

8 Complexity and simplicity during COVID-19: reflections on moving pre-sessional programmes online at pace

Kate Borthwick¹

Abstract

This article describes how a complex and large Pre-Sessional (PS) programme at the University of Southampton (UoS) moved online at pace during the COVID-19 pandemic. It outlines the scale of the challenge and the ideas that informed our approach. It gives an overview of the technical and learning design used to deliver the programme, and makes observations on how this was achieved using Blackboard, MS Teams, and Padlet. It indicates how a mix of whole-cohort content and smaller, online group spaces within one site were used to recreate a personalised, small-group teaching experience. It closes with some comments on lessons learned from the experience.

Keywords: pre-sessional, online learning, English language, international students.

UoS PS is a study skills and English language programme² designed to prepare international students for academic success in UK higher education. It runs over the summer from June to September, and has grown every year; in 2019, it welcomed over 2,200 international students from a range of countries. The majority of the students come from China, and go on to study a range of disciplines within the University at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

1. University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom; k.borthwick@soton.ac.uk; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2251-7898>

2. <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/courses/pre-sessional-language-courses.page>

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Students are typically required to pass the PS in order to progress onto their programme of study.

The summer PS programme consists of several full-time, intensive courses of study.

- Two 11-week courses in general academic English (suitable for students intending to study in any discipline) and in Business English (suitable for students intending to study in the UoS Business School). These courses are known as PSA and PSA Business.
- Two 6-week courses in general academic English and in Business English (for students with a higher IELTS³ score⁴). These courses are known as PSB and PSB Business.

Teaching in the programme is task-based and takes place in organised, small groups, which enables a personalised learning experience. Between 150 and 250 experienced English for academic purposes tutors are recruited seasonally to deliver teaching, with many returning to Southampton each summer.

Experienced staff and well-established processes allow us to work with this large number of students, whilst tutors ensure that the programme runs smoothly and prepares students for their entries into academic and student life at Southampton. 2020, however, was shaping up to present this complex, efficient, and successful system with some challenges.

In late February 2020, I was called to a senior-level meeting to discuss a developing crisis; a disease called COVID-19 had shut down China, the country of origin for many of the university's international students. No one was travelling. No one was studying. No one was taking English language tests. The

3. IELTS: International English Language Testing System. It is an exam which tests proficiency in English and is an accepted measure of linguistic capability for entry to UK Universities. <https://www.ielts.org/>

4. Students applying for PSA and PSA Business are required to have IELTS 5.5. Students applying for PSB and PSB Business are required to have IELTS 6.0.

university was facing the prospect of losing a large number of its international students for the 2020/2021 academic year, as well as a significant chunk of income. The first place we would feel the impact of all this would be on our summer PS programmes.

The situation seemed stark: would it be necessary to cancel the PS programme with all the attendant impact that would have? Alternatively, could the whole programme be delivered online? Would a move online give our students the language support they needed? And, could this be done in time?

As director of the university's open online courses, my response was always going to be "yes!". My colleagues responsible for delivering the PS in the Academic Centre for International Students were of the same mind.

The most significant challenge in moving such a large and complicated programme online was time. PSA would launch at the end of June, and this gave us three months for planning, course/content creation, and staff familiarisation with the new arrangements and training. It is worth noting that, when I plan a new massive open online course, I schedule at least 12 months' preparation.

As the COVID-19 pandemic steadily spread and worsened in early March, all staff working on the PS programme moved to remote working from home. This situation complicated communications, decision-making, and working speed.

We also faced the prospect that our temporary tutors would have to work remotely from their own homes. This meant the immediate consideration of their Information Technology (IT) capabilities and needs in the delivery of online education.

The PS programme does not only prepare students for academic study, it also plays a key role in preparing students for social and academic life at the university. For many students, the PS programme is the first meaningful, sustained interaction they will have with the University. It also provides them with an on-location, immersive language-learning experience.

If students are studying the PS programme online from home, those aspects either cannot be delivered or may not be necessary until the time when students can arrive in person. However, an online version of the course should still aim to build community-feeling, convey a sense of welcoming, and introduce the university.

The overarching aim in our planning was to reduce unnecessary complexity and ‘keep it simple’. These ideas informed our approach:

- retain the existing pedagogical approach of the PS around personalised, small-group teaching as a way of maintaining quality in the educational experience of students;
- emphasise that learning outcomes and study load expectations were unchanged;
- use existing platforms, processes, and systems, adapting them for online delivery, as well as identifying and solving any issues in real-time as we worked; and
- accept no diminishment in quality of teaching/learning due to moving online.

At Southampton, we use Blackboard⁵ as our virtual learning environment to support campus-based learning. In early 2020, we were about to commence work on a series of upgrades to improve our installation of the software, including moving the site ‘to the cloud’ and adding Collaborate, a virtual classroom tool. This work would complement ongoing enhancements of our digital systems through the increasing use of Microsoft Office 365 and its Teams⁶ app.

5. <https://www.blackboard.com/>

6. <https://www.microsoft.com/>

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, the work on these systems was accelerated and prioritised, which meant that the PS team felt it had the tools to deliver an effective educational experience.

Blackboard is usually used in a supporting role for the pre-sessional courses, but, in moving the programme online, it became the main means of delivering teaching and the first, principal point of contact for students. This necessitated a re-conceptualisation of how the PS Blackboard sites were used and presented.

A ‘home page’ was created, which would act as the default landing page – the point of entry into the course as a whole. It was given a bespoke look, with banners and colourful icons. Each icon linked through to a key area of course activity, e.g. information about the course, main course content, student support information, etc. A bespoke course menu was created to prioritise course activities and to render navigation as easy and transparent as possible. The aim of doing this was to present a welcoming online face to students and create an organised way to navigate content.

