

Julianne VanWagenen
Statement of Teaching Philosophy and Experience

You can access this document and its live links at my website: <https://jvanwagenen.github.io/pdf/TeachingPhilosophy.pdf>

Teaching Objectives: As a teacher of Italian language and Italian and comparative literature, my goals are necessarily various, yet there is a through line in my ultimate objectives. While my specific aims in the language classroom revolve around language-learning achievement via the study of authentic cultural materials, and in the literature classroom they focus on improvement of critical literary/cultural inquiry and writing/rhetorical abilities, I have found that the ultimate goal is singular: that students learn to understand and express their own experience, comprehend others', and interpret and evaluate those experiences with a generous and democratic mind. I believe that young people today – who, due to climate change and technological advances, are faced with unprecedented uncertainty regarding their futures, and will face ethical dilemmas that must be treated at the individual, national and global scales – need, more than ever, an education focused on citizenship and self-reflection, which only good humanities courses can provide.

Through introduction to a foreign language and/or culture, language and literature studies foster conditions in which students, crucially, come up against possibly radical changes of perspective, and it is of utmost importance to my teaching philosophy that students feel safe to question and experiment without judgment, that they feel encouraged to view the world more inclusively with every introduction to newness, and that they, finally, take that expanded viewpoint with them along their life path. As students are overcoming the initial challenges of learning language in my classroom, they are introduced concurrently to a new culture, in a framework that reflects, rather than surveils. Whether the class in an introductory-language or a literature course, I encourage students to contemplate their own beliefs and the cultural norms with which they have been raised, so as to stimulate greater open-mindedness and understanding.

Language/Culture Teaching Methods: As a language teacher, my main objective is that students achieve level-appropriate competence in L2 reading, writing, listening and speaking through the practice and development of their interpretative, presentational and interpersonal communication skills in Italian. In the first three semesters of language classes, and continuing in a variety of ways in the intermediate levels, my classroom activities are communicative and task-based. My syllabi require that students study pertinent chapter material (grammar and vocabulary) before class, allowing us to take advantage of our in-class community to bring the lessons alive through interaction with each other and non-textbook media. My in-class materials seek to enhance the often idealized and flattened vision of Italy presented in textbooks by presenting a less romantic, yet more inclusive and relevant, look at the contemporary Italian reality. For example, a chapter that talks about Milan and fashion has been complemented in past courses by an introduction to the ecological threat produced by 'fast fashion' and/or the status of migrant workers in the fashion industry. Depending on the level of the course, we have focused on vocabulary and our own relationships with fashion and ecological choices, presenting our own outfits and why we chose each article; or we have watched a clip from *Gomorrah* and read/discussed a short article about Roberto Saviano and his work. A chapter devoted to 'Italianità' may work with Francesco De Gregori's 'Viva l'Italia' and Ghali's 'Cara Italia', asking students beforehand to make a list of words they associate with 'Italianità', then, at the end of the module, depending on the level, adding a verse to De Gregori's anthem, writing and reciting their own short poem or song, and/or discussing in groups what an initial (stereotypical) and final (nuanced) list of 'l'identità americana' descriptors might look like.

As my courses advance from the beginning to the intermediate and advanced levels, course activities and materials begin to look more like those utilized in literature/culture courses. Yet, I continue to

include methods and activities that are unique to the language classroom. For example, in my fourth-semester [‘Radio Italia’](#) course, ‘note taking’ has proven to be particularly fruitful. In each class, I give a brief lecture, accompanied by power points, and part of the students’ final grades is a quarterly review of the in-class notes they take, which they are allowed to enhance (in different colored ink) with research online of key words/events they had not understood during the lectures. This encourages students to listen and take notes as they would in an SL1 course and to fill lacunae in their understanding at home, by using, for example, wikipedia.it. In that same course, student presentations across the semester were at once analytical and imaginative, culminating in a group project in which students recorded a radio broadcast (also a potential live department event) in which they introduced and played a set list and discussed relevant socio-historical events pertaining to the songs they’d chosen.

Literature/Culture Teaching Methods: Since the beginning of my tenure as a university teacher, bridging the gap of interest – between what I see my students voluntarily consume and what we are offering in literature and culture classes – has been a primary concern. This concern has been so central as to have informed my choice of dissertation topic (countercultural *cantautori*) and ensuing research topics, which all include a component that I feel can act as a ‘hook’ to encourage student engagement. My research and courses, therefore, bridge so-called high- and low-brow media, from comics and popular music to postcolonial novels and lyric opera; they bridge historical period, from Dante to Borges; they bridge oceans, from Italy’s colonial experience in Ethiopia to its love-affair with Edgar Lee Masters’ mid-western cemetery.

