Teaching Literature in the Digital Age: Some Theoretical Reflections

Mohammed Bennis

Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences Dhar El-Mehraz, Fes, Morocco
mohammed.bennis3@usmba.ac.ma

Abstract

This paper attempts to address the challenges facing the teaching of literature in the digital age. I argue that the rise, normalization and ubiquity of new technology entail the rapid integration of technology in the teaching of literature to dovetail with the increasing expectations and aspirations of the new generation who have grown up with technology and have abundantly assimilated digital cultures. For them technology is much more than digital tools and devices that can be interpreted as semiotic signifiers of the digital age; it also epitomizes the new generation's identities, mindsets, attitudes and cultural practices. Teachers are called upon to address the demands of the new generation and seriously reflect on propounding plausible and innovative pedagogical actions and strategies that would transform traditional methods which, I believe, seem cacophonous with the new generation of learners. Few would contest the fact that the traditional classroom with its classical methods of teaching is no longer compatible with the changing needs of the current generation of students who expect to be addressed as digitally cultivated learners for whom technology is a normative practice. It is incumbent on teachers to assimilate the fact that today's students are globally advanced learners who are aware of the crucial role of technology in the learning process and would fail to cope with the traditional classroom and its limited resources. Another daunting challenge facing the teaching of literature lies in motivating the digital age students to read, analyse and interpret literary texts through the integration of technology and encouraging them to enjoy literature and sustain their interest. The new learners are more enticed by graphics and visual content than texts. I argue that converting literary texts to visual productions and platforms would help digitally literate students regain interest in the literary texts and be engaged in the analytical process.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a piece of evidence that literature is facing an existential academic challenge for its survival in the age of digital technology. The gone days when literary works and genres cherished a committed and avid readership among scholars, teachers, critics and students. Reading novels, short stories, poems and plays within the boundaries of printed books was, indeed, a passionate experience and a deeply rooted culture. The printed words are used to hold a spell on the reader's mind and psyche by triggering his imagination which converts words into living images, emotions and thoughts. Through the act of reading, we immerse in the text, engage in the author's world and vision, and experience a variety of pleasures that words in the texts have the capacity to stimulate and make us feel our humanity. Reading literary texts is positively addictive as we merge with the book; we even become the book as Wallace Stevens reminds us: "the reader becomes the book; nothing separates them; there is no need for

mediation; reader and book are fused" (Qtd. in DiYani, 2021). The pleasure words evoke in the reader's mind is compelling as they can reveal beautiful or frightening pictures and ideas which converge to what Roland Barthes calls *Jouissance* which precedes the feeling of *plaisir* (Qtd. n Nodelman, 2003).

Through the act of reading literary works, we can visualize images of ourselves, of others and of the society we live in since reading takes us outside the texts through the technique of storytelling which weaves the narrative through which readers create meanings. The literary world is fraught with fictitious characters, constructed spaces/settings, and social, cultural, historical and political backgrounds which appeal to the reader's consciousness and sensibility. Before the recent digital boom or the "age of distraction" (Jacobs, 2011), reading was wholly carried out by printed books, with no need to resort to visual cues or electronic materials which have radically transformed the act of reading in the digital age. Printed books were canonized as valuable icons which take us back to the experiences of other humans in time and space (Kringelbach et al, 2008). It is through the pleasure of reading that indelible images of British and American literature, for example, still hold momentum in our memories; we discovered Renaissance drama through Shakespeare's plays; we lived the Victorian age through Dickens' and Hardy's novels; we understood modernism through Woolf's, Joyce's and Hemingway's literary works, to cite but few. We never thought that the printed literary text would cease to appeal to the new digital-born generation of students whose experience of pleasure has taken a different bent by shifting online. The printed word does no more exert the same attractiveness for them as the older generation who are described as "digital immigrants", as Mark Prensky (2001) rightly puts in his seminal work "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants."

