

How to Read “Silence” in a Literary Text without a Teacher: ODL Learners' Perceptions of Studying Literary Texts through the Online Mode

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Abstract

Teaching literature is a complex and challenging task, particularly because of the multiple interpretive possibilities of literary texts. It is even more so when teaching English poetry to learners for whom English is a second language. Further, Literature has been traditionally been a subject that needs the presence of a teacher to assist students in their quest to read for deeper understanding and interpretation of texts. This study investigated second-year undergraduates' perceptions on learning T.S. Eliot's epic poem *The Waste Land* - a notably difficult text to access, owing to its length as well as the need for compulsory background reading on history, mythology, Eastern and Western philosophy and the Classics - via both an online intervention and an in-person Day School, using a qualitative research design and in-depth semi-structured interviews. The study found that the BA in English and English

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Language Teaching students view the online component of the course as useful but supplementary in its function, that online learning cannot replace the teacher in a physical classroom and that they prefer the physical presence of a teacher when attempting to read, understand and interpret the literary text. However, they value the online component especially when it facilitates feedback on writing about Literature, and when it offers language-related feedback with regard to assessments.

Keywords: Teaching Literature, Teaching Literature online, Open and Distance Learning, T.S. Eliot

Introduction

Teaching of literature in English has particularly been practiced through the face-to-face mode, an attitude that to a great extent has even permeated teaching literature via the ODL mode. The complexities of texts considered as 'literary', their connectedness to the socio-political-economic contexts in which they were written and multiple interpretive possibilities inherent in the texts are the common causes such practitioners would often cite for their choice. The notion of multiple-interpretive possibilities is what makes teaching literature a challenging task, whereby a teacher would be called upon to float the possible interpretations in the class and construct new knowledge through negotiation with the students—a challenge overtly familiar to the present researchers who are practitioners of teaching literature, and a task that offers a formidable challenge in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) settings. As Owens (2010), who himself is a teacher of literature via the ODL mode, says "learning involves human relationships, and engages the emotions as well as the cognitive processes" (Owens, 2010) and thus "face-to-face contact remains important even in...open and distance teaching of literature" (Owens, 2010). Literary critic Pierre Macherey succinctly articulates the nucleus of this concern when he suggests that literary texts are not what they appear upon a surface reading. He points out that the speech of a book comes from a certain "silence" (Macherey, 2006) and this 'silence' informs us of the "precise conditions for the appearance of an utterance,...its limits...real significance" (Macherey, 2006). Macherey's assertion, just as it might serve to justify the acts of a face-to-face practitioner of literature pedagogy, also makes the task of

an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) teacher of literature seem daunting. It would be even more formidable to a novice teacher of Literature, who would have begun teaching entirely online during the COVID-19 pandemic. How could an ODL teacher deal with the complexities in teaching literary texts in an environment where the teacher-presence need not be compulsory? How could one effectively interpret the 'silence' in a text and construct new knowledge in an essentially ODL settings? And, most importantly, how do students in an ODL setting—specifically in asynchronous settings— read, absorb and interpret literary texts? The present study wishes to explore these questions with the objective of aiding the cause of teaching literature in ODL settings through critical discourse and opening up further research areas in the sparsely researched area of teaching literature from a distance.

The teaching of a literary text in a classroom (ODL/online or otherwise) would necessarily involve building competence in the demonstration and dissemination of reading skills, interpretive ability, patient endurance of complex texts, negotiation of socio-cultural contexts which could have motivated the creation of the text and which also imprint upon the text, and most importantly, writing responses to a literary text within a structured academic discourse. The tendency would be to (uncritically) assume that a traditional face-to-face classroom could deal with such challenges better than an asynchronous or synchronous online platform where the teacher is not literally standing in front of the students. Another tendency would be to place undue challenges upon an ODL teacher of Literature, since there is an innate understanding that ODL teaching pedagogy of literature needs to be, as Kayalis (2010) articulates it, "intuitive approximation of what goes on in face-to-face teaching". At the same time, such tendencies cannot ignore the reality of the (largely unsung) vast potential for education created by the ODL practitioners via video and digital technology, and how such technologies are absorbed into the folds of education in the pandemic-affected world to the extent that online learning, which used to be a blended mode of study offered to ODL students is now the common property of even primary schools around the world.

