Italian Language and Culture Conference

Challenges in the 21st Century Italian Classroom

Department of Italian, Georgetown University
Volume 1: Fall 2020
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INTRODUCTION

Pedagogy, by definition, is the art and science of teaching. It aims to develop the skills and knowledge students need to succeed in work, life and their communities. In order for pedagogy to be effective, schools, programs and educators need to implement new ways of teaching that reflect a changing world, address students’ needs and provide them with the information, models and tools that they can use in their lives and careers.

Therefore, in an effort to confront the challenges posed by teaching in 21st century learning environments, it is crucial to know how our students learn in the digital era so that we can tailor our courses to reach the more diverse, independent and tech-savvy students that populate our classrooms.

Unfortunately, in recent years, humanities and language programs, in particular, have suffered the consequences of a shift in interest towards STEM courses resulting in a reduction or even the total elimination of the language requirement. This is a worrisome fact that needs to be addressed if we want our students to have a balanced and well-rounded education. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. It is a matter of appealing to and retaining students by reorganizing programs that revive and reinforce the importance of the humanities for the formation of the next generation. In this regard, language programs can play an important role in creating connections across disciplines such as literature, business, the sciences, economy, religion, and art etc. In addition, the process of language learning develops a range of skills from critical and creative thinking to global intercultural fluency, all extremely useful in any workplace. For these reasons, foreign language curricula need to be revised, from course offerings to lesson planning and assessment. Language teachers must systematically integrate skills such as creativity, collaboration, communication and leadership into their lessons to better prepare students for success when they reach the job market.

These topics were at the core of the fourth iteration of the Italian Language and Culture Conference titled Challenges in the 21st Century Italian Classroom, which took place on October 26, 2019. The symposium was organized at Georgetown University, Washington D.C., as part of a series of events celebrating Italian Language Week, and welcomed over 150 participants between presenters and registered attendees. The conference provided a venue for educators to share their research, updated approaches, and the pedagogical strategies they have successfully tested and adopted at both a course and program level in the high school and
college classroom. It was made possible by the financial support of the Embassy of Italy and the Italian Cultural Institute in Washington DC, and the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Linguistics at Georgetown University. The conference program, published here as an appendix (page 167), shows the breadth of topics examined at the conference, from backward design, new curricula, experiential learning, and the theory behind task-based learning instruction to the hands-on creative implementation of technology and gamification.

The conference opened with remarks by the Dean of Georgetown College, Christopher Celenza, who stressed the importance of the humanities in Education, and by representatives from the Embassy of Italy who focused on the value of studying Italian as a foreign language in today’s global economy. The keynote address, *Enrollment Trends, Program Challenges, Successful Models* by Dennis Looney (University of Pittsburg and MLA) followed, laying the ground for the entire conference program. Through a study of the MLA data and statistics, Looney showed how language enrollments across the board in the US have suffered a decline as has the number of students deciding to enroll in Italian courses. To address the national trends and contrast the challenges in language education that the statistics underscore, Looney emphasized the importance of a humanities education by showcasing the benefits and the opportunities that the transferrable skills of such a background can offer to students, in a variety of fields, post-graduation. In addition, he stressed the value of learning a foreign language as a fundamental key to creating intercultural and global competence. He discussed the need to create connections and collaborations across disciplines and departments, inside and outside institutions, and indicated that, as educators, we need to be far-sighted, to envision what our programs will be in the future and how we can better serve our students.

In line with the keynote speech, the workshop held by Tania Convertini (Dartmouth College) and titled *Exploring Design Thinking for Foreign Language Curriculum Innovation* focused on design thinking, a practice that has gained popularity as a human-centered problem-solving method where designers work closely with end users to inform innovations. During the workshop, Convertini identified ways in which design thinking can be applied to the language classroom enabling opportunities for students and faculty to collaborate toward a learner-centered foreign language education.

In an effort to share the excellent work of our colleagues with a broader audience, and to contribute to the research in our field at such a critical time, we sought out a collaboration
with Digital Georgetown to publish selected papers from the conference. These peer-reviewed essays by teachers and scholars who are experienced in designing interdisciplinary courses, creating new course formats, and developing curricula, showcase the quality of work that is going on in our field, and provide exemplary models of innovation that can enrich and enhance Italian programs of all types.

The following section consists of a brief overview of the papers included in this volume. They appear in alphabetical order based on author’s last name.

The paper titled Gamification and (Video)Game-Based Learning Approaches in the F/L2 Classroom is a combined work by Bregni (Saint Louis University), Essary (Elon University) and Zamboni (Wesleyan University). This paper discusses the use of games (board games, role-playing games, and instructional games) and videogames in language classrooms. The authors explore and assess how a game-informed pedagogy has worked in their Italian language and culture classrooms and highlight projects that have worked or are in the works at different institutions. They showcase approaches to creating present or future teaching materials (ranging from classroom activities to thematic units and whole curricula) that are informed by Gamification, Game-based, and Videogame-based second language acquisition. Bregni and Essary present video games and their successful application in their language & culture classes, while Zamboni discusses a more analogic approach to gaming, considering board games and their implementation for language learning.

Between Interdisciplinarity and Experiential Learning in Online and Hybrid Culture Courses (De Santi, Farmingdale State College, SUNY) discusses the challenges that the 21st century classroom poses to instructors and how they need to respond if they want to reach today’s diverse learners. With increasing demands from institutional leaders to offer online and hybrid courses, instructors are asked to mediate between the virtual classroom and a pedagogy that needs to adapt to a fast-evolving higher education. De Santi provides examples from some of her courses, where interdisciplinarity and experiential learning in language courses (online and hybrid) play a major role.

A Day at the Museum: Assessing an Experiential Learning Project in Introductory Italian Classes (D’Eugenio, University of Arkansas) presents an experimental project organized in collaboration with a local museum that was conducted during Spring 2019 with second-semester Italian language students. The project led students to explore interdisciplinary
connections between the Italian language and other subjects as well as intercultural comparisons between Italy’s past and present. D’Eugenio’s paper walks readers through the steps of the experiential learning cycle giving detailed descriptions of the activities used and, drawing from the reactions of the students involved, reflects on the advantages and disadvantages of a project of this type.

*Mapping Italian Narratives with StoryMap JS* (Fognani, Coastal Carolina University) discusses the results of a digital initiative that students in Fognani’s Italian upper-level course (Italians Abroad) developed using StoryMapJS. The goal of the project was to transform a literary text (or part of it) into a digital interactive map. Combining written descriptions of places with corresponding images, audio, and video files, the maps provided a new way of visualizing and interpreting the texts. This project offered students a uniquely interactive approach to literary texts that encouraged them to consider the field of Italian Studies as more global, dynamic, and prolific.

Hall (Bowdoin College) in *Small Teaching, Digital Humanities Pedagogy, and Renaissance Literature* presents a project performed in Spring 2019 where students in a senior-level Italian seminar followed an experimental syllabus that led each of them to become experts on a different literary text. The pedagogical strategies employed during the semester were a combination of close reading, contextualization, and digital humanities methods of analysis. Overall, the course capitalized on students' interests outside the Italian classroom, their curiosity about data-driven research, and their eagerness to create or remix digital content for a wider audience.

*“Brutti Ma Buoni”: How to Use less than Masterpieces of Films to Engage Students* (Hiller, Adelphy University) explores the ways in which a bad film can sometimes serve as a more stimulating teaching tool than a good one. Beginning with a brief overview of some theoretical considerations from the social sciences, broadly to do with humans’ bias toward recording negativity, the essay shows a few examples of successful activities, and concludes with some thoughts about how instructors might take advantage of the increased availability of these types of resources in the Italian language classroom in North America.

Kierans (Rutgers University), in *Empathy on the Other Side: Community and Care in the Online Classroom* discusses how to practice empathy in our classrooms. Mental illness often stems from or is exacerbated by social isolation. Face-to-face language courses help to offset
feelings of loneliness and improve social skills through consistent interaction in a safe environment. However, in recent years, more and more face-to-face courses have been transitioning to online formats. Therefore, it is crucial to encourage a community of care and empathy in the online sphere. Kierans not only discusses the benefits of teaching empathy through language but she also explores ways in which an instructor can provide the necessary tools and environment to create a nurturing community of care.

Mosca (Purdue University) in her paper titled *Re-envisioning the Italian Curriculum through Active Learning and Literacy* discusses how the Italian faculty at Purdue implemented changes in the Italian Curriculum, making it more attractive to 21st century students and attuning it to the needs of the university as a whole. The article presents the administrative changes and innovative pedagogies (such as active learning, literacy, and intercultural competence training) that have had a positive impact on the growth of the Italian program at Purdue.

Saggin (Columbia University) in *Creating, Shaping and Sharing the Content: The Use of Web 2.0 Tools in the Language Classroom* discusses how Web 2.0 technology provides numerous opportunities for meaningful and authentic language use, offering innovative resources to support out-of-class learning. The use of technological tools empowers learners to transcend traditional concepts of the classroom and pushes them to create, share and shape the content through feedback and evaluation mechanisms. This essay presents experiences that Saggin had in her Italian Elementary and Intermediate classes, where students were able to overcome some limitations that are typical of classroom-based learning, especially those related to speaking.

Tosi (Georgetown University) in *Painting as A Communicative Text: Using the Art History Interpretational Canon to Teach a Cognate Language* presents a class activity that is a linguistic task as well as a cultural tool aimed at introducing students to an integrated performance model structured specifically around the epistemological interpretation of a work of art. It is a task that has been ideated for the course titled *Italian for Spanish and Romance Language Speakers* and is tailored specifically for the linguistic abilities of students of Italian as a cognate language who have reached an advanced level of linguistic knowledge and mastery.

We would like to thank the following for their essential and much appreciated support: the Dean of Georgetown College, Chris Celenza, the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, The Embassy of Italy, First Counselor Domenico Bellantone, Maria Fusco, Director of the Education Office, Emanuele Amendola, Director of Italian Cultural Institute D.C., the keynote speaker, Prof.
Dennis Looney (University of Pittsburg and MLA), Prof. Tania Convertini (Dartmouth College), the Department of Italian, and all participants along with our student volunteers who made this event a very informative and constructive place to share knowledge, projects and ideas to give our students a better learning experience as a whole.

In conclusion, we would like to extend our thanks to all those who contributed essays to this volume and to the presenters and attendees at the conference who facilitated a very lively and productive conversation. We hope to continue these discussions at the next Georgetown Conference that will be held in October 2021.

Donatella Melucci and Louise Hipwell
Conference Organizers
(VIDEO) GAMES, GAMIFICATION, AND GAME-BASED LEARNING IN THE FOREIGN/L2 CLASSROOM

Simone Bregni, Saint Louis University
Camilla Zamboni, Wesleyan University
Brandon Essary, Elon University

Introduction

Game and video game-based instruction (Game Based-Learning, Video Game-Based Learning, GBL and VGBL respectively) often is seen as a niche and obscure field; that is mostly due to the fact that the field of gaming is astoundingly large, and it can be intimidating. It is often overwhelming to start playing video games, board games, or role-playing games (RPGs): one needs to develop specific abilities to play, to read often complex instructions, or to become part of online forums in order to find new releases and understand what might be suitable for the classroom. Furthermore, the video game / board game / RPG world is first and foremost a variegated and fluid industry: it follows different rules and moves with different rhythms than academia, and we might feel that there is too much to keep up with. Finally, if one is not knowledgeable about games, one might fall prey to several stereotypes that surround the gaming industry: for example, video games might be seen as violent and “a waste of time” instead of a productive tool for teaching and learning; board games are often reductively seen as what was in the family closet, such as Risk! or Monopoly; RPGs are perhaps the most niche inhabitants of the gaming world, and they are often described – and dismissed - as “nerdy.”

However, games (video games, board games and RPGs) are terrific instruments to promote learning and engagement. That is what we hope to show and discuss in this written reflection based on our round table from the 2019 Georgetown conference, along with some concrete advice on what games to explore and how to use them in class.

Bregni and Essary will discuss implementing video games in their classrooms, presenting their experiences, their results, and their ideas for moving forward – they will also touch on what principles of game-based learning they have implemented. Zamboni will present a more
analogic approach, discussing board game nights she has organized with her students and a project-based course aimed at creating board games for language learning.

**Games as Realia**

The potential of gaming in learning has been explored in a variety of fields, including language acquisition (Reinders, 2012). Literature on analog (board games, RPGs) and video games in foreign and second language acquisition (F/L2) mainly focuses on “serious gaming,” and is centered on the concept of player agency and the creation of specific games for F/L2 acquisition (Sykes and Reinhardt, 2012; Neville, 2009 & 2010, Sørensen & Meyer, 2007). Research on F/L2 acquisition in commercially available games, however, has been limited (e.g., Ye, et al., 2008; Chen & Young, 2013). Certain commercially available analog games and cinematic video games are fully interactive experiences that show positive results in terms of F/L2 and culture acquisition. Particularly because of their interactive nature, games differ from other media such as novels and films: while the latter only require minimal effort to enjoy (i.e., turning a page or click on a “play” button), games are “ergodic” texts (Aarseth, 1997), in that they require “non-trivial” effort and trained skills to experience. Including such games in the curriculum as *realia* (Spurr, 1942; Dlaska, 2003) can help students improve their skills. *Realia* afford F/L2 acquisition through development of specific personal interests. Cinematic or narrative games, similar in nature to movies (they include verbal and non-verbal communication), also add the additional layer of agency, which improves learning (Deters, et al., 2014; Bregni, 2018a & 2018b). They also involve problem-solving and critical thinking that can be applied to group interaction, all particularly conducive to learning (Wenger, 1998) and F/L2 acquisition (Nunan, 1992). Additionally, games as *realia* can contribute to the goal of transforming our students into life-long learners of (a) F/L2 language(s), a process explored by CALL (e.g., Smith, 1997).

**Game-Based Learning vs. Gamification**

Is using games in the foreign language classroom an instance of Gamification? It is necessary to define and delineate a distinction between Gamification and Game-Based Learning
(GBL), two concepts that are often confused. Gamification refers to applying game principles to (language) learning, such as creating small competitions or implementing a point system, and other changes that do not aim for depth. Gamification works more like a motivational tool, which can encourage learning, but it is not an actual teaching method. GBL, on the contrary, is pedagogy grounded in research and closely connected to play theory. In GBL, learners apply critical thinking (Farber, 2017) and aim to infuse deep, gameful learning principles and practices into their teaching practices.

Another way to frame and complicate the difference between Gamification and GBL is to consider Jonathon Reinhardt's distinction between "game-enhanced" F/L2 teaching and learning (i.e., adapting a commercial game for learning), "game-informed" F/L2 teaching and learning (i.e., gamification, or applying gaming principles to learning), and "game-based" F/L2 teaching and learning (i.e., creating games specifically for educational purposes that aim for depth. (Gameful Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning, 2019).

The Challenge of Games

(Video) games are effective not (just) because they are fun, but because they are challenging. They are difficult, and repetition enhances comprehension and memorization. Playing analog and digital games involves the body at a physical level. The role of physical involvement in learning is analyzed in Total Physical Response theory (TPR) (Asher, 1996; Byram, 2000, 631-633; Cook, 2008). Also, playing (video) games causes adrenaline production (Mitchell & Savill-Smith, 2004) and modifies the perception of surrounding reality, which was taken into consideration in Csikszentmihályi’s (1997) Flow theory (FT), which states that the best learning happens when we become oblivious to the passing of time. Gamers often refer to “being in the zone” when they play effectively: “Time distortion indicates the degree to which a student loses the sense of time during a learning activity.” (Lee, 2015, 11-12). TPR, adrenaline production and FT, all point in the direction of games being particularly effective for learning. In the next section, future projects using also virtual reality will be considered.

1 Gonzalo Frasca: https://www.rosario3.com/noticias/Los-videojuegos funcionan no porque-entretienen sino porque desafian-20180131-0026.html
Video Games as a Simulation and the New Frontiers of Cinematic, Commercial VR

Video Games. (Simone Bregni)

The course Intensive Italian for Gamers at Saint Louis University (SLU) continues to yield positive results. A hybrid/blended format course, which was developed in fall 2016 through a Fellowship of the SLU Reinert Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning, it was offered for the first time in spring 2017 (Bregni, 2017, 2018a & 2018b). The VGBL component enhances “traditional” instruction, while the hybrid format allows for consolidation of grammar and vocabulary to be done as homework assignments. The last twenty minutes of each class period, three times a week, are devoted to game-based learning activities, through a PlayStation 4 (PS4) system connected to a large screen and with commercially-available, “AAA” cinematic games (such as Ubisoft’s Assassin’s Creed series and Quantic Dream’s PS4 exclusives, such as Heavy Rain) localized in Italian, which were purchased through Amazon Italy. In each class, the instructor selects a section of a game that specifically helps to reinforce structures and vocabulary that students have just learned through their textbook and modeled in class. The structure of the course, the cinematic games, worksheets and task-based learning activities used, have been described elsewhere (Bregni, 2017, 2018a & 2018b). For the purpose of this article, I intend to focus on one particular element emerging from outcomes of assessment results performed at the end of two iterations of the course, particularly students’ comments in the final survey regarding: video games as simulation of real-life interactions and the effectiveness of the simulation aspect in F/L2 acquisition. This aspect becomes, in my view,
particularly relevant when analyzed in the context of immersive virtual reality gaming experiences in the F/L2.

In their course evaluations, several student comments related to their feeling “safe” in expressing themselves in the F/L2 in my video game-based courses. Students also expressed feeling safe in exploring communicative modes in the F/L2 in the video game simulation. Along with my colleagues in this article, I believe that this is an important element in F/L2 acquisition: creating welcoming, low-stress, encouraging environments. This connects directly with James Paul Gee’s “Psychosocial Moratorium” principle (What Video Games, 2007, 62-63), as well as research on lowering “affective filter.” The focus of my current research is exploring the element of safety in the exploration of communicative modes in F/LW within the added dimension of immersive play afforded by virtual reality (VR). In recent cinematic “AAA” (games produced by a well-known, well-funded publisher with higher budgets for development and marketing) commercial video game titles in VR, the heightened simulation aspect further engages players in a dialogue-based, narrative context that can prepare students for real-life conversations.

Some VR video game experiences are simulations of fictional or real experiences and events, or a combination of both, in engaging narrative contexts. The simulation aspect (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2016 and Bregni, 2019) can engage players in an immersive, dialogue-based narrative context, a virtual setting that can prepare students for real-life conversations, through game mechanics that are challenging, based on repetition, and that engage players at a deep level, thus affording agency (Gee, What Video Games, 2007, and “Good Video Games,” 2005; Bregni “Using Video Games,” 2017).

In 2017 (Bregni, “Using Video Games”), I discussed the dawn of the VR revolution in popular, commercial gaming. In fact, in 2016 a number of relatively inexpensive VR headsets and related gear for PC and new-generation consoles were hitting the markets, particularly PlayStation VR for PS4 [PSVR]. Until then, VR experiences were either overly expensive, or otherwise limited. I stated that I believed it was bound to open new frontiers for language learning, describing how the PSVR, in my view, was the best VR headset for the language classroom, given the ideal price-tag-to-performance ratio and the fact that it can be easily connected to a large screen/projection TV for a shared, collective experience. However, it was not until May 28, 2019, with the launch of the first true multilingual cinematic immersive VR experience, Blood & Truth for PS4 that VR in the foreign language classroom became a viable,
feasible and effective learning experience. *Blood & Truth* is a gangster story, a first-person shooter presented as an interactive action movie. It is a very polished, big budget “AAA” video game title with an engaging, detailed narrative, which includes full voice-acted dialogues and lip-syncing that adapts to the different in-game languages. In the game, the player controls Ryan Marks, a former Special Forces soldier who must save his family from a London crime boss. The European version, which is region-free and can be used on PS4 systems anywhere in the world, can be played, besides in Italian, in English (Great Britain), Spanish (Spain), French (France), and German. The North American version includes English (USA), Spanish (Latin-American) and French (Canadian). The game, just like a gangster movie, contains some violence and is recommended for players 18 or older. I felt confident in using it in my college-level classroom, as the graphics, while realistic, do not overemphasize in-game violence. Players can interact with different objects, take cover and pick up different weapons. Movement is achieved by looking at a spot and pressing a button. The in-game character will then automatically move to the chosen location. During dialogues, players must listen attentively for clues and narrative developments of the storyline. Subtitles can be activated, in the F/L2 (always advisable, in my view) or any other of those included. By repositioning him/herself in the VR environment, the player can observe more closely lip movements and dialogue interactions among non-playable characters. While lip-syncing is not perfect, it adapts to the chosen language, thus enhancing comprehension (Kellerman, 1990).

Cinematic VR video games as simulations can assist our students in preparing them to engage and interact in the target language in a “safe” environment, where they can learn from immersive exposure to the F/L2 through repetition. Digital spaces are virtual immersion experiences, a re-creation of F/L2 cultural environments. Cinematic, narrative VR games can provide students with “survival” elements that can help them prepare for real-life experiences in F/L2. I intend to fully explore the benefits of VR cinematic, narrative video games in future iterations of Intensive Italian for Gamers. The ability to provide students with engaging contexts in which to prepare them for real-life experiences happens not only in digital games, but also in analog games, as Zamboni will now make clear.
Adapting and Creating Board Games for F/L2 practice inside and outside the Classroom

(Camilla Zamboni)

In this section, I will explore ways of implementing games into F/L2 practice inside and outside the classroom; I will focus on analog forms of gaming, and particularly on board games. I will first discuss what board games are and why they are both suitable and effective for language learning; then I will present a way to leverage board games to create communities of practice for F/L2 learning – through “Italian Board Game Nights” – and a plan to create a class dedicated to adapting and creating board games for language learning.

A board game is a tabletop game that involves pieces of various shape and size moved or placed on a pre-marked surface called the “board,” according to a set of rules and with one or several goals. Some games are based exclusively on strategy, and some rely exclusively on an element of chance (either in the form of dice, or cards, or electronic supplements); however, most games contain strategy and chance. Some examples of board games that might be familiar to most people are *Monopoly* or *Risk!*, but nowadays the field is characterized by variety and innovation.

In the past two decades, the production of non-digital games (board games and role-playing games) has boomed. This is mostly due to the rise of the Internet, which created the opportunity to develop online communities devoted to all forms of gaming as well as crowdfunding opportunities to produce innovative games with the direct support of fans and buyers. The explosive growth and popularity of non-digital gaming has caught the attention the media, which called it a board game “Renaissance” (Jolin, 2016). An article in *The Guardian* described board games as “making a comeback” (Freeman, 2012); another gave an estimate that put the growth of the board game market at “between 25% and 40% annually” since 2010, and described the current time as the “golden era for board games” (Duffy, 2014).  

The rise in board game popularity has been attributed to quality improvement (more elegant mechanics, components, artwork, and graphics) as well as increased availability thanks to online sales and the development of robust online communities where gamers and game designers can interact.

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2 Several articles are also dedicated to the rise and popularity of tabletop Role-Playing Games (RPGs); I chose not to focus on those in this article, and I will discuss such articles in a future piece on RPGs.
The most important of such online communities is Board Game Geek (BGG), the largest aggregator for board games reviews, ratings, comments, and so on.³ Game designers are invariably part of the BGG forums and community, where they present, brainstorm, and play test their games before launching crowd-funding campaigns.⁴ There are also entire companies that thrive by producing online content, such as game reviews or game-related web series and commentary.⁵ As far as online crowd-funding, the major platform nowadays is Kickstarter, which features an endless stream of new games daily.⁶ It is there that game designers come to propose their ideas (usually with elaborate presentations), in the hopes that enough subscribers will “pledge” and fund the game; it is also there that certain games have gone viral and collected millions in funding.⁷

As mentioned in the introduction, the game industry is primarily a business; but in the case of board games, buyers can participate in the design process, and help test out the game mechanics. This creates a large, global community that is dedicated not only to buying and promoting their favorite games, but also to making them better; as a result, board games have become highly specific and varied in theme, content, price, and dimensions. A quick look through Kickstarter is sufficient to realize that there are games for just about any preference. New game companies have arisen thanks to this development, and many of those are European: for example, Germany, France, and Italy showcase several successful game designers and producers.⁸

With such a variety of products, vibrant communities who play and discuss, and attention from the media, board games have acquired a much more central role in shaping

³ Please see https://boardgamegeek.com/.
⁴ Another examples of authoritative online communities is https://www.reddit.com/r/boardgames/.
⁵ Examples of popular game review Youtube channels are Shut Up and Sit Down, Watch It Played, and Board Game Geek TV. An example of an online platform featuring game-related web series and commentary is Geek and Sundry.
⁶ Please see the section of Kickstarter dedicated to board games: https://www.kickstarter.com/discover/categories/games/tabletop%20games.
⁷ A current example is the funding campaign for “Frosthaven”, which ended with $12,969,608 pledged. Please see https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/frosthaven/frosthaven?ref=discovery_category. Another recent example is the popularity of the game “Wingspan,” which sold out multiple times. https://nyti.ms/2ETMuZ7.
⁸ Some examples are Asmodée Editions (France), Ravensburger (Germany), dV Giochi (Italy).
entertainment in our society, and have become the subject of academic studies. They have also entered classrooms, as instructors see the potential of using games with specific themes in their content classes. However, unlike digital games – which have become the subject of many studies dedicated to their F/L2 classroom application – board games have not been widely discussed in the context of F/L2 pedagogy, though many commercial games are not only suitable for language learning, but potentially more effective than materials specifically created for the classroom, such as review sheets, grammar/vocabulary activities, and instructor-created games.

How can commercial games be more effective than traditional resources? The first aspect to consider is the student/player’s interest in learning, and how to encourage such interest. As mentioned in the introduction of this article, the main difference between educational games created by instructors and commercial games is quality, articulated in different ways: game mechanics, which are more varied and engrossing in commercial games, and graphics, which are more captivating. This is because teams of professional game designers and artists work on creating a commercial game, and because a competitive market requires a commercial game to be, first and foremost, enjoyable for the player. As Kurt Squire mentions in Video Games and Learning (2011), “the difference between good and bad games is more in the polished games experience than in the content” (5). For Squire, “good games are cleverly designed” and “the player’s experience is sculpted so that it feels like a warm hug” (6); thus, players learn to play while being engaged in a curated experience, which enhances motivation and enjoyment. James Paul Gee builds on this concept: in Good Video Games and Good Learning (2007), he maintains that good games are not only pleasurable and connected to control, agency, and meaningfulness, but are also “problem-solving spaces that create deep learning” (10). Games, for Gee, are “hard work and good fun” (10), two aspects that can foster a student/learner’s interest and create the conditions for optimal learning.

A second aspect to consider is the objective of the game. Educational games created by instructors usually focus on language learning itself and are designed for a classroom, thus finding their main value and purpose in creating competitive or collaborative opportunities for grammar or vocabulary practice. For the sake of clarity, these games tend to rely on a simple set

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9 For example, see Marco Arnaudo’s Storytelling in the Modern Board Game (2018), published by McFarland and Company, Inc.. The publisher focuses on digital and non-digital games from an academic perspective, with a dedicated series, “Studies in Gaming.”
of rules and straightforward goals (for example, to find a specific word, to connect predetermined related words, to utter the right verb conjugation), and do not allow for significant student/player agency. In contrast, commercial board games cater to a larger audience. Thus, even when they focus on language use and practice, commercial games offer more opportunities for customization and immersive play: they often have a theme, some offer the possibility to play different characters, and many feature a narrative element—all aspects that make the experience of playing more engrossing and personal.\textsuperscript{10} For the sake of enjoyment, good games also allow for creativity and player input both within the game (with different strategies and potential paths to victory) and around the game (with player’s feedback, online community discussions, new and improved editions of the game, and game modding).\textsuperscript{11}

A final aspect to discuss is the way in which commercial board games foster learning. All games provide some of the basic mechanics of language learning, such as scaffolding, thematic grouping of vocabulary, and repetition. Jonathon Reinhardt in \textit{Gameful Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning} (2019) draws numerous parallels between the dynamics of games and the dynamics of language learning: they both rely on rules and goals, as well as agency and meaningful interaction. Yet many games created for the F/L2 classroom only focus on the first two elements, thus creating language practice opportunities but forgoing the chance to truly engage the student/player. Instead, many commercial games encourage heightened player agency through open-ended development, or “emergent” gameplay (Reinhardt, 2019), as well as promote “meaningful play” (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004) through interactive and prompt feedback – so that student/players feel more involved and willing to participate in language practice within and around the game.

In light of all this, in order to promote effective learning, instructors should include the elements discussed above, which make commercial games both enjoyable and engaging to players. Yet replicating the quality and principles of commercial games would be very difficult in a class setting, mainly because of a lack of time and resources on the part of instructors.

\textsuperscript{10} For an in-depth and historical look at narrative trend in board games, please see Marco Arnaudo’s \textit{Storytelling in the Modern Board Game} (2018).

\textsuperscript{11} “Modding” a game refers to some type of alteration (“mod”, short for modification) to one or more aspect of the game performed by players or fans. Modding may range from small changes and tweaks to complete overhauls, and can extend the replay value and interest of a game. To learn more about board game modding, please see: \url{https://geekandsundry.com/modding-table-top-games-to-take-them-from-good-to-great/}. 
Thankfully, games that are suitable to F/L2 learning already exist on the market. As with video games, what is needed for an instructor is to be aware of what is available, of its potential for language learning, and how to use it for F/L2 practice – including, if necessary, how to adapt some of the game elements.