The world of fiction we lived through printed books is progressively subsumed by the new digital landscape constructed by cyberspace, the new habitat of the 'networked' generation. In a world that is massively imbued by digital cultures, it would be utopic to preserve the old traditional habit, let alone passion, of reading literature and reviving curiosity in the literary canon. Ever since the sweeping rise of new technologies, worries and speculations about "the imminent death of the book" (Murray, 2018) have been looming over the uncertain future of literature, especially for new students who do not evince the same enthusiasm and interest in the traditional reading of literary books. We have to admit that "literary reading is threatened in the digital age", as confirmed by Adam Hammond (2016) who supports his argument by advancing concrete examples which I find worth noting: "... a voracious book reader with an English Literature BA… who has stopped reading literature entirely. Another friend reports, like a voice from a post-apocalyptic film, 'I can't read *War and Peace* anymore… I have lost the ability to do that… another English major, writes, 'Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski." In his book *The Literary Text in the Digital Age*, Richard J. Finneran (1996) apocalyptically believes that we live in the "twilight of the Age of the Printed Book" and that younger generation will find it "a quaint device from another era."

Obviously, traditional literary reading is facing a dismaying decline in the digital age, the age of Digital Humanities as a nascent academic discipline which is, I believe, threatening the long-cherished position of traditional Humanities. We are witnessing a discernible paradigm shift that has been triggered by new technologies which have transferred the literary experience of

reading to the virtual world of cyberspace. Printed books have lost their physical boundaries to melt on the screens of students' digital devices. Our digital-age students have developed new ways of approaching literature through audiobooks, hypertexts and visual presentations which have definitely metamorphosed the very core value of traditional literary reading. The newly established tradition of reading literary books on digital screens has fostered new perspectives and platforms for analysing, interpreting and understanding literary texts. In my view, instead of adopting a nostalgic tone and lamenting the decline of traditional literary reading, we are supposed to rise to the needs and demands of our new generation and endeavour to revive interest in literature through appropriate and practical incorporation of digital technology in our teaching strategies.

2. New Technology and the Rise of Digital- Savvy Generation

Digital technology has fostered new techniques, values, practices and materials that pertain to the concept of "techno-culture" (Kellner, 1995) which highlights the smooth merging of culture and technology. This sweeping electronic ecosystem denotes a profound transformation of the ways we used to view human life and the old pre-digital age practices we were engaged with, which can no longer be adjusted to the needs of a new generation born in a digitally saturated environment.

To adequately comprehend the dynamics of the social, cultural and educational changes affecting today's societies, it is imperative to reflect on the fundamental innovations that have shaped digital culture and especially educational processes and fostered new learning environments for new educational institutions targeting a digital literate generation. Digital technology marks a historical development in human intellectual evolution, that is orality, writing and ICT (Teixeira et al, 2017). Oral tradition is not organized systematically as it involves life issues through the use of myths as a means of codification, memorization and narratives. The second intellectual artefact is writing which is based on logic, theory and interpretation of texts as narratives of human knowledge, generating a new scope for practical communication. In fact, writing has transformed the relationship between human cognition and transmission in terms of space and time: "The message is no longer bound to a moment or a specific place, but to the duration and availability of writing support, which tends to be perpetuated" (Teixeira et al, 2017). Digitalization is the third human intellectual technology represented by digital devices and networks which have become a mass medium for invention, communication and simulation, setting up new digital infrastructure that has permeated social and educational life, and changed our pedagogical approach to the learning process.

The new digital model, according to Pierre Lévy, is not to be interpreted as the classical text or traditional hermeneutics: "It is generally explored interactively. It is plastic and dynamic, with a certain autonomy of action and reaction" (Teixeira et al, 2017). Intellectual technology is, therefore, a powerful index of the digitalization of human knowledge and the potential matrix for electronic text with its new modes of reading and understanding. The use of digital technology amplifies the individual interpretation of texts since "every reading becomes an act of writing." Texts "in digital networks do not have clear borders; there is no longer a discernible and individualized text…a text is closer to the movement of thinking" (Teixeira et al, 2017).

