

**Constraints and Potentialities in Understanding and Evaluating
Literature in ODL:
Flexible Strategies, the Use of Technology
and the Role of Literary Theory**

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This paper is an attempt to discuss problems concerning the distant learner's successful involvement in literature as a teaching subject in ODL, especially when the literature module is of an introductory character and an autonomous unit within a general BA Program of Humanities. My main concern is how, in this particular circumstance, the distant learner can be successfully engaged in the learning processes of the literary subject in order to acquire the necessary skills for understanding and evaluating literature at large.

My argument draws upon my tutorial experience at the The Hellenic Open University in "Literature II: Modern Greek Literature, of the 19th and 20th centuries," one of the two literature modules in the BA program in Hellenic Culture. Taking into consideration the distant learner's varying cognitive status, I focus on the introductory character of the module and its simultaneous function as a pathway towards familiarisation with and/or acquisition of literary knowledge. The course objectives are to combine historical knowledge with critical thought and the historicisation of literature with the reading and interpretation of literary texts, which proves to be an extremely complicated task. This venture requires an ability to handle literature from multidimensional perspectives that transcend the introductory character of the course. My approach examines to which extent, at this level of education, literary theory and the advancements of technology may contribute to the task of addressing the conceptual and cognitive challenges posed by literature as a teaching subject.

The perplexities involved in teaching literature in ODL have been broadly discussed by scholars who focus on the interactive educational strategies necessary for tackling the particularities of the field.¹ Special emphasis has been placed on the multidimensional, heterogenous and varying interactive modes that the field of

¹ Kayalis 2005.

humanities, especially literature and in particular literary interpretation invite.² The same subject could be approached in very different ways and from varying angles in different educational systems, theories, institutions, cultures and academic environments. Thus mastering the multifacetedness of the course objectives on the one hand and coping with the variety of the students' cognitive background on the other could be construed as two of the most important factors which, among others (e.g. physical or virtual educational material, the tutor's role e.t.c.), constitute the complex educational problem of the literary domain; or what Rand J. Spiro and his collaborators have defined with the term "ill-structured knowledge domain", literary interpretation being one of its exemplary manifestations.³

Focusing more on the distant learner's difficulties to cope with the intricacies of the literary domain than on the difficulties deriving from the subject matter itself, I will try to present some of the crucial problems that might impede his/her gradual acquisition of literary knowledge and discourage his/her active involvement in distance learning education practices.

I shall not focus here on the issue of distant learners' varying backgrounds which result from their different levels of social, cultural and personal experience which is common to students in all universities. But I would like to bring forward particularities associated with the students' expectations from this particular course which, despite its introductory character, represents an extremely perplexed educational field. One of the major problems is the tension between student misconceptions about literature and the complex nature of the subject itself.

Being mature students and often cut off from educational practices for a long period, students frequently approach literature either through preexisting experiences deriving from high school education or through certain popular ideas about what literature is. Some consider literature a highly speculative field associated with sublimity of ideas and feelings, ethereal and distant, where spontaneity and sensitivity thrive and any attempt at analyzing seems to undermine the work of art. For this category of students, literary interpretation is an extremely difficult task, if not totally unattainable. For others literature might seem an easy field to approximate, through

² Rand J. Spiro, Paul J. Feltovich, Michael J. Jacobson and Richard L. Coulson (n.d.): "What is needed to comprehend a text is not solely contained in the linguistic and logical information coded in that text [. . .] The information contained in the text must be combined with information outside of the text, including most prominently the prior knowledge of the learner, to form a complete and adequate representation of the text's meaning."

³ R. J. Spiro, P. J. Feltovitch and R. Coulson (n.d.)

impressionistic rewriting of what the author has put there. For this category literary interpretation might seem an unnecessary task or something that might even spoil the pleasure of the text. This is, of course, a rather rough categorization which cannot stand for all occasions and circumstances. Yet, both attitudes are manifestations of the absence of certain criteria for comprehending and evaluating literature. This deficiency also appears in the students' difficulty to distinguish between the literary value of a best-seller and that of a classic work. In a similar vein, students often tend to question the purpose of reading what they think as an "old" text, e.g. an eighteenth century ode which they tend to consider as "out of fashion", without being able to comprehend its place and function within the broader framework of literary history. Also, questions concerning what is and what is not literary are not rare, and they are often posed by those who are seriously interested in making their way in literature. This kind of questioning often appears in the guise of requested recommendations or suggestions for selecting a literary text. The urgency also here seems to be the acquisition of certain criteria for evaluating literature. By and large all the aforementioned are signs of the kind of instability and embarrassment with which the distant learner makes his way towards literature.

