BEATING THE ODDS: TEACHING ITALIAN ONLINE IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT

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This study analyzes data collected from Italian language online classes during the course of four consecutive semesters at Bronx Community College in order to measure the impact that distance learning has on students' retention and success rates in elementary courses. The results reveal that reconfiguring the online meetings to a lower percentage and implementing social pedagogies reduce course abandonment and favor the creation of strong learning communities. Furthermore, the data relative to the grade distribution shows no substantial difference between online courses and face-to-face instruction.

1 Introduction

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the discussion of online foreign language course offerings in American community colleges. In particular, this study will address how to best plan an online Italian elementary language course, keeping in mind, in particular, the rate of student retention and academic success. This analysis will begin by examining the data related to several Italian elementary language courses offered at Bronx Community College[1]. Both the quantitative and qualitative results produced in this study were observed in four consecutive semesters from 2008 to 2010. Before engaging in the examination of the academic configuration of the course and the students' feedback acquired through a survey, it is important to discuss two relevant matters, one pertaining to the profile of students who attend Bronx Community College, the other, to the best pedagogical approach used to teach foreign languages within this context. Even though, the critical inquiries about the teaching of Italian language online, compared to other foreign languages are scarce; there is, however; evidence that in the last eight years, new computer-assisted language learning (CALL) online courses have increased at both two-year and four-year institutions[2] (Winke, Goertler & Amuzie, 2010; Jackowski & Akroyd, 2010).

2 Methodology

To better speculate about the experience of Italian online courses at Bronx Community College, five types of different inquiries were collected: one qualitative analysis, based on the direct observation of the correlation between social interaction and course grades; and four quantitative type of analysis. The latter analyzed the following:

- Data that captures retention rates and course grades in community colleges in general.
- Data that captures retention rates and course grades within Bronx Community College (in relation to other face-to-face sections of the same course).
- Data that captures the socio-cultural profile of Bronx Community College students' population.
- A Survey administered to students who took part in this study.

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[1] Courses taken under consideration were taught by the same instructor: Italian 11 (Fall 2008), Italian 11 (Fall 2009), Italian 12 (Spring 2009), Italian 12 (Spring 2010). They are both, online and face-to-face courses. Italian 11 and Italian 12 are two courses of elementary Italian level one and two.

[2] Courses taken under consideration were taught by the same instructor: Italian 11 (Fall 2008), Italian 11 (Fall 2009), Italian 12 (Spring 2009), Italian 12 (Spring 2010). They are both, online and face-to-face courses. Italian 11 and Italian 12 are two courses of elementary Italian level one and two.

The study examined four courses of Italian language offered in the hybrid mode (N=80) and four Italian language courses offered in traditional online courses (N=120) which were held between 2008 (Fall) and 2010 (Spring). The hybrid course met online 60% in class and 40% of online course. The content and course objectives were the same for both control groups. Both had the same final examination, midterm examination, and chapter quizzes or tests. Students in the online course had substituted some textbook assignments with online assignments. The four online sections were distributed a survey at the end of their respective course, 56/80 students responded to the survey.

Regarding the face-to-face courses the data collected is exclusively related to retention and course grades.

3 Results of the Survey

At the end of the four online courses, a survey was given to students, upon which it is possible to determine the profiles of the students who attended such courses from 2008 to 2010.

The percentage of female students attending online courses was 79%, for male it was 21%; Students enrolled in the Liberal Arts degree program were 74% the remaining 36%, instead, enrolled in other degree programs such as Business, Education, and Nursing. The percentage of students commuting less than one hour to reach the university was 88% and the percentage of students with home internet connection was quite high, 95%. The percentage of students choosing an online course for the first time was also 95%. The percentage of students working full-time was 34%, the one working part-time was 42%, while students without a job were 24% of the general population.