In this context, innovation is a sine qua non in the process of teaching literary texts and narratives to allow a new generation of students to regain interest in literature and engage them in constructive and congenial reading and understanding. We have to acknowledge that today's learners do not manifest the same concern with and interest in literature as their predecessors for the plain reason that the physical text does not address their cognitive potential which is primarily mediated by digital culture. The fluid and progressive integration of digital technology in our teaching methods would help digital-age learners to understand that "Literary texts provide rich linguistic input, effective stimuli… to express themselves, as well as a source of motivation. Especially nowadays, in the progressive time of digitalization, it is very important to keep the students intrinsically motivated which prolongs their attention span. Literary texts are a natural exposition of language and a way of learning…" (Kellerova and Reid, 2021).

Indeed, it is incumbent on teachers to rekindle the spark of motivation in students to boost their lexical repertoire, upgrade their critical thinking and infuse in them the passion for reading and interpreting literary texts through digital modes and platforms. Scholars and pedagogues such as Scrivener (2011) explained that literary texts provide interest, provoke curiosity and raise motivation, especially in the process of learning a foreign language. The lexical, cultural and intellectual output of literary texts is without limit, especially for English as a foreign language which entails more engagement, innovation and motivation. The digital age learner has developed new skills, techniques and different learning styles that have been shaped by new technology with its vast and prolific platforms which make classical learning methods at odds with the new generation's experiences and cultural backgrounds.

Today's students seem to be more at ease with interactive learning that focuses on seeing and doing. For example, Tapscott (1999) and McNeely (2005) insist on the role of teachers to enhance the culture of interactive learning through digital technology. This clearly showcases the massive impact of digital technology on the new students who are more motivated by learning that incorporates visual materials to meet the rising dominance of visual culture which is a defining marker of the networked society. Technology is an integral part of the students' lives, and naturally, they expect teachers to adjust their teaching strategies to meet this crucial need. In his seminal work on digital natives, Mark Prensky (2001) exclaims that "Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach… there is absolutely no going back …with the rapid dissemination of digital technology." Digital technology has changed students' lives, brains and ways of thinking. They prefer graphics, videos and visual productions which enhance interactive learning, the key term of education in the digital age. Most recent pedagogical theories veer towards the process of involving students in the learning environment to sustain interactivity and to consider the learner an active participant rather than the passive receiver.

The integration of technology in the teaching of literature provides practical venues for teachers and students to approach literary texts from multiple scopes. Both can use social media platforms and forums to express their thoughts, share ideas, design courses and presentations, and access relevant scholarly information, such as PDF articles, e-books and hypertexts, as will

be explained later. Such an innovative stance can reinforce the position of literature in academic institutions and entice students to re-evaluate the literary text as "a place of communication… and artistic expression created through (Language)… 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" (Kaba, 2017). With the impending decline of traditional printed texts, literature is facing the existential challenge to take the trajectory of digital technology which has generated new literary and digitalized concepts of hypertext and cybertextuality, causing a fundamental change in our notions of literature.

However, the focus must not be centred only on innovative techniques and methods, but more on how to foster a viable electronic landscape for students to engage in the process of reading and interpreting literary texts on digital platforms that radically differ from traditional methods and environments. In fact, literature has not always been limited to books. "We should also keep in mind that there is a new field of literature in the online world. There are various discussion areas devoted to literary issues focusing on particular authors or texts… Both literary blogs and discussion forums offer a huge potential for literary education…" (Koskimaa, 2007). Digital platforms provide a plethora of audio-visual spaces and stages for remodelled and immersive experiences of the literary discourse and at the same time increase the relevance of literature in contemporary life. I believe digital technology does not deplete literary texts from their intrinsic literariness which is traditionally associated with the printed text. On the contrary, our fundamental task is to keep literature alive through different modes of expression amply available on digital platforms. Smooth and practical implementation of technology in the teaching of literature is a growing necessity for our educational system to keep up with digital-savvy learners and restore the position of literature in our academic institutions.

