

Blogging Italy

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As a senior lecturer in the Department of Romance Studies at Cornell University, I teach First-Year Writing Seminars (FWS) for the J.S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines.¹ In one of these seminars, “Cultural Identities/Cultural Differences: Writing Italy,” students create a class blog to which they contribute regularly throughout the semester. When Covid-19 interrupted face-to-face instruction and we had to quickly adapt to a remote environment, I enhanced the blogging requirement to improve both the quality of students’ writing and their sense of community. The strategies I introduced can be applied to in-person instruction as well.

THE COURSE

I created this course because, after 25 years of experience as an Italian language instructor, I wanted to continue teaching about Italy and its culture. The original idea was to look at Italy from the experience of the Grand Tour. We would read texts written by foreigners about their travels in Italy and then the students would create their own online travel blogs about the sites they had encountered in the texts. I wanted to create a virtual voyage for my students that would satisfy their curiosity about Italy, while also guiding them in how to research a topic, organize a coherent set of thoughts, and communicate their acquired knowledge to their peers. As I wrote in my seminar proposal to the Knight Institute, “It is my experience that students — like their peers of the Grand Tour period — are fascinated by Italy and what it represents. They might be more in tune with an experience such as that of Elizabeth Gilbert’s “Eat, Pray, Love” than Goethe’s, but they are interested and curious about a culture that is both familiar and distant and therefore worthy of a deeper understanding. I believe that this seminar would be interesting beyond the study of literature, especially to those students who are interested in history, art, architecture, and, more generally, in studying abroad.” Furthermore, it seemed to me that many of the skills necessary for good writing in English are the same ones that an L2 language instructor should cultivate in students. Acquiring cultural competency as a requisite for language learning. Determining how to ask probing questions. Knowing how to arrange information in order to create a narrative. Communicating what has been learned in a way that prioritizes fundamental concepts over details. These foundational concepts are necessary both to approach and understand

¹ Information about the Knight Institute and guidelines for First-Year Writing Seminars can be found here: <https://knight.as.cornell.edu/fws-guidelines>.

a different culture and mindset, and to explore and organize something we want to communicate effectively. These concepts might seem obvious, but, in my experience, they are hard to convey and even harder to attain.

The course in its current form concentrates on three texts: E.M. Forster’s *A Room with a View*, Henry James’ *Daisy Miller*, and Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*. I settled on these works because they let the class look carefully at three different authors of three different cultures and time periods dealing with three different Italian cities: Florence, Rome, and Venice respectively.

THE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Following the directives of the Knight Institute, the course calls for both informal and formal writing. Throughout the semester, I assign prompts for reading responses; they provide a low-stakes forum for ideas that are then used to both structure class discussion and form arguments to be developed in more formal writing.² At the end of the reading and analysis of each text, students write more complex and polished essays that must undergo several revisions informed by peer review and at least one meeting with the instructor for advice on improvements. Through regular and frequent informal writing that favors content over form (such as reading responses, one-minute papers, journals); exercises that have a clear purpose (like summaries); and identifiable addressees (such as letters or memos), students can overcome a problem common among less mature writers: a lack of awareness of what they are writing and for whom. This lack of clarity about the purpose of their essays and their audience typically results in formulaic texts written to impress rather than communicate and delivered as perfunctory 5-paragraph essays, heavy on SAT vocabulary and weak in argumentation and logical structure.

In planning the course, I wanted students to remain aware of the purpose of their writing and of their readers and ensure that what they learned when they practiced informal texts would pass seamlessly when they produced formal, more polished essays. To achieve this, I needed a kind of assignment that would serve as a bridge between formal and informal prose and would allow students to explore writing in a personal and relaxed way, while also requiring rigor and precision. I decided that the best strategy would be to have students contribute posts to a class blog that would illustrate the three cities featured in the readings.

² These prompts usually ask students to pay attention to the form of the text and exercise their skills in close reading. The answers are posted in Discussions on Canvas – the platform used at Cornell University – and all students have access to the responses of everybody else in the class. Sometimes, I ask them to comment or respond to a classmate argument. Here is an example of prompts for the first pages of the first assigned novel, *A Room with a View*:

- The whole book is based on oppositions: Which one can you identify so far? Don’t look only at opposing ideas, but also at single words with divergent meaning starting from the “room” and “view” in the title. Start a list and comment at least on some of the items you identify. You will have to update this list throughout your reading of the novel.
- There are many guides (both animate and inanimate) in this book. Which one can you identify? Whom do they guide and how?

BLOGGING

Besides being a tool for exploring good writing practices, a class blog helps students acquire the cultural context surrounding the literary works we read, which they often lack. It is clear that E.M. Forster, Henry James, and Thomas Mann – proficient Grand Tour travelers that they were - build their stories around the powerful cultural myths that these cities represent assuming that their readership knows well their history and culture. Indeed, reading and analyzing these novels must be supported by a basic familiarity with the historical events and cultural facts that can help a reader better understand and interpret the three texts.

