Introduction

How often have we wondered how much better our life would be without technology? At the dinner table, when our children seem to receive an uninterrupted stream of notifications; at a restaurant, when annoying ring tones steal the peace of our dinner; in the streets, where walking is simultaneous with texting. At the coffee shop, where, standing in line, one often overhears bits of conversations with Siri. And finally, in our classrooms, where despite our no-technology policy, students can barely disconnect from the digital world for a mere fifty minutes. Irritated and frustrated, we wonder why technology is dividing us instead of connecting us to the world. Considering all this, why, then, a special issue on technology? And, more to the point, why technology in the classroom?

The answer is simple: because technology has dramatically changed our lives and our relation to reality, and it will continue to modify the way we learn, communicate, and perceive the world. Technology, in sum, is here to stay. Social media, social reading, blogging, and augmented and virtual reality are the future that is already here. Sharing with our students Italy's literary and cultural tradition, the significance of our national cinema, the basics of Italian grammar, and the complexities of medieval poems, we ought to be aware of when and how to use technology and which pedagogical role we want digital tools to have in our classrooms. Shifting our perspective and empowering students to use digital tools effectively is the key to unlocking the pedagogical potential of the digital classroom. As tempting as it is, a nostalgic return to traditional approaches that exclude technology from the classroom will prove disastrous, because our students live and breathe through technology, which has become central in their understanding of the world. To that end, this volume includes examples of intentional and productive integration of technology in the Italian classroom.

Much evidence points to the benefits of using technology in the classroom. Technological tools empower learners to construct personal learning environments for the purpose of independent inquiry and promote inquiry-based learning (Drexlet). It can also provide students with opportunities for greater motivation and a sense of ownership of their learning (Terrell), as well as tools that allow students to develop their foreign language speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills (blogs, wikis, video sharing sites); user-generated content is what makes

authentic communication tools an opportunity for active learning in the classroom and outside of it (Sykes et al.).

While we want to embrace technology, it is also important to be aware of the challenges it might present, from learning how to use new media to the treatment of sensitive data, to the choice of having (or not having) a social media presence. It also should be noted that technology is a tool, and for it to aid in student learning we must follow pedagogical guiding principles. There are a few simple guidelines to keep in mind when rethinking the classroom as a digital learning space. The first is that technology is useful only when it empowers us to do something we could not do otherwise. If students can make a poster with paper, glue, and markers, it is perhaps not necessary for them to learn complicated software to construct a digital version. It is possible, however, that they might want to take a picture of their poster, share it online and comment on it. In that case, technology would empower learning, communication, and reflection. The second guideline is moderation. It may not be necessary to use more than one technological platform at a time in a given course, for example. The last guideline is purposefulness. Students need to know why they are using technology and what they will learn from it; digital tools become intrinsically more meaningful if they are part of a shared strategy for learning.

This special issue, in the variety of different pedagogical experiences presented in the essays, addresses the fundamental value of pedagogy when considering the use of technology in the classroom. Our increased access to technology and our increased interest in it must be paired with the effort to prioritize learning. In this issue we have been careful to present a broad range of practice and research, from blogging to mind mapping, from Twitter and micro-input to digital archives, providing useful examples of how technology can be successfully integrated into the Italian classroom. Through a variety of approaches and objectives, the essays we have included in volume XXXIX, The Italian Digital Classroom, share the same goals: to increase student engagement and to encourage the understanding of technology as an enabling tool for students to actively construct meaning.

Stemming from a series of experimental practices in the classroom, Lisa Sarti and Carmela Scala's contribution, *Blogging Pinocchio: Reworking Culture in the Italian Classroom*, explores the intersection of virtual learning tools, such as blogs and discussion boards, with the study of classic Italian fairy tales. Paradigmatic of the modern Italian tale, Carlo Collodi's Pinocchio was used by the authors as a primary source to engage students in aural, oral, and written

activities focused on the acquisition of language and the development of cultural competence. Reading and blogging on Pinocchio encouraged students to analyze both the structure of the narrative as well as its historical context, challenging them to understand the past through the lens of present-day technology. The study is organized around data collected initially at Hunter College of The City University of New York and St. John's University in the spring semester of 2014, with beginning and intermediate learners of Italian. A careful examination of the experience and comparison with traditional writing assignments gives evidence of significant improvement in the students' writing skills. Blogging activities facilitated open and immediate sharing of thoughts, quick response through non-threatening peer feedback, and significant reduction of syntax and spelling mistakes, while allowing the acquisition and retention of sophisticated vocabulary.

