The *Decameron*'s Lessons, and My 100 Days of Seeking Ways to Alleviate the Pain of COVID-19 in My Italian Classes

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When the COVID-19 broke out in Italy in early January I was in shock and terrified by the prospect of the disease reaching the United States, and mutating. I tried to warn colleagues and friends and even resorted to posting on social networks to inform fellow Americans that the disease was real in my neck of the woods and that we could not afford to underestimate its wrath. We all know how that worked out. Later in March, my university decided to move all classes from in-person to online; the news made me do an inner dance because I had already taught online courses in the summer, for four years. I felt I was fully prepared to make my students transition flawlessly. What I wasn't anticipating was the new environment of shock and fear we were/are living in, and the task of recreating my scheduled curricular and extracurricular activities to fit a virtual environment, by trying to guarantee my students an immersive language experience, even if they were learning remotely. With morale down, and the overwhelming confusion that news and media were providing us, I felt that times were not ideal to focus on inculcating grammar in the brains of learners, at least not in a traditional way. I was seeking to lighten the weight of the world on our shoulders when Boccaccio's *Decameron* came to mind and reminded me of the Coronavirus, for so many reasons. First of all, because the main characters of the author's masterpiece lived during the Black Death of 1348 that killed large numbers of people throughout Europe, and originated in Central Asia; they sought refuge from the disease sheltering in a villa in Fiesole, outside of Florence, where they quarantined for 14 days and told one hundred tales; some of the tales in the *Decameron* are of wit, and life lessons, which we all could use right about now; and the tales narrated by the seven women and three men meant to keep their minds off the plague, delivering an optimistic take on life that evaded reality. Similarly, many of us today are escaping the horrors of the disease by embracing new activities, such as painting, coloring, knitting, watching comedies, and welcoming inspirational readings and funny stories from a friend or a neighbor. Although I didn't read again any of the novellas in the *Decameron*, my ideas were clear: I wanted to find ways to deliver the language to my students while keeping their minds off the pandemic, allowing them to enjoy the learning. Therefore, I re-imagined my activities and offered my undergraduates the opportunity to become part of an evading story. This is the recount of my "tales" during my one hundred days of remote

teaching, and the ways I was able to transform student activities into uplifting, morale-boosting, informative, and fun story-telling-themed presentations.

With the *Decameron*'s historic background and the urgency of the characters to break away from the pandemic in mind, I focused on four main themes that were to pervade my tri-weekly encounters (in the spring), and daily encounters (in the summer) with my students online:

- Evasion
- Irony
- Faithful daily encounters
- Treasuring connections

My first goal with students is always to make them speak the language, even by having them intuitively "invent" words, if necessary, just to break the ice and to make them feel comfortable trying out the language just as it is. Fine-tuning on grammar with exercises of composition and reading is excellent pedagogy; however, I strongly believe that one needs to "live" the language in order to learn it and appreciate it. When someone asks me how they can become fluent in Italian, I laugh- not because I am mocking them, but because I am trying to convey that "having" a sense of humor in the foreign language will go a long way. When one starts getting the humor in a language, and even better can understand or tell a joke, bingo, it's a done deal. When I first moved to East Tennessee, I was a complete stranger to the southern sense of humor; I couldn't keep up, faked laughter, and after asking to repeat two or three times, resolved in smiling and saying, "that was a good one." Experts say that comedy is one of the most difficult things to deliver in a second language. [1] Sometimes, however, humor can also be disastrous if you don't know the lingo or the culture you are humoring. Matt Dancis writes for Language Trainers, an American-Canadian language tutoring company, and his article *Why Humor is the Hardest thing to Translate* mentions how cultural makeup defines our sense of humor: "Cultural norms tend to imprint themselves onto a people's collective sense of humor, and language encompasses far more than just the words we speak. Comedians always argue that we need some humor to help us move past difficult times. But one cannot enjoy the escape without having experienced hard times. Without the necessary

