Humanities at a Distance: Classroom Experience from the Pandemic

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Abstract: *This article relies on the experience of the author, with teaching remotely during the pandemic; beginning with some references on the stage and previous status of the larger field of digital humanities in Romania, it touches some of the most relevant aspects, and concerns, or teaching remotely: the choice of the right tools, the creation of content that should be meaningful, instructional and measurable by the progress of students, the fears, stereotypes and possible solutions. It presents the most important difficulties along three semesters, as well as it suggests how the lessons learned during the period of teaching remotely can be used in the future.*

Keywords: *remote education, digital humanities, pandemic, content creation, pedagogy, Whattsapp.*

The experience of three semesters of distance teaching at Ovidius University, Constanța, Romania (the entire year of 2020-2021, and the Fall semester of 2021-2022) has been as heterogeneous as the digital world itself. Students and professors, alike, found themselves under the pressure of being part of a major shift, both in terms of choosing the right tools from the array that the university had made available, and of recreating the content of their classes, and looking into new pedagogy, in order to be effective, and to reach the students who found themselves severed from direct communication with their classmates, isolated at home, lacking adequate devices, or instruction on how to make most of the distance education. The academic year 2020-2021 was particularly challenging; the transition to distance learning was supported by the university through a series of workshops for instructors that presented the basic affordances of certain tools (Moodle, Webex, Microsoft Teams) offered by the institution; nevertheless, class instructors had to figure out how to make those tools effective for the content and purpose of classes that they taught, how much/when to delegate certain activities to students via collaborative projects that involved a higher degree of independence and personal responsibility than those known by the students, how to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching, and that of the students' attaining the objectives of the course. In the Spring and early Summer of 2020, our enrolled students, and the (then)

prospective students experienced a brutal disruption of their lives; continuous and paralyzing fear, interdictions, harsh punishment of those who did not respect the draconian rules of almost 'no human contact' triggered serious, and many times, unaddressed episodes of depression and despondency; the much-awaited return, or the debut of their student life did not happen in person but in a remote learning format. This meant that all the professors and class instructors had to adapt their curriculum, rewrite content, and imagine activities that made sense in the new medium. Teaching remotely does not mean a mere transfer of materials on a platform, but a sensible breakdown of what/how much is taught during the video sessions, and how much one 'lets go', and trusts the responsibility and good judgment of their students. During this trying and long three semesters of teaching remotely, much experience accumulated on both sides. This article presents some of that experience, projected against the concerns and urges for digital humanities in Romanian academic life. It also relies on the author's decade-long experience in teaching Romanian language and culture in traditional and hybrid mode at Columbia, Yale and Cornell Universities.

<u>Recent Romanian accounts on digital humanities. What we can learn.</u>

In other words, while the catchphrases "digital natives", "digital humanities", "netizens", "hybrid education", "distance learning" had been floating around for quite a while, they were more of "mots du jour" invoked at conferences and workshops where those teaching in humanities presented their own innovations in pedagogy and content creation, or explored them from a theoretical perspective. Justice should be made to the teaching of languages that has connected in a more synchronous, critical and meaningful manner to the developments in the field, seeking compliance of pedagogy and content to their target students, target languages, with a realistic glance at the curricula and technology provided by their schools. The teaching of literature and other humanities-related classes at Romanian universities has remained largely tributary to the European traditional style of teaching, although new methods/activities designed for students, relying on an interdisciplinary approach entered the field, by personal choice of some teachers, or by the need to redesign programs, in order to meet the enrolment requirements, and keep the programs viable. This is more visible in universities that launched interdisciplinary graduate programs, and also enjoyed the support of their administration for purchase of technology and instruction of professors who saw a benefit in such an approach. The initiative was embraced enthusiastically almost a decade ago at various major Romanian universities. For example, an

article published in 2014 by Mădălina Nicolaescu and Adriana Mihai (Nicolaescu, Mihai, 2)[1], the authors present their project of a "digital Shakespeare" with focus on the regional/local reception of W. Shakespeare's work, an interactive resource meant to have iconic work of the Western canon "talk" to users/students who belong to a different cultural space, i.e. Central and Eastern Europe; the project, the authors write, does not explore "the geo-cultural focus on Central and Eastern Europe, but the interactive and participatory focus on fluid, multilinear and digital stories" (Nicolaescu, Mihai, 6). Such an ambitious enterprise, that summon all theoretical and pedagogical energies, as it engaged with a major, and frequently taken for granted "universal cultural heritage" encountered, the authors admit, difficulties that pertain to the imbalance between the robustness of the project, and the lack of technical support, or funding necessary to implement technology, that often plague Romanian educational institutions of all levels:

