'Storifying' Shakespeare and 'Twittering' Dickens: Using Digital Tools in the Virtual Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The pandemic has been a tipping point for changing the landscape of teaching and learning globally. In India too, the massive disruption caused by the corona crisis has forced teachers and students to scramble frantically from offline to online mode of learning. While the level of achievement of student learning outcomes as a result of an overwhelming but exigent technology dependency on the part of teachers is debatable, the fact is that our education ecosystem probably can never return solely to the chalk and talk method of classroom teaching of pre-Covid times. The paper seeks to demonstrate the efficacy of the use of a few digital tools as teaching aids on virtual platforms and in closing the gap between learners and learning.

Keywords: Digital Humanities, Technology and Pedagogy, Google Map, Storify, Twitterature.

With each passing year, the profile of my students enrolled in the B.A. programme is changing. My literature students go to Shakespeare or to the classics in graphic novels, manga comics, video games, John Madden/Vishal Bharadwaj movies, rather than Shakespeare in the Arden or Norton editions; they search Professor Wikipedia and Dr Google more than they ask searching questions in my class. A.C. Bradley/Thomas de Quincy/Stephen Greenblatt are names of people from planet Mars! They prefer random access (like hypertext). They function best when networking and multitasking. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards. They prefer *Game of Thrones* to the throne of Denmark. They say "Winter is coming", rather than "this is the winter of discontent".

We often despair like the lost generation – cribbing "My students just don't get me", or bellyaching, "I can't get them to read or to write". "They have no appreciation for what I do in class." However, we just have to move ahead and try to keep in step with their times!

Digital Humanities and the New English Classroom

The umbrella term *digital humanities* covers such a wide array of practices – from building digital editions and archives to big data projects – that even defining the term is no easy task. For anyone trying to create an interdisciplinary digital humanities class, the challenges multiply: the course needs to be applicable to students in such diverse fields as History, English, Anthropology, Music, Graphic Design, Education, or Engineering, all of which examine different corpora; yet, it still needs a unifying concept and corpus so the students can see how applying concepts such as digital

mapping or distant reading can spark new insights.

Joanna Swafford, an assistant professor of English and Digital Humanities in the Maryland Institute, has created a highly innovative project titled 'Digital Tools for the 21st Century: Sherlock Holmes's London'. It uses Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories as a corpus on which to practise basic digital humanities methodologies and tools. The Holmes stories provide the perfect set of texts for a DH class, as they are flexible enough for students and teachers to use them in every unit: visualisation tools (such as Voyant and word trees) were used to look for patterns in words and in sentence structure within a story, build a digital archive of Holmes artefacts, create maps of where characters travelled, and topic model short stories to find thematic patterns. For any readers new to this phenomenon, word clouds are visualisations of word frequency in texts, in which words are larger the more times they appear. Students made word clouds of Holmes' stories and then discussed the results with their teacher and classmates.

Joanna and her team made several interesting observations, particularly with 'A Scandal in Bohemia'. 'Scandal' is the only work in the Holmes corpus involving Irene Adler, the only woman who outwits Holmes. Adler's ingenuity causes Holmes to reevaluate his opinion of women; as Watson writes at the story's end, Holmes "used to make merry over the cleverness of women, but I have not heard him do it of late." One might imagine that a story that revolves around a woman and the worth of women would mention words related to women (such as 'woman', 'women', or 'Miss'), at least as frequently, if

not more so, than words relating to men, especially since the story begins and ends by foregrounding Adler's gender. However, the word cloud actually shows that, although much of the narrative revolves around finding Adler and her photograph, the story contains far more references to men than to women: 'men', 'man', 'Mr.', and 'gentleman' occur 45 times, whereas 'woman', 'women', 'lady', and 'miss' occur 27 times. This difference, according to Joanna, suggests that while the text focuses on one woman's femininity, its sentences themselves focus more on the actions of men. In a sense, the stylistic features of language that Conan Doyle employed in his Holmes stories fit into the pattern of thinking of Holmes as a sort of misogynist that he is usually thought to be!

Taking a cue from Joanna's project, can we not also think of using some of the tools of digital humanities to enhance our classroom teaching? We can see how by learning some of the most important digital humanities methodologies, the stories that Joanna took for study and analysis in her class facilitated an interdisciplinary approach: students touched on issues of gender and class. Such activity led the teacher and the students to new interpretations of the texts.

Google Mapping Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines*

This semester, I piloted a similar digital project on a more elementary level, with my M.A. students of IWE paper. Since national borders, maps, and compasses are such important tropes to understand the narrative themes of Ghosh's *Shadow Lines*, I felt it would be an interesting exercise for my students to use the Google tool of virtual maps. Students could visually locate

cities and countries and their different timelines mentioned in Ghosh's novel on Google Maps. I felt that mapping the locations across which the major characters traversed at different points in the narration would enhance the student's understanding of the implications of Ghosh's 'shadow lines' – that borders of nations were real and imaginary at the same time.

Students worked in groups. Using Google Earth, they mapped the physical locations where key events of the novel occurred, connected them to specific passages from the book, and illustrated each geographic point with images, video, and/or hyperlinks. Using these digital tools enabled my students to have a better understanding of the way in which Ghosh connects individual and national identities to the cartography of space. By adding a multimedia dimension to the reading of the novel, it thrilled me, as a teacher, as well as my students, to establish an imaginative correlative to 'Shadow Lines'.

To Storify a Poem/Novel

Self-described as a curation tool, Storify allows users to search various places around the web and incorporate anything they find into a Storify story/poem. It helps elucidate the text's meaning, and also enables students to see the present-day influence of a text. It allows them to provide line-by-line annotation and to think about the poem/story as a visual or audio media event, rather than simply words on a page. Students may also provide interpretative material: music from the time period, photographs or videos that reference images, characters, or places in the poem. They usually use the Internet as shopping-for-all references to the text being done in the class. They compile news articles, tweets, Facebook posts, sound

bites, YouTube videos, images, and anything that has to do with the text was fair game.

