



Language program direction during COVID-19: Collective memories of the extraordinary

Nicole Mills, Harvard University

Keywords: *COVID-19, language program direction, archive*

APA Citation: Mills, N. (2020). Language program direction during COVID-19: Collective memories of the extraordinary. *Second Language Research & Practice, 1*(1), 159–163. <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/69849>

Introduction

When I arrived in Paris in January 2015, I felt a heaviness around me. A quiet and somber sense of fear was coupled with an impressive collective solidarity among Parisians. My arrival was several days following the terrorist attacks on Charlie Hebdo and the Kosher supermarket in Paris. The immediate worldwide attention and media reaction touched everyone and my connection to France pulled me personally into these events. As I walked the streets of Paris observing banners etched with the words “Je suis Charlie” or graffiti marked with “I am not afraid,” it was clear that everyone wanted to talk about the events and everyone had something to say. At the time, I did not fully understand why, but I felt an impulse to collect as many materials as possible (photos of graffiti, banners, newspapers, and posters) to share with professors and instructors so that we could recount the story. My reaction was one of urgency for this story to be told to our students. I knew that we needed to discuss its significance in our language courses.

When I returned to Harvard with a big cardboard box of materials and an iPhone filled with photos, I shared them with Virginie Greene, a professor of French medieval literature, and other fellow instructors. Conversations with Virginie Greene and Lidia Uziel at Widener library, however, led me to understand that telling this story moved beyond sharing this box with our current students and instructors. This was not only just a terribly tragic event to be discussed in classrooms—it was a significant historical event that people would be discussing for many years to come. It was a civic act to collect these ephemeral materials so that the events would not be forgotten and so that we could save traces of this public debate. This succession of events was the start of the Charlie Archive at the Harvard Library—an archive built in collaboration with Harvard librarians, faculty members, and students containing a wide array of materials and perspectives from individuals worldwide with a range of political positions and social backgrounds. The goal was to make the materials available to scholars for research in diverse academic disciplines and to teachers and students for the development of teaching materials.

In March 2020, I was faced with a similar sense of fear and panic in the hallways of my department as I had experienced during my 2015 trip to Paris. Less than two months earlier, I started a new position as interim Director of Language Programs and I was just beginning to navigate its various responsibilities, duties, and countless meetings. While scrolling through my crowded inbox during my early morning commute on March 11th, I received an email from the president of the university. The email stated:

I write today to update you on major near-term changes that will limit exposure to the [COVID-19] disease among members of our community...we will begin transitioning to virtual instruction for graduate and undergraduate classes. Our goal is to have this transition complete by Monday, March 23, which is the first day of scheduled classes following Spring Recess. (L. Bacow, email communication, March 11, 2020).

I was stunned. When I got to my office, I frantically navigated the consistent ping of emails invading my inbox with panicked questions of what to do next. *What do we do next?* Although I had read many articles about online language instruction and had experimented with emerging technologies in my instruction and course design, I had never taught a course remotely. To help others, I quickly realized that we needed opportunities to collaborate and share our resources, knowledge, and creativity. I hastily drafted the following message to all teaching assistants (TAs), teaching fellows (TFs) and, and course heads:

As a collaborative team, we can crowd source our creative pedagogical thinking and strategize interesting and unique ways to engage students and promote interaction and communication in virtual environments. It is often at times like this when the most pedagogical innovation is sparked. I look forward to seeing how this unprecedented moment encourages innovative pedagogical design across our RLL language courses (N. Mills, personal communication, March 11, 2020).

Although my message was filled with enthusiasm, the uncertainty surrounding the remote transition felt daunting. Following three days of non-stop zoom training sessions, language center discussions, and faculty meetings, we were sent home for spring break and had ten days to redesign our language courses for remote instruction. Although I was in reaction mode with limited time for reflection, I woke up in the middle of the night thinking about how I could document the creative pedagogical thinking of instructors “in the (remote) trenches.” How could we keep record of the perspectives of as many stakeholders as possible? And most importantly, how could this documentation and crowd sourcing of knowledge improve our understanding of remote language pedagogy?

Perspectives of Language Faculty

My first decision was to establish weekly Monday meetings with language faculty in Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese. The goals of these meetings were to offer a safe space for the expression of concerns and issues, to share evolving updates in administrative policies, and to discuss budding remote language teaching strategies. Course heads in all languages worked tirelessly with their teaching teams on a weekly (and sometimes daily) basis to transform existing materials into interactive Zoom sessions. They collectively analyzed previously developed teaching materials and workshopped how they could transform them into interactive remote experiences. Through trial and error, instructors experimented with creative use of time, asynchronous preparatory tasks, and innovative engagement strategies through various technological tools. Zoom breakout rooms allowed course heads in different languages who coordinated similar levels of instruction to discuss these creative remote solutions during our meetings. Topics from earlier meeting agendas included guidelines for emergency SAT/UNSAT grading and strategies for TA and TF observations in Zoom. Agendas later in the semester included unfortunate discussions of complicated issues associated with teaching assignments, financial support, and cancelled exchange TA programs for Fall 2020.