However, the staggering number of available commercial games, the sometimes-complicated game mechanics, and the time it takes to familiarize oneself with them can be intimidating to someone new to the field. A quick survey of different types of game that are related to Italian culture and language can serve as a helpful example. On one end of the spectrum are immersive and complex board games with an Italian theme, such as *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, *Bolognando, Marco Polo, Medici, The Prince of Florence*, and many more.\(^\text{12}\) Such games can be used in a content course in both the English or Italian edition (popular games are quickly translated in several languages).\(^\text{13}\) Other games can be used both for theme and for limited language learning, such as *Fresco*, which combines a Renaissance theme and a good review of basic vocabulary of colors and numbers.\(^\text{14}\) At the other end of the spectrum are commercial board games that can be considered as improved versions of games that are commonly used in the classroom, such as *Guess who? / Indovina chi, Essere o non essere, Vocabolando*, or *Scrabble*. These kind of games focus exclusively on practicing aspects of a language, and can be successfully used in review sessions and conversation sessions.\(^\text{15}\) Finally, there are board games whose mechanics work well for F/L2 learning and whose theme is also captivating (or can be easily adapted): notable examples are *Dixit, Concept*, and *Codenames / Nome in codice*.\(^\text{16}\) I will focus on such games, and particularly *Codenames* (Vlaada Chvátil, 2015), as they have been the most effective in my experience.

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\(^\text{12}\) A comprehensive list of the impressive variety of board games set in Italy can be found here: [https://boardgamegeek.com/geeklist/211408/boardgames-set-italy](https://boardgamegeek.com/geeklist/211408/boardgames-set-italy)

\(^\text{13}\) For example, *De Vulgari Eloquentia* was recently used in a Dante reception course by a colleague at my institution.

\(^\text{14}\) For more information about *Fresco*, please see: [https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/66188/fresco](https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/66188/fresco).

\(^\text{15}\) For example, *Essere o non essere* was successfully used by Teaching Assistants in conversation sessions for Elementary Italian.

\(^\text{16}\) *Concept* and *Code names / Nome in codice* should be purchased in their Italian version, while *Dixit* can be played in any language since it relies on non-verbal clues. The games can be found here: *Concept* [https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/147151/concept](https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/147151/concept), *Code Names* [https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/178900/codenames](https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/178900/codenames), and *Dixit* [https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/39856/dixit](https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/39856/dixit).
In the past two years, I have started to use commercial board games to complement and enhance the F/L2 experience of my students. So far, it has been outside regular classroom time: each semester, I have organized biweekly “Italian Board Games Nights / Serate di giochi di società in italiano” (IBGN) – informal evening events in which interested students meet to play board games in the F/L2. IBGN, which are not offered for credit or extra-credit, have quickly become successful for several reasons: they provide a chance for students to interact in the F/L2 outside the classroom; they offer an opportunity to practice the F/L2 in an informal yet structured way; they are open and welcoming to all levels of language proficiency; they are a very low-cost activity; and they are completely student-centered. Students can play on their own once they learn how the games work, and they are the main participants: they explain rules to each other, they play in the target language, and they discuss the games when conflicts or misunderstandings arise. From a pedagogical perspective, during IBGN student/players engage with the F/L2 in several ways: they read instructions or listen to a peer’s explanations, they speak to one another during and in between games, and they utilize the F/L2 in creative and meaningful ways.

For example, when playing Codenames, student/players are divided in two teams of spies. In front of both teams, 25 cards, each with a single word on it, are laid down to form a square. Each team then elects a spy master; both spy masters have access to a map of the cards, indicating which words belong to one team or the other; some cards don’t belong to any team, and if chosen, will have no effect (they are called “passersby”); one card, marked as “the assassin,” will instead immediately end the game, with a loss, for the team that chooses it. Spy masters, on their turn, must give clues to their team using only one word: the objective of the game is for a team to guess all their words before the other – and to avoid choosing passersby and the assassin card.
Students preparing to play *Codenames / Nome in codice*, left, and the set-up of the game (Italian version), right.

*Codenames* has quickly become a favorite choice during IBGN, because of its clear mechanics, prompt feedback mechanisms, flexible number of players, and enjoyable theme. Students have particularly remarked that the experience of playing *Codenames* in Italian was “fun and engaging,” that they “lost track of time,” and that they were “not afraid to use the F/L2 language” when discussing what to guess. Further, they enjoyed the experience “of being all together” and working towards “a common goal” that surpassed mere language practice. These comments mirror Sharon Boller and Karl Kapp’s definition of an engaging game: students were “involved and vested in the activity, expending energy, thought and focus” (*Play to Learn*, 2017). Engaging games, for Boller and Kapp, are the most effective, as they provide a task that is both entertaining and demanding.

Furthermore, the sense of community and commonality that students experienced calls to mind Gee’s concept of “affinity spaces” (*Good Video Games*, 2007, 98-101), spaces that are organized around a common interest, encourage shared knowledge and different forms of participation, and foster a way of learning in which “leadership is porous and leaders are resources” (101). While playing *Codenames*, student/players collaborated to create and discuss connections between words in the F/L2: they each brought their own, unique language knowledge, and they used it for a common goal. The analog quality of board games adds to this concept; IBGN are physical affinity spaces, in which students come together to play. As they join a team, they all sit on the same side of a table, physically sharing a space and the game. Their
language learning is activated and heightened by all senses, and the analog nature of the interaction can serve as an antidote for monotony in traditional class spaces or online burnout.

Finally, the feeling of losing track of time and the high level of enjoyment and fulfillment described by students recall the idea of “flow” (Csíkszentimihályi, 1990), which describes a psychological state in which student/players are completely absorbed by the activity at hand, which they perceive as both challenging (yet not overwhelming and always under control) and deeply enjoyable. The collaborative nature of the experience further moves this state from the individual to the group, and from a psychological to a social concept: as Celia Pearce argues, the flow is situated “between people rather than within” a single person. Pearce calls this state “intersubjective flow” (Communities of Play, 2009, 133), according to which a group of strangers, through play, “can form a sense of group cohesion” in a short time. As such, when students played Codenames, they created conditions that were conducive to language learning, and that should be replicated in a formal (classroom) setting.

Organizing Italian Board Game Nights was an initial experiment, which showed the potential of engaging board games for F/L2 learning; the evening events will continue, but because of their informal nature, they cannot accurately measure the effectiveness of board games for F/L2 learning. The approach in the future will be two-fold: first, I have created – and I am currently teaching – a course open to students with at least intermediate proficiency in Italian and a strong passion for board games. In this course, called “Italian Gaming Lab: Project-Based, Gameful Pedagogy for Language Learning,” students learn the most prominent theories on gaming and learning, and then either adapt a commercial game for language learning, or create a brand new language learning game that is informed by game design principles. All final projects and games will be posted on the course website, which will continue to be updated with future projects and which will hopefully become a repository of games for language learning, with both adapted and new games. The second step will be to implement games that are created or adapted by students of “Italian Gaming Lab” in elementary and intermediate Italian classes, and assess the efficacy of using board games in a formal F/L2 classroom. Even though Essary focuses more on the use of video games, as we will see in the next section, a

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17 The course website can be found here: [http://camillazamboni.wescreates.wesleyan.edu/bgl/](http://camillazamboni.wescreates.wesleyan.edu/bgl/). Due to the current covid-19 pandemic, the final projects/games have not been properly play tested, but they will be played and, if necessary, updated as soon as we can return to campus and organize new IBGN. I plan to follow up with a separate piece about the class and its results.
future goal of his, too, is to perfect game-based strategies in upper-level courses and have them trickle down in a variety of ways to elementary and intermediate courses.

**Teaching Literature and Language with Video Games (Brandon Essary)**

Students in ITL 375, “Italian Literature and Video Games” play and discuss—in Italian—*Rise of the Tomb Raider* (Square Enix, 2015), left, and *Uncharted 3: Drake’s Deception* (Naughty Dog, 2011)

After experimenting, like Zamboni, with successful, voluntary game nights in which my students and I played video games in Italian in the 2017-2018 academic year, in fall 2018, I taught at Elon University “Italian Literature and Video Games.” It was an upper-level “hybrid” course that welcomed both students who were concurrently taking third-semester Italian language or who had taken at least four semesters of college-level Italian classes. From an enrollment point of view, the class was an historical success. In it, there were 10 students, and there had not been an upper-level course with 10 or more students in our program for at least half a dozen years. In order to help ensure high enrollment, I make courses like this one as appealing and useful as possible, such that students who might be interested and qualified for it, cannot say “no.” In this case, the novel “hybrid” approach helped add a couple students who were concurrently taking third-semester Italian. As a 300-level course, it satisfied for some students the college’s advanced study requirement. I also garnered approval for the course to fulfill the core curriculum “literature” requirement. Naturally, it counted toward the Italian Studies
interdisciplinary minor. And, to arrive at the point of this article, the course used fun and engaging game-based learning, unlike any other course on our campus.

On the one hand, students read Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* in its entirety with the cantos divided evenly across the 15 weeks of the semester. Simultaneously, students watched game footage from *Dante’s Inferno* (2010) recorded by me—with game audio and subtitles in Italian—and posted to a YouTube for homework.18 Amazingly, the game is designed to follow and reflect in various ways the progression of the cantos in *Inferno*. So, these viewings, too, were divided evenly across the semester and were paired with corresponding cantos of the poem. Each day, on a rotating basis, students prepared discussion leadership questions for their classmates. One question had to be “traditional,” literary, and based on the poem and Teodolinda Barolini’s online *Commento Baroliniano*.19 The second question had to compare and contrast the poetic text with the digital narrative of the video game, including a screenshot from the game and the corresponding lines of the poem by which the scene was inspired. On the other hand, groups of two or three students chose their own AAAA PlayStation 4 titles to play, record, analyze (for literary elements and new vocabulary), and present in class on a rotating basis. With grant funding from Elon University’s Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, I purchased Italian editions of the games from Amazon Italy; put the games—*Assassin’s Creed Origins* (Ubisoft, 2017); *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (Square Enix, 2015); and *Beyond Two Souls* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2013); and *Uncharted 3: Drake’s Deception* (Naughty Dog, 2011)—on reserve in the library; and put several PlayStation 4 consoles, purchased with the help of an Elon Academic Technology Committee grant, on reserve in Media Services.

On end-of-course surveys, students unanimously agreed or strongly agreed that playing for homework and presenting on their favorite games: enhanced the language learning experience; provided active language learning opportunities; helped them learn vocabulary; offered a useful and fun chance to talk about literature and literary elements. Finally, 100% of

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18 Access to course descriptions, syllabi, and the YouTube channel videos is provided here: [https://bessary.wordpress.com/youtube/](https://bessary.wordpress.com/youtube/).
19 After discovering Dr. Barolini’s free *Digital Dante* web site, [https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/](https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/), my students and I have used it in all my courses. It is free to use, which passes savings on to our students, and it is very well designed, offering Dr. Barolini’s textual commentary; translations of the *Comedy* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Allen Mandelbaum; and the option to show the facing translation of Giorgio Petrocchi. In addition to these texts, the site offers numerous resources related to Dante and history, images, sounds, etc.
students strongly agreed that they “found a strong connection between the narratives of these games and the “traditional” literature read in the course, namely, *Inferno*. In the present article segment, I will use three types of evidence: student quotes from the aforementioned surveys; learning principles from James Gee’s *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Literacy and Learning* (2007); and scholarly sources on video games, literacy, and transmediation. I will demonstrate three main points: (1) game-based learning helps bring about an optimal learning environment when learning Italian language and literature; (2) video game narratives share the same storytelling DNA with traditional works of literature; and students learn language and literature more effectively in conjunction with playing and studying video games than without; and (3) such game-based learning approaches recognize and foster multiple literacies in our students, leading them to be more critical readers, thinkers, and language learners across a variety of mediums.

**Fun, Fresh, Optimal Learning**

In observing class discussions, studying student work, and reviewing student survey data, I found a common theme that indicates a harmony brought about by studying *Inferno* together with the studying the *Dante’s Inferno* video game and other titles. One student noted: “The set up that we had this semester seemed to work very well and it kept, I think, the class from reading, reading, reading, and reading. *Inferno* didn't get too redundant, and it made every day a fresh surprise!” Students remarked that pairing the study of games and the literary elements present in their complex narratives helped improve their Italian, written and spoken: “[Game-based learning] is a great tool, and I definitely learned a lot. I feel more confident as writer in Italian through the writing assignments that went along with the gameplay because the games gave me more grammatical knowledge.” It is interesting that students, even while embracing, enjoying, and learning from GBL in a literary context, don’t think of their game experiences (whether viewing footage or playing themselves) as a literary act. In fact, as intimated in Bregni’s introduction, game players must actively read and interpret the game world and the game narrative. The story cannot and does not unfold without the active input of the player, and, thus, players effectively become “co-authors,” deciding precisely how the story unfolds based on the decisions they make. It is important, especially nowadays when “literacy” is not merely “knowledge of letters,” that we give students chances to practice digital,
interactive literacy activities like this, and help them understand their ubiquitous presence in our society, their meanings, and the ideological messages built into them. Gee is one of the greatest sources for understanding the kind of deep, powerful learning that takes place in good games and game-based learning like this. For this section, I will draw attention to three principles: the (1) “Semiotic Principle”; (2) the “Semiotic Domains Principle”; and (3) the “Metalevel Thinking about Semiotic Domains Principle.” In comparing literature and the literary nature of games, with regard to the first principle, students learned about and came to appreciate the interrelations within and across various sign systems (images, words, actions, etc.) as a complex system designed by authors and designers. With regard to the second, students felt confident and comfortable by entering the (frightening and sometimes intimidating) world of Dante and the *Inferno*, through the popular game medium. Finally, with regard to third principle, whether actively playing or passively watching game footage, students’ “[l]earning involves mastering, at some level, semiotic domains, and being able to participate, at some level, in the affinity group or groups connected to them” (*What Video Games*, 222). Students established an identity in the video game affinity group, which presented to them semiotic domains in the games, which in turn overlapped with those of the poem. A bridge was thus built between the mediums such that, with regard to the third principle, time and again students demonstrated “active and critical thinking about the relationships of the semiotic domain being learned” to the semiotic domain of the poem. The video game medium has a special way of facilitating the formation of affinity groups, as Zamboni noted, as well as confidence within them that inspires confidence and curiosity beyond them. The transmediation of literature to video games has great potential, especially because of the kind of active thinking and learning it requires. Marjorie Siegel sums up well what is going on in this process: “Transmediation, the act of translating meanings from one sign system to another, increases students’ opportunities to engage in generative and reflective thinking because learners must invent a connection between the two sign systems, as the connection does not exist *a priori*” (“More Than Words,” 1995, 2). Time and again I observed, and students commented that generative and reflective thinking took place, especially when students led literary discussion using evidence both from the poem and the transmediated video game based on the poem.
Video Games, Literature, and Literacy

Students found time and again that exploring connections between poem and video game narratives was helpful to understanding Dante’s work and reducing stress associated with language learning and reading a complex work of literature. Interestingly, students also observed that the approaches of the course made for an environment that welcomed all levels and kinds of learners: “I think the connections that we were able to draw between the video game and the poem were great, I think it made reading *Inferno* a lot less stressful and manageable. This course truly accommodated all levels of Italian.” These observations draw our attention to larger issues of inclusivity and understanding the various kinds of literacies and learning styles of our students. Clearly, some of their literacies are digital in nature, and many of them can connect more easily to digital narratives. However, as we have already seen, it is important to note that the digital narrative does not have to be an end in and of itself. It can be used as a means to the end of understanding language and literature. As far as Gee’s principles are concerned, two have proven relevant to these points, in the eight different iterations of courses in which I’ve taught literature, video games, *Inferno*, and *Dante’s Inferno* (in English and Italian). First, the achievement principle states that “for learners of all levels of skill there are intrinsic rewards from the beginning, customized to each learner’s level, effort, and growing mastery and signaling the learner’s ongoing achievement” (*What Video Games*, 223). Clearly, this principle applies in games when players play and feel good about their achievements, no matter what their background or skill level is. In the class context, as educators we can embrace this gameful notion, and offer students multiple points of entry into—and multiple mediums relevant to—the content of our courses. In the same vein, we can understand the way these mediums connect and interact in terms of Gee’s intertextual principle: “The learner understands texts as a family (“genre”) of related texts and understands any one such text in relation to others in the family, but only after having achieved embodied understandings of some texts. Understanding a group of texts as a family of texts is a large part of what helps the learner make sense of such texts” (*What Video Games*, 224). Thus, by teaching with transmediated texts, educators can cultivate the understanding of those texts and the originals on which they are based, genres, families of texts across mediums. This process, when set up properly, can create a sort textual symbiosis powered by different, seemingly disparate, mediums. Traditional approaches and older generations of educators might well fear that the new text or medium will
replace the old. However, as noted by Zeller-Jacques, such a binary assumption is simplistic and unrealistic: “Such variety encourages us to think of adaptation not as a binary with ‘source’ on one side and ‘adaptation’ on the other, but instead as an ongoing process through which new adaptations continually (re)develop an ever-growing metatext – an intangible ‘ideal’ text formed by the agglomeration and interrelationship of all the texts which deal with a particular […] narrative universe” (“Adapting the X-Men,” 2012, 143). The paradigm proposed by Jennifer Rowsell, Isabel Pedersen and Douglas Trueman is useful in considering the process by which an original text is transformed into something new, especially with the proliferation of interactive story-telling mediums that give learners agency. These authors envision the original work as the “canonical mythical universe”; an “adapted video game world”; and the “imagined story world of the learner” (“Playing as a Mutant,” 2014, 48). This paradigm works for Inferno, Dante’s Inferno, and the personalized experiences for each student evinced in my courses. Video games, yet again, are an especially powerful medium because of how players co-author the narratives (or observe how other players do so) and project their real and imagined identities onto the avatar and into the game world.

Co-Existence of Tradition and Innovation

Inevitably students profess the efficacy of these GBL approaches. Inevitably, too, several students will praise innovation, and, at the same time, indicate preference for tradition: “Watching the video game made me appreciate the poem so much more as I noticed Dante the Poet’s details and made the masterpiece that much more special to me. The game itself had good vocabulary and language but it is no were near as good as the poem.” It is important to reiterate that games and game-based learning are not meant to replace books or literature. Rather, they are a powerful tool to help facilitate the learning of them and to direct students—novice and expert—to the study of literature and language. Good games (and good game-based learning) have a strong “Identity Principle” built in such that learners have “real choices (in developing the virtual identity) and ample opportunity to meditate on the relationship between new identities and old ones. There is a tripartite play of identities as learners relate, and reflect on, their multiple real-world identities, a virtual identity, and a projective identity” (What Video Games, 222). Our students tend to develop their game identities in a literary way by studying
the presence of literary elements in game narratives. They then feel more confident in identifying and talking about the same elements as they appear in traditional works.

As Squire concludes: “video games, like film or television, are not going to replace books but live alongside them [...]. Games are becoming ingrained within a range of political, military, commercial, and—at least for now on the margin of—education systems, bringing with them attendant changes in cultural practices” (“Video Game Literacy,” 663). We gathered at Georgetown University as educators of Italian language and culture concerned with “Challenges in the 21st Century Italian Classroom.” One of the challenges in the classroom is directly connected to the changes in literacy and cultural practices outside of the classroom. We must decide to face such challenges, embracing and adapting to our students’ pedagogical preferences, literacies, and mediums. Or to ignore them and risk being overcome and left behind by them.

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BETWEEN INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN ONLINE AND HYBRID CULTURE COURSES

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Introduction

Considering languages and literatures as they are taught both at the undergraduate and graduate level immediately brings to mind the crisis of the humanities. However, we should first ask ourselves if we are really facing a crisis of the humanities and, if so, what this means. To respond to this question, I would say yes, we are facing a crisis, which means that fewer students are graduating with majors and minors in the humanities and that many humanities courses are taken solely to satisfy Core Curriculum (CC) and General Education (Gen Ed) requirements. Digital humanities (DH) specialist and historian, Benjamin Schmidt, has provided data and graphs about these trends (“The Humanities Are in Crisis”), which helps us to understand the various phases of the crisis and what is transpiring. While Schmidt provides us with statistics, from our personal experiences, how many times, as instructors and academics in the languages, are we overwhelmed with news about the closure of programs and the reduction of departments in the humanities, and about the job market with its drastic decline in tenure-track jobs in favor of lecturer or adjunct positions? As we know, we are not alone: these struggles are shared by our colleagues in disciplines such as art history, history, literature, philosophy, and anthropology, just to name a few.

In many college and universities, language requirements are declining, and departments are often transformed into service departments, namely departments that serve the university in providing courses that contribute to the CC/Gen Ed requirements. However, higher education is not only changing toward a more technological, professional science, and toward a business approach to students’ learning to the detriment of the humanities, it is also changing in the delivery of such learning content, with more online and hybrid (50% online and 50% in the classroom) modalities replacing traditional face-to-face (F2F) delivery. When I began writing this article prior to the inception of the Covid-19 pandemic, many of us were still teaching F2F courses. Now, as I am finishing it, U.S. universities are delivering their courses remotely, with all
of us teaching online, something that would have been unthinkable only a couple of months ago.

I am sure that my colleagues who are now teaching remotely because of the Covid-19 are experiencing how the 21st century classroom certainly poses challenges that instructors must address adequately, if they want to reach diverse learners. In a non-pandemic situation, with increasing demands from institutional leaders to offer more online and hybrid courses for varying reasons, including space issues on campus, instructors are asked to adjust their pedagogy to mediate between the virtual classroom and current pedagogies that seek to integrate experiential learning in the curriculum as a necessary skill with which to equip the graduating students. How should we translate this need into courses taught in online and hybrid modalities? How can we make Gen Ed courses in the humanities and the arts valuable in the eyes of our students? How can we make our courses interdisciplinary while contributing to experiential learning? Without trying to solve a crisis that is well beyond the scope of this article and my power as an instructor due to the problem’s global resonance, I reflect upon the crisis of the humanities and the transformation of teaching, from F2F to more online and hybrid courses, and the diverse learners who enter our classrooms. What do these variables mean for us teachers of languages and world cultures? What can we do to have our courses viewed as valuable despite the humanities’ crisis, something that I also see as linked to the establishment of English as a global language acting as lingua franca, labeled by Robert Phillipson as “linguistic imperialism”?

This article provides examples of how interdisciplinarity and experiential learning can be introduced in online and hybrid classes to make them more meaningful to students. The first part of the article reflects on the crisis of the humanities and on language issues, including the aforementioned presence of English as lingua franca. The second part ponders the challenges of teaching online and hybrid courses, while the third and final part of the article introduces and shares examples from three courses offered online and in a hybrid modality where interdisciplinary and experiential learning play a major role.
The Crisis of the Humanities and the Role of Language(s)

Several years ago, I was talking to a provost and a dean with doctoral degrees in English. I would label it as “a conversation among humanities professors.” My two interlocutors rather firmly agreed that, in today’s world, they would not suggest that anybody pursue a Ph.D. in the humanities. I remember staring at them and realizing then, in their opinion, the humanities no longer hold value. Is this true, or can we do something to change the views of many of our own colleagues—perhaps even the administrators? This conversation has remained in the back of my mind for all these years, and when I returned to my office right before the start of the Fall 2019 semester, I found in my mailbox the most recent edition of the *MLA Newsletter*: again, I recalled that dialogue. The article on the front page of the newsletter spoke to me: “Making the Case for Our Disciplines” by Paula Krebs. I turned the page, and I found another eye-catching article: “Language Matters” by former Modern Language Association (MLA) President, Simon Gikandi. Both authors advocate for the discipline while also giving us all—teachers of languages, cultures, and literatures—valuable reminders:

> [p]rofessional associations in the humanities know that if our disciplines are to thrive, they must be seen by undergraduates, high schoolers, parents, and legislators as valuable at an individual level—in helping students with careers—as well as valuable to the community at large—in helping society solve social and technological problems. (Krebs 1)

Yes, we need to stand strong for these principles to make a case for our disciplines—to borrow the title from Krebs—despite the fact that we are facing challenges defined as a crisis. However, it is also true that a crisis can be positive, implying changes that must be made and endorsed. A crisis pushes us, human beings, to reflect on what we have done and what we can do better. A crisis is not necessarily negative: it means “change.”

Once again, I ask: how many times have we heard about the crisis of the humanities? An infinite number! We have heard this phrase so many times that we have grown used to it, thinking that there is no cure, there are no remedies to change the direction of U.S. Higher Education. Is this true? Are the humanities really collapsing? If we type “crisis of the humanities” into Google we get an electronic papyrus listing all the discussions and reflections about it unroll before our eyes. However, when we think of the crisis of the humanities, it is not something
new, although nowadays it is certainly worsening. If we go back in time, we see that J.H. Plumb edited a book about the *Crisis in the Humanities* in 1964. This shows that what we face today traces its roots to the past (as we see, it actually began in the 1950s), as Wayne Bivens-Tatum wrote in his overview of “The ‘Crisis’ in the Humanities” in 2010, after the economic crisis of 2008. Roughly five to ten years ago, other scholars and authors were also publishing texts in defense of the liberal arts education amid the crisis of the humanities: Martha Nussbaum (*Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, 2010), Michael Roth (*Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*, 2014), and Fareed Zakaria (*In Defense of a Liberal Education*, 2015).

We are told that we are facing a crisis because ever fewer students are enrolling in traditional humanities majors, and it is certainly true, as Benjamin Schmidt’s statistical review, mentioned in the introduction, demonstrates (“The Humanities Are in Crisis”). With the last crisis of the humanities, which reaccelerated in 2008 (Wayne Bivens-Tatum informally discussed it in 2010), Schmidt has also explained how the humanities went through different crises and why the last one was not the first, although it should be of concern that there is such a dearth of explanations offered:

The most reliable indicators about the humanities in American colleges are reports that all colleges and universities make to the Department of Education. These run back to about 1950. Since then, the humanities have seen three eras. The first ran from 1955 to 1985. As normal schools around the country, set up to educate teachers, transformed into comprehensive universities, men and women alike poured into English and history majors; then, when the economy soured and the growth of higher education slowed in the 1970s, the boom turned to bust, and humanities majors collapsed nationwide. The second phase began around 1985 and ran to 2008. This was a long period of stability; majors in the four largest (and easiest to track over the long term) humanities majors held steady, with modest fluctuations. Since 2008, the crisis of the humanities has resumed, with percentage drops that are beginning to approach those of 40 years ago. Unlike the drops of the ’70s, though, there’s no preexisting bubble to deflate. And there’s no compelling demographic explanation. (“The Humanities Are in Crisis”)
Once we have declared an emergency and tried to change the course of events, it would be difficult to forcefully enroll students in traditional Liberal Arts major if they don’t want to, and if these students are taking our humanities classes only because they are mandated by CC and Gen Ed programs, it seems that we cannot do much. However, some continue to stand against the prevailing winds, as we have seen with Martha Nussbaum, Michael Roth, and Fareed Zakaria.

In 2017, two noteworthy publications concerning the topic again made the case for the importance of a liberal arts education. Stross in *A Practical Education: Why Liberal Arts Majors Make Great Employees*, and Anders in *You Can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a “Useless” Liberal Arts Education* argue that a Liberal Arts (and humanities-oriented) education can make students flexible enough to succeed in a variety of careers, including business, demonstrating through success stories that one does not necessarily need, for instance, a business degree to became a manager. Certainly, the word “useless” found in the latter title can be painful: what teachers in the humanities teach is considered “useless” by many, from parents to students, from administrators to stakeholders and politicians—and to the society overall. Furthermore, if Stross and Anders make a case for a liberal arts education and its survival, they are also running up against a world trend that seems particularly pronounced in the United States. Here, as one knows, students and their families are paying skyrocketing prices for a higher education that results in student debts for decades to come. In this regard, Sara Goldrick-Rab (2016) has comprehensively explained the current situation of higher education in relation to costs, financial aid, student debt, and students’ decisions to pursue certain majors in her *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream*. This eye-opening book should be considered a must-read for all faculty and staff to better understand our students.

In 2017, a year after Goldrick-Rab’s publication, beyond Stross and Anders, two further authors reflected on higher education in the U.S. and its current development: Nathan D. Grawe in *Demographics and the Higher Education* and Cathy N. Davidson in *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux*—authors who tell the readers that while we are facing a crisis, the decline in the humanities began decades ago, although, as we have seen, one should speak more of waves of crisis, rather than only one. Also, this crisis is not localized in the United States, but we are dealing with a world-wide crisis of the
humanities, as reflected in the 2019 edited book by Dennis Ahlburg, *The Changing Face of Higher Education: Is There an International Crisis in the Humanities?* What we surely know is that demographics are changing because the world and its societies are changing, and we need to adjust to these changes somehow. This situation is complicated by the reality that many interests—especially financial—transcend higher education itself. However, as teachers, we should focus on our options and opportunities, namely on how to make changes in our classes and help the students take charge of their own education, that specifically in our case, revolves around learning other languages and cultures. However, there are other problems that must be dealt with when we consider how to adapt and adjust pedagogies to new demands and changes.

We have to face the unfortunate reality that, with the greater importance granted to STEM courses to the detriment of the humanities, despite the attempt to reinsert the arts through the concept of STEAM, higher education is moving away from language instruction and from language requirements toward graduation. As a survey conducted by the MLA shows, “[t]he percentage of four-year colleges and universities in the United States that require baccalaureate students to take courses in a language other than English to graduate has dropped in the last decade and a half” (Lusin 1). The survey highlights a sharp decline that is even more visible when comparisons are made from the 1960s to 2010 (Lusin 4–9). As we saw, the crisis of the humanities was investigated by J.H. Plumb in 1964, when a decline in the enrollments in the humanities initially surfaced. These crises appear to come and go in waves, so it is important to recognize a past dating back to the 1960s. Lusin’s analysis provides us with data on the last wave, which can help us understand a trend that may repeat itself during the current crisis. While instructors and academics are pondering how to return attention to language teaching and its importance in a world that is becoming more and more globalized, it seems that few reasons exist to invest in knowing other cultures and other languages, as if English can satisfy it all. Why is English perceived in this way? Because English is a global language that acts as lingua franca. But what do we know about lingua franca? What does it mean? Asya Pereltsvaig (2017) reminds us about its origin that dates back to the Crusades, when

> [t]he four leaders of the First Crusade (1096–1099 CE), Godfrey of Bouillon, Raymond of Toulouse, Robert of Flanders and Bohemond of Tarantola, who spoke the ancestors of Modern French, Spanish, Flemish and Italian, respectively, understood each other.
According to their contemporaries in the Middle East, they spoke the same language, lingua franca, or “the language of the Franks.” (15)

Over time, the language of the Franks evolved as the language of trade and business (Rossetti, 2020), while today a lingua franca is also the language of academia, medicine, travel, entertainment, social media, and international relations, and not only the language of business. Furthermore, despite the fact that English is the third most spoken language after Mandarin Chinese and Spanish (Pereltsvaig 13), because of its position as a global language serving as lingua franca, the number of non-native speakers learning English is expected to continue increasing in the years to come. In this regard, it is worth mentioning Braj Kachru, who explains the prominence of English in his book, The Alchemy of English: The Spread, Functions, and Models of Non-native Englishes (1986). Despite having been published over 30 years ago, it is a reference point for understanding how English has expanded world-wide. As scholars in any discipline know, understanding the past is the way to understand the present and sometimes to predict the future, or at least divine possible future trends.

