Harnessing online distance education methodologies to enhance teaching and learning for Literature students

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Introduction

1. The COVID-19 pandemic transformed the learning environment across all levels of our education system. While some educators and students had experience within online distance education (ODE), previously, now online became the main form of delivery. Regardless of your opinions on the merits of ODE, the move from a predominantly on-campus experience to online highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of learning online. Online education was no longer a minority; instead, it became the "norm".

2. Before discussing my opinions on how harnessing ODE methodologies can enhance the learning environment for Literature students and educators, I will outline my background and teaching philosophy. My journey into ODE began through my studies on the MA in E-Learning Design and Development (at University of Limerick) in 2002. On graduating from the MA, I joined Oscail (the Irish word for 'open'), the online distance education provider at the National Institute for Digital Learning in Dublin City University (DCU), Ireland. This role formed my understanding of how to design, develop, deliver, and manage online degree programmes for distance education students. I left DCU in 2015 for a PhD teaching fellowship at the University of Limerick, Ireland, where I focused on creating effective written assignment briefs. I have been teaching technical communication and instructional design modules since 2015. I took on the role of Course Director for the Graduate Certificate in Technical Writing, an online distance education programme, in 2019. It is through these experiences that I developed my expertise in e-learning, technical communication, instructional design, online programme delivery, curriculum design, and assessment

design. The views expressed in this article are based on my experiences and research over the past twenty years.

3. Teaching online requires a different set of skills, and it is worth reflecting on your teaching style and considering how to adapt for an online environment. According to Kurzman (2013, 335), if online faculty "agree to eschew the 'sage on the stage' orientation to teaching and are comfortable with a more modern 'guide on the side' approach, many would argue that distance learning is an entirely viable framework for professional education". I view my role as a guide; I aim to create a student-centred, flexible, supportive learning environment where students can become independent learners. Lea, Stephenson and Troy (2003) identify these as core principles of student-centred learning:

- Students must be active learners

- Students must adopt a deep approach to learning

- Students must be responsible and accountable for their learning

- Students must develop a sense of autonomy

- Students and academics must be inter-dependent

- Students and academics must have a mutual respect

- Students and academics must adopt a reflexive approach to teaching and learning

4. I want my students to be active participants and lifelong learners, which requires them to self-monitor and self-regulate. I aim to create a supportive learning environment where my students can develop and expand their skills.

5. Within ODE, as learning does not happen in a classroom, educators must accommodate the flexibility that allows students to create learning spaces that suit their needs. Effective communication and good planning are essential within the ODE environment. Educators must be cognizant that interaction is an essential part of learning. Moore (1989) suggests three types of interaction in distance education, learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner. A learning environment where students can interact with students, content, and educators, ODE is an excellent fit, especially for non-traditional students and students with diverse needs.

1. Defining ODE in 2022

6.   It is valuable to acknowledge that 'online distance education' is a nebulous term. There are different perspectives when categorising distance education, for example, technological or pedagogical. From a technological viewpoint, there are three stages/generations:

1. Printed-based correspondence: Hardcopy materials, transmitted by post.

2. Industrial mode: Printed materials plus radio and television instructional materials.

3. Third-generation: The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to allow interaction between learners and materials (CD-ROMS and the web) AND between students and educators. Aoki (2012) argues that this latter type of interaction is a fourth generation of distance education.

7.   According to Aoki (2012), from a pedagogical perspective, there are three categories:

1. Cognitive-behaviourist pedagogy: defines learning as a behavioural change triggered by learning stimuli.

2. Social-constructivist pedagogy: focuses on learning rather than teaching, which relies on interaction (between students/peers/educators).

3. Connectivist pedagogy: requires networks, where learners must be active participants.

8.   Technological advances changed distance education from a purely synchronous, print-based mode of education to an interactive, dynamic, and versatile learning space. "Distance education and technologies are considered inseparable as in order to reach students at a distance, one must use certain tools or technologies to do so" (Aoki, 2012; 1184). Technology is also integral in connecting students, educators, and content, as, "[a]ll forms of interaction in a distance education context are, by definition, technologically-mediated forms of interaction" (Friesen and Kuskis, 2013; 352). While distance education relies on technology, one could argue that all modes of education involve technology; connecting learners with teaching and learning resources requires technology, e.g., a book. The pervasiveness of technology within higher education and resources such as Open Education Resources and Massive Open Online Courses, may have "a seismic impact on the higher education landscape" (European Commission, 2013; 48).