Perspectives of TAs and TFs

In addition to the teaching team meetings, it seemed important that TAs and TFs have informal opportunities to discuss their trials and tribulations navigating this new mode of instruction. I asked our two departmental pedagogy fellows to organize weekly meet-up groups so that TAs and TFs could support, motivate, and inspire one another. Best practices and short vignettes about how they creatively harnessed new technologies to engage students were documented over the course of the semester on a shared Google Doc. These personal stories about mastering the art of time management in Zoom, using Google Docs as shared whiteboards, and maintaining presence and eye contact allowed remote language teaching to come to life in personalized ways.

In spring 2020, I also happened to be teaching a course exploring current trends in language pedagogy to experienced language instructors. This course included a guest speaker series with topics in social and text-based pedagogies and emerging technologies. Ironically, I had already planned a session on hybrid and

online language teaching for mid-April and invited Christopher Kaiser, the program manager from the Shared Course Initiative at Columbia, Yale, and Cornell universities. This distance learning model for shared language instruction would have been a completely novel initiative for the enrolled TAs and TFs before March 2020. After our remote transition, it was clear that our upcoming discussions of online teaching needed to shift.

Following conversations with Andrew Ross, the Director of the Harvard Language Center, I quickly researched articles on hybrid and online language teaching from Fernando Rubio, Robert Blake, Richard Kern, and others and created a reference list of twelve to fifteen articles. Each student signed up for one article and reviewed the Language Center's COVID-19 online resources. We asked the students to consider various questions: *How can we enhance the existing remote language teaching resources for the Harvard community? Is there relevant information from your assigned article that could be integrated within the Harvard Language Center resources? Are there new headings, content, or subject areas that should be included?* The website's text was placed in Google Docs so that we could crowd source comments and suggestions. I then contacted Christopher Kaiser to discuss strategy for his presentation. In addition to presenting the Shared Course Initiative, we decided to begin the session with a personal exchange of instructor experiences with remote instruction in their own classes. During the second hour, we divided the class into four working groups and asked students to discuss strategies to enhance our existing resources. Each group had an online language teaching or technology expert present to guide the breakout room discussions. Students became the representatives of their assigned articles and worked collaboratively to come up with an action plan for the development of remote language teaching resources for next year's teaching cohort. Using a Google Doc to document ideas, they actively discussed content, organization, structure, and strategies from research for a full hour. In the following class session, the four groups formally presented their action plans and submitted their finalized Google Docs to the Language Center. With a theory meets practice orientation, sample topics included discussions of presence and community in the virtual classroom, analysis of model hybrid lessons including both synchronous and asynchronous elements, thoughtful selection of tools based on defined learning goals, and instructor and student testimonials.

Perspectives of Students

During the first ten days of frenzied experimentation in the remote mode, instructors reported back moments of both joy and anguish as they tested new strategies. Intuition revealed that certain approaches yielded more success than others, but how did the students perceive our brave new world of instruction? With the technical glitches, delays, and lack of eye contact in the virtual environment, it was often difficult to gauge students' reactions to the teaching materials. We tried to engage in design thinking by brainstorming creative solutions and putting them into practice through lesson design, but it was clear that we needed to hear from the students. I developed a Qualtrics survey that questioned students about the class organization and content, effective and ineffective aspects of the remote learning environment, and our newly added asynchronous assignments. I shared this sample Qualtrics survey with the language coordinators and instructors on our shared Google drive (among other sample administrative handouts) and my TFs and I anxiously awaited feedback from our French courses. Despite our long hours creating asynchronous video tasks to prepare students for Zoom class sessions, students overwhelmingly expressed frustration to what they perceived as added work. *How is this possible?* We had placed so much thought and effort into these new assignments. Following initial feelings of exasperation, we quickly shifted gears. We reached out to students to explain our rationale for these tasks and reduced class time by 15 minutes to account for our 15-minute asynchronous assignments. We then attempted to strategize about how to step further outside of the box. We integrated guest speakers in small group discussions, experimented with alternative use of class time, and brainstormed how we could make their own home environment and the world's current context relevant in course materials. Lessons involving creation of surrealist art with objects from home or discussions of quarantine with Harvard graduate students living in Paris sparked students' interest in ways that topics that had traditionally engaged students in years past could not.

