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**A Literary/Creative Blog as a  
Active Tool to Teach Literature**

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## An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
Athens Institute for Education and Research

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## **A Literary/Creative Blog as a Active Tool to Teach Literature**

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### **Abstract**

Many Spanish programs at the Undergraduate College level in USA have adapted a Survey of Latin American Literature course at an intermediate level. This is a course that teaches students the most fundamental literature works from the oral tradition of the pre-Hispanic cultures to more recent writing. The material presented is challenging and as a result students are apprehended to take the course.

So, how do we as educators help students to see the importance of literature and most significantly how do we assist the student to feel comfortable with the literature texts? How do students gain confidence when reading literature and are they eventually engaged in the process of critical interpretation and their own learning?

The following paper studies how a Literary/ Creative Blog is a successful tool to studying literature. The blog is an example of active learning where students successfully overcome their anxiety when studying literature in another language. It is practical device that engages the students and allows them to take ownership of their own learning.

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<sup>1</sup> This article would not have been possible without the assistance and wealth of knowledge of Kevin Timmer, Assistant Lab Supervisor and David Shultz Lab Director of the Modern Languages and Literatures Lab at GVSU.

Teaching literature is still one of the major challenges in education. The majority of students question: ‘What is the purpose of literature?’<sup>1</sup> This article responds to the difficulties that university students face while learning Spanish literature in the USA. We focus on technology as a valuable tool in the teaching of literature and acquisition of a second language. We analyze how the creation of a literary/creative blog, as part of a literature class can reduce the anxiety<sup>2</sup> that students may have when writing about literature. As a result in participating in blogging, we find that students can comfortably engage in the learning of literature in another language and reflect on the values of studying literature.

A literary blog, as a method of teaching literature, is a digital tool that helps students easily become familiar with a literary text, be more analytical, and play with the text in a non-threatening and creative way. The blog is an example of experiential learning in which, the students are active subjects: they write, analyze, comment and listen. This approach is opposite to the traditional methodology in which students are passive; less apt to effectively learn the information. In traditional approaches, the learning is mostly vertical: from professor to students (Joaquin 2002). The introduction of the blog is an example of a more content-based approach.<sup>3</sup> Through the creation of hypertexts, the students become authors of literary texts. While the students are manipulating the literary texts, they become creative, feel comfortable studying literature, and are exposed to the authentic use of language and culture. The Experiential Education methodology allows the students to interpret literature from a perspective closely related to their own reality, which is important not only in learning another language but also in their educational career.

## **Foundational Problems**

Isabela Leibrandt (2007) reviews several studies, which focus on the difficulties of teaching literature; her review concludes that the didactic of literature has not successfully designed methodologies that engage students in learning. As this study by Leibrandt suggests, a need for improvement remains in the teaching of literature. One of the major problems is that a student pursuing an advanced degree in literature is not required to complete a methods course specific to the teaching of literature; this holds true for professors of Spanish literature today, at the university level in USA. The lack of pedagogical method training in the teaching of literature leads to the use of

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Spanish to English: ¿Para qué sirve la Literatura? Presented in Joaquín M. Aguirre Romero’s essay: <http://www.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero21/eliterat.html>

<sup>2</sup> Elenine K. Horwith, Michael B Horwitz and Joann Cope concluded that the usage of effective learning strategies do alleviates student’s anxiety (p 125).

<sup>3</sup> Please consult Terri Cononelos and, Maurizio Oliva in their article: “Using computer Networks to Enhance Foreign Language /Culture Education.”

traditional teaching methods more than, innovative ones. Because the teaching of literature continues to implement traditional methods, literature is introduced to students in a theoretical and abstract form; consequently, students feel alienated and do not participate actively in the learning process.

Not only is the professor not prepared to teach literature, but also the pedagogical focuses articulated by “Literary Anthologies” are still designed from the perspective of traditional teaching methods. Most learning is directed through knowledge of specific material: authors’ lives, works, social and cultural context, and historical situations. Therefore, the students are unable to sufficiently analyze the work or understand how literature has impacted today’s world and the students’ life. Isabela Leibbrandt (2007) mentions Carter and Long, in their classic book, *Teaching Literature*, to address the significant difference between the instruction that focus on the examination of knowledge about literature rather than the knowledge of literature. Consequently, students are unable to participate in the space created by literature; to reflect on basic life questions and analyze the complexities of the human condition. They are not able to simply experience pleasure when reading.

