

## VIRTUAL CLASSROOM – PROSPECTS FOR THE HUMANITIES<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** Online and distant forms of education have been reshaping traditional modes of higher education. Technologies are developing rapidly and provoke education to transform and rethink the possibilities of learning from every location. One of the software solutions, designed for classroom use, is the virtual classroom. As its name suggests, it is a virtual learning ‘space’ that aims at providing all the components of a traditional learning environment. The following article briefly explains the innovative functions of a virtual classroom and gives an example of its usage in one particular case study in order to present the advantages and disadvantages of the software for the field of the humanities and speculate on its possible implementation in university courses. The synchronous education aspect of a virtual classroom is emphasized as well as other functions that can be actively used both by students and a tutor in university taught courses. The fact that a virtual classroom can be implemented in LMS (learning management system) such as Moodle or Schoology provides a good perspective for distant and online forms of education. The example of a virtual session designed as a ‘lecture’ is only one of the many possibilities a tutor can engage students’ attention and focus on the practical aspect of a degree in the field of the humanities.

**KEYWORDS:** virtual classroom, online education, educational software, higher education, humanities, distant education

### Introduction

The death of the humanities (as an academic discipline) has been a recurring topic in recent years. Scholars notify about the decline in publishing monographs in the field of the humanities (Thompson, 2002), whereas others insist on the emergence of ‘new humanities’ (Fuery, 1997). The importance of such claims is not in their factual justification but in the amount of debate it creates in academic circles. The reasons for such declarations originate in but are not limited to the pursuit of rating and citation metrics that more relevantly bring fame to professionals in science and other areas. Nevertheless, the need of a fresh look on how the humanities are taught and to what extent the disciplines appeal to prospective students is apparent. This paper aims at presenting an example of a virtual classroom that can be implemented in a literary course as an example of the numerous advantages online education might have regarding the development of the humanities in the next decade. Even though the exemplary material concerns a lecture for students at a particular university<sup>2</sup>, it manages to frame an approach that can be used in different courses at various establishments.

In order to present the functions of the virtual classroom, we must answer the immediate question: ‘what, in fact, is a virtual classroom’<sup>3</sup>. The most simplified answer is that a virtual classroom is a part of a completed online system which provides all the necessary attributes for the educational process. Moreover, virtual classrooms can successfully be added to educational platforms such as Moodle or Schoology. The idea of a virtual classroom is to re-create an educational environment where synchronized learning takes place (which means that both tutor and student/s are present at the same time). However, the process of teaching, mediated through a virtual classroom is different from the one conducted in a traditional environment (auditorium, classroom, etc.) on several different points. These will be discussed further in the context of the general transformation of courses in the field of the humanities in the era of a strong technological demand and ongoing processes of globalization and access to education for different social, ethnical and cultural groups.

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<sup>2</sup> As a staff member of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, the author’s expertise is closely related to courses taught in philological faculties. This is why the current article on the advantages of virtual classroom are concerned with her practice at Sofia University.

<sup>3</sup> Hereby, and everywhere in the text, by the term ‘virtual classroom’ we mean a special software developed for online learning. To be distinguished from the term, which describes the overall process of conducting education throughout the means of the internet.

### Traditional vs. virtual classroom

In order to list the advantages (and certain disadvantages) of a virtual classroom, this paper focuses on one example of a virtual classroom. Developed by Bulgarian programmers, the virtual classroom of the learning management system Vedamo<sup>4</sup> is preferred as an example due to several factors: it is equipped with every possible tool that enables a productive work; it can be easily implemented in Moodle courses; it has already been used in educational environment by specialists at Sofia University; it can be utilized to serve individual educational needs; it is inexpensive and it would not cost much to train lecturers to use it.

Once started, the virtual classroom opens in a new tab on a browser and provides visual and sound connection between a tutor and student/s. The whiteboard is equipped with tools for writing, highlighting, underlying, drawing, inserting shapes, etc. The tutor is enabled to share content (presentation, document, interactive material, video or audio files, to connect to YouTube and other content web-pages in a few clicks (**Pic.1**).

