



Autonomy and Community in Learning Languages Online: A Critical Autoethnography of Teaching and Learning in COVID-19 Confinement During 2020

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During COVID-19 confinement in 2020, there has been a massive increase in learning languages online via a variety of apps, short courses, and as part of higher education on-campus degrees converted to online learning. This study argues that attention to the balance of autonomy and community is vital to successful language learning online. An initial exploration of recent scholarship on autonomy and community in learning languages online validates this approach to evaluating the situation. The specific phenomenon of online language teaching and learning during 2020 at the University of Melbourne is then presented as an autoethnographic case study and analyzed in the context of this research. In 2020, the author participated in online language learning experiences from several different perspectives. As Head of Languages, she led development of a new undergraduate certificate in languages in response to an Australian Federal Government initiative to offer significant subsidies for online language certificates in 2020. As a keen language learner, she enrolled in one of these certificates to study Italian. As a French lecturer, she converted Matters of Taste—French Eating Cultures, a highly interactive and sensory oriented on-campus subject for advanced French students, to online delivery. The autoethnographic work undertaken in this article aims to examine critically the author's experiences of teaching and learning in 2020, assessing the advantages and disadvantages of learning languages online from positions of both teacher and learner. These experiences are triangulated with the academic and administrative leadership and coordination required to produce a schema that relates intentions to outcomes in this particularly challenging context. This study is intended to offer insights that may help language educators reflect on their various roles during COVID-19 confinement. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that negotiating the balance between autonomy and community is (still) the key to learning languages online during COVID-19 confinement in 2020.

Keywords: autonomy, community, online language learning and teaching, autoethnography, sensory education

INTRODUCTION

During COVID-19 confinement in 2020, there has been a massive increase in learning languages online via a variety of apps, short courses, and as part of higher education on-campus degrees converted to online learning (Andress et al., 2020; Dutton, 2020; Rosenbloom, 2020; Sandle, 2020; Silva, 2020; Whitebloom, 2020). With notoriously high attrition rates due to lack of motivation or feedback, online language learning has suffered from a certain stigma in the most respected “sandstone” universities of Australia. This study argues that attention to the balance of autonomy and community is vital to successful language learning online, whether in COVID-19 confinement or not.

Scholarship on autonomy and community in learning languages online validates this approach to evaluating the situation. Since Henri Holec’s groundbreaking work on *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* was published by the Council of Europe’s Modern Languages Project in the late 1970s, (Holec, 1981) the advantages of self-directed language learning, freedom of choice and expression have been emphasized, but the fundamental notion that interpersonal relations, together with community values, were always maintained at the heart of the language learning experience. More recently, the internet has provided more opportunities for autonomous exploration to find language learning communities with shared interests, a desirable adventure that has been likened to “Chasing the Butterfly Effect” (Godwin-Jones, 2018).

The specific phenomenon of online language teaching and learning during 2020 at the University of Melbourne is then presented as a critical autoethnographic case study and analyzed in the context of this research on autonomy and community. I provide a first-person account of my participation in online language learning experiences to offer a critical autoethnography of teaching and learning in COVID-19 confinement during 2020, using personal narrative as method (Wood, 2017). My experiences are drawn from several different roles and perspectives related to learning languages online.

As Head of Languages, I led development of a new undergraduate certificate in languages in response to an Australian Federal Government initiative to offer significant subsidies for online language certificates in 2020. As a keen language learner, I enrolled in one of these certificates to study Italian, in my first experience of online language learning as a student. As a French lecturer with over 20 years’ experience in teaching on campus subjects, I embarked on my first online teaching journey, converting a highly interactive and sensory oriented on campus subject for advanced French students to online delivery.

The autoethnographic work undertaken in this article aims to examine critically my experiences of teaching and learning in 2020, assessing the advantages and disadvantages of learning languages online from positions of both teacher and learner. These experiences are triangulated with the academic and administrative leadership and coordination required to produce a schema that relates intentions to outcomes in this

particularly challenging context. This study is intended to offer insights that may help language educators reflect on their various roles during COVID-19 confinement. Finally, these insights are tested against the framing hypothesis—that the balance of autonomy and community must be carefully managed to achieve optimal results in learning languages online.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

COVID-19 Contexts: Australia and the University of Melbourne

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) timeline, the first indication that a “viral pneumonia” was sweeping Wuhan, the capital of Central China’s Hubei province, was picked up on December 31, 2019 (WHO, 2020). By January 23, 2020, domestic and international travel bans were imposed on Wuhan, and Australia registered its first case of COVID-19 on January 25, a man in his 50s who returned to Melbourne from Wuhan on January 19. When the WHO declared a global Public Health Emergency on January 30, Australia quickly moved to ban foreign nationals entering the country from mainland China, requiring Australians returning home from China to self-isolate for 14 days (Duckett and Stobart, 2020).

From the University of Melbourne perspective, alarm bells were ringing already, as there was doubt as to whether international students from China would be able to begin or continue their studies at the beginning of the academic year on March 2. Students in China with Australian citizenship or permanent residency or student visas were allowed to return to Melbourne but to avoid the 14-day quarantine, many travelled *via* other South-East Asian countries to reach Australia.

