



Flexibility is the watchword

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March 2020: Blindsided by a Sneaking Suspicion

Spring semester 2020 was proceeding as usual at the beginning of March for our large Spanish Language Program, which consists of a four-course sequence serving around one thousand students each semester and is staffed by an experienced coordinator for each course, as well as thirty highly engaged instructors (both graduate students and professional lecturers). We had reached spring break without incident and were looking forward to the final quarter of the academic year for a variety of reasons, including the resumption of data collection for two classroom-based research projects focused on new approaches to assessing student learning in our third- and fourth-semester courses. On March 11, the Wednesday of spring break week, the University of Kansas administrators made the decision to ask that students not return to campus after the break and to move all courses online for an unspecified amount of time. The date to resume classes was pushed back by one week, leaving us with ten days to redesign four face-to-face courses at midsemester to function in an online-only environment for the foreseeable future. To further complicate this daunting charge, the administration (including our own departmental leadership) advised that the new online versions of the courses be conducted asynchronously in order to maximize *flexibility*.

I pondered these parameters for a few days, not wanting to interrupt the coordinators' well-earned spring break and not yet ready to begin dismantling the sequence of courses that we have been consistently (re)designing and improving through collaboration and formative assessment for more than a decade. Asynchronous? How were students to practice their developing verbal abilities if there was to be no real-time interaction? Flexible? Our program was many things—challenging, innovative, intentional, consistent, fair, successful—but flexible was not an attribute that came to mind upon reflection. In fact, for all of the curricular innovations we had embraced with respect to approach, content, materials, and implementation, I had to admit that in many ways our program was still rather traditional. For example, courses are only offered in formats that require face-to-face meetings (though all four embrace blended learning approaches with asynchronous “virtual” class days fully integrated into the first, second and fourth semester courses). The two first-year courses comprise five credit hours each, while the second-year courses each count for three credit hours. We have a strict attendance policy (after the equivalent of one full week of absences for any reason, one percentage point is deducted from the final course grade for each subsequent absence with exceptions only for documented exigencies/university-related absences); active class participation is worth up to 20 percent of the final course grade and there is no way to make up class participation. Late work is not typically accepted in any of the courses, and the instructors are committed team members who understand that making exceptions that are not approved by the course coordinator only creates unfair circumstances for all of the other students and instructors. It is challenging to build a culture in which instructors consistently use first-person plural pronouns when referring to *our* students and course policies are regularly enforced and generally respected (albeit grudgingly in some cases), as the clear rationale for these rigorous and uniform policies must be continually articulated and then consistently practiced by a

diverse group of instructors with widely varying levels of experience. These policies are subject to continual revision after each term, based on instructor and student feedback, and then re-articulated before each new semester begins. While this system has worked well for years, flexibility has not been a driving principle in our program; to be honest, I had gradually become aware that this inflexibility might be a problem over the course of the year leading up to March 11, 2020. Our pedagogical approach has consistently evolved to incorporate research on instructed second language acquisition and innovations in curricular design and technology, but the course policies looked suspiciously similar to the ones I had brought with me from my doctoral studies sixteen years ago.

March 16–May 15: Let It Go

At the risk of engendering resentment from my colleagues at other institutions, I must admit that the abrupt transition to all online was actually rather painless for us. Our courses already employed native digital learning materials (fully paperless inside and outside of the classroom) on very stable platforms. The students and instructors were already accustomed to working with the necessary technology (including the option to meet with instructors via Zoom for office hours rather than coming in person), so that aspect of remote instruction did not present a challenge. The first-year courses assess student learning through the realization of meaningful end-of-unit projects that are shared with the class in a socially-networked portfolio system, and much of the assessment in the second-year courses could be easily administered through our learning management system (LMS).

As I mulled over how to replace class time that had been dedicated entirely to interaction among students and instructors, a friend sent me a link to Rebecca Barret Fox's viral blog post called "Please do a bad job putting your courses online." As would be the case for many colleagues, her recommendations (including the endorsement of requiring no synchronous class meetings) resonated more than University administrators' insistence on "flexibility." These were extraordinary circumstances that no one could have anticipated, and all of the stakeholders in our courses were shell-shocked and grappling with a new reality. What if teaching and learning Spanish were *not* one more stressor atop a mountain of unavoidable anxiety? This became the guiding principle for our transition to asynchronous online coursework to complete the semester. The coordinators did most of the heavy lifting, with the help of our team of instructors in each course and the fabulous folks at LingroLearning, and by the end of our transition week we had redesigned the syllabi for the second half of each of our four courses and adjusted our expectations for the semester with a premium on kindness and compassion for our students and for ourselves.

First and Second Semester Courses

Because the first-year courses had daily preparation as an established routine (model texts with practice for applying explicit listening/viewing and reading comprehension strategies, vocabulary and grammar presentations with an instructional sequence moving from input to output, cultural presentations with directed Web research activities), we decided to work within this structure more or less as scheduled, but we did emphasize to students that any work could be completed or submitted later, as needed. This allowed the in-class oral and written collaboration to be replaced by asynchronous voice-recorded and written activities that were already available with our learning materials but that we had not originally assigned. The students then completed the projects at the end of each unit to demonstrate their learning just as before. Instructors were available by email and Zoom and spent the equivalent of their classroom time and office hours supporting their students' learning and spot checking the "class work" to offer feedback.

