

Going from Face-to-Face to Online Teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Designing Curriculum in the Digital Age

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In mid-March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, K-12 and higher education instructors were forced to transition to online teaching. The challenges of this new mode of content delivery became evident with the nuances inherent in technological programs and virtual teacher-student interface. The transition to improvised online instruction was not ideal for many, as they had to navigate away from well-developed and intentional pedagogy. According to Boettcher & Conrad, “[p]edagogy is the science of how to design and teach so that students experience lasting and significant learning” (3). Many teachers and students faced a steep learning curve during this challenging new educational reality under phase one of the coronavirus lockdown. This article aims to offer advice for creating inviting and collaborative online Italian language instruction, as we all continue to improve this method of educational delivery.

In order to spontaneously design and implement operative online teaching strategies, many of us sought expertise from colleagues, researched and tested existing online language programs, consulted and accessed online resources, considered and created Open Educational Resources (OERs) and even relied on the generosity of free online materials from textbook publishers in the United States and Italy. Beyond these resources, instructors were asked to implement what they felt to be successful teaching practices for their individual situations. According to Conrad & Donaldson, “[b]efore a learner can effectively demonstrate the skills of an engaged learner, he or she must understand engaged learning and be amenable to adopting the strategy. Only then can a learner be expected to form a community with others in the online learning environment” (7). For many of us, these communities were difficult to create and solidify during the late middle phase of a class — the third phase of four in online course instruction according to Boettcher and Conrad.¹ For this reason, it is imperative that community bonding occurs early in the semester for online learners, much like in the traditional in-person classroom. According to Jesse Stommel, “[w]e need to recognize that online learning uses a different platform, builds community in different ways, demands different pedagogies, has a different economy, functions at different scales, and requires different curricular choices than does on-ground education. Even when the same [educational] goal is desired, very different meth-

¹ For detailed information on this concept see *The Online Teaching Survival Guide: Simple and Practical Pedagogical Tips*.

ods must be used to reach that goal.”² Therefore, in order to effect a successful virtual classroom, best practices and online tools for remote instruction should be employed.

Some suggestions for creating a more cohesive online learning community include: designing clear course expectations outlined within a liquid or flexible syllabus that is, as its name suggests, subject to modifications; presenting explicit course expectations to students in multiple digital formats (e.g. online, email, Google Docs, Blackboard or via another Learning Management System (LMS)); giving detailed structure to the parameters regarding synchronous and asynchronous learning; creating virtual spaces for online videos, conversations and group work (e.g. Flipgrid, Nearpod, Zoom breakout rooms), along with offering encouraging and thoughtful ways to orient students to technology and interactive platforms; maintaining habitual and consistent contact with all course users; designating specific office hours and a regular virtual presence in multiple digital platforms for real time interaction in order to answer questions and to clarify course content.

Creating active engagement among online learners is tantamount to a successful course. Emphasis on self-directed learning and co-creation of course materials (teacher-student and student-student) will ensure student success. Stressing heutagogy, i.e., self-determined learning (from the Greek verb *heuriskein*, to discover), will encourage students to autonomously engage in the course material. Long before the invention of the Web in the 1980s, experts like John Dewey and Paulo Freire emphasized and expounded pedagogy of active student learning with the educator in a supportive and collaborative role. Engaged learning requires participation and negotiation of information, so that those involved in the educational experience become co-creators of knowledge. Student-centered classrooms where personal experience and personal interpretations of knowledge contribute to the learning community are what Jean Piaget called constructivist-based learning strategies (Conrad and Donaldson, 2). Learning theorists like Piaget would have welcomed the online open classroom and its potential for equality among users, provided that there were no issues to internet access. What’s more, Piaget emphasized that learning must be connected to the learner in order to be meaningful (Conrad and Donaldson, 2).

The current public health crisis forced many instructors and students to switch to a new modality of teaching and learning language and culture. The global pandemic has unwittingly provided a learning opportunity to better design, develop and deliver language and cultural content online at the beginning, intermediate, advanced and even graduate levels. The unexpected transition to a virtual classroom in the spring of 2020 does not mean that future online instruction will look the same. Most instructors have had time to better consider what online instruction will look like with more preparation, not to mention how institutional support and funding have already impacted or will bear on increased operability of virtual classrooms.

² See Stommel’s website, *How to Build an Online Learning Community: 6 Theses*.

Educators learned and implemented several effective teaching strategies during the impromptu virtual classroom transition. Whether it was by way of Zoom, Skype, Messenger, Google classroom, Moodle or the like, we quickly realized that remote learning was not like in-person teaching, but that effective use of technology could make the experience less isolating. According to Amanda Henrichs, “[online teaching] requires you and your students to thoroughly shift your intellectual, physical, material, and even emotional frameworks around what it means to learn and to teach.” Knowing how to learn is a fundamental twenty-first-century skill, and a requisite given the pace of innovation and variety of technological advancements.