On March 2, Australia recorded its first case of community transmission, provoking bans on foreign nationals entering from other countries (Iran, South Korea and Italy) during the first half of March. However, Australians returning on cruise ships increased infection rates and the Formula 1 Grand Prix scheduled in Melbourne for the March 13–15 was the first major event to be cancelled due to fears of further community transmissions. From 15 March, the numbers of national cases began rising rapidly, doubling every day until national action was escalated with Stage 1 shutdowns announced on March 23, Stage 2 shutdowns on March 25 and Stage 3 shutdowns on March 29. Australia closed its national borders on March 20, and the domestic borders of Tasmania, Northern Territory, Western Australia, South Australia, and Queensland were all closed by March 25.

The University of Melbourne, after 3 weeks of classes on campus, directed staff and students to pivot to online teaching and learning from week four, in line with the Stage 1 shutdowns beginning on March 23. Many international students who had travelled back to Melbourne from China and elsewhere returned to their home countries, preferring to pursue their online studies from there. Some international students were feeling threatened by rumors of racism; some were in financial distress having lost their part-time jobs and unable to access any government support; some simply felt safer in their home countries.

Students from interstate found themselves in similar dilemmas—wondering whether to stay in colleges or student accommodation or return to the security of their family homes elsewhere. Although the curve mapping the rise of COVID-19 cases had flattened by the end of April, and in May, restrictions began to ease with the re-opening of some non-essential businesses, a cluster in Tasmania and outbreaks linked to quarantine hotels kept Australian authorities on guard. Universities were cautiously preparing to return to campus with social distancing and masks for semester 2, with the University of Melbourne calling for nominations for on campus subjects, beginning a week later than normal on August 3.

But by August 2, Melbourne was in the hardest and longest lockdown that any Australian city was to experience. In fact, at the time of writing this article, no other city in the world has endured the same level and duration of restrictions. From July 8, Stage 3 restrictions had been re-imposed in Victoria due to a spike in cases linked to hotel quarantine breaches, and on August 2, a 42-day Stage 4 lockdown was instituted, including an 8 pm–5 am curfew and travel limit of 5 km from home. A further 42 days of Stage 4 confinement with very slight modification to hours of curfew ended on October 26, the final week of semester 2 for University of Melbourne teaching staff and students, but with swotvac (revision week) and exams looming, and Stage 3 restrictions still in place, students could not yet enjoy their freedom. Finally, on November 23, Melbourne came out of lockdown.

COVID-19 Language Learning Initiatives: Australia and University of Melbourne

On April 12, the Minister for Education, The Hon Dan Tehan MP, released the Higher Education Relief Package designed to slash the cost to study short, online, courses offered by universities and private providers to help Australians retrain in priority areas such as nursing, teaching, health, IT, science and languages (Tehan and Cash, 2020a). New customized Undergraduate Certificates comprised of 2–4 units of study to be completed between May and December 2020 would be available to Australian students for either AU\$1,250 or AU\$2,500. The proposed Undergraduate Certificate in Languages (4 units) was in the lower cost category (\$1,250) which represented less than half the usual cost of 1 unit of languages study at the University of Melbourne.

Subsequently, Tehan launched the Job-Ready Graduates Package proposal on June 19, to lower fees in some subjects—mostly aligned with the areas subsidized in the Higher Education Relief Package—and raise fees for Humanities and Social Science subjects (not including languages), Economics, Law and Medicine (Tehan and Cash, 2020b). After much debate, the package was passed by the Senate on October 19 (Tehan, 2020). The clear message is that the Australian Government is encouraging an instrumentalized approach to language learning at universities with 100% online delivery.

The University of Melbourne does not espouse this instrumentalized assessment of languages nor this 100% online

approach to language learning. Pre-COVID-19, none of its languages offered 100% online delivery, and following the 2009–2013 Languages Curriculum Reform, all languages integrate language and culture subjects at all levels. (Martinez-Exposito, 2011). However, there was interest in leveraging these initiatives to foreground the online language learning that the University of Melbourne would be offering—exceptionally—in 2020. It was therefore decided that the University of Melbourne would explore possibilities for establishing a 100% online Undergraduate Certificate in Languages with 4 units for delivery from May–December 2020 only. As mentioned above, the 100% online delivery of all subjects was already guaranteed in order to honor commitments to international students to continue their language majors, whether or not Melbourne's lockdown continued, so it was deemed possible to create a package of 4 units to comply with the conditions of the government-subsidized Undergraduate Certificates in 2020.

COVID-19 Teaching and Learning Experiences: My Pathway Outlined

During 2020, I was one of the first University of Melbourne teaching and learning staff to be directly impacted by COVID-19 due to my role as co-coordinator of a summer intensive subject from 10 to 21 February: EURO20008/30007 A Taste of Europe: Melbourne Intensive. Around 40 of the 180 students enrolled were in China, unable to return to Melbourne to take the subject. All classes were still scheduled on campus at this stage, with no online options for tutorials or workshops. Before any suggestions or requirements to pivot to 100% online delivery at the University of Melbourne, we created and coordinated a new online tutorial stream for students in China, of which eight remained enrolled and successfully completed the subject, despite being in lockdown in Wuhan and other COVID-19 affected cities.

