

## **ASSESSMENT IN THE ONLINE VICTORIAN LITERATURE CLASS. A CASE STUDY**

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**Abstract:** *The paper discusses aspects related to assessing the English major and minor students at the Faculty of Letters, Ovidius University Constanța, Romania, participating in the online Victorian literature classes during semester one of the academic year 2020-2021. The assessment was conducted by Associate professor Nicoleta Stanca and Assistant professor Alina Cojocaru. The instructors started from the assumption that for evaluation they had to take into account the advantages and disadvantages of online classes, with which both they and the students had become familiar. The greatest challenge of this alternative to face-to-face education had been to create and maintain an online class community.*

*Thus, in order to preserve an online environment in which students should feel free to be creative and communicate with one another, two types of assessment have been introduced: a continuous one, “The British Literature Blog,” and a final one, “the Facebook/ LinkedIn Profiles.” Dr. Alina Cojocaru has been the administrator of The British Literature Blog: News, Views and Reviews from the students of Ovidius University, intended for students as an online source to complement their work in class in an active and collaborative manner. Associate professor Nicoleta Stanca has worked on the Facebook and LinkedIn Profiles for fictional characters, created by the students as final assessment, in order to offer the latter novelty in approaching literature, make them aware of the distinction between the private and the public spheres (with the Victorians and with us), make them focus on characters chronologically and psychologically, during stages of development, and make them do further research on social networks (with the Victorians and with us).*

*The paper will present results of these types of assessment with the English major and minor students enrolled in the Victorian literature class and will analyze the efficiency of the online assessment methods proposed.*

**Keywords:** *online class, assessment, Victorian literature, community, blog, media profiles*

### **I. From face to face teaching literature in classroom to teaching it online**

Teaching literature in classroom involves peer interaction, classroom discussions, with lectures and the seminar acting as forms of “cultural apprenticeship” (Kayalis, Natsima 1). When one teaches a literature survey in the traditional class, the concerns are as diverse as: choosing the approaches to use (i.e. texts in historical contexts and information on the background);

setting the corpus of literary texts (i.e. reliance on anthologies, on critical editions of popular authors, taking into account the length of the texts); designing coursepacks of critical articles to supplement the books assigned in a course; designing assignments so as to make students avoid plagiarism (through simple, short answer quizzes in class or open topic or assigned topic essays as homework) (Henry 49-57).

Conversely, teaching literature using digital technologies and online resources only because of medical restrictions that prevent classroom activities may run the risk of trivializing the subject: “If you are watching a movie or television or playing a computer game or surfing the Internet, you cannot at the same time be reading Shakespeare,” according to J. Hillis Miller (qtd. in Kayalis, Natsina 1-2). As a matter of fact, we were proved the opposite throughout the academic year 2020-2021 and the previous ones of online working with our students because of Covid19 pandemic restrictions.

Moreover, a computer-mediated class may raise questions of technology, with both instructors and students ranging from “digital immigrants” to “digital natives” (Prensky, qtd. in Blair 67-78). Instructors may find it challenging to move course materials from one environment to another, whereas students, given a variety of online sources, may find it even more difficult to select the reliable and useful ones.

However, theoreticians have also emphasized advantages of teaching online (in the literature class). Students that are shy, not interested or reluctant to raise their own questions will make good use of the chat facilities to write comments, edit and send them. Online discussions could encourage students’ participation better – from 70% teacher talk in class to 11% teacher talk in chat discussion (Dauer 163-170). Using online software environments, students have discussions, exchange papers, send emails and posts, etc. from home, which makes them feel more comfortable as well.

The greatest challenge with online classes is to create a “learning community” (Dauer 167), which is taken for granted as easily solidified in a traditional class. Probably the ideal teaching is to alternate online sessions with face-to-face meetings. How can the lecture/seminar instructor turn individuals working online into a group sharing an interest in the topic and also a sense of belonging to the group? This seems to be the key question in teaching online classes.

Dauer suggests four aspects instructors need to consider in order to achieve the so much desired learning community: technical, managerial, pedagogical and social (168). Require students to have / contribute to personalized webpages. Thus:

- Require introductory forum/ platform messages.
- Allow the class to discuss its own Netiquette (168), norms, ethics, communication style.

- Create a distinctive gathering place for the group, a student-only place, through the use of a chatroom or elsewhere online (i.e. a blog).
- Promote effective management in the group by asking students to take charge of particular sessions.
- Allow for pairwork / group work.
- Expect members to solve their own disputes, when the latter do not run the risk of including the whole group (Dauer 169-170).