Based on my limited personal experience with the online classroom, it appears that students appreciate the self-paced autonomy to access materials and complete learning objectives according to their individual schedule. Despite a mixed bag of attendance and participation among enrolled students in my spring 2020 courses, those who willfully adapted to an online program were able to continue learning Italian with several new multimedia tools available to them, including free OERs, YouTube videos and instructor-designed activities. Although there were last-minute crammers, I only had one student who completely disenrolled from a course. Interestingly, because of the extenuating circumstances regarding the coronavirus, many institutions had to amend their grading policy and offer Pass/No Pass options to their students.

Ultimately, the involuntary switch from face-to-face instruction to online learning will contribute to a more robust and prepared classroom (either in-class, HyFlex³ or online) for future teaching. With the continuous presence of the coronavirus within our states and communities, school boards, administrators, parents and students are all questioning what a safe and sensible academic year should look like. In order to ensure a successful experience, I recommend the following: placing a clear COVID-19 policy on your course syllabus; making all of your materials electronically available in multiple platforms; if you’re using a textbook for a class, working closely with your regional representative to ensure functionality and user-friendliness of student access to the materials; maintaining open and frequent lines of communication with your department chair, colleagues and students throughout the online course; being empathetic to students’ schedules and more flexible with deadlines. “As Stommel wrote about this digital shift, ‘If we are talking about teaching in a time of emergency, letting go is probably the biggest tool we have as a teacher’” (Henrichs). Navigating this new educational praxis means letting go of the standards that define a customary classroom setting, along with our previous expectations for traditional in-person teaching.

³ “A Hybrid-Flexible (*HyFlex*) course design enables a flexible participation policy for students, whereby students may choose to attend face-to-face synchronous class sessions in-person (typically in a traditional classroom) or complete course learning activities online without physically attending class. Some HyFlex courses allow for further choice in the online delivery mode, allowing both synchronous and asynchronous participation” (Beatty, *Designing a Hybrid-Flexible Course*).

Since teaching is a major aspect of our professional lives, many educators understand the necessity and importance of adapting their face-to-face instruction to other modalities like HyFlex, synchronous and asynchronous online learning. Often times, educators implement best practices and up-to-date pedagogy for second language acquisition in addition to maintaining active research agendas in their own areas of specialization. This means that the coronavirus has demanded we reimagine not only our language and culture classes, but also that we pay attention to innovating curriculum for online deliveries in content-based classes on Italian literature and cinema. Institutional support and backing for effective online education are key components for success. Eunjyu Yu discovered that “[o]ut of a diverse number of learner characteristics, the learners’ home institutions significantly impacted their preference for instructional delivery modality” (1). Online teaching and learning require digital competency and literacy on the part of the instructor and students, as well as institutional backing by our individual schools and administrations.

As we consider future teaching amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, many educators are grappling with the consequences of a possible continuation of online instruction and the impact that a remote methodological approach will have on attendance in our future intermediate and advanced courses, not to mention study abroad programs in Italy. It is necessary to weather this storm to the best of our abilities and to remind ourselves that the foreign language classroom setting is a place where students learn not only about language, grammar and culture but also about enhancing their interpersonal skills, a quality that will serve them throughout their entire lives. “Educational institutions are spaces for [online] learning, but more specifically, they are spaces for social learning. And so our role as educators and administrators of educational institutions has to be focused on building community in addition to offering courses, designing curriculum, and credentialing” (Stommel).

2020 has forever changed how we will approach teaching in the classroom. Italian language educators will most likely now incorporate multiple modalities to present course content and implement more multimedia technology including online meetings and chats along with virtual office hours. As we continue to learn and grow our online offerings, it will be more important than ever to engage with students and to consistently and meaningfully evaluate learning objectives and student learning outcomes. Another recommendation would be to offer students more agency by frequently surveying them regarding their preferences and experiences; much like any face-to-face class, the online dynamic requires student input. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that experience with online learning will ultimately enhance future face-to-face instruction. Eventually, this time away from in-person teaching will require us to reconsider and revise our individual educational philosophies to incorporate best practices in online pedagogy as part of our teaching repertoire.

This digital revolution has significantly impacted the way we teach and how students learn. The coronavirus pandemic has required us to reanalyze

the future of digital learning environments in education and how best to leverage computerized instruction. The impact of COVID-19 on study abroad affected the continuity of language programs, and it appears that travel back and forth to Italy as we knew it, may not be possible in the foreseeable future. One thing is certain: the digitization of learning could very well be the future of education. Institutions of (higher) learning will continue to be centers of technological innovation and creative pedagogy, hopefully demonstrating the efficacy of well-designed online courses. As educators, we are public servants, who, in our own way, continuously develop proficiency with emerging and existing digital platforms in order to help advance society in a technological age.

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