In Semester 1, I coordinated and taught all lectures and tutorials in French for FREN20013/30015 Matters of Taste: French Eating Cultures with 75 advanced French students. One student from China returned home and did not complete the subject. As with all University of Melbourne Semester 1 subjects, I commenced 100% online teaching beginning the week of March 23.

From mid-April–December, I led the creation, administration and delivery of five Undergraduate Certificates in Languages (French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Russian). In July, I enrolled as a student in the Undergraduate Certificate in Languages (Italian), from which I graduated in December.

In addition, I coordinated a core French language and culture subject at advanced level French 6: The Fine Art of French Conversation in Semester 2 with 165 students.

The event that sparked this critical autoethnographic project was a request from *Pursuit*, the University of Melbourne's multimedia platform for showcasing the latest research and opinion from academics, to write a piece on learning languages online, given the recent surge in general interest. I spent the month of April researching and writing this article, while concurrently developing the Undergraduate Certificates, and teaching Matters of Taste, and realized that I, like so many others,

would like to plunge into the experience of learning a language online during the COVID-19 crisis. My interest in critical autoethnography had already been piqued through working with anthropologists at the University of Melbourne and especially in supervising a PhD Candidate Sally Guilloux-Cooke in her autoethnographic and animation work on understanding creolization on Reunion Island. Sally sadly passed away on April 22, 2020 and I would like to dedicate this article and research to her memory.

The *Pursuit* article I wrote “Learning a Language at Home: You are Not Alone” foregrounded the dilemma of forced autonomy and desired community in learning languages online (Dutton, 2020). It caught the eye of Rhoda Sherman, guest co-editor of this special issue of *Frontiers in Psychology* on “COVID-19 and Beyond: From (Forced) Remote Teaching and Learning to ‘The New Normal’ in Higher Education.” She suggested submitting an abstract on the topic, and I saw this as an opportunity to explore further the themes and scholarship that could not be included in the mainstream *Pursuit* article, enhanced by the critical autoethnography that I wanted to undertake on the teaching and learning experiences I was in the process of curating.

These teaching and learning experiences are explored in more detail using critical autoethnographic methods, as described below.

Critical Autoethnography

Autoethnography has, arguably, always been critical. As a qualitative research method, the meanings and motivations of autoethnography have nevertheless evolved since the term first appeared in the 1970s to describe studies of cultures from within, from an “insider” perspective (Hayano, 1979). During the 1980s and 1990s, a shift towards cultures of storytelling and introspection for more reflective practices resulted in a broadening of the definition to include research involving self-observation and investigation within an ethnographic field—essentially moving beyond the myth of objectivity and towards subjectivity as a valid perspective. By the 2000s, academics from a wide range of humanities and social science disciplines were employing autoethnographic methods which, while privileging autobiographical and personal narratives, should still connect to broader questions of cultural, social and political significance (Ellis, 2004). The publication of special issues of journals (*Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 2006) and methodologies (Chang, 2008) paved the way for handbooks and edited volumes published by Oxford (Adams et al., 2015) and Routledge (Bochner and Ellis, 2016), thus consecrating autoethnography as a recognized qualitative research method.

Critical autoethnography strives to take this “cultural analysis through personal narrative” to another level, mobilizing “multiple standpoints to situate their stories and lives to call out positions of privilege and expose moments of vulnerability” (Boylorn and Orbe, 2014: 17, 18). In recent times, critical autoethnography has been used effectively to conduct research in marginalized, vulnerable communities where researchers, through reflexivity and introspection,

study the Self as participant, acknowledging that as members of a dominant culture, they interpret the “facts” through their own sociocultural circumstances (Tilley-Lubbs, 2016). This method has proved fruitful for academics to focus on analyzing their own teaching and learning contexts, practices, experiences, and issues from sympathetic positions, such as in the Special Issue of the *International Journal of Multicultural Education* on “Critical Autoethnography in Pursuit of Educational Equity” (2017). The editors make the salient point in their introduction: “Education, in its many forms, is an institution that mirrors the society around it, including its patterns of privilege and marginalization. Personal stories of living through and being a part of these patterns highlight for readers the ways we are all affected by and affecting institutionalized power and privilege.” (Marx et al., 2017: 2). The articles in this Special Issue include critical autoethnographies from both student and teacher perspectives, using individual and collective storytelling, and speaking from positions of relative advantage and disadvantage in the institutions described.

Several autoethnographic articles related to education have also been published in *Frontiers in Education* (Kappert, 2020; Fuller, 2020) and *Frontiers in Psychology* (Buckley, 2016; Langseth and Salvesen, 2018). In particular, Annette Kappert’s critical autoethnography on female black and minority ethnic educators in British higher education institutions eloquently defends autoethnography’s subjectivity, accuracy, vulnerability, reliability, and validity as a qualitative research tool for understanding educational paradigms and problems (Kappert, 2020).