The current generation of students cannot appreciate and be constructively involved in the reading process unless the literary text is relocated in a different context, that is the context of digital networks to which they have been accultured since their childhood. Their mindset is structured by their digital tools to which they have developed a cognitive and emotional attachment. They feel happier while connected and immersed on the screen where literary productions take new shapes and perspectives for reading and analysing literary texts. We are now facing a generation born and raised in different conditions and circumstances that are basically shaped by social networks, artificial intelligence and recently Chat GPT. It is plainly evident that today's students are digitally oriented; they can easily and smoothly switch from the real to the virtual. They can also simultaneously check the information they need on their digital tools and share it with others through virtual communities. Blogs, Internet Forums, YouTube, Snapchat and Video Games are defining characteristics of this generation, although they tend to show less concentration and they mostly rely on their digital devices for memorization. These defining traits of the new generation must be conceived as building blocks for the teaching of literature to both narrow the digital gap between teachers and their younger learners, and to maintain the position of the literary text as a major source of knowledge and linguistic background. However, integrating technology must be concomitant with the core traditional values of teaching literature, namely enhancing students' reading, writing and critical skills, and introducing them to the cultural, historical and social implications that lay beyond the linguistic fabric of literary texts.

These are the very core values of literature which we are expected to impart to our students through digital technology to bridge the gap with the digital era where everything starts and ends on the screens of our technological tools. The imperative concern with innovative teaching methods does by no means imply technological determinism which, in my view, dehumanizes our relations with technology with its focus on the machine rather than human interaction. Machines are mediums to foster virtual spaces for students and teachers to interact and interpret literary texts beyond the limited boundaries of the printed text. As conscientious teachers, we need to re-evaluate our teaching strategies and make the learner the prime focus of interest through our selfless endeavour to humanize technology which must be subservient to the humanistic needs of a generation that is dominantly shaped by digital cultures. Our new students would fail to manifest any critical feedback or understanding of Renaissance drama and nineteenth-century novels, for example, which represent a perennial tradition in English literature, if we keep the same classical text-based method which pertains to the pre-digital age. Indeed, it is inconceivable to elicit a positive attitude about classical literature from a generation that technology is an integral part of their day-to-day activities. Today's students cannot adequately engage with literary texts in the traditional classroom which lacks digital infrastructure that could stimulate imagination, entice critical thinking and build up a viable digitalized environment which is the key source of teaching and understanding literary productions.

The new media landscape is vast, open and fluid which empowers teachers to access different pedagogical tools that can benefit students in the process of reading and analysing literary texts and creating practical contexts for sustaining their interests. Teachers' awareness of the digital world as a "fund of knowledge" is vital to shift the traditional classroom to digital culture and face the challenges of literature revivalism. Recently, the Internet has become the preferred hub for writers and authors to publish their works through blogs, online forums and personal websites (Costabile-Heming and Halverson, 2023) which has radically transformed the experience of reading. Digital platforms are fraught with audio and video files, and podcasts, providing a rich online database of literary texts which allows the learner to take delight in the reading experience and narrow the gap with the traditional classroom. In my view, the virtual and imaginary scope of the Internet is the right place for new students to constructively immerse in and grasp the fictitious world of literary texts. There is a generally held assumption that cyberspace is an imagined and conceptual environment which concurs with the nature of fiction which is nurtured by both the writer's and reader's imagination. It can help instil students with the social, cultural, emotional and cognitive benefits of reading literary texts.

