Negotiating displacement, regaining community: The Harvard Language Center's response to the COVID-19 crisis

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The Challenge
The COVID-19 crisis has disrupted the usual models of academic support and driven a number of abrupt and fundamental changes in language pedagogy and instructional modes. How does a language center at a highly residential institution pivot to address these needs? What strategies can such centers employ to support successful learning outcomes for students who are displaced?

Abstract
The COVID-19 crisis has fundamentally disrupted teaching and learning practices at many post-secondary institutions with a highly residential population. The present article outlines the situation at Harvard University and details the steps taken by the Language Center to mitigate the effects of the transition to remote teaching and learning. These include changes in communication strategies, support mechanisms for faculty and students, and modifications to the Center’s operational policies. The authors provide a number of concrete recommendations for academic support units in transitions of this type.

Keywords
blended/hybrid learning, in-service and professional development, technologies: e-mail, Facebook, podcasting, synchronous and asynchronous videoconferencing, Wikis
INTRODUCTION

We are in the midst of a crisis that is both unprecedented and that calls into question the models of language instruction and language center (LC) operation that have, thus far, been the norm at Harvard University and elsewhere. A bit of background may be in order. Harvard University teaches approximately 80 languages on a regular basis, ranging from Old Irish to Catalan to Yoruba and Manchu. The 6,700 students of Harvard College are the principal audience for these courses; Harvard has a 2-year language requirement, although credit may be granted for previous language experience. Classes are generally small, compared with public university norms—it is atypical for there to be more than 18 students in a lower level language class; there are even fewer in intermediate and bridge courses. Instructional methodology varies across language programs; some hew closely to the communicative approach, others focus on language through literature, still others emphasize grammar and vocabulary development with a view to enabling reading and research in the second language (L2).

In March of 2020, Harvard took the step of closing campus in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic; all residential students (98% of Harvard students live in university housing) were immediately moved home, at a cost to the institution of $35 million. We now have students scattered all over the world for whose learning experience we are responsible. Some are well-situated to continue their studies in a remote setting; others less so. From a highly local, tightly-knit community of learners who are used to close and regular contact with their instructors, we are now engaged in completing an academic term in a completely different environment—one that the majority of our instructors have never experienced as teachers.

This short synopsis of the actions that Harvard’s LC is taking in light of the current crisis is intended to offer other institutions a view of one school’s response. It is not to be taken as a strict prescription for other centers and universities which may find themselves in the same situation, but rather an insight into lessons learned that may be of benefit. We are learning as we go and forging new relationships and collaborations with faculty and other colleagues throughout the university.

CONTINGENCY PLANNING AND FIRST STEPS

Teaching and learning at Harvard, with the exception of some of our professional schools and the Division of Continuing Education, has always been a highly local enterprise, with the vast majority of classes delivered on our campus, to students in residence. The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted that practice, and will likely inspire reflection on the modalities of instruction that we use, a sharply increased adoption by faculty of technologies that are readily available to them, and a sea change in the way that instruction will work post-COVID.

Contingency planning for remote instruction began at the LC as soon as it became apparent that the pandemic was going to disrupt normal operations, and that at some point, our students were going to need to self-isolate on campus or leave. The LC staff took a number of steps as precursors to remote operation, the situation in which we now find ourselves. These were (a) to communicate proactively with language departments and sections, (b) to provide web-based resources for faculty and students faced with a new mode of instruction and significant loss, both instructional and personal, and (c) to enlist the help of the graduate and undergraduate student communities that have relationships with the LC to support their colleagues and contribute to the Center’s outreach.
COMMUNICATIONS AND OUTREACH

The LC communicates through several channels; the first of these are regular e-mails to the directors of language programs, and for those languages that have a single preceptor who bears responsibility, to that individual. Topics include announcements of webinars, both local and national, information on changes to policy at the LC that impact instruction, links to web resources and to Harvard University Information Technology (HUIT) resources for general instructional technologies. The LC has also held and hosted webinars for the faculty on a variety of topics; one, a Q&A at the beginning of the crisis when the student evacuation from campus was confirmed; several webinars produced and delivered by the International Association for Language Learning Technology (IALLT); and prior to the crisis, webinars on open and “owned” educational resources aimed at helping faculty think through the process and ramifications of developing and organizing extensive learning materials that might correspond to those included in a textbook. Third, the LC meets, when invited to do so, with the directors of language programs and their preceptors in order to hear their concerns and share information. Finally, the LC continues to tweet and retweet information from other LCs and related organizations across the country.