There is no solid research to indicate how online learning/teaching

affects the acts of learning and teaching literature per se, though Koskima (2010) notes that in Finland there has been a decrease in the number of students “not reading literature at all” (Koskima 2010). In place of literacy, digital technology is seemingly creating ‘electracy’ Koskima (2010) points out, quoting a term coined by Gregory Ulmer (2002). The present study is motivated by the sudden necessity of, and interest in, online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to locate how the teaching of literature is best achieved through the online mode, and is an exploratory means of attempting to understand the rewards/limits of teaching literary texts online. Using an online component designed for undergraduate students studying English at The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), this study monitors their responses to literary texts online, and conducts interviews with the participants to assess their perceptions and experiences with the online intervention. The study is motivated by what Kayalis (2010) succinctly articulates as “making literary teaching in distance education competent and meaningful, through constant experimentation and improvisation through all aspects of literary pedagogy including the use of digital tools.” At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it imperative for ODL teachers of Literature—at OUSL and elsewhere—to take Kayalis’s notion of ‘experimentation’ and ‘improvisation’ seriously as teachers engage in the online mode to sustain the deep interest and enthusiasm the students showed for literary texts prior to the pandemic through blended modes of learning, with face-to-face learning sessions playing a central role. Bergstrand & Savage (2013) point out that, despite the proliferation of online courses, universities and researchers have only begun to systematically investigate what they can and cannot teach effectively in this mode. This research intends to go beyond these binary assumptions and locate ‘why’ and ‘how’ some practices of online teaching are considered effective and less effective, and hopes to offer suggestions to potentially nurture or mitigate such concerns.

Review of the Literature

There is a dearth of research related to online teaching/learning of Literature in the Sri Lankan ODL context to recreate an in-depth discourse on the topic. There is one study of using the ODL mode with students of English Literature at OUSL, albeit with a different focus.

Medawattegedara (2019) in a study of an online intervention with a group of OUSL students studying poetry of the First World War found the responses offered by students to the online component in this poetry course variegated with complex thoughts. He used the online platform to familiarize students with the complex socio-political context surrounding World War I. The students found the readings on the online forum helpful and 'interesting'. Yet, the online poetry engagement which they undertook after their exposure to the historical context became problematic owing to the complexity of the poetic expressions, difficulties in language and hidden thematics of the poems. The study found that although online learning of literature has its specific and subtle rewards, further research and exploration is needed in order to hone and moderate this medium as an effective tool for teaching literature.

Poidloue (1987) argues that in the domain of literature, distance teaching offers the inconvenience of a dialogue between the teacher and the student which is limited to three exchanges only: the lesson, the essay and its correction. However, Medawattegedara's (ibid.) study found more optimistic results: the students engaged with the online platform as long as the readings were uncomplicated and disengaged from the online medium when they encountered the literary texts, which required extensive teacher intervention.

Heble (2010) in a study aimed at locating whether online interventions could help develop students' critical thinking and literacy abilities used both the online and face-to-face mode of teaching on two groups of students in the Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman. The students were taught the subject *Introduction to Drama*, which the researcher says, falls into the category of a "touchy-feely" subject which requires "a more personalized approach" (Heble, 2010). Her study indicated that the students who got personalized instructions with teacher presence seemingly performed better than those who received online instruction. Those who received face-to-face instruction obtained more A grades and D grades, whereas those who got B and C grades were mostly the students who received online instruction. She concludes that on the one hand traditional teaching seems to favor students who are already performing well in class while online teaching helps students at all levels. On the other hand, she argues against coming to strong

conclusions about the merits and demerits of either online or face-to-face teaching of Literature, reiterating that “both experiences are valuable” (Heble, 2010).

