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ANGLO-AMERICAN LITERATURE COURSES IN TERTIARY EDUCATION IN SERBIA AT THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to determine the quality and nature of online Anglo-American literature courses at tertiary education level in Serbia, with the special focus on ad hoc solutions regarding the course management and design, as there was no history of conducting online literature courses prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. This pilot study predominanlty relies on the quantitative research based on the analysis of a corpus consisting of a survey questionnaire composed of 10 closed-ended questions distributed to 35 Anglo-American literature teachers at several state and private universities in Serbia. The teachers' answers were analyzed and classified into 4 categories according to the common denominator: online literature course management (1), teacher-student interaction (2), challenges of teaching literature online (3), and online tools used (4).

1. Introduction

In the 21ˢᵗ century being digitally literate is equally important for teachers and students and the ability to properly use ICT in the process of theoretical and practical knowledge transmission and acquisition has been an ultimate goal of all teaching courses in the field of humanities.

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Teaching foreign language courses is highly responsive to the integration of the latest technologies as it is interdisciplinary in its nature and open to the novelties originating from distinctive scientific fields. At the COVID-19 outbreak, it was expected from ESL teachers to create a technology-friendly environment that promoted English language learning through activation of productive and receptive skills, master working with online platforms within a short period of time, digitalize their face-to-face courses and keep up with the latest trends in the world of ICT.

Teaching literature courses online is even more demanding if seen in the light of its adjustment to the latest developments in the ICT world, as it is quite challenging to bridge the gap between technology – linked with the concept of dehumanization of humanity – and love of a written/ spoken word as a part of the artistic expression. Therefore, the process of identifying, exploring and interpreting human values in the VLE becomes a true challenge *per se* set before ESL teachers engaged in literature courses in the digital age (**Škobo** and Đerić-Dragičević, 2019, p. 84). With the COVID-19 outbreak, this challenge became even more salient for the Anglo-American literature teachers in Serbia, where traditional approaches to teaching literature were prevalent and no history of designing online literature courses could be traced prior to the pandemic. Thus, a sudden shift to VLE highlighted the importance of digital literacy of teachers and the need for redefinition of teaching methodology in literary studies.

2. Distance learning and online literature courses in Serbia

Based on the research conducted in the field of distance learning at higher education in Serbia, there were only a few departments that included distance learning into their study programmes - there was a total of 17 accredited distance study programmes at faculties and 6 accredited distance study programmes at colleges of applied studies in Serbia in 2013 (Matijašević-Obradović and Joksić, 2014, p. 155). According to the latest data retrieved from the National Entity for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2021), there are no accredited distance learning study programmes in Serbia in the humanities. A lack of training in regard with teaching methodology in distance learning courses was also detected (Škobo and Sentov, 2020, p. 394). As a result,

teachers' demotivation and a heavy workload were identified as the major setbacks in distance learning (Đukić-Mirzayantz, 2017, p. 45).

The crucial role in the development of distance learning system in Serbia was played by the Academic Network of Serbia (AMRES) that launched a project aimed at introducing the concept of e-education to many faculties across the country in 2007. Among the faculties that joined this project which assumed the use of Moodle - a free of cost, open-source platform - were also the Faculty of Philosophy and the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade (Milićević, Mili*ćević and* Milić, 2014, p. 80). However, there is a relatively small number of researchers from the social sciences and humanities that addressed the challenges of creating and implementing online foreign language courses prior to pandemic (Trajanović, Domazet and Mišić-Ilić, 2007; Vukotić and Tanasijević, 2012; Đorđević and Radić-Bojanić, 2014; Tanasijević and Vukotić, 2014; Đukić-Mirzayantz, 2017). The number of studies drops significantly when it comes to designing and organizing online literature courses at English Departments at tertiary education level in Serbia (Škobo and Sentov, 2020; Škobo, 2021). As no online literature course model was offered in Serbia prior to the pandemic to serve as a guidance to teachers in their course planning and implementation, it is of great importance to examine how literature teachers managed to tackle the emergency situation and lay the foundations for further research regarding the online literature course design and management.