In order to cope with these problems, many students seem to direct their expectations to tutorial guidance. Examining the students' difficulties in comprehending literature, research in progress, currently being carried out by a group of tutors of this module, highlights the need for tutorial guidance. As stated by Christos Daniil less than 40% of the students have laid their expectations for understating poetry on consultancy and guidance of sorts.⁴ Apparently the perplexity of the problem here arises first from the conflict between learning-centered and task-based distance learning with the more traditional teacher-centered and face-to-face education of the conventional university and secondly from the problematic nature of literature as a teaching subject per se.

According to my tutorial experience, most of the students are in search of a methodology that will provide certain constants for dealing with the slippery perplexities of the literary domain. The urgency of the problem is such that even a schematic approach would suffice; a gradual passage from one field to another, let us

⁴ According to Daniil (2005) the research so far has shown that a 45% of the students state that they do not understand poetry, a 42% claim that understanding poetry requires a spiritual cultivation that they lack, whereas less than a 40% believe that in order to understand literature a reader needs consultancy by an expert, namely the tutor.

say, from social to literary history, and from literary aesthetics to the text, might provide a relatively stable scheme of sorts upon which they may organize their study or research. It is hardly a coincidence that whenever the theme of an assignment is associated with the aesthetics of a certain period, e. g. naturalism, or symbolism, backed up by a bibliography comprised of complementary academic resources, printed or electronic, such as articles, essays, papers and books and in addition to the standard educational material, the students' performance in assignments seems to be improved. In search for a constructive methodology with which to approach the perplexities of the field however, students often resort to complementary material, not always of academic standards. In pursuit of a mode and/ or a model for approaching the literary subject, they often reproduce uncritically the structure of self-assessing exercises provided in the printed educational material.

In the light of the aforementioned, the pursuit of flexible strategies in teaching and learning seems to be a matter of urgent priority for literary studies in ODL. Yet any flexible strategy should take into consideration the objectives of the course, its level, its character and its place within the overall curriculum of the Program of Studies.

Research on the problematic nature of the teaching of literature and the field of humanities in general has highlighted the importance of inventing and employing certain flexible strategies for coping with the issue. A lot of the expectations for dealing with the problem have been invested in the promising and rapidly developing field of technology, with an emphasis on the use of electronic material, especially hypertext.⁵ Organised as a decentred universe of cross-references, hypertext's intertextual, multivocal and rhizomatic nature, has been considered as the promising electronic medium for effectively coping with the pitfalls of the literary domain (Landow 1992, Bolter 2001, McGann 2001). Hypertext's multiple representational functions seem to fulfil the central claim of Spiro's cognitive flexibility theory "that revisiting the same material, at different times, in rearranged contexts, for different

⁵ cf. Rand J. Spiro, Paul J. Feltovich, Michael J. Jacobson and Richard L. Coulson, *ibid.*: "The computer is ideally suited, by virtue of the flexibility it can provide, for fostering cognitive flexibility. In particular, multidimensional and nonlinear hypertext systems, if appropriately designed to take into account all of the considerations discussed above, have the power to convey ill-structured aspects of knowledge domains and to promote features of cognitive flexibility in ways that traditional learning environments (textbooks, lectures, computer-based drill) could not (although such traditional media can be very successful in other contexts or for other purposes). We refer to the principled use of flexible features inherent in computers to produce nonlinear learning environments as Random Access Instruction (Spiro & Jehng, 1990)."

purposes, and from different conceptual perspectives is essential for attaining the goals of advanced knowledge acquisition (mastery of complexity in understanding and preparation for transfer).”⁶ Moreover, backed up by poststructuralist literary theory, that emphasises the importance of non-linearity, hypertext has been considered as the medium that might create “a truly active reader” who “makes his or her own interests the de facto organizing principle (or center) for the investigation at the moment.” (Landow 1992: 36-37).

However, taking into consideration the ambivalent cognitive status of the aforementioned distant learners, their lack of certain criteria for approaching, comprehending and evaluating literature, perhaps one should reconsider the effectiveness of hypertext on students. If the demand for literary analysis and interpretation requires training in philological method and if the acquisition of stable criteria is the *sine qua non* precondition for an active involvement in the critical reading of literature, then Landow’s potential “active reader” and hypertext’s decentred universe might be far too advanced for the level of those students.

Addressing a pedagogic rather than hypertextual problem, this view gives rise to questions such as: How effective can be the flexibility of a strategy far too centered on the conceptual ill-structuredness of the literary subject rather than on the learner’s cognitive background as well as on his/ her personal predisposition towards the literary domain?⁷ Can an electronic or virtual environment communicate and deal with the learner’s personal or instantaneous response to certain educational difficulties? Can an educational system, even if it implies distance by its very nature, totally replace the tutor-student reciprocation by the virtual learning environment? One should also wonder whether hypertext can sufficiently deal with the distant learner’s varying levels of cognition or it should be used as just another extra resource of educational material in Open Distant Learning. Another class of question concerns hypertext itself: who is designing hypertext and for which theoretical and pedagogic tasks? How can we ensure that the links or the paths will provide the kind of leads that open up the text to broader theoretical frameworks developing critical thought instead of accumulating incidental and sterile information?

