

New Technologies and Teaching Comparative Literature

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**Abstract:** In her article "New Technologies and Teaching Comparative Literature" Graciela Boruszko discusses the use of new technologies in literary studies curricula. Innovative processes are becoming fundamental components of our educational systems as students challenge faculty to immerse themselves in their rapidly changing world. Learning in the twenty-first century is assisted by various information technologies because the networked information economy made possible by the Internet allows students to access a rich array of online resources including community based and collaborative knowledge exchange systems. Current students are "digital natives" grown up using a variety of digital platforms. Students multitask and process information quickly and therefore demand more from the learning processes proposed to them. Rather than consuming information, students form their own information networks and participate in learning communities. The discipline of comparative literature relies on the interaction of ideas and concepts which evolve from an initial core of seemingly disconnected literary works. Technology is an important facilitator of those connections, enabling deeper thought to be given to the comparative process that follows the initial challenge of understanding how connections are formed or what a particular constellation of connections represents.

## Graciela BORUSZKO

### New Technologies and Teaching Comparative Literature

New technologies are continually developed, improved, and even replaced at a rapid pace. Although this rapid change risks creating pleonasm, it is nevertheless a meaningful representation of our culture. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet says, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet" (Act II, Scene II, 2). For Juliet, a name is an artificial convention that does not carry as much significance as what it represents. In the twenty-first century, Juliet's utterance carries implications for new technologies. Recently, I visited the Wall of Peace in Belfast that separates the Catholic population from the Protestant population. While the name "Wall of Peace" sounds oxymoronic to me, it has a much more charged meaning for the Irish people. In the article at hand, I analyze the recent explosion of "new technologies" that claim to add important components to the educational process, but require faculty members to determine the extent of their contribution to educational practice. How will we navigate the wave of technological innovations while maintaining high standards of instruction? How can faculty balance academic loads while keeping pace with new technologies?

Innovation processes are becoming fundamental components of our educational systems as students continuously challenge faculty to immerse themselves in their rapidly changing world. Education begins with communication. We therefore need to find the most effective ways to make pedagogical materials accessible to the student. Min Zhou, describing teaching in an urban environment, provides a framework for the use of new technologies: "Teaching is a complex and multidimensional process that requires deep knowledge and understanding in a wide range of areas and the ability to synthesize, integrate, and apply this knowledge in different situations, under varying conditions, and with a wide diversity of groups and individuals. In quality teaching, this knowledge is applied in ways that provide equitable access and opportunities that build upon and extend what learners already know in facilitating the ability to acquire, construct, and create new knowledge" (208-25).

The current generation of students has required faculty to take on new roles. Educators are required to present materials in a dialogic, communicational format through which the learning materials are discovered in a mutually enriching exchange. In the field of literature, these challenges reinforce the premise that literature is both a communicational venue and a mode of artistic expression created through the science of linguistics. In the dialogic mode, the educator conveys knowledge and receives feedback that is enriched and redirected to students creating full cycles of exchange. Frequently, conversations extend beyond class time and into office hours through forums in all kinds of media becoming an integral part of the educational process. These new scenarios challenge teaching faculty because each student chooses the approach to learning that suits his/her personal preference or need. Technology, in all of its forms is an integral part of students' lives and they expect to find it in their learning process. For this reason, faculty members have begun designing syllabi which offer a variety of approaches to learning. Community engagement activities, service projects, group activities, online platforms, and other learning strategies entice students to learn in ways which are closer to their individual preference. In this scenario, the inclusion of technology in curricula is not a choice, but a necessity — a tool for teachers and scholars. The emphasis on assessment drives pedagogy to focus on results and to select effective teaching tools and in this process each faculty selects teaching tools with the circular structure of pedagogy in mind: instruction from the teacher reaches the student, it is re-engineered and circulates among other students in the community, in dialogues, and in conversation, and it returns to the classroom as an elaborated response. Technology assists each step of the educational process because teaching faculty to be effective must immerse themselves in the students' world.