I tried this experiment as a project with my students. The idea was to incorporate multimedia features into their seminar presentation on R. K. Narayan's *Guide.*

Instructions to Students

In this project, you will create a visual presentation of R. K. Narayan's *Guide* using Storify. You will type out dialogues/lines from the novel that you think is the most interesting, with respect to characters/themes/setting/atmosphere/style. For each selection, you will find at least two images, quotations, websites, videos, or songs that will help us elucidate or make sense of the lines you have chosen. However, you must be able to demonstrate the relevance of each component to our understanding of the novel itself. Finally, you will present your work to the rest of the class.

Learning Outcomes

Students came out with extremely rich presentations, by propping up their selected dialogue/lines from the novel with images, music, and videos. One student jazzed up her presentation by hyperlinking images, scenes, and songs from the movie *Guide*. This led to an interesting comparison between the text and the movie, the points of similarities and points of departure. Students got involved in a lively debate on whether the ending of the movie did justice to the novel. This led to a further assignment on the cinematic adaptations of literary classics, including Shakespeare. Another interesting discussion was on the point of view of the movie and that of the novel. Students discussed if the movie's POV was the same as the narrator's POV. Indeed, an

innovative teacher can certainly make creative use of social networking websites as a means to analyse a novel, its themes, or characters. For example, young learners may get enthused to do assignments that require them to think out-of-the-box. Say, for example, asking them to storify 'if' situations with respect to famous characters of fiction. What if Count Dracula or Frankenstein had a social networking site, what would they post on their sites? What might a status posting look like, who would their friends be, and what might be in their information postings?

Media literacy, creativity, individual and self-expression, and writing skills are the obvious benefits of such activities for the students. So next time you want to shake up a presentation or a writing-in exercise on a poem/novel/author/movement in the literature classroom, you can take the aid of the simpler tools of digital technology and make learning fun-filled and interactive.

There is no doubt that technology can inspire and motivate learners. If you are looking for a way to add excitement to your lessons and connect with more of your students, technology is the answer! Utilising and combining graphics, video, and audio can address varied styles of learning in a more effective way and be a tremendous support to English language learners. Finding a way to infuse technology into instruction not only helps English language learners acquire a second language, but also enhances motivation and confidence. As educators, we are in the unique position of embracing new technologies and using them to enhance the curriculum, while engaging with each of our students better.

In today's pandemic times, face-to-face teaching/learning has been completely replaced by the e-learning experience. We, as teachers, have had to upgrade our digital skills in order to cope with the challenges that the pandemic has thrown at us. In order to become an effective teacher, we are using the tools of the new media wisely and trying to offer varied learning experiences to our students, cut off from campuses and isolated in their homes. If the learning space of the future is a cloud (i.e. a web platform), then the teacher must also transform himself into an e-practitioner.

Twitterature and the Classic Twist!

Twitterature: The World's Greatest Books in Twenty Tweets or Less is a Penguin novelty book composed by 19-year-old American college students, Alexander Aciman and Emmett Rensin, released in 2009, which aims to condense over eighty literary works into a series of tweets.

Each classic is squeezed into 20 tweets or fewer. For example, from *Anna Karenina*, here is the nail-biting finale put into a tweet:

"Alright, twenty roubles says that I can toss my bag in the air, run across the tracks, and catch it before the train arrives".

William Shakespeare, John Steinbeck, Thomas Pynchon, and even Dan Brown get the Twitter treatment in the book, to widely varying humorous effect. I like the premise of the whole thing, even if it is sometimes a bit overcooked. Plus, the tweets actually cover the plot pretty well, so I can even imagine using this as a sort of jokey Cliffs Notes.

However, this is the thing. Twitterature is trashed by many as doodling with masterpieces, but the innovative teacher can find a use for it

in the English classroom. For example, while doing *David Copperfield* with my B.A. students, in the supplementary English class, I asked them to turn each chapter into a tweet summary. Students then started a Twitter handle for the class and posted their twitterature on Master David. This led to an interesting Twitter discussion on what events and characters in each chapter made the best summary of that chapter. In the process, students learnt the skills of active reading and concise writing. The activity actually made them go through each chapter in detail in order to abbreviate 10,000 words into a trickle of ten tweets of ten words each. Two of my students were even motivated to read Dickens in the original. Who said, "What the Dickens!"?

High Tech with High Touch

Education in the Covid world is now driven by technology. It is the black swan moment of this century. What will be the nature, scope, and result of digitalised pedagogy in the near future? What will be the new tools, apps, and platforms that will aid teaching? How will teachers adapt and become adept in the rapidly changing and technology-driven terrain? Will teachers manage to overcome technology hesitancy? Will learners welcome the "anywhere, anytime" mode of education, despite the crippling digital inequalities that exist in countries such as ours? Only time will reveal answers to these questions. Innovators innovate, and later, pedagogy plays catch-up, is the new lesson learnt during this pandemic. The world of theory (of evidence and research) is, arguably, lagging behind what is happening in virtual classrooms. In other words, if we wait for a case study to justify whether or not digital tools and applications have measurable value for student learning outcomes, we may be waiting a long time, and both the pandemic (hopefully) and technology (surely) will have moved on by the time the research has been done.

Through all of the changes the world is witnessing right now, one could argue that the teacher's role has remained and will remain constant: that of facilitating and guiding our students in the language learning process, providing them with the best possible materials and approaches that current technology is placing within our reach for students who are beyond our physical reach. Indeed, it is high tech that will keep us in high touch with our students.

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