

Literature Students in a DEL Training Program for Developing Alternative Ways of Teaching Literature in a Computer Environment

Sara Hauptman

Introduction

Technology can be of enormous value to our enterprise of teaching the Humanities. E-material can provide a rich context for learning, a high degree of immersion and the basis for varied interactions. The convergence of sound, still images, texts, hypertext, graphics and animation reconstructs for the learner the multidimensional nature of literature: visual, nonverbal, and cultural, as well as its linguistic dimensions. Technology facilitates access to the many dimensions of a text: linguistic, literary, cultural and historical; it also provides access to critical essays about the text (Coffin, 1995; Furstenberg, 1997).

As head of the Literature and LiteratureTeaching department at the Achva College of Education in Israel, I have found out that although our freshmen use technology easily and constantly for their academic studies, they rarely integrate technology in their teaching : whenever they developed or suggested a lesson plan, they barely included technology-based activities.

It became clear that a new approach was needed: a curriculum that would emphasize and improve the methodology of using technology in literature lessons planned and taught by our freshmen students.

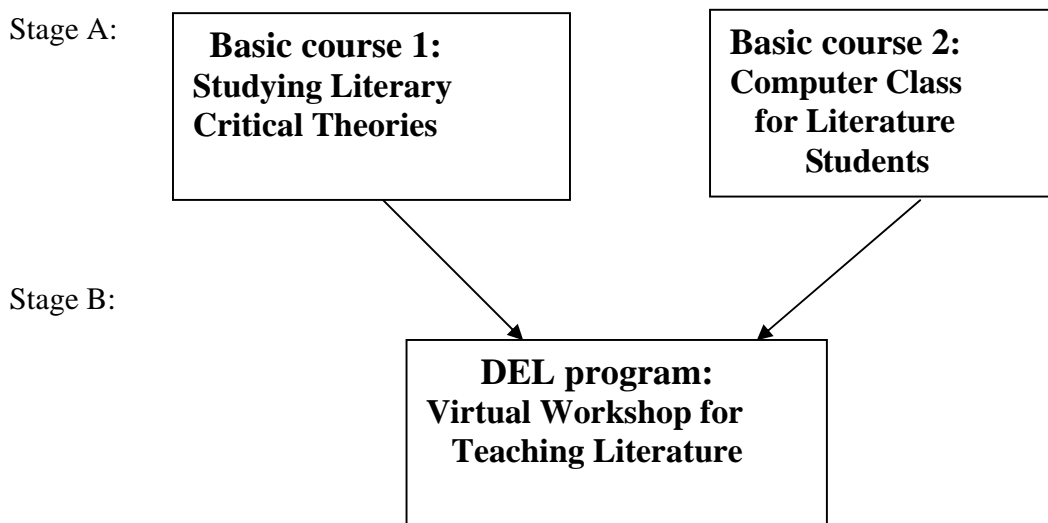
The new curriculum we suggested was based on three main concepts:

- a. As part of their pedagogical studies, students would be required to attend a pedagogical Distance Education program for training in the use of technology: a “virtual workshop” for planning literature lessons relying upon “ready made” and/or “produce your own” technology-based teaching material, as well as practice in the use of such technology-based activities in literature lesson plans. Students would also have to connect technology-based teaching material and their

