

Non tutto il male viene per nuocere durante una pandemia
Connecting Teaching, Scholarship, and Service¹

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In the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity.

Albert Einstein

INTRODUCTION

When I look back at the spring of 2020, it seems a very distant past, although it was only three years ago. The world closed down from one day to the next, and for two years, it became typical to teach remotely, meet with our colleagues over Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams, and wear masks in any in-person interactions with family and friends, acquaintances, and strangers. The weekend before retreating into my family bubble, I was at the Northeast Modern Language Association (NeMLA) convention in Boston, and back then I did not know that I would have to wait two more years to see my colleagues again in person in what would become a different world. Like many of us, in the first months of the pandemic, I was in a survival mode, trying to teach my college students and my 7- and 10-year-old daughters the best I could, considering that I am not trained to teach elementary school pupils. From a teaching perspective, the most challenging weeks were definitely those during which I became (or tried to act) as an elementary teacher, with better outcomes than I originally anticipated, as neither daughter ended up with any major academic deficiencies upon returning to the in-person classroom a few months later. Anyway, once the survival mode faded into a new normality, I came to recognize that as teachers we had an opportunity for changes, because eventually, we got used to that exceptional situation, and the extraordinary became the ordinary. Also, I have continued to repeat to myself all along that times of crisis are good moments for change and growth, so why not embrace them and their challenges? It is the reason why, from an academic perspective, *non tutto il male viene, o è venuto, per nuocere durante una pandemia* [not all evil comes, or came, to harm during a pandemic].

¹ I presented on this topic at the *Italian Language and Culture Conference: Connections*, held at Georgetown University in Washington D.C. on October 15, 2022, as “Non tutto il male viene per nuocere durante una pandemia: Connecting Teaching, Scholarship and Service in a Virtuous Circle.” As this full article grew out of the initial presentation, I thank the organizers of the conference, Louise Hipwell and Donatella Melucci, and my colleagues for the precious feedback that contributed to this article in its final, current version.

This contribution highlights the opportunities that were seized during the pandemic and how the changes ended up remaining longer than I could imagine. Specifically, this article is divided into three main parts representing the three pillars of academia, namely teaching, scholarship, and service (or administrative work), and it illustrates how each component, starting from teaching, has led to outcomes in the other two areas reconfirming how the three pillars are strictly connected. In particular, the part devoted to teaching—which is also the most robust—focuses on the changes to the curriculum for upper-level courses in Italian culture and film taught in English, on the transformation of a first- and second-semester Italian course from face-to-face to synchronous modality taught entirely over Microsoft Teams or Google Meet, and on the incorporation of the principles of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and intercultural components into the curriculum. The second part summarizes the scholarly outcomes, from conference presentations and co-presentations to co-edited, single authored, and co-authored works. The last part highlights how service has been integrated with the other two pillars, being strictly linked to teaching and its assessment to reiterate that *non tutto il male viene per nuocere!*

TEACHING: CHANGES AND TRANSFORMATIONS

When the pandemic shut us down on Long Island where I teach, it was Friday, March 13. Without getting too much into superstition, the date did little to reassure me. Back then, I was teaching one course fully online (*Italian Culture and Civilization*) and three hybrid courses (*International Cinema*, *Italian Cinema*, and *Italian Food Culture and History*). As the definition of hybrid courses can vary by institution, mine defines hybrid classes as meeting 50% of the time in-person in a physical classroom and 50% of the time online, meaning that my class met in-person once per week for 75 minutes. While the fully online course did not need any adjustment, the hybrid courses needed to have the 50% that had been taught in the face-to-face modality converted to online from one day to the next. The two cinema courses were switched more easily, as the students watched the films at home instead in the classroom as originally planned, compared to *Italian Food Culture and History*, a 200-level course that was taught in the kitchen of the university residence hall incorporating hands-on activities such as the actual cooking of Italian dishes. This course was also the most impacted by the pandemic because we had arranged for a speaker to come from Italy to deliver a talk on campus in April of 2020, which never materialized. Also, the course was run thanks to an institutional grant, and due to the pandemic, we lost two thirds of the funding.

