

Policy Papers

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Moving from a National to a Transnational Curriculum: the Case of Italian Studies

by Charles Burdett

- In the context of widespread change in Higher Education and of disciplinary innovation across the Arts and Humanities, it is clear that Modern Languages is at a crucial juncture.
- Italian studies, in common with all subfields in MLs, needs to demonstrate how the range of approaches that are now pursued within the subject area, share a common framework, the purpose of which is to provide a series of critical strategies that allow us to see how cultures operate in the past and the present, how they interact and how they define human being in the world.
- In a world of ever-increasing mobility and global interaction, MLs needs to develop the study of the national with the study of the transnational and, in the process, to demonstrate how inquiry into linguistic and cultural translation is at the basis of our branch of study.
- The paper outlines the different elements of the AHRC project 'Transnationalizing Modern Languages' (2014-2017) and the contribution that it is making to curricular reform.

Introduction

If we think about the range of issues that are currently affecting Higher Education in general and Modern Languages more specifically, then it is clear that we are living through a time of significant change. Over recent years, the [British Academy](#) has published a series of public policy reports and statements, including *Languages: the State of the Nation* (2013) and *Born Global: A British Academy Project on Languages and Employability* (2016). The AHRC has devoted £20 million to the four projects that make up its [Open World Research Initiative](#) (OWRI), the purpose of which is ‘to establish a new and exciting vision for languages research in response to the challenges and opportunities presented by a globalised research environment and multi-lingual world’. Many conferences and workshops have been organized (for example, Sheffield Hallam 2016 or Durham 2018) in various parts of the UK on the future direction of Modern Languages.

It is no doubt true that one of the intentions of so much activity around the nature of the provision of MLs within Higher Education is to encourage sustained reflection on the development of the curriculum and to ask whether it is sufficiently equipped to meet, or indeed to anticipate, the challenges of the future. In a climate of rapid change, it is the business of every area that makes up the disciplinary field of MLs to ask searching questions of what lies at the basis of its teaching and research. For any innovation, however, to be effective, it needs to be firmly grounded in an understanding of the way in which a disciplinary area has evolved over time. The purpose of the present intervention is to look at one area of MLs – Italian studies; to reflect briefly on its development as a university degree subject in the UK; to point to some of the issues with which it is grappling; and to suggest ways in which those issues – based on the experience of the large grant ‘[Transnationalizing Modern Languages](#)’ (2014-2017) – can be addressed.

What follows is primarily intended for curriculum designers within Higher Education but it has much wider implications. The piece argues that we need to revise the disciplinary framework not only of Italian Studies but of Modern Languages more generally, that we need embrace a transnational paradigm, and that we need to be much clearer about how the methodologies that are pursued within the disciplinary field cohere. We need no further statistical information to prove that unless we are clearer about the object and purpose of our branch of study, then MLs, instead of occupying a place that is central within education, is likely to decline. MLs needs, in other words, to claim its position as a key interdisciplinary/intercultural methodological tool in all sectors of education.

The development of Italian Studies

As with many other areas within Modern Languages, the principal object of research and teaching in Italian programmes has, over a long period of time, been literature in Italian. In his study of the development of the discipline within the UK, David Robey (2012) focusses on the subject association, the [Society for Italian Studies](#), and its journal *Italian Studies* (the first issue of which appeared in 1937). He charts how the subject, establishing itself at university level, initially sought to emulate Classics and concentrate on the language and literature of the past. While referring to the different currents within the growing subject area and the strength of its relationship with the study of Italian culture in Italy, he demonstrates the solidity of literature as the primary object of study, whether it is addressed through critical, literary-historical or philological approaches.

Though it continues to underlie the teaching structure of many programmes, the model has undergone a great deal of change over recent years, mostly because of the questions that researchers pose of their own work and the framework in which it is situated.

Research over recent years has questioned whether the concentration on the major works of a literary corpus (Brook and Pieri 2016) may mean that one fails to study moments in the historical development of a culture that have, supposedly, failed to produce works of note. It is also true that the

variety of media through which cultural artefacts are both generated and consumed continues to expand, thus necessitating a continual reflection on what we refer to as literature, film and, indeed, culture.

