

# 8 Creating communities of practice: The Harvard Language Center's role in supporting language instruction during the pandemic

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## Abstract

When Harvard University moved all instruction into an online modality in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, The Language Center positioned itself as a critical source of guidance on best practices in this new environment. For Harvard, an institution that has always prioritized face-to-face instruction above all other formats, 2020 has been a watershed moment that has forced faculty to reconsider nearly everything about the way they organize and deliver their courses. Owing to the pandemic crisis, we find ourselves in a moment in which the efficacy of these modalities in language learning is, despite initial concerns, being proven day after day. In the context of this crisis, The Language Center has developed training and support mechanisms for this transition, focusing on desired learning outcomes, centering instructor and student experience, and positioning the language faculty to be able to successfully employ hybrid and online approaches to instruction that will continue to serve them well after the crisis abates. This contribution describes the strategies and actions that The Language Center took to ensure the success of the remote teaching and learning of languages at Harvard University in the first term of the 2020-2021 academic year, after the emergency evacuation of campus in March

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of 2020, and offers a model for other centers engaged in academic support. While extensive insights on the success of these efforts are still pending, given the timing of this crisis and the interventions undertaken, early feedback suggests that faculty have found provided resources to be useful, and their intention is to adopt aspects of technologically-mediated instruction in their face-to-face teaching going forward.

**Keywords: COVID-19, remote online instruction, training and support, Harvard Language Center, USA.**

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## 1. Introduction

In March of 2020, central leadership at Harvard University made the determination that all courses would be conducted online for the remainder of the semester due to concerns about the nature, spread, and consequences of COVID-19. Furthermore, it was announced that all courses offered in June, July and August would be taught online as well, and that a decision would be made at that time as to whether the remainder of 2020 would allow teaching face-to-face, in a hybrid framework, or in an online modality. In early July, the institution decided to move all instruction for the academic year 2020-2021 online, although a limited number of first-year students would be invited to live on campus in socially-distanced housing during first semester (i.e. the term spanning from September to December) and fourth-year students would be invited back to campus for second semester (the term spanning from January to May), so as to be able to finish out their Harvard experience on campus. Faculty and staff are presently encouraged to work from home, where practicable, and a COVID testing regimen has been set up for those who must be on campus to perform work, including students.

The magnitude of this decision and its impact cannot be overstated. Teaching and learning at Harvard has historically been conducted face-to-face, and where possible, in small classes that afford a highly personalized educational

experience. Language courses were capped at 18 students prior to the pandemic; in the current online modality, they are capped at 12. For both faculty and students, teaching and learning online through the medium of technologies both synchronous and asynchronous is entirely new. The Language Center has stepped forward to take a proactive role in managing and facilitating a minimally disruptive transition to remote instruction, and a thoughtful approach to online teaching and learning in the COVID crisis.

### **1.1. Institutional context**

Harvard University, founded in 1636, is the oldest institution of higher education in the United States. It is comprised of Harvard College, which houses and educates undergraduates, as well as a number of graduate schools including the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard Law School, the Harvard Business School, the Harvard Medical School, the Graduate School of Education, the School of Divinity, the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, and the Chan School of Public Health. Its student body is highly diverse: in 2019, Harvard welcomed 10,285 students and scholars from 155 countries. In academic year 2019-2020, Harvard enrolled a total of 23,731 students at all levels, across all programs. Within the college, which will be the focus of this study, 819 students from 103 countries are included in the 6,716 undergraduate students enrolled in the 2019-2020 academic year.

Of the students attending Harvard College, 37% self-identify as White, 21% are Asian, 11% are Hispanic/Latinx, 9% are Black/African-American, and 8% are multiracial. The ratio of female to male students is approximately 1:1. Harvard's students are also economically diverse; the institution provided USD193M in grants to enrolled students in the fall of 2019, supplemented by USD11M in federal grants and external grants of USD12M. These awards are typically made on the basis of demonstrated financial need. Harvard is highly selective; its admit rate has declined over the last 20 years to approximately 4% of applicants.

