5 The 'go digital' Bristol experience

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Abstract

This article describes the move to digital teaching and learning for the language team in the School of Modern Languages (SML) at the University of Bristol as a consequence of COVID-19 in March 2020. Topics discussed here include the educational guidelines the university put in place; how these were followed and implemented by colleagues in Modern Languages; the new digital teaching and assessment practices; how decisions were reached across languages; technologies that people used and the support available; challenges in delivering teaching; and, lastly, the opportunities created for staff and students. In describing our practice during the pandemic, I will also offer my personal take and observations as the person responsible for digital education in the Arts Faculty who assisted the language team in this transition. I will reflect on how this pandemic has accelerated our digital education agenda and how having a background in language teaching has helped and informed some of the – sometimes difficult – conversations I had with my language colleagues during these fast-moving and uncertain times. The article will end with a brief description of some of our remaining challenges and lessons learnt while the university has announced that next academic year will be delivered largely digitally. The work done so far will inform our planning.

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Just before the national lockdown on March 13th 2020, the Vice-Chancellor and President of the university of Bristol announced that we would "move our learning and assessment online, wherever practical, as a matter of urgency".

At that point, as the person responsible for digital education in the Faculty of Arts, I was already helping the SML plan their move to online teaching. Indeed, even before the university announcement, it was becoming clear that there was a real possibility that face-to-face teaching might no longer be possible, and so I was asked by the SML Head of School to look at how they could best move to remote teaching and assessment.

It became apparent that the university wanted to adopt an institution-wide approach to this transition. In terms of teaching, the university had decided that, after the Easter break, the remaining four weeks of teaching had to be delivered entirely online. There was an acknowledgement that moving materials online would require time, so the deans and the heads of school were instructed to allow staff to prioritise preparation for online teaching over other duties and responsibilities.

The teaching had to be accessible via the institutional virtual learning environment, namely Blackboard, and each week had to include at least the following four components/steps:

- clear instructions for learning;

- an input or provocation (i.e. a synchronous live session or asynchronous slides or videos);

- a guided activity for students to complete; and

- a checkpoint/opportunity for feedback to students.

The central Digital Education Office built a website and a week-long online course, with detailed information on each component and suggestions on which

technologies (alongside Blackboard) staff could use to deliver their online teaching.

In relation to assessment, the university asked academic staff to simplify and reduce their assessments, as well as to find alternative types when the existing ones could not be delivered anymore, like exams. As such, schools and centres had to completely rethink this component, as the university was now effectively moving away from unit-based assessments and adopting a more holistic and almost programme-level assessment approach.

Faculties played a key role in assisting schools and centres in their implementation of these changes. In the Arts Faculty, for example, the Education Contingency Planning Group was established to help interpret and deliver university decisions, mitigate risks, and put together new processes. The Group was co-chaired by the faculty undergraduate and postgraduate education directors, and it included staff in leadership educational roles from each school and centre, as well as myself.

As a member of the faculty Education Contingency Planning Group, I was able to offer more local and subject-specific support, and to oversee the work of academics such as my language teaching colleagues in the SML.

In terms of their transition to online delivery, academics did exceptional work in quickly rethinking their remaining teaching for the academic year. They embraced the university approach of the four components – which happened to be very similar to what I was planning for the whole school – and required little help from me or the Digital Education Office to develop their activities.

I believe that this was largely due to the clear governance of the school. Indeed, each department has a language team with a director and a deputy who make key decisions, organise work, and provide leadership. Depending on the size of the department, the teams can be comprised of five to more than ten members of staff. They all have well-defined roles and responsibilities, which have facilitated some outstanding teamwork during the coronavirus crisis.

Based on their specific learning objectives and pedagogical approaches, each team developed slightly different teaching and learning activities. But, what they all offered in a similar way were some synchronous sessions of speaking practice.

When, at the end of the teaching period, we took stock of our practice in a meeting, the main challenge language teachers reported was the lack of engagement from some of their students. Given the amount of work colleagues had put into creating the new activities, it was disappointing to see that some students did not take part. This, however, is an 'old' problem, not unique to digital delivery, typical of face-to-face teaching, as well. The question of how we can tackle this issue is now one the faculty is also looking into, to try and help all schools (and not just Modern Languages) addressing it.

Other issues identified in delivering digital teaching were that some staff and students had poor connectivity (making it especially difficult to run or attend live sessions and upload content), and did not have many technologies available to work with when creating new material.

Despite these issues, which the teams were able to overcome, the transition to online language teaching went smoothly. Less straightforward, on the other hand, was the switch to online assessment. Pre-pandemic, the language teams relied heavily on paper exams to evaluate student language acquisition. As this kind of exam could no longer take place, language teams were asked to come up with alternative methods and simplify their assessments.

As a result, some assessments were dropped, and others were reworked. For instance, the oral exams (when kept) were replaced by a student-produced video 8-to-10 minutes in length. For compositions and guided writing elements, language colleagues put forward the case for timed online exams, where students had only a few hours to complete their assessment. However, the University (myself included) felt these were too risky, and could discriminate against those students working in difficult circumstances and with poor connectivity, who might struggle to access, complete, and submit the exam within a short timeframe.

This stance sparked some difficult conversations. In the end, it was felt that the way forward to test student remote learning was through open-book exams, where students had five working days to complete and submit their exam.

While this timeframe was fairer on students, the downside was that they could access notes and online resources while taking the assessment, which, when you test knowledge or skill acquisition instead of reasoning, can lead to inflated results. The other downside of open-book exams was that they were not supported by the Central Exam Office and required completely new processes – scheduling the exams, making them available to students, and promoting an updated code of conduct, etc. – which were led by the faculty in collaboration with schools and centres.

Whether we will be using open-book exams for language assessment in the future still remains to be seen. Given all their limitations, what they have shown, however, is that the school can move away from paper exams. Colleagues in SML had been talking about changing the format of language assessments for years, and, while they were making some progress towards this, the pandemic has certainly accelerated that process.

The pandemic has also speeded up our process of upskilling some colleagues in their use of technologies. For example, all language colleagues are now familiar with webinar and conferencing tools, and have shifted to marking assessments online. These were all items that had been on our list of things to organise for a number of years, but kept getting pushed back for various reasons (e.g. lack of time and resources, the false perception that languages can best be taught face-to-face, and that some language work is too complex to be marked online).

In planning the post-COVID academic year, which will be largely delivered online by the faculty, we have decided to revamp and modernise our Blackboard sites by introducing a new visual look and a common structure in order to offer a more pleasant environment and better functionality for the virtual classroom. For language staff, this translates into populating their sites with newly designed teaching and learning activities.

Some of them are eager to use new technologies and develop more innovative and cutting-edge language work. Indeed, some language colleagues have been experimenting with technologies for years, presenting their work at national and international conferences. It would be a pity not to facilitate such passion for innovation, and a shame not to give colleagues the particular tools they need to produce outstanding work. This is something that I hope I can better support this time, unlike at the start of the COVID-19 crisis, when there was a clear effort from the university to adopt institutionally supported technologies wherever possible.

I am also hoping that we, as a faculty, will have more time to collect systematic and meaningful feedback from staff and students, beyond our standard end-of-the-academic-year meeting. Yet again, this is something we were unable to do well last semester because of the fast-moving situation, the fact that other priorities took over, and the need for new procedures to be organised quickly. Many colleagues and institutions will certainly recognise themselves in the fast-paced and pressurised working mode which had to be adopted during COVID-19, acknowledging that, although some informal feedback has been collected, it is now paramount to do much more on this front at every level of organisations if institutions are serious about growing and learning from their own mistakes and successes.

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