Online Tools in Teaching Literature in Times of Troubles

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Abstract— **Bearing in mind the fact that the number of research papers dealing with the ways in which literature can be most efficiently taught in the digital era and the ways in which the existing online educational tools can be applied to teaching literature online is rather limited, we set out to conduct a modest research aimed at tackling these issues and providing the literature teachers with more information regarding the use of digital tools specially designed to meet the needs of literature courses. The first part of the paper offers a glimpse into literature review, in which the history of using modern technologies in literature teaching is briefly presented, the second part of the paper examines the list of online tools that can be the most effectively and easily adapted to literature classes, while the third part of the paper sums up the main ideas presented and opens questions that point to the need for further research into this field.**

Keywords – *Online literature course; Online tools in teaching literature; Blogs; Websites; Online quizzes and games.*

Apstrakt – Uzimajući u obzir činjenicu da postoji veoma mali broj naučnih radova koji se bave načinima na koje se književnost može najefikasnije podučavati u digitalnom dobu, te načinima na koje se postojeće onlajn obrazovne alatke mogu primeniti na podučavanje književnosti na daljinu, postoji potreba da se sprovede istraživanje poput ovoga u cilju dobijanja odgovora na neka od ovih pitanja i pružanja više informacija profesorima i nastavnicima književnosti u vezi sa upotrebom digitalnih alata koji su posebno dizajnirani da zadovolje potrebe časova književnosti, te nastavnih jedinica na kojima se obrađuju književna dela. Prvi deo rada daje kraći prikaz istorije korišćenja savremenih tehnologija u nastavi književnosti, drugi deo rada istražuje onlajn alate koji se mogu najdelotvornije i najlakše prilagoditi nastavi književnosti, dok treći deo sumira izložene ideje i otvara nova pitanja koja ukazuju na nužnost sprovođenja daljeg istraživanja u ovoj oblasti.

Ključne reči – Onlajn književni kurs; Onlajn alati u nastavi književnosti; Blogovi; Vebsajtovi; Onlajn kvizovi i igrice.

I. INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century brought about innovative ways of teaching, which meant a frequent implementation of modern technologies as a means of support to traditional, face-to-face, synchronous teaching. Meeting the needs of digital native students became a key goal of every teacher, instructor and educator who wanted to make his/her teaching subject appealing to the students. In order to achieve this goal, the teacher needed to keep up with the latest trends in education, attend various seminars and include new forms of media in his/her classes to keep the motivation level of his/her students high. For language teachers, the use of the simplest form of technology has long been an integral part of their teaching practice bearing in mind the fact that the developing of the listening skill required using of a cassette player or, later, a CD player. With time, ICT became an integral part of language courses and many scholars stressed the need for including modern technologies in traditional language teaching (see Garrett 1991; Ertmer 1999; Bax 2000; Golonka et al. 2014; Chan, Kern and Smith 2016)

Literature teachers, on the other hand, have long been focused on transmitting the knowledge to their students in the form of conducting oral lectures regarding the lives of the most prominent literary figures and the critical analyses of their works, which were usually followed by discussions and students' submission of essays on various topics. Digital age made literature teachers look for more modern and innovative approaches to presenting some aspects of the lecture content via multimedia materials. However, as literature courses have never been fully conducted online, there was no need for relying entirely on the digitally-based materials.

Today, in Times of Troubles, when the spread of Coronavirus threatens to burst at the seams and when most of the schools and universities across the world are forced to switch to online teaching, the benefits of being familiar with the latest ICT are most strongly felt. Even before the Pandemic, many scholars and researchers identified and presented the various ways of using online tools in language courses (Garrett 2009; Levy 2009; Meskill and Anthony 2010; Warschauer 2010; Son 2011; Terrell 2013; Nikolić and Dabić 2016; Nikolić 2017), paving the way for an easier and more effective organization of online language courses. On the other hand, the lack of prior research regarding the use of online tools specially designed to meet the needs of literature courses becomes one of the greatest challenges literature teachers face under the spotlight of the pandemic crisis.

This paper gives a short account on the history of using modern technologies in literature teaching before the Pandemic, examines the online tools that can be efficiently used in teaching literature and points to the further questions

regarding the effective use of new forms of media in literature courses.

II. LITERATURE COURSES IN DIGITAL ERA

Nowadays many literature teachers struggle to bridge the gap between "digital-native students," already acclimated to living in the digital era, and traditional and conventional approaches to teaching literature that have been practiced for years (Škobo and Dragičević-Đerić, 2019: 84-85). A lack of knowledge and experience in dealing with a wide range of possibilities that new technological advances offer may be a result of the teachers' devotion to traditional teaching practices. However, at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, many scholars stressed the importance of implementing modern technologies in literature teaching as well as the need for harmonizing the conventional teaching practices with the digitally-based ones (see Dresang and McClelland 1999; Porter 2000; Blaire 2010; Yacoob 2011).

