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Bridging Language and History in an Advanced Italian Classroom: Perspectives on Medieval Florentine Narratives within their Context

MARCO PRINA

University of California, Berkeley 142-170
E-mail: prina@berkeley.edu

Among the challenges faced by L2 instructors is the inclusion of historical memories. Although they are foundational to a culture's identity, sometimes they are so far removed from students' present reality that they have no familiarity with them. Meeting this challenge requires the development of activities that contextualize these narratives while bridging the past and the present by engaging with learners' own values and experiences. This article presents a model didactic unit drawn from a particular aspect of the Italian culture, namely, the medieval Florentine narratives. At the same time, the strategies and tools that are proposed can be implemented to explore virtually any historical memories in other L2 courses.

INTRODUCTION

One of the major challenges in fostering a cross-fertilized continuity between language and culture in the L2 classroom is the integration of cultural narratives (see, e.g., Kramsch, 1993; MLA 2007; Byrnes, 2010). However, L2 scholarship has been virtually silent regarding the specific issue of the inclusion of narrative cultural memories. Although these memories have been recognized as foundational in activating the collective remembering process (Wertsch, 2002), they reside so far in the past that language learners and even some native speakers may have difficulty relating to them.

Indeed, even in an academic context, these cultural memories tend to be presented as self-contained artifacts rather than as valuable experiences for the learners. As such, these memories are also divorced from a wider discussion about their implications on civic and individual identity, both that of the culture being studied and that of the students studying it, albeit with some very notable exceptions. For instance, in his 2007 article "Ahi Costantin, di quanto mal fu madre..." the influential Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari develops a reflection on the Catholic Church's role in shaping and controlling contemporary Italian society and politics in an article whose title is a direct quote from *Inferno* canto XIX, line 115 (Alighieri 1987, p. 203).[1] In its original context, this famous verse decried the fact that, in moving the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to Constantinople, Emperor Constantine had given the Church in Rome enormous political power and in effect fostered its worldly corruption. Scalfari's analysis is an example of a creative application of a specific cultural and literary tradition to present-day problems, engendering a heightened awareness of both past and present in the readers.

It has been convincingly pointed out that a solid intellectual and civic education has its foundations in the continuity between a culture's heritage and the values it entails (Giunta,

2008). Along these lines, the overarching purpose of this article is to present an instructional unit whose contents and objectives counterbalance this tendency within the context of the L2 classroom. Building such connections requires activities that contextualize these narratives while bridging the past and the present by engaging with learners' experiences. While this article presents an example drawn from a particular aspect of the Italian tradition, it opens a discussion with any language instructor facing similar challenges by proposing a set of strategies and tools that can be implemented in L2 courses within virtually any tradition.

The literary and cultural materials that are the focus of this article include medieval Florentine narratives, selected prose fiction (Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*), historiography (Dino Compagni's *Cronica*), and poetry (Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*), as well as a few striking visual instances produced during that time. The article reflects on the critical and vital integration of literary and cultural materials drawn from the distant past, considering the selected texts as dynamically engaged with the historical context that gave rise to them and which they shaped in turn. In fact, several college or university-level Italian language textbooks refer to Dante's *Commedia* and Boccaccio's *Decameron* as important literary instances of Florentine civilization; however, they tend to de-contextualize them and their medieval context, presenting them as isolated examples to illustrate particular geographic references or to present certain grammatical structures.[2]

The typical textbook presentation is symptomatic of an endemic rift between language teaching, on the one hand, and literature and culture teaching on the other hand. As a result, the role of language instruction is reduced to being instrumental, and language itself becomes a supposedly neutral communicative tool to be activated in cases requiring interaction with written materials or with native speakers (e.g., MLA 2007). In fact, when a centuries-old literary text is approached without any synchronic reference to its context – even in a language course – its depth of historical and universal meanings is obfuscated, along with any possibility of eliciting a vivid cultural discussion among learners. In particular, the foundational issue affecting the integration of literature within L2 teaching consists in locating texts within rich and meaningful networks of cultural references that resonate with learners' emotions and values (Kramsch, 2009).

The implementation of carefully planned bridging activities linking the past with students' contemporary experiences highlights the complex network of relationships in which identity, narrative and history are embedded. The activities presented here not only enrich the traditional presentation of Dante and Boccaccio in Italian language courses, but they also foster critical and creative re-elaborations of the ways in which memory is understood and transmitted through a selection of texts whose forms and contents can be applied to students' personal experiences and cultural backgrounds. Thus students develop self-awareness and grow intellectually.

This article presents a cohesive didactic unit as an example for L2 instructors interested in making historically remote materials accessible to students. Instructors must ensure that the level of linguistic preparation is compatible with the texts presented and with the complexity of the ensuing discussion. On this basis, this particular unit is suitable for students who have already completed at least four semesters of Italian language. The unit incorporates strategies for introducing the necessary context, regardless of whether students have been previously exposed to medieval Italian history and culture.

In other words, while Italian language instructors can adapt and incorporate the materials presented here into their advanced classes, the article ultimately aims to present a set of practical proposals within a framework that can serve as a starting point for instructors who are interested in integrating distant cultural memories into language teaching, within virtually any linguistic and cultural tradition. Thus, after having developed this unit, the closing section of the article provides a set of recommendations that can provide some guidance to L2 instructors wishing to implement past narratives into an advanced course of the language and culture they teach.

THE DIDACTIC UNIT

The overarching theme of this unit is the relationship between the individual and the city, taking into consideration the tensions embodied by such a relationship. It should be noted that, for the purposes of this activity, the term 'city' includes both urban physicality and community. The narratives produced in the context of the medieval Italian communes offer a privileged starting point for discussing these relationships, because they ultimately capture the attempt at representing the civic identity of newly formed communities. Among the narratives produced in the communal context, the Florentine ones stand out due to their particularly high level of literary and artistic sophistication. Moreover, because modern Italian is based on the Florentine vernacular, these narratives are not only more comprehensible to language learners, but also foster awareness of the language's diachronic development.

It is evident that any text written in the distant past offers the opportunity for discussion of language changes; instructors who intend to integrate such texts into a cohesive didactic unit should expect and encourage students to ask about and comment on these features. More specifically, this unit's linguistic objectives include an increased understanding that the target language is flexible and dynamic, not only from the synchronic point of view of different registers and local variations, but also from the diachronic perspective of linguistic development. On an even more practical level, the activities offer students the opportunity to discuss and incorporate keywords and concepts drawn from the texts and from the surrounding historical and cultural discussion into their linguistic repertoire, enabling them to communicate with greater confidence about issues related to individual and collective identity. Such an approach reinforces the mutual connection between authors' deliberate aesthetic choices and the poignancy of specific word within a literary text.

The particular texts showcased in this unit have been chosen on the basis of the cultural and historical objectives rather than their prominent place in the Italian canon, because they are part of a larger and cohesive tradition which succeeds in its attempt to represent civic identity during moments of crisis. It is precisely the struggle to redefine personal identity in a rapidly changing community that makes these texts so relevant to today's university students within the increasingly diverse and multicultural American context. As a result, students develop new perspectives on their own experiences as individuals within a globalized and multilingual world in which it is often difficult to associate oneself with one particular city or community, even broadly conceived.

