

TEACHING DRAMA WITH A COMBINATION OF REGULAR AND ONLINE COURSE: THE USE OF ONLINE MEDIA IN TEACHING LITERATURE

Eta Farmacelia Nurulhady

Diponegoro University
farmacelia@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Though drama or plays are written to be performed, the emphasis of teaching drama in the English Departments in many universities in Indonesia is on plays as literature. The many aspects of the plays that need to be discussed and analyzed require large blocks of time which the regular meetings hardly provide. Online media offer some alternatives to handle the limited time and improve students' participation and creativity in drama class. The combination of regular and online course engages students' participation beyond classroom regular meetings. Online discussion group enable shy and passive students to articulate their opinions in the discussion. Online resources afford abundant materials to deepen students' understanding about plays as literature and performance. Having little opportunity to see live English plays performance; students can access online resources to find a number of interpretations in performing plays. In turn, students can contribute to the richness of online resources by uploading their play performance video.

Key words: *Plays as literature, plays as performance, online course, online discussion, online resources.*



INTRODUCTION

Drama is one of the three major genres of imaginative literature taught at the English Department in universities in Indonesia. It differs significantly from the other two genres - fiction and poetry - in that drama is essentially written to be performed. However, in the English Department in many universities in Indonesia, more emphasis is given to drama or plays as literature (the terms drama and play are used interchangeably in this paper). Therefore, the discussions are centered on the elements of drama as literature. The common classroom activities would consist of teacher's presentations and explanation, question and answer, students' presentation, and discussion. In the English Department, Diponegoro University, a drama class carries two credit hour covering a one-hundred-minute meeting each week for sixteen weeks in a semester. With an average of four plays to read in a semester and the many aspects of drama to discuss, time becomes a challenging issue.

Another issue is related to drama as performance. Drama is meant to be acted. Though students can imagine how a play will be performed from the stage directions - the playwright's instructions on how to perform the play - which are always available in each drama text, watching the real performance will be a peculiar experience. Reading a play is unquestionably different from watching it performed

on the stage by the actors. Involving the interactions between the actors and their audience, drama performance offers richer insight. Live performance of English plays is unfortunately a rare occurrence in Indonesia.

Time constraint and the near-unavailability of live performance of English plays are some of the problems in teaching English drama. Another minor problem relates to the language and students' reading habit. Since drama is a literary work, the literary language in some English drama is quite hard to understand. On top of that, some students have not yet built strong commitment to finish reading the assigned texts and do their best to understand them. This study is aimed to explore the possibilities in using audio visual means and online media to improve students' involvement, enjoyment, and creativity in English Drama class.

THEORY AND METHOD

In their introduction to the discussion of drama, Kennedy & Gioia (2002: 131-2) argue that though plays are written to be performed, reading plays in their printed form afford certain advantages. Two of which are the following. Because no one will have the opportunities to watch all masterpieces of drama being performed on stage, reading some masterpieces is a better way to know them than not to know them at all. Reading drama also gives a chance to understand the plays in their entirety since each different performance of the same play is a different interpretation made by the people involved in performing it. Roberts & Jacobs are in line with Kennedy & Gioia about the advantages of reading plays. They add that the major advantage of reading is the opportunity to consider each element in the play in depth, to "stage" the play in one's imagination, and to adjust the reading tempo (2007: 1282-3). There are indeed advantages of reading a play, yet reading also has its drawback compared to watching the play since a play is principally meant to be acted. The major disadvantage, in Roberts & Jacobs' opinion is "the lack of immediacy of live theater" (2007: 1282) due to the lack of visual and auditory aspects of live performance.

As literature, the analysis of drama will cover its main literary aspects which include the text, language, characters, plot, structure, point of view, tone, symbolism, and theme or meaning. Drama as performance comprises a number of elements: the actors, director, producer, stage, sets, lighting, costumes and makeup, and audience. Teaching drama should embrace both drama as literature and drama as performance.

Acknowledging the interest of the 21st century students in technology, Bowman, et. al. articulate an interesting statement about the use of technology to teach literature:

As teachers of English arts, we need to view technology as a means of collecting information, capturing ideas, and making meaning, where students summarize, synthesize, evaluate, select, listen, read, organize, interpret, talk, write, edit, and revise. Technology is all about integration and finding connections, inspiring critical literacy (2002: 89).

Bowman, et.al. argues that technology can make Shakespeare, who lived centuries ago, be our contemporary. With the use of webquest, online resources and discussion

software, teachers can explore the possibility of technology to improve good teaching and connect students more actively with the text.