Owens in a study whose main focus was uncovering the potential challenges of designing an MA in Literature program at the Open University in UK found that teaching of Literature via the face-to-face mode was the most critical part of students’ experience at the university. Online exposure to the subject has its own advantages such as the ability of students to make “more measured and thoughtful contributions” (Owens, 2010) and more active student participation owing to the asynchronous nature of the engagement. Yet, his study favors face-to-face teaching of literature suggesting that “learning involves human relationships, and engages the emotions as well as the cognitive processes” (Owens, 2010). Thus he concludes that “face-to-face contact remains important even in...open and distance teaching of literature” (Owens, 2010).

The present study in its objectives is more aligned to Heble’s work in the sense that this study too attempts to locate the middle ground between online and face-to-face teaching of Literature through an extensive analysis of students engaged in an ODL study course of Literature.

Methodology and Procedure

The study adopted a qualitative approach in order to collect data on the complexities of students' experiences while engaging with the online component of learning literature

Participants

The participants in this study are students of the BA in English and English Language Teaching (BAEELT) programme which is a 4-year Honours degree offered by the Department of Language Studies of the OUSL. This program, as the title implies, combines the study of both English Literature and English Language Teaching. During their second year of study (Level 4) the students of this program enroll for a course titled *LEU4506: Poetry*, whereby they are required to read the Modern Poetry of T.S. Eliot, Phillip Larkin, Robert Frost and Y.B. Yeats. The

present study is related to the teaching and learning of one of those poets, namely T.S.Eliot. His epic master-piece *The Waste Land*, a challenging text for students of English literature, possibly in many contexts, is one of the texts in this course. Reading *The Waste Land* is better achieved with a thorough knowledge of Greek classics, eastern and western philosophy, mythology and classical opera. The poem thus requires a specialized mode of reading and consequently is not a popular text among students—at least until they surmount the initial difficulties of reading.

Sample

Ten students from Level 04 were selected for this study. The selected students' age range was 22-40 years. There were 09 female students and 01 male. English literature classes in Sri Lanka are mostly populated by female students, as any other such class worldwide. The participants were selected based on the marks they obtained at the final exam of this course, and these students' marks ranged from 55% (B- grade) and 70 (A- grade). In English Literature classes students who are struggling with reading and interpreting texts tend to obtain very low marks. (The department employs special methods of supporting low-achieving students - a discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article). A student who is struggling with the fundamental aspects of learning a literary text might find it difficult to engage with the researchers on a dialogue about the nature of learning-teaching, modalities of interacting with online components, and their reading experiences with the material uploaded onto the online platform. Hence, the selection of students who obtained marks of a specific range to participate in this study.

Online Intervention

The present online component was planned as an intervention for teaching this very difficult and challenging poem, Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Prior to this intervention, this course was taught in the traditional classroom, which now, in the light of the increased prevalence of online teaching, is referred to as the "face-to-face mode".

This planned online intervention could be illustrated as shown in Figure 1 below:

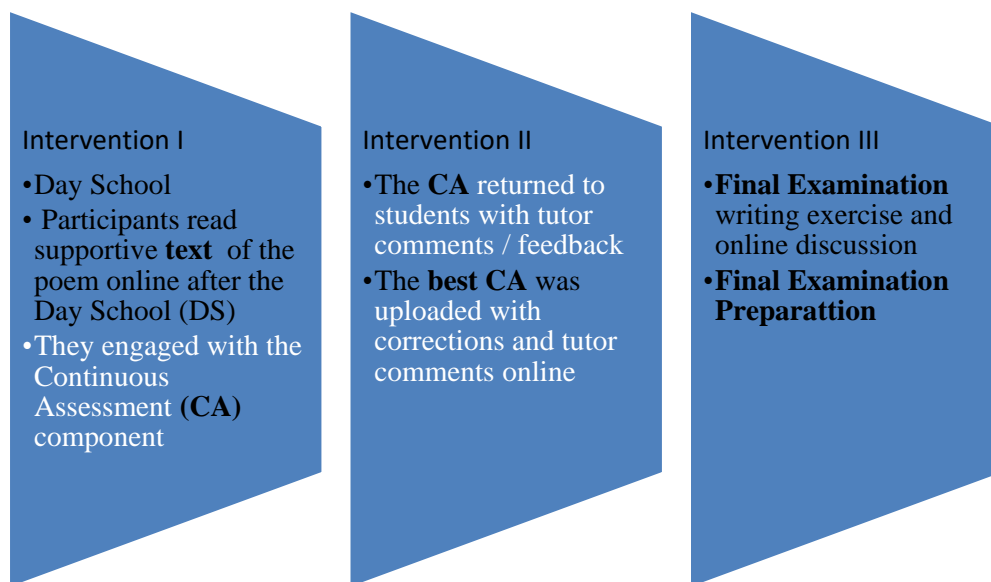


Figure 1. Online Intervention for Eliot’s *The Waste Land*

Unlike the usual mode of teaching Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, where the face-to-face Day School (DS) took precedence, in this exploration the order was reversed: the DS became the scaffolding through which the students were prepared for the online component. The idea was to evaluate whether students could be trained to become independent readers of a complex literary text with minimal teacher intervention. A specific example is provided to make the point clear. Eliot’s long poem begins with an excerpt from the Greek myth, Sybil of Cumae. The DS interaction kept the explanation of this myth minimal; in other words, this myth was explained only as far as it added an immediate meaning to the overall poem[†]. In the online component, this mythical aspect of the poem was explored in detail from a wider perspective. For instance, the online platform presented the entire mythical narrative of Sybil along with illustrations, and most importantly interpretations of the myth based on folkloric postulates. This enhanced meaning provided in the

[†] Pre-text in a poem tends to offer an overall thematic support to the meaning of the poem

online component was meant to expand the knowledge already gathered in the DS, and it was presumed that the model would actually work only if the students engaged with the online component intensely after the DS

In addition to issues concerning interpretation of texts, the other major issue that concerns a student of literature is articulation—i.e. articulating abstract ideas using the academic register. This online component took the initiative to help students with their academic writing. Writing is the mode by which students produce an output in literature and this output is critical for a teacher since it is a measure of a student's understanding of a text. Also writing is the means by which a student passes/fails an exam. Thus, though the focus of this article is on understanding literary texts, the findings on academic writing are included here since the two cannot be separated in learning-teaching literature. As indicated in Figure I, the best Continuous Assessment assignment response was uploaded to the forum with track-change edits. Thereafter, a mock exam question was uploaded and students were asked to write an introduction, or the first paragraph, as a response to that question. The best three answers were selected and were uploaded with edits. The process was repeated and the students who could not upload answers were encouraged to do so. Three such cycles were run before the actual Final Examination.

This intervention is connected and sequenced, in the sense that each stage is expected to be helpful for the challenges of the next stage. An assumption was made that if students followed the online course as per the design, the total experience would prepare them to face the Final Examination component successfully. The expected aims of this online intervention were pragmatic:

- To encourage students to engage with Eliot's poem intensely prior to the CA component
- To locate the challenges faced by the students when engaging with the CA and discuss those challenges with the students
- To enable students to write meaningful answers at the Final Examination

Data Collection

This study had as its focus the information gathered from in-depth interviews conducted with a sample of ten (10) randomly selected students who had participated in the online component of Eliot’s poetry consistently and who had scored above 55 marks at the final examination. The interviews were conducted after they completed their Final Examinations. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka[‡] did not affect the dissemination of this course because OUSL shifted their Day Schools (face-to-face lectures) to the online mode (video conferencing). Though these interviews were to be conducted face-to-face, owing to the pandemic situation they were conducted via email and Zoom calls. Further, although the researchers wished to analyze the Final Examination scripts, that idea had to be shelved because although the students were prepared for a 3-hour written final examination, the Department of Language Studies was forced to change the structure of the entire examination at the last moment owing to the pandemic situation.