The desire to address the lacunae of a disciplinary framework centred on the examination of literature, to engage clearly with issues of political importance, to expand complex textual analysis to new spheres of cultural production and to explore the dynamics of culture in a way that is less intent on according an exceptional status to a work of creative writing are among the reasons behind the development of Cultural Studies in Languages programmes. This development has occurred over at least the last twenty years and it lies behind research projects like '[Interdisciplinary Italy](#)' that seek to promote a multi-disciplinary approach to Italian studies.

In the 1990s, Oxford University Press published a series of texts aimed at defining the meaning and approaches of Cultural Studies across Modern Languages. In their contribution to the series, the editors of the Italian volume, David Forgacs and Robert Lumley (1996), set out to explore the different meanings that the term 'culture' has assumed both within Anglophone and Italian academic contexts. They pointed to how the term can be taken to mean, narrowly, a range of intellectual/artistic activities or, more broadly, a much more 'extensive range of practices characteristic of a given society, from its mode of material production to its eating habits, dress codes, celebrations and rituals.' An essential point in their argument was that the nature of a particular branch of academic studies will, to a large extent, depend on the interpretation of the term 'culture' (1996: 1). Rather than suggesting that Cultural Studies is an academic discipline with a specific object of research and which follows a distinct set of interpretative procedures, they defined this area of academic study more as a cluster of disciplines that include the consideration of literature, social history, media studies, human geography, cultural geography and which are linked to a common set of concerns.

There is no doubt that the volume succeeded in demonstrating how questions concerning geography, identity, media, culture and society can be addressed through a range of disciplinary approaches that share a similar set of preoccupations. In showing the broad spectrum of new approaches to the study of Italian society and culture, *Italian Cultural Studies* reflected the way in which the object of disciplinary enquiry has widened over a fairly lengthy period of time. The [Association for the Study of Modern Italy](#) (ASMI) has played an important role in promoting interdisciplinary study and the Society for Italian Studies has broadened the scope of the research initiatives that it supports and, from 2010, one of the editions of *Italian Studies* has been devoted to Cultural Studies (Duncan 2010).

The broadening of disciplinary inquiry reflects an important institutional development and that is the increasing tendency to appoint specialists whose area of expertise lies beyond the study of literature. It is now common for departments of Italian to employ experts on film studies, history, translation studies as well as linguistics that has always occupied a firmly established position. There is now a greater diversity of courses on offer than ever before (see Pieri 2014) and it is true that students can derive enormous benefit from the range of courses that they can study and from the diversity of approach to which they are exposed. The expansion and inclusion of multiple specialisms both within Italian and within MLs as a whole allows for direct, and ideally reciprocal, connections to be made with other disciplines, creating conceptual and critical networks that help to identify the specificity of MLs expertise/knowledge and to demonstrate its core relevance to almost all fields of enquiry.

Current issues and questions

Yet, no matter how appreciative one may be of the current provision in Italian studies, there remain issues that, at a time of advanced reflection on MLs, should be addressed.

Firstly, the very diversity of the range of individual courses (see Pieri 2014) that are now on offer poses some questions. In a degree founded upon the study of literature, the object of inquiry is clear and separate modules, linked by a similarity of approach, illuminate one aspect or another of a recognizable continuum. Within a programme where the nature of the material and the analytical framework in which it is considered differ from one module to another, it is less easy to draw connections. It becomes more difficult to see how the accumulation of courses contributes to the development of an integrated system of critical operations that one can apply both to the immediate object of one's studies and to the reality in which one lives and works. Though a diversity of approach, without doubt, opens windows onto many areas of human experience, there is a risk that, unless it is strongly coordinated, it can become confusing.

