


Teaching Literature through Online Discussion in Theory and Practice

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**Abstract:** In her article "Teaching Literature through Online Discussion in Theory and Practice" Monica Manzolillo focuses on the teaching of literature at the university through on-line discussion. Integrating discussion-based techniques with the predominant lecture mode is necessary because we need to modify students' merely receptive attitude, and help them develop the fundamental skills of reading, interpreting, and criticizing literary texts. Compared to live discussions, electronic communication has the advantage of providing a more relaxed atmosphere where social conventions are less important and this encourages positive interaction among students. Manzolillo illustrates the experimental use of the website *Learning Literature* <<http://www.learningliterature.it/>> as support for traditional literary courses designed and implemented at the University of Salerno and discusses how a forum provided in the website was used to improve close reading skills of students.

## Monica MANZOLILLO

### Teaching English Literature through Online Discussion in Theory and Practice

Recently, there have been calls to give literary texts a greater centrality in the classroom and to encourage students to give up a merely passive role (see, e.g., McKeachie). The study of literature at university is related to two approaches René Wellek and Austin Warren defined as "extrinsic" and "intrinsic" (15). The first method is related to the idea that the interpretation of literary texts is to be sought in a series of elements that are "external" to the work of art. These elements can either be historical, social, biographical, or cultural and are generally connected to an idea of linear progression or "biological evolution." The material proposed to students is organized chronologically in the much debated tenet of "histories of literature" or on a thematic or genre basis. In the teaching of literature, the historicist-biographical approach has long been predominant because of its ordering of the subject into sections such as authors, schools, movements, and centuries which is a way of trying to give a definite meaning to the material proposed to students (see Barthes 170-77). But the polysemous, pluralistic nature of literature means that it cannot be forced into rigid categorization, even though it undoubtedly helps to organize the teaching contents. In Louise Mary Rosenblatt's opinion, the historicist model has always been prevalent in the teaching of literature because it implies "information arbitrarily demanded" (237). Students learn about the succession of historical movements and memorize the chronology of authors and literary works, but then they forget everything quickly. What usually happens is that they first read literary histories and bibliographies, criticisms, introductions to editions, so-called study-guides "and then, if there is time, they read the works, so they never come into close contact with the literary work" (Rosenblatt 60). Histories of literature can thus be considered a relatively weak teaching instrument because it tends to favor procedures which are repetitive.

Nowadays, the external approach is mostly linked with cultural studies which helped to give a voice to minorities of all kinds and to denounce the mechanisms through which power is culturally constructed. Cultural studies are crucial for improving students' critical capacities, for promoting a genuinely multicultural identity, and for stimulating interdisciplinary connections. However, many scholars point out that these reading practices no longer concentrate on the aesthetic nature of the text. For example, in Jonathan Culler's opinion cultural studies emphasize what he calls a "symptomatic interpretation" approaching the text as a symptom of something else (67). Further, while cultural studies may have been successful in opening the way to literary theory and sophisticated readings, the widening of perspectives which ensued did not automatically imply a revision of teaching practices that tended to remain anchored to tradition. In the first half of the twentieth century, there was a violent reaction to extrinsic methods, a reaction which aimed at pointing out that the study of literature should be principally focused on the reading of literary texts. The diffusion in France of the *explication du texte* method, whose principal exponent was Gustave Lanson, together with the advent of the Russian formalist movement and practitioners of New Criticism concentrated their interest on the direct study of literary works. These methods for studying literature are defined as "intrinsic" because they give centrality to the text in order to appreciate its specifics.

