

## **Blogging Pinocchio: Reworking Culture in the Italian Classroom**

Be still when you have nothing to say;  
when genuine passion moves you, say  
what you've got to say, and say it hot.

D. H. Lawrence

Who knows if D.H. Lawrence would have really found it “hot” to entrust his writings to the fluctuating memory of the blogosphere. What is sure now is that Wikipedia reports that in 2017 there were over 440 million blogs in existence.<sup>1</sup> It is difficult, however, to know the exact number of bloggers active today in cyberspace, as statistics have proven that “a new blog is being created every second of every minute of every hour of everyday” (Keen 3). But the increasing success of platforms, such as Tumblr and WordPress, corroborates that millions of technologically semi-literate people efficiently use blogs everyday either to enhance their business endeavors or for personal reasons.<sup>2</sup>

This prolific blogging trend has now also made its way into second language acquisition. Recent scholarship has enhanced the use of blogs in the classroom as a trusted and effective way to foster students’ autonomy and empowerment in communication and writing (Bloch; Carney; Ozkan). At the core of this article is the same faith in the integration of virtual learning tools with face-to-face instructional methods. What we aim to highlight are mostly the benefits of intermingling modern technology with traditional fairytales and what these benefits can bring to foreign language teaching. We focus specifically on Carlo Collodi’s *Pinocchio* (1883) as it is contextualized in the Italian classroom as a meaningful text to boost students’ communicative competence, while also helping them gain intercultural literacy without losing sight of the challenges triggered by the digital revolution now running our personal and academic lives.<sup>3</sup>

Blogging has turned out to be an essential tool for this learning process. It is both a charming and familiar means for younger generations, who find themselves at ease when using the “language” they know best—that of technology. By taking into account the work on Collodi’s *Pinocchio* done at Hunter College of The City University of New York and St. John’s University with beginning and intermediate learners of Italian, this article will prove that blogging is surprisingly effective both in strengthening intercultural competency and in reducing

grammar mistakes along with sloppy writing styles in posts, particularly when compared to traditional handwritten homework. What emerges as significant from this study is the power of peer pressure that cannot be rivaled by the safe, private feedback that instructors provide when they return graded assignments. The fear of being exposed, judged, or even scorned by one's fellow classmates reveals, indisputably, that blogging is conducive in the fight against sloppy work.

*Pinocchio* was chosen over other canonical literary works because it represents a true iconic cultural text—a sort of inescapable rite of passage for generations of Italian readers. For us, *Pinocchio* was a must-read during our childhoods. A life lesson in print, teaching through the punishments and mishaps the puppet endured. It is not a surprise, in fact, that foreign authors often marvel at the exceptional popularity Collodi's work enjoys in Italy and its long-lasting educational role, which has no counterpart in any other country.<sup>4</sup>

As a matter of fact, Collodi's *Pinocchio* not only spurred an abiding intellectual discussion that involved major authors—from Moravia, Manganelli, and Calvino to Rodari and Tabucchi<sup>5</sup>—it also contributed to the shaping of modern readership. Its concise action and dialogues, its irony set against the author's deep respect for local culture, the character's refusal of authority, and his childhood-like rebellions play(ed) on the *fin-de-siècle* and modern reader with the same intensity.

*Pinocchio*'s uniqueness stands in its very ability to teach with a direct, colloquial language and timeless examples that speak to the young reader with incomparable effectiveness. Collodi's talent for characterization and humoristic details, for crafting dialogues that are erratically comic or tragic is what brings forth *Pinocchio*'s true ambivalent essence in the most sympathetic way. Torn between the shivers of mischief as a puppet and his fervent desire to become a decent boy, *Pinocchio* weaves his behavioral tension into the narrative so emotionally that it is impossible for the reader not to identify with him.

It is this charismatic spirit of Collodi's book, which is so deeply rooted in Italy's regional culture, that we wanted to transmit to our students. *Pinocchio* is an everyman, curious and flawed, disrespectful but eventually willing to swing around, who candidly speaks to our inner self regardless of the date of its composition and the plot's occasional darkness. In cultural terms, it was important that we acknowledge Collodi's modernity and the strength of his pedagogical message in the Italian collective imagination—which stands in direct contrast to Walt Disney's purged and sugarcoated version of the wooden puppet known to most Americans.

