

Ink to Pixel: Wattpad as a Pedagogical Tool for English Literature in India

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S. Nandhini, M.A., (UGC) NET

Assistant Professor of English

Shrimathi Devkunvar Nanalal Bhatt Vaishnav College for Women, Chennai

Abstract

Digital Humanities is a burgeoning field where traditional ink converges into digital pixels. Descending from the field of computing humanities data, the scholarly activity continues to produce innovative projects. As far as digital pedagogy is considered, the 2012 edition of Debates in the Digital Humanities shed light on the state of pedagogy as a neglected stepchild of Digital Humanities. But with technological innovations, various digital pedagogical tools have emerged in the past decades. Post Covid-19 lot of digital pedagogical tools have been recognized by educators as part of teaching methodologies. In India, teaching methodologies have evolved to a significant degree from traditional teaching to digital classrooms. Lot of innovative methodologies are employed by the faculties to enhance students' learning and performance. English Literature is one of the most sought out humanities programs offered in Indian Education Institutions. When it comes to Literature teaching, professors employ various teaching methodologies including e- teaching, where digital tools are being employed. The paper aims to establish Wattpad, a digital platform for writing and reading stories, as a pedagogical tool for English Literature in India. This digital storytelling platform provides a space for the students' literary expression where they can read and write literary pieces and get real time feedback from users which boosts interactivity. By using this digital pedagogical tool English Literature students are encouraged to apply their literary skills by employing what they have learnt during their course to produce literary works.

Keywords: Digital Pedagogy, Digital Story Telling, Wattpad, Teaching Methodology, Pedagogy, Digital Tools, Education in India, Digital Humanities

In the era characterized by the dominance of technological innovations, it is safe to say that Digital Humanities has come a longway. From text mining to narrative analysis and from digital archive to digital story telling, there are various approaches, projects and tools helmed under Digital Humanities. By converging inks into digital pixels, the scholarly activity not only preserves the data but also makes room for closely analyzing the text and its patterns through various digital tools. Recent studies point to a healthy number of digital pedagogies that help educators facilitate learning for the students in an effective way. These pedagogies take teaching outside the classroom and help create a digital learning space.

Before Covid-19, most Indian education institutions were ignorant of a lot of digital tools that could have enhanced education outside traditional classrooms. Only after lockdown was imposed, educational institutions started searching for a digital learning space.

For example, Google Meet and Zoom became popular among educational institutions only during the Covid-19 lockdown. With schools closed, those digital tools filled up for conventional education in classrooms. Online classes were scheduled everyday like normal school timings. Students were expected to attend classes and interact with the teacher just like a traditional classroom. At the beginning, it was difficult for both the teachers and students to adapt to this new method of education. But with time, they not only learned to adapt and warm upto this mode of teaching but were open to other pedagogical tools they could incorporate with the learning process.

During Covid-19 lockdown, Learning Management Systems (LMS) like Google Classroom was used to organize course materials, assessments, assignments and track students' progress in a digital format. Webinars were conducted. Various digital tools like Padlet, Google Forms, Zoom, Microsoft Teams were used for students' assessments. Digital platforms like Online Tyari, Metti and other platforms helped conduct secure online exams. Turnitin and similar other digital tools were employed to check for plagiarism in digital submissions.

Today, educational institutions are urging their teachers to explore new pedagogies. Instead of sticking with traditional classroom teaching, teachers are urged to switch to blended and flipped modes of teaching. In most of the colleges, almost all the classrooms are equipped with interactive white boards and smart classrooms. The management arranges for Faculty Development Programs to help teachers get familiarized with the emerging pedagogical trends. Colleges are signing Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with various E-learning platforms like Coursera and UDEMY. This helps students learn additional courses that aren't part of their curriculum/syllabus.

Employing all these digital pedagogies differ from institutions to institutions. They depend upon the institutional resources, the level of education and the specific goals of the courses. As far as English Literature is considered, mostly traditional pedagogies are employed by the teachers. Students are assigned written assignments and seminars. They are asked to prepare mind charts or character trees for literary pieces. Role plays in the classroom, quizzes and group discussions are also practiced in the classroom. The teachers can employ various digital tools to facilitate learning. Other than literary texts students are allowed to access online texts and e-books. This doesn't mean printed textbooks are getting replaced. Rather e-books are an additional material for the students to read and analyze literary pieces conveniently.

