Authoritarianism and totalitarianism
A case study of multimedia and interdisciplinary teaching

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this contribution is to present a highly significant case study where the operating methods and the finalities of a multimedia and interdisciplinary education path have been shown. It was necessary that the teaching staff and technicians at the Università degli Studi Guglielmo Marconi work in synergy to rise up to the challenge of the modern technodidactics, in particular with the selection and application of digital and visual technologies that are especially effective for teaching in the humanistic and history of art field.

KEYWORDS: Case study, distance education, instructional design, transmediality, virtual table, visual arts

It’s about replacing a thought which separates and reduces with a thought that distinguishes and connects. It’s not about abandoning the knowledge of the parts for the knowledge of totality, nor the analysis for the summary: we need to combine them (Morin, 1999)

Introduction

The challenge that new technologies forcefully imposes to the design and production of didactic services and materials for distance-education goes hand in hand with the radical changes in lifestyles, internet access and more importantly the search for information/data/notions and the progressive construction of knowledge. There are continuously stronger contaminations between the supply of structured and formalized didactic courses and the access to services and contents in a less formal way thanks to the processes of socialization and communication that the internet encourages and which contributes to the enrichment
of knowledge, skills and the experiences of the average user. Is it the same cognitive model that expands and evolves itself – or even degenerate?, towards what the philosopher Byung-Chul Han, the apocalyptic analyst of contemporary digital anthropology, critically defines as “the swarm” of knowledge on the internet, or rather, the shaping of an indistinct and liquid form of information and data to the untidy and disorganized appearance (Chul Han, 2015). Nevertheless, for workers of the most advanced and efficient systems of distance education – from academic profiles of teachers and researchers up to the more technical ones like the Instructional designers – this apparent “cognitive chaos” aspect must transform itself into a precious opportunity in order to link the effectiveness of the didactic projects with the innovation guaranteed by modern technological solutions; in other words, leading towards a choice of the best technological solution to obtain a valid teaching/learning result for the purpose of its multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary connotations.

The Università degli Studi Guglielmo Marconi experience

First of all, the idea of this course began from the need of implementing an in-depth tool for students in the faculties of literature and political sciences in the disciplinary fields of contemporary history, philosophy, history of art, literature and the history of political doctrines that characterized itself into an interdisciplinary approach and exploited the most innovative and advanced technologies in distance education, which the Università degli Studi Guglielmo Marconi offers. The idea is to involve the lecturers of the different subjects in a sort of open debate which has the final goal of identifying a common transdisciplinary teaching path that isn’t normally given in traditional academic approaches. The methodologies and technologies for instructional design have given the foundation for the confluence and convergence of this education project giving value to the course contents according to a dual use model: firstly, “vertical”, aimed at going further into detail and giving light on the interdisciplinary fields which weren’t openly dealt with in the formal teaching/learning path; secondly, “transversal”, in other words, highlighting common traits, contaminations and interdisciplinarities of critical literatures and interpretations which began near the events of Authoritarianism and Totalitarianism in the last century. This gives the possibility to access information, data and structured knowledge in a reticular and hypermedia way, so as to aid the learning process of the student in the most free, creative and synesthetic way possible.

In the general design approach, we began with the choice of a triple design of the functional criteria and the aggregation of contents into temporal, geographical and thematic macro segments as shown schematically below.

1. **Temporal**, with the identification of particularly significant historical time periods for the selected topic, grouped into two macro-areas (from 1870 to 1941 and 1942 to 1989), which in turn are articulated into the following micro-segments:
Figure 1. Screenshot of the project’s home page: choice of the temporal macro-segment

Figure 2. The choice of the temporal micro-segment
2. **Geographical**, with the mapping of the national and transnational territories affected in the events concerned, i.e. Italy, Germany and the Soviet Union (figure 3):

![Figure 3. Menu for the choice of the geographical path](image)

3. **Thematic**: once the historical period and the geographical area of interest have been selected, the student can get more in depth knowledge regarding the main features in history, political science, political-literature, philosophy and art (figure 4):

![Figure 4. The choice of the thematic path](image)

Further in depth analyses are available in text format, images and audiovisual contributions which allow for a complex and varied interpretation of the phenomenon with a video summary by the main lecturer of the subject. In particular, **keywords** and glossary entries facilitate and enrich the consultation of the prechosen section (figure 5):
Figure 5. One of the audiovisual contributions by the main lecturer of the subject

A set of general utilities is always available and allows the student to download/print some materials and have access to the general glossary which collects all the entries already available in the individual thematic sections.

