

## **Teaching and Studying Literature in The Digital Era - From Text to Hypertext**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Teaching literature bears availability, at any moment of literary texts, and the possibility that these texts are easily accessible by students who during the learning process should be taught how to analyze, evaluate and simply to understand these texts. Taking into account the difficulties that are faced by literature professors today, as a result of declining interest in reading books by students, the article stresses the need to motivate them and the role that technology resources information and communication play in this regard. This issue in the article is treated by analyzing initially and briefly the fundamental changes that the use of new technologies has brought in literature which show the development of multimedia with hypertext and e-books focusing afterwards at the impact that this technology has on the manner of study by students and on the didactic of literature by teachers. Arguing that the new technologies, can best support the teaching of literature technologies at any level of study, the article proposes the inclusion of digital technologies in the curriculum's literature.

**Keywords:** Multimedia, ICT, technology, literature, hypertext, e-book, computer, book, Internet, Web.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In 2001, Marc Prensky, an expert on digital technologies applied to the teaching and creative eminent of educational video games, becomes aware of an essential change from the students: according to him, they had not only changed their style, their way of living, but also the way of speaking. Prensky referred to an event that had changed things so fundamentally that there was no turning back. It was a new generation, consisting of young growers surrounded by computers, digital music, smartphones, iPods, etc. One of the definitions was that this was the Internet generation or digital generation. But according to Prensky, the most accurate definition was "digital born", given that all of our students were born in the digital era and have as their native language a computer language, video games and the Internet.

This generation of digital born uses continuously the technology, by transforming different occasions, sounds and images from one territory to another, from one screen to another, in notebooks, smartphones, iPods, iPads, etc. This generation has a different perception of time. It is "multitasking", which means that they can accomplish many things at the same time, such as: studying, sending messages, chatting with others; everything at the same time and in a very astonishing way.

Marc Prensky is again giving a definition to the class of those born before radical changes as a result of the arrival of new technologies, educated in a culture dominated by the Gutenberg<sup>1</sup> model of the printed words, to the denomination "digital migrants". The latter, unlike "digital born", are educated and continue to be educated by using technology as a passive instrument, with the purpose to document rather than exchange information.

Innovative processes, nowadays, are becoming everyday more and more main components of the educational system as students, being most of them part of the "digital migrants", are urging their lecturers to be included in their world, which changes very quickly and continuously. Education starts from communication. The current generation of students is always asking lecturers to undertake new roles. They are asked to introduce the new materials in a new format, more communicative and direct, through which they can be accessible and exchanged mutually.

In the field of literature these challenges reinforce the perspective that literature is at the same time a place of communication and an expression of artistic expression created through the science of linguistics. By communicating, the lecturers convey knowledge and achieve feedback from the students, and then this enriched knowledge is brought back to them by creating complete exchange cycles. Constantly, conversations extend beyond classes through forums in all types of media. Technology is an integral part of students' life, which is why they seek to find it in the teaching process as well. As a result, the academic staff has begun to develop educational programs that offer a variety of didactics. Community activities, group projects, online platforms and other teaching strategies motivate students to study in ways similar to their individual preferences. In this scenario, the introduction of technology into learning programs is no longer a choice but a necessity, a very important tool for both students and academic staff.

## **2. THE IMPACT OF NEW TECHNOLOGY IN LITERATURE**

The technology and tools provided by it provide a unique platform for both the well-known authors and ordinary people. People today freely express their thoughts using electronic media such as blogs and social networks. Technology today also enables one-to-one correspondence between an author and a reader, simplifying access to and understanding of literature by students, researchers, and readers. Online literature access by academics is increasing day by day. An increasing number of academic institutions are designing their online courses such as courses in literature, linguistics, creative writing, etc.

Among the key events that characterize the rapid development of technology, there is the development of multimedia, a technology that brought together hardware and software. It was called digital fusion: the melting of digital technologies based on computer usage. The development of multimedia, featuring Hypertext and E-books, brought radical changes in the field of literature because they revolutionized the way of writing and reading.

### **2.1 The Hypertext**

Hypertext is a set of linked documents between them through the key words - links. It can be thought of as a net, in which documents represent nodes. The main characteristic of the hypertext is that the reading can be realized in a nonlinear way: any of the network documents can be "successor", based

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<sup>1</sup> German inventor and typographer, inventor of the printing of mobile characters, to whom the technique of modern printing is dedicated.

on the choice of the key word from the reader. It is possible that inside a hypertext you read all documents that relate to the selected key word. Choosing different key words results in the opening of different documents: inside of the hypertext it is possible to access practically an infinite number of reading modes.

Vannevar Bush<sup>2</sup> is known as the father of the hypertext, with the device designed by MEMEX (memory extender) as a kind of file and mechanized library. This device was thought to combine a very large data set, also creating the possibility of connecting to each other of its various sections. But this device was never built because of the almost simultaneous development of digital computers that quickly made it out of use.

