BILC Conference 2021

The Lockdown Sessions: Experiences With and Lessons Learned From Distance Teaching at the Federal Office of Languages

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Experience with and Lessons Learned from Distance Teaching at the Federal Office of Languages

- The Situation - Lockdown 2021

- The Challenge and the Solution

- Making it work

- Student and Faculty acceptance

- Post-Course evaluation

- Conclusion

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The Situation: Lockdown 2021

"Lockdown Sessions" – in the Performing Arts…

… and in Language Instruction

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The Situation

- 2020: First "Lockdown" – courses suspended from March until mid-May

- Mid-May to 19 December 2020 – Live instruction under strict hygiene regulations (distancing, reduced class sizes, masks in common areas, ventilation of classrooms, disinfectant stations…)

- Christmas Vacation…

- January 2021 – Explosive increase in number of infections (the "Second Wave")

- 12 January 2021 – Courses resume – online.

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The Situation (continued)

- 12 January 2021 – Online courses implemented temporarily until "live" courses could resume

- Over the next three months: worsening COVID 19 situation in Germany resulted in that date being postponed several times

- In the end, the entire 11-week teaching phase was conducted in distance format

- Students were only present in Hürth for a 3-day exam phase at the conclusion of the course

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The Distance Coaching Concept

- Using all available means to bridge the gap until in-house teaching would again be possible.

- NOT to replace classroom experience 1:1

- NOT lecturing to a webcam (the "bad university" model)

- NOT "fire and forget" PDF worksheet assignments (the "bad school" model)

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The Didactic Challenges

- To provide communicative instruction in an online environment.

- To provide digitally assisted mentoring and coaching

- To use the strengths of the available technology and to compensate for its weaknesses

- To ensure all students maintain a level of language exposure comparable to what they would in a classroom situation

- To monitor student progress and ensure they achieve the required proficiency level

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The Administrative Challenges

- Differing levels of computer and internet affinity of teachers and learners

- Unsure time frame (When can we return to "live" teaching?)

- Connectivity and access issues: using government computers, learners without own devices, home situations (multiple people online simultaneously), cross-platform incompatibilities

- Data security – establishing contact with students' private internet and phone accounts

- Examinations: Only paper-based, in-person format permitted

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Solutions – and new challenges

- The required technology, the platforms, teaching and practice materials were already in place.

- Previously used to augment conventional in-person teaching or as part of "Kombi" (hybrid) courses

- Technical support and backup was provided

- Inhouse training and support for teachers available

- New challenge: to implement these tools into a viable system which could at least temporarily stand in for the "live" classroom