Fabrizio Fornara's contribution, *Micro-Input: Effects of an Instructor Model on Foreign Language Student Production on Twitter*, examines the effectiveness of the instructor-centered model in the teaching of foreign languages, specifically with online written production. The experiment involved almost one hundred students of Italian who used Twitter, a popular micro-blogging service, to post daily micro-blogging messages for a period of twelve weeks. The objective was twofold: to examine the usefulness of the traditional model, based on a teacher-centered class, in an educational context that is confronted daily with the ever-increasing role of digital technology, and the effectiveness of teaching methodologies that blend digital tools with foreign language instruction as a primary space of intervention. The study reveals that the blending of the instructor-centered model and digital technologies can improve students' written production, particularly in the case of recently introduced verbal forms and previously learned vocabulary but fails at convincing the learners of its overall impact. However, the general positive attitude students express toward this experience serves both as an encouragement but also as a warning that new methodological practices need to be developed that decenter the role of the instructor in the acquisition and retention activities, promoting a student-centered environment that favors self-learning.

As coordinator of the Italian Studies Program at Saint Louis University, Simone Bregni is aware of the importance of a multi-media approach in the teaching of foreign languages and believes that the thriving enrollments in Italian at his university are the result of the introduction of innovative teaching technologies in the traditional

curriculum. In his article, *Using Video Games to Teach Italian Language and Culture: Useful, Effective, Feasible?* Bregni explores the full potential of gaming with interactive multi-media narratives in the language classroom. His competence in and passion for the world of video games, together with a sound theoretical and methodological framework, produced a series of lab and classroom activities that involved video gaming (specifically the Assassin's Creed series) that engaged students both at the language and cultural level. While learning Italian, in fact, students also familiarized themselves with the history and everyday life in the Middle Ages and Renaissance Italy. In his study, Bregni discusses the many applications of video gaming in the classroom but extends its applicability also to online courses, where preparatory and follow-up activities are developed to further student retention and interaction, while class discussion and face-to-face activities can take place via video recording and group conferencing software.

In the essay *The Digital Archive and the Italian American Classroom*, Johanna Rossi Wagner looks at how the creation of digital archives in an Italian American course can engage and motivate students to conduct rigorous self-directed research. Here too, as in Scala and Sarti's experience, the objective is to empower students to become protagonists of the learning process, to guide the course narrative and to produce primary source material for dissemination among an audience of peers and researchers. Rossi-Wagner is aware that current theory and methodology in higher education reject the traditional lecture-based model for instruction in language and cultural studies using new technology, but she is also mindful of the difficult task of implementing new strategies in teaching and learning. To avoid the pitfalls that scholars have identified in the student-centered paradigm—impoverished content and diminished academic rigor—Rossi-Wagner invested time in the careful design of an oral history/digital archive project with emphasis on three main objectives: increased student autonomy in deciding the content and scope of the project, a new relationship between students, research materials, and primary sources, and improved use of available technologies.

Digital technologies find an ideal application in the humanities at the intersection of disciplines such as history, cultural, and media studies, as Massimo Riva and Valeria Federici argue in their essay, *The Garibaldi Panorama & the Risorgimento Archive at Brown University: Current Developments in Visualization Techniques and Methodologies for Teaching and Research*. Developed in 2007, the Garibaldi & the Risorgimento digital archive at Brown University offers a

comprehensive deposit of materials for the interdisciplinary study of Giuseppe Garibaldi's life. What makes this archive particularly interesting is the opportunity to visualize the Garibaldi moving panorama, a popular form of 19th-century public art, and to access digitized and searchable materials from various library collections, such as portraits from the Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection, extensive selections from the 19th Century Illustrated Press, and dozens of digitized pamphlets from the Harvard Risorgimento Preservation Collection. Scholarly essays and conference proceedings engage students in researching Garibaldi from a multiplicity of perspectives. In addition, the Touch Art Gallery enables interaction with a high definition version of the panorama on haptic screens. The archive is a work in progress, enriched continuously by the contributions of undergraduate and graduate students, whose projects are the focus of the second part of the article.