It is important for the framework of a degree course to be clear and for students to be able to define the underlying principles of their studies. It is perfectly possible to encounter students of Modern Languages who are highly enthusiastic about individual courses that they have studied, but who struggle to articulate the nature of the intellectual preparation that the degree programme *as a whole* has offered. There is a need to indicate the intellectual rationale of our degree courses, how they promote a diversity of approach while allowing students to apply a range of connected interpretative strategies. The need to do this is imperative since without a more robust definition of the coherence and purpose of MLs, there is a risk of specialists – whose work is central to MLs – simply moving to other departmental structures.

Secondly, it is not possible to study a language independently from the cultural context from which it originates. It is therefore important to demonstrate how language courses interact, at every level, with modules that address themes of a cultural, linguistic or historical nature.

The separation between the study of language and the study of culture remains pervasive within MLs, but it is detrimental both within the academic context and within public perception. As with other degree courses in MLs, a period of residency in Italy is, if not obligatory, at least strongly encouraged in most programmes of Italian, but the full benefits of this experience are unlikely to be felt unless it is seen as a moment in which the cultural and linguistic elements of the degree course come together as the result of a formal and integrated preparation.

Thirdly, many Italian programmes are set up in such a way that they examine the cultural history of the geographical area that corresponds, roughly speaking, to the boundaries of contemporary Italy, but the study of a culture restricted by a geographical area and by the concept of the nation/national identity has become increasingly difficult to justify. In common with any subfield within MLs, Italian Studies faces the challenge of how a focus on the national can be combined with the study of the transnational and how the framework of the discipline can be more finely attuned to practices of human mobility and cultural exchange (Bond 2014).

If we make the assumption that cultures are contained within national boundaries we are necessarily, though perhaps unwittingly, accepting a series of narratives of national belonging rather than exposing these narratives to critical scrutiny. We risk, further, perpetuating what Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2002) have defined as a kind of methodological nationalism and of implying that the monocultural is the norm. If the national is too solidly entrenched as the principle around which we organize our teaching and research, then we are ill-equipped to address the phenomenon and consequences of mobility, the pressures of globalization, and the potential meanings of the post-national.

If we agree that at the heart of the disciplinary field there should be the inquiry into the way in which cultures continually shift and change as they come into contact with one another, then we might argue that in studying Italian one is looking at an instantiation of the mixing of cultural practices. In fact, one could go further and suggest – because of its position at the centre of the Mediterranean, its physical proximity to Africa and to the Islamic world, its long history as a site of imperial activity, its relatively recent constitution as a nation state – that what we refer to as ‘Italy’ represents a highly concentrated space of intercultural contact and for that reason an object of study of indisputable relevance and importance.

Moreover, if we develop an approach that seeks to ease the rigidity of the association between language, culture and territory, and if we focus on the history of Italian mobility or rather on Italy’s many diasporas – to quote the title of Donna Gabaccia’s work (2000) – we can explore the composition and working of communities throughout the northern and southern hemisphere, the continuities and discontinuities of their connection with Italy, the pace at which they develop new forms of linguistic and cultural expression. The study of Italian culture, when seen in this perspective, becomes a means of examining the modalities and the consequences of intercultural exchange on a global scale. This question was at the centre of the recent seminar, ‘Italian Diasporic Studies and the University Curriculum’ at the [Calandra Italian American Institute](#) (January 2018).

Transnationalizing Modern Languages

Over the last four years, the project of which I am one of the investigators, ‘Transnationalizing Modern Languages: Modernity, Identity and Translation in Modern Italian Cultures’ (TML), itself part of the AHRC’s [‘Translating Cultures’](#) theme, has sought to address some of these issues. It has attempted to do so by looking at the forms of mobility that have defined the development of modern Italian culture, concentrating on exemplary cases, representative of the geographic, historical and linguistic map of Italian mobility.

From the insights that it has gained into the working of Italian cultural mobility, the project has attempted to participate in the re-thinking the disciplinary framework of Modern Languages (a list of the outward-facing events that TML has organized is available in Resources, below).

