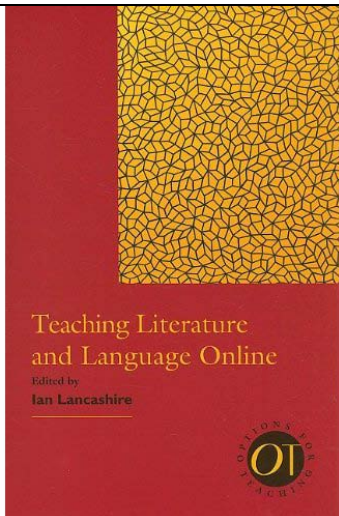


REVIEW OF *TEACHING LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE ONLINE*

<p>Teaching Literature and Language Online</p> <p>Ian Lancashire (Ed.)</p> <p>2009 ISBN-10: 9781603290579 US \$40.00 (hardcover) \$25.00 (paperback) 460 pp.</p> <p>Modern Language Association New York</p>	
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Review by David Malinowski, [University of California, Berkeley](#)

As Ian Lancashire points out in the Introduction to this most recent entry in the Modern Language Association's *Options for Teaching* series, blended and fully online learning models are in wide and growing use. Writing in 2009, he notes that in the fall 2006 term, almost 3.5 million students and 20% of all higher education students in the U.S. took an online course (p. 2). The Sloan Consortium's most recent (2010) report on the state of online learning in the U.S. indicates that as of fall 2009, these numbers had increased to 5.6 million and almost 30% of higher education students, with 63% of 2,500 colleges and universities surveyed saying that online learning "was a critical part of their institution's long term strategy" (Allen & Seaman, 2010, p. 2). Considering the frequent and varied use of technology in blended online and offline foreign and second language classes (see, for example, Blake, 2008), and the growing tendency in this direction for university literature courses as well (Introduction, p. 17), Lancashire's volume is a timely and welcome contribution. And, in light of the release of the MLA's own report questioning the governance structures that keep university language and literature curricula separate (MLA 2007, p. 2), *Teaching literature and language online* can be read as a discussion point in this wider conversation.

With close to thirty chapters written from the perspectives of teachers in university language and literature departments in the U.S. and Canada, this volume speaks both to beginning instructors and to instructors beginning to contemplate teaching courses partly or wholly online. In his introduction Lancashire recommends that, in part because of the many approaches to online education and varied contexts in which it takes place, teachers should make themselves part of professional communities of practice and, through exploration and judicious selection of practices and tools, develop their own unique "signature pedagogy" (p. 11). In this sense, *Teaching literature and language online* represents a step in this direction: after a series of chapters in Part I ("Overview") orienting the reader to issues and approaches in online education "for MLA disciplines" (p. 3), Parts II and III present collections of case studies that speak to a range of experiences in language and literature classes, respectively. Together, the diversity of courses and projects narrated bear witness to Lancashire's contention that, while teaching an online course can require more work than teaching face-to-face (e.g., p. 14), it provides an invaluable extension of the mission of higher education.

Following Lancashire's Introduction, Robert Blake presents data comparing proficiency gains in traditional Spanish classrooms and distance and blended courses, finding that distance education is a