In the teaching of literature, these approaches resulted in proposing to students the close reading technique, a form of study based on an attentive analysis of the text excluding any personal or external information. Close reading involves the style and narrative analysis of literary texts followed by a personal interpretation of the data obtained and the highlighting of the main themes and characteristics of the literary work. Close reading usually culminates in the writing of an essay in which students provide textual evidence in order to describe literary discourse as complex and coherent (see Kain 66). Close reading is therefore a mental process that leads from details to wider categories and that enables students to build up a personal interpretation, thus it is a very important activity in literary studies (see Boyles 1). Close reading techniques must be recognized as an important first step in literary studies provided they are followed by a phase of the contextualization of critical, historical, and literary perspectives. If close reading represents an important first step, an equally important second step is to confront the text with macro-texts. For this reason, if the internal approach is not completed with the external approach in order to fully understand the texts, literature never enters into a significant relationship with the world and students may not become interested in the study of literature. As Paul de Man suggested, the "scholarship of literature" includes at least two complementary areas: "historical and philological facts as the preparatory condition for understanding and methods for reading and interpretation" (3-4). Robert Scholes proposed that to integrate the two approaches, the organization of university curricula should not be based on content, but on specific abilities to be developed in students (71). According to Scholes, the teaching of literature should not propose a flow of information, but should help students develop specific skills. For this reason, he believed that the study of literature, especially in the first two years, should be based on the developing of three skills which are strictly related to one another: reading, interpretation, and criticism. Reading is the primary activity on which the other two are based. In this first phase, students read the literary text and give an immediate response based on their personal sensibility and experience. They can also be engaged in a series of creative writing activities whose main aim is not to form "professional writers" but to directly observe the functioning mechanisms of literature from the inside. Rewriting and manipulating literary texts in literature courses can favor the internalization of meaning because students acquire a deeper and more penetrating knowledge of the elements that constitute the literary text. Using such strategies, it is easier to involve students to introduce concepts such as "death of the author" or "intertextuality." The second step is interpretation because students ought to question themselves about what kind of messages the literary text suggests. At this stage, they read the text in close reading and then starting from the various elements which emerge in the analysis they proceed to cultural connections and

contexts. The final stage is criticism which is related to the reading of the literary text from ideological and pedagogical perspectives. The three phases are interconnected and produce textual activities which are different, but complementary: "in reading we produce text within text; in interpreting we produce text upon text; and in criticizing we produce text against text" (Scholes 24). Scholes's solution is convincing in so far as it gives students a wide and articulated vision of the various ways of approaching the literary text and he succeeds in establishing an effective dialogue between "the primary system in which the text is encoded and the secondary systems that can only be brought to bear by an interpreter who comprehends the primary system" (Scholes 161), while at the same time remaining open to the necessary connections with extra-textual information that any reading inevitably implies. His view gives centrality to the literary text and offers a teaching model where the different approaches to the literary text seem to be efficiently synthesized.

The traditional mode of teaching at university, the lecture, is not suitable for carrying out a teaching modality that requires the direct interaction of students with the literary text. The model which is widely used at universities in Italy and elsewhere is the so-called "tell-them-and-test-them" approach: a series of lectures followed by a final test, with no possibility for students to receive feedback regarding their actual comprehension. As William McKeachie points out, the lecture is useful for university students because it gives them the chance to experience direct contact with "a scholar in action" so that they can observe the way in which experts in the field relate themselves to the discipline (71). However, he also warns against the risk implied in this approach. Most of the time, in fact, during lectures, only the instructor thinks actively and students do not have the necessary instruments to perceive what could be new or original ideas: "in lectures we all too often present the products of our thinking without revealing the process by which we arrive at our conclusions. If our goal is to help students develop as learners and thinkers, more of our lectures should model the process we use in arriving at conclusions, and we should identify the directions we have followed in order that students can understand the model we represent" (McKeachie 236). While the physical presence of the teacher is undoubtedly reassuring and direct contact helps to stimulate enthusiasm and motivation, the problem of the lecture is the passivity of students who are engaged merely in note taking. While note taking is a valid instrument for stimulating long-term memory, it is only so when it comes out of a synthesis or re-elaboration processes. It is pointless if not detrimental, when limited to simply copying or transcribing the words spoken by the instructor because students who are engaged in a demanding act of mentally recording are not able to make a serious effort at understanding concepts. It is thus advisable to engage students with activities which "force" them to think and to use techniques to promote an active and interactive learning. It has been observed that while both lectures and dialogical methods appear to be equally efficient with regard to short-term retention of information, lectures seem to be less effective with regard to stimulating long-term memory enabling the application of knowledge to new contexts and to creating a solid motivation in students who feel frustrated by the impersonality of the context. To facilitate the storage of new concepts in the long-term memory, students must be engaged in a series of activities that help them apply concretely what has been studied in a practical way. Michelle Birnbaum believes that teaching practice has amply demonstrated how neither "teacherless environments" nor "discussion-based" models, when exclusively used, have ever assured a wider participation of students (187). For this reason, it is advisable to integrate the traditional literature course, organized around a series of lectures, with discussion-based modalities using a "blues" approach, based on improvisation and mixture to make the lesson a really positive experience for students.

