Applications

I materiali didattici della laurea triennale online «Lingua e cultura italiana»
(ICoN - Italian Culture on the Net)

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Abstract

This paper deals with the Online Undergraduate Degree in Italian Language and Culture for Foreigners offered by the ICoN-Italian Culture on the Net – Consortium (www.italicon.it), established in 1999 by 22 Italian Universities, in order to promote the knowledge and appreciation of Italian culture and language worldwide, through web based technologies. The Degree is conducted entirely online. The fundamental instructional materials are teaching modules that deal with a single topic and include supplementary materials (drawn from encyclopaedias, glossary entries, images etc.) and interactive exercises. Most students also participate in a virtual class environment, where activities are prompted and guided by the subject tutor. This model is rather unique in the field on E-Learning in Italian Universities, not only for its educational and cultural purposes and scope of activities, but also and probably most of all for the amount and quality of instructional materials created and used in the Degree. These materials (several tens of thousand pages in total) constitute not only a huge asset for the promotion and diffusion of Italian language and culture abroad but also a remarkable outcome of the interaction between the knowledge and expertise of academics and researchers in the Member Universities and the needs and challenges of a truly international online learning project. The final results are and will be measured not only in terms of academic achievements of the students, but also in terms of the creation of e-Learning communities and communities of practice and further educational and cultural developments.

1. Introduction

ICoN – Italian Culture on the Net is a consortium, created in January 1999 and composed by 22 Italian Universities (University of Bari, Cassino, Catania, Florence, Genua, State University of Milan, Padua, Parma, Pavia, Perugia for Foreigners, Pisa, Rome «La Sapienza», Rome «Tor Vergata», Third University of Rome, Salerno, Siena for Foreigners, Teramo, Turin, Trento, Venice, IULM University in Milan, the *Istituto Universitario Orientale* in Naples), the *Scuola Superiore di Studi Universitari* «S. Anna» in Pisa and the Net.t.uno Consortium. However, this project had already started a few years before that. It originated, in fact, from the work a group of scholars — most of which experts in Italian language and literature, but also political thought and law — who had created in 1995 in Pisa the *Centro interuniversitario Biblioteca Italiana Telematica* (Interuniversity Institute for the Italian Virtual Library); two years later, with the participation of representatives of almost all Italian Universities and the support of the Italian Ministry for University and Scientific Research (MURST), the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and RAI International, they began designing an online undergraduate degree in «Italian language and culture».

In 1998 this project had already reached its final stages; in fact, I remember taking part in May of that year in a crowded Round Table at the Turin Book Fair, where ICoN was presented; the Round Table was presented by Roberto Morione (the then Head of RAI International) and Renzo Arbore, who was the Artistic Director of Rai International and the New York Offices also took part, among others. Afterwards (also due to a reorganisation within RAI International itself) this partner left the project, although without serious consequences, beside some necessary adjustments; ICoN opened its courses in 2001 with its two first semesters.

ICoN's main aim is that of promoting and advancing, through the Internet, the study of Italian language and culture around the world, thanks to asynchronous E-learning metholodogies. It operates with the support of the Ministry for Education, University and Scientific Research, in cooperation with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and with the High Patronage of the President of the Republic of Italy.

The ICoN Consortium (www.italicon.it) has created one of the most important cultural and scientific portals concerning Italian language and culture available on the Net: it contains around 100.000 pages and received around 600.000 contacts each month, which means around 6 million pages visited each year.

Through its portal, ICoN provides:

Degree Course in Italian Culture and Language for foreigners, run jointly and officially recognised by the member Universities, with teaching activities, tests and exams conducted entirely online. This course is organised in four curricula:

arts-music-entertainment, historical-cultural, literary, pedagogic-linguistic and provides 330 teaching modules:

- Italian language courses, including courses specifically designed for English-speaking students, prepared by UCLA and a course for non-EU citizens living in Italy;
- Written Italian courses for professional purposes.

The resources also include a Digital Library, Museum, Encyclopaedia and News service.

After the first two semesters, in September 2002 the Degree opened officially with students from more than 50 different countries; on October 14, 2004 the first ICoN students, from Mexico City, Munich, Zagreb, Jerusalem and Brussels, obtained their graduation from the degree.

The ICoN teaching programme, based on E-Learning, constitutes a serious challenge, with several technological, organisational and educational implications; probably the most relevant, however, was the design and implementation of the instructional materials, in accordance with ICoN's strategic aims.

2. The instructional materials of the Degree

As far as the instructional materials are concerned, the most significant and challenging of ICoN's activities, and also the most rewarding, is the undergraduate degree in Italian Language and Culture for Foreigners. This is a three year degree and is officially recognised both at national and international level. Its main characteristic is the fact of being completely and exclusively accessible through the Internet, without any need for the student to move from his/her place of residence, except from once every six months, for the final examinations.