Of course, I could convey these notions by lecturing and assigning my preferred sources. I choose not to. While it is important for me to model for the students the analysis and discussion of the novels, I don't want to reinforce the idea of a teacher-centered classroom where all information is delivered by the instructor and passively received by the students. Instead, I guide the students as they research this information, synthesize it, and make it available for the whole class.

For each text, the students pick a topic of their choice from a list I have generated; they do some very basic research about it; they present it in class; and finally, they write a post about it in the class blog, which is available to all for the whole semester. Students become the resident experts for their chosen topic and, even when we move to a new text and a new city, they often use the knowledge they have acquired earlier in their virtual tour to ask probing questions and make insightful connections with the new material.

The final paper, written during the last weeks of the course, is an analytical and comparative reading of two of the three novels, backed by notions found in the blog. To support the ideas they present in their own essays, all students must go back to the blog entries and build from material found there. Since students know that they will have to rely on information written by their classmates, they understand better their task as writers: knowing that they will be using the class blog, they more easily identify with the readers of their own posts and evaluate their writing accordingly. Blogging motivates students to write straightforward but informative pieces that clarify the fundamental ideas about a topic to a classmate who is new to it and who may have to use this information to support their own arguments in the major paper of the course.³

Because the blog involves one post for each student for each of the three cities — usually around 50 posts in all since our classes are capped at 17 stu-

³ There are comprehensive presentations on blogging and its benefits on teaching writing in the websites of several University Writing Centers. Some that I have consulted and found useful are: the Sweetland Center for Writing of the University of Michigan (<https://lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/instructors/teaching-resources/using-blogs-in-the-classroom.html>) and the Center for Teaching at Vanderbilt University (<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/teaching-with-blogs/>). These sites are useful also to determine which public platform to use should one's home institution lack a Blog service. The Cornell University Blog Service can be found here: <https://blogs.cornell.edu>.

dents — students recognize that effective communication is also linked to a personal, appealing voice that not only informs, but engages as well.

Finally, blogging offers an additional creative element, i.e. the communicative use of images. Learning how to recognize, read, and interpret images — be they art pieces or cultural artifacts — is a complex skill that is also often new to first-year students and can be used to advance a student’s interpretative strategies.⁴

BLOG PROCEDURES

The mechanics of this blog exercise are described in detail in the syllabus, where I explain the process step by step. First, the students must get acquainted with the city and its history by reading about it in an online encyclopedia; then, they pick a topic from a list I have generated, and they start researching it. Once they have a sense of the material they need to cover, they meet with me and together we discuss how to better frame and develop their arguments. In this first conversation, we discuss how to approach the topic so that the classmates who will read the blog post will be able to understand and appreciate the subject matter in context. Here is where students usually have their first aha moment: they realize that they should not approach the exercise as a way to please an instructor who already knows what they are researching and writing about, but they must reach out and be helpful to a classmate who is new to the topic and will eventually need this information.

The first presentation of the topic is oral. Each student has around ten minutes to present and to prompt their delivery they can only use images. I do not allow for text in their slides, because I want the students to own what they present and make sure that they concentrate only on the bigger ideas without being distracted by information too detailed to be retained. After the presentation in class, mindful of the questions and comments they receive from their classmates, students write their post which undergoes several revisions.

As an example of the list of topics available, I am showing here the one I created for Florence, i.e., the setting for E.M. Forster’s *A Room with a View*. In this list, there are both topics that are specifically mentioned in the novel — Giotto’s chapels in Santa Croce, for example — but also subject matters that I believe are important to appreciate what has created and conveys both the historical reality and the myth of Florence. My goal is to have students understand some of the elements of the history and culture of Florence that Forster utilizes as background and mechanisms for his plot.

The novel refers to places, artists, and historical facts that give context to the story. Here is a list of the most meaningful throughout the book. Start by reading the entry on Florence in the online version of the Encyclopedia Britannica so that you’ll have a quick sense of the

⁴ For a discussion of Visual Rhetoric and how it can be used in a writing seminar, see this presentation on the Purdue OWL site: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/visual_rhetoric/visual_rhetoric/index.html.

main ideas. Then look at the list below and choose three items that you feel might be of interest for you. Send me your choices in order of preference via email by the end of today and I will assign you one to work on - I will try my best to follow your wishes. Schedule an appointment with me on Calendly to discuss how to prepare for this blog entry and presentation.

