

“JUST KEEP SWIMMING”

A Story of Teaching Transformation During the Pandemic

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Designing a course of academic English for 94 teachers to teach 1,200 students based in different parts of the world might present a challenge to any course development team. Add into that mix the transformation of a program from traditional face-to-face delivery, to a course delivered fully online, with teachers in different time zones using unfamiliar technology, and only 16 weeks to produce all the teaching and training materials. This is exactly what happened in the summer of 2020 at Warwick University in Coventry, United Kingdom. The following is the story of what happened.

CONTEXT

For 10 years, I have worked as an assistant director of studies on a team responsible for an annual 10-week summer program of intensive English language development for international students at Warwick University in England. Historically, it has been a residential course delivered on campus, starting with 4 weeks of general academic and study skills, which turns into a specialized English course with students grouped according to their future disciplines. Usually, approximately 100 students do the full 10 weeks, joined by other students for the 6-week subject specific course, rising to a 600–700 student cohort for the second phase. Students are supported by a team of

around 60 teachers, overseen by a small management team, and teaching has been delivered in the time trusted face-to-face model—in classrooms, on campus.

Presessional at Warwick has always been a very traditional type of course in terms of instructional delivery and very untouched by technology. Even up to 2019, most teachers have worked in classrooms with projectors and screens, some even still using a traditional chalkboard, with only a few interactive whiteboards available. It was not until 2014 that Moodle was introduced as the main technology support for the course, and even then, this met with a range of resistance from teachers unfamiliar with the idea of supporting a course online. Since then the Moodle site has been developed year on year to embrace the rapidly

growing participant numbers, but with hugely varying levels of staff engagement. A good proportion of returning tutors have consistently resisted adopting the in-house virtual learning environment to support what had started as a paper-based course; others were willing to adapt, and some tutors came to the course *all guns blazing* to adopt this technology—and introduce other tools and online teaching ideas.

So, in March 2020, when the department went into lock down for what was estimated to be an initial 12 weeks, no one was unduly concerned that the preessional would—or indeed—should—change format. What actually happened, of course, was entirely different and could even be described as revolutionary! Even as late as the end of April, some team members were still talking about on campus delivery, but it was becoming very clear that the traditional preessional English course model was about to undergo a radical overhaul, and this had to happen very rapidly. Some team members were already on the case, and making those adjustments, but inevitably, there were big challenges ahead.

The following comments are a snapshot of what actually happened, personal thoughts saved in a journal as the weeks progressed—and I beg forgiveness for the many exclamation and question marks!

March 2020: And So it Begins:

Applied linguistics has been locked down! Now we are working from home for at least 12 weeks.

So many frantic online meetings following the initial lock down! This in itself is new to us all everyone, it's really rather strange. Lots of discussion about next steps and many questions. Will the preessional course move online? If yes, which platform should we use? Should it be Microsoft Teams? Moodle? Blackboard? And what would happen to live lessons? Zoom? Teams? Blackboard?

We've got a management team in place who could possibly adapt the course, but we

don't have a dedicated team of academic technologists to guide us. This is going to be interesting.

Mid-to-late March 2020:

Senior management have told us we are definitely moving the preessional online.

Our team still comprises only three members of staff; we have just spent a whole day looking at the traditional syllabus and structure.

Given the subject specific nature of the teaching, and the diverse means of delivery, we know that to meet the August start date, just over 4 months away, the course in its current format won't work.

We're going to have to rewrite the course and adapt it for online delivery—asynchronous materials on Moodle, and live classes on Zoom or Teams.

There has been a suggestion to outsource the development of the online preessional to an outside company who are “experts” in online planning and technology, but the management team want to retain the “spirit” of the preessional and keep it in house.

March 30. Wow, we just had the biggest piece of news!—the university's management is clearly worried about enrollment and numbers of international students arriving in the United Kingdom, and so the strategy team at senior levels in the university has made a major decision—the preessional course will be offered fully online and completely free of charge. The floodgates have opened, and the challenge is accepted!

April 2020:

Team news. It's clear that our team of three can't continue alone—we need a bigger writing/technology development team dedicated to meeting the August start date.

Three extra staff members, who have all taught on the course before and know it well, will join us mid-April.

They know the staff struggles with Moodle, which is where the asynchronous materials needed to be developed and housed. They are all seasoned online teachers with vast experience of developing online materials.

Course news. The battle of Microsoft Teams versus Zoom has begun!

Immediately following lock down, there were suggestions about hosting the entire course using Microsoft Teams—but not without problems—staff generally lack familiarity with Teams, and we all feel the complexities of One Note integration—and we can't have the Moodle plug in. No idea why.

Additionally, Microsoft Teams live sessions don't have the same functionality as Zoom—no group break out rooms—we want to replicate as far as possible a traditional classroom, already available in Zoom and not in Teams.

IT services are confident that permission to use Zoom is forthcoming—but there are security concerns.