Harvard University employs 4,500 people in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Of these, slightly less than 2,000 are faculty and researchers. The remainder

are administrative and professional staff, and support personnel. The Language Center at Harvard has a staff of three administrative professionals and supports the approximately 80 languages taught at Harvard.

## 1.2. Assumptions

A few assumptions underpin the move to online teaching and learning, which should not itself be conflated with the emergency measures taken for remote instruction in the immediate wake of the move from campus (Ross & DiSalvo, 2020). The first of these is that most students have access to a basic toolkit of affordances and applications that will allow them to be successful online learners. These include internet access which Harvard has supplemented where necessary through the distribution of WiFi hotspots connecting to mobile networks for students who were unable to return to campus. Most students have access to their own computers or a shared computer; where this is not possible, Harvard has distributed laptops, iPads, and other essential devices such as webcams to students and faculty alike. All students have access to Canvas, the university's learning management system, and to tools such as Zoom, AnnotationsX (a collaborative reading and annotation tool produced at Harvard), and specific groups of students – those in language courses – are provided with VoiceThread<sup>3</sup>, a platform for asynchronous interaction and discussion around media, Extempore<sup>4</sup>, an application to allow for oral production and evaluation outside of class, and support for teletandem activities. In those cases where teaching staff find themselves abroad and unable to return to the US, Harvard reimburses the local purchase of technology that they need to perform their work successfully.

A second set of assumptions revolves around faculty and student experience with, and facility in, using these affordances and applications. For many faculty used to teaching face-to-face, the experience of moving instruction online has been challenging. A survey done by The Language Center early

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3. <https://voicethread.com>

4. <https://extemporeapp.com>

in the first semester of 2020-2021 (see [supplementary materials](#)), however, indicates that the majority of respondents did not feel a need to completely redesign their curricula for the move to remote instruction in Spring 2020. Some adaptations in terms of task design and communication, as well as in restructuring their courses for online delivery, sufficed in the short term, but often these changes required learning one or two completely new tools at most, as well as incorporating a training module for students in the use of those tools. Many, however, took significant time between May and August of 2020 to rethink and redesign their courses in preparation for the forthcoming semester, based on their experiences and student feedback on the remote instruction experience. Data from the survey suggests that a plurality of faculty members will incorporate technologies and strategies that they have used during the current crisis in post-COVID iterations of their classes.

## 2. Training and support

Harvard's community was fortunate to learn of the decision to go fully remote for the 2020-2021 school year in July of 2020, well in advance of the start to the semester, and faculty and staff were thus given adequate time to think and plan for how existing course offerings could be moved online. During this pre-semester planning phase, The Language Center reached out to every language program in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences to offer help in preparing instructors to teach online. In effect, this situation gave The Language Center a chance to foreground our capabilities and support model and establish ourselves as a knowledge base for faculty within the context of the crisis. Our plan for assisting faculty with remote language teaching involved two stages: pre-semester training and ongoing support. We assumed that many instructors would be interested in working with us *a priori*, but certainly not all, and we therefore expected that much of the ongoing support would reach back to the fundamentals taught in the pre-semester training. So, while there is significant overlap between these two components, we are aware of the need for faculty to feel that the training they receive at any given moment is neither beyond them nor beneath them, which therefore required us to be versatile and nimble in what we offered and how we

offered it. Our pre-semester training mostly took the form of pre-announced Zoom webinars on specific Harvard-licensed tools, while our ongoing support continues to be more situational and one-on-one. In the first instance we aim to be anticipatory, and in the second we aim to be responsive.

We note that the timing of this contribution, which we are writing as Harvard and the rest of the United States continue to grapple with the pandemic, renders us unable to present a quantitative summary of the impact of our efforts. We believe that it is still worthwhile, however, to reflect in this moment upon how we approached the sudden onset of remote learning and the need to pivot the entire university to a remote-only academic year in 2020-2021. In this moment, while it would be irresponsible to refer to early feedback and impressions we have obtained as hard data, or even identify causality in the relationship between our work and what learning outcomes may be apparent, there is value in assessing our own decisions and their immediate ramifications from where we stand now, particularly given the fact that recent experience so often impacts decisions for the future, whether data-driven or not.

