

# Beyond the Future and Back to the Past

In previous introductions to the journal *Beyond*, study abroad students have been analyzed as “immigrants” (*Beyond* 2), compared with “the other” (*Beyond* 3), and placed at the center of discussion as individuals beyond differences of gender, race, and religion (*Beyond* 5). But today, exactly which students are we talking about? Who is the international student who comes to Italy to study in a Study Abroad Program? Regardless of the country they come from, their gender, religion, or background, today’s students have undoubtedly experienced the pandemic during adolescence and have learned to take care of themselves and their inner world. They have reshaped their social interactions, relying more on digital communication, with a common perception that limiting social interactions would keep them safer. And that’s exactly what happened.

This new generation sometimes struggles to interact with others – not out of fear of the unknown, but often due to a simple lack of habit. Students rarely explore new places or try new things during their time abroad. In most cases, they follow the same paths laid out by students before them. They tend to stick to the group they traveled with from their home country; when in class, they prefer not to interact with the faculty or their peers, immersed in a silence that often betrays anxiety. It is precisely up to us, the teachers, to encourage students to discover themselves; it is up to us to foster cooperation in the classroom; it is up to us to propose activities that allow students to be creative and to suggest unexplored paths.

This applies not only to me, as a teacher of Italian Language and Culture at ISI Florence, but to all my fellow professors. We must (re)discover collaboration and exchange. And it was out of this very need that we launched the *IN-Formiamoci* training day on November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024. This event was conceived as an opportunity for professional development and reflection among teachers of Italian language and culture, especially those working for study abroad programs in Italy. This issue of *Beyond* collects – in English translation – the papers given that day at Palazzo Bargagli (one of the two ISI Florence facilities). It was a valuable opportunity for reflec-

tion and dialogue on teaching practices, involving teachers not only from Florence but also from other nearby cities, mostly serving schools that are affiliated with AACUPI (Association of American College and University Programs in Italy).

During that training session, which involved – in various ways – all the professors of the Italian language department at ISI Florence, we realized how our current textbook (though still valuable and useful) remains rooted in a pre-Covid world. The need for a different approach to language learning led us to consider creating a new textbook, stripped of those activities that may now be perceived as somewhat obsolete, although only ten years have passed since its first publication. As professors, we feel the need for a teaching aid that can immediately prove functional and comprehensive in the classroom. Believing this to be the right time to start studying Italian language and culture with a fresh, different approach, my colleague Professor Serena Baldini and I are currently working on this editorial project.

The issue of *Beyond* I am introducing thus looks to the future, but it does not forget its past or its history. The conference *Europa ed Estremo Oriente: relazioni, incontri e conflitti nella prima età moderna* (Europe and the Far East: Relations, Encounters, and Conflicts in the Early Modern Era, hosted by ISI Florence on March 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup>, 2024) takes us once again into history, putting China and Japan at the forefront through a series of essays by esteemed international scholars. Once again, past and future, yesterday and tomorrow mingle in these pages. Finally, in the journal's last section, several texts by former ISI Florence students sharing their experiences and projects complete this issue of *Beyond*, looking back at recent semesters and ahead to new initiatives.

It has been over 25 years since I first stepped into a classroom to teach Italian to North American students. Today I realize how much the prevailing approach has changed. New methodologies and techniques have emerged. Yet, teaching must always remain flexible, adaptable, and open to what is – inevitably – a continuous *work in progress*.

Prof. Catia Santi, Italian Language Coordinator, ISI Florence