- The geography of Florence and the Tuscan countryside (Fiesole and Settignano, Val D’Orcia as UNESCO World Heritage Site)
- Secular medieval Florence: manufacturing and trade
- The Republic and Palazzo Vecchio
- The Medici and the banks
- Piazza della Signoria and Loggia dei Lanzi
- Religious medieval Florence: The Mendicant Orders (Franciscans and Dominicans)
- Santa Croce and its role as the “Temple of Italian Glories”
- Giotto and the Bardi and Peruzzi chapels in Santa Croce
- Brunelleschi, the Ospedale degli Innocenti, and Piazza della Santissima Annunziata
- Botticelli and Humanism in Art
- Beauty as Virtue: Portraits of women in the Florentine Renaissance
- Dante, the Dolce Stil Novo, and the angel woman
- Music in “A Room with a View”
- British Romantic poets in Florence
- Baedeker guides, Thomas Cook, and the beginning of mass tourism in Italy in the 19th century
- Economic and social conditions of Italy at the turn of the 20th century

REMOTE INSTRUCTION

Remarkably, the events of this semester made the *raison d’être* of this exercise – knowing what to write and for whom in a personal voice - even more evident. One of the issues I had with this course in previous semesters was that some students were resistant to reviewing and improving their blogs once the oral presentation was done and the first text was posted, especially when the revisions required addressing intangibles such as contextual significance or logical sequence rather than grammar or syntax.

This happened to be true also this semester when face-to-face instruction was interrupted right after the oral presentations on Florence had been given and the corresponding blog posts had been completed. While some students were very receptive to suggestions for further revisions, others seemed uninterested in advancing the substance and readability of their posts. It appeared that these students, after having presented in person, understood the writing exercise to be *pro forma*.

This attitude changed when we moved online. When we resumed remotely, I eliminated the oral presentation because we were short on class time for synchronous presentations; also, I did not want to burden anyone with new tasks — such as learning how to produce a video — at an already too stress-

ful time. The unintended consequence of these decisions was that now students truly had only their text to communicate their content, which made them much more responsive to my comments and suggestions for improvement. Once students recognized that the physical blog entry was their only means of communication, they became much more responsible for its format and content. Texts became less detail-oriented; the pernicious insistence on names and dates cited out of context was dropped; images were used less as a decorative feature and more as an explicatory extension of the text; and posts sounded less like an impersonal encyclopedia entry and more like a sincere attempt at explaining and giving context to foreign concepts and ideas.

USING THE BLOG FOR THE FINAL PAPER

To make sure that all students read all the blog posts produced, I asked each author to add at the end of their post two or three questions that would test the comprehension of the topic in a couple of sentences. Each student had to answer these questions for all posts that were not their own and send them to the respective authors; the authors in turn had to check them and report to me that all had complied with the requirement. While this exercise may appear more administrative than educational, it was important to make sure that all students had read all the posts before writing their final essay because their arguments have to be supported by the content of the class blog, as stated in the prompt for the final essay:

Consider how the setting is represented in two of the novels we have read: you can look at geography, history, art and architecture, people and culture, and more broadly at the myth(s) surrounding the city described in each novel. Explain how these factors contribute to and shape events, characters and their actions, and, more generally, the atmosphere of the texts you are analyzing. Then compare and contrast what you believe are the fundamental ways in which the two authors you picked use both the factual and mythical aspects of their chosen cities to form the ambience of their texts.

For this paper, you *must* use the material written – by anyone - for the Class Blog and cite the information you are using. You are strongly encouraged to use ideas you developed in your previous analyses of the novels and/or points we discussed in class and for which you kept notes. (6-8 pages)

If the advantages of blogging as a writing exercise were clear during the semester, they were even more undeniable in the students’ final essays. Guided by the familiarity they reached with the contextual material of the novels, students seemed more adept at moving from the general plot to the significance of a specific detail and back again: they used their knowledge to isolate ideas and discuss them in terms of a broader picture and/or they were able to apply a wider concept to a detail they found interesting in the text. In some particularly proficient essays, the sophistication of these moves allowed

students to recognize, for example, which arguments belonged to the main text and what information was instead better left to footnotes - a skill that is usually characteristic of writers more proficient than first-year students.

A COMMUNITY OF WRITERS

We all understand the seminar to be a collaborative forum where all participants contribute to explore and deepen a greater understanding of the material. To facilitate this teamwork, instructors have thought about techniques that span from the conceptual to the practical, from planning stimulating questions for discussion to rearranging furniture for small group work. Most importantly, we strive to build a sense of community through rules of inclusive behaviors and compassion, and we empower students to become effective participants. The goal is to function as a group where the lines of communication connect all participants.

When the focus is on writing, however, the group dynamics fostered by the seminar setting become less obvious. Precisely at the moment of writing, these broader communal relationships shrink to a collection of two-way dialogues between each individual student and the instructor: the student writes a paper for the instructor, who comments on it and assigns a grade. Peer reviews and class discussions about writing using the students' papers as examples are certainly useful techniques, but they don't necessarily change the students' perception of their task, which they often understand as pleasing an audience of one.

Writing useful texts for one another — as the class blog allows them to do — reminds students that the key to generating good prose is to find the answer to those initial questions, “What I am writing? And for whom?”