In this article, I will draw on the justifications proposed by Kappert and others to center my Self as a site of enquiry (Marx et al., 2017). My ambition to translate the personal into broader research results in online language learning scholarship goes beyond certain projects that envisage autoethnography as an end in itself, to express fieldwork evocatively (Ellis and Bochner, 2006). I follow Leon Anderson’s approach in being “committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena” (Anderson, 2006). As Langseth and Salvesen note, “The strength of autoethnography, as we see it, is that the researchers can have a full, embodied understanding of the culture under scrutiny while at the same time maintaining a critical distance from the participants’ meanings and statements about their motives, values, and goals.” (Langseth and Salvesen, 2018). As I analyze my own experiences of teaching and learning languages online during COVID-19 confinement, I am constantly questioning and challenging my own and others’ representations of these experiences. While this process does offer greater “understanding”, I hesitate to state that it is a “full, embodied understanding” given the multiple natures of my roles as teacher and learner as well as providing strategic and administrative leadership. I therefore choose to express the outcomes of this critical autoethnography as “insights” rather than results or findings, following similar preferences for non-scientific terminology outlined by Kappert (2020) and Chang (2008).

INSIGHTS

Data generated through the reflective process constitutes most of the material that leads to the insights presented here. I wrote detailed notes on the process of pivoting to online language teaching, some of which were shared and workshopped with colleagues in email correspondence and meetings. My experiences of language learning online were recorded in weekly learning tasks and periodic assessment submissions, as well as my own personal notes. Student feedback and communication, interaction with colleagues at institutional and personal levels, students' participation and assessment results, and (re)enrolment statistics also serve to complement these insights. This section presents a series of three scenarios, each beginning with an evocative autoethnographic passage, followed by critical reflective analysis, then insights gleaned from the process.

MATTERS OF TASTE: FRENCH EATING CULTURES

Collaborative Sensory Education

Our last Matters of Taste classes before the lockdown were not in stuffy classrooms, but outside on the South Lawn in the warm autumnal sunshine. As increasing community cases of COVID-19 and rumors of restrictions were causing consternation, several students had expressed concern about our crowded conditions with 25 students elbow to elbow in an airconditioned classroom. Performing our first pivot, our *plein air* tutorials turned out to be an excellent forum for discussion of both our reading on the infamous French chef, Vatel, and the forthcoming period of insecurity and ambiguity. We also discussed how our teaching and learning experience would be transformed by compulsory online delivery.

Matters of Taste is an elective subject taught and assessed in French in which students examine the elaboration of normative codes relating to food and wine and the emergence of gastronomy as an expression of cultural dominance and identity. They also study challenges to bourgeois cuisine and gastronomy as have been experienced since at least the mid-20th century, resulting from the colonial history of France and globalisation. Collaborative sensory education complements traditional pedagogical practices—analyzing readings, unpacking concepts, contextualizing challenges—for exploring socio-historical gastronomic phenomena and their afterlives.

During the first 3 weeks of semester, 75 students enrolled in three groups had enjoyed the “embodied enculturation” that collaborative sensory education can offer (Thyssen and Grosvenor, 2019). Every week I would bring in tasting samples that illustrated an aspect of our learning, starting with two soup stocks showing medieval versus classical French culinary traditions, asking students firstly to identify the 10+ ingredients in each, then articulate the differences (medieval = sweeter, spicier, fruitier flavors; classical = earthier, greener, vegetable flavors), to conclude that geopolitical influences dictated both ingredient availability and taste trends during

these historical periods. Enriching vocabulary and stimulating conversation in French, these collaborative sensory education sessions have been an integral part of my language and culture teaching over the past 10 years across various subjects.

In week 4, the first week of lockdown, we were scheduled to taste wines together as part of our study of sensory memory and nostalgia. Instead, I pre-recorded the weekly lecture, a video clip on wine tasting and another on making madeleines in my home kitchen, presenting new specialized French vocabulary and an introduction to Proust's use of this classic French cake to launch into his childhood reminiscences of *A la recherche du temps perdu* [In Search of Lost Time]. For our first classes *via* Zoom, several students showed up with a glass of wine, and some with madeleines, in an attempt to continue our collaborative sensory education on an individual scale. Our collective nostalgia for on campus classes was immediate and poignant.

It was during this first online class that I experienced my most memorable ice-breaking activity—ever. As part of the wine topic for the week, I asked students to watch the film *Ce qui nous lie* [Back to Burgundy] (2017) by Cédric Klapisch. There is a scene at the end of vintage where all the vineyard workers sing the traditional “Ban bourguignon”—a well-known melody with the only words being “lalalalalalalalèèèè”, accompanied by swivelling hand gestures at head height and clapping (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Q6ST9Y-Sfs>). After explaining how many times I had sung this “Burgundian hymn” while undertaking research in the region, I encouraged the students to join in singing it with me. Every student had their cameras and microphones on and in big and little voices, each group sang along with me, doing the hands too, as a grand and absurd finale to their first zoom tutorial in Matters of Taste. After that experience, the barriers to online expression were down and anything was possible. . .

Negotiating Times, Spaces and Needs

We had collectively decided to recast our on campus tutorials that usually extended over 1.5 h for 25 students, to synchronous online tutorials *via* Zoom for 2 × 45 min with half of each class attending at a designated timeslot so as to promote intense discussion and interaction while limiting “dead” screen time. Our online classes seemed to be working well but to probe deeper, I asked students to complete an anonymous online quiz during the mid-semester Easter break to assess how their online learning was progressing and whether we should reinstate the longer classes with more students. Around one third of students responded to the quiz with generally positive comments and equal numbers preferring to keep the shorter 45-min online tutorials versus extending the tutorials to 1.5 h again. As a compromise, I made the remaining tutorials for the semester 1 h dedicated to essential learning outcomes for all 25 students in a group, with an additional 30 min for optional further conversation on the topic and social interaction in French.