[1] Bell, Skalicky, and Salsbury mention that: "Humor and language play have been recognized as important aspects of second language (L2) development. Qualitative studies that have documented the forms and functions of language play for adult and child L2 users have taken place largely in classroom settings. In order to gain a fuller understanding of such creative manipulations by L2 users, it is necessary to examine these phenomena across a variety of contexts" (XX). They explored how two students in particular marshalled resources to play with language and concluded that: "Despite individual differences in style, both participants demonstrated sensitivity to context in their use of language play and an awareness of the ways humor functions as a social practice, subtly adjusting their strategies to changing social situations" (XX).

background on the joke, the audience misses out on the gravity of the punchline, and the humor is effectively lost. Moreover, there's always the tension with regards to who has the right to laugh at what. Foreigners laughing at jokes over tragedies that do not involve them can be problematic. These points of tension also blur the lines between what's laughable and what's not." I agree that humor has its dangers; however, in my classes, I strive to create an atmosphere of collective acceptance and a level of comfort where participants feel free to open a session with the occasional joke, tongue twister, or cultural oddity. I also try to be self-derisive, and point out my own oddities (my students can never get over the fact that I am an Italian with a gluten, garlic, onion, and tomato allergy who loves to cook); it's not like I am trying to be funny, it just comes naturally because I know it's good for my mental and physical health. Teaching is a lot like acting: it requires high energy, and I develop a character I use in class that helps me get where I am headed.

Teaching my students to use humor, therefore, wasn't hard, especially in times of the virus. I asked them, for example, to analyze Italians in a series of videos and to focus on gestures, accents, inflections, attire, and background. Then I asked them to try to imitate or mimic what they learned, putting themselves in the person's shoes. Through a series of activities, they became hosts of an Italian Talk Show; they offered cooking lessons with recipes and step by step preparation; they created a Blog that showcased their Italian side, reinventing themselves with Italian names, nationality, upbringing, and family. The final step saw them transformed into an Italian Me: during a virtual session on Zoom, they conveyed their rehearsed Italian qualities and culture to the class. The results were hilarious and astoundingly clever. Some students were able to crack a joke, others dressed up for the role, and others focused mainly on pronunciation and inflection. All deliveries were excellent and so different: imagine a gondolier in a striped shirt with Venice in the background, making jokes about Carnival and how *Passiòn òrba razòn* (Venetian dialect for "passion over reason") wanted to convince locals that the Coronavirus would not cancel this year's Carnival February celebrations. Imagine a new, and improved, Giada De Laurentis discussing her latest cookbook and recipes that invited to join the table and defy bacteria and virus, using fresh *nespole* (medlars), well known for their detoxifying effects, and bitter greens like *radicchio* and *trevisana*; or a "Giovanni" who lives in Bologna and works at the uncle's restaurant and dreams of opening a bicycle shop, because now the virus doesn't allow for public transportation, and riding a bike is the only way to get around because locals are lobbying against the use of Vespas or other *motorini* that make too much noise. Only a keen, Italian eye would notice the truth behind the details, and understand that these students had mastered their task and researched the nuances of the culture. As they told their stories, they reminded me that the Coronavirus was a topic hard to get away from; but at the same time, they were able to evade from the fear and paranoia by using a bit of wit and irony. Their presentations were relaxed, enjoyable, and very funny, which was the whole purpose of the project, ultimately.

After I focus on my above-mentioned first goal and my strategies to make participants feel comfortable using a foreign language, my second goal is always to find ways that allow students to live the language as if they were in Italy. Extracurricular activities need to be part of their experiential learning. However, how could I pretend a pizza night? How could I bake biscotti for them and share, or bring them extra virgin olive oil to class in 4 different containers and have them guess which one is the real thing, after a savoring and sensorial session? How could I improvise a 3-day immersion weekend in the beautiful hills of Tennessee, on a lake, surrounded by mountains, with the promise of nightmares in Italian, but lots of cooking, singing, and fun? Or a meeting with our Italian Club where we share spaghetti and a movie? These are all activities impossible to provide virtually, and online.

