

## **Why Is It Worth Teaching and Learning Literature Online?**

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### **Abstract**

The need for finding new ways to teach literature in foreign language environments has inevitably changed with the Internet technology. In this article, first, application of the Internet technology in the teaching of literature is assessed. Second, the potential of online activities using Multiple Intelligences theory is scrutinized. The sample group consisted of 80 second year pre-service English teachers studying at a Turkish university. The results showed that the students developed a positive view of using the Internet as a medium of instruction in the learning of literature and the multiple intelligences activities had a positive effect on students who used them by using the Internet as a medium of instruction in the learning of literature.

Keywords: educational technology, web-based learning, literature

### **Introduction**

The promotion of new ways of communicating has created new opportunities for learning collaboration, thus providing a more democratic learning environment. We identify it as democratic because such collaborations result in learners' relatively more individualised access to knowledge by having a chance to choose what and how they want to learn while considering their immediate needs and expectations. The result of this more democratised process of education, we argue, is a move towards learner autonomy. In the body of this article, we apply one facet of education, namely literature teaching, to learning through technology by discussing it in relation to some of the most recent theoretical constructs

and then by suggesting ways of making such a connection available from a pedagogical perspective and through concrete applications. The theoretical constructs used in this study are multiple intelligences, sociocultural theory, collaborative learning, and learner autonomy, all of which are in support of building blended learning environments for the teaching of literature in today's classrooms.

As Arikan (2005: 32) articulated, there is a serious need in literature teaching curricula in many locales to re-consider and re-conceptualise the content of literature courses under the light of some recent theoretical constructs such as constructivism and emotional intelligence. As for literature teaching in foreign language teaching environments, traditional ways of teaching continue to dominate classroom instruction. As Premawardhena (2007: 94) observes in relation to literature teaching in English as a foreign language,

*the reluctance to express one's opinion, inability to work independently and take own decisions, heavy reliance on lecture notes read out in class, collective thinking and lack of critical and analytical skills all lead to obstacles in mastering a foreign language, as these are the very qualities that a student of FLT should not possess.*

Unfortunately, these are often the qualities of literature courses offered in foreign language programs.

In opposition to traditional ways of teaching literature, there are newer strategies or instructional models that are currently practiced all around the world. As Franco (2007) noted, with the advent of the Internet technology, these days, more and more universities are adopting blended learning which can be defined as 'a mix of face-to-face and online approaches'. However, when the context of literature teaching is considered, it is hard to claim that instructors of literature make sufficient use of online instruction, including but not limited to blended learning despite the contemporary acceptance of the Internet as a valid tool for learning. In contrast to this insufficient use of online instruction in the teaching of foreign literatures, as Cooze and Barbour (2007) claim, we have moved beyond accepting the Internet as a medium for learning, now the focus must shift to developing quality learning for the online setting. Among many issues related to developing quality learning for the online setting, those on considering students' learner styles has been one of the most important. It is imperative that instructional designers need to consider the multitude of issues regarding the online learning environment, including students' individualized learning styles (Cooze & Barbour, 2007: 8).

The application of technology in education seems to be ineffective if it purely mimics the traditional face-to-face classroom. For instance, although such newer techniques used in the teaching of literature, such as articulated by Gorak (1994) who asks students to contrast literary responses with the images from contemporary media, the problem with literature teaching is yet

a matter of pedagogy as much as an issue of content.

The importance of pedagogy of literature is particularly important in terms of the benefits resting in teaching literature online. Garland and Martin (2005: 1) suggest that the learning styles of all students must be considered when designing online courses. Similarly, as Lord & Lomicka (2004: 402) justify, “on the technological level, the issues of equipment, compatibility, and availability all have to be addressed prior to the beginning of the semester” before the application of any cyber-instruction of literature. However, using technology in any given course is important for teacher education because encouraging future teachers to *learn with technology* before *teaching with it* will make them become comfortable using various computer applications (Arnold & Ducate, 2006). This need is more pressing in places where teacher candidates are educated since they are expected to teach what they have learned.

## Background

The role of social interaction in the development of cognition is fundamental for learning to take place, either in face-to-face or online classroom. The role of social interaction is somehow accepted in all educational premises. Even in the most traditional literature classrooms, students and instructors exchange questions and answers and discuss the various topics related to the literary text studied or the period or movement in which the text is created.

Similarly, for Vygotsky (1978: 57) it was the interaction with teachers or peers that allowed students to advance. However, Vygotsky’s theory of education goes one step further in understanding the nature of social interaction in all educational activities. His theory of zone of proximal development, i.e. the distance between what students could accomplish by themselves and what they could accomplish when assisted by others, enables us to understand how socio-constructivist environments can provide fruitful learning opportunities. As such, virtual students, for instance, benefit from the givens of the sociocultural approach, because it is through interaction with peers or teachers that they can develop thorough understanding of a literary text.

Online collaborative learning environments are sites of discovery for literature learners. As Saraç-Süzer (2006) articulates, when readers are given freedom to discover, their personal styles will reveal in the form of different view points to the same literary text. In collaborative learning environments, students have the chance to learn cooperatively, which allows the members of a community of learners to be able to teach each other something in a learner-centred fashion. Effective learning experiences are created when each group member is encouraged to feel responsible for participating and for learning. Learners’ level of motivation is high and leadership is distributed, as they share experiences and solve problems while rotating responsibility in leading group discussions. Thus, it is fundamental that the instructors be careful as they plan and design the

online tasks and be watchful as students complete these tasks. Although in the beginning the students will be hesitant to criticise a text, moving from concrete examples and tasks is a good idea so is yielding applicable tasks which model acceptable sorts of criticism. As such, the following can help the literature instructor while designing and instructing literature classes through online tools:

- Read and discuss the text (online or paper based)
- Introduce one aspect of the school of criticism
- Apply this aspect to the text
- Let the students discuss freely and in a reflective manner by referring to the aspect and the text often
- Introduce another aspect of the task and continue discussing
- Repeat the process until your lesson is plan done with the aspects
- Ask students to collaborate in tasks which make them use hypermedia applications
- Ask students to prepare a blog or project activity to summarize their learning by extending it to the online environments and tools.