On one level, when students face texts representing an experience vastly removed from their own in cultural, geographical and historical terms, they are presented with the opportunity to develop a richer understanding of the differences between their own

perspectives and that of the historical other. On another level, students exposed to medieval Florentine narratives can develop a more deeply nuanced awareness of their relationship, no matter how ambivalent, with their own historical context and their own past experiences. For example, the very geographical and cultural differences between contemporary American perspectives and the 700-year-old Florentine voices examined in this unit serve as a springboard for a heightened awareness of students' individual identities and the foundational narratives of the cultures that have shaped them. In grading students' work for this unit, in addition to evaluating students' linguistic skills and development, the instructor also assesses students on the basis of activities which deal with individual and communal identity from a personal perspective.[3]

I have divided this unit into seven main steps conducted in the target language, each requiring approximately ninety minutes of class time. The extensive explanation of each step is preceded by a concise outline which aims at clarifying the objectives, materials and activities. For the convenience of instructors working with Italian, the appendix provides the original texts which are presented in translation in the body of the article. In order to contextualize the reading of excerpts from medieval Florentine narratives, the instructor often elicits discussion of students' personal experiences, amplifying and re-discussing them through both written and visual sources.

Step 1: A Gateway to Historical Awareness Through the Example of Florence

Objectives:

- Introduce keywords relating to Florence's urban physicality and landmarks
- Set a foundation for building awareness of the relationship between urban physicality and community on the basis of personal knowledge or experience with Florence

Breakdown of activities:

1. Introduction: Instructor explains the objectives of the activity, the timeline, materials used, and grading criteria. (10 minutes)
2. Eliciting background information: Instructor projects some images and, if desired, a short clip of contemporary Florence and elicits students' previous experiences/thoughts about Florence. (15 min.)
3. Small-group discussion: Students discuss their experiences/thoughts/ideas on Florence. (10 min.)
4. Follow-up: A student representative from each group reports the discussion to the class and transcribes on the board at least two questions generated during the discussion. (10 min.)
5. Whole-class discussion: Students discuss their questions, highlighting specific Italian words that describe selected landmarks of the Florentine urban environment. (15 min.)
6. Group reading: Each group selects one of the Florentine landmarks and reads a brief passage from a guidebook, discussing the connections between the landmark and its civic role during the centuries, with reference to their own cities' landmarks. (20 min.)

7. Follow-up: A student representative from each group reports the description to the class and transcribes the most important points on the board. (10 min.)
8. Explanation of homework assignments: The instructor assigns a short paragraph (10-12 lines) in which students describe some chosen features that shed light on the relationship between urban physicality and community both in Florence and in their own city. Students will submit their compositions online before the next class meeting. Students are also asked to bring to the next class an image of a particular aspect of their city. In addition, instructor assigns a one-page introduction to Boccaccio's *Decameron* and a passage selected from the Introduction to the first day of the *Decameron*, along with a few questions to guide them through the reading and prepare them for the next class discussion.

Materials:

- Some images and, if desired, a short clip showing the contemporary downtown Florence (Activity 2)
- A handout with concise artistic and historical descriptions of selected landmarks drawn from a recent guidebook of Florence (Activity 6)
- A handout with instructions for drafting the assigned composition (Activity 8)
- A one-page introduction to Boccaccio's *Decameron* and one page of passages selected from the Introduction to the first day of the *Decameron*, with a few focus questions (Activity 8)

Description of activities:

After explaining to the class the objectives of the unit as a whole and of this first step, the instructor clarifies the timeline, materials used and grading criteria (Activity 1). The instructor then projects some images and, if desired, a short video clip, providing a bird's eye overview of the city of Florence as it is now, in which the downtown area with its major landmarks is clearly discernible (Activity 2). Then, the instructor asks the students whether they have visited Florence; the students who have done so then briefly share their experience with the rest of the class. The instructor asks those that have not visited Florence what they know about it and where this knowledge comes from. The class is divided into small groups composed of 3 to 4 students, at least one of whom, if possible, has already visited the city, and at least one who has not (Activity 3). These groups will continue to work together for most of this instructional unit. Then each group discusses members' perceptions of Florence and they draft at least two questions about what they have seen in the images or learned elsewhere. One representative subsequently reports to the entire class and writes the questions on the board (Activity 4).

Then the instructor guides a whole-class discussion of the student-drafted questions, calling attention to specific Italian words that describe the Florentine urban environment – words which would lose their peculiarity if translated, such as: "Duomo", "Battistero", "Palazzo Vecchio", "Bargello", "Uffizi", and others (Activity 5). During this discussion, students share with the class what they already know about these landmarks, and the instructor projects images of each one as it is discussed. Then, students conduct a two-step activity in their groups (Activity 6). First, each group selects one of the major Florentine

landmarks just covered, and reads a brief passage on it from a guidebook,[4] focusing on the connections between the landmark itself and its civic role during the centuries. Second, each student in the group makes a connection between the Florentine example selected and the most closely analogous landmark from a city in which he or she grew up, reflecting on its role in shaping the community. Once again, a student representative from each group reports highlights from the discussion to the class and transcribes the most important points on the board (Activity 7).

As homework for the next class, each student will write a short composition (10-12 lines) reflecting on the relationship between at least one aspect of the urban structure and community in Florence and their own city (Activity 8). Students will submit this and subsequent compositions online, enabling the instructor to arrive to the next class having read and graded them. Students are also asked to bring an image of their own cities to the following class meeting. The selected photos, postcards, advertisements, online images and pictorial representations must represent particular aspects of the students' cities. Additionally, at the end of each class, the instructor will distribute the reading material to be discussed during the following class.

Step 2: Contrasting Visual and Literary Representations of Civic Values

Objectives:

- Extrapolate implicit and explicit civic values from visual and literary representations of the city
- Develop a critical analysis of accounts representing fourteenth-century Florence in crisis and in harmony

Breakdown of activities:

1. Composition discussion: Students participate in a whole-class discussion of the main issues and questions raised in their compositions. (10 min.)
2. Introduction of fresco: Instructor introduces the "Madonna della Misericordia" with concise historical and artistic information. (10 min.)
3. Group discussion of images: Students discuss the fresco in groups answering a few questions aimed at pointing out the relationships between a community and its civic values while making connections with the images they have brought of their own cities. (20 min.)
4. Follow-up: A student representative from each group reports on the discussion, writing the main points on the board. A brief whole-class discussion follows each group's presentation. (15 min.)
5. Reading discussion: Students discuss Boccaccio's *Decameron* on the basis of their answers to the questions provided along with the reading. (15 min.)
6. Class reading: Students take turns reading aloud an excerpt from the Introduction which describes the spread of Black Death in Florence. As they read, students paraphrase the text's meanings while the instructor summarizes the main points on the board. (20 min.)

7. Explanation of homework assignments: The instructor assigns a short paragraph (10-12 lines) in which students compare fourteenth-century Florence and their city today, focusing on the relationships between community and civic values that emerge in the fresco of the "Madonna della Misericordia", Boccaccio's passage and the image they have chosen of their own city. Students will submit their compositions online before the next meeting. In addition, the instructor will assign a second passage selected from the Introduction to the first day of the *Decameron*, along with a few questions to guide them through the reading and prepare them for the next class discussion.

Materials:

- Two slides of the "Madonna della Misericordia", one showing the entire fresco and the other showing the detail of the medieval city (Activity 2)
- A handout with a brief historical and artistic presentation of the "Madonna della Misericordia" (Activity 2)
- A handout with a set of questions to be distributed to each group (Activity 3)
- A handout with instructions for drafting the assigned composition (Activity 7)

Description of activities:

After returning the compositions and briefly discussing with students the main issues raised therein (Activity 1), the instructor projects and introduces an image of the most ancient visual representation of Florence, the anonymous fresco of the "Madonna della Misericordia" ["Our Lady of Mercy"], dated 1342, now in Florence's Museo del Bigallo, followed by a detail from this image which represents the physical city (Activity 2).