To compensate, my first idea was to guarantee a weekly encounter called *Tavola Italiana* (Italian Table) as an extracurricular venue. The unexpected switch to online interactivity, therefore, brought together my Italian friends from all over the world, and my undergraduates. The students were a bit shy at first, but once they warmed up to the participants, it was an interesting exchange of COVID-19 situations and human experiences. The virus still seemed to be on everyone's mind, and I felt it was good to be able to talk about the disease and discover how people around the world were living through the pandemic and dealing with it. One Wednesday, the *Tavola Italiana* group decided to discuss how the virus was being defined and interpreted in music and songs, therefore they shared information; among the many videos, they watched *Il Ballo della Quarantena* by Gnometto Band (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yc45MgvJme0) which is a funny collection of unknown artists singing about the oddities of quarantine in their household. Students asked for help with some of the expressions and dialect words that appeared in the song and transformed the topic into a cultural project. The new relationships originating at *Tavola Italiana* became a healthy escape valve. The positive reactions pushed me to invite my family and friends in Italy to talk with my students during regular class sessions, convincing me that sharing stories consistently would be helpful and impactful. I created "*L'Angolo del Virus,"* a 10-minute exchange of Q&A about the virus, and it could be good or bad news- we took it all in. I asked everyone to have questions ready each day and told my guests to speak very candidly about the virus and to bring up any oddities or complexities from their point of view. A guest was from Bergamo, one of the most hardly hit Italian cities in the north by the pandemic. She was a student in her second year in college, and a friend of one of my peer mentors, therefore close in age to my students. Her ten minutes became forty, once she began to narrate her life like that of a dog: yes, her life as an Italian dog in an Italian city hit by the virus. She wore a dog suit and pretended a few *bau-baus* —– that's the Italian for woof-woof. She had read an article in *La Repubblica*, one of the major Italian newspapers, and thought it would be fun to repeat much of the story in her own way, and from a dog's perspective. In the dog's words: "there is a strange worm with a crown, that humans call virus, and it has disrupted the human

family: people stay home, discuss the same topic incessantly, don't hug or kiss anymore, don't even watch soccer games on TV; they are all afraid of this worm with a crown, but at the same time they are passing it on to each other with great ease; and they are constantly taking me, the dog, out for a walk" (my translation). [2] The students thought it was a hilarious rendition, and I suggested activity in groups to imagine the point of view of "others" observing the human behavior during the virus in a household, such as a gold-fish, a cat, a snake, a cactus, and so on. Their take on the topic was humorous, and the class enjoyed the project immensely.

The song *Il Ballo della Quarantena* led me to ponder on using music and videos in my summer class to alleviate the stress and bring up the morale. Each morning, I began my sessions with a different video that featured popular Italian songs from the previous summer. The videos were taken from YouTube or Vimeo, and soon everyone was creating playlists. I invited the more curious to use *Lyrics Trainings https://lyricstraining.com/search?qry=italy* to practice learning the language through songs, and I gave them extra credit towards their participation grade. Soon everyone was posting their scores in our discussion board in Canvas, so I encouraged them to dig deeper, and consider the peculiarities, stereotypes, similarities, and oddities in these videos, and to express how the songs made them feel. One student memorized 3 songs and performed them in dance. Another wrote about her perception of Italian men at the beach. One other described that music and images inspired nostalgia and longing for an easy, laid back vacation and that the virus almost seemed far away. It was another fun experience, and I felt that my second goal was being fulfilled. I just needed to continue to seek ways to incorporate more interactive opportunities for my classes.

