



Teaching literature in the blended form. The student's profile

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Abstract

This work discusses the results obtained during an innovative German literature teaching experiment using an online teaching platform. Students took part in traditionally delivered lectures to then be gradually involved in a form of online learning that foresaw direct confrontation and a personal interpretation of the literary text. The writing activities conducted in this platform activated critical-interpretative competencies that are of absolute priority for a non- static but dynamic and cooperative approach to literature.

The "forum", used in a not appropriate way, to post knowledge-broadening activities, stimulated continuous debate among peers on the tasks assigned and engaged students in progressively more refined activities on the level of text analysis.

1 Introduction

The experiment in the course of the 2008/2009 academic year in G. d'Annunzio University of Pescara's foreign languages and literature faculty was launched with the intention of innovating literature didactics and thus render them "seminary". Classroom lessons involved and engaged students in an in-itinere learning process: traditional lectures - to some extent also representing a form of information flow - were followed by occasions of confrontation, interaction, deliberation and debate of issues relating to the course's central theme. These occasions can be considered as blended learning, namely an educational offer "that occurs mostly in the classroom, while the distance-learning activities are designed as complementary, to broaden knowledge" (Ranieri, 2005, p. 17). The blended formula is aimed at attaining a new product, which is not the simple juxtaposition of online education and classroom teaching (Michael Kerres *et al.*, 2006). A German literature module with only three university education credits would not enable occasions of interaction and debate on the text. Thus, recourse to a didactic platform allowed gaining an additional space where students were able to perform text interpretation tasks using a direct approach. The asynchronous nature of the activities conducted in this platform also gave rise to deliberations and direct debate of the literary text, enriching the range of critical-interpretative competencies linked to the discipline. In the last two weeks the course also foresaw the drafting of a written work, implemented by following the principles of cooperative learning, to broaden knowledge by cooperating, a particular aspect resulting from the course.

2 Description of the experiment

In the course of the first lessons students engaged in a training pact on the basis of which lessons would follow, and at the same time, consulting the knowledge-broadening material available in the platform. They were also informed on the in-itinere assessment methods, which would directly impact on the final oral test. The module focused on the reading of a theatrical piece and on the subsequent exploration of the historical context and literary text. After the first two weeks, students were called to answer progressively more challenging questions, having identified some textual strategies put in place by the author. At the end of each activity, students were able to discuss in plenum the topic proposed by the online task.

Table 1
PRESENTATION OF THE MODALITY OF INTEGRATION BETWEEN CLASSROOM AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Classroom lessons	Online learning	Classroom lessons	Online learning
- platform familiarization - course presentation	- reading of material - carrying out tasks, exercises	- feedback on exercises (also online) - reading of texts and comments	- exercises to perform in groups

The last two weeks were reserved for the preparation and implementation of a written work that the students - organized in groups of 2/3 - then presented in the last two classroom lessons. The subgroups had the freedom to choose the topic, to consult sources suggested by the professor together with other material they sought themselves, working cooperatively according to the Group Investigation principles (Sharan & Sharan, 1992).

3 Construction of the student's profile

On the methodological level, the experiment conducted is presented as a case study in an educational context. Qualitative and quantitative data were mainly derived from questionnaires administered during the course. The approach in conducting the study was of an exploratory nature (Michael Bassey, 2004, p. 117) in order to investigate the didactics of literature on an academic level using measurement and observational tools. The translation of qualitative data into quantitative data allowed and facilitated direct comparison of the two types of data.

3.1 The questionnaires

Participants were given three questionnaires in the course of the experiment. The first was intended to identify the group's personal details and determine their computer skills, even if only passive, prior to starting the introductory lesson and establishing the training pact. The second, submitted after the first two weeks (and the first online task), had the precise purpose of detecting any resistance to the novelty of in-itinere learning and using the platform to perform tasks asynchronously. Finally, the third questionnaire had the purpose of collecting data on ratings, on the expertise of the teacher/tutor; on the importance of the content proposed and on the management of learning times.

3.1.1 Personal details of the group and in-itinere criticalities

The group's reference data were reconstructed on the basis of the first questionnaire's data and developed by chiefly consulting the model used in the Tutor WISH case (Rivoltella, 2006, p.1/35). It was important to establish at the start of the lessons any obstacles to in-itinere learning supported by an online working table. Only one student manifested a certain resistance to this innovation. The data collected from the intermediate questionnaire moreover highlighted the importance of a constant and timely form of tutoring, which initially enabled the group to overcome the slight technical snags and subsequently to overcome the anxiety on the implementation time of the online tasks.

3.1.2 Final questionnaire

The most relevant data for the purpose of the discussion on the student's profile came from the final questionnaire (based on A. Nemanich's model, 2009) and the evaluations and observations collected by the teacher-researcher. The section dedicated to ratings proposed three affirmations for students to assess on a scale of 1 to 5. All three affirmations received very positive consensus: *I found this form of participation in a university course positive; the group work was fun; I found interesting aspects in this way of learning and participating in lessons* (respectively 4.74, 4.37 and 4.68 out of 5). A significant result emerged from the answers to the open questions that followed the preceding affirmations (*if you were able to indicate some, which would they be?*). The students largely highlighted the aspects closely related to the new ways of learning: interaction, peer confrontation, greater involvement, a more directly relation with the teacher who also has the role of tutor and - always on a perceptive level- more effective learning.

4 Discussion

What is the student's profile at the end of this type of learning experience? Based on only partially viewed data, the profile is more variegated with respect to that which could be constructed at the end of a module conducted only in the classroom. Of course, since only a single case was considered in its particular space-time context (R. Yin, 1994, p. 2 and 10), it is not possible to designate it as emblematic. The singularity of the experiment conducted thus provides useful indications only if referring to the particular context in which they were produced and observed. The student is a good navigator of a didactic platform and understands its key functions; activating forms of interaction and confrontation in the in-itinere activities, in the classroom discussions and in the final cooperative work, even if the effective praxis of cooperative work was in

many cases only outlined, also due to the fact that it is absolutely unusual and would have required longer preparation time. The point of greatest strength of the entire formula resides in the writing exercise that required a systematic re-thinking of the contents presented in the classroom. The asynchronicity of this regular exercise led students to focus on the contribution of their peers and not the issuer's, and also guaranteed occasions of deliberation and confrontation to the more introverted. With respect to the specific scope of a literature course, the blended formula promotes an approach to the text that is not mediated by the professor and limited to his interpretation, but extended to the student's usability of the text itself (Giacobazzi, 2000, p. 22). Direct interaction with the text, peer exchanges (in the platform and in the classroom) activate an unconstrained usability that is open to a personal approach. Based on the in-itinere evaluations made by the professor at the end of the three online tasks, the students however appeared to be rather dependent on the sources consulted, even if gradually becoming more daring in defending their personal interpretative position.

5 Conclusions

Although this is just an experience of learning activities on a literary text conducted in seminary form using online platform, the results obtained - in terms of the procedures activated by the written online tasks - indicate a promising path to innovate teaching. In fact, integrating this blended formula of teaching to continuous monitoring and corrective measures, it is possible to spur a process of innovation of literature training – in the human sciences in general – that may lay the basis to educating to the praxis of guided writing and deliberation.

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