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DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND THE SHAKESPEARE CLASSROOM

Lotfi Salhi, *University of Gafsa, Tunisia, Lotfisalhi123@gmail.com*

Abstract:

The field of Shakespeare studies is becoming more and more concerned with the implication of technology and digital media in Shakespeare scholarship and pedagogy. In fact, the place that Shakespeare still continues to occupy in the digital humanities reveals the number of strategies used to redefine the traditional Shakespeare dramatic course and to relocate the plays within an age characterized by the widespread use of information technology. Teachers of Shakespeare's drama find it necessary to integrate 21ˢᵗ century digital technology in their classes in order to engage students into the lesson and to facilitate their perceptions of the plays' actions, characters, themes and language. This paper on technology and the Shakespeare classroom is an endeavor to examine the place of Shakespeare in the digital world and to highlight the impact of such a world on old methods of teaching Shakespeare. The paper also aims to shed some light on the specificity of the drama course and on the preparations the teacher needs to go through in order to be able to respond to the objectives drawn for each lesson.

Keywords: Shakespeare, teaching, technology, classroom.

Since the educational landscape is increasingly influenced by technology and digital media students use in their daily lives and due to the fact that the present generation of students has grown up with the web, cell phones, wireless networks, and other digital technologies as perfectly natural, teachers of Shakespeare's drama find it necessary to model their teaching techniques in order to keep up with the change in education and in society as a whole. Besides, the fact that students too often find difficulties to connect with Shakespeare's play stories through traditional classroom methods compelled teachers to feel the need to complement the study of the plays with reference to a DVD, film adaptation and other digital techniques. Since no one single approach or method can claim to be exhaustive and far-reaching, I have drawn on various methodological principles. I have opted for principled eclecticism through the adoption of a variety of techniques and made use of what has been known as digital technology. Role play, mimicry, physical response and repetition are but some of the techniques I emphasized in my drama classes.

Drama is one of the major literary genres having an ancient history starting from the Greeks and the Romans until the present time. As a classical play, Shakespeare's Hamlet is an appropriate choice for third Year students who are motivated to evaluate and analyze the complexity of Prince Hamlet's situation, his motivations and the choices he tries to make. This course aims at familiarizing students with the basic elements of tragedy found in the play and enabling them to compare and contrast Prince Hamlet's plight with that of tragic heroes in Greek and in modern tragedies. Miller's Death of a Salesman (students already studied in second year classes) is a good example fit for such a comparison. Besides, by placing Hamlet in its political and social context, students are introduced to such notions as royalty, lust for power, political machinations, morality, etc. This course is divided into basically two interconnected axes: the thematic and the dramatic elements of Prince Hamlet's revenge tragedy.

One of the challenges I have faced with my drama classes and more particularly with *Hamlet* is that students come to the classroom without reading the plays and without enough knowledge of the characters, the dramatic structure or the plot development. They just skim plot or character summaries and focus on

principal events. Students often expressed anxiety from being assigned one of Shakespeare's plays without really providing logical reasons that justify their presumptions about the playwright. Shakespeare was seen by students as a playwright who produced sophisticated plays with complex meanings. As David Crystal once put it "reading a language is a meeting of minds" (5), he may be pointing to the four hundred years of linguistic change that separate nowadays students from Shakespeare. Every line in Shakespeare's plays, students say, has at least one word which needs some glossing which makes them rather uncertain of precise meaning.

Therefore, teaching Shakespeare's plays is not an easy task. Rather the teacher has to get prepared first by equipping himself with all the necessary tools that enable him to realize the objectives set for each play. The lesson plan is a framework for the lesson which makes it both interesting and purposeful. Planning a course and thinking about it in advance before presenting it to learners is one of the pre-requisites for achieving the goals of the lesson and acquiring the quality of effective teaching. In his book entitled *The Lesson Planning Handbook*, Peter Brun emphasizes two basic principles he considers effective for planning a lesson that I mostly consider when teaching a Shakespeare play and which involve determining with due precision the play's objectives and thinking about the procedure used for its implementation. This does not mean that the teacher should be enslaved by the plan or by the procedure he has fixed for the lesson. The teacher should be as much flexible as to respond to the needs of the class, the general atmosphere of the lesson, the level of the students, etc. Of course, one significant part of the lesson plan should be dedicated to the unexpected problems or situations that may occur in class and how to cope with them. Sometimes the teacher is even led to abdicate the plan he has prepared and to present the lesson by responding to the class requirements of that day or of that hour of the day.

