Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Julianne VanWagenen

Teaching Objectives: As a teacher of Italian language and Italian and Comparative Literature, my goals are necessarily various, yet there is a through line. While my specific aims in the language classroom revolve around language-learning achievement via the study of authentic cultural materials, and in the literature classroom they focus on improvement of critical literary/cultural inquiry and writing/rhetorical abilities, my ultimate goal is singular: that students learn to understand and express their own experience, comprehend others', and interpret and evaluate those experiences with a generous and democratic mind. I believe that young people today – who, due to climate change and new technologies, are faced with unprecedented ethical dilemmas and uncertainty regarding their futures – need, more than ever, an education focused on citizenship and self-reflection, which only good humanities courses can provide.

Through introduction to a new culture, foreign language and literature studies foster conditions in which students come up against possibly radical changes of perspective, and it is of utmost importance to my teaching philosophy that students feel safe to question and experiment without judgment, that they feel encouraged to view the world more inclusively with every introduction to newness, and that they, finally, take that expanded viewpoint with them into life. Italian culture in my classroom, furthermore, is introduced in a framework that reflects rather than surveils. Whether the class is a basic language or a literature course, I encourage students to contemplate their own beliefs and the cultural norms with which they have been raised, so as to stimulate greater open-mindedness and understanding.

Language/Culture Teaching Methods: My main objective is that students achieve level-appropriate competence in target language reading, writing, listening and speaking through the practice and development of their interpretative, presentational and interpersonal communication skills. In the first three semesters of language classes, and continuing in a variety of ways in the intermediate/advanced levels, my classroom activities are communicative and task-based. Syllabi require students to study pertinent chapter material before class, allowing us to take advantage of our in-class community to bring the lessons alive through interaction with each other and non-textbook media. In-class materials enhance an often idealized and flattened vision of Italy by presenting a less romantic, yet, more inclusive and relevant look at contemporary Italian realities. For example, a textbook chapter that talks about Milan and fashion has been complemented in past courses by an introduction to the ecological threat produced by 'fast fashion' and/or the status of migrant workers in the fashion industry. Depending on the course level, we have focused on vocabulary and our own relationships with fashion and ecological choices, presenting our outfits and why we like or chose each article; or we have watched a clip from *Gomorrah* and read/discussed a short article about Roberto Saviano's work. To a chapter devoted to 'Italianità', I may add Francesco De Gregori's 'Viva l'Italia' and Ghali's 'Cara Italia', asking students beforehand to make a list of words they associate with 'Italianità', then, at the end of the module, depending on the level, having them add a verse to De Gregori's or Ghali's anthems, to write and recite their own short poem or song, and/or discuss in groups what an initial (stereotypical) and final (nuanced) list of 'l'identità americana' descriptors might look like.

As courses advance from beginning to intermediate and advanced levels, my activities and materials begin to look more like those utilized in pure literature/culture courses. Yet, I continue to include methods and activities that are unique to the language classroom. For example, in my fourth-semester 'Radio Italia' course, 'note taking' has proven to be particularly fruitful. As a part of each class, I give a brief lecture, accompanied by Power Points, and a percentage of the students' final grades is a quarterly review of their in-class lecture notes, which they can enhance (in different colored ink) by researching key words/events they did not fully understand during lecture. This encourages students to listen and take notes as they would in a literature/culture course and to fill lacunae in their comprehension at home. In that same course, student presentations across the semester are at once analytical and imaginative, culminating in a group project in which students record a radio broadcast (alternatively, it could be a live department event) in which they introduce and play a set list and discuss relevant socio-historical events pertaining to their chosen songs.

Literature/Culture Teaching Methods: Across my career, bridging the gap of interest – between what I see students voluntarily consume and what we offer in class – has been a primary concern. This anxiety has been so central as to inform my choices of research topics, which often include components that I feel could act as 'hooks' to encourage student engagement (or cultural engagement, more broadly). For this reason, my research and courses often create bridges: between so-called high- and low-brow media, from comics and popular music to postcolonial novels and lyric opera; across historical periods, from Dante to Borges; and across seas, in Italy's colonization of Ethiopia or its reception of *Spoon River*.

In the classroom, even beyond the course-materials introduced, this desire to 'bridge the gap of interest' guides my literature/culture teaching methods. Lectures, activities, and assignments are designed, firstly, to render readings less abstract by contextualizing them historically, and, secondly, to remind students just how relevant past and foreign experiences, past and foreign cultural productions, are to the personal, contemporary and local. I have found my classes are particularly effective in this way, as I have seen students become suddenly aware of, even startled by, how directly a text, theme or moment is speaking to their own experience. For example, in my course on the *Divine Comedy*, we consider Dante's time period as one ushering in many of our current structures; we look at Florence's role in the rise of global capital and its social implications; we discuss the birth of Humanism, and stop to ask precisely what the historical role and goals of the humanities have been and are today. In considering Dante's cosmos, we linger at the end of Paradiso XXII when Beatrice tells Dante-pilgrim: "rimira in giù e vedi quanto mondo / sotto li piedi già esser ti fei." Dante goes on to relate: "Col viso ritornai […] e vidi questo globo", which he describes as "L'aiuola che ci fa tanto feroci." "Tutta m'apparve," Dante recounts, "da' colli a le foci." We meditate on this view of Earth, which humans did not *see* until 1968, when Apollo 8 shot 'Earthrise'. We discuss the moment that NASA mission-control realized, mid-mission, that photos would not effectively capture what the astronauts were witnessing and so asked them to use words instead: "We would like you, if possible, to go into as much of a detailed description as you poets can." We debate, in light of Dante's poem, Martin Puchner's claim about Apollo 8: "Philosophers had reflected on the awe that nature could inspire […] But they could not have imagined what it would be like to be out there, in space. It was the ultimate sublime, an awe-inspiring experience of vastness that was certain to dwarf them, crush them, make them feel small" (*The Written World*). Then, we put these moments of the backwards gaze in conversation with Borges-pilgrim's vision of the Aleph, which the author ultimately claims to be a false vision, and we call into question the power and limits of sight and expression, and the role of 'false visions', or fictions, in expressing universal truths.

Assessment: Students learn differently and, therefore, I feel it is important to give a wide range of assessments, particularly in the language classroom. From writing and revising compositions, to creating and performing short plays and organizing critical-thinking groups, students can shine where they are strongest and improve their weaker areas. Exams test three skill areas with a listening/watching portion and a reading-comprehension and short-answer portion; additionally, there is a grammar/vocabulary portion. At some levels, separate oral exams ask students to create and upload a recording in which they either read a piece of text or else listen to a set of spoken sentences and repeat them; otherwise, presentations and recitations function as oral assessments.

In the literature classroom, students are generally assessed based on class participation, presentations, and written essays. It is of particular importance to me that students improve writing as well as reading and critical inquiry in my classes. Therefore, essays are graded by rubric (Depth of Analysis, Grasp of Readings, Thesis Paragraph, Evidence, Conclusion, Organization, Clarity, and Mechanics on a scale from Highly Competent to Not Yet Competent), with detailed category descriptions that, along with my commentary in the margins, help students to understand how they can improve.

Student evaluations help me understand my courses' strengths and weaknesses and organize syllabi and class time accordingly. No matter the strength of evaluations, however, I am truly satisfied only when students come back for more, beyond their language citation or literature requisite. I have felt that I've met my goals in the past when students have returned to my classes, found me at office hours when they were no longer in a class of mine, or contacted me to ask for a book recommendation or to tell me that something we discussed in class stayed with them and has guided them in their lives since graduation.