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Since *Pinocchio* was taken as the model text to integrate language learning with cultural knowledge, the chart below offers an overview of the courses, the materials, and the time that were devoted to discussing *Pinocchio* in class, as a way to verbally reinforce the topics, points of view, and cultural differences brought forth by the students' blogs and homework:

Course	Class Size	Meetings	Duration of Class	Chapters read from <i>Pinocchio</i> <sup>6</sup>	Class time dedicated to <i>Pinocchio</i>
Ital. 106 (second semester)	19 students	Twice a week	75 minutes	8 chapters	15 minutes
Ital. 201 (third semester)	20 students	Twice a week	75 minutes	10 chapters	15 minutes
Ital. 202 (fourth semester)	14 students	Twice a week	75 minutes	12 chapters	20 minutes

When pairing a traditional fairytale such as *Pinocchio*—which was originally composed to educate 19<sup>th</sup>-century audiences on lessons of moral and civic responsibility—with the crisp, concise writing style of the blog, the result is a new learning environment in which students are encouraged to re-interpret the past and its canon through the lens of their technological present. Before discussing the use of *Pinocchio* in class, the students' reactions to it, and the advantages of combining tradition and modernity, however, it may be fruitful to address a most urgent question: why use fairytales in second language acquisition at all?

Storytelling is one of the oldest pastimes in existence.<sup>7</sup> Fairytales have been around for as long as humanity can remember. Since antiquity, stories were passed down from one generation to the next, orally at first and then through the written word, giving birth to the long literary tradition of folktales, myths, and legends that still intrigue us today. In fact, it does not come as a surprise that, since the beginning of civilization, folktales have been the safe-keeper of all that past generations wanted to pass on to their youth.

In a way, fairytales are a sort of cultural and folkloristic encyclopedia; a sort of journal that ancient generations kept to detail their lived experience and precious knowledge. They are the ancient version of our modern social media platforms, from Facebook to Instagram, to

Twitter and open access blogs. In fact, just as the old generations were eager to share their experiences, beliefs, ideas, and ideologies by telling stories or recalling ancient folktales, our generation does the same today via social media. Pointing out these similarities to our students before introducing fairytales is rather important because it helps them connect more to the stories and engages them more in the reading.

Furthermore, despite what one might think, fairytales are not stagnant “stories.” Fairytales evolve with time; they are constantly revised and adapted to the needs of our ever-changing society—which is what makes them virtually immortal. However, their “social” role seems to have remained the same. Indeed, in ancient times, fairytales were thought to explain the unexplainable, as they provided the emotional support fragile human beings needed in order to cope with the perils of the unknown and dispel the fear of death.<sup>8</sup> And it is remarkable how throughout the centuries fairytales have continued to serve this purpose, powerfully encompassing time and social/cultural changes.<sup>9</sup> It was this very adaptability that, according to Jack Zipes, made storytelling an irresistible genre capable of promoting new customs and social mores by altering “tiny tales” until they grew into the “whale like” narratives that have reached us today:

Think of a gigantic whale soaring through the ocean, swallowing each and every fish that comes across its path. The marvelous, majestic whale had once lived on land fifty-four million years ago and had been tiny. Part of a group of marine mammals now known as cetaceans, the land whale eventually came to depend on other fish for its subsistence and thrive on the bountiful richness of the ocean. To grow and to survive, it constantly adapted to its changing environment. The fairy tale is no different (Zipes, “The Meaning” 221).

Even in this aspect (helping people cope with the unexplainable or with their fears) fairytales resemble our contemporary social media platforms. One only needs to think about all the flash-mobs organized via social media or the plethora of posts and comments on these sites any time a tragedy (personal or universal) strikes.

Another good reason to use fairytales in the language classroom is due to their universality and adaptability across cultures. The universality of the tales makes them familiar to students, and their adaptability makes them “unique” to each and every culture. It is for this particular reason that fairytales represent a way to fill the gap between

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language instruction and cultural enrichment. What Paul Hazard said for England works for every nation: if you want to know what a nation was in the past and will be in the future, you need to take into consideration children's literature. The idea is that the old tales can tell us what the old generations valued as important, while the new ones can tell us what the modern values (the ones the children are reading about now and will act out in the future) are. By looking at those values, we can understand if and how a nation is changing or has changed. This makes children's tales a cultural repository of unparalleled worth that we should share with our students: "It is therefore logical that we specifically steer out students toward the fairy tales of a particular country at one point or another, if we expect them to learn about that country's deep-seated values" (Obergfell 441). Possibly, just as it is true for Perrault's stories in France,<sup>10</sup> some of the values that were important in Collodi's *Pinocchio*, might not be relevant anymore. But it is undeniable that by discussing them students will learn about cultural differences and how some of the fairytale's allegedly "old" morals might still be respected in contemporary Italy. But to this we will return later.