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The Platforms

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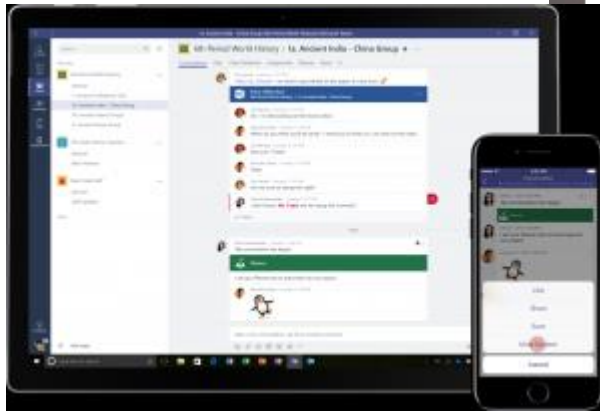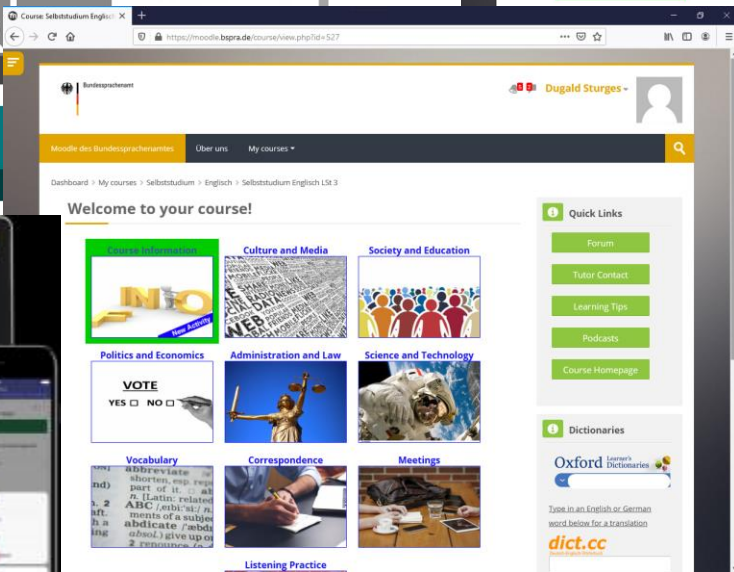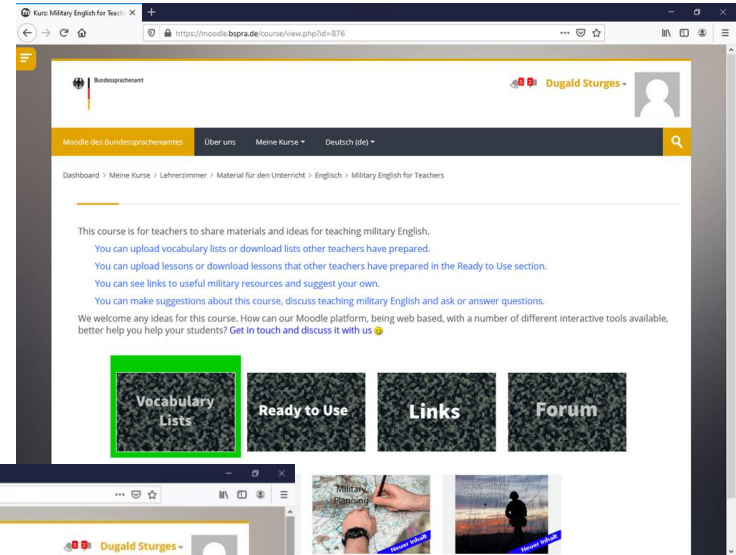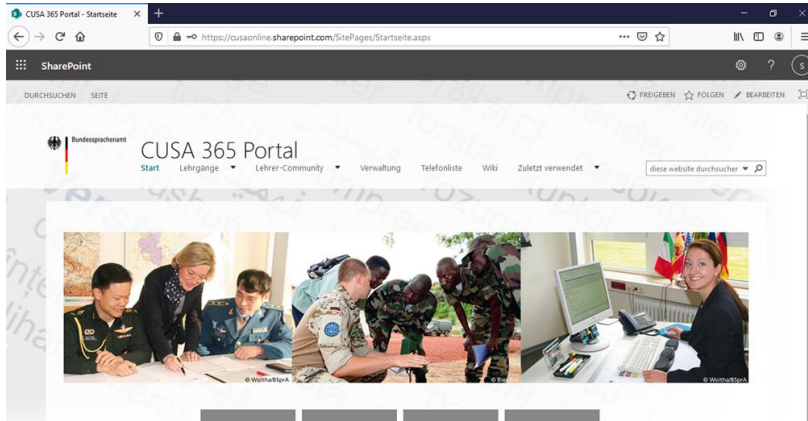
The Distance Classroom

- Microsoft Teams / Office 365 (CUSA365)

- Moodle

- Instructors organized in teaching teams according to level in order to facilitate substitutions, individual tutorials, etc.

- All students issued Moodle, Teams and Office 365 Online accounts to facilitate compatability

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Organization

- Greater focus on individual needs necessary

- More tutoring and mentoring, less presentation

- Attention span much shorter - duration of screen time sessions must be limited

- Result: shorter sessions spread out over a longer teaching day

- Change of method essential (teacher presentation / whole class sessions / pair and small group breakouts / one-on-one tuition)

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Exception 1

- BSprA instructors at the University of Applied Sciences for Public Administration (Federal Police Officer Candidates)

- All instruction at the UAS PA since October 2020 has been online.

