

9 How to flip it... never again? Towards agile models of work

Marion Sadoux¹

Abstract

This paper explores the way in which the Modern Languages team at the Oxford University Language Centre (OULC) sought to embrace the challenges of switching to a remote mode of teaching in the third term of 2019-20 as an opportunity to develop new ways of designing and delivering language courses for a flexible and hybrid future. It seeks to make note of agile recommendations towards further challenges to come.

Keywords: language teaching, delivery model, learning design, upskilling, elearning.

Back in January 2020, as I was preparing my presentation for the eLearning Symposium at the University of Southampton, I found myself contemplating the utterly disappointing use of eLearning to enhance the teaching and learning of languages in higher education, with an almost habitual sense of dread. I was reflecting on the all-too-familiar reduction of eLearning to its lowest possible common denominator – I use PPT – and on the difficulties I continued to encounter in my own career in convincing universities, let alone language teachers, that not all eLearning is bad or cheap, and that it can truly enhance teaching and learning. I had found an interesting survey in a recently published review of technology use in language teaching in higher education in the USA (Lomiccka & Lord, 2019) the results of which were at once disappointing and unsurprising. They indicated that preferred practice (teachers and learners) remained strongly anchored to what one can best describe as face-to-face models

1. University of Oxford Language Centre, Oxford, United Kingdom; marion.sadoux@lang.ox.ac.uk; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1875-6351>

How to cite: Sadoux, M. (2021). How to flip it... never again? Towards agile models of work. In A. Plutino & E. Polisca (Eds), *Languages at work, competent multilinguals and the pedagogical challenges of COVID-19* (pp. 89-95). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2021.49.1222>

of delivery in which technology plays a very limited role. This resonated with my own experience in different institutions and with the resistance encountered in terms of shifting practices from an educational engineering perspective. This resistance, I must say, is often ‘legitimate’, as language teachers in higher education rarely have the status, the salary, the time, the encouragement, or the opportunities to develop the critical engagement that would be required to genuinely transform professional practice (or to truly professionalise that practice).

Then came COVID-19 and the great flip! All of a sudden, the tools of eLearning had to be deployed across the sector.

At Oxford University, in some ways, we were lucky. The OULC had been an early adopter of the new Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Canvas, which was still in its early implementation phase; we had also been piloting our first fully online language courses in French, German, and Spanish, and the next phase of online courses were due to start in the run up to Easter. Use of the VLE to support face-to-face teaching was patchy though, and greatly varied among tutors and languages. With Canvas, we had a VLE which offered excellent affordances for languages, particularly with the seamless integration of video and voice tools – sadly, something that very few tutors had previously sought to use at all.

The switch to ‘remote’ teaching came later for us; our second term (Hilary term) was reaching its natural end as we made the decision to shut our doors on March 17th. We cancelled the face-to-face intensive courses that were due to start the week after the end of term; teachers and students, by then, had become very nervous. We then had a period of planned review meetings and staff development for the ensuing two weeks, followed by a long break leading to our third term of teaching, which started in late April. So, we flipped and met online – first in the virtual classroom provided by the open source web conferencing ‘Big Blue Button’, where we also held daily lunchtime social meetings in an effort to ‘normalise’ and ‘humanise’ the use of the synchronous video conferencing.

Unlike many others, we were able to observe, listen to, and see the difficulties encountered in the sector by those who had to pivot overnight to online delivery. Unlike most others, we also subsequently had an entire term to experiment with the remote teaching model that we had designed, collect feedback from our learners, and run a second iteration of courses as intensive online summer courses, whilst also tweaking the model of delivery. Another dimension that supported our endeavours was, without a doubt, linked to the very structure of the institution – the devolved nature of the collegiate university offered a blanket protection against central top-down diktats, and left a lot of room to manoeuvre to develop bespoke solutions in response to our needs, our learners' needs, and our tutors' needs. As early adopters of the new VLE, we were also able to rely on our robust relationships with the learning technologists, who also played a considerable role in ensuring that Information Technology (IT) services were able to work around bespoke solutions for us. We were also fortunate in that the university was eager to invest in making sure that the quality of the teaching and learning experience remained high, and to limit any potential reputational damage.