One of the most important recommendations of the project, as its title suggests, is that we need to move beyond the national paradigm that is still too firmly embedded within much teaching of Modern Languages. However, if we are to do so, we need textual resources that introduce students to the types of inquiry that can be pursued into transnational realities of the past and the present. Just as we need resources that indicate the connection between language and cultural units. The production of resources of this kind is strongly linked to the question of how we can demonstrate the coherence and interdependency of the range of critical operations that make up the disciplinary field of MLs.

Working in close collaboration with colleagues across Modern Languages, researchers from TML are producing a series of texts that will be published by Liverpool University Press in 2019 and which aims to promote and facilitate the study of language and culture in a transnational perspective. The series covers Italian, French, German, Hispanic, Portuguese and Russian studies, while texts that concern other language/cultural areas are in the planning stage.

Each volume of the series addresses the working of cultural and transcultural processes by focussing on four distinct areas of inquiry, all of which centre on practices that are basic to the way in which life is collectively structured and individually experienced/Performed. The first section looks at language, translation and multilingualism; the second at the set of practices that make up a sense of location and of belonging to a geographically determined site; the third at the notions of temporality that obtain within and between cultures; the final section looks at how we can explore modes of understanding subjectivity and alterity together with the complex layering of their inter-relation. Each of the four

parts is preceded by a brief introduction that outlines the themes that will be explored within the section and how the individual essays, though they make no claim to offer comprehensive coverage themselves, indicate issues of major concern and inquiry in the various fields to which they belong. The volume is intended to be read with close reference to the *Handbook*, edited by Jenny Burns and Derek Duncan, which provides an essential introduction to the volumes as well as an extended and indispensable series of concise critical reflections upon key terms and concepts.

The overriding consideration in the preparation of each volume is the same as the key recommendation of this paper. Namely, to demonstrate how the close connection between different elements of inquiry leads to the acquisition of a powerful lens through which one can see how cultural interaction, in all its multiple forms, underlies how we experience our environment, how we perceive both the past and the future, how we think of alterity, and how we experience our very sense of self. The volumes aim to show how distinct methodological strategies converge in the analysis of an extended range of objects of research, allowing deep-laid historical, linguistic and cultural processes – that function at a local, national and global level – to come into focus. In attempting to train as sharp a light as possible on the densely-interwoven network of critical operations that researchers employ in deconstructing instances from the early modern to the contemporary, each volume sets out to provide a statement of the value and purpose of Modern Languages.

The books with Liverpool University Press exemplify the kind of curricular reform that all contributors to the series believe is necessary. Yet, a further element and policy proposal at the centre of TML is that curricular innovation in Higher Education needs to be accompanied by sustained engagement with all levels of education and by outward-facing initiatives.

Through intensive work with schools in the UK, and especially in Scotland, TML has promoted an interdisciplinary approach to language education, exploring the re-location of Modern Languages in the curriculum and its integration with other subjects. A key question addressed by this intervention is how to evidence and reward students' existing language capabilities (which inevitably challenge the traditional western European bias of Modern Languages as a discipline), encouraging teachers to value linguistic and cultural diversity, while moving away from a generic and often abstract model of language fluency.

The elaboration (from 2016) of TML through the [Global Challenges Research Fund](#) and the work that the project has been able to accomplish with researchers from the University of Namibia (UNAM) on the role of multilingualism and translation in education and in healthcare has further enabled the development of the methodologies at the heart of the project.

TML has engaged with local communities and voluntary associations in the UK, South America, Australia and Italy, paying specific attention to how individuals and groups experience migration. This engagement has been enhanced by the project exhibition, *Beyond Borders: Transnational Italy*. The focus has consistently been on articulations of language and identity in conditions of mobility and on how creative processes can encourage a greater awareness of the linguistic and cultural practices that are part of everyday life.

Throughout, TML has sought to advance ideas for curricular reform not only by working closely with researchers across MLs but by attempting to see all the areas of its activity as deeply inter-connected. The purpose of the project has not been to suggest that one should follow one model for the teaching of MLs within Higher Education. The aim of the project has, instead, been to suggest that the diversity of approaches within MLs may be brought powerfully together by concentrating on the range of methodologies that lie at the core of the disciplinary field.

