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Giovanna Carloni, Christopher Fotheringham,
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Blended Learning and the Global South
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Foreword

Ruksana Osman
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

It is an honour to be writing this foreword to *Blended Learning and the Global South: Virtual Exchanges in Higher Education*. The seeds for this edited volume were sown back in March 2019, 12 months to the day before the world officially marked the onset of a global pandemic caused by the novel Coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, now known as COVID-19.

On the 25 March 2019, the Blended Symposium on blended learning in the field of languages, literature, and media was held at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. The symposium was also the inaugural event of an exciting, blended learning platform called BLOSA (Blended and Online South Africa), a South African platform for blended learning. The objective of the conference was to explore the theory and application of hybrid and blended learning for languages, literature, and media pedagogy in the context of developing economies. Little did we know that, a year after the symposium, much of our academic and scholarly exchanges and our teaching would be virtual. Owing to social distancing needs, the COVID-19 outbreak forced all levels of formal education to make use of digital learning and teaching methods, making this edited volume on virtual exchanges most timely.

This book also makes its appearance at a point in global history when the COVID-19 pandemic is reshaping all dimensions of life as we know it, including higher education. Its impact is dictating how we interact with others, transforming how we socialise and care about one another, restructuring business and the economy, and altering how we think about sustaining our world. The pandemic has forced

the global academy to question what it means to be a university, to reconsider its role in society and its relationship with other social actors. Concomitantly, it has provided the academy with a moment to pause, to reflect, and to propose new knowledge architectures that enable its reconfiguration in ways that advance flexible futures for all. The traditional role of higher education institutions centres on the creation of new knowledge, the development of high-level and scarce skills, and the advancement of the public good. Against the backdrop of a rapidly changing technological landscape and in a world where new challenges, such as the Coronavirus, emerge daily, the need for change is leading us into unchartered waters. The publication of this volume on virtual exchanges in higher education from the global south, at this time of pandemic, provides us with an opportunity to revitalise our way of thinking about teaching and learning in higher education and to enable the knowledge project of the academy to prosper post COVID-19.

In addition, COVID-19 has paved the way for universities from the global south to lead from the front on many issues, including teaching and learning in local contexts, while being globally anchored. The book project has enabled a multiplicity of voices, methods and framings to come to the fore, forging an inclusive community of scholars from across the world who write compellingly about virtual exchanges in higher education.

*Blended Learning and the Global Sout*h brings together a thought-provoking collection of chapters focused on new efforts and experiences in digital learning and the opportunities these have provided for advancing the learning experiences of teachers and students in Education and Higher Education Collectively the chapters provide insights on empirical and theoretical explorations of the widespread use of digital learning, and how we are deriving new insights into the theory and practice of formal learning. The chapters explore the advances in digital modes of learning and teaching alongside the conceptual and methodical developments in a number of specific areas such as the struggles associated with the uptake of blended and online learning (1), how such learning works with knowledge dissemination (2), the use of digital portfolios for formative assessment(3), testing the effectiveness of an online platform for language learning (4), the use of the digital story as an instructional tool in a French foreign language course (5), a peer-centred cycle for teaching in an English literature class (6), using eTandem to promote student-centred language learning in a two-country case study (7), the effectiveness of teleconferencing and telecollaboration for foreign language teaching and learning (8), questioning what really works in telecollaborative pedagogy(9), a transnational model looking at virtual exchanges to advance gender equality and global citizenship (10), and finally a case study of digital gaming in a foreign language courses (11).

These thought-provoking explorations address many questions, among them the following:

- Can online learning be better than site-based co-located learning? If so, what are the conditions for success?
- What are the inequalities that characterise the digital sphere and digital learning?
- What tools and methods are most appropriate for digital language learning?
- How can blended pedagogies be drawn on for the acquisition of high-level foreign language literacy?
- What is lost (and gained) when peer learning and telecollaborative knowledge building go fully online?
- What is gained (or lost) when classrooms are flipped and what do we need to know?
- How are the transformative effects of the digital realised in foreign language courses?

The contributing authors write from multiple national contexts and geographies, covering several knowledge fields and subjects, and their biographies and those of the editors lend the book a cosmopolitan flavour. This cosmopolitanism draws attention to the tensions and possibilities associated with teaching and learning in a complex global context. The chapters make explicit the relationship between learning and teaching and the intervening or enabling ever-present role of the digital. Collectively, the portrayal of digital learning and teaching in different formats combines the realms of ideas and inspiration with pedagogic action, foregrounding the ground-breaking intent of the book to imagine and shape alternative futures for education and teaching and learning in the global south.

Moving across and between South Africa, Brazil, Mexico and Algeria and then Italy, Spain, Australia, and the USA, the chapters reflect the many ways in which the global south encounters the world. They breathe new life into ways of being and seeing from the global south, giving shape and form to ideas about learning, e-collaboration and peer learning.

The contributions drawn from different geographies clearly show that these geographies are connected and coupled in so many ways and that collaboration – tele or in person – is the focus and centre of the knowledge project of learning to teach and teaching to learn. Each of the chapters reveals the authors' formidable power as teachers and their deep commitment to teaching and student learning. The reader is left with a clear sense that the digital future of learning and teaching advanced here, while focussing on on-line approaches and methodologies, represents a future of being human, that the future of teaching and learning is human and that virtual exchanges in higher education will always be, in the first instance, human. As

such educational relationships are central to the book's story and provide insights into the nature of education and its complex trajectory in fraught and complex times.

Although universities will need more time to explore the implications of virtual exchanges, while remaining cognisant of the limits and potential of screen-based reasoning and thoughtfulness, this book has developed a new educative focus which fundamentally reshapes the relationship between teacher, student and content, and the academy and society more broadly.

The book demonstrates that groups of researchers exchanging their research , integrating their experiences, and imagining different and flexible futures could be the basis for truly innovative thinking when sparked by creative experimentation. It is my hope that the compelling accounts in each of the chapters will draw readers into the world of teaching and learning in the global south.

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Blended Learning and the Global South. Virtual Exchanges in Higher Education
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Blended Learning and the Global South

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Digital Learning and the Global South

Digitalization has increasingly become an affordance of foreign language and discipline-specific learning worldwide. In this perspective, blended learning and Virtual Exchange play a pivotal role in today's pedagogical practices.

Blended Learning

Blended learning has become a buzzword in higher education settings in recent years. Proponents of the pedagogical style vaunt its effectiveness in dealing with higher education challenges that we, as 21st century educators, are facing. These include increased massification and connecting with a generation of so-called digital natives whose capacity for traditional literacy is proving an immense

stumbling block. However, proponents of blended learning often, it must be said, form part of the ranks of the bean counters of the neoliberal university who see in the system a sure means to greater 'efficiency'. From their point of view efficiency equals maximising student numbers and minimising outlays in human resources (this too was once a neoliberal buzz word which we have begrudgingly had to accept as a reality in higher education). These matters were of grave concern long before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic but have taken on an ever greater urgency. As most of the world's campuses closed their doors to students a precipitous scramble to move courses online occurred often with disastrous consequences for the continuity and quality of curricula. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic runs the risk of further blurring the distinction between blended and online teaching and learning, the proper application of former having become impossible in most cases while some stakeholders without proper familiarity with blended learning continue to tout it as a solution.

From the point of view of educators and students, however, blended learning is far from a panacea to the pedagogical bottle-necks many of us are experiencing. Contrary to what the administrators, who are often woefully out of touch with the frontlines of pedagogy would have us believe, and as many of us will attest, blended learning is not time-saving and is certainly not simpler that traditional teaching. The area of blended learning is also complicated by its conflation, in the minds of many, with online teaching. Blended learning is a distinct pedagogy where the online components of the course are seamlessly integrated with face-to-face contact which affords opportunities to create flipped-classrooms where active learning can flourish. Indeed, conceptualising, designing and implementing a blended course requires a very specific skill set and a real commitment to teaching and learning on the part of the educator.

The simple equation of being a digital-native and therefore being 'tech-savvy' is another simplistic marketing myth. Our students were born and have grown up in a world of stable, reliable and plug-and-play technology. They are the app generation while those teaching belong to the software generation. A native speaker of a language is less likely to understand the underlying system of their own language than someone who has taken the effort to learn the language and this dynamic plays out in digital natives. Especially in developing countries, the experience of technology of many young people has been exclusively with smartphones. Many students can download and use single-purpose apps but have difficulty working with file management and word processing on a PC. This is especially a problem in the Global South where computers are well out of reach financially for most people and is increasingly a problem in the workplace where the Zoomer generation is being found to be wanting in terms of prac-

tical digital literacy necessary for office work. Distressing also in the context of universities in developing nations is the stark inequality in terms of access and competencies: the so-called digital divide.

Virtual Exchange[1]

In Virtual Exchange, groups of students or groups of students and pre-service teachers, attending institutions located in different cultural and geographical locations worldwide, engage online through technology-enhanced activities, including videoconferencing (Lewis, O'Dowd 2016a). Virtual Exchange, mostly implemented to enhance foreign language learning from an intercultural perspective, has gradually developed across disciplines.[2] Virtual Exchange is an example of virtual mobility, which has recently become an asset of post-pandemic education, and in particular a form of Internationalisation at Home (IaH); IaH uses strategies suited to engaging nonmobile students in campus-based activities targeted at enhancing their intercultural and global skills (Beelen, Jones 2015).

Research shows that Virtual Exchange is suitable for fostering foreign language competence and intercultural awareness.[3]

In transnational Virtual Exchange contexts, providing students with timely feedback is pivotal to promote foreign language learning (Carloni, Zuccala 2017; Kurek, Müller-Hartmann 2017). Since students are not usually able to scaffold other learners' foreign language development (Lewis, O'Dowd 2016b), pre-service foreign language teachers have gradually become part of Virtual Exchange; pre-service foreign language teachers are in fact trained both to scaffold students' language learning and engage in digital pedagogy skilfully thereby enhancing methodological innovation.[4]

1 This section was written by Giovanni Carloni.

2 Guth, Helm, O'Dowd 2012; Jin 2013; Liddicoat, Scarino 2013; O'Dowd 2016; Lewis, O'Dowd 2016b; Vinagre 2016; Carloni, Zuccala 2017; Porto 2017; Carloni, Zuccala 2018; Sykes 2018; Cunningham 2019; Carloni, Zuccala 2020; Koris, Vuylsteke 2020.

3 Belz 2002; O'Dowd 2006; Belz, Vyatkina 2008; Ware, O'Dowd 2008; Helm, Guth 2010; Guth, Helm, O'Dowd 2012; O'Dowd 2012; Jin 2013; Liddicoat, Scarino 2013; Kern 2014; Bueno-Alastuey, Kleban 2016; Vinagre 2016; Porto 2017; O'Dowd, O'Rourke 2019; Helm, Van der Velden 2020.

4 Guichon 2009; Develotte et al. 2010; Murphy et al. 2010; O'Dowd 2015; Guichon, Wigham 2016; Nissen, Kurek 2020.

Blended Learning from a Transnational Perspective

This volume contains interventions on subject of blended-learning from a transnational and Global South perspective. The project began as an initiative by the Teaching and Learning Committee of the School of Language, Literature, and Media at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg. While the project was initially conceived of as an internal symposium to focus on our own challenges as a school of languages and literature, we were struck by the notion that we could enact blended teaching and learning in the symposium itself.

The 2019 Blended Symposium on blended learning in the field of languages, literature, and media was held on 25 March 2019 as the inaugural event of the newly designed and launched South African Platform for Blended Learning: BLOSA (Blended Learning Online South Africa). Two keynote addresses from international guests were presented along with seven papers, the majority of which were given by delegates from four continents; the conference was further attended by roughly 30 non-presenting delegates. The objective of the conference was the exploration of both the theory and application of hybrid and blended learning for languages, literature, and media pedagogy in the context of developing economies.

With financial support from the deputy vice-chancellor of the university, the inaugural conference of BLOSA was organised for 25 March 2019. In designing the event itself, an innovative and blended conferencing model was followed. The model relied on online engagement as a support and a scaffold for the face-to-face event. Contributors were required to present a short videocast for uploading onto the BLOSA site, where it was made available to site members a week prior to the conference-in the hope that online engagement before the event would enrich the conversations at the face-to-face symposium. The streamlined and user friendly site (`www.blosa.co.za`), co-designed and built in collaboration with Teracore Digital Marketing (`www.teracore.co.za`), was structured along the lines of a social media platform allowing members to post comments and engage directly with contributors and one another. The videocasts remained on the site well past the date of the symposium as a digital, globally sharable resource for fellow practitioners and fellow scholars of blended learning. Where the contributions and the debates of a traditional time-and-place-bound conference are ephemeral and reserved for a closed community, the model of the BLOSA 2019 conference was one of open access and long duration.

The rationale for this format was twofold: the first objective was to enact the blended model within the very structure of our conferencing activity; the second, to engage the emerging practice of *unconferencing* as a catalyst for democratised accessibility and as a form of resistance to the traditional conference model which neces-

sitates, for example, the presence of international keynotes and an elitist bias toward physical attendance at great expense to individuals and institutions. This is a model that arguably isolates academics from developing contexts from currents and debates emerging in large Global North conferences. This volume represents the outcomes of that conference.

Blended Learning and Virtual Exchange: Case Studies

The volume begins with a chapter by Rahul Gairola (Murdoch University, Australia) in which he sets the scene for the remaining chapters in the volume by situating blended learning in the context of postcolonial nations. He uses Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed as a frame for considering how blended teaching and learning can and does operate in contexts characterised by challenges inconceivable in the metropolitan Global North where blended learning as a concept was developed and is being instituted. Also within the realm of the challenges of uptake and implementation of blended learning is Laura Dison and Kershree Padayachee's chapter on the causes and consequences of resistance on the part of lecturers in higher education to embrace blended learning as a pedagogy. Working within the theoretical horizons of the Epistemic Pedagogic Device (EPD) and Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) and their chapter responds to some of the challenges in harmonising the, sometimes at loggerheads, institutional and pedagogical imperatives discussed above by valorising the various stakeholders in the process of design and implementation of blended courses. These more theoretically dense chapters provide a useful framework within which to approach the remaining chapters which, by design, are far more grounded in the practical experience of pedagogues working both in the Global North and the Global South, as well as transnationally. In the spirit of the BLOSA conference, this volume is a truly global endeavour and one with practical applications for pedagogues working in diverse cultural and economic contexts. We are proud to be able to publish the chapters that emerged from our transnational blended symposium in this volume which contains voices from South Africa, Algeria, Mexico, Australia, Spain, the United States and Italy.

Naturally, given that the symposium was hosted by the School of Languages, Literature, and Media, many of the papers in this volume concern foreign language acquisition using online and blended methods. Most satisfying in this regard are the examples of transnational collaborations between students in different countries. Rachida Sadouni (University Blida in Algeria) describes an effective telecollaboration of this kind which brought together students of French from two developing contexts, Algeria and Moldova. The chapter presents the

nature of the project and student responses to the programme which were mostly positive. It is also quite candid about the challenges in terms of connectivity and digital literacy faced by Algerian students in particular. Sadouni describes how she found resorting to email as a mode of communication between the Moldovan and Algerian groups to be the most effective method. Her findings underline that in contexts with limited resources a back-to-basics approach may be more effective and that complicated and costly platforms can be more of a hindrance than a help. She even noticed that some students did not even have email addresses or know how to email before the project started making her course an invaluable first step for students suffering from 'digital poverty'. Student-centeredness and peer feedback as an adjunct to foreign language curricula is also discussed by Arturo Mendoza (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/University of the Witwatersrand) who describes an eTandem project between students of Spanish in South Africa and students of English in Mexico. Again, in this project simple and freely available software was used: in this case Zoom. Mendoza mentions that eTandem projects can work with Facebook, Skype, Whatsapp or Hangout, allowing easy and natural language learning exchanges across continents.

In tandem with Aguirre de Cárcer Girón (University of the Witwatersrand; Universidad Nebrija), Mendoza contributes a second piece to the collection, in which they discuss the affordances and limitations of e-portfolios as formative assessment in the language classroom and elaborate a set of theoretical guidelines.

Francesca Calamita (University of Virgina) and Roberta Trapè's (University of Melbourne) Intercultural Citizenship Project goes beyond language learning and cultural exchange and allows students in the USA and Italy to take part in a transnational conversation about social issues creating a virtual space in which the matter of gender equality and inclusive language could be discussed. These three projects are all excellent examples of blended pedagogy because they are student-driven and supported by technology and face-to-face classes. Interventions like these have enormous potential to provide immersive and communicative intercultural language learning spaces for the vast majority of students who live in contexts where a study-abroad programme is an inconceivable luxury. In "A Telecollaborative International Exchange for Foreign Language Learning and Reflective Teaching", Carloni and Franzè analyse a Virtual Exchange where students of Italian from Columbia University and pre-service teachers of Italian as second and foreign language from the University of Urbino engage in foreign language development tasks. The study investigates in particular students' and pre-service teachers' perceptions in order to assess the effectiveness of Virtual Exchange as a foreign language teaching and learning environment.

Sandra Paola Muñoz (ENES Léon) and David Ruiz Guzmàn, in their empirical comparative study of two groups of students, one exposed to blended-learning and the other to only traditional methods, share their design process and the impressive results of a custom-built platform for English language courses in Mexico. Simone Bregni (Saint Louis University) describes a fascinating course that he designed capitalising strongly on the specific interests of an "affinity group": in this case gamers. While playing the Italian language versions of immersive video games set in the historical context of Renaissance Italy, Bregni's game-loving students rapidly acquired target-language vocabulary and grammatical forms while actively engaged in an activity that engaged them utterly. The concepts and knowledge acquired during these structured gaming sessions, which could be completed at home or on campus, were ingeniously reinforced by Bregni using different pedagogical instruments in the classroom. Students self-reported continuing to play games in Italian to build on their successes long after completing the course. All the studies discussed above illustrate the immense flexibility of blended-learning in terms of catering for the instructors' and students' aptitudes and dispositions towards the digital environment as well as busting the myth that blended-learning can only take place in highly resourced settings.

Continuing with the theme of grounded and practical interventions in the teaching and learning environment but focussing on innovative course design for literary studies, we have Fiona Horne's (Wits) discussion of the "digital story" as a pedagogical instrument for the acquisition of the fundamental literary analysis skills but using an innovative, interactive and scaffolded methodology which circumvents some of the negative affect associations of many students with traditional close-reading. Similarly, Colette Gordon (Wits) writes about the limitations of traditional approaches to teaching literary analysis skills in English Literature courses owing to a serious shortfall of South African school leavers capacities in the area of deep literacy. She problematises the concept of the flipped-classroom and describes the development of a peer-centred feedback loop using blended reciprocal peer learning.

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Lessons On-(the)-Line
Blended Learning and Pedagogy of (the) Digitally Oppressed

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Abstract In this essay, I explore the meanings and implications of blended learning in an era of global pandemic by extending Paulo Freire's notion of a "pedagogy of the oppressed" into the digital milieu and COVID-19 era of the 21st century. In doing so, I critically meditate on how Freire's cue is reformulated in the context of online teaching while situating questions about online learning in the context of the Blended Learning Online South Africa (BLOSA) project based at the University of Witwatersrand. I do so as a means for tracking how, in material practice, blended learning operates in the context of knowledge dissemination and postcolonial poverty.

Keywords Blended learning. Digital. Pedagogy. Online. Teaching. Oppressed. Students.

In memory of Paulo Freire

1 Hacking Hierarchical Learning in Blended Learning Forums

Can there be such a thing as excellent teaching in a challenging world in which the threat of disease and necessity of social distancing socially warrant a pedagogy designed by separation? Can educators rationalise the

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growth of 'distance learning' while also retaining the intimacy that lies at the heart of social justice praxis? These opening questions, which this essay explores, surface in my title, which intentionally places 'the' in parentheses to signify the ways in which the meaning of both lines of my title are framed by variable, signified meanings. That is, in both lines, 'the' operates as both a joiner and a separator of the production of meaning when we critically meditate on the innovative and restrictive interfaces between 'technology' and 'learning' – another semantic collocation whose meaning is presumed in the term 'learning technology'. By disrupting the phrases in the above title with 'the' as a semantic variable rather than hermeneutical preclusion, I linguistically signal from the outset that notions of 'online' and 'pedagogy' do not dwell in a fixed, canonical epistemology. This textual gesture is perhaps a reasonable manner of embarking into a paper that critically meditates on blended learning as a contemporary and innovative approach to teaching.

Blended learning interweaves online and traditional teaching methods, both synchronous and asynchronous, with classroom pedagogy, and commands an acute sense of urgency during the global COVID-19 pandemic. This disruption in my paper's title, then, meaningfully resonates with Paulo Freire's thinking in his pioneering study, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In that revolutionary text, Freire describes "pedagogy of the oppressed" as "a pedagogy that must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle this pedagogy will be made and remade" (Freire 2000, 48). He further details that

> The pedagogy of the oppressed, animated by authentic, humanist (not humanitarian) generosity, presents itself as a pedagogy of humankind. Pedagogy which begins with the egoistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes of the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression. It is an instrument of dehumanization. This is why, as we affirmed earlier, the pedagogy of the oppressed cannot be developed or practiced by the oppressors. It would be a contradiction in terms if the oppressors not only defended but actually implemented a liberating education. (48)

Freire's observation links pedagogy with the psychic bonds of power relationships that exercise permeability between classroom and the world while centralising 'human' as a category. In my own interpretation and research, I read and apply Freire's notion as describing class and hierarchical relationships in the world that often replicate

themselves in the universities.[1] In this context, a key observation is that universities can *specifically* be sites of alienation, even if unwittingly. This is a very current issue in South Africa, for example, with conversations about transforming and decolonising the way universities work in fundamental ways beyond the removal of statues or the window-dressing of curriculum, content, and delivery method. I would thus signal from the outset the technology gap in universities at different sites around the globe wherein access to technology, wifi, electricity, lack of computer literacy, poor command of English construct a kind of digital oppression which I return to later in this essay.

Indeed, Freire's observation instructionally resonates with the lives of enslaved, indentured, and/or colonised peoples assimilated by the imperial whip of colonial languages, among other cultural impositions. In literary imaginings from Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest* to Mary Shelley's Monster in *Frankenstein*, English literacy, for example, is both an anathema to and cure of assimilation. Thought that emerged from the Enlightenment period was notably marked by orientalism and racism perpetrated by "the overbearing, oppressive demeanour of the [Western] colonising powers" (Clarke 2002, 191). Freire's call for oppressed peoples to forge an organic modality of learning in today's global crucible of second wave COVID-19 outbreaks is urgent during global movements, led by students, young people, millennials, and Generation Z, against anti-Black factions. It is moreover a timely historical moment in which we can critically meditate on how to best develop a technique of decolonial pedagogy in sync with tactics of blended learning whose formats complement teaching materials, strategies, and methodologies.

However, in moving forward with Freire's notion that it is "a contradiction in terms if the oppressors not only defended but actually-implemented a liberating education" (2000, 48), it behoves us to critically reflect on what this means in the timely context of the university classroom in the age of COVID-19 and its impact on both face-to-face teaching and learning technologies. But beyond being situated in this context, per se, the university classroom is often a contact zone within which participants encounter society's hierarchies on a micro, versus macro, scale with others and within themselves. Developing countries have inherited educational systems developed in the West and imposed by colonialism and which continue to operate in the interests of capital, and these spaces and epistemologies and cultures of learning have been criticised for their Eurocentric biases etc. in South Africa for example. With this in mind, we can consider

1 See Gairola 2014 for more on this in the context of postcolonial classrooms that are disciplinary and Gairola 2016 for the ways in such learning spaces are meant to invoke comforts and exclusions of 'home'.

students as the pedagogically oppressed, or at least disempowered, in the top down, teacher-student binary of power relations. In other words, this paper rhetorically reads students as oppressed/dispossessed agents of change in the historical context of COVID-19 and in the skewed power relations routinely spatialised in the university lecture hall and tutorial room.

These fixed material spaces are timely spatial counterpoints to the unmoored learning forums promoted by blended learning models and the migratory freedom of mobile learning applications. Material and online spaces are counterpoints precisely because they offer solutions that not all learners can afford while those who do have them are often targeted by thieves, especially in 'developing' contexts; as such, the very accessibility promoted by these models often stifle the accessibility that they herald. In the context of differing learning spaces, we should from the outset acknowledge the overwhelming hegemony that the English language holds across these digital platforms even in the mobility of learning and teaching praxes. In addition to hacking hierarchical structures, including power relations that promote racism, classism, xenophobia, sexism, queerphobia, etc. in what follows, I explore the meanings and implications of blended learning in an era of global pandemic in the context of the Global South. To this end, in the next section I extend Freire's notion of a "pedagogy of the oppressed" into the digital milieu and COVID-19 era of the 21st century. The goal of doing so is to meditate on how Freire's cue is reformulated in the context of online teaching during a global pandemic that has been punctuated by disturbing xenophobic and racialised incidents worldwide.

In closing the essay, I attempt to situate these questions of learning in the context of the Blended Learning Online South Africa (BLOSA) project based at the University of Witwatersrand as a means for tracking how, in material practice, blended learning operates in the context of knowledge dissemination and postcolonial poverty. I briefly focus on Africa and Asia, two continents that widely experienced Western colonialism, and which have experienced what Kang Minhyung describes as a "global smartphone craze" that "has led to an explosion in internet use, ushering in a mobile phone era" (2010, 79). I conclude with a necessarily cursory manifesto for blended learning during the COVID-19 crisis and the responsibility of students and teachers alike to assume global citizenship in re-thinking and actioning social justice from the classroom to mobile apps in and through a strategic merger of blended learning pedagogical praxis with the critical pedagogy advocated by Freire and others.

2 Defining a Pedagogy of "the Digitally Oppressed"

Some teacher-scholars describe a pedagogy of the "digitally oppressed". Given the historical and geographical context of this essay, it is helpful to critically meditate on definitions of this term in the context of Freire's oeuvre. In her master's thesis paper at the University of Twente, Samantha Mariel Valenzuela Hernández writes:

> I conceptualise "digital oppression" as the technologically-mediated process where oppressor/oppressed relationships take place. Critical reflections about technologies can uncover these processes, which are regularly obscured due to narratives that frame technologies as neutral. When technologies are taken for granted, little attention is paid to hidden dynamics that prevent people to consider the way technologies shape their lives. For instance, digital learning mirrors a problematic model of education where the development of a critical consciousness is hindered because students are not encouraged to think for themselves. (2018, 29-30)

In the context of the above passage, Hernández is justified in noting that technology itself can embed undetected biases that present themselves as 'equity'. For example, I know from personal experience that not all students have PC and/or laptop access at home, or the financial resources to afford data fees and costly hardware. Some, indeed, may not even possess the ubiquitous smartphone that seems to be a staple appendage of 21st century bodies. Because of varying demands with jobs, family, finances, and political crises, the digital milieu can be oppressive to rather than facilitatory of multimedia, online learning content. For example, during the BLOSA conference from which this volume has emerged, participants lived in mortal fear that the electricity would cut out because of the breakdown of our state energy provider; this fear punctuated the unsuitability or limited applicability of blended models developed in the Global North in contrast to our developing contexts.

I experienced similar fears when teaching in northern India during the monsoon season (June-September), when torrential downpours and high winds warranted unpredictable, rolling power blackouts 2-3 times a day. I learned the hard way that we must compulsively save all work on computers and not take for granted the availability of power sources. Beyond such impact factors on learning technology like equitable and public access to electricity, Hernández's notion of "digital oppression as the technologically-mediated process where oppressor/oppressed relationships take place" also arguably occurs far beyond the control of both students and teachers – before any of us have even turned on the computer. For example, in her highly influential study titled *Algorithms of Oppression* in which she careful-

ly charts out the situated biases coded into search engines, Safiya Umoja Noble writes that

> human and machine errors are not without consequence, and there are several cases that demonstrate how racism and sexism are part of the architecture and language of technology, an issue that needs attention and remediation. (Noble 2018, 9)

In making this observation, I would argue that Noble's concerns link to those of Hernández (2018, 29-30) in conceptualising "the digitally oppressed" in demonstrating a history of biases that is implicit to the very information technologies that most users take for gospel at the interface of teaching and learning in the digital milieu. In simple terms, "the digitally oppressed" encompasses not only the conditions and resources that shape accessibility, but moreover the very information that we seek through myriad search engines to find information. We may thus say that knowledge production is mediated through the technological phenomena of algorithms, which Noble forcefully demonstrates are, like the cartoons and filmic representations that precede them, anything but objective mirrors of the real world. We thus see that the complications and difficulties of dealing with technology in the classroom are mired with political, ideological, geographical, and even climate factors that we in the Global North often do not think twice about.

Similarly, Mong Palatino issues a warning about how "the digitally oppressed" can be exacerbated and consolidated by technology through the very semantics of "diversity", "inclusion", and "accessibility". He writes:

> Diversity is equated with plural perspectives reacting to popular memes. Hence, the danger of limiting classroom discussions to topics that are viral and trending, even if these do not represent the lives of students. The valid aspiration to be relevant and seen could end up in a frantic race for cyber attention. This has harmful consequences to students who might wrongly assume that their life stories have to garner social media boosting as a prerequisite for acceptance in society. Or they could disown their local cultures, habits, and ideologies because they diverge from the popular norm. They might reject their framing of the world because it does not adhere to existing categories or it is deemed archaic for digital sharing. (2020)

Palatino's keen observation compels us to view blended learning in the context of "the digitally oppressed" as what Jacques Derrida has famously called, while drawing on the Greek philosopher Plato, the "pharmakon" – both an antidote and a poison (1981, 115). That is, blended learning pedagogical praxis dramatically revolutionises the

reach, scope, and possibilities for equitable education while it simultaneously marshals learning and teaching praxis into resources and variables that are not accessible to all. We cannot presume a stable connection, fast internet access, reliable hardware, requisite software, and/or weather conditions that routinely impact connectivity during seasonal weather cycles beyond the West and into the Global South.

Once that connection is achieved, we must be cognisant of peer pressure linked to social media access, as Palatino observes, as unwitting catalysts of digital oppression. In my reading, it is potentially misguided to assert that internet connectivity is a prerequisite for blended learning pedagogical lesson plans in the Global South. Educational technology and associated applications already exercise vast potential to transform the global education sector with, in the example of Saudi Arabia, iPads that can facilitate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching lessons (Elyas, Al-Bogami 2019, 147). Thus, the irony and ambivalence of "the digitally oppressed" – the oppression itself can be a function of lack of digital resources while also being the key to whole new worlds. This is especially true in 'developing' countries with massive rural populations including India, which has 400% more mobile users than desktop users (*The Quint* 2018). This fact suggests that many people may not be able to afford their own PCs and/or that mobile phone culture is not only a trend in India but also a daily necessity for managing other forms of domestic duty.

This would indeed be the case with India's ballooning youth population and the rise of connectivity across rural plans of the subcontinent. But how to infuse effective, blended learning technology even when internet access is compromised? In "Portable India. A Vision of Responsible Literacy in Digital Democracy", Rahul K. Gairola and Arnab Datta write:

> For example, portable mediums that are light weight, reliable, and which provide high density data storage can be realized in extremely small chips, and can be designed to be climate resistant. Such alternatives to digital archives that employ both flash and allied memory chips, which users can easily access exclusively through their mobile phones, eliminate dependence on Internet connection. State of the art memory technologies support novel technological trends in the Digital Humanities, not only in terms of the resources but also for efficient archival of them. This will make digital literacy in rural India feasible in the immediate future rather than relying on bandwidth sensitive internet connection. We recognize that a move away from pervasive internet usage seems counterintuitive, but so is the combination of our disparate fields that can improve digital literacy in rural India. (2015)

Here, we signal a kind of blended learning that steers clear of dependence on internet access while at the same time deploying technological tools for delivering lesson plans in remote parts of India with minimal use of expensive hardware – what Stacie Williams calls "minimal computing for maximum impact" (Williams 2018). We have conceived of a way of utilising mobile phone storage capacity, versus internet connectivity, to promote blended learning pedagogical praxis in remote villages across the subcontinent. This counterintuitive move to disaggregate technology from connectivity, we argue, is especially feasible and effective in rural communities wherein even an educational film can be projected on a schoolroom wall through the storage cards of a mobile phone (Gairola, Datta 2015). As such, I would suggest that blended learning should not be equated to the false assumption that online network access is warranted to engage in it.

Indeed, this vision of "Portable India" focuses on practical transferability rather than internet connectivity (Gairola, Datta 2015). I thus further focus on mobile phone use as a pedagogical tool at the intersection of blended learning, on the one hand, and "the digitally oppressed" on the other, in the geographical context of Africa and South Asia. With respect to the former, Jenna Delport opines, "digital transformation needs trusted and transparent partnerships because the public sector doesn't have the bandwidth to unwrap the nuances of digital to ensure it gets the best results" (2020). I would concur with Delport that digital transformation in countries like South Africa and India can be more challenging than in the West but given the comparative lack of resources and connectivity it is fair to say that blended learning pedagogies hold great promise of increasing education and literacy. Institutional equality and systemic white supremacy as the social reside of the colonialist project moreover appear to thematically unite India and South Africa as case studies worthy of comparison. This is perhaps most evident due to the prestigious tertiary institutions of higher learning that were established in both nations by the British Empire during colonial days.

For example, in briefly considering the move to racially integrate previously white universities in the latter, John Sharp and Rehana Vally take as an example the University of Pretoria. The co-authors detail that, for decades, apartheid was justified through the semantics of "a different culture" rather than "racial difference" (Sharp, Vally 2009, 5). Such semantics are a bit odd given that there are 26 universities with very different backgrounds and approaches in South Africa. For example, the apartheid mentality seems to be echoed in the student-led "Fees must Fall" movement, which linked up with the "Rhodes Must Fall" movement, amalgamating into a joined campaign for free, public higher education. As observed by I. Konik and A. Konik, #FeesMustFall advanced demands for free tertiary pub-

lic education for all in late 2015, eventually dovetailed with the calls for decolonisation that drove the #RhodesMustFall campaign (2018, 575). This history of universities in South Africa speaks to the ways in which the racial and economic differences under apartheid exacerbated conditions of oppressed, Black students beyond the clutches of colonialism.

3 Blended Learning with Mobile Devices

We can also say that these socioeconomic conditions nurtured by apartheid parlayed into the formation of "the digitally oppressed" merely decades later. We have defined "the digitally oppressed" above but the definition could benefit from a coherent, guiding sense of what I mean by "blended learning". In "Blended Learning in Indian Higher Education. Challenges and Strategies" Punam Bansal cogently offers the following definition, characteristics, and goals of blended learning in the geopolitical context of contemporary India:

> Blended learning combines online with face-to-face learning. The goal of blended learning is to provide the most efficient and effective instruction experience by combining delivery modalities. The term blended learning is used to describe a solution that combines several different delivery methods, such as collaboration software, Web-based courses, EPSS, and knowledge management practices. Blended learning also is used to describe learning that mixes various event-based activities, including face-to-face classrooms, live e-learning and self-paced instruction. These technologies have created new opportunities for students to interact with their peers, faculty, and content, inside and outside of the classroom. (2014, 3)

Bansal's definition highlights the ways in which blended learning strategically draws upon learning technologies that attempt to combine, rather than replace, in person student interactions with digitally enhanced components that have a wider reach than the constrictions of the time-space continuum. Strategical blended learning techniques have allowed me to host reputable scholars from different parts of the world as both guest lecturers for recorded long talks with no student interaction and as guest provocateurs in online dialogues using Zoom, Blackboard Collaborate, and Microsoft Teams. They have moreover reconfigured the home relationships of both traditional and mature age students in managing their family and personal lives while safeguarding them from potential exposure to the COVID-19 virus.

In Sivangi Dhawan's words, in the contexts of educational institutions in India,

> Combining face-to-face lectures with technology gives rise to blended learning and flipped classrooms [...]. Students can learn anytime and anywhere, thereby developing new skills in the process leading to life-long learning. (2020, 6)

But I would further argue, in extending mitigation against "the digitally oppressed", that we must also recognise how the most banal uses of daily technology produce learning moments on the go that are generated at users' fingertips. That is, even mobile phones with limited or no data connections can store enough pedagogical media to deliver robust lesson plans on hand-held devices, let alone smart phones with storage capacity harnessed to the universe of information available through search engines and geographical information systems designed for smart phones. My contention is perhaps more vital in the historical context of the COVID-19 pandemic than ever before, especially given the virus's disproportionate spread in the Global South and the alarming social articulations of racism that have attended it.

For example, Anthony G. Picciano describes travelling to South Africa in May 2014 to engage with "a federal government mandate to expand higher education opportunity to its citizens and had asked the public universities for strategies for doing so", while including tertiary education topics including "student outcomes, faculty workload, and blended learning in large section classes" (Picciano 2016, 1). He further states,

> Online technology allows teaching and learning literally to occur at any time and anyplace, and no longer shackles one to the time and place constraints of a physical classroom. Critical aspects of instruction such as media-infused content, group interaction, reflective practice, simulation, and assessment, are augmented with online technology. A course discussion never ends, student must be prepared to interact with colleagues in online forums where all can and are expected to contribute, and facilitated collaborative learning is commonplace. The new technologies have opened up many "frontiers" for pedagogues to explore as they convert or redesign their courses. (3)

In the above passage, Picciano compels us to see the ways in which the time-space continuum can promote pedagogical oppression in the context of new learning technologies. For Picciano a blended learning approach addresses the oppressiveness that is implicit in the "shackles" instituted by the time-space continuum in learning spaces. This academic observation in the context of augmenting the ways in which professors critically meditate on the various levels of "oppression" layered in myriad student experience. Anticipating "the size and range of the opportunities" of student learning with mobile

technology, Ellen D. Wagner opines that "[n]o vision of the future of learning is complete until we can imagine the power of converged digital and mobile technologies for education, training, and performance support" (2012, 41).

This accessibility to pedagogical resources through the mobile smart phone and its suite of apps simultaneously allow users to engage with diverse learning and social communities based on marginalised affiliations including gender and sexuality. In citing a few research studies whilst examining the interface of mobile technology and university education across Africa, Rogers Kaliisa and Michelle Picard write:

> The other positives of using mobile technologies in higher education include social and emotional presence, as well as pedagogical change where learners are able to learn anytime and anywhere, through mobile learning which has emerged as an innovative learning approach. Mobile learning makes learning more enjoyable, flexible and interactive since learners are not rendered immobile by the restrictions of desktop computer technology or the traditional classroom settings. (2017, 2)

Such technology, in other words, can facilitate pedagogical interaction while it allows queer users, for example, to avail safe resources and spaces in navigating from the streets into virtual safe houses while mediating against social exclusion (Gairola 2018, 101). This means that mobile technology can also facilitate safe and private accessibility to course materials that students may feel anxious or embarrassed to consult in material learning spaces like libraries, lecture halls, tutorial rooms, and/or break-out student groups. It enables and facilitates 'on-the-go' digital literacy without requiring a data connection (although this would be a requirement for interacting with hypertexts). Such varying perspectives, then, suggest that one way to step out of the conundrum of oppressed pedagogy is in and through the digital promise of mobile phone application technology in the continuing development of online curriculum resources.

Kaliisa and Picard moreover note, in regards to South Africa, that the greatest amount of African studies of blended learning approaches through mobile phone use have been conducted, which reflects that

> mobile phones are as common in South Africa as they are in the USA with over 89% owning a mobile phone and the country has a well-developed telecommunication infrastructure as compared to other African countries. (2017, 9)

This statistic shows the pervasive use of mobile phones in South Africa, as in India, as a means of accessing instructional resources and

lessons from the congested urban metropolises from New Delhi to Johannesburg. As such, the interface of learning with life is potentially always on the go and always traceable. While this undoubtedly has its own drawbacks, as in the critique lodged by the notion of "the digitally oppressed", it also renders an unprecedented and unique flexibility to knowledge transmission and interactive response.

In delineating the three major types of blended learning models, Charles R. Graham describes enabling blends that focus

> on addressing issues of access and convenience, enhancing blends that "allow incremental changes to the pedagogy but do not radically change the way teaching and learning occurs. (2012, 13)

Graham moreover argues that such blends

> allow a radical transformation of the pedagogy – for example, a change from a model where learners are just receivers of information to a model where learners actively construct knowledge through dynamic interactions. These types of blends enable intellectual activity that was not practically possible without the technology. (13)

Graham's distinction between types of blended learning modes allows us to critically meditate on and apply the one that may best serve "the digitally oppressed" in navigating the specific challenges of postcolonial life in the digital milieu for students in both India and South Africa who yet live and learn amidst the detritus of British colonialism. That said, I would conclude with the caveat that neither in this section or throughout this essay am I intending to represent nor homogenise the totality of tertiary education in South Africa, India, or indeed of the Global South.

4 Digital Humanities and Blended Learning in the Global South

In offering a blended learning case study to illustrate how it mediates against the reification of "the digitally oppressed", I introduce the field of digital humanities to think through theory, praxis, and pedagogy in higher education in the digital milieu. This section thus begins by briefly introducing the digital humanities, and subsequently examines how it seeks to excavate the power relations that frame both technological innovation and traditional humanistic enquiry. In the "Quantifying Digital Humanities" infographic, the University College London website features data compiled by Melissa Terras stating that digital humanities research and teaching takes place at the intersection of digital technologies with the traditional humanities (Terras 2011). In offering a pithy working definition of digital humanities, I would characterise the field as an exploration of the synergistic relationship between the traditional humanities, on the one hand, and the STEM fields on the other hand. In this symbiotic and productive relationship between the STEM fields and the Humanities, both are radically transforming the ways in which the other functions and operates today.

My working definition of digital humanities is significant when we think about the geographical and historical context of postcolonial nations (including India and arguably most African nations) as their technological development today is yet profoundly shaped by their colonialist pasts. These arguably continue to exercise a disproportionate amount of influence in these global arenas today and invoke what Roopika Risam has developed into a critical heuristic called postcolonial digital humanities. In her formulation of this critical lens with reference to digital pedagogy, Risam writes,

> Like digital humanities pedagogy more generally, postcolonial digital pedagogy challenges the reigning practices in humanities classrooms [...] through engagement with the theoretical concerns of postcolonial theory and the interpretation of postcolonial literary and cultural texts, emphasizing the relationship between colonialism and knowledge production. (2019, 93)

Risam's observation is especially important in the Global South, in general, and for postcolonial countries, in particular, namely those nations in Asia and Africa.

This is important not merely for exploring the many possibilities of how to define the digital humanities but also in the very narrative of how digital humanities came about. What we see are, arguably, orientalist and colonialist tendencies: that the very narratives to describe the genesis of digital humanities have limitations that are ar-

guably orientalist (Said 1978, 31). There is a dominant history of hypertext (Sano-Franchini 2015, 54), as it feeds the digital humanities, that reflects the field's tenuous definitions and links to dominant narratives concerning its own inception. The hegemonic narrative centres around an Italian Jesuit priest named Father Roberto Busa: According to Marija Dalbello,

> the most significantly early employment of computer resources in the humanities was the *Index thomisticus* concordance to the works of Thomas Aquinas initiated by Father Roberto Busa, and it became the basis for the published and database versions of the concordance and is considered the first electronic text project in the humanities. (2011, 481)

Dalbello further details that the project began as a government-industry scholarly partnership launching the first generation of IBM's large-scale digital calculating machines for research work nearly two decades before the computing industry started expanding its reach to everyday life. In 1946, Father Busa went to see CEO Thomas Watson of the IBM Corporation in New York City because he wanted to harness the power of Watson's punch card system to compile an index of the collected works of St. Thomas Aquinas. According to Steven Jones, IBM viewed Father Busa's work in data systems as an initiative "to help humanize technology at the height of the Cold War" (Nyhan, Passarotti 2019, xv). In 1950, Father Busa revealed his plans for an index to the works of Thomas Aquinas, requesting "any information […] about such mechanical devices as would serve to achieve the greatest possible accuracy, with a maximum economy of human labor" (Burton 1984, 891, cited in Dalbello 2011, 481). This 'origin story' bound up with Father Busa is the traditional tale of the global rise of the digital humanities (Schroeder 2019, 318).

Yet, it is indeed a story that, in Steven E. Jones' words, ensconces a "complicated history […] even in Father Busa's own accounts" (2016, 3). The punch card system as developed by IBM and promoted by Thomas Watson (and then of course used by Father Busa) is itself quite problematic given that Nazi Germany was deploying it to tabulate and keep track of the mass extermination of Jews in the concentration camps of Dachau, Auschwitz, and beyond (Black 2001, 60). However, I would concur with Jones' observation that other historical moments, ones that underscore the domination of different territories in both Africa and Asia during the apex of British colonialism and its gradual demise in the ashes of World War II, offer counter genealogies of the development of the digital humanities. As I have elsewhere argued in much more detail, this 'genesis narrative' of Digital Humanities could be displaced by other narratives that emerge from histories of colonialism and technology, including the innova-

tion of cinema and the Bollywood film industry in pre-independent India (Gairola 2019, 462).

This situated history profoundly shapes the rise of Digital Humanities and the need for postcolonial Digital Humanities in the formulation of an enriching blended learning experience for students in South Africa, India, and other regions of the postcolonial Global South which face similar challenges. To return to my earlier example of teaching in northern India, this is a region that was also sociopolitically wracked to this day by the British Raj's division of it. This is what makes very significant the notion of a "long partition" introduced by Vazira Zamindar in which the end of partition has not yet occurred; it's an ongoing long-term process of official engagement by both India and Pakistan (2010, 2-3). In *The Long Partition*, Zamindar "unsettles national closure" (7) by arguing that migration, return, and belonging are ongoing but constitute an omission of the contingencies of bureaucratic violence that produce the meaning of separate nations and states. I thus drew on Zamindar's concept when engaging in blended learning to speak not only about oppressive and unstable borders that are geopolitical, but moreover those that ostensibly separate different modalities of learning between the Global South and the Global North. Since I was teaching at an Indian Institute of Technology, this analogy was immediately palpable and observable outside of our institute's main gates.

5 Conclusion. Typing Truth to Power

In conclusion, I believe that we can engage with blended learning praxis to meaningfully engage a pedagogy of the oppressed as well as "the digitally oppressed". Freire's original work is highly significant in the frame of learning technologies of the 21st century in ways that have very real and reflective ramifications for the material realities of the world today. Learning technologies combined with postcolonial methodologies in and beyond literary theory and Digital Humanities have the potential to bring the world and the past into a wired classroom even if this is not always possible with respect to our disenfranchised students lacking mobile phone access in the Global South. While I have herein given brief examples of South Africa and India, I do realise that these are differing case studies of colonialism and the institutionalisation of tertiary education in both places.

Indeed, varying factors including types of colonialism (settler colonialism that destroys and displaces Indigenous peoples and cultures versus traditional colonialism that enforces hegemony and resource extraction to the Western imperium), and experiences of racism/colourism differ yet matter. This is because they profoundly shape access to education and technology in divergent ways across the Glob-

al South, which cannot simply be relegated to a monolithic swathe of Black and Brown populated land masses. Even when dealing with the diasporas of Africa and Asia, we must mindfully engage "the critical turn in cosmopolitanism" in pedagogy not only to the service of classroom praxis but also with respect to "the social, political, economic and cultural ambivalences, obstacles, inequities and competing interests involved" (Surma 2013). We must concede that there are indeed inadequacies of Western approaches to Digital Humanities and blended learning in developing contexts that emerge specifically from the very historical contexts that yet disadvantage the Global South to the Global North in matters of learning technology.

Blended learning, through the often-perceived cold calculus of technology, can indeed expose both students and teachers to the balance of emotional trauma and territorial conflict that many of us can often abstract and distance ourselves from since we are not a part of those epochs or lands. Engaging in a pedagogy of "the digitally oppressed", in other words, means accessing the pain of historical imperialist ventures that imbibe colonialism in and through digital media and resources made possible by learning technologies today. It is in this context that I would respectfully conclude by asserting that in the 21st century, university educators must understand why a model for postcolonial digital humanities is urgent with respect to both blended learning and "the digitally oppressed", if we are to secure both virtual and material equity and accessibility at pedagogical sites around our shared world. For it is in this shared material world that learning best occurs not only when it is blended, but when we – as creatures marked by difference – are blended by all means possible, especially in the era of a global pandemic, in the interest of productive tension that nourishes intellectual development.