Data Collection Instrument

Qualitative semi-structured interviews are often used to consider experience, meanings and the ‘reality’ of participants’ experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The comprehensive, semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted in the form of focus group discussions in a friendly informal manner and the students were briefed on the objective of the exercise prior to the interview. The interview schedule was based on the two topics listed below; however, in keeping with the semi-structured nature of the interviews, the topics merely were an approximate guide. The intention was to encourage free and open responses to the questions in keeping with the principles of a literature classroom where free expression, multiple interpretations and “sympathetic imagination” (Popper, 2002), are encouraged. Listed below are the broad questions in the interview schedule which are built around

[‡] Sri Lanka’s first COVID-19 patient was discovered in February 2020, and the nation went into a nearly 3-month lockdown from March to June 2020.

the objectives of the study.

Topic 1: Learning Eliot's Poetry Online

- How helpful to your learning was the online component you read after the Day School?
- Do you think you could manage learning poetry entirely online? If yes, why? If no, why not?

Topic 2: Student Perceptions of the Online Intervention in Writing an Answer[§]

- To what extent would you say that the online discussion forum on answering examination questions was helpful to you in answering the questions in the Final Examination?

The interviews were recorded and transcribed and a thematic analysis was carried out on the interview data.

Ethical Issues

The study was incorporated into the overall Course Evaluation which is an inherent part of online courses on the Learning Management system, and therefore it was not considered necessary to obtain informed consent from the students separately. However, all participants were informed that their participation in the interviews was for research purposes as well as to improve the online component of the course, and that they would remain anonymous and the findings of the study would be used to enhance the effectiveness of the course under consideration. Further, the interviews took place after the final examination results were released, and students knew that their response in the interviews could not in any way affect their academic performance/grades on the

[§] Writing an answer is the means by which a student demonstrates her knowledge of a literary text, thus the information gathered on writing is also presented here since both interpreting a text and writing an answer are inseparable.

course.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study are presented as per the two above-mentioned topics that guided the interview schedule for ease of discussion and understanding.

a) Learning Eliot's Poetry online

The following themes emerged from the data in the interview transcripts

(1) Useful as a supplement

All the participants were of the view that the online component was “useful” for them as a “supplement” for the learning in the Day School. They all understood that the online component and the classroom were connected in time (they had to engage with it immediately after class) and in progressive learning (online component was planned as the next step of their learning ladder).

Female student I said:

“I did not read the online section on that day itself, though we were asked to do so. I had work at office and home. I only read it about two to three days later, and suddenly, the classroom came back to me”

Female student II said: “I remembered what we discussed in class vividly,” and another female student III qualified her statement adding: “it was as if the classroom learning was recaptured in a very well-written note.”

Male student I who had engaged with the online segment immediately after the class felt that the classroom was reenacted as he read the online component. This frequently-occurring notion of “classroom re-enactment” experienced by them needs a careful analysis. On the one hand it could suggest that the ladder-effect of the experiment was lost because the students did not feel that the online component enhanced their learning which happened in the day school. On the other hand, the term ‘classroom re-enactment’ is an articulation that captures the

desired effect.

The researchers asked the participants to explain some critical sections of the poems back to them and noted down the nature of their responses. At least four (04) participants, out of the ten (10), articulated responses that were clearly influenced by the content disseminated by both the class and the online component. The rest of the students offered responses which were more influenced by the classroom discussion than by a combination of the classroom-online mode. The four students whose responses were influenced by both the modes of learning scored high-marks for the question related to *The Waste Land* at the Final Exam.

(2) Online learning cannot replace the classroom

Another theme that emerged was that the online component could never be used in place of the teacher. Female student IV said:

"The teacher has to be there. If you had asked us to read the online component before attending the class then most of us would not have done that." Male student I said:

"You made us read it by showing interesting ideas in the class, and that did it."