2.1.   Teaching Anglo-American literature in the digital age

Teaching Anglo-American literature in the 21st century means using interdisciplinary approaches that combine traditional language teaching with innovative teaching methodologies such as the use of online educational tools (Nikolić and Dabić, 2016, p. 318, Škobo 2020, Škobo and Sentov, 2020), audio-visual devices (Nikolić, 2017) and social networks (Johnson, 2016; Parrott, 2016; Rodrigo, 2016; Škobo, 2020). Using new forms of media content in teaching literature influences the way we read and understand the literature written prior to the digital age (Scholes, 2010; Cushman, 2011; ***Škobo and Dragičević-Đerić, 2019***) and encourages students' self-expression, creativity and critical thinking.

Many researchers have noticed that literature develops critical thinking skills and triggers creativity (Yaqoob, 2011; Alvarez, Calvete and Sarasa, 2012; Bobkina and Stefanova, 2016; Stefanova, Bobkina and Pérez, 2017). As critical thinking skills are crucial for interpreting the literary works and reading literary works encourages the development of critical thinking skills, literature teachers are required to find proper ways of their promotion and implementation in an online context. In both traditional (campus-based) and online literature courses critical thinking can be promoted through using multimedia contents in the form of digital storytelling (Ohler, 2008; Hartley and McWilliam, 2009; Robin and McNeil, 2012; Brenner, 2014; Robin, 2016; Ibarra-Rius and Ballester-Roca, 2019), blogs (Reimer, 2016; Giralt and Murray, 2019) and book-trailers (Tabernero and Calvo, 2016). Language platforms and forum discussions are another efficient means of developing critical skills and presenting and interpreting the contents of literary works, so they can be successfully used in online literature courses (Škobo, 2020, p. 6; Škobo and Sentov, 2020). Therefore, the level of teachers' use of online tools not only affects the quality of subject content created/presented but also enhances the teacher-student interaction in VLE.

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3. **Description of methodology**

The aim of this research was to determine the nature and quality of online Anglo-American literature courses at tertiary education level in Serbia in Spring 2020 term at the COVID19-outbreak. The survey questionnaire (www.surveymonkey.com) consisting of ten closed-ended questions, 8 of which included an 'Other, please specify' response option and 3 of which allowed multiple response answer, was distributed to literature teachers via e-mail. There were 35 Anglo-American literature teachers in total from the English Departments at three state (the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade, the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš, the Faculty of Philosophy in Kosovska Mitrovica) and three private universities in Serbia (Singidunum University, the Faculty of Law and Business Studies Dr. Lazar Vrkatić, the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Alfa BK University). The results are presented in four parts: online literature

course management (1), teacher-student interaction in VLE (2), challenges of teaching literature online (3), and online tools used in teaching and evaluating students' knowledge (4).

3.1. Presentation of the results

3.1.1. *Online literature course management*

Questions 1-5 focus on online literature course management. Question 1 concerning the type of online teaching platform the literature teachers mostly used for conducting their Anglo-American literature courses online is a closed-ended multiple response question with an 'Other, please specify' response option. The results are presented graphically (*Chart 1*).

Chart 1. Online platforms mostly used for teaching Anglo-American courses online.

The online platforms I mostly used for teaching Anglo-American courses online.
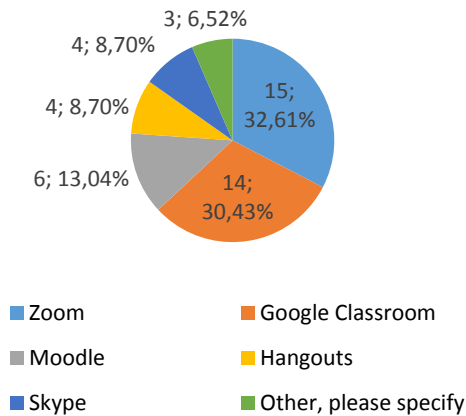
As shown in *Table 1*, the analysis of the results indicated that 32.61% (15) of all respondents used a web conferencing software Zoom for conducting their online literature courses during the Spring 2020 term. At the time it was used, Zoom was a solid ad hoc alternative to a more so-

phisticated LMS suitable for distance learning. Conducting lectures via Zoom resembled the traditional face-to-face instruction on campus, as teachers could lecture, share notes and presentations and students could virtually raise hands and ask questions. 30.43% (14) of the respondents used Google Classroom - the most frequently used LMS resembling a virtual classroom. However, at the time it was used, Google Classroom functioned as an asynchronous system. Only when the option for integrating Google Meet or other online meeting applications was offered, were the teachers and students able to see and hear each other in real-time, by providing an information about teaching sessions through announcements in Google Classroom.

