The Model Classroom: Digital Learning for Net Generation– A Case for English Literature Teachers and Students in University of Delhi

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It was the year 2005 when I attended my first ever Orientation Programme at CPDHE, University of Delhi—an evil mandated by the UGC for all the teachers seeking promotion. The thrust of the programme was on the use of Information and Technology and hence willingly or unwillingly we were made computer savvy. For these teachers, the digital technology and computer were viewed as instruments for learning. The only barrier was to utilise the tool to its full potential without any know-how. That was only the beginning for at the end of the four week programme we were directed to give a PowerPoint presentation. To tell you the truth I was at my wit's end when I came to know that I have to make a PowerPoint presentation on the use of IT and digital technologies in the teaching of literature in an Indian classroom. When I regained my composure I remembered how we staged plays from the curriculum of BA (Honours) English in order to make the students comprehend the text in a much better and friendlier fashion with the help of visual arts—as I strongly believe that not all teaching occurs within the classroom space. Meaningful engagement with students also occurs outside the four walls of the classroom as an extension of classroom and learning activities. The idea sailed me through my presentation and I suggested the use of electronic gadgets in the classrooms to present the students with the visuals of what they were reading in the texts. I was little surprised when I came to know that Delhi University wants

its colleges to convert the traditional classrooms to "model classrooms"—equipped with all kind of electronic gadgets and technology. This indeed will be a novel experience and this innovative step is certainly going to help the students and teachers of English literature immensely.

In the background of the above anecdote and on a more serious note what is the major role and use of digital technology in a English literature classroom at undergraduate level. In a few lines, without claiming to be an expert in the use of digital technology, the aim of this paper is to evaluate what are the potential roles of digital technology in the English literature classroom and encourage a critical discussion on using digital technology in the at Delhi University.

I remember reading James Belasco's marvelous study *Teaching the Elephant to Dance* (1990) that details the difficulties of change in big organizations like universities—often slow to change as opposed to today's children who are much more aware of digital technology and exposed to online / digital learning tools even before they are exposed to textbooks. As according to Cooper (2005):

Whereas the child of the recent past may have needed and introduction to computers and digital information upon beginning formal schooling, these things have very likely been a part of life for today's child from the beginning. (286)

With over 30 years of teaching experience as a teacher of English literature I can confidently say that we know that today's undergraduate students—the net generations—are exposed to a wide variety of literary texts and are reading more theoretically challenging material—not all of which can be interpreted to students through the time honoured lecture mode. Sometimes my fellow Science teachers joke that an English teacher just needs a book and some bored students. I say blackboard / whiteboard, books, paper, and pen are also technologies for an English literature student! I know that the demand for the new age classrooms is new digital technology—new, effective and meaningful ways not just to teach this material but also enable access to information, ideas and people. It has opened up the multiple dimensions in which good teaching can occur. Digital technologies have become an accepted part of most educational settings in the West during the last twenty years (see Anderson 327)—laptop, DVD players, TV, LCD projector, e-book readers, digital camera and high-tech sound system have come as a boon in disguise. Even in India distance education institutes and universities have used computers, TV and

web based teaching to enable teachers to interact with large groups of students based in remote areas from a single location.[1] Earlier some concerns regarding the use of digital technology with undergraduate students with respect to their concentration and acquiring language proficiency were expressed but the success of such technologies in the classroom has suggested these fears were unfounded. This does not mean that we have to sacrifice book learning and oral interactions. I strongly believe that a student first and foremost must have a strong reading base before they enter a digital classroom. Digital learning as a meaningful add-on student-centered tool can help build better teacher-student relationship and enhance both the academic and social growth of students especially students who are weak in English language proficiency, slow learners and who sometimes find it extremely difficult to understand the challenging academic curriculum offered to them.

Several articles and books have been published in the West examining the role and use of new media and digital technology in the classroom and what is at stake by bringing in computers and projectors into the picture. No major study is available in India to indicate how the teachers in Indian universities and colleges are using these technologies in their profession. I guess what we are asked to do at this level at Delhi University is build on "Information Ecology" —a term that was coined by noted sociologists Bonnie Nardi and Vicki O'Day (1999), to refer to "a system of people, practices, values, and technologies in a particular local environment." In "information ecologies," the spotlight is not just on the technology but also on teacher-student activities that are best served by technology. By taking a classroom as an ecology we are provided with a useful way of assessing the impact and effectiveness of new technologies for teaching and learning. Clements (1999) has argued that classroom teaching has moved beyond the simple question of whether computers and digital technology can help students learn.

What we need to understand is how best to aid learning, what types of learning we should facilitate, and how to serve the needs of diverse populations [. . .] not every use of technology, however, is appropriate or beneficial. The design of the curriculum and social setting are critical. (93)

Our classrooms are right now devoid of digital technology. But the idea of using one is to "balance familiarity with novelty" (Cooper 292) so that teachers and students are not frustrated in their attempts to use the technology as an additional

tool in the classroom. According to Cooper:

> While passive, rote activities afford the opportunity to practice a skill, environments that support the development of higher-order thinking are desirable. Creating an environment, which is student-centered, encourages higher order thinking, and allows for social interaction are all keys to success. (290)

Further Suzy Edwards (2005) has referred to some most frequently cited factors of importance that the teachers face while using technology in the classroom (I am quoting the ones relevant to Indian classrooms):

1. The need for educators to have knowledge of the various components (including hardware and software) of computer technology and how these are used.

