The Teaching of Literature in the Digital Culture Era: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract. The teaching of literature has undergone significant changes since the emergence of the digital culture. In the past, a teacher and students in the classroom had to have their copies of the traditional book(s) used but now no traditional books are always needed. The teacher and all students can have digital books on their gadgets. On the part of the students, digital culture greatly influences their way of reading, understanding, and appreciating what they are reading. In discussing this issue, this paper focuses on my experience in teaching a classic American novel, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald to my students. By narrating students' attitude in reading the novel, what they were doing in the classroom, and their writing weekly assignments and their final papers, this paper addresses the opportunities and challenges of the digital culture in the teaching of literature. The research found that the digital culture has two opposing sides. On one hand, it makes it easy for students to find everything they need but on the other it also presents challenges that we need to cope with, i.e. their reading and writing are greatly disrupted by the online sources.

Keywords: Literature Teaching, Digital Culture, Online Sources, Opportunities, Challenges

1   Introduction

In the past, when there was no internet and online resources, teachers and students only depended on traditional books or references in paper form available in libraries or bookstores. This could create problems when teachers of English and American literature wanted to use literary works for their classes. This happened to me when I was an undergraduate student. At the time, my teacher asked us to read the English and American novels they had decided, and we borrowed them from the library. If the number of copies of the novels in the library was not enough for all of us, we were divided into several groups so that we could share the available copies. Buying novels and other books in English was (and still is) costly for Indonesian students.

Times have changed and we are now in the digital culture era. Traditional books in paper form are no longer always needed. In my most recent English and American prose class, I decided to pick a novel to read in depth by all students. My decision to only choose one novel for one semester is based on the expectation that my students would read it very seriously and deeply. I wanted them to know the storyline well, understand each character and the conflict, and finally enjoy the novel. At the end of the semester, I asked them to write a final paper. The teaching and learning process became easier

because students didn't need to buy books, or I didn't need to provide many copies of the book. Instead, I just downloaded one novel and shared it with my students. In addition, I shared the link to the novel to my students and they downloaded it themselves.

Can we say that the teaching of literature will be more successful because of all the conveniences we have? Or do all these conveniences actually make students more relaxed because by reading a little they can find out a lot of information and references they need on the internet? These issues will be described in this paper. On one hand, the teaching of literature in the digital culture era offers many opportunities but on the other it also presents challenges for teachers. To discuss this, in this paper I present my experience in teaching the English and American Prose in the 2023-2024 academic year and the literary work we read together is *The Great Gatsby*) [1].

To discuss this topic, after this introduction I present the concept of digital culture. Next, I present the process of teaching the English and American Prose in my class, from choosing a novel to students writing their final papers. After that, I present the opportunities and challenges of the teaching of literature in the digital culture era. The last is the conclusion.

2   Digital Culture

The meaning of "digital" in this article is "using or relating to computers and the internet" [2]. Thus, in my understanding, digital culture is a culture that is related to the use of or arises from computers and the internet. Okasha [3] argues that digital culture includes many elements such as values, beliefs, behavior, and technology. These all shape how humans work and interact in an internet-based digital environment. Furthermore, he also states that digital culture is about various elements, namely mindset, collaboration, innovation and technology adoption.

From the Cambridge Dictionary definition and the concept by Okasha above, digital culture currently has a very broad scope, used in various areas of life and affects people with various types of educational backgrounds, professions, be it children, teenagers, adults, both male and female. In the field of education, especially in higher education, digital culture is now a necessity. It could be said that there are no teachers and students who are not influenced by computers and the internet, meaning that there are no teachers and students who are not influenced by the digital culture.

In the field of education in general, digital media literacy must be integrated into sustainable education [4]. In this sustainable education concept, digital media is believed to be able to improve students' learning. In fact, digital media currently has a very dominant influence on people's daily lives and social behavior in global culture [5]. In the world of literacy, digital culture significantly influences the effectiveness of digital literacy programs [6]. To sum up, digital culture has an extraordinary influence on human life. Social media, as a product of the digital culture, provides convenience in many aspects of life while also having negative impacts if used unwisely. Even though we can talk a lot about the influence of digital culture on education at large, in this paper I limit the discussion to the teaching of literature in the digital culture era. However, this paper does not address digital literature specifically.