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Blended Learning and the Global South. Virtual Exchanges in Higher Education
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Stakeholder Struggles in the Uptake and Use of Blended and Online Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract Recommendations for greater adoption of blended and online learning pedagogies pre-date COVID-19 by many years. However, the uptake and implementation of blended and online learning was largely ignored by lecturers in many contact institutions, despite the introduction of policies and various resources to support such a shift. In this chapter, we critically explore the reluctance of lecturers to adopt blended and online learning pedagogies, drawing on the Epistemic Pedagogic Device (EPD) of Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) and the elements of Archer's theory of Social Realism to explicate the roles and contestations among the various stakeholders involved in teaching and learning in higher education institutions. In particular, we examine the struggles for legitimacy faced by instructional designers and academic developers in the sites of teaching and learning, sites which have traditionally been controlled by lecturers. We posit that successful, sustainable implementation of online and blended learning requires institutional recognition of multiple stakeholders as legitimate role-players in teaching and student learning.

Keywords Blended learning. Online learning. Instructional design. Institutional culture. Educational change.

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1 Introduction

Higher Education (HE) institutions are well established environments of contestation (Shay 2015). They are spaces rich in knowledge production where new ideas are constantly conceptualised, tested and debated, and when these are legitimised through scientific proof or consensus, lead to profound technological advancements as well as significant shifts in societies. It is perhaps ironic then that while universities are celebrated for being drivers of innovation and change, pedagogical practices within these institutions are generally static, with traditional, face-to-face teaching methods and sit-down invigilated assessments still dominating in some universities despite the availability of alternative modes of engaging with students, including blended and online learning options (Blin, Munro 2008). Even during the circumstances of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) during the current COVID-19 pandemic, observations at our institution suggests that while many academic staff have transitioned their courses to online spaces, trying to retain disciplinary and pedagogical integrity, others appear reluctant to pursue possibilities for transforming their teaching and assessment practices, not seeing long-term pedagogical benefits.

McShane (2004) and Blin and Munro (2008) report some of the reasons for the lack of uptake of blended and online learning to be technical and infrastructural issues, logistical issues, absence of e-policies as well as lack of staff motivation and training and their resistance to change. Similar constraints were presented by McShane (2004) as well as Jones (2008), who both mention themes such as the lack of familiarity with online technologies, infrastructure constraints, workload concerns and lecturers' belief in the value of traditional face-to-face pedagogies over digital pedagogies. More recently, Badroodien, Fataar (2020) and Czerniewicz et al. (2020) all highlight the problematic pursuit of online learning in a context of unequal access and socioeconomic inequality, with Badroodien and Fataar (2020) also noting the challenge of student isolation. Both studies draw attention to the 'need for human connection' and the importance of mechanisms for supporting ongoing interactions in virtual classrooms – a timely reminder of the notion of "high tech, high touch" first proposed by Naisbitt in 1984 (cited in Bourner, Flowers 1997).

Therefore, to ascribe resistance to change to lecturer recalcitrance alone would be reductionist. A deeper, system-wide approach is needed to examine how the various components interact and influence each other to either maintain the status quo or bring about change. In this chapter we offer a systemic view of the interplay of factors influencing slow adoption of technology based on the notion of academia as a site of struggle (Bourdieu 1998). The introduction of blended and online learning in Higher Education (HE) may thus, have highlighted some of the long existing struggles between traditional stakeholders: uni-

versity managers, lecturers and educational developers (higher education teaching and learning specialists) in addition to triggering new struggles with more recent stakeholders (instructional designers).

We delve deeper into these stakeholder interactions and contestations using an explanatory framework created by overlaying the key elements of Archer's Social Realist Framework (structure, culture and agency) into the analytical framework of the Epistemic Pedagogic Device (EPD) of Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) (Maton 2014). Using this integrated framework, we illustrate how HE stakeholders, the positions and roles they occupy, and access to material resources, influence the struggles that play out in the social fields of practice in HE, and how responses to technology-enhanced teaching and learning could be a manifestation of various struggles for legitimate participation in these fields. We discuss how lecturers, buoyed by entrenched cultural and structural factors, have maintained control and collectively held the teaching and learning system in stasis. We then consider how the introduction of technology and two notable events in higher education in the last five years (viz. #FeesMustFall protests and the COVID-19 pandemic) triggered shifts in the dynamics within teaching and learning and influenced the adoption of blended and online learning, and we conclude with a reflection on what is needed to expand and sustain these shifts.

2 Overview of the Frameworks of Social Realism and Legitimation Code Theory

Attempting to understand the nature of change in the HE system often involves assumptions about the nature of the system and observed stagnations or changes within the context of the HE landscape. However, these assumptions may be influenced by individual perceptions and beliefs (i.e. axiological underpinnings), and may therefore be an underestimation or overestimation of the 'real' causes of change. According to Archer's Social Realist theory (Archer 1996, 2013; Archer et al. 2013), the potential for false or misinformed notions of the causes of change are referred to as "epistemic fallacies" (Archer 1996, 2013). Social Realism provides an analytical and explanatory framework to illustrate how complex effects or social events arise (e.g. how changes in South African HE occur or remain unchanged) (Boughey, Niven 2012; Quinn 2012), without falling into the trap of epistemic fallacies by examining the forces, processes or mechanisms that drive and shape them. Social Realism therefore provides a powerful mechanism for examining the complexities underpinning lecturer responses to blended and online learning. The three interrelated dimensions of social realism described below, highlight the complexities of understanding technological interventions as enhancing learning experience for students.

Social Realism is based on the existence and interactions between people (agents) and the 'parts' (structure and cultural artefacts) in any social system/society (Archer 2013). When it comes to structural issues, viewing the university as a contained sub-system within the broader HE system, structural artefacts may include physical classrooms and associated infrastructure, or structuring documents such as national and institutional policies. Structural artefacts may also include other forms of social structuring such as position and status or social class, gender and race, as well as material resources such as funding and government subsidies. These structural artefacts impose certain organising principles on the teaching and learning system. However, these organising principles do not exist in isolation and the extent to which the principles are implemented is directly dependent on the beliefs, values and ideologies held by the individuals within institutions (i.e. institutional culture).

In discussions of institutional culture, it is seen to be learnt through social interactions or through reading and contextualising information, and it may be shared with others (Archer 2013). This includes the beliefs and values that dominate, as well as the sets of ideas governing what constitutes legitimate knowledge and practices in a given context (e.g. HE) (Archer 2013). However, culture on its own, like structural artefacts, cannot operationalise the system. It requires individual agency for the cultural values to be embodied through the occupation and enactment of particular social roles and the use of structural artefacts available through those roles, to defend individual interests and to realise personal goals (Archer 2013). It is in the interplay between structures, culture and individual agency **[fig. 1]** that the organising principles materialise.

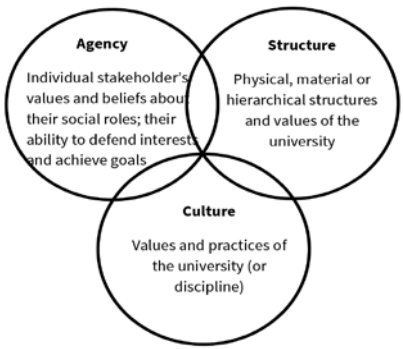

Figure 1 The interplay between structure, culture and agency set the organising principles for pedagogical practices, including blended and online learning

Legitimation Code Theory (Maton 2013) can be applied as an analytical tool for illuminating struggles of legitimacy among various stakeholder and for understanding what counts as legitimate knowledge in social fields like HE. Located in the sociology of education, it is also underpinned, in part, by critical realist philosophy and social realism. LCT locates the interactions between agents and the structures and culture in which they operate within particular fields of social practice, delineating the contexts in which different social practices occur and in which struggles for control may arise.

In HE, these fields of social practice can be described through the use of the Epistemic Pedagogic Device (EPD), where practices of lecturers can be defined as operating in three field of practice, viz., the field of *production* (where new knowledge is created through research), the field of *recontextualisation* (involving the curricularisation of disciplinary knowledge), and the field of *reproduction*, where disciplinary knowledge is pedagogised **[fig. 2]** (Maton 2014, 51). Within these fields, struggles may arise as different stakeholders within these fields compete explicitly or tacitly for status, resources and legitimacy, based on the specific knowledge practices occurring in each field. This, in turn, is shaped by particular organising principles (logics) or legitimation codes (Maton 2014). The recontextualisation field, for instance, is shaped by recontextualising logics while the reproduction field is influenced by evaluative logics (the latter being the field in which pedagogical choices must be made).

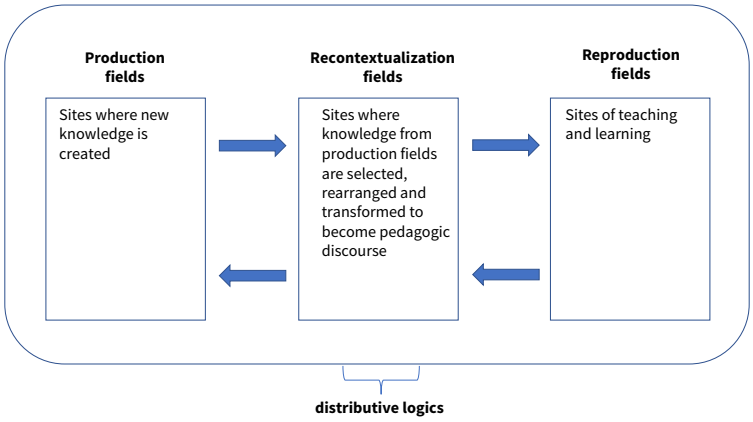

Figure 2 The Epistemic Pedagogic Device in LCT (Maton 2014, 51)

It is the fields of recontextualisation and reproduction that are of primary interest in our interpretation and conceptualisation of resistance to blended and online learning by university lecturers.

3 Stakeholders in the Fields of Recontextualisation and Reproduction

In the current conceptualisation of the adoption of blended and online learning by lecturers in the recontextualisation field within HE in South Africa, the key stakeholders (i.e. agents holding particular ideological positions and operational roles), include national policy makers such as the Council on Higher Education (CHE), professional accreditation bodies, institutional administrators, course coordinators, individual lecturers, and to some extent, educational developers **[fig. 3]**. Arguably, lecturers are the corporate agents (Archer 2013) within this field, dominating curriculum decisions such as the selection and sequencing and transformation of disciplinary knowledge into forms that are more accessible for students. Although curriculum choices and decisions are also influenced by national and institutional policy makers, professional accreditation bodies as well as institutional managers who maintain significant control through numerous policies and, notably, the distribution of material resources such as funding and infrastructure, lecturers still maintain a greater degree of power and control in this field.

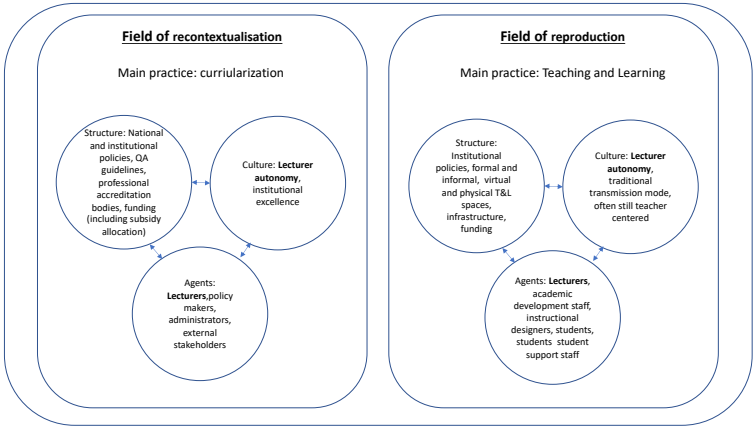

Figure 3 Decisions regarding the use of blended and online learning occur primarily in the fields of recontextualisation and reproduction. Although influenced by many stakeholders, these fields have traditionally been dominated by lecturers (indicated in bold)

The field of reproduction (also shown in figure 3), is similarly influenced by institutional policy but controlled by lecturers through their pedagogical practices in their particular courses and in the confines of their lecture rooms. Lecturers make 'expert' pedagogical choices based on their own intuitions as well as their trained understand-

ing of the knowledge of their disciplines and their often-tacit understanding of what is valued in their disciplines (Ferman 2002; Hannah, Stewart, Thomas 2011). Students are also key stakeholders in the field of reproduction in HE, but their agency may remain limited due to the transmission mode of teaching that still dominates (Massouleh, Jooeghani 2012). However, in attempting to persuade lecturers to adopt blended and online learning methods, university administrators may unintentionally have triggered previously limited struggles for control of the EPD in the field of production – between the lecturers on the one hand, and various other stakeholders, on the other.

As will be explained next, this struggle could partly have been a consequence of how e-learning was introduced and continues to be championed, the nature of blended and online learning, the lack of suitable structural and cultural conditions for the effective uptake and use of technologies for teaching and learning

4 Adoption of E-Learning Pedagogies in Higher Education

Güzer and Caner (2014) and Dziuban et al. (2018) highlight that blended and online learning has (and continues to be) presented as one of the great revolutions in contemporary higher education with significant potential to solve a host of ills and challenges facing the Higher Education sector. From being purported as the solution to increasingly large classes as universities have massified, to generate much-needed institutional funding to addressing issues of historical restrictions to formal access (particularly in countries like South Africa), online learning has been punted by university administrators as an essential component of the academic project. Appana (2008) highlights other advantages of blended and online learning such the notion that online courses may offer cheaper alternatives for students, not only in terms of reduced course fees, but also in terms of eliminating accommodation, travel and other incidental costs associated with campus-based learning, as well as potential time-saving benefits for staff, especially when dealing with large classes. In addition, proponents of online learning usually emphasise the flexibility of online courses, highlighting that with the unbundled, online courses, students would have greater autonomy in terms of what, when and where to study, as well as the increasingly widespread belief that completion of online courses may signal to potential employers an individual's intrinsic motivation and ability to self-regulate (Littlejohn et al. 2016).

Interestingly, initial publications on online learning tended to focus less on the technologies and more on the pedagogical issues of shifting into a virtual teaching and learning environment (Cole 2000; McLoughlin 2001; Harper, Chen, Yen 2004). It was not long however, before the emphasis shifted away from pedagogical considera-

tions towards technological issues, triggered by the publication and widespread adoption of design and development frameworks like the Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation (ADDIE) model (Molenda 2003; Branch 2009). This systematic approach to instructional development presented the opportunity to streamline the process of online course design. More recently, institutions worldwide also started to invest heavily in infrastructure development, including attempts to provide stable and effective Learning Management Systems (LMSs), as well as data and devices for students in better resourced universities (Güzer, Caner 2014). Weller (2016) however, suggests that it is insufficient to justify the use of learning technologies purely on the basis of their affordances. Other authors such as Guri-Rosenblit (2005), Watson (2001) and Njenga, Fourie (2010) also note the shortcomings and potentially negative impacts of e-learning for students and staff, cautioning against the uncritical adoption of educational technologies. In our institutional context, other unexpected challenges have emerged, such as the formation of a continuum of ideological and operational clusters within the field of reproduction.

5 Struggles for Legitimacy of Instructional Designers

In our role as Teaching and Learning advisors at our institution we have observed a level of scepticism among both lecturers and educational developers regarding the rise of instructional designers as a key category of staff in Higher Education institutions. Compounding the scepticism was the structural separation that began to emerge as new centres for digital learning were established, facilitated by various public and private partnerships for the development of MOOCS and online short courses which, administrators argue, could address issues of social justice while also generating substantial income through course fees. Globally and locally, universities also introduced various policies aimed at facilitating the shift to online learning (Braimoh, Lekoko 2005; Brown, Anderson, Murray 2007). However, much like educational developers struggles' for legitimacy (Boud, Brew 2013), instructional designers have found themselves facing a crisis of legitimacy despite their unique multidisciplinary perspectives and their potential to create new possibilities for learning and professional development (Keppel 2007). Schwier, Campbell and Kenny (2007) also highlight the significant constraints to agency and personal effectiveness experienced by instructional designers. More recently, a review by Wager (2021) addressed the issue of rebranding and reconceptualizing the role of instructional designers as learning experience designers. Such deliberate rebranding, coupled with the view that instructional design should encompass both

technical and pedagogical knowledge and skills for effective blended and online course design (Sahin 2009), have triggered greater acceptance and integration of instructional design staff into the field of reproduction, with varying degrees of success.

6 Higher Education Is Slow to Change

Despite these structural evolutions, including significant structural support at our institutional and at national levels, our experience as specialist in higher education has shown that traditional modes of teaching have persisted. This can be attributed to an institutional culture that values academic autonomy and the belief amongst some lecturers at our university that university teaching is an innate skill that develops alongside disciplinary expertise, rather than an evolving professional practice that can be developed through training.[1]

Coupled with the view held by some lecturers of teaching as an act of transmission of knowledge, is the view of students as passive participants in the learning process. This view that is greatly challenged when learning shifts into the online environment, which requires significantly more active participation and a high degree of self-directed learning (Krull, Duart 2018).

Unpublished data from surveys of staff perceptions of self-directed learning conducted at the School of Education at our institution in 2019 show that while most lecturers surveyed support the notion of self-directed learning (and many believe it to be a critical skill that students should develop), many argue that students do not necessarily know how to direct their own learning, a view confirmed by students surveyed in the same study. Students' digital literacy capacity and their ability to engage effectively in the online learning environment may still need further development, despite students being digital natives and students' use of social media (Tang, Chaw 2016; Czerniewicz et al. 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic also foregrounded lecturers' concerns about the quality of online assessments and the potential for greater levels of cheating and plagiarism online (Nguyen, Keusemann Humston 2020) and the trend towards greater adoption of digital proctoring and the unknown consequences thereof (Lee et al. 2020), and struggles with these concerns may inadvertently increase the reluctance of some lecturers to sustain emergent online pedagogical practices and result in a reversion to pre-COVID-19 norms.

1 University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, *Framework for Continuous Professional Learning of Acdemics as University Teachers*, 2019. https://www.wits.ac.za/media/wits-university/learning-and-teaching/documents/Framework%20for%20CPL%20For%20Academics%20as%20University%20Teachers.pdf.

7 Blended and Online Learning as an Outcome of Cultural and Structural Morphogenesis

Within in the context of Social Realism, Archer refers to a stable social system as "morphostatic" (Archer 2011, 2013). When that stability is disrupted (by a break in tradition or a change in material circumstances or governance, for instance), contextual incongruence arises, resulting in morphogenesis and the formation of a "morphogenic society" (i.e. a society in a state of dynamic flux) (Archer 2011, 2013). It can be argued that the push for online learning from the mid 2000s triggered a disruption in the distributive logics within the fields of recontextualisation and reproduction. However, the prevailing culture at our institution, that foregrounds lecturer autonomy, enabled lecturers to continue to maintain control of the EPD in these fields. Lecturers have largely remained in control of curriculum design, development and enactment (based on their disciplinary expertise) and continued to teach based on their own experiences and observations of teaching, an approach described by Borg (2004) as the apprenticeship of observation. This culture was however, challenged by student protests of 2015 which highlighted the call for decolonisation of higher education in South Africa (Griffiths 2019).

Heleta (2016) argues that the student protests and their calls for decolonisation presented major structural and cultural shifts in teaching and learning. Lecturers were suddenly confronted not only with the reality of universities as legacies of epistemic violence but more personally confronted with issues of power relations that underscored teaching and learning. More pertinently, lecturers in South Africa were also forced into using the online learning platforms that had largely been ignored till then. The protests also tipped the legitimacy scales in favour of both educational developers (who were requested to guide lecturers through the process of decolonising their curricula and assessments), and instructional designers (who were needed to guide staff to use the learning management systems more effectively). Still, unpublished data from an informal surveys conducted at our institution showed that most lecturers used the LMS as a repository for PowerPoint presentations and other resources rather than creating authentic online learning experiences for students.

Although lecturer use of LMS and technology appeared limited in our context, mainly due to infrastructure bottlenecks and a lack of technical skill on the part of lecturers to use the LMS effectively for learning, at a national level, the student protests did appear to trigger a shift in student agency as well as small but notable shifts in institutional cultures (Heleta 2016). Lecturers across South Africa were more aware of students' challenges and their feelings of alienation and disconnection from the academic project, and numerous na-

tional teaching and learning dialogues on decolonisation meant that lecturers were gradually coming to see students as important stakeholders in the field of recontextualisation.

The COVID-19 pandemic however, has created the conditions for a possibly more enduring shift towards online and blended learning. University administrators, locally and internationally, swiftly moved the academic programme online, and many of the persistent infrastructure issues were rapidly addressed. At our institution, students in need were loaned devices and all students provided with data. The access issues were therefore addressed (at least temporarily) to a much greater extent than before. The rapid transition also meant rapid upskilling for lecturers, who have spent significant time and effort on learning about online course design and simultaneously developing and running their courses. In addition, educational developers and instructional designers appear to have found themselves on more solid footing in their efforts to support lecturers achieve emergency remote teaching and learning. Students too, have, out of necessity, found themselves playing a significantly more active role than in the face-to-face teaching and learning environment, as they meet the challenge of directing and managing their own learning journeys in less formal, virtual settings. In the current South African context, we have noticed a marked increase in the willingness of lecturers to engage with blended and online pedagogies as a result of this confluence of structural enablements. However, there is also recognition that the teaching and learning taking place now cannot be characterised as true online learning, nor is it a proper blended learning (Hodges et al. 2020).

Hodges et al. (2020) compare the differences between effective online teaching which functions as a learning community for supporting learners with "co-curricular and other social supports", and emergency remote teaching which does not function within an ecosystem and which "provides temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up". The authors argue against equating the two, especially when evaluating how well they are working. Nevertheless, this forced shift has provided the opportunity for staff to prototype new pedagogical practices, and reflect on old practices more deeply and critically. The question that remains however, is how willing academic staff are to learn lessons based on their experiences in ERT to improve their teaching practices either in face-to-face or online modes of teaching, especially given the push for flexible learning options in many institutions. The key question is what factors and conditions will be required to sustain emergent practices in the longer term.

8 Long-Term Sustainability is Dependent on Greater Collaboration in the Field of Recontextualisation

The struggles for control of the different epistemic fields of the EPD, and the power and status afforded by that control, is not new to the academe. Higher Education institutions are also known to be slow to change and attempts to shift the balance of control is usually countered by opposing forces seeking to maintain the *status quo* (Barber et al. 2013). As evidenced in the literature and in this chapter, this has indeed been the case with blended and online learning. For as long as the cultural (and structural) features of institutions have remained fairly static, lecturers in traditional contact institutions were able to limit their technology usage and maintain control of the field of reproduction. As discussed, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a significant morphogenetic shift, accelerating the transformations that have been gradually occurring over last 20 years.

Nonetheless, long-term sustainability of the blended and online pedagogies depends greatly on whether the structural measures put in place now, such as the provision of devices and data, can be maintained. Also needed is sustained recognition of university teaching as a professional practice requiring appropriate professional education as well as sufficient time to engage with this knowledge base (a point highlighted and structurally reinforced in the National Framework for Enhancing Academics as University Teachers).[2] This framework also notes that the ability to provide 21st century skills depends on lecturers' ability to approach teaching and learning differently and work effectively with a range of traditional and digital pedagogies, and on collaboration among diverse stakeholders. This recommendation is strongly supported by Jacobs's concept of "collaborative pedagogy" (2007), which offers a persuasive argument for collaboration between stakeholders (academic staff, instructional and educational developers) in a context of disruption and change. Although Jacobs proposes collaboration between language and disciplinary specialists to promote discipline based, critical literacy practices in HE institutions, we propose that the same principles pertain to finding discursive spaces for embedding blended and online learning pedagogies. The goal is to provide discursive spaces for stakeholders to become reflexive about ideologies, values and beliefs rather than being caught up in institutional contestations. Jacobs (2007) suggests that such collaboration can enhance partnerships and interactions in communities of practice and consequently enable greater mutual knowledge building across various learning environments.

2 Council on Higher Education, *National Framework for Enhancing Academics as University Teachers*, 2018. https://heltasa.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/National-Framework-for-Enhancing-Academics-as-University-Teachers_signed.pdf.

9 Conclusion

Having examined the uptake of blended and online learning using a systems approach, we have sought to illustrate the complexities involved in transforming pedagogically sound technological practices within a social realist paradigm. We have argued that structures are required to enable meaningful collaboration so that different stakeholders can induct themselves into new discourses of practice. If supported by enabling policies, adequate resources and democratic leadership structures with inclusive departmental cultures, spaces will open up for lecturers to embed technological practices into their disciplines to enhance the learning experience for their students. In many of the recent accounts of the impact of digital technology on higher education teaching and learning, lecturers are called upon to interrogate the nature of the learning opportunities created through "technology-enhanced learning" through critical questioning (Weller 2016, 190).

As teaching in Higher Education is generally characterised by the stability (morphostasis) of existing institutional structures and cultures, we have shown how the teaching, learning and assessment processes may be preserved by lecturers and may remain static. However, we have also shown that transformative processes may be triggered by periods of disruption which tend to bring to the fore the legitimacy, expertise and agency of other stakeholders such as educational developers and instructional designers within the field of reproduction.

We suggest that for emergent practices to be sustained beyond periods of disruption, lecturers need to work together with educational developers and instructional designers in communities of practice as corporate agents (Archer 1996, 2013). The teaching and learning spaces of the future will be shaped by multiple stakeholders and role players collaborating in an increasingly open and democratic field of recontextualisation. In turn, this is dependent not only continued structural support, but upon fundamental shifts in individual mindsets as well as in institutional culture (especially at traditional research-focussed universities).

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What Really Works in Telecollaborative Pedagogy?
A Case Study of an Algerian-Moldovan Project

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Abstract This chapter presents and discusses an international telecollaborative text-writing and translation project conducted during the second semester of a translation course in 2017, 2018 and 2019. The participants were non-native intermediate students of French from universities in Algeria and Moldova. This paper firstly provides theoretical background on telecollaboration and its benefits for learners from different geographical, linguistic, and cultural contexts. Secondly, it analyses the challenges of telecollaborating via asynchronous and exolingual communication (email). To do this, I analyse student perspectives on the efficacy of the approach in the form of reports administered before and after the tellecollaborations. The chapter concludes that telecollaboration between learners from different backgrounds is difficult, but can succeed and remains an opportunity to develop linguistic, cultural and digital skills along with intercultural awareness. In the conclusions I give an overall evaluation of the case study, and suggestions for a future telecollaborative work.

Keywords Email. Intercultural competence. Telecollaboration. Translation. Text-writing.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 PTAM. A Telecollaborative Project Connecting North Africa and Eastern Europe. – 3 Methodology. – 4 Analysis of Pre-Learning and Post-Learning Reports. – 4.1 Analysis of Pre-Learning Reports. – 4.2 Analysis of Post-Learning Reports. – 5 Conclusions.

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1 Introduction

This chapter deals with PTAM[1] (Project of Telecollaboration Algeria-Moldova), a text-writing and translation telecollaborative project that has linked, respectively in 2017, 2018 and 2019, 2nd year undergraduate learners of French in the department of French, at the University of Blida 2, Algeria, and their peers, enrolled in a translation course, in the department of interpreting, translation and applied linguistics at Moldova State University. My aim is to demonstrate the role of this telecollaboration in developing students' linguistic and intercultural skills. I also discuss and analyse the successes and failures of the project and suggest possible interventions for improved efficacy in the future.

The following sections will highlight PTAM's aims and motivations, as a telecollaboration that has involved two countries on different continents, and with different languages and cultures. Above all, the two countries do not have official diplomatic ties. What follows is an introduction to the PTAM telecollaboration; a statement of its methodology; findings and discussion; and conclusions which offer an overall evaluation of PTAM telecollaboration and its implications.

2 PTAM. A Telecollaborative Project Connecting North Africa and Eastern Europe

Nowadays, it is important for university students to effectively communicate with their peers around the world in order to facilitate learning and to develop their linguistic skills and intercultural competence.[2] Future career prospects may also be dependent on the networks they establish during their studies. In this context, Lee and Markey (2014, 281) suggest that

> [i]n the fast-growing, globalized world, the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people across cultures is vital. Ensuring that our students attain the effective intercultural communication skills needed today is of paramount importance.

The Author would like to express her heartfelt thanks and gratitude to Dr. Giovanna Carloni, Dr. Christopher Fotheringham, Dr. Anita Virga, Dr. Brian Zuccala, for improving the style of this chapter.

1 Upon launch in 2017, the instructors agreed to call the project: PTAM (Project of Translation Algeria-Moldova). In 2019, they changed the name into Project of Telecollaboration Algeria-Moldova (PTAM). This change was decided upon because translation is only a task among others in this project with telecollaboration being the most important.

2 Cf. Chun 2015; Helm 2015; Schenker 2012; Ceo-DiFrancesco, Mora, Serna Collazos 2016; Hammer, Maylath 2014; Cebuc, Sadouni 2017; Maylath 2018; Sadouni, Cebuc 2018; Tomé 2009; Cabrales 2011; Guth, Helm 2010; Thorne 2003; Baggioni 1995.

One interesting and enriching way students can do this is to participate in telecollaborative projects, or what is also known as virtual exchange and online international exchange (OIE) whenever they have the opportunity (Lewis, O'Rourke, Dooly 2016; Godwin-Jones 2019). For Byram (1992), telecollaboration helps learners to "re-examine their way of seeing foreigners, to change the patterns they have of foreign cultures and peoples in general, and of the culture studied in particular [My translation from French into English]" (cited in Sadouni, Bekara 2020, 143). OIE also offers students the opportunity to become more confident by stepping out of their comfort zone and traditional learning environment (Ceo-DiFrancesco, Mora, Serna Collazos 2016).

In order to ascertain the extent to which telecollaboration can work between students with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and to help them develop their skills, two instructors of translation, from Algeria and Moldova respectively, have integrated a telecollaborative project into their programmes: PTAM (Project of Telecollaboration Algeria-Moldova). Unlike "[m]ost telecollaborative projects [which] are designed to link students who are studying each other's language" (Develotte, Mangenot, Zourou 2007, 276), PTAM links Berber[3] and Arabic native speakers from Algeria and Romanian native speakers from Moldova. To the best of our knowledge, PTAM is the only and first ever telecollaboration that brings together students from an African country and Moldova. PTAM is an exolingual telecollaborative project (Dimitrovska 2020; Holtzer 2003), where French is used as the only language of exchange and text-writing. Before continuing, I would like to offer some background to the initiative.

In September 2016, I participated via Skype in an international conference organised by the Faculty of Languages and Foreign Literatures, Moldova State University. It was the first time I encountered colleagues from Moldova. A few days after the conference, I contacted the organiser of the conference, Prof. Ludmila Zbant, and suggested a telecollaboration between students in Algeria and their peers in Moldova. Prof. Zbant accepted the offer, and appointed Mrs. Larisa Cebuc as the coordinator of the project at MSU. Following a series of Skype meetings with Mrs. Cebuc, we set up terms for this brand new telecollaborative project between North Africa and Moldova. The programme launched in February 2017.

Through PTAM, the instructors seek to place "emphasis on language as a resource for building relationships of significance, and

3 Although Berber has been promoted to an official language in Algeria (since 2016), it is taught in very few schools and universities across Algeria. It is not taught at the university of Blida 2 as the languages of instruction are Arabic, French, English and Italian. Therefore, we will refer to Arabic as a target language in the context of this paper.

not a focus on 'language' in the abstract sense of units within a linguistic system" (Thorne 2010, cited in Godwin-Jones 2019, 17). In other words, the two instructors in PTAM telecollaboration aim to allow students, who are unfamiliar with each others' cultures, to correctly communicate and write texts in French, and translate culture-bound terms and features embedded in these texts into the respective official languages of their countries. As such, this telecollaboration has an added educational value, as it uses a non-native language to learn about one own's history, heritage and traditions, and to present it in a way that is attractive to others (Gajek 2018). PTAM, as a bilateral exchange (Helm 2015; Godwin-Jones 2019), belongs to the third category of telecollaboration projects, "collective collaboration, where all the project participants are simultaneously involved" (Marczak 2013, 158). PTAM's principle is inspired by TAPP,[4] but it is conducted differently.

The instructors have agreed that the email, as a web 1.0 tool (Gajek 2018), would be a suitable means of cross-cultural communication between PTAM participants thanks to its numerous benefits for the teachers and the students alike.[5] Email is also more formal than other means of verbal and non-verbal communication and allows sharing different attachments (texts, photos, videos) in a professional way. It is rapid, free and gap-bridging (Schott 2000; Lagraña 2010). Although miscommunication and misunderstanding may emerge (Throne 2003; Belz, Müller-Hartmann 2003), email interaction remains a very good tool to document, record and trace conversations in contrast to face-to-face oral interactions (Belz, Müller-Hartmann 2003). In addition to email, in-country students use mobile technology to discuss their collaborative work, to send attachments (some Algerian students reported not having a personal computer), and to keep up with the different tasks forming the project. In addition to email, Skype and Facebook are used, but are not compulsory means of communication. Also, informal in-class discussions (Turula, Raith 2015, 25) take place between the instructors and their students: whether to give instructions to some teams, to remind others about deadlines, to answer students' questions, to give clarifications and to suggest problem-solving when necessary (Sadouni, Cebuc 2018).

PTAM is what Godwin-Jones (2019, 9) terms an e-tandem telecollaboration. It is conducted in parallel to translation classes, for a period of six weeks, during the second semester, between February

4 TAPP (Trans-Atlantic and Pacific Project) is a multilateral telecollaboration project, first launched in 2001. More info can be found on `https://www.ndsu.edu/english/transatlantic_and_pacific_translations`.

5 McPherson 1996; Liaw 1998; 2001; 2003; 2006; O'Dowd 2003; Cabrales 2011; Marczak 2013; Helm 2015.

and April of each academic year, given that both cooperating universities have the same academic calendar. Before each edition of PTAM begins, both instructors organise regular Skype meetings and exchange emails, between July and August (summer holidays in both countries) to choose the nature of the text-writing tasks, to improve pre- and post-learning reports based on the former collaborations, to set tentative deadlines and to share any useful suggestions. As such, PTAM is the result of personal efforts on the part of the instructors with the result of allowing students to use their respective target languages in a more meaningful way than in traditional class settings (cf. Jauregi 2016). It is worth mentioning that PTAM is not integrated into the curriculum in both universities due to complicated administrative procedures on both sides but remains an informal learning and teaching network between the two instructors and their students.

For the instructors, the project is about enriching their teaching experience, and going beyond the traditional educational space:

> The very act of carrying out an intercultural online exchange is an educational experience in itself […]. From the teacher's perspective, one can experientially learn to telecollaborate as well as reflectively confront this experience with one's teaching style and other relevant individual characteristics. (Turula, Raith 2015, 19)

The instructors on PTAM are engaged as "intercultural mediators" (Ensor, Kleban, Rodrigues 2017, 5) by combining traditional roles in class and online ones (Ensor, Kleban, Rodrigues 2017). They have agreed that since students of both sides are unfamiliar with each others' cultures, it would be interesting and more beneficial to share original texts about their respective cultures. In this context, texts are seen by Kern (2008) as an important tool "to identify (and sometimes to transform) the linguistic and sociocultural codes that organize meaning within a society". The same author believes that "connections to various discourse worlds, cultural concepts, and myths make texts interesting from the standpoint of learning a new language and culture" (Kern 2008, 374). These texts are respectively translated into Arabic and Romanian. Being aware that cultural translation remains difficult (Lederer 1998; Cordonnier 2002; Lecuit et al. 2011; Petit 2014), the instructors aim through this telecollaboration to see how students would overcome cultural differences when translating each others' texts. To succeed in this task, other not less important objectives of PTAM have been set to see how communication works between students unfamiliar with each others' culture, how the teamwork is organised, and what skills students would develop.

3 Methodology

Two hundred and nineteen Algerian students and seventy-nine Moldovan students participated in PTAM, between 2017 and 2019. Reflecting demographic trends at both universities, female students significantly outnumbered their male counterparts (269 to 29). The age of the students ranged between 18 and 25. The significant difference in the number of participants in Algeria as opposed to Moldova can be explained by the fact that the Algerian instructor teaches large groups of 45-55 students, whereas her Moldovan colleague teaches less than half this number (14-20). This is a consequence of the demography of Algeria, which has a much younger population than Moldova. Foreign language learning is also gaining more and more popularity in Algeria.

The telecollaboration takes place in a blended learning context;[6] i.e. the instructors mixed between in-class and distant learning modes.

PTAM is composed of five tasks. The first four tasks (pre-learning report, writing, translation, and post-learning report) are based on the TAPP telecollaboration (Vandepitte et al. 2018; Noronha Cunha et al. 2019). The pre- and post-learning reports were originally designed in English by Birthe Mousten, a TAPP member (Steinmann, Saduov 2018), but they have been modified and translated into French, in line with the specific goals and requirements of PTAM context. The final task, the video, was designed by the PTAM instructors (Sadouni, Cebuc 2018; Cebuc, Sadouni 2017).

Due to large class sizes on the Algerian side, the instructors agreed to have students participate as groups. Groups are preferred also because "[i]t is valuable for the development of group identity and, thus, supports the collaborative working process" (Müller-Hartmann 2007, 181). Also, groups "stimulate a more personal interaction" (Develotte, Mangenot, Zourou 2007, 279). As such, students were divided into in-country teams. In the first year of PTAM telecollaboration, 16 pairs were created as the Algerian instructor was teaching four groups (45-55 students per group). Algerian teams were made up of five to eight students, whereas the Moldovan ones involved only two to three students. In 2018 and 2019, eight pairs were matched as the Algerian instructor was fortunate enough to teach an unusually small group of 24 students. It was this group which she selected to participate in the project. Each in-country team was managed by a leader. The leader oversaw communicating and exchanging with the overseas team leader on behalf of the members of his/her team. As such, he/she oversaw sending emails to the corresponding partners, receiving emails from them, liaising with the instructors, and asking (and

6 Lindner, Méndez Garcia 2014; Thorne 2003; Orsini-Jones, Lee 2018; Alcantud Díaz 2016.

responding to) any questions and/or information requests on behalf of his/her team. The leader was instructed to copy both instructors into each email sent to the partner. In this way, the instructors were able to effectively manage the project. However, it is worth mentioning that this task was not always carried out by all team leaders, as some failed to copy one or both instructors when exchanging with their partners. Predicting that this would happen, the instructors regularly reminded all team leaders, in class or via email, to copy both instructors in any email.

The first task assigned to students in PTAM telecollaboration was exchanging a pre-learning report. This represents "the establishing-contact or getting-to-know phase" (Müller-Hartmann 2007): "It is the basis for initiating dialogical learning. In order to work together, learners must initially get to know each other and learn about each others' backgrounds, personalities and feelings" (Müller-Hartmann 2007, 173).

Students were given four days in which to fill in the report and to email it as MSWord attachment to the leader of their respective in-country team. After that, the team-leader of both sides sent all the team pre-learning reports to the other party overseas, as MSWord attachments via email (cf. Mousten et al. 2012). The pre-learning report provided a presentation of each participant, (name, age, hobbies, countries visited, any personal information wanted to be shared). As such, "this important phase is decisive in allowing learners to discover their partners' likes and dislikes, as well as their private and educational context" (Müller-Hartmann 2007, 181). One interesting piece of personal information shared was in 2018, when a male student from Algeria wrote: "I hate animals, but I don't like saying it to other people". What can be made of the last example is that in the Algerian cultural context, it is shameful for men, in contrast to women, to declare publicly that they hate animals. This is explained by the fact that in patriarchal Algerian society, men are discouraged of displaying weakness or fragility of any kind. Therefore, the male student shared this thought as personal information, being aware that it would only be read by his Moldovan partner. If asked in front of his classmates in class, this student would never have declared such a thing.

The pre-learning report contains three questions: 1) What obstacles may you encounter during this telecollaboration?; 2) What do you expect to learn from this telecollaboration; 3) What skills do you think you will need for this telecollaboration? Seeking to improve PTAM telecollaboration each year, the two instructors modified the pre-learning report (deleting some questions and replacing them with others) over the course of the three editions. Before moving to task two, students may interact and ask questions related to each others' backgrounds or their cultures.

In the second task, students were asked to write and share original texts in French. This task serves as "the establishing-dialogue

phase" (Müller-Hartmann 2007, 175). One of the main conditions in text-writing is that texts should present one or many aspects of the original culture. Students are given eight days to write the texts before they are shared via email with the overseas partner. They are then sent to the respective instructor for review. In this way both instructors make sure to avoid any misunderstandings or "breakdown of communication" (O'Dowd, Ritter 2006, 627).

Each PTAM edition was dedicated to a specific text type: fairy tales in 2017, descriptive texts in 2018 and argumentative texts in 2019. From 2017 to 2019, the instructors noticed that of all the teams, two Algerian teams failed to send their texts by the due date, whether because of lack of commitment among some team members, or lack of organisation within the team, whereas their Moldovan peers always sent theirs within the deadline. One of the explanations that can be given here is that whereas the Moldovan instructor saw her students three times a week, and reminded them consistently about the tasks and the deadlines, her Algerian colleague met hers once a week. Furthermore, not all of them attended the class although it was compulsory.

In the third task of the PTAM telecollaboration, students are asked to translate the original texts received from their counterparts, into the official language of their respective countries. This task is designed as a "critical reflection phase" and to promote "discussion of issues that came up, [and] negotiation of misunderstandings" (Müller-Hartmann 2007, 173). They are given a deadline of twelve days to complete the translation and to send it to their respective instructors, for correction and feedback via email and in class. During this phase, students are consistently reminded to interact with the original authors while working on the translation in order to make sure that they render the meaning in the target language and culture, and to ask any questions or request any clarifications, when necessary. In this phase we noticed very few interactions, as most of the teams busied themselves with the translation of the original texts without any exchange with the original authors. In this context, an example from 2017 is instructive. In this case, the Algerian team omitted to translate the word "ie" in the target text. When asked why they did so, they told me that they thought it may have been a typing error because such a word did not exist in French. I thought the same, of course, but to make sure, I emailed my Moldovan colleague to inform her about the "typing error". To my surprise and to that of my students, the Moldovan colleague informed me that the word "ie" is a Moldovan culture-bound word, used to refer to a traditional shirt worn by men and women alike, in Moldova, Romania and Ukraine. This example shows that interaction is a key element in the telecollaboration, and all details that seem unusual in the texts should be discussed with their original authors.

Another observation emerging from the PTAM translations was that the ones done by Moldovan students into Romanian were of much better quality than those translated by Algerian students into Arabic. The reason behind this is that French and Romanian are closely related languages. This makes translation between these two languages less difficult than from French into Arabic.

In the fourth task, students were asked to share a post-learning report with the corresponding team leader in the other country. The post-learning report consisted of two parts. The first part contained seven questions related to the organisation of teamwork, respect of the deadlines and overall impressions about the partner's text. The second part contained four questions on what had been learned during the project, difficulties encountered, and skills used and developed. In 2019, in order to ascertain the impact of PTAM on their students, the instructors added the following question: "Would you participate in a future PTAM telecollaboration if you have the opportunity?" All students answered in the affirmative. This means that they were satisfied with the very first academic and virtual exchange, and were eager to participate again.

The fifth task in the PTAM programme involved sharing videos. Students from each country are asked to make collective or individual videos to share with the other party. The instructors believe that asking students to make videos at the end of the project offers an informal way to express their feelings on their first participation in an international telecollaboration, and also to make a good impression on their partners at the partner university. It gave the students the opportunity to see their overseas partners for the first time since they started collaborating, as they had been acquainted only by email addresses and names when completing the first four tasks of the project. In 2017, all Moldovan teams shared their videos, but only three Algerian students (team leaders who made individual videos) did so. Most of them, who were female, told me that they did not want to share personal videos with strangers. In 2018, the same thing was reported. However, in 2019, there was an improvement, as most Algerian teams shared their videos. This was no accident. Based on the failure of this task in 2017 and 2018, the Algerian instructor shared some former PTAM videos with her students, in class, in order to encourage them to do the same. Among eight teams, three shared their videos, and one team shared an audio recording.

At the end of each PTAM telecollaboration, an award ceremony was organised. The instructors, in each country, organised a ceremony to award certificates to the teams for the best original texts, best translations and best videos. Also, certificates were given to team leaders and members who showed strong commitment while working on the project. The award ceremony has become a tradition to motivate students and to encourage further contributions in the future.

In the following sections, examples from pre- and post-learning reports are given. An analysis follows, along with discussions.

4 Analysis of Pre-Learning and Post-Learning Reports

4.1 Analysis of Pre-Learning Reports

As mentioned above, students were asked to complete a pre-learning report before the start of the telecollaboration. It appears from this report that students expressed their eagerness to discover a new culture and allow the partner to learn from theirs. They also demonstrated intercultural communicative competence skills by "showing openness and curiosity towards the partners" (Müller-Hartmann 2007, 183):

> I want to discover the culture and let my partner discover mine. (Algerian participant 2018)

> I am curious to learn about Algerian traditions. (Moldovan participant 2018)

> I guess that my partner may ignore our culture. This is why through this project, I will enrich my partner's knowledge about our culture, as I expect to learn a lot about his/her culture. (Moldovan participant 2017)

They also wrote about their expectations and potential difficulties as they perceived them in the telecollaboration at different stages of the project:

> I am afraid that I will lack vocabulary in French and will not be able to communicate with my partner. (Algerian participant 2018)

> The students in this project are non-native speakers of French. Therefore, I am afraid that we would have communication problems. (Moldovan participant 2018)

> The Internet connection I am using is of bad quality. (Moldovan participant 2017)

> I expect to learn about my partner's studies, his/her hobbies, the foreign languages he/she knows. (Moldovan participant 2019)

From the above quotes, it is apparent that students showed "attitudes of openness, respect (valuing all cultures), and curiosity and discov-

ery (tolerating ambiguity) [which] are viewed as fundamental to intercultural competence" (Deardorff 2006, 255). Furthermore, students seemed to be aware of the difficulties that may occur during the exchange, such as bad Internet connection or poor communication skills in French. They were also aware of "cultural identities and knowledge of self and otherness" (Chun 2015, 10). However, what is interesting is that no student of either side mentioned stereotypes. This is because of the almost total unfamiliarity with the other cultures.

4.2 Analysis of Post-Learning Reports

The examples that will follow are taken from 2018 and 2019 post-learning reports. Post-learning reports from the 2017 are not included because they are very basic, as they contained only nine questions about time dedicated to accomplishing the project, and an overall evaluation on the partner's original text. The post-learning report has been modified and improved since then (Sadouni, Cebuc 2018).

From the post-learning reports, it appears that the Moldovan teams all worked as unified teams, whereas some team leaders from Algeria complained about their in-country partners because they did not work as they should have done, and did not participate fully in accomplishing tasks. Consequently, they had to independently complete most of their tasks in order to meet all the requirements. Some Moldovan students complained that their Algerian partners were not committed to the project, and they took too long to answer their emails or that the original texts they sent were not cohesive. As a coordinator of this project, I am compelled to agree with the Moldovan students in this regard. It was a challenge to ensure compliance with the deadlines for the various tasks since we met only once a week, they did not reply on a regular basis to my emails. My Moldovan counterpart was able to supervise the project more effectively making use of supplementary tasks and supervision facilitated by the fact that she saw her students three times a week in class. My Moldovan counterpart also told me that her students were frustrated when their Algerian counterparts failed to reply to their questions about ambiguity in the original text. Another reason for the lack of involvement by Algerian students is, in my opinion, the fact that they are not students of translation, but rather students of French. As such, they are very aware that once they graduate, they will not work as translators but, in most cases, as French language teachers. Unlike their Moldovan partners who showed a high degree of diligence and commitment to achieving the learning outcomes of the project, the Algerian students were mostly grade-oriented and not willing to make of this project an enriching academic experience.