- teaching goals. It was very clear to us that without such rigorous training, freshmen would always feel vulnerable when using technology in the classroom.
- b. It is essential to use critical theories (Adams 1971; Rice & Waugh 1998; Eagleton 1998; Barry 1995) for developing interpretations and teaching strategies for the poems or short stories that students are planning to teach. This effectively means that teaching strategies need to be related to our basic knowledge derived from critical literary theories (Blau, 1988; 1993), especially when using technology: technology can make accessible the extensive amount of information from which multiple meanings and interpretations evolve. The visual and aural elements of multimedia can support critical theories contributing to high levels of motivation and involvement. (Porter, 2001; Swan & Meskill, 2001).
 - c. It is most important for novice teachers to develop more than one teaching plan for each lesson. As Cushing & Berliner (1991) and Hartman (2001) have argued, that considering several ways for teaching a lesson can contribute to the professional development of novice teachers before, during and after the lesson: it “forces” them to search for more material about the poem or story they are going to teach and search for more than one teaching strategy; it increases their flexibility in class and enables them to change teaching strategies on the spot if the need arises; it also enables them to reflect more critically on their lesson as they consider more than one point of view. The options of two or more lesson plans in teaching literature can easily be derived from using different critical theories, as Harshav (2000) and Izhar (1979) have argued: different critical theories are, in fact, different concepts, or “languages”, for discussing and interpreting the background, structure, main idea(s) and readers’ responses to the text. Thus, “alternative ways of ‘reading’ and understanding literature can lead to alternative ways of teaching literature in class” (Izhar, 1979, p332).

Our model of instruction

Our model of instruction included two stages: a basic program (term A) and an advanced one (term B).



Our model aimed to help our students in: a) finding and illustrating better connections between literary critical theories and teaching literature in class, and b) using technology in literature lessons in a variety of ways.

The first stage of our model - two basic courses:

1. Basic course for studying literary critical theories

Students were guided to read material on different critical theories (Adams,1971; Eagleton, 1996; Rice & Waugh, 1998; Barry, 1995). In class, we discussed the principles, concepts and main issues of each theory. From there, we went on to build a set of questions for processing poems and short stories according to the different theories, suitable for elementary school. .

2. Basic computer class for literature students

Students learnt and practiced a variety of ways to use technology both as a teaching-learning tool and as a communicational tool. All activities were related to literature lessons and took place in the computer room.

The second stage of our model - a DEL program:

The DEL program, a virtual literature-teaching workshop, included four e-assignments:

Assignment One: Choose a poem or a story you intend to teach in your class and suggest two critical theories that may be relevant and may contribute to the interpretation and processing of the text. Write two full interpretations of your poem/short story based on the two critical theories.

Assignment Two: Suggest teaching strategies pertinent for each interpretation and describe your teaching aims and classroom activities. Include technology-based activities.

Take advantage of e-resources (pedagogical material and/or material from your discipline) for assignments A and B.

Assignment Three: Write your reflections about the process and about your two products.

Assignment Four: Send your work to two members of our group. Read their e-notes carefully and find ways to improve your work. Add a second reflection and send your work to the teaching staff.

The virtual literature-teaching workshop was planned to be an online tutorial on teaching poetry and short stories for elementary school students. We wanted our students (i.e. the future teachers) to explore issues related to using technology in teaching, by exposing them to concrete examples of ways in which technology can enhance teaching methods. This program was considered as an important tool for helping freshmen to understand-by-practice the advantages of technology in the teaching-learning process: to rely upon e-resources for planning literature lessons, as well as e-notes for giving and receiving feedback. Eventually, the workshop provided high-quality materials for the teaching practice of our freshmen.

The study and its findings

To formally assess the results of the workshop we introduced, we devised a survey that aimed to examine and evaluate our teacher-training model. We investigated two areas:

1. Which aspects of the model were particularly useful for freshman literature-teaching students?
2. What needs to be improved?

Methodology

We trained 16 students to plan several alternative literature lessons for each poem or story they intended to teach, using a different critical theory and different teaching strategies for each lesson. We also trained them to use technology in a variety of ways, related to their different teaching goals.

1. Assessing students' products:

- a. One task assigned was to suggest two different / alternative lessons for an "unseen" poem chosen from the school curriculum. This assignment was given before starting stage one of the basic program (term A) and at the end of the training program, after attending the second stage of the program (term B).
- b. The second task assigned was to present two different / alternative lessons for teaching a poem or a story, chosen by each student from the school curriculum, using 1) different critical theories and 2) different technological applications in each lesson. This assignment was carried out at the end of stage B of the training program.