Teacher development and support. We need teachers onboard and trained as early as possible; many of our returning teachers have never taught online, and we are introducing unfamiliar tools and technologies—we will need a lot of support from the Central IT Services Team.

Mid-to-end April 2020:

Course Team News. Six writers/developers are now divided into two teams for writing and online development. Despite many lengthy online meetings about the best way forward, we are still moving forward at snail's pace—we need to move faster!

There's too much overlap, we must find a system whereby we were writing different elements of the course, but peer reviewing and feeding back. Teams has been great for this!

Enrollment News. Student numbers are spiraling upwards—alongside the preparation for the online delivery, more teachers are being urgently recruited.

Interestingly, applicants' technological knowledge now seems to have become more important than their pedagogical skills. In interviews, the questions are focused on applicants' online teaching knowledge, skills and experience—we need staff who will be able to get online and teach with confidence, and who may be able to support their counterparts.

May 2020:

Course news. The format for the course is finally agreed.

Reduced from a 10-week course (4 weeks general English for academic purposes/6 weeks English for specific purposes) to a 6-week general English for academic purposes course starting on August 10.

However, we've kept the teaching model of the face to face teaching—teachers will be teaching in "pairs"—this reflects how the skills have always been taught; one teacher will be responsible for teaching reading & writing, the other will be teaching listening and speaking.

It's vital that they work closely together, as the students will still be required to complete a research project and do a final presentation.

It will be delivered both asynchronously & synchronously, a real example of blended learning.

Asynchronous. With a completely new course, it will be fully resourced so that teachers don't have to worry about finding materials, plus

- all the "bells and whistles" will happen in the asynchronous sessions—Moodle incorporates the H5P plug in—a rich, very intuitive set of tools that makes teaching much more interactive and engaging.

- the live sessions must be as simple as possible so as not to complicate teachers' lives.

Synchronous. We are still awaiting a final decision to go ahead with live sessions using Zoom or Teams! We remain hopeful for Zoom—rightly or wrongly—Teams doesn't yet offer the flexibility required for our teaching needs—No breakout rooms, no built-in whiteboards in breakout rooms etc.

Enrollment News. Student numbers continue to rise exponentially—recruitment for teachers is also gathering pace, again the focus still squarely on seeking teachers who have the relevant technology skills and knowledge, and experience of online delivery.

Teacher Training and Support. Our first digital skills audit has been completed online—we have surveyed all our teachers to assess their knowledge and experience of teaching with technology. Out of the 62 teachers surveyed, the majority report having moved online using Zoom and very few with Teams—let's hope Zoom is agreed!

End of May 2020:

Course news. The course development is still moving slowly but with purpose.

But we received a “bombshell” decision—the university will *not authorize the use of Zoom*—everyone feeling a bit shocked and deflated, and this will have implications for our team, and for the course planning, teaching training and support.

Many teachers are expecting to use Zoom, now we have to double back and inform everyone that the platform for live classes will be Teams.

June 2020:

Enrollment. Student numbers still rising!—and teacher recruitment is continuing to

ensure that the teaching ratio of 1:12 (1 teacher—12 students) is met.

Course development, asynchronous: Despite a few setbacks, and one or two tensions, the development is moving with purpose. The Moodle content is now being produced and being set up on the Moodle site. This has included a series of rapid training sessions on H5P for the course development team; however, one member of the development team seems to be able to produce HTML-5-Package activities in his sleep!

Course development, synchronous: A second digital skills audit has been run—this time to try and identify staff who have experience of teaching with Microsoft Teams, as this still is a very new and unknown tool.

This has proved to be a useful exercise, as we have identified two or three potential Microsoft Teams “Champions.” We've invited them to an online meeting to discuss their use of Teams for teaching—planning to record it to help the management and development team and become a reference for teachers.

July 2020:

Course development, asynchronous. We have now completed and loaded four weeks of the course, but still have Weeks 5 and 6 to build. These are not going to be so content heavy, but still need structuring for assessment and testing activities.

Synchronous

Course development, synchronous. We know that we will be setting up a minimum of 94 Teams classrooms. We will be asking 94 teachers to deliver 1-hour sessions simultaneously to a cohort of approximately 1300 students—the teaching ratio had changed slightly, rising to just over 13 students in each class, but the enrollment is still open and we are not able to turn students away—university policy.

Additional issues to address are the management of students in different time zones, ranging from South America to China—luckily we have teachers based in Canada and Argentina to look after the South American group.

Teacher training and support. Main teams training offered by the university information technology services team, this is beneficial for everyone concerned to build confidence and skills, ready for the course launch in August. This comprised 10 hours and forms part of the official teacher induction. This was supported by a teacher handbook that has provided full details and course outline for teachers, to help them begin to prepare.

Student support. Students still enrolling, right up to the weekend before the course. They have been offered a live Teams training event, which was attended by more than 1,000 students to familiarize them with the course platform, ready to join their live classrooms on the first day of the course.