The LC’s website was updated in early March to include a COVID-19 response page. Our approach at the time was simple—what do faculty and students need to know in order to teach and learn successfully in a remote instruction scenario? The page contains tabs whose content covers topics that we felt to be germane to the immediate crisis:

- **General Resources** which point faculty and students to nonlanguage-specific tools and tutorials that are intended to get them to speed up in a distributed learning environment.
- A “Live” **Remote Instruction** section which offers tips and approaches to maximizing learning outcomes during synchronous sessions.
- An **Asynchronous Instruction** section provides recommendations for leveraging Canvas, Harvard’s learning management system, to aggregate materials and communication, and to provide a platform for assessment of student learning.

Perhaps the two most important sections of the page, though, focus on Student Engagement and Assessment and on information for students learning in a new-to-them environment. Our recommendations for the former included making increased use of Canvas as a communications tool and giving students a space within it to ask their own questions, seek responses and support from other students, and to create a learning community.

Instructor presence within a remote course is also key; although four to five to six hours of Zoom interactions a week are possible, this is not desirable for a number of reasons. The first of these is simple fatigue; if a student is taking four to five courses and the instructors rely on synchronous instruction, students are obliged to spend 15 to 20 hr of “classroom” instruction that could in many cases be substituted by asynchronous access to materials and instruction prior to reduced synchronous discussion and plenary sessions focused on practice, clarification, recycling, and speaking—effectively a flipped model of instruction (Mull, 2012). A flipped approach to instruction does not necessarily equate to less instructor presence in a course—recordings that recast material taught, clarify concepts, and provide group feedback can be a valuable means of keeping the instructor “in front” of the students. Regular messaging, through the announcements feature of the learning management system (LMS) or via other means is crucial to maintaining student engagement. Finally, a space within the course’s online environment that is specifically
Social and informal in nature can help students to gain or regain the sense of community that is critical to language learning.

4 | STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND ASSESSMENT

We have encouraged faculty members to use short videos where practicable, not only to respond to common questions and to reteach where warranted, but also to provide a sense of “presence” that has been lost in the transition to remote instruction. Students want a connection with their faculty and peers, something that is not necessarily as central in true online courses where the audience may be adults completing a degree while working full-time and juggling personal obligations.

Assessment at Harvard has changed radically for all courses: Faculty are now required to note students’ overall performance using Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory, with a notation that the mark was earned in an emergency situation. No letter grades are being given. Anecdotally, we are hearing that this is leading, in some cases, to reduced motivation on the part of students, and in others, to students petitioning for a letter grade in order to improve their GPA or chances of acceptance into a graduate program. But assessment is not solely the grade, of course. The assessment also means gauging the student’s participation in the work of the course, their engagement with the material, and their ability to respond to formative evaluations of their proficiency across the course curriculum. The first of these can be difficult to measure in a remote instructional environment. Our recommendation was to use the learning management system’s analytics to see how often students view the material posted within it, and in cases where the LMS is used to deliver and grade quizzes and other formative assessments, to use that as an early warning system for learners whose involvement with the course and its elements may be waning. As Rubio, Thomas, and Li (2018) point out, “continuity seemed to be the strongest predictor of final grades is an interesting finding and it lends support to most instructors’ intuition that among all types of online learning behaviors (...and) engaging with a course on a reliable and regular basis, especially in blended language courses, is what accounts for successful learning in the course.” (p. 245)