These would be some of the elements to focus on when organizing online classes, besides adapting the lecture and seminar materials to the new environment.

The concern about the (mis)fit between the field of arts and literature and online learning can also be related to raising the level of students' accountability. Educators will manage a continuous exchange process in the online class by: regular announcements; ongoing bulletin board discussions; postings to the assigned discussion blog/forum; development of written projects on a regular basis; devoting specific periods of time to the lecture; clarifications of assignments and deadlines; use of classmates as sources of feedback for student work (Blair 70-71), which is what we have resorted to including for the third academic year online.

Marshall and Slocombe refer to the same advantage of the online class that we have already introduced in slightly different terms: the integration of technology into the teaching of literature may trigger process-oriented “communities of learning” (100). The aim of literature pedagogy is therefore to teach students how to become members of such communities that read (Marshall, Slocombe 106) in this transition from technology to “teachnology” (103).

In the communities of learning, instructors and students alike act as co-creators of knowledge (Marshall, Slocombe 106). Using this advantage of instructor–student as co-creator and co-consumer, students will be able, for instance, to understand and reshape their own lecture and seminar bibliographies, which is a step forward towards independent research. In this context of the spread of technologies and collaborative projects, students will benefit from a web of knowledge with no barriers between students and their peers and teachers. Such environments rely on peer-review for self-validation, which represents another useful means for facilitating the transition from student to scholar (Marshall, Slocombe 110).

Koskimaa introduces the role of “electracy” to compensate for the lack of the literary element (124) with students, an idea instructors should take into account at present since it is considered that from the 1960s on we left the “Guttenberg Galaxy” (McLuhan) for the “Internet Galaxy” (Castells) (in Koskimaa 123). The asset of electracy engenders pedagogical possibilities that might prove extremely creative. In role-based discussions, students may

be appointed a certain character from the historical period under scrutiny and eventually they will be able to conduct online discussions impersonating their assigned character (Koskimaa 125). Various visual and auditory methods of teaching literary structures can be applied on the computer screen. The discussion areas devoted to literary studies (literature web journals, literary blogs, discussions in forums) may make students engage in debates with authors, specialists or least with peers and instructors, and receive feedback of their tentative ideas (Koskimaa 125-6).

## **II. Assessment in the online literature class. General remarks and examples**

The most common type of assessment in the literature class is the essay-based assessment. However, in order to develop skills in reading literature, it might be supplemented by other activities: reading diaries; learning journals; response statements; newspaper-style reviews; discussions; short creative exercises; note-taking exercises; questionnaires; read and summarize exercises; editing exercises; posters; work with databases, all of them being applied both in the traditional class as well as in the online one, constituting a student's portfolio for the final assessment (Gibson 99-114).

Another interesting type of assessment, which we consider well suited for the online literature class, is described by Patrick Fleming in his article “‘The Office Is One Thing, and Private Life Is Another’: Social Networking with the Victorians” (197-210). Namely, inspired by a quote in *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, in which the lawyer's clerk, Wemmick, claims that “the office is one thing, and private life is another” (162), Fleming discusses the task he gave students in his Victorian literature class – to design two profiles for characters in *Great Expectations*, a Facebook one and a LinkedIn one. After reading the novel closely, choosing a character, locating passages that characterize the character's background, values, and personality, the students were required by the Facebook exercise to explore a character's personal life as it emerges from the novel and by the LinkedIn one to act as economic agents and treat the character as a professional.

By creating the two profiles students could explore approaches to character and narrative; they could look at the ideology of Victorian “work” and differentiate between social media platforms with real implications in their lives. The “reinvention of the novel as a form that might do something positive in the world by swaying readers' minds rather than activating their passions” is to be traced back to the Victorians, to Dickens, Hardy, G. Eliot, who “articulated a project for the cultivation of the reader's sympathetic imagination” (Keen, qtd. in Fleming 197-210). The creation of the two social media profiles allows thus students to imagine how writers themselves imagined the lives of the respective characters.

The assessment activity proposed above can be easily done in a Victorian literature class because it seems that the second most popular word in the Victorian vocabulary, except for “God,” is “work” (Houghton in Fleming 199). Therefore, the distinction between the two spheres, professional and personal, as they appear in novels, must be mastered by students as it used to be as important with the Victorian Age as it is today.

