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, bibliographies, and bibliographies, criticisms, introductions to editions, so-called study-guides “and then, if there is time, do read the works, so these 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, for stirring, motivating, and stimulating. 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 an essential link in the form details of wider contexts 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 reaction 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 the basis for another cycle of reading and producing text: "in interpreting we produce text upon text; and in criticizing we produce text against text" (Scholes 24). Scholes' 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 true to the necessary connections with the meaning 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 perform critical 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 an important instrument for internalizing knowledge, it is only so when its content comes from the teacher's thesis 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 tend to the effective participation of all group members (see Brookfield and Preskill; Dauer; Rickly). Often the anxiety or fear of students appearing to be not sufficiently prepared causes them to remain silent. The teacher, as 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 (35). 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 way 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).

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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 interactive atmosphere. Members 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 homepage. 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 mail account which was easily created. This kind of account provides free applications including the creation of forums 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 and feelings ready for development. Ideas 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 creating an interpretation 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 Greta'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, narrative structure, symbolism, and so on. The group of 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 Tenacity: 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. Jekyll 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 the essay was 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. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," "Doppelgängers in European Literature," "Interpretive Vertigo: Deconstruction and The Dead," "Sunday Bloody Sunday: New Historicism and the Irish Question." The latter did not also provide 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 theo-
logical attitude that makes the opinions of recommended critics appear dogmatic and unquestionable.
In fact, it is also important to state that these downloadable files for further reading were simply meant
for the students to read and not necessarily to be part of the course grading. Students did not have to read or watch them all and were free to choose what
interests them most. By providing all sorts of multimedia links, articles, video, music, and web-
sites, 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. So the discussion period, during which 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 dis-
cussions.

The website counted an average of 80 to 90 visits a day with peaks of 160 to 180 while the lectures
were taking place. 339 students registered for participation in the graffiti wall comments, forum
activities, in particular visual

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