Educators evaluate each option that technology offers and choose the tools that complement their own particular style of teaching and the type of students being instructed. Naturally, some tools prove to be more effective for some educators and others do not. What an educator can do more effectively in person cannot be replaced by technology and it becomes necessary to enhance that particular skill of the teaching faculty. The teaching curriculum and the receiving curriculum

should form a harmonious ensemble as two intrinsic parts of a whole. These parts are negotiated at different levels: the institutional level, the program level, and the course level. Each curriculum becomes potential curricula which rely on standards to provide a framework. These curricula are enhanced according to the requirements of accrediting organizations, by institutional policies, and by the attributes of the institution and faculty members to fulfill the requirements of a given program. The key of all these components is the interconnectivity of each element. The stakeholders who connect all of the previously mentioned components are diverse. Each faculty can be effective as long as there is intentional and concrete institutional collaboration and support through instructional technology support, academic librarians, teaching development departments, service projects offices, community outreach groups, etc. However, the bottom-up approach to integrating curricula will only be successful when the academic leadership and teaching faculty are aware of the importance of coordination and are willing to have the technology integrated into their course curriculum. Department heads are important in the top-down approach. In the bottom-up approach, individual teaching staff including lecturers and librarians implement the curricular integration of each program. In the top-down approach, the curricular integration of information literacy is endorsed by the university or by the academic department. Practically speaking, a successful approach to integrating technology into the curriculum considers students' needs and feedback. Committed faculty leaders need to identify faculty members who feel comfortable establishing pilot programs which are experiments with the use of different technologies. These faculty members should be kept updated on new technological resources and allowed to disseminate their experiences to other colleagues and the community at large. It is also important to support the faculty involved in pioneering the use of new technologies. With this support in place, the academic community is ready to adapt to the generalized use of technology in instruction. Faculty that champion and pioneer new technology are able to recognize and locate new technologies that can be used effectively in their instruction.

Two approaches must be implemented simultaneously to commit all parties to implement the use of new technology: collaboration and negotiation. It is important that academic leaders exert energy to identify, evaluate, and draw conclusions from all pertinent sources to produce effective reports which represent efficiently each approach to the use of new technology. According to Clive McGee's curricular development model in his *Teachers and Curriculum Decision-Making*, the first step should include a situational analysis that considers both the external factors and internal factors which will dictate the need of specific tools. Identifying the curricular intention within the institutional pedagogical approach constitutes the second step. Third, faculty members must accumulate teaching experience through implementing learning activities with the support of new technologies. The final stage consists of evaluation and assessment, the results of which are incorporated into the curriculum content. This process could help to clarify the urgent question of "What should Universities teach?" and McGee suggests that content be selected based on its validity, significance, interest, learnability, and consistency with social reality.

In *Teaching Practice: A Cross-Professional Perspective* the authors used an examination of learning across three professions to identify three key concepts for understanding the pedagogies of practice in professional education: representations, decomposition, and approximations of practice (see Grossman, Compton, Igra, Ronfeldt, Shahan, Williamson). Representations of practice comprise the different ways in which practice is represented in professional education and what these various representations make visible to novices. Decomposition of practice involves breaking down practice into its constituent parts for the purposes of teaching and learning. Approximations of practice refer to opportunities to engage in practices that are more or less proximal to the practices of a profession. Deborah Loewenberg Ball and Francesca M. Forzani reinforce the same approach to pedagogy: "Redesigned around practice, the teacher education curriculum would include at its core opportunities to learn to perform a repertoire of teaching tasks and to choose among them with deliberate attention to pupils, as well as opportunities to acquire content and foundational knowledge centrally important to the work of teaching" (498). Their approach places in close proximity the processes of planning, enacting, interpreting, translating, and re-enacting which are used in the "teaching" of literature. New technologies facilitate each of these processes. Because pedagogy refers to a clearly designed and interrelated pattern of learning experiences

embedded within a particular theoretical perspective and guided by a clearly articulated philosophical stance that provides vision and purpose for long- and short-term learning outcomes, new technologies should be seen as an open field in which discretion should be exercised to choose those tools that prove to be most effective.