When moving from the personal to the professional profile, one can draw students’ attention to the Victorian class structure, important for the Victorians and illustrated in fiction, and to the challenge of finding ways for characters as well as for themselves to deal with an apparent lack of experience in the eyes of a future/prospective employer. In the case of female characters like Estella, Biddy or Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, the separate spheres are related to gendered spaces as well: male – work, female –home. It is to be remarked that LinkedIn, as a professional profile, shows no appreciation for home and for house work, which remains in the margin today as it did in the Victorian Age (Fleming 203).

Among the advantages of the two-profile assignment, one may mention: the novelty of the task, which might trigger students’ curiosity better; the focus on character analysis – a synchronic or diachronic approach, which offers a variety of choices to the student; the focus on close reading to identify the relevant passages to illustrate the features of the profiles; the focus on historical aspects of the Victorian Age (work, social class, separate spheres); the possible extension of research on imagining other peoples’/ characters’ minds and also research on social networks and theories of network analysis (Fleming 197-210).

For advanced students suggestions can be offered as guidelines for further BA/MA research starting from the simple tasks of designing the two profiles mentioned above. For instance, for imagining other peoples’/ characters’ minds, Fleming recommends three books to consider and work with: Adela Pinch’s *Thinking about Other People in the Nineteenth-Century British Writing* (2010), Vanessa L. Ryan’s *Thinking without Thinking in the Victorian Novel* (2012), and Alex Woloch’s *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (2003).

Adela Pinch, in *Thinking about Other People in the Nineteenth-Century British Writing*, discusses the way 19<sup>th</sup>-century texts account for the act of thinking about another person. Forms of thinking are social and embedded in passionate relationships to others or they are forms of action, producing real effects on others. Thinking can do good to others or it can inflict damage (as Coleridge, Barrett Browning, Patmore and Meredith claimed). In a social and moral sense, thinking acts as a form of altruism or it can harm the others, as it is continuously imbued with forms of energy.

Equally challenging is Vanessa L. Ryan's *Thinking without Thinking in the Victorian Novel*, which starts from the debate about consciousness in the Victorian era in relation to reading novels. At the time, scholars such as Herbert Spencer, William Carpenter, and George Henry Lewes worked on the so-called cognitive sciences and were read by novelists such as W. Collins, G. Eliot, H. James, and G. Meredith, for answers to questions related to our minds, how we experience with our minds, how experience relates to our behavior and sense of responsibility. Ryan's study draws conclusions related to the way in which the mind in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is embedded in the body, in behavior, in social structures and in fiction.

For Woloch, in *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*, each character is constructed through the space within the narrative as a whole. The critic coins the phrase "character-space" to name the relation between the character and his/her delimited position within a narrative structure (32-33). In 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels, we connect the character-spaces in order to understand forms of social relations. The realist character-system is dually oriented: toward each uniquely delineated character-space (the character it amplifies or obscures) and toward the unified structure, the symbolism, the plot constructed through character-spaces.

The studies suggested above constitute a minimal bibliography for undergraduate/graduate students to start from and deal with character psychology and narrative construction in their own boarder research projects on fiction.

For further study of social networks and theories of network analysis, the following sources might be consulted: "What Is a Network?" (And Who Is Andrew Lang?) (2013) and "The Bechdel Test and the Social Form of Characters Networks" (2015). In "What Is a Network?" the personality of Andrew Lang is evoked: a journalist, writer, folklore gatherer, translator, cultural anthropologist, editor at Longman's, dominating late Victorian culture. There is a long list of collaborating writers, institutions and hundreds of volumes as legacy associated with this name. Andrew Lang is thus discussed as an example of collaborative work, as a focal node of multiple actors, institutions and forms of knowledge. His "network effect" is analyzed in terms of textual interpretation, the changing outlines of disciplines, the philosophy of historical method, the conceptions of authorship and collaboration in the modern cultural marketplace.

"The Bechdel Test and the Social Form of Characters Networks" focuses on the Bechdel test, which originates with Alison Bechdel (1985) and measures women's dialogue in film, in relation to social network analysis. The test gives a pass or a fail based on three criteria: "One, it has to have at least two women in it who, two, talk to each other about, three, something

beside a man” (qtd. in Selisker 1). According to Selisker, the connection with contemporary digital humanities is important as the test offers criteria for “generating a character network for a text, and it also works as a means of expanding the scholarly conversation about the political dimensions of social networks within narrative” (3). An interesting example is offered by Caroline Levine about Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House*, namely the novel “imagines society itself as a network of networks” that link characters through ties such as “the law, disease, philanthropy, the space of the city, class, gossip and the family tree” (qtd. in Selisker 6). An analysis of networks, types of them, approaches to them, etc., with examples from literary works might prove enriching as a research topic for students, especially in this digital-oriented context.

