

ENGLISH STUDIES THROUGH THE CONTEXT OF VIRTUAL CLASSROOM SOFTWARE

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The rapid development in technology has changed the perception in numerous fields of human knowledge and experience. To understand the impact technology has on English studies, it is essential to investigate how new forms of teaching and learning, such as the virtual classroom, affect the theoretical understanding. This report shows how a lecture can be mediated through specialized software and what implications are caused because of the medium. It focuses on Angela Carter and her works in particular.

Key words: virtual classroom, English studies, Angela Carter, online teaching

Introduction

Online teaching has been developing for more than 15 years, following rapid technological progress. Nowadays, education is unthinkable without the impact of technology. Moodle, Schoology, Blackboard, Google classroom are some of the infinite teaching platforms available online. Yet, a lot of university personnel in the Bulgarian education system do not employ the wide array of innovative teaching tools in their day-to-day work with students. The reasons are broad and complex, the major ones being probably the poor information on innovative teaching, the lack of resource in employing new technology in the education process, and lastly, the wide-spread insistence on strictly separating on-ground from online teaching and learning. Despite the existence of distant learning programs and the implementation of Moodle in a great array of courses in universities, there is still an imminent need of modernization and change in syllabus.

For the purpose of this report, a virtual classroom software is defined as a special tool for delivering synchronous online learning environment which “...supports active learning by providing an environment with the learning tools, learning materials, and opportunities for contextual

discussion” (Yang & Liu 2007: 171-172). To demonstrate how such software can be used in a literary course, one example of a virtual classroom is used in this study. Developed by Bulgarian programmers and available in Bulgarian as well as other languages, the virtual classroom of Vedamo seems to be the most suitable option¹.

Among the benefits of using virtual classroom software in university-taught courses are better integration of students in “learning communities” and greater engagement with the subject, flexibility both in the teaching methods and the perception and learning strategies of students, the creation of a sense of up-to-date educational process that can be compared with leading practices in other higher teaching institutions, the management of a productive learning environment that relies on interaction to satisfy the need of developing practical skills alongside theoretical knowledge.

Angela Carter and her insistence on searching new forms and destroying clichés seem like one of the most appropriate and suitable authors for a methodological and medium experiment in literature teaching. “Most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the bottles explode.” (Carter 1983: 69). This quote gives readers a good perspective of what Carter intended with her writing. Born in 1940, she grew rebelliously defying her mother and the restraints of womanhood. Carter started publishing novels in the 60s and immediately stirred the literary scene with her presence. Among the most persistent themes in her novels are femininity, maturing – the scary and confusing transformation of a girl into a woman, new female gothic, destroying patriarchy, carnival, freak and so much more². Carter was a prolific writer and a lot of her novels experiment with genres. In *Heroes and Villains* she re-thought the Gothic, in *The Passions of New Eve* she dissected myth and cinema, in the collection of tales *The Bloody Chamber* she attacked stereotypes created by male-dominant culture by rewriting popular fairy tales. *The Bloody Chamber* is discussed due to its

¹ I have further discussed the practical side in using this particular software in Lyutskanova-Kostova, Ralitsa. "VIRTUAL CLASSROOM – PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR TEACHING ONLINE." *Eastern Academic Journal* 3 (2019: 25-32).

² Ali Smith gives her account of Carter’s themes as “Art, high and low (the switched-at-birth twins of her oeuvre) ...Brutishness, carnival, cinema, class. Clockwork mechanism and timeless human story. Englishness. Fear and its antidote, laughter. Feminism, folklore, language. The mother. Myth. Performance, politics, power and who has it, and how to get it. Profanity and its uses. Real and fake, and their closeness to one another. Sex, social anthropology, theatre, transformation.” (Smith 2007: 12-3).

“flexibility” in form and the radio and film adaptations of some of the stories, which seem suitable for more visually-oriented teaching medium.

Literature overview

In an article regarding social aspects of synchronous virtual learning Racheva (2018) argues that online learning “...required developing new attitudes in both teachers and learners regarding e-learning, understanding its benefits, and acquiring relevant skills to adopt and make the best use of its immense opportunities” (Racheva 2018: 2). Although her research is very informative about the different aspects of virtual learning and the benefits of using virtual classroom software, the perspective is engaged with the attitude of the tutors who took part. Students' perspective was the main focus of Jeffrey Martin's recent article “Building Relationships and increasing engagement in the virtual classroom: practical tools for the online instructor” (2019). Different aspects of the virtual learning environment are discussed in the perspective of how a tutor can use more visually-oriented content to raise students' engagement with the material and to create better communication and support among the learning groups. Moreover, different issues of classroom management are discussed in light of building meaningful interaction between students and the material. Martin's work is a continuation of the line of research conducted in the field of online teaching, concerning overcoming the sense of isolation a lot of students feel when studying at a distance (Falloon 2011; Fox, Morris, & Rumsey 2007; Sharma 2006).

For the purposes of the current study, some of the main aspects of a virtual classroom software are outlined and commented:

– Synchronous communication – live, face-to-face, person-to-person, person-to-group communication that is both aerial and visual. It mimics actual classroom, however, the participants can take part from every place in the world and are, among other factors, using the comfort of their home (place-independent group communication, Harasim 1990) and escaping the usual “sound-pollution” in a physical classroom. The benefits and some limitation of synchronous online education were discussed by researchers such as Mavrodieva (2011/2), whose main concern is the emerging new way of virtual communication and Suleri, J. & Suleri, A. J. (2018), who compare virtual, blended and classical classroom learning.