Discussions can be carried out in face-to-face interaction, but many studies show that live conditions hinder the effective participation of all group members (see Brookfield and Preskill; Dauer; Rickly). Often shyness or fear of not appearing to be sufficiently prepared can stop students from taking a direct part in conversation so that the teacher usually ends up talking to the same 3-4 students who seem to be more self-confident. Moreover, using asynchronous software, students tend to feel more relaxed and, in the privacy of their homes and at the time of their choosing, they can take all the time they need to read what the others have written and reflect on their own reactions, before giving their point of view on a given subject. It is also important to underline that in the traditional classroom, the conditions that in everyday interactions determine the marginalization of minorities are inevitably reproduced. A study carried out by Candance West and Don Zimmermann, for example, highlights that women or more in general people with personality traits which are culturally considered as "feminine" such as shyness or introversion, participate in conversation less frequently and, when they do, they are interrupted more often (118). In forums and chats everyone can, in principle, give his/her own contribution to the discussion without the fear of being silenced. The traditional classroom tends to reproduce the kind of discourse that Mikhail Bakhtin defines as "authoritarian" (72) because it is based on the passive assimilation of the teacher's positions, but with the introduction of new technologies the classroom can become more democratic since the focus shifts from the teacher to the students. Of course much depends on the teacher and the method used, but it is possible to say that electronic media can help create the conditions for what Jürgen Habermas defined a genuinely "egalitarian discourse" through a democratic discussion in which everyone has an equal opportunity to participate (55). Computer-mediated communication thus creates an environment in which social conventions are less evident and teacher talking time can be effectively controlled. Research shows that in live discussions teacher talk accounts for 71% of the overall speaking time while in web modalities it takes up only 11%. Another important element to be considered is that in live discussions there is little or no interaction among students, while in computer-mediated discussions 53% is student/student and 24% is student/class (see Rickly 105). This wider exchange among students can help create the kind of interpretive community described by Stanley Fish and learning environments where meaning is negoti-

ated among the various members so that everybody participates equally in the creation of knowledge, in a process akin to what Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia" (95).

The instrument used to achieve all this is communication software that enables people to interact outside of the classroom in online environments such as chatrooms, forums, and videoconferences. These technologies have modified computer use in favor of socialization and can help individual students join the wider academic community. Since everyone can find his/her own place in a communicative network, Thomas Barker and Frank Kemp believe that this is the ideal basis for a new post-modern pedagogy that reflects contemporary worldviews and creates a model in which all members participate equally and learn together (5). Of course, it is not advisable to simply use new technologies within the existing pedagogy which must, instead, be re-examined to accommodate the new potential that communication and information technologies offers. Innovations never derive from the mere use of a new technology, but from the contemporaneous elaboration of new pedagogy that takes into account recent technological developments. Starting from these theoretical premises, a website *Learning Literature* <<http://www.learningliterature.it/>> was initiated at the University of Salerno in order to support the first two years of a three-year English literature degree. The website provides general information and news about the courses, but it also includes two interactive areas: one for informal conversation among students and the other for didactic purposes. In the academic years 2013-14 and 2014-15 the site was used for courses and provided two separate areas: one for the students of English literature who were studying the Victorian novel and the other for the students of English literature who were focusing on modernist fiction. Each course site presented the same internal organization divided into three main sections: student area, virtual classroom, and forum. An account creation section and a newsletter section were also set up. In the student area there is a graffiti wall, a space of free interaction among students in order to stimulate aggregation. This is important because it is well-known that the reason why many students find it hard to study and end up taking no exams and eventually leaving university, is often owing to isolation and the anonymity of their initial academic experiences, especially during the first two years (see McGregor, Cooper, Smith, Robinson 45).