Returning to the concept of a global language, what exactly does this entail? First, for geo-historical and socio-cultural reasons, “[a] language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country” (Crystal 3). One should not forget that “why a language becomes a global language has little to do with the number of people who speak it. It is much more to do with who those speakers are” (Crystal 7). A classic case would be Latin: Romans were more powerful than the populations they subjugated. This example certainly illustrates the link between language and power, which can be political and military, but also economic: [w]ithout a strong-power base, of whatever kind, no language can make progress as an international medium of communication” (Crystal 7). Moreover, “international language dominance is not solely the result of military might. […] [I]t takes an economically powerful [power] to maintain and expand it” (Crystal 10).

While accepting the preeminence of English and possibly agreeing upon the benefits of studying another language, as instructors, we still often encounter misconceptions, resistance, and refusals, by the very same students who enroll in our language courses. As I mentioned in a previous article (“L’insegnamento della lingua” 116) about Task-Based Instruction (TBI) (Brandl 5-22; Larsen-Freeman and Anderson 115-130, 149-163) and the promotion of learning by doing
(Brandl 12) in our language classes, one should also try to apply the same principles to non-language classes taught in the target language (TL) or even in English, especially now that universities and colleges often require a certain amount of experiential learning to be accomplished in the classroom and outside of it. These experiences are categorized as applied learning, service learning, and experiential learning, to name a few.

What I see being detrimental to reaching those students (and their families) who struggle to recognize any validity in the humanities (also read: liberal arts) education is bringing to the classroom both the interdisciplinarity—meaning linking our courses to other disciplines—and the experiential learning. Certainly, with the increasing demand for online and hybrid teaching, as instructors, we face both the challenges of teaching in a non-F2F modality and the challenges of integrating experiential learning components in such classes. Reflecting on the challenges that we may encounter when we teach online is useful before even examining how we could offer more experiential learning and interdisciplinarity in some culture classes. Precisely for this reason, the next part examines those challenges to see how they can be, if not entirely overcome, managed to make learning a valuable experience for both faculty and students.

**Challenges in Teaching Online and Hybrid Courses**

When I share that I teach online and hybrid courses, I receive mixed reactions from my colleagues, who are surely distinguished in three categories: those supporting online teaching, those refusing it, and the ones who are in between, approaching the issue with “I’m not sure; let’s talk about it.” Although I never imagined becoming an instructor who teaches mostly through university management systems (such as Angel, Moodle, Canvas, Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, or Blackboard to name a few), for a series of reasons, in the academic year 2019–2020, I have found myself offering Italian Culture and Civilization online, and my other three courses Italian Cinema, Italian Food Culture and History, and International Cinema, that also features some Italian films, in a hybrid modality. During the Covid-19 pandemic I also transformed the hybrid courses into a fully online mode (De Santi, “Il mio 11 settembre nel marzo del 2020”), but this is an extraordinary situation that will return to normal once the pandemic subsides.
In these classes taught in English through an interdisciplinary approach, beyond having the students learn the academic subject matter and exercise critical thinking, I set goals for them to acquire tech skills through the creation of digital presentations that also enhance their public speaking skills (e.g., to produce e-portfolios or video-filed presentations that can be useful in their future careers). Two of these classes, Italian Culture and Civilization and Italian Food Culture and History, fulfil the requirements for applied learning (AL) through applied research within the local community. Finally, in the Fall of 2019, the last four modules of the International Cinema course were co-taught with an anthropologist from the University of Siena in Italy, and a colleague specialized in environmental studies from Akita University in Japan, through the State University of New York (SUNY) Center for Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL): COILing this course has enabled it to also fulfill the AL category at my institution.

Before getting into the specifics of the course, it would be important to examine the misconception that surrounds teaching and learning online, namely that it requires less work in comparison to a F2F class. Why do I view this as a misconception? Because online/hybrid teaching generally involves more grading: while in a F2F class, instructors might have several assignments distributed throughout the semester with lectures being the primary mode of instruction, in an online class the gradable assignments are on a weekly basis, which requires online instructors to dedicate substantial time to supporting the students, grading, and being present within the discussion boards. Below is a screenshot from a power point that I prepared for my students in the hybrid film classes to show the difference between a F2F class versus the same class in a hybrid format:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACE-TO-FACE CLASS</th>
<th>HYBRID CLASS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>75 + 75 minutes in the classroom</td>
<td>75 minutes in the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readings</td>
<td>Readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction to readings and films (7 of 400 words=2,800 words)</td>
<td>Reaction to the readings (13 of 200 words each=2,600)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper on a film (1,500 words)</td>
<td>Blogs on the films (13 of 200 words each=2,600)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital presentation on the paper (5-10 minutes)</td>
<td>Digital presentation (10 minutes)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you can see, the number of graded, written assignments goes from eight in a F2F class to 26 in a hybrid class. Moreover, it is recommended that instructors maintain an online presence
before the deadline of a blog, which requires leaving comments to student postings in blogs, discussion boards, or forums. Beyond the heavy load for the instructors, there is another issue: many students enroll in online and hybrid classes thinking that the actual presence in the classroom is simply eliminated and hidden in an unknown parallel universe where it is dormant (this misconception is the reason why I created a power point to explain to my students the pedagogy behind hybrid classes, thereby clarifying that it is not only more work for instructors, but also for the students). In fact, when many of the students realize that they actually have to work more online to compensate for the missing in-class component, the instructors often come under fire for making them work more. This vicious cycle is one that I am trying to stave off on the first day of class and through the aforementioned power point for the students: as I enter the classroom and before going over the syllabus, I explain to my students what a hybrid class entails, namely that the 50% of time that we don’t meet in the classroom has not disappeared through the cracks. While this is a difficult issue to solve because not everyone fully understands the workload implications, from my experience, online and hybrid teaching poses some further challenges that might heavily affect our way of interacting with students and, for sure, their learning.

- Not everybody can (or wants to) teach online or hybrid courses. This skill requires an adaptability, a flexibility, and tech skills that not every instructor possesses. The fact that higher education is going in the direction of online courses and programs does not mean that every faculty is equipped to teach online. Instructors are asked to mediate between the virtual classroom and a pedagogy that must adapt to 21st century higher education and diverse learners, and maybe not all are prepared to adapt to these changes. However, one positive byproduct of the Covid-19 pandemic has been to bring everybody online, obliging us all to leave our comfort zones.

- Many students are not as digitally native as we might expect from Millennials (born 1981–1996) and from Gen Z (born 1997–2012), as defined by Michael Dimock (“Defining Generations”). In fact, not every student can (or wants to) take online/hybrid courses. Although students should be aware of their preferred mode of learning, many of them think that taking an online class is as feasible as taking a F2F one, only to discover that they are two different experiences, beginning with time management. Both online and hybrid classes require a high level of organization both logistically and timewise: many
students might find difficult to honor deadlines on a weekly basis and, sometimes, to honor several deadlines within a week or module.

- When one teaches online or hybrid courses, F2F contacts with the students greatly diminish. Obviously, one does not see students in fully online classes, and one sees them only half of the time in hybrids. In most cases, one has to rely on virtual communication, which might not be preferable for many instructors and students. I still hold several in-person office hours a week for my hybrid classes with options to meet virtually upon request, and I am rather accessible via e-mail. I have noticed that while students in hybrid classes continue to take advantage of office hours, students taking online classes prefer communicating with me solely via e-mail, despite the opportunity to receive extra help through virtual meetings.

- While in the F2F teaching experienced instructors know exactly how much class time is available to them and roughly how much time is set aside for prep and grading, in online and hybrid courses, our teaching time is completely reframed: instructors are asked to adjust to a new conception of time. Instructors should always keep in mind that our students must adapt to it as well.

- From an instructor’s point of view, although designing an online and hybrid class is highly time consuming at first, it remains time consuming to reset it each semester: before the beginning of a new semester, online/hybrid instructors must copy all the content from an old course to a new one, change the dates, and set new deadlines, which though not difficult tasks, are certainly time consuming.

- Finally, the grading load. To provide an estimate of the heaving grading load for one online course and three hybrid courses that require the same quanta of weekly discussion board participation, and without taking into consideration the other assignments such as papers and various projects, with roughly 100 students, one could estimate that an instructor (in this particular example, the author) must read 20,000 words (100 postings of at least 200 words each) and 200 replies (two replies to two different postings) on a weekly basis. Because it is recommended that one maintain at least a 20% presence online via blogs, emails, and announcements also in the hybrid courses, the instructor should read and to comment upon at least 20% of the postings before the deadline (I usually comment on 50-75% of them based on their availability:
usually, 30-40% of the students wait the very last moment to post their reflections in a forum, discussion board, or blog) and to grade all of them through pre-established rubrics. The reader may calculate a semester’s worth of grading in a 14-week term on their own.

Beyond trying to manage these challenges in online and hybrid teaching, I also believe that it is imperative to respond to the necessity of making our courses as interdisciplinary as possible and to provide experiential learning opportunities, so that our students are enabled and equipped to embrace the challenges of a globalized world once they enter the workforce. How can we professors accomplish this? In the next and final part of this article, I offer three examples of courses where interdisciplinarity and experiential learning are at the core.

Before moving into the last part of the article, I would like to share a reflection on why certain options might attract students more than others, and why certain delivery modes and requisites can appeal to students. During the registration for the spring semester in the Fall of 2019, my four courses filled within a couple of weeks, and although I do not have proof of why they are popular, I tend to think that two factors might appeal to students: these classes are online or hybrid, and they are enhanced AL courses that fulfil AL graduation requirements. However, if these course structures (online/hybrid and AL) might work at my institution, we should not forget that every college and university is different and has different student demographics; therefore, instructors should always evaluate the best way to reach their own students and how to attract them to humanities and arts courses. Far from solving the crisis of the humanities, I believe that a course based upon the college or university’s requirements can bring more students in our classes, and from here, in the future, more students might be interested and enroll in Liberal Arts majors and minors. Establishing arts and humanities courses as more interdisciplinary and incorporating applied learning components are critical preliminary steps, together with diverse delivery options (F2F, hybrid, and online).

**Interdisciplinarity and Experiential Learning in Culture and Cinema Classes**

While I am still in the process of redesigning the course on Italian Cinema to satisfy the AL requirements, in the last couple of years, my other three courses have already been redesigned from F2F to online or hybrid with the goal of also aligning them with the applied
learning designation. This part presents the three courses (one online and two hybrids) as examples of the integration of interdisciplinarity and experiential learning.

Italian Culture and Civilization is the only fully online class that I have been teaching for the last two years, and the first one to be transformed from F2F. The class is set to give the students an overall view of Italian history from the Risorgimento to present times, framing it politically, economically, and sociologically, while also providing a reading of it through literature, cinema, and the arts. The interdisciplinarity is fostered through an approach to the assignments and assessments via pre-designed rubrics that take into consideration different ways of researching history, society, and culture. An example of an interdisciplinary assignment is a reaction paper on the documentary *In un altro paese* (*Excellent Cadavers*) by Marco Turco (2005), which is available on YouTube both in English and in Italian. In their reaction papers, students are required to integrate their knowledge on the mafia and on the mafia prosecutors, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, while also reflecting on photojournalism (Sicilian photojournalist Letizia Battaglia, well-known for having photo-narrated the mafia wars in Sicily, is part of the narrative of the documentary) and film aesthetics. Such an assignment is meant to introduce the students to the next major assignment fulfilling the requirement for the AL, namely a project on Italian and/or Italian American culture.

For the AL project, students are required to interview members of the Italian and/or Italian American community as part of their civic involvement experience with an undergraduate research focus. The goal of this project is to evaluate the perceptions of the local community toward Italian and Italian American culture and history and to see whether the community members’ perceptions differ from that the textbook. Because the documentary *In un altro paese* is based on interviews and on an open-ended narration, students should gain insights into what kind of content to look for in their interviews with the community members (friends, family members, and peers from work or school, to name a few options). Before actually interviewing community members, students must choose an area of Italian history and culture that they would like to know more about, and then create a list of potential questions, possibly going in multiple directions and covering different aspects of the chosen topic. Throughout the years, many students have shown greater interest in the North-South divide, while others have shown fascination for Italian American versus Italian culture, and also interest in the migrations (from Italy to the United States or from other countries to Italy, not to speak of the internal migrations...
Contrasting a textbook with what people have experienced or are experiencing in a certain area of Italian history is usually an eye-opening experience for the students, especially when they witness how perceptions can vary.

A similar AL project is also part of my hybrid course (or during the Covid-19 pandemic, fully online course), Italian Food Culture and History. As in the Italian Culture and Civilization class, students are required to interview members of the Italian and/or Italian American community as part of their civic involvement and undergraduate research experience. Here, the goal is to evaluate the perceptions of the local community toward Italian and Italian American cuisine and gastronomy. The structure of this assignment is quite similar to the previous one, including the set of questions that the students have to prepare ahead of time.

In both classes, based upon their interviews, students produce a 1,000-word narrative where they explain what they wanted to know more about in terms of Italian and Italian American gastronomy, whom they interviewed, and why they chose this person or people. Students in both courses are also required to incorporate the readings, which are interdisciplinary in their essence, that are assigned throughout the semester. From the 1,000-word narrative, students must produce a digital presentation where they present their own finding to the class. It is suggested that the digital presentations be completed using Screencast-O-Matic, an online software that allows screen recording with voice-over for up to 15 minutes for free, which I have also used in my language courses (De Santi, “(E-)Porfolios in Language Classes“ 181). With this assignment, students learn a new tech skill, namely to produce a digital presentation using screen recording software, and they also refine their public speaking skills through the voice-over narration. In both classes, at the end of the semester, students are required to watch four digital presentations completed by their classmates and to comment on them with constructive feedback. As in the case of Italian Culture and Civilization, in Italian Food Culture and History, students are rather interested in Italian versus Italian American cuisine, and curious to know more about Italian culinary traditions that are regionally based and different from what they encounter in the United States.

My final course fulfilling the requirements for AL is my hybrid course (as with the previous one, this course is offered fully online during the Covid-19 pandemic) on International Cinema, which is now also an Open Educational Resource (OER) course, meaning that the adopted textbooks are open source and available online at no-cost for students. The AL
component here is developed through an international collaboration organized within SUNY COIL. Substantially, students are required to collaborate with students from other countries to produce a group project. In the Fall of 2019, as mentioned previously, my students and I collaborated with the University of Siena in Italy and Akita University in Japan, and as a final project, students divided in teams across the three universities had to produce a final digital presentation on different aspects of food and sustainability. Every student and every team brought their own expertise and interests into the project, with the goal of fostering not only critical thinking and expanding academic knowledge, but also of refining intercultural communication ability.

Because of this triangulation of instructors teaching different disciplines (film studies, archeology, and environmental studies), I have substantially revised the curriculum of International Cinema, orienting it more toward food and sustainability, especially in terms of the international films that I have included in the curriculum. The approach I have used is highly interdisciplinary, combining film studies and film aesthetic, food studies, and sustainability studies to foster the students’ understanding of how different cultures interpret differently food and sustainability. Although the triangulation had its challenges, beginning with the time difference, with the U.S. six hours behind Italy and fourteen hours behind Japan, the intercultural exchanges across different countries have shown to be highly valuable for most of my students and are highly recommended as a way to accomplish interdisciplinarity and experiential learning in a hybrid class. Moreover, teamwork accomplished across different cultures and among diverse students and faculty has contributed to refined intercultural communicative skills and problem solving.

**Conclusion**

As the humanities and many language departments struggle with dropping enrollments and subsequent program and course reduction, or even elimination, as instructors we are urged to find new ways of bringing students into our classrooms and into our majors and minors. While the MLA calls for more collaboration and interdisciplinarity, we often witness an even greater competition among language departments and among colleagues, with an intent to protect a realm that seems to be losing grounds rapidly. If instructors and departments are forcefully recommended to collaborate across disciplines and in different modalities (COIL is an example),
instructors should reflect on how to adapt to a new generation of diverse students (from Millennials to Generation Z). We should ask ourselves what it means to teach students who are, or are supposed to be, digital natives and who are getting more and more used to learning through technology, even though many of us, and many of them, struggle with these platforms.

We should consider how communication is carried out today, namely often via social media: maybe we dislike it, but Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and Facebook, just to name a few, are part of our students’ everyday lives. As much as I agree that screen communication is imposing itself at the expenses of face-to-face communication, I also think that instructors and educators should feel the urge to find other ways to communicate with their students, trying to understand what communication means nowadays and how we can improve its quality. Increasing interdisciplinarity and including more experiential learning in our courses are ways to lift the communication to a different level, empowering our students with skills that will help them look at various situations from different perspectives. Sending the students into the community to learn from the others or involving them in an international collaboration such as COIL can also contribute to refining their teamwork and problem-solving skills while practicing intercultural communication. In a world where diversity is often painted as a threat and spurned or condemned instead of seen as an enrichment, encouraging students to learn with students who are ‘other’ from themselves can potentially contribute to a more inclusive and egalitarian world.

**Acronyms**

- AL: Applied Learning
- CC: Core Curriculum
- COIL: Collaborative Online International Learning
- DH: Digital humanities
- F2F: Face-to-face
- Gen Ed: General Education
- MLA: Modern Language Association
- NeMLA: Northeast Modern Language Association
- OER: Open Educational Resources
STEAM  Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics
STEM  Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
SUNY  State University of New York
TBI  Task-Based Instruction
TL  Target Language

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Acknowledgements

I believe that when we enter a classroom to teach, we present at a conference, or we write a scholarly work, it is always a team effort. The conference at Georgetown University in October of 2019 was a great opportunity to share our work and learn from other colleagues, while other conferences, especially the Northeast Modern Language Association (NeMLA), have always represented for me a yearly appointment where new pedagogical approaches are shared and where one gets useful feedback. I thank all my colleagues who, throughout the years, have helped me to improve my classes, motivating me to pioneer new ways of teaching, including teaching hybrid and online courses.

However, the transition from F2F to online/hybrid teaching did not happen suddenly, but rather, it was part of a training trajectory that started at OPEN SUNY in 2012 while I was at my previous institution, and then continued at Farmingdale State College, where I now teach, and where I was awarded incentives to develop online and hybrid courses and AL components, and adopt OER: I thank all the committees that trusted me with this funding. At Farmingdale State College, I thank Maya Bentz and Kathy Mitra (Distance Learning), Jennifer Bryer and Allison Puff (Applied Learning), Danielle Apfelbaum (Library, OER), and my chair, Matilde Fava because
without her support, all of these courses would have remained F2F with traditional textbooks and would not have fulfilled the AL requirements.

A heartfully COILed thank-you goes to Jan McCauley (SUNY COIL) and Mirjam Hauck (Open University, UK), who have introduced and trained me to become a COIL instructor, and my international partners, Carlo Citter (University of Siena, Italy), Yoji Natori (Akita University, Japan), and Mark DeBoer (Akita University, Japan) for their patience and collaboration throughout our ups and downs within the COIL modules in the Fall of 2019. Among my COIL colleagues, I thank a new addition that I virtually met only few weeks ago: Rosa Gabriela Méndez Carrera from the Tecnológico de Monterrey in Mexico. In the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, Gaby has “rescued” me when I remained without a COIL partner, allowing my International Cinema class to be COILed as planned in the Spring of 2020. Her professionalism, openness, flexibility, and optimism helped me to go through one of the most difficult semesters of our lives.

Finally, I thank my English native-speaker husband, Alex Caviedes, who, with a loving attitude and patience (after I released him from his service as my full-time editor), gave the last look at this article before its submission. His humor and support during this quarantine, while we are also homeschooling our elementary-school-aged daughters through Google Classroom, is vital for us four going through an epidemic whose epicenter is currently in New York City and Long Island, where we live.
During the academic year 2018-2019, students who were enrolled in a second-semester Italian-language course at a private college in Tennessee participated in an experiential project that was organized in collaboration with a local museum. The students engaged in weeks-long lexical and content exposure in order to become familiar with art history vocabulary and be prepared to visit an exhibit. After engaging with the exhibition’s curator during a formal lecture and in informal conversation, students applied their knowledge of Italian to describe artworks and express their reactions to the experience. The project’s primary objectives included exposing students to interdisciplinary connections between Italian language and other subjects and acquainting them with a community of people involved with Italian language and culture. Providing students with Early Modern products and practices from the Italian peninsula also prompted investigations of the historical aspects of the target culture, as well as intercultural comparisons between past and present perspectives. In so doing, the project offered students the opportunity to “relate a current learning experience to past and future experience” (Mollaei-Rahnama 269) and to practice the Italian language and culture through multiple sources.
1. Before February 1st, students will visit the exhibition in groups.

2. At the museum, students will fill out a provided chart, take a photo of their favorite artwork, and copy its caption.

3. By February 15th, students will describe their favorite artwork, including:
   - the name of the artist
   - the date of the artwork
   - a basic description of the figures or the scene depicted (how many people there are, what they are doing, what they are wearing, etc...)

   Students will also revise their “Composizione 2”.

4. On February 15th, groups will present their work to the class.

Figure 1
A Day at The Museum: An Experiential Learning Project in a Second-Semester Italian Class  ● Daniela D’Eugenio

The project’s phases were structured according to the experiential learning cycle (Figure 1). This cycle, which David Kolb structured in 1984, provides students with a space where they can experiment with and reflect on concrete events and authentic resources. Students learn by “doing something meaningful with [a phenomenon] through an active participation” and by thinking about the phenomenon with the aid of the target language (Mollaei-Rahnama 270). Building on the flipped classroom’s valuable application of individual learning in classroom and active learning, the experiential learning cycle encourages students to interpret, transform, and think critically while, simultaneously, producing meaningful output. The cycle’s four distinct stages consist of exposure to authentic experiences, time for reflective observations, abstract conceptualizations, and a final moment of active experimentation (Kolb 20-60). The organization of the different phases involves students as participants in their own language learning (van Lier, 2015).

1 For a discussion of the benefits of using authentic teaching resources, see Johnson-Finch, especially the section, “Why is it important to have authentic resources in the classroom?”
“The ecology of language learning” and also producers of knowledge, all of which foster “personal development” (Kolb 4). As they experience actual applications of the Italian language and culture in a variety of contexts, students also take part in interactive and collaborative activities, which, through proper guidance, makes the entire experience more productive and engaging. 

3 The article describes three essential characteristics of the ecological approach to learning: relationships between the language and the surrounding physical, psychological, and socio-cultural environment; quality of the experience; agency and autonomy. For further references, see van Lier, “An ecological-semiotic perspective;” in particular, pages 157-60 discuss how an ecological-semiotic approach to language facilitates the development of an experiential, contextualized, activity-based, and developmental curriculum. van Lier, The Ecology and Semiotics of Language Learning, also explores the links between an ecological approach and the socio-cultural environment.

4 See Bruff, “Students as Producers” for a discussion on the topic.

5 In addition to David Kolb’s 1984 foundational publication, Experiential Learning, see Svinicki-Dixon for the experiential learning cycle’s application in classroom activities. Kolb-Kolb and Mollaei-Rahnama provide a historical context for the experiential learning model and reference the current bibliography on the topic. Kohonen, “Towards experiential foreign language education” reflects on the constructivist-interpretative and critical-emancipatory paradigms and on the transformative orientation that inform the experiential learning cycle. Additionally, Kohonen, “Experiential language learning” offers a broader discussion on experiential learning theories and on their differences from a behavioristic model of instruction.
The exhibition, *Life, Love & Marriage Chests in Renaissance Italy*, which served as the basis of the project, ran from November 16, 2018 to February 18, 2019 (Figure 2). The exhibited items included Renaissance marriage chests (in Italian, *cassoni*) from the Museo Stibbert in Florence, along with other artifacts, such as tapestries, objects, armors, maiolicas, sculptures, and paintings, preserved at the same institution. The project allowed students to analyze the historical aspects of Italian culture and produce artifacts by narrating stories, documenting personal events, and engaging in a final visual, oral, and written presentation (Leander-Boldt 24). The lexical objectives incorporated describing objects, talking about past events, and

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6 Sederberg provides an interesting example of the application of museum-based learning models to a fourth-semester content-based course in German.
expressing likes and dislikes in accordance with the 2017 NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements (ACTFL, “Intercultural Can-dos Reflections and Scenarios”). The four phases of the project promoted the five “C” goal areas of the ACTFL World-Readiness Standards (Communications, Cultures, Comparisons, Connections, and Communities) and acquainted students with the ACTFL Cultural Standards (products, practices, and perspectives) of the target language (ACTFL, “World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages”). Among the five “C” goal areas, this project specifically sought to encourage students to connect with Italophone or Italophile communities, which continues to be the most challenging Standard to achieve despite the current assistance of virtual tools (Cutshall, “More than a Decade of Standards. Integrating ‘Communities’ in Your Language Instruction”).

One might argue that art does not intrigue students as much as activities and topics related to everyday life, such as ordering food or shopping. However, when exposed to art as part of ongoing experiential activities during the semester, students are given the opportunity to develop interdisciplinary, translingual, and transcultural connections (Sederberg 253). According to the directors of Life, Love & Marriage Chests in Renaissance Italy in the foreword to its catalogue, the exhibition allows the investigation of “the domestic interior during the Italian Renaissance.” Moreover, it promotes the examination of the instructional value of marriage chests “in the reality of the connubial bond for emotional, religious, economic and social reasons” (9). Hence, analyzing artworks reveals customs and traditions of Italian Renaissance society, while also serving as a tool to engage with the cultural and social aspects of the contemporary target culture and to understand its idiosyncrasies. Finally, the beauty of the artifacts that a museum presents, along with the preparatory activities based on the works of art, helps students to become more aesthetically and visually critical and prepares them to use their senses in the exploration and acquisition of the target language. This is, in Claire Kramsch’s words, the “aesthetic dimension” of learning (“An interview” 75-76). As the title of John Dewey’s seminal work in aesthetics states, “art as experience” occurs when its aesthetic standing interconnects with the “normal processes of living” and becomes tangible (9).
The Experiential Learning Cycle: Concrete Experience

Before the on-site experience at the museum, students engaged in home assignments, in-class collaborative exercises, and plenary discussions aimed to help them appreciate art in general and Italian Renaissance art in particular. Such preparatory activities trained them progressively to become more attentive to the characteristics and artistic techniques of the artwork. In class, students were exposed to different works of art, including those present at the exhibition. They were made aware of the provenance of the pieces (with specific attention to regional variations) and their use in Early Modern daily practices. At home and in class, students explored the exhibition’s website and read sections of a 1997 publication devoted to Renaissance marriage chests. Furthermore, they acquired familiarity with a few technical terms in English (for instance, tempera, stucco, gesso, and lapis lazuli) that could help them understand the captions of the works of art and the curator’s lecture.

Students visited the exhibition in groups of twos that had been already selected. Each group was given a chart to fill out in Italian for at least four pieces displayed at the exhibition (Figure 3). The chart included the name of the artists, their dates of birth and death, their provenance (city and region), the date of the artwork and its topic. Among these pieces, the group then chose their favorite, captured the artwork in a photo, and copied its descriptive caption. While at the museum, students were also asked to take notes on the Italian words that they could recognize and note two that they did not know. The entire experience was intended to involve students in making personal choices and in collaborating with their partner (Mollaei-Rahnama 275). Additionally, students were involved in searching for lexical terms already known and others that were not. Thus, they were empowered both in testing their knowledge and in deciding the gap they wished to fill with new words. As Derek Bruff states, exposing students to the artworks and asking them to find answers to a few questions prepared them for learning and for “telling their stories” (Intentional Tech 2).

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The Experiential Learning Cycle: Reflective Observation

After the museum visit, the students engaged in a guided conversation meant to elicit reflection on the experience (Mollaei-Rahnama 276). Following the Think/Pair/Share technique, students were paired in small groups, separate from their museum partner, to share the reasons for the selection of their favorite piece of art. In these groups, they also discussed the layout of the exhibition and the appropriateness of the complementing works of art. Students expressed their reactions as viewers of the exhibition, whether they were positive, negative, or neutral, and as learners of the Italian language and culture. As such, they experienced “not only critical analysis, but mindful thinking and aesthetic engagement” (Sederberg 258). Additionally, they engaged in “the process of analysis itself” by “identifying what questions to ask (and not to ask) to yield useful analysis” (Johnson-Finch). After the small group reflection, students shared their group’s ideas and thoughts through a classroom response system via their cell phones (specifically, Top Hat). A plenary discussion followed as students were prompted to comment on each other’s responses. Finally, all groups shared in a Google Doc the Italian words that they recognized in the titles or captions of the exhibition’s artwork and the words that they had just learned. This resulted in a project dictionary for the class.

This phase of the project permitted students to understand the value of the museum experience and critically reflect on the event in accordance with the ACTFL Interpersonal mode of communication (ACTFL, *Performance Descriptors for Language Learners* 14-19). First, students considered the exhibition itself as an artifact to observe and as a space in which to

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8 For further references on this group work technique and for a rich bibliography on the topic, see Brame-Biel.
interact. They were made aware of their role as users of the museum, regardless of their previous exposure to Renaissance works of art. As Fatemeh Mollaei and Hamidreza Rahnama argue, the critical reflection that is at the basis of the experiential learning process proves to be “a beneficial approach for helping learners to negotiate social meaning and their own shifting identities in a new culture” (268). Personal and individual perspectives enriched the conversation and offered students the possibility to formulate hypotheses about their ideal experience at a museum. These considerations led to the third and then fourth phases of the experiential learning cycle.

