

Digital Humanities and Pedagogy: A Case Study

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1. The research problem

A lot of foreign students dream of spending a period of their study life in Rome, the eternal city. Among those who come, the majority pick an American program and take an Italian language and culture class. When they sign up, they read the syllabus where it is stated that, along with the Italian language, they will learn Italian culture.

After having taught for 15 years in American programs and universities in Rome I was struck by the students' lack of real immersion in and understanding of Italian culture and the city of Rome. Despite what is declared in the syllabi, it seems to me that, while most of the students achieve a good level of Italian, few of them learn something significant about Italian culture and their new home city. Moreover, when some cultural information arises in class, it is clear that most of the students have difficulty connecting what they study for another class and what they learn in the Italian language one. It is as if knowledge is divided into separate boxes and a literature class, for example, has nothing to do with a language one.

2. The search for a possible solution

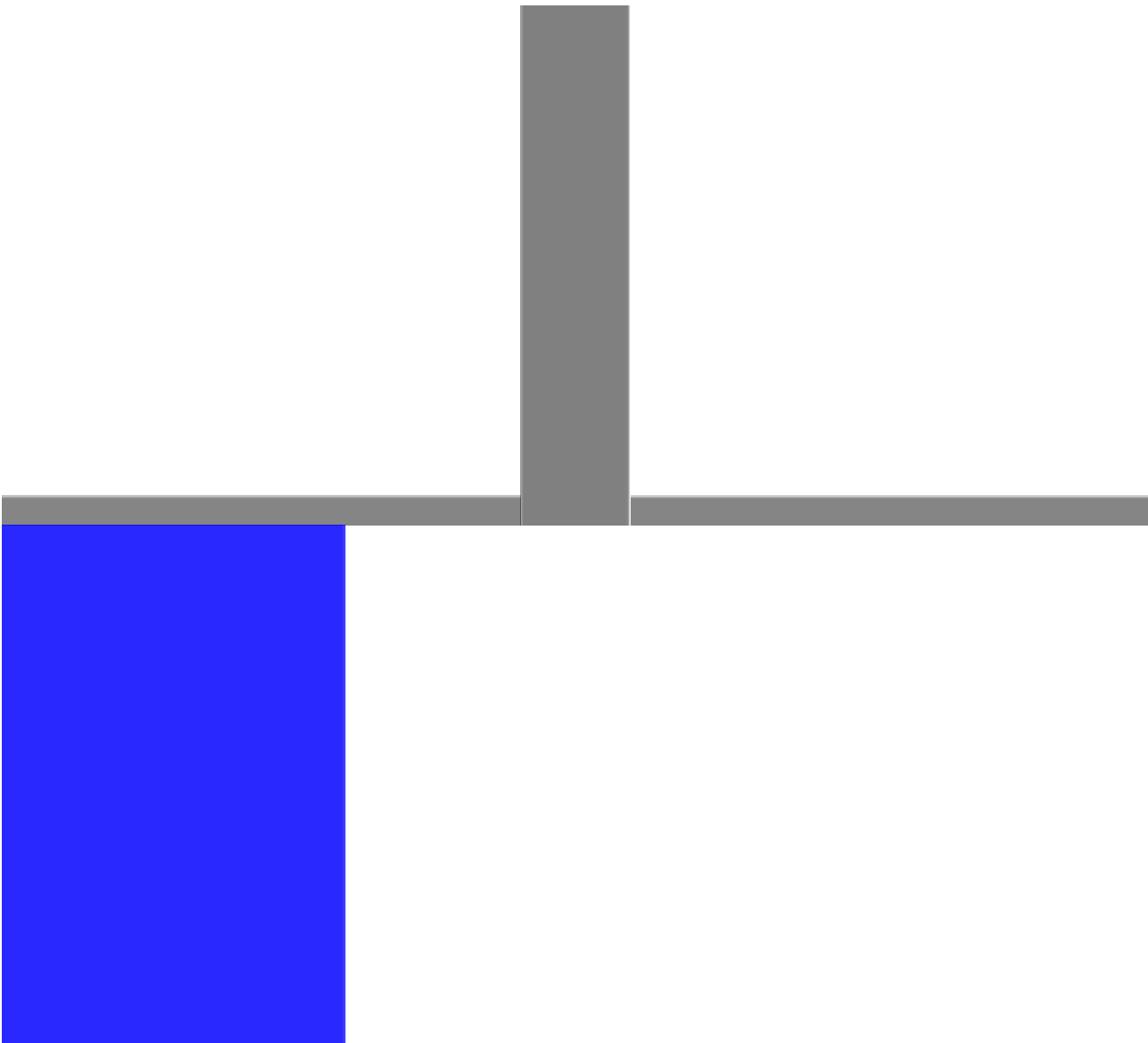
Convinced that learning and teaching are two sides of the same coin, I decided to look for a possible solution to the problem by creating a new, innovative and experimental tool to teach Italian language and culture. The main goals I had in mind while thinking of how to approach the problem were to:

- - create a tool that helped to look at knowledge as a whole and not as something disconnected;
 - - make students learn, first-hand, some cultural elements of Italy and, specifically, Rome;
 - - help students see with open eyes the places they were living in;
 - - present the Italian language in a way that could help them experience how much language and culture are interconnected;
- - create a tool that was open, free, collaborative and that grows with the class.

While I was researching, I found an Italian scholar, Rosaria Pace (2016), who in an intriguing book asked herself if Digital Humanities (DH) can be used as a learning platform.

The debate about what we define today as DH is very vast and this is not the right place to discuss it. It is clear that digital instruments are everywhere and that most of our daily activities involve some digital tool. Looking at Pace's question I explored the path of DH to see if it could be useful to design and create a tool to approach my problem. As often

happens during academic research, the tool I finally created was also influenced by the digital tools I found along the





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way. This is how, following the Actor-Network-Theory, (Latour, 2005), human and non-human agents are connected. This is also when my research became a DH research applied to the creation of a new teaching instrument.

Could DH become a tool to bring language and culture together?

3. Digital Humanities and Pedagogy

It is obvious that today the Digital World helps people educate themselves. There is debate regarding the meaning of education, the level of critical thinking in the new generations, difficulties in finding good information on the web and the consequences of being able to educate oneself without the onetime necessary help of a teacher. But, like it or not, we all use the digital world also for educational purposes.

What about using it as a learning platform? Why did I decide to use the digital world in order to approach the problem I met and described above?

First, after the invention of Web 2.0 there was a huge shift in the instruments we use to communicate and to exchange and create information. The internet and social media created a new flow of communication, many to many, a world where we are called on to be not just consumers but prosumers. We are constantly called on to produce something on the web, to become part of it, to participate. Are the new digital tools that the web offers us enough to create people able to really and ethically participate? What does participation really mean today? When we teach students, we cannot forget the main tools they use in their daily lives and our responsibility to help them understand the importance of participation: in the world and in the construction of their own knowledge as well.

Secondly, the digital world changed the format to represent cultural artefacts. This clearly does not mean that nowadays all artefacts are digital but some of them are and a lot of them use some digital tools to be built.

Thirdly, the digital world profoundly changed the language to express our content. This new language needs to be taught and to be used in classes as well in order to be able to use it with its

great potential. As humans, we never communicated in a linear way. The invention of writing forced our brains to learn how to work following lines and linear paths, but this is not how human brains naturally work. The potential offered by digital instruments in expressing our self in ways that combine different forms together is incredible.

Lastly, the digital world offered a new and great possibility to create sharing environments and open sources.

Everything that we just mentioned had another very important consequence: a change in the role of the teacher, from being the master of knowledge to becoming a designer. In her brilliant book *Teaching as a design science* Diana Laurillard (2012), following the socio-constructivism theory, explains how the digital world can help learning processes and help teachers to design their teaching.

Specifically, language teaching is a theoretical and practical science. When you teach a language, you need to follow an approach, a method and use different teaching techniques according to the different learning goals. The space of the teaching action is made by the subject, the student and the teacher (Balboni, 2014), It is also made by the tools that are used to facilitate the learning process. The space of the teaching-learning action-process creates the learning environment (Limone, 2013), In the case of teaching-learning a language, it has to include the language-culture, the student and the teacher. But the linear way I use to write the elements do not do justice to the way the elements should



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interact. If we look at the following chart, we can see how the communication should flow.

The teacher should be a bridge helping the communication between the student and the language-culture. The tools the teacher uses to be that bridge are fundamental.

How did I find DH useful to build that bridge and to reconnect language and culture?

When a language is learned the linguistic input is what we need to understand (Chini, 2005). The role of a teacher is to present an 'authentic' input that the brain can decode (Rastelli, 2009). I found that to make the linguistic input more significant while being at the same time a cultural input it helped to 'situate' it. In other words, to connect the input to a place.

One of the problems I saw with the students was their disconnection with the place they were studying and living in. It seems that the reality of the city of Rome, it being a living open book, was undiscovered by many. The importance of connecting our learning experience to places, to put them in spaces (real and virtual as well) is well known (Limone, 2013), Our memory is more likely to recall things when we connect them to something else (Rivoltella, Rossi, 2019).

