Survey Says
College Students' Perception of Community in the
Online Italian Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, publications in the field of language pedagogy have focused on the concept of community as a key factor in student success in language learning, stemming from the standards established by ACTFL's 1995 publication of the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*, later published in 2015 as *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages*.[1] Though at times relegated the bottom of the totem pole as the least important "C," studies have shown that the presence of community in the language classroom is in fact for many students highly prioritized, and from an affective standpoint, is perhaps the number one factor that determines their success as language learners (Mangan et al. 2014). In addition, studies have shown that a student's propensity to continue with language study beyond the "check the box" attitude driven by general education requirements is often tied to the presence of community in the language classroom (Perrone 2015).

The origin of the word *community*, with its root in the Latin term *communitas*, from *communis*, or *common*, is not lost on the educator who strives to help his or her students make connections and form common bonds. An online search of the etymology of the word community yields words and phrases like "society, fellowship, friendly intercourse; courtesy, condescension, affability; common, public, general, shared by all or many" (http://www.etymonline.com). Another crucial aspect of language learning, and one that is closely tied to the presence of community, is the role of affect. Tammy Gregerson, in her work on positive emotion in language learning, reminds us that "language learning is an affectively loaded process" involving emotion on the part of the learner (90). Hopefully, Gregerson argues, positive "vibes" are generated from a good language learning experience, vibes that reinforce the pleasing societal

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[1] As defined by ACTFL, the first Communities Standard encourages students to "use the language both within and beyond the classroom setting to interact and collaborate in their community and in the globalized world." The second Communities Standard supports lifelong learning, whereby learners "set goals and reflect on their progress learning languages for enjoyment, enrichment and advancement" (94).

and communal aspects that make life worth living. Being a part of the creation of this kind of community can make students happy, a feeling that leads to increased self-confidence as a language learner (Lomicka 310). Ken Bain, in his many interviews with university faculty nation-wide, also concludes that students learn best when they are happy and when they care about what they are learning. In his work on the crucial phase of the university years as a time of personal development, Alexander Astin concludes that levels of student satisfaction are enhanced by frequent interaction with both faculty members and fellow students, leading to a valuable outcome: student happiness spikes in direct correlation to positive community relationships (311).

COMMUNITY IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

Early in the fall 2020 semester at Bucknell University, a small liberal arts university in central Pennsylvania, our Humanities Council hosted a "Hot Topics" lunch for faculty and students focused on the challenges of remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the meeting, participants were asked to take a moment to do a free association of terms that came to mind when they thought of online learning. Immediately, words like *disconnected*, *distracted*, *isolating*, and *alienating* appeared in the chat bar in the Zoom meeting. For language educators, these terms represent the polar opposite of what we hope our students will experience in the classroom, whether it be online or in person, and most challenging of all, are diametrically opposed to the concept of community as it relates to language learning. The appearance of these terms begs the questions: Can a sense of community exist in the online language classroom? How does being on screen influence the affective aspect of the classroom? And, most importantly, do students who are learning remotely feel a sense of "society and fellowship," an intrinsic motivator that should push them toward both intellectual and emotional engagement, with their classmates and their instructor?

In her 2019 book, *Small Teaching Online*, Flower Darby considers the role of community in the online classroom, a situation in which students are "typically isolated, sitting alone behind a computer screen, engaging with class content by themselves" (76). After a semester of attempting to create flow, cohesiveness, and fellowship while juggling 24 images of a class of undergraduates, many of us can relate to this reality; our students are physically isolated from one another and often distracted. Student engagement and motivation can lag. We know from personal experience that attendance becomes a struggle for many students while classes are

online; it is too easy to decide not to come to class when it feels removed and virtual. But a virtual community, while perhaps not as ideal as physical one, might not be completely impossible to attain. In his essay "Community and Identity in the Electronic Village," Derek Foster argues that virtual communities – including online learning communities — are connected by "a subjective criterion of togetherness, a feeling of connectedness that confers a sense of belonging" (29). While online teaching is "often perceived as incapable of fostering the necessary interpersonal relationships or sense of classroom community that leads to effective student learning," recent studies, many published in response to the pivot to remote learning due to Covid-19, suggest that the creation of common bonds and a sense of connectedness between students and faculty in the online classroom is challenging, but not impossible (Deacon 5). Just as in the face-to-face classroom, components such as student interactivity, social presence of the faculty member, and a sense of connectedness between students can go a long way toward nurturing the presence of community in the online classroom (Lomicka 308).