The Experiential Learning Cycle: Abstract Conceptualization

For this section of the experiential learning cycle, students participated in a lecture by Trinita Kennedy, the curator of the exhibition at the Frist Art Museum (Figure 4). In order to prepare for the lecture, students received the catalogue of the exhibition and were invited to read the entire portion on the exposed marriage chests. They were then asked to prepare three questions about its content. Furthermore, they discovered information about dowry practices in their own cultures in the past and in the present that could relate to the exchange of marriage chests in Renaissance Italy. During the lecture, students were introduced more formally to the decisions behind the exhibition and the artistic techniques used in the realization of the artifacts. Kennedy provided additional information about the Early Modern Italian wedding traditions, the uses and value of marriage chests, as well as the literary and biblical references used in their decoration. She compared some nineteenth-century Northern American and Italian customs to illustrate how traditions can be transnational and transcultural and, conversely, how idiosyncratic they can become within a specific society. After the lecture, students participated in an informal conversation with Kennedy and asked her more detailed questions about her work as a curator and her passion for Italian Renaissance art.

9 David Carr describes the human experience of cultural institutions as follows: “The user needs the institution as a place, a process and an experience, as a way of becoming, a way of leading a less accidental and more reflective life, a situation where encounters surprise, rewards and renew” (8).
10 See also Norton on the relationship between learners’ identity and subjectivity and their second language acquisition process.
11 Specifically, the students read pp. 71-103 from Becattini-Franci-Colle.
Figure 4

The lecture and the discussion that followed helped students understand the work of a museum curator and Kennedy’s connection with Italian language and culture. Additionally, the event introduced students to core concepts in Renaissance society and art. Through this input, students were able to consider their experience of the exhibit in relation to their post-experience reflections. Simultaneously, they interpreted a single artwork within a larger framework and in alignment with the ACFTL Interpretive mode of communication (ACTFL, *Performance Descriptors for Language Learners* 14-19). Just as importantly, students interacted personally with a member of the local community, following the ACTFL World-Readiness Communities standard that the project intended to promote.

The Experiential Learning Cycle: Active Experimentation

For the last phase of the experiential learning cycle, the students transformed their original experience into one that was more individualized and personally relevant. This phase involved the implementation of the linguistic and cultural concepts learned throughout the project. Indeed, as experts of the Italian language and culture, students applied the content, vocabulary, and structures acquired in class to describe their favorite artwork, including its artistic and technical aspects (Knutson 53).

The students presented their project in both written and oral form. Before their final submission, they were provided with a rubric, which detailed the different components of the
project and their value (Figure 5). The written portion consisted of a one-paragraph introduction to the artwork, including the artist’s given and family name, its date, and a basic description of the figures or scene(s) (how many people there were, what they were doing, what they were wearing, etc…). It also included a description of the group’s visit to the museum: when the group visited the exhibition (day and time), which means of transportation they used, whether they enjoyed it or not, and what the group or the single student liked and/or disliked about the organization of the exhibition. As is evident from the rubric, the final written submission was scaffolded through two graded written compositions (“Composizione 1” and “Composizione 2”). For these two compositions, the students received the instructor’s feedback and incorporated it in an updated version slightly increased in word count for the final submission. For this portion of the project, the students received a grade from the instructor.

The second section of this final stage of the project had students show a photo of their favorite artwork, describe it, and explain their reasons for choosing it as part of a five-minute in-class presentation. In accordance with the ACTFL Presentational mode of communication (ACTFL, *Performance Descriptors for Language Learners* 14-19), a greater value was assigned to this oral presentation. The rubric specified that students should not read or memorize their talk, but rather engage in a spontaneous conversation at a level of Italian language appropriate to the class. The rubric also explained that there should be interaction between the two members of the group to mirror their collaborative effort and that the two presenters should address the audience in engaging ways. Each student in class assigned this portion of the grade, and the final grade for each group’s oral presentation was an average of the individual grade assigned by each student in the class. The inclusion of the students in the evaluation process gave them agency and, simultaneously, made them think more critically about their own performance (Mollaei-Rahnama 273). The last component of the oral presentation’s grade, which the instructor assigned, included the students’ participation in the question and answer period after each group’s showcase. All of the students wrote two questions for the group on a piece of paper: one in Italian about the artwork and one in English on the more cultural and artistic aspects of the work. Then, the students folded the paper and placed it in a box from which the instructor selected a few questions for the presenters, being careful to choose questions from a different student each time.
The structured and detailed sections of the rubric on the use of tenses and vocabulary exclusively covered in class, aimed to prevent the employment of automatic translation tools. In addition, the rubric intended to make the groups’ presentations understandable and enjoyable for their audience, that is their classmates (or hypothetical beginning learners of Italian), instead of having them try to impress their instructor with elaborate words. The rationale behind this element laid in the fact that “[c]onnecting students to authentic audiences for their work can motivate students toward deeper learning” (Bruff, *Intentional Tech* 168). A subsequent summative assessment of the experience included written final reflections that the students submitted anonymously following their oral presentations.\(^\text{12}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Written Submission</th>
<th>30 points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In complete sentences (160 words)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Description of the event (Composizione 1 – 75 words)</td>
<td>a) 10 point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Name of the artist, date of birth and death, and date of the artwork</td>
<td>b) 5 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Description of the figures or scene (Composizione 2 – 60 words)</td>
<td>c) 15 points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In-Class Presentation</th>
<th>35 points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Interactive presentation (Are the two students interacting? Does it feel that they prepared their presentation together?)</td>
<td>a) 10 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Spontaneity (no reading; no memorizing; hesitation is welcome! Does it feel like a spontaneous conversation? Are the two students looking at the class or are they talking to themselves or the board?)</td>
<td>b) 10 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Is the group’s presentation clear and convincing?</td>
<td>c) 4 points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{12}\) This portion of the project and its methodology will be discussed in a future article.
d) Are the linguistic and cultural aspects described appropriate to the class?
d) 4 points

e) Does the group answer the question “Perché ti piace quel pezzo?”
e) 4 points

f) Is there something that you find of particular interest about the overall presentation? Please, specify. Would you give the group three extra points for this specific aspect of the presentation?
f) 3 points

In-Class Presentation
a) Questions provided for each group presenting
10 points

Written Submission and In-Class Presentation
Correct use of the vocabulary and tenses (presente, passato prossimo, and imperfetto) learned during the semester
25 points (- 1 point for the incorrect use of tense and conjugation or for use of tense that we have not studied yet; - 1 point for the incorrect use of an adjective and of clothing vocabulary or for use of vocabulary not covered in class)

Figure 5

Conclusion

While acquainting students with the products, practices, and perspectives of Italy through history and art, this experiential and interdisciplinary project allows the making of “new connections among language, culture, and society” (Sederberg 252). Furthermore, the project ensures “career development opportunities” and helps students develop critical and transferable skills that are useful in academia and beyond (Kolb 4). As they enrich their social and interpersonal skills in a productive and constructive “learning space” (Kohonen, “Experiential language learning” 34-36; Kolb-Kolb 199-201 and 205-09), students are also stimulated in their curiosity and creativity (Kohonen, “Experiential language learning” 19-20).
Through the various phases, materials, and methodologies of the project, students are able to reflect on the target culture and compare it with their own, while finding ways to put into use the linguistic and cultural concepts explored in class (Andreou-Andreou-Vlachos 671). Additionally, they are given the opportunity to “design their own practices, activities, and texts” (Leander-Boldt 33) and become mindfully autonomous in their learning process. That students may experience Italian culture, find it emotionally relevant, and engage in meaningful relationships with those who speak or are passionate about the language provides an incentive for experiential and culture-oriented projects that promote integrative fulfillment in higher education (Kolb 162). “Experiential learning is participative, interactive, and applied” and stimulates educational responsibility (Mollaei-Rahnama 277). “A day at the museum,” then, makes all of it even more aesthetically pleasing and motivating.

Works Cited


**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Trinita Kennedy (Frist Art Museum) for her collaboration on this project during the Fall and Spring semesters of 2019 and for her technical input on this paper. I would also like to extend my thanks to Stacey Johnson (Vanderbilt Center for Teaching) for assisting me in structuring the project’s activities in accordance with the experiential learning cycle, and Simone McCarter (Vanderbilt Writing Studio) for her linguistic help. The Institutional Review Board approved this project in October 2018.
Appendix

Presentazione Italiana

Frist Art Museum
Nome dell’artista | Cerchia del maestro del giudizio di Paride
---|---
Data di nascita e di morte | 15° secolo
Provenienza (città/regione) | /
Data dell’opera | 1440
Soggetto | Aristotelio cavaliere da Filide

Pezzi d’arte del maestro del giudizio di Paride

https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Das-Urteil-des-Paris/2ADEF94290C1EE5
http://barber.org.uk/attribution-to-the-master-of-the-judgement-of-agarth
MAPPING ITALIAN NARRATIVES WITH STORYMAP JS

Arianna Fognani
Coastal Carolina University

The Context

The quality and quantity of digital initiatives in Italian studies has been growing significantly. When we think about important digital projects the notable ones that come to minds are the Decameron Web and The Garibaldi Panorama & the Risorgimento at Brown University; The Oregon Petrarch Open Book at the University of Oregon; the Kinolab at Bowdoin College; the Orlando Furioso Atlas at Muhlenberg College; and the many Dante projects circulating online. Promoting interdisciplinary collaborations among scholars, experts, librarians, and students, these multifaceted initiatives are conceived to disseminate knowledge beyond the institutionalized settings in which they are implemented. We often include them among the resources and bibliographies for our courses; we encourage students to explore them to enhance research skills and foster curiosity; or we show them to students to invite them to delve deeper into the interdisciplinary nature of Italian studies. However, when we explore these resources, we tend to overlook that most of their content is available only in English¹ and, in some cases, they have been developed within courses taught in English rather than Italian. Because the primary objective of these projects is not strictly pedagogical,² it is complicated to identify the impact of digital activities in students’ language proficiency even when they have

¹ The collaborative and transdisciplinary nature of these projects and the fact that they are developed by academic institutions in the U.S. explains for the use of English language. Although in terms of visibility and accessibility English remains the lingua franca of the digital world, its monopoly has been recently scrutinized to debunk the biases it encompasses in terms of products design and projects development. See for instance Halcyon Lawrence’s the virtual talk titled “I’m Sorry, I Didn’t Get That: How the Design of Speech Recognition Technologies Reinforces Access Bias” organized by Digital Commons for the Humanities and Arts at Coastal Carolina University in April 2020 to discuss how voice technology responds to English accents. For a discussion on how infuse Digital Humanities with pluricultural and plurilingual perceptive see Thea Pitman and Claire Taylor’s article “Where’s the ML in DH? And Where’s the DH in ML? The Relationship Between Modern Languages and Digital Humanities, and an Argument for a Critical DHML” in Digital Humanities Quarterly, (11.1, 2017).
² On pedagogy and DH see Brett D. Hirsh ed., Digital Humanities Pedagogy: Practice, Principles, and Politics, (Cambridge: Open Book Publisher, 2014). In particular, the introduction “</Parentheses>: Digital Humanities and the Place of Pedagogy” critically addresses the divide between the general debate around DH and the marginality of its pedagogy.
been working on Italian sources. Notwithstanding, as active participants in the project and as students of Italian their work must have played a role in their language proficiency.\(^3\) Fascinated by the creative endeavors and the potential learning opportunities that digital initiatives may uncover, I began wondering how to integrate small digital projects into the immersive environment of Italian courses. Which critical skills would students acquire from digital hands-on experience conducted in Italian? To what extent would digital pedagogy foster language proficiency?

To tackle these questions, I have been developing a digital initiative called *Mapping Italian Narratives*\(^4\) that aims at transforming literary texts into narrative maps and make them available to a wider audience. As an interdisciplinary work developed within my courses, it brings together spatial theories, digital humanities practices,\(^5\) Italian cultural studies, notions of human geography, mobilities, and urban studies. Relying on different media—images, videos, texts, maps—and engaging students in active and dynamic explorations of Italian history and literature, it provides new ways to visualize, interpret, and understand literary texts and to

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\(^3\) Literature discussing digital pedagogy applied to foreign language pedagogy and students’ language proficiency is scarce and scattered. In 2020 Melinda A. Cro published two works pertaining to these topics: *Integrating Digital Humanities in the Second Language Classroom. A Practical Guide* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2020) where she proposes a “methodological and theoretical approach to the language pedagogy informed by the digital humanities” (1) based on her experience with upper level French courses; and an article that Cro co-authored with Sara K. Learn titled “Developing a Process-Oriented, Inclusive Pedagogy: At the Intersection of Digital Humanities, Second Language Acquisition, and New Literacies,” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* (14.1, 2020). In the field of Italian studies, the most recent contribution is the special issue of *NeMLA Italian studies* “The Italian Digital Classroom,” edited and introduced by Tania Convertini and Simona Wright (2017). Blending together the use of technology and digital practices, this collection of essays presents an array of activities implemented in Italian courses.

\(^4\) While still exploring digital venues to disseminate this project and showcase students’ work, *Mapping Italian Narrative* is temporarily hosted on a private website owned by Franklin & Marshall College, the institution where I worked before and where the maps were created. I want to thank the Italian department, the digital initiative expert, and the librarians at F&M for their help, support, and collaboration.

\(^5\) For an introduction to DH see Matthew K. Gold, ed. *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Susan Schreibman; Ray Siemens; John Unsworth eds., *A Companion to Digital Humanities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); David M. Berry, ed., *Understanding Digital Humanities* (Palgrave McMillan, 2012); Anne Burdick, Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Presner, and Jeffrey Schnapp, *Digital_Humanities* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012). In 2017 the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published several articles including Erik Weiskott’s controversial “There is No Such Thing as ‘the Digital Humanities’” which brought more attention to this field and its thorny definitions.
highlight the critical role of the natural and built environments as represented in Italian narratives.

In designing the activities that implement Mapping Italian Narratives, my goal is to examine the possibilities that digital and humanist modes of inquiry offer when applied to the teaching of language and culture in the target language. In particular, I am interested in analyzing the ways in which mapping projects help students to rethink their language learning process and their own engagement with technology from different angles. As Convertini and Wright suggest, “Shifting our perspective and empowering students to use digital tools effectively is the key to unlocking the pedagogical potential of the digital classroom.”

Therefore, I propose that the inclusion of digital initiatives guided by critical reflections on the project and the tools employed, does not only enhance students’ digital literacy skills in the target language, but it also encourages students to reconsider their relationships with texts, narratives, and space from a digital and humanist perspective. The reflective nature of digital humanities practices is particularly relevant to my approach, because it distinguishes it from the mere incorporation of technology for pedagogical purposes. Applying digital humanities methods to language learning—and teaching—implies a continuous reflection on how that specific tool enhances knowledge and, above all, how the project does not just demonstrate what students accomplish but how its analysis generates new ideas or hypotheses.

In this article I present two maps that students created in my course on Italians Abroad. Throughout the semester we explored the trajectories of Italian mobilities, discussed the construction of multiple identities inside and outside the Italian nation, and the redefinition of the other’s space through short stories, film, and novels set in Sicily, Argentina, the U.S., Egypt, Eritrea, Libya, Japan, and Albania between the Unification of Italy and the early 90’s. All the readings selected had a significant spatial or geographical component; in other words, travel, geographical locations, and the built or natural environment played a prominent role in the

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6 Convertini and Wright “The Italian Digital Classroom,” ix.
7 Although Cro’s work is guided by very similar principles, her approach is grounded in exploratory pedagogy that emphasizes the design of the project rather than its completion, whereas in my course the completion of the project is a fundamental step.
8 Students were all Italian minors and had studied Italian for more than four semesters. Many had already studied in Italy; some were native speakers of Spanish and/or of Italian. Their language proficiency ranged from advanced low to high. Their academic specializations ranged from public health, environmental sciences, studio art, biochemistry and social sciences.
narrative. The course culminated in the discussion of the digital narrative maps that I am presenting here along with the activities that led to their completion. The first map is based on the opening section of Melania Mazzucco’s migration novel Vita set in New York City at the beginning of the 1900s while the other stems from Carlo Lucarelli’s colonial detective story Albergo Italia set in Eritrea in 1899. Both maps were built using StoryMap JS, a free mapping program that works—and looks a lot like—a split PowerPoint. Each slide can be enriched with multimedia content and it is accessible on the right side of the screen, whereas on the left side it is connected to a specific geographical point in an interactive map. Before venturing into the details of the project, I want to briefly outline the theoretical background that informs Mapping Italian Narratives and the work the students did.

Why Mapping Literary Texts?

In “Mapping Literature: Visualization of Spatial Uncertainty in Fiction” Ann Kathrine Reuschel and Lorenz Hurni point out that literary maps do not accompany or embellish narratives. Rather, “Literary maps are meant to be tools for interpretation and inspiration and powerful analytical instruments. Their purpose is to show something that has not been evident before.” Hence, literary maps are original and creative visualizations stemming from reading, research, and analyses based on primary and secondary sources. As analytical tools, their purpose is to deepen and further expand our understanding of narratives while bringing to light new elements that were not visible by just reading the text. Furthermore, as Franco Moretti puts it, “Placing a literary phenomenon in its specific space—mapping it—is not the conclusion of geographical work; it’s the beginning. After which begins in fact the most challenging part of the whole enterprise: one looks at the map, and thinks.” Similarly to texts, maps are the results of data elaborations and as such must be interrogated. Students come to realize that the maps

11 StoryMap JS is developed by Northwestern University knight lab https://storymap.knightlab.com/.
13 Reuschel and Hurni, 298.
are not the project but the beginning of a new endeavor, an interpretative journey to search for new knowledge or meanings that were not visible before.

The literary maps mentioned by Moretti, Reuschel, and Hurni are “thick” annotated maps conceived within extensive projects similar to those mentioned in the opening section of this article. Because these maps are complex visualizations of data and have layers of information embedded, they require skills and expertise that hardly can be developed in foreign language courses and may fall beyond their scope. Instead, narrative maps are a valuable and effective alternative. Rather than relying on big data creation or manipulation through distant reading practices, narrative maps can be built using quotations from the primary sources and deploying close reading strategies for analyses. Simple to design, narrative maps represent a manageable option that can be implemented in learning environments where balancing content and skills is always challenging. Moreover, creating narrative maps inspired by literary texts not only responds to the interpretative abilities that ought to be developed in upper division courses, but it calls for a higher order of thinking skills, they push students to experiment, investigate, evaluate, and build a project that goes beyond the representation of their knowledge. Finally, narrative maps resonate very well with the importance of activating students’ spatial critical thinking, which was one of my course’s learning goals.

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15 Reuschel and Hurni collaborate to A Literary Atlas of Europe [http://www.literaturatlas.eu/en/](http://www.literaturatlas.eu/en/) one of the most influential literary mapping projects in Europe that brings together scholars in computer science, literary studies, cartography, and graphic design. An interesting example of a thick annotated map is Mapping the Emotions in Victorian London [https://www.historypin.org/en/victorian-london/geo/51.521012,-0.118003,10/bounds/51.263081,-1.042914,51.777491,0.806908/paging/1/state/map](https://www.historypin.org/en/victorian-london/geo/51.521012,-0.118003,10/bounds/51.263081,-1.042914,51.777491,0.806908/paging/1/state/map).


17 The interpretative implications related to close and distant reading practices are part of the ongoing debate on DH practices. Moretti’s (in)famous comment that to understand literature we need to stop reading books, is both a provocation and methodological approach to literary analyses. His method calls for a computational, non-human, distant analysis of narratives that, according to some scholars, seems to clash with close reading practices at the core of humanities research. On distant reading see Moretti’s *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (New York: Verso, 2005). For a dissent view see Timothy Brennan “The Digital Humanities Bust,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* October 15, 2011 and Sarah E. Bond, Hoyt Long, and Ted Underwood who argue for a more integrated method in “‘Digital’ is Not the Opposite of ‘Humanities’,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 1, 2017.
Planning the Project

The uniqueness of *Mapping Italian Narratives* originates from the context in which it is conceived and carried out: the immersive, collaborative, and flexible environment of a foreign language course. During the first day of class I shared with students the rationale behind this initiative and its connections with my scholarly expertise, teaching methods, and the course content.\(^{18}\) Because mobility, maps, and space, were essential concepts of *Italians Abroad*, the implementation of a mapping project resonated extremely well with its content and successfully expanded the scope of this course. Considering its geospatial element, I created part of the syllabus as an interactive map\(^{19}\) to help students visualize the circularity of our transnational explorations and to introduce the reading materials in more engaging and dynamic ways (fig. 1). I build the map with the same software students would use later; therefore, since the first day of class, they had a clear idea of the project that they would create by the end of the semester. Besides showing the main locations of the reading assigned, the map introduced basic information on the texts assigned, few photos of landmarks mentioned in the narratives, and links to access resources that helped students to contextualize and further expand their understanding of the readings. For instance, to present “L’altro figlio” by Luigi Pirandello, I linked references to the theater and film adaptations and a review of *Kaos* published by *The New Yorker* (fig. 2); to highlight the transnational resonance of Edmondo DeAmici’s “Dagli Appennini alle Ande,” I added links to its cartoon adaptation for the Italian and Japanese audience\(^{20}\) (fig. 3). Moreover, to bring contemporary authors closer to the students I linked their video or printed interviews in which they talk about the work I assigned\(^{21}\) (fig. 4). Beyond my expectations, the

\(^{18}\) In *Using Digital Humanities in the Classroom* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017) Claire Battershill and Shawana Ross point out the importance to provide students with a clear idea of the project they will create, how it relates to the course content, and how it will be assessed, especially if it is their first encounter with digital project: 20.

\(^{19}\) To access the syllabus go to https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/7422602396cfe9ecbd79875cc1a9fbeb3/italians-abroad/index.html.

\(^{20}\) I invited students to reflect on the opening theme that seizes Marco’s transatlantic adventure as well as on the fact that this cartoon was also available for a Japanese audience. This is the link to the Italian edition https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9SJlztbwic and this one to the Japanese one https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iKl3WZe32UA.

\(^{21}\) This is a printed interview to Carlo Lucarelli https://liberidiscrivere.com/2014/09/02/un-intervista-con-carlo-lucarelli/. This one, instead, is a video interview to Enrico Loverso, the leading actor of *Lamerica* that discuss the film twenty years after it was realized. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmWwVEL7F4s
map became a point of reference to orient students’ preparation and research activity as well as a teaching tool with which I often started or enhanced class discussions.

Fig. 1 Image of the home page of the interactive syllabus for Italians Abroad.

Fig. 2 Image of the page introducing “L’altro figlio.”
Illustrating the purposes of *Mapping Italian Narratives*, breaking it down in a series of scaffolded low-stake assignments that progressively led to the completion of the narrative maps, helped to ease the students’ concerns for an unconventional assignment and facilitated their involvement into interdisciplinary hands-on research experience. While planning the course and the project, I explicitly linked its digital component with the students’ learning outcomes, which included among others: developing a critical understanding of texts, including maps as textual artifacts; acquiring spatial critical thinking skills; building and/or strengthening media literacy and digital competence; critically and creatively applying digital practices to textual analysis and interpretation.
Given the importance of the digital component and its novelty in an Italian course, I wanted students to be aware of their learning progress not only in terms of language proficiency and content, but also in terms of digital competency. Carefully balancing content knowledge and skills development in the target language, the first part of the semester was devoted to traditional textual analysis and discussion-based activities that aimed at establishing the cultural and historical background of Italy as a “land of departure”, while introducing spatial theories, basic concepts of human geography and cartography as well as digital humanities definitions and practices. Resuming from the Spring break students had completed a research paper—more details will follow—and formed two groups based on the novel they decided to map. Groups formed around research interests rather than other relations, prompted new collaborative dynamics among the participants, who had very diverse scholarly interests, perspectives, and creativity. During the second part of the semester, one of the two weekly sessions was designed as an in-class digital lab where students used their own computers to complete the task-based activities.

In selecting the tools to use for this project I considered its scale, the collaborative aspect, and the students’ access and familiarity with technology. Besides using the college LMS to communicate and post assignments, I chose Google Drive to share documents and resources specific to the project, to provide written feedback and tech support, and foster collaboration within the group outside of class. In consultation with the digital initiative expert, I opted for StoryMap JS as a mapping tool which, despite some limitations, proved to be simple, flexible, and highly accessible. Once students created a shared account they could simultaneously work on the same map from any browser or computer device during lab sessions or remotely, if needed. Since the maps are hosted on the program’s website, they can be edited by anyone with access to the account, with no need to transfer, download, or install any component on any device. Although maps cannot be downloaded, their portability is granted by sharing private links, like the ones included at the end of this article.

**The Execution**

The mapping project for *Italians Abroad* is comprised of different elements: a research paper (15%); a multimedia digital map that students built and presented in groups (5%); collaborative translations of the texts accompanying the maps (5%); and some weekly written
reflections on the project and its development (10%). As preliminary activities, students were asked to identify and keep track of any location, landmark, spatial reference or geographical description mentioned in the readings that was relevant for the characters, the events, or the narrative settings. They were encouraged to manually annotate their texts by underlining passages with different colors, marking locations’ names on the margins, or jotting down names and page numbers at the end of the book, or on a separate document. This simple process of collecting and organizing data would provide each student with the starting point for their research work and, later, it would also expedite the mapping process.

Emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinarity and independent research, the first high-stake assignment was a research paper on an open topic: students had to formulate and investigate their own questions. The only requirements were engaging with some spatial, geographical, urban, or environmental aspects of the narrative and working only on one novel among those assigned and discussed by mid semester. Although by mid semester the reading selection was not too wide, keeping this timeline was fundamental to ensure that students had completed their research and focused on spatial elements before starting the digital lab sessions. Besides, working on texts that the entire class had already read prompted livelier and discussions and facilitated the collaborative interpretation of the maps during the final presentations.

Once students identified a text to work on, they revisited the data collected during the annotating process to select five to seven locations. Each student isolated passages describing places and prepared a written response illustrating the reasons behind this selection. While activating spatial and critical thinking, this preparatory response aimed at prompting students to find a unifying theme or some overarching questions to address in their research. During this preliminary phase of the research process, a librarian held a workshop to help students to locate databases and identifying reliable sources related to their specific topic; at least one resource had to be in Italian. Students were also encouraged to connect their research to academic interests or disciplines they found compatible. This option empowered them to transfer skills and knowledge acquired in other courses to their Italian project and to articulate this expertise in the target language. It also made them more aware of the interdisciplinarity of Italian studies. For instance, one student incorporated their specialization in public health to discuss the child labor and the working conditions described in Vita. Another student combined their work with
insights from women and gender studies courses to analyze the role of madamato in relation to female mobility in Albergo Italia. Another one, relied on environmental studies to argue that the Italian characters’ frequent travels and landscape descriptions in Lucarelli's novel demonstrate how Italian colonizers aimed at taming the natural environment in order to dominate the population.

The next step consisted in collaboratively creating the narrative maps with photos, passages from the texts, and their translations during the weekly lab sessions. Labs were conceived as hands-on highly interactive moments in which the groups shared and discussed the results of the pre-lab assignments\(^\text{22}\) and completed the in-lab activities before the end of class. On one hand the lab sessions expedited the actual building of the map and on the other, they introduced students to best digital practices. The digital initiative librarian visited our class to lead workshops on StoryMap JS, archival research for photos, and the Creative Common license.\(^\text{23}\) For the first time, students were invited to think about digital curation, accessibility, fair use, and image attribution. The discussions we had on the CC license, public domain, and the ethos around digital humanities made them aware of the importance of reliable sources and digital open access archives as well as of the interdisciplinary collaborations that this growing discipline entails. Delving into collections like Flicker, Europeana, and the New York Public Library Digital Collections fostered students’ digital and media literacy in ways that will serve them even beyond the academic setting. Throughout the semester, when they kept selecting and discussing which photos to add to the map, where to locate and how to cite them, they were becoming conscious users of digital resources in the target language.\(^\text{24}\)

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\(^\text{22}\) These assignments required students to prepare and organize their data before coming to class, such as select the locations, transcribe quotes in a shared google doc, provide peer-feedback on the translation along with the weekly reflections.

\(^\text{23}\) The workshops were in English.

\(^\text{24}\) Despite the massive inclusion of tech-oriented activities in foreign language courses, cultivating literacy in the target language is often an overlooked outcome. The 21st Century Skills Map for World languages, developed in 2011 by P21 and ACTFL, recommends the development of information literacy to prepare students to possess “a fundamental understanding of the ethical/legal issues surrounding the access and use of information” and to guide them to access “information efficiently and effectively, evaluating information critically and competently and using information accurately and creatively for the issue or problem at hand.” (12). PDF file. January 2011. [https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED519498.pdf](https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED519498.pdf).
The collaborative nature of this project required students to make most of their decisions collectively. When working with StoryMap JS the first thing to agree upon was the selection of a world map that would be the geographical reference and background of the project. Students carefully evaluated the options offered by default in the program and made their choice, demonstrating a critical understanding of the maps’ visual components in relation to their project that they supported in their final presentations. Students working on Vita said they opted for OpenStreetMap for two reasons: first, because it operates under an open license, which means that rather than belonging to a private corporation, it is maintained and updated by a community of mappers. Second, they wanted to establish a visual connection between New York City’s past and present. Working with OpenStreetMap allowed them to identify, with a good degree of accuracy, most of the locations mentioned in the novel and match them with the real contemporary geographical referent. They argued that to keep the historical atmosphere of the novel they used old photographs and postcards dated between the XVIII and the XIX century which create an interesting contrast with the contemporary view of the city map. In contrast, students working on Albergo Italia chose a map called Watercolor with no geographical referent, but with soft marks and blurred borders. They justified their selection explaining that visually they aimed to maintain the spatial uncertainties that they perceived while reading the novel. They argued that Lucarelli’s descriptions of the Eritrea’s natural and built environments were vague and imaginative, therefore highly indeterminable.