Another great opportunity came my way in March while transitioning from face-to-face to remote learning. I happened to have a Yoga professional auditing my course, and I asked her to give my students a 10-minute breath-

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[2] The article in question is "*Questa strana storia del vermetto con la corona": il virus visto da un cane* (This strange story about a worm and a crown: the virus seen from a dog's point of view) by Massimo Razzi, that appeared in *La Repubblica* on March 14, 2020. The concluding note is hilarious, but savvy: Non voglio pensarlo e, riabbaio, in futuro potrò raccontare che "ai tempi del vermetto con la corona", noi cani stavamo meglio. Potrò, ma se ci penso bene, preferivo prima. I miei umani sono meglio un pò sciatti e egoisti come sono sempre stati: un pò caciaroni e agitati, che si baciano e si abbracciano. Anche perché, la Canina Provvidenza mi ha assegnato il compito di tenerli a bada e di mettere un po' d'ordine nelle loro vite esagitate. Se non escono, non lavorano, non si coccolano e mi portano fuori ogni due per tre, come faccio io a continuare a lamentarmi di loro quando incontro i miei colleghi cani? Come faccio a sperare di riuscire prima o poi a cambiare questi imprevedibili umani?
(My translation: I don't want to think they are using me, and I bark that in the future I will be able to say that in the times of the "worm with the virus" us dogs were better off. I could, but if I think of it, I really prefer how things were before. My humans are better off when somewhat boring and egoistic, as they have always been: a little talkative and agitated, and kissing and hugging each other. The Canine Providence assigned me the task of keeping them at bay and putting a little order in their agitated lives. If they no longer go out, don't cuddle each other and they take me out every moment of the day, how can I continue to complain about them with my canine fellows? How can I hope to change these unpredictable humans?).

ing and relaxation session during class so that we could calm down together. I recorded the meeting and posted it in our Canvas learning platform, so it could be available to anyone at any time of the day. By the beginning of May, when the academic year ended, that video had been watched over one hundred times. This prompted me to contact my cousin Francesca, in Tortona, Italy. She is a Yoga instructor who received her professional qualifications after studying and practicing for years in India. She was offering free Yoga sessions online for anyone who needed to detoxicate, so by the time my summer course started at the end of May, I had a Yoga class all planned out for my newcomers, thanks to her. *Yoga con Francesca* started as a 30-minute one-time session and became an extracurricular activity. My students immediately learned the imperative command -a verb tense usually tackled in their third or fourth semester of Italian- without a sweat. I had prepared vocabulary in context to explore beforehand, and we read about the particular type of yoga they would practice, Hatha Yoga, learning its history and positive uses. The yoga sessions eased their minds, and they mastered breathing and stretching techniques; and, they were booking classes online on an Italian website. Yoga, combined with healthy eating, became a favorite topic for my summer class. Chapter seven in our textbook introduced us to pasta, its origins, how it evolved in time, and how healthy it can be for our body. This seems to be especially true if we eat spaghetti (there is a whole theory that short noodles are not digested as quickly and sit in the stomach for a longer time (Goldberg and O'Reilly), while the long shaped spaghetti, cooked *al dente,* are very easily and quickly assimilated and digested).[3] One group of students proposed to share in a discussion board on Canvas spaghetti recipes and video presentations, recording their efforts in preparing the dishes, and asking others to provide feedback and likes. This became a project of its own, entirely led by students. I decided to assess with a one-page paper in which students considered what they had learned through the yoga sessions and the spaghetti presentations. The composition practice was excellent, although beside the point: participants described how they were suddenly living a different life, in a foreign language. The content was strong and well-paced; lots of words showed obvious excitement; unique meaning came out from the experience and was well explained. The quality of the content beat somewhat the quality of the grammar; however, the tone was humorous, and the sentences flowed easily and swiftly.

With the composition task in mind, I decided to propose a few written assignments with the use of 360-degree videos of Italian cities or museums. There is much available online, and I picked Milano, Roma, and Firenze for a view of the city, and the Uffizi Gallery in Firenze for a visit to a museum.[4]

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[3] Pasta al dente is easier to digest because the gluten retains the starch granules making their assimilation more gradual. *10 False Myths About Pasta* is just one of the many Delicious in Italy — The Food and Travel Guide to Italian Regions articles addressing the issue: https://www.deliciousitaly.com/cibo/10-false-myths-about-pasta. 30 October 2015.