Female student I suggested that though the online component was a safe mode of teaching during the pandemic, yet that did not mean that teacher's live presence should be eliminated from the teaching learning situation.

"I like that I do not have to travel for classes, but I always feel comfortable and cared for when a teacher is physically there to tell me things in a classroom"

As the discussion progressed the students overtly asserted that Literature lessons should opt for both options—"one cannot replace the other,"

(3) Literature cannot be learned without a teacher present.

Another theme that emerged from the data was that even an online course with much more extensive details and components than the present course would not make them more independent learners. All ten participants articulated this idea. Male student I stated:

"If a teacher could simply "animate" the online text in class, then life would be much easier."
Female student V said:

"Online is important due to COVID-19 but we want more human interaction."

Female student I said:

"Wasn't Eliot saddened by how humans have become engines in *The Waste Land*? We should not take away the human element from our Literature class".

The majority of the participants experienced the online component as an extension of the classroom, and specifically as a means of reclaiming the memory of learning in the Day School. Learning Literature, they felt, was essentially a human activity, and any additional technology-based learning component had to be secondary to the Day School, with the presence of a teacher.

b) Student Perceptions of the Online Intervention in Writing an Answer

(1) The continuation of receiving feedback on writing is important

A theme that emerged is that participants needed the writing support given online and therefore writing support as per given in this intervention was extremely useful. Although they had studied Academic Writing as a subject at the beginning of their degree study program, they felt that they needed frequent feedback on their writing. Some of the responses during the focus group interviews were as follows:

Female student VI: "Writing for literature takes time to master. So this type of micro support is important." Male student I:

“Application of the rules of academic writing to literature takes a while to learn, and this online component exposed our weaknesses in that aspect.” (This statement received the support of all the other participants)

Thus, the students felt that this online intervention in writing was overall, helpful. It must be understood at this point that any type of intervention with academic writing in this BAEELT program would be appreciated by the students. Thus, the researchers probed into specifics: what were the special features of the online writing intervention that they found helpful? The researchers elaborated that there had been two types of feedback from the tutors: on language and on concepts.

(2) Language editing of students' papers helps them improve their overall language ability

The participants felt that language edits, which were demonstrated on the best answers were helpful owing to their deeply felt need to master the English language with all its intricacies. One student added that she saved the edited document to read it over and over so that she would be motivated to be careful when she writes. The majority felt that language edits were more closely linked to the world outside than conceptual editing. English mastered at the scale of general accuracy was one of their dire needs and this writing forum helped them achieve that.

Female student VI said: “Learning to write in English without making errors is very important, because most of us are teachers. So, when we look at the red coloured edits done to an answer, we learn a lot,”

Female student VI said:

“I work in the media and am expected to work independently. So it’s very important that I master general language skills,”

(3) Feedback on the quality of an argument improves students' thinking and helps in revision for final exam

One of the participants who engaged intensely in the online writing forum, Female student VII said:

“Conceptual edits, help improve our thinking. In my answer I have written some terrible comments about Marie in Eliot’s poem. At the time of writing, it felt good to write that. But after the comments you made in red, I was, let us say, woken up...that was new learning,”

Male student I suggested that conceptual editing taught them new things about the poem. “When you challenge us about a view point in the poem, then I see that there are many ways of looking at something. That makes me happy because the same text that you and I have read has given us two different ideas.”

Female student II: “Both types of editing deal a major blow to our ego. Because without such feedback we feel we have mastered literature and writing.”

In conceptual (content) edits the discussions were longer, because they offered fresh means of looking at the poem. As a result the students said that they ended up revisiting the poem—“that was good revision for the exam”

(4) For improving writing skills in literature, the online forum is better than the face-to-face mode.

Some responses included the following:

Female student: VIII “In a class individual feedback would have been given and we would not have had access to many scripts like the online forum. Reading many edited scripts in an open platform gave us many learning experiences.”