It is clear, then, that in telecollaboration, unforeseen obstacles can emerge for many reasons (Jauregi 2016). Despite all the gaps reported, students from both sides declared that they were happy to discover a new culture and a new country. They were glad to communicate with students from different backgrounds. Some students described the project as "a new experience" and a "wonderful experience". Others acknowledged that after completing the project, they had overcome the anxiety they experienced before they started. They became more confident when speaking in French, both in their own estimation and in the estimation of the instructor. As for the benefits of participation in PTAM, students from both countries declared that the telecollaboration allowed them to improve their linguistic skills, to enrich their vocabulary and communication skills, as well as translation skills. To put it differently, students "like the experience and think that it is useful for their learning process, which boosts their motivation, and hence contributes to create a beneficial setting for optimizing language learning processes" (Jauregi 2016, 170).

As for team-work, while some students reported that they encountered no obstacles because they worked closely as a unified team ["We had no obstacles because we are a united team" (Moldovan participant 2019)], others declared that the lack of commitment on the part of members of their teams hindered effective collaboration ["The members of my team did not commit themselves in all the tasks of the project" (Algerian participant 2019)]. In addition to email, some teams reported that they used other synchronous means of communication and organised face-to-face meetings: "We communicated face-to-face at the university, by email and on Messenger" (Moldovan participant 2019). Others reported the number of times they met to organise the team work: "We met twice a week to work together" (Moldovan participant 2019). These examples show that Moldovan students had a healthy spirit of teamwork. We have concluded that for some Algerian team members, this telecollaboration was seen "as [a set of] academic tasks rather than communicative moves" (Ware 2005, 76).

An interesting byproduct of the programme concerns the translanguaging (trilingual Berber-Arabic-French in Algeria, and bilingual Romanian-French in Moldova) that occurred between students inside and outside the classroom. For Algerian students, French was used in-class between the students, and between the students and their teacher, as it is the language of instruction. Outside the classroom, colloquial Algerian Arabic was used for the reason that Berber, as the language of the minority, only occurred between students of Berber origins, and was not used among students from different

linguistic backgrounds.[7] As for students in Moldova, I cannot say for sure whether French or Romanian, or both, were used when working on the project inside and outside the classroom.

The PTAM instructors cannot say which of the languages mentioned above were used in Facebook and Skype exchanges as their use was informal and unrecorded, and the instructors did not interact with students via these two means.

To sum up, the reader should keep in mind that in PTAM telecollaboration, the exchange was performed in French between out-country students, between in-country students (in class) and the instructors of both countries. Arabic and Romanian were only used in the phase of translation, when Algerian and Moldovan students were respectively asked to translate their partners' texts into the official language of their native country.

As for learning about a new culture, all students declared that they learned about new traditions and discovered a new way of life. Above all, they reported that each other's culture was something totally new for them, and that they were happy to get to know each other:

> I learned that Algeria is a country rich in traditions and customs. (Moldovan participant 2019)

> We discovered a new way of living in a society quite different from our own. (Moldovan participant 2019)

> [Moldovans] have a culture different from that of Algerians and I am very happy to get in touch with them. (Algerian participant 2019)

> I learned how the wedding party takes place in Algeria. (Moldovan participant 2018)

> It is a pleasure to make new contact with people who live in another country. (Algerian participant 2018)

These findings relate to what Gajek (2018, 11) calls "cultural and intercultural awareness" as students "not only learn about other cultures but also understand their native culture and its values better. The findings are also in line with what Marczak points out as "inter-

7 As strange as this seems to be, although Arabic and Berber languages have been coexisting in Algeria since the spread of Islam in North-Africa in the 7th century CE, people from Arab backgrounds, in Algeria, can neither speak nor write Berber, whereas people from Berber backgrounds can. Thus, Arabs and Berbers communicate in dialect Arabic. The main reason is that unlike (standard) Arabic, which has been compulsorily taught from elementary school, since 1962 (Algeria's independence), Berber was introduced only recently as a subject in a few regions of Algeria, and it is not compulsory.

cultural learning, [...] where learners interact with representatives of other cultures" (2013, 163). As reported, students got acquainted with each others' sociocultural traditions thanks to PTAM telecollaboration. These findings are consistent with Ceo-DiFrancesco, Mora and Serna Collazos who believe that "the integration of telecollaboration as a pedagogical tool in language teaching expands the treatment of cultures" (2016, 60), i.e: students learn about cultures, not in books, but in the real world and by making direct contact with people from different cultures. The findings also confirm Rafieyan's assertion about one of the benefits of telecollaboration for students, which is "to interact with each other and exchange cultural knowledge about their countries" (129).

As for using French as a common language of writing and exchange, students from both sides, as intermediate learners of French, reported that by using "monolingual exchange" (Lewis, O'Rourke, Dooly 2016, 1), they gained a lot from it, as they were able to develop their communication skills:

> Communication with a foreign student is an opportunity to enrich our vocabulary and develop knowledge about the general culture of another country. (Moldovan participant 2019)

> I am very happy because French is the language of communication in this project. I benefited from this greatly because I had difficulties. Now, I have overcome them. (Algerian participant 2019)

> Communication with a stranger is an easy job, especially since we use the same language to communicate with each other and also each responds to the other in an honorable way. (Moldovan participant 2019)

> It is good to write in French with a person who speaks Romanian. (Algerian participant 2018)

Despite these positive impressions about using French in this telecollaboration, I think that unlike their Moldovan partners who seemed to know how to write a professional email in French, Algerian students did not develop their linguistic skills in French to the level of fluency.[8] This is evident from emails they sent to the other parties or to their teacher. Many of them have attachments, but not texts. The ones with texts are poorly written (very short using very simple words). On the contrary, Moldovan students were less successful than their Algerian peers when speaking French in the recorded vid-

8 Yet, it must be acknowledged that this is a high expectation.

eo. In other words, Moldovan students did not have good pronunciation where Algerian students did. A very good explanation to this is that, although Moldova is a member-country of the International Organisation of la Francophonie, unlike Algeria, Algerian students have a good mastery of French, as a legacy of 132 years of colonial rule.

When it comes to partner involvement, all Algerian students reported that their Moldovan counterparts were very good partners, but the vast majority of the latter complained about the lack of commitment on the part of their Algerian peers. This is what Ware (2005) calls "missed communication". In these cases Moldovan students showed "negative affect" toward their Algerian partners (Belz 2007), and reported "a lack of friendliness and motivation" (O'Dowd, Ritter 2006) on their part:

> Our partner did not answer our questions and asked us nothing about the text he received. (Moldovan participant 2019)

> The Algerian partner needed more time to respond to my emails. (Moldovan participant 2019)

The attitude and the reaction of Algerian students toward their Moldovan peers goes with what Helm (2015) describes as "working and interacting in order to be awarded grades" (201), or what McPherson (1996) calls "more from a sense of duty than from genuine interest" (41). In the context of this paper, 'sense of duty' refers to the fact that Algerian students only cooperate when they are obliged to. Which is the case during PTAM telecollaboration, as the instructor informed them that they would be graded on each task. We believe for our part that the lack of commitment by Algerian students may be explained by the fact that they did not place much importance on the telecollaboration as they were studying French, in contrast with their Moldovan peers who were future translators, and as such, needed to interact more, especially during the translation task.

Moldovan students found that the texts produced by their Algerian peers lacked good grammatical structure and cohesion:

> We had translation problems with the syntax because the source text does not have a clear structure and the sentences are too long. So, we had to cut the sentences into smaller units and add logical connectors to create consistency and cohesion. (Moldovan participant 2019)

As for culture-bound terms, both Algerian and Moldovan students reported that, due to their unfamiliarity with each others' culture, and despite the integration of pictures within the original texts, they found it difficult to translate certain culture-bound terms correctly.

Algerian students solved the problem by using phonetic transcription, sometimes followed by a footnote explanation in the target text, for culture specific terms such as *martishor*, *malanca*, *mamaliga*, *placinta*, *ïe*, *Pashtele Blajinilor*, *drushka*, *crishma*, and *Laur Balaur*. Some teams also reproduced the pictures included in the source texts to make the target texts clearer. The Moldovan students reported that it was quite difficult to translate French words from Arab or Berber origins, such as *burnous*, *henni*, *haïk*, *fouta*, *gandoura*, or terms related to Algerian culture and Islamic features, such as *Eid El Fitr*, *Al-Maghreb*, *Harz*, *baroud*, *sarwal*, *yennayar*, *adhan*, and *l'ham lahlou*. Moldovan students reported that in order to solve this problem, they had to look for these terms on Google. They also emailed their Algerian partners to help them with the meaning. They noted that not all their emails were answered.

As for the skills students learned, all of them reported that they learned beneficial things and could overcome some difficulties they had had before this project:

> It was difficult at first but now I know how to use email. (Algerian participant 2019)

> I had a lot of problems in the beginning because I had never used email before, but thanks to this project, I learned how to use it and I overcame these obstacles. (Algerian participant 2019)

> Thanks to this project I […] learned how to work in a team. (Moldovan participant 2018)

Other students reported that at the end of the telecollaboration, they got more familiar with email and developed digital skills, or what Çiftçi and Savaş (2018) call "digital literacy". However, it should be noted that unlike all Moldovan students who had regular access to the Internet, both at home and at the university via Wi-Fi, as reported by them, and confirmed by their teacher, some of their Algerian partners did not. The reason is that these students live in university residences where only one Internet room is available, and where there is no Wi-Fi connection. The same is to be said about the university campus where Wi-Fi is unavailable. Although all Algerian students who participated in PTAM telecollaboration did have a 4G Internet connection on their phones, they were unable to produce and share Word documents as easily as they would have by using a computer.

Another skill students learned from PTAM experience is the development of their intercultural competence as for:

> Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, be-

> liefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self. Linguistic competence plays a key role. (Byram 1997, cited in Deardorff 2006, 247)

Both pre- and post-learning reports sum-up students' fears, hopes, joy, and eagerness to get in touch with the Other and to learn from him/her, or what Schenker calls "overall enjoyment of the exchange" (2012, 454) or as termed by Ceo-DiFrancesco, Mora, Serna Collazos "enjoyment of interaction with others" (2016, 64). Also, when students expressed their desire to repeat a similar experience, once again, this denotes a willing of openness to new people and new cultures in a world characterised by globalisation. Although both instructors played the pedagogical, social, managerial and technical roles (Müller-Hartmann 2007, 169) while running the project, it appears that Moldovan students were always in the lead as they were very well organised and committed. One explanation that might be given here is that the Algerian instructor used to meet her students once a week, as opposed to her Moldovan colleague who had class with her students three times a week. Thus, the Moldovan instructor had more in-class time to fulfil these roles. Furthermore, it appears from the above examples that Algerian students are not as familiar with emails as Moldovan students. The exchange was slowed down by the fact that the Algerian instructor was obliged to spend some time at the beginning of the programme teaching students to set up and use email.

These observations lead me to conclude that sometimes students who are used to an in-person learning environment find it difficult to shift to working via an electronic exchange as it requires a level of digital literacy. To the best of my knowledge, Algerian students who participated in PTAM had never been in telecollaborative projects before, nor had they worked with their teachers using professional means of communication, such as the email.

Before moving on to conclusions, it is worth mentioning that after I sent this chapter for review, a fourth PTAM telecollaboration took place from 5 February through 17 March 2020. A great deal of the tasks assigned were achieved when the world was experiencing lockdowns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Overnight, universities around the world emptied and shifted to online-teaching. In the context of PTAM, this did not affect the students because only the task related to the video remained incomplete. To complete the task, Algerian students individually recorded a short video from home. Then, team leaders compiled the footage and shared it with the Moldovan partners and the respective instructors. Only one Algerian team did not share a video despite reminders sent to the team leader. Moldovan students worked differently. In the lead, as always during the project, they made their videos before the COVID-19 situation. They were able to produce much better and higher quality vid-

eos than those produced by their Algerian peers because they were able to work in groups outside the home.

It should be kept in mind that situations similar to COVID-19 could happen in the future. This is why PTAM instructors will consider developing more tools, platforms and strategies to facilitate the telecollaboration in general, and the electronic exchange, in particular. Among these means, Zoom, podcasting and blogs can be used. The instructors can post assignments, remind of deadlines, mentor, and students can work on the different phases in teams, and turn the assigned tasks in due time. Blogs and platforms can also help students to exchange online via forums. These tools will help both instructors and their respective students to be present at once, like in the classroom.

5 Conclusions

In this study, I shared my three-year experience in conducting a telecollaborative project at university level. I conclude that for telecollaboration to be effective, good coordination and preparation between the instructors involved is needed "for both teachers to develop a good online working relationship together in order to co-ordinate and reach agreement on the many aspects of the exchange" (O'Dowd, Ritter 2006, 627). However, learners may face some difficulties and fail to communicate as they do come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. To show this, I focused my study on two levels of factors that contribute to failed communication, namely: individual and interaction levels (Helm 2015).

The study also shed light on the strong as well as the weak points in the PTAM telecollaboration. What was lacking most, in my opinion, in PTAM telecollaboration were the "skills of discovery", the ones which "are needed in situations where individuals have little prior knowledge of the foreign culture or when interlocutors are unable to explain what is obvious for them in their 'taken-for-granted reality" (Byram 1997, cited in Belz 2007, 134). Upon this experience, it is urgent that due to the importance of in-class discussions, and face-to-face meetings, more hours in the curriculum should be dedicated to the translation class I teach, in order to ensure that the four role categories (Müller-Hartmann 2007) within telecollaboration are achieved.

All in all, despite difficulties and weaknesses noted in PTAM telecollaboration, this experience has allowed students to become more autonomous, more responsible and aware of cultural differences, and to develop their linguistic skills, as well as intercultural and digital competences. Therefore, it is of no doubt that PTAM has contributed to foster students' language and translation learning, and, as such, constitutes a very useful and enriching practice in students' academic life and future career.

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Blended Learning and the Global South. Virtual Exchanges in Higher Education
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Promoting Student-Centred Language Learning Via eTandem

The Case of Mexican and South African Students

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Abstract eTandem is a type of virtual and synchronic way of learning an additional language in collaboration with peers who speak the target language and who are also learning their counterparts' language. eTandem is usually incorporated as part of the activities that students have to complete whilst learning a language. However, these virtual activities are seldom part of the curriculum or the course syllabus and they are hardly ever part of the assessment process. The aim of this paper is to highlight the benefits of learning a language as the means of promoting a student-centred learning approach through autonomy, peer and self-assessment, self-reflection, feedback and by using the language to understand cultural and intercultural differences. The study was carried out via eTandem activities between Mexican students learning English and South African students learning Spanish. The results suggest that virtual exchanges whilst learning a language foster a wide ray of social, cultural and pragmatic means of learning a language in context. This paper has implications in promoting the inclusion of blended language learning in higher education settings.

Keywords eTandem. Student-centred learning. Language learning. Telecollaboration. Intercultural encounters.

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1 Introduction

eTandem is a telecollaboration practice for language learning in which two or more speakers of different languages meet on a virtual platform or app (e.g. Facebook, Skype, Whatsapp, Zoom, Hangout) to communicate and to practice the target language they are learning (Cavalari, Aranha 2016; Dooly 2017). This target language can be the first or second language of the peer, and the participants can be located or not in a place where the target language is spoken (Kohn, Hoffstaedter 2017). This type of language exchange practice is quite flexible and it can also be implemented institutionally to promote cyber language exchange, culture and intercultural exchange.[1] In such cases, the interaction is usually mediated by a language coordinator and IT support.

At the institutional level, eTandem finds its roots in self-access language centres created in the 1980s to promote language learning through conversation clubs and physical tandem collaboration between language learners. The idea was to foster autonomy whilst learning a language (Cziko 2004; Lewis 2003; Schwienhorst 2008). Autonomy was then achieved, according to Holec (1981), by setting objectives, defining contents and progressions, selecting methods, monitoring the learning process and evaluating outcomes. These basic concepts still apply, but with e-tandem now there is another important component: a peer to interact with (Lee 2011). So reciprocity, peer-assessment, mutual support, error correction and modelling are also part of the interaction and autonomous learning process.[2] With the advent and growth of information and communications technology (ICT), the tandem model has been upgraded to an eTandem version, which allows language learners to interact with peers from all over the world (Leone, Telles 2016; O'Dowd 2007). This activity goes beyond the classroom and it fosters an intercultural approach with a more global perspective of learning a language by which students interact with people with a different idiosyncrasy and view of the world.[3]

There are many benefits in implementing these activities in the classroom because eTandem fosters a comprehensive student-centred learning framework in a wide range of areas. Firstly, these activities follow the principles of autonomy, reciprocity and separation of languages (Schwienhorst 2008; Salomão 2015). That means that students are engaged in their own learning process, they collaborate with their peers by providing support while they try to communi-

1 Cappellini 2016; Lee 2009; Lewis, O'Dowd 2016; Salomão 2015; Schenker 2012.

2 Akiyama 2017; Vinagre, Muñoz 2011; Ware, O'Dowd 2008; Ware, Pérez-Cañado 2007.

3 Nissen 2016; Sauro 2013; Tellez, Vassallo 2006; Ware, Kramsch 2005.

cate in the target language (Akiyama 2017; Cunningham, Fägersten, Holmsten 2010), and they also split each session in both languages so that both parties can benefit from learning the target language (Cavalari, Aranha 2019). In addition, eTandem allows space for incorporating various assessment practices such as self-assessment, peer assessment and teacher assessment through mediation (dynamic assessment).

eTandem also facilitates a more meaningful pedagogical setting by including integrated tasks that promote cultural learning, intercultural exchange and social interaction with peers of similar age (Akiyama 2017; Ramos 2013; Salomão 2015). All the above result in more engaging learning process of the target language (Tian, Wang 2010).

The core component of a telecollaboration activity is to promote an exchange that allow learners to develop their awareness of other cultures (Jauregi et al. 2012). These activities are authentic for students because they do not only engage in 'the real use of the language', but may also bond whilst connecting with someone who is from another culture and who is also the user of the target language (Belz 2003; Kötter 2003; O'Dowd 2005; Yang, Youngjoo 2017). By engaging in this type of activities, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for learning a language might also increase (Jauregi et al. 2012). The desire to travel, to meet people or simply to interact with someone with a different culture may also increase (Cappellini 2016; Sauro 2013; Thorne, Black 2011).

Because the tasks are meaningful and similar to real-life activities, the atomisation of a language into four skills (i.e, reading, writing, listening and speaking) becomes unnecessary and students use all sort of resources to communicate and to avoid the breakdown of communication.[4] There are several online platforms that allow the use of text, video, audio, screen sharing and document uploading, all of which facilitate the natural integration of all skills during the conversation.[5]

The role of the instructor also encompasses a wide variety of activities. The idea of teacher-centred learning does not really apply in this context and the teacher becomes more the observer of the interactions between peers and the mediator that guarantees that the platform and the internet connection, among other things, are working adequately (Cavalari, Aranha 2019). There is less need to monitor and to follow each of the conversations because peers often enhance the opportunities for a collaborative learning, help their peers

4 Clavel-Arroitia 2019; Cunningham, Fägersten, Holmsten 2010; Silva-Oyama 2010; Romaña 2015.

5 Akbaba, Baskan 2017; Akiyama 2014; Andujar, Medina-López 2019; Mullen, Appel, Shanklin 2009.

when they cannot express what they want to say, correct them when necessary, explain cultural aspects or intercultural differences (Lee 2009, 2011; Ware, O'Dowd 2008; Telles 2015). Thus, the role of instructors is very different from the one they have in a physical classroom (Tian, Wang 2010).

Instructors can also use different instruments to guarantee a successful online session. For example, they decide on the topic or the task during the activity (Cappellini 2016). They also have to provide the means that students will use to assess and monitor their progress. This can be achieved by using a dairy or a journal in which learners can plan their intervention according to the topic they have been given to them. They can also get feedback from their peers regarding their performance (e.g. pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure), and finally, they can also self-assess their performance and identify what is needed to work on to improve their conversational skills.[6]

Several eTandem studies have been carried out in many different ways. For example, Cavalari and Aranha (2019) carried out studies to understand the teachers' role and perception of eLearning-teaching in computer-mediated environments. Other researchers have looked at students perceptions, corrective feedback, motivation, autonomy, corpus and discourse analysis.[7] But most of the aforementioned studies have been conducted either by analysing emails or text chats or through surveys or interviews (but see Clavel-Arroitia 2019; Kohn, Hoffstaedter 2017; Tian, Wang 2010 for studies on video-based environments). The present study contributes to filling the gap on the recent, yet scarce, studies that have been carried out whilst observing students interactions in computer-mediated environments. Thus, the aim of the paper is to answer the following research question: "How do video-based environments foster student-centred language learning?"

2 Method

2.1 Participants

17 students enrolled in the first and second year of Hispanic studies at the University of the Witwatersrand and 17 English students enrolled at the National Autonomous University of Mexico participated in the study. The proficiency level of South African students of Span-

6 Dooly 2017; Furstenberg, Levet 2010; Sauro 2013; Schwienhorst 2008; Ware, O'Dowd 2008.

7 See e.g. Akiyama 2017; Jauregi et al. 2012; Lee 2009, 2011; Lewis 2003; Ware, Pérez-Cañado 2007.

ish was A2 and B1 according to the CEFR, and B1 and B2 for Mexican students learning English.

2.2 Instructors

Two Spanish instructors affiliated to the Witwatersrand University, one academic coordinator and IT support from UNAM.

2.3 Platform

Zoom with the possibility of recording sessions in audio, video and chat. This interactive space gives participants the opportunity to use a camera and chat, share their screen, documents, photos and it has a blackboard. The platform also allows the creation of individual virtual rooms in which the participants can have one-to-one interaction. The instructors can access each virtual individual classroom and monitor the interaction between students.

2.4 Dynamics

During the first semester of 2019, a pilot project was conducted with eight participants with a B1 level (South African students learning Spanish) and eight participants with a B2 level (Mexican students learning English). Five sessions were organised for these two groups of students, and the aim was to promote cultural exchanges between them. During the first session, students received a short introduction on how to use Zoom and a briefing on the dynamics and the activities. At that stage, each South African student was paired-up with a Mexican student for this and the four following sessions. During that first session, they introduced themselves to their peer, they talked about their personal life and they covered the first given topic: university life. The following topics that were assigned were:

- My city (what to visit and to eat?)
- Public holidays in my country
- Two extra sessions with free topics

During that initial session, two Spanish instructors in South Africa and the academic coordinator monitored the sessions for future feedback in a classroom context, but also to identify possible technical problems. Due to the time difference between South Africa and Mexico (8 hours), students were asked to coordinate with their peer the remaining four sessions according to their availability. They were requested to have four more sessions, once a week during the

following month, in any sort of social media (e.g. WhatsApp, Skype, Facebook or Hangout). Unfortunately, sometimes students forgot to connect or they were not very committed in following-up the activities with their peers.

After this first experience and with the feedback given by students, we continued the project during the second semester of 2019. During the first session, students were given a 30-minute induction session on how to use the Zoom platform. They also received the general guideline about how to make the most out of each session, and they previously received a learning diary in which they would plan their intervention according to the topic assigned for each session. This diary was useful to identify errors, to take notes, to keep track of the feedback provided by their peers and to identify areas of opportunity for future interactions.

The topics selected for the students were the following:

For A2 students	**For B1 students**
• Describe your city. Plans for a visit. • Your last weekend • What I have not done in my life. • Shopping in your city. Compare with Mexico • Your last visit to the doctor • Independence Day in Mexico / South Africa: what is celebrated? • Your childhood • Your favourite character: biography	• Recommendations to visit Johannesburg-Mexico City • Opinion and stereotypes about South Africans and Mexicans • Traditions in South Africa and Mexico • What could be improved in Mexico City and Johannesburg? • Migration in South Africa and Mexico • The government system in South Africa and Mexico • Ancient cultures in South Africa and Mexico • Gastronomy in Mexico and South Africa

We also decided to implement slight changes based on the previous experience during the pilot project. Firstly, we planned eight weekly sessions instead of five and each session, Mexican and South African students covered two different topics that were previously assigned by their instructors. Each hour session was then split into three parts: 25 minutes for the discussion of topic "A", 25 minutes for the discussion of topic "B", and 10 minutes for feedback. It is important to highlight that the topics were selected to promote both cultural exchange and intercultural awareness.

Secondly, we decided that all the sessions would take place in Zoom with two possible dates (Tuesday or Thursday) and with a fixed time (11 a.m. in Mexico City and 6 p.m. in South Africa: at this time of the year the time difference is only 7 hours). This change allowed students to have a fixed schedule and also to interact with different students each session.

Thirdly, we decided to record all the sessions for several reasons. During the pilot project, several students reported that they felt uncomfortable when the instructors suddenly showed up in the virtual classroom, and would stop talking or would start hesitating because they felt intimidated by the abrupt presence of the instructor. Unfortunately, the virtual room in Zoom does not allow yet for instructors to be in an 'invisible mode'. We also thought that by recording the sessions, we would have more opportunities to give students individual feedback, and also to systematise the correction of common mistakes that could have arisen during the conversation (i.e., pragmatic, sociolinguistic, linguistic and strategic flaws).

Finally, although the activity was not embedded in the class syllabus, nor counted as part of the assessment of the course, we decided to include all the first and second year students who were learning Spanish in South Africa. In the case of Mexico, students voluntarily approached the media lab to be part of the eTandem.

3 Results

There was a total of eight eTandem sessions, twice a week during eight weeks, although students only had to participate once a week either on Tuesday or Thursday. In general, there were more Mexicans than South Africans during each session, so quite often two or even three Mexicans were paired up with one South African. The sessions were recorded at the media lab by Mexican students and with their peers' consent. A total of 38 recordings were made, which accounted for 28 hours and 44 minutes of recordings. The shortest recording was 19 minutes and 10 seconds and the longest one was 63 minutes and 35 seconds. The average time of the recordings was 45 minutes and 20 seconds. The information provided in the recordings was useful to give students individual feedback, but also to address collectively during class common mistakes or issues that might have arisen during each session.

All the recordings were then organised per session and the two Spanish instructors reviewed the videos and chats in order to collect general and detailed information regarding the performance of each student. Overall, students followed the rule of speaking half of the time in Spanish and half in English. Mexican students, who were in a media lab at the university, were given reminders by the administrators of the session when they had to switch languages.

In what follows, I will provide information that was drawn from the recordings and that shows the effectiveness of eTandem activities in a wide array of areas: use of strategies to avoid breakdown during the communication; increase of motivation and confidence while speaking; peer-assessment and monitoring; and raising of intercultural and cultural awareness.

3.1 Strategic Competence

One of the most important and basic rules of communicating in a foreign language is to negotiate meaning and to repair the conversation when it breaks down due to the lack of proficiency in the target language (Clavel-Arroitia 2019; Foster, Ohta 2005). The fact that Mexican students were more proficient in English than South African students were in Spanish allowed them to switch languages when they had to clarify something or when they had to explain concepts or translate words to their peers. This was especially the case of South African students at the A2 level of Spanish, who needed more translation and clarification of meaning in English. For the South African students the activity was more challenging and they showed more difficulties in sustaining a conversation in Spanish for more than 3 or 4 minutes, but the codeswitching from English to Spanish enabled them to speak for the allotted time.

Example:
SA Mi favorito um… *Movie. What's movie*?
M Película.
SA !Película! Ok. Mi favorito película es… Um… *I don't remember the name. But I have it here* [student stands up and looks for the movie]. *The lost City* [student shows the movie].
[…] Um… [student is thinking] *Plot*… [student looks for the Spanish Word of plot in his/her mobile]. El… ¿la trama?…
M La trama.
SA La trama es una expedición por un *English man*.
M Una expedición por un hombre inglés.
SA Hombre de inglés a Sudamérica.
M Hombre inglés a Sudamérica… […]

Students did their best to maintain the communication despite technical problems or language barriers on one or both sides. Kötter (2003) has also pointed out that when students face communication problems they will try to overcome issues by repeating, rephrasing or exploring different ways to express themselves. Even when the information made no sense, students found other ways to maintain the conversation, so they changed the topic completely in order to avoid a breakdown in communication. That shows the need to communicate despite the difficulties encountered while speaking.

Example:
SA Me escucho el músico alemán e inglés y *¿Danish*?
M ¿Inglés? [The Mexican student did not understand the Word "Danish"]
SA Inglés, alemán y *¿Danish*? Es un pequeño lengua.
M Ok, porque… ¿en qué zona se habla?
SA ¿Qué?
M ¿En dónde se habla? [The student rephrases her sentence and speaks slowly].
SA *Speak it*? Sí, hablo *Danish*. Yeah…
M Ok. Ok. [The Mexican student seems to be confused with the answer, makes a pause and changes the subject] You read? You read in Spanish?

3.2 Confidence Enhancement

The eTandem interaction fostered a balanced relationship among speakers. Several students, especially those at the A2 level, were afraid to speak and to make mistakes, but the fact that their peers were also learning a language made them feel more comfortable and willing to engage in the conversation. During the pilot project some students also reported feeling intimidated when the instructor suddenly appeared in the virtual classroom to observe the interaction. During class, while discussing the eTandem dynamics and activities, some students mentioned that they would prefer to communicate with their peers without the instructors' intervention. Sometimes students do not feel free to speak or to give their opinions in front of the instructor due to the hierarchical relationship between them. Without the instructor, students felt more comfortable to speak and share opinions, perhaps due to a more neutral communication between language learners who are experiencing similar difficulties whilst learning a language.

Example:
M1 Ok. It is time to change to Spanish.
SA Ohhh… [Student panics]
M1 We are going to speak very slowly for you. Don't worry.
SA Ok. You can ask me questions, but no judgements, please.
M2 No, para nada.
M3 We have many problems in English too.
SA But your English, all of you guys, is very good and compared to my Spanish…
M1 No te preocupes.
M3 Es la manera de aprender. […]

3.3 Monitoring

Students displayed all sorts of strategies to monitor their peer's participation. Sometimes they did not say anything when they identified a mistake, sometimes they would repeat the correct word or rephrase the sentence in the correct way, and sometimes they explicitly pointed out the mistake the peer was making. Some students even made the effort to try to explain to their peer the type of mistake they were making, but obviously they lacked the sufficient metalanguage awareness and knowledge that only those who have been trained to teach possess. Students, however, were more interested in communicating and in avoiding the conversation to break down than in receiving a grammar explanation. They seemed to be aware that they were not language instructors, and thus they did not have the tools nor the pedagogic background to explain grammar concepts.

Example:

SA La música en general aquí es tipo… Nos tenemos… un… Nos tenemos un… ¿Nos propios?
M1 ¿Nos apropiamos?
M2 Oh, como… ¿su música propia?
SA Sí, sí, las músicas propias. ¿Propia o propias?
M2 Propias. […]
M1 Hay algún artista que podamos escuchar que nos recomiendes que sea de allá.
SA Sí, um… tenemos Sho Madjozi. Yo voy a escribir. Yo escribo. [The student uses the chat].
M2 Algo te quiero decir de tu español. Hablas bien. Puedes sobrevivir si vienes a México.
SA Yo perciebo… entiendo… Yo entiendo mucho, pero cuando yo hablo yo tengo muchos problemas.
M2 Pero solamente es práctica. Se entiende muy bien. A veces conjugar el tiempo, pero es normal. Me gusta como usaste los conectores. Solo una cosa, música es general, no tiene plural. […]
M3 Lo que necesitamos tanto en español como en inglés es más práctica. Y hablarlo mucho.
M2 Te comiendo que escuches música y Netflix. Hay muchos shows en español lentos.
SA Sí, yo veo… [the student enlists several TV series].
M2 Pero, ¿le pones subtítulos o sin subtítulos?
SA Ah, yo pongo subtítulos.
M2 Pero muy bien […] Si lo lees y lo escuchas vas asociando lo que escuchas a la gramática.

3.4 Feedback

More than half of the Mexican students have participated in other eTandem activities so they were used to the dynamics and to the feedback they needed to provide at the end of the activity. After the first sessions, South African students did not really know how to give feedback to their peers, but they learned very quickly and through the sessions, they were able to provide more insightful feedback for their Mexican peers. Students also showed high motivation and enthusiasm in receiving feedback from their peers. Again, it seems that they saw their peers as equals and although they sometimes were shy when they received feedback, they felt comfortable with it. The following example shows how the feedback provides some strategies, identifies areas of opportunity and also plays an important role in motivating a peer.

Example:

M Tienes muy buen acento en español.

SA Muchas gracias, yo he practicado en videos en Youtube. He tratado de imitar a los youtubers. Ustedes también hablan muy bien.

M1 Muchas gracias. ¿Cuál sería tu recomendación para que mejoráramos en nuestro aprendizaje de inglés?

SA Mmm… la pronunciación de algunas palabras. La pronunciación es clara. Todo lo que dices es muy claro para mí.

M1 OK. Gracias.

M2 ¿Para los dos?

SA Para ti, habla un poco más claro. Nada más. ¿Y tus recomendaciones por mi español? Sobre mi español.

M Tienes buena conjugación de verbos, de lo que escuché. Hablas claro, ocupas bien los pronombres. Este… me llama la atención que conozcas ya datos de la Ciudad de México, de México, de la universidad. Eh… tu acento no se escucha que fueras nativo de aquí, pero sí podrías pasar […] me suena a acento colombiano. ¿Tus maestros son españoles?

SA Aprendí de videos grabados por colombianos. Eso tiene sentido.

M Pues muy bien. Fíjate que veo que… escucho que te ha funcionado esa técnica de los videos. El que trates de imitar el acento hace que tu pronunciación sea muy clara […]. ¡Qué bueno que estás aprendiendo el idioma y que encontraste tu técnica adecuada de aprendizaje! Y síguele.

3.5 Cultural and Intercultural Awareness

Students had general topics to follow in Spanish and in English. The topics were selected to promote cultural and intercultural awareness among students, but students were also allowed to address other topics, especially when those topics were related to their own experience and interest. In terms of cultural aspects, students were very interested in knowing more about the history, festivities, food, and cultural aspects attached to the country (e.g. important musicians, singers, movies etc.). They also wanted to learn more about the places they can visit, museums, touristic places and nature.

Example:

SA […] Si tengo la oportunidad de ir a México, voy a ir a ese lugar. ¿A ustedes que les gustaría conocer sobre Sudáfrica?

M Ah, pues por mi parte, ¿qué lugares me recomendarías visitar y por qué?

SA Pues tengo que decir que la Ciudad de Port Elizabeth […] pues la gente es muy amable, muy cordial, la ciudad es bonita. Eh.. en mi opinión… eh… y pues la playa es muy tranquila, más tranquila que en otras ciudades, Cape Town y Durban. Ah, pues también la Ciudad de Johannesburgo porque… pues, es el centro económico del país y hay muchas cosas que hacer. Puedes visitar muchos museos, parques. También el Kruger National Park. Nuestros parques nacionales. […]

Students were also motivated and engaged in conversations in which they shared who they are and their view of the world through their own lens. They were also enthusiastic and keen on talking about the country and the way their own society perceives and reacts to specific issues that are tied to intercultural exchanges.

Example:

M […] We are taking about stereotypes here in Mexico, but what about there… in South Africa?

SA Am I supposed to speak in Spanish now?

M Yeah! Te escucho.

SA [Student chuckles].

M Sí, sí, relax. I listen.

SA [Student laughs] I'll try… I'll try… Ok. ¿Qué conoces o qué sabes de Sudáfrica?

M […] He escuchado principalmente cuestiones políticas. ¿Sabes? La historia del apartheid y cosas que tienen que ver con tensión. Eh… recientemente, bueno, por el 2010, a través del mundial de fútbol, como que el mundo pudo conocer un aspecto un

poco distinto de Sudáfrica, ¿no? Pero realmente creo que todo lo que tenemos presente es esa cuestión política, la lucha.

SA Mmm.. […] ¿Y… de las personas, en general?

M De las personas… p's nunca había tenido el placer de conocer una hasta estas sesiones de tándem. Yo diría, por lo que he conocido, que son bastantes agradables y comprensivas. Sobre todo porque escuchan y te ayudan.

[…]

SA Ok. Ah.. es interesante que pienses que [student chuckles] los sudafricanos son agreable [the student meant to say "agradables"] porque en general las personas… Eh… Pienso a Europa, por ejemplo, Ah… ellos piensen que los sudafricanos y todo el África, todo el resto de África… piensen que los sudafricanos son eh… ¿un poco violente? O que hay mucha violencia en Sudáfrica. Eh… que hay mucha violencia en general y que somos antipático porque no reciben las personas eh… ¿cómo dice? De manera simpática. Y que no nos gustan los extranjeros, que somos los africanos blancos y que… ya… en general es muy agresivo y hay mucha violencia en general. Es el estereotipo de Sudáfrica.

M […] Creo que sí, generalizar es algo que… impide que conozcas una cultura o un país.

3.6 Learning Strategies

Students also showed a high degree of awareness regarding the utility of sharing learning strategies with their classmates. All these strategies were empirical and largely reflect what worked for them whilst learning a foreign language. Some of the strategies the students shared were very broad, such as practicing and speaking more, but some of them were quite detailed. Students, for example, highlighted the benefit of listening to songs and Youtube videos to learn pronunciation and vocabulary. They sometimes added that by singing a song the learning process speeds up because of the effort required to try to copy what the singer says. Learning a language through movies and TV series was also a frequent strategy reported by students. Either with or without subtitles, they agreed that engaging in an activity such as watching a movie, listening to a song or reading a book increases the motivation and also helps to acquire the language in a more meaningful way. They also mentioned that by reading literature in the target language there is a substantial increase in the vocabulary and in the development of grammar and awareness of the sentence structure.

Example:

M Entonces, trabajamos en la pronunciación.

SA ¡Pronunciación!

M Pronunciación. En las estructuras de las oraciones y en el plural y singular para ti. ¿Te parece?
SA Sí.
M And for me?
SA For you. Um… You are actually really good, though. Um… Vocab.
M Vocabulario.
SA You are good. I can't think of anything you did wrong. You did pretty well.
M Maybe you can read a book in Spanish. Maybe let me think about that and send for you and then speak about that. I think. Do you agree?
SA Yes, I agree. And you just practise English. And… I have an idea. If you listen to an English movie or something, see what they say but try to sound exactly like them and you will get the English accent.
M Ok. Thank you!
M For me is a good experience this lesson because I don't have contact for another country in English because all my friends want to speak in Spanish and all the time speak in Spanish.
SA Mis amigos hablo alemán y inglés pero no español. So…
M It is the same case.

4 Discussion, Limitations and New Directions

The aim of the present study was to identify how telecollaboration fosters the development of language learning based on a student-centred approach. Learning a language, however, is not restricted to the acquisition of grammar rules, syntax and vocabulary, but it encompasses a set of skills and fields of knowledge that can only be developed in contact with people from other cultural backgrounds where the language is spoken. Thus, the ability to communicate in an additional language becomes more meaningful when students are able to interact with speakers of the target language. In developing countries, such as Mexico and South Africa, students often do not have the opportunity to travel abroad and engage in real life situations where the target language is spoken. In the case of South Africa, for instance, students would have to travel far distances to be able to interact with Spanish speakers. Therefore, sometimes the only input they receive comes from various reading and visual media that does not promote spontaneous interaction outside the classroom nor the exchange of life experiences, cultural background and points of view.

Unfortunately, when the language is only restricted to the classroom, the activities students perform become artificial and that is probably the reason why motivation and interest in learning a lan-

guage declines. When students share their personal life and experience as well as different cultural and intercultural perspectives, there is a better chance that interest and motivation in learning a foreign language increase. This occurs in a more natural setting because students are given the chance to bond with someone who lives in a place where the target language is spoken.

Based on the videos and the interaction between students, there were many positive examples that showed various ways in which this form of eTandem fosters a more student-centred approach towards learning an additional language. For example, it was clear that the role played by the peer represents a great source of confidence and support for language learners. In this case, the English proficiency level of Mexican students was higher than the Spanish proficiency level of South Africans. However, Mexican students showed themselves to be very patient and understanding about their peers' difficulty in trying to express themselves in Spanish. The interaction, mediation and moderation between students fostered a friendly and confident learning environment that allowed them to practice without worrying too much about making mistakes or about being 'observed' by the instructor. This resulted in an opportunity to improve students' communicative language skills without the need of the instructor. In a real situation, the interlocutor might not be as patient and willing to understand what the other person is trying to say, so these activities certainly increased the level of confidence and students willingness to engage in a communicative activity.

The eTandem activities proved useful in promoting cultural exchange and intercultural awareness. Mexican and South African students were keen on learning about their peers' countries, culture, society and mindset. This motivation went beyond having a better understanding of the culture, the idiosyncrasy, or general facts about the country. Students showed a genuine motivation to get to know their peers, which was perhaps why they often digressed from the topic to talk about themselves and what they like. This is important in learning a language, because it enhances the students' communicative skills and also provides them with a valuable opportunity to know more about the cultural and intercultural differences.

Finally, recording the eTandem session allowed the two language instructors in South Africa to work with students one-to-one but also to address grammar and syntactic issues with the whole class. Students also mentioned during class that despite possible technical difficulties, this form of eTandem was a valuable opportunity to learn the language, but also to use the language as means for understanding a different culture.

4.1 Limitations

There are two salient limitations that are worth mentioning. The first one has to do with the time difference. Due to the seven-hour difference between South Africa and Mexico, the activity was conducted early in the morning for Mexican students, but late in the afternoon for South African students. Whereas Mexican students worked in a media lab with all the technological resources available there (i.e., IT support, computers, internet and headsets), South African students had to deal with systematic load shedding problems that are currently affecting the country, lack of Internet or a computer at home to work with. It was also more difficult for South Africans to be available at 6 o'clock in the evening because of other personal commitments.

The other issue that arose was related to the nature of the activity. This was an optional activity offered to all students because this sort of blended learning is not part of the curriculum and therefore it was not considered as part of the teaching-learning-assessment process. Unfortunately, students tend to be busy throughout the semester and they tend to focus more on mandatory activities that have an impact on their final class marks and their overall grade point average. This is why this blended learning option should be promoted and incorporated in the curriculum and in the syllabus at the university level (O'Dowd 2013). There is a clear need for more participation of those involved in the curriculum design, but also from those in the position to make decisions across language departments to incorporate this learning modality in the teaching-learning-assessment process. Eventually, although students overtly acknowledged the benefits of this type of learning, the only way to guarantee their full participation and commitment would be to include eTandem as part of the mandatory activities they have to perform during class.

4.2 New Directions

Future studies in this form of telecollaboration should include interviews with students or focus group sessions in which students share all the benefits they gain through this learning modality. It would also be important to investigate how other forms of communication such as nonverbal communication (i.e. gestures, eye contact, body movement and facial expressions) influence the development of the verbal communication in a positive or negative manner. The benefit of eTandem is that it allows for the use of video to compensate flaws in the communication versus regular phone calls or other written means of communication (e.g. emails, chats and blogs).

5 Conclusions

eTandem and other means of virtual learning incorporated in the language classroom represent meaningful and enriching experiences for learning a language without being physically present in a place where the target language is spoken. In developing countries students struggle even more to travel abroad, and an e-learning activity may represent the first contact with a foreigner. Learning a language does not mean to formally learn the structure in a vacuum, but rather to understand that it is embedded in the culture where it is spoken. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most institutions were reluctant and doubtful about including blended language learning programmes in the curriculum. However, after the quick transition from face-to-face interaction to virtual classes, the approach towards various forms of telecollaboration is bound to change drastically in the coming years. Thus, higher education institutions will be more proactive in incorporating blended learning courses in the curriculum and as part of the teaching-learning-assessment process.

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E-Portfolios as Formative Assessment

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Abstract This chapter proposes the use of digital portfolios, an innovative formative assessment practice, in the area of the humanities. An initial discussion on the importance of formative assessment practices that integrate digital tools is followed by a detailed description of the methodological principles of portfolios and how to design them, and how to integrate the digital component in its design. We conclude that assessment as reading, as opposed to the traditional summative assessment of reading, is a promising area of innovation in the pedagogy of the Humanities.

Keywords E-learning. Formative assessment. E-portfolios. Digital portfolios. Humanities.

1 Aim. Context. Rationale

This chapter is a theoretical reflection on the importance of introducing formative assessment practices in the present-day humanities classroom.

In an era when increasingly large classes have become the norm, there has been a strong pull towards final summative assessments that were standard-

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ised and could be quickly graded. This has reinforced the traditional tendency to grade, in the humanities, with a final summative essay.

We argue for interventions aimed at balancing this tendency in the specific context of Language Learning and in the Literature classroom, by incorporating insights from assessment of language acquisition, specifically reading comprehension and written production. Our proposal is based on innovative practices introduced in our own classroom, specifically the implementation of ePortfolios to create effective and meaningful Formative Assessment practices.

It is important to mention that the disciplines of Language Learning and Literature tend to go together in majors across the Anglophone world.[1] We want to highlight that the topic of assessment in language learning and literary studies continues to be contested, although it seems to involve some or all of the so-called *Four Skills* – in the case of language learning – and those reading and writing skills specifically required for literary studies. What is meant by a proficient command of literary analysis remains a locus of debate and, in this sense, Adsit (2017, 2018) suggests connecting creative writing and literary studies. The latter places special emphasis on the writing process, including literary knowledge *per se*, creative or aesthetic sensibilities and the context from which the text emerges. The defining concepts for assessing literature are by no means clear and unanimous. However, it is common to consider *reading* as a specific skill that is fostered in the literature classroom.

In the case of language learning, although there has been a major shift towards integrated tasks (Cumming 2014), proficiency is often assessed in an atomised fashion (i.e. separate assessments of listening, reading, writing and speaking) and, mostly, for summative purposes. We argue that portfolios constitute an effective measure of integrated skills (the ability to read and write, in the case of literature, and the ability to read and listen for writing and speaking), and provide meaningful gauge of students progress.

Insofar as literature teaching is concerned, Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall note that many lecturers "teach students without having much formal knowledge of how students learn […] nor do they necessarily have the concepts to understand, explain and articulate the process" (2008, 8). The same can be said about assessment, which often replicates conventional practices based on long essays (in literature) or multiple-choice tests (in language) at the end of the semester.

Firstly, we would suggest that there exists a lack of understanding among lecturers of the impact that assessment practices have on the

1 This is no different at the University of the Witwatersrand, where the e-Portfolios that form the basis of this analysis were implemented as formative assessment, within the framework of Spanish Studies.

student approaches to learning, namely in terms of the concepts of the surface approach or the deep approach (cf. Biggs 1988). Secondly, teacher's beliefs and misconceptions regarding the use of digital media for assessment hinder them from the likelihood of implementing a more comprehensive assessment programe through ePortfolios. We would argue, however, that the incorporation of ePortfolios promotes deep learning and good formative assessment practice.

In this chapter, we explore the advantages of the use of ePortfolios in assessment, particularly for the context of developing countries, where the effective use and command of technology might be a challenge for both scholars and students. In our view, this mode of assessment can be appropriately implemented without advanced technical mastery.

2 Formative Assessment

Formative assessment is an overarching concept that encompasses the design of meaningful and intrinsically motivating tasks, the monitoring of students and the feedback that they receive (from the instructor, peers or through self-assessment) and the setting of future goals based on individual performance (Bennett 2011). According to Sadler (1998), one of the benefits of formative assessment is to accelerate the learning process. Luckett and Sutherland (2000) argue that formative assessment is intrinsically motivating, and its purpose is to fulfil the needs of students and instructors by providing feedback of student progress. By contrast, they also contend that summative assessment is extrinsically motivated because its goal is to serve stakeholders that are not directly involved in the teaching-learning process arguing that summative assessment tend to be "used to provide judgement on students' achievements" (2000, 101).