[4] Milano: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIvZlgrWinY ;
Roma: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXb4fBQxMgY;

The students enjoyed the task and told me they sat in front of the video after preparing themselves an espresso and grabbing a biscotto, to feel relaxed and "more Italian." Since my program's study-abroad program in Bologna had been canceled because of the pandemic, I was trying to find ways to expose students to the real Italy, and these videos did give them a few important moments of experience.

Using 360-degree videos provided another idea. Every spring in April, my department hosts a mini soccer world cup. The tradition started about eight years ago when the Italian Club invited students from other languages within our department to play a soccer tournament. It transformed into a huge event that is now offered annually, and that is played in our official Regal UTK stadium on campus, which in itself is already a treat for players and participants. The event is preceded by lots of preparation. Students learn the Italian national anthem and its history; they practice new vocabulary focused on the topic of soccer, with hand-outs, videos, games, and Kahoots; players practice once or twice a week to qualify for the team; and on the day of the event, classes focus on face painting, drawing signs, and creating any forms of tricolor embellishment that will make them visibly proud to be supporters of the Italian team. It's a big deal, also because a few local news channel reporters show up and run their stories. Due to the COVID-19, the tournament had to be canceled, and you can imagine how disappointed students, faculty, and the campus at large were. I decided to dedicate a couple of classes to the sport of soccer: students still learned the national anthem and its history; they watched a series of 360-degree videos of different stadiums in Italy and Italian teams playing [5]; they learned about the largest and most famous stadiums and experienced what they look like; they got a taste of what it means being *a tifoso del calcio* (supporter of soccer) in Italy; and finally, we discussed the culture of the sport, and how it affects people and their every-day lives, as well as how it would be missed during the shelter-in-place period. One of our readings described how Italian soccer clubs were donating millions to fight the Coronavirus, [6] and soon students began researching what other parts of the world were doing to collect funds for vaccine research, purchase hospital equipment, and donate to needy families. Of course, this experience wasn't the same as playing soccer and being at the stadium, but I still managed to excite the students about the sport and give them a taste for what will come next spring, hopefully.

Firenze: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kO93R0Gw08w;
Uffizi Gallery: < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61uXUxmpKWg.

[5] Some of my favorite include: Juventus 360° highlights of victory against Fiorentina at the Allianz Stadium, Feb. 10, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vsN-EQhLA0 ; Juventus 360° victory against Milan at the Allianz Stadium, Nov. 22, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-yZw8fxjNM; 10 biggest stadiums in Italy, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-D9eZ_TYpIU ; San Siro Stadium match Italy Portugal-National Anthem, Nov. 17, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyJGBEFdxto.

[6] Giacomo Galardini contributes to the Sports Money section of Forbes and writes about Italy's series A and international competitions.