Upon asking for the reasons why many students often avoid reading the plays and instead opt for plot summaries, they often keep saying that they find difficulties in decoding the Shakespeare text itself and getting to meaning. The interpretation of Shakespeare's plays, some students say, is affected by the multiple meanings attributed to the words. Other students argue that Shakespeare's language is difficult and far-reaching. They also say that many of the plays' messages are conveyed through soliloquies and long speeches and that many of the characters in plays are on stage alone to express their inner thoughts and plans through private conversation. Furthermore, students too often ascribe difficulties in getting to the meaning of the plays to Shakespeare's inclination to use figurative language full of metaphors and allusions.

When reading *Hamlet*, for instance, students found difficulties not only in decoding the meaning of particular words but also in deciphering the complex issue of madness. Upon asking them to analyze the origins and the impact of madness on the central events of the play students showed uncertainty whether the madness of prince Hamlet relates to divinity or whether it is an eccentric behaviour. Digital technologies seem to offer a remedy for these language difficulties students often find with Shakespeare's plays by offering not only the ability to record and replay performances, but the means to share them with audiences near and far, transforming readers into viewers. In fact, the ready availability of Shakespeare's plays, for instance, on DVD, you tube and other digital platforms have changed the traditional relationship between the learner and Shakespeare play text. According to Batho in *Insoumise* (1998) teacher surveys published over the past ten years have shown that nearly every English teacher complements the course of Shakespeare text with reference to a DVD or a film adaptation of the play studied. It is worth noting here that the language distance which separates us from Shakespeare could be bridged by the use of digital technology.

An e-learning environment provides a wide range of technical choices for the teaching of Shakespeare's drama. While it is abstruse for students to master the thematic and technical features of a given play just through the teacher's lecture, it is more interesting and more effective to show students the

film version of the play. It is through direct exposure to the scenes of the film that students comprehend characterization and plot development since pictures brings the real world of the play to the classroom. Besides, videos are entertaining and engaging as they hold students attention and create a fun like atmosphere which enables students to be capable of revising their lessons more easily when they return home. While revising, students can easily be reminded of the content of the lesson just by remembering the scenes of the video. Furthermore, the events and the themes of the play could more stick to the mind when watched in a video than read in a book.

As far as *Hamlet* is concerned, once exposed to the film version of the play in my class, students have shown flexibility with the play text and capacity to guess the cause of Hamlet's madness and also what afflicts king Claudius. Students' guesses about whether Hamlet is mad or pretends madness all met round the stipulation that Hamlet pretends madness to disguise his plans from everyone loyal to King Claudius. In fact, it is by watching Hamlet's movements and analyzing his erratic behaviour that students came to decide the cause of his madness. The Screen scenes of Hamlet not only raised students' attention into the events of the play but kindled their enthusiasm to find explanations for causes which made the events take this or that direction. Besides, such filmed play aroused students' attention and enabled timid and passive ones to get involved in class discussions.

Therefore, taking full use of nowadays e-learning environment can aid students accomplish knowledge construction easily and efficiently. In their book *Rethinking Pedagogy for a Digital Age* H. Bethan and R. Sharpe call for a revolution against traditional teaching methods. According to them, traditional teacher lectures can be supplemented with videos and new digital techniques that show not silent frozen moments but gestures and intonation and movements through space. Digital technology, accordingly, could provide a full-length performance of the play that accompanies the script, usually (if not always smoothly) allowing the user to see the performance at the same time as reading the text. By simultaneously exposing the student to the language of the text and to the real performance of the event cognition is enhanced and language barriers are surmounted. Upon watching the performance of *Hamlet*, for example, students become awarded of prince Hamlet's tragic story and are, therefore, compelled to learn what he decides to do and to discover the consequences of his decisions. When shown the film version of *Hamlet* in my class, students have shown relief as they seemed to be given answers to many interrogations that were left unanswered by just reading the play.