The “Virtual Table”, real transversal and interdisciplinary contributions of the whole project, are round tables created in a virtual environment where several lecturers of the subjects participate in an open and synchronous debate, bringing with them their points of view and an original interpretation towards a common theme such as Nationalism (figure 6):

Figure 6. The animated introduction of the Virtual Table
Methodology and technology: the techno-didactic design

The general methodology followed and applied in the design and creation of the essentially historical course, refers to the modern theories and techniques of instructional design and storyboarding. The contribution of the lecturers of different disciplines (Contemporary history, History of political thought, Political philosophy, Sociology of political phenomena, History of contemporary art, Italian and contemporary literature) was decisive in the ideation and creation of the whole project: numerous and systematic meetings with the production team guaranteed a constant alignment in the various stages of the creation of the project allowing for progressive adjustments and a continuous verification of the general aims of the didactic path and the modality/solutions for their attainment.

In the macro-design stage, the elaboration of a factsheet to create new multimedia didactic objects by the proposed teachers and instructional designers was the starting point to define the general aims of the project, the motivations for the creation of the product, the main topics to talk about, the level of interdisciplinary expected, the type and main functional characteristics of the multimedia didactic object and the general flow of the didactic object. In particular, this first stage was intended to illustrate and define the functional steps for the access to the content areas on the dual spatial/geographical and chronological/temporal axis.

By going into more detail regarding the macro-design, the didactic goals were:

1. to present the historical-political categories under the name of Authoritarianism and Totalitarianism;
2. to enhance the interdisciplinary aspects of the proposed theme;
3. to offer the student the in depth tools aimed at boosting a creative study approach.

The reasons which inspired the creation of the product helped to:

1. implement the educational offer of the faculties and the individual disciplines involved;
2. give the student the possibility of adopting an interdisciplinary method which allows him/her to have new know-how and skills;
3. offer alternative didactic materials compared to the generally proposed ones (didactic units, video lessons);
4. give the student the possibility to dwell on aspects that were traditionally not so contemplated in the classical academics.

The main topics dealt with and recalled in the Authoritarianism and Totalitarianism in Italy, Germany and the Soviet Union product are presented and analyzed in the following areas:

- Historical and historiographical:
  - Fascism
  - Communism
  - Nazism
• **Political sciences**:  
  • political myth  
  • the figure of the leader  
  • resistance to authoritarian and totalitarian phenomena  
  • nationalism, imperialism  
  • interpretation of Authoritarianism and Totalitarianism

• **Political-literary**:  
  • genesis and meaning of concepts  
  • the debate in the 1930’s and 1940’s  
  • utopia and Totalitarianism

• **Philosophical**:  
  • Croce, Gentile, Armando Carlini (Italy)  
  • Heidegger, Arendt, Schmitt, School of Frankfurt (Germany)  
  • philosophers of the Soviet Union

• **Historical-artistic**:  
  • the historical avant-gardes (Italy)  
  • Weimar, Bauhaus (Germany)  
  • Russian constructivism, Chagall (the Soviet Union)

The project’s integral and qualifying part was a set of key interdisciplinary concepts where lecturers selected three/four topics of particular interest, where they are called upon to discuss at round tables and/or through archive video footage (figure 7):