In the virtual classroom students can get all the information and news they need about the course. There are sections with the lesson timetable, news about cultural events at the department, downloadable didactic materials recommended during the course, and a virtual library with a bibliography and a webiography with links to websites where students could gather more information about the studied topics. The students who subscribed to the mailing list received emails whenever new materials and new information about the course were published on the site. The most innovative part of the website was the forum where students discussed topics related to the course in a stress-free environment. The forum section opened with a page which listed the regulations and the basic *netiquette* principles (*net-etiquette* for correct online usage and behavior) students were expected to observe. In order to access the section meant to be visible to participants only, a username-and-password screen was inserted. The site was designed to be updated and modified frequently because it was a work-in-progress that could be continuously and easily improved even by people who are no experts in the field. Alongside all the previously installed functions, some of which have not yet even been used for the courses (the possibility of giving distance lessons or online exams, for example), new functions could easily be installed when required.

Didactic objectives must take into account the need to integrate the practices of literary analysis that Wellek and Warren define as "extrinsic" and "intrinsic," respectively. In order to achieve this the text-based activities of the forum were designed such that there could be a mutual reinforcement between the forum and the lectures in which extra-textual information has been given to the students. It is particularly important to improve students' ability to analyze literary texts during the first two years, in order to enable them to become specialists of the discipline, capable of comprehensively appreciating and evaluating works of literature. Discussing literary texts is also very important in order to reach some general objectives such as the development in students of what cognitive psychology designates "critical thinking," a skill considered by most researchers as "the essence of tertiary education." Critical thinking refers to a series of cognitive faculties that enable people to consider and evaluate the implications and contradictions of any position, before forming their own point of view (see Lazere 34). Among the many disciplines of study, literature is particularly useful for achieving these goals because it provides a series of reflections about human life and experience with no single and definite interpretation. In this way students learn to approach any issue from a multiplicity of perspectives. This provides them with a more open mentality reducing prejudice and intolerance.

The experiment was intended for students in the first two years of the three-year academic degree course, known as the *laurea triennale*. Courses more suitable for these kinds of activities are, in fact, introductory ones because students who start to study have to develop or reinforce specific abilities of textual analysis and prepare themselves to approach literary theory and criticism. Short literary texts such as poetry and short stories which are not too long texts are more suitable for close reading. Hence, in 2013-14 in the website forum for English literature I focused on the first ten chapters of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (the Gateshead and Lowood sections), since the entire novel would have been too long, while the students of the second year read James Joyce's short story *The Dead*. In the academic year 2014-15 students of the first year concentrated on Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde* and students of the second year discussed Joyce's *The Dead*. It is worth pointing out that *Jane Eyre* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde* were already part of the reading list for first-year students since it was important not to scare them with extra material to be studied during their first academic experience. Students of the second year were asked to read an additional short story of the same historical period as the one they were studying, so that they could expand on more topics. Since this was an experimental project a group of twenty students who volunteered to take part in the initiative was created for each class. Members of the forum regis-

tered and received a personal password that enabled them to enter whenever they wanted with no fixed time or duration. The posts in the forum were visible only to participants and moderators because it was important to create a familiar and intimate atmosphere. Moderators started new topics and then students discussed the issues raised. In the forum, the reading of the literary text was promoted through a series of activities based on Scholes's reading/interpretation/criticism model before instructors gave lectures about the literary texts to stimulate a reaction. They were invited to develop an investigative attitude, scrupulous and detailed, and to provide textual evidence for every assumption made. A new post was proposed weekly, but all previous ones remained open so that it was always possible to add new data and website functions.

