



MUSE

*The official newsletter of the Humanities Division
Brandeis University*



Message from the Head of the Division

Dear Friends of the Humanities,

The Covid-19 crisis around the world has been intensifying with numbers rising every day. The weather is getting colder, and everything suggests that we have a long road ahead with educational experiences inevitably changing rapidly. One of the UDRs from the Department of Classical Studies, Jack Vermette, '21, who is a serious language learner himself of Greek, Latin, French, and Hebrew, was curious about language pedagogy in this time of Covid-19.

Jack embarked on a sleuthing exercise to find out more about how our Brandeis faculty who teach foreign languages are managing these days. Face-to-face communication has always been a hallmark of language learning, especially since facial expressions and hand movements are often an integral part of speaking a new language. Jack interviewed three language professors (Dr. Sabine von Mering for German; Dr. Yu Feng for Chinese; and Dr. Catherine Theobald for French). He asked each of them the following questions: What, if any, experience did you have with remote learning before March 2020? Did your methods or style as a professor have to change? In what ways? What do you feel are the advantages and disadvantages of the Zoom environment for language learning? Despite the challenges, these interviews were so uplifting, I wanted to share the results of Jack's explorations with the whole community.

I wish you all a restful and restorative Thanksgiving Break next week.

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Language Learning in a Time of Pandemic

Dr. Sabine von Mering, the Director of The Center For German and European Studies:

I had taught a class online, and also facilitated weekly meetings on Zoom in my work as a climate activist for many years, but yes, Zoom certainly makes you do things differently. Everything is much slower, first of all, because there is usually some issue with this relatively young technology

(someone's audio or video or internet malfunctions every few minutes). In my language courses I typically move very quickly from one activity to another (partner-interview; group work; individual work; choral response). None of that is possible on Zoom. So yes, I do need to teach differently, and it is not always satisfying - not to me, and probably not to my students. I also invariably speak more English than I would normally like to speak.

I should add that I am currently teaching in hybrid mode in one class, which means I have seven students live in front of me in the classroom and eleven online on Zoom. The in-person students have their laptops with them so they can communicate with the students online, but all of us in the classroom have to wear masks, which means I have to enunciate super clearly to be understood - and often type in the chat what I said, and I also have to repeat what students in the classroom are saying to make sure the students online can hear it.

I love that students are able to participate in class on Zoom from wherever they are. I love the chat so that students can quickly help each other or ask a question without interrupting each other. I like using Google Docs in class so students can work in breakout rooms where they can work in a small group, but I can also help them on the Google Doc even though I cannot hear them. I also really like that I can record the class when a student is out sick and send it to them. None of this would have been easily available before we went online. The disadvantage is that moving from the full screen view to sharing screen to sharing a video always takes a few seconds, which slows things down. I also find it hard to keep track of who I have already called on, because when I am sharing my screen to show my PowerPoint slides I cannot see all the students.

I think we talk too much about the problems with distant instruction and too little about pandemic instruction. We're not doing this because we want to. It's a global pandemic. People are dying by the hundreds of thousands. In that sense this is still emergency-mode teaching even if we now are better prepared than we were in March. We are super privileged that we can actually continue our work in spite of all that's going on. I feel there isn't enough appreciation of that. I know so many people who have lost their jobs or are afraid of losing their jobs. Also, if this had happened before video conferencing was widely available -- what would we have done then? I think we should consider ourselves lucky that we are able to continue with our courses, stay connected as a community, and even get some work done - albeit imperfectly. I guess I like to see the glass half full.

Dr. Yu Feng, the Director of the Chinese Language Program and Master of Arts program in Teaching Chinese:

I did not have any experience of remote teaching and learning before March 2020 and I am still struggling with the new teaching formats. I am teaching hybrid, but it is difficult to correct the pronunciation of students wearing masks. Also due to network issues, many students cannot turn on their video, so I cannot see their mouths and eyes. Language learning is a very personal experience (I would even say deeply connected to the humanity of us all*). Without in person eye contact, it is impossible to have a really successful and effective language classes.

