned with the education of the modern citizen, both young and old?
- What role did literary education play in the production, distribution and reception of emerging literary practices and thought? How and to what extent did literary education impact the ways in which literature was read and produced outside school? And how did changing conceptions of literature outside school impact literary education?
- How did literary fiction represent, reflect upon and react to literary education in and outside school? How and to what extent did formats of school education intertwine with literary texts? How and to what extent did literary texts propose alternative pedagogies?
- How did old and new ideas on and practices of literary education circulate in a transnational European context, where local, regional, national and transnational contexts touch upon each other? How does literary education in Europe relate to a broader international context in a historical timeframe strongly marked by nationalism and colonialism?

Practical information

The conference "Made in Class" is organized at Leuven University in Belgium, as part of the research program "Learning Modern Literature: Literary Education in Western Europe (1880-1940)", which is funded by the KU Leuven Special Research Fund. The research group is associated with the MDRN research lab (https://www.mdrn.be/).

The aim of the project "Learning Modern Literature" is to chart the complex interactions between the world of school and the world of literature in Western Europe in the modernist period, against the backdrop of different linguistic, socio-cultural and political contexts, with a focus on transnational relations and exchanges (https://www.arts.kuleuven.be/literatuurwetenschap/english/lml).

The conference takes place at the Arts Faculty of KU Leuven (live), Blijde-Inkomststraat 21, 3000 Leuven, from 3 until 5 December 2025. Please send an **abstract of 300-500 words** for a 20 minute presentation, with a short bibliography and up-to-date cv, to literaryeducation@kuleuven.be by **20 August 2025**. We will inform you on the decision by 1 September. Conference languages are **English and French**.

Organizers

Dorian Barbieur, Bart Van Den Bossche, Eva Gijsen, Anke Gilleir, David Martens, Martin Michel, Giulia Scialanga, Pieter Verstraeten.

Selective bibliography

Buurma, Rachel Sagner & Laura Heffernan. *The Teaching Archive: a New History for Literary Study*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021.

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Kämper-Van den boogaart, Michael. 'Schulische Kanonizität als symbolisches Kapital. Anmerkungen zum Spannungsverhältnis zwischen literarischem und pädagogischem Feld', *Studien und Texte zur Sozialgeschichte der Literatur: Bourdieu in der literaturwissenschaftlichen Praxis*, edited by Markus Joch & Norbert Christian Wolf, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2005, 323-333.

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