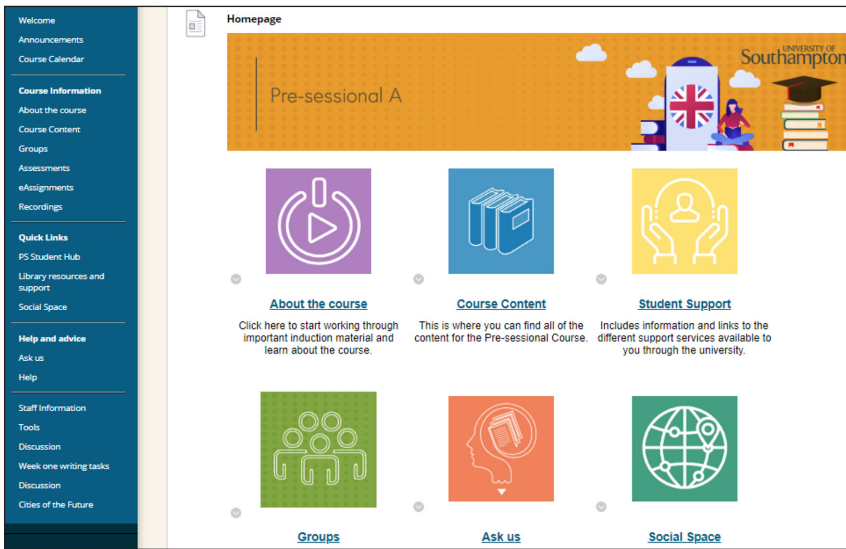
Information ‘About the course’ was positioned first, as this section gave information on how to navigate the online space, what to do if technical issues occurred, and also how the online course would work pedagogically (e.g. how to submit assignments or course expectations for study time and engagement). This scaffolding support was important to convey how the course works practically and technically, and to frame the educational expectations of learner and tutor. Usually, this kind of information is given verbally in class, and reinforced in downloadable course handbooks, then discussed informally with classmates and tutors. In the online space, such scaffolding of information and clarity of presentation aims instead to address the absence of social and informal information exchange.

Core course content was created for each week, and placed in a specific section on Blackboard. This material was created by the PS leadership and coordination team, and consisted of a range of materials including tasks, videos, and texts.

This material could be accessed and used by tutors in synchronous classroom sessions, and also used by students in self-study time.

Finally, a whole-cohort social area was added using a Padlet wall. This area aimed to encourage social interaction between students prior to travelling to the UK to study, and was intended to address the absence of face-to-face social exchanges (Figure 1).

Figure 1. PSA landing page



A key aspect of the pedagogical approach in the PS programme is small-group focus. Teaching, community building, and personal support is delivered through small-group interaction. Working with one Blackboard site and a large number of tutors with editing rights proved to be a technical challenge. We needed a space which could host overarching, whole-cohort information and content, but which could also have specific areas to which tutors could add resources and conduct group-specific activities.

This was achieved by making group spaces within the main Blackboard site. Each group space had its own discussion forum, Collaborate room, course folder, and separate group email function. This enabled tutors to manage their group space as they would their campus-based classroom by encouraging the sharing of class-specific resources, communication with group members, and the holding of synchronous discussions/lessons. Tutors could manage this space and their interactions as they wished. Tutors could also use this space to ‘troubleshoot’ issues of linguistic or content-related understanding, and also monitor attendance or uncover issues related to technical or course processes.

The PS programme maintained a high number of synchronous teaching sessions using both MS Teams and Collaborate with students. These ‘live’ sessions were essential in providing language practice in listening and speaking.

The mix of small-group space and live interaction aimed to supply an element of the interactive language experience students would be missing by not being in Southampton in person. Delivering an online course entirely through the medium of English provides a different kind of immersive language experience in itself – one that shifts in emphasis from oral and aural communication to reading and writing. The group spaces were intended to assist us in identifying issues in understanding and working on personalised solutions.

As I write this, the PS programmes have just drawn to a close. Over 1,500 students have taken the programme this year, and it is clear that they have engaged actively with tutors and online content. Outcomes in achievement are in line with previous years.

Robust induction programmes for tutors and students worked well in uncovering and solving technical issues with using Blackboard and Teams. As the course has progressed, we have experienced remarkably few technical issues – although we have not yet undertaken a full analysis. The course and its delivery model now exist as a repurposable entity, and, in this light, it will run again almost immediately to support international students in the Autumn of 2020.

Evaluative work on PS 2020 is just beginning as I write. However, I hope that my observations on the process of moving the PS programmes online so far might be of help to other colleagues with the need or desire to move an entire course programme from Face to Face (F2F) to online delivery.

My recommendations are:

- keep learning outcomes in focus, and stand firm on them. Teaching and learning can be just as effective online as on campus;
- maintain a good number of interactive, live classroom sessions – this is important in language classes;
- moving online offers the opportunity to guide students in more focussed self-study (especially in listening and reading practice);
- be aware that the online environment offers an immersive language experience of a different kind (increased emphasis on reading/writing, rather than oral/aural), and take measures to ensure content and processes are being understood appropriately;
- ensure scaffolding is in place to support students who are working at a distance and cannot physically ask questions/access support systems;
- utilise the staff, systems, and processes you have in a pragmatic way;
- work collaboratively and pull in support wherever you can find it; and
- respond to IT, and access issues as quickly as possible.

Although this article dwells mainly on technical matters, the experience gained in moving an entire PS course online at the fast pace dictated by the pandemic contributed to strengthening my belief in effective online education.

Prioritising pedagogy, learning design, and personal interaction and communication in online education are the roots to the successful facilitation of a transition from F2F to online language teaching and learning.

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