It is generally assumed that, owing to this intrinsic motivation character, formative assessment practices are better than summative assessment practices (Van Gorp, Deygers 2014). However, current research is unclear, as Bennett (2011) points out, due to the wide variety of implementations and the lack of a proper conceptualisation of formative assessment practices (Fulcher 2010). This chapter contributes to this clarification by dissecting the intertwined relationship between tasks, feedback and goal setting.

Crucially, we do not consider summative and formative assessment as competing practices, but rather as complementary. As Knight (2002) has rightly pointed out, the dichotomy of summative and formative assessment is not satisfactory, resulting in a polarised and extremist approach (443). Following Rea-Dickins and Poehner (2011), we argue that the balance between the two should be struck with formative practices, providing quality feedback and opportunities to engage, and sum-

mative assessment, capping the learning process. We are guided, in this sense, by Biggs' idea of constructive alignment or "aligned systems of instruction" (Biggs 1999, 64), which establish intended outcomes and align these with classroom teaching activities and the assessment practices. In other words, as teachers, we must always bear in mind that student performance and their own Zone of Proximal Development (Holzman 2009) is more important in establishing goals than the actions taken by instructors without any reference to student progress (Biggs 1987; Poehner 2014; Poehner, Lantolf 2010).

In this regard, portfolios are a useful way for monitoring and assessing progress as well as setting goals, and they constitute a useful means of embedding formative assessment into language and literature learning.

3 Defining Portfolios

3.1 Present Definitions of Portfolio

Portfolios are not something new (cf. Barton, Collins 1997; Farr, Tone 1994). In Fine Arts, they have been widely used since the 1990s (Moya, O'Malley 1994), and one of the most comprehensive definitions states that:

> a portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas. The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student self-reflection. (Paulson, Paulson, Meyer 1991, 60)

However, Paulson, Paulson and Meyer continue, the nature of the portfolio changes when it is used for assessment purposes:

> a portfolio used for educational assessment must offer more than a showcase for student products; it must be the product of a complete assessment procedure that has been systematically planned, implemented, and evaluated. (60)

3.2 Portfolios in the Language Classroom

The use of portfolios as a means of Formative Assessment strengthens the relationship between teaching, learning and assessment because it provides the instructor with insightful information about the students' development over time (Biggs, Tang 2010; Herman, Winters

1994; Yin 2014). This information is not only useful for assessing but also for informing the direction of future instruction. Assembling a portfolio and collecting relevant pieces of work also requires cognitive effort and the use of learning strategies to assess what is worth including and what is not (Yu 2014). In doing so, the student develops autonomy and self-assessment strategies. However, the task of selecting what to include in the portfolio does not depend only on the student but can be done in collaboration with other classmates and with the reflection and feedback of the instructor.

One of the key difficulties in implementing portfolios is the development of clear criteria for grading. The instructor must be able to pinpoint the different attributes that are important to consider during the assessment, making them tangible, clear and objective (Karpov, Tzuriel 2009). As we will see now, we believe that the literature classroom can benefit from the advancements made in the field of second language learning.

In this sense, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CERF) provides an interesting guide to scaffolding the teaching-learning process while acquiring a modern European language (Council of Europe 2001). The CEFR consists of six levels of proficiency (A1 to C2) that have been grouped into three broad levels: Basic User, Independent User and Proficient User. Although this document was not originally designed to guide assessment processes, it has had a great impact on this matter (Jones, Saville 2009). Since its publication in 2001, the European Council has incorporated a range of documents (e.g. rating scales and self-assessment grids) that are useful for those instructors and institutions that wish to develop their own criteria for assessing language by other alternative formative methods, such as portfolios.

In the field of language learning, portfolios are particularly useful in assessing productive skills (i.e. speaking and writing) although the steady growth of integrated tasks (reading or listening for writing or speaking) has also allowed for more authentic manifestations of oral or written discourse that can be assessed using portfolios (Cumming 2014; Pierce, O'Malley 1992).

It is important to remember that the criteria given to students to self-assess their work must be as clear as possible and this is only feasible when they are linked to a specific task. Let us briefly examine the descriptors offered by the CERF for written production, reports and essays, level C1:

> Can write clear, well-structured expositions of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues. Can expand and support points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples. (Council of Europe 2001, 62)

The descriptor is useful but too broad. It requires further division into many more understandable descriptors in order to effectively involve students in the assessment process via a portfolio. In the case of reading portfolios, the situation is the same: marking criteria must go hand in hand with the specific task given to the student (Van den Branden 2006). This implies that a general descriptor needs to be detailed according to a specific task or assignment.

Furthermore, we must also keep in mind the lesson from second language learning in relation to authentic assessment. The increasing awareness of the importance of these forms of assessment in that field must serve as a guideline for the implementation of reading portfolios: integrated tasks, with student involvement, can result into more meaningful opportunities for authentic learning which incorporate a social and contextual dimension (McNamara, Rover 2006).

In this regard, Moya and O'Malley (1994, 14-15) provide a set of 5 characteristics that apply to English as Second Language, but which can be easily adapted to the literature classroom. These are: *comprehensive* (the depth and breadth already mentioned), *systematic* ("planned prior to implementation"), *informative* (i.e. meaningful, with adequate feedback), *tailored* and *authentic*.

3.3 The Benefit of Portfolios

There are multiple benefits to using portfolios in the classroom. Firstly, student participation and engagement speaks to the issue of agency: formative assessment should consider the role of student participation in the co-construction of the curriculum (Yorke 2006). Offering choices can bridge the gap between the student-experienced curriculum and the intended curriculum. As Hume and Coll (2010) explain, there is often a "mismatch" between the two, and a portfolio can provide a connection. It is important to note that student agency should not be limited to selecting materials and forms of engagement. As Blake Yancey (2004) explains, portfolios should also invite students to theorise about their own reading practices, not just about the content of the texts selected in the syllabus.

Secondly, the criteria for judging merit implies that students should also participate in the assessment process itself. Rubrics can be co-created with students in order to incorporate their own points of view on the way material is going to be graded. In this way, lecturers can verify that students find the assessment criteria fair and valid. This is particularly important if we consider multiple modalities of engaging with the text, as we suggest in this chapter. If we are going to allow students to respond to a literary text by creating a podcast, the question is: "how are we going to grade the podcast?". If the student is not consulted, the mismatch between student perception and

teacher perception is reproduced: the student might feel that s/he has done a great job, but the grades do not reflect this.

Thirdly, self-reflection practices should be included in the portfolio. Finding adequate criteria to assess reflective practices is challenging and raises questions of the reliability of portfolios. It is essential to understand portfolios as part of the classroom in which they are implemented. As Tierney highlights, there is a certain "spirit of the Portfolio Classroom", one that is characterised by students' sense of ownership, "assessment that is responsive to what students are doing and that represents the range of things they are involved in" (1991, 4).

3.4 General Principles for Portfolio Design

We suggest that there are certain general principles that should guide the design of reading portfolios. These include:

a. Student agency
   Students should have an opportunity to decide which texts they are going to study and how they are going to respond to them. In this sense, the idea of curriculum as merely a selection of texts must be rejected to allow students to engage critically.

b. Modelling and clarity
   If we are going to move away from summative assessment to formative assessment, it is essential that we explain to the students what exactly is expected from them. This implies, at least, the development of rubrics that are specific to the tasks and the use of exemplars. This fosters innovation and collaboration because students are directly involved in the whole process of evaluation, instead of being mere recipients or passive users.

c. Use of multiple intelligences
   Summative assessment should not be based on one single skill: writing complex arguments in prose. Other forms of engaging with the text should be conceived. In this sense, we should update the notion of *reading* to include multiple intelligences (Gadner 1983), and implement portfolios that address multiple modalities.

This is a controversial point because (a) there is a strong tendency in Literary Studies to privilege the written word over the visual, the auditory or others; and (b) because, although there are indeed different learning styles, current research is not univocal on the benefits of implementing different learning strategies depending on the learning styles (Biggs 2001; Massa, Mayer 2006). However, we believe that the general point about portfolios being multimodal is still

valid. As Pierce and O'Malley remark: "the purpose of portfolio contents is to expand understanding of a student's growth based on multiple measures" (1992, 3). These multiple measures, from our perspective, should be connected to multiple modalities of engaging with the literary texts, to *read* them in multiple ways.

d. Systematic feedback
   There should be a feedback loop structure that allows for effective re-writing of the pieces. The student should be at the centre of the feedback process, with the ultimate goal of equipping "students to learn prospectively" (Hounsell 2007). Boud and Molloy (2013) remark that good feedback practice acknowledges the active role of learners. They identify four characteristics of sustainable feedback:

1. Involving students in dialogues about learning, which raise their awareness of quality performance;
2. Facilitating feedback processes through which students are stimulated to develop capacities in monitoring and evaluating their own learning;
3. Enhancing student capacities for ongoing lifelong learning by supporting student development of skills for goal setting and planning their learning;
4. Designing assessment tasks to facilitate student engagement over time in which feedback from varied sources is generated, processed and used to enhance performance on multiple stages of assignments. (703)

Portfolios should be designed to match these criteria to promote a formative development with a strong emphasis on dialogical experiences of working and reworking the material. Students learn how to plan their portfolio and evaluate and monitor their own learning over the course of a semester. They also learn to engage with different forms of feedback coming from peers and the instructor.

e. Self-reflection
   Ultimately, portfolios are instruments that should serve to verify whether the student has achieved a certain level, and also to allow him/her to understand how this happened. In past decades "portfolios were seen mostly as records of achievement or evidence of attainment of specific outcomes, and seldom as reflective learning experiences. The content of portfolios was often dominated by input by 'others' in control, rather than those who 'owned' the portfolio" (Woodward 2000, 330). However, only when the student is at the centre of the portfolio it can achieve the formative character that we aim for.

This, in turn, requires a certain degree of self-reflection from the student that should be embedded in the portfolio. Woodward (1998) also argues in favour of reflective journals alongside portfolios, because this fosters a better tracking of the student's growth. In the case of Literary Studies and reading portfolios, for example, students should have the opportunity to reflect upon their own work and upon their own understanding of texts and literary periods, as the course moves forward.

How would these 5 core principles be applied in different classrooms is a matter that must remain open. It should, however, establish a community of practice (Wegner 2011). This idea of "community" has also been suggested by Lam (2018), who calls for a "collegial portfolio culture which supports teaching and learning of writing" (109).

In summary, we believe that the most relevant benefits of portfolios are:

- Increase of metacognitive skills by including in the drafting organisational and research activities, which also translates into self-reflection and self-assessment.
- Fostering of critical thinking and time to investigate.
- Improvement of written expression, linguistic accuracy and the ability to generate ideas.
- Better planning strategies and editing skills.
- Development of autonomy whilst reflecting, analysing and selecting the best pieces of work.
- Identification of strengths and weaknesses.
- Increased interaction and feedback between students and instructor due to the constructivist nature associated with portfolios for assessing.
- Assessment for learning, meaning that the assessment becomes part of the teaching and learning process.

4 Integrating e-Learning. Reading e-Portfolios

We cannot present a complete picture of the role of portfolios without taking into consideration the changes that are taking place in the classroom in the digital age, especially nowadays, with the growing need of shifting face-to-face courses to either online or blended modes. As Merriam and Bierema point out: "our ability to access information has facilitated learning in a way that is particularly meaningful to adults: it is just-in-time, relevant, and self-directed" (2013, 191).

E-learning takes on multiple forms, from auto-instructional to instructor-led experiences. Deivam and Devaki remark that this can include many formats:

> text, image, graphic, animation, video and audio, or streaming video. E-learning provides very rich learning experiences and is be-

> yond comparison with conventional setting of education and is a very effective medium in the teaching-learning process. (2016, 12)

However, the focus is often placed on the production of didactic materials, without a parallel reflection on the assessment process. Yet, it is important to consider that, if the learning process has changed due to the presence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), assessment practices cannot remain the same. It makes sense, therefore, to expand our horizons with other meaningful ways of assessment, such as digital portfolios.

According to Lorenzo and Itterton

> an e-Portfolio is a collection of artefacts, including demonstrations, resources and accomplishments of an individual, group, community, organisation, or institution. This collection can be comprised of text-based, graphic, or multimedia elements. (2005, 2)

e-Portfolios have several advantages, connected to what has been explained before. Fundamentally, they expand the range of the multiple modalities of engagement with the literary text that normal portfolios already have. This, in turn, expands the concept of *reading* way beyond traditionally reading practices, a fact that may be a challenge for lecturers, but likely a motivation for younger students. A non-exhaustive list of digital reading practices could be this: a podcast; an Instagram post and/or an Instagram story; a storyboard; a conceptual map; a spin-off; and any other format that can be negotiated.

As remarked by Barret, for an e-Portfolio to become a truly formative practice, as we advocate, it is essential that the focus is on the learner: "to be effectively used to support assessment *for* learning, electronic portfolios need to support the learner's ongoing learning" (2004, 443).

5 Our Proposal for e-Portfolios. Assessment of/as Reading

Due to the extensive use portfolios could have in language learning and literature, in what follows we will set out an example of how formative assessment could be implemented in Literary Studies for assessing reading.

Reading should include much more than writing a commentary on a text. In other words, literature scholars should widen the scope of what can be done in their classroom and what can be considered 'reading', to include other forms of engagement with literary text. These forms should encompass other forms of expression besides the written word and should take into consideration the use of technology. In this sense, the creation of a podcast, a conceptual map or an Instagram story are potential candidates for an e-Portfolio.

From our point of view, the first defining attribute of the contemporary reading portfolio is this: reading should be about *doing something with the text*. Doing something with the text means that the student is encouraged to go beyond simple commentary or the text analysis. Reading portfolios should be designed to unleash the creativity of students in potentially unforeseen ways. The teacher should be ready to accommodate this, to adapt to it, to accompany the student in his/her journey with the texts.

There is a key reason for this creative element of reading portfolios: creativity is the highest form of production across disciplines. In the most recent version of Bloom's taxonomy, it is placed at the top of the educational objectives (cf. e.g. Krathwohl, Anderson 2009), whereas in the Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome (SOLO) taxonomy proposed by Biggs and Collis (1982), the level of "extended abstract" is associated with creating new ideas or engaging with material in an original, new (creative) way.

In our view, this is one of the strengths of portfolios over other methods of assessment: they truly integrate creativity as a core principle. The use of online platforms also allows the integration of multiple media formats that the student can use to engage with the text in different ways. This also allows students to engage in a practical and effective way with multiple intelligences and multimodalities. In terms of literary texts, a portfolio allows students to move beyond the vertical exegesis of the text, based on interpretation of meaning, into a rhizomatic openness to the text that provides an *interaction with multiple meanings*.

This takes us to the second defining attribute of a reading portfolio: it is not a final piece but rather a work-in-progress. It shows accomplishment in a fluid way, and it incorporates the student's reflection about this process. This requires a sustainable feedback system that separates "comments from grades because grades distract from engaging with feedback" (Boud, Falchikov 2007, 408). Portfolios can be resubmitted (particularly favourable in the case of e-Portfolios) and graded at the end, an assessment strategy that acknowledges the non-linear nature of developing understanding about literature.

The first objection to this assessment practice is the issue of large classes. Many lecturers claim that portfolios cannot be implemented in such conditions. However, e-Portfolios are also akin to other means of assessment (i.e. self and peer-assessment and reflection on progress; cf. LeMahieu, Gitomer, Eresh 1995). With the use of technology, a portfolio can be easily stored and accessed by different peers for reviewing and feedback, so students can be paired up with different classmates, and provide insightful feedback without the need of printing and photocopying material. In fact, e-Portfolios easily allow the use of writing in larger classes. We echo Hornsby, Osman and De Matos-Ala (2013) who consider intensive writing courses

> an inclusive pedagogy that promotes the practice of writing as learning and thinking within disciplines. Rather than viewing writing as simply a tool for recording and testing, it employs writing to learn techniques; writing for real communication; writing for different audiences and for different purposes; and *writing as revising, so as to think further*. (97; emphasis added)

In summary, reading portfolios could be implemented in the following way:

a. Text selection
   The lecturer provides a series of (open) tasks to students that are aligned with the content of the curriculum of the course. Reading and formative assessment practices must be constructively aligned, which necessarily implies clarity of the intended learning outcomes.

b. Agency
   Students should have the opportunity to negotiate the task, they should be allowed to engage with the texts using multimodalities, and they should also participate in the design of the rubric for the assessment of their performance.

c. Submission and feedback structure
   Tasks are submitted (online, preferably, to promote ICTs) but are not graded in the first submission. The lecturer provides constructive feedback upon this submission and then gives a reasonable amount of time for the student to resubmit.

d. Grading
   There is an explicit criterion in the marking rubric (with a % of the marks) allocated to how well the student has engaged with the feedback (i.e. a poorly written first version may still earn 70% if the student engages appropriately with the feedback provided).

We believe that this model can help to effectively assess the student's capacity to read literary texts critically with sustainable formative assessment practices that can promote motivation and engagement by using multiple modalities.

6 Shortcomings of e-Portfolios

e-Portfolios require a great deal of organisation on the part of the instructor. Students and instructors need institutional support for implementing new assessment methods as well as user friendly online platforms. Following Stefani, Mason, Pegler (2007), the implementation of ePortfolios requires full commitment at all levels if we want to benefit in the classroom.

There are other potential drawbacks in deciding to implement portfolios as a means of assessment in the classroom, but they will depend largely on instructor beliefs and conceptions of the intertwined relationship between teaching, learning and assessment. The first limitation is the teaching perspective. A student-centred approach facilitates the development of autonomy in the classroom and the detachment of the instructor as the only authority involved in the assessment process (Carless 2015). An instructor who believes in learning autonomy will give high priority to the reflective potential of assessment through a portfolio. Student's beliefs, however, must also be in alignment with this type of assessment. Depending on the students' background, some might be more prone to underestimate their capacity to effectively assess the quality of their own work or they might find it more difficult to provide feedback to a classmate because they might question their authority to do so.

The second limitation refers to the lack of tools available to assess a portfolio. Detractors quite often argue that the assessment becomes a subjective process that jeopardises summative assessments at the end of a course. It is true that without proper guidelines, students may find it quite challenging to identify the different attributes and characteristics that demonstrate the quality of a piece of work. Therefore, it is important to develop checklists and rating scales that guide students to identify the criteria that instructors also observe while assessing a piece of work. Instructors will have to invest a considerable amount of time in developing the tasks and in collecting or designing all the assessment instruments students will be required to use to evaluate the quality of the work. In addition, the instructor must explicitly teach the students how to use the checklists or rating scales and what each attribute means and how they can identify its quality in their own work. This is the reason why the implementation of portfolios cannot be left to instructors alone; in fact, the institution and stakeholders, namely heads of department and heads of schools, should promote their implementation in the classroom as part of the teaching-learning-assessment process. Hence, the effectiveness of portfolios will depend on how they are perceived by the institution, how they are implemented by the instructors and other stakeholders, and how instructors train students to work with them. It is important to highlight that most online learning platforms used

by institutions, and even some commercial apps, facilitate the creation of portfolios and the storage of multiple types of resources (i.e. written, audio and video) which can be easily used as part of the formative assessment.

Another potential shortcoming is the access of students to digital platforms. Not all students, particularly in developing contexts such as South Africa, have access to digital platforms[2] either because they live in rural areas, or they do not have a computer or Internet at home even in the city. We also observed that not all students nor scholars possessed the same literacy in relation to technology and, if they were going to be graded on the basis of their digital production, this resulted in situations of discrimination and exclusion. Thus, when we use ePortfolios we must ensure that we are also providing access and training to these practices and that we are not falling into the pitfalls of "the decontextualised learner" (Boughey, McKenna 2016).

Finally, we must consider the issue of large classes. For such contexts, a self and peer assessment might be a more logical approach. The quality and quantity of the feedback is by no means restricted to the lecturer (Hornsby, Osman, De Matos-Ala 2013). Even if our final mark is given by means of a final summative task, that does not necessarily imply that students cannot have reflected upon their own performance and learned from what their classmates did via quality feedback from peers. Some suggestions to overcome the difficulties of implementing portfolios would be:

- Providing training through reading portfolio evaluation.
- Using exemplars, available on the online platform of the course, so students can compare their work against a model.
- Feedback from peers and peer-evaluation.

7 Conclusion

Changing the content of the curriculum in the teaching and learning of languages was a difficult endeavour in the last 20-30 years, arguably and mostly because of the focus on Postcolonial studies and other Area Studies. However, the growing and sometimes abrupt necessity to accommodate most or all university courses online[3] will likely result in an unforeseen proliferation of assessment methods, such as the implementation of ePortfolios. The assessment practices described in this chapter are part of a larger project aimed at revising the way Literature is taught in Higher Education, one that moves

2 Something that has been brought into relief by the 2020 lockdown.

3 For reasons such as global emergencies of the likes of the 2020 pandemic.

away from vertical conceptions of curriculum dictated by institutions. The objective is to foster a more comprehensive and inclusive horizontal and rhizomatic way of teaching that engages students' agency and participation. We believe that this swift in epistemological approach leads to a (more) meaningful production and transformation of knowledge.

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Virtual Exchanges and Gender-Inclusive Toponymy
An Intercultural Citizenship Project to Foster Equality

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Abstract This paper focuses on a virtual exchange project between the University of Virginia, United States, and an upper-secondary school in Pavia, Italy. Centred on the question of gender equality, the project has been designed to take place over three years (2018-21), and with direct reference to the transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education proposed in 2019 by Robert O'Dowd. As an integrated part of the language learning curriculum, the project creates a virtual space which parallels the space-time of traditional class tuition, and which students can inhabit with a significant degree of autonomy. The project aims to foster gender equality and help students to reflect on the sociocultural evolution of the language and how it can be used to address issues of identity, diversity and inclusion.

Keywords Virtual exchange. Intercultural competence. Intercultural citizenship. Global citizenship. Active citizenship. Gender equality.

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1 Research Activities in the Background

As reinforced in and outside university settings by educators and scholars in foreign language pedagogy, teaching and learning a world language has little to do with technical skills;[1] on the contrary it is a sophisticated art form; researching the way a targeted language evolves and how its evolution influences the sociocultural context and vice versa is an essential step to pass students the appropriate tools to master it. It is crucial to discuss these changes in the classroom, not only to be innovative in the field of foreign language acquisition but also to transmit to students messages of gender equality and social justice that these linguistic variations often bring with them. In other words, language classes give educators the opportunity not only to teach vocabulary, grammar and syntax and engage in everyday conversation but above all to debate with their students on present-day issues in an international setting and help them to become global and active citizens in different areas. The acquisition and implementation of skills of "active citizenship" can be fostered in language classes through "intercultural citizenship" education, introduced by Michael Byram (2008; 2011) and developed, among others, by Robert O'Dowd (2019). Intercultural citizenship is not a matter of teaching and learning in classroom only, it needs to be linked with activity in the world; in language education this approach shows a concern with the social significance of language and its potential with a political/citizenship dimension. As Michel Foucault reminds us, "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and make it possible to thwart" (1978, 100-1); language educators can make a difference and students in these courses can apply what they have learnt to everyday life and other subjects, thus growing as language learners and human beings.

As Francesca Calamita (2018) points out in a recent article on the evolution of Italian language and gender and second language acquisition, in the 1980s and 1990s almost all teachers at schools in Italy were used to say "Buongiorno ragazzi" while greetings their students, employing the masculine form which has been referred for long time as "maschile universale";[2] today if a teacher wants to pass a message of gender equality while stepping into the classroom, they[3] would say "Buongiorno ragazze e ragazzi"; "ragazze" should also come first, thus

1 Linking foreign language acquisition and technical skills harms the discipline itself and contributes to devalue PhDs and MAs in the area of language studies.

2 "Maschile universale" refers to masculine nouns and pronouns often used with a generic function, in other words to refer to both women and men.

3 We are using the pronoun "they" to refer to all gender identities.

helping female students to realise that they can be ahead literally and metaphorically of their male counterparts in their future life and career. However, not all teachers are keen about passing such messages of equality for a variety of reasons and they often use the masculine form to refer to a group of students made up of women and men.[4] Some teachers might also argue that they simply apply the traditional grammar rule according to which the masculine form is used to address a group of people where at least one man is present. Furthermore, the issues of pronouns for the LGBTQ community in romance languages still requires much attention also from scholars who actively work towards linguistic gender equality. Moreover, textbooks to teach and learn Italian often give more visibility to male protagonists of history, literature, cinema and arts (almost all – if not all – textbooks to learn Italian mention Dante but how many textbooks give visibility at least to one canonical woman writer, such as Dacia Maraini or Elsa Morante?). The most conservative ones give instructions to complete exercises addressing students as if they are all males, employing "maschile universale". How do female students feel about it while studying Italian? Is this linguistic and content unbalance one of the reasons for having less enrolments in Italian language classes at university level in comparison with the past? Has the university population changed from the typical wealthy white boy to a diverse and inclusive community who prefers to study subjects from their perspectives (not all males-related, not all white-related, not all heterosexual-related points of view)? Why are teachers not yet trained to pay attention to issues of inclusion and diversity, including language-related debates on linguistic equality? Why have publishing houses not been questioning the content of language textbooks? Why do we maintain this *status quo*? While reflecting on these questions, we should consider that Melissa Bocci in a 2013 article on foreign language acquisition and community-base language learning suggests that "by privileging whiteness, white normativity in service learning can lead to assimilative, discriminatory, and/or exclusionary practices that reinforce oppressive socioeconomic power dynamics" (Bocci 2013, 8). Language in the classroom is not just about words, but about political and cultural messages that have the power to shape students' future choices in terms of life and career; as educators is part of our job to help students to think critically about the world.

As Michela Menegatti and Monica Rubini suggest in a recent publication:

4 The formulas "carissimi", "gentili professori" and "egregi professori" in emails and other written communication is often used rather than alternative and inclusive options such as "Cari/e tutti/e", "Carissimi/e" or "Car* tutt*". Recently we received a message from a study abroad programme in Italy addressing us as "Gentilissimi Professori".

> [v]erbal communication is one of the most powerful means through which sexism and gender discrimination are perpetrated and reproduced […]. The use of expressions consistent with gender stereotypes contributes to transmit and reinforce such belief system and can produce actual discrimination against women. (2017)

Sexism in languages has been addressed by feminist scholars since the late 1960s; in a recent collection of articles on the gendered politics of language, Deborah Cameron (2006), one of the leading voices in the field, suggests that gender and linguistics came together as a university discipline in the 1980s and is currently a major field of research, particularly in Anglophone contexts. Sexism refers to the discriminatory way of representing women with respect to men through the language, and it is evident that sexism is inherent in the Italian language, and other romance languages such as French, Spanish and Portuguese;[5] despite having been less visible, English can be a sexist language and recent changes have also been introduced to make it more inclusive; we are referring, for example, to the use of the pronoun "they" and the word "person" rather than "woman" or "man", such as in "chairperson" or simply "chair", rather than "chairman" and "chairwoman".[6] As teachers committed to pass messages of gender equality to our students, we often find challenges on our paths due not only to the traditional grammar norms that shape the Italian language, but, as already mentioned at the beginning of the article, also to the resistance shown by some educators at university and high school level who are not given the required importance to this issue.[7] Since the publication of Alma Sabatini's *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana* (1987), linguistic gender equality has been progressively promoted and sometimes achieved in and outside the Italian academic context, at least in theory while in practice a lot of obsta-

5 In Spanish, for example, the @ symbol is widely used in plural nouns referring to a group of people, such as "amig@s" (friends). This is a great solution in written form, yet it might be challenging to pronounce it, as for the case of the Italian use of the asterisk: "car* tutt*" (dear all). Therefore, the practice of addressing people with both feminine and masculine forms is the most common: "queridas amigas y queridos amigos" (dear friends). Similarly in French, also the use of parentheses or the middle dot has been implemented: représentés (m.), représentées (f.), représenté·e·s (inclusive), yet using both masculine and feminine forms, such as "toutes et tous", is the most used formula.

6 In the 1990s "chairwoman" was not in vogue. "Chairman" was the most used word since positions of power were still often occupied by men.

7 If students of a target language attend classes with a teacher who would like to promote linguistic gender equality and in the future they will take a course with an instructor who is not willing to question traditional grammar rules, they might feel very confused. Departments should address this issue and collegially work together to promote diversity and inclusion.

cles still need to be overcome.[8] Sabatini illustrates the role language plays in the social contexts and calls for a "non-sexist" use of language, a language that neither privileges men nor perpetuates a series of prejudices against women. If sexist language is at the base of the iceberg to illustrate gendered violence, rethinking its sexist connotation is the first step not only to achieve linguistic gender equality but to contribute to reduce violence against women and the growing number of femicides which are reaching record numbers.[9] The recent publications by Cecilia Robustelli and her engagement with a group of journalists (G.I.U.L.I.A.) has done much for the cause, however many newspapers and TV programmes on major Italian channels are still very adamant about linguistic equality. On social media feminist collectives, such as "Non una di meno" and "Abbatto muri", and well-known activists and writers, such as Michela Murgia, Michela Marzano and Lorella Zanardo, are constantly passing messages of equality, yet Italian society seems reluctant to progress, particularly through the use of professions in the feminine form, such as "architetta" or "medica" and more generally inclusive language.

How could we help our students to question and fight gender stereotypes? How could we feel comfortable when teaching language courses on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond with stating that the masculine agreement prevails when both sexes are involved?[10] How could we pass a message of gender equality if sexism is part of the Italian language itself? If it is true that some nouns that refer to professions traditionally only performed by men in the past are now widely used in the feminine form, such as "ministra" and "avvocata", it is still challenging to find textbooks that take this necessary fluctuation of language into consideration.[11] As Calamita suggested in her 2018 arti-

8 Since the publication by Sabatini, a few years after the publication of the groundbreaking *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* by American scholar Deborah Cameron, Italian language scholars in the area of sociolinguistics and gender have been debating this subject. Furthermore, in one her latest guidelines, Robustelli talks about the obstacles to achieve linguistic gender equality in administrative language. Despite such efforts, there is still much cultural resistance on this subject. See also Robustelli 2012.

9 At the end of January 2020, six femicides occurred in Italy in the same week. See `https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/01/31/news/103_femminicidi_nel_2019_emergenza_nazionale-247264904`.

10 The authors of this article have taught Italian in Australia (University of Melbourne – Trapè) and New Zealand (Victoria University of Wellington – Calamita), and USA (University of Virginia – Calamita).

11 In her language classes, Calamita adopts the guidelines given in *Donne, Grammatica e Media*. An appendix illustrates all the feminine forms of nouns referring to professions; this includes also *medica* and *architetta*. Calamita is currently working on a textbook to teach and learn Italian language with gender equality, inclusion and diversity. *DiversITALY* (under contract with Kendall Hunt and with colleague Chiara De Santi) should be available for adoption from Fall 2021. Trapè is one of the invited collaborators to this textbook project; the first of this kind in the Italian and North Amer-

cle, it would be surprising to see the word "casalingo" in a textbook, while "casalinga" is usually mentioned several times. It is often a man who is introduced in textbooks to teach the word "direttore" or "ingegnere" and a woman who is portrayed as the stereotypical "mamma italiana" who takes care of all the household duties. Same sex couples are almost non-existent (we never came across the word "lesbica" in a textbook to teach Italian, for example) and the portrayal of the traditional family (heteronormative and with two children) pervades many textbooks teachers use daily, thus suggesting an old – and patriarchal – idea of Italy, often dominated by the Catholic Church and its traditions.[12] Furthermore, the portrayal of social class and status are often problematic: professions and lifestyle mentioned in textbooks often reflect the upper or middle classes (for example, we never came across an exercise where a factory worker is the protagonist of it). Together with challenging messages on gender, race, sexuality and social class, issues where inclusion and diversity are rarely taken into consideration, students are constantly bombarded with messages of women's objectification on television and media. What could we do to improve this scenario? How could we help them to learn Italian language without perpetrating gender stereotypes and achieve linguistic gender equality? As Joan Clifford and Deborah S. Reisinger suggest: "As educators […] it is our responsibility to maintain an atmosphere that does not discriminate, stereotype, tokenize, privilege, or somehow treat students unfairly" (Clifford, Reisinger 2019, 114).

From 2017 Calamita focused on a project in intermediate Italian (ITAL 2020) at the University of Virginia (UVa), namely "A Gendered Wor(l)d: Grammar, Sexism and Cultural Changes in Italian Language and Society", a multimodal learning experience which allows students to engage critically with Italian media and to become sensitive to the gendered politics of language which she discussed in her 2018 essay.[13] Since then she hoped to open a debate on teaching Ital-

ican market. The book also aims to address students of Italian in Australia and New Zealand which very often are excluded by the dominant North American and European portrayals in language textbooks.

12 The idea of Italy as a white and Catholic country is still much in vogue among North American students. If it is true that Italy has, for a long time, been populated by white people and influenced by the Catholic Church, it is also true that many Italians do not attend church regularly, belong to other religions or are simply atheists. In this point in history, when the dangerous message of white supremacy has reappeared on both sides of the Atlantic (see for example the 2018 events happened in Charlottesville, VA where the University of Virginia is located), it is important to send messages of inclusion and diversity in language classes and point out that Italy has been evolving and society has been changing dramatically.

13 Students engaged in variety of activities which included: discussions and reflections with different means, such as blog posts, class speaking activities, as well as researching on the topic on newspapers and online resources.

ian with linguistic gender equality and to inspire other colleagues to engage in similar projects.[14] The new collaborative project with Roberta Trapè is the continuation of this work, which fosters women's visibility in Italian language and in the social contexts on both sides of the Atlantic.

2 The "Language Forward Initiative" Project (Autumn 2018-Spring 2021)

Trapè and Calamita designed a foreign language acquisition project, namely "Language Forward Initiative", based on a virtual exchange between students studying Italian at University of Virginia (UVa), United States, and students studying English at an Italian upper-secondary school, Liceo Adelaide Cairoli, Pavia.[15] The course design is based on the recommendations made by O'Dowd and Ware (2009), O'Dowd (2017, 2019), Byram et al. (2017), about factors that educators should consider when designing and implementing tasks for virtual exchange and in line with Calamita's previous project on linguistic gender equality which students of ITAL2020 at the University of Virginia continue to address as part of their assignments.[16] In this project, the intercultural communicative approach, the emphasis on civic action and the promotion of linguistic gender equality have been blended to address issues of inclusion and diversity in the classroom on both sides of the Atlantic.

Carried out over three years (Autumn 2018-Spring 2021), this project consistently blends face-to-face foreign language lessons with Skype-mediated digital learning. As an integrated part of the language learning curriculum, a virtual space has been created which

14 *gender/sexuality/Italy*, one of the few journals at the intersections of Italian Studies and Women, Gender and Sexuality dedicated an entire issue in 2016 to the evolution of Italian language and gender. Articles are available online: `http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/journal/issues/gsi-3-201`. In particular see articles by Ilaria Marotta and Salvatore Monaco, "Un linguaggio più esclusivo. Rischi e asterischi nella lingua italiana" and Michela Baldo, Fabio Corbisiero, and Pietro Maturi, "Ricostruire il genere attraverso il linguaggio: per un uso della lingua (italiana) non sessista e non omotransfobico".

15 The project was co-designed by Roberta Trapè (Italian Studies, School of Languages and Linguistics, University of Melbourne) and Francesca Calamita (Italian Studies, University of Virginia, the coordinator of the research group on the "Language Forward Initiative", Institute of World Languages). It is supported by a Jefferson Trust Award awarded to the Institute of World Languages, UVa, in Spring 2018. Eleven language programmes, including Italian, are involved, and each programme has designed a unique virtual space in which to develop students' cultural and linguistic fluency. See Trapè, Calamita 2019.

16 From Spring 2020, also Hiromi Kaneda, works with her ITAL2020 classes on the gender and language project designed by Calamita.

parallels the space-time of traditional class tuition, and which students can inhabit with a significant degree of autonomy.

In the project's second academic year (Autumn 2019 and Spring 2020) a challenging objective has been the development of virtual exchange focused on intercultural citizenship, which integrates the pillar of intercultural communicative competence from foreign language education with the emphasis on civic action in the community from citizenship education" (Porto 2014, 5).

> The essential difference between global competence and global citizenship or intercultural competence and intercultural citizenship lies in the importance attributed to active engagement in society. […]. So, while intercultural or global competence refer to the development of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to communicate and act effectively and appropriately in different cultural contexts, global or intercultural citizenship borrow from models of citizenship education to refer to the application of these competences to actively participating in, changing and improving society. (O'Dowd 2019, 17)[17]

O'Dowd used two models of learning of intercultural or global citizenship education to lay the foundations of a transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education (O'Dowd 2019, 15), which engages students with difference and alternative worldviews within a pedagogical structure of online collaboration, critical reflection and active contribution to global society (Leask 2015). These two models are *The Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (2018) based on a culture of democracy which refers to values common in Western societies, and Byram's *Framework for Intercultural Citizenship* (Byram 2008, 2011; Wagner, Byram 2017). Byram's intercultural citizenship construct, strictly connected to foreign language learning, has evolved (Wagner, Byram 2017, 1) and this evolution is adopted in O'Dowd's transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education. A key dimension of Bryam's new intercultural citizenship construct is "'active citizenship' […] [which implies] being involved in the life of one's community, both local and national" (Wagner, Bryam 2017, 3). In this light, intercultural citizenship is instrumental in promoting

17 The pagination we use is referred to the article "A transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education" uploaded by O'Dowd to `https://unile-on.academia.edu/RobertODowd`. The article was published online in the journal *Language Teaching* (Cambridge University Press) in May 2019, where it is presented as a "revised version of a plenary address given at the Sixth International Conference on the Development and Assessment of Intercultural Competence – Intercultural Competence and Mobility: Virtual and Physical. University of Arizona, USA, 25-28 January 2018".

the development of foreign language speaking citizens who are able to act in multilingual and transnational spaces effectively (Wagner, Bryam 2017).[18] In 2019 Byram gave the opening keynote at an international conference on global citizenship;[19] he argued that foreign language teaching can be enriched by reference to citizenship education and related this point to the Council of Europe's *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* to show how language teaching can become part of an interdisciplinary approach to intercultural dialogue. He focused on the definition of competences as "the ability to mobilise and deploy relevant values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and/or understanding in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities that are presented by a given context" (Council of Europe 2018, 1: 32). Although the idea of "democratic culture" is still central, Byram interprets it as connected with that which is human, with a "common core of values", however different in detail, "universal values to live a really human life in dignity and respect", valuing human dignity and human rights, cultural diversity, justice and equality, as in *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). This "core of values", he argued, can be taught, not giving answers but asking questions about ethical issues, about our ethical responsibility in the world in a discussion which makes learners reflect on the notion of decentring in order to put themselves in the perspective of the other, to understand the way of thinking of other societies, to find a logic in different perspectives. This encourages learners to go beyond their national perspective, to respect and value diversity, to be aware of our shared humanity and interdependence, and finally to engage and take action. In his new intercultural citizenship construct Byram argues that in the contemporary world language teaching has the responsibility to prepare learners for interaction with people of other cultural backgrounds, teaching them skills and attitudes as well as knowledge. In this perspective, the word "democracy" is expanded, and related to political engagement and participation. "Democracy" is intended as living together more than as a form of government, a

18 Wagner and Byram's most recent definition of intercultural citizenship follows: causing/facilitating intercultural citizenship experience, which includes activities of working with others to achieve an agreed end; analysis and reflection on the experience and on the possibility of further social and/or political activity; thereby creating learning that is cognitive, attitudinal, behavioural change in the individual; and a change in self-perception, in relationships with people of different social groups (Wagner, Bryam 2017, 3-4).

19 Byram was one of the keynote speakers of the international conference *Educating the Global Citizen. International Perspectives on Foreign Language Teaching in the Digital Age* held at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, Germany, 25-28 March 2019, with a paper entitled "Internationalism and Competences for Democratic Culture in Foreign Language Teaching".

mode of associated living, involving citizens to create a better society where everyone participates. As O'Dowd affirms, the model proposed by Byram

> understands democracy and political education as the development of "transnational communities" and critical thinkers who engage in social and political activity together to improve their own personal lives and the societies they live in. (O'Dowd 2019, 20)

Intercultural or global citizenship approaches

> involve learners either instigating change in their own societies based on their collaborations with members of other cultures or actually working with members of other cultures as a transnational group in order to take action about an issue or problem which is common to both societies. (O'Dowd 2019, 21)[20]

According to the intercultural citizen approach both groups of students in Charlottesville and Pavia are required to plan and carry out a civic action in their local communities across two semesters;[21] they are encouraged to become global citizens ready to interact effectively in multilingual and international contexts through active citizenship (Wagner, Byram 2017, 3). This is done by taking students past their comfort zone and engaging them in real-world tasks through a project that has direct relevance to their own communities. In this case we have chosen to address the question of gender equality, and the title of the project is: "Gender equality through toponymy. Urban landscape in Charlottesville and Pavia".[22] As such, the objectives are: learning beyond the classroom walls through virtual exchange, and contact with local organisations (those concerned with gender

20 A transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education (O'Dowd 2019): it creates opportunities for rich intercultural interaction which can include but is not limited to bicultural/bilingual comparison: it establishes partnerships across a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds and using *lingua franca* for communication with these partners; it encourages learners to engage with themes which are of social and political relevance in both partners' societies; it enables students to work with their international partners to undertake action and change in their respective local and global communities; it includes ample opportunities for guided reflection of the intercultural encounters in the classroom; it is integrated and recognised part of course work and institutional academic activity; it increases awareness of how intercultural communication is mediated by online technologies and how social media can shape the creation and interpretation of messages.

21 While writing the first draft students have just started to work on the second part of the project.

22 We are gratefully indebted to Debora Ricci (University of Lisbon) who inspired our project with her studies on gender equality and toponymy; we refer in particular to Ricci 2015.

equality and gender-based violence); community engagement and active citizenship; intercultural communicative competence, including linguistic gender equality; working in a transnational team; motivation and engagement (meaningful learning).

3 Project Rationale and Outline

In designing the virtual exchange project we referred to the above-mentioned transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education proposed by O'Dowd (2019), which engages students with different and alternative worldviews within a pedagogical structure of online collaboration, critical reflection, and active contribution to global society.

The virtual exchange has been organised between Italian Studies, UVa, and Liceo Adelaide Cairoli, Pavia. Thirty North American students have been partnered with 20 Italian upper-secondary school students to discuss (in dyads or triads) via desktop videoconferencing the contemporary cultural and sociopolitical theme of gender equality. Using the synchronous video communication tool Skype, students meet weekly to speak for 20 minutes in Italian and 20 minutes in English. Each semester includes eight Skype meetings. To begin, students introduced themselves and their school/university to their international partners in North America or Italy in the target language. Pre-virtual exchange activities guided them in the discussions that could then commence: for example, to activate students' prior knowledge of the theme, "ice-breaker" and brainstorming activities centred on gender equality took place in face-to-face lessons.

For the Skype meetings, students choose their favourite day/time within the week. Through e-journals created on the university and school platforms, they regularly share their experience of the virtual exchange with their peers. The Skype meetings and other means of exchange and collaboration increase the students' exposure to spoken Italian/English; foster the development of their speaking, interactional skills, and fluency in the target language; allow them to experience authentic language use, enabling access to meaningful interactions; foster students' active learning, increasing their motivation, agency, and autonomy; cultivate active citizenship.

Study materials have been uploaded to the university and school platforms (Collab for UVa and Google Classroom for Adelaide Cairoli): relevant journal articles and videos on the question of gender equality.[23] Students engage with others through documents and "in

23 In Spring 2020 we asked students to read several articles in preparation for the project: these include, but are not limited to, newspapers' articles from *The Guardian*

person", face-to-face and virtually, to discuss these materials in Italian and English. Discussion involves critical reflection and intercultural interaction on the topic and help students to develop critical thinking in a foreign language acquisition context. With their international partners, students create a transnational group, which closely considers the issue of gender equality in relations to streets' and relevant places' names which are rarely named after women on either side. Seeking others' perspectives and advice, they propose change, and finally act together to instigate change in their local communities (Byram 2008; O'Dowd 2019). The students in fact write down proposals to name a new or unnamed street/place in the students' respective towns after women who gave a meaningful contribution to the local community, and present them to the respective mayors.

While working on this project students apply real life contexts to education, thus also connecting this project to experiential learning. Experiential learning is the process of learning through experience which enables students to make progress in their chosen subject while reflecting on the knowledge they are acquiring.[24] As far as foreign language acquisition is concerned, experiential learning is a particularly rewarding teaching and learning experience for both students and professors: students are able to see their progress while experiencing full immersion in the targeted language and culture; professors observe them in real-life situations, thus projecting them in their future career and life outside the academic context. In David Kolb's words, one of the leading scholars of experiential learnings:

> [students] must be able to involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experience. They must be able to reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives. They must be able to create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sounds theories, and they must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems. (2015, 30)

This is exactly what students also experience with this transatlantic collaboration to foster gender equality.

and the BBC news: "Are our street names sexist" (BBC, April 2012) and "Next stop… Nina, Simone" (*The Guardian*, June 2018).

24 Several subcategories fall under the umbrella term "experiential learning", including "hands-on learning": a form of experiential learning in which students are not required to reflect on their final achievement yet they are involved in real-life situations wherein they can learn about their subject of choice.

During the Skype meetings, students develop plans to collaboratively create presentations focussed on gender equality within an intercultural framework. These are to be presented (in dyads/triads) within their respective institutions. They also plan a civic action in their respective communities. Students and teachers will discuss the students' presentations and active citizenship in the form of a final group-to-group video conferencing session. The action in the community involves research, reflection, and co-creating a formal proposal. First the students search for places/streets in their own towns that are named after women; they investigate the lives of some of these women. The students have studied articles about the imbalance in main European cities between numbers of streets named after men, and those named after women. Discussion follows (in dyads/triads) on mapping female street names, and on the sociocultural perception of women. In the classroom, students' learning is continuously supported by guided reflections concerning the intercultural encounters and questions made possible by the virtual exchange.

In the project's second phase, the student dyads/triads will seek information about a woman who is not well known, but relevant for the history/life of their town and its community. Each dyad/triad will choose a woman in Pavia and in Charlottesville. Through group-to-group discussion the Italian and North American students will narrow the final selection to two women, one for Charlottesville and one for Pavia. The students will then organise a proposal to name after these women a new or unnamed street/place in their respective towns. The proposals will be written down (through group-to-group virtual collaboration), and presented to the mayors of Pavia and Charlottesville. Students will submit their recommendations to mayors under the guidance of their educators.

With this kind of project we have moved towards intercultural citizenship-focused virtual exchange. The project aims to create virtual spaces where students' social participation and engagement is stimulated and officially valued and virtual exchanges of transnational teams, in an effort to address sociopolitical issues of today's world, and bring them to the fore of teaching foreign languages, to empower students to actively reflect upon their role in a democratic society. Virtual exchanges of this kind will situate learners as "active contributors to their society" and offer them "the opportunity to use their online collaboration to undertake action or change in local or international contexts" (O'Dowd 2018, 15).

> The future of virtual exchange appears to be bright yet still unclear in many respects. […]. In any case, although progress may be slow, it is clear that, in a world increasingly characterised by the rise of right-wing extremism, religious fanaticism, and populist political movements, virtual exchange will have an impor-

> tant role to play as educators strive to develop active, informed, and responsible citizens who are tolerant of difference and who are actively engaged in political and democratic processes. (w21)

The traditional system of foreign language education based exclusively on the acquisition of the target language needs changing. Language teachers can go beyond their national perspective, and expand the space of their classroom fostering the dialogue with students located in other countries.

They can bring questions on real-world ethical issues into the curriculum, introduce tasks which allow students to work together in international teams and consequently to give real contributions. Intercultural citizenship virtual exchange is one of the ways of including civic engagement and responsibility in language classes, to help students to interpret the world around them and empower them to act upon the world.

