

THE USE OF A LEARNING PLATFORM IN A READING AND WRITING COURSE

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ABSTRACT:

This article deals with an online course offered by the University of Navarra in the German Department in Spain which is based on the reading process of a literary work and the integration of various other sources of information, and on employing electronic tools such as the discussion forum, the diary and the Internet. The concept is developed using a literary didactic methodology that takes productive, learner centred literary communication as fundamental. Other important objectives are: to enhance the learner's autonomy with activities centred on their productivity before, during and after the reading; to improve their reading and writing skills with different kinds of reading materials; to extend their general cultural knowledge in relation to literature, other media, history, and therefore to use the Internet as a source in order to research topics related to the author, his work, place and time presented in the novel. The use of electronic tools not only ensures the instrumental advantages of independence of time and place, but more importantly, is to be seen in a new literary didactic approach in reference to the context, the intertextuality and contextuality of a text which characterizes hypertextuality and hypermediality. In this sense, the use of a learning platform in its convergence of production, literary communication, contextuality and hypermediality constitute the fundamental aspects of their net -character as an open dynamic system. The use of Internet in this context is to be seen in its pedagogical contribution to more sophisticated projects and as an integral part of teaching literature electronically. All these structural elements constitute in the theory of literature the basis of a more complex aesthetic of the new media in relation to literacy and the inherent potential of creating experiences which are no longer bound only to a book as a medium.

Key words: learning platform, literature, electronic tools, learner centred procedures

RESUMEN:

El artículo presenta un curso online ofrecido por la Universidad de Navarra en el departamento de alemán cuyo contenido es la lectura de una obra literaria integrando otras fuentes de información y utilizando las herramientas electrónicas del foro, del diario e Internet. El concepto está desarrollado según una metodología didáctica de la literatura que considera fundamental una recepción productiva y la comunicación literaria centrada en el alumno. Otros objetivos importantes son: fomentar la autonomía del alumno con actividades centradas en su productividad antes, durante y después de la lectura; el mejoramiento de las destrezas de lectura y escritura a base de diferentes materiales de lectura; extender los conocimientos culturales generales en relación con la literatura, otros medios e historia utilizando Internet como fuente para investigar temas relacionados con el autor, su obra, el lugar y el tiempo presentados en la novela. El empleo de las herramientas electrónicas no solamente asegura las ventajas como independencia del tiempo y del lugar sino que, como aspecto más importante, se aplica principalmente un nuevo acercamiento didáctico a la literatura con respecto al contexto, la intertextualidad y contextualidad del texto cuyas características se ven en la hipertextualidad e hipermedialidad. En este sentido el empleo de la plataforma constituye en su utilidad para la productividad, comunicación literaria, contextualidad e hipermedialidad una parte esencial como un sistema abierto y dinámico. El uso de Internet en este contexto es visto como una contribución pedagógica para proyectos más sofisticados y una parte integral de enseñar literatura de forma electrónica. Estos elementos estructurales forman asimismo parte de la teoría de la literatura y la base de una estética más compleja en relación con la literalidad inherente a las nuevas tecnologías y su potencial de hacer experiencias que ya no están ligadas solamente al libro como único medio.

Palabras clave: plataforma de aprendizaje, literatura, herramientas electrónicas, procedimientos centrados en el alumno

Introduction

Today, virtual learning communities are a common way to bring together people separated by space through computers and the net. The interchange of information within these communities constitutes a basic element as well as the participants' ideas and experiences. The interaction is carried out thanks to machines, but persons do not communicate with machines; on the contrary, they use them as a means of communication with other persons throughout the world. In the digital era, communication can be established by using tools such as mail, chat, video conference, weblogs, etc., depending on whether the communication is supposed to be synchronous or asynchronous. The primary functions are sharing and interchanging experiences and resources, creating collaborative processes with the objective of generating materials, documents, projects, and to learning through a platform in a community where all participants can contribute with their knowledge and vision of the problems. The challenge of these learning communities lie in solving or analysing problems, searching for solutions, and constructing knowledge by bringing together different outcomes.

