



The Role of the Virtual Museum in the Foreign Language Teaching. A Case Study of Teaching Italian as a Foreign Language in the University Setting

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Abstract

The virtual museum focuses on the importance of information and displays the exhibits of 'natural' museums. It can be used as a constructive way of education that transforms digital users to a community interaction with their cultural and intellectual heritage, activating experiences for aesthetic and objective as well as experimental and playful learning. Museum education gives the opportunity to activate the senses and to achieve the cognitive, emotional and social development of persons, a multi-sensory experience that stimulates the passion for discovery, remembrance, multiple knowledge and free expression, lasting for life. In the above-mentioned framework, Internet technologies can provide the means to create an efficient, cooperative learning atmosphere for online courses. Social networks and wikis can build online collaborative learning communities for dynamic interventions and contributions, co-creation of knowledge and learning materials. Following the above theoretical framework, a research was carried out in the Department of Italian Language and Literature of the University of Athens aiming at the creation of alternative learning environments using Web 2.0 tools for the teaching of the Italian culture and the Italian as a foreign language in the context of university language education. More specifically, our research aimed at linguistic and cultural education of students through alternative cultural environments, such as virtual museums, as well as the dynamics of online activities in cultural subjects.

Keywords: *virtual museums, museum training, wikis, online activities;*

1. “Digital Museums - Museum Education”

Contact with the museum affects values and attitudes, either by promoting cultural and social consciousness and enhancing the interest and curiosity of the visitor, or by motivating for further learning and decision-making on life. A great contribution of the Internet is the movement of cultural objects into a variety of recruitment environments. This builds a 'digital extension' of the museum on the Internet, a 'no-wall museum'.

Museum education is a cognitive process and a product of social and cultural interactions. It offers an opportunity to activate the senses and to achieve the cognitive, emotional and social development of individuals, a multi-sensory motivation to reach the spiritual and cultural heritage. The introduction of technology into the language and culture lessons can trigger a more original way of teaching in authentic environments that will fill learners with internal motivation and unimportant interest in knowledge, exploration, social activities and autonomous learning. Through online tours to local and global cultural institutions, the visitors will be able to not only enrich and improve their language skills, but they can also gain intercultural awareness [8] and a positive attitude towards the culture and the country they visit.

The experience of using the Internet for teaching purposes has shown that giving students access to authentic data with the help of technology can bring both cognitive gains (better assimilation of linguistic and cultural knowledge) and psychological (joy of exploration) [6], [18], [8], [7]. In surveys [10], [11], [7], [4] it has been shown that the right planning for the integration of culture into language learning and in particular the engagement with visual elements - expansion with virtual environments - brings positive results in learning culture by helping to foster positive attitude, learning alertness and efficiency, authenticity through images of people, landscapes, foreign language art, flexibility for multiple interpretations and adaptation to each other's experiences. This creates an autonomous learning environment that should be developed in a systematic way, providing new ways of using the language (mainly hybrid) that may enhance and motivate collaborative and interactive contact with others and the foreign language.

2. “Social Networking – Wikis”

The Internet offers those technologies and means to create an efficient, cooperative learning atmosphere for on-line lessons. With Web 2.0, web-based applications are based on dynamic information traffic and user collaboration. In other words, there is an active engagement in online content, allowing grouping and interaction on online content. In this way, online collaborative learning communities and wikis were designed to help teams to collaborate, to "build" online material, to interact, especially for distance learners. This is a possibility of collaborative writing and intervention at any time. Annotations and contributions from all members are non-linear activities with the potential to share the outcome and the final outcome. Moreover, supporters of wikis highlight to ease of use, flexibility in content development, but also to its open philosophy that makes it a particularly useful tool for teamwork support [17], [19], [1], [3].

Furthermore, wikis as tools can increase trainees' participation and motivation, facilitate learning and provide opportunities to practice writing skills. In particular, its two strong points are that it helps co-operation between users and allows the digital community to maintain and update information in a collaborative and easy manner [19], [5].