This study may be said as a preliminary Class Action Research as it is aimed to find ways to improve students' learning. Quoting Rawlinson & Little, Hewith and Little wrote: "Within the action research process, educators study student learning related to their own teaching. It is a process that allows educators to learn about their own instructional practices and to continue to monitor improved student learning" (2005: 1). This study is an attempt to utilize computer and internet-based technology in English Drama class, in a belief that the advancement of technology may serve as aids in teaching drama.

DISCUSSION

While a number of (most likely) senior lecturers are still not familiar with computer and internet-based technology, for most present time students, technology and internet-based services have become parts of their daily lifestyle. Technology has indeed permeated students' lives. Instead of carrying paper dictionary, for example, more students prefer to bring a pocket electronic dictionary. LCD projector is readily available in almost every classroom. PowerPoint presentation becomes a common aid in presenting material both for lecturers and students. In campus hall, it is common to see students being busy with laptops or notebook in front of them or on their laps. Libraries have started to lose their charms in attracting students who are searching for references. Students now turn to search engine on the internet when they need information. Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter become media for students to socialize and express themselves albeit the absurd realm of hyperreality inherent in such networks. Therefore, incorporating technology and internet-based services in teaching and learning process should be fruitful in engaging students in learning activities.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Close-reading a play is a prerequisite in analyzing its literary elements. In a typical English drama class in the English Department, Diponegoro University, students are assigned to read a number of plays and some references regarding the literary elements of drama. A normal meeting will proceed from the discussion of literary elements of drama and the analysis of the said elements in the assigned plays. Problems occur when students fail to finish reading the assigned texts. A short quiz at the beginning of each meeting is a possible way to ensure that students have read the assigned reading when they attend the class. When the assigned play is relatively short, the teacher can also allocate a few minutes of class time to allow students to read or reread the play together by heart.

Some students take advantage of online resources to get the synopsis of the play, making it as if they had read the play. Rather than opening the window of opportunity for students to cheat by not reading the assigned plays but getting the synopsis and analysis online, officially giving them the online resources about the discussed plays would make their actions legitimate. They can access the synopsis and analysis, yet they will still need to do the reading because they are still required to know the details, and the discussions will go beyond what they read

online. Literature Study Guide at <http://www.sparknotes.com> is a great resource for a large number of distinguished plays. The study guides for a play generally include the context, plot outline, character list, analysis of major characters, theme, study questions and essay topics, suggestions for further reading, and sometimes trivia quiz. There are controversies regarding the use of SparkNotes Literature Study Guides because they can be used by students as a replacement for reading assignments. However, the lecturer can actually devise a way that compels students to read the entire play and use SparkNotes to compare students' personal interpretation of the play with the analysis in the SparkNotes.

Search engine such as google and yahoo provide links to countless resources. Many playwrights have official websites, such Oscar Wilde, a distinguished British playwright, at <http://www.cmgww.com/historic/wilde/>. If one is interested in Samuel Beckett, he can find Samuel Beckett Resources and Links at <http://www.samuel-beckett.net/>. Among the many playwrights who are discussed and analyzed in online resources, Shakespeare is probably the most popular with the most website links, which include <http://www.shakespeare-online.com>; http://shakespeare.eb.com/shakespeare/ind_globe.html; <http://www.shakespeare-oxford.com/>; and <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shakespeare/index.html>.

ONLINE DISCUSSION GROUP

The belief in the importance of student-centered learning makes teachers plan class activities that compel students' active participation. Discussion in pair, group, or class is one of the common activities in keeping students active and involved. In a class with a small number of students, discussion can be effective since each student will have the opportunity to participate in the discussion. With a large number of students, discussion can be made effective by assigning topic for group discussions which is followed by class discussion in which each group presents the result of their discussion to the entire class.

Discussion activities do not go without obstacles. Some students tend to be more active and dominating. They are the ones who talk most of the time. Some other students prefer to keep silent for different reasons: they might not have anything to say because they are not well prepared with reading knowledge; they may not be confident in their own opinion; but some are just too shy to articulate their opinion (not to mention those who simply do not care about the discussion). Another problem is time constraint. Students' discussion is a time-consuming activity. With a syllabus to adhere and target materials to cover in a semester, many teachers find themselves not having the class time necessary to perform all teaching plans. In a drama class, the many elements of the plays that need to be discussed and analyzed require large blocks of time which the regular meetings hardly provide.