Along these lines, Darby suggests a number of ways to introduce effective social interactions and thereby togetherness in the online classroom, suggestions such as having students post an introduction in the first week of class that is somehow tied to the class material; including student video introductions in the course; and using online discussion board prompts meaningfully (83). Other activities can be readily adapted from the face-to-face classroom, such as fishbowl discussions, jigsaw activities, and short student presentations, and the use of a platform such as Zoom presents opportunities to use polls, the chat feature, and breakout rooms to encourage student connectivity and participation. Remote classes during the Covid-19 pandemic were often synchronous and required the undivided attention and participation of the instructor, an approach which in and of itself can help create a sense of care and support for our students. Andea Deacon, in her essay "Creating a Context of Care in the Online Classroom," reminds us that "teachers need time to think carefully about how the affective and social domain of their teaching becomes transformed in an online classroom so that they can encourage student learners to exhibit "origin" attitudes and behavior – to become proactive, confident learners who feel empowered and motivated to succeed" (6). The physical separation of classroom members behind the omnipresent screen does not preclude the value of the social and affective domain in teaching; in fact, it might make it even more crucial than ever before.

REALITIES OF THE COVID-19 SEMESTER

One of the challenges faced by faculty in the Italian Studies Program at Bucknell University is the university-wide one-semester language requirement. By week eight of the semester, when registration time occurs, faculty must have done their best to convince students of the many benefits of language learning so as to ensure student retention between the first and second semester. Add to this the large size of first-semester language courses (24 students) and the stress of teaching online during the pandemic and undertaking a beginning Italian class in fall 2020 presented a daunting task indeed.

The vast majority of students at Bucknell University were in residence during the fall 2020 semester; most students were enrolled in at least one course taught remotely via Zoom, and many of them were enrolled in two online courses (faculty at our institution were permitted to choose their mode of instruction during the pandemic). The students involved in this study were enrolled in a beginning level Italian course, and they met three times a week (50-minute sessions) with the instructor via Zoom, and once per week in person for a 50-minute recitation session with a student teaching assistant. The course was completely synchronous. Since they were living on campus, the students' residential experience did include some in-person contact, such as extracurricular activities and personal contact with other students in the dormitories and on campus. The instructor also met with all students one-on-one in person at the halfway point of the semester to discuss their overall progress in the course.

Techniques as simple as asking students to keep their video cameras on during class and greeting each student by name at the beginning of class helped create a sense of belonging and accountability during the remote semester. Other community building efforts, such as incorporating "hang out time" for students on screen without instructor presence (a convenient time to grab a cup of coffee), or "checking in" on students during breakout room activities, also helped create a supportive, connected virtual classroom. A feeling of commonality, based on the fact that students were studying a new language and culture together, was encouraged through projects like short student presentations on cultural points of interest, and Zoom interviews with both upper level Italian students and recent Italian studies graduates.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM
Language Council Survey

During the fall 2020 semester, the Language Council[2] at Bucknell University conducted an annual survey of all students enrolled in a language course to find out more about their language learning experiences. In total, 112 Italian students responded to the survey, representing all class years and levels of Italian. Notably, when asked what they perceived to be the positive effects of studying a second or third language, almost two-thirds of students felt that learning another language was enjoyable (see Table 1). This response would indicate a group of students who were, on average, motivated to pursue the study of another language for the intrinsic value of personal interest and fulfillment.

Table 1
**Question: For you, what are the positive effects of studying
a second (or third) language?**

	Question	Not at all		Somewhat		A lot		Total
1	Learning another language is important for my future study/work.	19.64%	22	60.71%	68	19.64%	22	112
2	Learning another language is enjoyable.	4.46%	5	31.25%	35	64.29%	72	112
3	The cultural aspect of learning another language is interesting.	0.89%	1	19.64%	22	79.46%	89	112
4	Learning another language helps me become a well-rounded person.	1.79%	2	29.46%	33	68.75%	77	112
5	Learning another language helps me participate in a language immersion program abroad.	8.93%	10	34.82%	39	56.25%	63	112
6	Learning another language helps me connect with my heritage	30.36%	34	34.82%	39	34.82%	39	112

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[2] The Language Council includes faculty from all languages at Bucknell, including the Dept. of Classics & Ancient Mediterranean Studies; the Dept. of Spanish; the Dept. of East Asian Studies; and the Dept. of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics, which includes Arabic Studies, French and Francophone Studies, German studies, Modern Hebrew studies, Italian studies, Russian studies, and Linguistics.