The Language Center coordinated with a number of other campus units, including the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning<sup>5</sup>, the Academic Technology Group<sup>6</sup> within Harvard University Information Technology (HUIT), the dean of the college, and the Division of Continuing Education, to deliver a series of topical workshops to faculty and teaching staff who were abruptly asked to move to an online modality. These ranged from a five-day intensive workshop for summer school instructors on designing and delivering an online language course, to a mandated three-day workshop for faculty in languages and literatures, to more focused workshops on creating learning communities in this environment, the use of specific tools, and assessment in online courses.

Of primary importance to us was to maintain consistency in our approach to training faculty, and to establish a set of principles that underlay everything we

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5. <https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/>

6. <https://atg.fas.harvard.edu/>

did. Firstly, cognitive load (Sweller, 2011) is a concern, both for instructors and for students. Anyone designing or using online learning materials and strategies must be mindful of how many tools they are asking their students and in many cases their teaching staff to deploy for the first time. We encouraged those in the role of creating syllabi and crafting lesson plans to think critically about whether the tools they were using were enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in a given setting, or simply being used for their own sake. We strongly encouraged instructors to make training and support a key part of their own course plans, as well, by first teaching students about the tools they would need and then gradually building in new information atop that foundation as it grew stronger. Harvard language instructors, having been trained in a communicative approach to language teaching (see Brandl, 2008), were no strangers to the concept of scaffolding (see Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 131), and this particular subset of our training materials on careful scaffolding and avoiding cognitive overload lined up well with principles to which our population already subscribed.

Secondly, we worked in close concert with academic technology staff at the university and took great care that our training directed faculty to learn and use the tools that Harvard had licensed and was prepared to support. At times, faculty in transition to remote learning had understandably reached for free, open-source tools that they had found either by consulting colleagues at other universities or by searching the internet themselves. When this led them to consult us for help, our job was to meet them where they were and help them find a way to realize their teaching objectives using the platforms that the university had approved and could support. For example, if a professor wanted to use an open-source blogging platform for students to research and discuss relevant topics in language, we helped them transition that same project, together with all its important pedagogical functions and objectives, to a Canvas-based discussion forum. This not only guaranteed that Harvard technology staff would be able to assist them in the event of difficulties but also protected them and their students from possible data privacy and accessibility issues.

Our third principle of faculty support stemmed from that very concern: that our training and support materials complied with Harvard's university-wide

standards for data protection and user accessibility. Early in the process, we explicitly committed to helping faculty work within Harvard-supported educational resources, which had been thoroughly vetted and found to comply with the university's stringent policies on privacy and accessibility. In addition to making sure we and our constituents were using these approved tools for teaching and learning, we also made sure that we frequently reminded faculty that the university's concerns should be theirs as well. Our website has a detailed online teaching and learning section<sup>7</sup> that contains curated and annotated deep links to university policy on accessibility, data privacy, and copyright and fair use. Through Harvard libraries, for example, students or faculty can access data-driven consultations on the accessibility and user-friendliness of Harvard-owned websites. Harvard's Accessibility Education Office<sup>8</sup> hosts a website full of detailed, easy-to-understand information about how to increase the accessibility of web-based learning content, and Harvard's Office of the General Counsel<sup>9</sup> has a website where community members can read in detail about how copyright and data privacy laws affect the practice of online teaching. We consistently and clearly encourage faculty members with whom we consult to learn not only how to work within the university's regulations, but also how to benefit from the guidance thereon.

### 3. Delivery

Harvard has historically privileged face-to-face instruction of languages, and small class sizes, even to the extent of allowing students to petition to learn languages that are almost never taught in US classrooms. These courses tend to be very small, with perhaps one or two students electing to learn Gullah, Mongolian, Nepali, or Icelandic for their very specific purposes. The use of technology, including that which has been readily available through the institution, has in many cases been seen as unnecessary for, if not an impediment

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7. <https://language.fas.harvard.edu/resources-remote-instruction-language-courses>

8. <https://ao.fas.harvard.edu/>

9. <https://ogc.harvard.edu/>



to, instruction, because its affordances have not been seen as significantly contributing to highly personalized instruction for a small cohort of students. The COVID-19 crisis has perhaps for the better changed that perspective.