In the classroom, even beyond the course-materials introduced, this desire to ‘bridge the gap of interest’ guides my literature/culture-teaching aims. Lectures, activities, and assignments are designed to, firstly, render readings less abstract by contextualizing them historically, and, secondly, to remind students just how relevant past and foreign experience, past and foreign cultural productions are to their contemporary, local experience. I have found my classes are particularly effective in this way and I have seen students become suddenly aware of, even startled by, how directly a text, theme, or figure is speaking to their own experience. For example, in [my course on the *Divine Comedy*](#), we consider Dante’s time period as one ushering in many of our current structures; we consider Florence’s role in the rise of global capital and its social implications; we discuss the rise of Humanism, and stop to consider precisely what the historical role and goals of the humanities have been and are today. In considering Dante’s cosmos, we linger at the moment in Paradiso XXII when Beatrice tells Dante-pilgrim: “rimira in giù e vedi quanto mondo / sotto li piedi già esser ti fei” (ll. 128-29). Dante looks and sees Earth as “L’aiuola che ci fa tanto feroci, / volgendom’ io con li eterni Gemelli, / tutta m’apparve da’ colli a le foci” (ll. 151-153). We consider this view of Earth, which humans did not see until 1968, when Apollo 8 astronauts shot ‘Earthrise’. We discuss the moment that NASA mission-control realized, mid-mission, that photos would not work to capture what the astronauts were witnessing on their journey around the moon and so asked them to use words instead: “We would like you, if possible, to go into as much of a detailed description as you poets can.” We discuss, in light of Dante’s poem, our opinion of Martin Puchner’s claim about that historic moment in 1968: “Philosophers had reflected on the awe that nature could inspire [...] But they could not have imagined what it would be like to be out there, in space. It was the ultimate sublime, an awe-inspiring experience of vastness that was certain to dwarf them, crush them, make them feel small” (*The Written World*). Then, we put this moment in conversation with Borges-pilgrim’s vision of the Aleph [cited only in small part here], which he ultimately claims to be a false vision: “I saw a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brilliance. [...] The Aleph’s diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished.” We call into question the power and limits of sight and expression, and the role of ‘false visions’, i.e. fiction, in expressing universal truths.

Teaching Assessment: Students learn differently, and therefore, I feel it is important to give a wide

range of assessments, particularly in the language classroom. From writing and revising compositions, to creating and performing short plays in class, to organizing critical thinking roundtables, students can shine where they are strongest and improve their weaker areas. Exams test four skills; every exam includes a listening/watching portion, a reading and response portion, and a grammar/vocabulary portion. At some levels, separate oral exams ask students to create and upload recording in which they either read a piece of text or else listen to a set of spoken sentences and repeat them, at other levels, presentations and recitations function as oral assessments.

In the literature classroom, students are assessed based on class participation, presentations, and written essays. It is of particular importance to me that students learn writing as well as reading in my classes. Therefore, essays are graded according to a set rubric: Depth of Analysis, Grasp of Readings, Thesis Paragraph, Evidence, Conclusion, Organization, Clarity, and Mechanics are graded on a scale from Highly Competent to Not Yet Competent, with detailed descriptions of each category that help students understand exactly what is not working and/or how they can improve.

Student evaluations help me understand my course's strengths and weaknesses and to organize my syllabi and class time accordingly. No matter the strength of my evaluations, however, I am truly satisfied only when students come back for more, beyond their language citation or literature prerequisite. I have met my goals when they return to my classes, to find me at my regular office hours even when they are not in my classes, or contact me to ask for a book recommendation in Italian or to tell me that something we discussed in class has stayed with them and guided or sustained them in their lives since graduation.

Teaching Experience (comprehensive view [in CV](#)): I have taught 11 semesters of Italian language at the college level since the fall of 2013 (Harvard and University of Southern California). During that time, I have taught from beginning to advanced Italian, Conversational Italian, and intensive Italian summer courses. Additionally, I have had experience teaching my own, original language syllabi (for example, "[Radio Italia: A History of Postwar Italy through Music, 1947-1985](#)"); writing my own, and collaborating on, exams; leading extra-curricular language tables; and organizing department events. Before beginning my graduate program, I lived in Italy for nearly five years (2006-2010) and was an English-language teacher as well as the English program director at AICI (Associazione Interculturale Italo-Irlandese) in Rome.

As a professor in the Institute of World Literatures and Cultures, with the University of Michigan Society of Fellow's Tsinghua-Michigan program, since 2018 I have taught university-level courses in literature. In 2018, I taught [transnational Postcolonial literature](#), with primary texts by Joseph Conrad, Ennio Flaiano, Gabriella Ghermandi, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Pap Khouma, and secondary texts by Ania Loomba, Edward Said, Lucia Re, Franz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Maya Angelou. In 2019, I taught the *Divine Comedy*, in a course titled "The Power and Limits of Sight: Rereading the *Divine Comedy* with Borges", in which we read a comprehensive selection of the *Divine Comedy* during the first $\frac{3}{4}$ of the class, many of the readings accompanied by Borges' essays on Dante, and then in the final module we read Borges' short story, "The Aleph".

Additionally, I have two semesters of experience as a thesis advisor and two summers of experience as a language instructor, teaching assistant, and program assistant director of Harvard Summer School's Milan and Siena study-abroad program.

I was a teaching assistant for literature courses from 2013 to 2017. As a teaching assistant, under Jeffrey Schnapp and Francesco Erspamer, I have taught the *Divine Comedy*; an experimental design/digital humanities course in which I developed and led a studio at Harvard's Graduate School of Design; and an aesthetical and critical inquiry course in which we read *Il piacere, Il principe, Le città invisibili*, and Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just*.