- Stricter coordination of contact hours necessary due to timetabling of other courses / faculties

- Different platforms (ILIAS and Big Blue Button) to facilitate interoperability with other faculties

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Post-Course Evaluation

- Good.
- Overall approval of course was comparable to in-class courses
- Approval rating of instructors, learning material, motivation by the teachers also comparable
- Less satisfactory: perceived lack of preparation for exams
- No area was ranked better than in-class courses

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Instructor Acceptance

- Good – some teachers previously without affinity to computers became "digital"

- Teacher training and technical support essential

- Individual preferences regarding format or lesson structure

- Option of teaching from home or from classroom

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Pro

- No time lost to commuting
- Flexibility in terms of time and space: (break out rooms, additional tutoring, mess hall hours, etc.)
- Side bonus: development of new digital materials which can be used in future teaching
- Indeed, even gratitude that we were making it happen at all

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Con

- Time consuming – considerably more preparation and additional tutoring time needed to achieve same results

- Disadvantages for weaker / more reticent students

- "Invisible" students

- 24/7-Syndrome – the open-ended school day

- Student cancellations due to unwillingness to be taught online or due to security restrictions

- More student conflicts with professional and family duties

- Temptation to mix distance learning with home office

- Longer paths of communication between students, instructors, civilian administration and military command

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Results

- Course objectives for the most part achieved
- Fewer achieved beyond the minimum class goal
- Reading skills development was comparable to in house courses
- Writing skills had been deteriorating since long before Covid (also in German); this trend remained unchanged
- Listening skills development was slightly lower than usual
- **The greatest deficit was in the development of speaking skills**

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Oral Proficiency drop – Why?

- Due to lack of "live" face-to-face interaction?
- Restrictions on interpersonal communication with other students due to screen format, physical distance
- TV effect: Reception rather than production
- Less peer correction and emulation
- More difficult for teachers to "see" students
- Less "coffee talk", no "mess hall tutorials" – limited conversation in the target language outside of structured lessons
- Had to be compensated for by additional after hours tutoring sessions

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Exception 2

- Officer Candidates at the Army Officer Training School, Dresden

- On base instruction – 8 weeks, full time, SLP 3332

- Most classes in classroom instruction, some in distance learning

- Direct comparison: Parallel courses, similar prerequisites, same time frame, same number of contact hours, identical content, equally qualified instructors.

- The proficiency achievement rate ("class objective") of the distance learning groups was 15% lower than that of students in classroom instruction.

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Conclusions

- Online language instruction <u>can be made to work</u>

- It can <u>augment</u> face-to-face live courses

- It can an function in a hybrid / combi arrangement (alternating "live" and distance learning phases)

- It is however <u>not</u> an equivalent replacement for live teaching
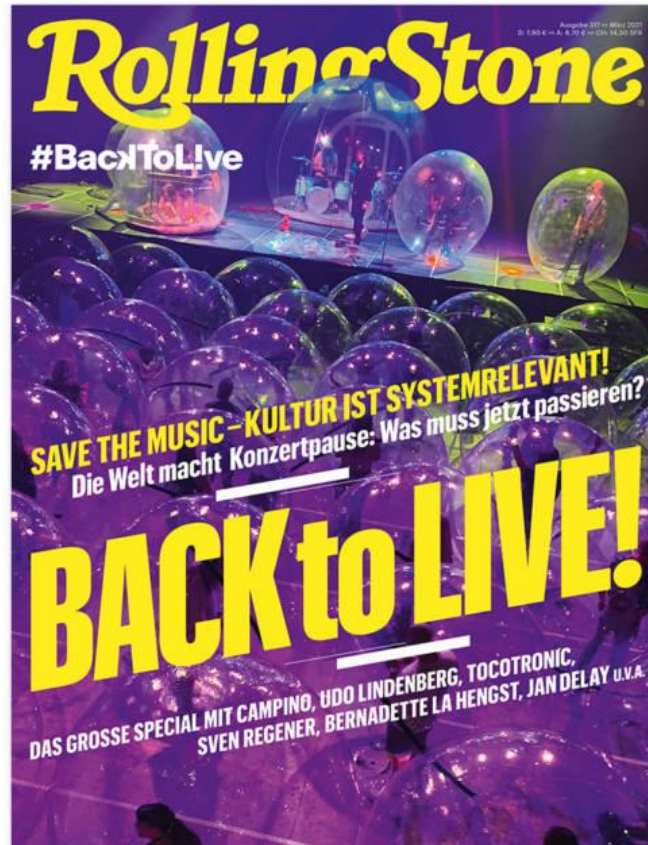
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Conclusions

To make it work without a "live" phase…

- Requires a considerably higher investment of time to achieve the same results

- All learners must have equal access to the required technology and accounts from day one (better: earlier)

- Constant monitoring of student progress by instructors and administrators is even more essential than usual

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And so, in the end, what we really need is…

Thank you for your attention.

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