Moodle, with its integrated the Big Blue Button that provides a real-time audio and video sharing option and also allows students to join with their webcams, turned out to be the second most used LMS within the universities observed in this survey (13.04% (6)). The results also show that the equal number of teachers 8.70% (4) opted for Skype and Hangouts as other types of cheap web conferencing software. Like Zoom, Skype and Google Hangouts allow video and audio conferencing, screen sharing, live chats, sharing and storing files and provide technical support. They all have an option for one-to-one tutoring with the use of two-way video, which provides an intensive one-to-one instruction and support and makes learning less impersonal and more "face-based". 6.52% (3) opted for other platforms and applications (iTeacher, Leftor). Social media networks and applications (Viber, Facebook) were not used as a means of conducting lectures in VLE by literature teachers, though they can serve as a viable supplement to teaching and presenting literary contents (see Škobo 2020).

Question 2 deals with teachers' satisfaction with the technical solution for conducting their online literature courses and the results are presented graphically (*Chart 2*), while Question 3 focuses on teachers' ability to maintain the same quality of their lecture content in VLE as in traditional, face-to-face instruction (*Chart 3*):
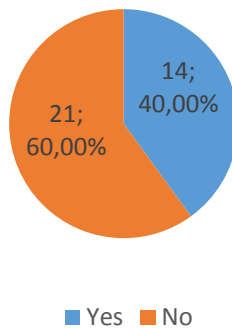
Chart 2. Teachers' satisfaction with the technical solution for conducting the online literature classes.

The technical solution for conducting the online literature classes was satisfactory.
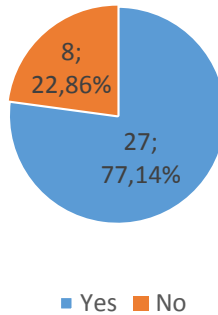
Chart 3. Maintaining the same quality of the lecture content in VLE as in face-to-face instruction.

The quality of the lecture content in VLE was the same as in face-to-face instruction.

The analysis of the results concerning teachers' satisfaction with the technical solution for conducting the online literature courses indicated that 77.14% (27) of all respondents answered positively, while 22.86% (8) of them responded negatively (*Chart 2*). As of the quality of online teaching content, the results indicate that more than half of the respondents (60%) said they were unable to maintain the same quality of their lecture content in VLE when compared to in-class instruction, while 40% answered positively *(Chart 3)*. The further analysis of the negative answers pointed to the absence of non-verbal contact, poor teacher-student/student-student interaction, motivational factors and inability to properly track students' knowledge acquisition as the main reasons for not maintaining the same quality of the lecture content in VLE as in face-to-face instruction.

Question 4 focuses on whether conducting online literature courses negatively affected the number of students attending the lectures (*Chart 4*), while Question 5 asks whether the literature teachers managed to properly evaluate the students' performance (*Chart 5*).

Chart 4. The negative impact of transferring a literature course to an online context on student attendance.

Conducting an online literature course has negatively affected the number of students attending the lessons.
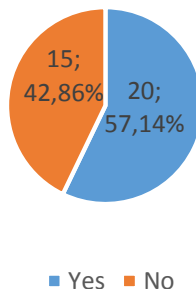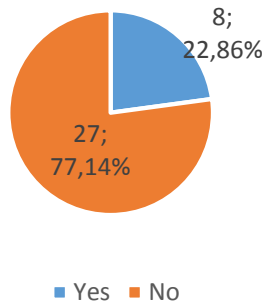
15; 42,86%   20; 57,14%

■ Yes ■ No

Chart 5. Teachers' ability to properly evaluate students' performance.

Teachers were able to properly evaluate students' performance.

8; 22,86%

27; 77,14%

■ Yes ■ No

As of online lecture attendance, the obtained results indicated that 57.14% (20) of all respondents claimed there was a fall in number of students attending the lectures, while 42.86% (15) answered negatively. The fall in number of students attending the online lectures is linked to the quality of subject content and teacher-student interaction, as adapting traditional materials to online environment and creating interactive online content makes the classes more engaging. The results obtained regarding the teacher's ability to properly evaluate the students' performance indicate that 77.14% (27) of all respondents answered negatively, while 22.86% (8) gave positive answers (*Chart 5*). These results point to the fact that proper evaluation of students' knowledge depends on students' in-class participation and attendance. However, the evaluation is problematized when students do not attend the real-time sessions but send their homework on regular basis, as it is difficult to determine whether they did it independently or relied on other resources.