This investment took various forms. In the OULC, the senior management team decided to acknowledge that the continuation of teaching would be on a best-efforts basis. We lowered the fees for all our courses by 25%, and we gave our learners the option to opt out of our year-long courses, and, if they wished or needed to, we offered them the option to take their assessments earlier than scheduled. Some 67% of our learners in those year-long courses opted to continue, giving us a strong sense of trust.

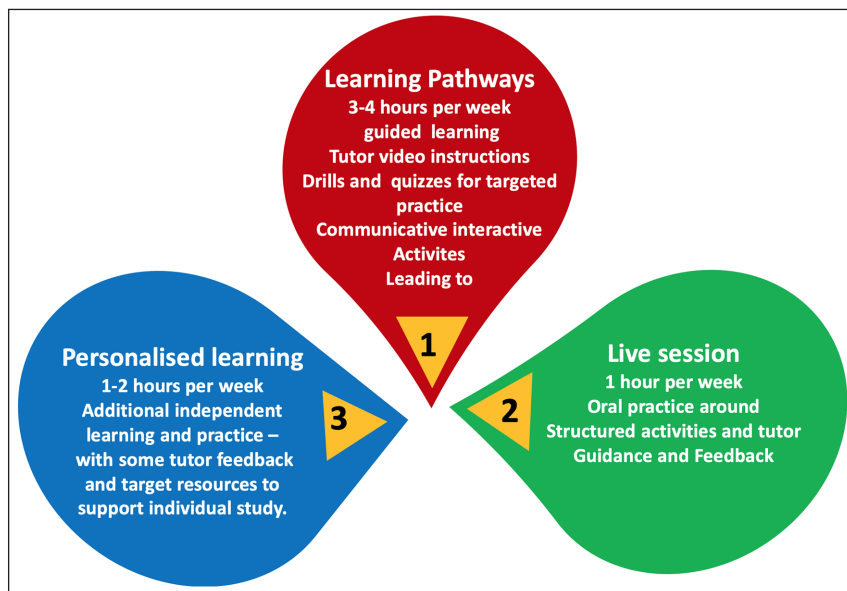
Another form of investment came in the establishment within the OULC of a peer-mentoring scheme. The workshops and meetings held during the two-week lead up to the Easter vacation were critical in developing the structure of the delivery model and in further analysing and understanding the needs of the team in terms of upskilling and support. This helped craft a strong case for additional spending to buy time throughout the third term. The early online teaching practitioners who had collaborated to the development of our online course pilots became mentors. This scheme enabled us to have daily mentoring

sessions with tutors who needed support and for general trouble shooting; this small group of mentors were also able to have weekly meetings in order to identify needs that could be met through a more generic and sustained intervention. Finally, a bespoke container (or course) on the VLE was set up to host all the required guidance, templates, video tutorials on how to use or set up certain tools, questions, discussions, and sharing of best practices. At the start of our remote teaching term, I had already spent over 100 hours setting up this platform, and, throughout the 11 weeks of the term, tutors spent an average of 58 hours each making use of its resources. The investment in time that our tutors dedicated to this transformation – painful for some, an epiphany for others – was exceptional in all the senses of the word, enormous and not to be taken as an acceptable norm!