Finally, our focus must be on our students; many of us in support roles have concentrated our efforts in preparing our faculty colleagues to teach successfully in this unprecedented context, as this has been our focus heretofore—teachers are multipliers of effect for the information and training that LCs devise and deliver. Our students, however, are not necessarily prepared to learn in this circumstance. Many of them have never taken an online course; some of them have limited access to the technology that will support them in this endeavor. Some are without a personal space in which to work. Some are homeless. We took the approach of offering advice to students who are, as we are, displaced from our campus, worried for our friends and colleagues, and having to make do with the spaces and resources that surround us in our homes. We suggested techniques for time management, strategies for communication with faculty and fellow students, self-care, and tips for making the most of the synchronous activities that a language class requires. Many of these recommendations are not unique to language learners, but they are essential strategies for our students to employ as we envision the possibility of a fall term online, and wish to engage our students successfully in the tasks at hand.

In developing these resources, we were approached by one of our colleagues who is currently teaching a graduate course on second language research and practice. She had the idea to engage her students in looking at our recommendations and linking them to the second
language acquisition (SLA) and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) research underpinning them. Those students have provided valuable insights for the web resources we are providing through the LC (https://language.fas.harvard.edu/resources-remote-instruction-language-courses) and their engagement with the Center's work has been, we hope, useful to them as they prepare to teach in a vastly changed environment, whether at Harvard or at the institutions that will employ them.

5 | STUDENT OUTREACH AND LANGUAGE TANDEMS

The LC has a number of undergraduate and graduate student workers who were essential to its operation during normal semesters. Faced with the closure of the physical space, we had to do some hard thinking about if and how we would employ them in a remote work context. We have assigned some undergraduates to report back on their experiences in this situation, both in language classes and in other subjects. Our graduate students are available to proctor placement exams, and they, or undergraduates, will be made available as “students” for faculty members to practice with the synchronous technologies that support their teaching.

Though the LC's mission since 2018 has primarily been focused on supporting instructors and students through technology, a mission which often does not demand in-person meetings, there, of course, remain many aspects of daily operation that cannot, and have not, been relegated to the digital realm. One group of LC employees especially hard hit by the physical closing of the LC in March has been the student workers, a group which has staffed our front desk over many years of the LC's existence. As a majority of the students returned to their homes or other noncampus lodging and the LC switched to a completely remote workspace, we felt that offering the possibility of remote work to the undergraduate students was not only an important gesture on the part of the professional staff, but also a potentially valuable way to collect first-person accounts of the experience of remote learning.

These motivations led us to several decisions about the offer of remote work. First, we were mindful that many students—and, it did indeed turn out to be the majority—would not have the time or mental energy to spend on the type of remote work we crafted for them. As such, we communicated that the program was strictly “opt-in,” and nonparticipation would in no way affect future (in-person) employment, whenever that should resume. Second, we landed on a moderate number of hours of work per week, knowing that students would be unlikely to seek the upper limit typically worked at the desk in the LC. Lastly, we decided to break the work into three discrete tasks to be completed each week: (a) a summary and appraisal of a digital application that the students found themselves using during remote learning—these applications could have a wide range of purpose, from academic to social to personal development; (b) a summary and review of a COVID-19 resource webpage from various U.S. language resource centers, (c) a weekly report on the individual student's own experience with remote learning.

As we have only run this remote work for a few weeks' time, it is too early to tell if something like this arrangement could be a workable long-term approach to remote student employment, and if and how it will need to change should we find ourselves working and studying from home in the fall of 2020 (or beyond). Thus far, the students who volunteered seem eager enough to offer up their own reviews of the tech and the modes of instruction they are currently experiencing, and we are hoping to use this data to help our instructors inform their teaching practices and to help us in our role as instructional support discover the best platforms and guidance to make available to instructors. Whatever this program looks like
several months into the future, administrators and instructors from university LCs and departments would be well advised to collect first-person student accounts of remote learning, not only to improve instruction, but to make sure that the students feel heard and understood.