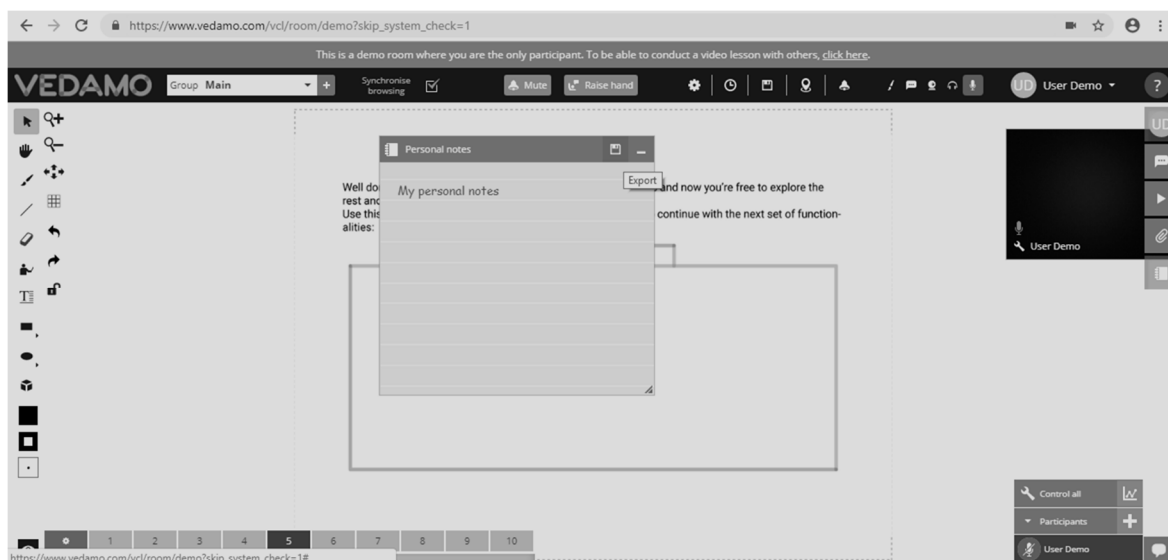
**Pic. 1** (Picture 1 illustrates how a YouTube video link can be added to the whiteboard in the virtual classroom of Vedamo. Alongside the view of the whiteboard and controls, we have an explanatory map of how the procedure is conducted step by step.)



Additionally, both tutor and student/group can individually take personal notes directly at the virtual classroom and upon session download them on their computers (**Pic. 2**). In this way they have their personal record of the learning process. The notes can further be edited or expanded to serve as the basis for report/article material, the backbone of a lecture and much more. They also keep the individual perspective of each participant. The supplementary nature of the function allows students to evaluate the learning process and assess it from their own personal vantage point. The students and the tutor share the same educational environment but for each of them the learning ‘space’ differs. The multifaceted environment in the virtual classroom opens the perspective of a further in depth study of how traditional and virtual education differ in their objectives.

**Pic. 2** (Picture 2 shows the function “personal notes” that is available to every participant and the button “export” is visualized to illustrate how notes are saved to the user’s computer)

<sup>4</sup> An example of the virtual classroom in question could be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9A2hDZFhgII> (Last accessed on 11.06.2019)



A session through a virtual classroom can be demonstrated as a presentation – for this purpose the files uploaded on the whiteboard turn into ‘slides’. There is an option for ‘screen share’, which directly gives students access to materials on the tutor’s device. Undoubtedly, one of the greatest advantages of a virtual classroom is the opportunity of instant share of materials – whichever resource is available online, it can be directly added to the session. One of the first articles concerning the application of online learning at university focuses on computer-mediated communication and concludes that one of the most important prospects is “greater communication among the members of a learning group” (Hiltz, 1986, p. 96). The function of highlighting a moment during the session cues students to the importance of the moment and the topic covered. Therefore, the main advantages of a virtual classroom are:

- It connects professionals all around the world and can be used to give a lecture, presentation, conference talk, admission interview, to hold a debate or conduct an exam. A lot of educational institutions have been using different tools for online education as they have recognized the need of expanding education beyond the traditional setting.
- As leaders in the field of education, universities take the responsibility of setting an example. The need of transforming traditional courses in online taught ones is demanding and inevitable. The possibilities of development that a virtual classroom has are its greatest advantage – it is an ongoing concept benefiting from the cutting-edge inventions of the modern technological advancement.
- Online education and tutor-led virtual sessions give minority groups, women on maternity leave, disabled people and undereducated people access to education that under other circumstances is unattainable to them. Professionals who need continuous education could also fit an online course in their busy working schedules.