In spite of their long history and cultural importance, fairytales have been often misinterpreted and misunderstood, especially in their educational message. In *Spells of Enchantment*, Jack Zipes questions the general assumption that "fairy tales were first created for children and are largely the domain of children," since "nothing could be further from the truth" (Zipes, *Spells* xi). The evidence that Western civilization has grounded fairytales in history through fantasy and metaphors somewhat exorcises such bias. Children love tales as much as grownups do, mainly due to the genre's capability to give the illusion of change and independence. With no age restrictions, fairytales liberate and empower the imagination.<sup>11</sup>

Even in the case of *Pinocchio*, looking at its plot as mere entertainment for children would be sadly disappointing—a lesson that our students learned after the first few classes. Before starting to read the novel, they were asked to write a paragraph on what they already knew about Pinocchio. Interestingly, all the three classes involved in this project answered this question by referring to their knowledge of Disney's cartoon, including those students with Italian heritage.<sup>12</sup> Very few of them (only 10%) specified in their responses that they knew about an Italian character named Pinocchio because they had heard of him from their grandparents, but they all naively admitted that they thought he was the European version of the Disney protagonist. In other words, they were expecting a childish and entertaining plot.

After reading the very first chapters of the novel, however, the students promptly concluded that Collodi's *Pinocchio* was anything but a children's book due to its dramatic tone, dark episodes, and the misfortunes experienced by the wooden puppet (who is actually a "child" of poverty, gaining his education on the road while the country around him struggles with post-Unification hardships).

As a matter of fact, it does not take long to notice that Disney's version of the story removed poverty and famished characters in exchange for a sugarcoated adventure—one where Geppetto did not have to sell his only jacket to buy Pinocchio the book he needed for school.<sup>13</sup> As Richard Wunderlich and Thomas Morrissey note, the film industry's imperative was to offer "soothing imagery" during the Great Depression, which could make viewers forget about the problems they were facing due to unemployment and the comforts they lost in everyday life (96). This would explain why Collodi's cold and unfurnished little room is visually transformed into the cozy, colorful cottage where Disney's Pinocchio could live his cheerful adventures.

Pre-testing the students' knowledge was a useful means for us to assess the course objective: learning about the customs and traditions of Italy while practicing and reinforcing the language through the context of a canonical text. In order to promote a true communication-oriented proficiency, activities on *Pinocchio* were driven by a cultural, rather than a grammatical, goal. Students were asked to analyze the leading character and the events involving him by isolating the most interesting moments in the chapters and explaining why they found them important. Students were expected to chart events as a draft to interview someone in the class and eventually come up with a series of contrastive and comparative statements. By creating sub-goals (the focus here was on actions and events) in the lesson plan, students successfully managed to express their feelings about Pinocchio as well as their likes and dislikes about his pranks.

Observing students prepare a draft to conduct the interview/survey gave us an excellent idea of the vocabulary they actually needed to complete the task. With this goal in mind, we designed matching activities (both with pictures and bilingual options) and multiple-choice questions in order to contextualize the vocabulary; these activities were then reworked in at-home assignments in the form of visual slides, drills, and fill-in-the-blanks as a meaningful extension of the class outside of school.

The blog was the final step of this process, with the virtual board serving as the space to share personal thoughts and comment on their

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peers' posts. Significantly, blogging liberated the imagination. Over 40% of the students put themselves in Pinocchio's shoes, writing about how they would feel in a similar situation, while 60% offered possible alternatives to Pinocchio's misdeeds and the consequent punishments. All in all, the students excelled at capturing the cause and effect logic of the book and Collodi's educative goal in using it. However, the most rewarding result of this activity was seeing the students recycle in-class vocabulary in their posts while successfully employing key words and grammar (especially *passato prossimo* and *imperfetto*).

Mistakes (both in spelling and syntax) diminished significantly. When comparing the first posts with those written in the last three weeks of class, we noticed a striking 90% improvement in style and punctuation, as well as in the ability to make a point through a more articulated sentence structure. Also, adjective-noun agreement was drastically ameliorated, in addition to the awareness that in Italian, unlike in English, it is not necessary to always express the subject. Students spontaneously stopped writing "noi siamo" ("we are"), exchanging it for the more colloquial "siamo" ("[we] are"), thereby demonstrating a mastered ability to grasp the linguistic nuances between the two languages. We noticed that in their traditionally handwritten assignments the subject "noi" ("we") continued to be used in sentences. The blog, thus, turned out significantly useful both for enhancing fluency in the target language as well as for the recycling of colloquial expressions.