Once the discussion was finished, students answered two questionnaires to monitor the way they responded to the use of a forum in a literature course and to assess aspects such as motivation and the abilities that were expected to be mastered. The first questionnaire was based on expectations of students and was published on the forum home page. Students were asked to complete it before starting their activities or within the first two weeks of participation. The second questionnaire was then added in the final phase of the course so that students could provide a complete evaluation of their experience and give their suggestions for improvement. Both questionnaires were designed as a selection of multiple choice questions, but students could also write down their answers when checking the option "other." In the final questionnaire, a large comments area gave students the chance to add any kind of reflection they considered relevant. Both questionnaires were anonymous thanks to an external link to a gmail account which was easily created. This kind of account provides free applications including a drive enabling the creation of survey modules for polls to collect results and visualize them in a graphic-statistical format. The group of participants was formed and the registration was successful, the discussions on the selected literary texts started in parallel to the lectures. Stage one, reading, was articulated in two posts. The first post was based on the first impressions of students soon after reading the literary text for the first time. We asked them to give their spontaneous reactions and say if they liked the work or not and what the principle themes were that emerged. This post was based on Rosenblatt's idea that it is necessary to activate the affective filter before analyzing the text (57). Only in this way are ideas fully interiorized by students and ready for development, because what is accepted only by reason tends to remain in the short-term memory. Students end up studying the material only to pass the exam and forget everything quickly afterwards. Statistically this first post was the one that received more answers because students were completely free to express their opinions and started discussing each other's views. We also provided links to the ebook versions of the selected works in Italian and English. The second post of this first section included activities based on creative writing and the Reader-Response principle that the reader does not simply receive the text but contributes in creating meaning. Students were asked to tell the story of a minor character, rewrite a passage from a different point of view, or to fill in a blank of the narration. Before doing this, they were invited to read the text attentively again in order to identify any detail which could be useful in developing and sustaining their creative writing version which had to be based on textual evidence. In doing so, students became more familiar with the text, reinforced their interest, and came to appreciate the author's skill much more. This post received many rewritings in different genres. Some second-year students reading Joyce's *The Dead*, for example, rewrote Gretta's story in the form of a poem or a letter. At the end of this section links to rewritten versions of famous texts were given in the form of ebooks or critical articles so that students could become more familiar with the literary device of rewriting which is so prominent in post-modern literature.

Stage two was aimed at interpretation of the themes which gradually emerged. Some posts were focused on the close reading of selected sections, others on the analysis of characters, narration modes, setting, symbolism and so on. This section comprised three posts for each group and some of the titles were "Fire and Eyre: Symbolism and Natural Elements in *Jane Eyre*," "Reader I Married Him: Double I and Narrating Voice," "The Secret of the Red Room: Close Reading and Gothic Elements," "Softly and Faintly Falling Upon all the Living and the Dead: Snow and Imagery in *The Dead*," "That Old Irish Tonality: Folk Songs and Visual Arts Suggestions in *The Dead*," "To Dare or Not to Dare? Gabriel and J. Alfred Prufrock's *Love Song*," "City of Dreadful Night in *Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde*," and "It was a Wild, Cold, Seasonable Night of March: Narrating Voice and Journalistic Reportage." In this phase the moderator guided the discussion and proposed ideas that students had not taken into consideration, avoiding the temptation to lecture them (see Brookfield and Preskill 138). It is important to stimulate a plurality of views which must be evaluated by examining the pros and cons, so that it is gradually possible to come to a consensus. This is how Fish's interpretive communities build up knowledge together. When the discussion reached an interesting level, suggestions for further reading were given in the form of academic essays by eminent scholars. When these essays could be downloaded from the web, links to web pages were provided, otherwise we gave bibliographical references.

The final stage, criticism, consisted of two posts in which a couple of critical perspectives were proposed to students, for example "The Angel in the House and Feminist Criticism in *Jane Eyre*," "From Page to Screen: Movie and TV Adaptations of *Jane Eyre*," "Remediating *Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde*," "Doppelgängers in European Literature," "Interpretive Vertigo: Deconstruction and *The Dead*," "Sunday Bloody Sunday: New Historicism and the Irish Question." The latter post also provided links to a U2 hit song and to the 1996 film *Michael Collins* directed by Neil Jordan. A link to an outline of the selected critical perspective was given for each post from the Bedford St. Martin's website and students were invited to reflect on the aspects of the literary text which could have been of interest for that particular critical approach. Students were required to support their hypotheses with textual evidence. In this way a personal application of theory was suggested before the reading of specific essays and thus students had a more active approach questioning their assumptions. Obviously, one cannot expect students to criticize in an original manner right away because the development of this critical

