



Course Development, Assessment, the Flipped Classroom, and Noodles: the Highs and Lows of an Online Classroom through the Medium of Noodles

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Abstract

Teaching a language and culture online has its set of challenges, but it also has unexpected rewards, delights, and a closeness with students one couldn't have predicted. This paper will describe the general structure of our online course titled "Noodle Narratives on the Silk Road: A Cultural Exploration of Italy and China Through Noodles." It will discuss course development, including how to set up a class online, the general structure of the course, and achieving a balance of synchronous and asynchronous activities for students to accomplish during the class. The paper will address the topic of class implementation and management, including time management, achieving learning goals, and assessment, all through an interactive online teaching experience. The paper will discuss how to utilize an online format to teach language and culture as it further defines synchronous and asynchronous activities, the flipped classroom online, as well as tips on how to foster and navigate community with students who are situated all over the world. This paper will dive right in to online classroom teaching in our global world, the benefits, the struggles, the overwhelming reasons why we should try it.

Keywords: *teaching, online learning, China, Italy, culture, food, noodles, connection*

1. Introduction

We were in a meeting in the fall of 2013 when we decided to compare noodles between two cultures: Italy and China. The metaphorical symbol of the noodle and all it represents in both Italy and China was enough to send us into a five-year investigation. And so our research began. Initially we had planned to get to the bottom of the noodle mystery—where did the noodle originate? This proved more difficult than either of us had imagined. We knew the noodle was a staple food in both countries but we weren't sure about their origin. Did Marco Polo bring the noodle from Italy? Ultimately, we discovered this was not true. There were many references to noodles in cookbooks, literature, and travel logs that pre-dated Marco Polo's voyages to China. When we saw an image of an overturned bowl of noodles that had been completely preserved in China, dating back 4,000 years, it did seem as though China had discovered the noodle after all. Yet, although these appeared to be the oldest noodles in existence, the discovery still didn't prove for certain that China had invented noodles, only that a number of conditions had come together to preserve a bowl of them.

Where the noodle originated was not the only question we asked. What we wanted to know more than anything involved how the noodle integrated itself into the DNA of Italian and Chinese cultures. Did the noodle manifest itself in the two countries differently? If so, how? Armed with a new curiosity about noodles, we developed a freshman seminar and an on-line course to continue our explorations. Although the in-class discussions we had in our seminar gave us new insights, this paper will focus on the on-line course and the technology and teaching techniques we utilize.

2. Curriculum for the Online Course and Technologies

2.1 Course Content

Our online course is offered over a period of six weeks, with two 75-minute synchronous sessions per week, focusing on four thematic units. In Unit 1 (week 1) we engage students in the study of

anthropological methods on food studies, aiming to build a theoretical foundation for the cultural exploration of Chinese and Italian food and prepare them for the research related to the final project. Unit 2 (weeks 2 and 3) is an introduction to Chinese and Italian food. In this unit, students read about Chinese and Italian culinary history, and discuss family traditions and social rituals manifested in food. Unit 3 (weeks 4 and 5) is a closer examination of the noodle, i.e. the history and evolution of the noodle in China and Italy, noodle variations, its relationship with nature and society. We also study literary works and food and noodle memoirs from China and Italy. Finally, unit 4 is the highlight of the course, showcasing noodle narrative projects and research papers (described in 3.2).

2.2 Assessment

Students are expected to achieve the following learning outcomes:

- Be able to explain at least three unique aspects of Italian and three unique aspects of Chinese cultures through the study of noodles in class readings, lectures, and discussions;
- Witness and reflect upon the intersection of traditional and modern life through assigned weekly blog entries and responses, cultural and literary explorations and discussions relating to course readings and noodle restaurant visits, and Voice Thread assignments;
- Integrate into student consciousness the idea of using cultural artifacts (such as noodles) as a jumping off point for multicultural exploration through the medium of assigned weekly readings and restaurant visits, and demonstrate this integration through noodle restaurant projects and final research papers;
- Explore how students' own relationship with noodles reflects their cultural and social belief systems in blog entries and identify how and where others do the same through interviews, observation, and other anthropological methods.