But the one who really invented the hypertext and hypermedia terms was Theodor "Ted" Nelson, whose ideas and visions had a lot of influence on the computer world. His hypertext project called XANADU was not really implemented, but some of his development techniques were used to create other successful platforms.

## **2.2 E-Books (electronic books)**

The electronic book is an electronic version of a traditional printed book that can be read using a personal computer or an eBook reader. This type of book except the images, it may also contain sounds, clips, video or mobile graphics.

The text in it can be searched automatically and referentially using hyperlinks that are references to the data that the reader can access directly by clicking on them. A hyperlink marks a full document or a specific element within this document.

These characteristics made this new format an ideal tool for all those readers that are interested in using these possibilities. The number of digital copies' readers is constantly increasing.

Until now, the printed books have been transformed into online format and the process is still going on. One of the most prominent examples in this regard is the Gutenberg Project<sup>3</sup>, founded in 1971 by Michael Hart, who has turned tens of thousands of printed books into electronic books, making it the first and largest collection of free e-books.

In addition, other giant technology actors, like Google, Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Apple have shown tremendous interest in digital literature production and circulation. We can mention here the giant Amazon publisher, which with its first e-reader "Kindle" achieved a striking result in the masses of people who prefer digital books rather than printed ones.

Pérez Galdós<sup>4</sup> Publishing Project is an example which shows that the attention of all writers, scholars, researchers or publishers is directed toward the creation of complete packages in electronic format.

Benito Pérez Galdós (1843-1920) is known as one of the greatest writers of Spanish literature after Cervantes and stays by greatest realist writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with Dickens, Balzac and Tolstoy.

This project started in April 1996 at the Department of Spanish Studies at the University of Sheffield in co-operation with the Humanities Research Institute.

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<sup>2</sup> Vannevar Bush (1890-1974) American engineer, politician and noted scientist, mainly for his political role in the creation of the atomic bomb.

<sup>3</sup> [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progetto\\_Gutenberg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progetto_Gutenberg)

<sup>4</sup> <http://gcp.group.shef.ac.uk>

The project objective is twofold: to produce texts on hard-copy based on early manuscripts and editions, but critically designed to justify their full use in school standards; and publish texts in electronic format ("packages") that contain complete textual tools, various indexes and alphabetical lists, periodicals, position references, and a chart of historical materials.

This undertaking is related to four novels: *Torquemada en la hoguera*, *Torquemada en la Cruz*, *Torquemada en el purgatorio*, and *Torquemada y San Pedro*. However, this is just the first stage of a long-term development, which includes the active cooperation of students who study Galdòs from different centers, especially those of Spanish universities. The final objective of the Project is the presentation of a standard study of all *Novelas españolas contemporáneas*.

### **3. CONTRIBUTION OF TECHNOLOGY IN THE STUDY OF LITERATURE**

By using technology, students acquire a higher level of control on sharing knowledge: they can access information, learning fields, as well as other sources in the most appropriate time for them and according to their engagements and lifestyle. Technology helps them to choose the time of accessing information sources, which can be integrated within the study course and can be completed after the auditoriums, in libraries or with standard methods of knowledge distribution.

Even if they are not physically (or temporarily) together, they can communicate and discuss their ideas with each other. Technologies such as emails or other communication platforms provide them with precious environments in which communication can continue even outside university auditoriums.

The study of literature through multimedia represents a new technique, which is more attractive compared to traditional books where verbal comprehension is predominant. It creates interactive activities and provides students with opportunities to study authors and textbooks using a variety of media and sources of information. It involves collaborative work and turns out to be a powerful catalyst for cooperative learning. Students use a wide range of strategies to experience, understand, interpret, and evaluate the texts.

Students and their lecturers share sources of information by encouraging a way of interdisciplinary thinking as well as a cross-curricular approach. The style of studying is best suited to teaching methods and thus becomes more effective and more efficient. The variety of materials and integrated methods motivates students more. They manage to create their ideas in a new format, using visual language, in addition to spoken and written language.

The use of multimedia supports constructive learning - students build thinking patterns to understand the world around them, or else they manage to build knowledge structures. Moreover, multimedia supports learning independently through information and events control.

### **4. THE CONTRIBUTION OF TECHNOLOGY IN LITERATURE TEACHING**

The main objective of a literature lecturer is to assist students in studying or searching literary works, individually and in relation to texts and other cultural content. Finding information, open questions, links, and content can be very effectively done through the computer, giving students the opportunity to access a number of materials as they wish and moreover collect and add notes to them.

The lecturer can electronically post different study material so that students can study them individually and independently. By using technology, literary texts can be intensified more, for example by turning them into literal hypertexts by introducing different notes (information, open questions, main ideas) and relationships (with other similar materials that can include also student assignments or notes). These materials are very effective and offer solutions that stimulate thought and encourage cooperation.

