



It takes a village: Digitizing domestic summer programs to confront COVID-19

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Introduction

This essay documents the Middlebury Language Schools' efforts to reinvent an adult domestic immersion summer language institute as a remote learning environment. After describing the institutional setting, I chronicle the process of retooling the programs for remote instruction. I conclude by reflecting on the most important insight I gained as a language program administrator during this transformation: the power of a highly engaged and engaging team.

The Middlebury Language Schools

The Middlebury Language Schools are part of Middlebury College and offer summer language programs for non-degree seeking students as well as graduate degree options to approximately 1,500 adult learners in eleven languages: Spanish, French, German, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, Arabic, Italian, Hebrew, and Korean. In 2020, the School of Abenaki was launched.

Pioneered in 1915, all programs have used a language pledge to maximize the immersion experience since the foundation of the Middlebury Language Schools (Freeman, 1975). Lilian Stroebe, Professor of German at Vassar College, who served as the founding director of Middlebury's German School, conceived the pledge to provide learners with opportunities to immerse themselves for an entire summer in the language (Matthias, 2019). Participants declare they will exclusively use the target language for the duration of the program. Whereas the Middlebury Language Schools enjoy a strong academic reputation, it is difficult to quantify the contribution of the language pledge to the educational outcomes. However, the effectiveness of Middlebury's summer programs has been highlighted in the context of numerous research studies (Dewey, 2004; Dewey, 2007; Freed, et al., 2004; Fukuda, 2014; Isabelli-García and Lacorte, 2016; Liskin-Gasparro, 1998; Rifkin, 2005).

All language programs offer co-curricular activities that include clubs focusing on activities such as team sports, theater, choir, hiking groups, culinary arts, and calligraphy as well as cultural events focusing on performing arts and guest lectures. Muramatsu (2018) suggested that these co-curricular activities, amplified through the language pledge, contributed to the foundation of a community that allowed students to use and refine language skills while being exposed to a variety of cultural products, practices, and perspectives. This strong sense of community explains the extraordinary learning outcomes associated with the Middlebury Language Schools.

The vast majority of the summer faculty, including most of the directors of the individual schools, are not teaching at Middlebury during the academic year and are hired from across the country and internationally to teach for Middlebury over the summer. Every summer, Middlebury appoints a vibrant mix of scholars in fields that are associated with the specializations for the graduate programs as well as carefully selected

language faculty. Although on annual contracts, many summer instructors return for years, in some cases even decades, often accompanied by family members. Collectively, they have served generations of students as classroom teachers, advisors, co-curricular event facilitators, and conversation partners. Their commitment to their students' learning process is central to the establishment of the community.

Transforming Face-to-Face Instruction to Remote Instruction

In the following, I sketch steps undertaken in 2020 to retool this brick-and-mortar, community-oriented learning environment into a remote learning experience that aimed at achieving learning outcomes and generating a community spirit comparable to the conventional model. I will structure the description into three main phases.

Phase 1: Late January to March 10

In late January, the leadership group¹ of the Middlebury Language Schools discussed potential implications of COVID-19 for our operation. At this point, study-abroad programs across Asia closed, and as a result we received a large number of applications for our programs in Asian languages. In addition, travel restrictions for Chinese nationals resulted in a shortage of summer instructors and required our School of Chinese to recruit more domestic instructors.

The evolving situation in the following weeks required the development of a series of increasingly pessimistic scenarios. On March 10, Middlebury College announced the discontinuation of all face-to-face undergraduate instruction until the end of the semester and to launch a remote learning model after spring break.

Phase 2: March 10 to April 15

As students, faculty, and staff left campus, it became clear to the leadership group that we would not be able to offer any of our summer programs in our conventional environment. This realization accelerated the development of alternative models. After briefly considering not to offer any credit-bearing programs in 2020 and instead merely providing remote enrichment events, we decided that we wanted to provide remote programs that met the standards of our conventional model for as many students as possible. We discussed the matter with the twelve directors of the individual schools, and by the end of March we felt confident that the energy, can-do attitude, and our collective experiences with online education and instructional technologies would allow us to offer our entire range of our credit-bearing undergraduate and graduate offerings remotely. This also included the launch of a new program, the School of Abenaki.

