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## Teaching Language Courses Online During a Global Pandemic

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# Teaching Language Courses Online During a Global Pandemic



Maria Robertson-Justiniano

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**In** the second week of March, when we all returned to campus after spring break, I quickly discovered that my role as professor of Spanish language and literature had changed.

Italy was on a draconian lockdown in efforts to prevent further infection. My family in Spain were resigned to a life locked inside for several months. Here in the States, we were business as usual.

Or so we thought.

My students had traveled and visited with friends from the hot spots of the pandemic, potentially exposed to the virus just as they were returning to campus. Having a young son with asthma and having lost my husband tragically 2 years prior, I was still recovering from the trauma and the loss.

I was terrified.

The pandemic had pushed me into a role that I wasn't prepared to play (monitoring the health of my students) and yet for the safety of my students, myself and my young son, I felt the need to take all precautions necessary.

Though we all tried to go back to class as if nothing had changed, I quickly realized that things were not the same.

Our world was irrevocably altered.

**The pandemic would play out for each of us in different ways, exploiting the inequalities and differences that separated us.**

It served to magnify the socioeconomic differences amongst my students and made going online for some students an impossible and defeating task.

Offscreen, in the background of our online learning, a human drama was unfolding that would explode in our faces months later.

In fact, there were two different pandemics threatening the fabric of our society.

One was Covid19.

**The other was a virus even more menacing — a virus that has plagued us for too long and in some circles been ignored — inequality.**

The slogan that started to circulate within the social media circles: “we are all in this together” quickly transformed into an empty message.

Certainly, we were all facing a global pandemic, but some were “in it” more than others. This inequality became center stage when we converted everything to online learning.

We were told to shelter in place and work from home. But online learning only works if everyone has the means and access to a private room, a computer and a good internet connection.

**Virginia Woolf’s book *A Room of One’s Own* came to mind as we switched to online learning.**

For many of my students the challenges of learning online during the pandemic came down to not having a room of one’s own.

Some students had lost family members to Covid-19 and were in the grips of grief and trauma. Many students had to choose between work and school because they were supporting their entire family as a result of the lock down and loss of income.

Suddenly, survival took precedence over online learning. Their immediate present erased their future dreams.

Still, they were expected to continue their education online.

I never once assumed that the transition from in-class learning to online learning during a pandemic was going to be smooth.

We were all trying to come to terms with the knowledge that life as we knew it was altered indefinitely. We had no clear indication of what our future would look like.

Still, I tried to navigate this unfamiliar territory.

I realized that if I was going to get through this online challenge, I would have to be sensitive to my students’s needs and acknowledge the obstacles that we would face.

Thankfully, my university quickly offered many informational sessions about the various platforms available for online learning. All of a sudden everyone was using Zoom, which came with its own set of challenges.

**I had to decide whether to hold synchronous sessions, which happen in real time, or asynchronous sessions, which are prerecorded.**

Language classes are most effective when students are exposed to the second language frequently. Scheduling one synchronous session a week — and making the other two asynchronous — was not ideal for language acquisition.

Another solution to the synchronous/asynchronous dilemma was to prerecord my lectures on Zoom using the share feature. This solution enabled those students who could not attend the synchronous lecture to at least participate by watching the lectures on their own time.

The online format also made class participation and class presentations very challenging. Of course, language students are always hesitant about speaking up — especially my freshman students.

Zoom has a very nice feature that allows you to divide the class into breakout rooms. During my 50 minute class online, I would divide my students into breakout rooms 4–5 times and provide them with a task.

I found that these smaller groups provoked much more discussion and willingness to participate from my students. The breakout sessions also gave them the confidence to participate in the larger group when they returned.

Alternating between the two helped my students feel more comfortable about participating.

**Though the pandemic has caused us to be more physically separated, we are now connected more than ever online.**

While technology helps us continue our lives, we all feel a collective grief for the world we have lost — a world in which we could meet our friends in real time, see a play, go to a concert, dine out, and hug.

# This confinement has required us to create new ways of connecting that highlight our “humanity”.

In times of darkness, in this time of darkness, during that draconian lock down in Italy, it was the music heard from distant balconies — the music that reverberated throughout neighborhoods in many towns in Italy, then later across the internet for all the world to hear — that calmed our nerves.

Those musical notes, played in the grips of a global pandemic, carried a message of hope for people exhausted by months of worry and sickness.

John Lennon’s *Imagine* echoed across the internet, reaching millions.

We still need to imagine a world in which racism and other inequalities are eradicated so that every human being on this planet can live and work in dignity — free of fear of death and sickness.

In light of the present state of affairs, we have lots of imagining to do. We will rely on the humanities to restore our own humanity and rewrite our narratives.

We will incorporate all of the voices that contribute to the collective story of our journey on this planet.

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