In order to understand the impact of online language courses, a survey was distributed (see Table 1) to 4 sections of online Italian language classes which were later studied (N=80). Some questions were of a qualitative nature, some offered open answers, others has five options (ranging from 5=Fully Agree to 1= Fully Disagree). In the optional questions, 43% of students indicate preferring podcast as the engaging element of the course. This indicator is followed by the 24% who choose the option "time off" as their favorite, and by 16% of students who preferred to practice language using the blog feature. Regarding the Wiki feature, 44% of students appreciates the possibility of sharing information and responsibilities, and 40% of students, in regards to the use of a blog in the course, mostly valued the possibility to practice (by writing it) the language and to gain insight into Italian culture. Knowing college statistics is important when developing online courses to assure better progression and lower attrition rates (Bocchi, Eastman & Swift, 2004).

Table 1
SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Survey Questions	Average of online course
Do you think that the course's structure reached the intended academic goals?	4.8
Did you like how the online course was structured?	4.9
If the course was more than 50% online would you have preferred it?	1.6
Do you think that having created five podcasts helped you increase your language proficiency?	4.9
Did the various online activities make studying Italian more interesting to you?	5.0
Thanks to the use of podcast, have you improved your comprehension of the Italian language?	4.9
I found it useful to have Instructional Technology Tutors embedded in the course	3.9
Did the course increase your digital literacy?	2.9
If you could, would you take another class online?	3.5

4 Research Questions

The study tries to answer two questions: how do you teach a hybrid online language course and avoid social isolation, and the consequent attrition, which is usually quite high in the e-learning environment? Given the survey's outcome, how do you extrapolate general criteria upon which to develop a successful pedagogical approach to CALL?

Success and Attrition in Community Colleges' Online Courses

A recent study, by Shanna Smith Jaggars (2011) titled "*Online Learning: Does It Help Low-Income and Underprepared Students*", analyzed online teaching applied to the typical community college students' population, which generally shows rather high attrition rates. There are several criteria being considered, analyzed through a comparative filter, with respect to traditional community colleges courses: "This review was also limited to studies that compared online and face-to-face courses in terms of students' course enrollment, completion, performance, or subsequent academic outcomes." (1) The study's results, not very favorable to e-Learning's promoters, underline that students enrolled in online courses abandon these classes more frequently than students enrolled in traditional courses. "Across the studies, online students tended to have estimated course withdrawal rates that were 10 to 15 percentage points higher than those of face-to-face students. Overall, the ten studies examining

student course completion suggest that students are less likely to complete courses if they take them online, although this tendency may be particularly pronounced among community college students, who tend to be disproportionately low-income and academically underprepared." (12)

Another interesting parameter is the one linked to the academic success of students who remained registered in the course even though receiving substantially lower grades in the online courses compared to the face-to-face classes. Several studies like that of Figlio, Rush & Yin (2010) and Brown & Liedholm (2002) demonstrate how grades of online courses are lower compared to grades of traditional courses. In 2010, Xu and Jaggars, who conducted studies at several colleges in Virginia, also came back with the same result. Their claim is that "online students who completed the course were significantly less likely to earn a good grade (C or above) than were face-to-face students." (17) Jagger's studies, like the ones conducted by Liu, Gomes and Yen (2009) show that "the proportion of students receiving a D or E grade is significantly higher for the online portfolio as compared to the matched in-class portfolio for both the individual grades and the grouped grades." (8)

Amongst the theoretic and research studies examined by Jagger regarding the research of online courses in community colleges, it emerges that the main obstacles linked to the academic failure are problems of technological literacy, social isolation, internal organization of the online course, and the lack of logistical support offered in home campuses. The results of this study reflect, in large quantity, the reality of the Bronx Community College, which offered, at the time, 46 online courses, of which a small percentage was offered in the "asynchronous" mode (from 80% to 100% online). Hybrid, is the most popular typology, based on 50% virtual contact. In 2010, 920 students were enrolled in online courses based on a total head count of about 10,000 college students. Bronx Community College's attrition percentage of online courses is around the 20.2%, the average for traditional courses is the 15%. This result is caused by several factors:

Table 2
REASONS FOR ATTRITION RATES FOR ONLINE COURSES
AT BRONX COMMUNITY COLLEGE

During advisement it is a common occurrence that students do not attend orientation meetings, or are miss-informed, or do not follow the advisors' advice.
During registration, students often ignore that they are signing up for an online course, or do not understand of the difference between hybrid andasynchronous.
In regards to pedagogy, a gap occurs between the use of the technology and the academic objectives.