“reasonable and responsible option” (p. 34) for teaching linguistic proficiency and oral skills, especially for beginning learners and in less commonly taught languages. In the next chapter, Kristine Blair draws on Lee Shulman (2005)’s concept of “signature pedagogies” and Chickering and Gamson (1987)’s “Seven Principles for Undergraduate Education,” arguing for the need for the writing and composition profession to take up a measured debate about principles and best practices for online education, while also focusing upon the contentious but often under-represented issue of instructors’ labor conditions. Elizabeth Hanson-Smith, meanwhile, provides guidelines for teachers of ESOL (ESL and EFL) to integrate technology into their teaching of language through literature; she presents evidence that “more student interaction, both with the instructor and with peers, can take place online than in class” (p. 55) and discusses integrated classroom environments like Moodle and Blackboard, literature-based content on Project Gutenberg and other sites, and tools for oral and written communication as they enable project-based and group-centered learning. In the following chapter, “Teaching World Languages Online,” Mary Ann Lyman-Hager reviews developments in language teaching beliefs and practices in the latter half of the 20th century, beginning with the audiolingual (Army) method of the postwar period. Pointing to Warschauer and Kern (2000)’s periodization of language learning technologies, then, she suggests that the most recent sociocognitive paradigm is particularly apt for intercultural e-learning environments that connect communities and foster collaborative tasks. In “Humane Studies in Digital Space,” Jerome McGann is likewise concerned with mapping an historical evolution; his interest, however, is with the transition from a book-based to a digitally-based culture of critical inquiry in the face of the commercialization of knowledge. Noting that inherent in the mission of the university today is “the self-conscious understanding that culture and critical reflection are shared activities and social acts” (p. 101), McGann introduces three digital tools (*IVANHOE*, *Juxta*, and *Collex*) designed to lead students to critical engagement with texts. Rounding out Part I, Stéfan Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell bring an interest in the use of tools for digital textual analysis so as to combine “both linguistic and literary sensibilities” (p. 104). They note that CALL applications, in particular, have often missed the opportunity to allow students to do just the kind of nuanced interpretation that McGann and others advocate, and introduce several text analysis techniques useful for the language and literature classroom.

Part II comprises five essays under the title “Case Studies in Language”. The first, by Stephen Tschudi, David Hiple, and Dorothy Chun, investigates cohesion in dialog and community formation through the use of online forums in an advanced Chinese writing class. While one feels hard-pressed to accept that students in this study shared feelings of “belonging” and “commitment” on the basis of the evidence presented, the reference to Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) notion of students’ dialogic cohesion as the “creation of a single text” (p. 124) in an online context was helpful. Also pursuing questions of community formation online, Diane Formo and Kimberly Robinson Neary present success stories from the use of Online Response Groups (ORGs) in the second language writing classroom. Making the analogy to the peer-to-peer writing center, they suggest several ways for instructors to use ORGs to help students organize their writing processes and give “honest” feedback and assistance. Next, Nike Arnold describes a “literacy-based curriculum in a foreign language class” (p. 165) through which she had her 3rd year German composition and conversation class interact online in relatively unstructured written exchange with native speaker guests. She writes that student survey results indicated that this exchange realized the literacy principles of situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice (cf. New London Group, 1996); a lack of evidence in the chapter makes this claim difficult to validate. Following this essay are two chapters that describe the development of learning resources that, once online, assumed multiple and at times unpredicted functions. Gillian Lord’s essay on *Aymara on the Internet* is noteworthy for its descriptions of the innovations required to bring a communicative approach to the rote grammar exercises of a decades-old language textbook, usable both by language learners and linguists interested in documentation and revitalization. Meanwhile, Douglas Morgenstern’s chapter describes the history and use of *MITUPV*, an open online environment for Spanish-English cultural and linguistic exchange. Unlike an online textbook, *MITUPV* was not designed with pre-given learning

outcomes in mind; Morgenstern notes that open registration and user-generated content have led to a pedagogical orientation that is “decidedly bottom-up” (p. 191), where content generation and even community formation become benchmarks for success (ibid.). A tension underlying this and other studies of online, open social sites for language learning is how the use of such environments articulates with the goals and structures of the classroom; with Morgenstern stating that “all required class-related projects are somewhat coercive and artificial” (p. 199) while Websites like *MITUPV* “[approximate] the serendipitous nature of authentic language immersion” (p. 198), the task of the classroom teacher seems monolithic.