Finding ways to "live the language" through extracurricular virtual activities had pretty much been achieved; however, the abrupt switch in spring from face-to-face to online learning brought other challenges that made me redesign some of my assigned activities. Students in Intermediate Italian 212, for example, learn about environmental issues in Italy, and the well-known Italian association *Legambiente*. They read about the marine campaign of *Goletta Verde,* the *Legambiente* boat that travels along the coasts of the peninsula to analyze the quality of bathing waters and their pollution level (and which has brought many students of UTK to Italy to work as volunteers on these boats in the past). *Siamo ecologici!* (Being Ecological) is a scheduled class activity that requires students to think outside the box and shows ways in which they experience being friendly to the environment. They go into the community and record themselves while being environmentally involved in protecting the planet. Recycling is presumably a simple task, and part of every day's life, therefore not an option on which students can present. I usually ask them to show how they pick trash in parks or on beaches; use cleaning products that don't damage the environment; take a bus rather than use a car; compost organic waste; and so on. However, with shelter-in-place the task became impossible. I asked students if they thought they could be creative and find ways to be ecological inside the house. The activity was renamed *Siamo ecologici- anche durante il virus!* (Being ecological- even during the pandemic). One of my students, Michaela Hall, presented a 30-second video that shows how we can take this time at home to check what is in our closets, and consider recycling clothes. Another student, Jack Dickson, was bored from staying at home and decided to recycle the wood from old palettes, and built DVD cases with his family: https://youtu.be/8wFmmU0h3Og; another discussed how the quarantine made her go out into the garden to clean things up, prune the trees, and weed; and another student, yet, explained how being a Vegan helps the planet, so we all learned something new. The presentations were well prepared and delivered; students enjoyed the task; and they used most of the vocabulary on the environment and ecology we had read and discussed in class, therefore it was easy to assess the activity and assign them a grade.

My Italian 315 Culture class, instead, had to undertake a group presentation on a beauty product. We learned about the Italians, who are often considered to be *un popolo di vanitosi* (vain folk) when it comes to beauty and fashion. They had to represent a publicity agency that was launching a brand-new product on the market. In the original assignment, groups are among the community, sharing a pamphlet and demonstrating their product. The students decided to change the original title *Spot pubblicità: un prodotto di bellezza!* (Ad for a beauty product) into *Diamo un calcio al Coronavirus con la bellezza* (Let's give a kick to Coronavirus with a beauty tip). Giosia LaRocco, Andrea Faggioli, and Jasemine Bowen, for example, created a video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3GG4ky70Z8) focused on one of the downfalls of the virus — loss of sense of smell. At the same time, their ad was an invitation to use their product to have a prettier nose. Another group in-

vented a product that will make you smile even if you are sick with the virus because it can turn your tongue into many different colors; and another group yet explained how one of the lasting side effects of the virus is thin and dry skin, not to mention the wrinkles that worry creates, so they invented a fix-it-all magical product that erases unlikable scars, wrinkles, and skin imperfections. Allowing my undergraduates to think outside the box, with the virus in mind, gave them an opportunity to be creative and to have fun.

Wrapping up my list of reinvented activities, I will finally mention that all of my classes have regular *Mostra e Racconta* (Show and Tell) improvised and/or planned presentations, which adapted well to the positive and uplifting story-telling-theme we were seeking since March and the explosion of the pandemic. Students were asked to find one piece of good news every day, unrelated or related to the virus. They were allowed to read from a script, or to improvise a presentation where viewers had to guess the news. In late March, one student showed up a few minutes late to our Zoom session, just to be sure we were all present, he said, wearing a home-made costume of a giant syringe. He had constructed the item out of paper and pieces of cardboard. It only took an instant (remember, we are trying to think positive!) to guess his story was about a possible vaccine against the Coronavirus, and we eagerly listened to his news. Another student followed the example and showed up wearing on her chest a huge pair of paper lungs and discussed how the environment seemingly had cleaner air since the disease outbreak, because of diminished carbon dioxide emissions. One group challenged the class with a quiz, proposing 10 images that were part of a puzzle to form the beautiful image of an Italian citizen on a gorgeously verdant balcony blooming with flowers, playing the saxophone at sundown, surrounded by spectators also on their balconies. Yet another group created a Kahoot called *Pensieri positivi di oggi* (Positive thoughts of the day) using images that we had to associate with our senses. One of my favorite Show and Tells was from a student who is from Sedona, Arizona, a city I truly adore, and that is internationally known for the uplifting power of its Vortex meditation sites.[7] She researched mysterious and unexplainable energy locations in Italy and took us on a journey to discover the seven sanctuaries linked by a straight line and the legendary sword of Saint Michael. According to legend, the *Sacred Line of Saint Michael the Archangel* represents the blow the Saint inflicted the Devil, sending him to hell. Researchers are fascinated by the mystery surrounding this align-