4 Conclusion

The Language Forward Initiative project on gender equality aims to create a virtual space where students' global social participation and engagement is stimulated, guided and formally valued. Facilitated by Skype, regular virtual exchange between transnational teams allows the students to address this sociopolitical issue that has urgency in today's world, and that can be brought to the fore in their foreign language learning. Thus in the context of their language studies, the young people are empowered to actively reflect on their role in a democratic society, and situated as active contributors; that is, as intercultural and global citizens addressing social injustice and fostering gender equality. Furthermore, students engage also in experiential learning, testing the targeted languages in real life situations in their Skype calls and in their interactions with local authorities. We have tried to reimagine language learning classrooms as spaces for students to think and to take collective action in the world as active and engaged citizens, informed by the expression of their identity, reflection and critical enquiry, to foster gender equality and address issues of identity, diversity and inclusion. With this project we hope to collaborate and foster connections with colleagues in foreign language acquisition working in the area of gender equality and active citizenship worldwide.

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Blended Learning and the Global South. Virtual Exchanges in Higher Education
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A Telecollaborative International Exchange for Foreign Language Learning and Reflective Teaching

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Abstract This chapter shares the reflections on a joint international research educational project, involving Columbia University students studying Italian, and Italian pre-service teachers enrolled in an MA in Teaching Italian as a Foreign Language at the University of Urbino, Italy. The northern hemisphere autumn term 2014 iteration of the project is taken as a case study to discuss the effectiveness of teleconferencing for foreign language learning and teaching. The results showed that the videoconference sessions positively affected the learning process of students, and simultaneously fostered reflective teaching in pre-service teachers.

Keywords Distance learning. Pre-service teachers. Foreign language teaching. Reflective teaching. Intercultural competence.

Giovanna Carloni 3.1.2, 4.2, 5.2, 5.3.1, 5.3.2, 5.3.2.2
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1 Introduction

In the field of foreign language instruction there is little doubt that online teaching and learning, which today articulates in a variety of asynchronous and/or synchronous ways, including email exchanges, discussion boards, online chats, wikis, video tandems, blended learning, and teleconferencing, is a fruitful and successful pedagogical resource. Over the past thirty years, in fact, a vast number of studies have highlighted the variety of new and exciting opportunities that Distance Learning (DL) can offer to our students, not only in order to master language skills, but also to promote intercultural competence.[1] Scholars point out that these types of social computer-based activities engage students in a wider array of issues, opening up new learning environments for pragmatics and social relationships (Belz 2007; Thorne, Black, Sykes 2009), and promoting stimulating "intercultural tensions" (Chapelle 2009, 747) that allow new ways of communicating (Hampel, Stickler 2012).

This chapter shares reflections on a joint international research educational project, which involves students studying Italian language (LLs) at Columbia University, and Italian pre-service teachers (PSTs) enrolled in an MA in Teaching Italian to Foreigners at the University of Urbino, Italy (see also Carloni, Franzè 2012). In this computer-mediated exchange, LLs and PSTs are paired up and tasked with reviewing major grammatical points and discussing Italian culture during four videoconferences scheduled over a two-month period.[2] Along the lines of traditional telecollaborations, the original motivator for the project was the desire to offer LLs an additional chance to practice the language outside of the classroom, providing an opportunity to interact in Italian with Italian native speakers in an authentic context using Skype. After all, "the relative isolation of instructed L2 settings, although potentially very productive for learning about language, can be seen as limited" (Thorne, Black, Sykes 2009, 804). Thus, teleconferencing represents the opportunity to open up the classroom to external stimulations. By involving teachers in training, the project, however, has a second – yet equally important – benefit, as it simultaneously gives the Italian PSTs the chance to practice teaching Italian in a technology-mediated environment. The involvement of teachers in training provides in fact a new angle of research, as of today still underexplored, from which to observe computer-assisted language learning. The aim of this chapter is to reflect simultaneously on the effectiveness not only of learn-

1 Goodfellow et al. 1996; Byram, Gribkova, Starkey 2002; Belz 2007; Blake 2009; Guth, Marini-Maio 2010; O'Dowd 2011; 2016.

2 Cf. Dey-Plissonneau, Blin 2016, for a similar project.

ing but also of teaching a foreign language via teleconferencing. In this study we observe how a series of videoconference sessions, coherently integrated with a traditional course programme, affects the learning process of a foreign language in LLs and, simultaneously, fosters reflective teaching in the PSTs. During the exchange, PSTs were invited to perform reflection-on-action in order to establish which type of input was more effective in a technology-enhanced learning environment. By rating the effectiveness of the two types of input (written texts and videos) that they provided to the LLs – in terms of student motivation, engagement, output production, fluency, sociopragmatic and interactional skills – the goal here is to ultimately investigate how LLs learn in a more solid way and, specifically, what activities effectively promote learning in a virtual space. The improvement in both LLs' language skills and intercultural competence and PSTs' pedagogical growth are measured through questionnaires and recordings of the online sessions. Discussions on this experience offer insightful findings, which are important to reflect on the validity of videoconference practices within or versus a traditional classroom setting.

This international collaboration has been successfully implemented for six years. In recognition of its potential the project was awarded a grant for Hybrid Course Redesign by the office of the Provost in 2016, and a grant from the Language Resource Center, both at Columbia University, in 2017. These grants allowed for further implementations and expanded the potentialities of this collaboration. The project has been officially integrated as a fundamental requirement of an Italian Advanced Course at Columbia University that was taught in the Spring of 2018 as the first hybrid course in the Italian department at this institution. This chapter describes the general framework of the project, its objectives, and the method used to assess its efficacy. Because of the small number of students in language classes and MA programmes of this kind, generalised conclusions are not attainable, so the focus is on the qualitative aspect of this experience. The data collected during the 2014 iteration of the project are used as a case-study to engage in further reflections on the pedagogical value of such a collaboration and its role in the training process of future teachers of a foreign language. This article, then, offers no definitive results, but rather offers reflections on a teaching experience that highlights the strengths of telecollaboration, arguing for further implementation of such collaborative projects as an opportunity not only for foreign language improvement, but also for professional growth.

2 Videoconferencing and Foreign Language Learning and Teaching

Pedagogical research exploring the potentials of computer-assisted education has developed to such an extent that it is difficult to keep track of the many technological resources and computer-based methods that are available to language teachers today. Institutions everywhere support and promote projects and collaborations that allow distance learning through teleconferencing, accepted as a valid teaching format almost comparable to a classroom experience (Blake 2009). Specifically, regarding the benefits of teleconferencing within a language classroom, O'Dowd (2016) offers a detailed overview of the history of teleconferencing, its diverse formats, and the issues that may occur when using this tool for learning. His studies point out how a computer-mediated exchange can become a source of authentic learning material that cannot be found in textbooks and that can contribute to expand and broaden students' critical awareness.

Alongside the positive results for students' individual motivation and intercultural communicative competence, pointed out by numerous scholars (Goodfellow et al. 1996; Blake 2009; O'Dowd 2011), O'Dowd paints a fuller picture by focusing also on the logistical, technical, and practical difficulties that may arise at the beginning of a videoconferencing exchange. In terms of logistical complications, he points out that there could be groups of students from different institutions and that are in different parts of the world. Technical issues may be the result of slow or unstable Internet connections, while practical issues may arise when dealing with a different academic calendar, a different grading system to assess the teleconference exchange, or culturally different modes of teaching and learning (O'Dowd 2011).[3]

Video-mediated interactions may even cause greater problems in terms of turn-taking than audio-only as more interruptions may occur (O'Malley et al. 1996, 187). With regard to gaze, especially when used to give feedback, speakers adopt a more confident style when they interact face-to-face. In a video-mediated virtual space, however, research shows that they seem to delay their interaction, because they feel less confident "that they understand each other well"

3 O'Dowd discusses issues that could interfere during teleconference: "the socioinstitutional, the classroom, the individual and interaction levels […]. The individual level referred to the learners' psychobiographical and educational background; the classroom level referred to how the exchange was organized and carried out in both classes; the socioinstitutional level dealt with the different levels of access to technology, institutional attitudes to online learning, etc.; and the interactional level looked at the actual quality and nature of the communication that takes places between the partner classes (O'Dowd 2011, 351-2).

and make up by increasing the level of "unsolicited information" (O'Malley et al. 1996, 190).

Several scholars have focused on the dynamics that take place during a teleconference exchange and compared physical face-to-face versus video-mediated lessons. Despite the positive results that some studies may initially indicate, O'Malley et al. ultimately speculate that participants seeing one another does not necessarily improve speakers' performance (cf. Boyle et al. 1994, cited in O'Malley et al. 1996). Similarly, the delay in transmission that may occur can put speakers' responses out of sync, affecting the interaction between speakers, and at times even restraining or distorting their normal use of body language (speaking clues versus visual clues) when they are in front of a camera (Goodfellow et al. 1996).

While today we can choose from a variety of programmes and applications to enhance and upgrade our online learning experience, our brief overview has shown that teleconferencing can present many variables. While recognising the challenges indicated by the scholars cited above, some of which were encountered in our own study, our focus is on the constant positive feedback, which showed that unexpected difficulties or technical obstacles did not undermine the success of this collaboration. The results presented in this chapter aim to challenge, inspire and motivate other LLs and PSTs who want to participate in similar projects. The many successful iterations of this specific programme demonstrate that any technical niggles are by far compensated for by the immense value that providing such spaces for communicative exchange provides.

More importantly, by engaging with trainee teachers of Italian (PSTs), our project presents a new perspective from which to investigate computer-mediated teaching experiences. Drawing upon Garret's definition of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), which is to be understood as a "dynamic complex in which technology, theory, and pedagogy are inseparably interwoven" (Garret 2009, 720), this project acknowledges the necessity of sound pedagogical instruction at the basis of a successful language exchange, and adds an original element to the already varied practices used in telecollaboration. In this respect, we define this project as a 'critical telecollaboration', where critical is understood as "alternative applications to telecollaboration in order to better exploit the educational potential of this activity" (O'Dowd 2016, 297).[4]

With a double target in mind – LLs' linguistic improvement and PSTs' professional growth – the structure of the online lessons is carefully controlled to ensure positive results. After all, as Goodfel-

4 Cf. O'Dowd 2016 for an extensive outline of the various existing telecollaborative partnerships and networks.

low et al. already suggested in 1996, reproducing an almost equivalent experience to the classroom is not enough and the quality of the online sessions depends on solid pedagogical design so that "lesson planning remains a *sine qua non* for best practice using technology as it is for the classroom" (Blake 2009, 823). Solid training of the PSTs that took place during this experience has become a key element of this teleconference exchange, instrumental for its successful outcome.

As stated earlier, due to the specificity of the exchange and the small number of participants, the data collected may not provide generalisable conclusions. Nonetheless, the pedagogical training of PSTs within a teleconference learning space was an unexplored area that called for further research. This study aims to provide some initial thoughts and ideas for those who would like to further explore the possibilities of computer-mediated collaborations that involve LLs and PSTs.

3 The General Framework of the Project

3.1 Participants' Backgrounds

The participants of this project are students enrolled in an Advanced Italian language course at Columbia University (LLs) and pre-service teachers (PSTs) studying to become instructors of Italian as a second and foreign language in a Master's programme at the University of Urbino, Italy. The numbers of participants vary at each iteration, thus the pairing up and some of the logistics cannot be decided beforehand. In general, the number of participants is around ten to twelve students and ten to twelve pre-service teachers. So far, the number of participants has never been even, so that at times two students were assigned to a PST or (more rarely) two PSTs to the same student.

The project is made up of four 30-minute online lessons, conducted over four weeks, usually corresponding to the last weeks of the semester in the United States. PSTs and LLs have one week's time to organise, independently, the exact day and time of their meeting.

3.1.1 Language Learners

Through the encounters with native speakers, LLs are exposed to a virtual yet authentic environment with the main goal of promoting and fostering not only their language skills, but also their intercultural competence. For example, the rationale for Schenker's email exchange project between groups of American and German students was that "in order to prepare students to communicate successfully

with people of different backgrounds, we must foster intercultural competence" (2012, 450). From a similar perspective,

> [e]valuating CALL provides a particularly rich challenge, demanding a holistic view of materials and their use without losing sight of specific theoretical implications. If technology-based materials and tasks are to be evaluated in terms of the opportunities they provide learners for SLA, then frameworks and guidelines are needed. (Chapelle 2009, 748)

In line with such 'holistic view', the ideal learning environment at Columbia University coincides with an Italian Advanced Conversation course, the main focus of which is to offer intense practice in the spoken language through the selection of various topics on contemporary Italian culture. The course, which meets twice a week for 75 minutes, is attended by students with diverse backgrounds. While some come directly from the four-semester university curricular track, with little or no experience in speaking the language outside of a classroom, others have already spent a semester at an Italian university and want to continue to cultivate their mastery of the language. There are also learners who have lived in Italy for some time in the past, but are still fluent, and have joined the class to acquire a more formal practice of the language. This often results in a heterogeneous group, for linguistic and cultural competence, age gap, and personal background, in which, however, everyone wants to have a chance to talk, participate, and improve their language skills and cultural expertise. The international collaboration reported here has originated from a desire to respond precisely to the needs of this varied body of LLs, offering them another opportunity to engage with the language outside the classroom.

3.1.2 Pre-Service Teachers

The second objective of this telecollaboration is reflective teaching experience targeted at monitoring the development of PSTs' online-specific foreign language teaching competences. The PSTs participate in this exchange project after attending a 30-hour course on the didactics of Italian as a Second and Foreign language, offered during the first semester of the MA programme. In the course, PSTs learn how to devise lesson plans and create teaching materials that foster the development of communicative skills and language awareness within a communicative theoretical framework (Savignon 1997). For the PSTs, the video-mediated lessons are part of a required laboratory course that concludes their training in pedagogy. By offering them a virtual, yet authentic context in which to test their mate-

rials, this exchange responds to their immediate need to practice the methodologies and techniques learned during the MA programme.

The project aims to help PSTs become reflective practitioners while reflecting on the implementation and development of a teaching competences in desktop videoconferencing:

> A reflective teacher needs a kind of educational technology which does more than extend her capacity to administer drill and practice. Most interesting to her is an educational technology which helps students to become aware of their own intuitive understandings, to fall into cognitive confusions and explore new directions of understanding and action. (Schön 1983, 333)

As reflective practitioners, PSTs need to become aware of their belief systems by consistently analysing how their teaching practices, that is their theories-in-action, reflect their espoused theories, that is the theories they believe in (Argyris, Schön 1978):

> When someone is asked how he would behave under certain circumstances, the answer he usually gives is his espoused theory of action for that situation. This is the theory of action to which he gives allegiance and which, upon request, he communicates to others. However, the theory that actually governs his actions is his theory-in-use, which may or may not be compatible with his espoused theory; furthermore, the individual may or may not be aware of the incompatibility of the two theories. (Argyris, Schön 1974, 7)

Within a reflective teaching framework, the PSTs involved in the project are thus expected to learn how to monitor their pedagogical practices to become aware of their belief systems. In this respect, to become effective reflective practitioners, the PSTs are provided with tasks targeted making implicit beliefs explicit (Williams, Burden 1997). PSTs are required to carry out *reflection on action*, namely the analysis and evaluation of teaching practices and learning processes in technology-enhanced learning environments after class using various tools (Schön 1983). Connelly and Clandinin define the difference between *reflection in action* and *reflection on action* as follows: "both terms name the method used in the act of thinking practically […]; [however, the distinction between the two terms] separates thinking during practice from thinking after or before" (1986, 294).

Through *reflection on action*, the PSTs involved in the project are asked to monitor their foreign language teaching practices and evaluate the development of their foreign language teaching competences in a transnational video-mediated online teaching/learning environment. The reflective practice thus fosters the development of the

pedagogical growth of global teachers through teacher training internationalisation (Kissock, Richardson 2010). Since specific pedagogical competences are pivotal in designing effective online activities (Goodfellow et al. 1996; Blake 2009; Guichon 2009; Murphy, Shelley, Baumann 2010), PSTs are expected to reflect on the development of a series of online, telecollaborative, pedagogical and digital competences, such as those elaborated by O'Dowd (2015) and Ernest et al. (2013). O'Dowd (2015) developed a model of organisational, pedagogical and digital competences as well as attitudes and beliefs that telecollaborative teachers need to develop to teach effectively in the new technology-enhanced environments. To collaborate successfully online, PSTs also need to develop competences, such as: planning and managing activities that are relevant for learners; managing online lessons, which entails managing time during lessons including time allocation for each activity; developing and communicating clear instructions and rules for the implementation of and participation in the activities including timings and responsibilities for each activity; during lessons, managing the rules regulating participation in the activities including timing and responsibilities for each activity (Ernest et al. 2013). In this context, it is important to notice that the competences necessary to teach effectively and collaboratively online can only be acquired through hands-on experiences (O'Dowd 2015) such as those provided by the project.

3.2 Roles for Language Learners *vs* Pre-Service Teachers

The collaboration follows eight steps, from setting up and defining lesson topics to lesson design and structure. Then feedback on the lesson is provided by the project coordinators and the planning begins for the actual collaboration followed by the participants' feedback. Each step is described below with the respective roles for LLs and PSTs.

1. *Pairs are set up*
   Before the exchange begins, LLs are partnered with Italian PSTs by the two coordinators of the project and provided with guidelines in order to prevent and/or limit unexpected issues as much as possible. These instructions outline the various stages, the objectives, and the contents of the project, from the initial steps of establishing contact with the assigned partner, to the necessary details regarding the implementation of each specific lesson, including materials design and lesson management.
2. *Lesson topics are defined*
   The online sessions parallel the syllabus of the Advanced Italian course, focusing on a topic previously introduced and discussed in class with their language instructors, such as im-

migration, work life, and childhood memories, to name a few. Online lessons become an integral part of the programme, during which LLs engage with a topic in a one-on-one session, counting for 20% of their final grade. Each online lesson, therefore, is unique and aims to give LLs a chance to talk about a topic with a lesson exclusively designed for them.

3. *Lesson design and structure*
   Once the topics are defined, PSTs start structuring the online lessons independently. The lessons must include two parts, one focusing on grammar and the other on communication. PSTs are required to create form-focused exercises, i.e. language awareness activities, and communicative activities related, respectively, to the grammar and cultural topics provided in the Columbia University Advanced Italian Course syllabus. The form-focused activities are, ideally, highly contextualised and should be targeted at helping students revise grammar topics they already studied in class. For the activities planned (i.e. pre- or post-reading activities), PSTs must pick either a written input or a video and create the teaching materials autonomously. PSTs need to devise foreign language teaching materials suitable to a technology-enhanced learning environment.
4. *Feedback on the lesson*
   PSTs are required to send their proposed lesson plans to the coordinators to receive feedback on the structure of the unit designed and level of language in their lesson. If changes are necessary, PSTs are required to apply them within a couple of days.
5. *Beginning of the exchange. Sharing activities with LLs and day/time set up*
   The meetings start after eight weeks have been completed in the semester. In keeping with the collaboration guidelines, a few days before each Skype meeting, PSTs send to their assigned LL(s) the form-focused activities along with the pre- and while-reading/while-viewing activities, which LLs can carry out autonomously before the online lessons. At this point, via email, PSTs and LLs also find a day and a time for their lesson. Although they are free to schedule the specific day/time of their virtual meeting, since each lesson becomes complementary to the syllabus, it must take place within one week of the related in-class lessons.
6. *Online lesson*
   In part I, the sessions are entirely held in Italian and start with feedback on the form-focused tasks. The correction of the pre- and while-reading/while-viewing activities follows.

   In part II, PSTs and LLs engage in post-reading/post-viewing activities, such as open-ended questions, role playing,

problem solving and decision-making tasks. In one of the iterations of the project, for example, LLs engaged with the topic of 'The city'. PSTs, thus, looked for meaningful videos or readings that could stimulate conversation and engagement from LLs. The activities were always preceded by exercises aimed at reviewing and expanding vocabulary and were followed by reading comprehension activities, through multiple choice or true/false questions, and/or open questions. Finally, PSTs concluded the lesson with a less closely guided task, in which LLs could engage in free conversation. Because very often PSTs decided to prepare a lesson that introduced their own city, often the final task resembled something like this: "Now that you have learned about my city, imagine that you had to convince a friend to go there on vacation. What would you tell your friend? How would you convince him?". Role play activities like this one, thus, did not focus on personal questions regarding the LLs' own ideas about the city or their own city, but aimed at testing simultaneously what the LLs had learned during the lesson exclusively designed for them. PSTs are required to record each lesson.

7. *Feedback questionnaires*
   Both LLs and PSTs fill out questionnaires to leave immediate feedback as soon as they finish each lesson, for a total of four post-lesson questionnaires.
8. *Final feedback questionnaires*
   Both LLs and PSTs fill out a final questionnaire assessing their experience of learning/teaching Italian online.

Before the online exchange takes place, the asynchronous moment, when the form-focused activity is sent and there is time for input and discussion beforehand (see step *5*), aims to remove any obstacle that may occur. This procedure is intended to circumvent unexpected technical issues like slowness in sending/receiving links and/or attachments, and incorrect file formats. It also aims to facilitate the online lessons, giving LLs the necessary time to complete the exercises at their own pace, and consequently reduce inactivity during the online sessions. As a consequence, the level of stress of the LLs is also reduced, giving them the time to carry out the grammar activity alone and without pressure, contributing to the LLs' sense of self-efficacy since they are likely to feel less threatened when receiving feedback on work which they have been afforded ample time to complete beforehand. After the correction of the grammar activities, and of some initial conversation, LLs are also more likely to feel comfortable engaging in dialogue with Italian native speakers. Moreover, the choice of sharing the input for the communicative tasks before the meeting also gives them the chance to read it as many times as

necessary, to review the vocabulary, and, ultimately, to adequately prepare for the actual discussion. This practice accommodates LLs' learning approaches, as learners can activate their preferred cognitive styles. Additionally, the communicative tasks aim at triggering LLs' oral interaction in Italian within an intercultural framework. Overall, through the various activities, PSTs promote LLs' output and sociopragmatic skills in a highly interactive and contextualised setting. It is interesting to mention that in all iterations of the project, PSTs and LLs usually, and spontaneously, continue engaging with the lesson much longer than the minimum time of thirty minutes required by the project guidelines.

4 Method

4.1 Language Learners' Questionnaires

In order to monitor the interaction closely and scientifically, at the end of each online lesson LLs are asked to complete online questionnaires based on a five-point Likert scale, ranked 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) in the first set of the following eight closed-ended statements:

- Speaking with an Italian native speaker has been useful.
- I had the chance to practice my knowledge of Italian.
- My Skype partner put me at ease.
- The lesson was well-structured and interesting.
- My Skype partner suggested fun and original activities.
- My Skype partner suggested interesting readings/videos.
- I learnt something I did not know of Italian culture.
- I am excited to have my next online lesson (first three questionnaires) / I wished the project included more online sessions (last questionnaire).

The questionnaire is not anonymous and it includes a second section with another set of questions, which asks LLs to comment more in depth, in English or in Italian, on certain aspects of the collaboration.

- What is your Skype partner's name? Does (s)he speak clearly? Do you have difficulties to understand him/her?
- Was the grammar section helpful or not? Was it well-structured or confused and/or too easy/difficult?
- Would you have preferred to just have a conversation on the weekly topic?
- How was the cultural topic of the week presented to you? Provide details on the kind of activity you received in preparation to the discussion (whether audio-video, only audio or only reading).
- How did you feel before, during and after each lesson?

- How was the experience of learning Italian on Skype? Would you recommend it to other students of Italian?

These open-ended questions aim to retrieve further information that can ultimately help the coordinators monitor the experience even more closely. Moreover, in the space of a paragraph, LLs have a better opportunity to illustrate what is happening during the online sessions and to give feedback on the project. These questions aim to determine the degree to which LLs' understanding and engagement with the language has changed over the course of the project.

By assessing the input chosen by their PSTs and critically engaging with the overall structure of the lesson, LLs provide insightful feedback that is useful not only to observe the development of the PSTs' teaching skills but also to assess and adjust the general requirements of the activity. The second set of questions allows for determining the sociopragmatic value of the project by investigating LLs' and PSTs' personal intercultural exchanges, and to further examine ways in which a videoconference can be successfully integrated into their more traditional face-to-face lesson in class.

4.2 Pre-Service Teachers' Questionnaires

Taking part in the telecollaborative project, the PSTs face two challenges for the first time: teaching Italian as a foreign language and developing online-specific foreign language teaching competences suitable to desktop videoconferencing.

PSTs' reflective teaching practice is carried out through online post-lesson questionnaires and the analysis of the audio recordings of the desktop videoconferences. After each online lesson, PSTs complete a semi-structured online questionnaire, designed to help them reflect on and critically think about their video-mediated teaching practices, containing both closed-ended questions, based on a five-point Likert scale, and open-ended questions such as the following:

- Examples of closed-ended questions:
  - How effective were your form-focused activities?
  - How effective were your communicative activities?
  - How comfortable did your student feel during the lesson?
  - How well did you manage the lesson?
  - How satisfied are you with your lesson?
- Examples of open-ended questions:
  - What cultural topic did you focus on during the lesson? To what extent did your student find the topic motivating? Explain why.
  - During the lesson, what did you notice about your student's sociopragmatic skills? Why?

- What types of difficulties did you encounter while conducting video-mediated lessons, and what, instead, did you find easy?
- What did you find particularly effective in the lessons you designed?

The post-lesson questionnaires also require PSTs to formulate and answer a question of their own, providing further insight into the development of their reflections and professional growth. Moreover, PSTs record the audio portion of each Skype-mediated lesson – when permission is granted by the LLs – via free online *Callburner* recording software[5] to listen to as part of the reflective teaching process. The following case study includes some examples of self-generated questions and considerations regarding the value of these audio recordings of the lessons.

5 A Case Study

In the northern hemisphere autumn term of 2014, the teleconference exchange involved eleven American undergraduate LLs attending an Italian Advanced Conversation II course and seven Italian PSTs. The effectiveness of the collaboration, according to the framework described, is discussed based on the responses collected from the questionnaires. In this case, due to the uneven number of participants, four PSTs worked with two LLs each, while three worked with just one student/LL each.

5.1 Language Learners. Results and Comments

LLs responded overall positively, assigning the experience of learning Italian through telecollaboration a value of 4 or 5 on the 5-point Likert scale throughout the project. LLs were also consistent in their interest in having more online lessons because they had gradually become more comfortable with the online form of learning and with their partner. The data collected from the open-ended questions also revealed that most LLs admitted that, by the time they got to the last session, their ability to understand their Italian native speaker PST had improved so that "the conversation had become easier and more fluid", as one of the students wrote.

LLs found the grammar review not only useful but also "necessary". Ten LLs consistently responded that they liked to engage with a form-focused activity and that they regarded it as "useful" for their

5 https://callburner.en.softonic.com.

linguistic improvement. Unexpectedly, the grammar review that preceded the online conversation was rated as an important section of the online lesson and was welcomed enthusiastically by all participants throughout the four lessons. As several LLs mentioned in their comments, they appreciated the fact that their PSTs "could actually correct and explain" any incorrect answer and grammatical inaccuracy and, therefore, recognised the unique pedagogical value of this online language exchange.

In terms of sociopragmatic exchange, while at the beginning five LLs admitted to feeling comfortable but definitely more "distant", "nervous", or "scared" by the overall experience, by the end of the project all of them had clearly established a connection with their respective partners. Some LLs wrote that they "felt sorry that this experience was ending", and one even expressed the desire to stay in touch, via email or "becoming Facebook friends".

In general, the responses were positive and all ten LLs who answered the final questionnaire recognised the benefits of the one-to-one sessions in developing language speaking skills. While one LL wrote that "it is the most practical way to learn and most realistic", another said that she "found it really nice to continue practising Italian outside the classroom and with a real Italian student". All the LLs consistently wrote that they would encourage other peers to engage in similar projects, which demonstrates that learning through telecollaboration improved their motivation and contributed to a general improvement in self-esteem and confidence while speaking the foreign language.

Ultimately, as shown, the responses to the questionnaires confirm that, for all participating LLs, this online exchange was an opportunity to further engage with the target language. They pointed out its pedagogical value especially given the difficulty of finding other opportunities to practice the foreign language in an authentic environment. Contrary to other studies (cf. O'Malley et al. 1996) favouring face-to-face over video-mediated interactions, LLs commented on the importance of the video component, which helped them "to understand the partner better", or allowed "a natural and intimate conversation" and so that LLs upgraded the experience afforded by this language exchange.

5.2 Pre-Service Teachers. Results and Comments

PSTs' responses and comments, collected through the online post-lesson questionnaires after each video-mediated lesson, can be divided into a number of areas ranging from motivation to time and rule management, form-focused activities, communicative activities, personalised activities, the use of authentic materials and dialogic interaction.

Finally, the improvement revealed by their self-generated questions and responses reveal impressions that can be traced across the four lessons. In this context, it is worth mentioning that after each lesson PSTs shared their reflections, comments, ideas, and doubts with their peers through *Penzu*, a free online journal.[6]

According to their responses to the questionnaires, all seven PSTs confirmed that they had learned first-hand how to signal and manage the time slots allocated to the different activities throughout the lesson, which Ernest et al. (2013) consider a pivotal competence in online learning. This responsibility required that PSTs handle time effectively. In this respect, after the third lesson, one PST wrote, "Is it possible to carry out all the activities in 30 minutes? Yes, it is, because I managed to do that successfully".

Complying with a set of rules, including timing, was another challenge for PSTs teaching in a digitally mediated learning environment. The seven PSTs felt that they had gradually learned how to implement rules effectively in Skype-mediated lessons, which is a key competence in online teaching as previously mentioned (Ernest et al. 2013). During the first video conferencing lesson, introducing the rationale behind the activities implemented and the strategies adopted as well as "explain[ing] clearly to students what is expected from them during an exchange: deadlines, performance objectives, learning outcomes, etc". (O'Dowd 2015, 68) helped these PSTs learn how to manage rules successfully.

While, as mentioned earlier, LLs highly valued the form-focused activities – which met their needs and expectations –, three of the seven PSTs pointed out that LLs reacted differently to the form-focused exercises during the four meetings. During the first and second online lessons, these PSTs noticed that contextualised form-focused activities targeting both grammar and lexis were too difficult for LLs; focusing on two different language aspects concurrently in fact caused cognitive overload. As a result, these PSTs adjusted their teaching practice for the following lessons, tailoring activities to their LLs' individual needs. The other four PSTs, who devised form-focused activities targeting only grammar, did not report any problems on the part of the LLs.

At this stage, Littlewood's (2000) descriptions of role playing and problem-solving tasks is extremely useful when comparing form-focused activities with communicative activities. In role playing:

- Learners are asked to imagine themselves in a situation which could occur outside of the classroom. This could be anything from a simple occurrence like meeting a friend in the street,

6 https://penzu.com.

to a much more complex event such as a series of business negotiations.
- [Learners] are asked to adopt a specific role in the situation. In some cases, they may simply have to act as themselves. In others, they may have to adopt a simulated identity.
- [Learners] are asked to behave as if the situation really existed, in accordance with their roles. (Littlewood 2000, 49)

In problem-solving tasks,

> learners must not only share information, they must also discuss or evaluate this information in order to solve a problem. Some constituents [of problem solving] are:
>
> - The range of communicative functions that occurs is further widened. In particular, learners will now be involved in going beyond surface facts, in order to analyse, explain and evaluate them.
> - This further increases the unpredictability of the interaction. More and more frequently, learners will need to explore their repertoire in order to express ideas for which they have not been specifically prepared.
> - There is more scope for disagreement and negotiation. Learners therefore have to manage the interaction more skilfully at the interpersonal level, for example, by learning ways of interrupting or disagreeing without offence. (Littlewood 2000, 33)

As a result, six of the seven PSTs rated their form-focused exercises as becoming progressively more effective although they did not rate them as highly effective and engaging as the role-playing and problem-solving tasks. Over the four lessons, the six PSTs reported an increase in their ability to design and implement these communicative activities fostering students' output and engagement. Moreover, all seven PSTs perceived LLs to be increasingly at ease while engaged in the communicative tasks, which suggests that PSTs had learned to a rather remarkable extent how to "model social presence and online identity for […] [their] students and help to create an online community of trust and learning" (O' Dowd 2015, 68).

The information PSTs gathered about the LLs during the preliminary get-to-know meeting – which had been scheduled for the first time in the autumn 2014 case study – was especially instrumental in fostering personalisation in designing materials, which had become a pivotal practice for PSTs. All seven PSTs thus devised teaching materials that increasingly catered to LLs' interests and language needs, which shows that PSTs developed to a rather good degree the ability to "apply […] [their] knowledge of the culture and language of the

partner class to organize culturally and linguistically rich tasks for the exchange" (O' Dowd 2015, 67).

As for enhancing dialogic interaction and motivation, questionnaires following the first online lesson showed all PSTs' awareness of the key role that motivation plays in foreign language teaching and learning. As one PST wrote, "Motivation accounts for 75% of the success of the lesson. Strong motivation is contagious: even teaching may be extremely motivating!". Six of the seven PSTs pinpointed the pivotal role motivation plays in enhancing LLs' effective engagement in conversation; at the same time, three of the seven PSTs also noticed how motivating teaching can be for instructors when the tasks designed trigger higher order thinking skills and engagement, such as when students are engaged in problem-solving tasks fostering critical thinking and negotiation of meaning extensively. As a result, PSTs focused on the development of their task design and task selection competences extensively. To foster motivation, as consistently demonstrated in their lesson design, all seven PSTs also searched for highly engaging topics and inputs to promote extensive video-mediated interaction. This search, however, was often a challenge for PSTs as three of them pointed out; for example, one participant said that "on the basis of the first and the second lesson, looking for a suitable input triggering also motivation is really time-consuming". All seven PSTs highlighted "the added value of the authentic input" they had used to devise effective teaching materials. Four of the seven PSTs noticed that authentic input was especially instrumental in fostering LLs' motivation and output in video-mediated lessons. Another of the seven PSTs pointed out that "videos seemed to be more motivating for LLs – also thanks to the paralinguistic information conveyed and the context provided – but [that] LLs appeared to recall information retrieved while reading a written text better". Six of the seven PSTs evaluated videos as being "more suitable to convey language and culture concurrently" in a videoconferencing learning environment.

PSTs' self-generated questions showed significant professional growth as attested by the following table of sequential examples across the four lessons.

Table 1 Samples of PSTs' self-generated questions across the four online lessons (translated from Italian by the authors)

Lesson	PSTs' Self-Generated Questions
1	How are you planning to improve the activities that did not work as you expected?
2	To what extent did LLs react differently to the written input provided in the first Skype-mediated lesson and the video provided in the second videoconference?
2	Would you have enjoyed acting as a LL during the lesson you planned?
2	Could you have made the lesson more motivating?

2	If you had the opportunity to teach this lesson again, what would you do differently?
3	Who is responsible for the negative feeling you get after a lesson (you or the LLs)?
3	What is the best strategy to correct LLs while they are engaged in conversation?
3	How much shall I tell my LLs about myself (i.e., personal information, interests, experiences, etc.) if I want them to perceive me as both friendly and authoritative?
4	To what extent have you improved as a teacher after the four online meetings?
4	Can one reuse the activities, which worked extremely well in a video-mediated environment, in face-to-face learning instruction?
4	What were your expectations before the project?
4	Were your expectations fulfilled?

Overall, PSTs' responses to their own questions show that all seven PSTs felt increasingly satisfied with their digitally mediated lessons over the four lessons. The trend paralleled LLs' perceptions who, as indicated, felt progressively "more at ease" while interacting in Italian with their native-speaker instructors in the videoconferencing space.

5.3 Evaluation of the Recordings

The recordings of the audio portion of the online lessons provide further evidence for the positive impact of teaching and learning via telecollaboration. As described, PSTs audio recorded each session to use the audio recordings for self-evaluation and share evidence of the activity with the two project coordinators. The didactic implications that emerged, also based on the PSTs' reflections on the recordings followed by their coordinators' evaluations, are not meant to provide any general conclusions due to the limited number of participants in this case study. However, they offer an interesting pioneering case study.

5.3.1 Pre-Service Teachers' Findings

Listening to the recordings of their lessons enabled PSTs to carry out a systematic analysis of their online-specific foreign language teaching practices. PSTs evaluated the degree of effectiveness of the various tasks provided, from role plays and problem solving to opinion exchange and decision making. They also examined to what extent the tasks they had designed triggered dialogical interaction, and proved conducive to knowledge construction and foreign language acquisition within a sociocultural framework (Vygotsky 1978; Lantolf 2000; Lantolf, Thorne 2006), and negotiation of meaning fostering language learning (Long 1996).

Soon after the first lesson, three of the seven PSTs who noticed that role-play had not provided enough time for LLs to talk about the targeted topics opted instead for other kinds of tasks, such as problem solving and opinion exchange, in the following online sessions. Through reflective teaching, these PSTs thus gradually learned how to select and design more effective communicative activities designed to stimulate dialogue in the video-mediated learning environment. As a result, the three PSTs gradually developed online-specific foreign language materials design competences. The other four PSTs, who had provided students with either role playing or problem-solving tasks, did not report any challenges probably because the activities they had devised were more carefully designed and conducive to more student engagement than those created by their peers.

In terms of managing video-mediated dialogical interaction, after the first lesson, four of the seven PSTs were not satisfied with quantity of LL output, interaction, and negotiation of meaning. After adding more engaging discussions to the second lesson, the four PSTs were better satisfied with the quantity of oral interaction during the video call, describing the conversation as "really interesting". One of the four PSTs also mentioned that the scaffolding[7] with which she had planned to provide the LL had not been necessary since, as she comments, "While I was ready to guide my student through the conversation, she was actually able to tackle the whole topic effectively on her own". PSTs' awareness of the importance of output and negotiation of meaning in foreign language learning thus emerged from the start; likewise, PSTs' ability to design effective exchanges, i.e. "tasks which support the activities of collaborative inquiry and the construction of knowledge" (O'Dowd 2015, 68), increased consistently.

During the project, overall, teacher talking time (TTT) decreased as the analysis of the recordings shows. During the first lesson, five PSTs talked for about 40-60% and two PSTs for about 60-80%, while already during the third lesson, three PSTs talked for about 40-60%, three less than 40%, and only one – who had talked for about 40-60% of the time during the first Skype-mediated lesson – for 60-80% of the lesson with the overall result of some additional student talking time (STT).

The analysis of the recordings also generated reflection on time management, a key issue for all PSTs. One PST pointed out that, during the first online lesson, she had spent "too much time chatting informally at the beginning of the session" although she valued the phatic exchanges, which were instrumental in establishing a connection with her student. Similarly, another PST wrote that "time goes

7 Scaffolding is understood here as "the intervention of a tutor […] that enables a […] novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts" (Wood, Bruner, Ross 1976, 90).

by faster than expected" during the online lesson while still another noticed that "we were not able to carry out all the activities planned although we were online longer than the expected 30 minutes". Working in an online video-mediated environment, where there are no overt signals delineating the beginning or end of class, led all PSTs to think that time management was a variable which, as Ernest et al. (2013) suggest, would need to be considered and organised carefully. Comments on time management issues faded as the project developed, which shows that the seven PSTs gradually learned how to manage time to their satisfaction.

Recordings also allowed PSTs to reflect more closely on their techniques for error correction with LLs. From the second lesson, PSTs paid more attention to error correction while engaged in conversation with their LLs. Listening critically to the previous lessons' recordings enabled PSTs to adjust their teaching practice so that they could begin to correct LLs' mistakes consistently, using strategies such as backchannels (for example repeating LLs' utterances using the correct language structures), which would appear as a natural pragmatic conversational component. The recordings also showed that all LLs increasingly used self-correction starting from the second online lesson.

All PSTs also noted improved teaching competences in their interaction in Italian with LLs in the video-mediated learning environment. All seven PSTs gradually started to talk more slowly using a speech rate suitable to LLs' competence in Italian and to use a clearer pronunciation. They learned how to make input comprehensible during oral interaction working especially on their speech rate and pronunciation; as a result, during Skype-mediated oral interactions, all seven PSTs used increasingly fewer repetitions as well as lexical and syntactical simplifications. In this respect, it is important to notice that all LLs were perceived as more and more relaxed during desktop videoconferencing and gradually able to understand the utterances produced by PSTs to a higher degree. For example, during the last video lesson focusing on the most difficult topic, namely migration, six LLs appeared to understand 80-100% of what the PSTs said while the rest of the LLs ranged between 60-80% (three LLs) and 40-60% (two LLs). On the other hand, during the first lesson focusing on a much easier topic, namely Italian towns, five LLs seemed to understand 80-100% of what the PSTs said while two LLs between 40-60% and one LL between 60-80%. Overall, it seems that PSTs learned how to scaffold dialogical interactions rather well through various conversational strategies, which suggests that they had begun to master the new interactional patterns that digital environments entail (Hampel, Stickler 2012). As a result, in terms of digital competences in telecollaborative learning environments, over the four lessons, all seven PSTs learned to a rather good degree how to "organise and structure real-time student interaction taking into account the par-

ticular affordances and technicalities of synchronous tools such as videoconferencing" (O' Dowd 2015, 68).

Overall, through reflection on action, all seven PSTs' perceptions of their solid improvement in lesson planning, classroom management style, and teaching competences in a digital space emerged. Their post-lesson self-evaluations showed that, over the four online lessons, all PSTs were increasingly more satisfied with the way they planned and carried out the lessons, changing from ratings "insufficient" (just one PST) "barely sufficient" (two PSTs) and "good" (four PSTs) for the first lesson, to "very good" (two PSTs) and "excellent" (five PSTs) for the fourth and final lesson.

5.3.2 Project Coordinators' Findings

As previously mentioned, PSTs shared the recordings with the coordinators for a detailed analysis that was carried out using the following parameters: pauses, turn taking, initiative in speaking, use of English words, and classroom and discourse management skills. The recordings of 4 pairs of LLs and PSTs were taken as examples from which to draw conclusions. The following tables compare the first online lesson and the last of the 4 pairs of PSTs with their respective LLs and show the changes we observed in the LLs and in the PSTs in a symmetrical chart.

Table 1 First online lesson

LLs	PSTs
Nervous laughs and long pauses	Start turns and ask questions
Less initiative. Wait for questions	Do not switch to English even when students do not understand
Use of English words	Allow long pauses to occur
Need to hear some questions again	Need to repeat various questions
Feel more comfortable towards the end	

Table 2 Fourth and final online lesson

LLs	PSTs
Take initiative and ask questions	Let students start turns, talk more extensively, and ask more questions
Feel more comfortable and ask teachers personal questions	Rephrase sentences more quickly
Fewer pauses	Ask students personal questions and let/help them produce longer utterances
Do not use English, but rephrase and repeat words	Manage to make students feel more comfortable and thus less afraid and tentative while interacting in Italian
Do not feel intimidated by the corrections, despite higher difficulties of the tasks	

5.3.2.1 Comments on LLs' Improvements

As table 1 and table 2 show, LLs' participation improved **[tabs 1-2]**: there were fewer pauses and the conversation was carried out in a much more relaxed, familiar, and spontaneous environment. LLs were able to complete tasks more quickly and did not feel intimidated despite the higher difficulty of the grammar exercises and of the communicative tasks. Recordings of the interactions indicated that, with time, LLs felt increasingly more comfortable and that after the first two sessions, they were less reserved, prepared to take initiative in asking questions, and were able to establish a personal connection with their partner. The LLs observed increasingly refrained from using English words and attempted to rephrase their sentences in Italian when the message was not clear. This helped to develop a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, in which nervous laughter and longer pauses gradually disappeared, to give space to a positive and encouraging environment conducive to learning.

5.3.2.2 Comments on PSTs' Improvements

The analysis of the recordings showed significant improvement in terms of classroom and discourse management skills in the PSTs observed. As table 1 shows, during the first online lesson, PSTs consistently initiated conversations and asked questions; as a result, the pedagogical interaction was mainly teacher-controlled and highly asymmetrical (Diadori, Palermo, Troncarelli 2009). Moreover, long pauses and silences occurred during video-mediated dialogical interactions without PSTs repairing them effectively, which made LLs feel rather uncomfortable. Likewise, misunderstandings occurred on a few occasions during the first videoconferencing lesson; PSTs did not manage misunderstandings effectively since they did not repeat or rephrase utterances when necessary.

The comparison of the first and last online lesson **[tabs 1-2]** showed that the four PSTs had steadily learned how to manage the video-mediated conversations. They learned how to encourage LLs to initiate the interaction, maintain topics, keep the turn, and control the interactional exchange when appropriate; the four PSTs also learned how to shift topics, rephrase utterances, and repair communication breakdowns appropriately. As the project developed, the PSTs learned how to scaffold LLs' conversations better; as a result, LLs produced longer utterances and were less tentative while interacting in the target language. The audio recordings also showed that while talking with LLs, besides slowing down their rate of speech, PSTs also learned how to modify sentence structures to make their utterances more comprehensible to LLs. Overall, the PSTs learned how to scaffold

LLs' interaction, take turns, and negotiate meaning within a video-mediated learning environment gradually but rather effectively. This shows that PSTs developed, to various degrees, pivotal online-specific language teaching competences suitable to the fostering of effective interaction through desktop videoconferencing (Ernest et al. 2013; O'Dowd 2015).

Moreover, PSTs learned to wait for LLs' answers, demonstrating that they knew how to manage silence and pauses effectively. Providing LLs with the time they needed to produce output became a key objective for PSTs, which further proved the effectiveness of their *reflection on action*. It is of paramount importance for PSTs to be able to manage silence and pauses successfully since, as previously mentioned, video-mediated interactions come with many variables and challenges, such as managing silence and turn taking, that can disturb the overall outcome of the exchange (O'Malley et al. 1996).

In general, the PSTs observed increasingly fostered LLs' active participation in the learning process, guided learners through activities, and promoted engagement. While, as stated at the beginning of the section, the conclusions just drawn are related to four pairs of PSTs and LLs, these observations tentatively indicate that similar results had been achieved for other participants as well. Although our conclusions may not be generalisable, they provide a jumping-off-point for further empirical research.

6 Conclusions

LLs' and PSTs' responses to the final surveys are generally encouraging, suggesting that this telecollaboration gives participants in the United States and in Italy a new and motivating opportunity to learn, reflect, and engage with foreign language learning. Their positive feedback suggests that this project

> ha[s] the potential to propel language learners beyond the confines of the institutional identity of 'students' by framing the boundaries separating language study from social life, student from player, and information consumer from knowledge contributor. (Sykes et al. 2008, cited in Thorne, Black, Sykes 2009 814-15)

Simultaneously, the feedback confirms that technology can present another space in which to engage in fruitful pedagogical practice and critical reflection on second and foreign language acquisition, offering an opportunity for collaborative practice of teaching and learning. For example, the better the PSTs knew their LLs, the more they were able to devise engaging tasks, fostering higher order thinking skills and the "ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explic-

it criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram 1997, 53). On par with their demonstrations of higher levels of intercultural communicative competence, LLs found that being engaged in various culture-specific practices in a technology-enhanced learning environment contributed to

> develop[ing] learners as intercultural actors or mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity. (Byram, Gribkova, Starkey 2002, 9)

As pointed out early in this chapter, better intercultural communicative competence is a key outcome for LLs who want to communicate successfully.

In line with the current academic offerings which are increasingly more inclusive of technological tools for language learning and online teaching, projects like this one support the value of teacher training for the success of the digitally mediated exchange. Today's classroom realities reinforce the urgent need to offer instructors not only the latest and most advanced technological resources and tools, but also a solid practice to be adequately prepared for an online teaching environment. Significance of teacher training in this area especially resonates in O'Dowd's words, who suggests that "telecollaboration is to become a long-term integral part of foreign language education […] rather than an extra or supplementary activity" (2011, 356). Meanwhile, as virtual spaces become more and more sophisticated, new research opportunities also emerge, allowing us to experiment in a variety of new and stimulating ways (for example, with more LLs and PSTs in the same room or in breakout rooms).

International telecollaborations can be a motivating experience, capable of simultaneously enriching the curriculum of all participants and of the coordinators through the building of an engaging and intellectually inspiring virtual space for authentic and significant linguistic, intercultural, and pedagogical exchanges.

