

THE SEVEN CARDINAL VIRTUES OF ITALIAN STUDIES

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Italians have a rather colorful means of expressing how individuals might get themselves out of a predicament or find the solution to a pressing problem: “la necessità aguzza l’ingegno.” Translated quite literally, the adage states that “necessity sharpens one’s wits.” Indeed, I have been sharpening my own wits of late in order to overcome a dilemma of sorts, the uncertain fate of Italian as an academic discipline at Assumption College in the midst of what has become a general crisis in higher education (Horn and Molesta 2019). As institutions of higher learning across the nation find themselves in a period of transformation, the nature, function and value of their product(s) have been subjugated by a greater paradigm shift, and, as a result, certain disciplines certainly seem to be taking it on the chin (Christensen and Horn 2013).

The crisis might be summed up as follows. Demographic changes are provoking a market correction, one that will only worsen in the coming years as the number of college-age students continues to decline. In the midst of this downturn, operating costs continue to rise. Smaller colleges built upon the model of liberal education have been forced to reinvent themselves in this increasingly competitive market (Grawes 2018). As wholesale closures of smaller institutions have not been uncommon and prognosticators warn that others institutions may face a similar fate, the Italian adage regarding the necessity of finding a creative solution seems particularly a *propos* in the case of Assumption College, a Catholic, liberal arts college founded in 1904, and belonging to a particularly vulnerable subset of institutions. The College has responded by, on the one hand, downsizing within the traditional humanities disciplines and, on the other, developing new programs, a trend that stems from perhaps the most troublesome reality redefining the definition of higher education: the idea that a college degree serves as a means toward securing a job.

This paradigm shift has left many foundational disciplines in the humanities particularly at risk; English, History, Art, and Music have been

hit as hard as Modern and Classical Languages. Faculty members in these disciplines, the experts in and, more importantly, advocates of their fields of inquiry, are under tremendous pressure. Factor in the ever-increasing expectations concerning their scholarly output and productivity within the profession, and the situation seems nothing short of dire. Is the responsibility even ours as faculty members? If so, how might we offer an appropriate response?

No official teacher’s oath exists in higher education, yet faculty members observe an unwritten rule that imposes an obligation to their students. In a similarly informal way, this commitment extends also to their specific disciplines and profession, the safekeeping and future development of which must be maintained and cultivated. We as educators, therefore, have a fiduciary responsibility that stems quite naturally from such a covenant. Innovation in all facets of curriculum and course development thus falls squarely within the category of teaching. While we are typically wont to refer to our disciplines as “fields of study,” for the purposes herewith, we might more aptly deem them “fields of teaching.” Within these trying times, some of us need to redouble our efforts in dedicating ourselves to our subjects.

I serve as Full Professor of Italian at Assumption College and, as a matter of necessity, have been forced to think creatively about the state of my discipline and, indeed, my livelihood within this rapidly changing climate. Potentially devastating cuts to the College’s program in Italian Studies might have spelled the end of a program that had been performing fairly well despite rather worrisome enrollment trends on the national level according to a recent report by the Modern Language Association (MLA 2020).

Table 1. Enrollment for Italian at USA institutions of higher education

Language	2016	2013	2009
Italian	56,743	70,982	80,322

Despite this nationwide decline, and thanks to some fundamental adjustments aimed at revitalizing the curriculum, Italian at Assumption College is poised to remain robust as an academic discipline. By no

means groundbreaking, these seemingly minor advancements and foundational principles serve as crucial components of what is an ultimately more focused discipline within the general liberal arts curriculum. I call them the SEVEN CARDINAL VIRTUES OF ITALIAN STUDIES, and they are as follows:

Virtue #1. A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO THE DISCIPLINE: There is quite a difference between a 3-credit course and a course of study within a given discipline. One certainly cannot presume to have met given standards by having completed a single course in that discipline. This lesson teaches us that a single component, such as a 3-credit course, is at the service of a greater unit, the course of study. We must keep in mind that a given curriculum includes many parts, and they must fit together to form an organic whole. These smaller components include everything from the choice of a textbook and creation of a syllabus to the formulation of in-class activities and determination of means of assessment. We must also remain mindful of the big picture. Nonetheless, if we cannot see the forest for the trees, then we are destined to fail. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) provides trusted proficiency guidelines, its “world readiness standards,” which provide an appropriate foundation upon which the Italian curriculum should be built (ACTFL 2020), i.e.,

The World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages define the central role of world languages in the learning career of every student. The five goal areas of the Standards establish an inextricable link between communication and culture, which is applied in making connections and comparisons and in using this competence to be part of local and global communities.