In the public debate, often the digital world is accused of having brought the young generation far from reality, making them live in a virtual world while having lost the capacity to live in the real, tangible one, that is in front of their eyes (Galli della Loggia, 2019), But is the virtual world we live in and we use for so many things nowadays forced to be just responsible for detaching us from reality? Or can it be used, in a learning environment for example, to enhance the reality itself, to

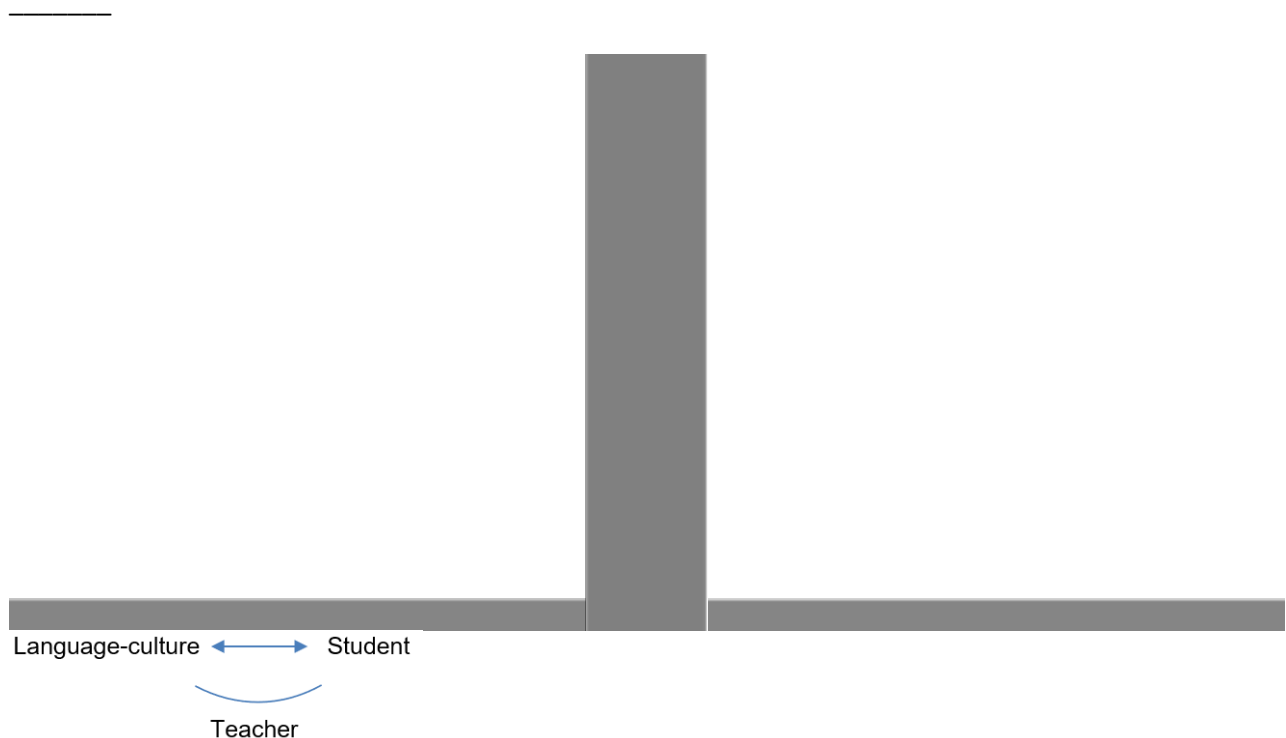
reconnect people to the real places, to make them learn a language and its culture easily and more profoundly? Don't we need to redefine the world 'reality' today? (Rivoltella, Rossi, 2019),

All this reasoning made me come up with the idea of a new format for teaching, a new idea of a textbook. That is a digital textbook whose 'cover' or main page-container is a map created with My Google Map; a digital textbook where all the activities, the ones in class and the homework, are put, in the form of links, located in places around, in my case, the city of Rome.

4. RomanaMENTE: how it was created and how it works

RomanaMENTE, the name I gave to my new experimental tool, is the first attempt to create content for this new idea of a digital 'textbook'. It is a hyper-media to teach Italian language and culture to students in American programs located in Rome. To create the content, I used only free digital tools. Since the main idea was to connect the learning experience to places, Google Maps seemed to be the best option for the big page-container of where to locate all the different activities. (Figure 1).

For the level IT101 two areas of the city of Rome were selected: Trastevere and part of the historical center. Starting from there, some educational paths were created. Anytime a place was considered significant, it was labelled on google map and the different activities, created for that place, were put, in the form of a link, under the description of the label. (Figure 2).





