REPORT

Transforming our perspectives as language professionals during COVID-19

Cori Crane, Duke University

Introduction

Every aspect of language educators' lives has been impacted by the arrival of COVID-19 and Language Program Directors (LPD) in particular have been presented with unique challenges and opportunities to question and reassess their work. Taking a cue from Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 1991), a learning theory that understands disorienting dilemmas to be catalysts of change in one's frames of reference about the world and self, this pandemic—coupled with moments of intense collective cognitive dissonance that our society is currently experiencing within the area of human rights and social justice—has encouraged us to take a hard look at our practices as well as understandings about how best to learn and teach world languages. For many LPDs, the move to remote instruction has meant rethinking various facets of our work—from course redesign, pedagogical practices, and assessment tools to support successful student learning, to mentoring novice instructors and supporting more experienced ones to ensure excellent and equitable instruction.

In adapting so suddenly to online remote instruction in March 2020, many of us were confronted with new realities concerning time and energy allocations. While morning commutes were shortened, class preparation took arguably much longer to complete. In considering how to adapt lessons to a different mode of communication, we now had to think how different layers of mediation (most notably video-conferencing) were impacting our and our students' ability to communicate across different modes—not just interpersonal communication. The "anytime, anywhere" movement of Ubiquitous Learning (Cope & Kalantzis, 2010) was becoming our reality with many students and even some teachers now located in different time zones across the U.S. and the globe. With multiple sections offered in our German courses at my home institution, for example, students were able to easily move in and out of different sections to accommodate new schedules and responsibilities. At the same time, the prep work—including additional instructor meetings to begin developing a shared knowledge base about remote language instruction—was intense and experimental. Recognizing that many teachers had new responsibilities and challenges at home during the lockdown, LPDs had to be especially sensitive to instructors' time and energy resources.

In early March, language program coordinators on my campus mobilized quickly to discuss logistics, exchange ideas, and compare notes on how different programs were addressing the sudden shift to remote instruction. During the semester, we met regularly over Zoom with conversations revisiting a range of questions about how best to administer our courses: How are we preparing ourselves and fellow instructors to work remotely? What do actual course contact hours look like in this new environment? How do we deal with testing and assessment? And what common tools and platforms exist to help support language teachers with more and less technological experience? In talking with each other, we reminded ourselves to manage our own expectations as practitioners and consider earnestly what we realistically could take on in adapting our courses to an online mode within such a short time. Through these conversations, we became more

aware of the vast expertise in instructional technology, including previous experience with teaching online courses, that was represented among language colleagues on our campus. A remote learning intake survey created early on by two colleagues (Lisa Merschel and Eileen Anderson) for language teachers to survey students' instructional needs was shared widely across all language departments; a shared Box folder was immediately created to share materials about online language teaching across programs; and our language advisory council worked with the College to secure additional funding for outside conversation practice with native speakers. It was clear that our community of world language teachers was leading collaborative efforts on campus to adapt to the new remote instruction.
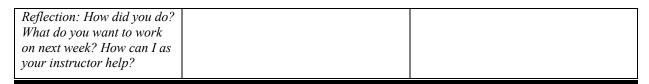
Seeing New Affordances in our Teaching Practices

While some aspects of our practice in my university's German program largely stayed the same once COVID-19 appeared,[1] other practices shifted radically as we were forced to consider student equity issues from new vantage points. At the forefront of these discussions were accessibility to technology (for both learners and teachers) and students' mental and emotional well-being during this uncertain period. We had to find ways to keep our classroom communities intact and keep students engaged even when new responsibilities at home and technological problems arose. This meant considering our pedagogies and materials through different eyes to discover new potential affordances (Van Lier, 2004) in them for delivering instruction, supporting student learning, and connecting with our learners.