The project has also suggested that we are unlikely to address the perceived fragmentation of Modern Languages – its division into separate and sometimes rival language area departments – unless we adopt an approach that is more willing to see the transnational and the national as inseparable. There

is little doubt that in seeking to develop a transnational approach to the curriculum, one loses the ease with which we tend to associate culture with place. There is also little doubt that any move towards a more transcultural curriculum can only be accomplished by extensive consultation with colleagues and, above all, students. Yet, the risk of remaining too firmly attached in our teaching to the model of the nation state is that our courses are not as responsive as they could be to the realities that surrounds us.

TML contributed to the writing of the [Salzburg Global Seminar Statement for a Multilingual World](#) (2018) and is organizing a policy-oriented event, focussing on curriculum reform, at the British Academy in November 2018.

Acknowledgements

The paper refers throughout to the AHRC funded research project, ‘Transnationalizing Modern Languages: Mobility, Identity and Translation in Modern Italian Cultures’ (2014-2017). It refers also to the AHRC funded project, ‘Transnationalizing Modern Languages: Global Challenges’ (2016-2018).

Resources

Durham University conference, ‘Our Uncommon Ground: Modern Languages and Cultures for the 21st Century’, April 2018: <https://www.dur.ac.uk/mlac/research/uncommonground/>

Sheffield Hallam University conference, ‘Languages and Cultures in the 21st Century’, September 2016: <https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/langculttransnational/>

Transnationalizing Modern Languages (TML): description of the aims of the project, the researchers and project partners involved: <https://www.transnationalmodernlanguages.ac.uk/>

‘Transnational Modern Languages’ book series, Liverpool University Press:
https://liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/collections/ro_series-transnational-modern-languages

TML: Working with Schools: <https://www.transnationalmodernlanguages.ac.uk/2017/03/21/tml-work-with-drummond-andcastlebrae-ch-schools/>

TML Exhibition, *Beyond Borders*, curated by Viviana Gravano and Giulia Grechi, has been shown in Rome and London, while modified versions have been displayed in New York, Melbourne, Addis Ababa and Tunis:

<https://www.transnationalmodernlanguages.ac.uk/media-collection/exhibition-beyond-borderstransnational-italy/>

Among the collaborative events that TML has organized (recordings of all of which are available on the project website) are: the event at the British Academy, ‘Reshaping Modern Languages for the 21st Century’, 26 February 2016; the conference ‘Transnational Italies: Mobility, Subjectivities and Modern Italian Cultures’, British School at Rome, 26-28 October 2016; and the conference ‘Transnational Modern Languages’, Italian Cultural Institute, London, 2-3 December 2016.

Further reading

- Bond, Emma. 2014. ‘Towards a Transnational Turn in Italian Studies?’, *Italian Studies: Cultural Studies*, 69, 3: 415-424.
- Brook, Clodagh and Giuliana Pieri. 2016. ‘Italianistica in Gran Bretagna: tra Interdisciplinarità e Tradizione’, *La Rassegna della Letteratura Italiana*, 1-2: 207-16.
- Duncan, Derek. 2010. Introduction to the first edition of *Italian Studies: Cultural Studies*, 65: 308-309.
- Forgacs, David and Robert Lumley, eds. 1996. *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Gabaccia, Donna. 2000. *Italy's Many Diasporas*, London: UCL Press.
- Pieri, Giuliana. 2014. ‘Teaching Italian Studies in the 21st Century’. The report is available under ‘Higher Education Academy report on the Teaching of Italian Studies in UK and Irish HEIs (Dec 2014)’ at <http://italianstudies.org.uk/links-and-resources/>.
- Robey, David. 2012. ‘*Italian Studies*: The First Half’, *Italian Studies*, 67: 287-99.
- Wimmer Andreas and Nina Glick Schiller. 2002. ‘Methodological nationalism and beyond: nation-state building, migration and the social sciences’, *Global Networks*, 2, 4: 301-334.

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