

ITALIAN IN THE DIGITAL SPHERE

Online Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The technological advancements of recent years have significantly transformed the field of education. However, despite the abundance of digital resources available to today's pedagogues, several tools remain relatively foreign to many. Some have not yet had the opportunity to explore such digital tools. Others nurture skepticism towards the role of technology in the modern classroom, asking the question, "Where are the examples of transformative online classes in the humanities?" as Lee Skallerup Bessette observed (Bessette). The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point for educators across the country and worldwide; universities without remote curricula scrambled to transition online, in some cases even mid-quarter or mid-semester, and instructors rushed to learn the basic skills of remote teaching. For those without previous online teaching experience, this abrupt shift carried significant and warranted concerns. However, it also presented a fruitful, albeit involuntary opportunity for growth and development. While the unforeseen challenges posed by COVID-19 are palpable on every level of today's educational experience, so is the rise in didactic creativity fueled by the urgency to mitigate the complex circumstances caused by the pandemic. In what follows, we will outline our experience of the rapid transition to online teaching. Nina Bjekovic will focus particularly on the departmental efforts to facilitate the transition of our curriculum online and on strategies for teaching intermediate Italian remotely. Joseph Tumolo will discuss upper-level Italian in the virtual classroom.

PREPARING FOR THE TRANSITION ONLINE

The sudden shift to online teaching sparked different reactions from our colleagues. While those accustomed to remote teaching effortlessly navigated the ins and outs of online instruction, others were apprehensive about their sudden immersion into virtual education. To allay our instructors' fears and help them prepare for this unanticipated feat, I led a series of virtual workshops in order to provide them with essential techniques for remote teaching. This included organizing and conducting meetings on Zoom, discussing appropriate and effective design strategies for didactic materials, and useful language acquisition methods for the virtual sphere. Using my workshop slides as an example, I encouraged the instructors to comply with ADA guidelines and to simplify their visual materials. One way in which I urged them to accomplish this was by "chunking" their materials and selecting strategic color schemes for their PowerPoint or Keynote presentations. These schemes includ-

ed white backgrounds, black text, and accent colors used to emphasize or underscore information. Stressing the importance of accessibility, I encouraged my colleagues to consider new ways to ensure that information is readily available to all students. While this may seem simplistic, it is remarkable how often we produce materials that do not meet the needs of all students. In the online environment, this is just as essential as in the physical classroom.

In my workshop presentation, I modeled the skills and information that I was attempting to impart. Alternating between collective and small group work, I replicated the overarching structure of an in-person lecture to dispel the common myth that meaningful one-on-one or small group work is not possible in online instruction. A hands-on workshop followed these informational sessions, enabling the instructors to put their newly acquired skills to use in online microlessons. After each lesson, I provided individual feedback and asked the other instructors to share their observations. These lessons and the collective evaluations of each individual performance accomplished three overarching objectives: 1) they presented the instructors with opportunities to practice setting up and conducting online lessons in Zoom; 2) they permitted instructors to experience lessons from the student perspective and to derive insight from other teaching styles by observing their colleagues; and 3) they provided the instructors with constructive criticism, while inviting them to contribute their own.

Most importantly, however, they presented a nurturing, supportive, and collaborative environment for instructors and underscored the advantages of online instruction in the unusual and stressful circumstances wrought by the pandemic. During this training process, it became clear that the shift to online education paradoxically amplified the “human” element of teaching in the humanities. Although social distancing guidelines confined us to our homes, the challenges they presented brought us closer together, inspiring us to seek creative and collaborative approaches to teaching and to support one another in our shared endeavor of providing the highest quality of instruction possible. While debates surrounding the effectiveness of online teaching persist, we predict that remote instruction is here to stay in one form or another. Although grammar lessons and literary discussions on Zoom will never allow for the organic and spontaneous interaction of an in-person classroom, the experience of conducting an online course is sure to expand our teaching sensibilities and endow us with valuable resources for any class. The boundaries of online instruction call for heightened conscientiousness and underscore the importance of effective and flexible communication. For introverted instructors, as for introverted students, the online experience can be especially daunting. Verbal cues, messages of encouragement, and constant written reminders play a substantial role in building approachability, comfort, and a sense of community in the online classroom.

TEACHING INTERMEDIATE ITALIAN ONLINE

As an experienced online instructor and a digital enthusiast, I felt equipped to navigate the shift to remote instruction. In particular, I was eager to support

my colleagues who were less keen about what would become, at least for some time, the “new normal.” The idea of spending hours in front of the screen and having to rely on new and unfamiliar tools to facilitate student learning sometimes generated stress and frustration. Nevertheless, despite the difficult circumstances, even the most fervent skeptics recognized the value of this unique opportunity. In my language and content courses, I enjoy experimenting with diverse methodologies and technological tools to respond to the needs of today's digitally proficient students for whom this experience also wrought substantial challenges. My own students have confessed that while they often sought online courses to more efficiently manage their busy academic and work schedules, the current circumstances have left them with a deeper appreciation for the physical classroom. Naturally, a wholly remote academic calendar consisting of multiple hours in front of the computer screen was sure to awaken a longing for face-to-face interaction.