In their recent research, Amy Benjamin and John Crow (2013) stress the importance for minds to revisit and review words as the best strategy to "keep them alive." They argue, in fact, that only the vocabulary stored in the brain "for retrieval" is productive, as opposed to words that are used "only to study for tests" (58). Catherine Doughty (1991) even stretched this rationale to learning grammar, claiming that meaning-oriented strategies are productive in mastering both non-communicative structures (i.e. grammar) and the full comprehension of the input (431ff). Our study certainly goes hand in hand with this scholarly logic. More so than computer-based, lexical activities, in fact, the blog engaged our students in practically processing and mastering vocabulary, especially those words with multiple meanings in different contexts. Of particular note is the rewarding experience both for the students and the instructors to see the quality of writing dramatically improve over the course of the semester.

In the case of *Pinocchio*, the real bridge between mere memorization and grammar was culture. When given the task to re-write new chapter endings (intermediate) or describe a character by listing

his/her peculiarities using examples from the text (beginners), all students relied on their curiosity for cultural markers to complete the assignment. Although initially amused by Pinocchio's picaresque wrongdoing and naiveté, students easily picked up the serious side of Collodi's story, which they approached through their multicultural lens. It is no accident that the liveliest class discussions triggered by the blog posts involved differences between Italy and America, in particular the way parents educate their children. Students were clearly puzzled by the brutality of Collodi's punishments for his rascal Pinocchio. "Sono i bambini punito così in Italia?" ("Are children punished this way in Italy?"), writes GN in her post.<sup>14</sup>

As a matter of fact, throughout the book the poor puppet is pursued by assassins, rabbit undertakers threaten him with death for not taking his medicine, he is almost fried in a pan as a fish, hanged, drowned, and devoured by a shark, not to mention the trauma he experiences by ending up in jail, being forced to serve as watchdog, and being turned into a donkey. If disobedience and misdeeds put Pinocchio in trouble, however, students could not help noticing the difference between Collodi's message and the simplistic, watered-down Disney version that essentially screened the puppet's incapability to distinguish between good and evil.

Interestingly, class time was used to share thoughts on Collodi's pedagogical approach thanks to the wave of the comments posted on the blog. Was the book's darker tone more effective in conveying the teaching message? According to 90% of the students, yes. The narrative realism was evocative and crude at the same time, but it better taught the lesson of the perils of laziness, intolerance, and repentance as an end in and of itself. They were stunned by Pinocchio killing the annoying cricket, a more tragic destiny for the poor, savvy insect than Disney's Jiminy singing the iconic "When You Wish Upon a Star."

Blog posts also commented on the "creepiness" of the little girl when announcing that all in a house were dead. The exchange reported below is visually and culturally powerful in proving how the students in the foreign classroom re-elaborated the *fin-de-siècle* narrative from their "technological" perspective:

AL: Pinocchio è un libro per i bambini e c'è una bambina morta?!?! 🤔

TA: Sì, era molto strano!

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AD: Anche io pensavo che era strano una bambina morta nel libro!

KR: Boh!

The insertion of an emoticon in the above post to emphasize the student's puzzlement and the colloquial Italian expression "Boh!" attest to a powerful combination of traditional, informal, and more descriptive written language that certainly legitimizes a new way to communicate, eradicating the barrier between grammar, slang, and new socio-cultural trends. As a matter of fact, the major challenge for students and instructors in these classes was understanding Collodi's work from its 19<sup>th</sup>-century context and not reading it from a biased contemporary perspective. The result was the birth of a new and inspiring modern cultural community capable of sharing thoughts and ideas on the importance of valuing and preserving national identities and costumes rather than discarding or judging them within their historical shell.

To help our students better grasp the importance of Pinocchio, we asked them to isolate those values and lessons strictly linked to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century cultural climate from those that are still considered "core values" of Italian national culture. For example, we pointed out how Italians generally prefer narrative realism over the embellished narrative typical of American children's literature. We also explained how the Fata Turchina, the loving and yet very strict mother figure, is a character who still resonates with Italian children today—virtually every Italian child has heard at least once in his/her life time the admonition "if you lie, your nose will grow long!"

As language instructors, one of our most difficult battles is to successfully introduce culture in our elementary and intermediate classes.<sup>15</sup> Fairytales provide a fun and effective way to accomplish this task, while also offering a chance to put grammar in context and reinforce vocabulary. In the last few years, much progress has been made in the integration of culture in our language classroom as it is now clear that studying culture enhances the interest in the target language, giving our students another reason to "want" to learn by making the process more meaningful. As a result, almost all textbooks on the market today have a section (as small as it may be) dedicated to culture. The problem is that, for the elementary and intermediate classes, culture is introduced in "bits and pieces" and is presented mostly via "stereotypes," concepts widely known and accepted but not necessarily true. There is indeed a tendency to leave more serious and realistic cultural elements for upper-level classes. But what if our students only take elementary courses and

do not pursue a degree in the language we are teaching (i.e. Italian)? In this case, the risk is for them to walk away with little to no knowledge (or even worse with the “wrong” knowledge) of what Italians and Italy really are today. Hence, the need to talk about real cultural values and patterns from the very beginning is strong. By including fairytales in syllabi, this lack of culture competency can truly be addressed.