The third problem arises from the selection of the readings chosen in the Survey courses for Hispanic literature. Many of the editors of the anthologies place substantial importance on canonical texts and eliminate authors that reflect less monolithic identities. This is problematic because students feel that their identities are unrelated to the selected texts; furthermore, the students’ identities, for the most part, are completely eliminated. Realizing these limitations, the project attempts to use a literary blog to support a learning style where the epicenter is situated in what Analouse Keating (2010) defines as ‘holistic-critical-thinking.’(109) Students analyze the world from the premise that everything is interconnected and their analysis of the texts is more inclusive in relation to diverse opinions and beliefs.

The fourth problem and no less critical is a lack of a reading habits that many young adults have today in the United States. The 2007 National Endowment for the Arts presented a study concerning the low levels of reading by the young Americans and the social consequences. (<http://www.nea.gov/news/news07/trnr.html>) In the absence of an established reading habit, most students enroll in literature classes without having developed a taste for reading, which in turn creates a barrier to learning.

In response to the aforementioned problems, during the winter of 2012, the students enrolled in the Survey of Hispanic Literature course at Grand Valley State University, created a literary blog. The blog was an example of the inclusion of the ICTs in the classroom, a field with which the students were quite familiarized and which represents an integral part of their lives. The blog was designed to support a more active and independent learning process. The digital support, as Richard Gerver addressed recently would allow the teacher to transform him/herself. The teacher’s main role is to prepare the student to learn by him/herself; to become independent learners. ([http://tecnologia.elpais.com/tecnologia/2012/04/20/actualidad/1334922119\\_543382.html](http://tecnologia.elpais.com/tecnologia/2012/04/20/actualidad/1334922119_543382.html)).

The blog encompassed a virtual platform for individual and cooperative education in which each student was required to individually complete a written section and as part of a group, a Podcast and a video interview. Including both individual and cooperative exercises fosters ‘multidimensional scenarios... knowledge depends on the practices in which they practice and the social instruments that are shared.’<sup>1</sup>

## **Methodology**

Sixteen students participated in a Survey of Latin American class in winter 2012 at Grand Valley State University. Out of these students, fourteen voluntarily completed the questionnaires about the blog. The blog was designed as a collaborative assignment between three students. The students were assigned randomly in groups during the first week of class. Their blog was developed incorporating a student centered approach where education builds from experience, interest, ability and the necessities of the student (McCombs and Whisker 1997). The students were part of “learning communities.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the model of D.A Kolb (1984) of Experiential Teaching and three of his fundamental points was incorporated: 1. Learning is Best Conceived as a Process, Not in Terms of Outcomes, 2. Learning is a Continuous Process Grounded in Experience, 3. Learning Involves Transactions Between the Person and the Environment. Once the blog was completed, we studied the results of the instructional activity by evaluating each of the elements of the blog.

## **Objectives of the blog**

The three principal objectives were fundamentally identified and shared with the students before the creation of the blogs. These objectives were directly related to the theory of D.A. Kolb’s Experiential Education: A. Learning is Best Conceived as a Process, Not in Terms of Outcomes. Students seem to feel that literature is not an important component of their future learning. However, literature continues to feed the imagination, support creativity, and encourage reflection; these elements are necessary in real life. They also assist us in forming our true self instead of imitating others. The blog

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Spanish to English: ‘escenarios multidimensionales...el conocimiento depende de las prácticas en las que se practica y de los instrumentos sociales que se comparten.’ Maria Belén Izquierdo Magaldi (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Maria Belén Izquierdo Magaldi (2011) in her thesis: ‘Estrategias Discursivas de la Interacción en el Aula [Discursive Strategies in the Interaction in the Classroom]’ presents this concept coined by Barbara Rogoff: “The idea of a learning community is based on the premise that the learning takes place when participating in the companies shared with others, so that all fulfill active roles however often asymmetrical” (Rogoff, 1994, p 209).