*Figure 7. Example of a Virtual Table frame*
In the following step of the design project, the macro-information in the macro-design factsheet are converged with a greater level of detail inside a micro-design document elaborated by instructional designers with a first hypothesis of structure, organization of content areas and indexing of information. The idea was that of identifying the significant spatial-temporal nuclei to “explore them” from several disciplinary points of view. In this way for example, the student won’t have a list of German philosophers in the philosophical area but only those relating to the German period taken into consideration (figure 8):

![Flow diagram](image)

Figure 8. The macro-design factsheet – Flow of spatial-temporal nuclei

In the executive production stage, a graphical layout was initiated with the intervention of graphic designers by establishing the overall mood, the visual communication style, the layout of the functional interfaces by always respecting the general usability and responsiveness and the technical feasibility study contextually carried out by software developers, who were responsible for the functional management of all interactive and multimedia elements foreseen in the project. The general functional and graphical design took into account the need to have complete usability of the product in both the desktop and mobile version and especially keeping in mind that – from Marconi university’s registry – there are always more and more students who regularly access the e-learning platform and its didactic services/contents via smartphones and tablets and abandon the more traditional fixed locations. For this reason, it has also affected the choice of the didactic treatment of the internal contents of the product and on the overall level of attractiveness for the smart use, or rather, for a more portable, ubiquitous and quicker study inclined towards synthetic consultation rather than analytical reading.

All of these pre-requisites have resulted in the choice of HTML5 technology to implement interfaces and interactivity as well as Mp4 and Webm formats for audiovisual contributions which are widely used and adopted in technological solutions for contemporary web communication known as responsive.
In the next step of *storyboarding* and *content editing/management*, we proceeded in:

- a dual level in the treatment of the text through a) a textual summary in abstract or in short factsheets of more complex and discursive contents, b) the possibility of accessing the whole version of the texts through downloadable and printable documents;
- more space to the *visual* component through graphical icons rather than access functions to contents, the presence of images and *photo galleries*, the recourse to short video contributions in which the lecturers go over the fundamental concepts of their authorial and academic contribution to the project;
- the virtualization in graphical environments ideally created for individual lessons held by lecturers and the interdisciplinary debate/confrontation with a look at the evolution of the most traditional teaching/learning processes towards forms of *edu-tainment* where academic contents and topics give space to a “spectacle” tempered by the highest and most noble didactic purposes.

**Technology for virtualization: the Virtual Set Real Time**

The latter component which describes what is contained in the “thematic areas” and “virtual table” sections is worthy of a more technical explanation. For these audiovisual contributions, we experimented a way for further techno-didactic innovations through the recourse to the Virtual Set Real Time system in use at the recording studios and the audio/video technicians at Marconi University. Since it deals with particularly versatile and efficient technology that is also applied to remote learning, it allows for the creation of audiovisual productions in real time with a very appealing and engaging visual rendering which gives an extra value to the teaching/learning contents as well as a remarkable reduction in times/costs of post-production activities.

A key role for the recourse to this system was however taken on the pre-production stage: in this phase, the 3D environments were selected and personalized, or rather, the virtual scenography where lecturers could implement their communicative and didactic performances. The Virtual Set Real Time allows for the merging of real and virtual images in real time, with a high level of visual coherence and offering the typical creation possibilities of a classic set with the potential of a three dimensional graph. As well as the preparation of the virtual scenography, the definition of the various contents that need to be strengthened were inserted in the recordings held by the lecturers in the pre-productions stages. It mainly deals with the selection of images, voice overs, audiovisual contributions, archive footage, etc. which ended up being the integral part of the educational path by enriching it from a content point of view.

From a technical point of view and unlike the traditional virtual studies, the Virtual Set Real Time system on a *green screen* doesn’t foresee the use of sensors but functions based on the movements of virtual video cameras inside the 3D environment.