In response to student requests for another informal space for broader interpersonal connections, I initiated an online film night and drop-in sessions for discussing individual and collective issues related to our subject and studying French in general. While these opportunities were not as actively subscribed as

expected, there were great connections formed during these online meetings, which have led to further collaborations (see below).

In the on campus version of Matters of Taste, one of the assessment tasks mirrored the collaborative sensory educational experience I initiated in the first weeks of semester. During the final 3 weeks of semester, all students normally present a research project focusing on a French or Francophone dish, regional speciality, or local product, offering samples of the selected subject to share with the group to enhance engagement through embodied enculturation. The online teaching and learning experience did not allow for such convivial and collective sensory education, but pre-recorded video clips by students demonstrated deep commitment to continuing their sensory education on an individual scale. Historical and cultural research complemented one student's demonstration and tasting of the Galette des rois; another student, dressed as a Dijon farmer, made mustard from seeds, wine and honey; another recounted their experiences at the legendary Bouillon Chartier in Paris, tracing the history and impact of this popular precursor to the Parisian fine dining restaurant; another searched out *les mères lyonnaises* in an effort to counter the masculine hegemony of French gastronomic heritage; another indulged their fascination for *merroir*, the marine version of *terroir*, to study the culture of oysters and traditions of their consumption in France; and a Bougna from Kanaky-New Caledonia, Couscous royal from Morocco, and vanilla from Reunion Island featured alongside Veuve Clicquot from Champagne, Château Latour from Bordeaux, and Chartreuse from the Grande Chartreuse monastery near Grenoble. Students were asked to watch at least one of their classmates' videos and write a constructive critique of the information presented and filming style. Their evaluation and appreciation of each other's work was inspiring and heart-warming, making comments on their achievements and empathizing with shared difficulties in presenting for an absent audience.

The subject was clearly successful in spite of the modifications required for online learning. Only one student from China left the subject after classes were moved online, explaining that they preferred to return home and delay French Studies until on campus teaching was reinstated. Another student facing considerable financial difficulties and some learning barriers managed to overcome both during the semester to finish with a solid grade. One student did not complete all pieces of assessment and therefore failed the subject. Otherwise, students' participation and results were considerably higher than average with an overall mean of 78%.

Ongoing Connections and Insights

Two positive insights stand out for me in relation to taking Matters of Taste from an on campus to an online subject.

Firstly, for successful online teaching and learning, it is vital to create a space for community beyond the formal teaching and learning space, which then leads to ongoing connections and deeper relationships. Students who entered this space excelled in their assessed work and have remained in contact with me throughout the year. Our ongoing communications include

exchanging film recommendations, food and wine tasting experiences, recipes, and general catch-ups. Several students have contacted me for references, advice about their future work and postgraduate studies, enrolling in other subjects I teach, and other university-related issues. I was invited to present "my life as a French Professor" at the Student French Club, and one of the most engaged Matters of Taste students has secured an internship with the French-Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Victoria with my support. There is a true sense of community that has evolved from this shared experience of adversity and achievement. Many students have expressed that Matters of Taste was the best online subject they have studied, indeed some said that it was what encouraged them to continue with their studies. One student contacted me specifically to say that they had never before felt as supported and encouraged to participate in a subject at university. This reaction completely contradicts my apprehensions about disconnectedness in teaching and learning languages online—an outcome for which I am very grateful, most of all to the students with whom I shared the Matters of Taste experience.

Secondly, sensory education can be facilitated in the online space, leading to embodied enculturation in both individual and collective contexts. I was fundamentally challenged by the impossibility of continuing the collaborative sensory education I wanted to encourage through on campus tastings and collective analysis. But students were innovative and driven to explore their own sensory education via their research projects and weekly interactions during tutorials. Their autonomous actions were surprising and enlightening, ranging from curating their own tasting experiences to sharing their sensory experiences in tutorials. I only realized in hindsight the value of the shared vocal, auditory and gestural experience of singing the "Ban bourguignon" together in the first online tutorial, as a collective sensory experience that was nevertheless dramatically different from the collaborative winetasting that I had planned. This ice-breaker allowed us all to consider more diverse modes of expression in the online space, and eventually re-negotiate our time, space and needs.

THE UNDERGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN LANGUAGES

Languages in the Spotlight

Languages are usually in the spotlight for all the wrong reasons. Not enough students, program closures, lack of institutional support, are the expected headlines. Government encouragement through radically reduced fees for an accessible Undergraduate Certificate in Languages came as a shock on April 12. My new role as Head of Languages put me in a position to decide whether to lobby for creation of an Undergraduate Certificate in Languages or leave it to other institutions to fulfill the perceived need for intensive online language learning. Some colleagues were immediately in favor. Others were not. I could see the advantages of profiling our language learning programs at a national level. These certificates would be

promoted *via* a dedicated section of the Australian Government courseseeker.com.au website, consulted by millions of prospective students. It would take some extra work with the Convenors of the Languages programs at a time when there was already enough extra work in converting our on campus subjects to online delivery. But in a climate of crisis when absent international students were dropping our overall numbers, the Undergraduate Certificate was also seen as a bid to increase flagging enrolments for 2020.