Besides the structural modifications to our curricula, student morale and participation proved to be perhaps the most unusual aspects of teaching during the pandemic. I attribute these factors to the lack of variation in student courses (traditional, hybrid, and remote) and the general obstacles of current social conditions. Travel restrictions forced many students to cancel or postpone their summer plans, which undoubtedly affected them personally and academically. This motivated me to implement activities that brought Italian culture into my students' homes. Some of these activities included: asking students to prepare traditional dishes from various regions of Italy; watching concert performances of Italian artists and analyzing their songs, as well as learning about the different ways in which Italians and others responded to the obstacles and hardships generated by the pandemic. During our in-class discussions, I frequently varied activities by asking students to conduct guided research about mainstream Italian figures and their global impact, and particularly their contributions to the coronavirus relief efforts in some of Italy's most severely impacted regions. By incorporating scaffolded assignments into my curriculum, I met my language acquisition objectives while also inviting students to reflect on Italian culture in a relevant, contemporary context. Another strategy that I intend to adopt in future iterations of the course is to ask students to participate in a letter or email exchange program with organizations or communities in Italy, such as retirement homes, where the elderly were deeply affected by lockdown measures. Perhaps now more than ever, we are reminded of the necessity of establishing and nurturing meaningful human connections.

Because varied and immersive communication is an essential pillar of language acquisition courses, I recognized that a full-immersion approach, while ideal, is not entirely feasible for elementary (Italian 1) and intermediate (Italian 2) courses. Still, strategic repetition and clear enunciation can mitigate some of the limitations of the online format. A useful strategy to maximize the use of Italian is to ask students to study a glossary of terms about Zoom functions and perhaps even assigning a quiz at the beginning of the quarter. This will provide students with useful phrases and expressions,

which will prove increasingly vital in an ever-evolving digital world. Similarly, I adopt this technique when asking students to join online competition platforms on their devices, thus maintaining the immersive experience while expanding their digital vocabulary. Review games and competitions have substantially improved student enthusiasm and morale during these challenging times, as the competitive nature of these activities tends to keep them focused on the task at hand, especially if a prize is involved.

UPPER-LEVEL ITALIAN IN THE DIGITAL CLASSROOM

The upper-level language classroom, in its new online format, posed a different set of challenges. Perhaps the most pressing issue I faced as an instructor in the online classroom was that of student motivation. Ambrose et al. theorize motivation as a twofold concept: it comprises both the "subjective value of a goal" (for my students, this would of course be the reasons why they value learning Italian) and the "expectancies, or expectations for successful attainment of that goal." Teaching an advanced Italian-language course (Italian 5) four days per week, I had no doubt that my students would be motivated by the subjective value of their goals. However, with the stress and anxiety of the pandemic coupled with students' suspicion of the efficacy of the online classroom (hosted on Zoom), it was clear that expectations for a worthwhile classroom experience could undermine our ability to achieve our learning goals. As I prepared for an academic quarter of online instruction in the span of about one week, I restructured my Italian 5 course to address these motivational issues in particular. I focused first on bolstering that which was already strong, my students' subjective desires to learn Italian. By shifting course activities and assessments to focus more on my students' individual interests and backgrounds, I found that I was able to challenge their reticence towards online teaching and ultimately raise their expectations for it.

As I worked with my colleagues to plan our rapid transition online, the general objective we all shared for our courses was to simplify our syllabi in such way as to 1) ensure students would continue to learn despite the pressing circumstances; 2) avoid placing undue stress on our students in the midst of an already highly stressful situation, and 3) facilitate a fast and successful transition from the brick-and-mortar classroom to the online classroom. This restructuring of my course provided me with more opportunity than usual to ensure that our activities and assessments would motivate students on the basis of the subjective value they placed into our learning goals. Specifically, I sought out activities that would allow students to use Italian to engage those topics about which they were most passionate. Thus, as I streamlined my course for the virtual classroom, formal compositions were replaced with blog posts, and formal presentations were substituted by student-led discussions. Both of these activities were based on topics chosen by my students. In practice, students enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to write about and discuss topics including life in quarantine, politics, food, and academic projects from other courses. Some were so generous as to share their personal

creative writing projects, which were written, of course, in Italian. My students' enthusiasm for these activities in turn helped to boost their expectations for what they could learn in an online format.

Between students' blog posts and guided discussions, the latter was the probably most successful activity. In their written feedback, provided both during and after the academic quarter, students identified the discussions as their favorite activity for two reasons. First, they saw the discussions as a meaningful and worthwhile way to practice the language. Second, they saw this activity as an opportunity to measure their mastery of grammatical structures and to gauge their increasing fluency in the language. The student-led discussions thus became a tool of self-assessment that showed my students that it is in fact possible to learn Italian even in the virtual classroom.

Though my students did come to accept that online instruction can be effective, it would not be accurate to say that they preferred online teaching after their ten-week experience with it. While scholars have found that a majority of students favor online teaching, a large minority prefer the brick-and-mortar classroom because of increased "participation and interaction" and the ability to "bounce ideas off each other" (Guiller et al. 197). Those students that prefer an in-person learning experience are likely over-represented in the upper-level language classroom where participation, interaction, and communication are key. However, just as the pandemic has brought about (and accelerated) so many changes, it may well lead upper-level language students like mine to a wider acceptance of the growing roll of virtual instruction in their education.

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