Movie dubbing is also a good choice for students to improve their literary appreciating ability. If we take for example Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*, this work describes the love and war themes of Elizabethan people in Shakespeare's time. In traditional teaching method teachers would spend a long time analyzing the historical background, the personalities of the main characters and the unique writing style of the playwright. Yet, in the presence of e-learning conditions, the teacher just lets students dub a segment from the newly adapted film Anthony and Cleopatra directed by Gary Griffin in 2015. After dubbing the film, students find it now easy to remember the themes, the social background and the writing style of Shakespeare's play because they themselves have been fused with the play story and its characters. In fact, by placing the student in the role of the play character the teacher allows him not only to role-play but also to learn and understand.

Basing assumptions on the different digital teaching strategies stated above one can argue that technology can be used to aid learning by exposing students to the real world of the play story that they may find it difficult to decipher were they to read the written version of the play text only. An E-learning environment also breaks silence between students. Having a group of students sitting together in the classroom and watching a scene from *Hamlet* from the same screen encourages students to ask about one another's interpretations of the dilemma of prince Hamlet. Students also learn more effectively in the presence of an e- learning environment as opposed to traditional teaching strategies which placed the

student in the role the passive recipient of knowledge from the teacher. Furthermore, multimedia technology teaching fosters in-class activities which emphasize group discussion and debates that offer more opportunities for communication among students. Such activities also inspire students' positive thinking and self-confidence that facilitate their integration into social life.

With the use of multimedia technology, the teacher can also proceed with after or outside of class monitoring of students through what one could call distance or electronic learning. Students of different groups are supposed to subscribe in an electronic class that backs and helps their revision and acquisition of the play studied in class. The platform that I use and administer is an American application known as Nicenet. Students are directed to the web site: www.nicenet.org. Then they are expected to register in the virtual calls (created by their teacher) using a certain class key. This method of distance learning provides a number of activities and options that help students in their learning processes such as sharing links about given plays or showing them sites about you tube videos or simply answering their questions. Students may also engage in interactions and chats about the themes, the characters or the dramatic structure of the play. Here electronic learning is effective as it enables the student to narrow the distance between him and knowledge. The student no longer has to jot down his questions and wait for the next lesson to ask the teacher. He can get the answer in a few moments just by opening his computer and sending a message to his teacher.

One of the axioms I have retained from my experience as a teacher of English at secondary schools and at university is that learners have to get involved in order to get educated. The use of information technology can be an effective way of involving students and kindling their interest into the lesson. For young learners, starting the lesson with songs or by showing them a live scene from a given play may be effective strategies as they set the stage for exploration and lay soft ground for the learning phase to take place. In a similar vein, university students require that same kind of exciting involvement in order to enjoy learning. The teacher has to find out what teaching techniques fit in a given learning context and what activities students enjoy doing, and then build these into his curriculum and plan ways of implementing them effectively.

While implementing such teaching strategies the teacher should take into consideration students' different learning modalities in order to ensure that he caters for the various learning styles of the students within the same classroom. Digital technology is effective in the realization of this objective since it encourages active learning, knowledge construction, inquiry, and exploration on the part of the learners. It also allows for remote communication as well as data sharing to take place between teachers and/ or learners in different physical classroom locations. Indeed, the use of digital technology in the drama course aims aim to involve the learner while at the same time encourages learner autonomy. Indeed, the learner is an intelligent human being who comes to the classroom with a view about himself and about the world and must therefore be given enough freedom to express his thoughts and views about issues discussed in class.

