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SHAPING MINDS: THE ROLE OF CANONICAL LITERATURE IN DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Canonical literature remains a foundational element in higher education, fostering critical thinking and transmitting cultural heritage. However, traditional pedagogical methods often fail to engage digital-native students, creating a gap between established literary study and contemporary learning expectations. This study empirically investigates how digital platforms and artificial intelligence tools can enhance the teaching of canonical texts to develop critical thinking skills and cultural awareness. Employing a qualitative multiple-case design, the research combined classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with students and faculty, and analysis of student essays and reflective journals across three universities. Findings indicate that AI-assisted text analysis, interactive e-textbooks, and virtual reality environments substantially increased student engagement and interpretive depth, as evidenced by high rubric scores and positive perceptions of learning experiences. Nevertheless, persistent challenges in recognizing counterarguments, along with concerns about data privacy and digital inequity, highlight the limitations of relying solely on technological interventions. The study underscores the importance of aligning digital integration with culturally sustaining pedagogies and ethical safeguards. Implications recommend investing in infrastructure, developing faculty training, and

designing policies that promote equitable access and responsible technology use. Future research should include longitudinal and cross-cultural studies to assess sustained impacts on learning outcomes.

KEYWORDS: Canonical Literature, Critical Thinking, Digital Pedagogy, Artificial Intelligence, Cultural Heritage, Ethics.

1. INTRODUCTION

The canonical literature is part of higher education as a source of cultural heritage and a stimulant of critical thinking. These works, be they philosophical treatises, historical novels, or works of foundation of literary culture, were long admired in their ability to determine not only the mind of an individual but also the collective identity (Amorosa & Vergerio, 2022). The students through the study will encounter lasting questions of the human experience, moral and ethical issues, and aesthetic values that have shaped societies over generations. This cultural pertinence explains why the pedagogical functions of literature must be maintained in the more digitized educational landscape.

Canonical literature is traditionally taught with the help of methods unlikely to satisfy digitally immersed students. Passive lectures and one-way analysis are disengaging or alienating to many learners who live in a world filled with technological reality. Prescribed literature curriculum, as Ervin (2022) notes, often fails to consider the various cultural experiences and interpretive schemes that students bring with them to the classroom. Critical thinking is crucial in academic success, democratic citizenship, and professional competence. Higher-order skills are undermined when students are placed in a passive role of recipients, instead of the active co-producers of meaning (Luckett & Bhatt, 2024). This difference between traditional practices and modern learning requirements poses an urgent dilemma to the teachers who are devoted to cultural conservation and intellectual growth.

Meanwhile, the development of digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) is starting to change higher education in complicated ways. AI and digital platforms provide a chance to democratize access, enhance richer ways of analysis, and develop individual learning pathways (Roy & Putatunda, 2023). As an example, the AI-based text analysis tools can assist the students in revealing the thematic patterns and intertextual connections that would not be otherwise identified (Cingillioglu et al., 2024). Conversely, ethical issues related to their usage are such as algorithmic bias, data privacy, and the danger of oversimplification of complex text (Bisht & Pujari, 2025).

The paper discusses how careful incorporation of digital innovations can benefit the teaching of canonical literature by reconciling the objectives of heritage preservation and contemporary pedagogy. It aims at the following two main tasks:

1. To explore how digital platforms and AI tools can be used to develop critical thinking
2. To discuss their potential in influencing the students' development of understanding literature as cultural heritage.

Placing this question in the context of discussions on decolonization and modernization of a higher education environment, the research offers a point of view that falls at the crossroads of pedagogy and technology, and ethics.

The significance of this work extends beyond classroom practice. With the effort of institutions to be more inclusive and responsive, there is a need to know how to incorporate technology without affecting the complexity of canonical. Finally, this research can highlight the necessity of rethinking literature teaching in a culturally sustaining, morally responsible, and reality-oriented manner concerning the conditions of the digital learning environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Canonical literature has always been considered as one of the types of cultural heritage, and the texts of which influence is not limited to the historical period but can be used to inform the current discussion of ethics, aesthetics, and identity. The very act of canon-making is ideological, as it is representative of cultural power relations that define which voices are maintained (Amorosa & Vergerio, 2022). The same tension can be observed in higher education, where the curricula do not properly reflect marginalized traditions (Ervin, 2022). Academics are demanding more of a method that supports the historical merit of canonical texts but questions the hierarchies that have placed them on a pedestal (Shahjahan et al., 2022). Through this, literature conveys cultural values and forms a ground of contention as to whose history gets legitimized.