Learning in the twenty-first century is assisted by various information technologies because the networked information economy made possible by the internet allows students to access a rich array of online information resources including community based and collaborative knowledge exchange systems (see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek and López-Varela Azcárate). Rather than consuming information, students form their own information networks and participate in learning communities. The connectivism theory fosters the idea that learning takes place across networked learning communities. Connectivism postulates that learning takes place when learners make connections among ideas located throughout their personal learning networks. Undoubtedly, information technologies are central to the processes of learning and the process of accessing information from multiple sources (see, e.g., Siemens <<http://www.elearnspace.org/Articles/connectivism.htm>>). Technology use develops the skill of evaluating connections between different information sources in a dynamic information network. I posit that the theory of connectivism is relevant to the field of comparative literature: the process of learning is structured through building connections among information sources. Comparative literature requires different points of reference and new technologies therefore constitute the ideal media through which to obtain the connectivity among the areas involved in the literary comparison. The rapid access offered by technology to a diversity of opinions urges educators to instruct students in the judicious discrimination of the available resources. Thus the discipline of comparative literature should be able to exploit the facility and disposition of students to rely on a wide array of resources to establish a comparative spectrum of the perspectives, expressions, and cultural innuendos imbedded in each literary work. Within this panoramic bonanza of information accessibility lies inherent dangers. The ranking of search results highlights some perspectives while limiting or hiding others and the benefits of the general use of search engines are accompanied by dangers.

Instruction in comparative literature benefits the student beyond the study of this particular discipline. Students are trained to evaluate the information that they receive. Connectivism highlights the importance of the ability to recognize patterns and similarities, the core strategies of the comparatist. Comparative literature involves the interaction among ideas and concepts which evolve from an initial core of seemingly disconnected literary works. Technology is an important facilitator of those connections enabling deeper thought to be given to the comparative process that follows the initial challenge of understanding how connections are formed or what a particular constellation of connections represents. According to Marcy P. Driscoll, "effective teaching is informed by theories of learning" (25). Connectivism therefore seems to be an appropriate theory to apply in comparative literature and new technologies which foster such an approach should have a privileged place in instruction. Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that the majority of the comparatists' work still occurs in long hours of solitary reading and reflection. New technologies can open up new and accessible venues of interaction that accommodate a faster pace of activity for the faculty and the students. The familiarity gained through these types of connections will facilitate a more overt practice of comparatism and literary exchange for future practitioners. Both learning theories and instructional theories structure teaching to make the acquisition process as effective as possible for the life-long learner. Introducing new technologies such as using iPads in groups to bring different fields of information to group discussion has proved to be an enriching experience that has brought the discussion to unexpected levels and excited students' curiosity to explore new fields of comparison. The computer is a private space and as such does not constitute a space in which students are open to share. The iPad, however, seems to be a more public space similar to a smart phone screen that people have a tendency to share with others. The use of iPads in the classroom favors the circulation of information and promotes the exchange of ideas. In a comparative literature class, a literary work can be studied by searches highlighting fields of information.

Another tool that has proven effective is the use of e-clickers which shorten the time taken to review the content of a literary work. Students approach this type of evaluation as if it were a game which inclines them to compete and facilitates consequently the process of individual involvement in the literary task. The use of provocative questions in e-clicker questionnaires can be used to open new fields of comparison and foster follow-up discussions. The use of e-clickers and iPads subscribes to behaviorist theories because it regards learning as measurable through observable changes in behavior. The tendency to share iPad space or to share information through an e-clicker questionnaire fosters the comparatist approach of connecting with others and other sources of information.