> In the support area, there is a deficiency between the necessary technical support of students and the ones offered during the online course.
>
> In the learning phase, many students are penalized by the social isolation deriving from online Studying: they feel insufficiently supported andencouraged, and they often lose interest in the course.

In the specific case of elementary Italian courses, the percentage abandoning the course settled on 13.04%, low compared to the overall percentage of the college (20.2%), with numbers that reached (for Italian exclusively) 0% attrition in the Spring 2009 course, 8.7% in the Fall 2009, and 10.3% in Fall 2008, the first year in which the course was offered. A discussion of the possible reasons for this minor abandonment, and the importance of the role played by the instructor in terms of the social role played within the online environment, will be addressed (Cardoso, 2011). The creation the "collectivist approach" (Keim *et al.*, 2011) identified in Hispanic learning communities, when replicated in an academic environment has been shown to stimulate student progress[3].

5 Background: Student Body of Bronx Community College

At Bronx Community College there is no Foreign Languages major, however, within the Liberal Arts Program, there is a requirement to take a foreign language course for two semesters. For other degrees, such as science or education, it is sometime required to take only one foreign language. The ethnic composition at Bronx Community College is divided as follows: students of Indian/Native American ethnicity equal 0.2,%, Asian/Pacific Islanders equal 2.7%, African-American equal 33.3%, Hispanics total 60.8% and Whites, 3.0%. As far as employment is concerned 34% had a job prior to starting college, and 45% found a job while in college -- 83% of the students work full-time, while 17% work part-time. 60% of students are women, 67% is under 25 years of age; the annual salary for 75% of students is under $30,000, with 26% earning under $10,000 per year. 48% of students are the first generation to go to college, and 22% are the first of their own family nucleus to attend college. 23% of students declared to have to support children, and only under 6% to use the kindergarten facility present on the college campus. 83% of students who are parents use schools outside the college. 33% of students take one or two hours to get to campus, while 4% take more than two hours to commute to campus. The composition of the college body brings awareness of the obstacles and conditions experienced by the student body, which inevitably impacts study time and time management. In addition, the lack of study habits that would

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[3] Higher scoring individuals in this area were more interested in working with a group to accomplish tasks and were extroverted (7) [...]. Hispanic participants had higher levels of belonging and social interest. This is likely indicative of the close family ties and important sense of community within the predominantly Mexican American culture within the college and community.

facilitate learning has also become a perceptible characteristic of most of Bronx Community College students.

6 Observations

For faculty, the profile of college population is an important element in order to structure online courses, but also it is crucial for administrators, in order to create technical and pedagogical support that could legitimatize online course offerings at the community college level. An article entitled "*Online Education as Institutional Myth: Rituals and Realities at Community Colleges*" (2005) written by Rebecca D. Cox reaffirms the importance of making empirical data analysis visible for community colleges in order to create an eLearning of quality and substance:"Without empirical evidence about exactly how and under what specific conditions online processes facilitate robust learning, the promises of online education are unlikely to be realized at the community college. Fundamentally, the possibility of a more equitable path of online development depends upon making the practical realities more transparent and reducing the disconnect between the myth and the practices." (29) There is much literature about creating successful eLearning experiences from culturally responsible learning in online environments (Smith & Ayers 2006; McLoughlin, 1999, Lagier, 2003) to the ability to create a community of learners (Shea, 2006). A decisive factor for creating successful online experience is creating a solid social environment, according to Curry (2000). "The attrition rate of online learners is […] brought about in large part by a sense of isolation."(6) McInnerney and Roberts (2004) also underscore several strategies for avoiding the social isolation phenomenon: "By creating an online sense of 'self', the participants of an online course can be enabled to alleviate that feeling of isolation, and a truly online community can be created." (8)

In light of the research literature, it emerges that students of Community Colleges feel unprepared and disoriented, and that they are in need of more support and social relations compared to students from four-year institutions. Students need stronger coaching to make them feel more involved and less prone to quit studying; in general, community college students usually feel left on their own and abandoned (Cattan, *et al.*, 2005; Gunawardena, 1995).