### ***Further Outcomes on Implementing Fairytales in the Curriculum Core***

Because of their structure, fairytales naturally work well in the classroom: they are relatively short, present an authentic use of language, and provide a good base for grammar and vocabulary review/expansion. More importantly, they put students in touch with a familiar setting, stimulating their attention and engaging them in the reading. The short length of the narrative, then, has two major advantages. First, it grants the instructor the possibility to complete the lesson plan in one class period, which should be welcomed as a significant benefit, considering the limited amount of time teachers usually have at their disposal. Second, it grants the student the satisfaction of reading *a complete text* as opposed to selected excerpts from a book.<sup>16</sup>

In our study, the latter proved pivotal. Empowered by their ability to master the story from beginning to end, the students showed a significant rise in motivation. Indeed, our work with *Pinocchio* proved that when students are able to read a complete text in a foreign tongue, they feel more accomplished. This achievement feeds self-esteem while simultaneously increasing interest in the target language. At the end of the semester, for instance, JW wrote, “Io non posso credere che ho letto il libro di Pinocchio in Italiano!” (“I can’t believe I read Pinocchio in Italian!”), to whom GA responded, “Anche voglio raccontare questa storia alla mia nonna” (“I want to tell my grandma about this story!”). Evidence shows that students won’t be able to understand every single word of the text (and we are not recommending translation). But the context and the unfolding of the plot will be inductively clear to them thanks to the fairytale’s predictable structure.

Major considerations also involve the language employed in the tales and the way it facilitates the students’ understanding. The lexicon consists of pre-fabricated patterns and recurrent series of words, with repetitions and formulas that experts have collected under the umbrella term of “formulaic language.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, simple sentences and fixed linguistic structures facilitate the learning and cognitive process. For

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example, at the beginning of a fairytale we all expect to find expressions like: “Once upon a time...” or “There was a time when...,” in the same way that we all assume the stories to be populated with princes, princesses, ogres, witches, and villains. We know there will be a protagonist opposed by an antagonist, and that the hero will have to face many trials in order to conquer or rescue his beloved.<sup>18</sup> All of this adds familiarity to the text and lowers the affective filter of the students, hence engaging them in the reading, which, in turn, becomes fun and informative at the same time.

Another positive aspect of fairytales is that they foster the students’ thinking processes and creativity. It is easy to spark a conversation in class based on the moral of the story and consequently, compare and contrast opinions. As we have seen, another possibility is to shift the conversation to cultural differences (i.e. Italian vs. American culture) or ask the students to rework the ending of the tale as well as write their own original fairytale. In this respect, blogging is a valuable tool for the instructor, as it makes the students feel more involved and learning becomes almost effortless.

This is also the moment when creativity is at its peak. For example, while on the topic of the eccentric events that Pinocchio has to deal with, we asked our students to talk about something “weird” that happened to them using *passato prossimo* and *imperfetto*. The results were posts that offered the most hilarious comments. GT recounted the memory of a stray cat that entered from an opened window and jumped on her while she was watching TV, while JF amused the class community with the funny argument he had with his friend, who had apparently stolen his “action figure.” Comments on this post flooded the virtual board, attesting to how our students’ minds think in real-life ways and naturally engage in context switching. Fast (and somewhat expected) was their mental association of the double-jointed wooden puppet with a modern fancy collectible. Again, Pinocchio’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century reality was extrapolated from its historical context and reworked with the experiences of the present.

Ultimately, the funny comments triggered by JF’s post were a cause for reflection on the importance of amusement both in teaching and learning. We could not but agree more with Zac Zambor that “laughing leads to learning” (62ff). Recent research, in fact, shows how humor in class, regardless of the discipline, can help students ingrain information and pique their interest even outside of the classroom, provided that hilarity serves as a complement to and not a distraction from course material.<sup>19</sup>

In our case, Pinocchio went perfectly with this logic and proved a valuable source of collective inspiration for jokes and shared amusement. The puppet's adventures—despite being incredible and brutal—almost became an encouragement to daydream, a sort of virtual excursion into that *Pleasure Island* that so powerfully captivated Pinocchio. In other words, we fell under the spell of the narrative and the power of the unconscious, which, for Bruno Bettelheim, takes us back to the irrational enchantment typical of imaginative stories. In Bettelheim's words, “the fairy tale, from its mundane and simple beginning, launches into fantastic events” (63).

