

Reflective teaching statement  
Andrea Casson- April 2017

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### **Teaching Philosophy:**

My teaching philosophy can be summed up by a common saying: “The burden of communication is on the communicator.”

Thus the philosophy becomes the task. My job is to support the communicator – our students– in order for them to communicate in the clearest fashion to satisfy their goals. To equip students sufficiently so they have the grammar, the vocabulary, the practice – and the courage– to leave English and express themselves in Italian.

### **The elements to teaching communication**

I began at FIT twenty-five years ago, like many adjuncts, I taught in multiple places. In the late 1990’s, I put my CCE to work, and my teaching took on form and direction. Lucky enough to be employed by ONE institution, I grew intrigued by the challenge of teaching in a design school: It was clear FIT students learn best in an environment rich with images and personal experience, I needed the classroom to become an active space, and the activity had to interest our very creative students.

### **How I teach**

I rely less on a traditional text and more on everyday realia in order to focus on contemporary Italy and today’s idiom. I find the FIT student body is eager to learn everyday language; they are enthusiastic to know about contemporary art, food, fashion, music, trends and people. Students in a FIT classroom are eager to throw themselves into conversation, and their energy is best when directed toward active dialogue. My goal is to have a classroom environment which imitates, as much is possible, the natural way language is learned. Were we able to learn Italian in Italy, students would absorb the language through ordinary encounters; discussing the weather with the barista, or fashion with the dry cleaner, exchanging pleasantries with the doorman, following commands in a yoga class, such are the conversations of everyday life that are the first step towards fluency. My goal is to make the classroom a place where conversation is constant and natural, where students can master the basics of Italian through practice in order to have a strong foundation upon which to build toward deeper expressive language.

### **How to bring the everyday into the classroom?**

### I) What has proven successful:

Modern technology has been fundamental: with power point presentations, grammar can be condensed as much as possible. Bullet points for rules, a few examples and students are prepped and ready to go. Not a class goes by without a power point, either to introduce or to sum up the lesson's grammar.

FIT students are accustomed to, and enjoy, group work, my most successful classes are ones with group or paired activities. I work a lot with polls, interviews, questionnaires: students query one another in small groups with questions based upon the grammar or the vocabulary I am focused on, and then they deliver the results to the class in plenum. Or we launch a lesson with a headline/slogan/ad/timetable/brochure/ movie trailer/ etc. easily pulled up on the internet in the classroom, so that current topics and contexts in Italy enter the FIT classroom in synchronous fashion.- Having current realia on the screen in class, should it be an advertising slogan, a clip from a Milan fashion show, a Nutella print ad, all are effective ways to make both culture and grammar facts approachable and integral to what we are learning. The availability of a visual/audio prompt brings relevance to the material, image and sound protect Italian from becoming a dry and distant topic. Having a visual or audio clip to respond to allows students to have vocabulary in their reach, they need not produce words, topics and thoughts out of nothing, they are responding to scenes and phrases which are in front of them. Small group work means that in a class of 26 students, everyone gets the opportunity to speak. Class wide correcting of comprehension allows me to unite everyone, and begin to be able to judge the class's mastery of the material. Lastly, supplementing with audio and video in Italian allows students to learn from voices other than my own: no one should learn a language from only one voice.

### Technology in the classroom

Here are some technological-internet-sources I find work best:

- 1) short films/web series which show young Italians speaking on current events- films only last 2 – 5 minutes and I always prepare handouts to check comprehension.
- 2) current songs- useful for vocabulary, idiom and investigation into meaning and grammar as evidenced by the lyrics. Songs are complemented with grammar exercises that review in varying ways: from blanks for students to fill with missing lyrics to identification of certain grammar patterns within the chorus, to pairing lyrics with their opposite meanings, to rewriting verbs into different tense structures, or changing the subject of the lyrics and making adjustments.
- 3) current restaurant menus-museum sites- transport sites- hotel sites- all can be used for web based scavenger hunts, vocabulary enrichment exercises, training on how to seek quotidian information in a culture that uses the metric system, a 24 hour clock and a different way of writing the date! Web searches of this nature give more than a grammar foundation, they prep students for how things will be presented should they be fortunate enough to go to Italy.

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I expand on the above uses of technology to mine the students' own command of today's technology. Students write discussion posts, blogs, invent Facebook pages for famous Italians, tweets, compose slogans for products in Italian, etc, and they present these in class via Blackboard or directly in the lesson.

Sometimes the simplest technological moments are the most successful teaching ones: a series of random photographs turns into a de facto slide show, and I can tailor my use of the image to support the grammar of the moment (i.e.: describe what you see strictly in the past; use the imperative to command the people in the photo to do something; make plans for them in the future)- or students must respond on the spot to a new image they have not seen before. I find such unprepared prompts allows for language learning to truly mimic real life—where one never knows how proficient one's command of a language is until a situation calls for unrehearsed responses.

