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The use of weblogs in teaching. "La compagnia del sigillo"

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Description

The Sigil Company was an experimental course in historical methodology using a blended form of traditional, face-to-face teaching combined with e-learning. It was launched as part of the graduation course in Humanities and Computing at the University of Pisa in the academic year 2005-2006 (http://infouma.di.unipi.it/). The course used both methods equally: the former as direct lessons given by the tutor and by statements made by the students; the latter on the web using a weblog.

The course was organized as a piece of fiction or role-play suggested by the tutor at the beginning of the course. The tutor pretended to be a famous writer of historical books, like Ken Follet or Umberto Eco, and she asked the students to join her "research team".

The introductory page of the blog:

The plot was proposed, set up and gradualy expanded by the tutor, who asked the team (i.e. the *company*) to help her in building and refining the historical setting.

For all practical purposes the team had to develop the historical scenario of a novel-in-progress, set in the Middle Age. The *company* members had to read, study, report and find relevant information (text, books, pictures and sources). They had to be inquisitive, and they had to ask, and to suggest, effective and practical questions in order to build up a good plot.

Writer and *company met in* two locations. The first, three days a week, was in the traditional classroom. Here, the *writer/tutor* gave her team the basic elements of the course and the plan of work, and suggested what books to consult. She also answered questions and resolved doubts, and listened to students' reports. The second location was entirely virtual: a weblog opened by the writer/tutor and available 24 hours a day just for the students and the tutor.

The story, suggested by the tutor/writer, was set in 12th century Pisa and was based on a murder and its ensuing investigation (see below: The plot).

By asking the students to construct the plot and make their personal contributions in developing the story, the tutor wanted to get the students to conduct real historical research, with the aim of transforming them into authors aware of "history".

The main idea was to make the students aware that in developing the story they had to understand the mentality, customs, traditions, language, beliefs and social behaviour of people living in mediaeval Pisa. In the real world, the writer of historical novels normally works in two ways: by reading widely about a particular historical period or event, and by analysing primary sources. The students in the *company* had to do the same: to read a variety of history books by different authors and to comment on sources used in them. The specific purpose of helping the writer/tutor to create a historical novel was to provide a tool to stimulate students and encourage their active participation and involvement.

The most interesting aspect of this approach was precisely the involvement of the students: they became an integral part of history-in-the-making and therefore were forced to think.

The plot

Pisa 1186. A few years after the start of a new Consular administration, there is a murder in the highest spheres of the municipal government. A rich ship-owner, a past member of the Consular board, has been killed in mysterious circumstances.

Charged to solve the mystery is one of the new Consuls, Gaetano di Burgundio, a famous judge and jurist, son of the most famous jurist and teacher, Burgundio di Pisa.

Gaetano asks for help from a young student, Jacopo Della Croce.

Investigations take Jacopo into the ship-yard, the docks, the city law-school and obviously into the untrustworthy city government. Jacopo is then caught up in an international intrigue, involving a fake document, a golden seal and a lost copy of Giustiniano's *Corpus Iuris Civilis*

Pedagogy

The course was planned for a maximum of 15 students involving 30 hours of face-to-face meetings. At the beginning of the course the tutor gave some lessons by way of historical introduction and provided technical information about the weblog. She then gave out 15 themes that the students had to study and work on. These were:

— Sea trade
— Navigation
— Crime and Justice
— Clothes
— Food
— Work
— Holidays and social events
— Sacred and secular calendar
— Religious beliefs
— Sex
— Marriage and family
— Hospitality and Travel
— Culture
— Political-institutional history of Pisa in the late 12th century
— Political-institutional history of Europe in the late 12th century

The list of themes was then posted in the blog:

Pursuing the course and developing the story, the students had to post their work in the blog and provide descriptive data. So the list was continuously changed and extended.

We can see it in this picture:

After this the tutor gave each student a theme and one or more reading lists. She then set up a preliminary calendar in which every student had to summarize for the others the research they had done, and at the same time post a summary of their work in the blog, selecting the most useful data.

Agenda and bibliography:

The summary and posting by each student were not just a passive form of learning. On the contrary they represented active participation in the team, because

1. there were discussions in the class-room at the end of each summary

2. they had a chance to participate using the "comment" tool, which allowed anyone to add comments and ideas at the foot of the page.

