

# Chapter 17

## Adapting, Appropriating, Writing: Towards a Digital Classroom of Literature

**Vandana Saxena**  
Taylor's University, Malaysia

### ABSTRACT

*This chapter proposes a deeper integration of the writing practices like creative writing and storytelling in a class of literature in order to develop a new pedagogical model that empowers the students of literature to not only read and interpret but also to express and engage with the text in a nuanced manner. It does so in the context of the current trends of interactive reading and writing fostered by the digital technology where productive engagements with the texts through fanfictions, visual adaptations, and so on are a part reading a text. Following the paradigm of fanfiction, the project “The Crucible on Twitter” implemented in the classrooms of English Literature in a Malaysian University revealed the ways in which digitally mediated writing activities enable the learners to engage with a text on its own turf, promoting cross-cultural understanding and empowering the learner-readers to integrate their own meanings, concerns, and issues into their reading of an original literary text.*

### INTRODUCTION

Consider a traditional classroom of Literature: it consists of two seminal activities – reading and interpretation. The learners read a literary text and interpret it, either collectively or individually. The discussions in the classroom put the text and the interpretations through a force field of literary and cultural theories which are finally distilled in the form of written textual analysis and research essays. Hence while reading and writing are integral to the literary studies, there is a dichotomy between the two activities. Reading and interpretation are the focal tasks while writing plays a subordinate role as a tool to express the thoughts and ideas gleaned during the reading.

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This division between reading and writing has characterized English Studies since its inception as a field of inquiry in the middle of the nineteenth century. The division reflects the tussle in the academy and the larger arena of culture (Scholes, 1985; Graff, 2009; Bousquet, 2009). According to Robert Scholes (1985), a prominent literary scholar, in the nineteenth and the twentieth century, English Studies comprised of close reading, interpretation and analysis, in other words a pedagogy that favored the consumption of a text rather than production: ‘we may consume ‘literature,’ which comes from outside our classrooms, but we cannot produce literature in classes, nor can we teach its production’ (4). ‘Production of literature,’ he points out, ‘is regarded beyond us’ (5).

The study of literature as the synecdoche of English Studies exists at the cost of the discipline of writing which includes of rhetoric, composition, philology and creative writing. In *Textual Carnivals*, Susan Miller (1993) argues that during the twentieth century ‘as even faint associations with classical grammatical instruction grew dimmer, composition was increasingly diminished and simplified. Concurrently literary studies grew and became more complex’ (128).

Thus, while becoming ‘a reader’ is frequently emphasized as an indisputable social good (Miller & Anderson, 2009; Sanden, 2014), practices like composition and production of texts have been considered less worthy of attention in an English classroom. In order to study and unpack the dynamics of the dominance of reading and interpretation, the scholars have focused on social and cultural agendas underlying the field like the colonial ideology which led to the dominance of reading, interpretation and consumption of English literature during the course of the twentieth century (Baldick, 1983; Viswanathan, 1989. Campbell, 1992; Bousquet, 2009).

This structural separation between reading and writing led to a gap in English Studies which lost ‘the rich educational potential of the complex relationships between creativity, scholarship, and critical analysis’ (Graff, 2009, pp.273) by the marginalization of writing. Citing the current lack of curricular collaboration between writing and “regular” literature programs, Gerald Graff (2009) has emphasized the urgent need for the integration of the discipline of creative writing and literature. For scholars like North (2009) and McComsiky (2006) this integration, the fusion of the disciplinary boundaries of writing and literature is one of the ways to counter the ‘long term decline in the cultural capital of literature...as a part of the larger decline in the role of humanities’ (Bousquet, 2009, pp.119). In the current classroom, it can be achieved by harnessing the potential of online activities like fan writing and discussions threads that occupy the contemporary learners. Such affordances of writing for engaging with and enriching literary studies have the potential to shift the focus from interpretation and consumption of a text to active literary production. At the center of such a classroom is the learner-reader who is also a producer as s/he uses the original text in a creative manner.

Thus a return to writing— as an effective mode of expression that actively engages with the language and its complexities — signals a new postmodern classroom of literature where the cultural, social and political ideologies and agendas of the original text are undone by production of texts that talk back to the original. This paper aims to develop a new pedagogical model for the new classroom of English Studies that empowers the learner to not only interpret but also to express and engage with the literary text in a nuanced manner. More specifically, the paper examines the trends of online reading and writing like adaptations and fan fictions as *produsage*, a term coined by New Media scholar Axel Bruns (2007), to understand how the current generation of learners not only consume a text but also explore it through their modes of production ranging from writing and re-writing to visualization of a text. To explore the peculiarities of writing in the twentieth century, the study delves into the field of online engagements to foreground their potential as pedagogical tools that can cultivate critical thinking and creativity. The

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