We assessed students' products in two ways : 1) **qualitative** evaluation of the theoretical terms/ concepts in use in each lesson plan and their connection to the clarification of the learning tasks; 2) **qualitative** evaluation of the original approach to the use of technology and its relevance to the critical literary theory chosen by the student.

2. Evaluating students' progress:

- c. Two long interviews before starting the second stage; e.g. when moving from the basic stage to the second stage (term A), and at the end of the second stage of the training program (term B), where students described their attitudes towards our model .

The interviews were **qualitatively** and **quantitatively** analyzed in an effort to explore different aspects of our students' attitudes towards our model and their statistic significance. Finally, we tried to find connections between all data supplied.

The main findings of the study point to an important contribution of the model to our students' training as well as to some difficulties in using technology in literature lessons:

a) On the first task, the improvement of the two alternative lessons, from the beginning of the training program to its end, was statistically significant in two aspects: the use of theoretical terms/concepts in each lesson-plan increased ($t=2.78$, $p<.05$). Likewise, as **Table A** shows, the clarification of the learning tasks improved ($t=4.41$, $p<.01$). Using the t-test for dependent samples, we observed a high level of significant improvement in both issues.

b) On the second task, much creative and original use of technological applications was observed, usually related to the chosen critical theory in the work of 10 students (**Table B***). The other five students did not suggest any technology-based activities in either of their two alternative lesson plans (One student did not participate at all in that task at the end of the course. See **Table B****).

c) The interviews point to the statistically significant contribution of the model in three main aspects of teaching literature, as mentioned by our students: Using Wilcoxon signed-rank tests we observed a significant increase of the amount of phrases, used in students interviews in the end of term B, for describing their literature teaching proficiency ($z=2.45$, $p<.05$), pedagogical confidence ($z=2.83$, $p<.01$) and various benefits of using technological applications in literature lessons ($z=3.43$, $p<.01$) as a result of our model as **Table C** shows. In the interview, students describe the benefits and the problems they encountered in using technology in literature lessons. Here we found a significant change in the students' attitudes after participating in the DEL program: at the end of the DEL program, our students pointed out a greater number of advantages after using technology, but on the other hand, the number of issues pointing to the disadvantages or problems of using technology in literature lessons remained unchanged (see **Table D*** and **Table D****). We must conclude that findings A, B, and C show a high correlation.

Table A: Assessing students’ products: the use of theoretical terms/concepts in lessons’ plan (n=16)

Student no.	Term A: Terms/ Concepts Lesson I	Term A: Terms/ Concepts Lesson II	Total: Term A	Term B: Terms/ Concepts Lesson I	Term B: Terms/ Concepts Lesson II	Total: Term B
1	1	2	2	4	2	6
2	1	1	2	7	10	17
3	2	1	3	2	2	4
4	3	2	5	2	4	6
5	5	1	6	4	6	10
6	1	0	1	2	1	3
7	7	2	9	2	7	9
8	6	2	8	2	7	9
9	0	1	1	5	3	8
10	1	0	1	8	7	11
11	2	1	3	6	6	12
12	6	5	11	7	7	14
13	1	2	3	2	10	12
14	2	0	2	4	1	5
15	4	1	5	6	4	10
16	1	1	2	6	4	10
Total	42	22	64	62	85	147
Average	2.625	1.375		3.875	5.312	
			2.063			5.038

As we can see in Table A, students’ use of literary theory terms and concepts increased significantly from term A to term B. It must be added that this improvement was also qualitative: in the second semester students used more sophisticated literary terms in their lessons, such as “reader’s response”, “analogy between metaphors”, “historical background”, “hidden psychological conflicts”, etc. They generally seemed to have acquired a better perspective on literature and literature teaching.