One of the most cited results of studying literature is critical thinking. McGuirk (2021) claims that it is not a generic skill that can be built on its own, but a contextual practice. In a similar way, Cromwell (2023) also notes that the close reading practice assists students in examining ambiguity, identifying bias, and working with different perspectives. The predictive processing model proposed by May et al. (2022) implies that education is what determines the way people combine new information, which strengthens the idea of placing critical thinking in the context of rich interpretations.

The digital technologies have already had a profound impact on the ways of teaching and experiencing canonical literature. Both e-learning platforms and AI tools provide a chance of increased

access and personalized assistance. Roy & Putatunda (2023) explain how chatbots using AI can promote student learning with the support of inquiry-based learning. Algorithmic interpretations may be a hazard to flatten out nuance (Bisht & Pujari, 2025). As an example, models, which were trained mostly on Western literary corpora, can reproduce the bias unintentionally, and it is questionable whether digital tools can really facilitate decolonizing pedagogies.

Digital resources may be well incorporated with traditional close reading. Chick et al. (2023) promote so-called signature pedagogies that would preserve essential disciplinary practices and use digital affordances. The digital annotation tools and collaborative platforms can assist students in viewing their interpretations as an element of scholarly discussions. However, as Spanjaard et al. (2023) observe, access to such innovations is not evenly distributed, which is why it is essential to discuss the inclusive approaches to resolve the existing disparities.

Technological innovation also introduces complex ethical considerations. Cingillioglu et al. (2024) emphasize the lack of transparency and possible bias of AI systems that can destroy trust and integrity. Bisht & Pujari (2025) warn that the use of algorithmic tools, without analysis, may destroy the historical layers of context. These concerns are also connected to the matters of intellectual property and data ownership (Enslin & Hedge, 2024).

Finally, the implementation of AI into the literature classroom is not only a technical problem but an ethical and cultural one. Implementation must be based on concerns of equity, epistemic justice, and understanding of history.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The study employed a multi-method qualitative approach that integrated classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis across three higher education institutions. This design was chosen to enable triangulation of perspectives and to capture the contextual nuances of how digital tools are implemented in literature instruction.

3.2. Setting and Participants

Three undergraduate literature departments in Indian universities were purposively sampled to ensure diversity in institutional type, student demographics, and access to digital infrastructure. The research engaged 36 undergraduate students, with 12 from each institution, and six faculty members who had experience teaching canonical texts using AI-assisted platforms, interactive e-textbooks, or virtual reality resources. All participants provided informed consent, and the study received ethical approval from the relevant institutional review boards.

3.3. Data Collection

Data collection involved classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis. Over six weeks, non-participant observations were conducted during literature classes where digital tools were integrated into instruction. The observations documented the types of technology used, instructional strategies employed, and evidence of student engagement, such as participation in discussions and critical questioning. Observational data were captured through detailed field notes.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with both students and faculty to explore perceptions of how digital tools influenced interpretive practices, critical thinking, and cultural heritage awareness. Student interviews focused on their experiences with specific technologies and their reflections on learning processes, while faculty interviews examined pedagogical goals, perceived benefits and limitations of digital integration, and strategies for supporting equitable access. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

In addition, student essays, reflective journals, and digital annotations were collected to assess evidence of critical thinking and engagement with canonical texts. A rubric adapted from Facione's critical thinking framework and aligned with constructivist principles (McGuirk, 2021) was used to evaluate clarity of argument, interpretive depth, recognition of counterarguments, and evidence-based reasoning.

3.4. Supplementary Pre-Post Comparison

To further explore learning progress over the study period, a supplementary analysis compared rubric scores from early-semester and end-of-semester assignments for each student. This pre-post comparison provided indicative evidence of development in critical thinking skills. Although the study did not establish a randomized control group, this approach enabled examination of trends in students' performance over time. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated for each rubric dimension, and mean differences were reported to highlight areas of

growth.

3.5. Analysis Approach

Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns across the qualitative dataset. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase process, which included familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. NVivo software was used to facilitate systematic coding and organization of the data. Codes were developed inductively to capture dimensions related to pedagogical outcomes, cultural heritage awareness, and ethical considerations of digital tool use. Quantitative summaries of rubric scores, including the supplementary pre-post comparison, were generated to complement qualitative findings and illustrate patterns in skill development. Correlations among core indicators of critical thinking were also examined to explore interrelationships between dimensions such as interpretive depth and evidence-based reasoning.

