Culture-Based and Community-Engaged Courses
From languages and cultures in the community to communities of language and culture learners

Marino Forlino
SCRIPPS COLLEGE

According to the Modern Language Association's twenty-fifth language enrollment census conducted in 2016, "total enrollments (undergraduate and graduate) in languages other than English dropped by 9.2% between fall 2013 and fall 2016." This alarming piece of data is even more disheartening when one considers that colleges and universities across the United States closed more than 650 foreign-language programs in the same three-year term.[1] However discouraging this trend might be, it has provided educators within and outside the country with an opportunity to reflect on specific language methodologies and innovative practices that will be necessary in revamping foreign language and culture curricula. Such an effort also takes into account the need for a more inclusive and equitable teaching and learning experience, and the benefits of experiential learning and community-engaged courses. In addition to canonical literature classes, it has become crucial to offer new Italian courses that integrate a variety of disciplines and promote the study of foreign languages and cultures beyond the classroom. In this article, I discuss the role and the advantages of culture-based and community-engaged courses focusing on my experience teaching Italian language and literature at a liberal arts college. I also address the need for more creative, accessible, and flexible teaching methods with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic.[2]

In a Scripps College Core course entitled "The Art of Medicine, Medicine in the Arts: The Body in Italian Literature" (Spring 2017, 2018, and 2019), students explored Italian literature through the uncommon lens of medicine. Students read, studied, and analyzed how various literary and artistic works represent and interpret the human body, illness, disease, and death, and sit-

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[1] For the full report, visit: Looney, Dennis, and Natalia Lusin. *Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Summer 2016 and Fall 2016: Final Report*. Modern Language Association, May 2019, www.mla.org/Enrollment-Report.

[2] For more information on accessibility and Universal Design for Learning, see: Burgstahler, Sheryl, and Cory, Rebecca. *Universal Design in Higher Education: From Principles to Practice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2008; Nelson, Loui Lord. *Design and Deliver: Planning and Teaching Using Universal Design for Learning*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing, 2014; Tobin, Thomas J., and Kirsten Behling. *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education*. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2018.

uated them in their social, historical, and political contexts.[3] The course materials covered a wide array of genres, from medieval treatises and handbooks on health and wellness, to Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical drawings and aphorisms, to depictions of the great plague in fiction and medical literature, and the birth and development of anatomical theaters and the consequent spectacularization of the body. These topics were at the center of lively classroom debates as well as in online open fora and chat discussions that maximized peer and collaborative teaching. After reading the assigned course material, students shared their impressions and posed questions online before the following day's discussion. In class, two students would start the conversation using the questions elaborated by their peers and two had to act as respondents before moving to a discussion in plenary. This approach was reinforced through a series of collaborative assignments (such as a peer revision of the Hippocratic oath in light of modern values, fears and medical progress) that culminated in a final digital group project (using Scalar as a platform) executed with the support of the Digital Humanities Initiative at the Claremont Colleges.[4] Working in pairs, students created a multimedia and interactive page of a digital archive book (*The Art of Medicine, Medicine in the Arts*) prompted by one of the readings assigned for the course, combining two or more disciplines and approaches. While most students enrolled because of their passion for the sciences and the medical field, it is also important to note that some students discovered and developed an interest in Italian culture that ultimately led them to enroll in Italian coursework and to follow a language track in conjunction with their pre-medical studies.

Another consideration when planning new courses *vis-à-vis* student interests should be the relevance of the course objectives to a broader set of transferrable skills that can be applied regardless of disciplines. Effective planning takes into account current global concerns such as issues of social justice and inequity. Values that promote diversity, inclusivity, and accessibility on a multitude of levels can be best presented through a plethora of class activities and directed homework assignments.

Relentless messaging from the media regarding "being the best," the perpetual stigmatization of misfits and outcasts, and the fear among young adults of being persistently shunned, was the catalyst for a course on "Losers in Italian Literature" (Fall 2018). Besides combatting ableist discourse in the academy, this course was aimed at scrutinizing and reconsidering the concept of failure and its implications through an analysis of fictional characters in

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[3] For more information on the Core Curriculum in Interdisciplinary Humanities at Scripps College, see: https://www.scrippscollege.edu/core/.

