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Nel mezzo del cammin tecnologico: Technology Integration within the Italian Classroom

“Dante, lo conoscete? L’autore della *Divina Commedia*.” After several attempts in Italian, I reluctantly switched to English. “You know, Dante? He wrote the *Divine Comedy*.” Even more confusion. “The most famous Italian writer?” It was a disheartening moment, while teaching my first language class at the university. Here was the author to whom I had dedicated several hours of study, swayed by his beautiful language, imagery, and influence on world literature. On the contrary, my students were oblivious to his grandeur, in addition to several other facets of Italian culture besides pizza and Ferraris. I caught myself wondering, “How could they know him? He’s someone from the medieval times, maybe irrelevant to their lives.” Yet, like all Italian culture, past and present, Dante is not irrelevant to the 21st century student’s life, and as an Italian language teacher, with the full disposal of this century’s new technologies, presenting this culture is easier than ever.

The impact of Italian studies on each student varies, from fulfilling a language requirement, traveling abroad for an extended period, or hopefully sharing the language and culture with others. Though I began Italian as a high school requirement, it has become a passion, so much so that I felt a void the semesters I did not study the language and literature. Like many American students, it has been exciting to learn about my Italian-American heritage, of which I am proud. There is something very distinct and beautiful about Italian culture, and only after my studies, have I realized its far-reaching and essential influence on Western culture. Yes, the food and landscape are savory, but even more influential on my life and education have been the art, literature, and music that Italian peoples have contributed throughout the centuries.

Though I am only a young teacher, I hope to inspire my students with this same love and passion for Italy and the Italian culture.

In addition to the traditional modes of instruction, such as textbook and classroom discussion, technology presents new opportunities for foreign language instructors to inspire their students. Technology should not replace traditional instruction, but rather bolster language acquisition as “comprehensible and meaning bearing input” (Lee, Van Patten 27). As foreign language researchers James F. Lee and Bill Van Patten note, “acquisition consists in large part of the building up of form-meaning connections in the learner’s head... [Input] must contain some message to which the learner is supposed to attend” (27). Like other visuals or authentic foreign materials, technology builds connections, beyond the tempting desire of many students to translate from English to Italian. Also, the Internet is becoming the major method of communication world-wide, thus necessitating the need of foreign language in technology. Through the Internet, authentic material from the past and present is more easily accessible and usable, and thus very beneficial to new students of Italian. As Italian instructors, there are three steps to integrating technology as a beneficial part in the classroom: awareness, real-time integration, and creativity in presenting the past.

The first step for proper technology enhancement in the classroom includes basic awareness on the part of the teacher. As an instructor, it may be tempting to stick to old methodologies without innovation. While these activities can be very helpful, technology may supplement them in such a way that the Italian culture surfaces even more clearly inside the classroom. For music, art, and literature, these technological tools are invaluable, especially software programs such as iTunes which have extensive collections not usually present in local libraries. Other online art collections, such as ARTstor or online museum tours, offer students

up close and zoomed in pictures of local Italian art. Though the technologies are vast and varied exploring these new modern enhancements remains a task that teachers must embrace. Teachers must constantly be aware of these appropriate technologies in order to enhance the instruction of their students and bring them as close as possible to a country across the ocean. It is also the teacher's duty to inform students of interesting technology tools online, which may not have a place within the classroom. For example, in my own learning, I have found many sites, such as the BBC World languages, iTunes international radio stations, and RAI television playback, through my own search. Informing students of these technologies can increase their passion for Italy even at home in America.

The next step includes integration of these technologies into appropriate classroom modes. As stated previously, it is tempting to rely on known technology, such as Power Point or You Tube. Yet there are even more ways to integrate the technology into the classroom, which ensure "interaction [which] pushes the learner to indicate what he does or does not understand" (Van Patten 32). Once again, technology brings authentic Italy deeper into the classroom. There are numerous modes of technology integration, from student-made movies and songs to social networking and Internet language sites. For example, at my university, several language programs contact native speakers through Skype and have real-time conversations between student and native speaker. Always keeping in mind safety that is talking to well-known friends online, Skype offers students the chance to "study abroad" and have similar interactions that an abroad experience would provide. For students who cannot afford such study options, Skype and other social networking devices provide solutions to making new international friends, learning more about Italian culture, and gaining second language fluency. Often the bane of teachers, cell phones or computer instant chatting, such as Gmail, could provide beneficial modes of

conversation interaction. For example, Gmail instant chatting could provide new practice speaking and reading among students in the L2. However, this must be monitored carefully, and perhaps due to its temptations, may be more beneficial as an activity outside of class.

The final step to technology integration involves presenting the past in innovative, modern ways. Since Italy has such a rich past, it is very disappointing that many young students find the history “too boring” to pursue further. Yet, as writers, such as Dante or Petrarch, have proven, their poetry and philosophies have survived centuries, and still offer truth for a 21st century student. Thus, in order to enhance appreciation for Italian culture, instructors must present the cultural past with as much passion and dedication as the present culture. However, as seen from personal experience, this medieval material becomes heavy or ignored when presented through simple text format. Thus, technology again provides the creative means to explore the past.

In terms of technological integration in history, many teachers have already utilized creative blogs or class websites for explorations of Italian culture. Students enjoying seeing their work appreciated and printed, and after receiving approval from parents or others in authority, blogs offer a great venue to display this work. It is important for instructors to be especially passionate about sites such as these, for students to begin commenting and discussing each other’s works. Social networking also offers new opportunities for technological integration. In one recent instance, an instructor had his class create a Twitter account for Dante, tweeting his various exploits through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. Once again, technology is not replacing traditional classroom instruction – students must still read the great literature to improve reading and writing skills – but supplementing the classroom by offering creative modes to express the past.

In my first year of teaching, I acknowledge that it has been difficult to find the time to search for these technologies, let alone implement them within the classroom. However, after writing this article, I cannot but see the benefits of technological integration in the classroom. Thus, I call upon all teachers to bring Italy closer to those students in the class who might soon visit Italy or may never have the chance in their lives. Perhaps it would be beneficial to start online or social networking groups dedicated to new foreign language technology to help other teachers. For not only does technology enhance the form-meaning connections of second language acquisition, but it also provides the authentic material of a virtual “study abroad” experience. It makes both learning and teaching the language and culture easier, for the culture may be brought directly into the classroom in real-world, communicative modes. For Italian studies to flourish in the years ahead, it is essential to continue this Dante-esque journey through new technologies, and find even more ways for students to truly appreciate and become passionate about the “dolce vita.”

Work Cited

Lee, James F. and Bill Van Patten. *Making Communicative Teaching Happen*. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2003).