6 | TELECOLLABORATION AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

One of the means of ensuring that language students feel heard while learning remotely is to offer them more targeted one-on-one communication with native (or native-level) speakers, and this is an initiative that the Harvard LC vigorously supports. Computer-mediated communication is an essential aspect of remote language learning, as Cheon (2008) states “Given that social interaction is considered an integral process in language learning, CMC-based language learning suggests a way of fostering language learners’ social interaction for second/foreign language classrooms where learners have limited or minimal interaction with their instructor or peers.” (p. 2). At the LC, we both host a formal telecollaboration for a language section as well as run our own informal Language Exchange.

Before delving into a description of these synchronous video chat-based programs, it may be useful to offer a little theoretical background on the various forms of tandem: asynchronous versus synchronous, video- and voice- versus text-based. Much of the research around e-tandems and telecollaboration over the three decades has focused on written chat exchanges, e-mail exchanges, message board postings, and so forth. MIT’s foundational Cultura project (1997) was distinct for utilizing a scaffolded approach to intercultural communication which included asynchronous written exchanges, live discussion of cultural divergences, and multiple occasions for reflection and analyses throughout the telecollaborative process, which ultimately led to the student having a greater understanding of both cultures and the “third space” he or she occupied as a language learner (Blake, 2008, p. 97). As Cultura creator Gilberte Furstenberg frames it, “From the very beginning, students generated their own cross-cultural data, elaborated their hypotheses, and were able to broaden their interpretations of culture via the mirroring effect of dialogue” (2016, p. 176). The failures of strictly text-based exchanges—or exclusively video-based exchanges—cast into relief the question for the remote instructor which telecollaborative activities are most fruitful framed as either synchronous or asynchronous, and how to strike an appropriate balance between the two. As Ware reflects in her research into her class’s asynchronous text communications with German partners, her students viewed lengthy written exchanges as “academic” tasks, where it is possible that synchronous exchanges could have been viewed by students as more communicative (Ware, 2005, p. 76). Using live video chats, as we primarily do in the programs described below, highlights the social aspect of telecollaboration and, further, encourages the student to improvise, often to fail to understand or be understood but nevertheless to learn by negotiating for meaning.

7 | TELETANDEM AND LANGUAGE EXCHANGE PROGRAMS

For the last several years, the LC has supported the Brazilian Teletandem program run by the Portuguese section of Romance Languages and Literatures at Harvard. The Brazilian Teletandem project is a global initiative that began as a local “solution” invented by two instructors
to the problem of the geographical remoteness of the Universidade Estadual Paulista (UNESP) campus (Vassallo & Telles, 2006, p. 190). The incarnation of the program at Harvard has seen several technological permutations, as it began in the former Language Resource Center, where students sat at individual carrels with desktops and headphones. What has not changed is the basic structure of the tandem: Harvard Portuguese students each meet remotely with a Brazilian partner from UNESP for an hour each week during class time. Half of the conversation is conducted in Portuguese, and half in English. The conversations are recorded so that Viviane Gontijo, the Senior Preceptor in Portuguese, and Ana Cristina Biondo Salomão, her counterpart in Brazil, can review the conversation for both pedagogical and research purposes.

The Portuguese Tandem program at Harvard has been a success by all accounts, and instructors report that it is one of the students’ favorite aspects of the course. The main challenge of the program, from the perspective of the LC staff, has been the technological challenges that we have had to navigate as platforms have changed. In the fall of 2020, we made the decision, with instructor consent, to switch from Skype to Zoom, which was better supported by Harvard’s IT and promised a more seamless delivery of conversation recordings. This transition was largely successful, but technological challenges have reappeared with the recent precipitous move to remote instruction, as students struggle with reliable Internet access and we fail to receive precise feedback as to where the process is breaking down. Problems with technology and access to it are a natural hazard in telecollaboration, as O’Dowd and Ritter (2006) aptly put it: “Apart from the tools themselves, access to them can also be problematic. How natural is the use of online tools in the students’ private lives? Do students have permanent out-of-class access to them?” (p. 633). Though these are essential questions to consider as we craft and implement tandem language exchanges, we are nevertheless hoping that further trial runs and tweaks to the process will resolve the majority of issues. Beyond the ephemeral technological shortcomings of this program, the pedagogical utility for the instructors and students is immense. As language courses are forced into innovative uses of technology to deliver high quality and consistent interactions, instructors would do well to consider the means of connecting students to native speakers.

