# An Online Latin Poetry Translation Lab in an Italian Classical High School

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## Abstract

This paper is an account of a project on the strategy for technology-based course development and management adopted for teaching a 4th-year Latin poetry class in an Italian Classical High school. It focuses on a strategy for course design, online delivery, and integration with an e-mail discussion list. The examples focus on Latin poetry, and there is a discussion of how technology can couple with changes in pedagogy and increase learning productivity, even in traditional subjects, when learners become self-motivated, self-directed, and collaborative participants in their learning experience.

## Introduction

Even though we work in times of mass education, we need to avoid being caught up in mass acculturation. We must encourage a curriculum that, through the years of secondary schooling will include a rich linguistic and literary education, through the mother tongue and any other languages studied by the students, in ways and means that differ from the standard clichés. All this should be directed to the goal of students no longer being passive recipients of other people's knowledge, but active interpreters of stimulating messages, competent and able to work on texts in all of their cultural richness.

With this premise in mind, I had the idea of creating and making available to students online course materials which could augment my class work in a 4th year Latin poetry class in which we study Horace, Virgil, and the elegiac poets. I attempted this not only to enable my students to become increasingly competent and critical readers of Latin poetry, but also to reflect on their own learning process in the Latin language.

# Fundamental Characteristics of the Project

The project is entitled "Horace: Experiencing His Life and Poetry." It includes both the poems of Horace that we study in class and others (40 odes and 4 *sermones*, or conversational poems), organized around a few fundamental themes, such as:

- life and the moment
- the function of poetry and poetic choices
- honour and glory
- women
- friendship

The course is made up of a textual component (the texts of the poems, comments, critical essays, guides to study), a video element (a guide to consulting Internet resources), and audio clips (metrical readings of the poems). This multimedia approach is the result of years of experiments that have caused me to continually update and renew my teaching methods with the introduction of these new technologies.

What I did in practice was to first design course material to be projected during the lessons: a) in order to show how an expert proceeds in his analysis, b) to help students focus on key elements, and c) to help them understand the Latin texts. I discovered that the use of material structured to favour reflective analysis also helps the teacher with class interaction and makes discussion and open questions flow more easily.

After only a few weeks, the majority of students, having understood more clearly through direct hands-on experience what tasks they needed to apply to the text to be analyzed, proved to be more independent and thorough learners.

At this point I began to think that in order to help students develop new skills and be increasingly motivated in their own personal study, I could provide for them on the Internet those same resources used by the teacher so that they could continue to interact outside the classroom. (About 90% of my students have access to a computer and to the Internet at home and there is a computer lab available to the students all day at school.) The advantages would be considerable: students would be free to explore materials whenever, wherever, and however many times they wanted. This would enable them not only to go through the teacher's 'lesson' again, but also to develop and explore concepts further on their own.

As soon as I started work on the project I began to ask myself what this advantage would actually prove. Would the simple upload of

materials on the Web help my students become more independent learners? Or would it be necessary to change the style of presentation for materials that had been previously planned for the classroom?

I had noticed in various other circumstances that if the learners were not prepared beforehand and the teacher was not present, students often interacted aimlessly with the media or tended to arbitrarily try out the various possibilities the computer offers. In these cases, the medium provoked a superficial response. The learner tended to proceed hesitantly and uncertainly because he lacked the necessary skills to work with the materials, and information obtained in this way (passively) does not develop into knowledge.

For this reason, I decided to plan something structured differently from the program used in the classroom, so as to avoid the learner working aimlessly. The inspiring principle was that the learners should be stimulated to find both literal and connoted meanings that would help them orient themselves within the complexity of the poetic message. But when learners meet a complex and rich resource such as a hypermedia database, how are they able to navigate the process of discovery, understanding, and acquisition of knowledge in a meaningful way?

Given the complexity of the subjects and of the poetry itself, the design of the project—including all this material—should allow the learner to navigate freely. But it is still more important that the material be structured in such a way that the original objectives of the course be reached, without the learners being merely led through a set route. Keeping in mind that hypermedia is an active medium that gives the user the opportunity to make decisions, to formulate and test hypotheses, to choose and construct interpretations; I decided to proceed in the following manner:

## Description of the Project

For the project, "Horace: Experiencing His Life and Poetry," a Poetry Translation Laboratory appears as a hypermedia database which one enters from the course home page (Fig. 1).