To comply with the Government regulations to provide a suite of 4 subjects between May and December 2020, we needed to offer an *ab initio* language and culture subject as an online winter intensive—3 weeks in July—then three subjects during Semester 2. French 1 and Italian 1 were already in the 2020 handbook as winter intensives, and German, Russian and Spanish staff saw potential for recruiting new students both from the Undergraduate Certificate and the general student population by offering their beginners subjects in online intensive mode in July. This *ab initio* online winter intensive as a predetermining condition for language progression over the period could not feasibly be considered by staff in the Asia Institute due to heavy workloads, so they were unable to offer their languages in the Undergraduate Certificate.

The Semester 2 study plan then included the level 2 core language and culture subject, and either a cultural studies subject taught in the target language (i.e., French and Francophone Cultural Studies) which was usually for more advanced students, or a European Studies subject: Language and Society in Europe, taught in English. The final compulsory subject for all students was Languages at Work, a work-integrated-learning subject with placement component using the target language. While the two core language and culture subjects at levels 1 and 2 were first-year subjects and therefore posed no particular problems for entry level students within their first 6 months, the Cultural Studies subjects and Languages at Work were both aimed at second-year students with higher levels of language and cultural competence. Participating staff nevertheless agreed that there would be scope for catering teaching and learning and assessment to the needs and competency levels of these incoming Undergraduate Certificate students, and so the new course required no completely new subjects, simply recasting or alternative delivery of existing subjects.

With the support of the School of Languages and Linguistics leadership, we took the Undergraduate Certificate in Languages (French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish) through the various levels of the University hierarchy of approvals. It was a risky play in a tight timeframe and there were many delays due to the rigorous processes for creating new courses—which usually take between 18 months and 2 years. However, the certificate was validated and advertised on the courseseeker.com.au website within 5 days of the final due date for applications, which was 5 days before the winter intensive *ab initio* subjects began. We received over 100 applications, of which less than half were accepted, and just over 20 students enrolled across the five language certificates.

So much work by so many people for so few students.

It felt like a setback rather than a victory, and I was one of the lucky few who made it through—just. . .

Uncritical Mass

As one of the creators of the Undergraduate Certificate in Languages, my pathway through the enrolment process was undoubtedly facilitated by 20 years of experience in the institution and knowing who to contact when things went wrong. A professorial colleague who also applied for entry into the Undergraduate Certificate likewise recognized her advantaged position in the system. However, both of our applications were initially rejected due to lack of proof of our previous degrees—impossible to obtain in the turnaround time required. Thankfully, the University acknowledged that our academic positions in the institution could serve as proof of our intellectual standing!

For the 20 other students, it was important to communicate the urgency of accepting their offer, enrolling immediately, setting up a university email address, completing a placement test to ensure no prior knowledge of the language to be studied, and the need to commence four-five hours of classes per day for 3 weeks beginning on Monday of the following week. The admissions team telephoned each of the students, leaving messages, and I followed up with texts and calls to explain the intricacies of the teaching and learning experiences they had signed up for.

In our conversations, I was struck by their uncritical attitudes, their patience and forbearance with the unfamiliar administrative processes required, and their willingness to change their schedules at short notice to take advantage of the online language learning experience on offer at the University of Melbourne. For the most part, these new students were highly qualified professionals—lawyers, merchant bankers, teachers, communications experts, medical specialists, gallerists, etc.—who had leapt at the opportunity to study a language online during a COVID-19 induced lull in their otherwise extremely demanding working lives. Their motivations were as diverse as their locations—students were connecting from Sydney and San Francisco, as well as the Philippines, with regional Victorian and rural Australian students also represented. Some students were stranded in Melbourne having returned from high-profile international careers in Liverpool and Hong Kong. All of them shared a commitment and passion for learning their chosen language online via the prestige community constituted by the University of Melbourne. There was a clear attraction to studying at the “Number 1 ranked university in Australia”, and several students referred to the particular language and culture subject descriptions as one of the principal drivers for their decision to apply for the Undergraduate Certificate in Languages at the University of Melbourne.

Feedback from students both during and after studying the Undergraduate Certificate in Languages has been overwhelmingly positive. Several students have elected not to exit the program with this qualification, upgrading to either a Graduate Diploma in Arts (Language) or continuing with their language studies at the University of Melbourne via other courses. The quality and commitment of the 20 students who did enrol in the Undergraduate Certificate in Languages have proved to be rewarding for teaching staff as well as other students in the subjects.

Administrative, Marketing and Pedagogical Insights

The insights drawn from developing the Undergraduate Certificate in Languages relate to administrative and marketing perspectives as well as pedagogical concerns.

The administrative load for creating and delivering the Undergraduate Certificate in Languages in such a tight timeframe for so few students was onerous and unsustainable for all concerned. However, the marketing opportunities and market research provided were invaluable. The visibility and targeting of these programs were measurably greater in terms of reach and impact than most other paid marketing strategies for language studies. Market research based on hits and views demonstrated significant interest for intensive online language learning certificates in French and Russian, with lesser but still considerable levels of interest in Spanish, Italian and German.