Compared to other subjects and courses, teaching literature has proved to be most resistant to the integration and use of modern technologies, as literature was predominantly associated with deeply spiritual, emotional and mental notions that could hardly be linked with the utilitarian world of technology (Škobo 2020: 87). The fact that technology has predominantly been associated with the dehumanization of society contributed to the fact that only a few researchers addressed the questions of finding suitable ways in which technology could go 'hand in hand' with literature without ignoring the importance of human factor. It is not enough to have an access to Internet to teach and interpret literature meaningfully through digital media. Literature addresses the questions of fundamental values and reading the literary works, particularly within academic institutions, has got a tranformative power (Cvetković 2018: 324). Havng this considered, teaching literature in digital era is a challenge *per se* and the application of online tools in literature courses can be a double-edged sword. Thoughtful incorporation of digital tools in teaching is undoubtedly, as Lisa Botshon (2014: 72) notices, "tricker than it seems".

A severe deficiency in online tools specially designed to meet the needs of literature classes, that became one of the greatest challenges the literature teachers faced in the time of Pandemic, calls for an urgent need for redefinition of the goals set and methodologies used in teaching literature in Times of Troubles. Before the Pandemic, there were only a few scholars that focused their research on identifying digital tools that could be used in literature courses and examining their practical application through case studies (see Kayalis and Natsina 2010; Cadwallader & Mazzeno 2017; Nikolić, 2017; Carrió-Pastor 2019; Škobo and Dragičević-Đerić 2019, Škobo 2020). These valuable studies represent a very useful source of information in the process of organizing and conducting online literature courses, particularly in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska, where no history of online literature courses formally recorded at both secondary and tertiary level of education can be traced whatsoever.

The aforementioned research studies specify the ways in which the new forms of media (periodicals, films/TV series, digital texts, video games, language platforms, forum discussions), as well as social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) should be included into literature classes and stress out the advantages of their implementation within the literature courses. Proper implementation of multimedia in teaching literature that includes the students' consuming and producing content in an online environment, invites students to challenge the latest trends in their surroundings and forces them to think critically, which is regarded as the ultimate goal of studying literature (Škobo 2020). Switching to online teaching has made literature teachers across Serbia and the Republic of Srpska search for multimedia material that can be properly applied to online literature courses. As there has been no official information regarding the online literature course conducted prior to the Pandemic in these countries so far, it can be deduced that there is an urgent need for providing an online literature course model that would serve as a reference point to many literature teachers who are struggling with organization of their courses.

III. ONLINE TOOLS IN TEACHING LITERATURE

In this section of the paper are presented three useful digital tools that can become an integral part of online literature courses: blogs (1), websites (2), and online quizzes and games (3).

Blogs

With the first appearance of blogging software towards the end of the twentieth century, precisely in 1999 (Blood 2000), the number of blog users has sharply increased in many areas due to the fact that they were regarded as free, easy to use and relatively safe. On the verge of the twenty-first century, the presence of weblogs in the field of higher education started to be more frequently felt and the educators and teachers started to stress their efficiency in the departments of Humanistic studies, where communication is regarded as one of the most important skill that is expected to be successfully acquired. The use of blogs in language classes and their potential in increasing students' writing skills was also recognized (Campbell 2003; Johnson 2004). Blogs provide students with an extra reading practice, trigger community-based learning, encourage students' participation and create an online portfolio of students' written work (Stanley 2005). Moreover, blogs enhance students' personal responsibility in writing as they become aware of the fact that their written work will be read not only by their peers but also the real audience outside the classroom – and this is why blogs 'outperform' discussion forums.

The use of blogs in literature courses is still relatively scarce although their potential is great, particularly within virtual learning environment (VLE). Bearing in mind the fact that the application of blogs in language classes is highly desirable and encouraging, particularly when it comes to improving students' writings skills (see Nadzrah and Kemboja 2009; Zhang 2009) and facilitating their critical thinking skills – both of which are regarded as crucial in teaching literature – it is extremely important to point to both the relevance and benefits of using blogs in literature courses. Moreover, according to some research studies, the students expressed

positive attitudes to the use of blogs in teaching literature (see Bozoglan 2014).

A detailed procedure of using blogging in literature classes is provided by Eric Reimer, an associate professor of English at the University of Montana, who managed to bring the realities of multiliteracy and multimodality into his teaching via blogs. By giving his students 'a blog assignment', students were able to respond analytically to literature, multiple-genre texts, various types of personal posts and testimonies, the posts of classmates, and various Web resources (see Reimer 2017). The students were to create a blog, think of its name, provide an address (URL) and design a blog's template. Then, they were navigated how to write a multigenre essays. By linking literature and music, Reimer shows how students can be properly encouraged to think critically and thus, provide texts that will reflect different genres. For instance, in James Joyce's short story "The Dead" (*Dubliners*), the main female character Gretta Conroy is taken back into the past and the memories of her late beloved by means of the song she hears on the radio. The power of songs in evoking past times can be brought into connection with the mysteries involving the end of Joyce's story, providing a rich source of discussion and a springboard to critical thinking. As a result, two literary genres are generated via students' blogging on this topic: autobiography and literary criticism).