Table B*:

Assessing students’ products (maximum of 100% for each issue): two different / alternative lessons for teaching a poem or a story, chosen by each student from school curriculum - including technological activities (n=10)

Student no.	Use of technology	Original Approach	Clarification of Learning Tasks	Theoretical Terms/Concepts	Total
1	90	100	90	90	92
2	100	95	100	95	95
3	100	90	90	85	91
4	100	100	100	100	100
5	95	90	90	90	92
6	90	85	85	80	85
7	95	90	95	90	95
8	100	100	100	100	100
9	90	85	85	85	87
10	95	95	95	90	92
Average	95.5	83	93	90.5	92.2

Table B**

Assessing students' products (maximum of 100% for each issue): two different / alternative lessons for teaching a poem or a story, chosen by each student from school curriculum (n=5).

Student no.	Original Approach	Clarification of Learning Tasks	Theoretical Terms/Concepts	Total
11	90	100	100	95
12	75	70	80	75
13	75	70	80	75
15	70	70	75	73
15	85	85	85	85
Average	79	79	84	80.3

Tables B* and **B**** show the difference between students who used technology (**Table B***) and those who did not use technology in their lesson plans (**Table B****). As we can see, the average score for students who chose to use technology in their lesson plans was better (92.2) than for those who did not suggest technological activities (80.3): the lesson plans of the first group had a highly original approach (95.5), and we observed a better clarification of the learning tasks and of the use of theoretical terms/concepts in their lesson plans.

Table C: Distribution of phrases according to the benefits of the model (in %) [n=16]

	Before participating in DEL program	After Participating in DEL program
Literature Teaching proficiency	11%	72%
Pedagogical Confidence	29%	67%
Benefits of Using Technology in Literature Lessons	9%	36%

Table C illustrates the improvement of the students' pedagogical confidence, e.g.: more phrases in student interviews included statements about pedagogical confidence as a result of our DEL program ("I found some interesting ways to present this poem to my class. I'm sure they will enjoy most of them, especially those that are technologically based," "I find technologically-based activities to be very challenging, therefore I use them very often...", "I know exactly which computer activities will be interesting for my students"). As we can see, some of the phrases were also related to "benefits of using technology" (the third line of Table C) or to "Literature teaching proficiency" (the first line of Table C). An interesting statement was made by one of our students, who said: "Now, when I look at a poem, I can picture the words in my mind and the background of the words highlighted in many colours on the big screen of my computer. From this moment I know how I would like to teach that poem." This short statement sums up the overall benefits of the model we introduced for our students.

Table D*: Advantages vs. disadvantages of using computer applications in literature lessons for teachers/students [n=16]

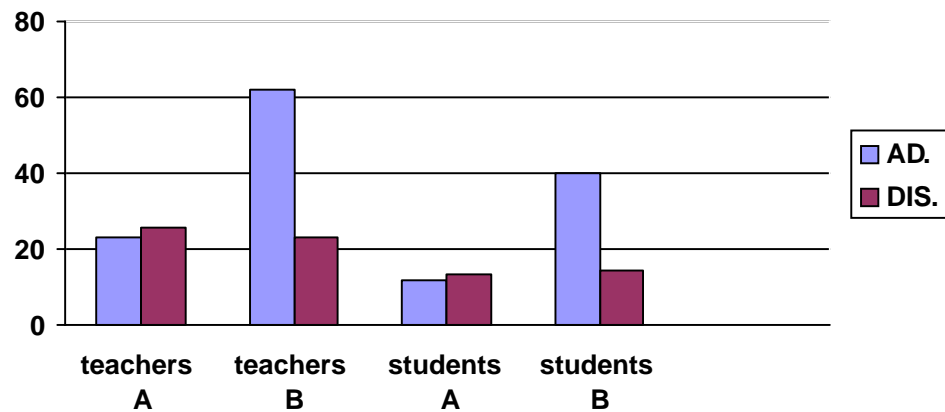


Table D* shows that our students were more willing to accept technology-based activities at the end of the DEL program (term B) than at the beginning of the DEL program (term A), yet the disadvantages/difficulties they found in using technology in their literature lessons did not disappear and, statistically, did not even decrease. We attribute great significance to this fact. It should be stated that these data were also collected through interviews with the students.