Through the interactive maps, students located streets, stores, and locations relevant to their project. Each location corresponded simultaneously to a pin on the map—on the left side of the screen—and to a slide that they enriched with information, quotes, translations, and images that best captured their envisioning of the place—on the right side (fig. 5).
Since students could only use images under the CC license, this operation required time, a lot of flexibility, and constant negotiation within the group to reach an agreement. Sometimes students got frustrated because they could not find images that aligned perfectly with their mental projections of the fictional place in question; other times, it became impossible to match the location mentioned in the novels with a *real* referent on the map. Dealing with the notion of soft and hard boundaries, students started questioning the objectiveness and precision of maps more broadly. For instance, with less geographical details provided in Lucarelli’s novel, it was challenging to match the precise geographical referent with the literary ones (fig. 6). The discussions around these issues were invaluable learning moments. From a language perspective, students *naturally* built their professional terminology and acquired a set of new expressions to describe technology and troubleshooting. From a digital *and* humanist point of view, they came to terms with the spatial ambiguities of the narratives as well as with the opacity of digital mapping practices.
As the maps shaped up, students submitted weekly individual reflections on the project and digital lab experience. Written in Italian, these low stake assignments were guided by a different set of questions for each phase of the project. Some questions included, why did you choose this novel? What do you think is the relation between the places you selected and the characters? What do these places represent in the novel? What challenges did the translation pose to you and your group? To what extent does your map provide new or different information to the reader? How "reliable" is your map for a reader? What was the biggest challenge for this project? What did you learn from it? Their purpose was threefold: to stimulated students’ critical and reflective thinking and ease the preparation for the final group presentation and the interpretation of the maps. They encouraged them to articulate their or their group’s decision-making progress, so that each student could actively show their contribution and had the opportunity to express their perspectives as an alternative option to in-lab group discussion. Finally, these weekly responses were invaluable to collect feedback on the novelty of this experience, the mapping process, the challenges students faced, and to monitor their engagement. As informal reflections they proved to be fundamental to identify what was not working well and what needed to be recalibrated for future endeavors.

The groups shared and discussed the maps in a small formal symposium. Since everyone was familiar with the texts, I asked each group to discuss four main points: the visual aspects of the map; how the individual research paper informed the building of the map; what the map
represented; and finally, what new information the map provided that was not available by reading the texts. Students engaged in interesting conversations about the aesthetics of their work including the choice of the background map, the reasons behind the use vintage photos and postcards of New York City in contrast with a current map. Some illustrated innovative solutions to bypass some limitation of StoryMap JS such as the group working on *Albergo Italia* who experimented more in-depth with this tool and found a creative way to include two images on the same slide: one as background of the text and the other above the text (fig. 6).

Shifting to a higher order of thinking skills and dealing with new visualizations students advanced their own conclusions on what the maps represented and could now reveal, as Moretti suggests. To interrogate the maps students had to take a distance from their work they and began to recognize that their maps went beyond the subjective visualization of written narratives. Even when they were following the characters, the movements represented on a map offered new paths of interpretations and triggered questions that could not be anticipated when reading the novels. One student proposed that retracing Diamante’s steps through his various job locations in NYC demonstrated that he was not just trying to leave Little Italy behind, but he was venturing up north, moving upward, towards richer areas of the city, he was climbing the social ladder and improving his economic status by fulfilling his American dream. Students also realized that the spatial reading of the texts pushed them to pay more attention to the role of the locations described. To prove the importance of the hotel in *Albergo Italia* as a metacolonial space, one student argued that “L’Albergo Italia e [sic] più della scena dell’indagine. Funziona come un “home base” ... rappresenta uno spazio nella colonia che funziona come un pezzo d’Europa.” Overall, the digital mapping project helped students to consider the location, buildings, and the environment as a fundamental narrative and cultural elements affecting human interaction and influencing the relations between Italians and locals.

**The Maps**

The map on fig. 7 follows Vita and Diamante's adventures and wanderings through various parts of New York City from their arrival in 1904 to their separation in 1911. Vita and Diamante are the two young protagonists of Mazzucco's novel *Vita*. Students read and worked on the first part of the novel only.
Fig. 7 Image of the home page of the map on Vita. To access this map go to:  
https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/6f1f0731c7ad9057344a36469ab2a2d3/vita/index.html

The map on fig. 8 does not follow the steps of any specific character but it marks locations where major events took place and highlights places connected with the main characters in Lucarelli’s colonial detective story Albergo Italia set in Massawa and Asmara in 1899.

Fig. 8 Image of the home page of the map on Albergo Italia. To access the map go to:  
https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/be80f1c4f99e364ac2cf6da15b561f6d/albergo-italia-lucarelli/index.html

**Conclusion**

Digital and humanistic modes of inquiry guide students to ask critical questions, develop curiosity, and explore new possibilities. In a foreign language environment, they become powerful and empowering allies to engage students with new forms of textual analysis. When students re-elaborate a narrative into a digital map, they become critical users and consumers
not only of the original text, but also of the technology they use. Through the research process they strengthen their digital literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills in line with the ACTFL world-readiness standards, which emphasize the importance of information literacy, real-world application of language, and 21st-century skills. Digital projects when guided by reflective practices in the target language, are great opportunities to adopt in our courses to better prepare students to face the global and digital challenges of the 21st century.

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In Spring 2019 I presented the 13 students in a senior-level Italian literature seminar with a choice: a traditionally-structured syllabus of readings and discussions on Renaissance primary sources or an experimental syllabus by which they would each become experts on a different text during the semester using a combination of close reading, contextualization, and digital humanities methods of analysis. They unanimously chose the experiment.¹ This article uses the lessons learned from the course to argue for the role of the emerging methodologies of small teaching and digital humanities pedagogy in developing learner-centered teaching approaches that address multiple challenging characteristics of students in courses at this level in small programs: waning interest in pre-modern materials, inconsistent prior humanistic training, and varieties of Italian language skills.

These challenges derive from the fact that most students in Italian programs are majors in another field. According to the MLA, by 2013, second majors accounted for more than 60% of all majors in Italian language and literature. (2015, p. 8) Bowdoin students, like their national peers, arrive with a passion for Italian culture, but non-uniform humanistic and language preparation, and varying levels of motivation for engaging with non-contemporary materials. Yet, at the end of a senior-level seminar, according to department standards, students are expected to "explain fundamental concepts for, and contrast diverse approaches to, the scholarly study of literature, film, and cultural production." ("Romance Languages and Literatures") Moreover, students are required to "conduct analytical research in Francophone, Hispanic, and/or Italian Studies, and present it with scholarly rigor, in written or oral form, using the methods specific to such disciplines." ("Romance Languages and Literatures") Many, but not all, of our majors and minors complete an Honors project or advanced independent study during their senior year, typically in their other field of study, which is often outside the humanities.

¹ Nearly all course materials can be found on the website for the seminar associated with this publication: https://sites.google.com/bowdoin.edu/ital-3011-spring-2019/home
Moreover, senior-level seminars at Bowdoin articulate certain content-based and analytical learning goals, which are complicated by these different skill levels, preparations, interests, and college-level experiences. Most Italian majors and minors study abroad, but not all; some arrive with AP credit, others place out of introductory coursework. Yet, in terms of content, students must demonstrate "critical understanding of Francophone, Hispanic, and/or Italian cultural productions through the discussion and critique of literary, artistic, historical, and sociological works of various authors, genres, periods, and regions." ("Romance Languages and Literatures") This is easy enough to achieve through the assigned primary source readings, although students' varying linguistic skills make scaffolding and support materials necessary. While we do not formally evaluate students based on ACTFL proficiency definitions (2012), our learning goals aim for Advanced High-Superior writing and reading levels. ACTFL performance descriptors (2015) further specify that students at this level are expected to demonstrate advanced interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational performance with the Italian language and their study of Italian culture.

In the face of such diversity, the activities enabled by small teaching and digital humanities pedagogy shift authority and responsibility for growth onto the students, allowing space for customized linguistic competency goals to suit individual needs, while moving the class as a whole toward the desired department outcomes.

**Emerging Pedagogies Combined with Best Practices in Italian Studies**

James Lang's recommendations in *Small Teaching* (2016) aim for synthesis of material and experimentation in types of analyses. The activities focus on process over product: developing understanding, practicing application, and offering justification for interpretive or analytical choices. These include information retrieval, prediction, and interleaving - the continuous practice of learning tasks after the class or chapter in which they are introduced. Instead of discrete units (i.e. a two-week unit on an author or a four-week unit on a genre), the approach prioritizes connecting the dots across class periods throughout the semester for a cumulative effect. It creates a habit of being watchful for connections and practicing synthesis rather than expecting the professor to reveal and declare a grand scheme of coherence at the end of the semester. Overall, these practices make visible the results of a growth mindset for the students (but also for the instructor).
The philosophy of small teaching is equally beneficial to establishing routines, assignments, and habits of mind that assist each student to identify goals and evaluate learning. Lang suggests changes in the classroom to facilitate student success, some as small as 5-minute activities, all designed to shift more responsibility for the recognition of learning to the student. NCSSFL-ACTFL proficiency benchmarks are similarly expressed as "can do" statements in the first person, prioritizing awareness and self-evaluation as aspects of improving and measuring performance (1). By periodically asking students to connect the conceptual dots across the semester and to reflect on how they are encountering new or old information, small teaching practices in the Italian seminar activated awareness of linguistic, cultural, and historical knowledge growth and change over the semester. The course was taught as a series of interconnected workshops: reading, writing, and project development. After building foundational skills in reading and analysis of Renaissance Italian literature, students were asked to return to the texts in order to compose short examples of literary critique, which they then used as building blocks for their final project. In this way, they were repeatedly returning to the early work of the semester while adding new skills and perspectives.

Digital Humanities (DH) Pedagogy emphasizes other priorities that bolster student agency in knowledge creation.2 Agency shifts students away from parroting received information or the inferred right answer, moving them toward becoming knowledge creators. As documented by Howe, DH tools can facilitate deep, attentive analysis of text from students. Following Caitlin Christian-Lamb and Anelise Shrout, a DH pedagogy that uses student agency as an organizing principle prevents instructors from approaching undergraduates as either digital natives or apprentice researchers. Blackwell and Martin articulate how DH methods of openness, curation, and collaboration move research papers, data set creation, and collation or indexing out of the space of diluted professional work and into this realm of student agency. The knowledge may not be new to the field, but it is new to the student, and acquired through a focus on the process of critical analysis rather than repeating a right answer at the end of the term. The Winter 2019 issue of Italian Culture highlights several case studies to this effect.

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2 This agency could take many directions beyond those chosen for this course. Christina Boyles highlights how curation of archives (through making or breaking organizational structures) allows students “to explore the consequences of meaning-making” in digital environments and to attempt to restore social justice within those information systems (1).
We specifically used tools from text analysis in digital humanities to facilitate making connections across Renaissance Italian works, in spite of the anglo-centrism of the technology. Incorporating DH into the course increased students' agency and ownership of the material by shifting the challenges and rewards of interpretation into their hands. By moving from the small scale of a reading assignment to the larger scale of trends in word frequencies, topics, and style in a complete text, students could conduct substantive literary critical analysis without having spent years mastering a text. That is, they possess the skills to consider word choice, interpret the role of syntax on meaning, contextualize an expression, and discover the power of rhetorical choices. What they typically lack at this level is the ability to hold an entire work in their minds in order to see the larger picture in which those authorial moves operate. With 3-7 semesters of Italian language training, that goal is still unmet for many students. DH tools for text analysis gave them a map of their text to direct them to similar or different passages in order to check their assumptions, gather more evidence, and explore the nuances of variations. Instead of a lecture on the key themes of Michelangelo's poetry, the tools for text analysis allowed them to compare their close reading with the work overall. They were in dialogue with themselves, and then in dialogue with their classmates, rather than receiving and parroting information from the instructor. Analysis became investigation rather than reading for content in order to have interpretation supplied post hoc.

That same advantage of scale meant that the students could also gain access to texts beyond what they could reasonably read in a semester, putting them in necessary and fruitful dialogue with their classmates. We did not explore texts beyond the ones they had chosen, so that there was always a representative "expert" in the room to answer questions about the patterns found computationally. In this way, students could begin the comparative work individually and then test assumptions in conversation with classmates. This collaborative aspect of DH did more than enrich discussion, it also enhanced the esprit de coeur in the cohort.

As a result, I did not set a benchmark for the entire class to reach, but each student identified their goals. I did not tell them explicitly what was important about the literature, but allowed them to explore and assess a variety of primary materials and a sample of secondary criticism with their own priorities in mind.

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3 See the supplemental website for tutorials, handouts, and vocabulary lists in Italian: https://sites.google.com/bowdoin.edu/ital-3011-spring-2019/home.
Interest in Medieval and Early Modern Italian Literature

All of the attention to agency counts for little if the students' motivation to apply it cannot be activated. In fact, during enrollment for the semester in which I taught the course, I happened to overhear a future student saying to her non-Italian Studies advisor, "Why do I need to study medieval literature? It doesn't connect to anything I want to do!" It is certainly a stereotype that continues to challenge pedagogues in this area (and others). Tellingly, Lang situates his inspiration for small teaching in the context of a pre-modern course that made neither growth nor synthesis a priority: "I still remember a Renaissance literature course I took as an undergraduate in which the instructor put us in small groups with instructions to discuss key passages of whatever text we were studying that day. I loathed those sessions, saw them as pointless, and can assure you I learned nothing from them" (88). Instead of connecting the pieces of the course, or outlining methods for developing expertise, such unstructured opportunities to practice literary and linguistic skills are frequently unsatisfying for students. Key aspects of learning for Lang are self-awareness and interpersonal behaviors such as collaborating, discussing, and co-creating. This often involves one student drawing from knowledge or experience that they have to help another student complete a task, or to help the pair or small groups do so.

To counter both challenges, little interest in the period and lack of structure for learning, I built a knowledge gap into the architecture of the course such that students were free to choose their primary readings for the seminar. The requirements for these texts were that they were originally written in Italian and existed in plain text format. As Jackaki and Faull note, the "size of the corpus should be small enough that students could gain an oversight over the material even without needing to implement techniques of distant reading" (361). This placed a significant limitation on selections, but the resources of IntraText, Biblioteca Italiana, and my work on Galileo's library provided us with ample choices representing history, political science, literature, natural philosophy, poetry, and theater. Aspiring scientists gravitated toward natural philosophers, students of government focused on political history, and the artist read the poetry of Renaissance painters and sculptors. This allowed us to put into conversation 10 texts written ca. 1350-1640.

Knowledge-gap activities are a staple in the language classroom, and I modeled the course structure on them. We read a few critical pieces in common, as well as excerpts, but
otherwise, students were responsible for becoming experts on a text and reporting to the class what they learned in every class period. In daily discussions, students were required to ask questions of their peers in order to understand how their texts contributed to or departed from broad themes in the period: love, nature, the Other, politics, *la questione della donna*, religion, *sprezzatura*, and visual arts. Students needed to have in mind what they had read and then practice asking questions of their classmates in order to test their understanding, assumptions, and conclusions about their texts and the Renaissance overall. This aspect in particular was valuable for the students who struggled to see how their study of Renaissance Italian might advance work in their (other) major field of study. Through interleaving and activities to synthesize the comments of their peers, the class recreated the study of the Renaissance, rather than being told what the period was.

I evaluated this reconstruction with a concept map activity suggested by Lang as part of the small teaching toolkit. (104-106) At the end of our intensive reading workshop, I challenged the students to work together to identify the most salient aspects of their texts and how they were connected. This was a very low-tech exercise involving notecards and colored markers.
When they finished, I distributed a copy of a schematic of Renaissance concepts, found in an Italian high school textbook, of the sort that would need to be memorized. I prompted them to evaluate the similarities or differences. Not only were they full of smiles to see how well they had understood the concepts, but they were also able to voice objections and counterpoints to what they saw in the textbook, using evidence from their own texts. They took ownership of the knowledge and argued from new-found positions of authority.

**Variations in Humanistic Background**

During the intensive reading weeks, students became specialists in the texts of their choosing, dividing the reading of the primary materials into 8 homework assignments and
completing class activities designed to introduce them to the process of humanistic, literary analysis. These reading workshops focused on decoding vocabulary, strategies for parsing poetry and prose, interpretation of grammatical choices, and resources for comprehending stylistic and thematic movements.

I was frank in the syllabus, announcing that I did not want them to become experts in antiquated lexicon. I asked them to curate a list of essential vocabulary for understanding their texts, offering a justification for the importance of 5-10 words in each of their 8 readings. Following small teaching principles, these exercises were graded on a done/not done basis for which I offered no feedback on grammar or spelling. Since the focus of this workshop was on reading, I followed Hallen and opted for these low-stakes writing exercises in order to allow cognitive and practical space for the weighty discussions of literary analysis. Vocabulary lists were both a point of reference for each student to track lexical and thematic highlights of the texts, as well as the beginning of the structure to overcome the knowledge gap across the different texts that they read.

Students began class periods by reviewing their classmates' vocabulary lists to find one thing in common and at least one difference with their own. Subsequent discussions were motivated by the overall goal of the course: to contextualize their work(s) within the Renaissance at large. Students asked each other about valences of terms, how they connected to other themes in the works, and if certain collocates were present. These were some of the most rewarding conversations to overhear. The students who studied Margherita Costa's allegorical work celebrating Vittoria della Rovere's pregnancies asked, in Italian, if Machiavelli presented prole (offspring) as an obstacle or a necessity for stability in Florence, or how Michelangelo presented the role of divinity in his description of love. The student reading Boccaccio wanted to know how foreigners were described by Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and Costa. The student who read Michelangelo's poetry asked the class to talk about how bodies were described in other texts. While these questions might feel obvious to specialists, they are neither obvious to students nor easily forthcoming. Yet, with the sense of ownership of the text and the final product for the course, the task became an opportunity to go back into their selected works and reread for new features. Most importantly, they weren't talking to me. They talked to each other, across and around the table to generate knowledge of the period. These
discussions formed the basis for several of the analyses that students completed in their final projects.

In addition to vocabulary, I asked students to keep track of any passages that were particularly challenging. Students shared those passages either by writing them on the board or projecting them on a writable screen. We collaboratively worked on parsing the syntax and vocabulary, bringing to light successful reading strategies that the class was employing. This gave us an opportunity to discuss the importance of critical editions, the use of historical dictionaries, and the limitations of online translation apps. In a future version of the course, I would provide students with more vocabulary for talking about the process of reading and the structures of literary texts.

Admittedly, since I was not an expert in all of the texts that the students chose, this meant that I was often on the spot to provide an interpretation. Rather than pretend to know everything, I was honest with the students about the need to consult resources and explore contexts. I chose to model the process that they should apply when encountering challenging linguistic and cultural materials. I would ask one student to look up a term, another to find the passage in a critical edition, and the student who chose the passage to talk about the context. While this might feel destabilizing in terms of the traditional authority of a professor, this partnership in learning is typical in a digital humanities setting. There is great humility as well as tremendous possibility in the examination of process and the focus on learning something new. Students later described how they arrived at interpretations of their texts using these methods, showing an awareness of successful and appropriate strategies for literary analysis. Such incremental and reflective habits also built towards practice in argumentation.

I was intentional in adopting an experimental approach, drawing from Digital Humanities Pedagogy, to avoid implying to students that there exists a clear or correct line of inquiry that initiates humanistic research. This is both destabilizing (anything is possible) and edifying (building a base of knowledge) because of the exploratory space that it opens in the curriculum. Rather than delivery of the final product of research, activities focus on the process: how to test whether or not a connection is meaningful, how to recognize rhetorical choices, how to decipher hidden stylistic tricks for communicating with readers, how to refine an observation, etc. As Catherine Waitinas describes upon reflection on a DH-Walt Whitman seminar, "While I've heard some colleagues express anxiety that too much technology will turn students away
from the deep humanity of literary study, I've found the opposite: students working on these
digital manuscript projects report feeling an intimate ownership of the poems with which they
tussle, not one offered up in a lecture or a reading assignment but, instead one they fought to
realize." (154) Ann Hawkins expands on this sense of engagement in terms of increasing the
number of ways in which students can encounter a text, moving them beyond the oft-applied
hammer of close reading and theory and its accompanying nail of the analytical paper.
Importantly, for this seminar, it put all students in the same realm of possibility rather than a
pre-established intellectual terrain defined by previous coursework in literary studies.

Diversity of Linguistic Preparation

The knowledge gap provided a structure onto which I could also scaffold language
practice centered on the students’ agency as individual learners. Lang's small teaching
recommendations include enhancing the self-awareness of learners by asking for reflective
check-ins. (122-123) I implemented these through a series of language self evaluations (in
Italian) that always began with identifying strengths, articulating goals, and self-assessment of
progress and strategies used to reach those goals.4 In the first iteration, students were asked to
reflect on register, syntax complexity, vocabulary sophistication, and other aspects of their
reading abilities and writing skills. In a future iteration of the course, I will offer advice for goal
setting framed explicitly by the ACTFL benchmarks for interpretive, interpersonal, and
presentational proficiency. While there was an oral presentation, and discussion was an
essential aspect of the seminar, I did not ask them to reflect specifically on that aspect of their
production, even though many did, and it would be an easy inclusion in future semesters.

The intensive writing weeks of the semester shifted their agency from comprehension
to analysis of the primary texts. Students focused on writing goals, practiced revision (not
proofreading), and gained new familiarity with their texts as evidence for an argument. Each
week they brought to class a first version of short assignments for peer review and discussion.
The prompts were: write a summary of your text(s) for someone who has not read it, compose
detailed captions for two computational analysis results so that a reader could recreate the
visual, explain a connection between your text(s) and the work studied by a classmate, and

4 See the course website for the prompts and questions.
connect your argument(s) to the scholarly conversation about your text(s). They submitted a revised version by the start of the next class period.

I provided revision guides with small teaching priorities in mind. I asked them to revisit the goals in their self-evaluations to compare their short writing assignment with their aspirations as language learners. I asked them to identify categories of errorini that they noticed so that they could create a checklist of things to look for when writing, revising, or proofreading subsequent writing assignments. Rather than simply correcting grammatical, lexical, or orthographical errors, they acknowledged the ways in which their aspirational writing and actual product were different. I also suggested that they slow down by reading out loud, randomly selecting sentences, or reading from end to start. This shifted focus away from ideas to expression, clarity, and form. We generated lists of synonyms and would occasionally rewrite sentences during discussion. Typically, we banned the use of interessante, importante, conjugations of dire and scrivere, as well as piacere to practice using more precise words. It became a game to avoid these common terms, as well as an excuse to explore deeper and more complex expressions.

Borrowing principles of student-centered collaborative and generative work from digital humanities, during the class periods dedicated to review and revision, students created a list of best practices to subsequently apply to the genre of writing of the assignment. For example, after reading at least two of their peers’ summaries, the class suggested the following principles for the final version: use full bibliographic information about the work (complete titles, full names of authors, dates of the publications), describe the structure of the text (length, form), identify primary characters and plot events, offer a general overview first followed by details, and wait to write the conclusion until the summary becomes part of the argument in the final project. None of these principles will be surprising to teachers of literature, but the difference between a professor prescribing principles and students arriving at them through experiences as readers and writers was profound. They took responsibility for the process and product.

Engaging with secondary criticism was equally procedural and experiential. I created a handout for discussion of secondary criticism. The exercise allowed us to evaluate the kinds of sentences that introduce quotations, offer interpretations of the scholarly argument, and transition to a new paragraph. While the worksheet did not have clear correct answers, it generated significant discussion about style and grammatical complexity, essentially the effects
of making linguistic choices. I also provided a set of translations of key phrases from Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say / I Say*, which had been recommended to me by Professor Marilyn Migiel, and which students in one of my Boccaccio seminars had prepared years prior.

The distinction between proofreading a product and revising as part of a process was critical in terms of agency for these language learners. Students who arrive at an advanced Italian course, regardless of their trajectory, have experience checking their papers for grammatical, orthographical, and typographical errors. While they may not be equally successful in their corrections, they often see the purpose of a draft as the moment to pause and look for linguistic mistakes. This is necessary, but I wanted to build in a sense of reflection, à la small teaching, so that students would consider both what they wanted to say and how they wanted to say it, rather than leaving the communicative act in its first version of expression.

**Conclusion**

While thinking about the next iteration of the course, end-of-semester evaluations offered two consistent, helpful points of reference. The first was that the shift to student-centered learning had been successful. Instead of comments about learning content, the evaluations were nearly all directed toward how the students had changed. When asked about how the course contributed to their overall education, this reflective capacity was particularly noticeable: "I felt SO much growth this semester with my writing and speaking ability. Just being in class with discussion, in addition to Hall's written feedback, contributed hugely to this development." Course reviews from students consistently highlighted the importance of revision as an aspect of growth as a language learner.

Yet, the voice of the Renaissance-reluctant student remained in the evaluations: "I am just unsure whether renaissance [sic] literature is the best vehicle through which to improve modern Italian fluency." I do not want to give a diagnostic test at the beginning of the semester, but I think that there are ways to draw students' attention to benchmarks for evaluating growth as language learners. Being more upfront about ACTFL standards, providing language for self-assessment of goals and progress, and insisting on comparison of a writing sample from the first week of the semester to a writing product at the end, will be ways to achieve this the next time that I offer the course.
Second, the structure to make student-centered learning successful still needs some explicit articulation and fine-tuning. The students had mixed feelings about this aspect of the seminar. Some enthusiastically embraced the self-designed, collaborative nature: "I liked that our professor trusted us enough to allow us to direct our own projects. She also provided enough structure for us stay accountable and pace out the work." Others were more skeptical: "The one thing about the class that I can't figure out if it works/I'm leaning towards it doesn't work is that different groups in the class read different texts." Admittedly, the knowledge gap was unlike any course structure that this student had experienced prior. By shifting the emphasis to learning rather than the delivery of knowledge, the seminar became more work than he had anticipated.

The implications go beyond student agency. I remain committed to an original idea for the course, which we did not implement: pairing students with Italianists who are interested in starting, building, or revising digital projects. To my mind, this is a way to scale knowledge in DH in the profession, connect students to research interests that they may have beyond the specializations of an often-small group of Italianist faculty on their own campus, and to practice networked collaboration. Such partnerships would turn the current questions about the Renaissance into a lived experience, make humanistic work visible, and offer ways to immediately apply and hone linguistic skills. Beyond achieving course goals, the shift in agency afforded by small teaching and digital humanities pedagogy would then also contribute to achieving goals in the field at large.

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“Yor, or the Unexpected Virtue of a Bad Film

The following research was inspired by a serendipitous confluence of teaching experiences taking place between 2016-2018 within my university’s First-Year Seminar program. This program, intended to help students adjust to the rigors of collegiate academics, allows faculty from across disciplines to teach unsuspecting freshmen virtually any subject matter, provided the content be tailored to a communal set of learning goals. I have used these courses to delve into areas of Italian studies with which I am unfamiliar, bringing the students along with me.

In the fall 2016 term, I selected Italian postwar comic cinema. Alongside Criterion Collection classics such as I soliti ignoti and Il sorpasso, the course covered titles far more obscure to an American audience, including several Totò romps, Bianco, Rosso, e Verdone, and, alas, Fantozzi. Two years later, my class traveled through the cosmos of Italian science fiction, including I cannibali and Lo chiamavano Jeeg Robot, with a significant portion of the course spent meandering through that most dark period of Italian sci-fi, the 1980s.

In both courses, the same strange tendency stood out: my students reacted politely to masterpieces, but absolutely delighted in panning the bad films. The poorer the quality, the richer the discussions, the more enthusiastic the reactions, and the more compelling the students’ essays. Divorzio all’italiana would elicit a stolid discussion of Italian marital practices, but somehow, the crude gender stereotypes at play in Fantozzi’s desire to maintain a mistress got the students talking for whole class periods. While I cannibali led to a stately moment of intertextual reflection on Antigone’s relevance amid social upheaval in the early ’70s, the students couldn’t say enough about how they loved to hate the baldly derivative laser blasters and spacesuits of Il Mondo di Yor.
Aware that I was on to something, I brought a few of these films into my fourth-semester Italian language courses, and the results were distinctly analogous. Students who were hard-pressed to do anything but summarize the usual classics from middle school (such as *Ladri di biciclette*, *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso*, or the film whose US-market title has sown untold confusion about the distinction between *tu* and *Lei*, Lena Wertmüller’s *Ciao, Professore!* were suddenly channeling their inner John Simon, dowsing their Google Docs with remarkably proficient vitriol. Snarky phrases such as “non ne potevo più”, “che schifo!” and “ma si può?” peppered the students’ delightfully enthusiastic efforts to skewer the unfortunate filmmakers and their creations. This was a most welcome development, as it is a perennial challenge for the language instructor (at least this language instructor) to find ways to get students to leave their comfort zone and take chances when producing speech and writing.

The following essay is a meditation on the forces at play and an attempt to unlock the mechanisms by which a bad film can sometimes serve as a more stimulating teaching tool than a good one. Beginning with a brief foray into theoretical considerations from the social sciences, broadly to do with humans’ bias toward recording negativity, I will share a few examples of the exercises I devised around this principle, and conclude with a few thoughts about how this might help us to capitalize on the increased availability of such resources within the Italian language classroom in North America.