How did I substitute the lessons designed for a kitchen experience to cover the second part of the semester as we were struggling with a largely unknown virus? Certainly, I accepted the fact that I could not offer the students the same experience that they would have had in a space where they participated in hands-on activities and cooking. Once I accepted this reality, I decided to add primary sources to the curriculum to enhance the book by John Dickie, *Delizia! The Epic History of the Italians and Their Food* (2008), which was adopted for the class. What I did was design discussion boards for the remaining six weeks of the semester, where the students had to react to certain content. I included narrative films and documentaries that could be watched through streaming platforms, videos from YouTube, literary excerpts, and short stories. The revisions made to the course in the last part of spring 2020 drove me to change *Italian Food Culture and History* from being a hybrid course to being a fully online one, as it is now. Eventually, to transform the course, I added additional content to the first eight modules, those originally taught in the kitchen in the spring of 2020.

During the pandemic, further changes to the curriculum were made, mostly revising upper-level courses on Italian culture and film taught in English. The changes were especially salient in relation to new content, spanning from YouTube videos, documentaries, and fiction films to Open Educational Resource (OER) texts and excerpts from primary sources. These changes, which contributed to a more diversified, dynamic online environment for students, were made to courses such as *Italian Culture and Civilization* (a 300-level course) with the adoption of a new textbook and the inclusion of films, documentaries, and excerpts from primary sources; *International Cinema* (a 300-level course) with the adoption of an OER textbook and the establishment of a long-term partnership with an institution in Mexico for Virtual Exchange (VE) collaborations, specifically using the pedagogy of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) on a semester-after-semester basis; and *Italian Cinema* (another 300-level course) with the adoption of an OER textbook integrated with scholarly and academic articles and essays, and organized into thematic clusters.

Regarding *Italian Culture and Civilization*, which was a fully online course even prior to COVID-19, two years into the pandemic, I came to the realization that the book that was previously adopted for the class—which mainly focuses on culture through the lens of history and civilization—was too limited in scope for the students, who perhaps were hoping to learn more about music, cinema, opera, literature, fashion and design, and food. As students learned more about Italian history throughout the semesters, I had the impression that it would have been beneficial for the students to

know more about the culture than the history, or to be more precise, to know more about Italian history through its culture. Based on this observation, I adopted a new textbook: *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Italian Culture* (2008), edited by Zygmunt G. Barański and Rebecca J. West. Although this textbook could use an update, as it is a bit dated—since cultures evolve rapidly in every country, including Italy—the book works well for the course, especially because I supplement it with primary and secondary sources. Students are now required weekly to read one or two chapters from the adopted book and write a 200-word minimum reaction paper responding to the readings in each of the 14 weekly modules. In a single module, students are also required to engage with primary or secondary sources linked to the main topic(s) of the week: a feature film or a documentary, YouTube videos, songs, literary excerpts, theatrical plays, poems, or academic articles. In choosing the extra sources, I made sure to include the less representative figures of our literature, such as women writers or authors outside of the canon, such as Stefano Massini with his *Lehman Trilogy*. In reacting to these sources, students also are encouraged to contextualize the material within the course content and the textbook. Further, students are able to explore and explain how the videos, films, and additional readings are relevant to themselves and society. Both online courses, *Italian Food Culture and History* and *Italian Culture and Civilization*, fulfil the three-credit Applied Learning (AL) requirement for graduation at my institution, and beginning in the fall of 2022, I redesigned the project that fulfils the AL requirements by asking the students to work on an oral history project that was authorized by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Combining the description from both syllabi, the description of the project states:

For the Applied Learning project, students are required to interview members of the Italian and Italian American community as part of their undergraduate research experience. The goal of this oral history project is to collect information from the local community towards Italian and Italian American cuisine and gastronomy or towards Italian immigration.