But what about literary subjects in which reading and writing constitute the principle contents, how can these skills be enhanced in virtual platforms? Literacy practices undoubtedly have changed in that the locations of production and participation have been transformed through digital devices. The interaction of different spaces with students' practices and tools is an important aspect showing the changing literacies and difference between multimodal, flexible practices and static approaches to reading and writing which are still associated with traditional academic writing courses. In contrast, to move the reading and writing practices toward electronically created and connected texts might allow bridges to form between students' interest and expertise and the development of academic skills. The Internet offers immense access to different texts and other resources enriching a literature course. So, how can we treat literary texts using electronic tools? Not less important we consider some pedagogical principles in the didactics of literature such as learner autonomy, the paradigm of problem solution, work on projects and procedures oriented to learner activity, all of which are related with constructivist learning theory and the construction of knowledge.

In this sense, David H. Jonassen (1996, 3) argues that students can not use these tools without thinking deeply about the content that they are learning, and the tools in the sense of 'mindtools' will facilitate the learning process. This means also that cognitive tools and learning environments that have been adapted or developed to function as intellectual partners with the learner engage and facilitate critical thinking and higher order learning.

Cognitive tools are generalizable computer tools that are intended to engage and facilitate cognitive processing--hence cognitive tools. Cognitive tools are both mental and computational devices that support, guide, and extend the thinking processes of their users. They are knowledge construction and facilitation tools that can be applied to a variety of subject matter domains.

In this sense, the example of the reading and writing course tries to show how an open learning environment like a platform is used to activate learner centred procedures through different interaction activities in order to help enhance basic skills like critical reading and writing emphasizing a close relationship between pedagogical and technological innovation and teaching literature which will overcome a traditional form of lecturing - in many cases still the only way to teach literature as an encyclopedic school subject.

In contrast, in the presented procedure literature is seen in its formative function: literature can contribute a great deal to develop critical skills and as the way to perceive, to get to know and to interpret the surrounding world in a more conscious way, to amplify one's own horizon of experiences through a literary work by learning that literature has something in common with life and people living in different

cultural contexts. Therefore, behind this learner centred procedure of using a platform there is a cultural approach of using literature for the objective bringing the learner into contact with universal values, cultures and other ideologies than their own and those of the present time. For this concept of a learner activating procedure this means above all to apply didactic know-how: analysing texts through problem solving and showing that there are possible different ways of reading and interpreting, skills which might be useful as well in other areas in life. We can state firmly that this way of viewing literature in its pedagogical context aims at new goals in teaching literatures such as to develop and research innovative teaching and learning methods, the creation and critical analysis of teaching and learning media, the integration and critical reflection about the use of new tools in the frame of a global media didactic concept in order to satisfy the changing sociocultural conditions.

Enlaces relacionados:

[La didáctica de la literatura en la era de la medialización](#), en Espéculo nº 36.

[La enseñanza de la Literatura y las Nuevas Tecnologías de la Información](#), en Espéculo nº 21.

[Guía de Letras: Recursos en Internet para promoción de la lectura y la literatura, enseñanza de la literatura](#)

Methodology and objectives

How do we ensure that our students develop to be more active, participating and productive persons not only in class but also in life? Based on constructivist principles of higher thinking processes such as interpreting, analysing or transforming information, our course should be enhanced by giving the opportunity to search for answers, questions or for solving problems. This means above all reflective thinking about certain problems, to rouse curiosity in order to research new questions and at the same time to learn to reflect about one own's thinking. In particular, the intellectual skill of reflection is known as in-depth knowledge.

The second important aspect refers to the way of learning which is not an isolated act but takes place in a social context. By solving a problem together learners have to help each other, organize themselves and interchange opinions and outcomes. In this type of didactic arrangement collaborative learning circles are the dominating form with the objective of elaborating a product. By working together, learners have to collect information, transform it and produce a product. Electronical tools can be very helpful in these processes because central activities such as searching for information and transforming it, to communicate and cooperate through a platform and the Internet, the discussion forum and a diary offer tools which are very useful to develop better critical reading and writing capacity. In this sense, the basic learning objectives are aimed at developing activities before, during and after reading to generate a deeper personal relation with the text and the subject. As all activities are done by students in written form through the electronical tools, the learning progress is also more visible.