### Class projects:

Here are just a few of the group projects that have been successful in the past that I repeat annually:

1) CIAO FIT! Students work in groups to film a video promoting the FIT experience. They must cover at least three to five points: e.g.: academics, location, activities, social life, and they must film themselves speaking Italian. In the elementary classes this video may sound like a bulleted list of words, but in the third semester and higher classes, the videos are longer and I can assign specific grammar structures to include (describe people, places or objects early in the video that you can refer back to using direct object pronouns; express opinions about daily life at the university using the subjunctive mood; describe your favourite place with at least five adjectives....) these links will bring you to some youtube videos that came out of my class projects: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmO6vAw3DwI>  
[https://youtu.be/5BCzWdEW\\_cU](https://youtu.be/5BCzWdEW_cU)

Attachments area

[Preview YouTube video Ciao FIT](#)



2) COME SONO LE TIPICHE STUDENTESSE DI FIT? Students make a video or slide show profile of the typical FIT student. Again, in groups they compose two minutes of video, or a 12 – 15 slide show, of descriptions and activities that a typical FITer might do. The group sometimes likes to take this activity into an online dating profile.

3) UNA VISITA A NEW YORK ECONOMICA: students make trip advisor/travelogue like videos covering lodging, eating and visiting tips for similarly aged Italian students travelling on a student budget to New York.

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4) RESEARCH VIDEOS/POWER POINTS: students work in groups or individually to present on a predetermined theme that I know can be researched online: from broad topics (discotheques and clubbing in Rome), to narrow ones (Gluten free eating in Rome), these are prepared research presentations, teaching more than simple oral communication skills.

5) PUBBLICITÀ PER IL TUO LOCALE: students make short videos or power points selling “their” hotels or restaurants- covering as many aspects as they can.

### Other projects:

A) students create their own brochures – always in Italian- about a famous site ( eg: the Vatican museum, the tower of Pisa, Milan’s La Scala theatre. They can research the site on the web virtually and prepare a brochure on the computer. This covers time and numbers as they are required to report on cost, accessibility, hours, exhibits etc.

b) students write and publish short stories via one of the free web based story sites: Storybird.com works well—they have a wealth of images to use and students can be supported through the satisfaction of composing a story to then present to the class and share via the website.

c) students create and share voice thread projects- same idea as storybird with more audio and visual options. I use this technology to both elicit student response to voicethreads I have set up, and to allow them to set up their own voicethreads for each other to respond to.

### 2)What has been unsuccessful:

I do run into glitches. I can over estimate student interest and under estimate comprehension. I can plan too long a segment on a topic or cluster of vocabulary or a cultural theme and I wind up watching students’ eyes glaze over within the first three minutes. I have organized projects based on short fashion films only to discover no-one cares for that designer; field trips to stores with Italian goods that interest no-one, web quests for information on events it turns out no-one in the room would dream of attending.

I can make a drill too long and make a grammar explanation too short.

I can presume a general level of comprehension that is not there and I do not know till quiz performance shows how little was truly understood.

I can plan a class with an activity for all 25 enrolled and only ten show up.

I can plan a class around a technology based activity- movie, webstreaming, internet hunt, audio- and the equipment fails.

These then are the moments to think on one's feet—what to do when plans go out the window?

### **Emergency teaching**

When faced with spontaneous combustion and all plans fall through, the joy of teaching a language is that it is precisely that, language, an ever present, fluid changeable subject, approachable at all times from multiple directions.

I find game playing will recover a group from any of the fiascoes above: from showing up with dice and have students drill verbs in response to throws of the dice ( one number is a subject the other is a verb) - to category games: students must come up with a name, action, place and adjective that all begin with a certain letter. Students can play charades; twenty questions; geography place games. All of these activities are easy, spur of the moment and crowd pleasers. All of them help create the effect I am seeking—to have language come out spontaneously, without conscious planning, as that is how one learns in real life, through listening and responding without knowing ahead of time what the topic will be.

### **Assessing for success**

When it comes to measuring success, I am a traditionalist. All spontaneous classroom activity must be accompanied with necessary grammar drills and tables and memorization on the part of the student. Written work, assigned each class allows for material to be reviewed at home. Weekly quizzes, whether short answer, multiple choice, fill the blank, write a short essay, respond to an oral prompt- are all valid measurements of comprehension and progress. They are my touchstone—from student performance I learn what is tricky, what has been easy, what is mastered, and what is lost—and it varies enormously from group to group. Oral presentations are good for some students, written work is effective for others. It is my responsibility to offer my students a variety of ways to communicate so that they exit our classes with something that works for them- Along with promoting talk in the classroom, we do a variety of written work: emails, tweets, Instagram posts, telegram messages, all of these missives are as effective as essay writing for honing written skills.

### **Future plans and teaching in Italy**

I have had the fortune to teach our Conversation in Florence class more than once. Abroad I have students interview the Italians around them multiple times a week- forcing them to engage in conversation WITHOUT English as often as possible. These interviews must then be recorded in writing, and a summary of the conversation is turned in to me in written form. We use the city as our classroom, with walks planned around vocabulary themes; train stations / bus stations become opportunities for planning future itineraries and fantasy to be presented

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in the future tense. Museums are adjective festivals; battle sites an excuse for the past tense; maps are a reason to use the imperative. Information booths are where you practice using the polite form of address; a trip to the supermarket is a culture learning tool—what products are presented in which fashion in contrast to the way similar items are sold in the USA. University bulletin boards are a window into a community's activities and proclivities, news papers offer a wealth of materials, photographs, headlines, etc.

My challenge right now is to find a way to integrate these Italy based interactive activities into FIT's classroom via the opportunities New York offers despite the dominance of English.