Cognitive and constructivist theories affirm that learning occurs when learners reconstruct the mental models through which they understand the world to incorporate new experiences and information (see Andrews and Haythornthwaite; Cohan and Honigsfeld). The student of comparative literature needs to recreate his/her mental models constantly in order to accommodate a new model based on the approximation of the elements of the comparison. New technologies favor rapid access to new venues of comparison and to more traditional sources of comparison as new databases become accessible and existing ones become more easily accessible through library services. Educators who incorporate new technologies into their pedagogical structure can create learning environments which enable students to get the most from instructional experiences. Humanist theory emphasizes the importance of a learner's emotions, feelings, and motivations for learning and new technologies, when applied in the comparative literature field, facilitate, to a degree, those connections with others through which emotions and feelings can be expressed and shared. Social media is currently an important forum in which many choose to express their emotions and feelings. Therefore, the inclusion of new technologies can favor, to a certain extent (there are obvious limitations to this kind of expression), the manifestation of the personal emotions and feelings which motivate a certain direction in the comparative work. For example, in a class entitled "The Spanish Myth of Don Juan" many students were open to expressing their feelings about each representation of the myth. Most of these interactions took place in an online forum. A central tenet of constructivist learning theory is the relevance of active learning that can be promoted by selecting media through which students can find a space to express their learning trajectories and become active participants in the instructional process. George Siemens argues that information technology requires a new theory (<<http://www.elearnspace.org/Articles/connectivism.htm>>). The theories mentioned above describe learning as brain-based, but a theory based on the use of technology engages the concept of networked elements external to the person that can contribute to elaborate meaning or knowledge.

Graham Cormode and Balachander Krishnamurthy postulate that in the digital age learning landscapes are networked socially and technologically (<<http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2125/1972>>). The internet allows learners to engage with countless information resources, including library databases, peer-reviewed open access journals, institutional repositories, and virtual reference services. In addition, Web 2.0 tools such as social bookmarking and tagging, media sharing tools, RSS feeds, and collaborative peer-to-peer resources are available to them. Web 2.0 (read/write web) allows users to connect, communicate and collaborate using a myriad of tools and technologies. A defining characteristic of the new web is collaborative information creation: in Web 2.0 end users have opportunities to create information and, consequently, knowledge. Christine Greenhow, Beth Robella, and Joan E. Hughes suggest that learning takes place "across a set of contexts found in physical or virtual spaces that provide opportunities for learning" (246). This approach allows students to exercise considerable authority over how, when, and with whom they learn which can be challenging for a novice. Digital culture has shifted from text-based knowledge to collaborative webs favoring broad, comparative dialogue (see, e.g. Schlumpf). Faculty instruction becomes one more voice in this broad dialogue and does not establish a hierarchy of authority for sources of information. Another source of concern is found in the frameworks by which the information is structured: the connections and selection of information do not respond to academically verified sources, but to other political or social constraints. Yann Moulier Boutang states that "Vertical

authority of knowledge or of education has been questioned through the Wikipedia phenomenon and, even more so, by [its] collaborative production" (62). This concept is the guiding thought behind the philosophy that the individual should not be persuaded to relinquish the personal quest of knowledge to the authority of a single voice. S. Thomas, C. Joseph, J. Laccetti, B. Mason, S. Mills, S. Perril, and K. Pullinger define transliteracy as "the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks"

(<<http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2060/1908>>). In this format, the comparatist student exercises the skills which enable learners to access information, communicate across platforms, and understand the information that is produced dynamically and shared online. Technological skills complement literary skills and foster a contemporary view of the field of comparative literature while maintaining the traditional tenets of the field. Teaching faculty assume that the students come to class with transferable skills which enable them to learn across platforms dispersed in a wide range of media. The media creates a space for applying instruction and developing critical evaluations and comparative frameworks. Within this vast array of theories, there is no single theory that contains fully the learning process within the framework of new technologies because the complexity of learning, combined with the complexity of the available teaching tools, defies definition by a single theory. While connectivism provides one of the best theoretical approaches to the teaching of comparative literature, the relevance of behaviorist, cognitivist, constructivist, and other humanist theories of learning cannot be neglected.