**The Power of Negative Thinking: Why Cheesy Films are Memorable**

The first consideration about why films of poor quality outshone their betters in my courses may lay in one of the key and nearly universal findings among psychologists and neurologists of the past generation: human beings have stronger reactions to, and form deeper memories of, negative experiences than positive ones. Upon this basic premise, we may begin to search for the causes behind the pedagogical utility of the bad film. The concept is best known through the work of social psychologist Roy Baumeister, popularized in the seminal 2001 essay he co-wrote with Ellen Bratslavsky, Kathleen D. Vohs, and Catrin Finkenaur in the *Review of General Psychology*, “Bad is Stronger than Good”. In the authors’ words, “events that are negatively valenced (e.g., losing money, being abandoned by friends, and receiving criticism) will have a greater impact on the individual than positively valenced events of the same type (e.g., winning money, gaining friends, and receiving praise)” (Baumeister et al. 323). In terms of
stimuli, they remark that “negative information receives more processing and contributes more strongly to the final impression than does positive information” (323-324). The essay argues that this is broadly true across a variety of experimental domains and is connected to the evolutionary advantage afforded to early humans. They write that in this early phase of human evolution, “a person who ignores danger (the possibility of a bad outcome) even once may end up maimed or dead.” (324) Indeed, evolutionary forces seem to have hard-wired this tendency into the brain. According to psychologist and pedagogical scholar Michelle D. Miller, emotions caused by negative stimuli are correlated with an increase in activity in the amygdala, which plays an outsized role in memory formation. She writes:

One structure in particular— the amygdala, located deep within the brain— is highly attuned to strong emotions, particularly negative ones. It becomes more active in the presence of emotionally charged stimuli— for example, an angry-looking face. In this highly activated state, the amygdala ramps up the creation of memories via its connections to the hippocampus, a structure that’s heavily involved in creating memories, and via its connections to other memory regions in the cerebral cortex (Miller 97).

Elizabeth A. Kensinger, Director of the Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience Laboratory at Boston University, argues that neuroscientific data indicates that “Negative Emotion Enhances Memory Accuracy”, which is in fact the title of a paper she has written on the subject. In her words, negative emotions:

[boost] not only the subjective vividness of a memory but also the likelihood that event details are remembered…The valence of an event (i.e., whether it is pleasurable or aversive) seems to be a critical determinant of the accuracy with which the event is remembered, with negative events being remembered in greater detail than positive (Kensinger 214).

One result of humankind’s hyperreactivity to negative experience has been that we tend to go to great lengths to avoid negative experiences. Indeed, the behavioral psychologist Daniel Kahneman, in his summative *Thinking Fast and Slow*, posits that this human tendency to feel negative experiences more strongly than positive ones constitutes the kernel of one of the many
biases that cause human beings to fail to act rationally, which he refers to in terms of “loss aversion”, which he defines as “the idea that people evaluate many outcomes as gains and losses, and that losses loom larger than gains” (Kahneman 300). This principle too is applicable to a variety of domains, from neuroscience to marriage counseling. In this last case, guru John Gottman states that it is necessary to have an overwhelming preponderance of positivity to make a romantic relationship successful. According to his research, it takes a full five positive interactions to counteract our bias for every single negative interaction with a partner (Gottman 57).

In terms of pedagogy, let me be clear that I am not advocating showing students five Fellinis for every slice of Cinepanettone, although that the five to one magic ratio (or even a higher one) might be a good idea in the case of a cinema course. Fortunately, the stakes of being exposed to a bad film are not so harmful that we should give in to our natural inclination to avoid suffering. Rather, I propose “leaning in” to bad films, harnessing the brain’s inherent ability to process and record a negative experience like Fantozzi, and bending this ability to language-learning ends. It is my intuition that the act of watching a poorly crafted film (and certainly, what constitutes a good or bad film is and must remain a matter of taste) can in fact exploit the negativity bias to get students producing more and better output in the L2 classroom. There appears to be a communal aspect in derision; encouraging students to crack wise about bad films appears to be a natural and productive way of getting them to open up, much in the same way that assigning a composition about a negative experience elicits a deeper response than the same composition does for a positive experience. Overall, mocking a bad film seems to put students and teachers on the same side, working together in reacting to a common “foe”. To frame this reaction, it is appropriate to bring up the aesthetics of camp and cheese viewership, as illustrated by the example of one of my favorite television programs of all time, Mystery Science Theater 3000.

A word, then, about camp and cheese, crucial concepts in articulating what it is we are doing when we watch films ironically, and what I believe was going on in my classrooms. Camp, a large subcultural theoretical field whose implications on power dynamics, gender, and race are fascinating but more complex than we need delve into here, is, at its core, what theorist Annalee Newitz terms “a kind of snide nostalgia for serious cultures of the past which now seem so alien and bizarre as to be funny” (Newitz 59). At its simplest, viewing a film through a camp
lens allows one to take enjoyment out of something intended seriously but which is now, for whatever reason, laughable. Cheese, on the other hand is appreciating a work of art not intended seriously to begin with, the ironic derivation of pleasure from the act of consuming non-aspirational content. As Newitz argues, cheese is an essential experience for the contemporary viewer, which she defines as “both a parodic practice and a parodic form of textual consumption. It is the production of, and appreciation for, what is artificial, exaggerated, or wildly, explosively obscene.” (Newitz 59). These two viewing practices are at the core of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, the model I was subconsciously using when intuitively encouraging my students to revel in bad filmmaking.

For the uninitiated, the concept of *MST3K*, the recently rebooted cult show of ’90s, is that an actor and two puppets are subjected to B-movies against their will, appearing in silhouette at the bottom of the screen as a sort of peanut gallery and stand in for the viewer’s perspective. In the words of film scholar John King, these characters represent “living footnotes on the bottom of the television screen, commenting on whatever film or television show we are watching them watch.” (King 41). The show’s entertainment value lies entirely in the interventions of these show-within-a-show viewers, who produce a constant stream of quips about the reels they are forced to watch.

![A still from Mystery Science Theater 3000, aired October 23, 1993](image)

According to King, camp and cheese are the comedic tools by which *MST3K* operates through its cast of meta-viewing puppets. King posits both *MST3K*’s camp, by King’s definition “an ironic distance on the part of the viewer,” and its engagement of cheese, in the consumption of “movies are not only extravagant in content, but are ineptly envisioned (King 46).” King argues that in particular, this “sensibility of cheese is essential to *MST3K*” (46) I believe that the combination of camp and cheese reflects the very sensibility responsible for the effect I observed in my classrooms.
Armed with the knowledge that our brains will react strongly to bad films because they are bad, we are ready to apply the lens of camp and cheese to a few less-than-masterworks of the Italian cinema.

**The Miracle of Cheap Special Effects. *Miracolo a Milano* (1951)**

As a disclaimer, I do not hold the opinion that De Sica’s *Miracolo a Milano* is a poor film, certainly lightyears better than the 1980s sci-fi examples to follow. The film, a neorealism-meets-magical-realist tale of solidarity, intentionally devolves into the ridiculous in its final act¹, when the protagonist, Totò (Francesco Golisano), acquires magical powers which serve as a *deus ex machina* to untangle the film’s class-strife plot. Surely, De Sica intended for the specific episode to which I will allude to be silly. But what drives moments of the film into the category of camp is the great progress special effects have made since 1951, making De Sica’s efforts seem laughably clumsy to the contemporary viewer. The best example of this is when Totò uses his powers to clothe the residents of his shantytown in top hats, coats and tails.

¹ See, for example, the officers sent to break up a slum whose voices burst into absurd, operatic song (De Sica 1:08:18).
As the viewer can see, Totò’s proletarian companions are instantaneously and quite jarringly made into signori. It is at this point that students in my courses universally began to chuckle incredulously and comment on the shoddiness of this and other special effects. In my fourth-semester language course, this was the transitional moment where I channeled the discussion into a review of that ubiquitous Italian textbook vocabulary list on clothing. With this scene etched into the class’s collective memory, we suddenly had a context to help the students remember cappelli a cilindro, pellicce, abiti da sera, and so on. Thus, Miracolo a Milano achieved something that high production value documentary videos on Italian haute couture could not.

Alas, Poor Yor. Il Mondo di Yor (1983)

The worst of the three film examples in this essay is certainly Il Mondo di Yor, an ill-begotten mess of a sci-fi/fantasy epic directed by Anthony M. Dawson (né Antonio Margheriti). The film, shot amid the famous “fairy chimney” rock formations of Cappadocia, Turkey, begins in a world inspired by Conan the Barbarian (released a year earlier), where our hero, the amnesiac, loincloth-clad Yor (Reb Brown, having fallen considerably from the heights of his 1979 made-for-TV stint as Captain America), must save an unsuspecting village, first from a “stegoceratops” (yes, that is a cross between a stegosaurus and a triceratops), and then a rogue tribe of hirsute bandits. Halfway through the film, the search for Yor’s past leads him to the underground lair of the “Overlord” (John Steiner), the mad scientist who rules Yor’s world, and whose high-tech laboratory and storm troopers belong unmistakably to a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away².

I have found this film, which positively oozes cheese, to be an exceptionally good tool for practicing the ever-elusive distinction between the passato prossimo and the imperfetto. The action sequences are so memorably awful that students who have trouble grasping the concept seem to have a heightened awareness of small background details, sequences of events (simultaneous and interrupted), and detailed recollections of physical attributes. The best example of how this works is found in the stegoceratops fight scene (Dawson 7:00). Here, Yor, his love interest Ka-Laa (Corinne Cléry), and her father Pag (Luciano Pigozzi), are somehow taken

² Return of the Jedi was released a few months before Yor and, it shows. The scenes in the Overlord’s lair are rife with green and red laser blasts and shiny-suited, faceless minions.
by surprise by the giant, lumbering, beast, and are forced to fight for their lives. The beginning of the sequence has a moment that never fails to amuse. Before the battle begins in earnest, Ka-Laa admonishes Yor to be careful (7:10). Then, the camera zooms in on Yor, gazing at Ka-Laa, blithely taking his eyes off the (presumably deadly) dinosaur to broadcast his infatuation.

Prompted with the appropriate vocabulary (combattere, saltare, ferire, ruggire, ascia, dinosauro, perizoma, etc.), my students have been inspired to write lengthy summaries of the cheesy mayhem, in a classroom where a relaxed sense of hilarity reigns.


My final example will turn from grammar exercises to a cultural activity, taking inspiration from Lucio Fulci’s 1984 sci-fi dystopia I guerrieri dell’anno 2072. This film, which oscillates exquisitely between camp and cheese, is set in a future world where an arms race over television ratings has engendered a return to gladiatorial combats to the death in the Colosseum, with motorbikes serving as the chariots of choice. Our hero, Drake (sci-fi veteran Jared Martin), is a futuristic Spartacus who leads his fellow gladiators in a revolt to loosen the grip of the television corporations and win the heart of the love interest, a genial computer programmer (Eleonora Brigliadori). The film was shot on location throughout Rome, and indeed its first and last sequences pan over a Roman cityscape dotted with superimposed skyscrapers and maxi-screens reminiscent of Blade Runner (released two years earlier).
From the Vatican to the Vittoriano. *I guerrieri dell’anno 2072* (1984), 1:44-2:00

The film, which mostly alternates between a blaring Riz Ortolani score and the roar of motorcycle engines, has proven to be an effective artifact for reviewing landmarks presented in my fourth-semester Italian course’s unit on Rome. First, I ask the students to watch the initial scene followed by a scene where the redoubtable “Praetorian” gladiators ride their motorcycles through the *centro storico*, and list the monuments they see.


This review feeds into a new writing activity, in which the students are asked to invent their own dystopian vision the Eternal City fifty years from now. Using existing vocabulary from their textbook, the students reliably come back with elaborate, creative, and occasionally hilarious dystopias, including such horrors as cappuccinos being drunk late into the evening, Linea C (along with Linee D, E, F, and G) remaining in a perpetual state of construction, and the fusion of Roma and Lazio into a single, purple team.
To the Classroom and Beyond

While the experiences shared in this essay are admittedly anecdotal, and a properly controlled study would be needed to ascertain the existence of a positive “bad film” effect (e.g. setting up an assignment where half a class is exposed to Yor, and the other is not, or perhaps a third group that watches L’avventura, then measuring respective levels of retention), it is my suspicion that the phenomenon I have observed is unlikely to be limited to my experience or my university setting. Ironizing poor-quality films seems too integral a part of (at least the American) youth experience for it to be anomalously successful in my specific case. As we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, I find great encouragement in the fact that we are witnessing the international proliferation of forgotten Italian films and television from prior eras (primarily through YouTube and other streaming services, where copyright holders seem increasingly content to let unauthorized rips of forgotten titles live on). Indeed, campy and cheesy Italian films have never been available to a wider audience than they are today. A final lesson that we may perhaps learn from bad films is their ability to break down students’ typical diffidence towards Italian film, which they have evidently been trained to regard as high art, to be taken entirely seriously. The democratization of types of Italian content available to the L2 instructor may help to break down this barrier; an obviously bad film signals that no reverence is called for. It is in this space, where our brains are finely attuned to record the negative, in a culture where mockery of camp and cheese is a formative experience, that we may truly open up our students in a novel way to the possibilities of experimentation in a new language.

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EMPATHY ON THE OTHER SIDE: COMMUNITY AND CARE IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

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“I think we all have empathy. We may not have enough courage to display it.”

– Maya Angelou

The traditional language classroom offers emotional support and a sense of community to vulnerable students who feel isolated and struggle to find their footing in an unfamiliar university environment. It is no mystery that mental illness can stem from feelings of loneliness, often exacerbated by society’s reliance on social media. Today more than ever, students connect superficially on media platforms based on personal branding. It is a virtual world that if not used carefully artfully grooms egocentrism while decreasing self-awareness and constructive communication. Face-to-face language courses help to improve social skills through consistent interaction in a safe environment that motivates students to let down their guard, interact eye-to-eye, and engage meaningfully on a regular basis. Moreover, a classroom founded on empathy, community, and care facilitates learning. In turn, students become more socially and academically confident, and thus they are more likely to succeed in any course or career. The issue at hand is how do language instructors compensate in the virtual classroom for the loss of social-emotional benefits associated with traditional classroom teaching?

In the face of COVID-19, students have been called on to complete their coursework online while sequestered at home. This transition has left many students anxious and longing to return to their in-person classes. I propose that now more than ever, instructors have a moral obligation to mindfully bring the practice of empathy to the virtual classroom. In this paper I discuss the multiple factors that influence one’s ability to empathize. Thereafter, I examine the various reasons why face-to-face language classes are particularly conducive environments for developing empathic skills. Finally, I explore several ways in which language instructors can bring empathy to the asynchronous online classroom.

Numerous researchers have written about the benefits of empathy, which attests to the importance of this topic. Ultimately, however, this has caused several definitions of empathy to exist simultaneously. Thus, for the purpose of this paper I shall rely on the meaning of empathy as outlined by Theresa Wiseman. I have chosen to employ Wiseman’s definition of empathy, because she has succeeded in carving out an operational definition of empathy through a concept analysis of the term. The four main attributes of empathy according to Wiseman are as follows:

1.) See the world as others see it
2.) Non-judgmental
3.) Understanding another’s feelings
4.) Communicate the understanding

Instructors of all subjects should plan lessons with an eye towards incorporating the four attributes of empathy, keeping in mind that it is the cornerstone of emotional intelligence, which “leads to an increased ability to sense one’s own emotions in others, appropriately express emotions, more deftly manage conflict, better predict outcomes, and thereby become more effective in class and at work.” Although there are countless benefits to fostering empathy in the classroom, if it is not cultivated carefully students may empathize selectively, for example, with peers of common cultural and ethnic identity. It is not enough for students to empathize with their like-minded neighbors. As such, it is imperative that instructors motivate students to empathize with people of all backgrounds. When a person is moved to empathize

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8 For more recent publications that focus on the importance of empathy, see Krznaric (2014); McLaren (2013); Riess and Neporent (2018); Ross (2019); Waal (2009); and Zaki (2020).
with one member of a stigmatized group, they are subsequently more likely to empathize with
the entire stigmatized group.\textsuperscript{11} Therefore, it seems that creating a classroom environment in
which students are inspired to relate to individuals who differ from themselves increases the
likelihood that they will continue to show concern for diverse communities of people
throughout their lives, whether on campus, in the workplace, at home, or abroad.

Various factors shape one’s capacity to take the perspective of others. Helen Demetriou
emphasizes that biology, personality, and “nurture-related environmental influences” are
important components that impact an individual’s ability to empathize.\textsuperscript{12} Fortunately,
instructors can help compensate for setbacks caused by a lack of secure attachment and
emotional sharing in the student’s home environment by building rapport based on trust, care,
and appreciation. Nadine Dolby underscores that it is the work of the instructor to “find a way
to respect and walk beside [their] students, to listen intently to what they are saying, and to
work with them so they can broaden their circles of empathy and their knowledge about the
world.”\textsuperscript{13} It is crucial that college instructors dedicate themselves to developing their students’
empathic competency with the same fervor as do kindergarten instructors. Indeed, college-
level language educators are not merely responsible for exposing students to the hard content
of verbs, vocab, adjectives, and syntax. As Franzese reminds us, “Without empathy, we are
teaching content instead of students.”\textsuperscript{14} Accordingly, it is essential that instructors keep social-
emotional goals in mind as they plan lessons.

Practicing empathy is a skill that requires students to put themselves in a position of
vulnerability. In particular, language classes are an ideal space for instructors to help students
hone their empathic capacities, because they require a high degree of openness and emotional
exposure. Thus, classroom activities may initially feel alien to those who are, for example, of
diffident disposition or ill-equipped to express feelings and respond to others in a productive
manner. Language instructors should be aware that students who are slow to participate in
activities may feel uneasy or overwhelmed. In order to reduce student angst, it is important that

\begin{itemize}
\item Daniel C. Batson et al., “Empathy, Attitudes, and Action: Can Feelings for a Member of a Stigmatized
\item Nadine Dolby, “Reaching Our Students: The Journey to Empathy,” \textit{Rethinking Multicultural Education
\item Franzese (2017), 695.
\end{itemize}
instructors create a safe space that reduces affective filters. Effective instructors are not afraid to show empathy and vulnerability, and it is through modeling that they encourage students to do the same. As students slowly adjust to the environment and expectations of their language course, with the aid of icebreakers and communicative activities, they will connect more easily with their instructor and peers. Fortunately, the highly interactive nature of language classes gives students a plethora of opportunities to express themselves. As is to be expected, each individual brings their diverse opinions and experiences to the classroom, providing all students with the opportunity to collaborate with peers who offer new perspectives and thus enrich the learning environment. It is, however, crucial that students exercise empathetic tolerance throughout their exchanges.

Undoubtedly, the four main attributes of empathy are pertinent to all language classes. First, many students are compelled to learn a second language precisely because they desire to travel abroad and live like locals for a period of time. Instructors incite students to walk in the shoes of others, whether through role play, information gap activities, or other exercises. In doing so, students glean a firsthand glimpse into how different individuals view the world around them. Second, language classes are judgement-free spaces that invite curiosity and awareness with open arms while challenging students to examine cultural assumptions and stereotypes. Third, language classes encourage students to understand the feelings of others through film, music, literature, and other mediums. Finally, students are prompted to communicate their understanding of the target culture via physical, written, or oral response activities.

However, language classes do not just stimulate students to engage empathetically with the target language culture, they push students to relate to their peers, and in turn, to reflect on their own selfhood. For example, in a think-pair-share activity I asked students to compare the schedule of an Italian college student, the protagonist of the reading at hand, with their own schedules. A pair of students came to the conclusion that their agendas were more different than similar. Student A lamented how he spent less time at home with his family than the Italian college student, because he had to participate in extracurricular activities. Student B chimed in and expressed wearily that he would like to spend more time either at home with his family or pursuing hobbies, but that he is constrained to work evenings to make ends meet. Student A conveyed concern for student B and openly acknowledged the hurdles student B had to
overcome in order to attend class. Not only was student A empathizing with student B, but we can presume that student A was also prompted to reflect on his own privileged position. In essence, language classes fuel connection and inspire students to make the vulnerable choice to sharpen their empathic capacities. Language classes necessitate that students feel with their fellow pupils, and when students invest in learning about others, they also shed light on their own subjective inner world. Yet, given that all educational classes are presently taking place virtually, how does the role of empathy translate into the online classroom?

One of the main challenges that instructors face during this unprecedented time of COVID-19 is creating online learning environments that promote empathy. Many instructors agree that the role of empathy in the online sphere is compromised due to distance. Glenn Russell describes distancing as “a separation in time or space that reduces the empathy that a person may have for the suffering of others. Distancing results from human, mechanical, or electronic agencies.”15 Among other setbacks to online teaching, Russell highlights that empathy, as well as mutual respect and congeniality, are more difficult to accomplish in the online classroom as a result of distance.16 To further dash hopes of cultivating community in the online sphere, Franzese asserts that “facelessness is the portent of indifference. Engagement and meaning depend on proximity.”17 Undeniably, some of the most well-intentioned instructors have difficulty welcoming the idea that there is space for empathy in the online sphere. Consequently, they do not seek to compensate for social-emotional setbacks that the virtual classroom presents. Accordingly, it is understandable that instructors of online courses tend to receive lower student ratings of instruction than those who teach face-to-face courses.18 In order to improve the quality of online courses, instructors must implement activities that increase student interaction and a sense of community.19 Despite the various obstacles online teaching presents, instructors have an ethical duty to expend the same time and effort, if not more, preparing virtual courses as they do preparing face-to-face ones. This requires that each semester instructors dedicate energy to attending workshops and exploring new methods and

16 Ibid., 2.
17 Franzese (2017), 704.
19 Ibid., 77.
tools that they can implement specifically in their online courses. Indubitably, learning is an ongoing process for students and instructors alike.

In the wake of the recent country-wide transition to virtual classes, faculty are beginning to discuss the best practices for future online courses. A major question of debate is whether they should be taught synchronously or asynchronously. Inevitably, there are pros and cons to both types of courses. Synchronous ones tend to mirror the face-to-face classroom in format but are more likely to create logistical issues. Some students work erratic hours and cannot commit to a fixed class schedule, others do not have reliable access to a stable internet connection, and no small number of students are unable to attend virtual lessons in a calm environment devoid of kids and commotion. In other instances, students cannot escape the vigilant eye of family members who disapprove of course content. Asynchronous classes, on the other hand, offer more flexibility, less social pressure, and students can access and complete assignments at their leisure. However, the convenience of the asynchronous classroom does not come without a slew of setbacks: instant feedback, live discussions, higher levels of accountability, as well as the instructor’s ability to quickly identify unmotivated students, to name just a few components, are lost or compromised in the asynchronous classroom. Yet, perhaps the greatest detriment to asynchronous courses is the lack of community and opportunity for collaboration and empathic exchange. Indeed, these shortcomings are perhaps the most serious and unnecessary of all, because with informed planning all instructors have the competence to nurture emotional intelligence in the online sphere.

It is of utmost importance that instructors do not overlook the affective domain for the sake of convenience. Before setting out to teach an online course, it is essential that instructors reflect on potential hindrances they may encounter during the semester: “[O]nline teachers have a moral imperative to consider how the choice or application of technology constrains their interactions with students.” Accordingly, instructors should not merely transfer their face-to-face curriculum to the online classroom. In most cases, activities devised for the traditional classroom will have to be revised or even cast aside and reinvented in order to meet the needs of the online classroom. Although there is presently a plethora of online tools available for educational purposes, as with all learning materials, not all of them are of high quality, and as

20 Ibid., 4.
21 Russell (2005), 1.
such, should be selected with discretion. Even students who are tech savvy may feel frustrated when required to employ more than a few online platforms for class purposes. Thus, each semester it is advantageous if instructors choose around three online learning sites to use in their language courses. Instructors should be prepared either to provide clear and simple written instructions or to invite students to join optional training sessions via video meetings. It is important that when choosing platforms for use in online classes, instructors take into consideration the level of their language students in combination with the learning goals of the course. In his article “Building Empathy in Online Courses: Effective Practical Approaches” (2012), Richard Fuller highlights that “the fundamental principle for effective on-line teaching is for instructors to derive a realistic understanding of learners’ needs and their expectations of the online program, while adapting the instruction to the learners’ level of skill and perspective.” Throughout the semester, it is favorable if instructors request student feedback so that they can tweak course materials to better serve the diverse needs of their pupils.

It is not enough for online teachers to be organized and available. They must continuously gauge how students feel throughout the online course experience and make necessary adjustments. Fuller maintains that empathy is more relevant to the online environment than the face-to-face one. He differentiates between instructor presence and empathetic practice in the online sphere: “Presence is the instructor being visible and active in a course which does play a role in promoting empathy. Empathetic presence however goes deeper and is the ability for the instructor to understand online students’ needs, being constantly aware of how they are receiving and processing information.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, instructors who have an empathetic presence tend to be more successful online educators. Fuller set out to understand the habits of effective online graduate and undergraduate instructors who are recognized for their empathetic interaction with students. He gathered valuable feedback from fourteen outstanding online instructors from seven universities. These instructors shared the practices they employed in both the planning and active teaching phases of their asynchronous courses:

1.) Instructors provide a “tips for online course success” document prior to

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22 Fuller (2012), 39.
23 Ibid., 39.
24 Ibid., 43.
Empathy on the Other Side: Community and Care in the Online Classroom ● Eilis Kierans

a class beginning.

2.) Empathetic interactive instructors use synchronous chat rooms.
3.) Instructors use a conversational tone.
4.) Interaction is promoted through careful facilitation in the discussion boards.
5.) Empathetic presence is practiced.
6.) Design “think forward type lessons” that offer clarity for student understanding.
7.) Instructors use frequent checks for learning.
8.) Instructors make a personal connection at the start of a class.

The majority of strategies employed by the fourteen online instructors are not particularly laborious or time-consuming. They do, however, require a fair amount of foresight and sensitivity—emotional intelligence—on the instructor’s behalf. Thus, despite that the asynchronous online instructor will likely spend minimal intervals of synchronous time communicating with students, they will interact with them much more frequently, although arguably in more simple ways, than the face-to-face instructor.

Online instructors should keep in mind that some students are less suited to take online courses than others. In his chapter “The Theory of Distance Education” (2003), Börje Holmberg suggests a comprehensive theory of distance education in which he points out that learning remotely is convenient for self-sufficient adults who cannot or do not want to participate in classroom activities: “[Distance Education] aims at benefiting from the expected maturity of these students, usually assumes a certain amount of student independence and aims at promoting it further.”25 However, as experience has evidenced, some college students are neither mature nor particularly independent, especially at the undergraduate level. Furthermore, many college students, who are presently constrained to complete their coursework online during the current pandemic, typically avoid online classes precisely because they prefer the intimacy of face-to-face, hands-on instruction and perform better in the traditional classroom. As such, it is advantageous if online instructors reach out individually to students who miss assignments or receive low scores. In many cases, instructors will need to

25 Börje Holmberg, “The Theory of Distance Education,” Distance Education in Essence (Bibliotheks 2003) 38-39.
video chat weekly with at-risk students. Keep in mind that video chat is always preferable to phone chat, as body language and social subtext speak just as loud as words. In sum, it is favorable if online instructors have a virtual, open-door policy. Thus, unlike face-to-face instructors who typically deal with student issues and enquiries during set times, such as class or office hours, online instructors must brace themselves to broach student concerns at sporadic times, night or day, weekend or weekday. Moreover, instructors should respond to student correspondence as quickly as possible, ideally within a few hours. As students gradually adapt to the requirements of their online courses, it is essential that instructors check in with all students through various means: email, forums, polls, or optional group meetings, which can be recorded and stored for later review. During the present climate of fear and uncertainty, students will likely touch base with instructors more frequently than usual; some are in need of emotional support just as much as course content support. In some cases, it will be necessary to direct students to mental health services provided by the university. It is vital that instructors prepare themselves to serve as a liaison between students and psychosocial services during this period of increased vulnerability. A compassionate instructor and community-centered classroom, however, can provide some solace to volatile students.

Language instructors have a wide variety of online tools at their fingertips that help students connect to each other, so in turn, they may connect more deeply to course content. Unsurprisingly, some platforms are more interactive than others. I will focus on three particularly enriching programs that promote community and care in the online classroom: Flipgrid, Vialogues, and Edmodo. Flipgrid is a fun and highly interactive website that allows instructors to post questions and other supporting materials to which students respond asynchronously via video. Students also engage with the work of their peers through video responses that can be accessed by all participants. An additional perk to the program is that instructors can email written and video feedback to their students directly through the site. Vialogues is another nifty learning tool that promotes discussion around videos. Instructors upload a video that they either create or select from YouTube or Vimeo. They write thought-provoking questions to which students respond as they watch the video. The program is organized similarly to a forum and makes it seamless for students to dialogue with one another’s written comments and questions. Conveniently, by clicking on a student’s time-stamped contribution, participants are directed to the video’s corresponding sequence. Edmodo is a
learning management system that functions similarly to Facebook. It is like a virtual homeroom, providing a safe social environment for students of all levels. Instructors use Edmodo for multiple purposes. They post videos and assignments, provide feedback, poll student opinions, create discussions, and engage in live chat with students. Instructors even use Edmodo to connect their language classroom to other language groups around the world. Indeed, there are many highly effective online programs that increase empathic exchange through oral, written, and visual collaboration. However, before online instructors integrate learning tools into their curriculum, they must carefully consider potential issues students may encounter while using programs of interest. Instructors should spend ample time assessing course materials before the start of the academic semester.

Because the social-emotional component of learning is just as important as the cognitive one, learning is facilitated when instructors reinforce empathy, community, and care in the classroom. Moreover, students are more motivated to learn when feelings of empathy are a prioritized part of a course. It is not enough for online instructors to simply manage a class in the virtual sphere. Through research, planning, and foresight, online instructors can create lively online classrooms that promote friendships and tight-knit student-teacher relationships. Many adults who grew-up in the traditional, face-to-face classroom look back fondly on a special teacher who showed them compassion and fostered a growth mindset. Will Generation Z students warmly remember their online instructors in a similar vein? It is the responsibility of online language educators to construct a virtual community that does not merely teach content, but that promotes cultural fluency, open-mindedness, and kindness. Indeed, distance learning has come a long way since its beginnings in 1837, when Sir Isaac Pitman became the father of distance learning with the development of his shorthand correspondence course. Pitman received student work through the post, corrected it, and then returned it with comments and words of encouragement. Although computers have since made correspondence easier than ever, the array of resources at our feet is futile and we risk resigning ourselves to Pitman’s purely pragmatic teaching practices if we do not invest our time and creativity into building an online learning environment founded on empathy, community, and care.

