

Teaching Children's Literature Online: Modern Technology and Virtual Classroom Communities

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Abstract

Online teaching, a new phenomenon in literary studies has elicited strong emotions among scholars of children's literature, some of whom are noted for their progressive beliefs. Like most of my colleagues in the academy, I was skeptical about teaching a graduate children's literature course online initially because I thought it would not only compromise the overall quality of the experience, but would also interfere with critical discussions that are usually associated with literature. However, now I realize that e-learning has its strengths and challenges just like residential teaching/learning. But for the virtual classroom community to function at its optimum the rules have to be clear.

網上教兒童文學：現代技術與虛擬課堂社區

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摘要

網路教學為文學研究中的新寵，引起許多兒童文學學者的熱烈響應，其中有些學者以其進步的想法而著稱。一開始我和大部分學術同行一樣，對於教授網路兒童文學研究生課程抱持懷疑的態度，我認為網路課不僅影響了學習經驗的整體品質，也與文學中的批判性討論相左。然而，我教的網路課程愈多，我愈瞭解這種形式的教學，同一些教育學者所言，和面對面教學一樣，具有其優點和挑戰。最重要的是，我最讚賞它所促進的相容並蓄教學法，每個學生都能擁有自己的網路學習經歷。然而，為了使網路社群達到這種相容並蓄的目標，教學規則須明確地制定。

Tisha Bender (2003) opens her book on online teaching by declaring that, “Reasonable or not, those of us who embark on online teaching do so because we want to do something that is educationally progressive, is innovative and beneficial, and adds an extra dimension to the courses taught on campus (p.xv). In this statement there seems to be a certain ambivalence, about online teaching, especially in her use of the word “reasonable.” What does she mean, and/or why would this not be a reasonable approach toward teaching and learning? Perhaps it may seem “unreasonable” because the thought of gaining “formal” education in a virtual classroom sounds not only radical but also unfathomable.

In the spring of 2007 when I opted to teach my first online graduate course in children’s literature, I was excited but filled with trepidation. My fear stemmed from the fact that I had never imagined any other way of teaching besides face-to-face instruction. Also, understanding the nature of children’s literature and how it comes alive in a “real classroom,” I was even more concerned. I pondered what it would be like for both me, the instructor and the learners, whom would not be physically present in the virtual space that would serve as our classroom for the entire semester.

In traditional classroom settings, children’s literature lends itself to a myriad of critical thinking and pedagogical strategies and activities that enable learners to interact with literary texts in a variety of ways. Learners can transmediate, perform, and analyze texts, as they forge personal meanings out of the reading experience. By responding to texts through these different avenues or forms, they display a wide array of emotions, including emotions that convey pleasure, express sadness, anger, and surprise (Louise Rosenblatt, 1995). These manifest

themselves through students’ voice intonation, facial expressions and above all, through their body language [1]. Thus, these classroom interactions also provide students with a platform from which they can engage in a passionate academic discourse or literary analysis that is grounded in different schools of thought depending on the students’ interests and belief systems (Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer, 2003). So I was justifiably worried that it would be a different experience teaching children’s literature online to a virtual community of learners.

However, after undergoing a helpful orientation process that familiarized me with the software, technology and the culture of online teaching in general, my doubts began to fade away. It was only then that I came to recognize the potential benefits of online teaching. Not only is it “educationally progressive and innovative,” as Bender (2003, p. xv) proclaims, it truly creates an opportunity for a much more inclusive pedagogy, especially in regards to the teaching of children’s literature. However, depending on the course design, the instructor, and the students enrolled in the course, cyberspace can become an alternative classroom within which students can gain quality education. It provides a forum whereby students are able to read and chat about children’s books, respond to/through/with texts, while sharing their excitement, disappointments, joy and displeasures from their multiple encounters or/and *adventurous interactions* with specific texts.

In addition, students can accomplish all these within the confines and comforts of their homes, offices, schools, and libraries that are spread across the United States and around the globe. This diversity, in turn, is reflected in their conversations on literary texts, their attitudes toward certain subject matters or artistic styles, and their understanding of the role that

literature should play in an English and/or literacy curriculum. It is a dialogue that requires an instructor to simply play the role of a moderator, as he/she "guide[s] on the side" (George Collison, Bonnie Elbaum, Sarah Haavind, & Robert Tinker 2000, p. 7), making sure every learner's voice is heard, and acknowledged in the discussion forum. For this reason, I have arrived at the conclusion that online teaching makes possible the practice of an inclusive pedagogy.

What is Online Learning or Teaching?

Also referred to as e-learning, it is an educational experience that, "attempts to recreate, as far as possible, more traditional face-to-face learning environments, whilst simultaneously trying to leverage the obvious differences between the bricks and mortar classroom and the virtual one" (Teaching English Editor 2005, p.2). While it is impossible to achieve the effectiveness that face-to-face instruction adds to the educational experience, online teaching provides an opportunity that comes close to this reality. It is different from hybrid programs in that students take all their required courses for a degree program but online, whereas hybrid or blended courses/programs may vary from having a few face-to-face meetings to several in the course of the semester. Peter Sands (2002) adds that, "In genetics, hybridity refers to offspring of two genetically dissimilar parents. A hybrid is also a mechanism in which two dissimilar parts produce the same function or result. Hybrid teaching and learning partakes of each of these concepts to some degree" (p.1). He elaborates further that, "Because the online component of the hybrid class is the unfamiliar and time-consuming one, teachers have to pay closer attention to that than to their face-to-face interaction,

so long as those face-to-face interaction successfully connect with the online work in the course" (p.2).