In the online Italian courses there were two fundamental roles played by the instructor[4]. One is related to the social presence, and sense of empathy, which concerns interpersonal communication (constant e-mail exchange, questions on progress, and inquiries as to the reasons of poor results, etc.), and the other, linked to the cognitive presence, more strictly related to the transparency of learning outcomes and its pedagogical modules and technical support. Part of

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[4] Courses taken under consideration are given by the same instructor.

the latter, is making available technical equipment (mp3 players, for example), the explanation of course's rules, and of several other structural modules of the course. Communicating in a clear and understandable manner the organization of the course is extremely welcoming to students: it makes them responsible, while at the same time creating a sense of trust. The student becomes the protagonist of the learning process, becoming eager to collaborate and cognitively understanding how he/she is advancing in linguistic proficiency. As Garrison (2006) observes: "Social presence reflects the ability to connect with members of a community of learners on a personal level. Cognitive presence is the process of constructing meaning through collaborative inquiry. Finally, teaching presence is the crucial integrating force that structures and leads the educational process in a constructive, collaborative, and sustained manner. However, it is at the intersection of these three elements that a community of inquiry is created and a collaborative constructivist learning experience is achieved." (3-4) It is obvious that, either in an online course or in a traditional course, the engagement of the instructor is fundamental for activating students' participation. However, in an online course, the instructor's presence becomes not only important, but necessary to make the student a "loyal consumer" and continue to be enrolled in the course. The presence of the instructor, however, goes beyond the mere quantity of contacts; there is a clear understanding of the strong relationship between fostering student cognitive skills and the promotion of social and emotional learning in the classroom. Thus, developing a caring and sensitive classroom atmosphere allows the students to experience less anxiety and feel more academically supported. A critical study demonstrate that several "constructs identified as facilitating social and academic empathy […] reveal that such intervention programs can be effective." (Kanuka & Jugdev, 2006)

7 Pedagogical Approaches To Foreign Language Online Courses

Going inside the specificity of the pedagogy used in teaching foreign languages, the more commonly used are the communicative and task-based methods. However, a hybrid of other pedagogies coexists in the foreign language classroom, such as the direct method, the natural method, and content-based learning (Chapelle, 2010). The Italian online courses used on this study used a mix of all of these typologies since they are all proponents of collaboration, social interaction, student-centered and project based.

A comprehensive explanation of the different foreign language approaches is given to us by Stephen Krashen, in his article "Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition"[5]; in this study, the linguist explains how these

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[5] These hypotheses are based on the Stephen Krashen's theory. In the direct method, grammar is learned inductively, (without explicating grammatical rules), while with the natural method this does not occur. The natural method by Terrel and Krashen

three approaches[6] have in common the assumption that the learning is facilitated if the teaching, the discussion, and the verbal exchanges in the classroom are exclusively carried in the target language (L2), and the use of English is null. This principle of avoiding translation at all costs is known as the *Total Immersion Approach*, and it is presently one of the pillars of teaching foreign languages since it allows students more opportunities for collaborative learning.

Some studies (Mackey, 1991), show that students who are involved in verbal language exchanges with classmates increase their proficiency compared to the ones who are not exposed to the communicative exchanges in the target language (Krashen, 1988). Thus, this method facilitates the opportunity of constant interaction amongst students through precise tasks: oral drill questions on the lesson of the previous day, controlled conversations, peer group work; thus also promoting social interaction. The *Content Learning* approach, together with the *Total Immersion* method, assumes that the learning and the use of the foreign language occurs in specific contexts such as professional categories, for example, nurses, doctors, tour operators, etc. For this purpose, the target language is taught in reference to real and concrete situations, and not in abstract scenarios: "The subject matter is primary and language learning occurs incidentally to the content learning […] content based language teaching is concerned with communicative and cognitive processes (Reilly, 1988). The methodology of *Content Learning*, the so called "methodology of the stimulus" becomes decisive in elevating the cognitive level, pushing students to make a "jump forward" in order to reach a higher goal with respect to the actual level of the course: "'Content' in content-based programs represents material that is cognitively engaging and demanding for the learner, and is material that extends beyond the target language or target culture." (Mei, 1991). The benefits range from placing the student at the center of the learning process and increasing motivation and interest level.