[4] Scalar, Omeka, and Drupal are content management systems (CMSs) that serve as digital platforms for the creation of digital archives. For additional information on the integration of technology in the classroom and on the role and use of digital humanities, see: Battershill, Claire, and Shawna Ross. *Using Digital Humanities in the Classroom: A Practical Introduction for Teachers, Lecturers, and Students*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. On the integration of technology in the language classroom, see: Blake, Robert J. *Brave New Digital Classroom: Technology and Foreign Language Learning*. Georgetown UP, 2008.

the Italian short story tradition. Those labeled as "*perdenti, reietti, inetti, vinti, sconfitti*, and *falliti*" (losers, outcasts, as well as inept and defeated characters) often made history in literature by proving how getting lost, losing, missing an opportunity, or being defeated are transformative experiences and ultimately should carry no shame. In addition to examining the texts, students discovered and discussed issues of social justice inherent in the readings and critically engaged in response papers and creative writing exercises prompted by the readings. Comments on student evaluations reinforced the fundamental role of the humanities in our contemporary society. Moreover, their references to a newly acquired self-awareness as learners and human beings and to their "growing determination" and "confidence" attest to the importance of foreign languages and cultures and the *humanae litterae*.

When reflecting on the curriculum and course offerings, a student-centered approach cannot be complete if it ignores the possible career and vocational inclinations of the students and the communities outside academic institutions. In my Core 3 course on "Foreign Language and Culture Teaching Clinic" (Fall 2019) — a course that emphasized the importance of language skills, intercultural competence, and career readiness — students who were also fluent in languages other than English explored the notion of culture, its representation, and its inextricable correlation with foreign language acquisition.[5] In addition to traditional classroom instruction on theories of culture and different modes of language instruction, from the fourth week on, students partnered with a local school, team-teaching a self-designed foreign language and culture curriculum twice a week in Chinese, French, Hindi, Japanese, and Spanish. Students also met once a week on campus to discuss topics related to foreign language pedagogy with their peers and professor and to critically reflect on videoclips from their classroom activities and community engagement experience.

By applying skills learned in the college classroom to actual teaching in a local community school, students shared a similar mission, that of fostering younger students' interest in foreign languages and cultures. In doing so, they gained exposure to a broader community and developed a more meaningful sense of community. The enthusiastic feedback from school administrators, students, teachers, and parents has led to an unprecedented expansion of the program and German and Italian have been added to the curriculum. Given the present circumstances and the college decision to opt for a remote mode of instruction for the current semester, students enrolled in this course, are able to continue to be engaged remotely with the local elementary school and experience first-hand online foreign language and culture teaching. Additionally, in future iterations of the course, they will contribute to a digital project (a repository of online resources) to be shared with elementary

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schools within and beyond the local district and made available to students and teachers around the globe.

The unprecedented moment of the COVID-19 pandemic, however challenging, also provided an opportunity for educators' professional growth. The transition to remote teaching revealed the demand for new lines of inquiry and posed additional pedagogical questions that will prove useful for the creation and organization of future courses. In many instances, the transition to remote teaching forced many of us to overcome the fear of integrating technology into our classrooms and demystified the complexities of many digital platforms. As a result, educators have developed different and more accessible ways to foster a sense of community, be it digital or virtual, beyond the classroom walls.

In conclusion, the recent shift in the educational climate, affected by physical distancing and the necessity of a prolonged period of remote teaching, magnified the urgency of finding more creative and flexible alternatives to our teaching methods. Furthermore, it reinforced a commitment in higher education to not penalize community engagement courses but, on the contrary, to encourage new and more innovative routes of engagement such as digital advocacy. The current teaching and learning scenario has also shed new light on the need for a universal design for learning and will be another lantern to brighten educators' planning of their syllabi and teaching methods aimed at removing barriers to learning and giving all students more equitable opportunities to learn and succeed.

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