

## Innovative Teaching on the Course of American Literature —Some Practices in SXRTVU

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**Abstract**—Innovation sustains the progress of a nation, which has become a current trend all over China. China's education is badly in need of innovation now, and the key to the innovation of education is innovative teaching which includes both the teaching content and teaching form. Teaching content contains both print course and multimedia course, and teaching form means the teaching method we are using both in print course and multimedia course. This paper tells of how the innovative teaching is practiced in the course of American literature for distance learners in Shaanxi Radio and Television University.

*Keywords*-Distance Education ; Innovative Teaching ; American Literature

### I. INTRODUCTION

Shaanxi Radio and Television University (SXRTVU) is situated in the world-famous historical and cultural city of Xi'an, the capital city of Shaanxi Province in China. The university, founded in 1978, is the only comprehensive open and distance teaching university in Shaanxi Province. In the past thirty years, the university has always persisted in taking the scientific outlook on development as the guide, taken into consideration the overall situation of the national construction of a harmonious and learning society, adhered to the principle that all enjoy their rights to education and education should be provided for all. By using several forms of media: the internet, satellite television, prints, audio and visual teaching materials, the university has built a modern teaching system which integrates television, satellite, computer and the internet, with the help of online platform, VOD and two-way-video-conferencing to provide services in distance education. All these are able to meet the learners' demand of autonomous learning and have achieved the modernization of transmission, reception and feedback of teaching and learning information. After all, SXRTVU has become a provincial center for distance education, which covers both the rural and the urban areas and serves all the people within the province. The author of this paper is one of the senior teachers of SXRTVU.

### II. THE NECESSITY OF INNOVATIVE EDUCATION AND INNOVATIVE TEACHING

It is known to all that with the carrying out of the open-door and reform policy, China has taken on a new look and become a powerful country, which is now entering into the

period of transition both in economical development and social management. According to China's developing process at present, the nation is badly in need of innovation, for innovation sustains the progress of a nation. China's education is badly in need of innovation because education plays a key role in building China into a harmonious society and a more powerful country.

The aim of innovative education is to cultivate students' consciousness and creative spirit, to foster the students' innovative competence so as to meet the demand of the rapid development of the society. Concretely speaking, innovative education includes three aspects: one is to cultivate the students' sense of social responsibility to stimulate their enthusiasm for exploring science and truth, the other is to foster students' academic quality to pay close attention to social reality and the latest achievements of the subject he or she deals with, the last is to arouse the students' strong desires for knowledge as well as their scientific ideas of doubt and their rational faculty [1]. To reach these goals, it is primarily important to reform the present teaching models, the key to which is to practice innovative teaching which can be divided into two parts: one is the innovation of teaching content, and the other is the creativity of teaching form which means the innovation of teaching method. Only through practice can the idea of innovative teaching be turned into reality.

The author of this paper has been teaching English in SXRTVU for many years. And in the last few years, I have been trying to use the method of innovative teaching in the course of American literature for the distance learners in the university, which has achieved very good result.

### III. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF DISTANCE AND OPEN EDUCATION

To reach our teaching goals, we should first of all be aware of the characteristics of distance and open education. There is a lot of differences between traditional education and distance education. The traditional education is face-to-face classroom teaching between a teacher and his or her students, while distance education is quite different, for distance learners and their teachers are almost separated, and learners can only have face-to-face teaching and learning once every two weeks on weekends in SXRTVU. In other words, students receiving traditional education are "professional learners" who are teenagers, while distance learners are "amateur learners" who are almost all adults.

“Amateur learners” can only make use of their spare time to study what they want to. Some scholars of the Commonwealth [2] argue that distance learners have the following characteristics: Distance learners pay great attention to the practical usage of what they are learning or what they are going to learn; Distance learners are responsible for both their study and their work; Distance learners study what they want to with rich experiences of their own; Distance learners choose to study on their own initiative when they are ready; Distance learners’ studies are problem-centered; Most of distance learners’ learning intention results from personal reasons. Some other scholars of the Commonwealth [3] also argue that there are great differences on the learning purpose for different distance learners: Some want to acquire their credentials, some want to learn real skills related to their works, while others seek for a kind of leisure interests.

In SXRTVU, learners are going in for quite different jobs, most of them are married, and they are both responsible for their families and their work. Therefore, there is a sharp contradiction between learning and their work. Table 1 illustrates some features of distance learners (80 members) of English Department in SXRTVU.