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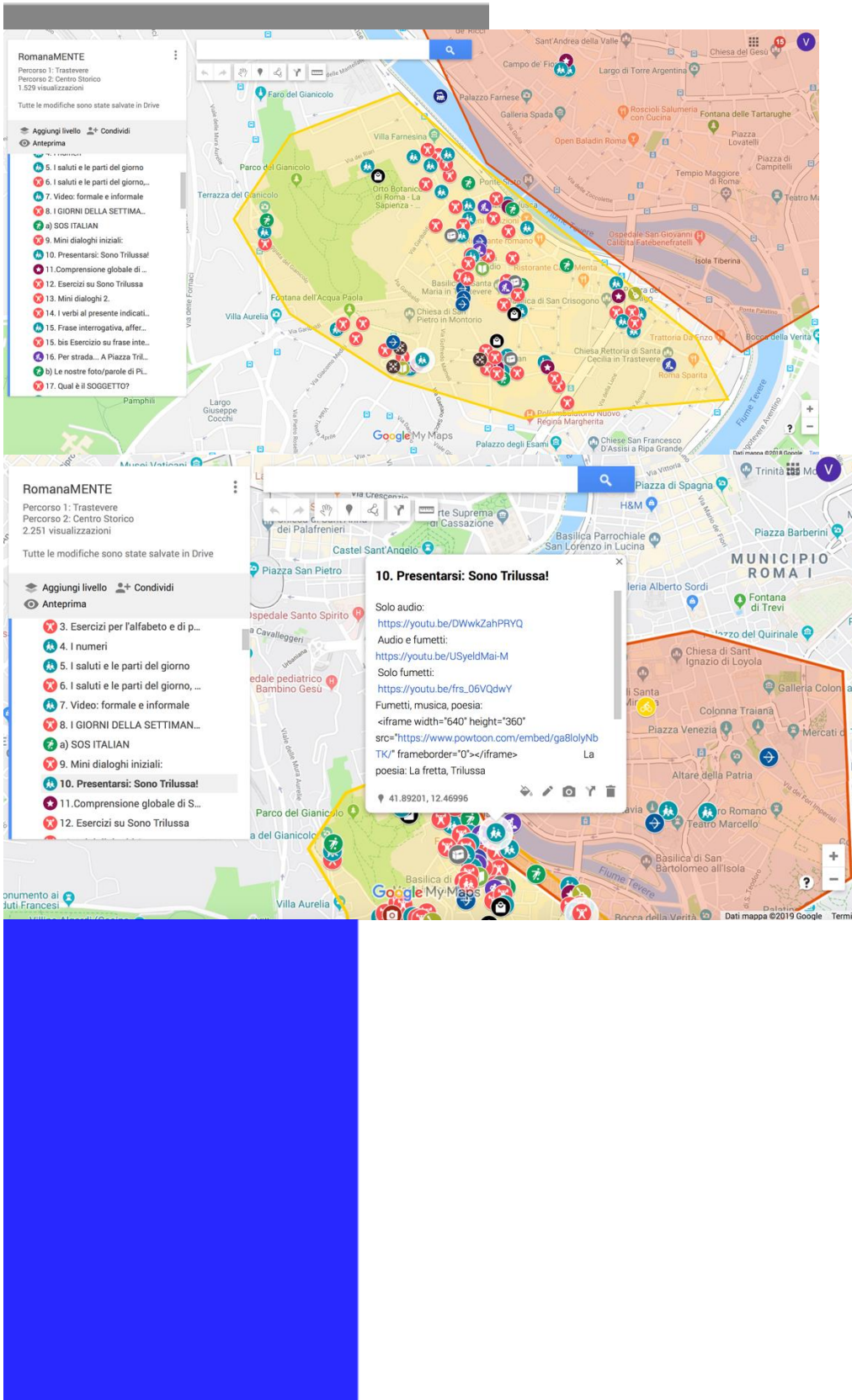
FIGURE. 1. *An overview of RomanaMENTE*

source: RomanaMENTE (2018)

FIGURE. 2. *An example of the link to activities*

source: RomanaMENTE (2018)