The World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages create a roadmap to guide learners to develop competence to communicate effectively and interact with cultural competence to participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world

Virtue #2. MORE THAN JUST A LANGUAGE. We have a motto at Assumption College, “#ACItalian: more than just a language.” Italian

is, of course, a language, and it takes significant time and dedication for students to achieve a degree of proficiency that allows them to engage more fully in Italian as a discipline, part of the “more” to which we refer in our motto. Nonetheless, students of Italian at Assumption College belong to a community of learners, one that is welcoming, engaging, and entertaining. Most of all, they grow socially, intellectually, and emotionally in their course of study. As in any tight-knit and distinctive community, the members feel as though they are part of something special. This sentiment is grounded in research performed in the sociocultural tradition, see Lantolf 2000, for an overview.

Virtue #3. A MICROCOSM OF LIBERAL ARTS: Language study has come a long way in recent decades. Today learners engage with the language in innumerable ways while instructors continue to develop novel methods of delivery. Two features have remained constant: 1 - grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, as is the case with other modern languages, remain foundational, and 2 – the study of Italian inherently comprises a variety of humanities disciplines. Students are undoubtedly able to engage more fully in these disciplines once they have gained proficiency in the target language, but the introduction and discussion of art, literature, history, music, and other subject areas should begin at the introductory level despite the inherent challenges of doing so when language literacy is limited. As students progress through their course of study and strive to achieve mastery, they are able to engage with the subject(s) more deeply while also developing invaluable transferrable skills. It is never too early to promote such engagement, and the application of this guiding principle is beneficial to students, who grow increasingly accustomed to lessons that are *in* Italian and not simply *about* Italian.

Virtue #4. INTERDISCIPLINARITY: Students derive a number of benefits from an interdisciplinary course of study, and several institutions have proactively advanced programs of this nature. One institution, the University of Illinois at Champlain, provides an excellent model for the future direction of language study and, in particular,

the means of preserving foundational humanities disciplines. Rather than eliminate traditional disciplines suffering from low enrollments, the University of Illinois at Champlain has strived to combine them with those that offer pre-professional training. If, as I argue, Italian is a microcosm of liberal arts, then numerous opportunities must exist for students wishing to pursue the study of Italian along with other disciplines. Such is undoubtedly true, but faculty members must be proactive in identifying such synergies and encouraging their application among students.

Virtue #5. THE SHOW IS ON THE ROAD Over the course of the semester, the traditional classroom setting and dedicated meetings provide opportunities to foster student learning, but there is a world of options that transcend the time and space of 50-minute meeting in the brick-and-mortar classroom. Taking your show on the road allows students to more actively engage with content (and with their instructor) in meaningful ways. Over the course of a semester, Italian Studies sponsors a number of events, from visits to the Worcester Art Museum with an Italian docent to yoga classes (in Italian) and film screenings. Such events are easily worked into the curriculum of a course, and there is no limit to their scope.

Virtue #6. AUTHENTIC STUDY ABROAD – Years ago, students enrolled in study abroad programs in cities throughout Italy with the understanding that they would study the language, literature, art and culture of Italy; indeed, some institutions required that participating students had at least some prior knowledge of the official language of Italy. Today, the situation is radically different, especially in Italy, and critics have written at length about the phenomenon, indicating “study abroad’s seven deadly sins” that prevent students from gaining a deeper understanding of the Italian nation and its people (Coclanis 2016). We can, however, advise our students early on, encouraging them to participate in challenging programs of study that offer direct enrollment in Italian institutions and fulfill the original mission of the study abroad experience. We might even “take the show on the road”

by leading a program (be it short-term or semester-long) of our own, forging lasting relationships with students and ensuring that their experience is truly transformative. Chances are that some of these students will continue their study of Italian upon return to the U.S.

Virtue #7. LEARNER IN THE MIDDLE I rarely speak to students from behind a desk or lecture to them from behind a podium. Both the desk and the podium create a division between teacher and student, one that upholds what I perceive as a dated model of student-teacher engagement. I want learners to feel that we are in the learning experience together and that I am on their same level, serving more as facilitator than as *auctoritas*. Students are special, and the power is always in their hands to maximize their potential. Students should, therefore, be central in such a relationship and conducted to drive the content of the course as much as possible. The instructor is responsible for orchestrating the program by which they engage with the content and develop skills, yet the onus is on student to maximize their potential. Samuda (2001) refers to this as “teaching from behind” and it is a principle I try to reinforce in my classrooms.

The aforementioned attributes aimed at reinvigorating the study of Italian at Assumption College are not particularly radical, and there is certainly no guarantee that they will neutralize a worrisome national trend concerning language study in higher education. Nonetheless, representing a point of departure, they may very well prove useful to stewards of programs in Italian within other institutions and also to colleagues in other humanities disciplines eager to uphold the sanctity of their own academic disciplines in the midst of the current crisis. It may not take a degree in Italian to realize that the adage “la necessità aguzza l’ingegno” corresponds to “necessity is the mother of invention,” but it is certainly compelling to think about the semantic distinctions between the two expressions. In any case, as faculty members groomed according to a classical model of liberal education, we have the responsibility of sustaining the integrity of our disciplines, and that same background ensures that we are equipped with the requisite skills (and wits) to do so.

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