To deter students from using Web 2.0 technologies and encourage them to use online primary sources which have recently been made available, these tools must accommodate learning preferences and pedagogical goals by becoming more functional (see digital and thematic online collections, early published works online, databases and catalogues online: Anthis, Coiro, Wang, Lindquist). Current students are "digital natives" having grown up using a multitude of digital platforms. Students multitask and process information quickly and have come to demand more from the learning processes proposed to them. To a certain extent, this new scenario favors the teaching of comparative literature because it allows faculty to concentrate on the process of literary comparison while leaving the gathering of information to the students. The community learning environment and the individual learning environment are equally favorable to the learning process of these "digital natives" because they process information in a non-linear fashion. Learning by doing seems to be their mantra, and maximizing technology's success as a learning tool requires a learner-centered focus to identify productive pedagogical tools. The comparative component is of primary importance in the comparative literature field. Familiarity with a variety of platforms facilitates a non-linear approach, promoting the comparative aspect of literature classes and allowing instruction to focus on building a solid understanding of literary themes, contexts, and other content resulting in critical approaches to the material. New technologies renew students' interest in the comparativism which is becoming increasingly similar to their experience with digital media and speaks to students' increasingly cosmopolitan perspectives. Younghee Woo and Thomas Reeves affirm that "textbooks are being replaced by technologies that need to be refined in order to respond to the learners' need to undertake authentic activities that have real-world relevance and require them to solve ill-defined, multifaceted problems through collaboration" (19).

The large-scale digitization of cultural heritage collections offers potentially a valuable resource for contextualizing efficiently the literary narratives of different cultural environments. Students can visit archives around the globe and make complex and accurate associations through a comparative approach. This same digital world, however, places enormous pressure on educators to find and select appropriate digital material and guide students' selection of resources. Teaching and research faculty also face challenges in managing, maintaining, and reusing the resources selected. New technologies may impact the time investment of educators and connectivity increases their availability to students and learning, staying informed, and strategizing the effective use of new technologies may become increasingly demanding. Successful assignments focus students' efforts on synthesizing information, thinking critically, and working with other students in meaningful collaborations. For example, in a culture or literature class, students are assigned to research a specific subtopic in groups and then analyze it and share with the rest of the class. In a culture

class, students enjoy acting out periods of history, historical characters, or literary interpretations of such periods. Those activities are more effective if they include a choice that involves the learner in the task and creates a sense of ownership which translates into stronger motivation. One important potential pitfall of using new technologies is their tendency to fail in the middle of the presentations. In addition, the effort invested into implementing the use of new technologies is not adequately acknowledged. The longer a person works in a field, the more expertise the person develops, and the decision to take time away from that occupation to optimize the effective use of new technologies seems disproportionate to the efforts required. Thus, the decision to continue to use more traditional approaches sometimes hinders the educator's willingness to adopt new technologies. A faculty member who is an expert in a certain field of study can simultaneously be a novice in the use of new technologies creating a gap that can only be solved by providing time and space to find meaningful solutions. Further, critical reading skills are crucial in the study of literature: people outside of academia seldom practice this kind of reading. Information consumerism and the abundance of inaccurate or trivial information constitute the experience of many students who navigate new technologies without discriminating between sources. Training in the proper use of technology — which could influence the whole academic experience of a student — should be provided in first-year seminars and these seminars should be a collaborative effort among faculty, librarians and information technology specialists. Further, each area of study should hold seminars in which students can exercise discriminatory skills on a regular basis. Research projects conducted by faculty researchers also promote the effective use of new technologies. In the field of comparative literature, the previously mentioned options are optimal methods for developing critical thinking and teaching in-depth analysis of literary works. The implementation of book clubs within the class creates a rich forum in which students can elaborate on the content of the curriculum and develop a collaborative approach to the practice of comparative literature. The online availability of many literary works makes synthesis easier for the Global or Net generations.