In his book *Brave New Digital Classroom: Technology and Foreign Language Learning*, Robert Blake (2008) gathers all the same principles proposed by Krashen, but adds an additional one, which sees students "as (co-)producers of technologically enhanced materials."(130) It is based on these principles that in the Italian online courses, as it will be later discussed, students create audio podcasts and become part in the active creation of pedagogical content.

8 Logistics of the Italian Hybrid Course at Bronx Community College

From the experience of teaching Italian online at Bronx Community College, from Spring 2008 to Spring 2010, it emerged that the methodological and

(1971) is based on the hypothesis that the learning of grammatical structures happens slowly over time.

[6] The methods in question are the direct method, the natural method and content based learning.

technological strategies implemented increased the loyalty of students enrolled in the course, encouraged their interest in the subject, improved their motivation, and, subsequently, reduced the attrition rate, which is lower compared to the overall average of the entire college. It is important to discuss the pedagogical, technological and relational strategies implemented in the online course and the analysis of their impact on students regarding loyalty to the course. Before deciding on how to structure the online Italian language, the instructor poses two fundamental questions: what are the student learning goals? How can technology help in reaching them?

In order to formulate the learning goals for the online language course, it is crucial first to take under consideration the disposition of students in taking CALL courses (Winke Goertler & Amuzie, 2010), and which mode to implement. This analysis leads to the conclusion that the best option is for the hybrid mode method, which also includes a face-to-face option due to its higher success rate (Scida & Saury, 2006). For hybrid courses, Bronx Community College recommends 50% online and 50% face-to-face; however, but since the typology of these students is not the "self-learner", different modalities are implemented. In fact these students do not often possess the necessary continuity and consistency for learning a new language, (Barrette, 2001). Therefore, it was decided to adopt a 40% online contact and a 60% face-to-face teaching approach, in order to significantly decrease the negative incidence of social isolation. For at least the first two weeks (4 two-hour lessons each) it was deemed necessary to schedule meetings in the classroom and then decrease the initial frequency of the face-to-face encounters: one a week, every two weeks, etc. The higher initial meetings are driven by the need to give students the necessary support for using the class management system; since at least half of the class demonstrates some initial difficulty. Some students are not even aware that they are enrolled in an online course. The intent of these early face-to-face meetings is not only to establish a relationship of trust with the instructor, but also to explain the rules and expectations of the course. The sharing of the rules with students, as underscored by Shea, Swan & Pickett (2005) and Swan & Shea (2005) allows for the creation of a community of learners: "Communication of time parameters, due dates, and deadlines contribute to learning community as do clear course goals, course topics, and instructions on how to effectively and appropriately participate in the courses." (15)

9 Structure of the Online Italian Course

Support Structures of CALL Courses

There are two kinds of technological supports to Bronx Community Colle-

ge's students. One is offered in the college laboratory by the instructor in class, who gives students personalized information on online tools (hardware, software), the other is offered by an ITT (*Instructional Technology Tutor*), which is available to the students for both technical (Blackboard and podcasting in this case), and language tutoring. The constant input, from the instructor and tutor, creates a relaxed and engaging environment where students feel supported in every aspect. The constant communication between the instructor (students receive three emails a week from the instructor or tutor), tutor, and students fosters that sense of community which is crucial to achieve a lower attrition in the course, (Garrison, 2006).

The efficacy of creating an "intrusive" and caring teaching approach is also confirmed by Garrison (2006) according to whom: "The more clearly the instructor helps students to understand expectations and value a culture of collaboration, the more likely it is to develop." (28) The 360 degree attention to students' needs and the interest in the students' lack of participation, contribute to create an atmosphere of accountability and of high expectations. The instructor's presence is evident and recognizable, even if the faculty plays the role of facilitator. This allows students to take responsibility for their own learning (Kennedy & Miceli, 2010).