Female student V said: “In a normal class other students would not show us their script,”

Female student IX said that the online forum gave them time to learn. “The fact that the edited scripts were there on the forum gave us ample opportunities to study and discuss them.”

The researchers gently urged him to narrate the nature of those discussions, and he answered that the discussions were primarily those focused on language and content.

When it came to language, students discussed the edits in detail, and what emerged in these discussions was how they were not aware of a specific language rule, how formal grammar lessons in the past failed to predict the errors they would make. Also if a specific language error (e.g. a misplaced modifier) was discussed, students who did not make the error also brought their own knowledge thus increasing their knowledge.

Conclusions

The online forum for an academically challenging literary work like *The Waste Land* was a leap of faith for these researchers who have been teaching this poem primarily through the mode of face-to-face lectures (Day Schools). This online forum was designed very much prior to the pandemic crisis and it became critically important during the Covid-19 lockdown in Sri Lanka. The objective of this exercise was exploratory and the study attempted to understand the 'experience' of teaching literature through different modes of delivery. One of the important findings about teaching literature using the online mode was that Day Schools needed to take center stage: DS is the main motivation for encouraging the students to engage with the online component (whether these DSs are face-to-face or video conferencing DS would be the topic of another study). This finding does not suggest that a DS offers more possibilities of learning for an ODL literature student. Rather, it suggests a possible sequence of events for a successful blended-learning session for students of literature—that a DS might be a good way to encourage students to engage with online components. In summary, the students who benefitted the most from the online component were the students who were high scorers at the exam—this finding aligns with Heble's findings where she found similar results in her engagements with students in Oman

Although this experiment used a ladder-process to connect the Day School and the online component of the course, students did not view the process that way; rather they viewed the online course component as a summary of the Day School. Although the students viewed it as such, as teachers of literature, the researchers feel that such views expressed by students are an indication that they have engaged with Eliot's poem deeply and done extensive reading. At the same time,

whether a poem as complex as *The Waste Land*, or for that matter any literary text, could—or should—be customized for evolutionary kind of learning is a theoretical issue that needs further research in this context. Literature in the online mode seemingly favors the self-motivated students who have cultivated the ability to sustain their interests in literary texts regardless of their complexity. Thus, a student who is struggling with literary texts could perhaps benefit more from a face-to-face classroom. This finding contradicts Heble's findings in Oman whereby students who struggled with their studies did not necessarily benefit from traditional modes of teaching.

As for using the online mode for teaching writing, the students felt that the medium offered many an advantage like the exposition of an edited text for a wider audience for a lengthy period of time. This kind of effect is difficult to achieve in a Day School where individual feedback would remain with individual students and someone with more errors in his/her text—which is a good learning opportunity for the rest of the class—might not prefer to show the script to the rest of the class. At the same time, this writing exercise unwittingly crossed its own boundaries and became a literature class for students—for they learned much more about the poem through the writing class. This opens up new possibilities for the practitioner of teaching literature, whereby an online writing class could also be exploited to engage a student with a literary text.

In conclusion, this exploratory study demonstrated that both the traditional teacher-in-class sessions and online learning offer vast potential for a literature teacher. If 'fear' is an element that prevents literature teacher practitioners from using online forums for teaching, and if the loss of a 'human presence' is the 'fear' that haunts a learner of literary texts as he or she engages with a text over an online forum, this study demonstrated that those 'fears' were concerns that would not disappear easily. Over time and space, literary texts thrive on their complexity and concealed meanings, and perhaps, as Hebel (2010) suggests, it is up to the teacher practitioner of literature to exploit both online and traditional teaching methods to unlock such meanings without one overwriting the other. As students say, if an online writing session is also an opportunity to learn a poem better, then perhaps some of literature teachers' own apprehensions about the teacher 'absence' in

an online forum could, to paraphrase Eliot, turn to dust.

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