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In loving memory of Ms. Nuala Mullen, whose warmth and wit touched us all.

Works Cited


RE-ENVISIONING THE ITALIAN CURRICULUM THROUGH ACTIVE LEARNING AND LITERACY

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By now, all instructors and faculty in the profession of world languages teaching should be familiar with the findings of the 2007 MLA report “New Structures for a Changed World.” The report summarized the status of foreign languages in higher education in the USA, concentrating on declining enrollments and on the discrepancies that exist between current curricula, the needs of students who take foreign languages, and students’ “exit” competences in the second language at the end of their study in programs in North American colleges and universities. The report also offered recommendations for closing the gap between these discrepancies and making curricula more relevant to the needs of today’s students, suggesting the inclusion of transcultural competence as well an integrative approach with updated course offerings. Many other documents, theories, recommendations and models followed this report. The most important ones, which are also relevant to this article, are the ACTFL 21st century skills document that ties world language study to the soft skills and recommendations suggested by the MLA report; the ACTFL redesigned proficiency guidelines and “Can do statements” that better render the specific competences of students in world languages and now also include Intercultural Communication; the multiliteracies approach advocated by several academics, which is inspired by Kern’s Literacy theory and offers a framework for its applicability to training the professoriate to teach this classroom approach.

There is, therefore, a sense that pedagogies, like the Communicative Language Teaching method, no longer satisfy the needs or desires of today’s world language students. As initially reported by the MLA 2007 Report and echoed by many academics, a break in the curriculum between the language sequence –i.e. lower division courses– and the content courses –i.e. upper division courses– persists and it perpetuates a monopoly of traditional courses. This leads to several perceptions about language courses: that the lower division courses are not challenging or relevant enough and that learning of the target language is not being continued and developed in the upper-division courses, which are usually taught in English. Many academics are instead advocating for a model, in which language learning continues throughout
the major and upper division courses, and where items such as content and pragmatics are also explored more in depth in lower division courses.

Most importantly, probably, is the sense that currently in world languages there is a discrepancy between the desired and achieved outcomes pertaining to competence in the target language at the end of either the language sequence, or upon completion of the major in a world language. It must be noted that although curriculum design plays a role in such a discrepancy, factors such as time on task, opportunities to practice, a supportive environment and student motivation are also involved. (Davidson and Shaw). Nevertheless, as shown by a study that aligns the ACTFL proficiency scale with the CEFR ratings, students who have completed the language sequence –i.e. Advanced X language– should thus be at the advanced level of the ACTFL proficiency scale or at the C level of the Common European Framework of Reference. However, oftentimes this is not the case and students find themselves at the lower end of the tiers, such the “Novice High/Intermediate¹ Low” level of the ACTFL scale and at the A2/B1 level of the CEFR ratings.

This situation leads to the need to better reconnect language learning to the multiple competencies required by contemporary society. Language teaching must also emphasize the relationship between language learning and the development of 21st century skills (ACTFL), including intercultural competence, also known as transcultural competence. This poses the issue of re-examining the curriculum placing an emphasis on multiple competencies. In essence, there is a need to form students of world languages in a way that they will gain competencies or skills that are not only of a linguistic and cultural nature, but that will also be applicable to their future work, and useful in contemporary society.

**Literacy, Intercultural Competence and Active Learning - Possible Answers to These Challenges**

In the field of world languages, one answer in response to these challenges and needs is the growing interest in multiliteracies approaches. The concept of Literacy as formulated in 2000 by Richard Kern is at the heart of these current approaches. An expert in French sociolinguistics, Kern proposed the following more encompassing new definition of literacy:

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¹ ACTFL OPI (Oral Proficiency Interview) Workshop, Middlebury, VT, 2010
Literacy is the use of socially-, historically-, and culturally-situated practices of creating and interpreting meaning through texts. It entails at least a tacit awareness of the relationships between textual conventions and their contexts of use and, ideally, the ability to reflect critically on those relationships. Because it is purpose-sensitive, literacy is dynamic—not static—and variable across and within discourse communities and cultures. It draws on a wide range of cognitive abilities, on knowledge of written and spoken language, on knowledge of genres, and on cultural knowledge. (Kern, "Literacy" 16)

Given that currently there is no official Italian definition of the concept of literacy as defined by Kern, and there are no studies in Italian that cite Kern’s theory or translate this concept, it is relevant to propose a translation whenever and wherever it is discussed. The definition below is my translation:

Literacy\(^2\) è l’utilizzo di prassi pedagogiche che mirino alla contextualizzazione dei materiali inserendoli nel loro contesto sociale, storico e culturale per creare e interpretare significati attraverso i testi. Coinvolge almeno la consapevolezza implicita delle relazioni tra le convenzioni testuali e il loro uso contestualizzato e, idealmente, l’abilità di riflettere in modo critico su tali relazioni. In quanto sensibile agli scopi da raggiungere, la literacy è dinamica—non statica—variabile culturalmente all’interno di comunità dove si forma il discorso. La pratica della literacy attinge elementi da una varietà di abilità cognitive, dalla conoscenza di testi scritti e della lingua parlata, dalla conoscenza dei generi e dalla conoscenza della cultura di provenienza. (Annalisa Mosca)

This concept has gained ground within the field of second language acquisition as it is seen by many as the philosophy posited as the basis of the Pedagogy of Multiliteracies (Allen & Paesani) which in turn is considered as the approach in world language teaching that will replace Communicative Language Teaching (Liskin-Gasparro 2013). In fact, even in its transformed applications of Contemporary Language Teaching (Van Patten), the CLT method no longer seems

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\(^2\) In the translation, the term “literacy” is maintained in English as there is no appropriate translation for that term in Italian, and this follows the recommendations discussed by Banzato in her 2014 study Analisi critica degli approcci di ricerca della literacy pedagogy.
to fit the needs of students while approaches based on Literacy are viewed as the next development in the field.

Kern’s definition is an encompassing one that includes multiple competencies as well as different skills. It must also be noted that Kern’s concept seems to be the predecessor for other official guidelines, statements and recommendations that have been subsequently published by several professional associations. A few notable mentions are the ACTFL Global Competence Statement, two VALUE rubrics of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, the QCER/CEFR, and several definitions of Intercultural Competence, most notably the one by Guilherme. The noticeable similarities are the result of personal observations performed while preparing for workshops and presentations. Although, as of today, no documentation has been uncovered that shows whether these documents were in fact informed by or based on Kern’s concept, they contain significant portions or wording that echo and resonate with key points contained in the definition of literacy that he formulated. In the field of world languages, these parallels, especially with the widely referenced AAC&U Value Rubrics and with the concept of Intercultural Competence, are of significant importance as they place world language teaching within a larger institutional framework and within current desirable multi-disciplinary skills. It follows that these documents, coupled with Kern’s literacy and the Pedagogy of Multiliteracies, can be used both to advocate for the importance of world languages as well as to make evident to other departments and to administrators how world languages fit within the new principles and competencies that are being promoted by many institutions.

Another concept that universities are dealing with, is related to student motivation and making students more involved in courses. At Purdue University, the department of Teaching and Learning has been promoting the framework of Active Learning, via grants called IMPACT grants that are awarded to faculty to help them redesign their courses, modifying the delivery format to include a large portion of activities that engage students, and making a more efficient use of technology. This concept of active learning is informed by the theory of self-determination (Deci & Ryan)³ and transformative learning based on Bloom’s taxonomy. It advocates for student centered learning based on three principles:

³ Facilitators of the IMPACT program summarized principles from Deci & Ryan’s 2017 publication.
Autonomy: the feelings of volition and choice, endorsement of behavior, ownership of the learning process

Competence: the extent to which students believe they have mastered content material or are able to perform academically

Relatedness: the need to feel belongingness and connectedness with others and the material presented in class, also termed relevance

Having gone through the training for the grant, the process of active learning seems to be geared mostly towards transforming standard large lecture courses in non-liberal arts disciplines, many of which still follow a frontal lecture format. It also appears to relate more to quantitative rather than qualitative outcomes and results, whereas language standards are based instead on qualitative results. Both the ACTFL proficiency guidelines and the CEFR levels use qualitative descriptors and follow functional outcomes rather than quantitative scores and strict associations of exercises and activities to a single learning outcome. On the other hand, the three active learning components of autonomy, competence, and relatedness do seem to fit into the current theories of language teaching and address the recommendations related to student needs. If we combine the three components, we will find parallels to the multiliteracies principles and the 21st century skills. The active learning activities themselves comprise an umbrella of activities based on making students more independent in the choices they make within a given course, thus promoting engagement on the students’ part with the ultimate outcomes of competency or proficiency in the material studied. Many active learning activities are based on group work, discussion, presentations, peer work, and co-creation of content, i.e. negotiation of meaning or meaning-making. The program offers many resources that can help faculty promote this type of activity.

As can be seen from the types of formats encouraged by active learning, world language instructors, especially those teaching the language sequence, are halfway there; those formats are already part of the curriculum. It becomes a question of modifying some elements of the course rather than the entire course to make learning more engaged, “participatory” or in Italian “partecipato” and “active” or in Italian “attivo” as well as integrating short simple activities, to make the “why” behind the content and structures more explicit to students and, most of all, to help them make connections. It is preferable that these elements be integrated and repeated in
each module or unit so that students, while being challenged, already know what to expect from
the newly integrated elements.

**Descriptions of Examples of Activities That Are Informed by These Theories**

In the case of Italian, I have incorporated several examples of activities based on these
two methods in the curriculum, from the beginning through the intermediate level. The
activities are to be performed during classroom instruction and repeated throughout the
semester using the different grammatical structures and content presented. Let's discuss some
elements of *Literacy* informed activities and *Active Learning* informed activities that can be
immediately integrated into the World language classroom at any level. These activities are
meant to show how what happens in the classroom can easily be adapted and modified to fit
into the framework of current learning theories and trends.

**I. Literacy Informed Activities**

Before getting to the actual activities, it is worth noting that the concept of *literacy* can be
summarized into seven principles: language use, collaboration, interpretation, problem
solving, conventions, reflection, and cultural knowledge (Kern 2000). When one studies the
definition of *literacy*, it often seems like an idea that is appropriate only to the higher levels of
language learning because of the number of skills it involves. Nevertheless, I would argue that
these skills have various degrees of performance as appropriate to each level. For some, it might
not always be evident how this concept can be promoted from the beginning levels, but it bears
emphasizing that Kern himself advocates that *literacy* can be promoted from the early stages of
language learning. Therefore, the activities presented have been purposely created to support
this idea and show how it can relate to content and grammatical structures performed at the
earliest stages of the beginning level in language learning. Throughout the course, and in
subsequent courses, the framework of *literacy* is always in the background, and it is developed
as appropriate to each level. The activities are neither perfect nor a mandate but serve to
represent a practical example of what *literacy* informed activities might look like at the start of
the beginner levels.

(Image 1)
Activity 1: This is to be presented and performed when students learn numbers, telling time, and have seen the verbs essere (to be) and avere (to have) in Italian. Cultural snapshots or readings in textbooks vary, but likely will have included items such as the 24-hour clock, class schedule, other schedules, or Italian habits where the focus is simply the time when they take place. For the activity, the instructor writes the headings “L’orario in Italia” and “L’orario negli Stati Uniti” on the board. Students then work in groups to produce a series of sentences related to time for both Italy and the US based on the information they have just learned. The class is reconvened 5-10 minutes later, the exercise is corrected as a class and feedback is provided. Sample sentences that might emerge are as follows, albeit with some acceptable grammar mistakes that for the purposes of this article have been rendered correctly:

This activity is an activity at the basic level that moves beyond widely used exercises simply related to time (reading clocks, pronouncing hours and telling time) that are present in textbooks and reinforced by instructional practices. It also integrates some vocabulary that will be covered in more detail later on during the semester – at this stage, if needed, the instructor can provide the unfamiliar Italian words (pranzo, colazione, cena) using images instead of translation – thus challenging students a little. The text produced by students during the activity also provides an opportunity to begin addressing differences in cultural practices. Finally, students will be using or recycling recently learned grammatical structures, vocabulary as well as cultural elements they likely saw in English in their textbooks at this point – most textbooks shift readings to the target language at approximately the third unit. The activity satisfies many, if not all, of the seven principles of literacy: in particular, students need to use collaboration and problem solving to use the target language to co-create meaning that reflects cultural
knowledge. It also addresses the ACTFL 5Cs and especially that of comparison. It must be noted that, although practicing grammatical structures is part of language use, accuracy should not be the focus of this type of activity, especially at the basic level. As students continue with their language learning, that aspect may be given more attention when they learn to use language that is appropriate to their higher level of competence.

Activity 2: This activity can be performed immediately after students have seen the verb essere (to be) and have been introduced to cognates, usually during the first week of class. It can be performed as a class or in small groups which then reconvene for correcting and providing feedback. For the activity, the instructor provides students with a PowerPoint slide and/or a handout with the exercise below, asks students to figure out “Cos’è?” (What is it?) and explains the model. Students determine the relationships (match) between the items of both columns. Instead of simply performing a matching exercise (ex: L’Italia => “c”) students will instead follow the provided model to create a complete sentence.

| MODELLO: Il Pacifico ___ ___ ___ ___ => Il Pacifico è un oceano. |
|------------------|------------------|
| NOTA le parole analoghe = parole simili all’inglese (cognates = words similar to English) |
| l’Italia         | a) lago          |
| Como             | b) vulcano       |
| L’Adriatico      | c) penisola      |
| L’Etna           | d) isola         |
| La Toscana       | e) città         |
| Il Tevere        | f) regione       |
| Firenze          | g) mare          |
| Ischia           | h) fiume         |

Experienced instructors may remark that, save for a few words, the topic of the city, nature and all its related vocabulary is not usually presented at the beginning of the basic level – there are a few exceptions. This is irrelevant since the activity focuses on students’ problem-solving skills to recognize and use cognates in order to understand words they have not yet learned. Without a doubt, all instructors introduce their students to cognates; however, I would venture that, per
personal experience observing the instructors I coordinate, not as many reinforce the skill of recognizing cognates throughout the semester or practice this skill regularly with integrated activities. There is instead the opportunity to do just that and to also integrate cultural elements from the very beginning with an exercise such as the one proposed. The activity again satisfies many, if not all, of the seven principles of literacy. In particular, students will use problem solving skills to recognize vocabulary they likely do not know but they can reflect upon by practicing “cognate recognition.” They will then need to use collaboration in order to figure out the associations between the two columns in order to co-create meaning in the target language and this in turn reflects cultural knowledge as they form the correct relationships between the items of the columns.

II. Active Learning Informed Activities

There are many active learning informed activities that can be applied to the World language classroom. Below are examples that I have found to be most applicable, because they are also easily repeatable. Remember that active learning means giving more autonomy to the students so they are more engaged (relatedness) in the process of learning. Once again, the activities presented serve as an example of how the concept of active learning can be easily integrated into the classroom. The two I will present are “concept maps” and an activity called “A-Ha wall” or “A-Ha moment”. Everyone is familiar with concept maps but it is not always evident how and where they can be useful in the language classroom. Perhaps the immediate association is between concept maps and content, such as literature, culture or history. However, concept maps can easily be used to help students make connections and expand their short answers in the language classroom. The “A-Ha wall” or “A-Ha moment”, though variable and perhaps not always as successful as desired, is an activity that can lead to the ACTFL “can do statements” since the aim of the “A-Ha Wall” is also to have students realize and summarize what they have learned.

**Activity 1:** This activity can already be presented after introducing the verbs of the first category ending in “-are.” A very popular active learning activity is one that has been around for a long time, namely concept maps. Either in the form of a handout or on the board, the instructor will present students with a blank concept map, except for the initial center item which will be filled
with the chosen topic, for example “Cosa faccio? La mia giornata”. Students, either in small groups or as a class, will then provide responses to fill the remaining bubbles of the map with items related to the initial one, and the instructor will add what students say. Sample items that might emerge are as follows:

(Image 3)

In my class, this particular concept map activity was introduced after learning verbs in the present tense in Italian. The purpose of integrating the concept map was to help students make connections to the material which is usually presented in textbooks in separate sections, often in different units (verbs in -are, then -ere, then -ire, then irregular verbs) and as a list of verbs in the infinitive. Although textbooks and instructors explain how to conjugate verbs, students, who may not be used to study strategies for world languages, often do not realize what they are expected to do with the material, and they sometimes assume that studying the list will suffice. They do not make the connection between the explanation, practice activities and outcomes. The concept map helps them to both tie it all together in a functional manner and realize that they are producing language that is realistic in interpersonal communication. The activity was repeated, maintaining the same central circle item of “Cosa faccio? La mia giornata” (What do I do during my day?), and built upon after each section, mixing verbs of different endings learned up to that point. Finally, it was re-introduced at the end of the present tense, having students use verbs from all three conjugations (le tre coniugazioni di verbi) and irregular verbs as well.
A follow up to the concept map would be to have students either write a paragraph or produce an audio or video with additional details, for example for the “mangio” (I eat) bubble they could add at what time they eat and where they eat (“mangio alle 12 in mensa”). Just a technical note: it may be more practical to draw a concept map on a sheet of paper or have a widely available ready-made template that can be written on and projected with a document camera. However, a template in Microsoft’s “SmartArt’ in Word or PowerPoint can also be useful, keeping in mind that the more bubbles are added, the smaller the font will become once they are filled.

**Activity 2:** This activity can be performed as little or as much as desired, even during every lesson. The original “A-Ha wall” or “A-Ha moment” activity requires that the instructor mark off part of the blackboard or whiteboard and label it “A-Ha!”. As blackboards and whiteboards are erased, it is suggested, instead, to keep a running Word document, Wiki or discussion forum in the course’s Learning Management System and add to it every time the activity is performed. Throughout any lesson, when students learn or understand something, or students make a desired connection, the board or documents are gradually populated. This can be achieved either by the instructor writing the connection the student has made on the board or the student getting up from their desk and proceeding to the board to write their “A-Ha moment”. In a language classroom, an example might be connections made to the introduction questions presented and practiced immediately on the first day of class (*Come ti chiami? Come stai? Di dove sei? Quanti anni hai*?). The main purpose for these questions is to start the course in the target language, give students the takeaway that at the end of their very first class they have learned something that can already be put into practice (going out and meeting that Italian student on campus). The “A-Ha” part comes in subsequent class periods, per content progression: once the course gets to the point where the irregular verbs contained in those questions are covered and a student makes the connection with the verbs presented in those initial four questions. Students can make this connection by expressing it on their own, either in broken Italian or English (“stare” ... in “come stai?”) or by prompting on the instructor’s part (*ricordate “la lezione 1”*). Other examples might be students noticing similarities between structures (“praticare ... noi ... con “h” like giocare?”), students finally realizing that subject pronouns are not needed in Italian and making the shift to not using them – instructors will have
given constructive feedback on this but students do not always spontaneously replicate that feedback immediately.

It must be noted that this activity is highly variable. Per the experiences in my classes, it has seemed at times more successful if done not so much as an activity, but rather somewhat stealthily, while the instructor circulated in the classroom when students worked in small groups and asked, often in broken Italian, for confirmation of the connection made. It might even be more productive in the classroom to have the instructor suggest the connection, as in the prompting mentioned above, and then have students manifest it via an example. Nevertheless, the activity seemed to have an impact on helping students make certain connections to previously learned material, connections that were not made as readily prior to integrating the activity. Therefore, it is worthwhile to continue experimenting with the “A-Ha wall/moment” despite the challenges and the varying levels of success, since the activity as originally intended does not always achieve the desired results and needs to be modified in its application.

Conclusion

This article discussed the most current trends in world language learning as well as teaching in general. The focus of the discussion was on the multiliteracies approach based on Kern’s Literacy theory, as well as active learning. Practical activities were presented to showcase some examples of both theories with particular attention to the beginning levels of language learning. The activities served to show that, in order to follow the new trends and theories of language acquisition, instructors do not have to reinvent the wheel and do not have to completely revolutionize their courses. It is sufficient for instructors to understand what these new theories are promoting, and to slightly modify the way they currently teach, revamping the approaches they are familiar with, and seeing the activities they currently offer from another perspective and within a different framework that is more encompassing and functional.
Appendix

Figure 1: Summary visual of the definition of Literacy (Kern 2000) in English

Figure 2: Summary visual of the definition of Literacy (Kern 2000) in Italian – translation by Annalisa Mosca
Re-Envisioning the Italian Curriculum through Active Learning and Literacy • Annalisa Mosca

Figure 3: Visualization of the Active Learning philosophy in English

IMPACT philosophy of active learning to facilitate student learning through the principles of “Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness” and informed by Bloom’s taxonomy. Challenge for FL/humanities: redesign plan is more quantitative than qualitative.

Transformative learning that promotes in students the attitudes of being active and engaged.

Modify some elements of the course rather than the course itself

- Integrate activities that lead to the objectives
- Promote efficient connections within the material
- Render evident and explicit the “why” of any given task

Figure 4: Visualization of the Active Learning philosophy in Italian

IMPACT filosofia di apprendimento attivo per facilitare l’apprendimento degli studenti tramite i principi di “Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness” e informato dalla Bloom’s taxonomy. Sfida per le lingue straniere: più quantitativo che qualitativo.

Apprendimento trasformativo che promuove atteggiamento attivo, individuale e partecipato (engaged).

Modificare alcuni elementi del corso piuttosto che il corso intero

- Integrare attività che aiutano gli obiettivi
- Promuovere connessioni efficienti tra il materiale
- Rendere evidente il perché di un task

Works Cited


Re-Envisioning the Italian Curriculum through Active Learning and Literacy • Annalisa Mosca


CREARE, MODELLARE E CONDIVIDERE I CONTENUTI CON IL WEB 2.0:
ALCUNI SPUNTI DI RIFLESSIONE SULL’USO DI VOICETHREAD NELLA
CLASSE DI LINGUA

Alessandra Saggin
Columbia University

Introduzione

Il web di seconda generazione, il cosiddetto Web 2.0, secondo la definizione coniata da O’Reilly nel 2005 ha allargato e amplificato le possibilità di comunicazione online. Quotidianamente, milioni di persone interagiscono attraverso blog, collaborano su pagine wiki, pubblicano podcast e video, instaurano e coltivano relazioni attraverso i social network e valutano tutte queste forme di comunicazione attraverso feedback e meccanismi di ranking. Internet è diventato un network globale e dinamico, un insieme di comunità interconnesse, nelle quali l’utente diventa creatore di contenuti che possono essere modellati, condivisi e valutati.

Progressivamente, la tecnologia Web 2.0 e con essa gli strumenti CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication) sono entrati anche nei contesti di apprendimento delle lingue e hanno dato agli apprendenti e agli insegnanti la possibilità di provare nuove vie per esplorare l’uso della lingua. In letteratura si trovano studi che riconoscono i numerosi e vari benefici a livello pedagogico di questi strumenti. Sun (2012), per esempio, ha dimostrato l’importanza dell’uso di un voice blog e dei social network per migliorare le abilità orali dei suoi studenti. Sono state fatte anche delle ricerche per vedere come questi strumenti permettano di ottimizzare l’uso della lingua al di fuori della classe (Guth&Helm 2010, Kessler 2013), di accrescere la motivazione, stimolare la creatività, incrementare il livello di collaborazione e di interattività tra studenti e tra studenti e insegnante (Abrams 2011), di facilitare le abilità sociali (Arnold et al. 2005) e incrementare l’autonomia degli studenti (Curwood 2010, Kessler & Bikowski 2010, Bustamante et al. 2012). Questa tecnologia dà inoltre la possibilità agli apprendenti di accedere a molte risorse online e, grazie alla sua modalità asincrona, di connettersi senza costrizioni di tempo e di spazio. Gli strumenti CMC permettono diverse modalità di lavoro e apprendimento: in maniera indipendente, con la creazione di contenuti, e in maniera collaborativa, con la possibilità di aggiungere commenti. La ricerca ha indagato anche i benefici psicologici
Creare, modellare e condividere i contenuti con il Web 2.0: Alcuni spunti di riflessione sull’uso di Voicethread nella classe di lingua • Alessandra Saggin


Il progetto

In questo articolo esporrò alcuni spunti di riflessione su un progetto creato per la presentazione orale finale per il quale gli studenti hanno utilizzato Voicethread (VT) (www.voicethread.com), un’applicazione CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication) multimodale e asincrona. Essa permette di creare presentazioni con slide che contengono un insieme di media (immagini, documenti, video, audio) e possono essere usate come punto di partenza per una conversazione multisensoriale e interattiva tra studenti e tra insegnante e studenti. Voicethread permette di creare contenuti e scambiare idee con compagni e insegnante all’interno di una comunità di apprendimento virtuale che, nel caso in esame, è costituita da due classi di italiano intermedio II, che condividono lo stesso istruttore. Gli studenti assumono diversi ruoli: creano contenuti, leggono, ascoltano e commentano le presentazioni dei compagni e attraverso il feedback (ricevuto dall’insegnante e dai compagni) si aiutano reciprocamente a sviluppare nuove idee, a riflettere attivamente sulla lingua, rafforzando così, oltre alle conoscenze culturali, anche le loro abilità linguistiche, il lessico e la grammatica. VT è asincrono quindi gli studenti possono lavorare con il proprio ritmo senza subire pressioni di tempo e avere limitazioni di spazio, avendo così più libertà di riflettere e commentare.

Metodologia – contesto di studio

Il progetto è stato portato avanti nell’anno accademico 2017-18 con due classi di intermedio II (ITAL 1202) con otto studenti ciascuna. Il progetto orale finale, per la realizzazione del quale sono state impegnate cinque settimane, è stato annunciato a inizio semestre e, affinché gli studenti arrivassero preparati a loro compito finale, sono state organizzate delle sessioni per illustrare le principali caratteristiche di VT, imparare a pubblicare le presentazioni e inserire i commenti. Poiché la creazione dei commenti riveste un ruolo cruciale all’interno del progetto, a questa attività è stata dedicata una sessione, nella quale studenti e insegnante hanno discusso quali siano le caratteristiche di un buon commento, che possa produrre una riflessione e quindi un miglioramento della presentazione. L’insegnante ha poi postato su Canvas un video tutorial con tutte le informazioni necessarie per lavorare con VT. Alla luce degli studi condotti sull’uso di VT (Ching Y.H. – Hsu, Y.C. 2013; Mango 2017) in diversi contesti di insegnamento delle lingue, gli obiettivi principali del progetto erano i seguenti:

- migliorare le abilità di comunicazione orale degli studenti contestualmente al vocabolario e all’uso delle strutture grammaticali
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- creare una comunità online, costituita dalle due classi di Italiano Intermedio II, nella quale gli studenti potessero condividere e scambiarsi idee, cercando di sviluppare un senso di comunità e di appartenenza.
- dare agli studenti l’opportunità di partecipare ad una esperienza di apprendimento collaborativa, sfidando la loro attitudine a lavorare da soli.
- spingere gli studenti fuori dalla classe per usare le risorse umane, fisiche e ambientali di una città come New York, dove hanno la fortuna di studiare
- fare in modo che gli studenti sviluppassero una maggiore familiarità con le risorse tecnologiche
- migliorare l’autonomia di apprendimento degli studenti

Procedimento di lavoro

Il compito assegnato agli studenti prevedeva la scelta, l’esplorazione e quindi la presentazione di un aspetto della cultura italiana a NYC. Gli studenti sono stati invitati a scegliere un aspetto che per loro rivestisse una certa importanza e significato sulla base di conoscenze, interessi ed esperienze precedenti. Di conseguenza, gli studenti hanno scelto di fare presentazioni su aspetti culturali di vario genere: da una notte all’Opera a vedere Rigoletto o la Traviata, ad una passeggiata nel Bronx ad Arthur Avenue per fare una lezione di pasticceria e imparare a fare i cannoli, una serata in una pizzeria italiana, seguita da una breve chiacchierata con il titolare, la visione di un film italiano, una visita a Eataly per fare la spesa e bere un caffè espresso, una visita al Metropolitan Museum of Art per vedere la mostra sui disegni di Michelangelo, per citarne alcuni. L’esperienza su cui fare la presentazione doveva essere reale e quindi era necessario visitare il posto, raccogliere informazioni e produrre quindi una breve registrazione (circa 5-7 minuti) accompagnata da immagini, video e documenti. Dopodiché, la registrazione doveva essere caricata su VT, nella pagina dedicata alla classe, seguendo le indicazioni e le scadenze fornite dall’insegnante. A questo punto, le presentazioni erano visibili a tutti e pronte ad essere commentate dai compagni.

Il ciclo di lavoro collaborativo creato per la realizzazione del progetto consiste nelle seguenti fasi:
1. L’insegnante definisce e assegna il compito dando semplici istruzioni di base, lasciando gli studenti liberi di esprimere la loro creatività e preferenze in base alle loro precedenti esperienze, conoscenze ed interessi personali
2. Gli studenti analizzano il compito, cercano, valutano le informazioni necessarie per portarlo a termine, organizzano il testo per la presentazione sulla base della loro esperienza concreta
3. Caricano il loro materiale su VT affinché l’insegnante e i compagni possano vederlo e commentarlo
4. I compagni guardano le presentazioni, aggiungono i loro commenti, fanno domande
5. Gli studenti riflettono sui commenti e sul feedback ricevuto, controllano e rivedono il loro lavoro, infine creano una nuova presentazione
6. Commenti finali dell’insegnante.

La possibilità di commentare le presentazioni dei compagni, oltre a permettere di migliorare le capacità di espressione orale, ha permesso agli studenti di esprimere le loro idee e di accrescere le loro conoscenze culturali. Per esempio, dalla trascrizione dei seguenti scambi, uno su una serata all’Opera e l’altro su una visita ad Arthur Avenue, si può vedere come gli studenti abbiano creato un dialogo reale con molte idee e spunti per ampliare e integrare le rispettive presentazioni.
Esempi di attività (trascrizione audio)

Una serata all’opera

Studente A: grazie per avere illustrato “La Traviata” e per le foto della Metropolitan Opera. La tua presentazione dà tante informazioni interessanti che non conoscevo. Puoi aggiungere altre cose su Giuseppe Verdi? Qualche mese fa ho visto una statua di Giuseppe Verdi su Broadway. Lo sapevi? Sai perché hanno messo questa statua? Io non sono mai andato a vedere un’opera perché ho paura di annoiarmi. Che consigli dai?