– Computer-mediated learning – it enables a tutor and a learner to equally explore the benefits of reaching out to web resources and almost instantly implement them in the active learning

process. This can create a sense of overwhelming, however, it is the tutor's responsibility to prepare the online session in such way that it guides students to the best possible way of using resources in a useful and productive way. Bullen (1998) is one of the first to comment on the limitations of students in using computers for education. This could be due to the early stage of technology advancement at which the research was conducted, yet, even today we can observe lack of elementary computer literacy in some learners who willingly chose the online form of education³.

– Easy to apply to blended learning and online taught courses – a virtual classroom software can be implemented in LMS (Learning Management System) such as Moodle, which enables designing online-taught courses. Ilieva, G. & Sandalski, M. (2006) focus their research on group-based asynchronous learning in the field of electronic learning. They comment that “the combination of classical classroom education and e-learning raise the quality of the education process by stimulating knowledge sharing among students” (2006: 1).

Aims and methodology

This report focuses on two major questions: (a) how a virtual classroom software can be implemented in a literary course and (b) how the new medium changes the design of a “lecture”. In order to answer these questions, the report gives a simple course design, which theoretically can be used in both online education and blended forms of learning. The idea is to exemplify good practices in implementing virtual classroom software in higher education courses. While following the steps of the course design, the text would also highlight the major issues a tutor might face in their lecture or online classes preparation.

Course design

When ideas about the exemplary course were pondered, the need emerged to think solely in theoretical perspectives, thus, what would be presented as course design is rather strategies of using virtual classroom

³ That observation is the author's own and it was acquired in her work with adult learners of English as a second foreign language in a private institution. During those lessons, a Vedamo virtual classroom was used and despite the relatively easy set of tools and interface, 5 of every 10 people experienced difficulties in turning on their microphone, camera, even accessing the room itself.

software in online education. It is presumed that the course is conducted only online, although it could be implemented in blended learning forms.

A virtual classroom is theoretically employed in 3 main ways: a "lecture" to be delivered by a tutor, a presentation to be prepared by the students; and a discussion/seminar based on readings and other forms of material.

1. Lecture

In designing their lecture, tutors must be well prepared to work with the medium. If they experience any insecurity or lack of knowledge about how best to use the tools of a virtual classroom, they might encounter serious difficulties in conveying their knowledge to the students. One of the first steps in designing a lecture through a virtual classroom software is to pick those materials that would best serve the medium. In our case, to present Angela Carter as a writer and to highlight the major topics that would be further discussed and worked upon in the course, the tutor should select such visual and aerial supplements to their oral presentation that could serve the students as a solid foundation for their research and preparation. Hardly limited to shared external links for follow-up reading, the materials could include a biographical entry from a believable source – from a scanned page of Carter’s biography to a self-prepared picture of important dates and milestones. A screenshot of official website pages dedicated to Carter’s oeuvre, bits of BBC documentary on Carter’s life and work⁴ and much more could be used by a tutor when they navigate through the presentation pages on the whiteboard. What mainly distinguishes a virtual classroom from a “traditional” one is the interactive nature of the medium. Students are enabled to mark, comment, write personal notes or debate with the tutor or with each other during the lecture thanks to the incorporated functions of messaging and raising hand button. What is more, a tutor can use the function of highlighting a moment to direct participants’ attention to an important instance of the lecture, for example, introducing major novels that have been influencing British literature. In a virtual classroom, students willingly “enter” the virtual classroom, which to some extent models their attitude to the teaching-learning process. Since they do study a lot using their

⁴ <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0bf4whd>>.

computer screens, a virtual classroom provides them with a setting that enhances this experience.

To engage the attention of their students fully, a tutor can start every new moment of their lecture by posing questions to the students that check their basic comprehension and willingness to participate. This strategy could also be utilized as a sort of a “game”, where students’ thoughts guide the lecture to the next step. For example, if a tutor asks what major topics might appear in Carter’s early works, showing students random covers of 3-4 novels, and they highlight the carnivalesque, then they might proceed with Carter’s later works instead of adopting a chronological approach.

2. Students’ presentation

Students are asked to pick a topic from a list a tutor has provided and the lecture time is divided between the participants. 4-8 participants can present in front of the others using the tools of the virtual classroom. The tutor allows each student in turn to be a “presenter” and to be able to fully conduct the virtual lesson. This task aims at two main goals: first, to see to what extent a student was able to think over the class material on the given author and create a meaningful content based on their learning; and secondly, to teach students how to deal with online teaching tools effectively when preparing a presentation in front of peers or other target groups. Some students chose English studies to be able to pursue a teaching career and gaining such experience would be of great value to them. To perform well, a student needs practice and it requires more than one attempt at using virtual classroom software.

3. Seminar/Discussion

The third way a virtual classroom software can be used is when the leading role is shared between tutor and students. In this case, the tutor is more of a moderator of the discussion. The focus is a major work of the author studied, in this particular case, Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*. Depending on the course aims, the tutor might decide to compare bits of the original text and the Bulgarian translation in order to start a discussion on the author’s perception. Questions about film adaptations and text could also be discussed with an active comparison between film (*The Company of Wolves*) and tales in the collection.

Conclusion

This report is theoretical and the examples provided for implementing a virtual classroom software are rather ideas for incorporating good practices in teaching English studies. However, a strong belief of the author is that, despite its limitations, this report would give some prospective options to tutors who engage in distant learning education or blended and online forms of teaching at universities. Angela Carter also deserves popularizing among students and the adaptations of her works on screen and radio could be easily utilized through virtual classroom software in a wide array of classes among various disciplines.

Empirical data would be beneficial to measure students' perception of the medium and it could make comparisons of performance based on grades and participation. Only then could we fully support the speculations made by this report: a virtual classroom is more interactive than a traditional setting; it changes not only the “look” of the lecture but also the methods used to conduct the online class as well as students' participation and engagement; it helps students gain practical knowledge on teaching and learning through a virtual classroom software.

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