⁶ Rand J. Spiro, Paul J. Feltovich, Michael J. Jacobson and Richard L. Coulson. *ibid.*

⁷ cf. Aarseth 1997: “As a theoretical perspective, cybertext shifts the focus from the traditional threesome of author/ sender, text/message, and reader/receiver to the cybernetic intercourse between the various part(icipant)s in the textual machine.”

Acknowledging that hypertext cannot be a cure-all for these problems, hypertext exponents have highlighted the need for “grounding hypertext design in a suitable theory of learning and instruction,”⁸ emphasising also its interconnection with literary theory.⁹ As I will discuss shortly, literary theory and criticism might constitute the essential and/ or even indispensable tools for dealing with problems of this kind. Literary theory, however, is not limited to the much privileged poststructuralist theories and distant learners are not, or should not be expected to be, familiar with literary theory at all. Thus, for example, before inviting the student to perform as “a producer” rather than as a “consumer” of the text according to Barthes’ distinction between readerly and writerly text – the latter standing for hypertext, in Landow’s terms –¹⁰ one should provide students with the necessary theoretical background upon which Barthes’ theoretical intricacies rest. Also before instructing students to perceive hypertext’s links and paths as Barthesian “lexias,”¹¹ and before thrusting them into the realm of intertextuality one should wonder whether these lexias could be of any interpretative value without Barthes’ five codes of evaluation (hermeneutic, semantic, proairetic, cultural and symbolic) which, nonetheless, lead to broader conceptual fields.¹² Thus reading the Nausicaa episode in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, to use one of Landow’s examples (35), a mere reference to “many other texts or phenomena” to which “Joyce’s text here ‘alludes’ or ‘refers’” would not suffice. This reading should take into consideration that the construction of Gerty MacDowell’s character derives from certain codes, such as the cultural code of Mariolatry, the literary code of pulp fiction or the symbolic code of aesthetic and bodily correspondences with Joyce’s schemes, to mention but a few.¹³ Inextricably associated with the macrostructure of the entire novel and activated by the proairetic code of actions, in Barthes’ terms, all these codes support the hermeneutic code of this particular episode. Subsequently, through this hermeneutic code the reader may or may not understand “the enigma”¹⁴ of Gerty’s encounter with Bloom - the fact that the whole scene occurs in Bloom’s

⁸ cf. Rand J. Spiro, Paul J. Feltovich, Michael J. Jacobson and Richard L. Coulson. *ibid*: “There are many ways that hypertext systems can be designed, and there is good reason to believe that a large number of those do not produce successful learning outcomes (e.g., because they lead the learner to become lost in a confusing labyrinth of incidental or ad hoc connections). What is needed is the discipline of grounding hypertext design in a suitable theory of learning and instruction.”

⁹ Landow 1992.

¹⁰ Landow 1992: 5-6.

¹¹ Landow 1992: 5-6 and 64-65.

¹² Barthes 1993: 3-20.

¹³ cf. Voyiatzaki 2002: 121-129.

¹⁴ According to Barthes (1993: 19), the hermeneutic code usually resolves an enigma.

imagination.¹⁵ Accordingly, to provide relatively stable criteria for dealing with the slippery grounds of the plurality in meaning and interpretation one cannot dispense with these broader theoretical frameworks. Otherwise, the hypertext's non-linear guidance to links with fragmentary information out of context might lead to an oversimplification or compartmentalization of knowledge. This might well disorientate rather than facilitate the student's quest for literary interpretation.

It seems, therefore, that before the chaotic interconnectedness of concepts, ideas and theories, before the links, the webs, the networks and all interweaving associations that derive from both contemporary theory and hypertextual strategies, before the non-linear, non-causal approach to the inexhaustibly open textual world, the student needs a stable analytical ground to rest upon.

It is literary theory, comprising training in method, which might provide those evaluative and academic criteria which can expand the student's interest beyond the, at times, tiresome meticulousness of literary history.¹⁶ The exploration of the conventions of a canon, of the rules and the roles of literary genres, of their sociohistorical and aesthetic evolution in time, is the indispensable medium for literary analysis and interpretation of a literary text. Particularly at this introductory level, equilibrium should be achieved between "literature and history, between historical and aesthetic approaches".¹⁷ Thus the exploration of representative texts of different periods, within their historical context and from the point of view of their special positioning within literary history may provide the necessary skills in approaching, analyzing and interpreting a literary text. Accordingly, by an analytic description of "the reception and the influence of a work within the objectifiable system of expectations that arises for each work in the historical moment of its appearance," the student may understand the contemporary literary value of an eighteenth century ode, which, today, might seem unattractive or parochial to him.¹⁸

¹⁵ In response to Arthur Power's question about what actually happened between Gerty and Bloom on the beach, Joyce said, "nothing happened between them. It all took place in Bloom's imagination" (Power 1974: 32).