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Blended Learning and the Global South. Virtual Exchanges in Higher Education
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Creating and Testing an Online Platform for Language Learning in the Mexican Context

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Abstract This chapter presents the results of a case study conducted in 2016-17 at the National School of Higher Studies in Morelia (ENES-M), Michoacán, Mexico, where a pilot programme was implemented at bachelor's level for students learning English as a foreign language. The platform used in this study was composed of small digital units called Learning Support Units (UAPAs) first developed in 2011 to help students practice and develop their linguistic skills at two levels, basic and pre-intermediate. These selected UAPAs were hosted in a portal named *Ambiente Virtual de Idiomas* (AVI) (Language Virtual Environment) administrated by the Coordination of Open University and Distance Education (CUAED). Later, in 2015, it was proposed that a more complex and complete platform be designed and in 2016 the new UAPAs for levels A1, A2, B1 and some of B2 were developed and then piloted for further evaluation. As a result, the experimental groups exposed to a blended teaching reported higher scores in the post test than control groups that were taught with no use of technological elements, hence proving that blended-learning teaching is a good pedagogical option for university students.

Keywords Blended learning. Higher education. Digital educational Technology. Virtual learning environments. Learning management systems.

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1 Introduction

The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) is characterised as a transformative space dedicated to critical analysis, freedom of thought, creativity and innovation. Language learning and the mastery of information technologies are among the most relevant skills promoting critical thinking, problem solving and collaboration.

At UNAM, language learning has become an essential element of the BA curriculum. In line with the notion of multilingual education established by UNESCO in 1999 (30 C/Res.12), UNAM provides for the possibility of using at least three languages in education, the mother tongue, an indigenous language and a foreign language. In particular, the learning of English, as the dominant language of the global academy, has become a fundamental tool for accessing knowledge, while the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's) is valuable in achieving learning objectives. This is the scenario in which AVI (Language Virtual Environment) emerged as an interactive platform to expand language learning possibilities.

The aim of this study is to illustrate the impact and effectiveness of this platform in combination with the mandatory face-to-face classes for students at tertiary level. We believe that students exposed to a blended learning model will achieve better results in their English language learning.

In the first part of the chapter, we review the educational context that gave rise to the emergence of the AVI language learning platform at ENES, UNAM, its design process and the theoretical framework of blended learning that is utilised in the study. In the second part, methodological and sample considerations for data collection will be explained. Finally, in the last part, we discuss the results and conclusions.

2 Theoretical Framework of AVI (Language Virtual Environment)

The academic model of all National Schools of Higher Studies (ENES) is innovative. The creation of ENES is part of the 2011-15 Institutional Development Plan proposed by the former university rector, Doctor José Narro Robles. Thus, on 31 March 2011, in an extraordinary session of the University Council, the creation of our National School of Higher Studies Unidad León (ENES León) was unanimously approved to teach innovative bachelor's and postgraduate degrees. Similarly, on 9 December 2011 ENES Morelia was created to offer Mexican society new options for higher education in the centre-western region

of Mexico.[1] ENES campuses were created as a way of expanding the possibilities for more and more people to pursue university studies.

Perhaps, one of the aspects that makes ENES a more up-to-date academic and pedagogical model is the fact that English is no longer seen as a mere elective but is rather integral to the programme. This responds to the status of English as the dominant language of international business and academia and renders students more competitive and better equipped to navigate the globalised world.

At ENES, students cannot qualify with their bachelor's degree if they have not taken English subjects corresponding to their programme.

Features of English instruction at ENES include:

1. upon entering the bachelor's degree, students must take a placement test in order to determine their level of proficiency in English;
2. students take English classes for the duration of their bachelor's degree and are expected to attain B2 level on the CEFR framework;
3. aside from their regular English classes, other workshops directed to specific areas or subareas of language are offered through the Self Access Learning Centre.

Entrance tests and proficiency levels are an inexact science and it is of course inevitable that the level of English among students in any given class varies to some degree. Compounding this issue, in face-to-face classes professors and instructors cover grammar and vocabulary topics in a relatively linear process, leading to some students being unable to follow the class in its entirety or finding a particular aspect of the class difficult. There are also students who, due to internships or fieldwork related to their areas, are absent from face-to-face classes for certain periods during the semester. In this scenario, online instruction combined with face-to-face instruction becomes more of a necessity than an option.

3 Language Virtual Environment Project and UAPA's Development

UNAM has always been a leading educational institution, and in the case of language teaching this is no exception. CUAED (Coordination of Open University and Distance Education) is a UNAM institution in charge of administrating systems and platforms in virtual

1 Information taken from the official sites of ENES León: https://enes.unam.mx/ and ENES Morelia https://www.enesmorelia.unam.mx.

learning environments. Thus, in partnership with other faculties of the University, CUAED carries out various projects aimed at the development of virtual environments.

ENES Morelia and ENES León were able to collaborate with CUAED to create different projects aimed at learning languages. The projects are aimed at providing university students with tools and activities that promote language development in autonomous learning environments. In 2017, in collaboration with other institutions at the University, the Virtual Environment of Languages (AVI) project was launched to design and develop materials. UNAM's Language Virtual Environment is a platform that hosts four-skill courses (that is, courses involving the development of Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing) so that university students can learn English, as well as French and Italian soon. The materials are organised into Learning Support Units (UAPA) that allow students to work on aspects of the language in which they feel they need practice. This means it is a resource that can be used as a language course or as a side component of a language learning process. Learning Support Units are designed for autonomous use by students. Feedback is immediate and effective.

The process of developing a unit involves different players. The project administrator coordinates human and material efforts to achieve institutional objectives, identifies project requirements and monitors implementation. The content expert – a language professor/instructor – is in charge of the pedagogical design of the activities that will be included in the UAPA as well as their development. Each learning activity must include clear objectives for the student and a guide on how to carry out tasks on the platform, as well as the corresponding feedback. It is necessary to point out that the language used within the unit must be friendly and motivating, which encourages the student to continue working on the material because, as we have already mentioned, they are autonomous tasks without teacher supervision. Once the first part of the process of creating a unit is carried out, the pedagogical advisor reviews the instructions, objectives and characteristics of the activities, to verify that the objectives that have been set out correspond to the activities and feedback provided. An editor takes over standardisation of the style within the instructional script and with respect to the educational programme in general, verifying also that the terminology used is adequate. This part of the process is extremely important because it ensures that each unit is coherent and perfectly integrated with the whole.

After this, the visual communicator conceptualises the graphic interface of the website (image, colours and navigation characteristics) based on the navigation diagram. Finally, the systems engineer supports the visual communicator and the pedagogical advisor ensuring that the interactive platform operates seamlessly.

This process is of course not linear but completely iterative. The team works together to ensure that the activities in the unit are perfectly integrated and cohesive. The final product is a digital learning unit with its own content and activities that can either function along with other units independently.

4 The Language Virtual Environment. An Innovative Approach to Learning English in Higher Education

The AVI platform responds to the needs of the Mexican context and UNAM's mission to ensure ever greater societal access to tertiary education. The relationship between the University and greater Mexican society is paramount and the audience of this platform includes not only registered students but the general public who can access the platform free of charge.

Also, as part of the university's goals vis-à-vis its own student body, AVI represents an important innovation. One of the priorities outlined by the rector of the UNAM, Enrique Graue Wiechers, in his 2019-23 institutional development plan is the massively expanded use of new Learning and Knowledge Technologies.[2]

An additional advantage is that it allows a smooth transition between educational modalities, for example distance learning, in order to "move towards an education that uses the educational resources of Learning and Knowledge Technologies as a complement to face-to-face education" (Graue 2019, 46). Along these lines, AVI represents online support for subjects with high failure rates such as compulsory English courses.

It is important to highlight that this platform responds to one of the key objectives of tertiary education: student autonomy.[3] The transition between secondary and higher education can be understood in term of students' dependence on teachers. The platform allows students to work autonomously and at their own pace. Students are able to follow different learning pathways. Students may follow a linear sequence corresponding to mastery levels (from A1 to B2) or, alternatively, they can organise their learning according to themes or indeed use the platform as a resource of activities to support their in-class curriculum.

The UAPA's activities are self-assessed and offer extensive feedback – not just based on right or wrong, like most free online plat-

2 The platform is managed as an existing resource that must be articulated and consolidated by incorporating it into face-to-face education, which represents the essence of blended learning.

3 Learner's language autonomy is understood as the act of acceptance of one's responsibility of learning and implementing consciously language learning strategies (Little 2002, 22; Macaro 2008, 54).

forms that offer activities with correct or incorrect answers – helping you to improve your skills autonomously and with the expectation of more significant progress, based on more specific performance criteria. Moreover, it covers not only grammar or vocabulary practice but all four skills, both separately and in integration.

5 Designing a Blended-Learning Experience at ENES

After the Learning Support Units were designed and developed, and the platform made available online, it was necessary to test its effectiveness as a pedagogical tool under the rubric of blended learning.

Graham (2006, 3)[4] offers a precise definition: "*Blended learning systems* combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction". However, a definition that gives us a greater range when talking about the technological aspect is required. According to Means,

> It is not sufficient to merely put course contents on a web site for students to download for a blended-learning course to be successful, [n]or does the mere inclusion of more resources such as video or online quizzes appear to influence the amount of student learning. (cited in Hew, Cheung 2014, 5)

Thus, the definition proposed by Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal – although established a couple of years earlier – paints a more comprehensive picture:

> [b]lended learning is a pedagogical approach that combines the effectiveness and socialisation opportunities of the classroom with the technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment, rather than a ratio of delivery modalities. (2004, 3)

This broader definition is more appropriate because it accounts for the integration of technology and digital media with traditional classroom activities led by a teacher in the interest of providing a more dynamic learning experience. The technology is not only used to complement but also to transform and improve the learning experience; as Garrison and Vaughan (2008, 6) note, blended learning is a complex mixture of resources, classroom and online activities.

4 There are several definitions for blended learning, some patently too broad, such as the following: "blended learning involves the combination of two fields of concern: education and educational technology" (Chew, Jones, Turner 2008, 1). See also Sharma 2010, 457-8.

It is important to emphasise that considering this platform a pedagogical tool implies that we are aware that blended learning does not happen automatically just by adding technological resources to a traditional classroom programme. It is indispensable to understand how these two components interact. In keeping with Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal (2004)'s position, Hew and Cheung state:

> blended learning should be viewed as a pedagogical approach that combines the opportunities of face-to-face learning with the opportunities of the online environment such as increasing the interaction between students and students, as well as students and instructors. (Hew, Cheung 2014, 3)

Therefore, the implementation methodology for the learning units rested on two practice models in blended learning. These models were proposed by Staker (cited in Hew, Cheung 2014, 9) and considered because of the student's requirements:

Rotation model	• Students rotate on a fixed schedule between learning online in an individualised, self-paced environment and a traditional face-to-face classroom • Online learning component can be remote or on site in school • The face-to-face teacher usually oversees the online work
Self-blend	• Students take online courses to supplement their school curricula • The online courses are always remote

Among the main reasons for using these models are:

- they provide flexible, personal and more attentive training to the learner, that is to say, the students take their classes in their established schedules and gain freedom to organise their time when doing the modules online, giving them greater control on their learning;
- they give the student the confidence to clear up doubts that arise from the online modules in the face-to-face classes;
- they cover a variety of learning styles and teaching methodologies: face-to-face learning activities (interaction, face-to-face, role-plays, labs) and online activities (videos, chats, forums, live connection);
- they make it possible to solve problems and develop critical thinking from different perspectives to access knowledge (collaborative work, teamwork, use of digital tools);
- they make it easier to study face-to-face subject matter online when the student is forced to miss class;
- they optimise classroom time because the student can review the class topic online in advance.

6 The Blended-Learning Experimental Experience at ENES Morelia

The objective of this study was to measure the effectiveness of blended learning through the implementation and the analysis of the teaching modules of the online platform (UAPAS) in a face-to-face class of English as a foreign language in university students of ENES Morelia.

The pilot phase began in August 2016 and terminated in August 2017. The selected population was composed of 10 groups – Basic (A1), Pre-intermediate (A2) and Intermediate (B1) levels – from the National School of Higher Studies (ENES) of UNAM in Morelia, Michoacán. The school offers BA programmes which include English as a standard subject and some of the teachers who participated in the design of some of the UAPAs were employed at ENES at the time of the study. A total of 290 students were involved in this study. The female/male split was 52% to 48%. 99% of all the students were between 17 and 18 years old, while the other 1% were older (20, 22 and 66).

Before piloting began, the research team[5] had two options, either to pilot the programme as an online course, or to implement it in the classes as an innovative tool, turning the course into a blended experience. Since the creation of the platform was still in progress, it was decided that a blended experience would be more meaningful and productive.

It was decided that five groups would be exposed to the blended experience and the other five would not, providing two hypothetical outcomes: one being that the test groups would not perform differently (H1); the other being that the control groups would have scored lower owing to the lack of extra input from the blended experience (H2).

7 Methodology

For piloting the platform, only A1, A2 and B1 groups were included. Five teachers (all of whom had at least 4 years of experience) were selected to run the pilot project. Coordinating and assessing the process was the language coordinator of the School. The decision to exclude B2 level students was taken because the creation of the B2 learning unit was not complete at the time. There were a total of 10 groups: four groups of A1 level students, 2 experimental groups (B and Bi) and two control groups (C and Ci). The same structure applied to four A2 level groups. The B1 level subjects were divided into only 2 groups (1 experimental and one control). In total there were 290 students involved in the study: 142 in the experimental groups

5 Project leader was MA Ana Lilia Villegas.

and 148 in the control groups. It may be relevant to mention that the total population of students of English at that time in the School was around 800, divided into 4 groups at A1 level, 6 groups at A2 level, 6 groups at B1 level, 6 groups at B2 level, 3 groups at C1 level, and other groups of academic English (around 100 students enrolled in 6 different groups). The number of groups for the pilot chosen was thus statistically meaningful.

The English programme consists of four hours of contact teaching per week for 16 weeks, amounting to a total for each level/term of 60 hours a semester and four hours for exams. Consequently, every level of English, consisting of two semesters, would be covered ideally in 120 hours a year. Since the two blended-learning models selected for this project implied a mix of face-to-face classes and online work, it was decided that, for the experimental groups, an equal amount of teaching time would be given over to the two modalities. Thus two hours per week of face-to-face interaction was performed to cover the textbook, speaking and reading skills, as well as new grammar and checking book exercises while the remaining two hours would take place on the platform on which students would practice the grammar taught in class, as well as developing writing and listening skills. In addition, once a month the class was taken to the language lab to do online activities together. These were carefully selected by the teacher on the basis of the progress made by the group. In other words, the language lab class helped the group to clarify general doubts regarding certain grammatical structures as well as taking student questions. These questions were taken into consideration by the teacher who would then provide links to online resources aimed at resolving specific issues.

At the beginning of the course a placement test was administered to provide initial parameters. This placement test was administered by the English unit in Mexico City so that the neutrality of the results could be ensured. The same placement test was administrated as a post-evaluation before the pilot project ended. No instrument was applied to measure the digital capacity of the students. Nevertheless, to ensure that all students in the experimental groups had the minimum digital skills to navigate and use the platform, a mandatory tutorial had to be taken before starting the course itself.

The pilot was set to last the whole academic year, giving enough time to the experimental groups to familiarise themselves with the platform and blended learning. Clear instructions were given to the teachers so everybody involved would have a clear idea of what to do and whom to contact in case of technological, academic or logistic issues. The academic side would provide the necessary assessment regarding the topic or the sequence of the programme and the learning unit. Concerning technology, a selected team of engineers was assigned to help the teacher and students when a matter of connec-

tion, downloading or accessing the platform and its contents would arise. Finally, in terms of logistics the language coordinator of the school was charged with that task, reporting and recording all data in order to keep track of the piloting process and give advice on the success, or failure, of the AVI Programme.

The teachers from the control groups were not given any specific instruction other than following the subject programme as they would normally do, with no use of technology or online material and keeping record of the notes for the placement test at the beginning and at the end of the course. The programme for those courses was not modified or altered. In contrast, the teachers from the blended-learning groups were required to:

1. keep records of the notes of the pre- and post- test;
2. use an element (learning unit) of the platform to teach, practice, reinforce or wrap-up a grammar topic in class at least once a week;
3. ensure that students used an element (learning unit) of the platform to teach, practice, reinforce or wrap-up a grammar topic of the course at home at least once a week;
4. give feedback on the platform to the students at least once a week;
5. report, by means of email, any problem they encountered with the platform, and follow it up with the coordinator until resolved;
6. administer a qualitative test to the students at the end of the course in order to gather their impressions of the platform and ascertain whether the blended experience had been beneficial to them or not.

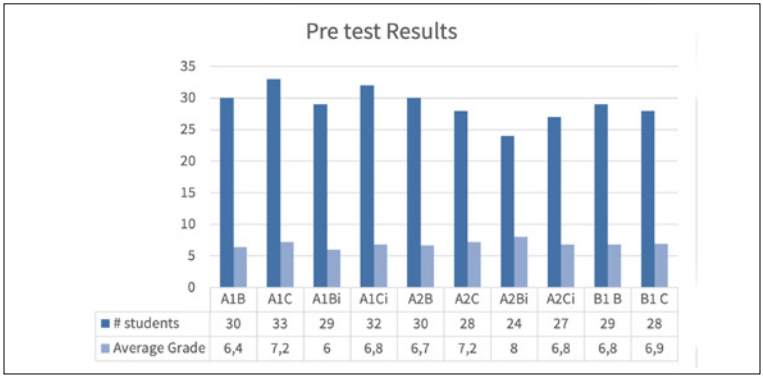
8 Data Collection

Over the course of one year, students from both the experimental and the control groups were monitored and assessed, using the rotation and self-blended models (Hew, Cheung 2014). Every teacher had to keep a digital weekly journal of situations that may be interpreted as variables that could affect the learning process of the students. The observations made in the journals were discussed in the monthly meetings and shared among all the teachers and the coordinator in order to evaluate how the platform and classes were evolving. The data collected from the pre- and post-tests were considered to measure the truth or otherwise of the first hypothesis. All teachers were asked to report the average grade, owing to the fact that this number was the absolute in the comparisons between the two groups and, therefore, the basis for assumptions regarding the effectiveness of the blended teaching experience.

9 Results

The 5 groups who were exposed to the blended-learning experience reported a similar, even lower mark in the pre-test, while the control groups reported marks in the expected range, between 6-7. As illustrated in graph 1, the average number of students per group was between 29 and 30. At A1 and A2 levels, the number of students was slightly higher, 33 maximum. However, the number of students is irrelevant in this study, because we were interested in measuring the impact of the blended teaching on the students, rather than teaching or learning techniques, which would be affected by the number of students in a group.[6]

As we can see in graph 1, the experimental groups (B/Bi) achieved an average mark of 6.78, which is relatively low compared to the control groups (C/Ci) whose average grade was 6.98 **[graph 1]**. The data is extremely important because, as H1 states, it was expected that after the blended experienced all experimental groups would have a higher score in the post-test, compared to the control groups.

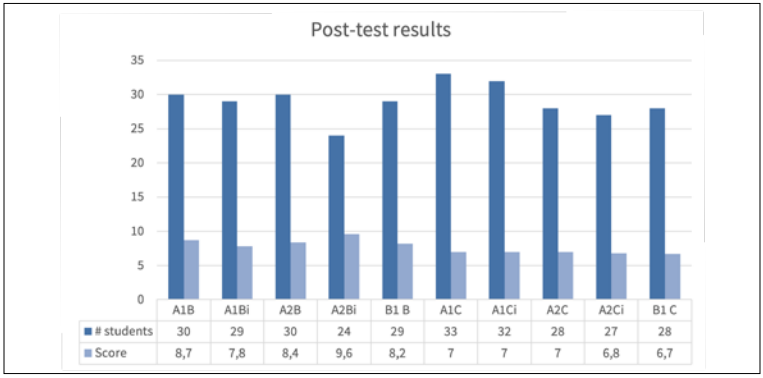


	A1B	A1C	A1Bi	A1Ci	A2B	A2C	A2Bi	A2Ci	B1 B	B1 C
# students	30	33	29	32	30	28	24	27	29	28
Average Grade	6,4	7,2	6	6,8	6,7	7,2	8	6,8	6,8	6,9

Graph 1 Pre-test results; experimental and control groups

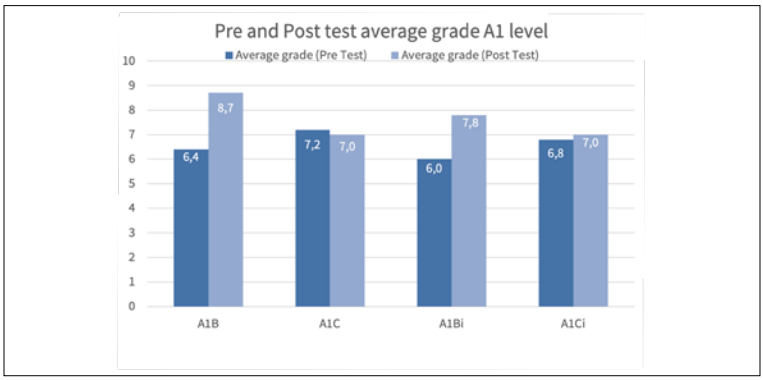
6 See Hallinan, Sørensen 1985, specifically on the impact of class size on teaching techniques.

As can be seen in graph 2, the post-test results reveal that the blended experienced was successful **[graph 2]**. As can be observed, the control groups reported similar scores as they did in the pre-test (6.9). In contrast, the experimental groups improved by 20% compared to the pre-test results, achieving an average mark of 8.2.



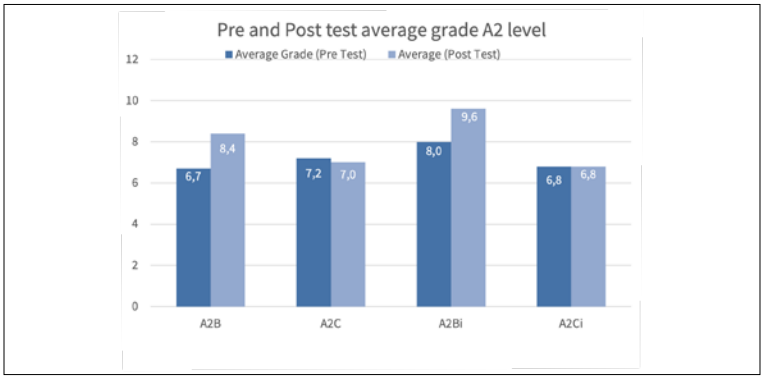
Graph 2 Post-test results; Experimental and control groups

If we analyse the results level by level, comparing A1 levels in the case of graph 2, we can observe that experimental groups improved drastically with an average score of 8.25, compared to the pre-test results of 6.2. This means that the blended experience was well adopted by students and they responded positively to this innovative way of teaching/learning (they had not been otherwise exposed to other, similar types of teaching/learning at ENES Morelia.



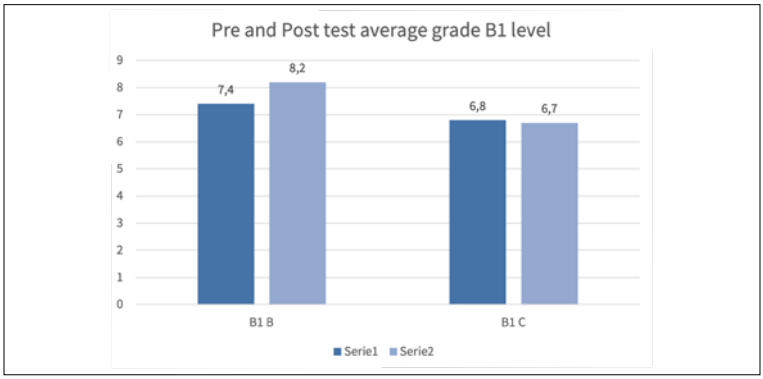
Graph 3 Pre and Post average grades A1 levels

In graph 4, it can be observed that the improvement is even greater at A2 levels than at A1 levels **[graph 4]**. This information is highly relevant when compared to the B1 level. A2 groups had been taught in a regular, communicative, yet not technology-based class. Thus, this change in their learning paradigm seemed to have a positive result, since their improvement was nearly 30% (average grade of 9) compared to the pre-test grade average (7.35).



Graph 4 Pre and Post average grades A2 levels

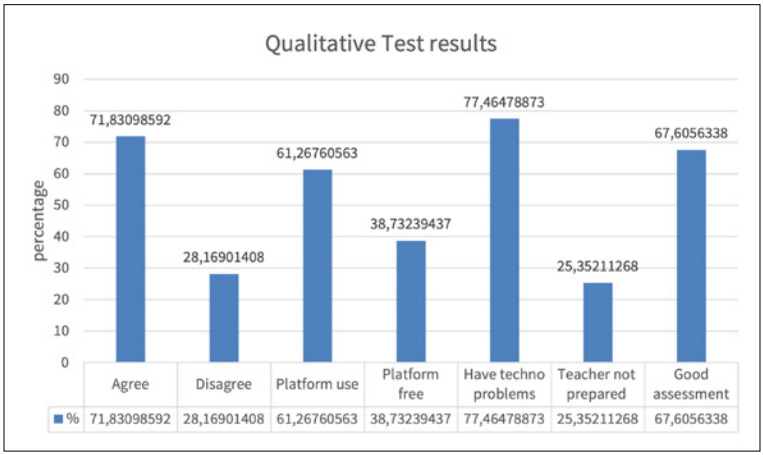
At the B1 level **[graph 5]**, the score in the post-test revealed, as mentioned above, that the change in learning experience motivated students and made them practice and learn in different ways. For this reason, students improved their scores in the post-test. Nevertheless, the difference between average mark results was not as high as in the other levels. Probably, this variable may have been related to other factors, like the teacher's lack of mastery of the technology, or that some of the units were not fully finalised in the platform. However, despite the above-mentioned drawbacks, as expected, there was an improvement (H1).



Graph 5 Pre and Post average grades B1 level

Finally, after applying the qualitative test to the final grades of the 142 students, the results reported that 70% of the students who underwent blended learning would agree to enrol in a blended-learning course again. The overall conclusion was that the experience itself was very satisfying, and the students would be more likely to repeat it as a result. This outcome is linked to the fact that 60% of students expressed that they would use the platform again, implying that the platform itself served its purpose to motivate and facilitate knowledge through interactive units hosted on the platform. Some comments related to technical failures and problems were reported as was expected since some of the units were under trial mode and others were even under construction. However, during the second term, most of those problems were solved and the experience with the learning units improved.

Lastly, regarding the evaluation, almost 68% reported that they were appropriately assessed by their teachers. This was primarily due to the close follow-up and commitment of the Language Coordinator, who weekly asked the teachers to report any situation they observed in order to have a prompt solution. Regrettably, 22% of students who provided negative feedback of their assessors, noted that the teacher was not committed to the class, or that response time on the platform was mediocre, and that some teachers did not master the technology being implemented. All these comments were considered and further measures were adopted.



Graph 6 Qualitative test results

Summarising, reviewing the graph and results, the general sense of this case study is that blended learning does affect language teaching. As it was illustrated, level by level, all of the groups achieved higher scores in the post-test, and regarding the qualitative test, most of them expressed that the experience was motivating and innovative, despite the technological disruptions they encountered.

10 Conclusions

The study shows that blended learning can be a feasible and positive option for undergraduate students in the context and learning areas illustrated here (see Harahap, Nasution, Manurung 2019, 532). The selected models of rotation and self-blending provided the required elements for this experiment to be successful. Having fixed face-to-face schedules with the teacher who assessed the students on the platform increased the confidence and trust among all students as well as at an individual level. Constantly highlighting and reminding the students of the importance of doing the online exercises (learning units) as a way of supplementing the curriculum gave positive results, and most of the students either consolidated, practiced or learned structures, lexicon and language skills through the blended-learning experience. It is evident that implementing blended elements, carefully selected and merged harmoniously into the face-to-face programme, can result in improved scores in the final test. More importantly, it can provide an innovative and motivating method of learning for students: the blended-learning experience proved

to render the overall learning experience more dynamic and meaningful (see Dziuban, Hartman, Moskal 2004).

Thanks to this pilot and its results the UAPA project and the AVI Programme at UNAM[7] was fully developed, compiling the learning units into structured modules organised by levels, A1, A2, B1 and B2. The online platform has already been implemented as a fully online course for BA distance majors in Mexico. A training course for teachers has been developed in order to minimise further negative experiences, like those reported by some students in the qualitative survey. Also, this experience has opened the possibility of expanding courses to other languages like Italian, Spanish and French. The learning tool has also been made available more broadly as part of the official English Programme at UNAM as well as a supplementary tool for anybody who wants to practice English online thanks to it being open-access.

Even though in assessing this specific experiment thorough statistical tests were not conducted, owing to the nature of the experiment itself (a piloting project rather than a validity one), we think that further studies should be conducted taking into account elements such as the level of English of the students, the blended learning models, the quantity of time exposed to the online activities, as well as the time spent in the language lab. It is suggested (see Portridge, Ponting, McCay 2011) that a more formal and interdisciplinary discussion should take place[8] in order to implement blended learning programmes more broadly and organically using the platform in the future. Further research could and should be done to test the AVI content and capability as an educational technology (see Castro 2019) in other blended models, levels of language mastery, and educational contexts.

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Hybrid Design and Flipping the Classroom in Content-Oriented Foreign Language Courses
Developing Intensive Italian for Gamers

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Abstract Recently, content-based language teaching has emerged as a successful response to the increasing challenges that language departments in higher education face. This is a case study. The hybrid format enabled the creation of a content-based intensive foreign language video game-based course. Flipping the classroom allowed learners to spend more time and focus their attention on exploring the spoken language through the digital gaming realia and communication. It also encouraged independent language exploration. Pilot data show that students attained the desired level, autonomous learning continued, and less stress was involved.

Keywords Game-based learning. Computer assisted language learning. Computer assisted instruction. Gamification. Second language acquisition. Video game-based learning. Italian. Italian as a second language.

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1 Introduction

In recent years, scholars have increasingly stressed the importance of content-based language teaching (CBLT)) as a potential successful response to the increasing challenges that foreign language departments in higher education currently face in the context of the economic downturns that have beset academia (see, for example, Lightbown 2013). The primary challenges are declining enrolments as well as programme closures. The 2016 Modern Language Association's (MLA) *Final Report on Enrolments in Languages Other than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education* shows a 9.2% decline in enrolments between fall 2013 and fall 2016. As the authors state,

> numbers imply that the downturn has affected introductory enrolments (the first through fourth semesters) most sharply, and indeed the 15.9% drop in enrolments at two-year institutions, a special area of concern given those institutions' role in higher education access, corroborates that interpretation. (Looney, Lusin 2019, 2)

The report calls for innovative critical thinking, in light of heightened focus on STEM degrees, then proceeds to present case studies of successful models. Those successful models all have one common element, the application of content-based learning. This article is a case study on the advantages of using a hybrid format in an intensive, content-based foreign language course, which utilises video game-based learning (VGBL). In this essay I also provide evidence that some current video games that have an emphasis on communication can be conducive to second and foreign language and culture (F/L2) acquisition. The successful experience of creating and teaching the course *Intensive Italian for Gamers* at Saint Louis University (SLU) ultimately reflects, and confirms, my belief that F/L2 acquisition necessarily means integration of language and content, thus rejecting the formal separation between 'content' and 'language' as a pedagogic necessity for language learning (Creese 2005). The 2016 MLA report highlights examples of

> programmes whose robust enrolments demonstrate the value of innovative curricular thinking as well as dedicated faculty members who have the support of their administration. (Looney, Lusin 2019, 2)

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The case studies that the authors then analyse on pages 7-21 of the report as examples of innovative curricular thinking all share one common element of content-based courses and curricula, although articulated in different forms. For example, integrating language and culture (page 7); community and cross-disciplinary connections (page 13); connecting languages and careers (i.e. Spanish and nursing, page 17).

2 Narrative Video Games as Content and VGBL

The rise in popularity of gaming on consoles, computers, mobile devices, and even 'casual gaming' on social networks, has contributed to making video games an integral facet of our lives. Since the early 1980s, video games have been a pervasive part of our culture. The Pew Research Center recently stated that about half of American adults play videogames, with no substantial differences between male and female players (Duggan 2015), while 97% of youth aged boys and 83% of youth-aged girls play video games (Anderson, Jiang 2018).

As a teacher of foreign languages, literature and culture, I have been experimenting with video game-based learning since 1998. In previous articles, I have discussed recent, communicative-oriented, cinematic video games, which I found to be effective in FL classroom as supplements to more traditional teaching techniques. I use VGBL as a tool to reinforce vocabulary and grammatical forms, as a means to present authentic cultural content (for example, the reconstruction of daily and political life in Renaissance Florence under the Medici in *Assassin's Creed II*) and as an opportunity for students to apply problem solving in the target language (TL). Games such as the main chapters in the *Assassin's Creed* series (*Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft, 2007-20) are fully interactive multimedia experiences combining real-time animation, speech, subtitles, writing (textual interaction) and, in some cases, even spoken interaction, in the form of audio, sometimes also video chat with other users. As a form of digital *realia*, artifacts in the TL that help enhance language acquisition, they can be used to reinforce and expand materials that have been previously learned through traditional methods (Bregni 2017; 2018; 2019).

3 A F/L2 Course for Gamers

Experimentation with introducing video games as a learning device in the F/L2 language classroom led me to explore the option of developing a video game-based language course. In fall 2016, as the recipient of a Saint Louis University (SLU) Reinert Center for Transformative Teach-

ing and Learning fellowship, I further developed language acquisition strategies, methodologies, and materials (worksheets, projects and assignments based on video games and related media, such as magazines, online and in print; websites; YouTube videos, etc.). In spring 2017, I used the SLU state-of-the-art Learning Studio to teach for the first time *Intensive Italian for Gamers*, a course that combines 'traditional' intensive language instruction with VGBL. Following the pedagogical premise that language acquisition is a process that involves, and benefits from, daily interactions in the language in and outside the classroom, the course targeted the specific segment of the student population that self-identifies as gamers, approximately 10% according to the 2015 Pew research (Duggan 2015). Based on my teaching practices and experiences, I believed that a strong, shared interest for gaming would stimulate and enhance the students' learning process, thus justifying the intensive nature of the course (Bregni 2017; 2018).

4 Video Games as Digital *Realia*

The potential of gaming in learning has been explored in a variety of fields, including language acquisition (e.g. Reinders 2012). Literature on video game in F/L2 acquisition mainly focuses on 'serious gaming', and is centred on the concept of player agency and the creation of specific games for F/L2 acquisition (Sykes, Reinhardt 2012; Neville 2009, 2010; Sørensen, Meyer 2007). In my research and teaching experience (Bregni 2017; 2018; 2019), certain commercial cinematic video games are fully interactive multimedia experiences that show positive results in terms of F/L2 (and, in some cases, culture) acquisition. Including such games in the curriculum as *realia* can help students improve their skills (Spurr 1942; Dlaska 2003). *Realia* afford F/L2 acquisition through development of specific personal interests. Cinematic games, like movies, include verbal and non-verbal communication, but also add the additional layer of agency, which improves learning (Deters et al. 2014). They also involve problem-solving (and, as we will see more in details below, critical thinking) that can be applied to group interaction, all particularly conducive to learning and F/L2 acquisition (Wenger 1998; Nunan 1992).

Additionally, video games as digital *realia* can contribute to the goal of transforming our students into life-long learners of (a) F/L2 language(s), a process explored by Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) (e.g. Smith 1997).

Some specific commercial cinematic games contain materials diverse enough to aid in reinforcing many different parts of FL acquisition (lexicon, grammar, morphology and syntax). However, in order for all *realia* to be effective, video games included, there must be solid preliminary work done, which involves the creation of vocabu-

lary worksheets, listening, reading comprehension and grammar exercises that should take place both before and after each video game-based class activity (Bregni 2017; 2018; 2019).

5 Video Game-Based Learning and Critical Thinking

Is using video games in the foreign language classroom an instance of gamification? It is necessary to define and delineate a distinction between gamification and Game-Based Learning (GBL), two concepts that are often confused. Gamification (teachers turning lessons into a game they designed) is merely a revamped reward system, not an actual teaching method. It is a motivational tool. Motivation is important to encourage learning, but it does not actually do the teaching. GBL refers to the borrowing of certain gaming principles and applying them to real-life settings to engage users (Trybus 2010). GBL is pedagogy, closely connected to play theory. In GBL, learners apply critical thinking (Farber 2017). Regarding critical thinking, research highlights the importance of student discourse in the construction of knowledge and the fostering of critical thinking skills, especially in the field of problem-based learning (PBL). Further, a growing body of research on GBL draws parallels between playing specific types of games (analogue or digital quests centred on problem-solving, such as *Dungeons & Dragons* or the *Assassin's Creed* series), and the solving of ill-structured problems, citing similar conditions for learning (teachers as facilitators, small student groups, student centred, problems as vehicles for development), and similar learning outcomes (collaboration, communication, problem-solving, critical thinking) as PBL. Cicchino (2015) demonstrates how GBL affects critical thinking as evidenced by student discourse in traditional classroom environments. Since my focus is video games, I refer to my research and teaching practices as video game-based learning, or VGBL.

6 An 'Affinity Space' for Gamers

By designing a course specifically targeting self-professed gamers, I aimed to create an 'affinity space'. According to Gee,

> [a]n affinity space is a place or set of places where people affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class culture, ethnicity, or gender. (Gee 2004, 77)

As research indicates, affinity learning groups, whether formal or informal, enhance learning (Gee 2005). Such affinity spaces can also take place virtually, in online video games or online spaces for

gamers (fora, groups, etc. Hayes, Gee 2010). In creating the course, therefore, my purpose was to set up a learning environment specifically designed to attract self-professed gamers, which uses highly-communicative, cinematic video games as *realia* to reinforce, and expand on, vocabulary, grammar, morphology and syntax already acquired through traditional methods. Based on my preliminary research during course development, I believed that creating an 'affinity group' of gamers would allow students to progress rapidly in the language, thus acquiring the equivalent of two semesters of elementary language in one. I also believed, based on research, personal experience and previous in-class experimentations, that students would attain very positive results. Finally, since gamers like to be challenged, I believed that the course would provide students with language acquisition instruments that would enable them to continue progressing in the foreign language by playing video games (and therefore learning) outside the classroom, and beyond the course.

7 Responding to Programme Needs

The course was created to respond to a specific need, declining enrolments in third semester Italian. Currently, the university has a three-semester Core language requirement for most students in the College of Arts and Sciences, which is the largest at the university. Students are expected to acquire competency at the novice-mid proficiency level according to the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) scale. The hybrid format allowed me to create a content course that would enable students to take the equivalent of the first two semesters of language and culture instruction in one. Since 2013, and before the creation of *Intensive Italian for Gamers*, third semester Italian (which is offered on a rotation system every fall semester only), struggled to attract the necessary number of students (ten minimum) to avoid course cancellation, thus potentially endangering the well-being of the programme, since students declare a major and minor in Italian Studies during their third semester. Since the hybrid course was offered for the first time in spring 2017, third semester Italian has been in good standing.

8 The Advantages of a Flipped Format

I believed that a college-level foreign language course could be centred on video game-based acquisition and provide positive results. Given the nature of the content and of the medium, it became evident at a very early stage of the process of course creation that the only viable format could be a flipped one.

As I mentioned, *realia*, including video games, cannot be used by themselves, but they can be effectively used to reinforce materials that have been learned through traditional methods. Games such as Quantic Dream's *Detroit: Becoming Human*, present animated, spoken cinematic scenes and in-game text and subtitles in multiple languages, including Italian. Each main chapter in the *Assassin's Creed* series, with its detailed re-creation of everyday life and culture within a specific era and geographical setting, allows educators and students in languages and cultures to virtually explore, first-hand, everyday life in societies that are distant both in space and time. Two chapters of the *Assassin's Creed* series are set in Renaissance Italy: in Florence under the Medici, then Savonarola; in Rome under Alexander VI; and in Venice under the Most Serene Republic. While the authors took some liberties with the historical content, the cultural re-creation is accurate: cities, clothing, habits have been reconstructed from contemporary iconography and documents by a multidisciplinary team of experts. In *Assassin's Creed Origins* (2017), set in Hellenistic Egypt, the creators have reconstructed the pronunciation of *koiné* Greek, the *lingua franca* that was spoken in the area at the time.

For GBL, like any other *realia*, to be effective, however, there must be solid preliminary work done involving the creation of vocabulary worksheets, listening and reading comprehension exercises and follow-up activities that should happen before each video game-based class activity (Bregni 2017; 2018). Each gaming session was combined with preliminary and follow-up worksheets centred on scaffolding (Sawyer 2006) and task-based learning (Thomas, Reinders 2010). It is a process I call *Identify*, *Acquire*, *Create* (IAC) that informs my methodology, including worksheets, which use cinematic video games as *realia*, as will be described in detail below. They are designed to reinforce what students already know (previous vocabulary and cognates, for example), and then expand their knowledge by gradually introducing new vocabulary and structures. The game's cinematic cut-scene sections are used for fill-in-the-gaps and word-matching exercises, which guide students to identify new vocabulary and structures in context. Other exercises guide students to answer questions (individually, in pairs or small groups) and role-play to acquire new vocabulary, verbs and idioms. The final phase includes follow-up exercises focused on expansion of oral and written production (Bregni 2017; 2019).

The process of using *realia* in the F/L2 classroom is time-consuming, particularly in the case of an immersive course involving interactive medium such as narrative video games. My *Intensive Italian for Gamers* could not have been possible without a hybrid course format. In this course, as well as in our other elementary and lower intermediate language courses at SLU, we used *Percorsi* by Pearson (Italiano, Marchegiani 2015). Starting in 2021, we intend to use Vista Higher

Learning's *Sentieri* (Cozzarelli 2020). Both are connected to online Learning Management Systems (LMS).[1] Both online programmes are user-friendly and are designed to train and test students in all areas of language acquisition (listening, speaking, reading, writing), and integrate culture(s) well. Adopting textbooks with integrated LMS has allowed me to 'flip' the classroom. We meet students on our courses three times a week, for 50-minute periods and for one 50-minute lab once a week. The hybrid format allows for consolidation of grammar and vocabulary to be done as homework assignments. Typically, I first provide a very brief (five minute) overview of a new vocabulary section or grammatical point (i.e. parts of the house or second conjugation verbs). I then assign vocabulary and grammar sections, which students learn at home on the LSM. Then, when we meet in class, thirty minutes are for 'regular' instruction: modelling, exercises from the textbook, solving doubts, further expansion of vocabulary and structures. The last twenty minutes of each class period are then devoted to game-based learning. Prior to each class I select a section of a game that specifically allows me to reinforce the structures and vocabulary that students have just learned through their textbook and LMS and modelled in class.

The key to the gaming component of the course is playing games in the chosen language with subtitles set in that same language. The biggest challenge for language learners at the total beginner and lower intermediate levels (which, according to proficiency standards of the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages, ACTFL.org, typically correspond to the first two to three years of FL instruction in high-school, or the first three semesters in college), is to move away from constantly translating everything into one's own native language, and towards approaching the foreign language as such, with its own forms and structures. Whenever students encounter a word that is not familiar, they are invited to look at the context. Are they able to give that word a plausible meaning based on that specific context? If so, they are encouraged to do exactly that, and move on. If students are completely stuck on that word, they are encouraged to pause the game, and take a few seconds to look up that word in a dictionary. Students soon notice that their vocabulary is rapidly expanding, that those new, previously unfamiliar words are quickly becoming part of their vocabulary.

1 See `https://mlm.pearson.com/northamerica/mylanguagelabs/` and `https://www.vhlcentral.com/`.

9 Effective Use of Video Games as *Realia*. Task-Based Worksheets

As mentioned above, each gaming session is combined with preliminary and follow-up worksheets centred on scaffolding and task-based learning. My typical worksheet first presents general gaming vocabulary and a brief overview of the game in the TL, focusing on cognates, words that are similar among languages that share common roots. Pictures are used to introduce new vocabulary as presented in the game. The video cut-scene sections are used for fill-in-the-gaps and word-matching exercises, to guide students to identify new words, verbs and idioms in context (first phase, *Identify*). Additional exercises assist students' listening comprehension (with YouTube links to users' play-through videos that students can use for follow-up exercises). Through hyperlinks, students can learn more about the context (for instance, Renaissance Italy). The game can be paused at any time, and students can engage in answering question, group repetition and role-play exercises in pairs or in group. All these exercises are designed to help students acquire new vocabulary, verbs and idioms (second phase, *Acquire*). The final phase (*Create*) includes follow-up exercises focused on expansion of written and oral production, partially done in class and partially assigned as homework. For example, after learning about the parts of the house (the kitchen and its appliances, the bedroom and its furniture, etc.), the class plays the first fifteen minutes from the first chapter of *Detroit: Become Human*, which I selected because it presents many of those verbs in context. That section deals with house chores. As we learn, the young protagonist, Kara, who looks human, is in reality an android. In terms of vocabulary expansion, this section is effective in that it presents in context vocabulary related to chores, furniture, appliances and parts of the house. A worksheet I created guides students to review related vocabulary and structures, and then observe them at play in the game's narrative (through fill-in-the-gaps exercises). Other exercises assist students in expanding their vocabulary (using images to introduce unfamiliar words) and forms (i.e., talking about chores). Finally, students are asked to discuss, reflect upon and write about the storyline first, and then about their own life experiences, by applying the vocabulary, verbs and structures that they have just learned. This is the process I call *Identify*, *Acquire*, *Create* (IAC): identifying, first, already known vocabulary and structures, then new ones; acquiring them through a series of task-based exercises; finally, creating written texts and spoken discourse. Current high-budget, cinematic games feature detailed narratives that often lend themselves to animated discussions regarding the complex social issues contained therein. This is certainly the case in *Detroit: Become Human*. In the sequence I utilise, Kara meets 9-year-old Al-

ice, the child whose life Kara will ultimately save. Alice's father is a drug dealer, an addict himself, and abusive. Kara, breaking the barrier of her programming constraints and thus developing autonomous consciousness, decides to step in and rescue the child from her father's blind rage. It is a powerful narrative that has captured the attention of gamers worldwide. Lead writer Adam Williams, in an interview, discussed how the game is not about specific social issues, but rather a universal theme of a divided society (Lemne 2018). In fact, my students have discussed how the game's narrative focuses on a variety of issues that divide society, including sexism, racism, homophobia, social inequality, domestic violence, substance abuse, etc., a perspective confirmed by Waszkiewicz (2018), for whom Kara's post-humanism (in that she is an android who develops free will) aims to challenge the player's vision of the world. As Williams stated,

> We wanted to explore the universal theme of a divided society and let the player bring their own specific context to the story, which is going to help them write their own story to the choices they make. (Cited in Lemne 2018)

While the subject matter does not make the game suitable for use in the high-school classroom, given the appropriate framing, trigger-warnings and disclaimers, I found that it can facilitate discussions in more advanced courses. I suggest that it could possibly be used within the context of a multi-disciplinary project, for example in psychology, artificial intelligence or social work.

Game-based activities are not only limited to gaming, but also include analysis of related digital *realia*, such as YouTube videos and online gaming magazines. As I mentioned, the course has a connected weekly lab hour. During lab meetings, students conduct online-based, individual and small-group activities through related *realia* (such as videos, for example, creating a video review of a game; online gaming magazines, and game-creator apps) and that further expands upon what has been recently learned. Accordingly, I developed weekly class gaming worksheets and separate set of bi-weekly lab activity worksheets. Worksheets follow the content of vocabulary and grammar as it is presented in *Percorsi* and *MyItalianLab*. I use scaffolding and task-based learning to organise the exercises included in my worksheets.

I prepare for each game-based activity by exploring gaming content. I play the games myself and use some of the playthrough videos uploaded by gamers on YouTube, which are available in multiple languages.