Many programs, as is evident in Sands' (2002) article attempt to balance online teaching with a residential component, thereby creating a hybrid educational system. However, some are designed to serve specific needs within a university system; needs that may include the preparation of students for the rigor of face-to-face instruction. In such circumstances, students are then expected to take remedial courses online to improve their academic skills. When used in this manner, online teaching may be perceived as lacking in rigor in comparison to face-to-face instruction.

Bart Rienties, Martin Rehm, and Joost Dijkstra (2005) describe one remedial program developed for foreign students pursuing education in the Netherlands. In their article, "Remedial Online Teaching in Theory and Practice Online Summer Course: Balance between Summer and Course," they posit that, in order to address the academic needs of their increasing international body of students, remedial programs needed to be created online. They believe that cyberspace is an effective venue through which a university system can handle certain challenges. This model of online teaching, they argue, is different from distance education, for distance education, "encompasses two important elements namely distance teaching and distance learning" (p.570), which they note is different from online education because "the element of distance education is only related to the short time period before students start (physically) at the regular curriculum" (p.570). This model of online teaching though serving a practical need of the university in the Netherlands, contradicts my thesis of online teaching fostering an inclusive pedagogy, since it basically segregates

foreign students from their domestic peers. The online teaching, which I am referring to is the 100% online system that is open to all students who are intellectually curious and are willing to engage in an equally intellectual discourse on or about children's literature. While there are constraints to this model, it seems to be the most progressive in its approach to the art of teaching and learning online.

Reinties et al (2005) point out some of these constraints adding that, "It is harder to transfer communication elements like body language or intonation" in this kind of format (p.570). As they draw attention to these obvious constraints in 100% online teaching programs, they also acknowledge that course designers can circumvent these in a variety of ways. Some ways include breaking students into small groups, which make it possible for "group processes and learning [to] remain clear and manageable" (p.570). Moreover, they postulate that in such a model, "it is assumed that tutors together with students are responsible for stimulating interactions as well as stimulating the learning process" (p.570). This is the model with which I am the most familiar. I now focus on my experiences as an online instructor of children's literature.

Children's Literature Instruction Online?

Admittedly, as I stated earlier, my understanding of the process has deepened with time. While I often approach each semester with excitement and quiet apprehension, mainly because different groups of students, as is in the case of residential programs determine the overall quality of the teaching and learning experiences, I am always amazed at the level of energy students bring to the online courses. In general, the university's online courses are unique in that they strive to replicate the face-to-face content,

mood, and overall classroom experience. Thus, course designs encourage a high level of participation from students through a vibrant discussion forum, and an engaging interaction between students and the instructor that is propelled forward often times by discussion prompts.

My greatest concern about teaching children's literature online has always been my inability to visibly notice students' facial expressions and to hear their verbalized enthusiasms and/or emotions as they respond to literary texts. Although I miss their physical expressions of pleasure, as they interact with texts, and the heated passion that comes through an animated academic debate on important and/or controversial issues, as is typical in face-to-face instruction, I have come to cherish their carefully written responses that are indicative of how they feel and who they are as readers and individuals. From their numerous postings of their personal and intellectual reactions to assigned scholarly readings and literary texts, I have noticed that students reflect deeply on the issues and choose their words carefully. This confirms Bender's (2003) observation about online students. She remarks that students who take online courses "have more time to be reflective and provide well-thought-out answers" (p.65).

In the program where I teach, I believe this is made possible by the "Tell Me" framework that continues to anchor all discussions on literary texts. In *Tell Me: Children, Book and Talk*, Aidan Chambers (1996) simplifies the discussion process by identifying four events or matrices that would elicit deep and personal responses from individual readers. These include a reader's likes and dislikes about a text, puzzles he/she finds in the text, and patterns he/she notices. Around this framework that may seem mundane to some scholars of children's literature,

students are able to articulate different sentiments about literature. It frees them to be individuals and literary scholars.

The "Tell Me" framework therefore, has provided an effective means through which students can still share the kinds of pleasures Nodelman and Reimer (2003) refer to in *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*. These pleasures stem from their vibrant interactions and transactions with children's books that at times enable them to create new texts or "poems" (Louise Rosenblatt, 1994) in their virtual classroom just like in a residential classroom. However, this framework is only as effective as the instructor who facilitates the learning process, and the students' desire to participate in an academic dialogue with one another on the assigned readings, or their willingness to engage in a grand conversation on literary texts (Ralph Paterson & Mary Ann Eeds, 1999).

