



Sietar Italia

USING LITERATURE AS A LOW-TECH VIRTUAL TOOL

AT SIETAR EUROPA CONGRESS IN KRAKOW

Virtual worlds, simulated reality and distance learning using advanced technology are the protagonists of our time in bringing cultures and peoples together. But can literature and, in particular, novels still prove useful as low-tech instruments in increasing mutual understanding among cultures? And, even more so, is literature suitable for intercultural training, for example, in the business world?

These questions were the starting point for Sietar Italia's new project 'Using literature as a low-tech virtual tool' presented in Krakow for Sietar Europa 2011 Congress. But how did the idea start? How did it develop? How was it presented in Krakow? And what were the outcomes?

1. THE ORIGINS: Though relatively young, Sietar Italia has always focused its attention on promoting projects that would be both the result of team work and starting points for further development. This is what happened back in 2007 with the project 'Exploring trust across cultures and gender' which was then presented in Granada in 2008 for the Sietar Global conference. At the beginning of 2011, when the deadline for submitting proposal for Krakow was getting

Exploring Trust Across Cultures & Gender



SIETAR-Italia
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closer and closer, SI decided to dare and focus its attention on a subject that probably would not be presented by other professionals: explore literature, address it as a low-tech virtual tool, identify texts that were

linked to cross-cultural issues and reflect over uses that could be promoted in training classes... And, even more importantly, produce our first Sietar Italia product: a booklet that would collect our work and could be shared.

2. THE DEVELOPMENT: Once the end goal was clear, the team started to work on the selection of the texts and on identifying some core topics such as 'Defining The Identity' and 'Around the table' on the basis of which the texts could be chosen. Moreover, the project wanted to be ground breaking especially in terms of introducing a new methodology.



'How can we promote opportunities for virtual reality experience and, at the same time, group and person-to-person interaction during training? One simple way but effective low-tech tool is literature. And this is possible because stories, especially in the form of novels and fiction, allow readers to 'visit' another world and to have a virtual experience, which involves diving into a different setting and then 'interacting' with the author and other people with whom they discuss what they have read. The first step of this methodology used within the intercultural context involves choosing specific excerpts that focus on intercultural issues such as identity, social rituals, meeting other people' - from the workbook produced from the project.

THE PRESENTATION IN KRAKOW: Thanks to the hard work of our board members Martina, Maura, Ruth and Cristina and the contributions of all our members, Sietar Italia was ready to present a well structured and well defined project supported by a workbook with 11 texts all translated into English and all followed by teaching notes with questions that can be used in the training room.

Maura di Maura supported by myself, Marianna Amy Crestani, finally opened the doors to the participants. The training activity started after providing an overview of the project giving specific emphasis to the roots and definitions of virtual worlds in addition to focusing on the strengths and limits of using virtual reality e-tools for intercultural training.

While focusing on the topic ‘Encountering the others: defining identity’ and choosing an extract from Amin Maalouf, *Les identités meurtrières*, *The Identity*, 1998, the group was divided into subgroups and invited to work together to ana-



lyze the text and its meaning.

More specifically, the questions the participants were invited to reflect about were:

- How does the author define the concept of identity?
- How would you define your identity? Which of the elements described to define your identity really matter and are truly essential for you?
- In general, how does your identity influence your encounter with the other? And what about in the context of your professional group, work environment or the society where you work?

After the activity, the subgroups were invited to present summaries of their analysis in plenary.

THE OUTCOMES: The outcomes of the presentations in plenary proved indeed to be very useful not only for the answer to the training notes of the text chosen, but also in terms of the methodology of the project and of future developments.

1. **IDENTITY:** The text from ‘*Les identités meurtrières*, *The Identity*’ by Amin Maalouf, and the training notes raised interesting comments on the concept of identity and, more specifically, on identity as a dynamic and highly contextual context. ‘*Let’s think about ourselves, at this congress, how do we present ourselves? We provide our name and origin...but if we were at a different congress we would probably introduce ourselves stating our name and our job*’. Moreover, identity should be divided into 2 main aspects: core identity linked to issues of familiarity on the one side and added layers on the other.
2. **METHODOLOGY:** Given the professional identity of the participants, a lot of enriching exchanges arose around the issue of the methodology at the basis of the project. More specifically, it emerged that success of methodology depends a lot on the culture of the participants and on their level of English. Secondly, reading might be a very personal and silent moment for some people and for some cultures so sending the text before the training day could be advisable. Thirdly, the extracts need to be contextualized in terms of what happens before and what happens after the novel it is taken from. Fourthly, the texts could be accompanied by other tools, such as the audio version of the extract or the movie created from the novel.

THE FUTURE: Thanks to the work of the SI team and the excellent reactions by the participants in Krakow, we are now working towards two goals: creating an online questionnaire to collect feedback from trainers on the use of the tool itself and expand the collection of texts and intercultural topics! What else could we wish for?!

To know more about the project, the future developments and the workbook, contact: sietar.italia@gmail.com