3.6. Researcher Reflexivity

Throughout the study, the reflexive memos were used to document positionality, potential biases, and evolving interpretations, particularly concerning assumptions about the neutrality and effectiveness of educational technology. Regular peer debriefing sessions were conducted to enhance analytical transparency and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to rigorous ethical standards. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was secured, and confidentiality was maintained through anonymization of all data. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review boards, and all contributions from students and faculty were treated with respect for privacy and intellectual property.

3.8. Limitations

Although the multi-site design improves the credibility of the findings, the results are context-specific and may not be generalizable to institutions with substantially different resources or cultural contexts. Self-reported data may also be influenced by social desirability bias. While descriptive analyses of rubric scores were included, the absence of experimental controls and random assignment limits causal inference about the impact of the interventions.

4. RESULTS

The analysis integrated data from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis across the three participating institutions. Findings are presented in four sections: quantitative assessment of critical thinking skills, pedagogical impacts, perceptions of digital tools, and ethical considerations.

4.1. Quantitative Assessment of Critical Thinking Skills

Student essays and reflective journals (n = 36) were evaluated using a rubric assessing four core dimensions: Clarity of Argument, Interpretive Depth, Recognition of Counterarguments, and Evidence-Based Reasoning. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics.

Table 1: Summary Statistics of Critical Thinking Skills.

Skill	Mean	SD	Min	
Clarity of Argument	3.87	0.42	2.85	
Interpretive Depth	4.10	0.48	3.02	
Recognition of Counterarguments	3.58	0.64	2.30	
Evidence-Based Reasoning	4.02	0.45	3.10	

Interpretive Depth and Evidence-Based Reasoning emerged as the strongest dimensions, suggesting that integrating digital tools contributed to deeper analysis and stronger textual justification. Recognition of Counterarguments had the lowest mean and widest variability, indicating an area for targeted pedagogical development. Correlation analysis revealed strong interrelationships among core indicators, especially between Interpretive Depth and Evidence-Based Reasoning (r = 0.79), supporting the notion that interpretive skill and evidence use are mutually reinforcing.

4.2. Supplementary Analysis of Pre-Post Changes

To further explore the potential effects of integrating digital tools on students' critical thinking skills, a supplementary comparison was conducted using rubric scores from early-semester and end-of-semester assignments. The study design did not include a fully randomized control group. This pre-post comparison provides indicative evidence of

progress over the study period.

Descriptive statistics showed improvement across all rubric dimensions between the initial and final assignments. For example, mean scores for Interpretive Depth increased from 3.71 (SD = 0.53) at baseline to 4.10 (SD = 0.48) at the end of the semester. Similarly, Evidence-Based Reasoning improved from 3.74 (SD = 0.49) to 4.02 (SD = 0.45) as shown in Table 2. Recognition of Counterarguments showed a smaller increase (3.44 to 3.58), consistent with findings that this area remained a relative challenge.

Table 2: Pre-Post Rubric Score Comparison.

Skill	Baseline Mean (SD)	Final Mean (SD)	Mean Difference
Clarity of Argument	3.68 (0.51)	3.87 (0.42)	+0.19
Interpretive Depth	3.71 (0.53)	4.10 (0.48)	+0.39
Recognition of Counterarguments	3.44 (0.62)	3.58 (0.64)	+0.14
Evidence-Based Reasoning	3.74 (0.49)	4.02 (0.45)	+0.28

Qualitative interview data corroborated these trends. Students described feeling more confident in constructing arguments and identifying evidence, attributing their progress to the combination of AI annotation tools and interactive e-textbooks. Faculty also noted increased depth in students' written analyses over time.

4.3. Pedagogical Impacts of Digital Tools

Classroom observations and student interviews consistently highlighted three pedagogical benefits associated with digital technology integration:

- **Enhanced Engagement:** Students reported increased motivation when using interactive e-textbooks and AI annotation tools. Observations documented high participation rates, with 72% of observed students actively contributing during digitally mediated discussions.
- **Deeper Interpretation:** Faculty described AI text analysis platforms as "opening new interpretive pathways," while students characterized them as "helping us see connections across texts."
- **Cultural Heritage Awareness:** Virtual reality recreations of historical contexts were particularly impactful. In interviews, 81% of students indicated that immersive experiences increased their appreciation of canonical literature's cultural significance.