Technology-mediated teaching and learning resources were crucial in continuing to provide education during the pandemic. Combining pedagogy as the method and practice of teaching (involving understanding learning), online as the use of the Internet and associated technologies, and distance as self-paced and asynchronous, then essentially, ODE is asynchronous teaching and learning mediated through technology. Throughout this paper, I will consider technology as an integral part of ODE.

2. Designing for all students

9. There has been a realisation that technology can accommodate the needs of a diverse range of students and improve the educational experience for all students. This is evident in the adoption of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles and accessibility guidelines. "Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an educational framework based on research in the learning sciences, including cognitive neuroscience, which guides the development of flexible learning environments that can accommodate individual learning differences and cater for the wide range of diversity in our lecture rooms" (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2022). Putting accessibility (see the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) at the core of your design can often help all students.

10. One of the characteristics of technical communication is its focus on the audience. The needs and expectations of your audience inform your design decisions (e.g., word choice, use of jargon and terminology, length of sentences, length of paragraphs, and visuals/language on visuals) and the tools and technologies you use. Considering the characteristics of your users and their contexts, improves the quality of your design (Allanwood and Beare, 2019). Designing effective teaching and learning resources requires that you consider your students' needs and expectations. It is also possible to have more than one audience, i.e., a diverse student cohort. Schriver (1997) defines three approaches to gathering audience information: classification-driven, intuition-driven, and feedback-driven.

Schriver's categories	How educators apply this approach
1. Classification-driven audience (identify the audience's characteristics)	Classifying the students' characteristics, e.g., their age, prior knowledge of the subject, attitude to the subject.
2. Intuition-driven audience (self-reflection and personal experience to imagine the audience)	Drawing on their own personal experience as a student or that of a personal acquaintance, to envisage the needs of their students.
3. Feedback-driven (gather feedback from audience)	Talking to students to get direct feedback. Monitoring usage statistics. Conducting polls within virtual classrooms and virtual learning environments.

Table 1: Mapping Schriver's approaches to gathering audience information to an educational context

11.   All three approaches can be used to design teaching and learning materials in higher education. When we adopt the second approach, intuition-driven, we draw on our experiences as a student. However, Boettcher and Conrad (2019) query how these experiences transfer to today's educational context. In creating a series of four online workshops on research design and methodology for final-year undergraduate students, I adopted all three approaches. To design the content of these workshops, I considered what the students would know about this topic and what I would have needed to know as a student. Finally, I adopted the feedback-driven approach to get feedback from my students to revise the content of the workshops.

3. Advantages of ODE

12.   ODE has numerous advantages, especially for students who can self-monitor, self-assess, and self-regulate their learning. Good instructional design and study tools (such as checklists) can help students to develop the ability to plan and monitor their progress.

13.   A key strength of ODE is the flexibility it affords. The asynchronous nature of ODE allows a student to fit their studies into their schedule. Within reason, they can mould their study schedule to match their needs.

Technology supports a diverse range of student abilities, as students can tailor the learning experience to suit their needs and context. For example, students can pause the content to reflect on their learning, adjust the pace of recorded content, view captions supporting recorded content, look up additional resources/explanations, add notes, and access dictionaries and glossaries.

14.   Content can be enriched by adding multimedia, for example, to deliver material that is less effective when communicated in writing (e.g., visuals, video, and audio). Students can use feedback from self-assessment questions, quizzes, and tests to identify gaps in their knowledge and target the parts of the content they need to revise. Technological developments, e.g., learning analytics, can focus students' attention on the relevant part of the course content and direct students to additional resources and support.

15.   Technology can enhance the learning experience by widening access to expertise and resources. To maximise their learning potential, students must interact with content, educators, and peers (previous and past). To become part of their discipline, students must gain the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competencies of their learning community. Technology can be used to share content or to demonstrate skills, for example, demonstrating a close reading in action. Using a plethora of resources, people, and perspectives—unavailable in the traditional classroom—potentially provides a richer educational experience.

16.   While ODE can provide an excellent learning environment for many students, there are challenges, some of which we shall explore.

4. Challenges of ODE

17.   One of the challenges relates to the vast amount of information available. For students, this can be overwhelming, and requires students to develop the skills to be able to find relevant information, evaluate the quality of resources, and use these resources appropriately. For educators, technology provides access to a range of resources, yet using these resources effectively requires good data management skills. Using resources involves finding quality resources, choosing appropriate resources, storing resources, describing resources, and integrating these resources into teaching materials. Although there are databases of Reusable Learning Objects

(RLOs) and Open Educational Resources (OERs), educators may need to create content, which can be time-consuming and may require skills they do not have. In my teaching, I use the Virtual Learning Environment to create learning spaces for my students. For example, for my undergraduate research students, we use an online site to share resources (e.g., definitions, further explanations, templates, and other resources) and to communicate as a group. To share resources, students must develop the ability to find relevant resources, to evaluate the quality of these resources, and to summarise the relevance and content of these resources. The onus is not on any student to do this work; instead, it is a collective endeavour. The ability to find and evaluate the quality of resources is important skills.