Technical Support and Infrastructure

Classrooms' wireless system facilitates the explaining of the various assignments (via the interactive syllabus) where students share video of cultural content (Wagener, 2006). The college is equipped with several labs, where students can go to do homework on the days the course meets online and work. From a college survey distributed in 2010 it emerges that 79% of students have a broadband connection (DSL), and that only 6% have no home internet access and need to use the college labs. Data shows that 21% of students regularly use the lab at the Bronx Community College[7]. The creation of a strong support infrastructure is key to create more engaged online students (Kabata & Wiebe, 2005).

The 60% face-to-face meetings in person also serve to motivate students to do the work online, provide technical support, which includes meeting in person with the tutor. These one-on-one meetings also serve as a way for students to discuss the reasons of the possible noncompliance of assignments' deadlines, creating a stronger incentive for students to complete the exercises. The role of the tutor is fundamental to the task of daily contact with students of the online course. This role is carried out by a student who is selected from previous Italian online courses, hand-picked for being an academically successful stu-

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[7] Data collected from CUNY Student Experience Survey in 2010.

dent, for having strong technical capabilities, and excellent communication and interpersonal skills. The tutor can speak of the homework concretely, having previously done the same assignments, and, in addition, is able to share the same problematics, (balance academia with work), which help other students overcome both personal and academic obstacles[8]. Technology tutors often feel closer to a student who experienced his/her own difficulties and finds extremely rewarding to help them study Italian. This rapport enables both students and tutors to "mitigate barriers" with great synergy and with trust and peace of mind. (Sottilare & Proctor, 2011).

10 Pedagogical Online Tools for Engagement

The Italian online course revolves around four essential elements:
1. Virtual platform (Blackboard): in this space students deposit their grammar, cultural, and vocabulary assignments.
2. Word-Games: Use of Web 2.0 programs with crosswords and puzzles.
3. Podcasts: Audio and videos, aimed at grammatical and lexical learning.
4. Wiki: An activity in which students get to experience collaborative works.

In the course each student carries out assignments on virtual platforms (blackboard, ePortfolio or blog) on several subjects, one of which is Italian cuisine, a subject that is strictly related to the culture of the *Bel Paese*, and which students find pleasant and incentivizing. The exercises on culture have the purpose of recognizing typical Italian foods (from pasta to cheeses, from wines to desserts) through video podcasts created by the instructor. These videos also allow students to review the correct pronunciation and spelling of cultural vocabulary. Furnishing notions on Italian eating habits is another added bonus of this cultural activity. Students are given information on different cultural aspects of Italian culture, with particular attention to the *Slow Food* movement, and to the philosophy behind it. Finally, to stimulate further engagement and self-confidence[9], students are asked to write a recipe using the target language. The professor provides, in the blog, an audio podcast of what to do in order to complete the task. Students also are asked to find a picture of the selected dish and later to read the recipe on their digital recorder and post it on their ePortfolio. Students have to prepare a second audio file with comments about the recipe, discussing the cultural terms (location of origin, connection to re-

8 The program of Instructional Technology Tutor started at Bronx Community College in 2009. Tutors are chosen by the professors or by self-nomination. Participants enroll in a summer training offered by the Office of Instructional Technology and are paired with online courses in which they have shown excellent academic results. This program was also funded by Title V.

9 At the beginning of the year, students are given a digital player housed in the library that the student can check out for the duration of the semester. Training is provided by the instructor.

ligious tradition, etc.) and nutritional values, (quality of ingredients, cooking methods, etc.). The pedagogical goal of this assignment is to learn the language by practicing it in a specific context; the culinary context in this case[10] (Zeiss & Isabelli-García, 2005).