As the students navigate the map, they encounter and meet significant people of Rome and Italy that can be found, for real, in statues around the eternal city. For example, one of the first stops on the map is in Piazza Trilussa. This is where the students meet, for the first time, the main character of RomanaMENTE, Rita, a young very talkative American girl, studying in Rome, who loves to discover the city and to know its history, traditions and people. In Piazza Trilussa Rita meets the statue of the famous Roman poet and following a link, the students will watch, in class along with the teacher, a video, created with the movie maker program Powtoon (<https://www.powtoon.com/home/>), whose background is Piazza Trilussa where the cartoon girl Rita and the statue of Trilussa have a conversation. The dialogue presents the students with the expressions Italians use to introduce themselves and to get to know someone for the first time. In the meantime, as one of the characters is the statue of a famous poet, the students are exposed to general cultural information and are intrigued by the fact that they are 'meeting' an historical figure whose real statue they will be able to see a few steps from where they study. As the story goes on and the



students keep moving around the paths in Trastevere, they will find activities always created using, as a starting point, authentic material linked to places. For example, after a few 'steps' in RomanaMENTE they will find themselves with their teacher in Vicolo del Bologna where there is a famous pizzeria, 'Dar Poeta', and while they are getting to know a new poet (Giacchino Belli, Roma, 1792-1863), they will see a picture of the pizzeria's menu, transformed into teaching material thanks to the platform Thinglink (<https://www.thinglink.com>) to introduce the Italian nouns. By clicking different icons nearby the nouns in the menu different information will appear, some extra links that will take them to the grammatical explanation both in Italian and in English and some pictures with some charts. In both cases just used as examples, the homework activities the students will have to complete will make them physically go to the places they encountered in class with RomanaMENTE. For Piazza Trilussa they need to go and find the statue, take a picture of it and the whole piazza and tag it, using Thinglink, with Italian words of things they see and like in the Piazza. In the Pizzeria 'Dar Poeta', after having read a dialogue in the pizzeria, they need to go and find some information they were asked to find directly there, as a treasure hunt.

Rita's story continues and the students in class and outside class, both virtually and in the actual city, follow her while discovering Italian language and culture. The way RomanaMENTE is created makes the level of students' participation in their own learning process extremely high. The students are continually asked to be part of the story and to create different kinds of materials that the teacher will then add to the map, making their textbook grow with them.

5. The use of RomanaMENTE in class. An explorative study

During the Spring Semester 2019, a semi-experimental qualitative study was conducted. Two Italian 101 classes were picked, one as the control group (B) and one as the experimental group (A). In group A RomanaMENTE was used as a 'textbook' while in group B the traditional Italian textbook *Italian Espresso 1* was used.

Data was collected through questionnaires and the observation of the professor in both classes during the whole term. At the beginning and at the end of the semester both groups filled in a questionnaire with both open and closed questions. The first questionnaire was identical for both groups, and it aimed to find out basic characteristics of the students (age, nationality and spoken languages), their interest in Italian language and culture and their opinion about what works best to help their learning processes. The questionnaire at the end of the term had some common questions for both groups and some different ones. The common questions wanted to measure if there was an increase or a decrease in the student's interest in Italian language and culture after taking the Italian 101 class. Then, the further questions for group A sought to find out the student's perception about the use of RomanaMENTE compared to a traditional textbook while the ones for group B sought to measure the student's perception about different activities, more or less traditional, used in class.

During the class observation a lot of notes were taken that were later analyzed along with the answers to the questionnaires to draw some initial reflections about the teaching tool in practice. In summary, the explorative study shows that, even with some adjustments that need to be done, RomanaMENTE was successful in making students:

- more interested in the Italian culture;



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- - more able to look at their learning of a language as a part of the general knowledge;
- - learn more information about the Italian/Roman culture while still covering all the linguistic elements stated in a 101 American syllabus
- - more aware of their surroundings, able to use the actual places they were seeing to help their acquisition of the language;
- - more aware of the importance of participation: participation in the building of their learning processes and participation in the sense of sharing their knowledge and capacity peer to peer and with the teacher in both the real and virtual learning environment of RomaNaMENTE.

6. Some final thoughts

RomanaMENTE is a digital humanities project that, at the micro level, created some specific paths in the city of Rome to connect the learning of the Italian language with the discovery of the city of Rome and Italian culture using free digital tools to build the whole hyper-media and having as its target university students in the American context in Rome.

The macro idea behind it is to create a format and a model to be used and shared among teachers of languages and of other humanities subjects that could create their own maps with Google Maps with their own content situating as much as possible their teaching. Moreover, in the same university, different professors could work on the same maps and paths presenting their own topic and subject links to the same places. This would facilitate students to look at the same monument, place and historical figure from different angles and perspectives and to create their own paths and their own connections in the beautiful world of the humanities where digital tools can help to make us more human and empathic if approached as powerful instruments, part of reality, and not as merely a way to be detached from it. This also needs to be learned, taught and experienced.

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