

Challenging Social Distancing with Online Teaching

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At the end of the spring semester we were forced to move our classes online due to the spread of Covid-19. It was a sudden and abrupt transition, one of the many consequences of the necessary isolation that allowed us to protect our own and other people's health. Ironically the experience gave us awareness of the extent to which our being socially connected is itself a key aspect of our wellbeing, both physically and mentally. In the poem, "Nove marzo duemilaventi," Mariangela Gualtieri reveals through her verses how perhaps there is "dell'oro in questi tempi strani"¹ (*Doppiozero*, 23 Mar. 2020). We were given, in fact, the time and the opportunity to reflect and realize how deeply interconnected we are, how anything that happens in the remotest corner of the world has consequences for our very own individual life. Those consequences became fiercely visible with the pandemic: "tutta la specie la portiamo in noi. Dentro noi la salviamo [...] Più delicata la nostra mano sarà dentro il fare della vita. Adesso lo sappiamo quanto è triste stare lontani un metro"² (*Doppiozero*, 23 Mar. 2020).

One of the major pitfalls of online teaching and learning is certainly the feeling of isolation that comes with it, and yet, paradoxically, for many of us technology constituted the only available tool during the pandemic to overcome isolation and interact with our students, colleagues, friends, and family. We did not, for various reasons, embrace online teaching contentedly, but we certainly embraced the opportunity it gave us to reconnect with our students, not only to continue teaching our disciplines but also to restore a sense of community and to support one another. Moving online within the context of the pandemic better positioned us to explore how to leverage the online environment to create opportunities, empathize, reflect, and connect.

In this article I would like to share my online teaching experience with the elementary level Italian class I taught at Emory University. The course was completely online with a synchronous and asynchronous component. It met synchronously (live via Zoom) three days a week and asynchronously two days per week. Since over the last few months we have been overwhelmed by trainings, articles, and tutorials that helped us adapt, my intention is not to repeat what can be easily found elsewhere. Instead, I propose to share my experience. Teaching languages online presents us with unique challenges,

¹ "gold in these strange times." All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

² "We carry within us the all of humankind. Inside our self we keep it safe. [...] Our hands' touch will be more kind. We know now how sad it is to stay three feet away."

and I hope the practical knowledge I have acquired through a trial and error process can be of some use to colleagues. In their study F. Martin, K. Budhrani, S. Kumar and A. Ritzhaupt determined that “Common tasks of an online instructor course fell into two areas: Course Design or Teaching” (Martin et al. 184). I will be focusing on the teaching task by sharing my attempts to move away from a teacher-centered, low-interaction online instruction by exploring ways in which the online environment can be used to achieve the student-centered, high-interaction instruction that should characterize language pedagogy (Martin et al. 186).

MAKE IT PERSONAL

To a certain extent we are all able to read the social cues expressed during face-to-face interactions. Experienced teachers, however, learn to become particularly skilled at reading students’ body language, facial expressions, and intonation. These non-verbal languages, which might go unnoticed by an external observer, are essential for the teacher to calibrate the class environment. Each student has their own personality but so does the class as a community, resulting from the formal and informal interactions among its members: the students and the teacher. The online platform deprives us of the signals we pick up on during in-person relations. When I sit in front of my computer, ready to start teaching, I feel as if I am entering into an empty space. Technology allows me to overcome the constraints of time and space, but in order to function I must find a way to anchor myself and regain consciousness of what is inside and outside the virtual space.

Best practices for online teaching tell us that when we are on camera, we should carefully consider the background, it should not be too busy nor too plain, the light, either artificial or natural, should be soft and in front of us, not behind. I don’t follow such rules strictly, since none of my students has a perfect background, some are sitting in their living room, others in front of their desk, and some others on their bed with the computer on their lap. During our first synchronous meeting, after introducing myself briefly, I ask them to do the same and I sometimes casually mention what I see in the background of their room. This is always a good icebreaker and brings some “reality” into the virtual space. I then point at something they can see in my room. It is often one of my cats and he always manages to make students smile. I then ask for volunteers to show something they have in their room. In doing so I acknowledge the existence of the space outside the frame and remind myself and the students that we might be connecting virtually but we live in reality and by acknowledging that, I can build a more authentic relationship with the class. I look for ways to move outside the constraints of the screen thought the semester. Below are some examples:

Vocabulary: (synchronous activity) For homework, I ask students to select objects corresponding, when possible, to the vocabulary we are studying, the classroom vocabulary is well suited for this activity. During our synchronous session, I then mention each item by name and the student must show the objects on camera. Of course, these activities take up a good amount of time

so they might be feasible or not depending on the timeline and the course structure. Another opportunity is offered by the room where the students are — if it is a bedroom, they can tell us what the furniture is they have in there, if it is the kitchen, they can describe the food they have in the fridge etc. Based on my experience, anytime we offer the opportunity to “escape” the book, the students’ engagement and motivation to learn increases.