The course, which covers 16 weeks, will, in its finished version, have the following structure:

1. online modules (course program and calendars)
2. materials (index of documents—texts and contributions by experts)
3. online self-evaluation
4. virtual classroom (teachers, learners, and teacher-trainees as tutors)
5. "forum" (an e-mail discussion group)
6. online chat room

In each module there is a choice of poems linked by a theme (see theme list above, in "Fundamental Characteristics of the Project"). Each poem has specific resources: for example, cards that help learners with grammatical analysis, text analysis, and vocabulary (Fig. 2).
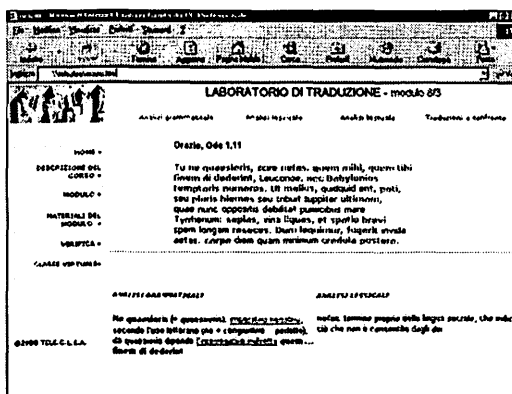


If we take grammatical analysis as an example, its colour code is green. The colour code helps the learner to immediately recognize which type of resource is linked to the word. An important word in terms of both grammar and vocabulary is two-tone: red and green. If we want to look into the phrase, "ne quaesiris," the corresponding "hotword" activates the grammar card indicating that we are dealing with a negative imperative. Each linguistic structure is linked to a grammar reference section, which helps the learner focus on the rule.

A few poems are accompanied by translation to stimulate the learner to "understand" and "interpret" the Latin texts—"understand" being only a preliminary step, as one needs to immediately move on to "interpret," the second stage, which will permit the full and complete penetration of the message.

I selected poems according to the requirements of the syllabus and the interests of the students. Supplementary readings were introduced for reinforcement of grammatical structures, enrichment of vocabulary, and the examination of the cultural, social, historical and political context of Horatian poetry. These materials were selected from a variety of sources, such as books, articles, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and web sites.

The Latin curriculum in an Italian Classical High School is demanding. Besides classroom time (four hours per week), students are expected to do at least four hours of homework every week. The students were in the lab one class a week for word searches, text retrieval, and web-based research. Most of the homework was done on computer, either online or off. In the online (e-mail) discussion the teacher plays the role of the moderator who compiles a list of questions to ask the group members, so that they can reflect on how they will answer the questions with details in class and, if necessary, review additional documents and materials.

The students are tested and assessed at the end of the term. At school the students must translate accurately from Latin into Italian selected poems of Horace and respond to 15 free-response questions about the same poems. They also have to write an essay, in which they argue a particular issue within one of the course themes, using appropriate Latin words or phrases from the poems selected for the test.

## Feedback

In the online portion of the course, I have incorporated some instructional software, including drill-and-practice and tutorial programs. This material includes true-false, multiple-choice, and fill-in-the-blank exercises and is presented in a pre-set sequence (syntactic structure, figures of speech, meter, lexical analysis, text comprehension, translation) to help the students to acquire a solid grounding in both basic and advanced techniques of poetry analysis. The program provides some easily understandable and constructive feedback (Fig. 3)



1- Struttura sintattica - I,20

specific to both correct and incorrect answers, which guides the students to remedial work or to improve on the goal attained. In Figure 4, you can see an example of a multiple-choice test about the meter in the Ode I, 20. The feedback provides clear indications about the Sapphic meter.



As previously stated, learners can navigate freely in the text database, but to encourage their real exploration I have favoured activities which promote active learning, which stimulate comprehension rather than memorization of facts, and which develop specific skills. These are specific questions on topics dealt with in school, enriched with a few special projects, which involve consulting texts not previously studied, but present in the online database. Each week the students have to carry out the research work and recognize the key concepts on which they can build their personal conclusions. Each student works individually and brings the results of this research to school in the form of essays or analytical cards that will then be discussed together with the teacher and the fellow students. Every two or three weeks, students can choose to explore a few questions together. The class is divided into workgroups. Each group is responsible for developing the subject assigned to them (for example: the "wise man" characterization in Horace's poetry). They draw their conclusions with the other students online, participating in an e-mail discussion list that involves everyone. In this case, too, results are then discussed in class with the teacher.

## Conclusion

My best evidence that the students have become less passive and more active learners with the online lab is that they consistently do more comprehensible and accurate translations than in the past. They have acquired this skill through the additional guided practice available from the lab and through the extra interaction of online discussions. Besides that, many of them have searched the Internet on their own and brought to school supplemental reading material

to help themselves get a clearer comprehension of the poetry under study. At the same time, the skills they have acquired through these exercises go beyond the boundaries of this particular discipline. ◆

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