Blended Learning Strategies for Japanese Literature Classes in the University

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Abstract—**In Brazil, the country with the largest population of Japanese descent outside Japan, there are currently one private and eight public universities offering undergraduate studies in Japanese Language and Literature. Even though there is a considerable amount of research about blended learning strategies concerning the study of foreign languages, it does not happen the same way when it comes to foreign literature. Besides, learning literature demands more than knowing the language in which it is written. This work presents some reflections on blended learning strategies with the aim of contributing to Japanese literature classes in the context of Brazilian undergraduate courses.**

Index Terms—**Blended learning, higher education, Japanese literature, literature classes, active learning**

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching literature is a task that leads to a double-faced way of considering literature: as an object of science – the science of Literature, in capital letter, including not only its specific theory but also its relation to other areas like History, Philosophy, Social Sciences, and so on – and as an object of aesthetic pleasure. This double-faced character must be taken into account when in the classroom, no matter its level.

The contact with literature happens from the very first steps of literacy, or even before. Even a child who does not know to write or read may have an adult read for him/her. Considering an environment in which the child has all rights respected and access to education, as well as a warming community, reading starts almost like playing. However, the way literature is taught in levels equivalent to high school sometimes reflects the approach it is given in the university – pompous, hard to understand, accessible only to a selected number of geniuses, not attractive at all, so different from elementary school. Academia is the place where Literature is a discipline in both meanings of the word: that of a subject, a field of study, and also that of the activity of mental training, being much closer linked to science than to the aesthetic pleasure.

Nevertheless, future literature teachers have been urged to think – and rethink – their teaching practice with the discipline during their formation years to update their methods and techniques. Every significant change takes time and the teachers who attended classes modeled by a traditional approach when in high school (with that ethereal atmosphere in which literature was tangible but to those who, like sorcerers, were initiated to the mysteries of distant wisdom) have begun to question that traditional perspective and started trying new forms of teaching literature. In the beginning, the resistance casts doubt on the effectiveness of new formats and strategies, but changes continue.

What happens to the teaching and learning of literature in higher education? It seems to keep that aura of erudition, and sometimes literary theory overlaps the literary texts. When referring to the literature of a foreign language, the gap can make students feel even more distant. We are not advocating that science should be replaced by pleasure, but that they can come together, for both belong to literature. Blended learning presupposes the combined use of traditional methods and technology, the mix of online and onsite activities, and, in the case of literature, the blending of science and aesthetic experience. In his book "Art as Experience," Dewey (1980) connected the aesthetic experience with the development of imagination (fundamental to the process of learning), and literature is an art in which this connection can be clearly seen [1]. Kokkos (2010), in his paper "Transformative learning through aesthetic experience: towards a comprehensive method," presents an extensive literature review on the subject, also commenting on the works of Dirkx, whose study is directed to adult education. Learning literature cannot do without the aesthetic experience [2].

Koskimaa (2010, p. 123) calls our attention to the fact that "literature in the traditional sense has given way to electronic and, increasingly, digital media in the overall media landscape," and also that "literature itself has changed significantly since the birth of electronic media" [3]. This change process has been happening faster each year, especially after 2020, with the world pandemic pushing everything to an online standard. Academia could not escape this wind.

II. IN THE CLASSROOM

There are many resources in blended learning turned to enhance language studies (especially foreign language acquisition). From Vygotsky to broader constructivism, experiences looped when technology gave a more significant contribution and brought new perspectives and problems. The number of applications developed to make it easier to teach/learn a new language is vast and

growing every day. Researches on topics like machine translation and long-term memory, for example, have become more current and are attracting more and more interested students and teachers. However, when it comes to learning literature, the traffic becomes lower. It is even worse in the cases of specific foreign language works of literature taught mainly in the University - the case of Japanese Literature.

There are currently one private and eight public universities teaching Japanese Language and Literature undergraduate courses in Brazil. One of them (University of São Paulo) offers graduate studies (Master's degree) on Japanese Language, Literature, and Culture. In a primary overview, it seems that Language and Culture studies are more frequent than Literary studies in the field of Japanese. Moreover, as the Japanese language is very different from Portuguese, it takes a long time for students to reach an acceptable proficiency level to read literary texts more effectively and understand them more easily. Besides, Japanese literature has concepts and models that are different from those we have in Western literary theory. For many students, Japanese Literature classes are a frightening challenge.