Of the 112 Italian students who responded to the Language Council survey, 55 participants, or just under half, were studying Italian in an online remote classroom setting via Zoom during the fall 2020 semester. These students were asked to respond to additional questions about their classroom experience to gauge the effectiveness of remote pedagogy from their perspective. While self-reporting is not necessarily an accurate measure of course outcomes or learning goals, the survey responses do point to self-perception on the part of the students regarding the role of community in their online classrooms. Thirty-one out of 55 students (56%) indicated that they felt a sense of community with their instructors and peers in the online classroom setting, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2
Question: I feel a sense of community with my instructor and fellow students in the online language classroom.

	Answer	**Percent**	**Count**
1	Strongly agree	20.00%	11
2	Agree	36.36%	20
3	Neutral	23.64%	13
4	Disagree	16.36%	9
5	Strongly disagree	3.64%	2
	Total	100%	55

1 - Not important / Of no value; 5 - Very important / Of highest value

When asked to name the activities and components of the online classroom that added to the sense of community, students responded: "being able to see people's names [on the screen] at all times," "having a discussion as opposed to a lecture," and "having us all keep our cameras and microphones on." Fifteen students indicated that working in small groups in breakout rooms contributed to establishing a sense of community. Noticeably, 13 out of 55 students remarked that being able to meet in-person around campus for Italian Club events, group project collaborations, recitations, and study sessions added to the sense of community with their professors and classmates. The opportunity to engage in some form of a residential, on-campus college experience helped facilitate and augment the sense of community developed in the remote classroom setting.

Not all students were content with the remote classroom setting. Eleven out of 55 students (about 20%), disagreed when asked if they felt

there was a sense of community between themselves, their peers, and their instructors (Table 2). When these students were asked which activities and components contributed to a sense of community in the online classroom, their responses were less than enthusiastic; student comments included: "Nothing really. Languages are much better when taught in person" and "None. It's not enjoyable or helpful to do remote learning. The only thing it does is take away [my] motivation and [make me] feel unimportant." Another student simply compared the current remote course to the previous year's in-person language learning experience, stating: "I felt more immersed in the class when it was fully in person. I also felt that I was better able to retain and recite information." A small but considerable group of students struggled to grasp a sense of community with their peers and instructor in the online classroom. Though anecdotal, notable is the comment that focuses on a diminished sense of self-worth as a language student in the virtual classroom.

As stated above, student retention presents a significant concern for language instructors at our institution. To gauge student intention related to retention, all students, remote and in-person, were asked whether they planned to continue studying Italian during the following semester. Fifty-eight out of 112 students (approximately 52%), responded that they were not planning on continuing or were unsure at the time of the survey.[3] These students were subsequently asked about the reasoning behind this decision, and 28 students (39%) indicated that the mode of instruction was a "somewhat important" or "very important" factor in their decision-making. One student in particular indicated that "Zoom makes it a lot worse," pointing to the remote classroom setting as a deterring factor.

Exit interviews with Italian 101 students

At the conclusion of the fall 2020 semester, students enrolled in Italian 101 were offered the opportunity to participate in a short individual exit interview to discuss their experiences with remote learning as it related to the presence of community in the classroom. Nine out of 24 students volunteered to participate in the interview (see interview questions in Appendix A). When asked to define the presence of community in the classroom setting, responses included: "being comfortable," "having a good relationship with the professor," "being able to communicate with

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[3] This percentage is reflective of the retention rate during a face-to-face semester at Bucknell University; typically, about 33% of our Italian students continue from the first to the second semester.

the other students," and when "people enjoy going to class." In general, these students grasped the meaning of community in the online classroom as a communal, shared, and friendly environment in which the role of positive affect is crucial.