Here is one student's comments:

il tempo della storia

Su un sito Internet ho cercato notizie sull'anno 1186. Ho trovato che in questo anno la Pasqua cade il 13 aprile e quindi se vogliamo far partire il romanzo da aprile, ci troviamo in pieno periodo pasquale. Sennò se vogliamo invece spostare lo svolgimento della storia nell'autunno dello stesso anno, a novembre ci troviamo nel nono mese del calendario musulmano, quindi nel mese del Ramadan. Quindi, se ci troviamo ad aprile, sullo sfondo avremo la preparazione per la Pasqua, invece se ci troviamo a novembre si dovrà tenere un po' più in considerazione la cultura dell'arabo.

Va bene il periodo pre e post pasquale. Ottima la notizia sul ramadan... che non riguarda il nostro arabo. I mercanti pisani però devono saperlo per regolarsi. Devono venire via dai porti del Mahgreb prima di novembre.

Materials

At the beginning of the course the tutor allocated individual tasks to the students, such as texts to read and themes to develop. All this was provided on-line.

In this way the story was developed by the students themselves, because each of them read, wrote and searched for material of all kinds and made it available to the others, who had to read and comment on it. The course and the blog itself thus generated learning materials.

Different students posted :
— maps
— text and bibliographic comments
— images
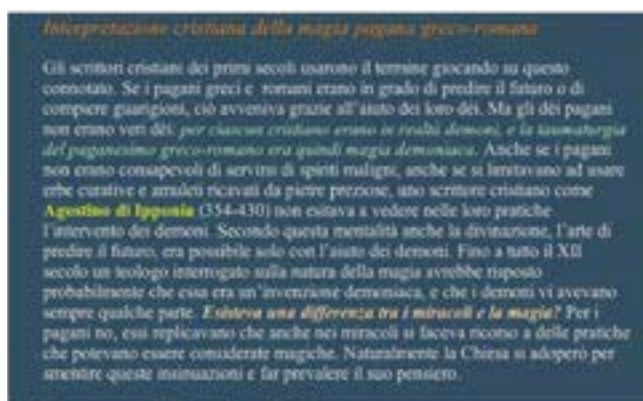
Platforms and technical aspects

The blog was hosted on a public web-site because, during the preparation phase of the course, the computing staff at Pisa University had not yet installed appropriate software. From a technical and graphics view-point there were minimum difficulties in building up a blog on a public web-site.

During the progress of the course a number of positive and negative side- effects became apparent resulting from this choice of web-site.

Positive effects:

1) a chance to sort into groups the postings created during the work-in-progress: this helped navigation
2) a chance to insert into the blog: music, images and links, as with any other web-site
3) a "comment" function, allowing the creation of comments at the foot of the same posting thereby allowing strong thematic "mini discussions" to be built up.

Negative effects:
1) the blog's structure, which gives prominence to the latest posting, rather than the most important ones

2) the chronological publication of the comments, and the consequent rapid turn-over of comments resulting in the "virtual" loss of the earlier ones (see the following image)
3) the lack of a true platform, which could include a forum or chat

In conclusion: the blog revealed itself to be a not very suitable tool for a course conceived and designed in this way. On the one hand it is more flexible for sharing opinions and themes not dictated by the tutor, but spontaneously generated as the story progresses. On the other hand reading and surfing a "rich" blog can be hard work and may not be very effective.

Possibile solutions, for courses such as this, could be:

1) insert the blog into a more complex e-learning platform
2) use several tools in combination such as wiki, chat and forum

Another important consideration must be the number of students. In order to be stimulating and effective, using this structure, the course cannot extend beyond 15 students, involved over a period of 30 hours of face-to-face meetings during a six-month period. To exceed these limits it would be difficult to manage the students, and the blog-format would appear to be neither useful nor effective.

Intercultural issues

The interaction between cultures, though not a topic specifically dealt with on this site, permeates it throughout and is constantly suggested as a subject of thought and motive for analysis.

It is not possible to define briefly the intercultural significance of the subjects dealt with in "La compagnia del sigillo". We can simply underline the fact that this project was carried out in Italy, using only the Italian language.

Two separate cultural and research areas, Italian and French, were inherent in participation in the blog itself and in the bibliography proposed for the course. To study and discuss these different approaches, students had to be aware of the broad outlines of the national traditions of historical studies in Italy and France, know what kind of sources the different historical traditions normally use, and understand what problems are encountered when using these sources for original historical research.

Quality assessment – of the course

The course was evaluated by the students filling in a set of questions anonymously about the course topic, about the knowledge and skills obtained and about technical matters. The outcome was very positive indeed.

Quality assessment – of the students

Assessment of the students, which was announced at the start of the course, was made on the following basis:
1) the quality of the speech each student had to make about their own particular task
2) the quality of postings to the blog and of material contributed by students
3) the frequency and quality of participation during the face-to-face meetings
4) the frequency and quality of participation in the blog
5) individual comments.