Adding to these aspects, there comes the general understanding that classes in the university are more rigid or that they have to be more "serious." We understand that academia is a specific environment with its peculiarities, and scientific rigor is one of them – a definitive feature. In the university, there is the impression that fun, alternative active learning classes are somewhat a flexibilization in the discipline of study or a way to ease the professor's assessment duty. In the case of Brazil, computer resources and internet connection were often not available to the needed extent. When Education, with a capital E, is moving and changing faster than ever, there is a crucial need to keep up with the evolution. The year 2020 was a booster in this change.

In the search for theoretical approaches, to adapt them to the present reality, and maybe to make some contributions to the field of Japanese literature teaching, we found Bonwell and Eison (1991) and Laurillard (2006). Bonwell and Eison's monograph, entitled "Active Learning: creating excitement in the classroom," calls the attention from the title itself [4]. In the abstract, one can find that it is written concerning higher education – and there is when the surprise comes. It is a rather old work (almost thirty years from its first publishing). However, it is still cited. Even though criticized in some aspects, nobody can say the work is not worthy of reading and does not bring exciting insights into the reality of teaching in the university.

Bonwell and Eison (1991, p. 7) cite some common barriers to educational change, from the perspective of faculty: the influence of educational tradition; faculty's perception of their own roles; the discomfort of changing; limited incentives to change; difficulty in administrating class time (and also time for preparing the classes); the problem in handling large classes; and lack of resources. The first four barriers relate to change in general, and the last ones to active learning in particular. They go further,

adding that the fear of risk might draw professors away from trying active learning activities more often.

Almost thirty years later, this frame has changed a lot; some of the barriers are still standing; the influence of educational tradition is one of them. Nevertheless, there are many resources (apps, materials, publications, websites, and so forth) available on the internet, some of them free to use. Time-consuming tasks like class preparation were, in certain stances, substituted by time-saving resources. Handling large classes is no longer a problem; neither is the absence of encouragement to implement new approaches connected to active learning. This is where active learning starts to become deeply embedded in the idea of learning through technology so that many times we use the expression without even thinking that active learning may happen without the use of technology. It coincided with the period when the term blended learning came to the scenery.

Having researched broadly about blended learning and some definitions of the term, Graham (2006, p. 3) cites three most common definitions of blended learning: 1) learning "combining instructional modalities (or delivery media)," 2) learning "combining instructional methods"; and 3) learning "combining online and face-to-face instruction" [5]. He stands with the third definition because the first and the second are too vague – and we follow him by opposing online and onsite instruction.

Blended learning assumes a balance in what is blended, but this balance is not, in fact, 50-50 percent. Anthony *et al.* (2020) state that it combines 30% of face-to-face interaction with 70% IT mediated learning and mention other authors who consider a 20% and 80% rate. The real balance is to use online and onsite resources to function as intended in the class objectives. A "traditional" class can be well-designed in terms of structure and outputs, and a blended-learning environment can be disastrous, depending on how pedagogy takes place in them.

Diana Laurillard, a professor of Learning with Digital Technology at the University College London with many published works on a wide range of subjects concerning the theme of blended learning, advocates that "in order to challenge digital technologies to deliver a genuinely enhanced learning experience, it is possible to use the educational theories already developed about what it takes to learn" (2011, p. 5) [6]. With this in mind, we agree that pedagogy comes first, and technology – as a media, an instrument, or a resource – follows it. McGee & Reis (2012) also stress this fact, highlighting that "the impact of technology use may be relegated to the individual instructor whose focus may be more on how to manage an unfamiliar course design"[7].

Koskimaa (2010, p. 134) reminds us that nowadays "literature is by no means limited within books," and this fact "poses a double challenge for literary teaching: the specific nature of literary discourse should be kept clear, and at the same time the overall media landscape and the sprawl of media forms, old and new, should be acknowledged, with literary discourse seen as an inseparable part of this larger field."

Though this matter is addressed as a challenge – as it really is – it is also pointed out as a "positive development." Do we, professors, agree that this is positive? The ideas and the theory that are built upon them may seem unrealistic. Without proper conditions and updated structure, professors cannot move forward a long distance. The study conducted by Anthony et al. (2020) showed that "for BL (blended learning) practice to be successfully implemented, the decision of lecturers is determined by the ease with which online course services are managed" [8]. As for students, besides the autonomy, they need "time management, communication, and study skills" (McGee & Reis 2012), as well as a good knowledge of the technology being used in the course. Thornby (apud Hockly 2018) adds the matter of learning tools' adaptivity, suggesting that students should be allowed "to set their own paths and goals" [9].