Table D:** Advantages versus disadvantages of using computer applications in literature lessons (teachers/students) [n=16]

a. Disadvantages/problems for students

1. Students don't try to understand poems/stories by themselves: they immediately search for material on the web
2. Not all students are digitally literate; some of them might feel "lost" during technology-based lessons
3. Students are preoccupied with technology and not with literature studies
4. Students might lose interest in going to the library and might search only for e-material, which lends their work a superficial character
5. Technology can't involve feelings, which are so vital to literature studies
6. Students need to listen to their teacher's voice
7. Students read less literature

8. Technology is based on written responses. But not all of the students are capable of expressing their thoughts/feelings in writing
9. The response to students' interpretation is not as immediate and lively as in the dialogue taking place in class
10. Technology cannot contribute to discussions on values

b. Advantages/benefits for students

1. Enriching students' knowledge on literature
2. More interesting lessons
3. Better understanding of the poem/story
4. The student is involved in the learning process (does not "feel lost" during the lesson)
5. Independent learning
6. Better for shy students
7. Stronger effect: the student remembers the learning material
8. Related to the modern world of the student
9. Developing computer skills
10. Every student can progress according to his/her skills
11. Students can choose the method they prefer for interpretation of the poem/story

c. Disadvantages/problems for teachers

1. Not enough experience and confidence in using computers in class
2. Students might have less affection for the teacher
3. Literature and computers are not connected in any way
4. No constructive dialogue between literature teacher and students can take place in the computer room
5. Students are preoccupied with technology and not with the poem or the story they are studying

6. Teachers need to help their students in operating computer technology instead of teaching them literature
7. The teacher loses control over the students
8. Teachers might prefer ready-made lesson plans
9. Much noise in the classroom
10. No feelings can be discussed while using technology.
11. Teachers might use the same lesson plans over and over again, because they have spent a lot of time in constructing them

d. Advantages/benefits for teachers

1. Available material for understanding literature
2. Available material for teaching literature
3. Better lesson plans: more interesting, allowing for a critical understanding of the texts
4. Planning literature lessons becomes very interesting
5. Preparing long-term material
6. The presentation of learning material (texts and instructions) arouses student interest
7. Each student can choose his/her favorite concept for the interpretation of the poem/story
8. Better attitude towards the literature teacher
9. Better attitude towards literature

Conclusions

This research focused on the evaluation of a model for training first-year literature students at a teachers' college of education to use technology-based activities in their literature lessons. Our model was aimed at finding a suitable curriculum that would supply working tools as well as theoretical and pedagogical concepts for using computer applications in literature classes in a creative and constructive way.

In our e-workshop, we trained our students to design two different and alternative literature lessons for a poem or a story the students intended to teach, by 1) referring to

different critical theories and 2) using different teaching strategies, including technology applications related to the chosen critical theory.

The findings of our study point to an important contribution of the model to our 16 students; statistically significant progress was observed in the final products in regard to four aspects we explored: the use of literary theory concepts, clarification of the learning tasks, original approach to the literary text and, the main issue, technology-based activities suggested in lesson plans. This model, as we learned from students' interviews, increased their self-confidence and mastery of the computer environment in class, which could lead them, as we all hope, to expose their elementary school students to e-material in a more professional way.

Yet, there is still a deep gap to fill since not all of our students find technological activities effective; five out of sixteen preferred literature lessons without computers. In spite of the outstanding success attained through the use of technological applications, most students were stressed and anxious about the difficulties and disadvantages of the use of technology in literature lessons.

Our study demonstrates the freshman literature students' need for more practice in e-pedagogical programs and in e-workshops, as well as in classroom experience using technology-based activities. We still need to develop more and better connections between technology and pedagogy.

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