Outside the realm of formal pedagogy, even before the move to remote working conditions, we at the Harvard LC were considering ways to unite and support language learners outside the classroom. In February of 2020, the LC launched an online self-serve tandem program for Harvard affiliates, the Language Exchange. Using Google docs to allow users to enroll, we were able to limit access to those in the Harvard community while welcoming users from across all schools in the University. We opened the program to all Harvard students, faculty staff, visiting scholars and their spouses, as well as retired members of the University.

The timing of this launch was felicitous in light of the social distancing measures that were implemented a mere month later. Though we are still firmly in the initial phases of this project and hope to roll out tailored software designed by our IT support staff sometime in the late spring or early summer, we are hopeful that this will be a resource for Harvard affiliates across languages, cultures, and speaking abilities. The ease of sign-up, searching, and “meeting” (over various online platforms) is exactly in line with online socializing.

Several CMC researchers have pointed out the need for rigorous guidelines and imposed structure on the part of instructors in order to facilitate a successful exchange (O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Blake, 2008). The informality of our language exchange program forgoes this structure in the hope that the interlocutors, whatever their linguistic skills, role at the university, or stage of life, will act as thoughtful representatives of their own cultures while feeling empowered to end a possibly unsuccessful partnership. We believe that the potential of the
program to bring language learners from various cultures together outweighs the lack of formal guidance for users. Though the program carries immediate and obvious benefit in terms of linguistic practice—if a user finds a compatible partner—we should not underestimate the inherent human value of tandem programs. Not only are students forced to negotiate for meaning as they strive to understand and be understood, they are also forced to negotiate new cultural confrontations. For this reason, we felt it indispensable to make this program accessible to visiting scholars from other countries and cultures. Though we know that this time of pandemic may have displaced these visitors—perhaps for good—it is our goal to make this program a means of maintaining a connection to the community at Harvard.

8 | LESSONS LEARNED

In the spirit of collaboration and passing on the practices we have found most useful during this time, the staff at the Harvard LC offers the following recommendations for language resource centers helping ease instructors to a remote teaching model during the COVID-19 crisis:

- Set realistic expectations for staff, instructors, and students during this period. Timelines may shift and goals may need to be scaled back as members of the language-learning community cope with unforeseen obstacles.
- Keeping the above caveat in mind, maintain open lines of communication with instructors and students while realizing that some messaging may fall through the cracks. Aim for succinct, impactful parcels of information. Offering a webpage of resources will give instructors a chance to peruse information at their own pace, answering their own needs. Live, open Q&A sessions can also serve this purpose while breaking up some of the tedium of crowdsourcing. Centers should aim, above all, to meet the changing needs of instructors (and their students).
- Develop and push for the use of technologies that are well established at your institution, if possible. Instructors should already have a familiarity with a specific LMS, for example. When it comes to introducing new programming, see if you can build on existing structures, or collaborate with other institutions.
- Encourage instructors to make judicious use of synchronous videoconferencing. They may find that meetings of smaller groups for shorter amounts of time—supplemented by asynchronous activities—cut down on “Zoom fatigue.” Because many instructors will be tempted to hew rigidly to original course objectives and timelines, they may fall into the trap of the “course and a half” syndrome, adding more and more components to their remotely taught course without cutting back on facetime.

9 | CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 crisis has fundamentally altered the ways in which languages and cultures are taught at Harvard, as it has and will at almost all institutions across the globe. From an intensely “present” mode of instruction, involving face-to-face classes, in-person tutoring, recitation sections led by drill instructors, and other frameworks that privilege close personal interaction, we find ourselves in a moment that requires a move to remote teaching and learning, and rethinking the delivery of instruction for the foreseeable future. We do not yet
know what the fall semester will bring, but believe that the combination of a move to struc-
tured, well-designed online courses buttressed by informal learning opportunities will allow
faculty and students to continue to work effectively together as long as the pandemic lasts.

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