[7] Pete A. Sanders, Jr. is a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) honors graduate, a bestselling author with over a million copies sold, and the world's leading expert on Sedona's famous vortex meditation sites. According to Sanders, "Vortexes are locations that can act as catalysts, facilitating more effective prayer, meditation, stress-reduction, mind/body healing, creative problem solving and spiritual insights. When you know the science and spirituality of how to tap them, it amplifies your abilities and deepens your experience in them." Is there any scientific explanation for vortex sites? In a nutshell, Sanders theorizes that what's happening in vortex sites can be explained based on topography, gravity, brain science and superstring physics.

ment.[8] Although there are interesting theories, science has not yet been able to demonstrate what link there is between these sites, that are considered fundamental in esoterism. My student's intent was to discuss areas in Italy that are charged with positive energy, and her peers reacted with immediate curiosity. She hosted a special session after class, where she told us all about Sedona and the different types of vortexes, and how they release energy and heal. Needless to say, once the Coronavirus is defeated, many of us will take a trip to Arizona to destress, cleanse, and restore.

I'd like to conclude this paper with a few comments by other faculty who have found themselves, willingly or not, teaching a course online. I know some Colleges are changing how they collect and consider student ratings of instructors, citing the COVID-19-driven move online. Mainly, the argument is that the majority of faculty are teaching classes that are substantially different from the ones they planned and prepared for, and students are evaluating instructors in a new context. Student evaluations of teaching have been controversial for a long time, [9] but my point is that evaluations have never been more important than today, in my opinion. Our mandatory switch to online teaching has forced us to adapt our pedagogical methods, our organizational skills, and the way we assess; many have been forced to work hard to invent innovative ways to teach, that are more interactive, straightforward, and productive. The benefit we will all have once face-to-face learning is back in full swing is immense, I argue, and I look forward to sharing experiences with colleagues. Professor of History at Grand View University Kevin Gannon wrote the article *Teaching Online Will Make You a Better Teacher in Any Setting*, that appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education in September of last year. The professor underlines how his teaching has improved, stating: "Three aspects of online teaching, in particular, have made me a better instructor, no matter the setting. For newcomers to digital classrooms and the remaining skeptics, teaching online can help you design a better course, and assess it better, too; reveal the importance of how you "speak" with students, and prompt you to explain things better in *every* course. [..] I'd taught these courses in a physical classroom for so long that I assumed the answers were

[8] In the English edition of *Aleteia,* a publication of Catholic news and information, Gelsomino del Guercio writes: "In any case, it is surprising how well these sanctuaries are, in fact, aligned. But the details of such alignment are also astonishing: the three most important sites, Mont Saint Michel in France; the Sacra of San Michele in Val di Susa; and the Sanctuary of Monte Sant'Angelo in the Gargano [these last two both in Italy] are all the same distance one from the other. Some say this is a reminder from the Holy Archangel: the faithful are expected to be righteous, walking the *straight path*. If all this was not surprising enough, the Sacred Line also is perfectly aligned with the sunset on the day of the Northern Hemisphere's Summer Solstice."

[9] Many faculty members argue that the categories and scales used in these instruments are reductive and arbitrary and fail to capture the complexity of the student-teacher relationship. Others have pointed out that student evaluations of teaching create an incentive for teachers to grade more leniently, as students earning high scores may rate a teacher more highly. There is research that suggests that these instruments may not have been developed with the key measurement principles in mind: validity, reliability, and fairness.