Image 1. Anonymous, Madonna della Misericordia, 1342. Florence, Museo del Bigallo.

Image 2. Anonymous, Madonna della Misericordia (detail), 1342. Florence, Museo del Bigallo.

The instructor reads a brief historical contextualization of the image and discusses it with students,[5] pointing out that it was painted in 1342 and was commissioned by the "Confraternita della Misericordia" ["Confraternity of Mercy"], an association of citizens devoted to works of charity and religious piety within the city. Students work in groups to answer questions regarding its component parts and, by extension, its implicit civic values (Activity 3). The questions are:

- What elements constitute the fresco? Describe it briefly in its entirety.
- Where is the city located in the image and, in your opinion, why? What kind of hierarchical relationships can you identify between the elements of the image?
- Keeping in mind your answer to the previous questions, how does the fresco function as a whole? To what extent does this representation seem to be realistic? Attempt a provisional interpretation.

Students then share the image they have brought of their city with their group, and discuss each image in turn on the basis of the following questions:

- What aspects of the city does this image represent?
- Does this image allude to hierarchical structures within the community?
- More generally, what civic and social values does this image imply?

A representative from each group briefly reports the main points of the group discussion to the class (Activity 4). A whole-class discussion follows each report. Then, students discuss their answers to the questions provided along with the Boccaccio reading, and the instructor writes key points on the board as students discuss their answers to each question in turn (Activity 5). Among the most important points to emerge in class discussion are:

- The *Decameron*'s role as foundational short-story collection within the Western tradition.
- The historical context in which the *Decameron* was written (1348-1352) and to which the frame story refers, namely the 1348 epidemic of the Black Death in Florence.
- The presence of ten young aristocratic men and women as storytellers within the frame story.
- The reference to the historical landmark of the Church of Santa Maria Novella (the instructor should project a current image of the church when introducing it, thus reconnecting the current lesson to the previous step), where the storytellers originally meet.

Then, the instructor reminds students that the previously shown image of the "Madonna della Misericordia" is a pre-plague representation of the city and asks them what similarities and differences they note in these two representations of the plague. Students are likely to note that Boccaccio's representation, which emphasizes the unraveling of the social fabric and the loss of moral values during the plague, sharply contrasts with the fresco's idealized representation of a well-ordered city.

At this point, students take turns reading short portions of the excerpts from the introduction to the first day of the *Decameron*, and attempt to paraphrase the text's meanings, while the instructor transcribes main points on the board (Activity 6):

> I say, then, that the sum of thirteen hundred and forty-eight years had elapsed since the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God, when the noble city of Florence, which for its great beauty excels all others in Italy, was visited by the deadly pestilence. Some say that it descended upon the human race through the influence of the heavenly bodies, others that it was a punishment signifying God's righteous anger at our iniquitous way of life. But whatever its cause, it had originated some years earlier in the East, where it had claimed countless lives before it unhappily spread westward, growing in strength as it swept relentlessly on from one place to the next. (Boccaccio, 1995, p. 5)

Although learners are likely to request additional literal explanations, due to the archaic patina of Boccaccio's fourteenth-century vernacular if compared with modern standard Italian, for the moment the focus should remain on the general meaning, as the next step will include an activity on specific lexical elements.

Before class ends, students receive a handout with instructions for writing a short paragraph (10-12 lines) in which they provide a reflective comparison of fourteenth-century Florence and their city today, focusing on the relationships between community and civic values that emerge in the fresco of the "Madonna della Misericordia", Boccaccio's passage and the image they have chosen of their own city (Activity 7). Students will submit their compositions online, enabling the instructor to read and grade them before the next class.

Step 3: A Literary Narrative as a Contrasting Representation of Civic Values

Objectives:

- Work toward an enhanced lexicon for communicating about the moral unraveling of a society
- Creatively apply information from past literary sources to a hypothetical scenario involving the present

Breakdown of activities:

1. Composition discussion: Students discuss the main issues and questions raised in their compositions. (10 min.)
2. Reading discussion: Students discuss in their groups a set of questions which move from the peculiarity of the lexicon (in particular, adjectives and suffixes) displayed by Boccaccio in the Introduction to the first day of the *Decameron* to an interpretation of the relationships between the individual, the city, and religion. (20 min.)
3. Follow-up: Instructor poses each question in turn to the entire class and guides a brief whole-class discussion. (10 min.)
4. Class reading: Students take turns reading aloud a subsequent excerpt from the above-mentioned Introduction, which describes the collapse of moral values within

the city during the Black Death. As they read, students paraphrase the text's meanings while the instructor summarizes the main points on the board. (15 min.)
5. Group writing: Each group collaboratively writes a brief composition (8-10 lines) addressing the hypothetical scenario of a plague spreading in their own community, modeled on Boccaccio's narrative pattern. (20 min.)
6. Follow-up: A student representative from each group reads the composition to the class. The instructor transcribes on the board the most striking words/expressions that describe the moral condition of the city. Students refer to this list of words while writing their compositions at home (see below). (15 min.)
7. Explanation of homework assignment: The instructor assigns the a short paragraph (10-12 lines) reflecting on Boccaccio's representation of Florence during the Black Death, on the basis of the relationships between individuals and the city discussed before. Students will submit their compositions online before the next meeting.

Materials:

- A handout with an excerpt from the Introduction of Boccaccio's *Decameron* already used in the previous step (Activity 2)
- A handout with a set of questions to be distributed to each discussion group (Activity 2)
- A handout with the subsequent excerpt from the Introduction of Boccaccio's *Decameron* (Activity 4)
- A handout with instructions for composing a fictional narrative to be distributed to each discussion group (Activity 5)
- A handout with instructions for drafting the composition for homework (Activity 7)

Description of activities:

Students conduct a whole-class discussion of the main issues and questions raised in their compositions (Activity 1); then they return to their groups, where they reread the passage from Boccaccio presented in the previous step, underlining the adjectives and suffixes that offer an insight into the moral tone of the passage (Activity 2). On this lexical basis, the groups discuss the ways in which Boccaccio describes Florence:

- In which ways do the adjectives and suffixes used to describe the city shape the reader's perception? What can be deduced about the narrator's intention?
- To what does the narrator attribute the spread of the plague?
- What relationships emerge between the urban, human, and religious dimensions?

As soon as each group has briefly addressed these questions, students conduct a whole-class discussion of each question in turn (Activity 3). Then, the instructor distributes another excerpt in which Boccaccio describes the Florentine population's reaction to the plague:

> [T]his scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephew, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted their husbands. But even worse, and almost incredible, was the fact

> that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children, as though they did not belong to them…As a result of this wholesale desertion of the sick by neighbours, relatives and friends, …there grew up a practice almost never previously heard of, whereby when a woman fell ill, no matter how gracious or beautiful or gently bred she might be, she raised no objection to being attended by a male servant…Nor did she have any scruples about showing him every part of her body as freely as she would have displayed it to a woman, provided that the nature of her infirmity required her to do so; and this explains why those women who recovered were possibly less chaste in the period that followed…And it was perhaps inevitable that among the citizens who survived there arose certain customs that were quite contrary to established tradition. (Boccaccio, 1995, pp. 8-9)

The instructor guides students in focusing on the passage's main ideas: as students take turns, they extemporaneously synthesize the sentences' meaning; the instructor transcribes these syntheses on the board (Activity 4). After addressing questions and/or misunderstandings, the students return to the group-discussion setting, collectively writing a brief narrative (6-8 lines) that addresses a hypothetical scenario (Activity 5):

> Imagine that a terrible epidemic spreads through your community, bringing about a reversal in some of its most foundational family, gender, and interpersonal values. Following the narrative pattern modeled in the previous passage, describe this morally ravaged landscape in terms of each of these three categories: family, gender, and interpersonal.