should be understood as a process in the discovering of knowledge in literature where the critical process is in constant reformulation. B. Learning is a Continuous Process Grounded in Experience. Drawing on knowledge of literature and technology literature is explored in distinct forms, in addition to the analysis in class. Play, explore, have fun. Lose the “taboo” in literature. Make it become a part of your life. Invite literature to enter your world because the text and work does not belong solely to the author when the public reads it. C. Learning Involves Transactions Between the Person and the Environment. Almost all the authors that we will read in class have been individuals who have shaped the course of history, through the politics and society of their time, and who were true actors in their story. The blog is our own space where we are able to bring these authors to this present time and thus reflect on the various themes that the writers have invited us to contemplate while validating their worth in today’s world. It is a space to enter into communication between classmates as well as the cybernauts that explore our blogs.

### **Elements of the blog**

Each student in class received a description of the blog (see below).

The blog needs to have the following elements:

1. Individual assignment: an opinion piece on one of the readings completed for the class. This consists of one analysis for every member of the group, each a minimum of two pages.

2. Group assignment: an experimental video in which the students interview two people, one a student and one a professor at GVSU, each is bilingual in Spanish and English. The two interviewees are to read a poem or an excerpt from a story or some other literary texts read in class and reflect on the meaning of the text. There is no time limit.

3. Group assignment: A podcast done in Garage Band. Commenting on the interviews, the group members create a podcast focusing on the following: a) their reasons for choosing their particular text, b) their thoughts about the interviews, and c) their thoughts on the importance of reading literature. These ‘podcasts,’ seven to ten minutes in length, can be creative and use special effects.

Once the blog is finished, each student gives a presentation in front of the class about their blog in groups. This presentation consists of not only an explanation of the different aspects of the blog and their choice of texts for the blog in particular, but also their personal impressions of creating the blog. On the last day of class, there is an analytical exam over the blogs. Every student selects a classmate’s blog and answers some general questions about that particular blog.

### **Quantitative Evaluation**

When the blog was completed, a questionnaire was given to the students who participated in the creation of the blogs (see Appendix 1). Fourteen students completed voluntarily the questionnaire. The class received it the same day that each group of students finished their presentations, April 2012. By completing the questionnaire at the end of the course, we wanted the student to reflect on their own learning process and we hoped to assess three principal learning objectives from the implementation of the blog:

1. If, according to the student, the blog had been a useful tool in developing his/her creativity.
2. If the blog had invited the student to talk about literature outside of the classroom and consequently made it part of his/her reality.
3. If the blog created a comfortable atmosphere for learning.

We mentioned at the start of this study that many students feel apprehension when they analyze and study literary texts. The first objective of this blog was to design a space in which every student could manipulate and play with the texts in a free and creative way. Analyzing the graphs used for this study (see Appendix 2), we can conclude that this objective was achieved in the three elements that composed the blog. The students not only fulfilled the assigned components of the blog, but also included in the blog other visual and auditory elements. They used: photographs, art, song versions of some poems, and videos of interviews done with the chosen authors. Therefore, the teaching was reinforced not only from a strictly literary analysis but also from the interpretation of the works in a more interdisciplinary manner. The blog encouraged students to think about literature in other areas of study, which they normally would have not done in a more traditional way of learning (non-experiential).

All of the students who participated had some knowledge of at least one of the electronic mediums, but none of them were well versed in each technology device used for the blog. The blog, then, allowed each one of them to use his/her own technological expertise and, at the same time, continue learning about the ICTs and literature. The students' technological knowledge allowed them to confront the literary texts with more confidence. They felt they could analyze the literature in a way that related to their own lives, over which they had some authority. This confidence made them feel that they could contribute something new to the literary analysis.

Lastly, we hoped that with the creation of the blog, the students would not only be exposed to a collaborative project, but also that they would exchange ideas with others outside of their group: with other students, and even with other Internet users, and even other people who were not in the class but were members of their university community. As we can see in the graphs (Appendix 2), these objectives were clearly achieved due to both videos the students had to produce and the radio program (Podcast) that they prepared.