And so it was for us. We started commenting on the first steps that Collodi's whimsical puppet took within the harsh reality that was *fin-de-siècle* Italy—a reality evident from the very beginning with the marionette's paper clothing and bread cap. And we ended up laughing at posts commenting on the hilarious episodes from another *Pinocchio*: the popular eponymous Korean TV drama. In this drama, Collodi's plot suffers from a wholly new and extravagant ailment: lies cause the characters to hiccup until they confess the truth.<sup>20</sup> HK and KC, two Korean students in the intermediate class, shared funny posts with video clips dubbed in English from *Youtube*, which triggered hilarious comments in Italian, especially those on false reports in the news and the fake celebrity world.

Blogging once again led us to walk along unexpected trails, such as practicing the *condizionale* while we imagined how our lives would be affected by the incapability to lie due to the “Pinocchio syndrome” as in the Korean TV show. This fictional “illness” was a funny and out-of-the-blue way to end our class, which taught us the most important lesson we could learn from fairytales: they made our teaching experiences enjoyable and productive, and in turn, made our students' learning experiences pleasurable and fruitful. As the old adage says, *docere* truly meant *delectare* in our case.

### ***Major Reflections on the Importance of Blogging in the Italian Classroom***

This study proved that blogs are, for the new generation, the modern version of the old-fashioned hand-written journal; a virtual space where writing becomes instantly public and sharable, translating the fast pace of the modern thinking process. Blogs give the instructor the true pulse of the mind—and consequently the learning—of our students. Information is fast and short, as young learners favor, and more

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importantly, it is conveyed through comparisons and connections rather than dull memorization. A considerable body of scholarship in psycholinguistics has by now demonstrated how, in second language acquisition, memory has to be taken into account for its function beyond the mere acquisition of new words and inputs. This is the case because the retrieval and the storage of information is important in order to retain what has been learned over time.<sup>21</sup> Our experience with blogging confirms this trend. Posts fostered word recycling and consequently consolidation, as well as retention of vocabulary and grammar. The recurrence of some words strictly related to Pinocchio's storyline, such as *povertà*, *bugie*, *punizione*, *perdonare* (poverty, lies, punishment, to forgive) were used in the right context and confirmed significant improvement in producing a more complex sentence structure in comparison with the weak statements in the posts at the beginning of the semester.

Throughout the course, the comments posted offered a chance for us to reflect on how blogging facilitated creative learning rather than the mere drilling of information into the brain. As we have seen, the population in our three classes mastered new content through analogies—or by relating Pinocchio's adventures to their personal, everyday lives. The result was a compelling conversation triggered by arguments that in turn generated counterarguments. Students did not always agree with each other. One of the most recurrent expressions in posts was the very “Non sono d'accordo” (“I disagree”)—but they were not afraid to say it. In the end, we acknowledged the evidence that even the shyest students were able to express their points with a self-confidence they surely did not show in class debate.

What the blog offered the class was independence in learning, a quite surprising achievement that went beyond the academic understanding of the topic. When blogging, students appeared to be moved by their own initiative and motivation, which fostered the challenge for us to implement new teaching strategies, tackling instruction from the learner's perspective. This was a significant accomplishment, if we consider that experts speak of “self-regulated learning” as one of the most important goals students hope to achieve, which also has a serious impact on the way teachers need to interact with their classes (Zimmerman and Schunk). The autonomy we praised in our students—mostly triggered by their more active approach to the task at hand—is what Susan Sheerin (1997) labeled as “independent learning.” It highlighted the learners' willingness to communicate in the target

language at all costs and to pay attention to accuracy as well as appropriateness.

Blogging also worked particularly well in the Italian language classroom due to its ability to recreate what we might call “a comfort zone” for our students. They appeared very familiar with communication via the web. Posting on social media and *talking* via text are, by now, integrated activities in their daily routine. It is likely for this reason that the blog represented for them a pressure free environment, an unrestricted space in which they could write and share their thoughts without worrying about the hovering presence of the instructor as happens in the classroom. What was more striking to us, however, was to acknowledge the evidence that the freedom innately presented by the blogging platform did not manifest itself in students’ production of sloppy and nonsensical phrases. Instead, quite the contrary happened. Even though the students were able to bypass the stress ensuing from the presence of the instructor, there was, nonetheless, another “influence” that pushed them to perform at their best: peer pressure.