3   The Teaching of Literature in the Digital Culture Era

Communication technology that emerged as the result of the internet starting in the 1950s, which then gave birth to the digital culture, has had a huge influence on the learning process. The digital culture changes the way we learn, teach and communicate [7]. In the past, communication between teachers and students was very limited—we could say that the communication between teachers and students only happened in the classroom and, even though it happened outside the classroom, it was always face-to-face. But nowadays, communication between students and teachers can be done via social media. This is what changes our behavior and way of communication.

Before the digital culture existed, all of us language and literature teachers had to prepare books in paper form. Students also had to have the predetermined books so that everyone could read them. Then the teacher and students met in the classroom. Lectures could only be held in person or, as the term now is called, offline. But now, with the digital culture, lectures can be carried out fully online in which face-to-face meeting is not a must. Because of the advance of technology, hybrid classes—the mixture of online and offline classes—are also common in today's world.

In teaching literature, nowadays we may not ask students to only read the novel that we give them but we can also complement it with a film version. Before the rise of the digital culture, teachers could also do this but it would be troublesome. Doing this now is very easy. We can play the film in whole or in part, depending on our needs, in the middle of a lecture. We can even easily share film clips or pieces of a text in a very short time so that all students can read and focus on the same thing. This is just one example and there are many other things that language and literature teachers can do in the teaching and learning process.

However, on the other hand, there is a concern that the digital culture that emphasizes speed and efficiency could lead to a decrease in formality and seriousness in language, especially in written language. It is no longer a secret that many educators and parents are worried about the attitudes and habits of the current technology-savvy generation because their language standards are dropping [7]. Social media makes written communication very informal. As a teacher, I try hard to maintain the formality of the relationship between teachers and students even through social media messages. For me, my relationship with students is a formal relationship and I always use formal language in my messages to them. However, many of them violate formal rules in writing so that this affects their papers. Below, in detail I present the process of learning the novel *The Great Gatsby* in my class.

4   My English and American Prose Class

As I always did in the previous academic years, in the 2023-2024 academic year I taught English and American Prose. The previous year I chose George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) and this year I chose the 1993 edition of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The reason I chose this classic novel is because students almost no longer read classic works (and I address other reasons in the following section). The following is the description of how the lecture process took place from start to finish.

4.1   **The novel choice**

The choice of *The Great Gatsby* as the material is not random but deliberate. I wanted students to read just one novel because I also wanted them to learn the history, economics, and culture of the United States at the same time. Therefore, I chose *The Great Gatsby* because this novel is a novel that is rich in socio-economic problems, apart from its intense conflicts. Various existing reviews and analyses [8] [9] [10] [11] [12]—to name just a few, strongly indicate that this novel is still important in the discussion of American literature. In terms of language, *The Great Gatsby* is not an easy novel to read. But with the internet and online dictionaries today, students have much greater convenience than I did a long time ago when there was no internet.

The Great Gatsby's importance from the historical, economic and general cultural perspective makes it really important in American literature. Therefore, in guiding students to understand the novel comprehensively, I also provided references related to The Roaring Twenties, The Great Depression, and how the United States of America changed towards an industrial country. Of course, the main and first thing is that I hoped that students would understand the story, know each character of the novel well, as well as know the relationships between the characters. If they understood all this, at the next level, I hoped they would also understand the social implications of *The Great Gatsby* in the sense that this novel is not just a story but is also a reflection of life in the United States in the 1920s from Fitzgerald's point of view. Thus, readings related to the United States in the 1920s become important references for students.

4.2   **Reading and discussing the novel**

Lectures lasted sixteen weeks, with the mid semester exam in the eighth week and the final exam in the last week. Thus, the class meetings lasted 14 weeks, while *The Great Gatsby* consists of 9 chapters. Therefore, I did not directly invite students to read the novel but provide them with the social, economic and cultural context of the United States in the 1920s.

As all teachers do, at the first meeting I explained the syllabus and lecture materials, including the rules and code of ethics for the students. I emphasized that each week we would only discuss one chapter of the novel. I need to say here that reading the original *The Great Gatsby* for Indonesian students (in this case my students) is not easy because in terms of language, *The Great Gatsby*, as I have mentioned, is a novel with difficult language and a high level of story complexity.

Thus, we only spent nine weeks reading and discussing the novel. I used the first week to explain the syllabus. In the next three weeks, I provided materials on the social, economic, and historical background or context of *The Great Gatsby* for our discussion, namely Periods of American Literature and The Modernist Period [13], as well as The Roaring Twenties [14]. We started reading the novel and discussing it in class in the fifth week. In addition to the references above, I also asked students to specifically read "Introduction" to the novel [15] after we finished reading the novel. We read "Introduction" to the novel this way in accordance with the suggestion of Carabine [16], the General Adviser writing the "General Introduction" to the novel. We spent the rest of time, two weeks, for midterm and final exams.