3.1.2. *Teacher-student interaction in VLE*

Questions 6-7 focus on the nature of teacher-student interaction in VLE. Question 6 dealing with the teachers' satisfaction with the level of online teacher-student interaction is a closed-ended with the option to specify the reasons for providing negative answers (*Chart 6*), while Question 7 focuses on the ways in which the teacher-student interaction was achieved in VLE (*Chart 7*).

Chart 6. Teachers' satisfaction with the level of interaction with students in VLE.

Teachers were satisfied with the level of interaction with students achieved in VLE.
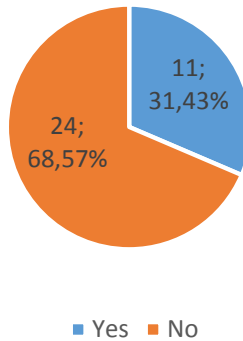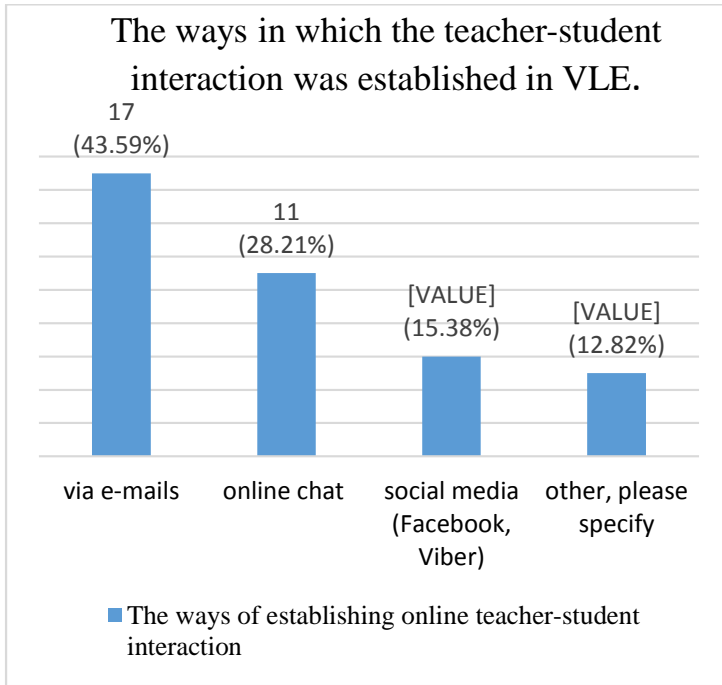
11; 31,43%

24; 68,57%

■ Yes ■ No

Chart 7. The ways of establishing teacher-student interaction in VLE.

Teacher-student interaction was detected as a major problem. The obtained results indicate that more than half of the teachers (68.57%) were dissatisfied with the interaction with their students in VLE, while 31.43% (11) of them responded positively as shown in the chart (*Chart 6*). Further analysis of their responses regarding their dissatisfaction with the teacher-student interaction pointed to the following reasons: inability to properly track students' attendance and participation (students often feigned their presence and skipped the lessons); the limitations of the platform used (i.e. inability to do the tasks in pairs and groups), and motivational issues stemming from a poor teacher-student interaction.

As of the ways in which the teacher-student interaction was achieved during the stated period, the results indicated that the interaction was mostly asynchronous, as 43.59% (17) of all respondents used e-mails.

This is followed by online chat used by 28.21% (11) and social media networks and applications used by 15.38% (6); 12.82% (5) chose 'Other' response option *(Chart 7)*. The further analysis of the results indicated that the respondents who opted for 'other' response option relied on the synchronous 'real-time meeting' component integrated within the online platform (i.e. The Big Blue Button within Moodle or Google Meet and Zoom within Google Classroom).

3.1.3.   *Challenges of conducting online literature courses*

Question 8 focuses on the general obstacles the teachers encountered when conducting their online literature courses (*Chart 8*).