### **III. Assessment in the online literature class. A case study**

#### **Lecture assessment**

The following tasks have been assigned to undergraduate students from the English–German/Turkish/French/Italian program, 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, at the Faculty of Letters, Ovidius University of Constanta, Romania.

British Literature – Romanticism and the Victorian Age  
Sem. 1, 2020-2021

#### Assignment 1 (4.5p)

Design a Facebook profile for a fictional character in one of the Victorian novels you have read: Pip / Estella / Catherine Earnshaw (Linton) / Heathcliff / Jane Eyre / Dorothea Brooke / Tertius Lydgate / Tess (Durbeyfield) Clare

Include:

- the character’s name
- a picture
- a status update
- basic info (relationships status, city/ town/ village, interests)
- 1-3 friends from the novel, with pictures
- 5 posts from the character or his/ her friends

(Tips: include lines of dialogue from the novel; mention videos or news articles the character might like)

#### Assignment 2 (4.5p)

Design a LinkedIn profile for a fictional character in one of the Victorian novels you have read: Pip / Estella / Catherine Earnshaw (Linton) / Heathcliff / Jane Eyre / Dorothea Brooke / Tertius Lydgate / Tess (Durbeyfield) Clare

Include:

- the character's name
- a professional picture
- a job title, location and field
- current and previous employers
- education
- 100-word summary (quote from the novel for support)
- 100-word explanation of experience (rely on the novel)
- 3 endorsed skills / 3 groups (rely on the novel)

You are not allowed to use sources without acknowledgment! Originality of profiles is strongly encouraged! The fictional characters' profiles are to be used in class only!

First of all, 37 students responded to the lecture task. According to the data found, it seems that the most popular characters for a Facebook profile were Catherine and Heathcliff (13), Jane Eyre (11), Pip and Estella (5), Tess (5) and Dorothea and Lydgate (4). Conversely, the students considered more appropriate for a LinkedIn profile: Jane Eyre (13), Pip and Estella (5), Catherine and Heathcliff (6), Tess (5) and Dorothea and Lydgate (4).

For the Facebook profile, the findings reveal that students included: the character's name, pictures, usually from film adaptations, a status update, basic information on the places where the characters are imagined to live, on their interests, hobbies and a few friends from the novel, with pictures, mostly from the same film adaptations. Finally, the profile also mentioned 5 posts from the character or his/ her friends, which were largely of two types: 1. quotes from the novel relevant for the evolution of the character; 2. imaginary lines by the character(s) in connection to the plot, in a very imaginative dialogue with the novelist, as we see for instance for Catherine Earnshaw (Linton). The second category is interesting to consider, as it looks like an exchange in the Victorian Age between Dickens' readers of serialized stories in his *All the Year Round* and the author himself, for instance. It not only proves the depth of the engagement of the student with the text but also the need for the creation of the community mentioned in the second section of this article, a community of reading in which the literary process is conceived as a continuous interaction.

The LinkedIn profile designed by the students, comprised, as required, the character's name, a professional picture (from film adaptations), a job title, location and field of work and possibly previous employers, the various stages of education the character benefitted from, a 100-word professional bio summary (quote from or based on the novel) and a 100-word



explanation of experience (relying on the novel) to justify the qualification for the professional position searched for and endorsed skills (relying on the novel).

First of all, it is challenging to look at the same character depicted from the two perspectives, personal and professional. The aim of the task was achieved as the students realized that the distinction that we make in our daily lives between the private and the public spheres is equally envisaged by the fiction writers assigned in the lecture syllabus. As it can be noticed in one example, the Facebook profile for Tess Durbeyfield, Thomas Hardy's heroine, centers on personal self-introduction, family, relationships and friends, love, major moments in her personal life – seduction, becoming a woman, having a child, falling in love, getting married, separation, betrayal, murder, running away, death and fate acceptance, all rendered through quotes and pictures from one of the numerous film adaptations. The LinkedIn profile, on the contrary, introduced the character from a professional viewpoint, with a neutral summary, education and previous work experience, and the skills advertised in search of a new position. The scarcity of resources here results from the lack of encouragement for women to pursue education and a professional activity in the Victorian Age.