In order for the class to run well, all students had to read so that they could contribute to the discussions we had every week. They did their reading assignments at home or outside of the class. It should have been a relatively easy read for my students because the had the whole week for reading one chapter only. But I wanted them to read it very carefully. I suggested that they read it not once but at least twice so that they knew the story well and could give a significant contribution to our class discussions. However, there were always students missing part or parts of the chapter because they did not read it seriously. When this happened, however, other students could or would provide comments on the parts that had not been addressed by the appointed students.

To ensure that each of my students read everything, I gave them weekly assignments in the form of short journals of two pages and they had to upload them on Google Classroom. I didn't give them the task of writing a summary of each chapter; instead, I asked them to write what is interesting, important, or very impressive to them. They were allowed to write about the main characters, or supporting characters or whatever they thought was interesting, important, and impressive. In this way I forced my students to read. If they only wrote a summary of the chapters we discussed in a particular week, I wouldn't give them a good grade. When they encountered difficulties and wanted to consult me, I asked them to contact me via Google Classroom (even though the classes were held offline), email, or WhatsApp messages and I made sure to respond to their questions. This way, we had good discussions every week. In my class, everyone had to help each other. But of course, as it generally happens, there were always students who were less enthusiastic and less motivated. I strongly emphasized that they had to pass the course so that no matter what happened, they had to do what they had to do.

4.3   Students' final papers

From the very beginning of the class, when I explained the syllabus to them, students knew that there was no final exam in class but they had to submit a final paper. Before writing the final paper, they also had their midterm exam. Because until the seventh week we had only read the first two chapters (there were several students who had read more than the chapters assigned), the midterm exam was to review the extent to which they understood the references I gave at the first several weeks of the class. They did the midterm exams in class, offline, and they were not allowed to have internet access. This sounds 'cruel', but I had already told them at the start about this, so they had to prepare themselves well to understand the readings I gave. In addition, I also gave questions regarding the first two chapters of the novel to assess their comprehension. For the preparation of the final paper, starting from the ninth week, at every meeting, I always reminded them to prepare themselves and they could always consult me any time. In this way, I expected they could all finish the course well.

Topics and titles.   There were 18 students taking this course. As the semester progressed, we discussed the novel week by week and I gave my students freedom in expressing what was in their minds. In this case, I draw on Rosenblat's reader response theory stating that readers have their resources at their disposal; meaning that different readers might have different interpretations and come to different meanings when they read the same work of literature [17]. At the end of the semester, when my students had

to write their final papers, it turned out that they came up with different titles even though they had similar or the same big topics.

After reading the students' papers, I found that the papers fell into four big topics, i.e. psychological analysis of the main characters, socio-economic reflection of the novel, American dream, and complicated relationships between Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan, and Tom Buchanan. Interestingly, they all had different titles for their papers.

For the first topic, the focus of the paper is on Jay Gatsby. This topic is chosen by three students. For the three students, Jay Gatsby has a complicated life and they analyze it from the psychological point of view. Meanwhile, for the second topic, i.e. socio-economic reflection of the novel, four students focus on how the social and economic life around New York in the 1920s shapes Jay Gatsby's life. Modernization after World War I triggered the United States of America to become an industrial country and thus it changed the way of life of the people. However, my students wondered how Jay Gatsby rises from a poor to a rich person. Five students look at the novel from the American dream perspective. Before reading the novel, not many of my students really understood what the American dream is. However, after reading the novel and some references, they understood it better and, therefore, used their understanding as a foundation to better understand the novel and the life of Jay Gatsby's. Five out of 18 students wrote their papers on this topic. Lastly, four students wrote about the last topic, i.e. the complicated relationship between Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan, and Tom Buchanan.

Sources of ideas and references. The sources of ideas of the students' papers are definitely from the result of our weekly discussion. Every week, every student came to class and contributed their ideas freely. The freedom they had is of course based on how well they understood the novel. However, these weekly discussions surely made each student enrich each other. What one student did not understand turned out to be explained well by other students.