The pedagogical experience was of excellent quality, but potentially much more demanding than usually expected in such as program. The high calibre of students accepted into the Undergraduate Certificate in Languages allowed for engagement at an appropriate level in the second-year subjects (Cultural Studies and Languages at Work), whereas I suspect entry-level students with no prior academic experience would have difficulties in coping with the more advanced subject material and challenging language competencies required at such an early stage of their studies. The cohort's capacity for autonomous learning combined with their maturity also promoted good community-building strategies to connect with other students both within the Undergraduate Certificate program and beyond.

THE UNDERGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN LANGUAGES—LEARNING ITALIAN ONLINE

Delights of Code-Switching

As an academic specialized in language teaching and learning, I consider myself well-versed in the theories and practices of code-switching. Linguists generally define code-switching as occurring when speakers use two or more languages, dialects or varieties in the same conversation without any apparent effort (Gardner-Chloros, 2009). In recent years, behavioral code-switching has been more closely observed, especially in racial and gendered contexts, with special attention on the psychological costs that constant code-switching can entail (McCluney et al., 2019). In my case, from July to December 2020, I was constantly code-switching between teacher and student, attempting to find a space in which I could be free to make mistakes and learn from them like any other student, and yet also support and respond to the expectations my colleagues inevitably placed on me as a fellow teacher.

My enrolment in the Undergraduate Certificate in Languages (Italian) was at first, a folly that I had no delusions about being able to maintain. For the first few days of the Italian 1 online winter intensive, I decided every evening to withdraw and yet every morning was excited to login to our classes. I learnt so

much, so quickly, and enjoyed every minute of it so that by the end of the first week, I knew I had to continue despite personal and professional advice that I was taking on too much. And I learnt so much more than just Italian language and culture—my teacher was a colleague I have known for over 20 years whose talents and expertise in language teaching made so much sense to me from the student perspective. Their nurturing and sometimes self-deprecating positioning produced neither disrespectful nor exploitative reactions in the students. Instead, by emphasizing a compassionate and vulnerable approach in their teaching style, they co-opted the students into an intimate community of trust, which is a fundamental advantage in building confidence in language learning and one that is harder to achieve in the online classroom than in on campus classes.

Most of the time, I was just Jackie, *una studentessa d'italiano*, but sometimes it became clear that I was not just a student of Italian, but a teacher of French as well. I could not help myself asking other students who had learnt French all through secondary school whether they were studying French at university. When they replied: no, it was too hard to get good marks in advanced French, I was interested, storing the information for later conversations with colleagues. Of course, like me, they found their background in French grammar and vocabulary an advantage in learning Italian. An unfair advantage? Well, yes, in a sense.

Our teacher told us about everything—all about their studies, travels, family and children—subjects we'd never discussed in the corridor in such depth or frankness. In return, I submitted essays in Italian about my childhood experiences, my dreams, my family history and my fears, exposing myself as I never normally would to colleagues in English or French. I felt completely vulnerable on one hand, and then my teacher would email me to ask a question about languages strategy or some other administrative approval and the scale would slide again.

The other students embraced me into their community, not expecting me behave like a teacher until it was asked of me. For example, other students would lead the small group activities, freely correcting my pronunciation or errors, but if advice was needed on enrolling in subjects or getting approval for a course, they would not hesitate to ask me for help—such as an introduction to the Convenor of Japanese, or a course plan for advanced French. They code-switched even more easily than I did. We compared answers and marks and experiences and recipes. I understood where the international students were coming from and going to, how they lived in Melbourne with a parent, or a sibling, or all alone, wishing to return home. We joined facebook groups and organized study groups, revised together and got nervous about the oral exams. Several of these students are enrolled in the subjects I teach next year—what strange and wonderful on campus reunions they will be!

Challenges of Code-Switching

Italian 1 and Italian 2 flowed one into the other, with the same teacher and some of the same students—and a true feeling of community in diversity. Italian Cultural Studies and Language at Work were very different experiences. In both subjects, I was

mostly working in small groups with other students enrolled in the Undergraduate Certificate. The high-achieving cohort was more demanding, less diverse, than in the other classes, and I was more obviously a reference point as the main administrative contact for these students. I felt responsible when they complained that there was too much work in the subject, or that it was too hard for our level. I agreed, suggesting strategies for making the tasks more manageable. However, their ingrained work ethic and competitive approach seemed to override their perceived shortcomings and both their individual presentations and group projects appeared of very high quality.

I agree that reading Petrarchan sonnets, Machiavelli's *Il Principe* and Boccaccio's *Il Decameron*, comparing the Renaissance and contemporary Italian used, as we were asked to do in Italian Cultural Studies, are not really tasks for beginners. But they were feasible activities for the more advanced students in the other tutorial, and we could read the texts in English translation and write our essays in English or Italian, maintaining only our oral presentations in Italian. I certainly learnt a lot in this subject and my code-switching between student researcher and academic researcher may prove further challenging. I am currently writing an academic article comparing Machiavelli's and Thomas More's visions of enlightened leadership, part of which was submitted as an essay for Italian Cultural Studies.