In the past, both courses had a similar project entailing interviews with members of the local community; however, now the project adopts a more serious approach: the interviewees are required to sign a consent form since, after the end of the semester, the interviews are made available to the public with the goal of creating a repository of stories as part of an Oral History Project still in progress at the moment of writing this article. The

idea came to me from the Bronx Italian American History Initiative at Fordham University, which is listed in the Cited Sources.

During the pandemic, for the hybrid course, *International Cinema*, after having tried several OER textbooks, I finally found one that successfully serves the purpose of integrating film elements in the discussion of the various films assigned for the class. The chosen OER is Russell Sharman’s *Moving Pictures: An Introduction to Cinema* as published at the University of Arkansas in 2020. During the pandemic, the author, who is also a scriptwriter, attended our classes remotely in two different semesters, meeting with the students, answering questions, and explaining how the film industry works. One can say that these two occasions were perhaps the highlights of the course, although we had other important learning moments as the course was—as it is now—run as a Virtual Exchange (VE) course, meaning that a portion of it is designed for an interdisciplinary collaboration between the home institution and an international partner. The two faculty partners design modules for their students with the goal of having them collaborate on final projects. In this article, and as mentioned previously, VEs are characterized by the pedagogy of COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning).

The other hybrid course, *Italian Cinema*, also witnessed a major change during the pandemic through the adoption of a new OER textbook (the same one I adopted during the pandemic for *International Cinema*), which I supplemented with scholarly, academic articles or essays focusing on certain Italian films. I also re-organized the course, which now features films such as *Ladri di biciclette* (Vittorio De Sica 1948), *Riso amaro* (Giuseppe De Santis, 1949), *Il posto* (Ermanno Olmi, 1961), *Lamerica* (Gianni Amelio, 1994), *Così ridevano* (Gianni Amelio, 1998), *Angela* (Roberta Torre, 2002), *La finestra di fronte* (Ferzan Özpetek, 2003), *Nuovomondo* (Emanuele Crialese, 2006), *Terraferma* (Emanuele Crialese, 2011), *La mafia uccide solo d’estate* (Pif, 2013), *Il capitale umano* (Paolo Virzì, 2013), *Noi e la Giulia* (Edoardo Leo, 2015), and *Perfetti sconosciuti* (Paolo Genovese, 2016). These films were grouped into three thematic clusters—(1) employment and work issues from post-World War II to present day, (2) emigration, migration, immigration, and (3) current social and human perspectives—that also served as the basis for other thematic analyses, as explained in the next paragraph. Moreover, in the spring of 2021, the course was run through a VE via COIL in collaboration with universities in Italy, South Africa, and Japan, experiences that have inspired an article devoted to what we labeled COIL@4.

Both film courses—*International Cinema* and *Italian Cinema*—were, and are still, structured in the same way, namely by requiring student reactions

to the readings and participation in discussion boards where students react to films analyzing them through predetermined themes, such as (1) human communication (or lack thereof), (2) human understanding (or lack thereof), (3) gender roles, (4) children and youth, (5) resistance and/or war, and (6) identity and/or interrupted identity, contextualize them within the class readings (the OER textbook and further readings), and finally connect the films to the world outside the classroom by saying how the films are relevant to students or our society. The three main elements required for the discussion boards were, and remain, defined as pillars (not to be confused with the pillars of academia): pillar one—the thematic analysis, pillar two—the contextualization, and pillar three—the connections. In the spring of 2023, I specifically made the academic analysis a fourth pillar, as I started requiring the students to incorporate the scholarly readings on the various films in their discussion boards.