I always told my students that they could use the readings I provided as references for their final papers. In fact, only very few students used them. Instead, they searched for or used references of their own choice. Surprisingly, many of them used some books as references, some used online sources from certain websites, and the rest used journal articles as references. In terms of quantity, journal articles rank the lowest compared to books and sources from websites. This is surprising because, as I have stated, journal articles about *The Great Gatsby* written by researchers both from Indonesia and outside Indonesia are numerous, an indication that *The Great Gatsby* is still an important and interesting study material in the world of literature. However, students did not actually read these journal articles even though I suggested that they read them. But the final decision is up to them, and I explain it below.

5   Opportunities and Challenges

From the beginning to the end of the semester that I have described above, I emphasize that in fact the job of a literature teacher like me is only to guide or provide a way for students to understand literary works in depth. They have the freedom to give meaning

to the literary works they read. As I mentioned above, in this case I agree with Rosenblatt suggesting that each reader has a different interpretation when reading the same literary work. Likewise, I give my students the freedom to understand *The Great Gatsby* from their own perspective. In the current era of digital culture, it is no longer the time for a literature teacher to direct his students to understand a literary work or interpret it according to the teacher's understanding and interpretation. However, what needs to be emphasized here is that the digital culture in the literature learning process, such as in the English and American Prose class that I teach, can be both an opportunity and a challenge.

5.1   Opportunities

What I did with my students is an experiment. In the era of the digital culture, most of us, including teachers and students, can be said to have unlimited resources. As long as we have gadgets and an internet connection, we can do many things. In terms of the process of the teaching of literature, we can do anything: downloading literary works that we want to read, looking for references that suit our topics and downloading them, reading reviews of certain works, and so on and we can get everything we need for free, except articles in paid journals or those that do not fall into the category of "open access" journals. Regarding *The Great Gatsby*, if someone has problems understanding it, he or she will easily know the storyline and conflicts from the film version, for example the film *The Great Gatsby*, starring Toby Stephens and Mira Sorvino [18]. In addition, there are many reviews and summaries of the novel available for free.

In other words, digital culture makes our lives easier. We have opportunities to do anything. In my class, for uniformity, I downloaded the 1993 version of *The Great Gatsby*, then downloaded several references. My goal was to make my students and I have the same starting point in the learning process. Then, I gave my students freedom to express their own understanding and interpretation. In the process, I guided them, listened to what they were sharing with each other, and answered their questions.

I am very aware that in a literature course it is impossible for me to force my students to adopt my understanding and point of view. This also means that apart from the readings that I have provided, they could search for their own readings they wanted. I even said to them that if they didn't agree with me, they could jump in at any time to express their perspective. For me, literature courses must be democratic. But because of differences in cultural values between the West and the East, my students, members of the Indonesian society and culture, did not always do what I asked. On many occasions they remained waiting for what I would say.

But for certain students, especially those who like reading literary works, the digital culture really helps. In the discussion, they expressed their opinions supported by their readings, and also by movies and videos they had watched. They were very enthusiastic. This enthusiasm is what makes me happy as a literature teacher. Thus, the opportunities that arise from digital culture are not only about making it easy to find references for free but also enabling students to develop their potential. I do not go into further detail regarding the topics and titles of students' papers because I only use all of them as an illustration of how easy it is to find reading materials, both literary works and references for writing papers. We all have almost unlimited access. Digital culture has changed

our lives. In the context of literature learning, we can obtain a lot of information in a very short time. We can read anything that suits our personal needs.

Living in the digital culture era, students who really want to learn and develop their potential can get all the resources they want for free and quickly. They are not only able to use literary works and journal articles, books, or anything else, but they can also use online dictionaries with voices at the same time. This is what makes it possible for students studying English to avoid mispronunciation and misspelling because online dictionaries are well equipped for this purpose. It is different from what we had in the past: if a teacher pronounced a word incorrectly, students would also likely pronounce the word incorrectly. But nowadays, if I mispronounce an English word, my students can correct me.

Being familiar with the digital culture, my students could complete all assignments, and their assignments are safely stored in Google Classroom which has many features. I can read them whenever I have the opportunity from any place. My students can read all my comments instantly on their gadgets. One of the features of Google Classroom, Google doc, is really helpful in the learning process. These are some of the opportunities the digital culture provides in a literature course. On the other hand, however, we have to be very careful with the digital culture in literature learning because it also presents challenges as I explain below.