If what our experiences have taught us is true, today’s students are very competitive, and one of the unavoidable consequences of this competitiveness is to “never want to look bad” in front of peers. Well, the blog—as a public space—makes the students aware that what they post will be read not just by the instructor but by the rest of the class as well. We noticed that knowing that others could see their writing stimulated our students to produce the best work possible. They tried to write better, or, at least, they paid more attention to their use of grammar and vocabulary.

It was obvious, for instance, that some expressions used in the posts were computer-proofed, even though the use of mechanic translators was forbidden. For their part, students predictably denied having sought the help of word processing systems and spell-checkers. But that the ban had been bypassed was especially evident in terms of noun and adjective agreement, which was flawless even for those who systematically made mistakes in in-class written assignments. Clearly, students were aiming at accuracy for the community’s sake so as to avoid the risk of being singled out for weak grammar skills.

This was eventually the motivation that pushed us to opt for lenience rather than punishment for the very few students who did not respect the ban. After all, by double-checking their writing and taking into consideration their potential mistakes, the students still experienced remarkable gains in both accuracy and awareness. Theirs was a

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constructive activity that gave us the chance to address the “risks” of relying too much on artificial intelligence.

Indeed, what students had not taken into consideration was the computer’s inability to be aware of context. Some posts, in fact, resulted in unintentional hilarity because of mistranslation. One student, for instance, who intended to write “Anche la mia” (“Mine, too!”) to a post saying, “Questa è la mia opinione” (“This is my opinion”) resulted in the extravagant Italian sentence “La miniera, anche!” (“The [coal]mine, too!”). Clearly, the misunderstanding was caused by the computer’s incapability to apply context, despite the enormous dictionary built into it. In this case, the machine was not able to make a distinction between the possessive pronoun and the noun and use it appropriately. But, more importantly, the student did not realize this. If the student had attempted his own translation without worrying about possible mistakes being made in front of the class, he would have done a better job than the computer.

This case apart—which actually caused more hilarity than concern due to its blatant conflict with the claim that the student had not infringed the ban—our study recorded encouraging data that underscores the difference between traditional handwritten assignments and the writing in the blog entries: ultimately there were considerably fewer mistakes on the virtual posts. A questionnaire at the end of the course confirmed that students experienced a substantial reduction in anxiety while blogging when compared to participating in in-class debate. Seventy percent of our students said they felt less confident speaking in front of their peers than writing a blog post. Class conversation, however, should not be demonized because of this percentage. Many students, in fact, admitted that group discussions were stressful but very effective as they gave them an opportunity to independently assess their performance. This, in turn, allowed them to gain a real understanding of their strengths and weaknesses.

Blogging was also welcomed for its easy accessibility. Students appreciated being given the chance to post their comments when, where, and how they wanted. Answers in the end-of-the-semester questionnaire showed that for some, blogging gave them the impression of being more independent and in charge of their own education; for others, it was a sign of the instructors’ respect for the busy lives of students who are also full-time workers or young parents.

These answers certainly offer food for thought. The relationship between instructor and students is intertwined more than we think, regardless of the subject we teach. More importantly, however, the

relationship is mutual and goes beyond the evaluation of learners through homework assignments and quizzes. By privileging blogging over other, more traditional testing practices, we discovered that students appreciated being asked their opinion and treated as adults, receiving respect for their dislikes and encouragement for their mistakes. In the end, even their initial skepticism of a fairytale they thought to be too out of fashion or childish was dismantled. Keeping our minds open let us learn important lessons, both from Pinocchio and from each other. This experience not only proved that tradition and modern technology can be a successful pair in pedagogical terms but also that instructors' professional growth is always fostered by the students' direct involvement and feedback.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog). Information retrieved on May 30, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> As of June 2018, Tumblr alone hosts 421.0 million blogs, with 161.8 billion posts (See "About," [tumblr.com/about](http://tumblr.com/about), accessed 20 June 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Carlo Collodi was the pen name of Carlo Lorenzini (1826-1890), a journalist from Florence, who became interested in children's literature after translating Perrault's fairytales. Originally, he published *Pinocchio* as a serial in 1881 in *Il giornale dei bambini* directed by Ferdinando Martini. *Pinocchio* was compiled into a book in 1883 with the definitive title and the greatly-admired illustrations by Enrico Mazzanti.

<sup>4</sup> German Scholar Dieter Richter speaks of Collodi's *Pinocchio* as a "national monument" for Italians who attribute an exceptional respect to the educational messages the book brings forth. Interestingly, Richter discusses the difficulty for German audiences to relate to such enthusiasm for the wooden puppet's adventures. He does not see a possible comparison to the extent of *Pinocchio*'s influence on a national readership in any other European literary work. See Dieter Richter, 2002, in particular pp. 123-47.