Studente B: Grazie dell’idea. So che c’è una statua di Verdi, ma non ho molte informazioni. Adesso cerco di prendere più informazioni e le aggiungo. Scrivo anche dei consigli per una introduzione all’opera, così puoi andare a vedere alcune opere interessanti che non sono noiose.

Ho imparato a fare i cannoli!
Creare, modellare e condividere i contenuti con il Web 2.0: Alcuni spunti di riflessione sull’uso di Voicethread nella classe di lingua ● Alessandra Saggin


Studente B: Grazie del commento. Aggiungo la storia della ricetta e metto anche informazioni su altre ricette della Sicilia a New York. Un amico ha la nonna siciliana in New Jersey, chiedo a lui le informazioni.

Valutazione

Come in tutti i contesti di apprendimento, anche in attività in cui si usano strumenti CMC il momento della valutazione è centrale, in quanto dà agli studenti un feedback utile sul contenuto e sulla forma del loro contributo. Scegliendo dei criteri che seguissero gli obiettivi pedagogici formulati e tenendo in considerazione sia la tipologia del compito assegnato che il mezzo attraverso il quale svolgerlo, la griglia di valutazione è stata suddivisa in tre ampie categorie, all’interno delle quali sono stati valutati diversi elementi:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partecipazione 40%</th>
<th>Feedback, quantità di commenti, livello di interazione</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presentazione 30%</td>
<td>Uso efficace del materiale visivo e audio, creatività, strutture grammaticali, vocabolario, fluidità, accuratezza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contenuto 30%</td>
<td>Comprensibilità, uso di buone fonti, integrazione di vari elementi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

La griglia di valutazione è stata condivisa con gli studenti prima che questi iniziasse l’attività, per motivarli e promuovere un maggior numero di scambi.

Commenti degli studenti

Per valutare l’impatto delle attività svolte con CMC, se siano state efficaci o se abbiano creato dei problemi, alla fine del corso è stata impostata una survey ed è stato chiesto agli studenti di scrivere dei commenti sulla loro esperienza con VT, sullo sviluppo delle loro abilità
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orali, di interazione e tecnologiche. Sono stati guidati, nella scrittura di questi commenti, dalle seguenti istruzioni:

- Descrivi in generale al tua esperienza con VT. Questo progetto ti ha aiutato a migliorare le tue abilità orali? Se sì, spiega come.
- Racconta il momento in cui l’interazione su VT ti è sembrata particolarmente utile e/o difficile
- Hai trovato l’argomento assegnato interessante? Spiega le ragioni della tua risposta
- Condividi le tue idee sui commenti ricevuti dai compagni e dall’insegnante. Li hai trovati utili? Ne hai tratto vantaggio?

In generale gli studenti hanno apprezzato il progetto di presentazione orale e hanno detto che è stata un’opportunità per migliorare le loro capacità comunicative. Pensano inoltre che VT sia stato uno strumento efficace per lavorare sulla loro competenza orale e durante queste attività, abbiano avuto più occasioni per parlare con i compagni che se avessero fatto un progetto tradizionale (generalmente una presentazione accompagnata da un PowerPoint). Hanno anche apprezzato molto la natura interattiva e collaborativa del progetto e la possibilità di esplorare New York. Durante le cinque settimane del progetto, hanno avuto molte occasioni di scambiare idee con i compagni di classe e della classe parallela, praticando oltre alle abilità orali, anche l’ascolto e l’interazione. È stato apprezzato anche il feedback ricevuto dall’insegnante che li ha aiutati a migliorare la pronuncia, a rendere la loro produzione più corretta dal punto di vista linguistico e grammaticale, oltreché mantenere alta la loro motivazione.

La possibilità di registrare i propri commenti in maniera asincrona, senza limiti di spazio o di tempo, anche attraverso l’uso dello smartphone, li ha aiutati a superare timori e ansie derivanti dal parlare in pubblico e a gestire comodamente i tempi di lavoro. Per esempio, uno degli studenti commenta così:

*I am shy and usually get a bit anxious when I have to speak or do a presentation in front of the class. VT helped me a lot because it reduced stress and anxiety and I had the opportunity to use Italian to exchange ideas with my classmates in a more relaxed way. Sometimes I used the VT app on my smartphone, every time I saw something interesting*
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on campus or during a walk in the city. I think that VT is a great tool to practice speaking and listening in a fun way.

Vari studenti hanno inoltre evidenziato come VT sia un valido strumento per apportare cambiamenti e correzioni e rendere migliori le presentazioni:

I liked Voicethread because it allowed me to review my presentation over and over. I noticed my own mistakes and I usually ended up recording my responses several times before I published them. Moreover, the comments added by my classmates and by the teacher helped me review and integrate the presentation and make it more complete. By the end of the course, my speaking ability and the knowledge of Italian culture improved.

In maniera piuttosto simile, uno studente che ha sempre avuto problemi con la lingua ha sottolineato i progressi che ha raggiunto usando VT:

During my Italian classes, speaking has always been the most difficult thing for me. I noticed that at the beginning of the project, I spoke at a slower pace compared to my classmates, but after using VT for five weeks, I started to speak with less hesitation and errors. I found VT a great tool for speaking practice. I liked this project very much.

I commenti degli studenti dimostrano anche che l’uso di VT ha migliorato le capacità orali perché hanno potuto comunicare più facilmente, senza troppe restrizioni. Una buona percentuale di loro ha inoltre detto di aver tratto benefici dall’ascolto delle registrazioni e dei commenti dei compagni, poiché hanno potuto conoscerne meglio gli interessi, le esperienze e il background culturale. Molti di loro hanno apprezzato anche la velocità e la facilità di comunicazione:

Recording my voice was a smart way to give and receive comments. I had to pay attention to what my classmates said in order to respond to them. It gave me the opportunity to practice listening as well.

I vari commenti ci permettono di capire quanto sia stato fruttuoso per gli studenti interagire attraverso la voce e allo stesso tempo costruire e rinsaldare la loro sicurezza nell’uso dell’italiano in una comunicazione reale. Hanno inoltre sottolineato come la struttura del
compito abbia dato loro delle indicazioni chiare per condurre le attività orali. Tutti questi commenti si allineano ai risultati riportati negli studi di Ching e Hsu (2013) e di Lee (2014) a dimostrazione che VT, grazie alla sua multimodalità, facilita la condivisione delle conoscenze, la collaborazione e accresce la sicurezza. Molti di loro hanno detto che l’interazione con altri studenti in un gruppo classe e interclasse ha permesso di creare un ambiente amichevole attraverso il quale hanno avuto la possibilità di migliorare la loro sicurezza nel parlare, come si può evincere dal seguente commento:

_Interacting with a small group formed by my classmates and other students from another class created a high level of intimacy. I had the opportunity to know them well and I was comfortable to express my ideas and views. This project increased my speaking confidence and improved my speaking and listening skills. In addition, I met new friends._

Tali commenti suggeriscono come questo tipo di attività su VT abbia permesso di creare una interazione spontanea e un ambiente connesso dal punto di vista emotivo che ha fatto sviluppare l’impegno e la presenza sociale.

La scelta di far lavorare gli studenti fuori dalla classe per esplorare New York e i vari aspetti, talvolta nascosti, della cultura italiana li ha resi più consapevoli del forte legame tra il contesto di apprendimento e il mondo reale e ancora di più del ruolo da loro ricoperto nel creare connessioni tra ciò che si impara in classe e ciò che si impara in situazioni al di fuori della classe. _I enjoyed listening to my peers’ reports about different aspects of Italian culture in NYC. I found them interesting and informative. I’ve learned so many different things that I had never heard about._

Un altro aspetto positivo sottolineato dagli studenti è il livello di disciplina, responsabilità e autonomia che hanno raggiunto nel corso delle cinque settimane durante le quali si è sviluppato il progetto. Ognuno ha sentito un forte senso di responsabilità, dimostrando un alto livello di impegno, affinché il progetto potesse procedere secondo le modalità e i tempi stabiliti.

Tra gli aspetti meno positivi, bisogna segnalare il fatto che gli studenti hanno avuto bisogno di tempo prima di prendere confidenza con VT, ma le sessioni preparatorie e i tutorial sempre disponibili sono stati per loro un valido aiuto. Alcuni problemi si sono presentati con due studenti che inizialmente erano riluttanti a commentare le presentazioni dei compagni e si
sentivano vulnerabili nel ricevere commenti e domande. Oltre alle discussioni preliminari, condotte con tutta la classe, su come impostare un commento valido, per loro sono stati necessari ulteriori confronti con l’insegnante per riflettere sulle modalità e le caratteristiche di un commento. Attraverso un lavoro di incoraggiamento e di sostegno, sono riusciti a guadagnare una certa autonomia e indipendenza, come si può vedere in questo commento:

*When we started this project I was a bit scared, because I did not feel comfortable in commenting my classmates’ presentations. I did not what to say. The professor helped me think about different aspects of a presentation: images, music, places... and then I started to add my comments.*

È stata riconosciuta la flessibilità e comodità offerta da VT, anche se vari studenti hanno apprezzato che l’insegnante fosse sempre presente per scandire i tempi delle consegne e per tenerli sempre attivi. Alcuni di loro hanno anche sottolineato il senso di “proprietà” e la natura dinamica del prodotto che sono riusciti a creare nel corso delle cinque settimane e che poi è stato usato in classe anche come strumento didattico. Ciò li ha aiutati a diventare parte attiva del corso e ad esserne in parte protagonisti.

**Conclusioni**

I risultati di questa indagine, nonostante le limitazioni (campione di studenti ridotto e breve durata), permettono di notare che l’uso di VT per la realizzazione di un compito orale rafforza la riflessione e fortifica la dimensione sociale, poiché permette agli studenti di imparare sia in maniera indipendente che in maniera collaborativa, con i loro compagni e l’insegnante. Si possono inoltre trovare delle similitudini con i risultati degli studi condotti da Lee (2014) e Mango (2017) nei quali strumenti come VT e altri CMC motivano gli studenti ad impegnarsi nel processo di apprendimento e allo stesso tempo la presenza di argomenti culturali alimenta l’interazione tra compagni.

È interessante notare anche quanto sia importante la presenza dell’insegnante con il suo ruolo di facilitatore e di guida. In questo tipo di attività con CMC, la sua azione di scaffolding e feedback serve a facilitare la partecipazione degli studenti per massimizzare il potenziale di VT, dare sicurezza, aiutare a sviluppare la precisione nella produzione orale, a promuovere la loro autonomia, nonché a stimolare una riflessione più profonda, e offrire strategie per
sviluppare il critical thinking, per stimolare risposte profonde e significative.

In generale, il progresso degli studenti è andato oltre il dominio cognitivo, interessando anche quello affettivo: hanno infatti dimostrato di avere maggior sicurezza di sé, hanno sviluppato abilità sociali e di collaborazione, un miglioramento delle interazioni con i compagni e maggiore coesione del gruppo. Insieme a tutte queste abilità, hanno avuto modo di accrescere le loro conoscenze tecnologiche, che insieme a quelle appena menzionate, sono competenze molto ricercate nel XXI secolo e centrali anche per le loro future esperienze di apprendimento.

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This class activity is intended and proposed both as a linguistic task as well as a cultural tool, and aims to introduce students to an integrated performance model structured specifically around the epistemological interpretation of a work of art. The interpretative path follows a variety of procedures, all adhering to the canon established by the different humanities involved, such as history, the history of art and the history of ideas, but in this specific contextualization the approach remains essentially a linguistic one. This task, inspired by the ACTFL IPA, has been ideated for the course titled *Italian for Spanish and Romance Language Speakers*, and focuses specifically on the linguistic abilities of those students of Italian as a cognate language who have reached an advanced level of linguistic knowledge and mastery. For this reason, this task is scheduled at the end of the course’s second semester and represents the ideal conclusion of the linguistic acquisition process. In addition to providing a new vocabulary and modes of expression, this activity stresses the importance of the use of a variety of vocabulary and verbal tenses when speaking, and emphasizes the use of connectors and conjunctions as effective and helpful tools when explaining a subject or summarizing a narrative.

The activity develops through three different distinct phases: 1) the presentation of the painting, the exegesis of the narrative sources, the modalities of the *comissionone*, the personality of the *committente* and his role within the community of reference; 2) the reconstruction of the painting’s narrative within the frame of its specific artistic, historical and cultural configuration; 3) the creation, on the part of the students, of an original interpretational class presentation that assumes the sample presented in class as the reference tool. For all these reasons, the activity is titled *Painting as a Communicative Text: Using the Art History Interpretational Canon to Teach a Cognate Language*, and the performative task consists in opening and reading a work of art as if it were a written text.

The standards addressed in this task are the language development of Interpersonal, Interpretive and Presentational Communication, the implementation of the capacity to relate
Cultural Practices and Products to Perspectives, and the configurations of Connections to and Comparisons with several fields of the Humanities. Finally, given the variety of subjects and issues studied for this cultural and linguistic process, the length of time usually required to develop and conclude this task is four days.

The work introduced for this task is *La conversione di Saulo*, by Michelangelo Merisi, commonly known as Caravaggio, a baroque painter who introduced an entirely innovative style in painting in regard to the composition of his works as well as to the technique that he employed. Before starting, as a preliminary activity, the students are asked to conduct some research on the historical context that inspired the Baroque way of expression. The class is divided into groups each one researching a particular aspect of the period, and then each group presents the result to their classmates.

Then the students are introduced to *La conversione di Saulo*. The scene portrays the topical moment of the apostle Paul’s conversion, the one in which Jesus Christ appears to Saul in a blinding light to order him to desist from persecuting him and become his minister and witness. Present in the scene are, for the most part, an old man and a horse who, thanks to the divine intervention, raises his hoof so as not to step on Paul.
The conversion is described in Acts 26,12-18, and as a first assignment the students are asked to read the passage as the narrative of reference for the painting.

On the first day, the painting is introduced to the students, along with a commentary in the form of a short paragraph that recounts the history of the painting, according to the hermeneutics set by art historians: the time frame of its creation, who the committente was – the individual or patron who commissioned the work, the individual who also gave clear directions for the representation – what the initial location was – which also explains the correct spatial directions for reading the painting, in this case from top to bottom – and finally what the
occasion for the commission was. In our case, the Conversione di Saulo is an oil painting on canvas (230x175 cm), made in 1601, commissioned by Monsignor Tiberio Cerasi, and it is still kept in the Cerasi Chapel of the Basilica of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome, which was its original location.

In addition to setting a standardized procedure for the observation, the paragraph is also a linguistic tool because it shows how to use the Passato Remoto – the preterit tense – as the preferred past tense for more formal, written contexts, as opposed to the Passato Prossimo – the compound past tense – more common in the colloquial register of contemporary Italian.

The activity then proceeds by focusing on the characters presented in the scene, and the particular representation and fashion of their portrayal.
For this occasion, the students are divided into discussion groups and to each group is assigned a specific topic of analysis, such as 1) the predominant colors of the landscape and the clothing, 2) the evidence of the different social status between an officer of the imperial Roman army and his palafreniere, the peculiar position of the horse – characterized by the uncertainty of its body balance – 3) the Roman insignia ruined on the ground. Then the activity proceeds by outlining all those elements of the painting not immediately perceivable at a first glance such as: 1) the intersection of different geometrical perspective of the scene, 2) the intentional direction of the light on the foreground as opposed to the tenebrism of the background, 3) the plasticity of the representation – the scene shows the moment when Saul falls from the horse – and the noise emanating from the fall itself.

For the activity of the second day, the students elaborate all the information that they have acquired during the previous two days, such as: 1) the notions of history they have learned, 2) the impressions received from the simple observation of the painting, 3) the strategies of reading all those elements that emerged from the representation and that became evident after a careful analysis of the painting. With the help of a questionnaire prepared by the instructor, the students expose in class their individual interpretation, highlighting, in particular, the geometric perspective of the painting, the use of the oil colors emphasized by the contrast of light and shades, the geographical definition of the place, the particular pose of the most
important character, the movements of the three figures on the scene and the aesthetics of the iconographic depiction of each of them.

This activity should not be confused with a simple summary of what has already been widely discussed in class, but constitutes, instead, the oral exposition of a lexicon and a narrative technique that here, for the first time, are absorbed and owned by the students, to be finally transposed to the level of a spoken discourse. The effort to utilize new language skills allows the students to switch to a more sophisticated linguistic register, which, in a case like this, is not perceived by them as a stressful task, given the frequency of true cognates recurring in the vocabulary of both English and Romance Languages. Even in this case, the students are provided with specific grammar tools to be used in their presentation: the *Present Indicative* – as the standard tense used in contemporary Italian for depicting an object or for reviewing a literary passage – the *Gerund* – indicated to describe an action in progress – the *Present Subjunctive* – used to convey all personal opinions and interpretations – and finally all the adverbs that express the places and locations of the several details of the painting.

The activity of the third day is mainly a class discussion.
Even in this case, the students follow the guidelines set by the instructor’s questionnaire, and the topics of the debate focus on the existing correlations that can be traced between Caravaggio’s work and the general mood of the period when it was executed. In other words, the effort here is to contextualize La conversione within the historical ideas promoted by the committente and the ideals that preceded the creation of the painting. These questions are posed in regard to: 1) the painting’s details that give a particular meaning to the composition, 2) the particular perspective adopted to depict the characters, 3) the underlying reasons that motivated the placement of La conversione right in front of Caravaggio’s other work La crocifissione di San Pietro in the Cerasi Chapel, 4) and finally how the ideas of the Counter-Reformation are reflected in La conversione. Once again, the use of the Passato Remoto – especially when exposing the philosophy of the time – appears to be the most indicated tense for the construction of this argument.

The last and conclusive activity of this task consists in a presentation – individual or by group – in which the students are asked to utilize this interpretive model to organize their own research on, to give their own interpretation to, and to reach their own conclusions about, a work of art of their choice, always within the time of the Baroque period. Given the variety of international provenance of most of the students in this class, the presentation must not
necessarily focus on an Italian painter, being as this proposed model is applicable to any work of art.

In the end, this task has three main objectives:

1) Provide the students with a linguistic model that they can use in the process of language acquisition and replicate when creating their own model. In this way, they can acquire new linguistic structures accompanied by new vocabulary, as well as experiment with the language and enhance their ability to present before an audience.

2) Give the students a useful cultural tool that they can use in any circumstance when interpreting art, stimulate a deeper understanding of an artistic product, and finally make them active participants when exploring the art and the culture they love.

3) Promote the interest in learning a cognate language through teaching strategies based on art, culture, and traditions, all integral parts of the language studied.
Biographies of the Authors

Simone Bregni, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Italian and Chair of the Department of Languages, Literatures & Cultures at Saint Louis University. His research interests and publications include Dante and Medieval literature; Renaissance Italian Theater, with a focus on sexual alterity; the Classical Tradition; and the application of media & technology to F/L2. In fall 2016, he developed Intensive Italian for Gamers, the first video game-based language-learning course.

Daniela D’Eugenio, previously Senior Lecturer at Vanderbilt University, is currently Assistant Professor of Italian at the University of Arkansas. Her research interests focus on proverbs in Renaissance and Baroque literature, intersections between paleography and linguistics, relationships between texts and images, and pedagogy of the Italian language. Her articles appeared in Publications of the Accademia della Crusca, Aracne Editrice, International Studies on Humor, Italica, and Forum Italicum.

Chiara De Santi is Assistant Professor at Farmingdale State College, where she teaches Italian language, culture, and cinema, in F2F, hybrid, and online modalities. She has a Ph.D. in Italian (University of Wisconsin-Madison), a Ph.D. in History (European University Institute), and a Laurea Magistralis (M.A. equivalent) in Foreign Languages (University of Florence). Her research interests include Italian cinema, literature, and history; Italian food culture; and Italian as a second language.

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Arianna Fognani is Assistant Professor of Italian at Coastal Carolina University where she teaches Italian language and culture courses using a task-based approach. Her scholarly work focuses on transnational subjects and the concepts of space, identity, and culture in relation to various forms of mobility. Her most recent article, “Resistenze in conflitto nella narrative italiana ambientata ad Alessandria d’Egitto,” appeared in the last issue of California Italian Studies.

Crystal Hall is Associate Professor of Digital Humanities, affiliated faculty in Italian Studies, and Director of Digital and Computational Studies at Bowdoin College. Her research and teaching focus on the relationship between technology, textual expression, and the creation of knowledge. Her scholarship places particular emphasis on Renaissance and Early Modern Italy, but also extends the inquiry of digital methods to other fields through interdisciplinary collaboration.

Jonathan Hiller is Associate Professor of Italian at Adelphi University. A scholar and translator of nineteenth-century Italian literature and opera. His research interests include the Risorgimento, scapigliatura, verismo, science fiction, and women’s writing in the post-unification period. His first full-length translation was of I. U. Tarchetti’s Paolina (2017). He has also written extensively on the relationship between literature, opera and the works of the school of criminal anthropology of Cesare Lombroso, including a chapter on the subject in the Cesare Lombroso Handbook (2014). Other publications include analyses of Emilio Praga, Arrigo Boito, and Grazia Deledda.

Eilis Kierans is a Ph.D. candidate in Italian Studies at Rutgers University where her research focuses on women’s writing and feminist food studies. Her essay titled “Hungry for Honey: Desire in Dacia Maraini’s Il treno per Helsinki” was recently published in (In)digestion in Literature and Film. Eilis is passionate about experiential learning and has led students on numerous educational trips around Italy, Argentina, and Ecuador. She is presently teaching remotely from Spain where she is improving her Spanish language skills.

Annalisa Mosca is Senior Lecturer and Coordinator of Italian Language courses at Purdue University. She holds a Doctorate in Modern Language in Italian from the Middlebury College
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**Camilla Zamboni** is Assistant Professor of the Practice in Italian and Education Studies at Wesleyan University. Her work focuses on L2 pedagogy, open educational resources (OER), and analog game-based learning. She has created an OER-based Intermediate Italian curriculum at Wesleyan, and she has collaborated in the creation of the online repository TILCA Peer-reviewed Teaching Modules. She is now developing board games and role-playing games for language learning.
Italian Language and Culture Conference:

*Challenges in the 21st Century Italian Classroom*

**GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY**

Georgetown College
Department of Italian

Washington D.C.

Saturday October 26th 2019

CONFERENCE PROGRAM
8:00 – 8:30 Registration and Breakfast COPLEY HALL

8:40 – 9:15 Welcome and Opening Remarks COPLEY HALL
- Anna De Fina, Professor and Chair of the Italian Department, Georgetown University, Washington D.C.
- Christopher S. Celenza, Dean of Georgetown College, Georgetown University, Washington D.C.
- Domenico Bellantone, First Counselor, Maria Fusco, Director of Education Office, Embassy of Italy, Washington D.C.
- Emanuele Amendola, Director, Italian Cultural Institute, Washington, D.C.

9:20 – 10:20 SESSIONS 1A, 1B, 1C

SESSION 1A
ICC 115
Increasing Student Engagement through Digital Tools
Chair: Francesca Calamita, University of Virginia
- Carmela Scala, Rutgers, University, How to Engage Generation Z
- Arianna Fognani, Coastal Carolina University, Mapping Italian Narratives with StoryMap JS
- Francesca Calamita, The Language Forward Initiative: Virtual Places of Learning, Transnational Encounters and Socio-cultural Debates on Both Sides of the Atlantic and Beyond

SESSION 1B
ICC 116
Small Steps and Giant Leaps: How Italian at Purdue Faces the Challenges of the 21st Century FL Education
Chair: Gianni Cicali, Georgetown University
- Annalisa Mosca, Re-envisioning the Italian Curriculum through Active Learning and Literacy
- Tatjana Babic Williams, Interculturalizing the Italian Curriculum

SESSION 1C
ICC 120
Gamification and (Video)Game-Based Learning Approaches in the FL/L2 Classroom
Chair: Brandon Essary, Elon University
- Simone Bregni, Saint Louis University, Video Game-Based Learning in Italian Language, Literature & Culture Courses: Benefits, Challenges & Ongoing Development
- Brandon Essary, Elon University, Go with the Flow: Video Games, Literature and Language Learning
- Camilla Zamboni, Wesleyan University, Board Games and Tabletop RPGs in the Classroom: Present and Future Approaches

10:30 – 11:50 SESSIONS 2A, 2B, 2C, 2D

SESSION 2A
ICC 115
Maximizing the Online Learning Experience
Chair: Donatella Melucci, Georgetown University
- Peter Janssens, Donatella Melucci, Fulvia Musti, Georgetown University, Fully Online Courses for Summer Sessions: From Design to Implementation
- Daniela Bartalesi Graf, Wellesley College, Blended and Online Courses to Support a Variety of Learning Strategies and Promote Inclusion
- Chiara DeSanti, Farmingdale State College, SUNY, Between Interdisciplinarity and Experiential Learning in Online and Hybrid Culture Courses
- Ellis Kierans, Rutgers University, Empathy on the Other Side: Community and Care in the Online Classroom

SESSION 2B
ICC 116
New Approaches to Teaching Literature
Chair: Gianni Cicali, Georgetown University
- Gianni Cicali, Georgetown University, Meta-teaching and Millennials. New Pedagogical Approaches
- Crystal Hall, Bowdoin College, Small Teaching, Digital Humanities Pedagogy, and Renaissance Literature
- Kristin Stasiowski, Kent State University, From Deconstructive Space to Maker Space: Applying Design Thinking to the Teaching of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch
SESSION 2C  ICC 120
Learning by Doing, Integrating Experiential Learning into the Italian Curriculum
Chair: Louise Hipwell, Georgetown University
- Daniela D’Eugenio, Vanderbilt University, A Day at the Museum: Assessing an Experiential Learning Project in an Introductory Italian Class
- Emanuele Occhipinti, Drew University, Tasting Food and Culture in Italy: A Multi-sensory Journey in the Cilento Area
- Jessica Greenfield, Cleveland Clinic Education Institute, Social Justice and Community Engagement in Short Term Study Abroad
- Louise Hipwell, Georgetown University, Enhancing the Language Learning Experience through Internships

SESSION 2D  ICC 108
Roundtable: Designing Across the Curriculum: Instruction, Assessment and Professional Development in the Italian Program at Dartmouth College
- Giorgio Alberti
- Damiano Benvegnù
- Tania Convertini
- Matteo Gilebbi

12:00 – 1:15 Plenary Session  COLEY HALL
Keynote Address: Enrollment Trends, Program Closures, Successful Models
Prof. Dennis Looney, University of Pittsburgh, MLA

1:15 – 2:30 LUNCH  COLEY HALL

2:30 – 4:00 Plenary session  COLEY HALL
Workshop: Exploring Design Thinking for Foreign Language Curriculum Innovation
Prof. Tania Convertini, Dartmouth College
Design thinking has gained popularity as a human-centered problem-solving method where designers work closely with end users to inform innovations. Applying design thinking in the foreign language curriculum reform can help engage students, as end users, in the coproduction of learner-centered education. In this workshop, we will identify ways in which design thinking may enable opportunities for students and faculty to collaborate toward learner-centered foreign language education.

4:00 – 4:15 Coffee break  COLEY HALL

4:15 – 5:35 SESSIONS 3A, 3B, 3C, 3D

SESSION 3A  ICC 115
Creative Teaching and Learning through Technology
Chair: Lillyrose Veneziano Broccia, University of Pennsylvania
- Alessandra Saggin, Columbia University, Creating, shaping and sharing the content: the use of Web 2.0 tools in the language classroom
- Lillyrose Veneziano Broccia, University of Pennsylvania, Digitally-Enhanced Teaching and Learning for Language and Culture Teachers
- Lisa Sarti, Patrizia Comello, BMCC The City University of New York, Enhancing Global Competencies in the Hybrid Class

SESSION 3B  ICC 116
(Trans)formative by Design: Curricula for 21st Century Citizenship.
Chair: Chiara Fabbian, University of Illinois at Chicago
- Chiara Fabbian, University of Illinois at Chicago, Diversity and Social Justice in the Italian Curriculum: A Theoretical Framework
- Alessia Valfredini, Fordham University, Textbook Content and Cultural (Mis)Representations
- Emanuela Zanotti Carney, University of Illinois at Chicago, Reflection, Change, and Impact. Curricular Considerations for a 21st Century Citizenship
- Gina Maiellaro, Northeastern University, La competenza comunicativa interculturale nel curricolo di italiano LS: definizione degli obiettivi e delle pratiche glottodidattiche
SESSION 3C  
Teaching Cognate Languages at Georgetown  
Chair: Giuseppe Tosi, Georgetown University  
- Leah Andelson, Georgetown University, *Guest Speakers in the FL Classroom: Increasing Student Motivation and Language Skills*  
- Rozana Aparecida Lopes Messias, UNESP, São Paulo State University, Michael Ferreira, Georgetown University, *Telecollaboration in Portuguese for Speakers of Romance Languages: Autonomous Teletandem Practices in Accelerated Classes*  
- Patricia Balestra, Georgetown University, *Playing the Part: Culture & Communication in an End-of-course Assessment*  
- Giuseppe Tosi, Georgetown University, *Painting as a Communicative Text: Using the Art History Interpretational Canon to Teach a Cognate Language*

SESSION 3D  
Creative Teaching and Learning through Music, Film and Art  
Chair: Francesco Ciabattoni, Georgetown University  
- Veronica Vegna, the University of Chicago, *From Language to Film: Bridging the Gap in the 21st Century Italian Curriculum*  
- Daniele De Feo, Princeton University, *Task Based Videos for the Literacy Classroom*  
- Francesco Ciabattoni, Georgetown University, *Canzoni nel contesto: storie di cantautori e cantautrici*  
- Jonathan Hiller, Adelphi University, “*Brutti ma buoni*: How to Use Less-than-masterpieces of Film to Engage Students