In preparation for Fall semester, all faculty who were to be teaching were required by the dean of the college to sign up for training in how to move a face-to-face course into an online environment. The Language Center helped coordinate and deliver a three-day workshop for language instructors that focused on the adaptation of curriculum and teaching strategies to an online format. In working with language program directors in a number of departments, we incorporated research-supported, outcome-driven methodologies of language teaching into the core of our guidance. All languages at Harvard are taught with a student-centered focus, though individual departments are given considerable license to decide which methodologies to embrace; our role is not to prescribe but to support and optimize, and language faculty at Harvard – particularly the language program directors – are well-acquainted with the research of instructed second language acquisition. Therefore, the common denominator in our remote teaching workshops was to foreground the use of student-centered, interactive, and task-based activities, and to help teachers find ways to minimize one-way transferral of information for students to absorb, as in a lecture format delivered via Zoom or other technology. For the languages with very small enrollments, this was perhaps a simpler matter than for those with multiple sections as well as teaching fellows – graduate students who teach and provide instructional support as part of their professional development and financial aid package. The instructors of less-commonly-taught languages, for instance Yoruba, Vietnamese, Gullah, or Norwegian, needed to understand how to use Harvard’s videoconferencing platform, Zoom, how to distribute (typically self-created) materials to their students, how to receive completed work from students, and how to assess student outcomes reliably. These classes have tended to look similar to their pre-COVID counterparts; plenary sessions via Zoom in which materials are presented, drill activities are conducted, and students’ spoken language abilities are assessed. Canvas, the university’s learning management system, has typically been used in the past as a document repository and as a site for

students to upload completed assignments. In a few cases, instructors in these courses are adopting other tools to support their students' learning. African languages faculty, for example, are using VoiceThread as a digital storytelling platform, allowing students to explore the nature of oral transmission of culture and to respond to prompts that are culturally authentic, if mediated by technology.

The rupture inherent in a move to online has in some cases provided language programs – particularly those which are well-staffed and supported, an opportunity to rethink their curricula entirely, and in some cases to move from commercial textbooks toward educational resources that are either open, or available for license from peer institutions. The German department has moved from a commercially-produced textbook to an online resource created at Princeton University, called Der|Die|Das<sup>10</sup>. Rather than retrenching to a reliance on an 'easy' solution provided by publishers, they have made a clean break from an environment and set of resources that no longer was meeting their needs. The Spanish department developed its own curriculum, modeled to some degree on the educational resource adopted by the German department.

It should be no surprise that course organization and scaffolding student use of online platforms and materials have proven to be essential in designing online language classes. In March 2020 The Language Center developed an orientation module that was made available to all faculty building courses in this modality. The module contains a course 'map', a set of surveys on learner preferences and self-perceived ability in the language, an inventory survey that asks students to relate their level of comfort and ability using particular technologies, and an inventory of the affordances they have available to them. This module has been widely deployed and adapted across online courses and serves to prepare faculty to address student needs *ab initio*.

We are seeing a few different models of course organization across language divisions at Harvard. Some large programs, such as Spanish and French, have

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10. <https://www.dddgerman.org/>

opted to create a single Canvas instance into which all sections of a multi-section course are enrolled; students must select the assignments and communications channels that pertain to their section. Other languages, such as German and Portuguese, have opted to create a Canvas site for each section. Most courses are organized by module, a division which correlates to week or unit, depending on the program's choice.

#### **4. Lessons learned and planning for the future**

This past year has provided The Language Center with an unprecedented opportunity for teaching new material to a wide and diverse audience, and we have learned that the principles that we are urging them to espouse are just as important for our own instruction. In teaching our community the skills and affordances needed for effective online instruction, we have striven to model evidence-based pedagogical strategies, not just for the sake of example but for ensuring maximal uptake of best practices.