Chart 8. General obstacles the literature teachers encountered in online literature teaching.
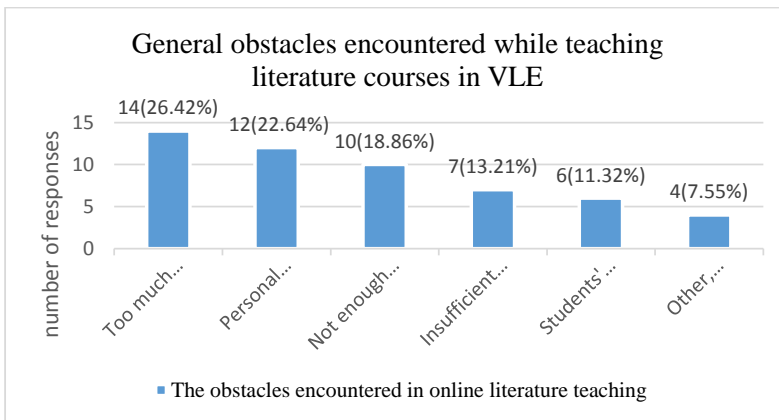
The analysis of the results regarding the challenges indicated that 26.42% (14) of all respondents listed too much work as the most frequent obstacle, 22.64% (12) of them opted for personal distractions, 18.86% (10) listed not enough support in terms of online tools available, 13.21% (7) chose insufficient supplies/equipment, 11.32% (6) opted for students' attendance, while 7.55% (4) chose an 'Other, please specify' re-

sponse option (*Chart 8*). The respondents choosing the 'Other' response option identified their inexperience with online platforms as the greatest obstacle when conducting their online literature courses.

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3.1.4. *Online tools in teaching and assessing students' knowledge*

Questions 9-10 dealing with the use of online tools in online literature courses were closed ended with an option to specify which tools were used if the answer was affirmative and the results are presented graphically (*Chart 9, 10*).

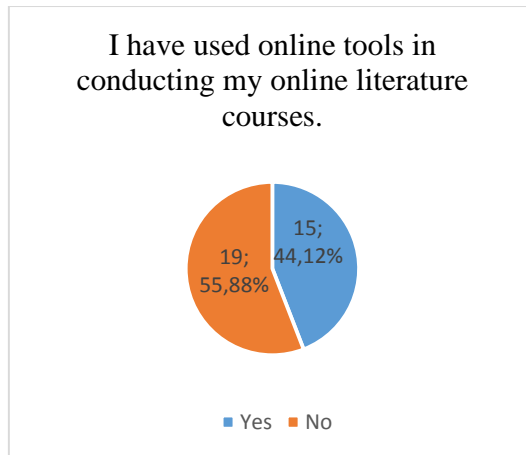*Chart 9. The use of online tools in conducting online literature course.*

Chart 10. The use of online tools for testing.

I have used online tools for testing.
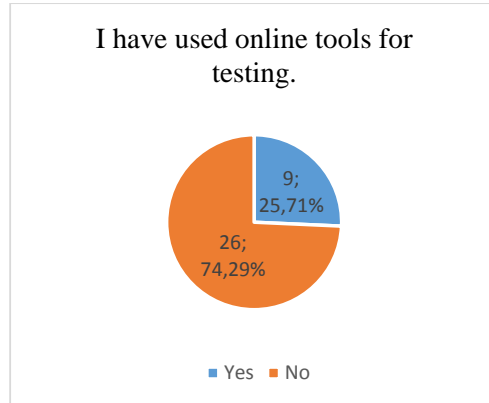
9; 25,71%

26; 74,29%

■ Yes ■ No

Chart 10. The use of online tools for testing.

The analysis of the results obtained concerning the teachers' use of online tools in presenting their subject content indicated that 55.88% (19) of them did not use any online tools whatsoever, while 44.12% (15) answered positively (*Chart 9*). Also, 74.29% (26) of all respondents did not use any online assessment tools, while only 25.71% (9) answered positively *(Chart 10)*. The further analysis showed that the respondents who answered affirmatively regarding the online tools in teaching and testing relied on the tools offered within the online platform (Moodle/ Google Classroom), such as the online quiz (i.e. Moodle quiz allowed simple, multiple-choice knowledge tests and complex, self-assessment tasks with detailed feedback /multiple choice, true/false, matching, short answer, essay/) or Google Forms. MTutor is identified as another online assessment tool used. However, as it is limited to multiple choice questions, it needs to be combined with other online assessment tools allowing longer responses that reveal students' deeper understanding of literary texts.