To assess whether our students achieve the stated learning outcomes, we utilize a variety of assessment methods. Student grades are based on the following components:

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| 10% | Self-intro Voice Thread and Class participation |
| 20% | Reflection entries on Scholar Blogs |
| 15% | Group Project Presentations |
| 15% | Oral Mid-term Exam |
| 20% | Interview Project and/or Voice Thread Noodle Narrative |
| 20% | Final Paper and Presentation |

Students write weekly blog entries on assigned topics that require them to analyze the readings and critically reflect upon the issues discussed in class/readings. Student blog entries also provide topics for ideas and analysis during the synchronous sessions. Oral midterm exams give us the opportunity to interact with students and explore topics in real time. The group project promotes collaboration and interaction among students who are physically located in different parts of the world. The project is completed on Google Drive and presented on Zoom. In order to allow students to take advantage of their local culture and foodscape, we ask students to complete an individual project as well. Students have the choice of either visiting a local noodle restaurant and completing a VoiceThread presentation with video, images, and narratives; or conducting an in-person interview and a write-up of 3-4 pages on the cultural significance of the noodle. For the final research paper of 8-10 pages, students choose a topic relevant to the noodle, analyze primary sources (such as literary works), discuss the cultural and social significance of noodles, evaluate the impact of social changes on dietary choices, and research immigrant experiences in relationship to food. Students are required to apply anthropological methods to food studies or use fieldwork methods whenever appropriate.

2.3 Flipped Classroom and Technologies

Developing a community of inquiry and providing interactive and collaborative learning experiences are key to the success of online courses and to the achievement of higher-order outcomes. However, it is not difficult to see the challenges online courses might experience when face-to-face communication is entirely absent. In order to establish/promote connection and collaboration among students and make the learning experience engaging and interactive, we strive to integrate synchronous sessions with asynchronous learning in a purposeful and thoughtful manner by applying the principle of the flipped classroom. Our online course consists of 12 synchronous sessions where students can "see" each other



and discuss issues in real time. To make the synchronous sessions more engaging and dynamic, we purposely reduce the time for lecturing by creating our lectures in multi-media formats on VoiceThread for asynchronous learning outside the classroom. Students are required to watch slides and post video comments. Although learning takes place outside the synchronous sessions, it is almost as interactive – students can see us, hear us, and respond to our questions, and are able to interact with their peers in the same manner. This allows us to gain knowledge of our students' experiences and perspectives before they arrive at the synchronous sessions. As a result, we are able to incorporate their comments into class discussions. In this way, class time is used, for the most part, for meaning-making discussions, analysis of texts, and the sharing of experiences and ideas, which is an effective way of building a community of inquiry in an online setting and providing an engaged and collaborative learning experience for students who don't have a chance to meet in person.

A variety of instructional technologies are used in this course. The main organizing platforms for the class are Zoom and Canvas. Zoom (zoom.us) provides remote conferencing services through cloud computing. Instructors create a Zoom link for the courses and students join synchronous sessions using a personal computer or by calling in on their phones. During synchronous sessions, instructors can show presentations, videos, audios, write on the virtual white board, divide students into groups for discussions. Students can raise their hands to ask questions, give in-class presentations, and attend office hours outside the classroom on Zoom.

Course materials, including the syllabus, lesson plans, readings, and assignments, are housed in the course site on Canvas, which can be accessed online from any location, anytime. Additionally, Canvas supports technologies such as Youtube and VoiceThread, making it an easy and convenient tool for online courses.

Providing easy-to-use platforms for students to share their coursework is important for successful online courses.

In our class, students submit their reflection entries on Scholar Blogs (scholarblogs.emory.edu). The blog site allows the posting of narratives, videos, and images, making it possible for students to include media components in their blog entries. Instructors and students can add comments.

VoiceThread is used by both students and instructors in this course and they can interact with each other asynchronously anytime, from any location. As a versatile tool, VoiceThread allows a group of people to engage in asynchronous conversations around a series of textual documents, images, audio files, or videos. Such communication can be placed in a relatively closed, and thus protected, online environment. Since VoiceThread is incorporated into the course Canvas site, students can easily create a multimedia presentation of their noodle narratives based on a visit to a noodle restaurant. *VoiceThread* also proves to be an effective tool for active learning.

3. Conclusions

During our noodle classes, both in person and on-line, our debates, conversations, and projects go deep into the noodle's purpose. Initially we were convinced we would find distinct and obvious differences between Italy and China, reflecting historical, geographical, and philosophical differences. We did find these. However, what surprised us and our students the most involved the similarities these cultures share, especially around the emotions and connections created through the act of food preparation and eating together. Food preparation is a vital component of the eating process. Both Italian and Chinese cultures value communal food preparation just as much as they do eating the prepared food. These two acts bring families together, allow them to discuss and resolve problems, give them a forum for demonstrating love and devotion to each other, and allow them to individually and collectively be more resilient in the face of adversity. Time and time again, when discussing noodles and food with our students, we discover and rediscover that the act of preparing and eating food is a way families bond, talk, and overcome, not only in Italy and China, but all over the world. Many of our students miss their home towns and families. They long to recreate their family meals by cooking for friends and purchasing spices that evoke home. Students also share food with others as a way to bridge cultures. Through on-line teaching techniques and technology, careful scaffolding, and the flipped classroom, we are able to see into the lives, experiences, and dinner tables of our students. With delight, we share noodles with each other across tables, cultures, and oceans.