The reading course offered through a learning platform is based principally on the productive reception of a literary text. The reading of the novel is complemented by activities using electronic tools and giving the possibility to integrate other sources of information and didactic procedures such as problem solving in order to lead the learner to greater participation and productive activity with the following general objectives: to read a literary work in its original language being able to recognize the main topics and ideas in the text and to develop personal reflection about them, to use the written language in order to improve the writing skills by working on small projects and using the forum for communication between the participants, to develop greater intercultural competency by using the text not only for an encounter with the language but also with the culture, history, the ethical values, problems and topics which constitute the core of the narrative.

This approach is primarily thought to amplify the learners' knowledge about society, in the past as well as the present time, by updating the content and giving the learner the opportunity to discover his own vision on present-day society and culture. This means creating intercultural connections between different worlds, times

and experiences, those of the main figures of the book as well as the learners' ones. This intercultural approach therefore takes into account the reading of the novel as well as the use of the Internet as the main source for recent material which can be connected with the present and past of the place of the action, as well as giving access to other topics of interest: contemporary literature, writers and others supplementary material about the author and his time. Following the constructivist approach other objectives are also considered very important: to develop a critical scientific spirit by analysing cultural topics, and to sensitize students for a more reflexive and participative learning with productive and collaborative activities.

The methodology applied in this course is intended to involve the student in a more active way of working by integrating the following tasks and tools: the forum, the reading diary and the Internet: The participants must read the corresponding chapters of the book as indicated in the reading plan. They are expected to show in a reflexive way in their reading diaries the key concepts, main ideas and important aspects as these topics also constitute the basis for the discussion in the forum. Each one is therefore expected to be adequately familiar with the corresponding readings and other information gained from the Internet.

Moreover, the reading of the novel is complemented with small-scale research tasks in order to deepen the topics discussed. These activities also have the objective of involving the student in a more productive work and improving their capacity of expression in writing. The written results are published in a document in the platform in order to make possible an interchange of the different outcomes. The course is organised in the following way: Each week students receive a worksheet with the tasks assigned for the whole week including reading and writing activities as well as topics to be discussed in the forum. The teacher revisits the diary and forum weekly commenting, adding new points and moderating the forum, collecting all results from the diaries and publishing them after they are corrected in a document which gives the students the opportunity to read also the answers from the other participants and thereby making possible a greater interchange of ideas and different results.

Enlaces relacionados:

[El aprendizaje intercultural a través de la literatura](#), Espéculo n° 32.

[Escribir para publicar: Las funciones pedagógicas del empleo de medios electrónicos en los procesos de escritura](#), Monográfico de Quaderns Digitals

Reading online: portal con un amplio índice de artículos relacionados con el tema de la literacidad: <http://www.readingonline.org/>

Guía de Letras: Recursos en Internet para promoción de la lectura y la literatura, enseñanza de la literatura, http://www.educared.org.ar/guia_de_letras/archivos/ensenanza_de_la_literatura/index.htm

The forum of discussion

The forum is the tool which is used for the interchange of opinions, impressions, doubts and commentaries about the readings and the related topics. The participation in the forum constitutes the communicative part between the participants. The commentaries are therefore often personal and informal, having the aim to get in touch with each other despite the distance which separates the participants. The kind of contributions, the tone, the length, the personal reflection, the regularity are very decisive in this part as this is the only way to get to know the others, and so the success of the course depends to a great extent of the relations which come up in this space. Therefore, constant participation is demanded in order to assure an active interchange of debates and opinions which contribute in an important way to the constructivist character of the course. The participants must read in time the corresponding chapters before each new session in the forum showing that they are able to add something constructive about the book or other topics proposed in the forum. Both reading and writing in this space are closely related as the participants reply on the others or make comments on what they have read in the different posts. Nevertheless, the way that the teacher moderates the discussion, proposing interesting topics, showing humour and contributing also with personal comments is decisive to achieve an informal atmosphere and as well as to ensure high-quality contributions in the forum.