## Multiple Intelligences

Web-based activities can serve the purpose of encouraging literature learners by developing love towards reading as they offer a rich environment by enabling learners to develop their capabilities and potentials. As such, the theory of multiple intelligences walks hand in hand with blended learning as described by Roblyer and Edwards (2000: 66):

*Gardner's theory meshes well with the trend toward using technology to support group work. When educators assign students to groups to develop a multimedia product, they can assign students roles based on their type of intelligence. For example, those with high interpersonal intelligence may be the project coordinators; those with high logical-mathematical ability may be responsible for graphics and aesthetics.*

Gardner's (1993) theory of multiple intelligences has transformed many traditional classroom environments by paving the way for its application in online learning environments. The theory provides instructional designers and e-teachers with a stimulus for matching technology facilities to learning styles, thus improving students' adaptivity to learning systems.

## Method

The sample group of the study consisted of 80 second year pre-service English as a foreign language teachers studying at English Language Teaching Department of a State university in Ankara, Turkey. The students were enrolled in the course titled Introduction to British Literature I. In terms

of gender, 64 of them were females and 16 were males.

A questionnaire was used as a survey instrument which contained 10 Likert type items which were short but comprehensive (*strongly agree=5, agree=4, undecided=3, disagree=2, strongly disagree=1*). The data collection procedures were started and completed in the fall semester of 2007 after the 4 week procedure of having completed the online activities described in the Appendix. As there were no missing responses, all of the questionnaires were used for data analysis. The findings are given in percentages, to make the reading of the findings easier and more memorable.

## Findings

Statistical findings in the study are given in two sections. The first section gives the findings on students' views on learning literature in a blended learning environment. In the second section, the findings on their views on the online and computer-based multiple intelligences activities completed in this course are presented.

### A) Learning literature online

As it is shown in Table 1, the students were not taught literature by means of online materials before as 94% of the students claimed to disagree with the item (item 1). Furthermore, upon learning literature in a blended learning environment, 94% of the students stated to prefer a literature course employing the Internet and computers over a classroom based learning (item 4) although 78% of the students enjoyed working with the Internet (item 2). Upon the future applications pertaining into literature teaching, 82% of the students think that future literature courses should make use of online learning (item 3). Overall, 92% of the students agreed that the content of this course became richer with the help of online learning materials (item 5). These results show that the students had developed a positive view of using the Internet and computers as a medium of instruction in the learning of literature.

Table 1. Students' views on learning literature in a blended learning environment

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
1. Online instruction was used in our literature courses before.	4	2	94
2. I enjoyed working with the Internet in this course.	78	10	12
3. In the future, literature courses should make use of online learning.	82	8	10

4. I prefer a literature course employing the Internet and computers over a classroom based learning.	94	4	2
5. The content of this course became richer with online learning materials.	92	4	4

## B) Views on the online Multiple Intelligences activities

As it is shown in Table 2, the multiple intelligences activities were not employed in their literature courses as perceived by these students (item 1). The majority of these students (88%) state that they enjoyed working with these activities (item 2) and for 82% of them articulate that these activities made learning of literature facilitated their learning of literature (item 3). It is agreed by 90% of these students that the activities provided them with new ways of seeing and thinking, suggesting that the multiple intelligences activities provided them with newer ways of enhancing their literature learning (item 4). Overall, 90% of the students agreed that they learned about literature in a more subtle and robust manner (item 5). These results show that the multiple intelligences activities had a positive effect on students who used them by using the Internet as a medium of instruction in the learning of literature.

Table 2. Students' views on the Computer based Multiple Intelligences Activities

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
1. Multiple intelligences activities were used in our previous literature courses.	0	10	90
2. I enjoyed working with these activities.	88	0	12
3. These activities made learning of literature easier.	82	4	14
4. The activities provided me with new ways of seeing and thinking.	90	4	6
5. I learned about literature better with these activities.	90	6	4

## Future research directions

Future research should scrutinize the success of blended learning applications in settings where literature is taught. Because of the limited nature of this study, it could not answer whether or not students' success in

learning of literature differs in blended learning environments in contrast to traditional classrooms. The results, however, indicate that it is more likely that blended learning with such engaging activities can increase students' interest in the study of literature.

## Conclusion

Parkinson and Thomas (2000: 6) articulate that “there is room for learners to make, or participate in, other kinds of decision to stop reading a boring text, to choose non-traditional text types” (including films for example). Blended learning in literature teaching gives all these formulations to instructors and learners so as to empower them with knowledge and skills necessary to study literature in a positive environment that is conducive to learning. However, it must be underlined that the main concern of the literature instructor who aims to make use of blended learning in the teaching of literature must be not to simply reproduce traditional methods in an online learning environment. In doing so, one may run the risk of restricting the number of learners whose learning styles will be taken into account. Kaminski (2002: 7) reiterates this idea as “the opportunities extended by distance education cannot be taken advantage of if, during implementation, they replicate the problems found in traditional classrooms”. That is why, as this article suggested, alternative forms of theoretical and practical constructs along with a variety of online resources and activities should be used in the planning and delivery of literature teaching such as the theory of multiple intelligences.

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