Take a tour: This is an activity that students can do several times over the course of the semester. When covering the unit on houses and furniture, for instance, by using their phone students can make and share a video of their house. I always assign alternative activities in case someone does not feel comfortable showing their personal space. Students can engage in similar activities focusing on different themes: the city, the grocery store, and so on. The advantage of these activities is that while students are learning vocabulary, grammar, practicing speaking skills, they are also sharing something real about themselves: the city, the place where they go shopping, the monuments, etc. The goal is making sure we use the language for real communication and when we learn something about each other we have proof that is what we are doing. The online environment becomes a privileged tool to promote cross-cultural exchanges connecting students from different countries or even continents. For their part the teacher can use authentic material creating a virtual field trip allowing students to explore Italy and its culture. As I said, it is not my intention to focus on technology in this essay (you can search online for best web tools for virtual field trip to come across a rich variety of options) but in this particular case I would like to mention *nearpod*, which allows teachers and students to create interactive activities around virtual reality filed trips offering 360-degree views of the places. Nearpod (<https://www.nearpod.com>) was developed to be used in K-12 online instruction but it “has been effectively used in college courses to overcome the obstacles associated with having students review a slideshow lecture independently.” (Davis et al. 260) It is an extremely versatile tool, in that it does not only allow for the user to embed links to websites, audios, and videos; but also to produce interactive slides “that require students to do activities such as: answer a quiz question, take a poll, match keywords, or write a short answer to a discussion question, to engage them in the material. Students’ responses to these activity slides are recorded in a data file and can later be used for grading participation.” (Davis et al. 260)

Descriptions: In order to review vocabulary, I ask students to pick an object they have at home and describe it to their classmates. By doing this, they can practice a variety of structures. For instance, using the past tense, (*imperfetto* and/or *passato prossimo*) they can talk about their childhood, or perhaps their last vacation or trip using an object connected to their memories. The idea is for the students to build a story around the article they picked up as happens in Yvon Marciano’s short film *Emilie Muller*, where the protagonist is auditioning for a film role and the director asks her to describe what she has in her bag. Emilie describes each item in such detail that by the end of the audition we feel as we come to know her fairly well, only to find out, in

a sudden and genius twist, that the bag did not belong to her, so she made up a lot of what she said in a masterful way demonstrating she is indeed a great actress. I tell my students they are allowed to lie when speaking Italian, although for very different reasons from those of *Emilie Muller*. They might, in fact, need to adapt what they say to the linguistic competency they possess in Italian. If they don't have the words to talk about the way something is in reality, they can mix reality with fiction and enjoy the experience.

CAPTURE IT ON CAMERA.

Instructional videos often constitute the largest part of the asynchronous component of the course. In the language class, videos provide an effective way for content delivery and also for eliciting students' interest. In “Designing and Developing Video Lessons for Online Learning: A Seven-Principle Model”, C. Ou, D. Joyner, and A. Goel explain how,

despite the multiple options available “researchers have tried to identify and classify different types of production style” (Chorianopoulos, 2018; Hansch et al., 2015; Santos-Espino, Afonso Suárez, & Guerra-Artal, 2016). Eventually, these studies [...] distinguished “two dimensions of classification scheme: human embodiment (e.g., talking head, voice-over, animated human, digital avatar, robot) and instructional media (e.g., slides, handwriting, graphics, animation, screencast)” (Ou et al. 87-88). The article is an excellent resource for best practices in design and developing video lessons and it describes seven guiding principles, one of which I consider especially important: *personalization* (Ou et al. 88).

There are several tools available for editing but when it comes to instructional videos I suggest not to aim for perfection. They do not need to be utterly polished, if they are, they look unreal and will bring the class back to that feeling of being trapped in a frame on the screen. I use simple conversational language, occasionally including humor as appropriate, I never use a script although sometimes, depending on the type of video I am recording, I might use an outline. There is a double advantage in doing this, I save myself time, thus avoiding burnout, and I model a comfortable and spontaneous environment so the students themselves don't feel pressured to turn in a perfect recording.

1. Student produced videos as asynchronous activities.

I often ask students to produce videos or video comments for their asynchronous session. The general recommendation for asynchronous activities is the production of video lectures that allow the teacher to flip the class. I certainly do that, but as all language teachers I am used to keep lecturing to a bare minimum. A downside of teaching online is the limitation for students to interact with one another and use the language. Zoom provides the option of creating rooms for group activities but what I can do in the synchronous classes is nowhere close to the amount of interaction I can offer in a face to face environment. Therefore, I have been using the asynchronous sessions for student-centered cultural learning activities and collaborative assignments

(such as, for instance, skits, dialogues, research, etc.) including peer learning and group review sessions. I found this to be an effective way to building community and extending the time students actively use the language.

2. Self-made Media

There are a variety of videos I produce for the students, mainly by using VoiceThread or Studio on Canvas. I regularly use them for homework assignments by creating a Power Point presentation (or Google slides if that is your preference) embedded in a voice thread. In order to complete the embedded assignments, students must go over the slides carefully and learn the material explained in the thread. This type of assignments provides for a more interactive way of communicating. There are endless ways to solicit students’ video responses and possibly cover every topic in the curriculum. At the beginning of the semester, I also post a few videos in English to give the students an overview of the program for the week but I stop after the second- or third-class module. Some programs and applications you can use to efficiently produce your own media resources are Explain Everything (iPad app), Camtasia, Screencast-O-Matic and more. I personally try to keep things simple and consistently use the smallest number of tools that I can adapt to different uses.