At my institution, due to the necessity during the pandemic to teach remotely, the administration is now seeking the opportunity to possibly expand synchronous versions of some General Education courses. In particular, in the fall of 2022, some pilot courses across different disciplines were run in an online synchronous modality, as was the case during the height of the pandemic. Among these pilot courses, we also offered a first semester of Italian in a synchronous modality through Microsoft Teams, and in the spring of 2023, I taught the second semester of Italian synchronously through Google Meet. Both synchronous courses met twice weekly for 75 minutes each over the aforementioned video communication platforms (with students required to keep their cameras on), while the Brightspace learning management system replaced Blackboard at our institution and throughout SUNY starting in the fall of 2022. Moreover, for the academic year 2022–2023, all sections of Italian I and II adopted a new textbook, *PassaParola* (replacing *Percorsi*), run fully online through the Lingro-Learning supersite where we administered the exams, completed the oral projects, and collected submissions from the workbook. In a future publication, I may share the experience of teaching elementary Italian courses in a synchronous modality in a post-pandemic world; however, for now this is only a short overview of what happened for a single year, since there is no intention to again offer the two semesters of Italian as synchronous courses, absent another emergency situation.

Finally, as part of the various changes to the curriculum, the VE via COIL ended up playing a major role during the height of the pandemic. These exchanges have been especially important in strengthening the DEI and intercultural components in the two cinema courses through, and

thanks to, interdisciplinary collaborations with non-US institutions. De Santi et al., in the abstract of their already mentioned article on the COIL@4 experience, write:

A virtual exchange with more than the standard pairing of two partners amplifies the goals of fostering an inclusive process in student collaboration efforts across languages and cultures, contributing not only to a climate of greater diversity, equity, and inclusion with the goal of overcoming biases and stereotypes, but also contributing to team building and problem solving through inter- and cross-cultural interactions. (De Santi, deBoer, Bosman, and Citter 2022, 2).

To further illustrate how a time of crisis can lead to lasting outcomes, in the spring of 2020, following an attempted collaboration that did not happen because of the pandemic, I started collaborating with a university in Mexico, and since the fall of 2020, I have been collaborating in my *International Cinema* class with the same partner from this Mexican institution, which has led to both a strong partnership and a friendship. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, in the spring of 2021, I collaborated with three colleagues from institutions located in Italy, South Africa, and Japan: four faculty from four disciplines—Archeology and Cultural Diplomacy, Architecture, English as a Second Language, and Film—embarked on the COIL@4 experience that led to a co-written article published at the end of 2022, whose excerpt is included above.

As anticipated, if the pandemic and its aftermath have seen many changes in the curriculum, these did not remain decontextualized from the rest of academic life, since they also created several opportunities for scholarship and impacted my administrative service, as we will see in the next two parts of this article.

SCHOLARSHIP: PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS

Scholarly outcomes—including conference presentations and co-presentations, and co-edited, self-authored, and co-authored works—have emerged in tandem with the aforementioned changes to the curriculum, with the service, and through connections with colleagues both in the United States and abroad. This is to say that I presented at conferences (remotely and in person) about the changes to the curriculum, about the international collaborations (including co-presentations with my colleague from the afore-mentioned Mexican university), and about the development of COIL at my institution through a COIL task force, work that will be

explained in the next part of the article. In particular, with a colleague from Rutgers University, I co-organized a remote conference on DEI and co-organized various sessions on pedagogy at conferences, specifically dealing with the pandemic and post-pandemic world. First, one should recognize that the pandemic has brought to the surface many social justice issues that have negatively impacted diversity, equity, and inclusion. Moreover, the necessity of teaching outside of a physical classroom has pushed us teachers to adapt and re-invent ourselves, including our pedagogy that has undergone a rapid evolution, with lasting outcomes worth sharing and reflecting upon in conference settings.

In terms of pedagogical publications stemming from my teaching and its changes over time due to the pandemic, in the spring of 2020, I was invited to write an article about teaching during the pandemic for the online portal of literature, *Griselda Online*, housed at an Italian university, titled “Il mio 11 settembre nel marzo del 2020. Non quasi, ma tutto online ai tempi del coronavirus.” The reflections written one month into the pandemic not only began with memories from the past, but also include some points learned through teaching online well before the pandemic hit, which could have been useful to colleagues who were new to distance teaching and learning.