As a representative from each group reads the narrative aloud, students take note of the most striking words or expressions that give a sense of moral devastation (Activity 6). After each passage is read, the instructor solicits from the class the resulting list of words and transcribes them on the board. This list serves as a springboard for a brief discussion of the perspective evoked by these particular Italian words, and students will further elaborate on them at home.

In fact, as homework students are required to write a brief composition (10-12 lines) reflecting on Boccaccio's representation of Florence during the Black Death, on the basis of the relationships between individuals and the city, as discussed during class (Activity 7). This composition, like the previous ones, will be turned in online, enabling the instructor to arrive to the next class having read and graded it. In addition, the instructor assigns a passage taken from a recent historical text, along with a few questions to guide students through the reading and prepare them for the next class discussion. The questions provided along with the historical reading challenge students to make connections with material already covered in the previous steps.

Step 4: Reading a Historiographic Approach as a Complementary Representation of the City

Objectives:

- Extrapolate causes and effects from historical readings, applying previously acquired knowledge
- Make connections between past and present, analyzing patterns of similarity and difference

Breakdown of activities:

1. Composition discussion: Students discuss the main issues and questions raised in their compositions. (10 min.)
2. Discussion of historical context: Taking as a starting point the question: "in what context did the Black Death develop in Florence?" the instructor guides a discussion. (5 min.)
3. Homework follow-up: Students discuss their answers to the questions provided as homework along with the historical passage. (15 min.)
4. Class reading: Students take turns reading aloud a passage from a recently compiled history of Florence which presents a summary of its remarkable historical and economic achievements. After reading each portion of the passage, students ask clarifying questions and summarize key points. (20 min.)
5. Group discussion: In their groups students discuss the passage answering questions related to the possible implications of such economic and demographic growth. (20 min.)
6. Follow-up: A student representative from each group reports the discussion to the class. A brief whole class discussion follows. (20 min.)
7. Explanation of homework assignment: The instructor assigns a short paragraph (10-12 lines) in which students reflect on the causes and consequences of Florence's 'golden age', with reference to an example from the contemporary world. Students will submit their compositions online before the next meeting.

Materials:

- A handout with a modern historiographic passage on the 'golden age' of the Florentine commune (Activity 3)
- A handout with a set of questions to be distributed to each discussion group (Activity 5)
- A handout with instructions for drafting the composition for homework and the reading from Compagni's *Cronica*, along with a set of questions (Activity 7)

Description of activities:

Students conduct a whole-class discussion of the main issues and questions raised in their compositions (Activity 1). Students are then introduced to the overarching challenge of

step 4, namely placing the Black Death within Florence's economic and social context prior to the epidemic. Thus, as a springboard for this step, the instructor writes on the board: "In what context did the Black Death develop in Florence?" (Activity 2).

Then, the instructor guides the class through a reflection on the assigned reading, which presents a summary of the historical and economic context during these important years (Activity 3). Students discuss their answers to each of the questions, integrating as necessary the materials discussed in previous steps, while the instructor writes key points on the board. Among the most important points to emerge in class discussion are:

- Before the epidemic, Florence enjoyed considerable political and economic power.
- This power changed the city's urban structure and the very conception of community.
- Florence's power led to cultural consequences, including the rise of preeminent literary figures, foremost among them Dante Alighieri and Giovanni Boccaccio.
- The literary figures that emerged during this time period contributed significantly not only to the development of the whole Italian literary tradition, but also to the vernacular that was to become, centuries later, the 'standard' Italian they learn in the classroom.

After the students have completed their discussion, they take turns reading the following passage aloud (Activity 4):

> Raw materials were scarce in Florence, even in the case of wool manufacturing, which was at that time preeminent among the other industries. However, the "answer" of the resourceful will of the Florentines overcame the "challenge" posed by these adverse conditions… The Wool guild produced highly valued textiles out of raw materials, which were imported from afar. In the thirteenth century, Florentine merchants extended their activities from London, Bruges and Paris to the fairs of Champagne and to the markets of the Eastern Islamic and Byzantine world. The minting of the florin, a coin made of the purest gold bearing the effigy of St. John the Baptist on the one side, and the Florence's lily on the other, began in 1252. This coin rapidly asserted itself in all the markets, becoming a sort of common … currency. From 1280 to 1330, Florence enjoyed an unrivaled pre-eminence in international commerce, adding to this more lucrative financial speculations, involving popes, kings and magnates in their businesses transactions. In an age of illiteracy, they created innovative economic tools, such as the bill of exchange, insurances, and the system of double-entry accounting books … The industrial boom stimulated the influx of the workforce from the countryside to the city… Between1284 and 1333 Florence built a third set of walls, wider than the former one and well-suited to a city which already counted more than one hundred-thousand inhabitants – an enormous number for those times – of whom a further increase was expected. (Spini & Casali, 1986, pp. 22-23. My translation)

After each student reads, the class has the opportunity to ask clarifying questions and summarize the passage's key points. Then students address this set of questions in their groups (Activity 5):

- According to this account, what factors promoted Florentine economic development?

- Can you identify some of the ways in which Florence grew demographically as a result of this development?
- Could you list some possible consequences of the rapid demographic growth which followed this economic boom?
- Can you give some examples from recent or contemporary history that are somewhat comparable to the case of Florence? [students might mention immigration to U.S. and Europe, and/or the rapid urbanization of developing countries].
- Has the community where you grew up experienced a comparable phenomenon in recent history?

In the ensuing discussion, the instructor asks each group to reflect in particular on the possible social and political consequences of such dramatic demographic and economic growth, and the groups share their results with the rest of the class through a representative's brief report (Activity 6).

As homework, students are required to write a brief composition (10-12 lines) reflecting on the causes and consequences of Florence's 'golden age', with reference to an example from the contemporary world and, if applicable, from their own communities (Activity 7). Students will submit their compositions online before the next meeting. In addition, students receive a handout with the reading from Compagni's *Cronica*, along with a set of questions, as well as a concise introduction to Compagni and his chronicle, written in vernacular a few decades before the epidemic.

Step 5: Examining Objective and Subjective Descriptions of the City

Objectives:

- Break down a complex text into its constituent parts according to their civic values
-Analyze the effects created by the intermingling of objective and subjective elements in a historical account

Breakdown of activities:

1. Composition discussion: Students discuss the main issues and questions raised in their compositions. (10 min.)
2. Homework discussion: Students discuss their answers to the questions provided as homework along with Compagni's passage and the introduction to Compagni, reviewing key biographical points and discussing some ways in which he complicates the 'unambiguous' description by the previous modern account in alternating Florence's achievements with its contradictions. (20 min.)
3. Class reading: Students take turns reading Compagni's passage aloud, paraphrasing the text's literal meanings. (20 min.)
4. Group discussion: In their groups, students discuss Compagni's description and divide his city's definitions into three categories around the overarching question: "What is Florence like according to Dino Compagni?". These distinctions are written on the board in three columns. (20 min.)
5. Follow-up: students conduct a whole-class discussion of the questions. (20 min.)