18.   Another challenge students may encounter in ODE programmes is a sense of isolation. When interaction in distance education was "asynchronous learner–instructor communication in the form of letter writing and via postal service" (Xiao, 2017; 124), the "lack of reciprocal interaction was believed to be a major drawback" (Xiao, 2017; 125). While printed-based correspondence was limited to asynchronous interaction, technological advancements provide multiple means of communication, which increases interaction options and facilitates synchronous interaction. Technology has created various opportunities for interaction in ODE, including

- Online discussions, e.g., forums and chat room

- Virtual classrooms

- Feedback, e.g., assignments, quizzes, tests

- Email

- Printed materials, e.g., anthologies, complete works

- Online materials, e.g., e-books, articles, out-of-copyright repositories

- Blogs

- Wikis

- Podcasts

- Videos/TV programmes/Radio

- Polls

19. According to Natsina (2007; 145), "however sophisticated the methods developed to tackle the lack of face-to-face tuition in open and distance learning, communication between student and tutor seems to remain a constant need". Multiple forms of interaction are available: student/student, student/educator, and student/content. A student's experience of ODE is shaped by internet connection, technology, and software. Additionally, Richardson (2009; 71) points out that "students may encounter problems when attempting to access online tutorial support because of technological problems, ambiguity in the tutor's advice and instructions, and the paucity of social and other contextual cues (Hara and Kling, 2000)". My research interest focuses on the communication of written assignment briefs. The main aim of my PhD was to explore how written assignment briefs affect students' understanding of assessment requirements and, thus, students' potential to perform effectively. Excellent communication, organisation, and good planning are essential for effective ODE.

5. Creating a learning environment to encourage creativity and engagement

20. An essential consideration in creating an effective learning environment is how to deliver content and the role of the student.

> Constructivist theory posits —and research supports— that learners must construct their own knowledge base. It is more effective for students to follow their own lines of thinking and inquiry by talking to peers and immersing themselves in resources, rather than listening to the delivery of content from an instructor for long periods. Research is supporting this pedagogical theory, indicating that lecturing alone, without periodic questioning or discussion, is an ineffective way of learning. In most lectures, learners are too passive for much higher-level learning to occur (McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, & Smith, 1986; Wieman, 2008; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011).
>
> (Boettcher & Conrad, 2019; 8).

21. I agree with Shearer (2013; 255) who said, "[s]tudents still need a sense of how to navigate through the course so they don't become lost in the vastness of content being presented and created". For a learning environment to be effective, the educator must chose the appropriate tools/resources, provide sufficient guidance, and create relevant learning activities. "Dennen and Wieland (2007) conclude that a consistent, facilitative instructor who anchors discussions around questions and shared artifacts is

more likely to produce discourse associated with the co-construction of knowledge" (Friesen and Kuskis, 2013; 354). For example, when including a resource, it is useful to tell students how it connects to the learning and why students should read/watch/listen to it. Linking the resources to a task or question helps students to focus on the content. During my PhD research, some students discussed how they struggled with a complicated and overly "academic" reading. As they struggled to complete the reading, they linked the difficulty of the task to a lack of purpose and direction. When I asked if providing questions to guide their reading would help them complete this task, all of the students said this would help to guide their reading. I have adopted this task-based approach to other aspects of my teaching. For example, when I provide recorded versions of my lectures I ask students to contribute to an online discussion based on the content of the lecture (see figure 2 for a screen shot of the instructions provided to students).
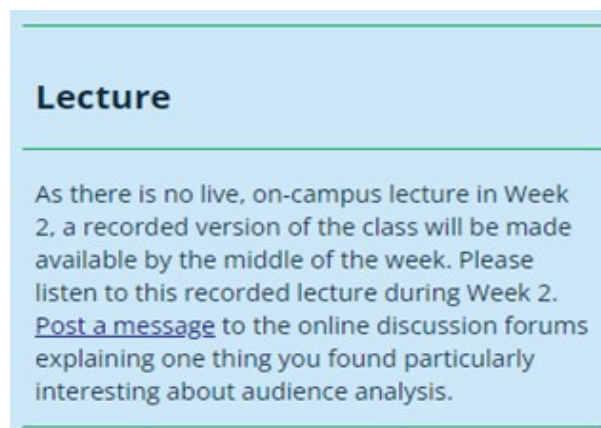

Fig. 2: Instructions for students who watch the recorded lecture

6. Using ODE methodologies to address the challenges of teaching Literature

22.　　In preparing for this presentation, I spoke with two lecturers (Literature) about the core and distinctive characteristics of teaching and learning in Literature. Both of these lecturers identified close reading as a central factor; there seems to be an inclination to rely on face-to-face tuition for close reading and interpretation of the text.