Gender	Range of ages	Marriage and children	occupation
Female 55persons	21-40 years	40 married and 30 have children	Primary and secondary school teachers 34 persons
Male 25 persons	28-55 years	All married and 20 have children	Company members 25 persons
			Officers 10 persons
			Unemployed 9 persons Retired men 2 persons

From table 1 we can see there are more female students than male students in all 80 distance learners enrolled for English course, 81.25 % are married, and 62.5 % have children. Most of them have to do housework and nurse their children after work. Through the investigation we also know that all the 80 learners are eager to obtain knowledge they want although they are very busy every day. I had an interview with some of the students respectively and got to know that their learning purposes are quite different: Two retired workers like learning English very much, and they view learning English as a hobby and enjoyment after their retirement; The company employees are learning English to advance their careers so as to shift careers some day to get a higher pay. Primary and secondary school teachers are to improve their English for doing a better job in their teaching.

Officers are learning English for the sake of promotion in the future. Those unemployed are seeking to complete a degree in order to get a diploma. Some female learners are learning English to teach their children. Most of the learners have to keep a balance between work and family responsibility with their learning. Because of all this, a distance instructor should instruct the course in accordance with the learners’ objective fact and suit the instruction to the learners’ English level. Thus, the course American literature in SXRTVU needs to be reformed and innovative teaching should be carried out.

#### IV. THE REFORM OF TEACHING CONTENT IS THE STARTING POINT OF INNOVATIVE TEACHING FOR AMERICAN LITERATURE IN SXRTVU

There are dozens of textbooks for American literature published in China, and for most of the textbooks, American literature is divided into three periods: Romantic period, realistic period and modern period. Almost all the books copy some selected works of the authors, almost all the books lack the introduction of writing background, almost all the books are short of introducing the authors’ other works. And what is more, not more than 20 writers’ works are introduced in most of the textbooks, to say nothing of the latest achievements of American literature. The textbook for American literature having been taught in SXRTVU by Zhang Boxiang only includes 15 writers’ works, and none of the ethnic writers and their works are introduced. [4]

Facing this condition, the author of this paper interviewed some learners about the reform of the textbook, and at the same time, the author asked for a questionnaire to be filled by all the distance learners on the local network. A universal agreement from the interviewees is that the textbook for American literature being taught in SXRTVU is too difficult for distance learners to learn, and the learners have no time to read the original works. Based on the learners’ feedback, the author had a discussion with the faculty of our teaching office and also exchanged views with a few professors in Xi’an International Studies University, we all agreed that we ought to compile a new textbook suitable for distance learning. We put our thoughts into practice during a very short period, and our newly compiled textbook is titled “*A Guide Reading to American Literature*”. As the title suggests, this textbook serves as a guide for the study of American literature. In our textbook, American literature is divided into five parts: Part One tells of American literature before 1800; Part Two deals with American Romanticism; Part Three copes with American Realism; Part Four handles American literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Part Five introduces ethnic literature in America. The book, on the whole, is much easier than all the same books so far published, and is of course suitable for distance learners. The ultimate purpose to compile the book is to make the learners have a mastery of the common sense of American literature so as to arouse the learners learning interests and lay a solid foundation for those who

are especially interested in American literature and for those who want to read the original works in the future. In addition, before each part there is a brief introduction to the background of writings, and after each part all the notes are written in Chinese and the new words are marked so that the learners can have a better understanding of the text. In order for learners to consolidate what they have learned, we designed four modules of exercises and tests, and the key to the exercises and tests is given to the students at the back of the book. It goes without saying the textbook is broadly welcomed by distance learners.

#### V. THE INNOVATIVE TEACHING OF CLASSROOM IS THE FIRST STEP IN THE TEACHING FORM INNOVATION FOR DISTANCE LEARNING

As mentioned above, we give our face-to-face tutorials every two weeks on weekends. The use of our new textbook marks a good beginning of innovative teaching for American literature in distance learning. As the saying goes, a good beginning is half success. It is quite necessary for a tutor to integrate closely the content of innovative teaching and the form of innovative teaching. As for distance learning and teaching in SXRTVU, the first step is to practice innovative teaching in the classroom.

During the classroom teaching, traditional teaching method is to give students lectures by a teacher according to a textbook, the content of which is only literary works and literary theory. The common sense tells, however, that literature is a mirror of real life, and literary history is at the same time a history of the development of a nation. Therefore, I first, during my tutorial, give learners a brief introduction of American history in the different developing periods, and then combine the literary development with historical development during the same period. Thus, through telling the students the developing features in different periods, I made the learners know the existing form of American literature during the period. For instance, from early 17<sup>th</sup> century till the nation's independence in 1776, few literary works appeared because the first important thing for the people in the British colony was to make a living, then to seek for development, at last to try to obtain their independence from the British ruling. Also through a brief introduction of American history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I made the learners know the features of American Romanticism during the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century and the features of American realism literature after the Civil War.