The evidence of the multi-applicability of the digital component to the Humanities is confirmed by Massimo Lollini's project, *Reading, Rewriting, and Encoding Petrarch's* Rerum vulgarium fragmenta *as Hypertext*, which reflects on the results of a seminar offered at the University of Oregon in 2014. Dedicated to re-reading Petrarch through the Oregon Petrarch Open Book, a database-driven hypertext of Francesco Petrarca's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, the experiment developed from the challenge of transforming the passive reading of a single text into a rich and textured literary experience. Driven by Stanley Fish's critical questions on the digital humanities, the course objectives focused on how digital tools challenge learners to understand the humanities in an entirely different way while promoting empowering and agency-driven practices. The study articulates how the various activities (transcribing manuscripts, incunabula, and commentaries, studying different translations and modern re-writings, analyzing intersemiotic transpositions, even creating tweets) transformed students into discussants and contributors to the ongoing research on Petrarch's masterpiece. In addition to a general introduction to the Oregon Petrarch Open Book database, in his article Lollini discusses the significance, applications, and assessment of an experiment that aimed, successfully, at finding new and meaningful philological tools to approach and interpret Petrarch's work in original and captivating ways.

In *Mind Maps: New Perspectives*, Metello Mugnai explores the effectiveness of the application of mind maps, initially conceived by Tony Buzan as a note-taking method, in the digital classroom. Their structure as image-centered radial diagrams was fashioned to visually

present information arranged hierarchically around a central idea, from which propagates a large number of minor concepts. Mugnai argues that this model can be applied successfully in various learning activities, for it is useful in approaching the new material or in reviewing or expanding on previously internalized knowledge. The popularity of mind maps is well-known: its use is quite prevalent among students as new software becomes accessible online and can be used in individual or collaborative digital assignments. Mugnai's focus in this article is on the use of Mind Map Maker, an application that is part of the Google Drive software suite, which is free and easily accessible. Mind Map Maker allows the creation and the modification of mind maps online, and this gives Mugnai the opportunity to present practical examples of its use inside and outside the classroom, in an analogical or digital setting, as well as in small groups or individual projects.

The last article of this volume is dedicated to the exploration of online, blended learning in the teaching of Italian. Rosario Pollicino's *Tra sincrono e asincrono: L'insegnamento Online-Blended della lingua italiana*'s primary objective is to propose a methodology that combines both synchronous and asynchronous modalities, blending face-to-face and online activities to overcome the shortcomings and weaknesses of these methodologies as they are employed singularly. Integrating both learning modalities, Pollicino argues, has several advantages, primarily in maintaining the central role of the instructor, who provides general guidance throughout the learning process, but also in recognizing the increasingly meaningful role of students as agents of their own learning. While in the blended learning mode the instructor remains the primary provider of linguistic input, much more freedom is given to the learners to efficiently manage the time dedicated to designated activities. The asynchronous model is quite suitable, in fact, when learners are not traditional students, who need to manage learning practices in more flexible ways, maintaining the rigor expected in an academic pursuit. Furthermore, Pollicino sees the blended learning model as attractive to both traditional and non-traditional students, who could find the flexible schedule more attractive than the conventional in-class model, encouraging them to become empowered and thus more committed learners of foreign languages.

Carol Chiodo concludes the volume with a brief, but critical contribution on the role of the Digital Humanities in Italian studies. To better understand the present, Carol Chiodo invoke the help of Giambattista Vico, whose philosophical question about "current study methods" can still guide the Digital Humanities and any liberal arts

education, for that matter. Carol Chiodo's reflection is a perfect conclusion for this special issue on the Italian digital classroom. We hope you will find the reading of the essays thought provoking and will make you want to explore new ways of using technology in the classroom.

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