> "Considering the difficulty of introducing those apps to Romanian students given the financial costs of the computer tablet supporting them (…) Romanian teachers who want to make use of digital material are more likely to turn to databases and educational websites which are in open access" (Nicolaescu, Mihai, 4)

One can see that, according to the members of the project team, the most competent choices in what the literature of the field would name "teaching philosophy", or the most appropriate design for the purpose of the project cannot but remain a projection in lack of the basic tools that would have allowed its users to participate in the co-creation of interactive content and effective use of it. In other words, while the article is abundantly documented, with a necessary critical reading of the theoretical sources available at the time of the research, it seems to remain more a wish as far as its implementation, and consequent evaluation are concerned.

Other articles on digital humanities in Romania, published after 2014, and available on research databases expose similar concerns: the effort that researchers, course instructors and students, alike, put into educating

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[1] Nicolaescu, Mădălina and Mihai, Adriana. "Teaching Digital Humanities in Romania." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 16.5 (2014): <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2497>

themselves in digital humanities is hindered by the difficulties that arise from infrastructure and mere educational technology.

As we approached the end of the second decade of the 21st century, articles, studies and assessment of ongoing projects in digital humanities in Romania were published constantly; this proves that the preoccupation with the implementation, localization and effective use of digital humanities in Romania goes beyond the theoretical exploration of literature. A seminal study, published by Mihaela Ursa in 2015[2], is a critical account on the status of digital humanities in Romania. Together with the continuous delays brought by administrators who still understand the use of educational technology in terms of being able to "strike the keys on a keyboard" or navigate the Internet for basic information, the reservations towards the engagement with digital humanities, Ursa argues, come from the prevalence of the aesthetic approach in literature and all connected disciplines:

> "As an epistemic transformation, the digital turn is not a matter of cultural choice, but one of statistic necessity. Starting in the mid-nineties, with the expansion of massive networking and database-sharing, the digital turn soon finds its own metadiscourse in the form of digital humanities, forcing an entry in the given system of disciplines and in most academic curricula. The new discourse is received either as a threat to humanities as we know them, or as hope for the future improvement in social appreciation of the same humanities. I intend to discuss here both the state of digital research related to Romanian culture (literature, in particular) and the main challenges that digital studies are facing in Romanian context. It is my contention that an ethos of suspicion pervades the public reception of the digital turn, paradoxically sharing the stage with an uncritical enthusiasm. This is why this paper intends to pinpoint some of the things that really should be at stake in the Romanian debate around digital studies and digitization." (Ursa, 81)

Further on, she analyses the deep mechanisms that contributed to an "interrupted" development of the `digital turn' in Romanian humanities. One of the reasons is the persistence of the aesthetic approach to literature, together with the perpetuation of national literature as the core of the identity of the

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[2] Ursa, Mihaela. "Is Romanian Culture Ready for the Digital Turn?". *Metacritic Journal* for Comparative Studies and Theory 1 (1), 80-97, *2015*.

modern nation-state. Obviously, this can be noticed across Central and Eastern Europe, and it appears as one of the many paradoxes in the area: on the one hand, the enthusiasm for `anything Western', or the desire of 'going global' are tempered by the fear of losing the tradition of teaching/learning literature/literary theory, and everything in between in manner that may harm the uniqueness of literature and may induce a mechanical, quantitative, reductive approach:

> "On the one hand, openness and interdisciplinarity are among the dearest slogans of the academia everywhere and much lip service is given to that, but, on the other, imposing an intermedial or even interdisciplinary system challenges the academic status quo and its traditional resistance beyond simple slogans. There is a systemic resistance among literary scholars and professors of literature to the idea of opening the literary field to either new practices, or to what I call hybrid objects, or to digitally born praxes or methods; we should add to that there is also a silent but systemic resistance within the university to the idea of interdisciplinarity, nevermind intermediality. Much energy is lost in some Romanian literary studies on preservation of disciplinary purity and autonomy, on rejecting a reinterpretation of one's own place in the new web of knowledge, along with a theoretical and methodological reformulation of one's own discourse." (Ursa, 85)

I chose to reproduce a longer fragment from Ursa's study, as it synthesizes the internal reasons of the resistance to digital humanities beyond their first stage, that of repositories of documents, books, data, available to everyone who needs rapid access to reliable information in the field. At the same time, it is important to notice that the fragment also signals the position of those who urge the engagement with digital humanities in the teaching of literary disciplines at university level in opposition to the perpetuation of the old ways of understanding the object of our expertise and teaching. A '2.0' *querelle des anciens et des modernes* seems to arise, as it is documented by the author of the article, with the conservative academics being worried about the possible loss of autonomy of their fields of specialization. Indeed, digital humanities brings, as Ursa, and then later studies show (Olaru, 2019)[3],

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[3] Olaru, Ovio. "What is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in Romanian Departments?". *Transilvania*, 5/6, 30-37, 2019

commenting on international experts, the shift from close reading to intermediality, more of a *locus* or hybrid objects than an examination of existing 'objects'(literary works, theoretical concepts associated with literature, etc.). The in-betweenness of the new field, whose fundamental principles brings it close to current *intersectionality* means the definition and examination of literature from the perspective of a new teleology.

If we are to sum up the concerns of the few authors who wrote about the status of digital humanities in Romania in the last seven years is the treatment of the field as one of the theoretical fads, a fashionable way of intellectual virtue-signalling at conferences, or of showing off among academic peers who act more consistent to their beliefs in the old methods. Obviously, they do so by presenting projects (Olaru, 2019, who builds, theoretically, on Ursa, 2015) or by formulating rhetorical questions that still wait for answers. One pertinent observation (Olaru, 30) confirms that the field is still approached with the same theoretical gusto, and less engagement with the development of new pedagogies and adequate statements of teaching philosophy.

No matter how fascinating the theoretical, and innovative projects, or newly designed master's programs in digital humanities[4], these are still at an experimental level in Romania. Doubled by the new publications that explore Romanian culture/literature within a global perspective, the teaching reality in philology departments remains different. The undergraduate programs for those majoring in Romanian Language and Literature (with a minor in another language and literature program) prepare future teachers in the aforementioned fields. Whether they choose to follow this career, or not, it is a subjective choice; the curriculum, sanctioned by hierarchically superior fora that rate/rank the university/department/program and are directly coordinated by the Ministry of Education, must include a number of courses/texts/methods that comply with the skills and knowledge requested by future employers. Thus, one can see that the teaching staff and students, alike, were obliged to design, implement, and use, respectively, new methods and tools, while the curriculum remained unaltered, as the situation was deemed "temporary". From what I presented above, real and conscientious engagement with the digital 'mode' in teaching and assessing literature and connected subjects should have started

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[4] The University of Bucharest launched an MA program in Digital Humanities in 2019. The general presentation of the program shows that it is taught entirely in English, although Romanian humanities are in great need of closing the digital gap. We also understand that at the time of its inception, the program defined digital humanities more as a field devoted to data collection, annotation, digital archives, data interpretation.

with a thorough redesign of the entire curriculum, and with a collective decision to adopt a certain set of tools that provided some predictability during the three semesters. Obviously, certain tools/apps function better for a subject, but are not extremely useful to others. It is also commendable that Ovidius University insured maintenance, updated the software, in short, took care that the technical conditions for distance learning were met.