It is a wide-ranging study path, very demanding for the organisers and the students alike. The students can chose to follow the course with the support of specialist tutors or as self-guided study, with the help of the teaching materials.

The most important part of this system is made up by the 330 teaching modules, which include self-correcting multiple-choice exercises and were written by lecturers of the member Universities especially for the degree.

The fact itself that the students can chose to follow the course only through the teaching materials highlights the main characteristic of this degree, i.e. the fact that these materials are self-contained and provide the students with all the information and teaching content they need to successfully complete the course. This means that the modules are both the textbook and the lecturer: this is not unusual in the context of online and hyper-textual teaching materials, also at school level. Each module contains all the elements (presentation, index, tematic guide and bibliography) that facilitate the reading and study process and the com-

prehension on the part of the students of the teaching objectives of the module or group of modules.

These teaching materials are not in themselves a novelty, or the contrary, they are based on the theory and practice of several decades of open and distance learning of the first and second generations, supplemented, in this case, by the new technological solutions provided by hypertexts and the availability of teaching materials on the web and therefore with openings also towards the so called third generation.

The modules are strictly interconnected, through hyper-textual links, with each other as well as with the resources of the Digital Library, Museum and Encyclopaedia and also with additional specialised texts, specifically designed to provide further insights into particular topics or the connection among them.

What is particularly noteworthy in this field is the incredible amount of teaching contents, scientifically validated and «guaranteed» by the member Universities, that has been and is continuously being prepared for the students, in order to provide a complete undergraduate degree entirely «on paper» — online in this case — and available to them through the *wherever* and *whenever* they intend to access it. Each module, in fact, contains an average of 7 units of 5 pages each, which means 11.550 pages in total.

All this required a difficult methodological mediation between ICoN's experts and the authors of the modules, who were often not used to writing for the web or, in general, for students who would not benefit from direct access to an expert/lecturer to act as an interpreter/guide for the teaching materials.

The self-correcting multiple choice exercises, moreover, are not normally written by authors of the teaching modules, but by experts or the tutors who work directly for ICoN; this is done in an attempt to help the students understand the most difficult parts of the modules and at the same time to assimilate and utilise the knowledge they provide in the most productive way, in accordance also with the well known Bloom's Taxonomy.

This whole process was particularly fruitful, as it allowed not only a further revision of the texts in their use within the teaching methodology designed by ICoN, but also a further systematization and hierachization of the contents and concepts in the texts in view of the *in itinere* and final exams.

All teaching materials, moreover, are verified on a regular basis, something that is taking place also in these few last months, in order to develop an even better integration between the teaching materials and the teaching and metholodical traits of the e-learning model chosen by ICoN.

The financial and scientific investment needed in order to create the entire corpus of the materials is reflected in a continuous improvement, together with the guarantee that the materials are now a solid base on which to build further knowledge for the students and for anyone interested in language and culture,

anywhere in the world; surely they constitute a wealth of knowledge and opportunities for learning that has no equal in its field.

ICoN students can pursue the whole course of their studies exclusively through the teaching materials (self-study path), even though they can still refer to ICoN staff for specific questions regarding the contents or the organisation of their study.

Alternatively, they can join the virtual classes, all led by a tutor, which are organised around a set of modules related to the same broad topic. Each class has a virtual forum, within which the tutor provides suggestions, guidance, possible interpretations and also assigns and marks two short essays on the topics the class deals with; these essays are very similar to those used during the final exams. These activities, therefore, are aimed not only at helping the students understand the teaching modules, but also at helping them develop their own abilities in interpreting and utilising the knowledge they acquire.

The results of these two essays, of the exercises and the evaluation given by the tutor on the student's participation in the discussion within the class are all part of the final grade, together with the final exams (the students who study on their own need only take the final exams, of course).

The students within the virtual classes, therefore, enjoy a learning experience, although in a virtual and asynchronous environment, in many ways similar to a face-to-face «real» class. The interaction they experience within the virtual class is very helpful in terms of study and learning, as well as for their personal commitment. What does not happen, in this case, is a complete substitution of the «lecturer», i.e. the teaching modules with their exercises.

The tutors, in fact, act more as facilitators of the learning process than as teachers, in the sense that their objective is not that of transferring contents or concepts to the students, rather that of making their learning experience more interesting and fruitful, as well as of mediating on specific obstacles, such as language or terminology issues.

Something that is certainly noteworthy, finally, is the fact that a considerable number of ICoN students have already graduates from other universities and/or are themselves teachers of Italian language and culture abroad. For this reason, the meaning of the tutor-led virtual class goes far beyond providing help with the teaching materials and the preparation of the final exams. Within the classes, in fact, the students can exchange experiences, questions, issues that refer directly to their professional experience with the use and teaching of Italian abroad. In this sense, participating in the degree offered by ICoN, characterised by a truly international student body but also by the fact that the students are not required to leave their work and study environment, can truly become a unique experience with respect to, for instance, residential specialisation courses for teachers of Italian language and culture held all around the world.