Another successful activity within the online course is the one linked to games with words, (cross word, puzzles, cryptograms, etc.), for recognition, for memorization and for vocabulary acquisition. In the case of puzzles, the exercise focuses mainly on both the geographic element (the map of Italy, divided by groups of regions and geographic areas) and a cultural component (the Italian menu divided by order of entries). Podcasts are also another engaging tool used in the course. There are substantially two types of podcasts: the ones created by the instructor and the ones created by students. The use of podcasts is justified in that they make the learning process and the "cognitive" presence even more transparent. The ones created by the instructor are created with the goal in mind of the "social" presence of the instructor, which creates more engagement, since it looks for constant contact with the student - in this case - via audio. For example, the instructor can make a video which goes over the rules of the course to provide instructions on a particular assignment. Even if short in length, they are important to demonstrate to students that there is an engaged instructor who cares about creating a sense of trust with students in clarifying aspects of the course[11]. The recorded assignments range from the creation of an autobiography, a recipe, to the explanations of the daily routine using the reflexive, and the description of what is recycled in the United States using the conditional tense.

Several researchers claim that the efficiency of podcasts as applied to learning helps the student to feel more a part of the course: "Considering the dynamics of the novelty and timeliness of this project, students benefited from the pedagogical principles of "persuasion" in action while learning about the principles behind it. Upon completion of this task students will actually know what they like, but they will also know why they like it. […] the podcast(s) generated student excitement." (Fose & Mehl, 2007; Heins *et al.*, 2007).

Access to the audio is very valuable to users because it offers them custo-

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[10] In the exercise dedicated to the cuisine, I inserted a long list of specific verbs related to the preparation of food (to cut, to mix, to whip, etc.) Students are asked to write a recipe in Italian, using ten verbs from the list (in this way, they have to use them actively) and two specific tenses: the infinitive and the imperative.

[11] Podcasts (especially those dedicated to pronunciation) can also be created upon request of the students. There are several benefits for integrating podcasts in a foreign language class: 1) Students become active participants in the learning process; 2) Students create language, i.e. spontaneous speech; 3) Students build confidence in speaking the language in public; 4) Students can monitor their language progress (assessment); 5) Collaborative production of podcasts strengthens student motivation and competency; 6) Students will increase technical skills; 7) Students will improve speaking and listening skills; 9) Students will learn the language not in abstract, but in a real-life context; 10)Students will be able to use podcasts for their academic and professional endeavors outside of the scope of the language classroom.

mized learning; thus, podcasts are created based on the textbook and students' requests. The advantages of using audio and multimedia support in online courses are highlighted by the expert Tianwei Xie, according to whom, audio files, besides being friendly to users, are also easily updatable by the teacher. This can be extremely advantageous for those who do not have immediate access to native speakers: "Multimedia language learning programs provide texts, sound, images and interactive drills. With the help of computer software and the Internet, learners can now study languages anywhere and anytime, in classrooms, labs, at home, or even on the go. It is particularly convenient for those learners who live in the areas where language teachers, native speakers, and learning materials are difficult to access." (Xie, 1999)

Another relevant factor to consider is that podcasts, when produced by students, help to overcome the fear of expressing themselves in public, in addition to this, it also helps to improve their own level of linguistic recognition, as shown in several studies[12] (Khatib & Khodabakhsh, 2010; Derwing, & Munro, 2001; Weininger & Shield, 2003). Another tool used in the Italian online course is the creation of two kinds of Wikis which allow all students "to create" meaning since everyone can create a story (using the present and past tenses), or change and correct the content written by peers. The instructor gives a few inputs based on which students, individually; have to correct all of the errors intentionally created by the professor. Since the Wiki registers the history of each user, it is easy to see who made which correction and how a word or sentence has been corrected. This exercise has three main objectives: to promote word recognition, to practice writing and self-correction, and, lastly, to create engagement in the classroom in a community of learners, thus fostering social learning. This exercise has proven rather valuable for improving grammar and the structure of writing assignments (Elola & Oskoz, 2010). Experts like Schopieray (2003) state that "adult learners require the creation and maintenance of social networks in learning and, because of this, adult learning is best achieved in dialogue. By giving students the opportunity to participate in groups, we give them the opportunity to create, learn, and socialize with others." (2) For students enrolled in a foreign language class, the incentive is to create content that promotes linguistic competency and "social" involvement (Arnold *et al.*, 2005; 2009; Kessler & Bikowski, 2010).