The students also expressed that they felt more comfortable talking about literature in cyberspace than discussing it in the classroom environment.

### **Qualitative Evaluation**

As part of the questionnaire the students were also asked to complete three open ended questions:

1. Compare your experience with the blog to your experience with other formal presentations or projects you have worked on
2. Using one specific blog entry as an example, describe how the blog supplemented in-class lectures or discussions. What inspired you to write this entry? How did writing it further your learning of topics presented in class?
3. Did the blog allow you to demonstrate your individual talents while contributing as a group member? For example: graphic design, writing, video, music, etc.

Student responses to these questions were very similar; from their responses we are able to identify several themes. We are making quality evaluation about specific responses that were overwhelmingly used by the students.

Students mentioned that the blog allowed for a more creative product and encouraged individual engagement. By working on specific topics on the blog, students incorporated different ways of expressing their opinions and could share their ideas more freely. The blog created a less threatening space to express and communicate ideas. It made literature more enjoyable and playful. The blog motivated the students to research on their own, investigate more work by the same authors and read about diverse perspectives. It exposed them to new usages of technology and how they could be incorporated to expand on previous class discussions. Each and every one of the comments is in line with the objectives that were proposed with the creation of the blog. In this article, we have addressed how students feel an aversion to studying literature and how this anxiety directly affects their ability to learn the Spanish language. It is important to create an environment where students can minimize their anxiety and in turn increase their learning. Our findings suggest that the blogs support an environment where students are able to overcome some of the anxiety of studying literature.

### **Conclusion**

Both the quantitative and qualitative analysis used in this study suggested that students' engagement in studying literature by an experiential teaching-learning process is successful. The blog is a virtual space where the students are comfortable; they can contribute to their learning. In contrast to the limitations of the classroom and the traditional learning, the blog allows students to manipulate the physical space; engage with ideas and texts outside the classroom and invite them to research topics and texts of personal choice.

The study of literature in a second language class at the university level is still a field very open for future research. We are interested in continuing our own research in how different methods of experiential learning used in literature classes do increase language acquisition.

Appendix 1:

On a scale of 1 through 3, rate your level of agreement to the following statements related to the literary blog you created for SPA 332 with Professor Gomez. (1 I agree, 2 disagree 3 I neither agree nor disagree)

Podcast Questionnaire

1. As my classmates and I bounced ideas off one another for the podcast, I was able to view diverse interpretations of the literature we were studying. 1 2 3
2. The music for our podcast reflected in some way the tone of the literature on which it was based. 1 2 3
3. The podcast allowed for my classmates to be creative and it was more enjoyable than a traditional homework assignment. 1 2 3
4. Interviewing other people about literature allowed me to observe others' reactions to literature and helped me get to know my fellow classmates and professors better.  
1 2 3
5. Choosing jingles, music, and conversation to record for our podcast made it easier for me to identify more literary elements in the pieces we analyzed. 1 2 3

Writing Questionnaire

1. The writing component of the blog allowed creative freedom. 1 2 3
2. The writing component of the blog provided a way to form better connections with the different works of literature. 1 2 3
2. The blog presented a comfortable atmosphere to share ideas confidently in a different language. 1 2 3
3. The writing component of the blog presented each group space to discuss topics and share opinions on literature making the blog personal to each group member.  
1 2 3
4. The creativity and freedom to express thoughts and opinions made the writing component a fun way to learn and discuss literature outside the classroom.  
1 2 3

Video Questionnaire

1. In the process of doing the video, I came to see that literature is tangible for everyone. 1 2 3

2. Making the video with a group was better than doing it individually.1 2 3
3. Doing the interviews – going “out into the world” and hearing different interpretations – helped me see the work of literature in a new way.1 2 3
4. Working in the video outside the classroom, create space to interact with another students outside the classroom.1 2 3

Open ended questions. Please, give us a response for these questions. Thank you.