Recently, I have clearly discerned an aura of optimism among scholars and pedagogues who strongly believe in the capacity of social media networks to benefit literature and persuade the new generation of learners to regain interest in and pleasure from reading literary genres. For example, Suzanah Holz (2019) posted a blog about the implications of teaching literature in higher education today confirming that "The educational possibilities within the world of physical books, library artefacts, fiction and classic literature have only begun to be explored by pioneering pedagogues who are developing multi-disciplinary courses (primarily in higher education) that take an agile approach in studying the humanities. Using technology that assists

students to delve into fictional texts in both vertical and horizontal ways, educators are reviving both the context and the content of classic literature for contemporary students." In the same vein Eleanor Ty (2018), in her attempt to reflect on the teaching of literature in the age of digital media, points out that "Digital technology has influenced literature and literary studies in several ways; first, the participatory potential of (social networks) has redefined and broadened our notions of authors and authorship…Second, digital media has promoted an increase in the use of visual imagery, which has been accompanied by a decrease in the consumption of traditional printed material". The focus is always centred on visual imagery as the staple contribution of digital media to the reconfiguration of the literary text outside the limited circumference of printed materials to shift from text to hypertext. From another perspective, Roberto Simanowski (2010) addresses, while reading digital literature, the issue of "defamiliarization" and "estrangement" of the conventional literary text when being delocalized from its natural habitat which is the printed physical book, and the potential repercussions it could have on its aesthetic value and literariness. But he does not deny the positive impact of digital technology which allows readers to access "conventional literary works hypertextually annotated and multimedially furnished."

To round up this practical and somehow futurist mood about the teaching of literature, I find *Prestwick House's* idea of using technology to teach literature worth noting, especially their insistence on the invaluable role of digital tools in teaching and learning through interactive classrooms and online projects which would bring literature to life and trigger students' interest (*Prestwick House*, 2024). To unlock the position of literature in higher education the house proposes *KeyLit* which is a digital exploratory and interactive program designed through online discussion boards "to guide students, working independently, or in class, through a close reading of famous literary texts to help build critical reading skills. It can also help individualize lessons… Every *KeyLit* unit… allows students to express their ideas about the literary work, cite evidence from the text, and interact virtually with one another" (*Prestwick House*, 2024). These workable samples confirm the necessity of combining technology with the teaching of literature which marks a paradigm shift in the learning environment.

The proliferation of research projects on the integration of technology in literature teaching highlights the increasing concern among scholars about the extraordinary potential of literature for students to enrich their linguistic repertoire, engage in interactive work, and gain insight into the aesthetic, social, psychological and cultural outputs of literary works. The traditional perception of technology as having little to contribute to literature (Porter, 2000) is basically incompatible with the new digital age learners who manifest different needs and expectations. To make our students fit for the 21st century (Simanowski, 2009), we need to situate literary texts in the broader social and cultural dimensions that have been redefined by digital technology. In an increasingly digitalized world, we have to accept that cyberspace is the appropriate medium to teach and understand the contemporary culture which shapes our young learners; the aesthetics and the mosaic structure of digital media respond to the divergent needs of the new generation who live in a compressed and globalized spatiality with new forms of artefacts, documents, concepts and discourses (Simanowski, 2009).

3. From Text to Hypertext

Most theories that seek to foster innovative strategies for the teaching of literature generally converge to the imperative implementation of hypertext as a practical method to meet the pedagogical requirements of the digitally born generation. The hypertext provides both literary versions of the literary texts and linked documents which allow students to respond to the literary text in a non-linear way (Kaba, 2017). This didactic procedure is supposed to engage students in an interactive environment that addresses them with their own culture and tools, that is cyberculture.

The term hypertext dates back to 1965 when Ted Nelson invented the concept in Mathematics and Sciences to mean "Extension and generality." With the rise of new technology, hypertext has been integrated into digital content, gaining momentum by being extended "beyond simple text to include graphic images, sound, and, at times, full-motion video" (Feustle,1997). Through hypertext provided by technology, students have the opportunity to access *Coursebook Parallel* which is a "guided path" that includes multimedia learning materials that are relevant to the studied literary textbook (Porter, 1999). To enhance a positive attitude about the teaching of literature, teachers are expected to encourage students to read electronic versions of literary works which could be a significant enrichment of their cultural and linguistic background. Electronic literature, in this context, is traditional literature converted to electronic format like PDF. Nedelko and Cirnu (2009) shed light on the major benefits of e-literature: "The most important benefits of e-literature is the search function, the use of automatic bookmarks, the ability to browse page by page at the touch of the key, the scrolling, the creation of page notes and print excerpts, the ability to store several books on a personal computer."