Conclusion

Two studies of online learning at Bronx Community College have shown that there is no substantial difference between online and face-to-face classes

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[12] There are, evidently, important aspects that make multimedia a valid instrument for the learning of foreign languages; for example, it has the advantage of being constantly updated, unlike CDs or DVDs which soon become obsolete.

in terms of academic performance. From the data, the following are elements which positively affect online language courses in term of academic success and attrition:

- The type of tailored pedagogy adopted by the instructor.
- Knowing the cultural and socio-economic profile of students.
- The quality of technical tools adopted.
- Intrusive social and empathic presence of the instructor and his/her ability to reinforce motivation in the course.
- Interest in the subject matter.
- To beat the odds in terms of achieving higher retention and progress percentage, both qualitative and quantitative results of the internal studies done at Bronx Community College reveal that it is possible to produce positive outcomes by following certain criteria.
- To provide academic and social support (ITT, teacher) and to provide a sense of trust.
- Activate good practices that create a sense of community (student centered classroom, teacher presence, active learning, emotional learning, etc.).
- Stimulate learning with creative exercises and involvement that develop more interest in the learning process and subject matter.

For the college, the training of qualified teaching personnel in managing such online courses has an elevated cost, which can be also be seen as an investment, (Kraemer, 2008; Bañados, 2006). E-learning is nowadays a mandatory path for the universities, but especially for community colleges where most students come from an unprivileged background and often have to bear several working and family commitments. For these students taking one or more online courses could be an opportunity that would guarantee the possibility of completing all coursework within a reasonable time. It is, though, necessary that online courses plan their course materials and pedagogy to address the realistic needs of the students they have, and not the ones they wish they had (Sañchez-Serrano, 2008) especially in terms of emotional and social integration.

In recent studies completed by the Community College Research Center, and from the analysis of existing literature compiled by Shanna Smith Jaggars (2008) on the academic success of students of community colleges, the data is often conflicting in terms of grade acquisition. However, a clear pattern is shown which demonstrates that there is no large variant in grade distribution between online and face-to-face Italian elementary courses. "In terms of results, several studies included multiple outcomes that showed mixed results, and some studies' statistical results were unclearly reported. Taking the broad view across studies; however, most showed either positive effects or no effects

for online" (19). Even in a small 2010 study carried out by Somenarain, Akkaraju, and Gharbaran at Bronx Community College it is evident that there is no substantial variation of grades between an online course and a traditional one: "there was no significant difference in course grades when comparing the two online groups and to the control group (355)." Compared to traditional Italian language courses, the online versions also reveal a minimal decline in academic progress and success, which confirms the results obtained by colleagues of the Department of Biology[13].

To this date, students' abandonment of online Bronx Community College's courses is still high. Recent studies, like the one complied by Jaggars (2008) have, though, shown that a complete online degree online shows lower attrition rates. This is why Bronx Community College's is studying the opportunity of offering complete online degree, with the assumption that it could gain more significant academic results compared to the model it has now in place which offers hybrid and few asynchronous courses. In recent years more funding has been allocated to study Community Colleges' impact in post-secondary education, emphasizing the importance of providing access and opportunities to a growing sector of the population: from workforce preparation, to remediation, to community enrichment, and online education. In addition, further studies should concentrate on the effects of bilingualism on foreign language acquisition within the online environment, a field that presently lacks relevant research. It is the hope that the results of this study will stimulate this type of academic research and promote additional considerations. Given the bilingual background of Bronx Community College's students, one would argue that bilingualism supports the acquisition of foreign languages, in terms of cognitive, linguistic, socio-cultural themes (Peal & Lambert, 1962) and students' success (Sanz, 2000). However; recent studies on this issue are less conclusive and debatable. (Cenoz, 2003; Ang, 2011).

The guidelines that emerged in offering Italian language online, such as the creation of more collaborative and active learning activities, will serve as useful indicators to lower attrition and improve academic progress rates. (Bambara et al., 2009; Jones, 2008).

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[13] Percentage of online grades: A 29% B 36% C 19% D 7% F 9%. Grades of face-to-face courses (study is based on five Elementary Italian courses offered in the same academic year) A 21% B 33% C 38% D 4% F 8%.

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