The Collection

On the last day of the spring semester, I was drawn to an email in my overflowing inbox with the subject line “For an ordinary memory of the extraordinary.” This email was from Sarah Gensburger, a senior research in social sciences at the French National Center for Scientific Research. With research interests in the social dynamic of memory, she had collaborated with our group in the development of the Charlie Archive in 2016. She was writing on behalf of two colleagues, Myriam Piguët and Caroline Montebello, who had written an Op Ed about the COVID-19 epidemic entitled “Covid19: Pour une mémoire ordinaire de l’extraordinaire.” Published in several French-speaking newspapers (*Libération*, *Le Soir*, and *Le Temps*), this Op Ed called on both scholars and “ordinary people” to preserve the memory of the epidemic. Montebello and Piguët (2020) stated:

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, most of humanity is currently on lockdown and facing restrictions on personal liberties. We, historians, sociologists, museologists, archivists and researchers in humanities and social sciences are calling on individuals, institutions and public authorities to preserve archives of these times... we must preserve the memory of the “ordinary” people: cashiers, parents, post workers, doctors and healthcare workers, construction workers, truck drivers and transportation workers, prisoners, migrant workers, refugees or children (and more)... This archiving process could draw inspiration from the initiative taken after the terrorist attacks of 2015, 2016, and 2017 by Harvard University, Archives of Paris, the Archives of the city of Brussels, and the Manchester Art Gallery and Archives... We should, first, encourage everyone to keep personal and professional records of the pandemic. These records can take all kinds of forms: photographs, videos, personal life-in-lockdown stories, solidarity initiatives, posters, e-correspondence, hospital records or press articles... (translated from French, n.p.)

I was immediately fascinated by their mission. Like the Paris attacks in 2015, 2016, and 2017, the COVID-19 pandemic was an historical event that would impact society and education for years to come. In my role as a language program director, it was my own civic responsibility to collect materials so that we could save ephemeral traces of this transition in foreign language education and make materials available to scholars, instructors, and course coordinators for analysis and discussion. I was compelled to preserve this memory.

Through a combination of trial and error and student feedback, my French TFs and I had stumbled upon successful lessons and several proud teaching moments. If we had encountered success stories, I was confident that many others in the department had discovered success in diverse ways. Through informal chats and email conversations with instructors, I started to solicit sample remote teaching materials. I asked instructors if they had success stories and if they would be willing to post these lessons on a Canvas site as inspiration to their fellow and future colleagues. Then, I began to transfer other types of materials to a Canvas site created by the Harvard Language Center. From my graduate seminar, I uploaded the research articles on hybrid and online language teaching and the Google Docs with recommendations for remote language teaching resources. I transferred student survey templates and other sample administrative documents. With permission from our pedagogy fellows, I uploaded the personal stories from the TA/TF meet-up groups about how they creatively used new technologies to engage students in remote language learning. Approximately 60 handouts, documents, lesson plans, PowerPoints, and VoiceThread Boards were ultimately shared by French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese instructors.

Not too different from my cardboard box of materials that I brought back to the department in 2015, it was just a beginning. More materials were needed and many questions required answers. How would these documents be useful for analysis? How could our preserved teaching materials inform language pedagogy research moving forward? How could our remote practice inform theory? How could the perspectives of the various constituents who had taken on this daunting mission continue to live and prosper and benefit language pedagogy (remote or otherwise) moving forward? How could we harness this intersectional memory and use it to the benefit of language programs at Harvard and beyond? Like Montebello and

Piguet's (2020) proposal during this unprecedented historical moment, I look forward to seeing how these questions find answers through interdepartmental exchange within universities and inter-institutional bridges across language programs. Let's work together to memorialize and interpret "the extraordinary."

References

Piguet, M., & Montebello, C. (2020, April 25). Pour une mémoire ordinaire de l'extraordinaire. *Libération*. https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2020/04/25/covid-19-pour-une-memoire-ordinaire-de-l-extraordinaire_1786299?fbclid=IwAR2gm8_yD-G0e64urjnV-IFPQE78rZPYRL8L7lQD1PmWuR-6UOyPGti2Mrk.

About the Author

Nicole Mills is the Director of Language Programs (Interim) for the Department of Romance Languages & Literatures at Harvard University. She conducts research in virtual and simulated environments, psychology of language learning and teaching, and language program evaluation. Her co-authored book, *Perspectives on Teaching Language and Content*, was published in 2020 with Yale University Press.

E-mail: mills@fas.harvard.edu