Nevertheless, it is necessary to start pulling it to practice. Thus, we present some reflections on blended learning activities in the proposed context, illustrating them with examples of activities that may be adapted and performed in other subjects' classes. We are aware, as said before, that significant changes take time.

III. BLENDED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

One manner of categorizing the activities is to divide them into groups of tools: communication tools, collaborative tools, and individual tools. As the name says, communication tools are related to instruments created with the primary purpose of communicating (Skype, GoogleMeet, WhatsApp, Line, Telegram, and other similar ones), but can be used to benefit the class. Collaborative tools are the ones in which many people are engaged in the activity to have a product/result – mind mapping sites, murals, word cloud makers, jigsaw reading, etc. Individual tools are primarily designed for individual use (even though they can be adapted for activity in a group), like blogs, vlogs, logbooks, and slides presentations. Hockly (2018) adds that both teacher and learner training are fundamental to this variety of possibilities.

McGee & Reis (2012) also exposed three groups of activities but using the criterion of instructional strategies: process-driven (brainstorming, problem-solving, simulations, for example), product-oriented (podcasts, art projects, compositions), and project-oriented (debates, blogs, journals).

Let us imagine the following activity: using an instant message communication tool (WhatsApp, Line, Telegram, Facebook Messenger), one student each day will send a "quotation of the day" from one of the authors studied in the course. Comments are not only allowed but also desired. It is supposed to be shared daily, but it can be made weekly or even monthly. The local context of professors and students, as well as their needs and beliefs, is going to define the regularity of the task (Hockly 2018). This is an example of a communication tool used in a project-oriented activity.

If we use a collaborative tool like Padlet (www.padlet.com), students can share videos, pictures, websites in a Padlet mural. Of course, they can share texts to show their answers to a given question or their translations of a small poem indicated by the professor. Learners can like one another's posts and make comments. This is an example of a collaborative tool used in a process-driven activity. If it is a permanent mural, open to posting during all the semester, it will be a project-oriented activity with regular interventions. Text translation or elaboration of glossaries in a group with a shareable format like GoogleDocs and other collective tasks are also examples of activities with collaborative tools – they are product-oriented activities. However, they can become project-oriented if they last longer.

Individual activities include many possibilities, such as creative writing (parodies, comments, reviews); personal blog/vlog development; creative storytelling, presenting a book/author to a specific public through podcasting or slide presentations; they may be process-driven, product-oriented, or project-oriented, depending on the directions given by the professor - directions that may also be decided together with the students.

Individual activities can also be adapted to be used as group activities because group discussion, practice by doing (listening/seeing) and teaching others are the most effective ways to learn and keep what is learned. Curiously, as far as our experience has allowed, one of the most used methods in literature classes in Brazilian universities is the seminar presentation – which is, by the way, the perpetuation of the lecture-model class since the students are evaluated according to their research contents and presentation skills. What if the professor assigned a different task? What if part of the grade is based on the creativity of a new form of studying/teaching a given subject? Assessment is a very arid topic and crucial to a blended learning course. Students need to understand precisely what is being expected from them, the criteria, the grading according to the outputs, the deadlines. Clear and adequate to the content, the task must be relevant and connected to the course objectives.

It is also necessary to include activities that deal with the peculiarities of Japanese aesthetics. Western concepts will not supply the need for specific Japanese terms and ideas that help us understand Japanese literature (and culture) better. If students already have contact with these specific tools, blended learning activities may well enhance and deepen the understanding of Japanese aesthetics.

IV. CONCLUSION

Blended learning strategies are very compelling and more than just a fashionable tendency, having found many interested researchers and instructors in the past decades. Nevertheless, it is necessary to bring the concept to a broader debate in the context of its implementation. In this study's scope, it is up to Japanese Literature professors and students to think about the problems in adopting a blended course format and what viable solutions could be addressed to them. Professors and students may not have the same kind of limitations to it.

Even though there is a tight association between blended learning strategies and technology, which relies on the online specter of the "blended," it is essential not to neglect the role of pedagogy. Technological resources and tools can help save time and promote student's autonomy, for instance. However, they are not useful if they do not follow a plan with previously elaborated objectives and strategies. This is a good kick start to break the resistance of conservative traditionalist views where they still remain.

Literature must be seen as something important, filled with meaning, and not just a subject to be undertaken during a determined number of semesters. The integrated study of literature as a science and as an art is to be encouraged, not discouraged. After all, it does not seem that they have to be separated. We strongly believe that blended learning can help in this matter, as well.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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