Internet Resources in Teaching Literature

CLAUDIU MARGAN

Universitatea “Aurel Vlaicu” Arad
Facultatea de Stiinte Umaniste si Sociale
Catedra de Limbi Moderne
Str. Elena Dragoi 2, Arad
e-mail: claudiu_margar@yahoo.com

Abstract
Considering the increasing difficulty teachers of literature encounter today, following a decreasing interest in reading books, the author points to the need to motivate students, which ICT resources can help accomplish. He then discusses, besides the Internet, other virtual media and multimedia resources available for literary studies, documenting his view with Internet resources on William Shakespeare.

Keywords: ICT, VLE, literacy vs. electracy, digital literature, cybertext

Rezumat
Luând în considerare probleme de care se lovesc profesorii de literatură în ziua de astăzi, în urma lipsei de interes în a citi cărți, autorul atrage atenția asupra necesității de a motiva studenții prin intermediu resurselor TIC. Apoi, pe lângă Internet, autorul discută alte medii virtuale și resurse multimedia disponibile pentru studiul literar, documentându-și punctul de vedere cu resurse Internet despre Willliam Shakespeare.

Cuvinte cheie: TIC, VLE (mediu virtual de învățare), alfabetizare tradițională și digitală, literatură digitală, cybertext
English teachers, no matter the grade they are teaching, have always been and will always be dealing with literature in their ESL curriculum. I am positive that most teachers use the computer and the Internet in order to better prepare their lessons. But very few encourage students to use technology for support in their literary studies and even fewer use the computer in a literature-oriented English class.

We all know that there is a certain reluctance concerning computers and the Internet, not only on the part of the teachers, but also of the parents, who consider them a threat for education. When it comes to literature and to reading, teachers and parents unite their voices and lament that children do not seem to read anything anymore. Is that true? Are children reading less? Are they still reading literature? Recent statistics seem to confirm these fears: the number of pupils not reading literature at all is increasing. Furthermore, research in developed countries indicates a growing number of pupils with limited reading skills. Some of them compensate this limited literacy with what Gregory Ulmer calls electracy, (i.e. electronic or computer literacy), Ulmer predicting that, in the future, there will be four types of people: those well equipped with both literacy and electracy skills, those doing better in the world of literacy, those doing better in the world of electracy and those left out of both worlds. Is literature going to disappear then? As surprising as it may seem to some tormented teachers and parents, statistics, not only in Romania but throughout the world, are quite reassuring: print literature is steadily increasing. Even if print runs may be diminishing, the number of titles and the overall figures are on the increase. Sales volumes of newsstand literature have marked a boom in the recent years, when major newspapers in Romania compete to exhaust print runs of over 100,000 volumes a week of Romanian and universal literature. As Raine Koskimaa points out, ‘despite the facts that most households have an Internet connection, that networked computers have entered nearly all classrooms, that many people spend several hours weekly playing digital games, literature and reading seem to be doing fine’.

What is the potential of digital technology? What is the future of literature? How can we, as teachers, keep up with the literary hypertext? And if we cannot escape technology, how can we turn it to our advantage?

What are the good practices? We can easily guess that ICT activities only have value if they allow students to develop key skills. A plot overview or a character description on websites such as sparknotes or wikipedia give students the easy way out when they are faced with a literary topic so they do not seem to help that much. There are, however, resources which can prove highly interesting and motivating for students. We shall exemplify in the second part of our paper such resources that we were able to identify on William Shakespeare and his work.

One of the best ways to encourage curiosity among students regarding a certain literary topic is to introduce them to what methodologists call a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). VLEs can be those websites which are designed like spider webs, very well organised and once you enter such an environment you cannot leave it without having learnt something. Examples of such VLEs are the Victorian Web and the Romantic Circles, which provide thousands of links and references to an enormous quantity of resources, from the e-texts of almost any literary production of the period to detailed descriptions of the social, political,

16 Koskimaa, idem, p. 171.
historical and economic context, with cross-references to major literary works. VLEs do not actually save effort on the part of the student but extend possibilities of going beyond the traditional classroom setting. Such an approach places the student at the centre of learning and activates what D. Greenwood calls ‘kinaesthetic learning’, an essential feature of ICT use in English, which ‘enables the use of a much greater range of effects, the use of varying type fonts, wide use of colour, the addition of sound and imported graphics, and kinetic effects for example. The potential of such effects has been shown to have a highly motivating effect on students, especially those who are more likely to think in terms of spatial rather then verbal models’.17