<sup>5</sup> On this topic, see Bertacchini.

<sup>6</sup> Summaries for the missing chapters were given to students, so that by the end of the course they could have the sense of the whole story without feeling they had only read a selection.

<sup>7</sup> Scholarship on this topic is rich and wide ranging. See Bottigheimer; Tatar, *Hard Facts*; Ziolkowski; Zipes, *Spells and Fairy Tales*.

<sup>8</sup> The comfort that fairytales offer(ed) to people and society is a topic touched upon by several scholars. See Bettelheim; Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales* and "The Meaning."

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<sup>9</sup> In her *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale*, Marina Warner looks at fairytales as a phenomenon capable of crossing borders and cultures through the sanitization and bowdlerization the genre underwent.

<sup>10</sup> “Certainly, it is true that reading a Perrault fairy tale will not instruct our students about contemporary socio-economic conditions in France. But reading these fairytales with proper direction and guidance may lead to an understanding of some facets of the French national character that are constant and have not greatly changed since the seventeenth century” (Oberfell 441).

<sup>11</sup> On this issue and the creative and cognitive benefits of storytelling both for adults and children see Maria Tatar’s *Enchanted Hunters: The Power of Stories in Childhood*.

<sup>12</sup> In 1940, Walt Disney produced *Pinocchio*, a film based on *Le avventure di Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi. Its screenplay was the result of multiple collaborations, which involved the work of an impressive numbers of artists. After WWII, *Pinocchio* became a box office hit that has stirred the public’s imagination with the wooden puppet’s mischiefs ever since. With this film, Walt Disney was acknowledged to have revolutionized the animation industry. See Neal Gabler’s *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination* and Michael Barrier’s *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in Its Golden Age*.

<sup>13</sup> Walt Disney’s cinematic rendition of Collodi’s *Pinocchio* has been the object of scholarly curiosity for its loosely adapted plot, giving birth to a pool of contrasting interpretations arguing the superiority of the adaptation over the literary source and vice versa for several decades. Critics such as Christopher Finch (1975) and Leonard Maltin (1984), for instance, praised the film as the triumph of animated cartoons for its ability to teach a moral lesson bypassing the book’s scary episodes thanks to the technical magic of images on screen (Wunderlich and Morrissey 95). Maurice Sendak attacked the world Collodi described as a “ruthless, joyless place, filled with hypocrites, liars, and cheats” which certainly contributed to *Pinocchio* being “born bad,” whereas he favored Disney’s ability to focus on the puppet’s desire to grow-up (Sendak 40). Zipes, on the other hand, preferred the book to the adaptation, as in his opinion Walt Disney deformed Collodi’s values and *Pinocchio*’s misbehavior, which he treated as mere corporate constructs (Zipes, *Happily*).

<sup>14</sup> Posts in Italian are reported with the grammar mistakes that appeared in the original. The blogger’s names will be initialized to maintain privacy.

<sup>15</sup> A wide range of scholars have generated an extensive literature on the topic. For instance, Genc and Bada; *Kramsc*, *Context and Language*; *Moran*; Putnam.

<sup>16</sup> As stated previously, students who were given selected chapters from the text were also provided with chapter summaries so that they had a sense of the whole story.

<sup>17</sup> On how formulaic sequence in the narrative can facilitate fluency in speech, see Byram and Feng; Wray; Ellis, Simpson-Vlach, and Maynard. See also Chinghwa Lee on how fairy tales can help to facilitate primary language education. Although Chinghwa focuses primarily on English, her work is nonetheless a very informative reading.

<sup>18</sup> An extensive body of scholarship has been produced on the traditional fairytale pattern. See among the others, Luthi; Propp.

<sup>19</sup> On this prolific topic, see Garner; Shatz and LoSchiavo.

<sup>20</sup> On November 2014, the Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS) released the TV drama *Pinocchio*. According to Asian Wiki, this show holds the record of being the most expensive Korean drama ever sold (in China the rights were paid \$280,000 per episode). Besides the intriguing plot and the actors' performances, *Pinocchio* became a hit also for successfully combining different genres, from fantasy and comedy to family and romance. See [www.asianwiki.com](http://www.asianwiki.com), retrieved on June 30, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> The cognitive interaction between language and memory has been extensively discussed in a number of different fields, from neurology and behavioral studies, to linguistics and L2 pedagogy. Significantly, at the core of these studies stands the belief that the process of foreign language acquisition deeply involves both “working memory” and the brain’s storage function. On this topic, see Nation; Pienemann; Cook; and Wen.

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