While dealing with innovative teaching in the classroom, I, more often than not, recommended to learners to read some famous works of American literature in Chinese edition so that the students can have an impression of these works. Then I told them to read the original works after they have accumulated little by little profound English knowledge. I also told the learners to watch films adapted from the famous American novels, most of which can be downloaded from internet. And all the actors and actresses speak English in the films while you can see the Chinese

translation at the bottom of the screen. This is really to kill two birds with one stone because the learners can not only improve their English but also have a understanding of the original works.

#### VI. TO PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO THE LATEST ACHIEVEMENTS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

In recent years, Chinese government always stresses the importance of keeping pace with the times. English teaching and the teaching of American literature for distance learners, in my opinion, also need to keep pace with the times. That is to say, those who teach or study American literature should not only teach or read some famous works of American literature but also pay close attention to the latest achievements of the subject. Only in this way can we get to know the developing trend of American literature, and can also have a keen insight into the development of American society.

In the past decades, there has been a unique phenomenon on the literary arena in the United States—ethnic literature emerged and is becoming flourishing. In 1952, the black writer Ralph Ellison (1914-1994) published his famous novel *Invisible Man*. Beginning from 1970s, Tony Morrison (1931-), the only black woman so far to achieve the Nobel Prize in literature, published a serious of novels that typically focus on black women and have explored the experience and roles of black women in a racist and male dominated society. Saul Bellow (1915-2005) and Isaac Singer (1904-1991) are both Jewish American writers, and both of them won Nobel Prize for literature. Czeslaw Milosz (1911-2004) was a Polish American writer who also won the Nobel Prize for literature. Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977), a Russian-born American writer, has been famous for his so called pornographic novel *Lolita* (1955) all over the world. Sandra Cisneros (1954-) is a Mexican American female writer whose novel *The House of Mango Street* (1984) has been translated worldwide. Chang-rae Lee (1964-), a South Korea-born American writer, is now considered to be a new star in American literary world. Maxine Hong Kingston (1940-) and Amy Tan (1952-) are both Chinese American female writers, and both of them were awarded National Book Award and National Book Critics Circle Award [5]. Iris Chang (1968-2004) is also a Chinese American female writer who is most famous for her book *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, which was made into a film by an American film company in 2006.

All above mentioned American writers and some of their works reflect the latest achievements of American literature. At the same time, literature as a mirror of a society refract a general picture of American society today. It is known to all that *The Declaration of Independence* adopted in 1776 declared that "All Men are created equal" [6], yet it is an obvious fact that in a long period of about 200 years, the people of minority nationalities were discriminated against and sometimes even cruelly persecuted. The flourishing of

ethnic literature in America in the past few decades and the election of Barack Obama as American president in 2008 fully shows that the United States is now a country with more toleration, more equality, more freedom and more democracy.

## VII. THE INNOVATIVE TEACHING OF MULTIMEDIA IS OF PRIMARY IMPORTANCE FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

As I mentioned in the beginning of the paper, the distance learners in SXRTVU, for most of the time, are geographically separated from their tutor, and the main means for them to learn is self study. Under this condition, multimedia teaching and learning are of crucial importance for distance learners. Multimedia learning theory focuses on principles for effective use of multimedia in learning or instructional technology. Today many technologies can be, and are used in e-learning, from blogs to collaborative software, eportfolios, and virtual classrooms. Educational technology today generally refer to the use of technology in learning in a much broader sense than computer-based training or Computer Aided Instruction of the 1980s and 1990s. [7]

It is essential to make the learning process more productive and interesting. But the question is that how to make the learning process more productive and interesting. What technology should we use in distance learning and teaching? What kind of course materials should we upload to learners on the local study network? According to some Chinese experts, the instructional design of e-learning course must be done from the angles of learners so as to suit for distance learners' psychological factors, educational level and the ability to use new technologies [8]. Which is to say, multimedia teaching must implement the principle of "teaching students according to their aptitude" so that learners enjoy their learning and are good at learning. [9]

In accordance with the real condition of distance learners and the characteristics of the course, we take the following measures and use the following technologies to let learners identify and make full use of online resources.

A. To deliver the basic online information to the students. The information includes an introduction to the course, a brief introduction to the teacher who is in charge of the course, syllabus, learning goals, learning methods and direction for examination.

B. To utilize the Microsoft Power Point. The technology of Power Point can be both used in classroom teaching and online teaching. We made about 120 pieces of Power Points for the course of American literature with the authors' portraits and their major works on them, and also with Chinese translation beside English. We combined Flash technology with Power Point to create a sense of moving so that all the Power Points look more vivid. At last we upload the Power Points in chronological sequence to the local network of SXRTVU.