Secondly, it is interesting to look at the evolution of the posts for each character chosen by students, as this proves the ways in which they became aware of the growth/transformation of that particular character. And since we are dealing with 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels, the very idea of the shaping of the personality of the protagonists is central to the narrative. For instance, for Jane Eyre, while working on the LinkedIn profile, students noticed the educational and professional components imagined by Charlotte Brontë with the aim of drawing attention to the woman's status in the Victorian Age. Students therefore enumerated the character's skills and endorsements (English, communication, History, Geography, Arithmetic, piano, sewing, French, drawing, teaching) and previous job experience and employers (teacher at Lowood Institution, governess at Thornfield Hall, teacher at Morton School for Girls), becoming aware of the need of the heroine to free herself through work. For Catherine Earnshaw (Linton), Emily Brontë's Romantic heroine, the students' Facebook profile follows the destiny of the girl-woman-ghost character: the good old days of little Catherine – savage, fierce and free – and Heathcliff wandering around the moors; the growth of love between Catherine and Heathcliff; the intrusion represented by Edgar Linton, and the marriage between Catherine and Linton; Catherine's decline, death and haunting of Wuthering Heights.

Thirdly, the analysis of the two types of profiles highlighted the concept of the network represented by the characters under scrutiny. For instance, the choice of Tertius Lydgate, the doctor in George Eliot's

*Middlemarch*, is a very good example to consider the idea of social network in Victorian society. Dr. Lydgate is a newcomer to Middlemarch, this provincial town imagined like a network by George Eliot; he works like a scientist to reveal the “primitive tissue” of the social life of the late Victorian provinces. Driven by “intellectual passion,” but stifled by the provincial Middlemarchers, Dr. Lydgate would like to make a link in the chain of medical discovery and profession. He stands out as a breach in the network of mediocrity, self-sufficiency and egoism of Middlemarch.

### **Seminar assessment**

For the seminar assessment, students were invited to deliver a presentation or write an essay on one of the topics suggested during the seminar, representing the analysis of (a) particular poem(s) or of (a) chapter(s) from the novels studied. Following the implementation of an online Victorian literature class, the need to preserve a “learning community” (Dauer 167) and engage the students in an active learning process became of prime importance. Therefore, in addition to the seminar discussions and assignments, a literary blog was created as an asynchronous medium of communication for promoting collaborative learning and continuous assessment. Since the British literature seminars themselves inherently involve intense reading, writing, and exchange of ideas among students, the literary blog could be perceived as an extension with a huge pedagogical potential due to its interface, which promotes further reflections and informal discussions on the works studied in the virtual classes. From this idea stemmed the British literature blog titled “News, views and reviews from the students of Ovidius University,” a collaborative project created in 2020, nurtured by the students throughout the academic year and accessible via the following link: <https://ovidiusbritishliterature.wordpress.com/>.

Research on the benefits of blogs for both language acquisition and enhancing higher-order thinking skills has been conducted since the beginning of the century. Specialists have acknowledged that the interactive interface and archival feature make blogs effective learning tools and “collaborative spaces where people negotiate and construct meaning and texts” (Richardson 74). Students from the English–German/Turkish/French/Italian and Romanian-English programs created an active literary community by writing posts that fit various genres – from literary analyzes to reflective comments – and included various media aimed to improve the level of preparation for the seminars and the final examination. There was a high degree of flexibility and freedom to choose any writer, specific work, or cultural element from the syllabus that resulted in a great focus shift in different directions of interpretations. I could notice how kernels of ideas produced by students as a result of seminar close readings and discussions

morphed into individual blog posts and seminar presentations. Moreover, students expressed a shift in attitude towards writing activities inasmuch as the process of drafting, editing and reviewing increased the accuracy in getting their meaning across and fluency when using the target language. The British literature blog was regarded as a virtual agora where anyone could share their findings or ideas, complementing or responding to existing posts.

Blogging represents one of the manifold technologies for literacy that encourages both students and professors to adapt themselves to new cognitive patterns and modalities. On the one hand, researchers have emphasized that students make progress not only by reading and writing their own assignments in order to comply with the course objectives, but also by engaging in reflective thinking over what they and their peers have written. As Ford states, “blogging requires higher-order thinking skills such as the ability to evaluate and synthesise” (9). This observation highlights the blog as a worthwhile pedagogical tool which operates with the highest levels of cognition, according to Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives. Instead of testing the simple knowledge or comprehension of the subject, students are asked to approach issues concerning Victorian literature by tracing textual evidence and reading critically. To quote from George Eliot’s novel *Middlemarch*, “It is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view” (63). The interactive nature of the blog adds an additional layer of metacognition since students can reflect upon the ideas introduced by their peers and reconsider their own, deepening their understanding of the topic and potentially improving their work.