6. Explanation of homework assignments: The instructor assigns a short paragraph (10-12 lines) in which students focus on the lexical elements that add complexity to Compagni's description of the physical city and its community, taking into account the previously read historiographic account. Students will submit their compositions online before the next meeting. In addition, students will read a brief introduction to Dante's life and works and a passage from Canto XV of the *Paradiso*, with a series of questions to prepare them for the next class discussion.

Materials:

- A handout with Compagni's description of Florence (Activity 2)
- A handout with instructions for drafting the composition for homework (Activity 6)
- A handout with a brief introduction on Dante and his *Commedia* along with a passage from *Paradiso* (Activity 6)

Description of activities:

Students conduct a whole-class discussion of the main issues and questions raised in their compositions (Activity 1). Then, students begin discussing the introduction to Compagni and the excerpt from Compagni's text on the basis of the questions provided as homework (Activity 2). While students discuss the questions, the instructor notes the key points on the board, including:

- Compagni, who wrote the *Cronica* between 1310 and 1312, was a wealthy Florentine merchant who was involved in his city's government prior to its writing and was forced to withdraw from active political life after the failure of his political party.
- Compagni's text, like Boccaccio's, contains a number of linguistic and lexical variations from standard contemporary Italian.
- Compagni's excerpt is drawn from the beginning of the book, where he introduces his views of contemporary Florence.
- This first-hand account of Florence's 'golden age' correlates the commune's economic and political power with a number of negative qualities, including civic factionalism, a bellicose nature and an immoderate thirst for wealth.
- Compagni's description of Florence, which oscillates between an emphasis on its achievements on the one hand and its underlying contradictions on the other, is much more ambiguous than the description provided in the previously read historical account.

Then, students take turns reading the passage from the *Cronica*, attempting to paraphrase the meaning as they read (Activity 3):

> When I began, I intended to write the truth about certain things which I saw and heard, since they were notable events and no one truly saw them in their origins as I did. … And so that foreigners may better understand the events which took place, let me describe the form of that noble city in the province of Tuscany, built under the sign of Mars, rich and ample with a regal river of fresh water which divides the city almost in half, temperate in climate, sheltered from harmful winds, poor in land, abundant with

> good products, its citizens bold in arms, proud and combative, and rich with unlawful profits, distrusted and feared for its greatness by the nearby cities, rather than loved. … The city of Florence is very populous and its good climate promotes fertility. Its citizens are well-bred and its women lovely and adorned; its buildings are beautiful and filled with many useful crafts, more than any other city in Italy. For these reasons many people from distant lands come to see Florence – not because they have to, but because of its crafts and guilds, and the beauty and decoration of the city. (Compagni, 1986, pp. 5-6)

Elaborating on the lexical peculiarities of this text, students reread the excerpt in their groups and categorize the elements in his description of Florence as either 'positive', 'neutral' or 'negative', briefly justifying the reasoning behind each choice (Activity 4). A representative from each group transcribes the groups' categorizations onto the board, which has already been divided into three columns according to the category headings, underneath the overarching question: "What is Florence like according to Dino Compagni?" Then, students return to their groups in order to discuss this representation of the city on the basis of the following questions:

- How would you describe the personal and moral perspective on whose basis Compagni presents Florence?
- Keeping in mind the objective tone of the previously read modern historical passage, which parts of Compagni's passage seem more objective, and which seem more subjective?

Then, students conduct a whole-class discussion in which they elaborate on each question (Activity 5). Before class ends, the instructor assigns a short paragraph (10-12 lines) in which students identify the main elements that make Compagni's description complex, incorporating some key words used by Compagni according to the categories discussed in class (Activity 6). Students will submit their compositions online before the next meeting. For the next class, students will read a brief introduction to Dante's life and works and a passage from Canto XV of the *Paradiso*, with a series of questions to prepare them for the class discussion.

Step 6: Rethinking the Relationship with the City Through Visual and Poetic Perspectives

Objectives:

- Engage with the complicated connection between a poet and his city, reflecting on the relationship between the historical dimension of this connection and its artistic and subjective transpositions
- Apply specific lexical and syntactical features of a poetic example to a new creative piece involving students' own context

Breakdown of activities:

1. Composition discussion: Students discuss the main issues and questions raised in their compositions. (10 min.)
2. Introduction of fresco: Instructor projects Domenico di Michelino's fresco representing Dante, his *Commedia* and Florence, asking the class what connections they see between particular elements in the fresco and Dante's life and works, as introduced in the homework. (10 min.)
3. Homework discussion: Students review key points about Dante's life and works in a whole-class setting, on the basis of their answers to the questions provided along with the introduction to Dante, discussing in particular the poet's complicated relationship with Florence. (15 min.)
4. Group discussion: In groups students discuss the ways in which Domenico di Michelino's fresco represents Dante's relationship with Florence, and what motivations might lie behind this interpretation. (20 min.)
5. Follow-up: A representative from each group reports to the class, and the instructor writes key points on the board. (15 min.)
6. Class reading: Students take turns reading aloud the assigned excerpt from Cacciaguida's episode in *Paradiso* XV, attempting to paraphrase the main ideas. (20 min.)
7. Explanation of homework assignments: As homework, each student briefly rewrites the passage in modern Italian (10-12 lines), keeping some basic features of the structure and substituting Dante's city with his/her own. In addition, students will read two additional brief passages from the Cacciaguida episode and answer a few questions provided along with it.

Materials:

- A slide of Domenico di Michelino's fresco (Activity 2)
- A handout with a set of questions on the fresco to be distributed to each discussion group (Activity 3)
- A handout with directions for the composition (Activity 7)
- A handout with a second passage from the Cacciaguida episode, along with questions to prepare students for the next class discussion (Activity 7)

Description of activities:

Students conduct a whole-class discussion of the main issues and questions raised in their compositions (Activity 1). In order to introduce Dante's poetry and his representation of the city, the instructor projects Domenico di Michelino's fresco representing Dante, his *Commedia* and Florence (Activity 2). The instructor points out that the fresco dates back to 1465, almost one and a half centuries after Dante's death (1321), and can still be seen today inside the Florentine church of Santa Maria del Fiore (whose image the instructor may also wish to project as a reminder of what students have already learned in step 1).

Image 3. Domenico di Michelino, La Divina Commedia di Dante, 1465. Florence, Church of Santa Maria del Fiore.

Students then conduct a brainstorming activity on the connection between particular elements in the fresco and Dante's life and works, as introduced in the homework (Activity 3). For example, students might notice:

- Dante is represented within a neutral space outside of Florence's city walls, which students might connect with his exile.
- Florence takes up a considerable amount of space and is represented as an integral part of the composition, on the same level as the three otherworldly realms.
- The gates of hell and those of Florence, which flank Dante on either side, are virtually identical.

Once students have made a series of connections between this image and the introduction they have read, they review key points about Dante's life and works in greater detail in a whole-class setting, on the basis of the specific questions provided as homework along with the introduction to Dante, with reference to the poet's complicated relationship with Florence.