Third and Fourth Semester Courses

The changes to the second-year courses were more dramatic. The coordinators reorganized the courses on a weekly schedule, with all work for a given week due on Sunday night (with the same caveats about accepting late work as in the first-year courses). Because these courses are team-taught with collaboratively created and shared lesson plans, each instructor created an embedded narration of the existing PowerPoint presentations for one week of class and worked with the course coordinators to translate the interactive

class activities into individually completed comprehension checks in our LMS. Other assignments, such as blog posts, asynchronous discussion boards, and capstone projects were maintained from the original courses. After the transition week, the role of the instructors shifted primarily to supporting individual students' needs and providing feedback, as was the case in the first-year courses.

The results were really as good as could be expected given the circumstances. Compassion and concern for our students' wellness guided our administration. Grades were inflated, all requests for accommodations and extensions were granted. No student failed the class based on absences from before the shift to remote learning, and the feedback from students was overwhelmingly positive. In fact, it turned out to be the least stressful end of a semester that I have ever experienced, with only three students questioning their final grades across all four courses and no greater attrition than in previous semesters. By the measures in focus, we successfully completed our course programs without unnecessary additions to the anxieties and stresses that we were all experiencing during the initial months of the pandemic.

This compassion was clearly appreciated by most of our students, and in turn by our instructors and coordinators. It was also very welcome to me personally. While the shift to "corona time" had been easier than feared as a Language Program Director, it was as destabilizing for me personally—as a mother, wife, friend and citizen of this of this country—as it was for everyone else. My first-born child did not get to experience any of the anticipated rites of passage, or the pomp and circumstance, of his last semester of high school; instead we worried about whether he would be attending college in the fall as planned. My very extroverted and social 12-year-old daughter needed constant support while adjusting to life without in-person school or sports. I spent far too much time on Twitter. In many ways our lives became virtual, and I was so depleted by adjusting my expectations downwards that I began to wonder how I could ever *hold the line* again at work or at home. After two months of these experiences, the painless close to the semester in mid-May left me thinking that maybe we were on to something with this *flexible* approach. Still, deep down, there was an awareness that I had accepted flexible to mean something more like *loosey goosey* and devoid of rigor or ambition. The "measures in focus" mentioned above did not, in fact, include student learning outcomes.

June: Moving Forward Balancing *Sthira* and *Sukha*

It's been about a month since the spring semester ended. In the intervening time everything has become more complicated. The University of Kansas now has an incomprehensibly large budget crisis, and as a result, most of our talented lecturers have yet to be invited back to renew their year-to-year contracts. The four course coordinators are on multi-year contracts and so are safe. As you might expect, I have been tasked by the university to adapt the four-course sequence to be flexible for the fall: ideally, we are told, the courses should be able to shift seamlessly between a socially distanced face-to-face (with optional virtual attendance) and a fully online format. These parameters all still percolating in my mind, and it is difficult to dig in with the world feeling even more chaotic and upsetting. This, along with my own reticence about asking instructors and students to be in the classroom at all in the fall, has resulted in deep ambivalence. At times it strikes me as absurd to even try to design courses that are intended for face-to-face and online contexts simultaneously, and at other moments it strikes me as a unique and serendipitous opportunity to reimagine how our program could better serve our students who often complained about its rigid structure and just as often perceived their own learning to be very successful in reflection to assignments and course evaluations.

I practice and teach yoga, and during the pandemic I've become aware that my yoga practice is seeping into my understanding of what it means to be a successful language program director. I believe that this is a good thing. A central tenant of yoga is that through balancing *sthira* and *sukha*—effort and ease—we can travel a more joyful path. This principle prompts me to ask if there really is an inherent tension between a course designed to accommodate our students' increasingly complicated lives (even in a post-pandemic world) and one that sets meaningful expectations for their learning while structuring pathways for their success as learners of Spanish and Hispanic cultures. If the tension does exist, does this have to be a

problem? Can learning to balance the need for compassion with the need for rigorously pursued learning outcomes lead to a middle way—the exquisite balance between effort and ease, between structure and openness? It strikes me that the circumstances of the moment call for building an intentional and stable framework that allows for plasticity and responsiveness, not unlike a tree that sways with the breeze and bends securely in a storm because it is supported by a sturdy trunk and deep roots.

In this analogy, of course, these deep roots refer to student learning outcomes (both perceived and directly measured), and I am relieved to report that my faith in them has survived this crisis. I am also ready to confront the outdated course policies that for too many years have informed the deep structure of our otherwise innovative language program. It has only taken a global pandemic, harrowing economic and societal crises and a lot of yoga to realize that it is time to let go of routines that limit us unnecessarily, and instead to explore new ways to balance rigor and grace to create flexible learning experiences that will better serve students and instructors alike.

References

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About the Author

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