Students are also assigned to prepare multimedia presentations which help them explore and present literary themes, characters and settings. They are asked to take seminars with the presentations they prepared. They are also encouraged to start blogging to improve their writing skills. Students are also encouraged to contribute to online magazines. Even though flipped and blended modes of teaching are popular, only few teachers practice these modes. They should employ these modes of teaching as it not only makes teaching easier but also gives a space for students to actively take part in learning. Through this method the students are expected to read the literary materials before attending the lecture. This will help the students to develop their own interpretation of the literary pieces. Through this method students will actually read literary pieces instead of depending on the summaries available online.

One of the sad realities in the Indian education system is students are valued based on the marks and percentage they score in the boards. This resulted in schools and colleges focusing on academic performances-based teaching rather than skill-based teaching. Because the focus of the education and examination stays on the marks, even teachers adopt teaching modes that enhance students' academic performances. Application-based education is being practiced in only a limited number of education institutions. Only during recent years skill-based and application-based learning are being urged to follow in the curriculum.

As far as English Literature students are concerned, the students learn about British and other major literature written in English. They learn about Literary Forms, Literary Criticism, Literary Theories, Linguistics, Language theories and much more. The students are prepared in such away that they are taught to write paragraphs and essays based on literary pieces. They are

Taught about the fundamentals of the language and how to use it to communicate. They are trained to improve their academic writing skills. But what about their literary writing skills? Why aren't these Literature students urged to write a poem or a fictional story? They learn how to write a critical analysis of a poem but never assigned to write a poem? What about the literary forms they learned? Shouldn't they be allowed a space for the application of literary forms they learnt? Shouldn't their creativeness be stimulated? Don't they deserve a space to let their literary expression out?

A literature student should be encouraged to write a poem or a fictional story just like they are encouraged to write a summary or critical analysis or essay of a literary piece. This application-based method for English Literature teaching is needed for Indian students. To practice this approach the teachers couldn't just depend on typical classroom pedagogies. They can employ some digital tools that can help students provide a space for their literary expression. There are various options for the same and the article aims to establish Wattpad, an online story telling website as a digital pedagogical tool for English Literature students in India. Through this tool application-based educational practice can be employed by the teachers. As a result, focus will be on the students' literary writing skills.

With more than 50 languages, over 94 million users and one-fourth of its users as writers, an online writing community Wattpad is a free online writing community. Users can get involved through either the web or via mobile apps. The platform that allows its users to read and publish stories. It provides a digital space for a global community of readers and writers to come together. The platform's estimated that the users spend around 23 billion minutes a month in the platform boosting a huge readership. As a product of collaboration, Wattpad was founded by Allen Lau and Ivan Yuen in 2006. The company is currently headquartered in Toronto, Canada.

Wattpad has a couple of stand alone apps called "After Dark" and "Tap Originals" launched in 2015 and 2017 respectively. "Paid Stories" was a program where selected stories are to be paid with Watt Coins, which can be purchased in the app. Premium readers have access to these stories. This program offered a chance for the writers to earn through their stories. In 2019, Wattpad launched a publishing division called Wattpad Books. Wattpad Studios was launched as an effort to pave a path for the authors to both publishing and film industry. Some of Wattpad's books have actually been made into films. Netflix movies like *Kissing Booth* by Beth Reekles, which she wrote when she was just fifteen and movie series *After* by Anna Toad are well received among movie lovers.

Some famous authors, literary figures like Margaret Atwood, Paulo Coelho and more have also joined Wattpad. Margaret Atwood has even endorsed Wattpad and was one of the judges for Wattys 2012, an annual writing contest on the platform. She has even published her works on the platform and even promoted her novel *Madd Adam*. But what would an established author like Margaret Atwood gain out of publishing in Wattpad? Simple. It would help establish a connection between her and new generation readers.

"Atwood is an established name, with a history of critical as well as commercial success, so what does Wattpad offer her?... Wattpad has, crucially, given her access to a younger audience. The predominant users of the site are young adults, and Atwood has tailored the work she has made available on the site to their dominant tastes." (Irish Times. Nov 2013)

Wattpad offers a platform for its users to quench their thirst for literature. True to its tagline 'where stories live', the platform houses a vast digital library of stories for its users including stories, novels, poems, books in English and many more languages. From Teen fiction to Young Adult fictions and from Fan Fiction to Romance, it offers over twenty genres. The platform not only offers its members a chance to read but also write and publish stories. With its various genres of fiction, it is actually encouraging reading habits among the young crowd. This generation teenagers, who always take a step back from books, are now fawning over the characters from Wattpad books. It is safe to say that Wattpad boosted the reading interest among the young crowd.