4.4. Instructional Methods

Observation data showed that instructors used a blend of pedagogical strategies (Table 3).

Table 3: Frequency Of Instructional Strategies.

Instructional Method	Frequency (%)
Socratic Dialogue	32%
Group Discussion	29%
Lecture	24%
Digital Textual Analysis	15%

Sessions emphasizing Socratic Dialogue and Group Discussion correlated with higher rubric scores in Interpretive Depth and Evidence-Based Reasoning. The limited use of Digital Textual Analysis may explain weaker performance in counterargument recognition.

4.5. Student and Faculty Perceptions

Qualitative interviews underscored positive perceptions of technology-enhanced instruction:

- **Students** described AI tools as "breaking down difficult language" and "forcing us to think critically."
- **Faculty** emphasized that digital platforms facilitated differentiation and engagement but expressed concern about over-reliance on automated feedback. Both groups highlighted the need for more scaffolding to support counterargument development and clearer guidelines for addressing data privacy.

4.6. Ethical and Access Considerations

Despite benefits, several challenges were consistently reported:

- **Digital Inequity:** Approximately 25% of students mentioned intermittent access to reliable internet or compatible devices.
- **Data Privacy Concerns:** Faculty raised concerns about the collection of student data by third-party platforms, consistent with prior literature (Bisht & Pujari, 2025).

4.7. Conceptual Model

Figure 1 summarizes the relationships among digital tools, pedagogical processes, learning outcomes, and moderating factors. This model illustrates how technology integration shapes student engagement and skill development while interacting with contextual constraints.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Digital Tool Integration and Outcomes.

4.8. Narrative Interpretation

Overall, the results demonstrate that integrating AI and digital tools meaningfully enhances student engagement, interpretive depth, and cultural heritage awareness. The persistent gaps in dialectical reasoning and ethical challenges underscore the importance of thoughtful, context-sensitive implementation. These findings provide a robust empirical basis for recommendations to develop inclusive, ethically responsible strategies that leverage digital innovation in literature education.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of the given research indicate that the introduction of digital tools into the teaching of canonical literature leaves a lot of room to fill the gap between the conventional pedagogical practices and the educational demands of modern learners. Observations in the classroom, rubric-based evaluations, and interviews of participants proved that AI-aided text analysis websites, interactive e-textbooks, and immersive virtual reality environments all have special affordances that can lead to greater engagement, the development of interpretive skills, and raising awareness of cultural heritage. The identified results align with the academic tendency toward the integration of constructivist learning paradigms into the higher education process when learners are regarded as active co-producers of knowledge, not its passive consumers (Cromwell, 2023; Chick et al., 2023).

The constant increase in the motivation and engagement of students in the case of the use of digital tools to supplement traditional instruction was one of the most notable findings. The quantitative data revealed that the mean scores were high in the items of Interpretive Depth (M = 4.10) and Evidence-Based Reasoning (M = 4.02), which means that students could read canonical texts more critically and corroborate their interpretations with more evidence. More specifically, AI-driven annotation tools prompted learners to consider new perspectives and build more advanced analyses, the values that are consistent with constructivist views that focus on scaffolding and collaborative sense-making (McGuirk, 2021). The predictive processing model, introduced by May et al. (2022), also supports this interpretation and proposes that the learning environment within technologies allows restructuring the expectations of the students and fosters critical thinking through more cognitive engagement.

The other outstanding theme was about the use of digital platforms to strengthen cultural heritage consciousness. More than 80% of students mentioned virtual reality re-creations of historical contexts as being important to the comprehension of the sociohistorical forces at work in the creation of canonical texts. This observation makes the relevance of inculcating culturally sustaining pedagogies where literature is positioned in the context of larger

narratives of identity, justice, and collective memory (Ervin, 2022). The faculty warned that ideological frameworks that supported canonical choices might be used to marginalize people unless subject to critical appraisal (Amorosa & Vergerio, 2022; Asea, 2022). Academic libraries, as Wiegand (2022) notes, tend to enforce the ideology of reading, which gives priority to dominant narratives, and it is crucial to utilize digital resources and opportunities to increase the representation and diversify the occurrences of narratives. Moreover, the cultivation of critical thinking has also been cited as the key preparation of students living in a time that can be termed as the era of post-truth, where the ability to assess the information critically is invaluable (Jiménez-Aleixandre & Puig, 2022).