In order to further elaborate on the complexities of Dante's relationship with Florence, students return more systematically to Domenico di Michelino's fresco (Activity 4). In their groups they discuss the ways in which it represents Dante's relationship with Florence, and

what motivations might lie behind this interpretation, taking as a starting point the general question "To what extent does the city create its citizens, and to what extent, by contrast, do citizens create their city?", and elaborating it on the basis of these more specific questions:

- What parts constitute the fresco? Briefly describe it in its entirety and attempt a provisional interpretation of it.
- Where is the city located in the image and, in your opinion, why? What kind of relationship could be posited between the representation of the three realms, the city of Florence, and the figure of Dante himself?
- Having read in the brief biography that Dante was exiled from Florence for political reasons, how can we account for the presence of such an iconic representation of Dante in Florence's most important church in Florence?

A representative from each group reports to the class, and the instructor writes key points on the board, eliciting a brief whole-class discussion of these issues (Activity 5). The purpose is to engage with the complicated connection between this remarkable citizen and his city and to encourage students' reflections on the relationship between the historical dimension of this connection and its artistic and subjective transpositions.

In order to build a bridge between the discussion on the city's modes of representation and Dante's poetic account of ancient Florence, the instructor briefly contextualizes the excerpt from the *Paradiso* which students have read at home, mentioning that, during the course of his allegorical ascent towards God in the *Paradiso*, Dante the pilgrim meets his ancestor Cacciaguida, who was born in Florence roughly two centuries before the poet. The instructor also points out that in this poetic narrative, Dante presents his ancestor both as a model citizen, who was also a loyal follower of the emperor and a martyr who died heroically fighting against the infidels as a crusader in the Holy Land. Students take turns reading the passage and briefly paraphrasing it as they read,[6] noting the most striking linguistic differences with the modern standard Italian (Activity 6):

Florence within the ancient circle from which
she still takes both tierce and nones dwelt in
peace, sober and modest.
She had no gold chain, no crown, no
embroidered gowns, no belt more to be looked
at than his wearer.
The daughter did not yet, when born, make her
father fear, for ages and dowries did not yet flee
the measure, those downward, these upward.
There were no houses emptied of their
families, Sardanapalus had not yet come to show
what can be done in a bedchamber. (ll. 97-108 - Alighieri, 2011, p. 307)

As homework, students are challenged to rewrite their own version of these verses in modern Italian, substituting "Fiorenza", the medieval name of Florence in the original Italian text (l. 97), with the name of the city to which they feel most closely connected; in other words, the place in which they come closest to feeling that they are 'citizens' (Activity 7). On

a formal level, students retain the basic structure of the original Italian, which includes a negation at the beginning of each tercet: "Non … Non … Non …", from l. 100 onwards, and they compose their own satirical rebuke of the 'degenerated modern times' in their chosen city from a *negative* point of view as Dante does, respectively: of fashion (ll. 100-102); of inter-familiar relationships (ll. 103-105); and of sexual habits (ll. 106-108). Of course, the instructor does not expect students to recreate faithfully the prosodic, metrical and lexical complexity displayed by Dante's poetic craft, but directs students to follow the pattern of the negations and, if possible, to replicate the same number of verses, consistently using the past tense as in the poetic example. In addition, students will read two additional brief passages from the Cacciaguida episode, along with a set of questions designed to prepare them for the next class discussion.

Step 7: Poetry as a Gateway from an Idealized Past to a Critical Perspective on the Present

Objectives:

- Develop an awareness of how the past can affirm a personal and controversial, complex vision of the present times
- Creatively rewrite a text from the past to reflect on present times

Breakdown of activities:

1. Composition discussion: Students read their satires aloud, and a whole-class discussion follows. (20 min.)
2. Class reading: Class reading: Students take turns reading aloud two other excerpts from the same *Paradiso* XV (ll. 112-120 and 130-135). (20 min.)
3. Group writing: The instructor divides class in groups based on the most geographical heterogeneity possible, and students write collaboratively a paragraph that describes the basic features of an 'ideal' city. (30 min.)
4. Follow-up: Students read aloud their satires and the instructor guide a brief discussion on the content. (20 min.)
5. Explanation of homework activities: As homework, students will compose an essay reflecting on the seven steps of the unit (2-3 typed, double-spaced pages in Italian). In this essay, students will rework elements of the briefer compositions written up to this point. The goal is to demonstrate how their experiences with Florence's past memories has reshaped and stimulated their emotions and their reflections of their own role as individuals and citizens in today's much more globalized world. Students will have at least one week to complete this essay.

Materials:

- A handout with the two brief excerpts from the Cacciaguida episode (Activity 2)
- A handout for each group with instructions for rewriting the excerpt from Cacciaguida's episode (Activity 3)

- A handout with instructions for drafting the final composition for homework (Activity 5)

Description of activities:

The final step of this activity aims at closing the circle, in the sense that students' reflections on the peculiarities of medieval Florence bring to the foreground the discussion of the connections between past and present already developed through the previous steps. Students continue to develop their increased sense of the 'otherness' of the past and to discuss how these peculiarities apply to today's world. As a pedagogical result, students are encouraged to approach both past and present with an increased critical awareness. Additionally, students enhance their awareness that, far from being neutral, a city's representations are shaped in personal terms, and that such terms also involve the role of individual citizens within the community.

At the start of class, the instructor explains that in his idealized description Cacciaguida portrays the Florence of his times from the perspective of both its urban environment and the moral values that shaped his community. In doing so, he is actually attacking contemporary Florence's moral decadence. To further clarify the context, the instructor might also point out that Dante casts his ancestor as his own spokesman, because elsewhere in his works the poet harshly rebukes both the ecclesiastic and the communal power, whose greed violated God's will by eroding the emperor's political control.[7]

Then, students read their satires aloud, and after each one, the rest of the class offers comments and questions (Activity 1). Then, transitioning to a reading and discussion of the two excerpts read as homework, the instructor points out that later in the very same canto, Cacciaguida's voice supplements this 'negative' description of the past city with a 'positive' one. His portrait of a few exemplary citizens reinforces his description of the virtues of ancient Florence, as in the lines read by the students. At this point, students take turns reading and paraphrasing the excerpts (Activity 2):

Bellincion Berti I saw go wearing leather and
bone, and his lady coming from the mirror
without a painted face,
and I saw him of the Nerli and him of the del
Vecchio contented with plain leather, and their
ladies with the spindle and the distaff.
Oh happy ladies! each was sure of her burial
place, and none as yet had been left alone in her
bed because of France. (ll. 112-120 - Alighieri, 2011, p. 309)
…

To so peaceful, to so comely a life of citizens,
to so loyal a citizenry, to so sweet a dwelling,
Mary gave me, invoked with loud cries, and in
your ancient Baptistery I became at the same
time a Christian and Cacciaguida. (ll. 130-135)

After students have briefly discussed the literal meaning of these verses,[8] the instructor forms new groups of 3-4 students, based on the greatest possible level of geographical heterogeneity (Activity 3). Within each group, students take turns rereading their satires aloud, comparing and contrasting the chosen cities and descriptions. Then, following the example of the idealized 'positive' description provided by Cacciaguida in the lines the class has just read together, they substitute the names of their group members for those of the illustrious citizens cited by Dante, and write a brief prose description, in the present tense, of the situation of an ideal city in which they live together harmoniously on the basis of shared values. The resulting product includes a description of how members of this ideal city dress and groom themselves (paralleling ll. 112-117); the condition of women in the context of the economic and political situation (paralleling ll. 118-120); and of how individuals take on a sense of subjective identity within the context of a harmonious family within a peaceful community, represented, if possible, by a meaningful civic landmark (paralleling ll. 130-135). A representative from each group reads the resulting written product to the rest of the class, and a brief discussion follows (Activity 4).