To provide one such example, a tool from my own classroom that was initially used to keep track of class attendance was repurposed with the move to remote instruction in March. Pre-COVID, I had adopted the practice from a former graduate student instructor (Dani Javorics) who had each of her students write a comment or question to their instructor on their own printed attendance sheet in a column next to the class date. Attendance sheets were distributed at the start of each class and picked up again at the end. Following class, the teacher would write a short response back to the student in a third column. Over the many semesters I have used this tool, it has not only served as a record of class attendance, but also provided me and my students with an opportunity to regularly dialogue with each other. In past years, students used this simple printed sheet to ask follow-up questions on content covered in class, give me feedback on instruction, request meetings with me, and practice their German. Now with COVID-19, it seemed that the interpersonal dimension of these attendance sheets could be leveraged for their potential to connect with students regularly as well as provide a space to foster metacognition. Below is an excerpt of the revised attendance sheet (translated into English and with an added weekly "short participation reflection"), which each student could access in their own individual Box folder shared by them and their teacher:

Figure 1

Excerpt of Retooled "Attendance Sheet"

Class Dates	Student's Comments	Teacher's Comments
March 23		
March 24		
March 25		
March 26		
Short Participation		

Reflection: How did you do? What do you want to work on next week? How can I as your instructor help?		

Once we resumed classes remotely following our spring break, students were told in the revised syllabus that this short weekly reflection would be considered part of their weekly participation grade. With the attendance sheet now in electronic form, the students wrote much lengthier notes to me as well as other teachers in our program who adopted this practice. These check-ins—especially the new longer end-of-week reflections—provided us, their teachers, with important information about how the students were processing the material in our new online environment and what kinds of obstacles to learning they were experiencing now that many of them were back home with their families, or—in the case of some international students—not able to return home. And as is often the case with reflection work, I found the students' comments to be invaluable in developing my own understanding about learning and teaching. Most notably, I learned through this written dialogue that both students and I were surprised to see how much language learning could happen in an online environment, forcing me to revise certain assumptions and biases I realized I had unknowingly developed about teaching remotely. It is important to point out that this reflective work—as short as it was—was dialogic and co-constructed. The reflections therefore helped me to process the learning experience *with* my students and to share in these emerging "aha" moments together.

In coordination meetings with our instructors, I learned of additional pedagogical tools and strategies that teachers in our program were using in new, unique ways. One instructor, for example, opted away from using PowerPoint slides over Zoom and instead screen-shared a simple MS Word document that served as both PowerPoint and white board. At the same time, teachers in our program explored features in both Zoom (e.g., the chat window, polling, the white board, virtual backgrounds) and our course management site (e.g., discussion forums) to discover potential affordances for instructional use. This discovery process additionally led us to realize that our own course management sites had been relatively underutilized and could serve more purposes than simply storing course documents and a gradebook. Meanwhile, the integration of new outside technological tools and platforms (TalkAbroad and Flipgrid) made many of us wonder why we had not been using some of these resources earlier! While a few teachers unfortunately reported struggling with the new remote instructional mode, my sense was that on the whole teachers were adapting well to this new landscape and were eager to discover new meanings in our expanding pedagogical toolkit.

The move to a remote environment additionally called some of our more traditional assessment practices into question. How could one reliably test vocabulary and grammar in timed chapter tests and quizzes, some teachers asked? What about test security? Thankfully, our program had been moving increasingly towards task-based assessment across all communicative modes, e.g., genre-based writing tasks, interpersonal and presentational speaking events, and more in-class reading and listening tasks. But the chapter tests and the stray final written exam had to be immediately rethought. It was clear that even content-based testing of lexico-grammatical forms would not be as meaningful to students as engaging in authentic communicative acts where language is used for meaningful purposes. To ensure fairness, we ended up converting much of our in-class testing into take-home assessments that students could complete within 24 hours. This was a decision motivated strongly by anticipated concerns that students might encounter challenges in accessing technology or juggling new responsibilities at home (indeed, in most of our language classes, there were at least a few students who needed this extra time for exactly these reasons). This new take-home format encouraged us to similarly think carefully about the resources students would have to draw on in completing their work. In addition to recognizing the futility in controlling students' use of outside materials in these testing situations, we realized that some structured use of class materials could offer our learners (especially those who were struggling) invaluable scaffolding opportunities to learn the material beyond our own

instruction. Thus, we opted for an open-book format in which permissible resources (i.e., the textbook, class notes, PowerPoints, and class recordings) were clearly delineated and could be meaningfully drawn on by students to complete more authentic content- and text-based communicative tasks.