3. Online Resources

Online you can easily find an assortment of resources from institutions specifically dedicated to creating educational videos such as the Khan Academy, Phet Simulations and TedEd just to mention a few. My suggestion is to use them sparsely and in a very selective way. I tend to avoid utilizing too many external resources when it comes to a language class because I realized that doing so is counterproductive. It is difficult, in fact, to find resources that perfectly align with the structures, vocabulary and general topics covered in class or that match the level of the students, and so such external resources might end up confusing the students rather than help them. This is not the case if you use external resources focused on cultural topics in English. Some might be against the idea of not always using the target language, but I find it beneficial to use English in order to explore topics more deeply engaging, and to use the opportunity to engage the students’ interest and increase their motivation to learn. Another problem with using online resources is that they reinforce the idea that students are interacting with a computer rather than with a teacher. This might reinforce the sense of alienation that characterizes online teaching. Students need to be reminded at every opportunity of the presence of a real teacher structuring the virtual course.

GUEST SPEAKERS

Teaching online should not prevent us from inviting guest speakers, in fact, it actually makes it logically easier and more affordable. During the summer course I hosted two guest speakers and, in both cases, the feedback I received from the students was enthusiastic.

Teaching and learning languages imply reflecting on the relationship between language, culture, and identity. Music is an effective tool to engage students and also to teach about the culture of a country. In my summer course I taught a module on contemporary Italian rap music. Among the musicians we discussed there was the Italian rapper of Syrian origin named Zanko El Arabe Blanko. First, the students listened to his songs and then they learned he would join us on zoom for a live session. Zhudi, Zanco's real name, talked about his life experience as a second-generation musician and how he used hip hop to claim his multicultural identity and fight prejudices. He defines himself as Italian, Arab, French and English but he also says he is a “stranger in every nation.” He lived in different countries and something of each of them remained with him and molded his identity. Not wanting to give up any aspects of his self, he raps in different languages and was the first rapper in Italy to use Arabic. Each language, he told us, has its own sound and allows to express specific feelings. Mixing up languages, he added, was a way to better express himself, his feelings and his multicultural identity.

My second guest speaker was Tommaso Lana, an award-winning performance and consulting artist, creator of Embodied Learning (<https://embodiedlearning.co/>), a multidisciplinary experiential training program that aims to transforming communication and collaboration in educational settings and work environments by exploring the language of the body. The object of Tommaso's presentation was to make the students aware that “beside its cognitive nature, learning is a physical and emotional act” and that by engaging our feelings, moods and body, we learn more naturally and at a deeper “level.” Despite the virtual platform, Tommaso was able to engage the students with hands-on activities asking first to leave the computer and look for the tools they would need to perform the tasks he planned. The students particularly liked the experiment where they created sound by rubbing hands on the handles of a kitchen pot filled with water. It was a challenging task and not many succeeded but even learning about the difficulty of finding the mental and physical concentration to perform the task was important and created empathy and connection.

LOWERING THE AFFECTIVE FILTER

I want to conclude with a topic that should be constantly considered in any interactions with the students: lowering the affective filter. Lowering the affective filter is essential both in the physical classroom and the online environment. In the latter, learning anxiety, lack of motivation and/or self-confidence might be harder to detect because, in a way, we expect students to be less engaged. The consequence is high student dropout rates, which is always bad but especially so at this juncture in time when none of us made the choice to move online.

In order to prevent this from happening, I try to find ways of assessing engagement in informal conversations. I do this at the beginning of the class (I enter the room 5-10 minutes earlier) or after the class (even if this means I am going to finish 5 minutes before scheduled to make sure I can ask indi-

vidual students to stay for a few more minutes). I also try to send a personal email once in a while. Clearly this is possible only if you have a small class and are not teaching multiple sections. The teacher could send one “personal” email to a single student per class, mentioning something they learned about that specific student, for instance a place he/she visited, a language she/he speaks, a passion for rap music or the opera etc. It is not feasible to write to each student individually, but you can strategically reach out to those who seem to need some encouragement. It is surprising to see the difference in reaction an email like this can produce compared to one where you urge the students to be more engaged during class.

These exchanges sometimes lead to surprising discoveries about my students’ interests. I had a student from China with a real passion for pottery. From him I learned that pottery was invented in China in 1600-1054 BCE, that there is a type of kiln named the Dragon Kiln, because it has the shape of a dragon and a length of up to 30 -70 meters. Eventually, we ended up talking about the influence of polychrome Chinese decorations on Italian porcelain and the student fell in love with Italian.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize how, based on my experience, engagement and motivation are key for the success in the online environment. I tried to elicit both in a variety of ways, and I will continue to experiment this semester when unfortunately, once again, we are forced to teach online. My hope is that soon we will be able to return to campus and fill the classroom enriched by what we learned while teaching during the time of the Covid 19 pandemic.

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