Part III, “Case Studies in Literatures”, comprises 16 chapters; here I depart from the order of the original text in favor of four thematic groupings of chapters. First, and noticeable as well in previous sections of the book, is the visibility of an array of innovative tools developed to foster new forms of textual analysis and linguistic proficiency. Seemingly a holdout from Part II of the book, Noriko Nagata’s study (appearing near the end of the volume) outlines the functioning and impact of *Robo-Sensei*, an online Japanese textbook using natural language processing to analyze beginning students’ written input on the sentence level, while generating feedback and instruction tailored to their structural errors. Meanwhile, Gerald Lucas describes the evolution of digital tools tried out over years of teaching his online world literature course *World.Lit*. Discussing the merits of using student and teacher blogs, a wiki, a discussion forum, and a content management system for aggregating these tools together, Lucas foregrounds the need for literature instructors online to engage students in discussions about course expectations and procedures, while explicitly teaching computer literacy. In another chapter introducing a novel tool developed on-site, Haun Saussy describes his detailed selections, re-orderings and annotations of the classical Chinese text *Shang Shu*, incorporated into a late-1990s hybrid *Introduction to the Humanities* course in order to lead students to deeper textual analysis and comparison. Finally, introducing the open-access networked resource *Decameron Web*, Papio and Riva present a vision of the ‘outmoding’ and evolution of a now 17-year-old tool for teaching and researching late medieval and early modern Italian studies. The authors convey a fundamental tension between the hierarchical concerns of the academic community (where research and publication are protected domains) and “virtual collaborative space[s] where multiple activities can take place simultaneously, in an ongoing and self-enriching dialogue” (p. 353).

Of course, reading this collection of essays in the 2010s, many people may feel that the ‘home-grown’ sites in the studies above simply offer features that have become commonplace in the corporate-owned and often freely available blogs, wikis, online games, virtual worlds and other online media (for a review, see Thorne & Black, 2007). Indeed, several chapters in Part III address the benefits offered and constraints imposed by such tools in the online literature classroom. Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s contribution, “The literary machine: Blogging the literature course,” is a narrative of the successes and failures that she experienced using blogging in a 2003 literature class; she finds that “the open-endedness of the blog” (p. 211) is among the reasons why literature instructors need to make their expectations clear, provide model posts, give guidelines for comments, and otherwise structure student blogging. Kathy Cawsey and Ian Lancashire’s essay reports on the success of the chat medium in an online *Reading Poetry* class as it encouraged distally located students to discover and explore subtle meanings in the texts at hand; drawing from an extended chat transcript on Seamus Heaney’s poem “Punishment”, they argue that “the interaction among committed students and their teachers improves markedly in a virtual classroom (chat room, bulletin board, e-mail) over what is possible in a physical classroom” (p. 311). In “Seeking the best of both worlds: Online and off-line Shakespeare”, Michael Best draws from his experience using the resource Website *Shakespeare’s Life and Times* and a variety of online media in his classroom teaching, arguing that together, they enact “a method of communication that is both effective and democratic” (p. 266)—this despite the challenges of dealing with plagiarism, development costs, and technological change while paying greater attention to the critical evaluation of sources and materials.

Several chapters in this volume demonstrate that, together with the introduction and use of new tools in

the online classroom, the very technologies of the online literature classroom—the changing ecologies of pedagogical structures, procedures, and relationships—are in flux. In his chapter, “Old English online at the University of Calgary”, Murray McGillivray writes that his mandate in creating an entirely online course was to improve on what he terms the “humiliation” students undergo in class when called upon to do direct grammar translation, and out-of-class when reading source texts and their annotations; he argues that teachers online need to make explicit the structures for students’ participation, performance and evaluation that are often left implicit (or absent) in the face-to-face classroom. In an essay on teaching undergraduate and graduate online courses on Shakespeare, James Fitzmaurice presents a seeming contradiction in that a preponderance of “highly motivated students in the virtual classroom” might be motivated in part because they feel “deprived” at not being able to be physically in the face-to-face classroom (pp. 275–276). Meanwhile, Martha Wescott Driver, in a chapter on her multimedia course bridging Middle English readings and text interpretation with student multimedia projects, relays her students’ singing praises of the online medium and surmises that the fact of their sense of “expanded audiences” for online work pushes them to collaborate and focus in new ways. Finally, Kathryn Grossman, an instructor of both language and literature courses, echoes the interest of authors from Part II in the formation of classroom communities online. In moving from the offline medium to online instruction, she finds that “students working collaboratively in my hybrid course submitted much better and more writing overall” (p. 337); she concludes by offering numerous recommendations for literature and language instructors to use collaborative work to heighten student involvement, while simultaneously reducing the teacher’s workload.