The contact through the forum serves primarily to get to know each other giving a space for a more personal implication with the topic and giving the opportunity to connect personal experiences with research and intercultural interchange of customs, values, views. The weekly debates will implicate the learner in topics which are related both, to the author and his novel but also to real life, present problems or other topics which should be interesting for the student bearing in mind his habitual interests, the age and cultural background. So, the questions proposed in the forum are carefully to the content of the novel and culture aiming out to provoke a closer connection between the novel and the students' personal experiences or memories which then also serve as a starting point for the following reading activities. The forum serves therefore as a constant emotional contact during the course between the teacher and all participants to share good or bad memories by referring for example to previous reading experiences, especially in second language learning, comparing them and establishing a confidential ground for dialogue. Without any doubt, the forum offers a space for communication and dialogue which possibly in a lot of cases does not arise in a traditional class, due to such reasons as the size, age or the lack of confidence to express feelings about readings, fear of speaking in class and expressing oneself correctly complex ideas about the content as well as shortage of time in traditional classes. In contrast, the forum is always open, one can read the different comments carefully, take the necessary time to reflect about them before answering or adding a new one. So, sometimes the possibility of writing makes it easier to express oneself and to be more open than in the presence of other persons.

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Matthews Woodlief, A., *A Community of Learners: Teaching Literature Electronically*, <http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/webchap.htm>

The reading diary

This space serves for the writing of all the tasks which the students receive weekly: comments on the chapters from the novel, research work, but also reflections about their own progress during the course or possible problems with the reading comprehension. Students are also encouraged to include their opinion and comments about the course in general and all aspects with reference to the corresponding task so that they get used to being more reflexive with their work and learn to self-evaluate themselves. In this sense, the diary is a space to reflect personal work on the activities and the reading of the book, and also to express the personal opinion, feelings, problems or other ideas related to the reading. A working sheet with questions about the corresponding chapter which is given weekly serves as a guide and students have to write first of all a brief summary of the chapter referring to the most important aspects: who, where, what, why, who, etc.

In second place, they have to relate the chapter or the most important aspects to their own opinion by saying why they liked it or not, giving an interpretation of what the author probably wanted to say, referring to other readings, movies or other books that fit the topic.

In the third place, the diary has to show some kind of personal reflection about the progress made in the reading skill, the communication in the forum and the writing by asking themselves: what have I learned or improved, where do I have still some difficulties, how did I manage the task, what did I learn by that, what did I do well, why did I choose this topic, what will I improve during the process of reading and writing, how do I feel about my

capacities, what did I learn that I did not know before (for example about German literature, culture and other topics), what was most difficult about the book and why, what would I do in order to improve my reading and writing skills, what other objectives do I have for the future as reader and writer?

These three guidelines for the work with the diary, the interpretative summary of the chapter, the personal reflection and the self-reflexive comments about the process allow the teacher to observe during the course how much the student has contributed with his constant participation and productive work to the objectives of the course by communicating and showing his process of work, the results and thinking. The content and quality of the diary can be evaluated by taking into account the proportion in the realisation of these three interconnected parts. As for the methodology, the diary constitutes the principal basis for the evaluation of the personal interpretations, other readings or the research to be done with the Internet. Students have to write at least once a week in the diary expressing their reflections and answers with respect to the reading by including commentaries, opinions or possible critique. Without doubt, the tool of the diary serves primarily to enhance the reading comprehension in that way that the student guided by the teacher's questions learns to read more reflexively, to take notes while he is reading and the diary offers him a space to explain in written form his difficulties with the reading, the new experiences he experiments and his feelings about the reading.