Besides directing our attention to the pedagogical dimensions of a remote model, two operational concerns guided the transition during this initial phase. Budget: In recent years, the Middlebury Language Schools generated revenue for the institution. Middlebury's central administration was keen to see a continuation of this trend. This mandate confirmed our commitment to offer credit-bearing classes that would yield tuition revenue, but it also framed decisions that related to pricing, faculty compensation, and class sizes. Wage and benefits continuity: Our best chance to maintain current staff levels through the crisis (circa 20 year-around administrative employees) depended on our ability to offer our wide array of programs remotely. Initially, one of my major motivations for building these remote programs that were both pedagogically robust and financially sustainable was to mitigate any threats to my colleagues' employment situation.

Before we could publicly announce our decision to cancel the face-to-face summer, we supported the twelve program directors in their efforts to develop curricula and instructional models for the summer, including community-building programming as well as thoughtful modifications of the language pledge. This happened through a series of weekly group meetings among the twelve directors as well as individual one-on-one planning sessions. My role was to facilitate the flow of information and innovation across programs, so that existing competencies and new ideas that would otherwise remain siloed within a single program could spread across the institution. On April 15, after the directors had completed a general outline of their

curriculum and pedagogy, we were ready to announce to our students, faculty, and alumni our decision to offer remote learning experiences in 2020. Due to our legacy and our inability to conduct a reliable market analysis in such a fluid economic and public health environment, we remained skeptical about the enrollment potential of the remote model.

Phase 3: April 15 to June 22

Immediately after announcing our decision to offer remote programs, the director of enrollment as well as our team of assistant directors worked tirelessly and encouraged students who had already enrolled for our conventional face-to-face programs to consider the alternative remote program. Many, but not all of our prospective students, made the switch. At the same time, the director of enrollment led the launch of a revised internet presence and social media campaign to market the new programs. As a result of the remote teaching model and a successful marketing strategy, we were able to attract a surprisingly large number of students, who may have had us on their radars in previous years, but did not have the opportunity to attend. The administrative workflows (transferring students to the remote program and adjusting tuition bills, recalibrating financial aid awards, issuing refunds, etc.) were complex and required extraordinary efforts from our assistant directors and close coordination with relevant administrative units on campus. Nevertheless, we celebrated with our administrative staff and academic directors every enrollment milestone, and we finally managed to attract more than 1,150 students to the 2020 summer session of the Middlebury Language Schools which opened on June 22.

Starting in the second half of April, in collaboration with a team of instructional technologists at Middlebury's [Center for Digital Learning and Inquiry \(DLINQ\)](#), I guided the development of a faculty development curriculum with synchronous workshops and asynchronous resources for instructors with various degrees of experience with online education. In addition, I supported the steering committee of the [Middlebury Language and Culture Incubator](#), who organized and hosted a conference on remote language and culture teaching. In addition, Middlebury College's IT helpdesk staff made themselves available to explore our students' and faculties' anticipated technology needs and to optimize services.

I also led the Language Schools in the development of new guidelines and policies that related to matters such as the appropriate treatment of Zoom class recordings consistent with FERPA regulations, cyber security, cyber harassment, commercial social media services, ADA matters, and classroom etiquette and decorum in online learning spaces. The crafting and implementation of these policies not only required consensus-building among twelve academic directors, but also the input from Middlebury's Title IX office and the institution's general counsel.

In order to replicate the community dimensions of regular summer sessions, the academic directors, staff, and faculty showed extraordinary levels of creativity (Urlaub, 2020). All schools developed a wide range of co-curricular programs and school-wide cultural and social events. They invited guest artists and speakers, and Zoom allows them to use some co-curricular events to reach out to prospective students, reconnect with alumni, and showcase our programs to friends of the institution. Together, we discovered new opportunities that our conventional model did not offer.

Lastly, a [virtual convocation ceremony](#) provided Middlebury's leadership and the academic directors an opportunity to welcome all students and to emphasize the importance of language study in an age of a global pandemic as well as the #BLM movement. By emphasizing that language and intercultural competencies are powerful tools to develop and express compassion and to amplify social justice causes, the ceremony provided a clear signal to our students and faculty that in 2020 the kind of education offered by the Middlebury Language Schools remotely is more relevant than ever. At the same time, the convocation ceremony also marked the Middlebury community's official welcoming of the School of Abenaki and featured two musical pieces performed by Jesse Bruchac, the inaugural director of the School of Abenaki.