10 Teaching with Games. Multimedia Classroom and Access to Gaming

The Sony PlayStation (PS) 4 currently has the highest number of cinematic games. Many of them are system exclusive, such as the Quantic Dream games, which are also the most effective, in my view, for FL acquisition, since they have a focus on narratives and dialogues, rather than action). Some games are also effective for foreign culture acquisition, besides language (for example, the two chapters from the *Assassin's Creed* series that are set in Renaissance Italy). The multimedia Learning Studio classroom where *Intensive Italian for Gamers* is taught is equipped with a PS4 console. The system is small enough that it is easily portable so sometimes I bring my own, for example, to the Language Lab (where the class meets once a week). In the lab, we do other related activities in which students actively use the PCs that are available to them, for example, to create a language game quiz on Kahoot, or to create a video game video review.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the limitations inherent to a course based on access to technology and the Internet that are more accessible in most universities. The necessity of moving instruction online has exposed the inequities of access and called for creative solutions that would still make a VGBL course meaningful and, above all, accessible for all students. The solutions I explored are illustrated later in this article.

11 Class Size, Location and Technology

As mentioned, in spring 2017, 2019 and the first part of 2020, the course was taught in the SLU Reinert Center state-of-the-art Learning Studio. Foreign language courses at SLU are typically capped at twenty students. However, due to the interactive nature of the Learning Studio space, courses that take place there are capped at fifteen.

The studio is equipped with a large wall screen monitor that can be subdivided into multiple screens, each potentially showing an independent video source. Typically, I would divide the screen (vertically) into two main areas, one displaying the classroom PC screen (for the *Percorsi* eBook, PowerPoints and worksheets) and the other one for the PS4.

Students also had access to tablets and laptops, besides their own mobile devices. We used PS4 because, as I mentioned, some of the best communicative gaming experiences are available only on that system, such as Quantic Dream's *Heavy Rain*, *Beyond: Two Souls* and

Detroit: Become Human,[2] three complex cinematic experiences (Bregni 2017; 2018; 2019). Also, gaming PCs tend to be very expensive. Thanks to the support of the Reinert Center and my departments, students have access to a PS4 system and games entirely in Italian, both in their classroom and in the Language Resource Center in the Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures. A special section of the Center has been reserved to function as a gaming lab, which students in the department can freely access every day for several hours a day. The cinematic games I recommended for purchase also include content in Spanish, French and German, while some also offer Chinese, Portuguese and Russian. Students from all languages taught in the department are able to access gaming in the Language Learning Center from 8 a.m. through 8 p.m. weekdays.

In terms of the actual in-classroom gameplay, I elicit volunteers. One student would physically hold the gamepad, while the rest of the class 'guides' him/her through a series of commands in the TL ("Jump!", "Turn right!", "Open that door!" and so on) and by expressing approval or disappointment, using communicative forms and structures they have learned on a preliminary worksheet. Each volunteer gamer would hold the pad for approximately five minutes, and then pass the pad to another student.

As I mentioned, we only cover a specific portion of the game in class: approximately 15-20 minutes, which allows me to reinforce specific structures and vocabulary as needed. In some cases, games allow me also to teach cultural elements, besides F/L2, in new, immersive ways. So, for example, I have been using the first thirty minutes or so of gameplay of *Assassin's Creed II* to reinforce imperative forms; some conversational and idiomatic expressions; to learn about the Medici family in Renaissance Florence; to learn about the monumental landmark bridge Ponte Vecchio, its architecture and history, and, more in general, about Roman infrastructure such as sewers and aqueducts that the Medici renovated; and the background of the contemporary feud between the Medici and the Pazzi family. The main chapters in the *Assassin's Creed* series can also be used to teach, for example, about the foundation of the United States (*Assassin's Creed III*); the French Revolution (*Unity*); the Colonial era (*Black Flag*); Classical Greece (*Odyssey*); and more.

2 https://www.quanticdream.com/.

12 The Advantages of VGBL Flipped-Classroom Content. Guided and Autonomous Exploration outside the Classroom

The cinematic games I select are polished, attractive, big budget products. Their characters, storylines and narrative development are designed to attract gamers. That is certainly the case for my students, who have expressed enthusiasm for the games used. My activities focus on the first forty minutes or so of gameplay (the average cinematic game is designed to last between approximately six and twenty hours of gameplay total). I aim to provide students with the tools that ultimately enable them to play the entire game on their own. Even after only four weeks of classes, students were able to navigate the plot, the characters and their motivations, and knew enough context to be able to acquire new elements that enabled them to proceed with the storyline. Thus, I encouraged them to continue playing on their own (as a group, outside the classroom, by accessing the PS4 and games available for them in the Language Resource Center). When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, I developed solutions that, as we will see later on, enabled them to continue playing at home. The in-class gaming sections, which were typically conducted, and concluded, over the span of one week (one per learning unit), provide students with the necessary linguistic background (vocabulary and structures within that specific narrative context) that enables them to continue playing the game on their own. I would however always encourage students to play as a group in the game-based sessions at the Center. As research has shown, group interaction centred on problem solving is highly conducive to learning and language acquisition in particular (Wenger 1998; Nunan 1992). Positive preliminary results from outcomes assessment seem to point in that direction (see section below).

Students are also encouraged to set their own gaming systems and games at home in the TL, which would allow them to play games in that language. This works on all recent gaming systems. I also always recommend setting in-game menus and turning on subtitles in the TL. A good exercise I propose is to re-play games they have already completed, but this time in the TL (for game menus, dialogues and subtitles). Games purchased in Western Europe are compatible with the current generation of US consoles. While games sold in the Americas only typically include three languages (English, Latin-American Spanish, French Canadian), Western European games include full content in English (UK), Italian, French (France), Spanish (Spain), German, and often also Dutch and Portuguese.

12.1 Outcomes Assessment

Outcomes assessment was performed, using both direct (testing: initial test, midterm exam, and final exam) and indirect measures (an exit survey and an intercultural competency survey). The midterm and final exams are comprehensive, as they include all materials covered in class up to that point. The format, vocabulary and grammar exercises are the same as other 'traditional' language courses. Reading and listening comprehension, as well as written production exercises, are similar in structure. The only difference is the context, in that exercises focus specifically on gaming. For example, in the final exam students listen to, and read, video game reviews, and then answer related questions; in the written production section, students are asked to write their own video game review. The exit survey asks questions about students' perception of their learning, as well as their level of appreciation for the FL. Their results were compared to students in regular, non-hybrid, non-game-based courses. Preliminary analysis does show some interesting facts that are worthy of further study (see results below).

12.2 Course Evaluations Results, Student Reflections and Exit Surveys

The response rate in the course evaluations was 66.67%. Questions in the course evaluations are standardised across the College of Arts and Sciences at SLU. Here are some of the responses that I selected as most appropriate for the nature of this study:

- 100% of the respondents strongly agreed that the course design (timing of and relationships among readings, discussions, labs, assignments, exams, etc.) supported their achievement of the course learning outcomes.
- 100% of the respondents agreed (50% strongly agreed) that the course challenged them intellectually.
- 100% of the respondents strongly agreed that the course required them to apply what they learned in new ways.

The overall course median score was 3.85/4.00 (the department median score was 3.62 and the College median score was 3.55). The overall instructor median score was 4/4 (the department median score was 3.79 and the College median score was 3.66). Students commented that learning in the course was fun and approachable. They also liked that the instructor adapted test and quizzes to reflect the course focus on gaming, as well as the related cultural content that gaming introduced. They also commented on feeling at ease (they repeatedly used the word "safe" to describe their experience as stress-

free) in expressing themselves in the TL in the classroom, especially when talking about their gaming passion, likes and dislikes. This was my aim in creating an 'affinity group'. The strong, shared passion for gaming gave the group a connection, a sense of belonging, and created a learning community. Even students who are typically introverted, or had negative experiences in high-school language courses (who reported feeling like they were "put on the spot" every time the teacher asked them to respond in the TL) felt inclined to participate, were not afraid of making mistakes and were responsive to modelling of correct pronunciation, vocabulary and structures. Games helped to lower or eliminate the 'affective filter' in the world language classroom.

After taking *Intensive Italian for Gamers*, 16.6% of the students in the course graduated; 16.6% transferred; and 33.3% of the students continued taking courses in the TL. In an online survey conducted approximately six months after completing the course, students were asked to provide general comments on their learning in the course, as well as on motivation to continue learning in their TL after course completion. Did they continue playing games in the TL ("always", "often", "sometimes", "rarely" or "never")? The response rate was 83.3%. Most interestingly, all of the respondents reported that they autonomously continued to play games in their TL, in their own spare time, with a higher tendency towards "often".

Students' narrative comments, also, were quite interesting. For example, one student, who could not continue taking Italian due to scheduling conflicts, wrote:

> Even though I have been busy with my classes, I have been playing *Pokémon Black* in Italian in my spare time. I have been switching all the games I own to Italian whenever possible (*Borderlands 2*, *Skyrim*, *Halo Reach*), but since the *Pokémon* games are very dialogue-heavy I've preferred Italian *Pokémon*. [...] I guess I would put myself down as "often" [..]. It feels weird playing games in English now. Recently I have been able to fit in studying Italian again on *Duolingo*. They changed the format of the website so there are multiple layers of repetition now, so I am having an easier time learning/remembering everything as opposed to previous months/years I've spent on the site. I have also been turning on Italian subtitles on YouTube videos whenever possible. [...] I really hope in the coming years I am able to reach fluency. It is such a beautiful language and it fills me with joy just pronouncing the words.

The student continued to work independently on FL acquisition even after completing the course, and while not taking further courses. She was already familiar with the games she mentions (as many of our students are, since they are popular, long-standing franchis-

es), and also felt motivated to pursue independent learning in other forms that were available to her (Duolingo). Last but not least, she mentions passion for the language and reward (she uses the word "joy") in its acquisition.

Another student wrote:

> I would always play games in Italian except for games with no story/voice acting. Now it's closer to very occasionally when I want to play the one game with Italian subtitle. That change I feel came from the fact that I don't have anyone local to talk to in Italian. While practising my Italian I would alternate playing games with Italian subtitles/English voice acting with games with English subtitles/Italian voice acting. I did not get to the point of Italian subtitles/Italian voice acting, but that could have been my next step. I found this method far more fun than when I was learning Spanish in high school. I was convinced after going through Spanish that my brain was just not built for language. After taking your class, as well as the anthropology project I did on learning Italian, I think I was just using that as an excuse not to make an effort. I have retained more Italian partly due to being immersed in the language for hours rather than struggling to stare at a book for an hour.

In this case, the student compares the experience of learning Italian through gaming with his/her experience of learning another romance language, Spanish, in high school with a traditional method. Motivation becomes the highlight of this comment, in my view: gaming motivated the student to make more of an effort, as a result of the experience of learning in an environment where s/he was not made to feel like his/her "brain was just not built for language". Games therefore facilitated a sense of accessibility. Learning became a challenge that was attainable through continuous application and effort.

A student responded in Italian, and wrote (translation is mine):

> I play every game that I can find that has an Italian version available. Now I am playing *Oxenfree* on Nintendo Switch. Thank you so much for such a unique experience!

While the student also expresses motivation to continue playing in the TL past the course completion, s/he makes another interesting point: gratitude for a transformative ("unique" is the word s/he uses) experience.

Another student wrote, also in Italian (translation is mine):

> I continue playing video games in Italian as my chosen language, and I am learning new words, idioms and phrases through this method.

This comment points in the direction of continued expansion of grammar and structures past the course completion.

12.3 Results

Results indicate that the experience has been very positive. Although students came from very different backgrounds in terms of linguistic abilities, they all successfully attained second-semester competency in the language. By the third week of the semester students could effectively provide gaming-related commands ("Go forward!", "Open the door!", "Take the path to the right!", "Talk to the person in the room!") and express success or disappointment, all essential communicative structures that are normally acquired towards the end of the first or early second semester.

Most interestingly, all students autonomously continued to explore gaming in the TL outside the classroom, by playing their own games in the language, or meeting as a group to play in our language lab. As a result, by the end of the semester students were showing knowledge of the language and culture (including idioms, interjections and fillers, expressions of joy, excitement and frustration, all markers of proficiency and fluency in foreign language acquisition) above standard. While more long-term research must be done, initial results of this course do, in fact, provide an answer to the question of whether video games as *realia* are effective in language acquisition. They also provide an answer to the question of whether the flipped format is beneficial to F/L2 acquisition, since the delivery of the VGBL content would not have been feasible without utilising a flipped course format. Currently, the size of the sample is small, since the course has only been formally taught three times to groups of ten to fifteen students. This makes it difficult to run significance tests on the data. However, preliminary analysis does show some interesting facts that are worthy of further study. In the language course for gamers, the mid-term grade approximates the final grade that students would achieve in the first semester of the two-semester sequence and the final grade approximates the final grade that students would achieve in the second semester of the two-semester sequence. A look at this data shows that students in the gaming course were almost four points lower when comparing the midterm grade with the final first semester student grades. When one looks at the final grade for the gamers, as compared to second semester students, the relationship reverses. Here the students in this new course rank two points higher than their counterparts in the regular programme. What this seems to indicate is that the 'initial shock' of the intensity of the course might well have a dampening effect on grades but by the end of the semester, the students are doing better than their counterparts in regu-

lar courses. The intensity and immersion may be confusing initially but can be overcome, yielding better results for students. When the course was offered again in spring 2019, it produced similar results.

12.4 Teaching *Intensive Italian for Gamers* during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Interestingly enough, the course also produced very similar results in spring 2020, when, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, all courses at Saint Louis University were moved online when classes resumed after spring break. I then decided to teach my course in a more complex hybrid format, in a synchronous and asynchronous pattern. We met on the same days and at the same time as the regular course on Zoom, the video conference online platform, for social interaction and development of speaking skills. We then used a combination of the textbook LMS (*MyItalianLab*) and BlackBoard, the official LMS at my institution. Gaming sessions were conducted asynchronously. Not all students owned a gaming system, and even fewer of them had access to those specific games in Italian. Thus, for the content-specific weekly game-based activities that I had prepared, we used playthrough videos on YouTube. In light of that substantial change, I asked students to select one game among those which, early in the pandemic, were made available for free on PC and Mac (Ubisoft and EpicGames, as well as other companies, made some of their best games available for free); or to select one of the games already in their possession that included full Italian content. I also asked students to write a weekly journal entry in the BlackBoard discussion group about their gaming sessions, with the following instructions: play for approximately twenty minutes each week; identify at least three idioms, or sentences, or structures that they already knew, identify and describe at least three new idioms, or sentences, or structures and, finally, write a comment on the overall experience.

The pandemic has pushed me to explore new solutions for new problems. One problem that the pandemic made evident was the need for equality in access to technology. Should the COVID-19 emergency extend well into 2021, I have identified a possible, more accessible solution. All students already have access to a laptop. A subscription to the Ubisoft's *UPlay+* online platform would enable students to access 100+ games, many of which cinematic and with full multilanguage content, for a monthly subscription fee of approximately 15 dollars. At issue, a decision needs to be determined on how the university can facilitate the acquisition of educational materials for all students during social distancing. Based on the experience of the first three months of the pandemic, it is also feasible to assume that publishers will continue offering games for free in the future.

12.5 Li(p)mitations? Progress Is Being Made

In a previous article (Bregni 2017) I mentioned that at least one game development company recognises the potential and importance of fine-tuning the linguistic dimensions of their games: Ubisoft. At the time, they were exploring AI language-specific automated lip-syncing in their forthcoming products (Boyle 2018). That is currently the case, since late 2018, with games such as *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*. Observation of lip movements has been shown to assist in listening comprehension (Kellerman 1990; Gullberg 2006). This was an important limitation that is currently being addressed by video game producers. Other companies, in fact, have taken notice. Personal communication with Ubisoft developers has confirmed that this was a very intentional step forward that their company has taken, based on focus groups with educators. It is feasible to assume that more games are also being used as foreign language learning devices, because the video game market has exploded during the COVID-19 pandemic (Smith 2020). Also, more media around the world are covering the language learning advantages afforded by video games. However, another important limitation that is still present at the moment, and the most relevant one, is that not all games are fully localised to the extent I they should be. Full localisation (which is not just mere translation, but a full cultural adaptation in which all elements are perfectly understandable for any player from the country in question) is an investment that I believe all companies should make. Maybe governments should consider getting involved, by financing and promoting localisation as a means to promote the learning of the language(s) and culture(s) of their country.

12.6 Lack of Specific, Video Game-Based Foreign Language Learning Teaching Materials

There are currently no textbooks that could provide a 'data bank' of suitable commercial games and video game-based exercises for F/L2 acquisition (Bregni 2017; 2019). Dr. Brandon Essary at Elon University and I have revised and collected the materials we have developed for our VGBL courses using commercially available games. Our proposal is currently in circulation among US and European publishers. Our format could be adapted to all languages, not just Italian, which is what Dr. Essary and I teach. Creation of additional VGBL courses at other institutions that could be facilitated by the adoption of a common, specific textbook, would allow for extensive data collection above and beyond the current limited sample.

13 Conclusions and Future Studies

The experience of teaching *Intensive Italian for Gamers* in its three iterations so far (2017, 2019 and 2020) was very positive. Although students came from very different backgrounds in terms of linguistic abilities, outcomes assessment showed that they all successfully attained second-semester competency (the ACTFL Novice-mid Proficiency level) in the language.

VGBL activities immersed students in the TL, through a medium they love, and which has currently become a regular part of life experience. As a result, by the third week of the semester all students in the course could effectively use essential communicative structures that are normally acquired towards the end of the first, or early second semester.

The 'affinity space' of, and for, gamers continues producing positive results. Students regularly comment on feeling like they can express themselves in the TL in the *Intensive Italian for Gamers* (both physical and virtual) classroom without fear of making mistakes. Games helped to lower or eliminate the 'affective filter' in the F/L2 classroom.

Students continued playing games in the language outside the classroom. As a result, by the end of the semester students were showing knowledge of the language and culture well above standards. In the final test, students in the course continued to rank two points higher than their counterparts in the regular programme.

Furthermore, interviewed students mentioned that they continued to play games that used Italian even after the course had finished. Their motivation continued beyond the end of the course. A substantial portion of my students (approximately 25%) are Computer Science majors. My institution does not yet offer a game studies curriculum. Is it feasible to argue that my students may one day pursue a career in the gaming industry where their Italian linguistic and cultural competency skills will play a relevant role? I believe that may well prove to be the case.

In conclusion, I would like to share some additional observations as an educator during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. I observed that gamers were the most resilient group among my students. A common comment during our Zoom sessions was that the scenario we were experiencing amidst the pandemic was considerably less threatening compared to what they had all experienced virtually through game series such as *Bioshock*, *Final Fantasy*, *Assassin's Creed* or *Fallout*. Also, gamers, being more used to spending time indoors immersed in their hobby, appeared to be less affected by social distancing. Even during the pandemic, my VGBL students fared well in their course, attaining results that were comparable to those in the two previous iterations of the course.

Thus, while additional long-term research must be done, results of this course do, in fact, provide an answer to the question of whether the use of video game *realia* improves language acquisition. Results from 2019 and 2020 reinforced my belief that video games are an effective didactic tool for F/L2 acquisition, thanks to the immersive nature of the medium (Bregni 2019).

My content course, which would not have been possible without a hybrid format, could serve as a model that could be applied to other languages and even other fields. The *Assassin's Creed* series, in particular, continues to lend itself to interesting multidisciplinary developments. For example, with my colleague in Classics we are currently co-developing an Introduction to the Classical Humanities course that utilises the chapters *Origins* and *Odyssey* for VGBL activities. Such course design could also be applied to other fields of study (i.e. History, Art, Literature, Creative Writing, and many more).

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The Digital Story as a Reading Response to the Literary Text
Revisiting Camus' *The Outsider* in the French Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract This contribution discusses the potentialities of the Digital Story as a complement to literary analysis in the French foreign language (L2) classroom. The case study examines the Digital Story as an instructional tool in the reading of Camus' seminal text, *The Outsider*, reflecting on the role it may play in addressing learning challenges in the L2 classroom and in moving beyond traditional reading postures and approaches. The Digital Story is shown to cultivate a scholarship of engagement and collaborative action in the teaching of literature. Furthermore, as a multimodal, multigenre form, it fosters potential for mapping out new interactions between reader, text and technology in the context of emerging literacies.

Keywords Digital stories. French foreign language. Literary analysis. Reading postures.

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1 Introduction

The use of the digital narrative as an instructional tool in educational settings has gained traction over the last few years and its advantages in L2 teaching and learning contexts have been highlighted by practitioners and researchers alike (Castaneda 2013; Green 2013; Kim, Lee 2017; Raffone 2017; Razmi et al 2014; Wu, Yang 2012). Narrative is inherent to the human experience and is at the heart of the language and literature experience, whether in interactions with others in new language communities or in the intercultural interactions between reader and text.

Very little research, however, has been conducted on the utilisation of the Digital Story (DS) in teaching and learning literature, particularly within the context of Higher Education (HE). As pointed out by the authors of *Digital Storytelling in Higher Education* (2017), HE is typically associated with "bookish studies" where "distant and disengaged reason" dominates and media is excluded (Jamissen et al. 2017, 33). The authors argue that emotions, voice and image deserve a sharper focus in HE curricula and propose expanding on the four "scholarships" – "discovery", "teaching and learning", "integration" and "application" – to include a scholarship of "engagement and collaborative action" (32). This is embodied in the practice of the DS.

The absence of "engagement and collaborative action" in the teaching of literature is unsurprising, as student-centred approaches are rarely favoured (Everson 2005; Horne 2016) despite the fact that reading is a highly interactive, subjective and intercultural process (Rouxel 1996; Séoud 1997). It is within this framework of enquiry that I interrogate the role of the DS in relation to disciplinary cultures in teaching literature and reader response theory, which is premised on meaning-making as an interaction between reader and text (Iser 1972; Eco [1979] 1985). In this contribution, the potentialities of the DS are linked to the particular challenges students face at the A1-A2 level of language acquisition and in reading literature in the target language. Taking a case study which employed the DS as a response to Camus' seminal work *The Outsider*, I hope to demonstrate that digital narratives may be used to support learner voice, emotion, engagement *and* critical literacy in meaningfully constructed responses to the literary text.

The first part of this chapter provides an overview of the DS in foreign language (L2) teaching and learning environments, the teaching cultures specific to literary studies and the challenges faced by foreign language readers. The value of the DS is highlighted in the context of emerging critical literacies and in relation to existing approaches to the literary text. The second part of the chapter describes the teaching and learning context of French and Francophone Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand and the case study

which used the DS as a response to *The Outsider*. The final section describes and analyses the findings and maps out reading postures in relation to emerging digital critical literacies.

1.1 The Digital Story and L2 Teaching and Learning. An Overview

A Digital Story (DS) is an emotive, multimedia presentation which incorporates images, text, video, music and narration. Relying on a short format (2-5 minutes long), it is centred on the author's voice and point of view. As a learner-centred, multi-modal, collaborative, creative tool, it is highly compatible with communicative and action-based methodologies, as espoused by the European Common Framework for Languages (2001), which favours learner voice, participation and subjectivity. The DS is a form of technology-aided pedagogy that draws heavily from Social Constructivism (Vytgotsky 1978), which posits that meaning and knowledge are individually and socially constructed. Within this framework, learning is viewed as an active, contextualised process. In framing student perspective and voice in a highly interactive and personalised way, the DS places the learner in an active learning role.

Within this paradigm, Wu and Yang underscore:

> the importance of student collaboration using available tools and learning activities in an authentic environment in constructing and reconstructing ideas and beliefs. (2012, 339)

As a negotiated (re)construction of knowledge and skills through the lens of personal ideas, beliefs and cultures, in collaboration with others, the DS is particularly suited to L2 classrooms as intersubjective and intercultural sites of exchange. Ohler (2013) has suggested that the greatest potential of the DS lies in the fact that digital natives can speak a language they are familiar with in an environment they feel comfortable in. In an era of participatory media and web 2.0 culture, where content creation is accessible to everybody, it is easy to see how the DS has emerged as a popular and relevant scholarly genre.

Language competence. In L2 contexts, the DS has been shown to enhance learners' narrative skills (Kim, Lee 2017), improve oral production (Razmi et al. 2014), and aid in the acquisition of phraseological units (Raffone 2017). Green (2013), citing Green et al. (2010), identifies three characteristics of Digital Storytelling (DST) that contribute to students embracing the target language:

a) The presence of a visual component, b) the ability to edit out mistakes, and c) student awareness of a larger audience (Green 2013, 7).

Green (2013) further highlights the fact that the visual component of the DS creates a context in which language use may be embedded meaningfully. The use of storyboarding, captioned text and representational gestures all contribute to the development of contextual meaning (Green 2013, 6). Non-linguistic representation, that is, the use of images, sound and their combination, is an important aspect of DST and may stimulate reflection and recall (Maddin 2014). In the language classroom, non-linguistic representation involves broadening the range of skills typically mobilised (these are usually centred on receptive and productive language skills), and in doing so, valorising students' preexisting knowledge, abilities and experiences. Castaneda (2013) reports on the high levels of motivation students experience in authoring and taking ownership of their own stories in the target language.

Extralinguistic skills and multiple intelligences. As a multimodal form, the DS promotes the development of multimodal literacies which include reading images, video, facial expressions and textual forms. It also contributes to transliteracy, defined as

> the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media through signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks. (Thomas 2013, 184)

However, the DS goes beyond functional literacy, in that its composition entails independent and interdependent meaning-making, involving metacognition, critical reflection and experiential learning (Hessler, Lambert 2017, 22). From this we may conclude that the DS is an example of the transformative use of technology in pedagogy. In this regard, it corresponds to the third category of Hughes' (2005) classification around technology-supported pedagogies:

> Technology as replacement involves technology as replacing and in no way changing established instructional practices, student learning processes, or content goals. […] Technology as amplification capitalizes on technology's ability to accomplish tasks more efficiently and more effectively, yet the tasks remain the same. Technology as transformation may change students' learning routines, including content, cognitive processes, and problem solving. (Hughes 2005, 281)

As highlighted by Hessler and Lambert (2017, 28), multimodal composition is a cognitive process which accesses multiple intelligences. The layering of meaning through various semiotic resources is a radical way of rethinking content, cognition and problem-solving

in educational contexts. The most compelling argument supporting the DS as transformative learning, however, is the development of self-reflexivity:

> when practiced as a transformative rather than summative process, DST helps storytellers look at stories through the lens of personal experience, but then also to look at the way they are looking, on how they are working towards a process of discovery. (Hessler, Lambert 2017, 23)

The DS and affect. The most common use of digital storytelling in the foreign language classroom is the narration of personal stories. As a genre that explicitly engages with learner subjectivity and emotion, it brings into focus the role of affect in language learning. Arnold and Brown (1999) have highlighted how affective factors such as anxiety, inhibition and self-esteem have a detrimental effect on language learning. As laid out above, the DS, as an empowering learning tool, may aid in overcoming some of these negative emotions, as learners take ownership of their stories and learning processes in an individualised manner.

Sharing stories develops empathy and the DS has been associated with the development of emotional intelligence (Pieterse, Quilling 2011). As stated by Hessler and Lambert:

> when responsibly scaffolded, storytelling can foster a level of supportiveness and mutual respect that brings people together in ways that are fundamental to our humanity. (Hessler, Lambert 2017, 54)

These principles are particularly resonant in L2 settings which are characterised by cultural and linguistic plurality and their interaction. Intercultural competence has long been an aim in language learning (De Carlo 1999; Conseil de l'Europe 2000) and has been defined as an attitude (respect, openness, curiosity), a form of knowledge (cultural and sociolinguistic (self-)awareness and (self-)knowledge), and a set of skills (effective and appropriate communication skills in intercultural situations) (Deardorff 2011). The desired outcome of an intercultural approach is not only effective communication, but a shift in the subject towards adaptability, flexibility, empathy and an ethnorelative view of oneself and the other.

1.2 Reading Literature in a Foreign Language. Teaching Cultures and Reading Challenges

As stated in Introduction, literature has rarely been taught with learner engagement in mind, although reader response theories, like language acquisition theories, are similarly premised on the active subject and their negotiations in meaning-making. Researchers and practicians have pointed to the need for an epistemic shift which engages the subject-reader: Rouxel (1996) calls for the engagement of the subject in teaching literature, arguing that the creation of meaning results from reader engagement in the interaction between reader and text. In her words:

> Le questionnement de texte est inséparable du questionnement de soi. (Rouxel 1996, 112)
>
> The questioning around the text is inseparable from the questioning of the self. (Author's translation)

Intercultural approaches to literature, which are centred on reader perception, are based on the principle of plurality, described by Séoud as follows:

> Tout rapport avec le texte est dans son essence interculturel […] compte tenu évidemment de la 'pluralité' culturelle, de la multiplicité des croisements culturels, caractéristiques de la civilisation d'aujourd'hui […]. De plus, la lecture littéraire est par définition plurielle, en raison de la polysémie des textes, et il en découlera par conséquent, en situation de classe, un processus de croisement de regards, qui sera d'autant plus complexe, en théorie, qu'il y a plus de lecteurs, que ces lecteurs appartiennent à des cultures différentes, etc. Le concept d'interculturel justement rend bien compte de ce type de processus, où l'altérité donne à se voir. (Séoud 1997, 138)
>
> Any relationship with the text is by its very essence intercultural […] given cultural plurality [and] the multiplicity of cultural exchanges which are characteristic of today's civilisation […]. Furthermore, reading literature is by definition plural, in light of the polysemic nature of texts, and it consequently follows that in classroom situations […] there are more readers, that these readers belong to different cultures, etc. The concept of interculturality takes this kind of process into account, by illuminating otherness. (Author's translation)

These insights are important to contextualise when considering teaching cultures specific to Modern Languages and challenges learners face when reading literature in a foreign language.

Teaching cultures. Modern Language departments have traditionally approached language and literature as separate, hermetic entities. The absence of harmonisation around language levels, vocabulary development, critical academic skills and knowledge (arguably harder to define), stems largely from the status of literature as a 'specialism' in academia, where it is taught – in principle at least – as an extension of an academic field of expertise (Everson 2005; Horne 2013). Literary studies are by their very nature 'balkanised' in their diversity, and approaches to the text are informed by personal ideologies (Séoud 1997). As such, it is impossible to reach consensus on content and methodology or streamline texts into linear programmes and outcomes with a clear progression (Démougin 2001). The result is that teaching literature and developing literary competence are often tacit in nature and seem to take two forms: scripted, formalistic approaches to the text or a strong reliance on the teacher's erudition and personal charisma.[1] This normativity stands in contrast to approaches to the text in language education, which are centred on the learner and their participation and engagement. Research on reading cultures underscores this distinction through a series of binary oppositions: Eco distinguishes between "naïve" and "critical" readings ([1979] 1985), Marghescou ([1974] 2009) alludes to "referential" or "literary" reading conditions, and Dufays (2006) distinguishes between "distance" and "participation" where "critical distance involves the valorisation of formal elements, of the intertext, of enunctiation […] and the aesthetic value of texts" on the one hand, and "psychoaffective participation" (2006, 89-90) engages emotion, imagination, and pleasure on the other. In this vein, literary studies favour 'expert' or informed readings, while language education concerns itself primarily with learner participation and subjectivity, encouraging reader responses as a springboard for discussion, with the general aim of developing language skills.

Reading challenges. The difficulties L2 readers experience in reading literature may be attributed to the complexity of reading but also, to a degree, to normative approaches to the text. Reading is a complex, multifaceted activity which requires diverse skills and strategies, more so in a foreign language. Eco ([1979] 1985), for example, distinguishes several reading skills which participate in the process of interpretative cooperation: "linguistic competence" (mastery of vocabulary and syntax); "encyclopedic competence" (knowledge of the world and cultural references); "logical competence" (ability to

1 Maingueneau (2004), in his analysis of literary discourse, elaborates on the privileged status of the literary text as an object of teaching and research, which is founded on its autotelic nature, that is, in having an end in itself.

make logical connections which give meaning to a text); and "rhetorical competence" (ability to interpret a text based on knowledge of how the literary text functions); and "ideological competence" (the value system mobilised in the text). Textual competence involves a complex interaction between cognition, affect, and world knowledge and as surfaced above by Rouxel and Séoud, engages readers' own *habitus*, subjectivities and variable levels of competence.

In Modern Language departments, language and literature threads rely on opposite approaches to the text. This is well summed up by Citton (2007) in the distinction he draws between functional and literary communication. In the case of functional communication, textual coherence is constructed through denotative value, which is achieved by ignoring or skirting around obstacles or "sites of resistance". Literary interpretation, however, consists of "actively seeking textual agrammaticalities and transforming these into privileged sites of interpretation" (Citton 2007, 138). It is these sites of resistance that pose a particular challenge to inexperienced or foreign language readers, who are called on to engage with the connotative and polysemic potentialities of the text and to make sense of these within a critical framework and the literary field.

Another factor which plays a role in student disengagement in L2 contexts are traditional, formalist approaches to the text, as alluded to above. As highlighted by Alatriste:

> Students struggle with literature in part because they are asked to explicate complex texts or to analyse them in more formalist traditions that place emphasis on the view that the core meaning is embedded in the text and needs to be "found". Such teaching approaches do not recognise the role of the reader as a meaning maker in this process. (2013, 21)

The lack of recognition of the role of the reader originates from a hierarchy of forms of reading in academic contexts. The result of this is that Modern Languages are unhelpfully caught between two teaching cultures, and it is possibly herein that emerging literacies may play a role in (re)thinking reading postures.

1.3 Mapping Out Emerging Literacies through the DS

As discussed above, the DS is a tool which can be employed to promote the development of emerging literacies, such as digital and media literacy, as well as traditional literacies, such as reading, writing and speaking. Ohler (2013) contends that the DS can assist students in communicating what they understand, by combining the power of storytelling and critical thinking. To this end, Ohler maps out a "media grammar" to help teachers develop the basic vocabulary and perspectives needed to discuss new media production with their students and create assessment rubrics that are simple and useful. These are grouped into distinct areas: the grammar of using images, audio, and music; the grammar of editing, transitions and titling; and finally, the grammar of organisation. This classification allows for identifying:

> the run-ons, fragments and other "grammatical infractions" that impede clear communication in a digital story. (Ohler 2013, 228)

Below are the main elements of the DS as a genre which serve as a general guide to composition and to assessment.

Figure 1 Seven elements of Digital Stories (Lambert 2006, cited in Castaneda 2013)

1. Point of view	The theme/angle of the story
2. Dramatic question	A question that captures the audience's attention and propels the action
3. Emotional content	This is central to the story and should be conveyed in different ways – voice, sound, music, images
4. Voice	The author narrates the story, their voice, tone and intonation underscore the emotional content of the story
5. The soundtrack	The music and sound that supports, heightens and embellishes the story
6. Economy of language	The exclusion of unnecessary details and the pairing down of language
7. Pacing	The rate at which the story is told and developed, should not be too quick or too slow

Textual competence and media grammar. There is great potential, in my opinion, in associating the principles of media grammar, as set out above, to textual grammar and the critical literacies foregrounded in academic contexts. Indeed, the strategies involved in interpretative cooperation – linguistic, encyclopaedic, logical, rhetorical and ideological (Eco [1979] 1985) – may be fruitfully transposed and extrapolated to the DS, through the use of multimodal resources and its own representational frameworks. This orientation allows for a reframing of critical literacy in relation to the traditional academic genres of textual commentary (such as the essay, close reading, *explica-*

tion de texte)[2] or creative genres such as poetry. The DS is a hybrid form, in terms of its multimodality but also in that it is situated at the intersection of critical thinking, imagination and creativity. In this regard, Ohler suggests that when embarking on a DS project, teachers start by deciding whether students are producing "an essay or a poem" (2013, 229), and considering where on the continuum the assignment lies. As an essay form, the DS is more explanatory in nature, requiring the student to "come to the audience", in that expression should be clear and not cause any obstacles to understanding. The poem, on the other hand, requires the audience to "work harder" and in this regard, more grammatical leeway may be granted. Deviating from and subverting the norm is inherent to poetic licence and links to Citton's analogy regarding the "agrammaticalities" of the literary text as an artistic form and in creating and "sites of resistance" for interpretation.

These considerations, which reframe traditional reading postures described above, illuminate the challenging task of the teacher: that of developing reader competence on the one hand ("the essay"), while also allowing for readers' individual responses, on the other ("the poem"). It is a balancing act between developing critical distance – without making learners feel disempowered – and encouraging participation, while making learners aware of the pitfalls of 'naïve' or purely solipsistic readings. The model of the continuum, specific to the DS, demonstrates that these two imperatives are not mutually exclusive and may be integrated meaningfully in a medium which combines both critical literacy and creativity.

2 The Teaching and Learning Context

The department of French and Francophone Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, like most language departments, separates its teaching offerings into language and literature threads. The undergraduate programme is primarily focused on language acquisition, starting at beginner level in the first year of study.[3] Literary appreciation and the study of canonical texts offer a form of socialisation into francophone cultures and a cultural 'supplement' to learning. This aspect of the curriculum is introduced progressively and by the third year the academic programme is weighed equally between language and literature components. Despite its gradual introduction,

2 The *explication de texte* is a French approach to close readings, involving a close examination, analysis, and exposition of the text of a work, and concentrating on language, style, content, and the interrelationships of the parts to the whole in regard to meaning and symbolism.

3 See information on course offering on the University's website: `https://www.wits.ac.za/sllm/french/`.

students struggle with literature and approach it with trepidation. This is exacerbated by the particular learning challenges they experience at this language level.

Learning difficulties at the intermediate phase.[4] At second year level, (elementary to intermediate level: A1-A2), students have acquired basic communication skills but are not yet autonomous speakers of the language. The makeup of the second year level at Wits University is heterogeneous, as the group consists of former matriculants (having completed French at high school), former first year students (having completed one year only of intensive French), and students from francophone backgrounds, with varying levels of competence, who have been socialised into the language from a young age. Many students experience a drop in motivation at this level which may be attributed to several factors: the consistent work and engagement required in taking a language course compared with other undergraduate courses,[5] the fact that progress is harder to discern compared with the beginner level, and finally, the discrepancies in language levels, which leave many students feeling insecure about their abilities and vulnerable in expressing themselves in the target language. These factors are further exacerbated by larger structural issues facing learners who are generally struggling to meet the demands of university life.[6]

Student culture. Student culture, too, is rapidly changing: self-referentiality has become synonymous with the millennial generation and over the past years, narratives of selfhood and identity have infiltrated the academy, whether in campus politics (as demonstrated by the #FeesMustFall movement)[7] or academic enquiry (in the emergence

4 The reflections in this section are borne from several years' teaching experience, feedback from students in the form of informal conversations and student evaluations, and from a Ph.D. dissertation which explored academics' perceptions to teaching literature in French (Horne 2013). Many academics alluded to student difficulties in reading, understanding and interpreting literary texts, especially at second year level. Very few participants adopted a student-centred approach to teaching literature and/or integrated language competence with literary content.

5 One only has to compare contact hours between departments to grasp how intensive and time-consuming language courses are: at Wits University, at first and second-year level, the English department has 3 hours per week of contact time, compared to French, which stands at 7 hours per week. This time is essential in creating interactive, communicative teaching/learning scenarios, which are necessary to a skills-based curriculum. Outside of class times, students are also required to do homework and reading.

6 The myriad of structural issues South Africa faces contributes significantly to high failure and attrition rates: factors such as, *inter alia*, financial pressures in the context of a funding crisis, massive socioeconomic inequality and academic unpreparedness all play a role.

7 Calls for the decolonisation of Higher Education in South Africa surfaced a "re-assertion of blackness, and an attempt to make sense of [students'] positionality in a

of identity-oriented disciplines: Gender Studies, Queer Studies, Feminist Studies, etc.).[8] The role of the subject and of affect is central to this changing paradigm, as is the expectation that this be engaged with explicitly in the learning/reading process.

This teaching and learning context, along with the normative approaches to literature that tend to alienate students as described above, formed the rationale behind introducing the DS into the literature class at this level. As pointed out above, authoring digital narratives has been shown to stimulate motivation in students experiencing linguistic insecurity, especially in L2 language settings where language competence has typically been framed from a 'deficit' point of view. In this context, the digital narrative may play an important role in empowering students in their language learning journey. In terms of the study of literature, it provides an opportunity for teachers and students to move beyond their scripted roles, in so far as students become creators of meaningful content and knowledge. It also allows learners to bring their own *habitus* to bear in their responses to the text, which are conditioned by their sociocultural backgrounds, life experiences, variable levels of proficiency and reading skills. Finally, the potential for the DS to open up a space for affect and learner engagement in relation to reading literature was a central consideration in the conceptualisation of this project.

2.1 Teaching *The Outsider*

If, according to reader response theory, meaning making takes place in the interaction between the reader and the text and is not inherent or to be 'discovered' therein, the challenge of approaching a classic text with a significant tradition of scholarship without limiting reader responses is consequential. This is indeed the case of *The Outsider* (*L'Etranger*, originally published in 1942) which is taught in French

world characterised by the exclusion and marginalisation of black bodies on the basis of class, race and gender" (Langa 2017, 10). On the discursive modalities of student activism, Mbembe (2015) writes: "Psychic bonds – in particular bonds of pain and bonds of suffering – more than lived material contradictions are becoming the real stuff of political inter-subjectivity. 'I am my pain' […] 'I am my suffering' […] this subjective experience is so incommensurable that 'unless you have gone through the same trial, you will never understand my condition' [and reveals] the fusion of self and suffering in this astonishing age of solipsism and narcissism".

8 The Culture Wars, which unfolded in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, saw the emergence of hitherto marginalised identity groups in the academic space. They proposed "new theoretical perspectives on matters of politics, social institutions, gender relationships, sexual preference and the experience of literature" (Goodheart 1997, 154). In Post-Apartheid South Africa, these new disciplinary configurations are visible in Media Studies, which at the University of the Witwatersrand, was established in 2002, and postcolonial theory, visible in Language and Literature departments.

departments the world over. This novel holds particular appeal in the French foreign language classroom due to its simple grammatical structures, flat style and compelling philosophical themes. As such, it is widely considered an appropriate introduction to literature at the intermediate level of proficiency. Finding a point of entry into this text presents, nonetheless, a further challenge: the key to the interpretation of the novel lies in attempting to understand and interpret Meursault's, the protagonist, character, intentions and actions.[9] His strange indifference, and distant, toneless narration provide no clues as to why he did not shed a tear at his mother's wake, why he killed the Arab and why he did not show any remorse for this act.

An 'open' work. The layered, polysemic reception of the work attests to its ambiguity and complexity: critics have described the novel as:

> a colonial allegory, an existential prayer book, an indictment of conventional morality, a study in alienation, or a Hemingway rewrite of Kafka. (Kaplan, cited in Moore 2016)

Heffernan identifies three phases in the reception of *The Outsider*: the first, a philosophical focus on the novel dominated by Sartre's existentialist preoccupations; the second, a postcolonial interpretation and critical preoccupation with Camus' alleged colonialism; and the third, a nuanced approach:

> motivated by a genuine interest in arriving at a balanced judgement on the literary legacy of Camus. (Heffernan 2014, 3)

A third, more recent approach to the text focuses on its psychoanalytic and clinical interpretations (Jaanus 2013; Shuster 2018). The many points of entry into this novel (existentialist, postcolonial, psychoanalytic) all attempt to account for Meursault's elusiveness and ambiguity as a character who, to quote Camus in the preface, "does not play the game" (Camus 1999). In this regard, *The Outsider* may be qualified as "open work" (Eco 1965) which makes the scope for its interpretation vast. It also means that spontaneous, naïve responses to the text are more visible.

9 Meursault is an office clerk in Algeria who displays emotional insensitivity and indifference at his own mother's death. The day after her wake, he starts a casual affair with a former coworker, Marie, and shortly after establishes a friendship with his neighbour Raymond who is rumoured to be a pimp. He helps Raymond by writing a letter to entice his allegedly unfaithful mistress into a situation in which she will be abused. After Raymond beats the woman and is arrested, Meursault testifies for him. The next weekend, Meursault, Marie and Raymond go the beach to visit friends of Raymond. The abused woman's brother and another Arab man follow them, and Meursault kills her brother, the "Arab", by shooting him five times. The second part of the novel is centred on Meursault's judgement and trial, where he is sentenced to death by guillotining.

Naïve responses to the text. Upon a first reading of the novel, students typically react with shock at Meursault's seeming lack of empathy. This leads to two 'naïve' responses: a moralistic response where the protagonist is judged harshly; and a pathologising response, where he is considered "unstable" or "mentally ill".[10] These responses may be explained in terms of the DEFT (Defence, Expectations, Fantasy and Transformation) reading model (Holland 1975), which draws heavily on psychoanalysis. According to this model, reading is a transaction that involves four main stages – expectations, defence, fantasy and transformation (Mailloux 1982). Expectations refer to the reader's initial approach to the text; defence, to being selective about what they take in; fantasy, their projection of wish-fulfilment; and transformation, the translation of fantasies into intellectual themes.

The initial reactions described above may be interpreted as defensive responses to the text, which are unconsciously activated when a threat or danger appears in our lives – in this case, to the reader's value system. During literature classes, the teacher guides students towards informed discussions of the text, which nuance and temper initial reactions, to be finally modified and adapted into intellectual and philosophical themes (transformation). In this regard, a major consideration in proposing the DS as a response to the text is the potential of digital literacies and grammars in mapping reading postures on a continuum (poem-essay) and in terms of reading stages.

2.2 The Digital Storytelling Project as a Response to *The Outsider*

In this case study, which took place in 2019, I introduced the DS project in parallel with lectures on *The Outsider* at the second year level, over a period of six weeks. Students were required to create a DS as an 'extension' to the novel based on secondary characters that they were assigned to develop. These secondary characters would shed light on the protagonist, Meursault, and his actions, in terms of the character's own positionality in the narrative. This idea was inspired by the novel by contemporary Algerian writer, Kamel Daoud, *Meursault. Contre-enquête* (2014), which is a retelling of *The Outsider* from the point of view of the Arab's brother who is given a name and his own story. This novel may be considered a postcolonial response to the original, in redressing the historic and political imbalance of the original narrative.

10 Students spontaneous reactions were noted as follows: "Meursault est fou!", "Meursault n'est pas stable", "Meursault est un sociopathe" ("Meursault is crazy!", "Meursault is unstable", "Meursault is a sociopath").

As developed throughout this chapter, the main objective of the project was to increase student motivation, engagement and participation in relation to reading literature in French. I was also interested in how the DS, as a new way of engaging with the text, could illuminate the interplay of reading postures. How would students negotiate 'naïve' and 'expert' (informed) readings in the creation of their own digital stories? Would the creative aspect amplify initial phases of reading – representing scenes for fears and fantasies to play out? Or would their DS be informed by the transformative phase of reading, engaging with characters in a critical way?

The instructions for the project, scaffolded in the pre-preparation, preparation and creation phases, were crafted to allow for flexibility and freedom in responses but also required the compositions to be anchored in the novel. Part of the anchoring process was the requirement that students reflect on the social context of *The Outsider* within a broader individual-society dialectic. In this regard, absurdist or postcolonial (re)framings of the novel could be pertinently employed.

Below I outline the main phases of the project which was organised in incremental steps to make the composition more manageable for the students. Each step of the process received peer and teacher review and feedback, in line with the notion of storytelling as a creative, cyclical process. This approach also underscored the collaborative aspect of the project.

Pre-preparation phase. Students were divided into small groups. Each group was assigned a secondary character from the novel: Meursault's mother, Marie (his mistress), Raymond (his friend), and the Arab. They were asked to reflect on the following question as the driver behind their stories: "What is the point of view of X (the character) in relation to other characters in the novel and the society they live in?" Having discussed Meursault's character at length, I felt it would be more useful to frame the action of their DS through the eyes of another character, and of an imagined character arc.