In particular, the project allowed for:

- the instant switching of several 3D virtual sets;
- the possibility of setting up 4 virtual video cameras and 32 positions for each video camera;
- a large range of scene transitions;
- the possibility of inserting different animation effects.
Digital and art: didactic strategies integrated in the academic field

The interdependencies among the new technologies and languages of art – as the futurists of the twenties-thirties were able to partly demonstrate and experiment – have continuously become more consistent and in many cases, decisive for an ‘alternative’ use of the work of art. The multimedia and interdisciplinary path of the project was designed with the objective of wanting to represent a constant and incisive moment of this connection, spanning between texts, interactive photo galleries, audio-video contributions/testimonies, virtual table, etc. The interactivity has therefore been the added benefit identified by this project where the intention is that of aggregating and engaging the students with the purpose of giving the incentive of a participatory – and participated – approach to the project itself. In this sense, as an ‘entity’ of abstract fruition, the student is the founding and collaborative subject of the educational course.

There are many opportunities that contemporary digital and visual technologies offer to the teachings of history-art of large impact in both the didactic and learning aspect. Not only have they changed what we can see, but how we can see and perceive it. While the students’ eyes are glued on an image, they are capable of listening (and seeing) the lecturer commenting; this allows the aesthetic relationship and the semiotic reading become other elements that are capable of creating continuous connections between artistic languages and new technologies. Inasmuch their extremely interdisciplinary nature, the historical-artistic disciplines are among the humanistic subjects that are more suitable to this model of new learning/teaching methodologies which use digital technologies like the didactic tool which connects all the aspects of know how.

Furthermore, digital has allowed us to integrate the teaching according to thematic combinations that have been effective in the dynamic lessons.

Figure 9. Mario Sironi, *The suburbs*. Example of a frame from the video dedicated to the Italian experiences of Italian art and artists in the twenty years of Fascism
The contribution given by the history of art to the project (or better, by the history of visual arts) was that of explaining, with a different disciplinary point of view, the historical facts which characterized and marked the periods taken into examination. The purpose wasn't that of reconstructing the history of art but to propose a different reading of the historical events in order to offer the student an original approach and critical comparison with the subject of study; by stimulating the research through virtual comparisons and new alternative ‘channels’ (for example the insertion of VirtualTable).

The use of digital technology then permitted the release of images from the traditional text that – even if they remain in the background – shaped into a virtual environment specifically studied to involve the user by placing him/her in the conditions of giving an aesthetic and emotional answer to what he/she sees, feels and listens. The virtual space, conceived as a real and proper “reticular container” allows the student to be called to live inside an immersive and multisensory setting; in other words, a non-conventional space in which the contents are manifested by interacting among themselves and especially with its user. The role of the graphical interface has been fundamental too and in particular the way with which the interface itself has acted by ‘re-activating’ the photos for a discipline that wasn’t originally a digital one. The methodological choice of inserting the artistic area inside the project on Authoritarianism and Totalitarianism has favored not only the integration of the other three areas involved (history, political science and philosophy); but it was the reason for a strong collaboration between the researchers and lecturers of the various disciplinary fields.

Conclusions

The recently presented project – despite being in its ‘pilot’ stage – was quickly made available on the university’s Virtual Campus to let students view it, probe it and experiment it. It is already in its first year and lecturers have noticed better performances during their exams as they are faced with a more critical-textual approach and less mnemonic and more knowledge.

The typically ”open” nature of this multimedia object showed – lecturers and instructional designers, the need to implement it by part of the work group with an interactive component that sees an articulated module with four disciplinary areas added, where lecturers, those responsible for the disciplines and the students were invited to interact/share/collaborate – through dynamic exercises by getting educational feedback aimed at further improving the learning of the discipline. Hence, the case study proposed here demonstrates the current need of implementing a significant change of paradigm inside the academic courses of didactics and research. The contemporary techno-didactic solutions have in fact allowed for an innovative and effective approach to the learning/teaching processes in the university field: interactivity and multimedia introduced and enhanced by digital technologies can bring about modular and interdisciplinary, customizable and socializable modules, or rather, to the spread of types of services and contents for the academic formation that is perfectly compatible with the times, modes and languages that the new digital anthropology imposes.

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