From the point of view of the construction of knowledge we can state that the diary accomplishes different functions: a productive reception as a result of an analysis of the text and reflection about the process of reading with the aim of increasing the reception competency helping to develop real literary communication. The diary therefore enhances the reading competency by giving the opportunity to express one's own reading process by reflecting continuously about aspects which might motivate, irritate or make the comprehension difficult. In reference to the reading pedagogy we must state therefore an important evolution towards reader centred procedures by including metacognitive factors which guide and influence in an important part the reading process. By using the diary for the expression of their reading experiences students realize better what phases the reading process consists of, and are more conscious about their reading role which is fundamental in a creative activity where the construction of coherences and connections with the personal world and the situation of each individual reader plays a decisive role. The collected diaries during the course document very well the possibility of transmitting the students the importance of an individual, self-regulated and reflexive learning, therefore in many aspects much more complete in comparison with the previous courses based on more traditional and, in some way, more passive procedures. The continuous documentation of the reading process also shows that students get used to reflecting and evaluating themselves continuously in their progress. The electronic diary moreover permits very quick answers and corrections from the teacher which can be valued very positively respecting possible corrections of the interpretations as well as the chance to motivate or encourage the student during the course if necessary. Due to these different aspects and pedagogical reasons, the writing of a diary can be valued very positively in the whole course structure in its function to personalize and strengthen the contact between student and teacher as well as the reading material.

On the other hand, the experience also has shown that the demonstration and visualization of one own's way of learning is one of the most difficult parts in the whole process. The reasons for possible rejections of being reflexive about one own's learning style surely go back to the novelty of the procedure to which students are not used. We can observe that the fact of being reflexive and having to externalize an internal process such as the reading and learning one for some students frequently seems to be an added effort whose benefits they do not want to see at the beginning. To overcome these possible rejections it is very helpful to give a positive example of previous diaries and explain the advantages. Without doubt, it is very important to explain very clearly the methodology used in the course and the function of the different meta-reflexive techniques which will help them to become more conscious of the processes that they are performing by making it very clear that the main purpose of the diary is not only to use it for writing a summary and answering the proposed questions but that the meta-reflections about the way they get to the final aim are also very crucial.

In this sense, guiding questions are required which direct students' attention towards the text but also to their own perception, for example: by commenting on the text in a personal way, by stating agreement or disagreement with the message of the text, showing a personal reaction towards the story, explaining the reading strategies used, describing the personality of the principal figures and relating the text to their own experiences and personal life, explaining why they liked or disliked the text, commenting on the author's writing style, expressing the reactions towards a certain action of a figure or describing an image which has been created by the text in their mind.

Enlaces relacionados:

Just read now, <http://www.justreadnow.com/strategies/response.htm>

Reading Journals,

<http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/bassr/heath/syllabuild/courses/pedagogy.html>

The Internet

The course finishes with a small final project related to the content of the course and finally published on the course web-page. The course-webpage includes interesting links about the author, other material related to the book as well as video or audio material. The main objective is to offer a space which is dedicated to literature and culture related to the country as well as the topics we comment on during the course. Furthermore, it offers an opportunity to be in touch with the language by reading or listening to other sources as there is no oral communication in the course. Different types of texts are selected in order to practise the reading skills. The page also shows the written course results as all written work is published serving as concrete examples for new students and also as a growing archive of the outcomes throughout the courses (texts about the author, articles, interpretations, presentations of books, comments on the paragraphs that the students liked most, etc.). The page therefore has a special value as reading course material in order to motivate for future projects as well as a demonstration of the work done by students.

The Internet serves moreover as the most important source of research material related to the course, for example, about reading habits, literary writing, the author's life, famous literary figures, German children's literature, related movies, the history of the action in the novel, contemporary authors, etc. Apart from the novel, the students receive weekly a work-sheet with small research tasks with the aim of using the Internet as a source of information, to collect information and to write brief reports which after being corrected also are published in the space provided for documents so that all participants can learn from each other and get to know the different written results.

Conclusions

Making a brief didactical evaluation of the course outline I would like to point out its orientation towards constructivistic principles of learning as well as the reader oriented pedagogy or aesthetic knowledge. These procedures will enhance the student's autonomy with activities centred on the reader and his aesthetic perception without leaving out a profound reading of the novel. In this sense, throughout the course strategies of metacognition and self-reflection are applied continuously during the process of personal appropriation of the literary work in order to sensitize the learner for a more conscious process of the importance of his self-observation and techniques of self-correction. These processes are carried out by the constant tutoring by the teacher who, through the continuous contact of the diary and forum, is able to guide and correct the student in his reading and writing progress. Therefore, the methodology and the tools used in the online course allow us to put into practice real personalized learning and learner centred procedures.