The blog was intended as a virtual space that would enhance the topics covered in the online Victorian literature classes, uncover new concepts, open up new dimensions of the literary texts and provide sources of inspiration for the individual seminar assignments. As a form of continuous assessment, self-evaluation and a useful support for learning, this new methodological strategy engaged the students in a sustained activity of reading, writing and reflecting. Giralt and Murray remark that, in the case of their students, blogs in the literature class “enhance their comprehension process of the novel, the depth of their reflexions and the development of their literary appreciation, in other words, their critical thinking” (Giralt and Murray 288). Indeed, a progressive critical approach could be observed throughout the semester, building up to the final critical appreciation submitted in essay or presentation form for seminar evaluation. For instance, the blog post “A Discussion about Love in *Wuthering Heights*” displays the ability to contextualize quotes, to present and contrast two opposing perspectives and advocate for one of them by offering supporting evidence from the novel and to make connections with other art forms.

On the other hand, in addition to helping achieve student learning objectives, blogs constitute a hybrid teaching and assessment environment with regards to the multimedia content. Online Victorian literature classes give professors a greater leeway to adapt the seminars to the reading habits and devices that this generation of students prefers in order to engage with the literary sources. Prensky stresses the need to develop good practices in collaboration with the students, united by the motto “We are all learners. We are all teachers” (46), and emulate the students’ “ability to quickly master, use and apply technology, and in their fearlessness to try new things” (Prensky 46). In the blog post titled “Catherine’s True Loves: Heathcliff and Nature”, the student produced a critical response by referring not only to textual evidence from the novel, but also to the 2011 film adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*. Thus, she points to an interdisciplinary approach and to cinema as a discourse capable of unravelling new dimensions of the novel. Furthermore, the film medium overcomes the dichotomy between low culture and high culture just as the blog encourages a bridge between a formal and informal literary analysis and discussion.

Overall, the semiotic resources chosen by students revolved around including digital media, videos and images as carriers of meaning. Specialists in the field of education have scrutinized these “multimodal approaches to academic argument” (Huang and Archer 65) included in the writing practices in Higher Education. They noted that, traditionally, students have experienced resistance from professors when trying to make an academic argument in a written essay using not only the logic of the word, but also of images, especially when wielding web-based or social networking tools, podcasts or even reverting to forms of lowbrow popular culture such as comic books. The proponents of this multimodal approach to writing practices in the digital age urge professors to rethink discourse practices and admit the integration of elements pertaining to all semiotic systems, from linguistic and visual to audio and spatial. The students of today are familiarized with digital texts ranging from e-books to hypertexts. Therefore, the form of communication which uses only the alphabetic print can no longer be considered dominant. As readers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, students need to be able to understand, analyze, and produce texts that are not only written but are also verbal and visual.

Beyond a continuous form of assessment, the blog may also constitute a follow-up or a starting point of discussion for the following seminar. Returning to the concept of multimodality, students make the most of the plethora of resources available online and disseminate those they consider would interest and benefit their peers. To some extent they share with the professor the role of being a researcher and educated professional, investigating and selecting the most relevant study materials. The “learning

community” (Dauer 167) that interacts by using the blog is hence student-centered since students have the chance to be active creators of knowledge, not only recipients. In addition, they also have the opportunity to get acquainted with the learning styles and preferences of their peers. In the case of one student, the point of interest was the manner in which art and contemporary popular culture are imbued with cultural products from the Victorian age. The song rendition of Lord Alfred Tennyson’s *The Lady of Shalott* by Loreena McKennitt brings attention to the intertextual mirroring of song and poem which is in itself “a song that echoes cheerly/ From the river winding clearly/ Down to tower’d Camelot” (Tennyson 21). The visuals which accompany the song equally stimulated further discussions at the seminar. The poem “Mariana” by Tennyson was also analyzed with reference to the works of the Pre-Raphaelites (Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais and John William Waterhouse). Although at first sight not essential to the core course material, such interdisciplinary activities raise awareness of the socio-political and historical context of the Victorian era.

The audiovisual stimulus proposed by another student illustrates a contemporary critical interpretation focused on *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy. She states that the material was discovered while she was doing research for the seminar essay and that it helped solidify the concepts introduced by the lecture and seminar and acknowledge multiple new perspectives that complement the core course material. The podcast format provided by BBC offers both an enjoyable, user-friendly interface and a favourable occasion for a quality listening comprehension exercise. In fact, the student recounted how she was very pleased to be able to easily take notes while she was listening and use them for the seminar assignment. Students stimulate one another in this discovery process, turning the blog not only in a method of continuous assessment, but also of collective learning and language acquisition. Using these new forms of media, the lines between criticism and playfulness are blurred.