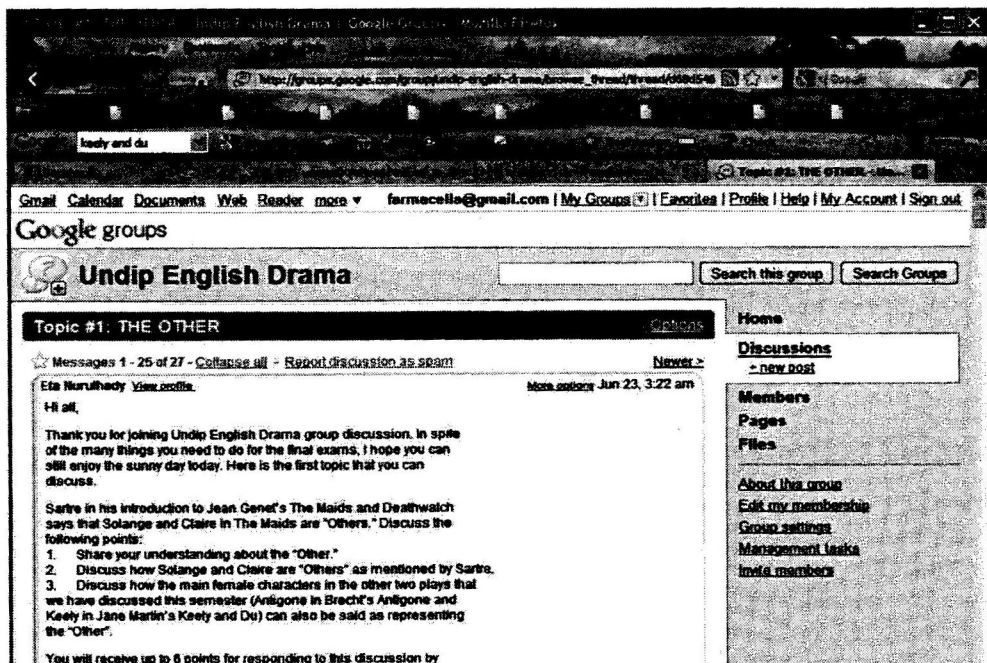


Figure 1. Undip English Drama – an example of Google Group

The combination of regular and online meeting can be a solution to the problems mentioned above. Google provides Google Group (<http://groups.google.com>) that can be utilized by a lecturer to promote interaction between a lecturer and his/her students and among students outside the class. The group has several features: **Home**, **Discussions**, **Members**, **Pages**, and **Files**. A lecturer can create a group and name it according to the class that s/he administers, for example Undip English Drama. S/he can decide whether the group is open for public or restricted only to confirmed members. After creating the group, s/he can invite students to be members of the group. Students must have Google email (gmail) account to be able to join the group. When a student is confirmed by the lecturer as the administrator of the group, the student's name, email address and other information will appear on **Members**. On the **Home**, the lecturer can explain the purpose of the group and explain how the group would be a medium for interactions outside the classroom. The **Discussions** is a place where the lecturer can post a topic to discuss. Students are invited to respond to the topic by replying to the discussion thread. To ensure interaction between participants of the discussion, every student needs to post his/her opinion or comment on the topic of the discussion. If he/she is not the first or second to respond to the thread, s/he is required to respond or comment on at least one of his/her friends' response. A deadline is set for each discussion topic. Students will get certain points for responding to a discussion thread by the deadline. Late response will not be counted. Individual assignment can be posted on **Pages**. As its name suggests, **Files** is the feature of Google Group that can consist of uploaded files by the lecturer or students.

When utilized for the first time in Contemporary English Drama class in 2010, Google Group stirred various responses from students. The most common, yet easy to solve, problem was that many students did not have Google email account. Their email accounts varied from yahoo account to hotmail account. They needed to create Gmail account to join the group. A few students were surprisingly not familiar with internet service. Some students complained that online discussion gave them more works to do, especially when they did not have access to internet at home. However, most students found it interesting and challenging. The first discussion thread was proven to work well in eliciting students' active participation. Each student had their say about the topic. Students' responses to their friends' posting showed that they are enriched by their friends' response on the topic while also able to add or refute. Most students showed their commitment to participate in the online discussion.

ONLINE MEDIA AND DRAMA AS PERFORMANCE

A student once complained about the final test which included a play performance in addition to a written test. She believed that the class should not perform the plays because they were not going to be actors or actresses. Besides, she argued that they were the English Department students who learn literature not entertainment. She apparently did not see the point of drama as performance.