"We hear a lot these days about two ideas. First, that young people aren't reading, but are playing video games instead. However, you don't get that impression from Wattpad, possibly because the site emulates features of video games: participation." (Atwood: Why Wattpad Works)

In Wattpad, authors can upload a part of their work by serial publication method. Authors can work on their feedback for the chapter and improve their content before publishing the next part. They can take any amount of time they want to post the next chapter but some authors try to update new chapters weekly to keep their readers interested. For example, Robert Thier, fondly called Sir Rob by his readers, is one of the most famous authors in the platform, known for his Storm and Silence series. Over the years Sir Rob would post new chapters of his stories every Wednesday. There are other authors who may take more or less time depending on their availability.

"Like Dickens during his serial publication of Pickwick, Wattpad writers get feedback from readers, and may shape their stories accordingly." (Atwood: Why Wattpad Works)

For its members Wattpad offers a digital work space. The members who wish to write can create their own story. They can give a title and description to their story, put the story under a specific genre, add keywords and even preserve the copyrights for their story. They can type and draft their works before publishing. They can even edit the published parts. Any established Wattpad authors generally have a healthy number of followers. Readers can not only follow their favorite authors on the platform but also privately message them. Authors are considered as a micro celebrity there which again boosts the author's morale and helps pave the way for their publishing career. One of the major reasons for the success of Wattpad is its easy audience reach. The app is easily available in Google Play Store. Any one can create an account with their email or contact credentials. Both the website and App are user friendly. Users can easily find their way around the platform. Basically, it's a free App but few stories are exclusive for premium members who get access to Paid Stories. The platform is mostly used by women ranging from 13 to 40 years but it has a strong male readership as well. As far as India is concerned, the country is one of the leading users of Wattpad in the world. There's a separate craze for this digital story telling community among the younger generation. Teenagers and young adults are the major users according to data So, the platform is already well established in the country.

"India is home to some of the most creative story tellers on the planet, with the most exciting literary and entertainment sectors any where. With millions of Indian users and stories already on Wattpad, we're in an ideal position to help local Indian writers build a global audience, and help Indian studios and publishers find new voices. And Times Bridge is enabling this journey for us." (Keating. Digital Samosa)

By employing Wattpad as a pedagogical tool for English Literature students, teachers can assign students to use Wattpad a same dium to show case their literary skills. For starters it is free. Therefore, it is economical to use this tool. Students can create an account and become a member of Wattpad. Once they become members, they get access to avast digital library of stories both by established and amateur writers. Students will get both a private library and a public reading list.

They can both read and write stories on the platform. This will help improve their reading and writing skills.

Also using Wattpad for education will create creative excitement among the students. Nothing beats the traditional pen and paper writing but this new approach could be fun and appealing. All they need is a mobile phone with internet connection to access this vast digital library. With this generation kids stuck to their mobile screen; the platform's even more easy for them to access. There are a lot of categories of stories for the students to select and read. Even classic literary works are also available in Wattpad. So, students can find their course materials and read it at their own pace. This way students can focus on both their academic work and improving literary skills.

Teachers can also create an account in Wattpad and post learning materials. The inline comment section will help students interact with the learning materials. For example, a teacher can post a poem and ask the students to critically appreciate a poem. Students can post the answers through the inline comment section and compete among themselves. This will make the learning process fun and engaging. It will cultivate literary appreciation among students. One of the best things about Wattpad is that anyone can be a writer. The platform has a lot of a amateur writers. So, it provides a judgement-free space for the students to publish their book without worrying whether.

Their language is good enough. Even the reader's age ranges from 13-40. So, it is indeed a diverse community of readers.

Teachers can assign Literature students to write poems. With the literary forms they have learnt from their course, the students can attempt to write poems and post it on Wattpad. The student's work can be read not only by the teacher and fellow classmates but also by general readers. Through inline comment sections, they can interact with the content and leave behind feedback and constructive criticism. This will help both improve the student's writing as well as boost the student's morale.

Students can also attempt to write short stories and other fiction. Most Wattpad authors practice serial publication. Students can create a book, update apart, wait for the reader feedback and improve the plot before posting the next chapter. This will help the students develop personal authorship. Teachers can also host poetry, prose and story writing competitions for the students on Wattpad. This will encourage the students to involve more in literary writing. Just like book clubs, literary clubs can also be formed on Wattpad. This can be extended to other major students too. A community of students who love literature from different departments of the institution can come together and share their love and appreciation for literature. These are few applications of Wattpad in English Literature classrooms and there's always scope for more.

DIKSHA, Edmodo, Class Dojo, Swayam, Moodle, etc., are some of the digital tools that are already being used by educator in India. Adding to this, Wattpad, with all its features, can be employed as a digital pedagogical tool, especially for English Literature students to improve their literary writing skills. With emerging innovations and perspectives to digital teaching, application-based learning will see a new change in the country.

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