23.   While close reading tends to be a solitary activity, now we have new technologies, digital resources, and opportunities for collaboration (Zauha, 2013). Technology can support students' needs and expectations. Recording a demonstration of a close reading (by an educator or student) is a valuable resource, which students can view at a time and place that suits them. They can watch the resource privately, once or multiple times. They can control the pace of this type of learning resource. Educators can use technology to enhance their teaching (demonstrate a close reading in action, direct students to YouTube videos demonstrating a close reading in action). Technology can provide links to additional resources, for example:

- Dictionary (words linked within the body of the text)

- Glossary (terms linked within the body of the text)

- Other resources (e.g., discussion of the text through various lenses, develop a sense of the wider context, e.g., social, historical, political, cultural)

- Audio (e.g., helps students with pronunciation, provides additional information through interviews with the author, critics, and/or SMEs)

- Graphics

- Video (demonstration of close readings, works/plays, conversations about Literature)

24.   ODE provides ways in which we can foster a community of learners. If we want students to be part of a community, to engage with others in that community, they must learn the language and practices of that community. "Open and distance learning (ODL) poses significant challenges to the traditional view of literary instruction as initiation to the enjoyment of and critical thinking about literary works" (Natsina, 2007; 131). Developing students' skills, knowledge, and confidence is an important step in becoming part of the community. Collaboration can be viewed as both working with yours peers on a task and working with your peers by building on their work (with appropriate attribution). Building a community of learners can be supported through sharing student work (i.e., samples/exemplars) or getting support from previous cohorts. While sharing work can help weaker students, it can also support all students.

25.   One resource that I created during my time in Dublin City University was a repository of student work. The goal was to create a learning space where students could learn from each other by sharing examples of their work (post assessment). The benefit of exemplars "to communicate much of the tacit aspects of the assignment (e.g. the language to use, the depth and level of coverage of topics, the structure of the assignment)" (Walsh, 2021 ; 309) was a key finding from my PhD. Even though students recognise the value and learning opportunities from examples of poor-quality work (Walsh, 2021), only examples of good-quality work were included in the repository. The example in figure 3 is not a replica of the repository. Instead, it is an illustration of this type of repository and how it can be used to develop students' knowledge and skills.
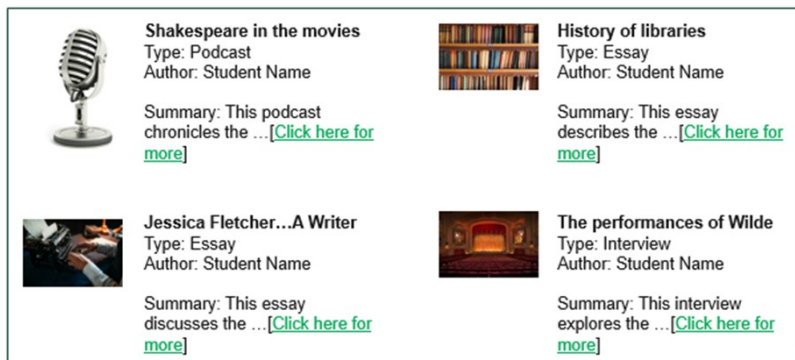
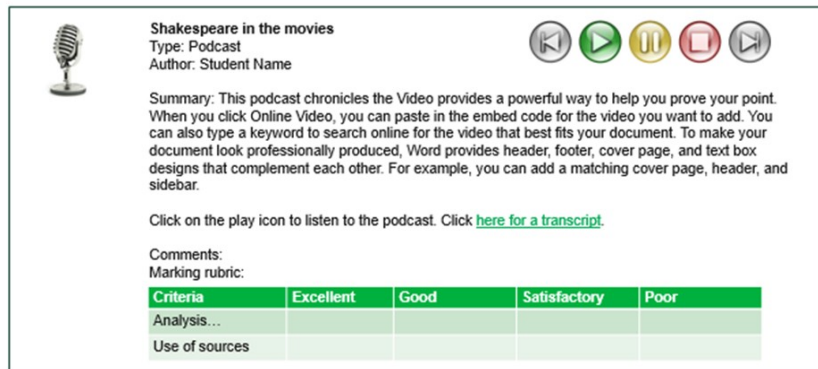*Fig. 3: Illustration of the interface of repository of students work*