ability requires time and exercise. What really happens is that students gradually abandon a theological attitude that makes the opinions of recommended critics appear dogmatic and unquestionable truths. It is also important to stress that the downloadable files for further reading were simply meant to stimulate discussion. Students did not have to read or watch them all and were free to choose what interested them most. By providing all sorts of multimedia links, (articles, videos, music, and websites), the forum thus became a wide hypertext storeroom where students could choose their own learning paths. This helped students develop a fluid and associative frame of mind that, in complex societies, needs to be mastered alongside a traditional linear, thematically, and historically stringent one. At the end of the discussion period, students were assessed on the basis of frequency and pertinence of the comments provided using three grades: A, B, or C. The assessment report for the forum activities was designed to count for 20% of the final examination mark because it was important to take into account the extra-work involved. As Susan J. Dauer suggests, it is necessary to give some reward in terms of assessment marks to online activities, otherwise students would not dedicate enough time to them (88). Following an oral examination, students received further grading about their reading, interpretation, and criticism techniques developed through the forum activities to other literary texts on the reading list. During oral examinations many students who participated on the forum declared that their study with the webpage facilitated by instructors benefitted them because many of the crucial issues arising from the program had already been dealt with through online discussions.

The website counted an average of 80 to 90 visits a day with peaks of 160 to 180 while the lectures/forum were taking place. 339 students registered for participation in the graffiti wall comments, for the download of didactic materials, and for the periodical newsletters. Participation on the forum was enthusiastic on the part of all members and the project received 646 answers on 34 topics. Although on some occasions there was no debate and students tended to conform their opinions, many of the forum members wrote more than one answer a week and the length and pertinence of the opinions expressed was encouraging. The response to the questionnaires shows that students decided to participate in the forum because they wished to study the topics related to the program in depth and because they were interested in exchanging ideas with colleagues. Before starting this experience, they expected to acquire the methodological instruments that they would need in order to approach the literary text and to develop precise reading abilities. They also underlined that the decision to participate was encouraged by the online framework which enabled them to organize their time and ideas autonomously. Once the forum ended, 100% of the students who participated evaluated the experience in positive terms, saying that they found the discussion approach very useful for mastering the topics. Further, most of the students confirmed that the online setting favored interaction and helped them to feel more relaxed by not being face to face with others.

In the final comments where students were free to write whatever they wished, some students underlined, for example, that in the forum "a single work of literature was fully exploited, analyzed and observed in detail" and "We usually made very interesting links to other subjects, in particular visual arts." Such comments suggest students understood that the priority was not the amount of content given to them, but to develop skills and an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge in the study of literature. Many students stated that they appreciated the anonymity of the online setting which enabled them to feel more relaxed when expressing their views: "I really appreciated the fact that in the forum there were no names, surnames or familiar faces but simply lovers of literature sharing their opinions, without feeling judged or in awe." Nearly all students underlined the importance of using teaching and learning techniques which are no longer based on passive reception of content, but on contextual elaboration and negotiation of knowledge and noticed with pleasure that more and more courses are now taking this direction: "I really enjoy active learning. I must admit that this year most of our teachers required more participation on our part, through group work or frequent testing for example. I found discussions very useful and I hope that in the future this method will be used for other courses, especially literature courses" ([on the relevance of digitality and new media technology in the study, pedagogy, and scholarship of literature, see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári](#); [on teaching literature with new media technology, see, e.g., Boruszko <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2355>>](#)). The limits of the experiment are related to the fact that the forum allowed only a restricted group of students (20-25 students per class out of 70-80 who attended lectures), but the instructors' experiences show that it is possible to moderate up to 3 or 4 groups simultaneously and that the online discussion format could be proposed to an entire class. Further, the data obtained covered only two academic years while a use on a full three-year degree course would be a good starting point for further reflection. In addition, the site could also be improved thanks to the many suggestions suggested by students and the course instructors' experiences.

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