What did we do exactly? We reconfigured what had thus far been an implied model of face-to-face delivery (in reality, covering wide ranging and disparate practices) to work for online teaching. Tutors were given a template to follow. I purposely directed the work away from what seemed a disastrous and ubiquitous model of a 100% switch to online synchronous replacement of face-to-face interactions, and, instead, designed a hybrid flexible template that would also have the potential to shape future practice in a more homogenous way. Most importantly, the hybrid mix of asynchronous and synchronous elements aimed to ensure maximal access and engagement from learners, irrespective of their access to good broadband. If our online course pilots had taught us one thing, it was indeed not to rely too much on the quality of sound in live sessions. In this model, represented in [Figure 1](#) below, synchronous online sessions are short and designed exclusively for the purpose of learner spoken interactions that have been scaffolded by the asynchronous learning pathway; there, the tutor becomes a guide and a facilitator, but leaves the centre stage to the learners as much as possible.

The learning pathways follow a rigid template in terms of navigational layout and structure, including seemingly annoying details such as how long learners should expect to spend on a given section.

Figure 1. Model for designing and delivering language courses



The way we worked had to change radically. From time spent with learners in a classroom, we shifted to time spent on the creation of learning pathways, the monitoring of discussions, and the production of feedback. This was resourced through a reduction in teaching load, and in the closing or postponed scheduling (as online intensives at the end of term) of some courses. Tutors had to spend less time on live delivery to be able to undertake the rest of the design work mentioned above.

This required intensive monitoring, feedback, support, and multiple check points to ensure that learners were satisfied and that tutors were coping. A small number of students felt that going from three hours of face-to-face teaching down to 30 minutes in class was not sufficient, and asked for the full three hours to be reinstated; some felt that they had had to work harder, and appreciated being able to distribute the time flexibly. The vast majority of the feedback, though, was

positive, and a high number of learners commented on the superiority, in their view, of this delivery model. As one learner put it, “providing detailed/specific material to go through before the session helps to focus learning”.

Looking back, what we accomplished – in disparate ways and in different styles, even within the structure of a template – is literally awesome. Many language teachers have had to learn a new way to do their job; faced with new daunting technology they would never have chosen to use, many have experienced moments of despair, ranging from frustration to alienation. We must pause for a moment and reflect on the tensions between what we gained and what we lost, what we committed in terms of good will, time, and effort, and what a realistic professional expectation going forward could be. Where do we go from now to make sure this never happens again? How do we learn the lesson of what lesson we need to learn?

Arguably, for the shifts in beliefs, attitudes, and identity, as well as the necessary new ways of working that we needed to develop, the role of our institutions locally and across the sector in easing or worsening such tensions is more critical than ever. We need fair instruments to account for the changes brought to our ways of working, and we need to make sure that, rather than responding to a single crisis (COVID-19), we are building resilience towards a sustainable future which we are able to embrace as it emerges. Developing this agility is not really about technology – it is about inventing new ways of collaborating, new ways of learning together, and constantly rethinking, recreating, and prototyping what we do.

We have an opportunity to re-evaluate what good teaching and learning is, and how to best respond to the needs of diverse learners in different institutions. We need to carefully rethink what this means in terms of skills, knowledge, and expertise from teachers and learners, and we need to ensure that, whilst we support the development of new competencies, we are equally sensitive to the problematic uprooting this may engender in relation to professional identity, core values, and beliefs. We need new tools to account for time needed in this adjustment. One essential thing that eLearning can provide us with is an ecology

of learning which opens towards more agile and sustainable ways of working – together and in communities of practice.

Reference

Lomicka, L., & Lord, G. (2019). Reframing technology's role in language teaching: a retrospective report. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 39, 8-23. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0267190519000011>



Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Contact: info@research-publishing.net

© 2021 by Editors (collective work)
© 2021 by Authors (individual work)

Languages at work, competent multilinguals and the pedagogical challenges of COVID-19
Edited by Alessia Plutino and Elena Polisca

Publication date: 2021/02/26

Rights: the whole volume is published under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives International (CC BY-NC-ND) licence; **individual articles may have a different licence.** Under the CC BY-NC-ND licence, the volume is freely available online (<https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2021.49.9782490057832>) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.

Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book is believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover layout by © 2021 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-83-2 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-84-9 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-82-5 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)

Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.

A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: février 2021.