To provide this learning unit with a sense of closure, students write a longer reflective essay (2-3 typed, double-spaced pages) addressing issues that have emerged throughout these seven steps and reworking elements they have already incorporated in the more brief compositions written to this point (Activity 5). In so doing, students keep in mind the overarching question that has hovered over this step, that is, "To what extent does the city create its citizens, and to what extent, by contrast, do citizens create their city?" Students aim to demonstrate how their experience and contact with Florence's past memories has reshaped and stimulated their emotions and their reflections of their own role as individuals and citizens in today's much more complex and globalized world.

CONCLUSIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

As already mentioned, the objectives and methodologies presented here can be applied by any language instructor wishing to integrate materials commonly perceived as belonging to a remote past into the L2 curriculum. On this basis, the following section presents some guidelines for adapting this unit to a different linguistic and cultural tradition.

1. Focusing on cultural and linguistic relevance: In choosing the time period and the materials, the most important consideration is to choose materials whose linguistic and cultural relevance to a civilization associated with the target language has a sound basis that can be understood by students. While, of course, every time period and narrative is endowed with a great deal of value, it is ideal to select instances that have acquired a particular resonance over the centuries, or which revolve around a network of particularly powerful historical memories. In this way, students are less likely to perceive the materials as arbitrary and/or disconnected from motifs and values to which they themselves can relate as well.
2. Keeping the unit cohesive and progressive: It is critical to keep the didactic unit reasonably brief and cohesive, in addition to providing a solid context that furnishes a certain degree of depth and complexity. Historical and geographical boundaries must be clearly defined, and instructors must focus on using the materials to reach clear learning objectives, rather than to present content as an end in itself. Although

the unit is broken down into steps, the instructor must carefully weave them together and help students move incrementally from each step to the next, always keeping in mind the overarching themes and purposes of the unit.

3. Building bridges between past and present: Precisely because of the historical and cultural distance separating students from these materials, a project such as this offers L2 instructors a useful opportunity to create a series of bridges, primarily between students' experiences and identities and those expressed in the sources presented to them. Furthermore, these bridges should enable students to critically re-evaluate aspects of their own cultural identities. This is particularly important because it allows students to place themselves, their experiences and their emotions respectfully and inquisitively in relation to those of others.
4. Enhancing complexity through the variety of the materials: Rather than limiting the choice of texts to a particular author or to a homogeneous artistic representation (e.g., only literature; only visual art; etc.), this kind of instructional unit benefits from the carefully planned and contextualized representation of literary, historical and visual examples in relation to each other. The variety of materials proposed within this kind of carefully planned and cohesive unit limits students' possible boredom; even more importantly, the tapestry emerging from such a variety of historical narratives exposes students to a sense of the complexity of the questions and problems raised. As a result, they engage in a critical re-assessment of their own perceptions in relation to these materials.
5. Modulating methods and activities to foster meta-reflection: Because active student engagement is critical to any activity, the instructor must include a variety of texts and modes of representations, in addition to varying instructional methods and activities. In the example above, beyond the variety of visual and written materials, students engage in different kinds of small group activities, whole-class reading and discussion, and collaborative and individual writing assignments of increasing length and complexity. The variety of tools and methods, of course, is limited only by the skills and imagination of each individual instructor, within the restrictions imposed by the institutional context. In any case, it might be desirable to include meta-reflection activities, preferably written and/or shared with their peers, at the conclusion of the unit and/or during key moments along the way.

As a whole, this didactic unit, which weaves together students' personal experiences, reflections on past and present, and a direct approach to texts and images belonging to a historical past from which students might initially feel disconnected, is aimed at an integration of language, history, literature and culture while developing and enhancing students' own critical awareness in relation to the community – from a personal, civic and urban point of view – to which they belong.

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NOTES

1. The article, published in 2007, can be read online on the website of the Italian newspaper "La Repubblica":http://www.repubblica.it/2007/07/sezioni/politica/scalfari-fondi/scalfari-5-agosto/scalfari-5-agosto.html?ref=search. It should be noted that Scalfari's title slightly modernizes Dante's original verse according to the standard critical edition (Ed. Petrocchi), writing "madre" instead of the more archaic "matre". Interestingly, online forums have engaged in a criticism of the ways in which Scalfari engages with the past from his present-day perspective, taking as a starting point this citational divergence from the original.

2. In this regard, a few examples drawn from some recent Italian language textbooks can be shown. In Lazzarino, G. (2012). *Prego! An invitation to Italian. Eighth Edition*. New York: McGraw-Hill, p. 323, the figure of Dante is 'introduced' as a vignette at the margins of an intermediate chapter dealing with the fine arts, and his concise biography appears in the context of a reading comprehension exercise, as well as in the same edition's *Workbook*, p. 209 and p. 212. The figure of Dante is introduced in a small vignette as a side note to a cultural reading on the rise of medieval and Renaissance Italian art, presented in conjunction with a few grammatical structures in Cozzarelli, J. M. (2011) *Sentieri. Attraverso l'Italia contemporanea.* Boston, MA: Vista Higher Learning, p. 369. Along the same lines, Boccaccio is added to Dante in a vignette on the origins of the Italian language in Celli Merlonghi, F. & Merlonghi F. (2012). *Oggi in Italia.* Boston: Heinle Cengage Learning, pp. 354-355, and (in English) in Italiano, F. & Marchegiani, I. (2012). *Percorsi. L'Italia attraverso la lingua e la cultura.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, p. 3. Later on, this textbook (pp. 162-163) alludes again both to Dante and Boccaccio in introducing Tuscany at the margins of a chapter on household management. More interestingly, in Italiano, F. & Marchegiani, I. (2007). *Crescendo! An Intermediate Italian Program. Second Edition.* Boston, MA: Thomson Heinle, p. 360, a few questions accompanying Domenico di Michelino's fresco (see step 6 further on in this article). They are meant to elicit a cultural reflection as an introduction to a chapter devoted to the Italian culture, but these questions rely solely on students' personal experiences, without reference to a wider context.

3. More precisely, the instructor's evaluation of students' increasing awareness of their historical and civic consciousness can be broken down into two categories. The first is quantitative, and applies to the group work and collaborative writing activities, which are evaluated on the basis of a participation grade; the second is qualitative, and applies to students' individual compositions, which are evaluated on the basis of content as well as linguistic accuracy. Indeed, the compositions, group discussions and collaborative writing activities, many of which require students to make connections with their own experiences in their communities, provide continuity between the learning objectives and the tools used to evaluate them.

4. As a reasonably concise and reliable guidebook, I recommend *Toscana. Guide Verdi d'Italia.* Touring Editore. 2008.

5. A suitable description is available in Brucker, G. A. (1983). *Firenze 1138-1737. L'impero del fiorino. * (Trans. M. Maresca, Trans.). Milan: Mondadori, p. 22. See also the online resource by Giannozzo Pucci, "The Madonna of Mercy, the Bigallo Orphanage, Florence": http://www.umilta.net/bigallo.html . This online resource is useful for the images, details and transcriptions of written elements embedded within the painting. Pucci's detail of the dedication clearly demonstrates the date as MCCCXLII, in contrast with some modern interpretations, Brucker's among them, which give the date as 1352.

6. To clarify the meaning of the first verse about "la cerchia antica", that is, the most ancient wall that surrounded Florence, the instructor could project a map of the city showing the different layers of walls built over time. An image is available in Alighieri, 2011, p. 301. See also:

http://www.worldofdante.org/maps_main.html, drawn from the excellent website "The World of Dante", http://www.worldofdante.org/, ed. Parker D., which features numerous teaching resources for Dante's *Commedia*, including the above cited details drawn from the "Madonna della Misericordia."