2. The selection of software for use in the classroom that is appropriate to children's developmental and learning needs.

3. Access to current and reliable technology (including hardware and software).

4. Considering the educational or intended purpose in using the computer within the context of the broader curriculum .

As for some teachers knowledge of basic skills can be challenging so there is a strong need for continued professional development in the area is necessary to ensure the appropriate integration of digital technology and computers in classrooms. In this regard, S. Haugland (1999) has identified four stages of professional development for teachers learning to use digital technologies in their classroom programmes:

1. including practice experiences with computers;

2. participation in workshops;

3. exposure to models and mentors; and

4. supervisory follow up support. (30)

These set of factors hold implications for how effectively digital technologies can be used in literature classrooms to support student's learning and development.

University and College administrators will need to foster frequent feedback and communication among teachers, students, professors, and technical staff on new technology acquisition, use, and its pros/cons.

Coming to the central question of this paper i.e. the use of digital technology in an English Literature classroom, I am inclined to ask: does the use of digital technology encourage authentic pedagogy? Will the pedagogical activities carried out by English teachers engage the students in a similar fashion as it used to be in traditional classroom situation? For example, will the students be acquiring information or knowledge in such a high-tech classroom! As "information" is purely data. On the other hand, "knowledge" is associated with a specific human being and is the knower's appreciation of the meaning of the information (Brown and Duguid 119-120). The next question that immediately comes to my mind is: will the use of digital technology, DVD / media palyer, promote merely entertainment? I understand that we must not restrict our students to just listening to a lecture. Shanetia P. Clark and Barbara A. Marinak (2011) have argued that "a goal of literature instruction should be to arrange venues whereby courageous conversations can take place" (2)—for it is by nurturing intrinsic reading motivation that "educators can reconcile the sometimes seemingly disparate goals of engagement and accountability" (2). The challenge, however, for teachers is to discern what adolescents value. We must promote active learning—make learning fun! Watching plays and films based on literary texts not for amusement but learning should involve students' critical analyses. Each discipline will have to establish its own criteria for digital technology in teaching depending on the requirements of the curriculum and core relationship between teacher and students. The administrators will also need to help teachers who are looking to involve digital technology in their literature classrooms find relevant resources and materials. Till now, in English Literature classroom, discussions of using digital technology in teaching have been restricted to postgraduate classroom—with select courses like travel writing, creative writing, film studies, visual culture, etc. There are numerous ways English literature teachers can integrate digital technology into classroom instruction.

1. Create PowerPoint slides to be used as visual aids say for teaching plays / theatre setting.

2. Teach students to access online resources, such as e-libraries like jstor.

3. Integrate short video clips from films and plays in classroom discussions.

4. Use a variety of documents, including texts of literature and history, paintings, photography, film, song, cartoons, and advertisements in their lectures.

5. Apart from submitting term papers / projects also encourage students to make PowerPoint presentations or perform Acts / Scenes of plays in class using multimedia devices.

Students interact with a range of different kinds of texts in the English literature classroom and for many, films a favourite medium to explore and engage with literary texts. In my College many of my younger colleagues occasionally use films based on novels and plays, like *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Home and the World*, *Jane Eyre*, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *From Russia with Love*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Frankenstein*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Look Back in Anger*, *The Power and the Glory*, *Sons and Lovers*, *The Crucible*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, *The Colour Purple*, and many more which are directly or indirectly related to the core texts or themes prescribed in the course, to engage students in a meaningful dialogue.

Further, I think that as teachers of English Literature we can also use digital technology to promote digital literacy. A. Martin (2006) charts this shift in his definition of "digital literacy":

the awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse, and synthesize digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, communicate with others, in the context of specific like situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process. (15)

I assert again, that with changing times we must work towards new paradigms in changing the definition of literacy and model classroom.

In conclusion I believe that the use of such digital technologies will not just expose students to constructivist experiences but also help, as pointed out above, in developing social and language abilities through a collaborative and group activities. In this context, as also noted by S. Edwards, professional development of faculty members needs to include key computing skills, involve reflection on their relationship

to the existing curricula in relation to the various levels i.e. support understanding of how a digital technologies can be related to the traditional classroom methodology. We must remember that "information ecology" is made up of people (teachers and students) and digital technology along with the values, so an interaction between these elements will result in complex change and technology can be used to effectively expand the classroom space (see Henderson 1999). There is no straight forward path to examine the success of the use of new media and digital technology practices, as it is subjective and depends on many factors like reading and writing skills of students, appeal to the visual and digital intelligences of students, teacher-student ratio, student-student and student-teacher interactions. The use of digital technology in the UG classroom at Delhi University is yet to be thoroughly implemented and examined. Ultimately the success of this new style of teaching and learning will be determined by the students' ability to learn and Delhi University's promoting the responsible use of digital technologies in the classroom.

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