Considering that blogs allow posts and comments in an asynchronous manner, the study of literature develops not only the aforementioned reflective dimension but also a creative one. Using virtual media, students discover and put into practice themselves the relationships between criticism and experimentation, theory and creativity. New literacies foster the capacity of students to be critical readers and experiment with different media. As one of the students recounted, it is as if the literary text, explored beforehand only in theoretical terms, gains materiality through the use of video and sound. Furthermore, students become aware of the open, incomplete nature of a literary text that may be incorporated into hypertexts which function on the basis of interactivity. The online format of the Victorian literature lectures and seminars allowed the integration of a wide range of virtual resources.

One of the platforms that students found particularly appealing, since it could be used outside the time frame of the seminar, was Stanford University's project "Authorial London: The City in the Lives and Works of its Writers". Students could interact with the map of London in order to discover references to places found in the works and biographies of Victorian writers. The close reading of passages from literary works of Charles Dickens became more engaging once places of interest could be readily instantiated on the map by means of geotagging.

It might be argued that the "learning community" (Dauer 167) created online harkens to reader-response criticism. Technology-rich practices stimulate a learning environment that expands beyond the confines of the classroom. Literacy and language acquisition have been established by specialists "as social practices rather than technical skills" (Street 79). From this perspective, integrating social interaction and technology engenders an articulation of reader response into the very fabric of the text. The active role of the reader in literature and media empowers the student to explore a variety of interpretative strategies. Nevertheless, as Stanley Fish points out, the interpretative strategies "proceed not from him but from the interpretive community of which he is a member" (Fish 14). Neither the text nor the reader remain fixed, and reading is not an event that should be isolated as occurring between a reader and a book or within the time confines of the seminars. The exchanges of ideas occurring throughout the semester during the online seminars and on the blog have made students aware of their own learning and interpretative community and of the extent to which their conversations influenced and supported their individual responses to the literary texts analyzed at the seminars. With this in mind, the aforementioned conversations fundamentally require spaces that nurture them. The ubiquitous nature of technology makes blogs a viable solution for dialogue to prosper outside the classrooms. Despite social distancing, students have at their disposal an additional method to communicate and create meaning together. Examples from the blog which may be offered include a critical response to the poem "The Lady of Shalott" by Alfred Tennyson which is focused on the contrast between isolation and freedom, as well as a response to a feature of the novel *Great Expectations* that a student found particularly fascinating. Through such virtual interactions, the blog was incrementally turned by students not into a tool that teaches how to read and interpret but how to become a member of a reading community.

Blogging may be interpreted both as a form of social interaction and social action. It represents a form of dialogue through which meaning is produced in collaboration as important questions surface in relation to previous posts, readings and literary experiences. By getting acquainted with the blogosphere and getting involved in a process of reflective reading and

writing, students are intellectually stimulated to discriminate, evaluate, form opinions or question their individual responses to the literary texts and thus they are more likely to absorb and retain the knowledge that they gain. Online teaching and learning raises the question of motivation and responsibility when supporting student independent learning. As active participants, students develop a critical attitude towards learning and the learning outcomes. Furthermore, students are aware that the information that they impart on the blog is accessible to a wider audience, as opposed to their individual seminar assignments. According to the “Stats and insights” section of the blog, in the year 2020 the blog had 228 views, while in 2021 the number increased to over 700 views. Taking into consideration the importance that society gives nowadays to visibility in the virtual space, the sense of responsibility and care towards the work produced increases while the likes and comments provide an incentive to continue researching and writing. Some might argue that intensive reading and writing is required when communicating in the online environment, fact which may hinder students who struggle with these skills to contribute in the ongoing conversation. However, progress cannot be achieved unless there is a considerable amount of practice. Furthermore, it was a pleasant experience to witness more introverted students take advantage of the chat option of both synchronous and asynchronous platforms used for the seminars.