The technological invention of the hypertext has opened several innovative paths for the teaching of traditional literature with its essential multimodality which offers new ways for reading and interpreting literary works. Hypertext does not only weave the written words together, but it also allows for audio and visual modes of representation which can enrich discussion and trigger students' critical thinking potential. The incorporation of hypertext compels us to imagine a future where technology will certainly permeate literature and metamorphose traditional teaching methods. I believe the physical presence of the book will certainly lose ground in favour of cybertext which will bring enormous implications and challenges to the readings and interpretations of literary texts. We must conscientiously accept that human communication is undergoing a rapid technological leap which has brought our traditional concepts, theories and convictions to a symbolic implosion. Staying trapped within the traditional environment would certainly imply we are not fit for the digital age. The future of higher education depends on the readiness and preparedness of teachers to smoothly incorporate digital technology in their teaching strategies, on the one hand, and the availability of a viable digital infrastructure that would transform the boundaries of the traditional classroom.

4. Conclusion

These theoretical reflections forcibly lead to the conclusion which has already been advanced by Mark Prensky (2001) that teachers "will have to change." Yes, change is not a choice, but a necessity to meet the pedagogical and epistemological requirements of current and future

generations of students who live within the seamless boundaries of cyberspace and are shaped by the virtual platforms and social networks of cyberculture. There is no going back to the traditional classroom which our networked generations consider obsolete and incompatible with their digitally constructed mindsets. Social media networks are much more than mere virtual platforms for communication; they, indeed, epitomize a radical generational transformation in terms of culture, attitudes, values and, above all, learning strategies and methods. This entails a seriously pondered reconceptualization of the learning environment that would lead to the fluid integration of digital technology in the teaching processes.

This paper has also attempted to problematize the existential challenges facing the teaching of literary texts in the digital era. It has been clearly underscored that literature *per se* does no longer cherishes the same privileged position as in the pre-digital age, the age of the printed book. We, mainly older-generation teachers, have discerned a noticeable decline of interest in both literary genres and the reading tradition of literary texts. With the increasing hegemony of digital culture, interest in reading printed literary books is incrementally fading away, losing ground for the growing attractiveness of cyberspace which has compelled us to redefine traditional conceptions of the learning environments and rethink our teaching strategies.

Without stooping to sheer fatalism or determinism, I envisage the future of teaching literature, in particular, behind the screens of our students' digital tools; we need utopic or atavistic minds to believe in the 'resurrection' of the traditional reading habit of printed literary texts among current and future digital-born generations of students. Today's students no longer paginate; they rather scroll literary works on their electronic devices; they no longer read literary works in their entirety; they rather prefer to skim over summaries and synopses on their coddled smartphones; they do no longer depend only on their teachers to analyse and understand literary texts; they also prefer to rush to hypertexts, PDF articles, visual productions, podcasts and audio-books which all offer a multitude of readings and interpretations.

Having mapped out the state of literature in the digital age, we seriously need to reflect on the two challenges facing the teaching of literary texts. First, reviving interest in literature among networked generations by instilling in them the passion and habit of reading, especially through electronic and audiobooks. Second, integrating digital technology into the learning process is commensurate with the cultural and pedagogical needs of digital-age students. There is, however, a moral obligation to underscore that the incorporation of new technologies in the learning spaces is not incumbent on teachers only, but also on the availability of and equal accessibility to digital infrastructure, especially in the Third World Nations which obviously raises the issue/challenge of digital divide/gap.

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