I also published a chapter in the conference proceedings of the Faculty Research Network’s 2020 Symposium on curriculum change: “Connecting Content to the World Outside the Classroom in Hybrid Classes.” In particular, the piece explains more about the three pillars that I have introduced in my two film classes, and specifically in the discussion boards where students react to films on a weekly basis. As previously delineated, the same three pillar structure was recently introduced in the other two fully online classes that I teach, namely *Italian Food Culture and History* and *Italian Culture and Civilization*, where the students reacted to primary and secondary sources of various origin, including but not limited to films.

As expressed in the previous section of this article, COIL clearly plays an important role in my work as I believe in the power of connecting internationally for both students and instructors as a way to learn and improve intercultural communication and sensitivities. Further, to contribute to the evolution of the discipline in the area of VE, and as referenced earlier in this article, I have co-authored an article with colleagues from Italy, Japan, and South Africa about our COIL@4 experience as fulfilled in the spring of 2021: “International Multidisciplinary Collaboration on Four Continents: An Experiment in Fostering Diverse Cultural Perspectives.” Published in *The Journal of Language Teaching and Technology-LTT* in the December 2022 issue, the empirical

report explains in detail all the phases of this intense international collaboration, a scholarly contribution that may be especially interesting for those who seek to design VE across countries and continents.

Another pedagogical publication emerged through my job, as I was invited through a publication project at my institution to contribute a chapter on the process of writing for an OER volume entitled *Processes: Writing Across Academic Careers* and published in March 2023: “The Process of Writing as a Spontaneous Act of Storytelling: From the Classroom to a Published Essay.” Utilizing the example of an essay that I had originally published in 2017 as part of conference proceedings, the chapter reflects on the process of writing as a deeply personal practice that has evolved over time and is in continuous evolution. The idea at the basis of the book is sharing different ways and processes of writing that can become a reference point for faculty, staff, and students in a post-pandemic world.

Finally, although not directly related to the pandemic or the changes to the curriculum due, or thanks to, the pandemic, some other publications that are listed in the Works Cited benefited from a situation that saw many of us saving time due to reduced commuting, and possibly to being more concentrated or simply more productive. Among these further publications, I count a co-edited book published by Vecchiarelli Editore (Manziana, Italy) in May 2022 on the representation of history and society in Italian films, *Passato e presente nel cinema italiano. Storia e società sul grande schermo* [*Past and Present in Italian Cinema: History and Society on the Silver Screen*], to which I contributed with a chapter and a co-written introduction, which was begun before the pandemic hit; the first of two volumes of a textbook of Italian, *DiversITALY: Elementary Italian with Inclusive Language & Gender Equality*, which I co-authored with a colleague based at a US institution and published through Kendall Hunt (Dubuque, Iowa) in November 2022 (volume II is expected in the fall of 2023); and a monograph on Italian intellectuals traveling to the former Soviet Union in the 1950s, published by Le Lettere (Florence, Italy) in May 2023: *Privet, compagne e compagni! Intellettuali in Unione Sovietica negli anni Cinquanta* [*Privet, Comrades! Intellectuals in the Soviet Union in the 1950s*].

Clearly, curriculum modifications and further publications during the pandemic have greatly contributed to the scholarship side of the academic life; however, the administrative work as defined as “service,” has also benefited from all these connections, although, admittedly, the impact on service was less pronounced than in the other two fields.

SERVICE: TASK-FORCE AND COMMITTEES

Beyond the impact that the pandemic had on my teaching and scholarship, service has also been open to transformation, especially with respect to integration of the DEI components, showing in particular how the opportunities for international collaboration through Virtual Exchanges and specifically COIL have drawn the interest of state and federal programs such as the TRIO (Educational Opportunity Program) or EOP program within SUNY at my institution. Conversations were initiated in the summer of 2022 to explore the integration of COIL into workshops and seminars for incoming students in these programs, and these changes will possibly be implemented in the summer of 2023.