However, there are certain drawbacks to the virtual classroom that need to be considered. The most obvious one is the dependency on internet connection and electrical power. The lack of any of these two components means inability to conduct a session through a virtual classroom. In contrast, in a traditional environment a tutor is always able to improvise if there is a technical problem.

Another serious difference between a virtual and traditional classroom is the interaction among tutor and audience. In a traditional environment certain lecturers influence students by their body language, charisma, posture, or mere presence. Although a traditional classroom provides video connection and a tutor can use a certain body language, the medium changes the perception of the other person. Inevitably, hearing a voice transmitted through speakers and seeing an individual with headset might intensify the feeling of mediated communication. One can speculate that after the rapid development of online communication a speaker, wearing equipment, looks like another kind of human – familiar but not quite – a product of a new (r)evolution.

### Virtual classroom – a session example

An overview of a session through a virtual classroom is to be presented by discussing different elements from the process. The most essential point in conducting a virtual session is the preparation – it provides the smoothness of the process. However, the virtual classroom allows a lot of room for improvisation. The following example focuses on Angela Carter in the context of British literature from the “permissive 60s” on.

There are a lot of ways to introduce the topic of the session and it largely depends on the tutor’s creativity and resourcefulness. For this particular lesson, it has been chosen to start with general information on the author available at Wikipedia. It can be uploaded on the whiteboard as a separate file, as a link from the source (it opens in a new window) or the information needed is directly pasted on the board, pointing out to the original source as exemplified below:

**Angela Olive Carter (later Pearce)** (née Stalker; 7 May 1940 – 16 February 1992), who published under the name **Angela Carter**, was an English novelist, short story writer and journalist, known for her [feminist](#), [magical realism](#), and [picaresque](#) works. She is best known for her book [The Bloody Chamber](#), which was published in 1979. In 2008, [The Times](#) ranked Carter tenth in their list of "The 50 greatest [British writers](#) since 1945".<sup>[1]</sup> In 2012, [Nights at the Circus](#) was selected as the best ever winner of the [James Tait Black Memorial Prize](#).<sup>5</sup>

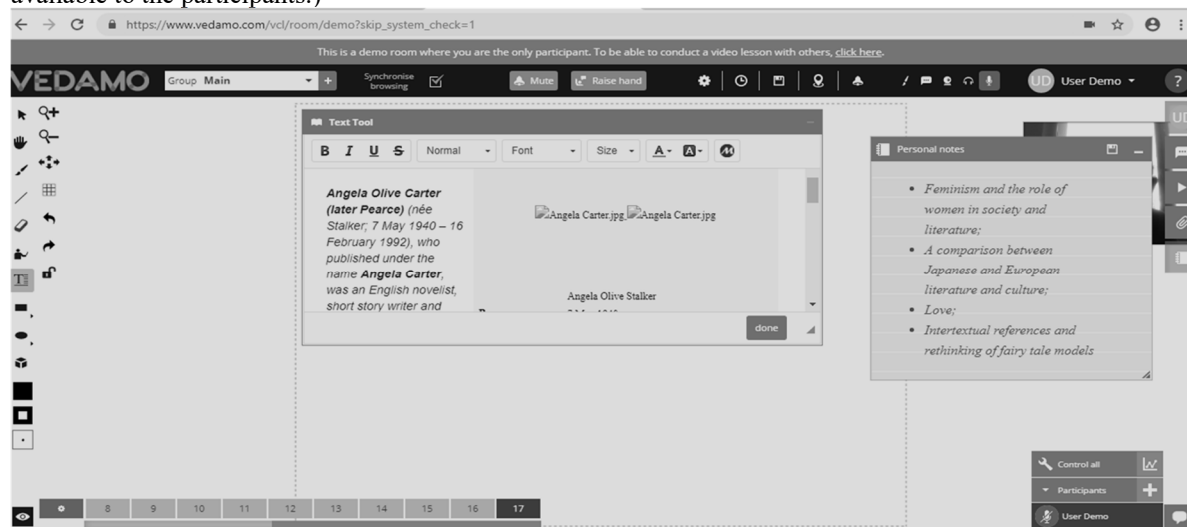
If the information is visualized and is available during and after the session, it will save time for research and effort on compiling learning materials – it is a time effective and goal oriented type of learning. It also saves a tutor the effort of teaching students that copy-paste operations from different web pages are easily traceable.