4. *Discussion*

As unified online platforms (LMS) with integrated video conferencing software are the most sophisticated alternative to the face-to-face instruction as they function as virtual classrooms that support efficient distribution of class materials and uploading resources in a variety of formats, enable diverse communication and assessment options and offer transparent feedbacks, it is of great importance for educational institutions to carefully choose the type of LMS for teaching practices. This pilot study pointed to the fact that the tertiary education institutions involved in the survey responded well to the emergency situation, as they ensured learning continuity by choosing easy-to-use online platforms that proved to be a solid ad hoc alternative to a traditional teaching model. This is the reason for teachers' satisfaction with the technical solutions for conducting their online literature courses.

However, the fact that more than half of the teachers did not use online tools in presenting their subject content and evaluating students' knowledge in VLE is indicative of the teachers' tendency to use traditional teaching approaches in an online teaching environment. Teaching in VLE requires taking innovative approaches that combine the use of interactive online tools that meet the needs of the digital environment. This is the reason why the teachers were unable to maintain the same quality of the subject content in VLE as in the traditional classroom, which further affected the number of students attending the lectures and problematized the teachers' ability to properly monitor and assess students' performance. As this study does not reveal what type of online tools should be used to meet the needs of online literature courses in particular, further research should be conducted to address this issue.

Traditional literature courses rely on students' engagement in live discussions and debates that develop critical thinking through verbal and non-verbal communication. Due to the fact that social interaction activates language learning (Bugarski, 1996, p. 12; Hellerman, 2008, p. 2), it is not surprising that social factors are identified as one of the key components in maintaining the effective class management in VLE. The results showed that the teacher-student interaction, detected as the major problem, was mostly asynchronous and limited to the written communication.

In similar vein, the results indicated that the fall in number of students attending the lectures in VLE was the result of a lack of oral (face-to-face) and non-verbal communication, as students predominantly used e-mails and chat boxes in the platforms/social networking sites for communicating with teachers. Moreover, some institutions involved in the survey asked their teachers to record their lectures so the students could listen to their video recordings anytime. Although such an option seems very attractive to students (they skip the lesson in real-time meetings and listen to the recording whenever they like), it is extremely tiresome for teachers, as it leaves them with a heavy workload and no immediate feedback from the students. A heavy workload – identified as the most frequent obstacle the teachers faced – resulted from the dozens of e-mails to reply to concerning the misunderstandings and further clarification of certain sections of the lecture. These results are in compliance with the results of the recent research, which pointed to a workload as one of the most significant stressors regarding the forced conversion to online teaching for more than 600 language teachers across the world (MacIntyre, Gregersen and Mercer, 2020, p. 7).

5. Conclusion

Due to the fact that teachers in Serbia were faced with limited number of LMS to choose from, it is concluded that distance learning programmes that rely on the use of LMS have been a rarity in Serbia and that further research is needed in this field in order to encourage teachers to frequently use LMS in teaching regardless of the circumstances. Moreover, it is of great importance to provide teachers with adequate training which will help them to fully grasp all the benefits of using LMS, as teachers' inexperience with online platforms and lack of seminars and teacher training play the crucial role in proper online classroom management.

Taking into consideration the fact that online literature courses in Serbia have been a novelty and that there was no online literature course model to start with, it can be concluded that for the period observed literature teachers at tertiary education in Serbia were able to go beyond the various limitations imposed on them, of which a poor teacher-stu-

dent interaction was detected as a major problem, as it directly affected the online class management (students' attendance, a quality of the subject content, a proper monitoring of students' performance and evaluation of their knowledge, a heavy workload). Teachers' inexperience with online platforms and digital tools and their tendency to make their online courses as similar as possible to those conducted in traditional classrooms affected the quality of the lectures in VLE and problematized the assessment and the process of monitoring students' progress. The analysis of the results has revealed an urgent need for further research into distance learning in the field of humanities, particularly in teaching literature courses online. In order to create a proper alternative to the traditional literature course – its online counterpart – the researchers in Serbia need to take into account the limitations and possibilities of the Serbian education system and adapt them to the online literature course models offered in developed countries. Only with the creation of a proper online literature course will it be possible to direct the research towards developing and implementing innovative blended learning models.

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