Firstly, language instructors are just as susceptible to cognitive overload as their students, and we need to be mindful of that when teaching and modeling new tools. When teaching a workshop on our learning management system, Canvas, we have had to recognize a wide variety of comfort levels with the platform and pace content appropriately. We cannot expect faculty to learn to create an effective and clear assignment without first teaching them how the content editor works, and if someone needs to learn how to embed a media file, they cannot be expected to retain that skill if they are learning it on top of five other brand new functions they have never used before. Learning outcomes must always be front of mind, for us as well as for those we hope to teach, and our teaching modules must be tailored and focused to respect the amount of new information an instructor can credibly retain. We created a Canvas shell for instructors only in which every member could use instructor privileges to experiment with the platform's many affordances, its main objective being to encourage instructors to *do* things rather than merely *ask* things in the course of deciding how they would teach. The principle of creating low-stakes tasks

as a gateway to effective learning and strengthening of skills has been proven effective in language pedagogy (Rubio, 2015), and it is equally so for those learning the lexicon of online instruction.

We think it important to frame our current situation as an opportunity for thinking about the future. We intend to focus ongoing language center efforts in three areas: creation of a series of self-paced training modules for instructors who need to learn how to implement online teaching tools in their courses, exploration of different models for flexible instruction even when face-to-face instruction again becomes possible, and continued advocacy for technology in language instruction.

In an attempt to begin assessing the impact of our interventions in the language teaching community at Harvard, we have begun collecting informal feedback regarding instructional sessions on remote language teaching that we conducted in March and again in June of 2020, in which we modeled synchronous and asynchronous approaches tailored to the specific needs of the instructors who were in that moment preparing to teach. The responses we have received to date indicate that they were, indeed, helpful in the process of course planning, and as such we plan to make a flexible, self-paced version of these sessions widely available to language teaching staff across the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, or the college).

We envision a series of modules addressing the various synchronous and asynchronous tools Harvard has licensed for educational use, with a particular focus on how these affordances can help faculty work toward the specific learning outcomes they hope to produce. If instructors could access this repository at any time, they might feel freer to repeat certain modules when they inevitably need a refresher on some of the things they had previously learned. Furthermore, we hope that teaching staff will continue to use the various online tools they worked with in 2020 to enhance their teaching when we return to in-person instruction. The Language Center will host a post-term debriefing session to allow faculty to share their experiences with their course's structure, delivery, and outcomes, but we are already gathering information on these elements via informal conversations.

On an institutional level, we hope that pedagogical objectives will cement themselves in the foreground of discussions around the implementation of other models of hybrid instruction. There are currently many individual models of ‘flexible’ instruction, though few institutions have the technological resources to adopt a fully HyFlex model, which implies that any student can choose on any given day whether to attend any given class in person or from a remote location, or indeed not to attend (Beatty, 2019). HyFlex – currently of great interest to administrators – assumes, of course, that faculty are sufficiently equipped and supported to deliver this type of exceedingly flexible teaching without hindering the learning objectives they are pursuing, and that the structure of the course lends itself to a model in which synchronous face-to-face, synchronous remote, and asynchronous modalities can be equitably leveraged by students. In the past, higher education has seen online programs implemented as a response to the financial or logistical needs of their institutions, irrespective of whether online teaching makes sense for the subject matter at hand. Now that there is more data on which online affordances work best in which contexts and how some tools can be leveraged effectively as an accompaniment to face-to-face learning, it should follow that resources for development of online teaching and learning programs be allocated, at least in part, based on which disciplines can benefit the most from a more flexible model of instruction.

Harvard’s language faculty and students have met this moment with exceptional creativity and an inspiring collaborative spirit, and we hope to preserve a record of the work that has emerged as a result. Faculty who participated in an end-of-term debrief and symposium (December 2020) shared a number of innovative practices incorporating dynamic assessment techniques, project-based learning, and in at least one case, the move away from publisher-produced materials to a ‘custom’ curriculum. In addition to making people feel good about their successes by showcasing and celebrating them, we plan to create a repository of best practices that have distinguished themselves this year. From here, we can move forward with a more organized overarching structure that will guide future decisions about where, when, and in what way to implement online and blended learning not as crisis management but as an integral part of the most effective pedagogical approach to language teaching and learning.

## 5. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/o3ztmhwle94oymiyiqcet5z1ut0uop88>

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