Having dealt with both young and advanced learners of various learning styles and different levels of motivation, it seems to me that the engage- study- activate troika plays champion role in producing effective teaching and learning both at secondary schools and at university. In this respect, the use of technology can very well be useful in the three stages. The engage step is the point in the teaching sequence where, as a teacher, I try to arouse students' interest into the lesson, thus involving their emotions. Activities and materials used to engage students include games, music discussions, simulating You tube videos, dramatic stories, anecdotes, etc. Basing assumptions on Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences theory a piece of music may very well for a category of students by drawing their attention and stimulating their interest into the lesson in the same manner that a picture may raise the interest of another category of students. It is, therefore, necessary that the teacher should plan his lesson and make use of digital technology with consideration of the variety of students in the same classroom. Starting a lesson with a

song, joke or by showing students a picture may be effective strategies as they set the stage for exploration and lay soft ground for the learning phase to take place.

The Study step is when I ask students to focus on language and information, on how it is constructed and how it affects the meaning of a given play. During the study phase I may for example lead students to study the characteristics of a tragedy and how multiple meanings of words affect the interpretation of Shakespeare's Hamlet. The question "Why is Hamlet so hesitating and thoughtful?" guides students to explore the concept of revenge, its relationship to madness, and its consequences. Using a data show to portray Prince Hamlet in a thoughtful situation may allow students to easily perceive the above question and may, moreover, arouse students' remembrance of the causes of Hamlet's procrastination that they have already seen in the film version of the play.

Using a data show to portray students such a picture of prince Hamlet on a large screen may also encourage them to discuss extensively Hamlet's soliloquy and to come out with as many interpretations and explanations of Hamlet's behaviour as possible, etc. The Activate phase describes exercises and activities which are designed to get students to use language as freely and communicatively as they can. By Activate exercises I aim at offering students a chance to try out real language with little or no restriction. By, for instance, role playing scenes, raising debates and discussions, students get exposed to language and use it effectively.

Indeed, training students to use language communicatively has a thoroughly beneficial effect since people learn a language not only for knowledge but also to use it in communication. As far as my teaching experience is concerned two of the serious difficulties hindering speaking among students are anxiety and unwillingness to speak. Even here information technology plays an effective role as it facilitates interaction between students of different speaking proficiencies in the classroom. A classroom equipped with computer devices allows students to ask and answer each other questions in an organized way following the teacher's instructions. Using head sets the teacher encourages students to open a debate about the essential theme in the play. Students are identified in numbers and not by their names. This method allows students to use language and to correct their mistakes passively without being identified by their classmates. This digital technology method gives chance for timid and less self-confident students to practice speaking without being embarrassed and without being offended. By such doing these students develop what H. Holec calls "autonomous learning" in his book *Autonomy and Foreign language learning* (2009).

It is, therefore, axiomatic that technology is effective as it can aid in educational achievement. On the one hand, it removes the barriers between the learner and knowledge by facilitating understanding and easing cognition. On the other hand, technology enables the learner to pass from the stage of retaining knowledge to using it in meaningful contexts. Internet based education allows students to form their own learning communities as students are not restricted to what they learn in class at their local university site. Rather, they can use share and exchange information with students beyond their local university district and discover new course varieties and new strategies of responding to given play or text. Strictly speaking, digital technology plays an important role in the teaching and learning process. It encompasses the new tools that are introduced in classrooms on a daily basis including, for example youtube videos, computer-mediated communications and social networking applications, etc, that are supposed to be available in our classrooms and educational institutions.

Yet, even here there are some challenges for teachers who would like to make use of computer or internet devices in English literature classes. It is up to the ministry of higher education, or let's say up to the local university, to provide campus website and classrooms equipped with multi-media devices, which is the basis for the teaching and learning activities of the British and American literature course in the information age. Yet even here there are some challenges for both teachers and learners. It is up to the local

university or to the Ministry of Higher Education to provide campus networks and classrooms equipped with multimedia devices. Besides, lecturers need to develop digital literacy by learning how to use such digital techniques in teaching and see which digital technique fits with each student separately. So while there are certain expectations placed on teachers to develop new technological skills, there is also sometimes a generation and technology gap between teachers and students, which makes the matter more complicated. Students, in turn, should learn how to use digital technology in order get educated effectively.

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