In a hypertextual program, besides the materials and exercises created by the lecturer, there can also be included materials that require students' engagement, such as electronic discussions, various assignments, book reviews, or hypertext creation with study material or translation drafted by students themselves. In fact, the main reason why students should study a hypertext is that they learn to read "hypertextually", utilizing the many possibilities found in the text. Students also, using the URL of a program, can connect to the web with wider readership communities. It is noted that the tools provided by web 2.0, collaborative platforms and videos, as well as social media have become powerful book allies in teachers' efforts to stimulate readers' interest and bring them into the magical world of reading.

Ann Matthews Woodlief - a professor at the English Department at Commonwealth University of Virginia, USA, in one of her publications addresses the topic of teaching literature by using technology.<sup>5</sup>

"Pedagogically", she explains, "my goal is to use a computer system to help create more dynamic communities of readers and literary translators, to develop such class lessons that allow each student to feel involved in intensive reading/thinking/writing activities and what is more to make it part of the larger readers' and translators' communities."

According to the professor, the main problem is to hold a focused course on pedagogy rather than computer which should be used to convey pedagogic messages rather than to harm them. It is the lecturer who has to carefully balance the focus on the text with the chaos that can cause students' electronic discussion.

She notes that the most important thing is that at the end of the course, students declare that "not only did we learn more about using the computer, but we learned how to think and write about literature."

She recalls that the first program which started its teaching in a totally computer environment, it was GUIDE, a simple hypertext program, which she used to give literature lectures on-line on: American Literature through the Civil War, American Nature Writing, Literary Criticism, and Women Writers. But besides it, she also used the Web as each of them offered various but incredibly needed options. For example, GUIDE offered flexibility and complexity not yet enabled by WEB. This program used by the professor refers to the period 1990-2000.

However, today we can list a number of more developed applications to help students and lecturers. These applications do not only offer students free of charge a significant number of texts in different formats, but also provide information on how to understand these textbooks by developing their desire for reading and literature. I am mentioning some of these applications:

**Goodreads** – Designed to help find and use shared books. Students can exchange recommendations for different books or suggest new books based on the preferences they have expressed in online

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<sup>5</sup> A Community of Learners: Teaching Literature Electronically - Ann Woodlief

communities. In addition, they can categorize and make reviews of favourite books, or keep book entries in reading. This app contains over 2000 eBooks.

**Audible** – It is quite valuable, especially for those students who have difficulty concentrating. Through the application, users can hear hundreds of thousands of audio books, enabling labeling of different parts while reading. This application, giving students the opportunity to earn different badges, motivates them to read / listen.

**SparkNotes** – through this application, students can read book reviews, character reviews, and general analysis of literary works. If a copy of a current book is not available, the application helps students in the best sense of a reading or finding information to include in their literary theses.

**Literary Analysis Guide** – an application to assist in the preparation of literary analysis theses or any other related activity. It is equipped with three mechanisms that contain information about poetry, prose, and rhetoric. Using these mechanisms, students can access summaries and examples of more general literary terms that help them further in performing their literary assignment.

**Literary Review** – professors who are increasingly looking for the latest developments in the world of literature can use this application. Although full access requires subscription in the Literary Review, the cost is personal, nominative and gives access to the latest publications in many genres and critical literary discussions. The application also provides the ability to search previous publications to find teaching-related articles.

**Kindle** – an app that gives users the ability to download eBooks from Amazon directly to a smartphone or tablet. To read eBooks the app is also equipped with a vocabulary and offers the ability to read and transfer to PDF format.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Today we can say with conviction that the time of literary teaching based solely on literary text is ending. It is true that the teaching of literature in today's world, dominated by technology and multimedia, is becoming more and more complicated. But at the same time information and communication technology sources can be the solution to the challenges faced by professors in order to incorporate and motivate their students in literary studies.

Technology provides ways to find the best research methods and techniques, the method for disseminating study material, provides advanced search tools, and can also provide the page that helps the teacher guide the student in implementing new techniques.

Technology helps motivate studying and experimenting; new teaching methods add interest to the subject in the student.

But we should bear in mind that technology is only one approach that needs to be adopted, the success of this method is not guaranteed at all costs, but with a well thought-out use and appropriate integration in the subject matter, it can become an extremely effective tool important for both the lecturer and the student.

On the other hand, we as lecturers need to know and keep in mind the fact that inadequate and excessive use of technology adversely affects students and this impact can be very serious for their future. It is up to us to decide how and by what purpose we should use it and how to prevent negative influences on our students. More and more dependence on technology poses a great risk, adversely

affects it, as it curbs the natural thinking process of young people who are completely occupied by technology and forget the world around them.

We should never forget that every opportunity that technology offers has a cost. When we get to know them, and understand them well we will find ways to minimize them, and only then the help that technology will offer will be positive.

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