*JV: The words in parentheses are mine, not Prof. Feng's.

Dr. Catherine Theobald, French and Francophone Studies and Undergraduate Advising Head of Romance Studies:

I did not have any experience with remote learning, besides using LATTE for announcements, information, and assignments. I had never taught a class using videoconferencing before March 2020, although I had used it for contacting family and friends.

I don't think my style as a teacher has changed very much from when I was all-remote last spring and when I am using Zoom this semester (I also teach some of my classes in person this semester to students who are able to attend). I have always tried to be very organized and transparent regarding assignments and assessments via detailed programs for each unit. That backbone of all my classes has carried over well in this new environment where students need a great deal of

organizational support. Also, I have always tried to be very upbeat in class, and, even though I can't walk around the classroom on Zoom, I still aim to be as engaging as possible by maintaining a positive attitude and proposing a variety of activities. On the one hand, my methods in the virtual classroom have thus not changed all that much, since I still give students in language classes the chance to listen, read, speak, and write every day together with me and in small groups. I have also been able to adapt some of the same technological tools for remote learning; for example, I use the polling feature in Zoom frequently as a replacement for the more informal polls that we used to do in class, and I still use the online quiz platform Kahoot!, although as an individual game without the "team" feature that we used before.

On the other hand, I spent months with the help of my wonderful colleagues in the language programs, the Center for Teaching and Learning, and LTS learning to use new apps, online resources, and LATTE features. Those experiences have helped me create different types of virtual assignments and in-class activities. I will definitely continue using some of those resources after the pandemic, such as the video activity website Edpuzzle and the LATTE quiz feature for formative assessments. I will also use less paper in the future, which is a very positive change from an environmental standpoint. I will go back to using some paper for in-class assessments. For me, giving feedback on certain documents is much easier for my eyes and for efficiency on paper, but I will continue to use new digital tools for certain assignments. Finally, I won't hesitate to give a Zoom class if I am unable to attend in person, which adds flexibility to my teaching.

I certainly feel that Zoom has certain advantages, including the ability to send recordings to absent students and, particularly, the way that it allows students to participate in class using the chat feature. Last spring, I found that some of my students who were very shy in person contributed in new ways to the course via the chat. It's hard to speak up sometimes in a foreign language, but the chat can give students a "voice" who might otherwise feel too much pressure to participate verbally. I have also "offloaded" some parts of my teaching by using pre-recorded videos posted to LATTE or VoiceThread for vocabulary and grammar explanations, which has made my time in class more efficient.

Of course, there are disadvantages. I can compare the two modes directly this semester, since I give the same language classes in person and on Zoom several times per week. First, we get through less material on Zoom, due to things as simple as opening and closing the break-out rooms, students turning on their microphones to speak, and switching screens. I find myself explaining things like instructions for activities more times on Zoom than in person as well. In-person classes thus seem to have a more rapid, engaging pace. Moreover, my students in person claim that they are "less distracted" in the classroom, which kind of surprised me. They have told me that they focus better in person, and I am also able to get a sense of how the group work is going as a whole. On Zoom, I have to visit the breakout rooms individually, which is both disruptive to the small group and doesn't allow me to see who has finished, who is struggling, etc. Also, while I see my students on Zoom using the gallery view (and two monitors) at all times, it's hard to know sometimes if they are paying attention! During a screen share, they often focus solely on the document and my voice, so any gestures I make or facial expressions to improve their comprehension may get lost in the shuffle. In short, Zoom gives a more disjointed class than I can provide in person using a projector, speakers, whiteboard, voice input, and body language all at the same time.

I'd like to add that I am very grateful to be part of a community that cares so deeply about the quality of instruction and about our collective health. As the summer unfolded, my admiration for the transparency and efforts of the administration to make fall semester happen in a hybrid, but safe way grew exponentially. I am also so proud of the students (and staff) on campus as they continue to adhere to the rules to keep us all safe, despite their diminished experience. We are a resilient and dedicated community, and we are making lemonade out of lemons. We will grow from this.