5.2   **Challenges**

In the end all my students were able to understand the storyline of *The Great Gatsby* well. They read the novel in its entirety, read online summaries and reviews of it, watched the film version of the novel, participated in weekly discussions, and wrote weekly assignments. But because this course or literature course in general at the college level is not only about reading and discussion but also about writing the final paper, it is not enough for my students to just understand the story of *The Great Gatsby*. They should also analyze it in their final paper.

This is where the problem occurs. As a teacher who wants to do the best for my students, I never underestimate my students' writing abilities. But when I read their final papers, I was not really happy. The fact that many of my students wrote good papers made me happy, but their writing style did not. There are several papers whose language is very complicated and there are almost no grammatical errors. Of course this is surprising. I have been teaching for more than 30 years. Based on my long experiences, I know very well the abilities of each of my students (I never have many students, for example above 50 in one class). Reading their final papers, I found that many students wrote their papers really well. However, personal views were missing in them. It means that they also missed their personal styles of writing. It is true that currently there are many translator machines that can be used freely, but writing is not the same as translating. Writing is expressing ideas coherently, systematically and logically. In a paper, there are analyses, arguments, personal views, and so on. It is in all of these that, in my judgment, my students went beyond their capabilities.

In addition, I also looked at the references they used. If students used a lot of books as references, my question is: when did they read those books? But if they read online sources from certain websites, this is very understandable because I know that they do not like reading journal articles and books. Reading online sources from certain

websites becomes students' favorite because the readings are relatively light and short, and the language is not complicated. Not many of my students used journal articles published in the past 5 years either.

These all indicate that the digital culture also has a negative impact on students' learning process because it makes them want to complete their tasks instantly. This, in fact, does not only happen to my students but also happens to anyone from any level of education. It has become a general phenomenon. Many teachers, even professors, also do this. The similarity of ideas is not a problem as long as we are honest in expressing what is in our minds. However, if the similarity of ideas is written and is indicated to be very similar or the same as someone else's writing, then the problem arises. Since the first meeting with my students in the second semester (they were taking English and American Prose in the sixth semester), I have reminded them to read a lot and practice writing a lot. I always told them to use other people's writings as references to support their ideas. It is wrong to copy and paste. But this is something that is not easy to teach. My students are not the only ones to blame as many academics do this too. It is our duty as teachers, however, to always remind them that we all have to be careful in our writing in this digital culture era. This is surely another negative side of the digital culture for making many people increasingly lazier in writing seriously. To be sure, this is a challenge that must be overcome by teachers, including teachers of literature courses. As teachers, we must not only order our students not to commit plagiarism but must also set an example for them.

Writing requires practice and not just once or twice but always, for a long time. If all our students' final papers are good, of course we will be happy. But the problem is, are our students that good? If they are, we need to appreciate them. But if they are not, we need to make sure that the abundance of online sources is to be used as references, not to be copied and pasted. At this point, I try not to be too pessimistic. I always say to my students that they are in the process of learning so making mistakes is normal. Making mistakes is not a sin. I always tell them that I too make mistakes and always need people, my colleagues, to proofread my writing.

These are some of the challenges that language and literature teachers must be aware of. We all want our students to be able to read and write well. These are reasons why we are there for them: to teach, guide, and educate them. At this point, the digital culture is a challenge that is not easy to solve. But as teachers, we must try as hard as possible. If at first only some of our students listen to us and do well, but in the end the number of students who listen to us increases, we can be proud. As teachers, we must be wise and careful. Is this easy? Absolutely not.

6   Conclusion

The digital culture, with internet technology and all its conveniences, makes the process of the teaching of literature easier, especially in terms of obtaining teaching materials. But on the other hand, digital culture also has weaknesses, i.e. it reduces students' reading endurance and it makes them tend to be tempted to look for shortcuts by relying too much on online sources in their writing because everything can be obtained very easily. If they read the online sources well and use them as references, there should be no problem. The problem is that the average student does not have original ideas about

what they are going to write. Instead, they tend to take ideas along with a lot of parts from the sources they read. But there are always students who have original ideas in their perceptions and interpretations. For the majority, though, these online sources "kill" their ideas and creativity. This is a challenge that is not easy to cope with for all of us literature teachers.

I hope this paper becomes a trigger for the beginning of a discussion or at least part of the discussion for us literature teachers in how to overcome the various challenges that exist in the teaching of literature in this digital culture era. More research on this topic will confirm whether the digital culture is a blessing or a disaster for literature teaching. Of course this depends on many factors, including the background of each student. It is hoped that literature teachers will carry out a lot of research in this field, including research on digital literature which has not been addressed at all in this paper.

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