After talking about Carter’s biography, bibliography and major works a short discussion is started by asking the participants if they can suggest what main themes appear in Carter’s oeuvre. While the students are giving their answer, the tutor is taking personal notes of their comments (**Pic. 3**) in order to use them further in two ways:

1. After the end of the discussion the notes are posted on the white board as highlights;
2. The tutor can use the highlights to start a file for each student (where contribution and participation is marked) and use it for the final grade, if applicable.



**Pic. 3** (Picture 3 shows that alongside the list of main points compiled via the personal notes tool, the whiteboard shows the information cited from Wikipedia and it is available to the participants.)



<sup>5</sup> From Wikipedia: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angela\\_Carter](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angela_Carter)> (Last accessed on 16. 02. 2020)

The session then proceeds with enjoying Angela Carter’s radio play “Vampirella” (shared via a link). While listening, the participants are asked to take notes on the structure, characters, themes, plot, conflict, possible reference to other works/authors, etc. The notes every participant takes can further be used as a study material and as a base for comparison between the radio play and the story “The Lady of the House of Love”.

As a conclusion of the session, the tutor uploads a set of pictures (covers of Angela Carter’s novels without the titles) and asks the participants to take turns and share their opinion on what the pictures depict and how they represent Carter’s work. In this case a group discussion is very beneficial because the participants are really motivated to present their opinion in the best possible way. They feel they will be assessed by the other participants as well. Such competitive rush adds to the productivity of the overall session and points to motivation that is not that distinctively evident in a traditional learning environment.

Normally, a great number of students would be able to compare the discussed work with other books, novels and stories depicting vampires. Hence, they are allowed the role of a moderator in the classroom and can shortly present some work of fiction using all the tools a virtual classroom provides. Thus, the roles of a tutor and a student can dynamically intersect and experience fully the advantages of this particular learning landscape (McLoughlin, & Lee 2008a).

### Conclusion

It could be argued that a virtual classroom simply copies a traditional environment and it is questionable to what extent it develops the process of education. However, the fact that a virtual classroom does transform traditional education is unquestionable. The focus of further studies should be on how exactly this transformation works in changing the mere perception of education. What distinctly sets apart a virtual classroom from its traditional counterpart is the function of keeping the session as an archive – from then on it can live a life of its own. It can serve any appropriate purpose when its creator and participants are in agreement<sup>6</sup> on the possibilities of the further use of their intellectual work. A virtual classroom provides the three p’s of education as discussed by McLoughlin, Catherine, and Mark JW Lee (2008b): personalization – in the fact that fulfilling the role of a presenter, participants actively create content; participation – communication within the group is the basis of driving the educational process forward; productivity – stimulated not only to participate but to actively create, students get the perception of gaining skills and knowledge. The example of a virtual classroom provided above is just a touch upon the vast perspective of researching the future of online education. On the other hand, it gives a simple and easy to apply look to what perspectives await the humanities in the future of online education.

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<sup>6</sup> One of the ideas to use a virtual classroom archive is to use it on YouTube uploaded on the university official channel. In such way the subjects taught in the field of the humanities can reach broader audience and attract prospective students.