26.   Agarwal (2010; 11) suggested that "[a]n important characteristic of effective communication is the need to complement one mode of communication with another, to ensure the message is "properly understood and carried out". Using multiple formats is also part of the Universal Design for Learning's (UDL) second principle, Multiple Means of Representation. In fig. 4, content is provided as text and audio. Additionally, students are also encourage to interact by commenting on each other's work.
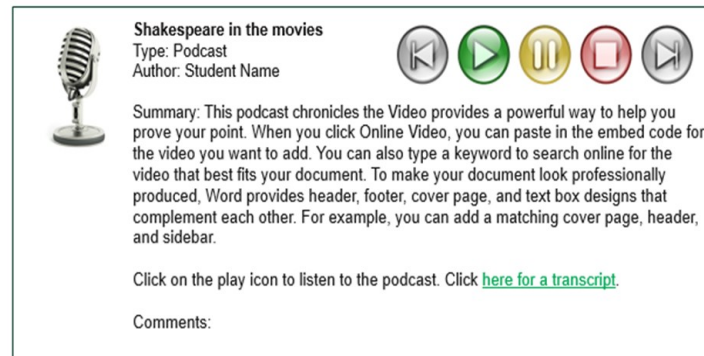
Fig 4: Illustration of the interface of repository of students work including multiple modes of delivery and peer review

27.   Increasing the type of interaction even further could include peer assessment. O'Donovan *et al.* (2008; 208) stressed the improvement in student performance when they were active learners, engaged in the "social construction of knowledge of assessment criteria and standards". This involves the use of a marking rubric (see figure 5). Peer review and assessment require students to be actively engaged rather than passive and provide an opportunity for "formative activity that supports the development (rather than judgement) of learning" (O'Donovan *et al.*, 2008; 213). As discussed previously, interaction is a crucial part of learning. Similar to the findings from O'Donovan *et al.* (2008), that articulating grade descriptors and assessment criteria is insufficient to communicate the assessment process and standards, the participants (students and educators) in my PhD stressed the need to discuss the assignment.

*Fig. 5: Illustration of the interface of repository of students work
including multiple modes of delivery, peer review, and peer assessment*

28.   It is possible to include examples of close readings within a repository. Students could share their initial close reading with each other (e.g., video), engage in peer assessment using an online rubric, and revise their close reading to incorporate peer feedback. Additionally, when providing assignment feedback, educators could support their feedback with a video of a past student doing a close reading (of the same text). This could be expanded by asking students to reflect on what they learn from this video.

Conclusion

29.   Educators can harness the experiences they gained from online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic to improve the quality of their teaching. The nature of ODE makes it a good fit to meet the needs and expectations of a changing student profile. Effective ODE programmes have these characteristics: flexibility, excellent communication, and good planning and design. Educators can use these features of ODE to improve the learning environment for all students. A good ODE educator is aware of their student's needs and expectations and has good knowledge of the tools and technologies available. A skilled ODE educator matches the best teaching strategy (including tools, technologies, and resources) with their students'

needs. They will use technology to engage their students and to shift teaching and learning activities from the educator to the students.

Acknowledgements-Thanks

Appendix: Examples of repositories

MERLOT
- English Community Portal for teachers/learners of English, https://www.merlot.org/merlot/English.htm
- Comparative Literature and Classics, Material Search Results (merlot.org)

OpenStax, Writing Guide with Handbook – OpenStax

OER Commons, English Language Arts | OER Commons or see Reading Literature | OER Commons

List of OERs, Community College Consortium OER Repositories – CCCOER

OU iTunes resources, https://www.open.edu/itunes/subjects/arts-and-humanities

Early Modern Books, https://www-proquest-com.proxy.lib.ul.ie/emb/literature?accountid=14564

English Short Title Catalogue, https://www-proquest-com.proxy.lib.ul.ie/emb/literature?accountid=14564

Teaching commons, https://tinyurl.com/y7jw7e7e

OASIS, https://tinyurl.com/54bs9ues

Bloomsbury, https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/online-resources/

Gutenburg project, https://www.gutenberg.org/

AB Literature Philippines, https://abliterature-philippines.com/

Google Books (out-of-copyright books), https://www.google.com/google-books/about/free_books.html

Humanities Text Initiative, https://tinyurl.com/2whb55db

JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/subject/literature

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