Witnessing a theatrical performance of English drama is a rare opportunity in Indonesia, especially in Semarang. A glimpse of what a play performance is like can be seen from snapshots of play performance provided by some reference books on drama. Types of Drama: Plays and Essays by Sylvan Barnet, et. al. is a case in point. The book provides snapshots for each of the more than twenty plays that it has in print. Some plays have been adapted into movies, such as Shakespeare's Hamlet, Othello, and Romeo and Juliet and Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest. Watching the adaptation on the VCD or DVD is an alternative for looking at how the play is actually acted by actors in costumes within prepared sets. However, movies are not the same as theater performance of a play. Students can surely stage a play in his/her imagination, but watching a play being performed on the stage benefits them in knowing the possible interpretations of a play. Since each play performance is a particular interpretation of a play, different performance of the same play can yield different interpretation.

Although students may not have the opportunity in watching live play performance, they can still look at snapshots and clips of play performance through online media. Hundreds of pictures are available through Google Picture. An example is an album which consists of many snapshots from Arthur Miller's All My Son play performance at <http://picasaweb.google.co.id/HoosierPete/AllMySons>. For clips of play performances, one can look at <http://www.youtube.com/> to find a clip such as the following:



Figure 2. Clip of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* in <http://www.youtube.com/>

YouTube is so far the most popular site for people who want to see video clips of almost anything. Because the availability of the video clips depends on people who generously upload the clips, a search of a certain play may give more result than a search of another play.

Since students are generally excited about technology, incorporating computer and internet-based technology into the classroom activities is worth trying. The students who were enrolled in Modern American Drama class in 2009 were informed that they would have to perform an act from one of the three plays that would be discussed in the class. Since this class was an elective course for students of American Studies Section, it was understood that students did not really have foundational knowledge of literary elements of drama. The first half of the semester was dedicated to discuss the literary elements of the plays such as characters, plot and themes but with the emphasis on the plays as representations of real life happenings. The plays were still discussed in the second half of the semester. The emphasis, however, was shifted to play as performance: how they might perform the plays. These are students without theatrical background. Some had never read a play before the attended the class. Almost all of them had never performed anything on stage. Online media became handy. Snapshots of different performances of the plays were discussed in class. Students research the video clips of the performance that they could find from YouTube or other online sites.

Of the three plays discussed in class: Elizabeth Gaskell's *Trifles*, Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, and Langston Hughes' *Mulatto*, three groups of students decided to

perform each of the three acts of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, and one group chose to perform an act from Langston Hughes' *Mulatto*. The three groups performing *All My Sons* shared the same set and props, while the group staging *Mulatto* prepared their own set. A play acted on stage is addressed not to solitary readers but to a group of people as the audience whose response can affect one another. While their friends were performing the play, the rest of the students became audience. They could experience the dynamic of a play performance and witness how audience's response could also affect the actors who were acting the play. The performance of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* by three different groups confirm the claim that says every stage production of play is a fresh interpretation of it. The casting of characters, how each character performs his/her part, and the costumes worn by the characters in each of the three groups are immediate evidence of different interpretation of the same play. One of the groups undoubtedly did an in-dept research of the play as they had a clear idea on how an American gentleman in 1940s would dress. A student performing a character in Langston Hughes's *Mulatto*, could even speak in a Black Southern American accent. Those are made possible by the availability of online media from which students got their resources in preparing to perform the plays. Students' performance of a play is indeed fresh interpretation of the play. When they video-tape the performance and upload it to YouTube or other sites, they will have done their parts in contributing to the richness of online resources.

CONCLUSION

English drama class can utilize online media to improve students' participation and creativity. Online resources offer great aids in improving students' understanding of literary elements of drama. Combination of regular and online course, such as the use of Google Group for a medium of online discussion is an alternative to manage the limited class time while still engage students' active participation. Online media help students to watch plays acted on stage and prepare to actually conduct live performance of the assigned plays. After researching others' interpretation of the play, students can show their own interpretation by performing the play.

The use of online media in teaching literature is worth exploring. What has been done in two of the English Drama classes in the English Department, Diponegoro University exemplifies how online media can become valuable aids to improve students' active participation and creativity in English drama class. To analyze thoroughly the advantages of the use of online media in English drama class, a lecturer can conduct a Class Action Research to evaluate the effectiveness of the use of online media in teaching literature.

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