Students have employed the blog as a tool for free exploration of various ideas, asking themselves and their peers questions. While some chose to impart their emotionally charged first impressions of the books, as in the fifth blog post example titled “The Timeless World of Charles Dickens”, others selected elements of criticism from the seminar that they have found particularly fascinating. According to Gibson, “many lecturers seek to use subjective engagement with the text in a productive way, to develop students’ reading skills without betraying this enthusiasm” (Gibson 106). Consequently, even the initial highly subjective approaches to the literary texts are instrumental in developing the skills to read literature. The enthusiasm of the student could be honed in on achieving a true critical engagement with literature. The challenges of literary theory could also be overcome and, as the number of blog posts increased, students found themselves more and more eager to address more complex topics. For example, in the blog post “Was Emily Brontë a feminist?”, the student brings back to the attention of her peers Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*, highlighting the dichotomous representation of women in Victorian fiction and the gender roles assigned to them. The differentiation between the public and the private sphere in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was strengthened by the tasks students had to complete for the course assessment, where they focused on depicting fictional characters from the

two perspectives, personal and professional. The student who wrote the blog post equally outlined the historical context, mentioning the Declaration of Sentiments of early feminists, and focused on the biography of the Brontë sisters, tracing their upbringing. The blog post displays a multidimensional approach and ability to tackle the subject by using a rich variety of sources.

Engagement with contemporary cultural representations and interpretations of 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature is also present in the blog post titled “Heathcliff as a Representative of the Human Unconscious”. Using critical sources, the student delves deeper into the interpretation of Heathcliff as an archetype and a projection of the unconscious. Since the topic proved to be of special interest for the students, the blog post functioned as a starting point for the following seminar, where we revisited psychoanalytic criticism. Students briefly analyzed Heathcliff, Catherine and Edgar from Emily Brontë’s novel *Wuthering Heights* as the embodiments of the Freudian id, ego and superego, respectively. They supported this interpretation with evidence from the text which pointed to the symbiotic relationship between the characters. Students were encouraged to participate in active learning and revise some of the ideas they had already assimilated, a core requisite of any activity within a learning community.

The blog, combined with the seminar discussions and assignments, stimulated and nurtured the process of discovery and sharing. Students were offered the necessary virtual instruments to immerse themselves in the research process and experiment with a range of learning styles. Beneath the surface features which would make readers inclined to judge it as superfluous or effortless, blogging is not an easy endeavor. It goes further than the private comprehension and appreciation of the literary text, requiring a critical approach, the ability to reflect on topics, to discriminate between the abundance of available materials, select the ones they consider most relevant and justify their assertions and choices. The British literature blog “News, views and reviews from the students of Ovidius University” was intended to get students to think beyond the confines of the academic setting in a format which completes the core seminar material. As technology progresses and becomes requisite for academic performance, the inclusion of innovative forms of assessment may play an important role in designing an effective pedagogy which fosters a student-centered learning environment.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The use of social networking profiles and blogging as part of the online Victorian lecture and seminar favored an innovative approach to the assessment process and the creation of a virtual repository of digital resources that students can revisit for an in-depth analysis of the topics covered throughout the semester. Both the creation of Facebook and



LinkedIn profiles and the contribution to a literary blog bear a substantial potential for literary pedagogy and involve students in a process of active learning that offers new ways to approach and engage with literature. Students, whose consent we obtained for the use of their examples in this study, expressed a positive feedback about the blog and the relevance of all lecture and seminar assignments they received since these tasks engendered a development in their analytical reading skills and offered the opportunity to demonstrate their critical thinking skills. Although blogging and social networking cannot altogether replace academic assignments as exclusive forms of continuous and final assessment, they have the potential to complement the work done synchronously by extending the conversations which ensue within the confines of the seminars and the literary concepts that they encounter in the courses in various asynchronous virtual spaces that this generation of students already inhabit in their free time.

By completing the online assignments, students displayed their ability to discover new patterns in well-known literary texts, correlate them with the historical and socio-cultural background and share their findings in a way that is useful and accessible to their peers. The blog posts prompted reflective and critical thinking on the topics covered by the syllabus and provided a virtual space that kept students connected to the lecture and seminar activity. It might be argued that from a pedagogical perspective the outcome of these innovative forms of assessment may not be on a par with the traditional forms of written assessment which are more rigorous and toilsome, yet technology makes the assessment process engaging, creative and intellectually stimulating for students who establish their own learning community under the careful supervision of the professors. In this student-centered learning environment, the creation of knowledge is equally undertaken by students. Once placed in the position of co-creators of knowledge, students become more active, motivated and responsible participants in their learning process. An additional layer of metacognition is activated since students are able to reflect upon the ideas introduced by their peers in order to improve their personal work and thus develop a more critical attitude towards their learning outcomes and personal academic evolution. The conjunction of formal and informal learning generates lifelong learning while the subsequent innovative assessment practices transform assessment into a habitual, enjoyable and authentic experience which becomes intrinsically motivating for all those involved.

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