Despite these encouraging outcomes, the study revealed several limitations. Among the main limitations, it is possible to state the fact that the study was carried out in institutions that have relatively strong digital infrastructure and faculty development resources, which may restrict the applicability of the results to other contexts with weaker technological capacity (Shahjahan et al., 2022). Some interviews revealed enduring unfairness in device and internet access, as well as the overall criticism of higher education structural exclusion (Mackey, 2021; Washington et al., 2025). Even though digital tools encouraged participation and critical thinking, certain faculty members raised their concerns about the interpretive simplicity of the canonical texts that might be reduced by the use of algorithms. Cobley and Siebers (2021) have also cautioned that distant reading methods and algorithmic studies carry the risk of reducing the text to a monotone in the absence of training students to understand the need to question the results of automated programs.

The other limitation is that there is no longitudinal data in terms of the sustainability of the observed learning outcomes. Although the students were highly engaged and performed well in the short term, further studies are required to determine whether the gains would result in competencies that can be maintained over time (Jin & Ye, 2022). Furthermore, the possible psychological and affective advantages of multimodal tools, including higher self-efficacy and well-being, are underrepresented in the education literature, though, in other fields, literature is associated with positive correlations (Jin & Ye, 2022).

The implications for policy and practice are significant. To guarantee that every institution is involved in the educational technology integration in a meaningful way, it will be necessary to invest in the digital infrastructure and carry out specific professional development. It is also paramount to create ethical guidelines to deal with the problem of data privacy, algorithmic bias, and intellectual property. Researchers have stressed that blind use of AI instruments can lead to the replication of inequalities and simplification of the interpretation process (Cingillioglu et al., 2024; Bisht & Pujari, 2025). Based on this argument of Ebarvia (2023), antibias literacy instruction is another model that can guarantee that digital integration is culturally responsive and ethically safe.

Pedagogically, the results contribute to the demand to rethink the teaching of literature in line with the manifestations of digital culture. Hock and Pennington (2024) emphasize that the incorporation of both canonical and non-canonical literature, along with new ways of approaching it, can democratize the study of literature and foster critical thinking. McRae (2022) also supports the pedagogies that would place literature at the center of critical thinking development and not within the confines of the curriculum. The faculty in the modeling of reflective practice and critical engagement cannot be ignored, especially when the question of how the technological mediation mediates the authority, interpretation, and agency of the student arises (Soysal & Soysal, 2023; Luckett & Bhatt, 2024).

In the future, cross-cultural studies should be given priority to study how students with different backgrounds experience digitally mediated literature learning and whether the transformative learning process and creativity can remain engaged in the long term (Kreber, 2022). Longitudinal designs will also be especially useful when it comes to the evaluation of the long-term impact of digital tools on critical thinking, cultural awareness, and psychological well-being. This kind of work will assist in ensuring that the approaches to the incorporation of technology in the teaching of literature are not rigid, unjust, and unconducive to the changing nature of education.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper shows that canonical literature is essential in higher education, but its sustainability depends on educators' ability to transform pedagogy to fit into digital culture. The evidence indicates that engagement, interpretive skills, and cultural awareness can be improved through AI-powered text analysis, interactive e-textbooks, and virtual reality. Students performed well in interpretive depth and evidence-based reasoning, but difficulties

in identifying counterarguments suggest that technology alone cannot develop all aspects of critical thinking. These findings confirm that digital technologies should not replace traditional scholarship. The research offers a model emphasizing the importance of ethical and culturally responsive use of technology while considering equity, data privacy, and intellectual property rights. Such insights can help educators and policymakers design curricula that are both literature-rich and leverage modern tools. However, it is important to recognize that the results are context-specific, based on experiences at three institutions with strong digital infrastructures, and may not apply to resource-limited settings. Additionally, the lack of experimental controls limits causal claims about the interventions' effects. Future research should include longitudinal and cross-cultural studies to explore the long-term impacts of digital approaches on learning outcomes and to understand how learning environments influence their effectiveness across different contexts. Ultimately, canonical literature should be preserved with cautious, ethical innovation. Educators can thoughtfully combine technology to create learning environments that respect tradition while equipping students with the skills needed to navigate a complex world.

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