This type of learning mentioned above, the kinaesthetic learning, draws the teacher’s attention to the importance of the visual element in motivating students to become involved in the study of literature. VLEs can also present themselves as online discussions on a literary topic, set up or moderated by the teacher. Starting with secondary education, Nettelbeck points out, online discussions allow students to formulate and reformulate their ideas in response to literary texts and to share them with their fellow students. There are other advantages as well:

- online discussions are a valid pedagogical tool in respect of the text response outcomes;
- online discussions are successful in encouraging students to ‘engage in a reflective activity with someone outside of their normal social groups;
- on-line discussions not only provide students with an additional mode in text response, but also make available to some students a preferred mode of expression’.18

Coming to terms with the digital era can be a difficult task for English teachers, but it is a challenge that they have to face in order to keep up with the times and manage to provide motivation and necessary skills for their students. For methodologists, it is a question of dealing with e-texts, digital literature, digital publishing and cyber-textuality. Raine Koskimaa refers to the emergence of a new type of literature, digital literature, which has to be addressed by methodologists as it is complementary to the traditional form of literature. We shall not insist on this topic at this point; however, we feel that Koskimaa’s explanation of digital literature according to its three different meanings can be useful here:

1) **Digital Publishing** focuses on the production and marketing of literature with the aid of digital technology. It includes such phenomena as eBooks, Print on demand, Audio Books made available on MP3 files, and others.

2) **Scholarly literary hypertext editions** for educational and research purposes. This category includes hyper-textually annotated literary works, as well as multimedia implementations of literary classics.

3) **Writing for Digital Media.** Digital texts are always programmed text: text based on computer code, which makes it behave in a dynamic way. This perspective is called ‘cyber-textuality’ and the works ‘cyber-texts’, an umbrella term for different types of digital text, such as hypertexts, kinetic texts, generated texts, texts employing agent technologies and so on.

Teaching Shakespeare with the use of ICT, and teaching literature in general with ICT, is often restricted to the e-text of the literary work discussed. The interaction between literature

---


and the computer has to deal with texts, but especially with those characteristics which are emphasised by ICT: software, audio and video content and so on. We shall provide, in the following section, some ideas of making Shakespearean drama more appealing to students.

The first thing to do is to browse the Internet for videos of plays or film adaptations on YouTube or similar websites. Hundreds of play scenes are just a click away and watching such a video seems to be far more motivating for students. Websites such as the one hosted by the Royal Shakespeare Company represent a gold mine for English teachers who want to spice up their lessons with extracts of plays, interviews with actors and directors, etc. It would be a good idea to have the students watch an extract from a play such as Francesca Annis’s interpretation of Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy in Roman Polanski’s movie and follow the e-text of the play in a separate window.

Better yet, one of the most extraordinary Internet resources on Shakespeare on the Internet is an interactive reading of Shakespearean text by Sir Ian McKellen. The actor reads and explains, for instance, the opening soliloquy of Richard III, the students being free to start with the line of their choice. Furthermore, the actor answers a number of questions that students can choose from a menu. The menu also includes a selection of different interpretations of the opening soliloquy in the 1952 film featuring Laurence Olivier, in the 2006 play featuring Conrad Nelson or in the 1995 film featuring Ian McKellen himself.

Applications such as Google Earth feature an itinerary function which allows the user to create a virtual trip through different locations, a trip that includes information on each different location and links to further information. This function can prove highly motivating for students when it comes to the study of literary settings. For teachers with limited computer skills, who find it too difficult to create their own literary trip, there is some good news: at www.googlelittrips.org you can download ready-made literary trips such as one on Macbeth that can be loaded and run by Google Earth.

There are resources for children as well: at http://librivox.org/tales-from-shakespeare-by-charles-and-mary-lamb/, teachers can find audio books of the most important Shakespearean plays, retold for children by Charles and Mary Lamb. The imagination of software engineers has produced even computer games, such as The Seven Noble Kinsmen – A Shakespeare Murder Mystery, where users have to complete a mystery game, learning loads of details about Shakespeare’s period and his work.

The days of teaching literature based on the literary text alone are coming to an end. It is true that teaching literature in the contemporary world, dominated by multimedia, is becoming more and more complicated for English teachers. We feel, however, that ICT resources may be the answer to the challenge teachers have to face in order to involve and motivate their students in their literary studies.

References