3. The supplementary teaching materials

ICoN students, moreover, have access to a series of supplementary teaching materials, which are absolutely unique not only in terms of the quantity of contents prepared, but also and most of all in terms of the immediate and continuous availability on the Net.

3.1 Digital Library

The Library offers to all subscribing members 318 works of 104 among the most important Italian authors, in cooperation with the *Centro Interuniversitario Biblioteca Italiana Telematica* (www.bibliotecaitaliana.it). Direct access to the full texts is an essential element of university education. The Library provides the students with certified full texts in Italian, which they can read and download in various formats directly from their home or place of work — without further expenses and without difficulties for those who cannot access any major University or State Library.

3.2 Virtual Museum

The Virtual Museum contains images of 2500 works of art from antiquity to the Twentieth century. The message given by this precious resource reinforces the aim already pursued through the Library. Through the technology of the Web, the students can easily access the most interesting images they require for their study, in an environment that is perfectly integrated with their study and communication experience and they can also share their opinions and experiences starting from common ground.

3.3 Encyclopaedia

ICoN presents, finally, on its portal a selection of encyclopaedia entries, with an internal search engine. This selection is linked to the teaching modules and offers a wide range of references on the main aspects of Italian culture.

Thanks to an agreement with the *Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana* (Institute for the Italian Encyclopaedia), several entries are taken from the *Piccola Enciclopedia Treccani* and are identified with the name *Treccani*.

Furthermore, ICoN offers access to these resources not only to its students, but also to individual and institutional subscribers, such as foreign schools and universities, as a separate service with respect to the degree and the various courses offered by the Consortium; this opportunity is offered precisely because these resources are precious and unique not only thanks to their quantity and scientific and educational value, but also thanks to the fact that they can be accessed through the Web and therefore be integrated into very different courses and learning paths.

4. Conclusion

My experience in the field of E-learning in the last few years – between 1999 and 2002 I was project-leader for e-Learning at the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Turin and since the academic year 2002-2003 I have initiated and presided over the Specialist Degree in Computer Networks for Social and Economic Applications, aimed precisely at creating the professional profiles for E-learning in firm and Public administration — makes me think of the challenges and difficulties implied in ICoN as a project as a pioneer undertaking, at least under certain respects, which was initiated by a group of university lecturers belonging essentially to the Humanities.

We had formed this group, as I have already mentioned, in Pisa within the *Biblioteca Italiana Telematica* (now *Biblioteca Italiana*) in 1995 (www.bibliote-caitaliana.it) under the competent and enthusiastic leadership of Marco Santagata and Mirko Tavoni; this same group decided later on to pursue a far more ambitious project with the designing and creation of ICoN, probably also with a certain degree of boldness in the face of the enormous difficulties we had to face, in terms of financial and organisational resources, technological solutions and, most of all, educational and methodological issues. Actually, all the working groups located in various member universities could benefit from the reassuring support of specialists and experts of very high level, called in from other universities or the CNR (*National Council for Research*).

Several years later, it is certainly rewarding, especially for the «humanists», to think that this initial boldness has allowed the accomplishment of the project. Maybe the enthusiasm we always shared has helped us also to design and write extremely challenging and complex teaching materials, considering that it was not possible in any way to define the peculiarities and individual needs of ICoN students, who can always be young or old, have a degree or not, or simply be interested in Italian language and culture or have specific professional needs in this respect).

Our choice of giving a considerable weight to the teaching materials originates from this issue and they clearly needed to be written with the strongest commitment and according to very strict rules. Not only did we need to find the suitable experts for each topic, but also the teaching materials had to be adequately composed in order to become truly multimedia resources and to be able to attract and retain the students' interest. The role of the tutor, although very important, is based on these materials and cannot become a substitute for them.

Surely today, thanks to the many experiences and concepts recently developed also thanks to new technologies and solutions, these materials could have been organised and presented in a different way and this is precisely the reason why the revision process never stops. Anyway, the results we have achieved seem to

prove that the initial group of «humanists» was right in tackling these difficult and challenging issues. This is further confirmed not only by the students of the undergraduate degree, but also by the numerous teachers and learners of Italian language and culture who, in the various continents, use our resources on a daily basis within universities and schools all around the world.

In sum, ICoN's teaching materials can be considered, in my opinion, not only a unique and long-lasting source of knowledge and promotion of Italian language and culture abroad, but also a very good result in terms of mediation between the experience and professional capacity of the university lecturers who wrote or co-ordinated the writing of the materials and the needs of an online learning project, which aimed at being truly international, flexible, not limited by geography or time constraints and also capable of creating communities of knowledge and practice, as well as further developments we could only have imagined a few years ago, while we were planning and developing the services and opportunities offered by ICoN and its portal.

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