Facilitating Online Discussions: Some Observations

Understanding that learning is a social process (Vygotsky, 1978); that reading is purposeful (Frank Smith, 2004); and that reading literature involves a transaction between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1994), the role of the instructor as a facilitator of learning becomes crucial even more so in the virtual space. A key aspect of this process has to do with "civility," as Bender (2003) puts it, or on politeness. Admittedly, online conversations on literary texts can be very compelling, nevertheless, sometimes these can get out of hand, if the instructor and students get too excited and lose sight of the purpose of the literary discourse. At such moments the conversations may spin out of control and create an unhealthy atmosphere for all.

Ming-Lung Yang, Yu-Jung Chen, Minseong Kim, Yi-Fan Cheng, and Michelle Jordan (2006) discuss three politeness strategies in their article, "Facilitating or Limiting? The Role of Politeness in How Students Participate in an Online Classroom Discussion." Citing Brown and Levinson, they remark there is:

positive politeness, showing appreciation of something that the speaker believes the listener would like to hear, ... negative politeness, attempting to reduce any imposition on the hearer; and... off-record, making a statement that the listener can interpret either as an imposition or not (354).

Furthermore, politeness is of grave importance, they postulate, "because participants cannot see their interlocutor and yet, they know that they are interacting with someone who may respond soon" (p.345). When all members of the online learning community, including the instructor are respectful of one another, the learning and teaching process can be rewarding and fruitful for all involved. But if otherwise, it becomes a tedious experience everyone wants to leave behind as soon as the course is over. Hence, it is a partnership that requires the facilitator to communicate the rules of participation very early in the semester (Bender, 2003; George Collison, Bonnie Elbaum, Sarah Haavind, & Robert Tinker 2000).

Yang et al (2006) provide specific examples of what constitutes the different types of politeness, as they comment further that, "in online asynchronous classroom discussions, students had strong concerns for politeness due to the nature of the written discussion (eg., a permanent record, written format) and this concern was reflected in the ways they stated and phrased their comments" (p.354). Yes,

every response posted to the discussion threads in online courses is considered a permanent record, unless someone deliberately tampers with it. Bender (2003) cautions against this, observing that while the temptation to delete responses that many may find offensive or inappropriate is great, it would be wrong to do so. Rather, she recommends the course instructor address the issue in a way that would ease the unhealthy climate caused by the response. She notes further that, “to remove the response seems in some ways dishonest, as if it were a pretense that the remark was never there” (p.102). I share this view as well.

Assessment and Online Teaching

Another aspect of online teaching that one needs to pay attention to is assessment. For many instructors, this can pose a challenge, partly because formative assessment takes precedence over any other form of assessment, more so than in face-to-face instruction. This notwithstanding, an instructor would have to work closely with the course designer to achieve a good balance in terms of how a student’s overall performance is assessed and evaluated throughout the course. Understanding the dilemma that most instructors of online courses may face when it comes to assessment, Reinties et al. (2005) emphasize the need for assessment tools and methods that are flexible.

The online children’s literature courses that I have taught utilize a variety of assessment tools and methods, as we hope to capitalize on the different strengths students bring to the courses and their different learning styles. The assignments, therefore, usually include written responses posted to discussion prompts, reaction and analytical papers, as well as multimedia projects that represent an in-depth

understanding of children’s literature and texts. These reflect the formative assessment philosophy that informs the program. Since one major goal of online teaching is to get students to constantly improve the quality of their work, formative assessment, Bender (2003) remarks, should feature high in online teaching curriculum. In the online courses I teach formative assessment is the norm; but as is typical of residential programs grades are also an integral part of teaching and learning. Consequently, this can impose limitations to how an instructor facilitates discussions online. It remains an issue of debate that is beyond the scope of my article.

Conclusion

In this age of globalization where geographical and cultural boundaries have been rendered non-existent by modern technology, more and more students are turning to online programs for their educational needs and/or degrees. Some educators continue to find this new format of teaching and learning problematic or unreasonable for a number of reasons, some of which I have addressed in this article. For some students, it has created an opportunity for them to obtain an education that would otherwise be out of their reach. In addition, it has provided them with educational options that suit their specific intellectual and/or professional needs and does accommodate their physical reality, especially those struggling with time and mobility constraints.

E-learning, as exotic as the concept may sound, and/or as scary as it may seem, can be invigorating. Nevertheless, this does not mean that it is free from challenges. On the contrary, because it is an “innovative” approach to the art of teaching and learning, there may be several educators like me

in the academy who are still learning about online teaching and its endless possibilities, or trying to adjust to the technological and pedagogical demands that are associated with the experience, and the limitations such demands may impose to teaching in cyberspace and to education in general. I remain hopeful, however, that online courses will continue to grow in prestige, as they serve the needs of both traditional and non-traditional students, creating endless opportunities for an inclusive pedagogy, as they push us as instructors to rethink our understanding of learning and perceptions of learners and their needs in the twenty-first century

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Notes:

[1]: Reintis, Rehm, Dijkstra (2005) mention this in their comments on the constraints of online teaching. In addition, research on reader response in the classroom mention these elements as useful in discussions on literary texts with school children. See Jeffrey Wilhelm's (2007) *'You Gotta BE the Book': Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents*. Second Edition; Teachers College Press.

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