7. The instructor could select a few of these other passages and present them to the students to enrich the context. The most famous and relevant passage in the *Commedia* is perhaps *Purgatorio*, Canto VI, ll.76-151.

8. To remind students about the "Batisteo" (modern "Battistero") at l. 134, the instructor could show images both of the ancient and the modern Baptistery, drawn from the sources already used (the "Madonna della Misericordia" and the image of modern Florence) and which should at this point sound familiar to students.

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APPENDIX

The appendix provides the original Italian versions of the texts cited in the main body of the article step by step (no texts are cited in step 1), in order of appearance within each step.

Step 2

Brucker, 1983, p.22:

La più antica veduta di Firenze (1352) è tramandata da un particolare della Madonna della Misericordia … Benché la verità topografica soggiaccia all'interpretazione allusiva e sintetica della città altomedievale, il profilo urbano rivela lo sviluppo verticale dell'edilizia su sezioni stradali assai strette. Continuano a sussistere numerosissime case-torri, abitazioni e fortilizi di privati…

Boccaccio, 1985, pp. 11-12:

Dico adunque che già erano gli anni della fruttifera incarnazione del Figliuolo di Dio al numero pervenuti di milletrecentoquarantotto, quando nella egregia città di Fiorenza, oltre a ogn'altra italica bellissima, pervenne la mortifera pestilenza: la quale, per operazion de' corpi superiori o per le nostre inique opere da giusta ira di Dio a nostra correzione mandata sopra i mortali, alquanti anni davanti nelle parti orientali incominciata, quelle d'inumerabile quantità de' viventi avendo private, senza ristare d'un luogo in uno altro continuandosi, verso l'Occidente miserabilmente s'era ampliata. (1.1.8).

Step 3

Boccaccio, 1985, pp.16-17:

Era con sì fatto spavento questa tribulazione entrata ne' petti degli uomini e delle donne, che l'un fratello l'altro abbandonava e il zio il nepote e la sorella il fratello e spesse volte la donna il suo marito; e, che maggior cosa è e quasi non credibile, li padri e le madri i figliuoli, quasi loro non fossero, di visitare e di servire schifavano.... E da questo essere abbandonati gl'infermi da' vicini, da' parenti e dagli amici ... discorse uno uso quasi davanti mai non udito: che niuna, quantunque leggiadra o bella o gentil donna fosse, infermando non curava d'avere a' suoi servigi uomo ... e a lui senza alcuna vergogna ogni parte del corpo aprire non altramenti che a una femina avrebbe fatto, solo che la necessità della sua infermità il richiedesse; il che in quelle che ne guerirono fu forse di minore onestà, nel tempo che succedette, cagione.... Per che, quasi di necessità, cose contrarie a' primi costumi de' cittadini nacquero tra coloro li quali rimanean vivi. (1.1.27-31)

Furthermore, this Italian edition of Boccaccio includes helpful notes focused on the literal meaning of specific words and should thus be included in the students' handout.

Step 4

Spini & Casali, 1986, pp. 12-13:

Firenze era povera di materie prime anche per le manifatture laniere che erano allora la grande industria per eccellenza. Ma la "risposta" della volontà ingegnosa dei fiorentini superò la "sfida" delle condizioni avverse.... L'Arte della Lana produceva tessuti di qualità pregiate con material prima fatta venire da lontano. Nel XIII secolo i mercanti fiorentini estesero le loro attività da Londra, Bruges e Parigi alle fiere della Champagne e ai mercati dell'Oriente islamico o bizantino. A partire dal 1252 venne coniato il fiorino, una moneta di oro purissimo con l'effigie del Battista da una parte e il giglio di Firenze dall'altra, che si impose su tutti i mercati fino a diventare una sorta di moneta comune ... Dal 1280 al 1330 i fiorentini ebbero un primate incontrastato nel commercio internazionale, e unirono ad esso speculazioni finanziarie ancora più lucrose, coinvolgendo papi, re e magnati nel loro giro di affari. In un'età di analfabeti, crearono strumenti geniali di attività economica, come la cambiale, le assicurazioni, la partita doppia nei registri .... Il boom industriale stimolò l'afflusso di forza lavoro dalla campagna alla città .... Fra il 1284 e il 1333 Firenze si costruì una terza cerchia di mura, più ampia della precedente e adeguata a una città già allora di 100 mila abitanti – una cifra enorme per quei tempi – di cui si prevedeva prossimo un aumento ulteriore.

Step 5

Compagni, 2000, pp. 3-5:

I [1] Quando io incominciai, propuosi di scrivere il vero delle cose certe che io vidi e udi', però che furon cose notevoli, le quali ne' loro princìpi nullo le vide certamente come io.… [2] E acciò che gli strani possano meglio intendere le cose avvenute, dirò la forma della nobile città, la quale è nella provincia di Toscana, edificata sotto il segno di Marte, ricca e larga d'imperiale fiume d'acqua dolce, il quale divide la città quasi per mezzo, con temperata aria, guardata da nocivi venti, povera di terreno, abondante di buoni frutti, con cittadini pro' d'armi, superbi e discordevoli, e ricca di proibiti guadagni, dottata e temuta per sua grandezza dalle terre vicine più che amata. [3] … [4] La detta città di Firenze è molto bene popolata, e generativa per la buona aria; i cittadini bene costumati, e le donne molto belle e adorne; i casamenti bellissimi, pieni di molte bisognevoli arti, oltre all'altre città d'Italia. Per la quale cosa molti di lontani paesi la vengono a vedere, non per necessità, ma per bontà de' mestieri e arti, e per bellezza e ornamento della città.

For notes focused on the literal meaning of words in Italian that can be included in the students' handout, see: Bezzola, 1995, pp. 46-49.

Step 6

Alighieri, 1987, pp. 910-911:

Fiorenza dentro de la cerchia antica,
ond'ella toglie ancora e terza e nona,
si stava in pace, sobria e pudica.

Non avea catenella, non corona,
non gonne contigiate, non cintura
che fosse a veder più che la persona.
Non faceva, nascendo, ancor paura
la figlia al padre, ché 'l tempo e la dote
non fuggien quinci e quindi la misura.
Non avea case di famiglia vòte;
non v'era giunto ancor Sardanapalo
a mostrar ciò che 'n camera si puote. (*Paradiso*, Canto XV, 97-108)

Step 7

Alighieri, 1987, pp. 911-913:

Bellincion Berti vid'io andar cinto
di cuoio e d'osso, e venir da lo specchio
la donna sua sanza 'l viso dipinto;
e vidi quel d'i Nerli e quel del Vecchio
esser contenti a la pelle scoperta,
e le sue donne al fuso e al pennecchio.
Oh fortunate! ciascuna era certa
de la sua sepultura, e ancor nulla
era per Francia nel letto diserta. (*Paradiso*, Canto XV, vv. 112-120)
…
A così riposato, a così bello viver di
cittadini, a così fida cittadinanza,
a così dolce ostello,
Maria mi diè, chiamata in alte grida;
e ne l'antico vostro Batisteo
insieme fui cristiano e Cacciaguida. (*Paradiso*, Canto XV, vv. 130-135)

For notes focused on the literal meaning of words in Italian that can be included in the students' handout, see the footnotes within the same edition of the *Commedia*.