1. Compare your experience with the blog to your experience with other formal presentations or projects you have worked on.
2. Using one specific blog entry as an example, describe how the blog supplemented in-class lectures or discussions. What inspired you to write this entry? How did writing it further your learning of topics presented in class?
3. Did the blog allow you to demonstrate your individual talents while contributing as a group member? For example: graphic design, writing, video, music, etc.

Appendix 2

Figure 1.Podcast Questions

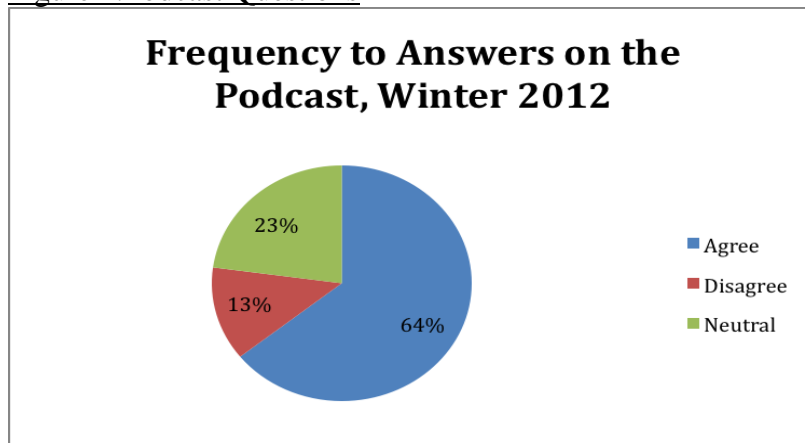


Figure 2. Writing Questions

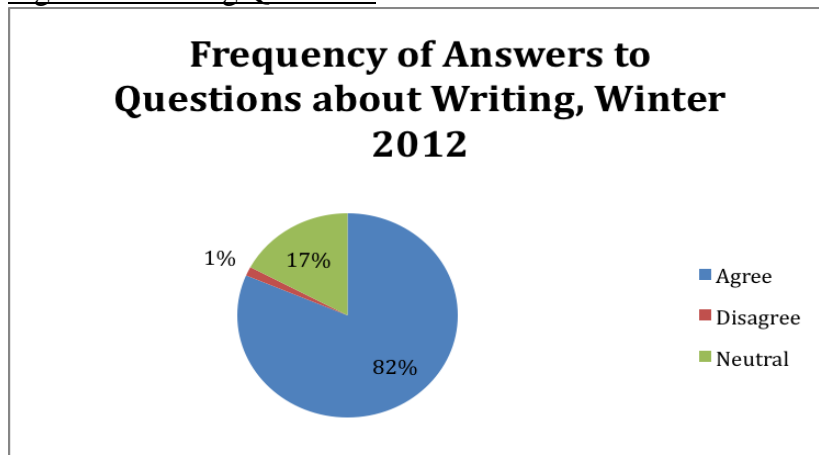
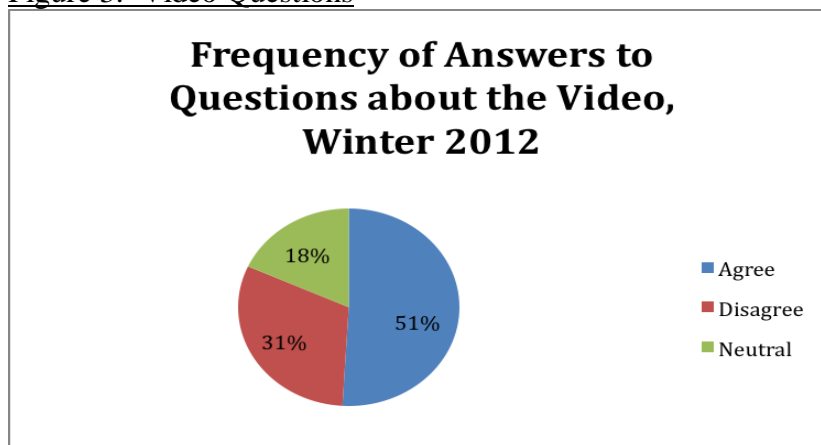


Figure 3. Video Questions



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