In addition to this, blogs can be used as a powerful reference point as they can provide the teachers with the additional materials and innovative approaches to teaching. In Serbia, for instance, many language and literature teachers share their experience with online teaching via DATA DIDAKTA blog (http://www.datadidakta.rs/blog), where a lot of useful information can be found in regard with the use of various digital tools in both traditional and online language and literature courses.

Websites

Another useful digital tool I would like to point to when it comes to teaching literature online is a website called CommonLit (https://www.commonlit.org/). This website provides an access to tools which ensure implementing an effective literacy programme in schools, colleges and universities. Teachers can create their free CommonLit account, browse free lessons and teaching material, share the content with their students and track students' progress.

Browsing the website, I found out that it offered a great variety of multimedia resources that could efficiently supplement literature teachers' lessons. Therefore, I made sure my colleagues could properly use the website and sign up for educator accounts and asked the website's technical support to add our university domain (@sinergija.edu.ba) to their system as an accepted school email domain. Students, on the other hand, do not need their emails approved to sign up for students' accounts, which makes the website easy-to-use. The website offers numerous types of activities based on the literary works included into our syllabi. For instance, there are various sections related to the British literature of the nineteenth century (Victorian Literature). With the educator

account, the teacher can look for an excerpt from Victorian novels (e.g. Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and a famous episode describing Oliver's asking for more gruel) and opt for enabling the guided reading mode with his/her students (https://www.commonlit.org/en/texts/excerpt-from-oliver-twist). This mode prompts students to answer guiding comprehension questions as they read the text. The text is revealed as they answer the questions correctly. Each passage contains explanations of many words and expressions that students may find unknown and ends with a guiding multiple-choice question aimed at assessing the students' understanding of what has been read.

Along with guiding and assessment questions, the activities include an annotation tool, where both teachers and students can annotate assignments, and a discussion section that places Dickens's novel into a real socio-historical and cultural context. Moreover, the excerpt has got a 'read aloud' mode, which can be a quite useful option sometimes, especially for students with good perceptive skills. There are also other interesting options within the website, such as 'Paired Texts' and 'Related Media'. With text pairings – a reference to other texts based on similar themes - the teachers are provided with great supplement to their lesson. For instance, an excerpt from "A Christmas Carol": *Marley's ghost* is offered as an additional text to accompany Dickens's excerpt from *Oliver Twist* and Oliver's asking for more food. Students can be asked to compare the themes of *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol* and list their similarities in terms of the writing style and tone the author employed. The 'Related Media' resource includes videos, audios, and other multimedia that provide context for this text. In case of the aforementioned excerpt, an excerpt from a 2005 Roman Polanski's adaptation of *Oliver Twist* is shown, as well as a YouTube video on life and works of Charles Dickens.

Online quizzes and games

The last but not the least online tool presented in this paper as an efficient means of making the online literature course more interesting and appealing to students is an online quiz. With the use of game-based learning platforms such as Kahoot! (https://kahoot.com/), Quizizz (https://quizizz.com/), and Wordwall (https://wordwall.net/) - the latter of which is best used with younger learners - literature teachers can create different types of interactive activities based on their online lesson content (i.e. questions concerning the writer's biography, the writer's writing career, interesting facts about the author's life, or whatever it has been explored and discussed within the class). These platforms are highly engaging and, as such, they enhance the learning process. They can be used at the beginning of an online literature class as a warm up activity or an ice-breaker, in the middle of the lesson to change the pace of the activities, or towards the end of a lesson as a closer (usually aimed at recapitulation and revision). Moreover, these platforms, when properly customized, can be used as an innovative testing tool in online literature courses in the countries like Serbia and the Republic

of Srpska, where online teaching, along with online testing tools, has been a relatively unexplored area.

IV. CONCLUSION

Teaching literature in the twenty-first century has been a great challenge owing to the fact that it is difficult to make a balance between the need for using modern technologies in education, literature included, on one hand, and the fact that anything that fits into the category of 'machines, industrialization, digitalization' has long been perceived as a means of stripping the society off a human component (a human factor), on the other.

The occurrence of the Pandemic, however, made literature teachers in desperate need for proper online literature course models that would serve as a proper guidance in the process of creating, organizing and conducting their online literature courses.

By identifying the current challenges of teaching literature in the digital era, presenting the history of using modern technologies in literature classes and pointing to the deficiency in proper online digital tools specially designed to meet the needs of literature classes, particularly in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska, the author of the paper highlighted the most acute problems the literature teachers were facing in Times of Troubles and stressed out the importance of further research into this field.

Shedding light on the benefits of using blogs, websites and game-based learning platforms in online literature courses, the author of the paper suggests that these online tools should become an integral part of any literature course as they encourage critical thinking and improve the students' receptive and productive skills, and invites the literature teachers in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska to conduct further research with regard to meaningful implementation of digital tools in literature classes.

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