3. “Research methodology”

A three-year study was conducted by students of the Department of Italian Language and Literature of the University of Athens, aiming at the creation of alternative learning environments using Web 2.0 tools for teaching culture and foreign language in the context of university language education. The ultimate goal of the research was the language and cultural education of future language teachers through alternative cultural environments such as virtual museums as well as the dynamics of online activities in cultural and foreign language lessons [12], [13], [14], [15]. During our research, students were familiarized with cultural material, rich interaction, exchange and negotiation of ideas between them, alternative ideas and a flexible view of things. As a result, they were able to choose what they would learn, show interest and encouragement in the performance of the other.

For these reasons, a basic wiki environment (<http://it.web2lang-learning.wikia.com>) was created, from where the student groups pumped general cultural or practical information about the course activities. Eight laboratory courses were planned, which consisted of several activities. Students wandered into virtual cultural institutions in Italy, museums, temples, theaters, libraries and groups, each time choosing one of the course's suggested activities to develop it in their own wiki environment. All activities were developed on the following theoretical basis: On the one hand, they rely on the theory of multiple types of intelligence. This theory allows the broadening of students' experiences by approaching different themes and subjects in alternative ways by exchanging with their fellow students experiences, knowledge and approaches; thus promoting a unified learning "flow" within the classroom. On the other hand, they rely on the theoretical principles of constructivism for active cognitive exploration and construction of their own knowledge and, lastly, creative writing [16] the opportunity to free their imagination and creativity into a safe and creative environment and to promote original solutions.

4. “Research Results”

From the virtual cultural experience of the students and from the questionnaires (initial-final) given to them, remarkable results emerged. It is worth mentioning that the concept of topicality is crucial to how students face the exploitation of New Technologies. By incorporating authentic and up-to-date material, language can be supported and the required range of communication and socio-linguistic competence can be acquired. It turns out that our students have the need to gain a positive and more open way of thinking. They are ready to recognize the participatory exchange of views and to work together, having a common goal.

The students have positively evaluated the potential of New Technologies as an ever-evolving environment, rich in cognitive and informational material. On the other hand able to contribute and support learning and collaboration on the one hand, and on the other hand their creative expression in pedagogically planned activities.

It becomes clear that the concepts of understanding and deepening the issues with which our students are negotiating are extremely important. They believe that with the New Technologies, they have the ability to design their own learning program and gradually lead to the understanding of another language and the culture associated with it. They acquire knowledge of the subject that they negotiate, understand and visualise concepts, they gain learning experiences in Internet environments.

Moreover, they design and evaluate the products of learning itself, which leads to understanding and reflection. It also appears that the New Technologies can introduce students to the scientific approach to knowledge and reality. It gives them the opportunity to observe and explore, to be interested, by sharpening their imagination. Finally, it is crucial for our students to be creative with the new technologies in order to experience aesthetic experiences in different situations, producing many ideas, using the transport way of thinking. Encouraging creativity involves students in authentic social activities and teaches them to negotiate linguistic and communication codes that promote autonomy and self-control. By being exposed to different societies and cultures, their imagination is stimulated and the consciousness of alternatives becomes an integral part of their thinking.

5. "Conclusions"

Cooperative writing wikis facilitate the production of teamwork and the learning of culture, maintaining and updating the informational treasure, in an atmosphere of activating creative thinking and linguistic experiences. In the virtual museum, there are active participation and multiple opportunities for dealing with a subject or exhibit, depending on the preferences, knowledge and interests of each, aiming to make the visit more attractive and efficient. We need the pedagogical script support to achieve both mental and emotional vision of objects, addressing all senses and types of intelligence, visualizing abstract concepts and interacting with specific elements as well as socially with other users, and of course, to lead to an increase in effective and informal learning.

Bowen [2] concludes with a phrase by Nobel laureate Penelope Lively, "we carry a museum inside our heads," and goes on to argue that the Internet may be a way to reveal some from the most essential information to everyone. However, we must be careful to see the digital presence of museums on the website as something special and complementary to the traditional image of the museums we have in the authentic experience and viewing of the exhibits. Under no circumstances is this culture to be replaced by virtual museums. The opposite. The virtual museum is the intermediary, the tool that will strengthen the presence and visit of the museum's natural spaces. Clearly, they cannot offer real objects to their visitors, but they can extend the ideas and principles of these collections to the digital space [9]. In this way, they not only reveal the essential nature of the museums but also allow digital visitors to experience a visit to places they may never have been able to carry out.

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