¹⁶ As Culler (1997: 17) puts it, "The nature of theory is to undo, through a contesting of premises and postulates, what you thought you knew, so the effects of theory are not predictable. You have not become master, but neither are you where you were before. You reflect on your reading in new ways. You have different questions to ask and a better sense of the implications of the questions you put to works you read".

¹⁷ Jauss 1982: 18.

¹⁸ cf. Hans Robert Jauss 1982: 22-24. See also his project for understanding the role and the influence of a literary work "through a dialogic relationship of the present to the past": "This project must consider the historicity of literature in a threefold manner: diachronically in the interrelationships of the

More likely it seems that the accomplishment of certain criteria for comprehending and evaluating literature derives from this training in philological research and method.

Literary theory can equip the student with certain guidance in unraveling and analyzing the textual strategies, in associating literature with the broader theoretical field of humanities (philosophy, history, sociology, politics, psychology etc.), in comprehending the place and the role of literature or of a particular literary text within a certain context. Therefore it can lift the veil of vagueness on the why and wherefore of a literary creation or product. It can transform the consumer of a literary work into an active participant in the act of analysis and interpretation. In this sense, perhaps, it should be part of the humanities curriculum especially if literary interpretation is to become part of the distant learner's educational project.

Yet even in the current transitional situation, literary theory might be compressed within the overall schedule of an introductory course of a kind, through a selective and representative presentation of varying theoretical frameworks, which would take into consideration the major achievements of the field. I can hardly imagine an interpretative mode which would ignore the fundamental achievements of Ferdinand de Saussure's general linguistics, of the basic distinction between signifier and signified, synchronic and diachronic systems, between *langue*, *langage* and *parole*, or Jakobson's linguistic functions of poetic language (referential, emotive, poetic phatic, conative, metalingual), all of them anticipating Barthesian analysis, to mention but a few examples of theoretical interconnectedness.¹⁹ Similarly, I cannot see how a student can analyze, let us say, the function of flashbacks or analepses within a textual economy, knowing nothing about the spatio-temporal order of a text, lacking even the elementary training in narrative discourse method.²⁰

In order not to cast the student totally unarmed into the field of literary interpretation, perhaps we should reflect on flexible modes of incorporating literary theory into the educational program of an introductory course. Providing selections of

reception of literary works (see X), synchronically in the frame of reference of literature of the same moment (see Xi), as well as in the sequence of such frames and finally in the relationship of the immanent literary development to the general process of history (see XII)" (32).

¹⁹ Ferdinand de Saussure. *Course in General Linguistics* (1915). Trans. and edit. by Roy Harris. Illinois: Open Court, 1983; Roman Jakobson, *Essais de linguistique générale*. Paris : Minuit, 1963.

²⁰ Gerard Genette. *Narrative Methodology, an essay in Method* (1972). Trans. by Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca New York: Cornell University Press, 1980.

the already existing theoretical material,²¹ presenting sample analyses on paradigmatic texts, even with the incorporation of some kind of lecturing within ODL educational practices might contribute significantly to this. Employing audiovisual material and electronic resources does not necessarily entail totally forsaking more traditional modes of knowledge transference and instruction.²² Thus employing seminars, increasing the number and the frequency of the tutorial sessions, incorporating an hour-long lecture on theoretical subjects and gradually decreasing them till a substantial theoretical and analytical level is achieved might be of great help; this will not only introduce students to literary theory and textual analysis but it may also smoothen the passage from face-to-face teaching to distant learning practices. I am not suggesting here a retreat from the principles of ODL practices. All I am saying is that taking into consideration the formative needs of the students, at this level, ODL practices should be adequate and flexible, even if this requires the reemployment of conventional strategies and their combining with the achievements of advanced technology.

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²¹ Perhaps a flexible selection of sorts should follow e.g. Culler's four qualities of literary theory: that theory is interdisciplinary, analytical and speculative, it involves of a critique of common sense and finally it is reflexive, involving thinking about thinking. cf. Culler 1997: 15.

²² The frequency of meetings varies in different ODL Universities while extra meetings may be used on a particular occasion or on a special subject e. g. the Open University of England ("residential schools") or the Universidad de Educación a Distancia of Madrid. Cf. Natsina. 2005.

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