Task 1/week 1 (to be completed individually): *Write a diary entry from the point of view of your character on the city and the society you live in. You should indicate, as realistically as possible, how you are treated in your society and how you treat others. Discuss your interactions with one or more of the other characters and how you perceive them (500-800 words)*. The aim of this activity was to set the scene and create a context for the story based on the students' existing knowledge of the novel. This writing piece was marked and returned to students before the following task.

Preparation phase. Task 2/week 2 (group work): *Compare your written pieces with your group. Together, select the most compelling elements from your writings that you will incorporate in your stories*.

The aim of this activity was to consolidate the character and, as a team, start the process of storytelling.

Creation phase. Task 3/week 3 and 4 (group work): *Create a storyboard which incorporates all the elements that you will use in your digital story. Use the programme "Storyboard That" to do so*. In this task, students were required to conceptualise each stage of their stories in the storyboard. They had to consider all the elements – images, dialogue, text, narration and their interaction, frame by frame. The free online storyboard *Storyboard That* was suggested as it is an easy, enjoyable timesaving tool. It has a drag and drop interface and a large collection of artwork, which allows for the user to select the settings, characters, insert speech bubbles and notes at the bottom of each frame. Throughout the creation phase, students were reminded of the seven elements of the digital story (see § 1.3), which served as a guideline in their composition.

Task 4/week 5 (group work): *Use a variety of digital tools to create your story from the point of view of your character*. In this phase, students were required to digitise their stories into a final product. To do this, they had work across platforms, selecting, integrating and creating semiotic resources in order to create a coherent story. The proliferation of free online digital storytelling websites can be overwhelming at first, and since this project was not focused on digital sophistication, but rather on digital literacy, students were encouraged to work with what they knew and not waste time learning and mastering programs they were unfamiliar with. The most common and easy to use tools, which were suggested for this project are Microsoft *Power Point* and *Slidestory*. While these appear rudimentary compared to other programs on offer, they allow for the combination of picture slide shows, voice narration, text captions and the embedding of videos. They also include options for layout, colour themes and background images. These features were more than sufficient for the purposes of this project.

Week 6: *Present your digital story to the class*. This phase allowed for students to showcase their work, and served to valorise their projects. They were also asked to reflect upon the process as students in the L2 French classroom. This took the form of a focus group.

2.3 Discussion. Students' and Teacher's Responses to the Project

Having implemented and closely observed each stage of the project, it was clear that the DS allowed for a scholarship of "engagement and collaborative action" in relation to the study of literature in the French L2 classroom. This was confirmed in the focus group, of which I provide an overview.

A positive experience. During the focus group, participants confirmed that the collaborative, goal-oriented project was a motivating factor, as was having an audience to showcase their stories at the end. Students further asserted that the project had heightened their appreciation of the novel. This is doubtless a result of engaging with literature in a hybrid form, which freed them of the traditional academic genres of the essay and literary commentary (*explication de texte*). Relying on imagination and technology to fuel the creative process was perceived to be an exciting and stimulating challenge.

When students presented their projects to the class these were met with enthusiasm and encouragement from their peers. It was evident that authoring their stories had been an empowering experience, allowing them to 'own' their narratives, especially as L2 learners who felt hindered by their language competence. Incorporating non-linguistic representation in the stories was highlighted as a positive and a refreshing change from purely written and oral expression.

Instructional design and organisation. From both the teacher and students' points of view, the realisation of the project involved considerable time and organisation. Students expressed their surprise that the technology component was less challenging and time consuming than the writing of the story itself, which required considerable conceptualisation, editing and reviewing. Indeed, as facilitator of the process, my main task consisted of assisting students in (re)framing their stories and pairing them down, as they tended to become overelaborate and unfocused. This served as a valuable demonstration of writing and creation as processes, involving several phases of reviewing and editing.

The stages of instruction design and implementation, notably in the pre-preparation phase, required careful planning and close guidance. Far from a form of technology-aided pedagogy as replacement or amplification (Hughes 2005), the DS illuminated the role of pedagogy as transformation – a self-reflexive, cyclical, engaging endeavour, for students and teacher alike.

The paradox of freedom. In the focus group, several students expressed a similar wish: instead of being told to create an original

story, they would have preferred a more structured approach in the creation of their stories, for example, a simple adaptation of one of the scenes of the novel. They felt that this would have helped them improve their understanding and analysis of the novel itself. The need to 'stay close to the text' was a revealing finding, as it demonstrated firstly, that they found their creative freedom overwhelming. Secondly, the desire for a more structured approach demonstrated an awareness of their own limitations and the need to improve their analytical skills to become more informed readers. These reflections underscore the deep paradox and challenge of reading in a foreign language, articulated by Kramsch:

> Given the fact that the authors cast readers into a made-up role and call on them to play the role assigned, foreign language readers have to find out which role the author wants them to assume and be taught how to assume it. But at the same time they must be shown how to preserve their freedom to flout the writer's intentions and make their own meaning out of the text. Such is the privilege of the foreign culture reader. (1985, 358)

The DST project allowed students to escape their assigned roles as readers, as they were granted total freedom and autonomy as creators of meaning. As foreign language and culture readers, the absence of ideological or cultural bias meant that they could flout traditional interpretations and adopt their own reading postures. This was both a liberating and burdensome experience.

3 Analysis. Student Productions

As described above, the students' compositions, written as character extensions to *The Outsider*, were intended to function as framing devices to the novel and to the central character. After a brief description of each story, I discuss the weaknesses and strengths of the project through an analysis of student productions and what they reveal in relation to reading postures and emerging digital literacies.

In the first story, the Arab was depicted as a man with an unhealthy fixation on his sister, controlling and repressing her freedom as a woman, thus embodying the archetypal patriarch. In the second story, Raymond was portrayed as a damaged man who was abandoned by his mother through suicide during childhood. This angle attempted to explain his abusive treatment towards women. The third story depicted Marie, Meursault's girlfriend, as a woman who had had an abusive father growing up, and, as a result, had become enamoured of a man who was unable to love her. The final story, which dealt with Meursault's mother, dealt with her relationship

to her son, and her loneliness in feeling abandoned by him at the old age home. This story remained the closest to the text, in that it explored a central theme in the novel.

As may be inferred from the above descriptions, the strength of the students' projects lay in their characterisations and the emotional content of the stories, which was successfully conveyed through the use of voice, music and image. The rendering of pathos exceeded my expectations, as managing student inhibitions, especially in the language classroom, is an ongoing challenge. This was no doubt the result of the collaborative and creative nature of the project which allowed students to express vulnerability and emotion without feeling self-conscious. Embracing the emotional aspect of this genre confirmed the need for engaging with affect in the classroom.

Participants' narratives did not, however, engage with the social dimension of the novel as prompted by the initial question ("What is the point of view of X (the character) in relation to other characters in the novel and the society they live in?"), or incorporate postcolonial or absurdist themes.[11] Instead, they opted for psychological responses to the text to explain characters' mental states. This approach echoes Holland's assertion that unity does not lie in the text but in the mind of the reader and that the transformation of fantasy content into a coherent unity is a gratifying experience (Mailloux 1982, 25). The first three stories demonstrate how the reader creates themes and interpretations in order to rationalise their own defences and fantasies. In these instances, transformation through the creative process rendered characters' actions, which were seen to be morally reprehensible or inexplicable, acceptable: vengeance (the Arab), the abuse of women (Raymond), and the pursuit of a relationship with an indifferent man (Marie).

Although this assignment was situated on the 'poem' side of the DS continuum, granting students significant artistic licence, the lack of consideration for intellectual themes presented by the novel was a weakness in the projects. Furthermore, while media materials were chosen with care and consideration, and there were attempts at stylisation and dramatic effect, certain sections of the digital narratives were difficult to follow. Gaps in rendering the character's backgrounds and their motivations, and grammatical infractions (unclear sound, jarring transitions, unbalanced pacing) resulted in incoherences and inconsistencies. This is not only attributable to a lack a rigour but also to an attitude of solipsism (alluded to in § 1.3 in the context of subjective reading postures). It points to the need, in media production, to "cross the media maturity line" (Ohler 2013, 227),

11 It was surprising, for example, that the Arab's position in French colonial society remained unexplored, given his subservience and anonymity as a character in the novel.

which means making media pieces that are relatable and understandable to the audience, and not only to oneself (i.e. through one's personal lens and references).

In light of the above analysis of student productions, it seems possible to map out reading postures in relation to the DS genre and more broadly, to emerging digital literacies. These require careful guidance and goal setting with the instructor in terms of how they are to be positioned on the poem-essay continuum. There is potential in further exploring the role the DS could play in expanding on critical literacies in relation to textual analysis. Although commentary and analysis are metareflexive, extradiegetic forms of discourse, the versatility of the DS as a creative and critical medium may pave the way for the transposition and reinterpretation of the critical skills and strategies elaborated by Eco in the process of interpretative cooperation.

4 Conclusion

This contribution has illuminated, I hope, the role that the DS can play in fostering inclusion, engagement and motivation in students, in particular in the L2 language classroom. It has also shed light on what creative responses to the text reveal about reader response mechanisms in inexperienced and foreign language readers, an aspect that requires further development in relation to digital literacies. Introducing this kind of project in the literature classroom has a number of advantages which I will briefly highlight. Firstly, it allows for the meaningful integration of two disciplinary threads, moving beyond traditional, binary and unhelpful teaching and learning postures. Secondly, the merging of creativity and academic pursuit opens up an important space for affect, subjectivity and student voice which, as we have seen, is a necessary and valuable part of the learning experience. Thirdly, in engaging with the third space (the digital space), students are able to express themselves beyond the limitations of words, drawing on media resources, their own funds of knowledge and experience, and leveraging peer relationships towards a common goal. In this regard, the DS has the potential to craft learning experiences that inspire reflection and engage the whole learner as part of 21st century education.

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Blended Learning and the Global South. Virtual Exchanges in Higher Education
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Always Flipped? A Peer-Centred Cycle for Teaching and Learning in the English Literature Class

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Abstract In English departments, the default literary pedagogy of 'read and discuss' renders student performance particularly vulnerable to shortfalls in the area of deep reading. Where students rely on online content resources before reading literary texts, they effectively flip the class, *decreasing* rather than increasing active learning. This article presents a blended model for mitigating this trend by means of a reciprocal peer learning feedback loop. The Peer-Centred Cycle minimises direct instruction online or in class, and uses an online-to-classroom feedback loop to shift the majority of classroom activity to reciprocal peer learning, distinguishing it from both flipped classroom pedagogies, as well as from RPL as an occasional classroom strategy.

Keywords Reciprocal peer learning. Deep reading. Flipped classroom. Peerinstruction. Just-in-time teaching. English literature. Peer-centred cycle.

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1 Background. The English Exception

Asked in an online forum about the flipped classroom's continuity with traditional (pre-web) pedagogy, flipped classroom originator Jonathan Bergmann cedes the point that e-learning does not create the flipped classroom, but avoids a general bracketing with classroom 'prep' by citing the specific example of the literary classroom: "English teachers require students to read Hamlet before class so in that sense they have flipped forever" (Bergmann 2011). For Bergmann, a teacher of chemistry, the literary classroom works as an (ambivalent) exception, singled out simultaneously as traditional and progressive, its process both overestimated and underestimated. But the English classroom is better served by more careful attention to the sequencing and integration of in-class and out-of-class activity that blended learning (BL) can offer.

Bergmann's example assumes that students do read *Hamlet* before class, that teaching is designed to ensure this, and that the preparation is meaningful. These assumptions are challenged in practice. Ironically, given the vital role of active learning in the flipped classroom, this example positions the play text *Hamlet* as equivalent to the disciplinary content knowledge delivered by an instructor in a traditional classroom, rather than as a site of active meaning-making where disciplinary skills and knowledge can be developed and tested. Breaking this down, if read-[*Hamlet*]-and-discuss constitutes a flipped classroom, one must imagine this 'flipping' a 'normal' classroom in which *Hamlet* is read out to students as content. Evidently this is an absurd hypothetical. But an equally absurd situation pertains in universities in which literary students discuss *Hamlet* without reading it.[1]

The internet's ubiquity can be seen as having created new problems for university English departments, as lecturers contend with short attention spans, shallow extractive reading practices, 'cut and paste' multitasking, and expanded opportunities for plagiarism. Alternatively, it might be seen not as producing, but as exposing essential problems at the root of 'English literature', which burgeoned as a discipline in the service of the colonial educational project (Viswanathan 1989) and, poorly fitted to the university's paradigm of knowledge production, struggles to justify or even define its role.

Though the end of the 'canon wars' toppled the once dominant idea of English literature serving to steward a corpus of 'great works', permitting the canon to be expanded or set aside as the 'turn to theory' substantially decentred setwork choices, literary syllabi still dis-

1 This is distinct from scholarly or computational analysis in distant reading (Moretti 2013) or scientific reading (Martindale 1990).

play the persistence of the traditional English curriculum (Amoko 2013; Graff 1987).[2] The special embarrassment of university English literature however would be found not in the undergraduate reading list, but in the undergraduate maxim that 'you don't need to read the books to pass', or even do well in the subject, the perception that skilful engagement with paratexts can, more than supplement, entirely substitute for, the direct engagement with literary texts that purports to be the core of the discipline.[3] This practical wisdom, summed up in a Wikihow 'How to get an A without reading the book',[4] points to a failure not of students but of the discipline, as it exposes the gap between what literary departments claim and what they really teach (and test).

Evidently the internet did not create this situation, although the profusion of online materials providing both the insights students are supposed to glean from texts and basic content information suggests that it could play a significant role in maintaining it. All academic subjects offer some predigested content. As students are quick to grasp, departments teaching canonical literature are in fairly equal competition with other resource providers offering content across a spectrum from formal recorded university lectures, to study notes, to full essay writing (cheat) services. Given the wide, flexible safety net that the internet provides, and the likelihood that they acquire some familiarity with using internet searches to solve everyday problems (before acquiring formal research skills), students might reasonably understand these external online materials not as supplementary, but as fundamental to their success. High rates of student absenteeism suggest, among other things, that significant numbers of students rely heavily on resources outside of the classroom. Regardless of whether their lecturers are investing in blended learning, students are taking a blended approach to their studies.

What matters is not the source of this content material, but its place in pedagogy. Returning to Bergmann's example (recognising that reading the book may be the last, not the first, thing the student does) if read-then-discuss is the literary classroom standard, then students who access notes and summaries and/or attend lectures and classes to gain knowledge *before* reading the literary text (assuming that the object of discussion will at some point be read) are in effect flipping the class. Crucially, rather than increasing ac-

2 The Wits curriculum follows strikingly the progression Amoko finds, citing Simon Gikandi: "periodization of English studies in epochs such as Medieval, Renaissance, Augustan, or Victorian" (Gikandi 2001, 648; Amoko 2013, 131).

3 This is different from the problem of students 'not doing the reading' or being 'given too much reading' in other humanities subjects where classroom inquiry is focused on a set of concepts, not the reading itself.

4 `https://www.wikihow.com/Get-an-A-Without-Reading-the-Book`.

tive learning, this strategic flipping reduces active learning, both in the class and outside of it.

The loss for learning in the classroom is obvious. Participating in discussion of a book one has not read evidently prioritises procedural display (Bloome 1986; Bloome, Puro, Theodorou 1989) over learning. Outside of the classroom, the student who reads a literary work knowing beforehand what they are expected to discover is still 'active', but minimises the time consuming and cognitively demanding processes of deep reading (Roberts, Roberts 2008) and deep learning.[5] When deep reading is replaced with acts of surface reading, a student 'studying' a literary work may be *less* cognitively active than a general reader.

Avoidance and inexperience of deep reading limits students in other subjects (Roberts, Roberts 2008), but particularly in literary studies, where, notwithstanding the embedding of constructivist thinking across scholarly literary praxis (Easterlin 1999), it remains easier to train students to discuss a text's 'meaning' (given as content) than to understand how literary texts *work*. A primary reading experience, activating confusion, anticipation, and moment-to-moment revision, matters neither for any moral value (not cheating), nor for any experiential value (not cheating oneself / 'the pleasure of the text'),[6] but for grounding meaningful analysis that factors in the constructive role of reading.

The constructivist understanding that knowledge is not acquired (as content), but built, through an active, contextualised process is commonplace in the humanities, particularly after the "cultural turn" (Bachmann-Medick 2016). Following social constructivist principles (pedagogic and epistemological) students of literature would not receive knowledge from an authoritative source, but establish the 'knowledge' necessary to interpretation through their experiences as readers, both individually and collectively (Vygotsky 1978; Piaget 1971). As Raf Vanderstraeten observes, constructivist epistemology does not disallow more authoritative teaching (2002, 244). But class discussion could allow students to access the rich range of readings that a text supports and to better understand their own reading experience in the context of these possibilities, positioning peers as a

5 "Deep reading" is defined differently (and variously) in literary scholarship contexts, where scholars use it to mean different things within their arguments (likewise its antipode, surface reading). I use "deep learning" in the more general and stable sense assigned in educationalist discourse, where it is closely related to deep learning.

6 The argument that 'good' students will engage primary material for intrinsic reward, is essentially a flawed moral argument that forgets that, particularly in a country as unequal as South Africa, such 'good' students are likely to be the more privileged, who can afford to hazard higher risk for uncertain reward rather than working in the most efficient way to meet basic requirements. See also Roberts, Roberts 2018.

vital resource at the centre of the classroom experience.

This requires that students invest in the process of reading and suspend their investment in an authoritative interpretation. But this orientation to knowledge and learning is not the default of discussion. Students can be motivated by the desire to receive the correct reading (confirmed by the lecturer) and/or to fulfil the needs of procedural display. Colleagues complain of finding themselves lecturing in seminars, faced with passive unprepared students. The lecture is meanly served by teaching and learning scholarship, where it most often appears as a control group and foil against which innovative teaching approaches are measured and validated. In reality, lectures may be variously interactive and, far from becoming obsolete, the practice of sustained collective listening may have particular value now (Kennedy, French 2017). Small group teaching can equally yield passive teaching and learning dynamics, or activity that does not meaningfully promote active learning. In useful terms that also correlate with deep versus surface learning (Stanger-Hall 2012)

> [c]ognitively active learning can occur with behaviorally active learning or with behaviorally passive learning, and cognitively passive learning can occur with behaviorally active learning or with behaviorally passive learning. (Mayer 2002, 105)

Lecturing is not necessarily a problem. But there *is* a problem when small group seminars slide towards 'lecture' (i.e. transmissive) mode because students are not adequately prepared for active learning.

Guided discussion is the default in English departments, the core teaching method in the discipline, and something of an article of faith. Taking active discussion for granted however might limit the extent to which instructors design their teaching to address factors inhibiting meaningful active learning. Active learning has been vigorously engaged where discussion is not the default, in sciences teaching. The flip can reduce thinking about teaching to a crude content delivery teaching activity binary. But understanding literary study as an interpretive, not a content, discipline (students develop skills of interpretation aided by disciplinary tools, rather than acquiring disciplinary knowledge), flipped class strategies might be used not to move content-transfer online to make space for active learning but to make *both* in- and out-of-class work active and part of a cycle of active learning. Constructivist principles (pedagogical and epistemological) argue for and support this approach. A blended learning design combining peer learning and structured feedback loop makes this practicable.

2 Theory and Methodology

Bergmann's example, *Hamlet*, presents distinct challenges for students' reading and meaning-making that I would argue are best met by blended pedagogies specifically designed to engage these challenges.[7] The peer-centred approach I describe here was created and used for teaching premodern (Medieval) poetry, but offers a general blended strategy combining targeted reading exercises and collaborative elaboration that can be used for all literary texts, bearing in mind the above rider.

This method was developed in the context of an elective course taught over 6 years at the University of the Witwatersrand, Department of English (2014-19).[8] The course's blended learning approach, like its content and pedagogy, evolved over time: from the practical necessity of making resources available online (reducing costs), to occasional and then more regular use of preparation and follow-up tasks, and later a structure in which the blended component is integral to the course's pedagogy and becomes difficult to evaluate as a separate component. In the last two years of teaching the course saw significant student achievement, which may be attributed to this more fully integrated blended approach (the main change). But this chapter is not an attempt to prove this, nor to assert the efficacy of this model or 'blended learning' in general. Rather it is an attempt to describe the complexity and interdependence of a blended approach that complicates such claims.

As Martin Oliver notes,

> [m]any of the proposed advantages of scientific methods, designed for use in controlled conditions, such as transferability and replicability […] simply do not apply in the ill-defined, authentic world of education practice. (2000, 87)

While Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has been reasonably criticised by educationalists for lacking theory or method to align with educational research (Kanuka 2011), the claims, explicit or implicit, of blended learning research to produce valuable data and generalisable insights are weak when a basic conceptual incoherence leaves "no coherent way of synthesising the findings of studies, let alone developing a consistent theoretical framework with which to

7 Teaching Renaissance drama, I use a blended learning platform that engages students with frameworks of expectation (and focus assessment on this activity) to activate multimodal literacies. The challenges of novel-length narratives may be usefully answered with collaborative (online) annotation.

8 The Invention of Love: Medieval Love Poetry, a course elective within ENGL2005 Medieval Literature.

interpret data" (2005, 24). In this context where, as Oliver and Trigwell have argued, the discourse of blended learning "bolsters the subservient relationship of higher education to industry" (2005, 21), data-driven rigor has a primarily rhetorical function, helping to legitimise BL as a face-saving mechanism for the corporate training industry and cost-cutting universities (Oliver, Trigwell 2005, 21), while generating research 'productivity'.

As an academic in a literary humanities discipline, my role is to deliver high-quality learning in a research-intensive university context. For teaching academics in the disciplines, research design is not a part of teaching design. But it is not so much the absence of research design as the requirements of teaching that create problems for the experimental reporting model. Teaching involves constant data gathering and adjustment, made on an ongoing basis, in the context of a continuous feedback cycle. Oliver notes that

> [e]xperiments are predicated on the ability to control the context in which they take place [...] in order to isolate the variables to be studied. In an educational setting, it is often impossible to do this on pragmatic and ethical grounds. (2000, 88)

This fundamental problem for SoTL is not addressed by the norms of research ethics (Kincaid, Pecorino 2004).

The blended strategy which I describe here evolved in the context of teaching as a set of responses to specific problems in my own discipline, rather than as an attempt to apply Just-in-Time Teaching (JiTT) and Peer Instruction (PI) to a literary studies context, and combines the two in ways that significantly alter their operation. I choose to describe and position my practice in terms of these specific strategies since this affords insights from this body of scholarship and a way to forge connections between my work and others'. Importantly, JiTT and PI denote flexible strategies (broadly covering web-based preparation and reciprocal peer learning) that may be used in varied teaching contexts under the same or different names. Colleagues may use similar approaches under other names, although there is little evidence of Peer Instruction (the core of my approach) being used (consciously) to support literary teaching outside of ESL.

The social constructivist principles informing the development of the Peer-Centred Cycle likewise have a disciplinary basis in literary and cultural studies, rather than the imposition of blended learning models like the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework. While the Framework has developed beyond a compensatory BL emphasis on social and teaching presence, focusing more on the goal of cognitive presence (Garrison, Anderson, Archer 2010) and can as a whole inform design decisions, it is still used primarily for coding online transcripts, i.e. evaluating an online component (Castellanos-Reyes 2020).

As an academic, the aim of my teaching has always been integrating learners into a knowledge community, the process that, for Vygotsky (1978, 57), effectively constitutes all learning. Tasked with introducing students to specific disciplinary knowledge and more broadly inducting students into academic practice I, like many colleagues, use the classroom to model intellectual community.

Using Garrison's terms, I would argue that cognitive presence ("the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse") and community of inquiry are essential both to traditional notions of academic excellence and to the inclusive pedagogies of presence required for decolonised classrooms (Garrison, Anderson, Archer 2001, 11; Mbembe 2015). To this end, rather than using a CoI framework to support blended learning (in a deficit model), I use blended learning to support community of inquiry.

3 Creating a Peer-Centred Cycle for Teaching and Learning

3.1 Peer Instruction and Just-in-Time Teaching

Peer Instruction (PI) and Just-in-Time Teaching (JiTT), both originating in physics teaching, stand independently as major contributions to active learning pedagogy, but they are also regularly combined. JiTT prioritises and makes space for active student-centred learning by (1) moving the content-transfer element of the course to (web-based) pre-class preparation tasks (flipping the class). The online element facilitates the second, and defining, step (2) creating a feedback loop between preparation and class. The instructor reads student's submissions just before teaching to gauge levels of understanding and select appropriate learning activities.

PI likewise relies on a feedback loop, in this case to replace teacher elaboration, where feasible, with active reciprocal peer learning (RPL). A PI teaching session may incorporate many PI cycles, opened when the lecturer poses a question to test understanding and closed once understanding is established. A classroom response system (typically clickers) gives the instructor immediate feedback on the proportion able to supply the correct answer. If there is significant but not excessive confusion (PI's creator, Eric Mazur, suggests between 30% and 70%), students find a peer with a different answer and discuss until there is consensus (a vital element). Answers are then resubmitted, the lecturer may clarify and confirm understanding (Mazur uses a quiz), and the cycle is closed (Mazur 1997).

PI was designed as a lecture strategy and can be deployed as such without web mediation (and without classroom response technology) but Mazur acknowledges that meaningful active learning ben-

efits from preparation. "[F]or this method to be most effective, students need to come to class with some basic understanding of the material" (Watkins, Mazur 2010, 39). Mazur thus proposes incorporating JiTT in peer instruction to facilitate student preparation and more targeted design of PI questions (Watkins, Mazur 2009), while PI is recommended as a "universally applicable" complement to JiTT (Maier, Simkins 2010, 71). Both are thus associated with the 'flipped classroom', though PI is used within a context of direct (lecture) instruction.

As David Boud notes,

> [r]eciprocal peer learning is often considered to be incidental – a component of other more familiar strategies, such as the discussion group […]. As a consequence, until recently, reciprocal peer learning has not been identified as a phenomenon in its own right that might be used to student's advantage. (2001, 4)

Because the method I outline here significantly minimises direct instruction either online or in class, and uses an online-to-classroom feedback loop (JiTT) to shift the majority of classroom activity to reciprocal peer instruction I will refer to it as the peer-centred cycle (PCC), distinguishing it both from its individual elements and from RPL as an occasional classroom strategy.[9]

3.2 The Peer-Centred Cycle

PCC joins individual (online) and group (class) learning in a cycle that connects action and reflection to promote deep learning, with a particular emphasis on metacognition as a driver for meaningful learning. Students move through individual activity (submitted online), collaborative elaboration and reflection (in class), and individual reflection (in class) informing the next cycle of action (submitted online).

1. a. Students complete a preparation task. Rather than a JiTT 'warm-up', this is a substantial exercise that can allow for comparative elaboration over one or even two sessions. A range of exercise types is beneficial, but a typical exercise could involve reading one or more poems and answering a series of scaffolded questions.[10] An autograded test could equal-

9 Since its inception, JiTT has been explicitly understood as an evolving, flexible teaching strategy that requires different implementation in different disciplines and teaching situations (Novak 2011).

10 These would range from basic questions designed to identify and bring awareness to possible difficulties and interpretive divergences in the text (e.g. who is the speak-

ly provide substantial learning opportunities, even across multiple sessions.[11]
b. Students submit online (via LMS) any time before the teaching session; after this time, the submissions tab is closed.

2. a. At the start of class, the instructor facilitates a very short discussion (5-10 minutes) identifying difficulties and questions shared by the class.
b. Students compare answers in small groups (2-3 students). As in PI, where there is disagreement, students explain and compare their interpretation and reasoning.
c. If students cannot find agreement on a point, they consult with the instructor (circulating) or with another group. If there is no disagreement in a group, equally students call the instructor. Through the instructor they may be questioned on their reasoning, given a further step to think through, or connected with another group.
d. In the final 10-15 minutes, the instructor invites groups to share key insights and points of debate. The instructor helps to draw out connections and patterns.
3. The instructor uses insights gleaned from the session and student feedback to create, or modify, the next preparation task.

3.3 Interdependency and Flexibility

In PCC learning design, the two blended learning techniques (JiTT and PI) are not just combined, but highly interdependent. Structured individual preparation (JiTT) makes it possible for classes to be by default framed and prioritised as a space for collaborative elaboration via reciprocal peer learning (RPL). Less obviously, the continuity and the predictable shape of classes proceeding automatically as RPL, mitigates the need for the instructor to read and respond to online preparation and design active learning activities in advance of teaching. This reduces the time spent on reading, responding, and planning and gives the instructor slightly more flexibility (see below).

er of a line, what is the speaker's assumed gender, to what does a particular deictic refer) to higher level questions affecting the poem as a whole (e.g. tone or intention).

11 E.g. students are given a pack of poems in a genre. A set of questions encourage students to read the poems, identify patterns (mid-level interpretation and genre competency) and find significant variation (higher-level interpretation). This is scaffolded with questions that direct attention to fundamental elements in the text that may cause interpretive confusion. E.g. How many poems have multiple speakers? In how many poems is the speaker a woman?

3.4 Feedback Loop for Instructors

JiTT's feedback loop connects online preparation and classroom work by giving the instructor insight to design activities before the teaching session (Marrs, Novak 2004). With the PCC, the essential and regular feedback loop that connects online preparation and classroom work is created at a different point: *after* the class and just before the next task is published. This is particularly useful in university humanities study where the curriculum is flexible. Just-in-time amendments to online tasks also allow for pacing adjustments responsive to the needs and interests of the class.

The option to consult students' submissions before any class still exists. But "talking points" (Novak, Patterson 1998) may equally be gathered in class while students are engaged in discussion, "just in time" to connect threads of discussion, or to bring to the end of class wrap-up. The instructor still actively monitors responses, but is particularly active in the class, moving between groups, facilitating peer discussion and gathering information while students are engaged in RPL. As in JiTT, instructor learning happens importantly alongside student learning (Watkins, Mazur 2009, 41). But emphasis is given to instructor responsiveness and learning in the collaborative classroom.

3.5 Feedback Loop for Students

PCC maximises not just active learning, but feedback during learning, what Biggs and Tang identify as "[a]rguably the most powerful enhancement to learning" (2007, 97). Having provisionally committed to an answer in the online preparation, students receive initial feedback in class in the form of knowledge of peers' answers (1). This is partial feedback in two senses, since students know only their discussion partners' answers, not the pattern for the whole class, and since the instructor does not furnish a correct answer. This initial feedback is still sufficient to prompt reevaluation, increasing confidence or driving questioning.

Proceeding from this first reevaluation, students elicit explanations from their peers and/or provide elaborations of their reasoning, feeding a second cycle of feedback and reevaluation.[12] Students benefit (in distinct ways) from hearing peers explain their thought

12 Some applications of PI leave out collaborative elaboration assuming that knowledge of peer's answers generates sufficient reflection. However, testing by Van Dijk, Van Der Berg, Van Keulen (2001) suggests that where instructors leave out the peer discussion and consensus-building elements of PI, students achieve lower test results.

process (2), from articulating their own thought processes, and from receiving direct peer feedback (3).

Having gone through these fundamental stages of peer discussion, groups may seek input from the instructor to clarify points or move the discussion forward. The instructor may meet this need by directly engaging the group (4), or introduce their debate into another group's collaborative evaluation cycle, feeding further cycles of elaboration and reevaluation (5). If the instructor is not available and a group has reached an impasse (disagreement or complete consensus), students engage nearby groups. Once groups merge their discussion and seek consensus, the instructor can again be called in to respond and the process can be repeated.

Toward the end of the session, the class comes together to identify and close feedback loops. This may be initiated by calling on all groups to address a question posed to the instructor. Snowballing may also mean that the class reaches this point organically. Rather than going through the answers, students are prompted to share shifts in perspective from their discussions and any remaining points of disagreement or uncertainty. The emphasis at the end of the session is on establishing insights or reasoning/reading techniques that can be used in the future. Accessing the views of peers and instructor, students can establish the answers and evaluate their original performance. However, focus is shifted to their current reasoning, and finally to what has been called feedforward (shifting from past to present to future).[13] Classes engage students in a spiral of action and feedback, the goal being sustainable feedback as defined by Carless et al.: "dialogic processes and activities which can support and inform the student on the current task, whilst also developing the ability to self-regulate performance on future tasks" (2001, 397).

In every PCC class, students 'receive' large quantities of feedback. But what is significant is less the quantity or quality of the feedback than the (learning-oriented) action that precedes and follows it. Working from a constructivist understanding of feedback as co-created active meaning making, the PCC method maximises feedback experienced as a regular part of active learning, rather than as passive transmission, whether from an instructor or from peers. It emphasises dialogic feedback (otherwise hindered by the power asymmetry between students and instructor) and works to reduce the distance between peer and instructor feedback.

Where feedback is associated with assessment, it may be a challenge to shift students away from surface or strategic attitudes to

13 Marshall Goldsmith's corporate coaching concept of feedforward does not articulate anything that is not present in standard understandings of formative assessment best practice, but names a useful emphasis.

feedback (Sadler 1989; 2009). The PCC class seeks to associate and connect feedback with learning, rather than with assessment. 'Flipping the semester' (see below) may also help in this respect.

3.6 Online Feedback and Keeping Students in the Loop

The literature on blended learning stresses delivery of timely, specific, comprehensive, personalised online feedback. JiTT prescribes use of autograding to deliver feedback and minimise instructor workload (Marrs, Novak 2004). Maier and Simkins additionally recommend giving short written feedback on JiTT responses wherever possible, recognising that workload may make this impracticable (2010, 138). However, trade-offs other than workload may inform a decision not to give online feedback. Immediate feedback (autograded or instructor) can have the effect of furnishing an early exit from the peer-centred cycle.

Reciprocal peer learning in class instead generates a set of reference answers collaboratively created, following general constructivist principles as well as the understanding that students learn better working with "authentic" examples (Simkins 2010, xiv). While in JiTT authentic examples are brought in by the instructor accessing preparation tasks unseen by the class, authentic examples are particularly powerful (and memorable) when students encounter ideas as they are generated and articulated by their authors in class.

As noted above, autograding, which has specific benefits (immediate feedback; novelty; labour saving; catering to different learning styles) can be used in the PCC model, as long as feedback does not close the cycle. For example, students are given a numbered set of poems to read and asked to identify which poem/s contain/s certain features. Students are given a grade and possibly an option to retake and regrade to assess their performance, but autograding does not supply answers.

3.7 The Flipped Semester (Pacing)

JiTT is frequently described in terms of time optimisation, as a method for maximising the efficacy of class-time (and overall time on task). In a PCC design, the continuous, predictable cycle of online tasks followed by in-class RPL reduces time spent setting up and framing class activities. In terms of overall course design, it can also facilitate more meaningful pacing of assessment.

A common pattern of student engagement sees low effort and course engagement (including neglect of unassessed reading) up to the point where assessments are due, with most time spent at the

end of the course, when students are focused on assessment and 'catching up' and time on task is offset by low attendance. Continuous assessment mitigates this somewhat, improving engagement between assessments but without shifting the overall pattern. Maximisation of learning and achievement of deep learning requires inverting this pattern.

The regular rhythm of the online and class feedback loop can support this more extreme kind of structural rebalancing, as in the example below.

> The first half of the course features *high task load with substantially reduced assessment*. There are no essay assignments in the first half, only one test of acquired reading skills (short questions on seen and unseen material) at the end of the section (25%). Classes, focused on students reading, responding, and assessing their beliefs and strategies, offering practice and feedback for the test. This reduces the need for additional grade incentive. 5% is awarded for regular completion and submission of tasks across the whole course. Reducing the number and weighting of assessments allows students to focus on rapidly gaining the contextual knowledge and familiarity required for reading primary material, setting them up for expert (versus novice) learning.
>
> The second half of the course features *increased assessment and reduced classwork demand*. Students write a similarly structured test (20%) covering material from the whole course, but also submit an essay (40%) and engage in written peer feedback on essay concepts and abstracts (10%). Tasks and classes continue to introduce new material. But students can more easily make connections and draw on prior knowledge (competence), easing the work burden. Students are given greater choice and encouraged to use classroom discussions as a resource, identifying and promoting lines of discussion that might connect with their essay interests (promoting autonomy). In this way, students working toward their essay assessment are encouraged to identify not only interests, but *expertise*, in themselves and each other, the ability to make particular contributions in class (relatedness).

The flipped semester aims to support transition from a situation promoting extrinsic motivation (avoiding failure, avoiding risk, securing grades) to a situation promoting intrinsic motivation, where autonomy, competence, and relatedness (see above) play a key role (Ryan, Deci 2000).

4 Observations and Discussion

4.1 Flipped Attendance

In the two out of six years when I used this full blended approach to teach my elective class, there was a marked improvement in attendance. While it is common for colleagues to teach electives at less than half capacity (despite a nominal attendance requirement of 80%), particularly later in teaching blocks, attendance in these years was high and stayed high across the semester, averaging above 90%.

The blended learning literature contains little discussion of the effects of BL on attendance for active learning classrooms. Studies typically focus on large class (lecture) pedagogy, with several assessing online participation as an alternative form of attendance.[14] Stockwell, Stockwell, Cennamo, and Jiang (2015) noted higher face-to-face class attendance in a course using a video assignment versus a textbook assignment and attributed this basically to agreeableness, "a video is a more engaging way to present new and complex material to students and stimulates students to be interested in learning more about the topic by attending class" (2015, 934). Besides the connection being weak, this effectively compares two delivery methods for asynchronous activities, the advantage being audiovisual rather than online. More meaningfully, JiTT has been found to correlate with higher attendance. But studies compare JiTT-enabled active learning with traditional lecture formats which make no space for active learning.[15] Deslauriers, Schelew and Wieman recorded improved attendance in lectures that incorporate a broad range of active learning elements, some (though not all) enabled by JiTT (2011, 862). JiTT and PI might promote attendance insofar as they promote active learning, although in class polling in PI can also be used to electronically monitor (and incentivise) attendance.

When I taught through PCC, rules on attendance remained unchanged (departmental standard) and there was no penalty applied and negligible grade incentive (5%). Further, students were told that if they could not attend a session, online submission of preparation would count toward attendance. While students did take advantage of this flexibility, overall attendance did not decrease.

14 Hakala and Myllymaki's "A Blended Learning Solution and the Impacts on Attendance and Learning Outcomes" (2017) compares participation figures of students attending face-to-face lectures, accessing lectures video content, or given a choice, and does not record the effect of blended pedagogy on lecture attendance. See also Riffell, Sibley 2004.

15 Novak (2011) reported an increase from 50% to over 80% attendance introducing JiTT into an introductory physics course, with significant improvement in retention, and "similar results" from colleagues in other disciplines in the 15 years following.

High preparedness might drive high attendance. Students were not incentivised to attend, but incentivised to prepare (doing the work associated with the session). Reducing extrinsic motivators, attending class was no longer framed as meeting a workload obligation and the perception of effort and obligation was moved to preparation. Students who had submitted work before the class had already done the work and could demonstrate the fact and the face-to-face class was reframed as a resource for students. Attendance remained high even when students were told that model answers generated in the class would be made available online.

High attendance would suggest that students found face-to-face classes structured as collaborative elaboration sessions valuable to their learning or at least necessary to their success in the course. Emotions, positive and negative, might have driven attendance: curiosity, interest, and engagement on the one hand, anxiety on the other. Among these "activating emotions", anxiety stands out less for its negative valence than for its correlation with extrinsic motivation (Pekrun 2006; Pekrun, Frenzel, Goetz 2007).

4.2 Negative Feedback and Activating Emotions

Kanuka (2011) cites scholarship that suggests that absence of anxiety along with intrinsic motivation allow for deep processing. Students had relatively high intrinsic motivation entering the course since 1) this was an elective; and 2) the most popular elective option, requiring early sign up or special written motivation. The PCC method was combined with a flipped semester structure (see above) to reduce the role of extrinsic motivation and to promote intrinsic motivation for deep learning. But PCC was not able to achieve absence of anxiety. While student achievement was high and feedback was overall very positive, in ongoing feedback (class check-ins), mid-semester feedback, and final course evaluations, students reported anxiety in their experience of the course. Anxiety was reported in relation to higher than usual course expectations (concern with control), but more often – and more significantly in respect of the blended approach – students described anxiety associated with not receiving written feedback on preparation tasks, also citing frustration.

This was framed as desire for feedback. But, in discussion, students indicated that they would want feedback on their *original* performance, not a revised performance, maintaining this preference even though reciprocal peer learning in class (including peer feedback, self-assessment, and instructor feedback) would render this feedback no longer meaningful. Students were unwilling to do more work to receive usable feedback. This suggests that the issue was not insufficiency of feedback (in either quantity or quality).

Although every class cycle functioned to rehearse assessment and generate extensive feedback, students lacked written instructor feedback *measuring* their performance without peer and instructor feedback. I was able to address this need using preparation assignments with limited autograding. The flipped semester structure further aims to reduce anxiety by avoiding, in Pekrun's terms, a high value low control situation, allowing students to gain mastery (control) with low assessment stakes (value) promoting positive activating emotions in the classroom (Pekrun, Stephens 2010, 238).

Anxious demand for feedback might reflect resistance to preparation that is not grade incentivised (Cookman 2010, 172-3), a perception that submission of written work entitles students to feedback even where this feedback does not aid learning. I worked to promote this shift from feedback for assessment to feedback for learning tacitly, by routinising active, dialogic feedback, and explicitly, by making students aware of multiple functions of feedback.

Transmissive feedback that does not produce reflection or action does not lead to learning (in the constructivist sense) or promote independence (Carver 2017, 1706). Authoritative instructor feedback can override the work of dialogic feedback as active meaning making and promote dependency. It also undermines attempts to move students from an idea of literary meaning as inherent in the text, to a social constructivist understanding of literary meaning, where multiple readings are revealing about audiences and the text's possibilities. Whether transmissive feedback replaces anxiety with (positive deactivating) relief or with (negative deactivating) disappointment (depending on the gap between self-image and assessment) in both cases it is deactivating in terms of motivation and particularly for the peer-centred cycle.

As Winstone and Carless note:

> The broader literature on emotion and learning tells us that the distinction between positive and negative emotions, where negative emotions lead to detrimental outcomes, is far too simplistic to account for the impact of emotions on behavior in the context of feedback. (2019, 150)

This is particularly the case for negative activating emotions (anxiety and frustration), and positive deactivating emotions which are anxiety's opposite: relief and relaxation. Failure-related anxiety *can* negatively impact intrinsic motivation, but can also strengthen motivation (Pekrun, Frenzel, Goetz 2007, 26). Anxiety is most detrimental to learning as it directs cognitive resources away from task, while positive activation emotions create task-related flow experiences and correlate with positive performance outcomes.

Alignment between feedback and self-perceptions has been found to correlate with constructive engagement with feedback, while mis-

alignment produces less adaptive responses (Winstone, Carless 2019, 152). Crucially, the peer-centred cycle allows students to maximise feedback and minimise this gap while focusing attention on task.

4.3 In(ter)dependence and Performance

Teaching with PCC, the signal outcome was a significantly high standard of work produced across the class, academic essays and peer review contributions that met (and in some cases exceeded) expectations at Honours level. Students lacked scholarly grounding in the field, this being their first (single semester) exposure to Medieval literature, or to any premodern literary study outside of Shakespeare. But in generating arguments from independently selected material, reflecting on the limitations of arguments, students were closer to the processes and expectations of academia, the steps required to produce a reading with interest to the field, than the limited close reading and essay writing skills required by undergraduate essays.

Performance metrics for blended learning share many of the same problems as performance metrics for face-to-face learning. Student satisfaction metrics[16] and course site data are given prominence in evaluating blended learning courses (Bowyer, Chambers 2017), but do not evaluate *learning*. Significantly Deslauriers et al. find that "students in the active classroom learn more, but they feel like they learn less" (2019, 19251), attributed in part to increased cognitive effort, and conclude that student evaluations of teaching "could inadvertently favor inferior passive teaching methods over research-based active pedagogical approaches" (19256). With these considerations, I took the quality of student's output as the key measure of success for the course.[17] When I was awarded a faculty teaching award for teaching this elective in 2018, it was on the basis of a submission of written work (essay abstracts) from every student in the class.

16 Course evaluations in the form of a Monkey Survey were embedded in the LMS (Sakai).

17 Sakai's statistics offer valuable user interaction data (user visits, user interactions with course tools, and user interactions with resources) which allow a course designer to observe broad patterns across the cohort and also to monitor where individual students are interacting or not interacting with particular tools or resources. This is useful for ongoing course and resource adjustment, for monitoring individual students, and for evaluating the blended learning aspect of the course. However, though these tools appeared as available in 2018 and 2019, no data could be accessed due to the tools not being supported by technical staff in the university in both years, with negative implications for teaching (ongoing course evaluation), ongoing design (final evaluation) and research. It was thus impossible to determine whether, as other scholars have found (Chen, DeBoer 2015), there is correlation between performance and frequency of engagement with online materials.

It is significant that students produced this work with a high degree of independence from their instructor. In the second half of the course, an online forum (Sakai forum tool) was made available on the course site for students to post their essay concepts (thesis statement) and working titles. In final class sessions which workshopped articulating and revising ideas, I used early posts to the forum as examples, motivating both those who had and those who had not yet committed to publishing draft ideas. Posting ideas was optional, but giving feedback was mandatory. Students were urged to read and engage with peers' postings on the forum both to deepen their understanding of the essay task and to broaden their exposure (drawing on the expertise of others) as preparation for the general coverage test.

The forum was most successful in 2019 when attendance at a conference put a strict limit on my participation. Although initial uptake was slow, in the final days before submission the site become extremely active. Students referred peers to discussions elsewhere on the forum, recalled and modelled instructor prompts, and published on average 500 words of peer response.

Students' meeting of high expectations and the role played by interpersonal scaffolding align with Vygotsky's (1978) important concept of the "zone of proximal (or potential) development" (ZPD), what the student can potentially achieve in the social space of learning, developed further in Moll and Whitmore's positing of collective ZPD (1993, 20). Interaction with "more capable peers" (Vygotsky 1978, 86) as much as direct teacher instruction, can allow students to "perform [...] in collaboration with one another that which they have not mastered independently" (87) and what the student is able to do collaboratively in the ZPD, as the zone of possible learning, "He will be able to do independently tomorrow" (211) in what Vygotsky terms the "zone of actual development". As Wells notes, this does not require a more advanced learner, since capability may be distributed across a group for different tasks, expertise being mobilised within the group (1999, 323). Mahn and John-Steiner likewise emphasise complementarity, particularly for learning environments where high cognitive demands may diminish ZPD, aspects of which may include "a common understanding of the task at hand, an appreciation of one another's cognitive, social and emotional development, and potential contribution" (2002, 49). These help to account for the rapid development, synthesis, and mastery of ideas in the Forum. By the end of the course, these were developed to a sufficient level for students to work and learn online as a community of inquiry in the absence of an instructor.

5 Conclusion

The contrast between blended learning and 'normal' teaching practice has long, and perhaps always, been a false one. In 2011, Norberg et al. (207) characterised blended learning as the "new normal" in teaching (Dzubian et al. 2018). Oliver and Trigwell argued that the term had been so ill-defined and the practices it encompasses so widespread as to make it redundant (as well as incoherent) in educational contexts (2005, 21). Whatever the definition, however, arguments for and about blended learning are bound to look different in the wake of recent and current events.[18] Recognising that higher education is facing a compounded crisis, this chapter does not make general claims for blended learning.[19] It does not offer generalisable techniques to reduce face-to-face teaching or reduce the difficulties of online teaching, two practical questions now urgently engaging universities. 'Online learning' features in this account not as an element that can be imported into teaching programmes, reducing or substituting for contact teaching, but as a hard-won educational outcome achieved with a full contact teaching presence that is itself achieved with the help of online tools. The question the intervention addresses is not how to blend online and face-to-face learning, but how to give face-to-face learning, where it is available, its proper value. It is a question I expect will look slightly different, but will still be relevant, in the new 'new normal'.

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18 Including (but not limited to) the 2020 global pandemic.

19 Grimaldi and Ball's (2019) nuanced assessment of blended learning's neoliberal investments and Naomi Klein's (2008) analysis of the logic of "disaster capitalism", both urge caution.

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