The last strand of chapters I note in Part III is one that opens up questions of textuality, representation, and teaching online to greater and greater degrees of self-scrutiny and doubt. Laura Bush’s chapter “Solitary confinement: Managing relational angst in an online classroom,” for example, seems to double backwards and begin to question the very humanity of the humanities online. Where she spends the first part of her essay pragmatically outlining “four distinct areas” of competence necessary for faculty to teach literature effectively online, in the second part she describes a pervasive sense of isolation that besets online teachers and students who lack the robust social presence of the face-to-face classroom. Devoid of angst but marveling nonetheless at human transformations amidst changed knowledge relations online, Ian Lancashire’s “The open-source English teacher” describes the fate of the online instructor. The “open-source teacher,” he says as creator and editor of the Web-based archive *Representative Poetry Online*, makes the fruits of her or his intellectual labor available to the general public through Websites, interactive databases, and other online resources, and so enters into an asynchronous and unstructured relationship with faceless students who are only occasionally made visible through the impromptu email (p. 418). As with *Representative Poetry Online*, in her two chapters Martha Nell Smith reflects on new modalities of knowledge and collaboration engendered by humanist research and instruction with the *Dickinson Electronic Archives* and other large-scale projects. With respect to the Archive in particular, she highlights the textual indeterminacies and creative processes that are, she says, frequently hidden within the legacy technology of the book. The online medium, on the other hand, allows the learner to maintain a *processual* orientation to textual meaning—the very approach that she claims Dickinson herself took toward her own writing (p. 281). Lastly, in “Hybrid world literature: Literary culture and the new machine”, William Kuskin reflects on his *WebCT*-delivered “Hybrid English” course that was, on the surface, successful in “delivering record student credit hours” (p. 359). However, the problem of online courses, and the challenge that online instructors must work against, Kuskin says, is that online courses such as his “[reduce] the problems of online and traditional learning to the single issue of information management” (p. 359), a discourse of control already present in the notion of “record student credit hours”. The fundamental challenge of the online teacher of literature, Kuskin contends, is rather to lead students to an awareness of a fundamental contradiction that runs through their humanistic inquiry online: that while the realm of the literary is traditionally understood to be figural and never fixed, he writes (invoking imagery from the science fiction hit *The Matrix*), “the logic implied by digitization, by the

green veil of computer code, by the various downloads and uploads that constitute the curriculum, was that literary knowledge can be entirely encased in computer technology” (p. 361).

Overall, the chapters from this and the first two parts of *Teaching literature and language online* present many useful lessons, while provoking thought about the pedagogical and institutional challenges that arise with the use of technology; they are well worth reading individually with these practical goals in mind. Taken together, however, I found that they give occasion to an urgent question of an altogether different nature. As Kuskin reminds us, language and literature teachers alike ought to share a concern with *what it means to be human online*:

The future of online education for the humanities, therefore, involves not only the implementation of online teaching but also our understanding of the process of symbolic production of ourselves as human in the history of textual technology (p. 360).

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

David Malinowski is a doctoral candidate in Education in Language, Literacy, Society and Culture at the University of California, Berkeley, and a research assistant with the Berkeley Language Center. His research interests include distance and blended learning in foreign language education, multimodal literacies, and semiotic landscapes.

E-mail: daveski@berkeley.edu

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