August 2020:

The course went live on August 10—we've had lots of teething problems, but systemic rather than pedagogical. This included enrollment issues and main university administrative systems not "talking" to each other.

An additional database has also been added to the mix at the very last minute, requiring teachers to download a VPN to access the information to record registers and assessment marks—this has been introduced very late in the day, and has caused a lot of stress for everyone, not least for the management team, who have been caught up in the enrollment issues.

Asynchronous. Students have engaged quickly with the Moodle content once online.

The course has been set up to be very intuitive to use, and through forum tasks, it is clear there is a high level of motivation and enthusiasm for completing activities, especially forum discussions, teachers are finding the Moodle materials easy to access, and sample lesson plans are proving helpful in planning live lessons.

Synchronous. The majority of the early teaching sessions have gone better than expected. There are some excellent examples of online teaching, and there is real team spirit evident.

To support our teachers through the first few days, we have divided them into five subgroups, and meeting them every day after their class, in live Teams meetings, to answer questions, share ideas, and pass on information. We don't expect this to last, rather to ensure that everyone is on the same page from the start, and in a small way, replicate a virtual staff room and place for daily check ins, reminders and for information sharing.

September 2020:

The course is drawing to a conclusion, and thankfully, after all the initial teething issues, it has settled down to become a rewarding experience.

We've watched teachers growing both in confidence and skills, and we have observed some excellent online practice. Most teachers set up some great "routines," such as chatting with students before live sessions began and setting up "tables" in different channels to replicate break out rooms.

Final assessments went well—students were happy to be monitored in a writing exam that was recorded live, and there were some interesting projects and presentations produced to a high standard. Moodle and the Turnitin plug in were very helpful here to ensure that students received timely feedback and in a very authentic manner.

Post Presessional and Beyond: Summary

The course is now concluded, and our students have all moved on to their main degree, possibly online, with a view to arriving on campus as soon as the pandemic allows. Our teachers have also moved on to their next projects—but we couldn't let anyone go without asking for feedback on the course. Surprisingly (or not), this year, we received the most feedback we have ever had on any presessional to date.

FINDINGS

Out of the 70% of the students who responded to the survey, 83% strongly agreed that live lessons were useful. We also asked if they thought learning through Teams had helped them develop their academic skills and 72% strongly agreed, while 24% agreed. Eighty-nine percent strongly agreed that they knew how to study on an online course. The lowest scoring section was for Moodle having too much material, the time it took for material to download, and realizing that the course is full time even though there are only 2 hours of live teaching.

Staff feedback was equally helpful, and at times complimentary, with most teachers highly rating the accessibility of the Moodle resources. Most of the criticism related to Teams, especially the sheer volume of new information, especially for the returning teachers who had certain expectations—so much had changed. Feedback indicated that the training on using Teams was generally appropriate for what Teams does, we had to supplement that with what we needed the teachers to do to effectively deliver the presessional course. This resulted in a lot of additional information being shared, across multiple channels—and teacher feedback generally implied there was a lot to absorb. In terms of content, mostly positive—teachers indicated that there was a lot for students to get through, and they were worried about “monitoring” engagement.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, it is clear that the Warwick University presessional team traveled a long way in a very short time through a new and unknown landscape to move this important face to face course online.

We had to make a lot of decisions, very often “on the hoof,” and one of the things that we missed was actually being on campus and sitting down with a cup of coffee and talking things through. Meetings, whether on Zoom or Teams, were often long and tiring, and we all missed that personal contact very much.

There are some additional “take away” points that are also worth sharing, as follows:

- Planning and preparation are key—if the course was to run online again, we already have the first iteration in place, but we would still want to start our planning and preparation well in advance, and to ensure that key decisions had been made well before the planning started. This is evidenced by the late decision to use Microsoft Teams (not Zoom) which required a very late doubling back, a second digital skills audit and the loss of valuable preparation time.
- Training and technical support is needed early on for both staff and students—none of the online presessional team were dedicated academic technologists, and many of the teachers coming onto the course arrived with different perceptions of what was going to happen. In this regard, we definitely would like to develop a dedicated website for staff and student (might have to be two websites) that could be accessed well before the course starts, to include details of course structure and content, as well as offering the opportunity to check that technical equipment works and everyone has access to what they need.
- Finally, the key learning point is don't aim for everything to be perfect—a lot of time was spent agonizing over what to include, and in the end, when quick decisions were

needed, we had to trust the experience and knowledge of the team. We could actually still be working on content now. We arrived at the conclusion of this year's pre-session knowing that we had a great team of academics who adapted to becoming online materials writers very quickly, and

technologists, who worked really closely with an evolving teaching team. And even though we continue to sail through largely uncharted territory such was the professionalism of everyone involved in the course, we feel there is much to take forward and continue to learn.