Experience and experiment; what we learned from each other

Along the academic year, my teaching load consists of various classes in literature (Romanian literature second year, Spring semester), Literary Theory (101, 201), Intro to Romanian Ethnology and Folklore (101), Romanian Literature and Film (a master's level course, one semester). To these, classes in Romanian for non-native speakers added. It is obvious that the content, relevance to the curricula, and direct impact of these classes to the students' future career differed. The mode chosen for delivering the classes was hybrid (a combination of synchronous and asynchronous activities), with video interaction via Webex, and individual study, collaborative activities, homework to be posted on Moodle, etc.

The initial drawbacks came from both parties. First, the switch to remote teaching activated the stereotype according to which we deal with digital natives, savvy, smart and creative as far as educational technology is concerned. This assumption flew then (and it still does, now); as a result, the Ministry of Education, and other institutions that were responsible for upgrading the infrastructure, or updating software, or purchasing software necessary for education at all levels, patted each other's shoulder in content, laboring under the illusion of "Romanian youth is IT-literate/creative/the best-given the number of those who made in Silicon Valley, or as notorious international hackers, as per the periodic references in newspapers. While there is an important number of academics, software developers, researcher in the field, with notable accomplishments, the tendency to generalize, that may be part to a homogeneous representation of collective identity, hides the reality that those who do not own, or have access to a device, other than a smartphone, or who use a PC/laptop/tablet for simple activities, such as minimal navigation on the Internet, communication via social media, etc. is by far bigger than that of those who know how to make the most of what a device can offer, or are able to self-educate via video tutorials, or written discussions available on dedicated pages. To this, the fact that classes that were supposed to teach the students how to work with various elements of software applications for education were not held in a computer lab, on machines that run the same

version of software, but using one's own devices. In a way, it seemed that, under the pandemic pressure, we expected to train concert pianists who practiced their digitation on the kitchen table. Thus, each instructor spent some of the teaching/learning time to introduce the students to the software, and even to some affordances of the Office package, little, or unknown to them.

The stereotypes, created by the mature generation, sometimes out of fear of not being flexible/adapted to the 2.0 world that postulate that digital natives must come equipped with a complete set of skills in their interaction with the virtual world is not new. In a now classic book Palfrey& Gasser (Palfrey, Gasser, 2008) documented the fact that going digital did not necessarily come naturally to those whom we label as such; after analysing surveys, interviews and evaluations of programs where educational technology was used, the authors saw that many of the young generation opt for a combination of the "classic" with the digital. This happened more than a decade ago, and the evolution and prevalence of the virtual in our daily routine may entitle us to assume that the conclusions of the authors are no longer valid. However, I will present some personal conclusions, after the period of teaching remotely.

The criteria that I observed (keeping a strict personal course diary for each class, during the first semester, in order to see what I can improve, in order of pedagogy, usefulness of course design, reading/homework load) were the following:

1. <u>engagement with the synchronous activities</u> (via Webex), i.e.- alertness and adequate reaction to the material presented by the instructor, willingness to participate in ad-hoc brief collaborative activities using breakout rooms, abiding by the netiquette in a video class

2. <u>engagement with asynchronous activities</u> (via Moodle, i.e.- access course materials and work with them, completion and upload of homework, participation in collaborative projects via Moodle, group communication related to the content of the class using the tools provided by the platform, other individual initiative for learning using the platform and other tools

3. <u>retention/attrition</u>- as our students were not penalized in a definitive manner by lack of attendance/engagement with the classes, I measured the number of the students who participated in all video sessions in an active and adequate manner, and who submitted the homework/participated in collaborative projects.

<u>What I noticed</u>:

1.In terms of engagement with the synchronous activities, I should first mention that, in lack of a firm policy concerning netiquette in video classes, adopted by the entire school/university, the request to keep the camera on, unless an emergency, or technical issues occurred, many students found it overbearing and intruding. It took some time to explain to them that, similar to working from home via videoconference, participating in a video class came with a set of requirements, that range from connecting from a stable, quiet place, to dressing professionally, to keeping the camera on, to not doing other things with the class as "background music". Also, even if we all imagine that digital humanities only intricate reflections on how to transfer the learning of literature in the 2.0 world, and to create resources and new pedagogies, it sometimes means teaching the students how to adjust light in the room, where to sit, and how to devise a "plan B", without fear, when technical glitches arise. Sometimes, learning from home, or from other locales, creates the illusion that the class is not part of an academic program, but more of a leisure activity, and this was the first difficulty we had to overcome. It is nonetheless true that connecting to three/four classes daily takes a toll on one's attention span, and we tried to alternate synchronous activities that required attention with short visual moments, connected to the topic, but less demanding, and to offer 10-15 minutes break when everyone disconnected and relaxed.