Languages at Work was the real test in terms of code-switching—both behavioral and linguistic. Both teachers marking my work were also tutors that I directly supervise in other subjects. The partner organization with which I was working on a group placement project, the Australian Multilingual Writing Project (australianmultilingualwriting.org), is directed by a close friend and colleague of mine. There were various questions around ethics and assessment that were resolved intelligently and reasonably, but this subject was the most challenging for me in terms of negotiating autonomy and community. With only three 1-h tutorials during the entire semester, the rest of our time was supposed to be spent working with our group and partner organization. However, there was no real opportunity for a “placement” given the online nature of the project and limited interaction with the partner organization. Our group was incredibly dynamic, smart and creative—all equally motivated and yet some were prepared to take on greater challenges—with commensurate time commitments—than others. Our project to each interview a selected poet published in the Australian Multilingual Writing Project journal issues about their code-switching ideas and practices was fascinating and rewarding work. Transcribing and editing the interview for publication on the website was not. For me, this subject definitely involved a very high workload, no specific language skills enhancement, and it was more difficult for me (and several other students enrolled in the Undergraduate Certificate) to see the benefits of taking this subject. However, students who chose this subject as part of their study plans clearly enjoyed this subject and drew much satisfaction from completing the projects using higher levels of language skills. Essentially, there was not enough autonomy, too much community interdependence to make this subject a good fit for my learning needs.

Professional Development Insights

Enrolling in the Undergraduate Certificate in Languages (Italian) is the best personal and professional development for language teaching and learning I have ever done. It has helped me understand the University systems and cultures from the student perspective, and also to recognize cultural differences in ways of teaching and learning European languages, as in the Italian vs. French experience.

The delights and challenges of code-switching have become abundantly clearer to me and I have observed and developed better strategies for accepting and negotiating professional slippage between coordinator, teacher and learner roles.

Learning a language online is enriching, exciting, and enabling if a balance between autonomy and community are maintained.

DISCUSSION

Rather than discussion points, this critical autoethnography poses projection points. Each of the three scenarios that contributed insights to this study require further action for future projections.

Offering sensory oriented subjects like Matters of Taste: French Eating Cultures for 100% online delivery is now a proposition that I can envisage and would recommend to others, despite my initial hesitations. What is lost in the lack of collective sensory educational activities can be gained through autonomous and spontaneous acts of sensory exploration and awareness. However, another sensory oriented subject that I coordinate and teach, Wines of the World, has been twice cancelled due to the impossibility of on campus delivery in July 2020 and February 2021. It is scheduled to be offered 100% on campus as the sensory and fieldwork components represent 50% of classwork and assessment. This percentage of collaborative sensory work cannot be compensated for with individual or autonomous sensory work. I therefore identify limits as to what kinds of sensory oriented subjects can be delivered in 100% online modes.

The Undergraduate Certificate in Languages will not be offered again in its current format. The experiment was successful in terms of marketing, market research and outcomes for the students enrolled in the 2020 delivery of the programs in French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish. Looking forward, we can project that an Undergraduate Certificate in Languages that also includes the languages taught in the Asia Institute (Arabic, Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean) with a sequence of 4 units in language and culture core courses over 2 years part-time could be very attractive both to our current students and to students who wish to study only a language at the University of Melbourne.

Learning a language online myself by enrolling in the Undergraduate Certificate in Languages (Italian) has been an invaluable lesson in determining how the balance of autonomy and community can influence the outcomes of the experience. The intensity of the community experience in Italian 1 and 2 was nurturing and balanced out by autonomous activity and assignments, whereas the Languages at Work experience of a small, outcome-driven group without significant autonomy or interaction with others outside the group, proved less fruitful in terms of language learning or cultural enhancement in Italian.

Somewhere in between, Italian Cultural Studies provided a balance of autonomy and community, though the community was limited by reduced language competency in the Undergraduate Certificate in Italian cohort versus the more advanced Italian students.

These language learning experiences in Italian coincide with and confirm projections related to teaching online in French in Matters of Taste. The best balance of autonomy and community can be achieved through creating a harmonious and trusting community within the formal class, and informal smaller groups for increased levels of exchange outside the formal class.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this critical autoethnography demonstrates that negotiating the balance between autonomy and community is (still) the key to learning languages online during COVID-19 confinement in 2020.

Diverse experiences of teaching and learning languages in the ever-changing COVID-19 context at the University of Melbourne show that perceived barriers to successful delivery, such as the absence of collective sensory education or communicative group work, can be overcome if the right balance of autonomy and community is achieved.

Formal synchronous classes with flexibility in duration and delivery style, complemented by informal meetups and group

work for revisions, provide clear positive results in teaching and learning languages, according to this study.

Critical autoethnography methods were fundamental and essential to gather the insights and projection points presented in this article. It is hoped that this work may help language educators reflect on their various roles during COVID-19 confinement.

Finally, nothing compares to “walking a mile in their shoes” when it comes to understanding students’ perspectives and needs regarding online language learning. This reflective experience was invaluable in so many ways, and has shaped the way that I am now recasting teaching and learning experiences for online and on campus language students.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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