Moreover, the methodology applied in this course is oriented toward the most important points of the European Higher Education Space construction process, a movement which will put forward a reformation and renovation of the superior education trying to incorporate new active methodologies which are able to enhance the student's involvement in his learning process. The student's principal role is based on his workload which is to be carried out throughout the course in order to reach the outlined objectives. Therefore, the distribution of time (reading, complementary activities, participation, writing) take into consideration the learner's workload. These objectives and the possibility of putting them into practice allow us to make the most important changes in a methodological approach which has changed from a traditional presential reading course to an online one modifying this subject in such a way that students not only receive knowledge and content but also must adopt new attitudes towards their learning progress. The adaptation of methods and the evaluation in this course follow in this sense the objectives proposed by the European Higher Education Space and also correspond to learner centred education instead of a teacher centred approach which is still very common in higher education. The student is therefore required to be able to work with different types of resources, to know how to manage information overload and organize it, present the results in a summarized version, process the information, use the information efficiently in order to solve the problem and know how to present it to others.

We can state firmly that participants in an online course are undoubtedly more challenged as they have to know how to manage some basic learning skills such as organizing themselves and collaborating with others for a common objective. Moreover, there are other aspects needed such as curiosity, compromise, to like working together with others, to experience new ways of learning, and to feel part of a community.

Not less important in the whole process is the function of the teacher-moderator. There are some basic functions which are required: to help with technical problems, and solve organizational as well as pedagogical issues. We might give further the following recommendations: If possible an initial gathering is useful in order to explain the system, the course organization, to build up confidence and to introduce the platform. Secondly, the success of the course is determined by the successful integration of all participants searching for a cohesion of the group by trying to develop a systematic way of working and collaborating. Thirdly, the moderator has to try to encourage all participants to contribute to the discussions which requires him to know very well the different personalities, interests and each individual learning style. Having in mind the objective of construction of knowledge by learning from each other and by solving problems it is essential to give participants feedback even though one should try progressively to reduce the moderator's active role at the beginning and let the interventions of the participants increase in order that they adopt a more active role. So without doubt, apart from a collaborative model there is also needed, to a great extent, a directive one. Besides, the moderator has to learn to develop two other basic skills: to know how to use the participants' ideas and to know how to ask good questions. In the first case the moderator has to know how to summarize the essential ideas expressed by the participants, sometimes adding new aspects or raising an important idea expressed by a student, making some concrete application, exemplifying these ideas or establishing a comparison between the exposed ideas. This manner of proceeding often reawakens the participation and contributions of new postings, and students welcome seeing that they also can generate

significant knowledge with their arguments. This way of acting is often called creating a 'positive interdependency' between the members in order to generate debates, facilitate the interchange of information and social construction of knowledge. Therefore, its use in online teaching is considered a highly significant strategy if we also bear in mind the present demands and capacities required of present and future students. In this sense, we might state that collaboratively oriented online learning prepares students to assume and to fulfil such compromises as to be more tolerant by accepting different points of view, to see cultural differences, to expose their ideas but also to learn to receive criticism from others.

If these procedures manage to work in the described process, two of the generated values in a virtual community are shared knowledge and socialization. In this sense, there are several basic aspects which the teacher-coordinator - moderator should be able to develop among the participants: the involvement and constant participation of all participants in the constructing process, the increase of their autonomy, the mutual interdependency and own responsibility of each learner with respect to his or her own learning process as well as basic principles of collaborative learning.

Using a platform in the exposed way can be also described with the terms of 'learning world' and 'learning environment'. Students immerse in a new world where they can move, find structures but also follow their own paths, where they find stimulations which create questions and help them to find answers, to discover new things and enlarge or reorganize their existent network in the head. Thereby, the platform is not so much used to transmit knowledge but to construct new knowledge by searching for answers for the given tasks. The provided activities help the user to engage emotionally and personally with the topics and challenge each individual participant. Authentic encounters with different topics are offered instead of lecturing. Therefore, the course methodology allows dealing individually with a topic making possible a real personal comprehension. In this sense, the main aim is to provide the learner authentic and situated worlds of experimentation which help him to construct new knowledge by activating him as much as possible. The applied tools can be considered in this context 'tools of active construction of knowledge structures'.

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