self-evident ("it's on the syllabus!"). In reality, my course materials weren't as clear as I'd always assumed. In revising my syllabi, assignments, and other resources for use online, I found myself having to be much more explicit. […] In short, I was asking them (the students) to do things in my traditional courses and assuming they understood the benefits. It wasn't until after my foray into online teaching that I stopped assuming that students would "get" the point behind my practices and started explaining the why." I would add that teaching remotely has improved my skills in addressing students who might not learn like everyone else, and need alternative options that will still allow them to excel. Another engaging article that appeared more recently in the Chronicle of Higher Education is by Flower Darby, an instructional designer at Northern Arizona University. *How to Be a Better Online Teacher* gives lots of good advice, and my favorite recommendation is the one to organize course content intuitively. Darby states: "Try to think like a student when you organize course materials. Commonly, online students become confused, frustrated, and disengaged simply because you or the campus LMS have made it too hard to find the content and activities. When students use a lot of cognitive resources just trying to figure out where to go to access readings, videos, discussions, or quizzes, they have little mental energy left for the content itself. Discouraged and/or irritated students are less likely to learn. Once again, compare the organization and support services of your in-person courses with what you provide in your online teaching. In both contexts, there should be a method to your madness that is not hidden from students. The design and sequence of content and learning activities in both realms should be methodical, systematic, and purposeful." A "method to my madness" is exactly what I strive to reach, and I agree that teaching online forces you to be well organized.

There is another interesting and important aspect of teaching that I believe we need to keep in mind, regardless of how we teach, face-to-face or remotely. Cultural scholar and critic Henry Giroux, who is considered the father of critical pedagogy, teaches us to understand the relationship between how we learn, and how we act as an individual and social agent. He fights for social and economic justice, and believes that students need to learn how to think but also: "[…] come to grips with a sense of individual and social responsibility, and what it means to be responsible for one's actions as part of a broader attempt to be an engaged citizen who can expand and deepen the possibilities of democratic public life." In *Henri Giroux, The Necessity of Critical Pedagogy in Dark Times*, Jose Maria Barroso Tristan interviews the scholar for the Truthout Global Education Magazine, and we get a glimpse of the critic's mentality. He states: "Teachers are deskilled, largely reduced to teaching for the test; business culture organizes the governance structures of schooling; knowledge is viewed as a commodity, and students are treated reductively as both consumers and workers. […] Teachers are no longer asked to be creative, but have been reduced to the keeper of methods." And he continues: "As a moral and political practice, education produces the modes of literacy, critique, sense of social responsibility, and civic courage necessary to

imbue young people with the knowledge and skills needed to enable them to be engaged critical citizens willing to fight for a sustainable and just society." Following the scholar's thoughts, I find that teaching Italian is a lot of fun, but like with any other subject, I have the responsibility of creating a class that is democratic and participatory, that promotes dialogues, and creates an atmosphere of growth and shared leadership. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students are going through a lot of emotional, psychological distress. The classes I have offered online since March focus on lifting the morale, and talking about stories of the virus and the new environment in which we are forced to live; by using the language as a way to explore a culture and its multifaceted aspects, and as a tool to overcome our agitation and anxiety, I believe my undergraduates are growing up with their peers sharing distress and happiness, and learning to be part of their society.

Boccaccio's *Decameron* inspired me to follow a certain path, that led me to innovative ways to organize my classes, recreate activities, and assess preparation. As you recall, the four themes I wanted to focus on were: evasion; irony- as an antidote against fear; faithful daily encounters- with peers in breakout rooms; and treasuring connections. Not letting physical distance keep us from sharing stories of laughter, tears, and fears with friends is the ultimate achievement. I'd like to end with a few comments from my students:

- I truly appreciated the way that she made this online course interactive and encouraged us to speak as much as possible to gain a degree of fluency in spoken Italian, even if we were talking about the virus!
- It was a flawless transition. Class in person was exactly like class online. I looked forward to every class and loved meeting in breakout rooms with other students. I bonded more online than I usually do in class. I feel like the burden of this pandemic is lessened when I am in class and can't wait to see what is new and planned for the day.
- I loved that we had to improvise stories, that we got to watch videos every morning with songs, and that we were visited regularly by someone from Italy. This class was so much more than I expected, and I learned so much! I wish my Social Studies class was set up like my Italian class.

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