When asked during the interview to identify the specific factors that either added to or detracted from the sense of community in the remote classroom, students were able to recognize both positive and negative aspects. A few components that students felt added to the sense of community in their class included: the screen-sharing technique on Zoom, the use of the Zoom whiteboard, and the ability to see their peers' names every day, which two students contrasted with their other in-person classes that required them to sit far apart from their peers with masks covering their faces, limiting their ability to connect. As one student remarked, "In these circumstances, remote learning actually helps with community." Six out of nine students interviewed stated that breakout rooms were a positive component in establishing community because small group interaction creates a "personal experience;" one student specifically remarked that they did not see the helpfulness of breakout rooms. Similar to the responses of the participants in the Language Council survey, a noticeable number of students interviewed, (seven out of nine) indicated that the ability to meet their classmates in-person around campus and in their dorm buildings or for recitations, group projects, and study sessions allowed them to foster a sense of community amongst their peers. On the other hand, the most commonly stated negative aspect of the remote classroom, as indicated by five of nine students, was the inability to easily have side conversations during class. These students felt the lack of "society and fellowship" in the virtual classroom and as a result were not able to form the same relationships and connections with their peers that might have happened in the face-to-face classroom.

Two of the interview questions asked of students were directly related to ACTFL's definition of the Communities Standards. As seen in Table 3, the average student responses to these two questions were positive, with a slightly higher value placed upon using Italian for personal enjoyment and enrichment.

Table 3
Community Standards

	Average Response
How important is it for you to use Italian within and beyond the classroom setting?	3.4 / 5
How much do you value using Italian for personal enjoyment and enrichment in your life in general?	4 / 5

1 - Not important / Of no value; 5 - Very important / Of highest value

Finally, interviewees were asked whether they intended to continue studying Italian the following semester and to explain whether the sense of community in their current Italian classes impacted their decision. Of the nine students interviewed, seven indicated that they would enroll in Italian 102 the next semester, one student said that they would not be continuing the following semester due to a class conflict but would consider taking Italian 102 the following year, and one student was still undecided at the time of the interview though stated that a remote instruction method would not affect their decision either way. Five of the seven students continuing with Italian 102 indicated that the sense of community created in their Italian 101 classes impacted their decision to continue studying the language; only two of the seven students who were continuing with Italian 102 stated that community was not an influential factor in their decision-making at all. Of these five students, two students mentioned the encouragement and teaching style of their instructor as a contributing factor in building a sense of community in their classes, and three students noted that knowing their classmates personally and making friends with other students in Italian 101 impacted their decisions to continue on with Italian 102. One student specifically stated: "I enjoyed this course more than any other courses this semester and this was the only fully remote [one]," implying that the impact of positive affect helped to create a sense of community in the class, a feeling that they were hoping to experience in Italian 102 as well. It is important to remember that these interviews were conducted with a self-selected group of students; as such, the participants might have had a greater intrinsic interest in language study than their peers, and their responses might have been more favorable toward continuation to Italian 102. Nonethe-

less, their responses were helpful indicators of students' experiences with community in the remote classroom during the fall 2020 semester, and the influence that community played in their choices regarding whether to continue studying Italian the following semester.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced both faculty and students to partake in a teaching and learning modality that they did not "sign up" for, one that until March 2020 was quite possibly the farthest thing from their minds. While no substitute for the interactive, elbow-to-elbow intensity that often characterizes community in a face-to-face classroom, the establishment of a community of learners in an online classroom is not impossible. Ensuring the social presence of both faculty and students, nurturing positive vibes, and fostering connectedness between students are ways to encourage a sense of community in the virtual classroom. Instructors might also consider conducting a survey at the beginning of the semester in which students are asked to reflect on the meaning of community in the online classroom and to discuss what techniques could help strengthen the sense of community for them. While faculty and students alike are certainly looking forward to the day that they are sitting in their classroom community again, the lessons learned during this unique and challenging time can inspire reflection and renewed dedication to the formation of classroom community, regardless of the mode of instruction.

APPENDIX A

Community in the Online Italian 101 Classroom

Interview Questions
1. Why are you studying Italian?
2. What does the term "community" mean to you as it relates to the classroom setting?
3. In what way does remote learning have an impact on the sense of community in this classroom setting?
4. What activities or components of the remote learning class have added to or detracted from the sense of community?
5. Do you feel more connected to the Italian-speaking community after taking this course? If so, to which Italian-speaking community? In Italy or in the United States?
6. How important is it for you to use Italian within and beyond the classroom setting? (Scale of 1 to 5)

7. How much do you value using Italian for personal enjoyment and enrichment in your life in general? (Scale of 1 to 5)
8. Are you planning on continuing with your study of Italian next semester? If so, to what extent was your decision based on the sense of community created in your Italian class this semester?

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