Reflection: It Takes a Village...

In this final part of the essay, I offer a reflection on the most important insight I gained from my position as Associate Dean of the Language Schools in the past three months: the immense power of highly engaged and engaging teams. The transformational processes described in the second part of this essay depended on the efforts of all members of an extremely dedicated group of colleagues within the Middlebury Language Schools' administration beyond the above-mentioned leadership team. The directors that serve as the academic leaders of the individual schools earn without doubt a huge amount of credit and gratitude for their efforts to retool the programs. However, this last section is dedicated to the *unsung heroes* of our profession: our staff members. The thirteen assistant directors of the individual language schools, our operations director, our systems specialist, our business and financial operations analyst, and our enrollment coordinator, all of whom are year-around employees of Middlebury, had gathered since the beginning of the crisis every weekday morning on Zoom for a group meeting led by the Associate Dean for Operations. Their thoughtful and honest input informed every single planning step profoundly, and their uncanny ability to anticipate frictions and offer solutions proved essential for managing the transition. Equally important, once decisions were made, practically all of which resulted in significantly higher workloads, the members of this group were at the frontline of implementing the necessary steps to build the new programs with an extraordinary level of can-do-attitude and grace. They had all been "essential workers" for years, but during the reinvention and implementation of the new programs in response to COVID-19, the centrality of highly competent and dedicated staff became even clearer to me.

As spring turned into summer, I started recognizing the enormous power of our team, and I developed a deep admiration for the qualities of this team that confronted a crisis so effectively. But I also realized that many of these qualities have existed within the team for years and only surfaced in obvious ways during the crisis. It was an important realization to me that arguably the most significant contributor to the team's effectiveness was deeply anchored in each member's dedication to the academic mission of the Middlebury Language Schools. All team members approached the entire project through radially student-centered perspectives. Their deep identification with our most important stakeholders, our prospective or enrolled students, enabled them to share nuanced input and thoughtful perspectives. In addition to their passionate dedication to both our educational mission, the team members continued to foster an ecology of internal support structures among themselves that further helped us as an organization to grow and prosper for the ultimate benefit of our students. It was an immense source of inspiration to witness this process and discover the roots of the team's success.

I also realized that one cannot build this extraordinary ethos in a team overnight in reaction to a crisis. When I joined the Middlebury Language Schools in 2017, this team spirit had already existed. It had been continuously cultured and fostered within the group and through collaborative leadership styles, and the current situation merely demonstrates the deployment of these powers in a collaborative and mission-oriented spirit. Therefore, COVID-19 highlighted for me the incredible importance of continuously building strong, trusting, and confident teams that are finely tuned in to the missions of their academic programs and that are ready to boldly confront crises and embrace change.

When I will look back in a few years, my memories of COVID-19 will without doubt be profoundly infused by my personal emotional landscape of anxiety, isolation, sadness, and frustration. However, I also hope that my growing understanding and appreciation of the power of effective teams will remain with me. We often see the term *collaborative leadership* in mission statements of academic units or job announcements for upper administration. Until very recently, I considered this phrase a hollow fragment of corporate speech that had made it into the higher education management vernacular. Today, I know better. After having experienced that a team that had been forged for years through collaborative leadership principles into a workforce that confronts a "once-in-a-lifetime crisis" with can-do attitude and substantial change, I realized that qualities like trust, compassion, mutual respect, confidence, and a healthy dose of humor are critical to building teams that can tackle any future transformation processes in higher education.

There remains a great deal of uncertainty. We do not know any of the ways in which COVID-19 and the political mismanagement of this public health crises will continue to reshape the higher education sector. Most likely, the situation will require ongoing programmatic responses in post-secondary language education. We also do not know the shape or form of the next crisis that will inevitably come and further challenge the status quo of our field. However, what I know is that we will only be able to confront any future crisis effectively, if we continuously foster in our teams those qualities that I had the honor to experience at the Middlebury Language Schools in 2020.

Notes

1. The leadership team consists of Steven Snyder (Dean of the Language Schools and Vice President, Academic Affairs), Tim Page (Associate Dean, Operations), Molly Baker (Director of Enrollment), and the author of this essay (Associate Dean, Academic Affairs).

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About the Author

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