Additionally, the Virtual Exchanges spurred the administration to create an infrastructure for COIL at our institution: for this, a COIL task force was created in the spring of 2021, and concluded its work at the end of the fall of 2022. Because of my experience and involvement with COIL, I was appointed as the chair of the COIL task force by the provost, leading a team of nine colleagues: three faculty including myself, two professionals from the office of International Education and Programs, one from the Office of Distance Learning, one from Information Technology, and two from the Office of the Provost. Through monthly meetings, we produced a 20-page handbook for faculty who are planning to collaborate internationally through a COIL VE, a proposal delineating the (infra)structure of COIL at our institution, and an application for faculty to have such courses recognized as fulfilling the Applied Learning/Civic Engagement requirement, while COIL codes run through the registrar have been established so that COIL courses are tracked in the students' transcripts. With the conclusion of the task force's work in the fall of 2022 and with the start of a new semester, I was also appointed as the campus-wide COIL Academic Coordinator by the provost, while the next steps will be the creation of a COIL Review Board to evaluate the proposals of COIL courses, a COIL Advisory Council that oversees COIL at every institutional level, and a COIL microcredential, all in progress at the time of writing this article.

While COIL has been the most important part of service that was positively impacted by the pandemic, certainly it was not the only one. As the chair of the General Education Assessment Committee in my department, I continued to lead the assessment cycles carried out at the height of the pandemic. Despite the difficulties in assessing courses in the midst of such major disruptions (for instance, we assessed all our languages—Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, and Spanish—fulfilling the General Education requirements for foreign languages in the fall of 2020 while we were teaching

from home, with each instructor assessing in a different way and under a good amount of stress due to our situation), we were able to conduct the assessment successfully. The outcomes, together with the work completed throughout the years, might have led to other opportunities later on, such as being invited to be part of the campus-wide General Education Committee that oversees that assessment at the institutional level.

Finally, as part of a committee organizing and running a yearly-based event, the pandemic also pushed us to seek new ways of celebrating the International Mother Language Day (celebrated by the UNESCO worldwide on February 21) since we could not access campus. We were able to celebrate it in person in February 2020, only a few weeks before the college shut down its in-person profile; however, we then switched to an online synchronous mode, continuing to hold our yearly event, but until 2021, over Google Meet or Microsoft Teams. We continued to have a successful event somewhat outside of our comfort zone, and we also learned a lot from changing the modality of delivery, including how to target and engage the audience synchronously, how to market an online event, and how to run it. However, in the spring of 2023, we finally returned to an in-person event, bringing our pandemic experience to a close, but not without having learned valuable lessons from it.

CONCLUSION

As our lives are slowly but steadily going back to normal, or to a new normal, with teaching in the physical classroom again or holding events on campus (although at my institution, we still hold most of our meetings remotely), we should stop and look back to see what and how we have changed in terms of our ways of teaching and learning, and what kinds of positive outcomes we had that are staying with us. As I am sure that my journey was nothing special, and that many of us have had similar experiences, I hope that sharing what came out of a moment of profound crisis, namely a global pandemic, can help readers to look back at their own experiences to realize that *non tutto il male viene, o è venuto, per nuocere durante una pandemia*, and that we can still find the best in the most difficult situations with which we are confronted. In the end, our lives are made out of threads that are braided in a way such that what we do and who we are leads us into adventures and connections that would or could be unimaginable during normal times. This is an invitation to reflect on the time we spent in the pandemic, with the goal of embracing new challenges and paving the path for the next phase, a post-pandemic world that awaits to be molded by all of us.

GLOSSARY

AL (Applied Learning)
COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning)
DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion)
EOP (Educational Opportunity Program)
IRB (Institutional Review Board)
NeMLA (Northeast Modern Language Association)
OER (Open Educational Resource)
SUNY (State University of New York)
UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)
VE (Virtual Exchanges)

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