Rethinking the Teaching Observation Process

Teacher supervision represents a key responsibility for many LPDs. Thankfully, I had conducted teaching observations of our graduate student instructors in my program prior to the move to remote instruction in spring. But I often thought throughout the second half of the semester as I was navigating this new virtual format myself for the first time how different my class observations would look in an online setting. In thinking about the likelihood that future semesters would involve more online or hybrid teaching, I found myself increasingly wondering how I might adapt or need to expand on my current observation practices—focused largely on class dynamics and the co-construction of knowledge—within an online environment. What all should we be looking at when we evaluate remote teaching, I asked myself. Would it be sufficient for a teacher educator to merely observe the virtual Zoom classroom? Should teachers' asynchronous teaching, including how they provide feedback to students, not also be considered? And how does expanded lesson preparation to scaffold self-paced student work as well as teachers' facility with materials and technologies figure into the observation process? When we eventually return to face-to-face instruction, these dimensions of the larger teaching-learning experience (e.g., giving students written feedback, communicating asynchronously, supporting students outside of class, maximizing one's learning space) that arguably have taken on a more pronounced role in delivering quality remote instruction may well become part of our standard teacher supervision work. My sense is that our understanding of what it means to teach is being reshaped radically, encouraging us to look at the student experience in a more holistic way.

With the recording option for virtual conference meetings like Zoom, LPDs now also have a tremendous resource available to help teachers whom they supervise take on a more agentive role in their own teaching development. This might seem like an obvious point. After all, video recordings have long been advocated as a tool for supporting professional development. Yet, something has shifted, I think, in how we view the very act of recording ourselves. The rush in spring 2020 to provide recordings of our instruction for students not able to attend classes meant that any inhibitions teachers might have had in recording themselves pre-COVID-19 had to be dealt with rather quickly. With Zoom recordings now at hand, teachers of all levels (not merely graduate students readying for the job market and looking to have a polished video of their teaching to present to potential employers) have a useful tool through which to develop greater understanding about their teaching. In my own post-observation conversations with graduate student instructors, I often begin by asking teachers to share their impressions on how their class went, a practice that allows me to sense how they see their own classes before I share my observations with them. Having a video that one can refer back to now gives teachers the opportunity to take a first go at these observations. It becomes a rich resource for one's professional growth and serves as a good model for continued reflective teaching practice.

Opening Up Professional Development Opportunities

For me, one of the most important shifts in thinking about our practice has been the broadening of the virtual landscape of professional development (PD), which opened up in unique ways once particular barriers (e.g., lodging and travel costs, dealing with childcare, etc.) were lifted due to the lockdown. The urgent need among so many language educators to quickly educate ourselves in educational technology not only occasioned a real demand for PD to be delivered remotely, but also showed us how easy and accessible a virtual format could be. The exchange of ideas on social media platforms like Facebook (e.g., *Pandemic Pedagogy* and *Technology for Language Teaching and Learning*) and in webinars hosted by national Language Resource Centers (LRC) revealed an instant form of community of practitioners ready to provide support and expert guidance on a diverse set of topics related to our work as language educators. After a colleague pointed out an online summer course offered by CARLA (the Center for Advanced Research on

Language Acquisition) in the early weeks of the pandemic, it struck me how many exciting opportunities for professional growth would be available to me in a way that had not before due to cost and time away from my family. Suddenly, a wealth of resources in different forms (webinars, workshops, free access to journals, etc.) were made available through many LRCs and our professional organizations (e.g., AATG, ACTFL) to help support language educators in developing a solid knowledge base. While my preference remains in-person learning with colleagues—I miss the impromptu small group and one-on-one conversations that often occur in immersive conference settings—these recent successes in offering PD programming virtually proves how accessible continuing education opportunities can be for all educators in online environments.