C. To meticulously design the online course of

American literature to offer a virtual learning environment for distance learners. This is no easy job to do, and it needs a close cooperation of tutors and technicians. In order to produce high quality online learning course, we organized a group including three tutors and three technicians. The chief tutor, in my opinion, is the designer who is like a film director and plays a key role in making the course. This needs the designer to have both the print course and the technological process of making online course at his finger tips. I myself, of course, served as the chief tutor in the making of process. The group made full use of new technologies such as Macromedia Dream Weaver, Macromedia Flash and Web2.0 to make the course practical, moderate and interactive so that learners can easily deal with the online courses. In addition, we update the online courses once in two weeks so as to keep pace with the learning and teaching demand.

D. To arouse learners enthusiasm by means of every possible approach. Apart from some frequently used methods such as online chatting, BBS, e-mail, etc, we now, based on learner-centered pedagogy, often organize some group discussions, seminars and brainstorming, we also make full use of the latest technologies such as Blog and QQ to offer chances for interaction between learners and tutors, and among learners themselves.

E. To take advantage of mobile phones in distance education. As people have become much richer than before in China, almost every adult has one or two mobile phones. With the technological development of mobile phones, M-learning has become more and more popular. Perhaps we are entering a world where learning objects will be at our finger tips. Learning objects on different topics will likely something you can grab like magazines and newspapers on the way into a plane, bus, or train. [10] It is true people at present can learn the knowledge they want anywhere and anytime—in trains, buses, cars and even on beds and in toilets. On account of this, the proportion of utilizing mobile phones for the aim of distance learning and teaching is increasing in SXRTVU by leaps and bounds.

F. The format of assignments for the online course of American literature. The same as print course, we divide the assignments of multimedia course into four modules after each chapter: A. Fill in the blanks; B. Match the authors with their works; C. To tell true or false; D. Questions for thought. The amount of assignments are moderate, and they are uploaded on local network of SXRTVU after finishing learning each chapter. The learners are asked to finish the online assignments within the allotted time, and it goes without saying that the tutor corrects the assignments online and gives the learners feedback without delay.

## VIII. ASSESSMENT

The assessment of outcomes is essential, and the only criterion to assess how well we are achieving our teaching and learning goals remains in two aspects: one is the feedback of learners, and the other is the final examination.

During the semester, we uploaded a questionnaire on the local net and ask the students to complete it within the time of two weeks. Table 2 illustrates the opinion of learners and the outcome of our innovative teaching for the course American literature.

Classroom teaching	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The content of print course is quite new</li> <li>2. The latest achievements of American literature are included</li> <li>3. The methodology of teaching is both practical and effective</li> </ol>
Multimedia teaching	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Online teaching materials are rich</li> <li>2. All the materials on local network are designed according to learners' English level and suit for distance learning.</li> <li>3. The interaction between the students and the teacher are frequent</li> <li>4. The method of M-learning is pretty good and really useful</li> </ol>
Assignments	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The design of the assignments is reasonable</li> <li>2. To update and correct the assignments without any delay</li> <li>3. After finishing doing all the assignments we have a thorough understanding of the whole course</li> </ol>
The assessment of the whole course	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We are very interested in learning the course and quite satisfied with the teaching content and teaching form</li> <li>2. We have got a good mastery of American literature through innovative teaching and learning</li> </ol>

As can be seen from table 2, the learners are quite satisfied with the pedagogy we used to achieve our goals for innovative teaching. In addition, nobody failed in the final examination for the course. This made us feel a strong sense of achievements.

### IX. CONCLUSION

Innovation is a current trend across China. The key to the innovation of education is innovative teaching which includes both the teaching content and its form. The content contains both the print course and multimedia course, and the form means the teaching method of both classroom

teaching and online teaching. The unity of the content and its form is quite necessary for innovative teaching in distance education. Only by combining teaching content with its form can we implement our innovative teaching effectively. Only by making full use of innovative teaching can the students' learning interests be aroused. Only by utilizing the method of innovative teaching can learners have a good mastery of the course. Only by practicing innovative teaching can learners get to know the latest achievements of American literature. Only by teaching distance learners according to their aptitude can we achieve our teaching goals. Above all, the innovative teaching of multimedia plays a key role in distance education. Nevertheless, everything especially the information technology is developing with each passing day all over the world. Therefore, teachers' abilities to teach online are critical to the quality of online education. Thus a teacher engaged in distance education should keep studying throughout his or her life because "A drop of water to students commands a bucket of water on the teacher". [11]

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