As far as the synchronous ad-hoc collaborative activities are concerned, the students eagerly awaited them, and, judging by the quality of their responses, critique and interpersonal communication related to the topic, I would appreciate that they were a success.

2.As all the class materials were uploaded in weekly/thematic breakup sessions, together with activities meant to help reflection, and to encourage the students read, look up for more sources, reflect in a critical manner, I managed to avoid the discomfort of feeling disoriented, or out of place if someone missed a class. The activities, that were created in a scaffolded manner that was explained to the students, were meant to help them with self-assessment, measurement of progress and report difficulties. As shown under 1., many students opted for the old ways of learning before the exam/final test, although remote learning means constant preparation and turning in homework on time. Statistically, during the 2020-2021 academic year, the rate of uploading homework on time varied between ½ and 1/3 of the total number of students enrolled in each class. The rest opted to send the homework via email, although they were reminded repeatedly that a space allocated to homework existed on the platform. The students motivated their attitude by the fact that they felt email communication as a more personal interaction with the class instructor,

as well as safer. This habit shows that, no matter how enthusiastic, or willing to experiment with new media, or tools, our students may appear, they still felt that the old email communication was a kind of necessary connection with the former way of relating to teachers. It is also possible that, because they use social media to communicate with each other, to feel that the use of a platform for uploading their work was similar, in a way, to the informal communication. However, Whatsapp, as a tool for educational exchange, was preferred by them, and not favoured by me. Studies in behavioural patterns and education effectiveness of Whatsapp use[5] (Kumar, Bervell et alii, 2020, 60-61), show that the application, which was not designed for educational use, is favoured by students as it brings a sense of self-efficiency and it echoes behavioural models of personal communication within their group of friends, or family. At the same time, it shapes the behaviour related to learning and encourages immediate gratification that is believed to be achieved by the quick compilation of some material related to the homework, uploading and sharing it with the group and with the teacher. Although my strict policy concerning homework via Whatsapp was not met with enthusiasm, to put it mildly, the students started to use the platform and, with time, understood the importance of turning in homework on time.

In this article, I will not get into details about the quality of the homework, or the gap between the deep philosophy of digital humanities (briefly presented above) and our need to come up with curricula, syllabi and teaching materials adapted to the remote format, in a very short period of time, and review it, afterwards. The fact that the remote experience followed the uncertainty of returning/not yet returning to in-person education, as dictated by the evolution of the pandemic, prevented the teaching staff and the students from engaging in a coherent assessment/dialogue, that would have led to a robust model/ materials of transitioning to digital humanities, as a necessary mode of redesigning education in our departments. Thus, what I listed under 3.retention/attrition appears to be connected to the emergency mode in which we implemented and ran the remote teaching/learning. The shift to digital humanities involved the conscientious redesign of how we define and deliver literature and the connected subjects, keeping in mind that the written

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[5] Kumar Jeya, Amantha, Bervell, Brandford, Annamalai, Nagaletchimee, Osman, Sharifah. "Behavioral intention to use mobile learning: Evaluating the role of self-efficacy, subjective norm, and WhatsApp use habit". *IEEE Access,* 8, 208058-208074, 2020.

discourse is partially replaced with the visual and with the haptic, even the latter happens in a virtual world. In the classes that I taught, this translated as:

a. the students relied on easily accessible, generic sources of information to complete some of the homework, although they had written materials available; some of them did not question, of verify the scientific value/reliability of information, under the assumption that if it appears on the internet/websites, it must be trustworthy and valuable. Thus, the critical thinking took second place, and the fascination with the possibility of completing a task without too much effort came first. Also, even if all class instructors educated the students on plagiarism, and its unwanted outcomes, I encountered cases of simple transfer of information, without references, or comments. To some of those who chose this way of completing a task, the attitude did not mean plagiarism, which was probably associated with the "traditional" way of gathering information, critical reflection and writing.