Sharing PD opportunities with other institutions came more easily, as well. When colleagues at Emory University's Language Resource Center opened an invited talk over Zoom by Glenn Levine (UC-Irvine) to individuals outside of the institution, a number of us from Duke attended. When Duke's Trinity Language Council organized a series of webinars on teaching languages online later in the summer, we reciprocated the invitation, inviting colleagues from Emory to attend. We learned that setting up a webinar could be as easy as opening up a Zoom meeting and that the borders of professional communities could easily be expanded. In addition to providing access to talks, certain practitioner research models continued to exist on our campus. #EPThursdays, a group of language teachers who met biweekly to engage in Exploratory Practice, now met over Zoom every other week to check in with each other and talk about our puzzles on teaching and learning. Though participation decreased in the remote environment, this group provided an important community space for colleagues to come together and make sense of the enormous changes that were impacting our professional and personal lives.

In short, the pandemic's reliance on video to communicate with others is without doubt shifting our way of thinking about professional development and sharing expertise. It is hard to imagine once we return to in-person contact again that online PD options will not be available.

Disorienting Dilemmas and Challenges Moving Forward

My comments thus far have taken on a rather rosy hue regarding the pandemic's impact on language education, viewing the challenges before us as opportunities to see our instruction, our students' learning, and our own professional development through new eyes—a process of reflective awakening that can potentially lead to a shift in our frames of reference both individually and collectively. As I write this though, we are still very much in the middle of this disorienting period that continues to affect our lives on social, political, economic, and emotional levels. Certain constraints on learning, such as inequities that show up outside of instruction in student group work, have the potential to become even more acute in a remote environment that relies more heavily on self-paced work without the direct guidance of instructors to ensure equitable practices. Moving forward, teachers and program directors will need to be increasingly aware of how to foster togetherness and inclusiveness in a remote environment for all learners. Additionally, we have to recognize that while remote instruction offers many new possibilities for thinking about interaction and mediated learning, it does not replace face-to-face learning. Video-conferencing can bring individuals from far-away places across the globe, but it cannot replicate the rich, unique cultural exchanges and intense community-building that happen through in-person immersion and study abroad experiences. And we must continue to remind educational policymakers of this fact.

Finally, this experience teaches us that as language educators we need to articulate more clearly our relationship not just to instructional technologies, but also to our tools and materials more generally within the complex ecology of our much expanded classroom space (cf. Guerretaz & Johnston, 2013). Looking ahead, this expanded perspective of what constitutes our unique learning and teaching environments (including our relationship to instructional materials and technological tools) is likely to become the focus for further language learning research in COVID and post-COVID times. It will indeed be interesting to see how our own frames of reference—our values and practices for interpreting experiences—continue to shift over the coming years as opportunities for learning and teaching world languages expand.

Notes

1. For example, "Kulturpunkte" ("culture points") that students in our beginning and intermediate German courses were asked to pursue by attending campus-sponsored events related to German language and culture were easily adapted to an online environment where students could visit virtual museums and news media outlets, as well as watch movies and concerts in the German-speaking world, among many other possibilities.

References

Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (Eds.) (2009). *Ubiquitous learning*. University of Illinois Press.

Guerrettaz, A. M., & Johnston, B. (2013). Materials in the classroom ecology. *Modern Language Journal, 97*, 779-796. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2013.12027.x

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Van Lier, L. (2004). *The ecology and semiotics of language learning: A sociocultural perspective*. Kluwar.

About the Author

Cori Crane (PhD, Georgetown University) is Associate Professor of the Practice at Duke University. Her research focuses on graduate student teacher education, second language writing and literacy-based instruction, reflective teaching and learning, and transformative learning. Her articles have appeared in the *Foreign Language Annals*, *L2 Journal, Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German,* and various AAUSC volumes.

E-mail: cpc32@duke.edu