Comparative literature students can also practice several languages via new technologies. Victoria Hasko and E. Soria posit that virtual social networks which shape the communicational style of the net generation stimulate students to use Collaborative Online International Networking Sites (COINS), including *livemocha* (Bibel 130) <<http://www.livemocha.com>>, the *mixxer* <<http://www.language-exchanges.org>>, my happy planet <<http://www.myhappyplanet.com>>, busuu <<http://www.busuu.com>>, babbel <<http://www.babbel.com>>, voxswap <<http://www.voxswap.com>>, or xlingo <<http://www.languageexchange.org>>. These web-based instructional sites offer students a practical way to channel instruction and connect with other learners. Faculty could use such websites as supportive platforms for stimulating students to experience deep learning as the students organize and structure content into a coherent whole. In their book *Using Educational Research to Inform Practice*, Lorraine Foreman-Peck and Christopher Winch describe surface learning as a quantitative increase in knowledge and deep learning as making sense of and understanding reality in a different way. New linguistic technology supports the educational objectives of deep learning required to practice comparative literature. According to Paul Ramsden, "surface approaches can never lead to understanding; they are both a necessary and a sufficient condition for poor-quality learning. Deep approaches are a necessary, but not a sufficient condition, for high-quality outcomes" (59). Memorization, association, and external motivation can therefore result in high quality outcomes and aid in organizing and structuring content into coherent wholes, the hallmark of deep learning. As connections are made through a comparative approach, teaching faculty can use new technologies to direct instruction towards the most significant aspects of the educational process. Practitioner research allows teaching faculty to assess educational processes and establish the criteria for quality assurance and strategic development.

If we look beyond the tool itself to see, in Arnold Pacey's words, "the web of human activities surrounding the machine" (5), we must acknowledge that technology is a form of social practice and an integral part of life itself. Technology, in whatever manifestation, has always been an integral part of all societies. The ability to communicate has been developed and improved, whether through the *chasquis* lining the Andes that carried news in the Inca Empire or the "gam"

described in Melville's *Moby Dick*, when whalers met in the open sea to exchange personal letters and the news of the trade.

Studying comparative literature requires the development of critical skills which enhances the aspect of literary study. Becoming a critical reader is a process and a practice and new technologies provide a channel and a set of channels through which students and faculty can exercise critical skills to find and select the material that will facilitate the comparative approach. In the literary realm, we argue that the meaning of words and texts cannot be considered outside of the cultural and social practices in which they are constructed. We recognize that the comparative approach lacks neutrality because the politics of meaning determine whether texts are maintained, challenged, manipulated, or changed. Educators should take a socially critical stance toward information and communication and understand the place of new technologies within our contemporary reality (see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári). Educators should adopt a specific orientation and attitude toward these new technologies and they should learn not only how to operate them, but how to approach them appropriately thus becoming critical consumers who consider both the educational objectives and the context in which those objectives must operate to help students reach the desired level of achievement. Because comparative literature faculty value a breadth of possibilities, they are concerned with their capacity to communicate using a variety of media, taking into account the audience and the purpose simultaneously. Digital technologies require a clear understanding of the ethical, cultural, environmental and social implications of their use. The efficacy of new technologies can only be proven over time. Time is also required to find appropriate ways of integrating technology into existing administrative systems, teaching methodologies, and learning contexts. New technologies seem to be used in two contexts: in an individual-generated and individually accessed context or an instructional context generated by faculty. Both contexts are associated directly with the pedagogical work of the comparative literature educator. New technologies propose a different way of organizing learning and delivering course material that coincide with faculty members' desires to enhance interactive learning structures in multiple contexts.

In conclusion, by incorporating new technologies, comparative literature becomes a community of mutual engagement in which a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire create a context for comparative negotiations. Through these exchanges, practitioners of comparative literature construct an identity for the community and the discipline. The communities of the practice of comparative literature describe knowledge-in-action by replicating physicist John S. Brown's and Paul Duguid's words: "Acquiring this expertise requires learning the explicit knowledge of a field, the practices of its community, and the interplay between the two. And learning all this requires immersion in a community of practice, enculturation in its ways of seeing, interpreting, and acting" (278). Comparative literature subscribes to the social theory of learning, in which the community constitutes both the context and the content of learning; every literary work, having been generated within these contexts, must also be analyzed and studied within these contexts.

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