b. creativity, and personal contribution were understood, by some of the students, as a recourse to image-heavy projects, with text acting more as captions of the images, or as too much time devoted to the 'adornment' of slides in .pptx format. In saw these preferences not only as a 'easy way up', but as a result of the mechanisms of coping with the uncertainty and solitude during the pandemic. The recourse to a more 'high school' style treatment of homework, or projects may have induced a 'safe space', that of a younger age, before the disruption and fear.

With time, the majority of the students improved their performance, and realized that remote learning does not equal rapid communication via a smartphone, or data transfer on social media. However, the retention/attrition rate was about 2/3 to 1/3, with the latter fraction representing the students who either prefer to take a year/semester off, or to take the final exam later. Apart from the reasons mentioned before, I should mention the fact that some of the students took jobs (either in-person, where available during the pandemic), or remote; remote education equalled, in these cases, to an activity easy to complete, something similar to the films in which multi-tasking superheroes are presented. This was enabled by the fact that there was little familiarity reinforcement on classroom policy, and rules in a remote environment, and also, of the personal understanding of videoconference rules vs. invasion of privacy.

To sum up, I would list the following conclusions, as I recorded them and reflected upon them in my course journals:

1. emergency remote education should have equipped us, academics and students, with a set of skills acquired by trial-and-error, constant reflection

of our own experience vs. that from other educational systems; what we learned should be used in critical ways in the integration of practices, tools, new pedagogy, not forgotten and related to the pandemic;

2. digital humanities, in their deep, theoretical approach, should not be conceived as a distant territory, where only those who are really endowed with abstract thinking and solid IT skills have access; after all, one can improve their pedagogy, or creation of class content by the adaptation of the theory and experiments in digital humanities in Romania. As university instructors, we do not need to feel uncomfortable if we do not know everything, or contribute to some major theoretical breakthrough;

3. the continuation of using hybrid modes of teaching/assessment means the engagement with the administration of our institution, in terms of their constant support for software and tools update; if remote learning, or its more prestigious source "digital humanities" may seem as a one-stop shop that solves all of our problems, it may not work in lack of a more coherent stance from all those who benefit from it, who teach and who administer programs. This includes periodic pedagogy workshops that do not need to engage a lot of funding, or rely always on guests but need our willingness to share, look for solutions, and learn from each other. In my opinion, and based on my former extended experience with the hybrid format, only by doing this we can invite those who distribute funding to become partners to innovations in pedagogy and meaningful creation of content. While ambitious, theory-rich research projects and publications will certainly bring recognition to their author(s), there is a stringent need to close, or at least reduce the gap between the design of a project and its real implementation, with benefits for students and learning.

4. the critical examination of the main stereotypes that pertain to students "they are savvier than us with all things virtual, their generation just knows these things", and the counterpart "they cannot learn, they are all day long on their phones" will brings a lot of benefits to both parties involved. As the literature of the field announced a while ago, if we live under the illusion that a certain device/app/tool contributes to quality education by itself, and our duty is just to share content, we may find our students, and ourselves, at a dead end:

> "However, if this is the direction that technology is taking us – toward greater and greater flexibility in course delivery – we must be careful not to lose those elements so fundamental to quality education (…). Among the most basic aspects of real learning are collaboration and student interaction. In many ways, an entire college course delivered

via cell phone seems predicated not on sound pedagogy but on the wish to respond to perceived market demand – educators giving students what they want – especially demand for flexible learning. We end up with little more than a high-tech telecourse. And it ironic that entirely self-paced learning might actually be delivered through an advanced communication device." (Snart, 70)[6]

In our case, the recourse to tools, models, etc. happened under pressure, and sometimes, adopted with distrust on the part of instructors, and of some students. In other cases, with too much enthusiasm. What is important, after the experience that we all lived, is to learn from it, and to keep improving our pedagogy, which is not something that we should leave only to specialized departments, or to bibliography.

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