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Controversial Issues in Education



Proactive Pedagogical Thinking about Online Instruction

By Charlotte Lindgren

The author shares her perceptions derived from 10 years of teaching French online at a university in Sweden. Particular emphasis is placed on three points: working with the feeling of belonging to a group, recording lectures, and developing appropriate examinations. At a time when many courses are being put online, the author wishes to share her experience and encourage proactive pedagogical thinking about online instruction.

I have been teaching modern languages at Dalarna University in Sweden for 10 years. Dalarna specializes in online and distance-teaching methods, and I would like to share my teaching journey. Given the current situation, when a lot of teaching will take place online, it seems even more important to share experiences in online pedagogy. I will begin by describing my university and my working environment before offering some reflections on how my online teaching has evolved over the past 10 years.

My Work Environment

Sweden is a country in the north of Europe with approximately 10 million inhabitants. The capital is Stockholm, where the largest university in terms of student numbers is located. Dalarna University, where I teach, was founded in 1977 and is located in central Sweden in the historical region of the same name. The university has two campuses, one in the town of Falun and the other in the town of Borlänge. In the beginning, the university was founded on three pillars: technical education (the region is a center for the mining of copper and other metals and forestry), nursing education, and teacher training. Nowadays, it offers a wide range of educational opportunities in different fields. The latest available figures show 778 employees, including 46 professors, and 14,882 students.

Today, 66% of these students study online. In fact, since the early 2000s, Dalarna University has begun a fundamental effort to “put” many of its courses and programs “online.” One of the departments most involved in this process is modern languages. Today, 12 languages are taught, such as English, French, German, and so forth. At the beginning of the 2000s, those in modern languages were obliged, for various reasons, to move gradually from on-campus teaching to online teaching. This was done (Lindgren, 2020) in an extremely ambitious and conscientious way. At the time, close collaboration existed between teachers and the technicians who supported their teaching environment. The rule was that the needs of teachers took precedence over technical developments and not the other way around. Most teachers wanted to create, in an online environment, the same atmosphere as in a classroom. For them, there was no question of setting up the method of the “correspondence course.” Maintaining the interaction between student and teacher—but also between and among students—was a key consideration when the language courses were provided online. Moreover, those involved decided to use collaborative working methods and flipped classrooms for students as well as to promote collaborations actively, not only with technicians but also between teachers, in a much more intensive way than

usual in this teaching environment. Such intense collaboration between and among colleagues on pedagogy is one of the reasons I have been able to carry out my own pedagogical reflections.

Teaching French Online in Higher Education

I defended my doctoral thesis in French at the University of Uppsala in 2005; it was a study of the use of the past tense in stories of French-speaking children in Sweden published in 2008 (Lindgren, 2011). During my doctoral studies, I took several pedagogical courses, because doctoral students are often involved in teaching. I was therefore very interested in the training courses on “Teaching for University Teachers” and “Supervising Undergraduate Thesis Students,” to name but a few. Several years after the defense of my doctoral thesis, in the fall semester of 2009, I was offered a position at Dalarna University, but...the teaching was almost entirely online. I had taught online before but only sporadically when working for a private company that taught high school students who needed help in various ways. The only contact with these students was through telephone conversations.

At Dalarna University, a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE, called Fronter at the time) had been developed in which the teacher could upload reading materials and exercises and post messages and in which students could hand in their homework, find course materials outside of the course literature, chat on a forum with the teacher or other students, and also get information about the course. Adobe Connect, another online meeting program, was also used so seminars could be held online in real time. For me as a teacher, this was not just a matter of taking on and running new courses but also of learning how to teach online. Although some of the courses were still on campus at the time, all of mine had shifted to online delivery. Today we use Learn Blackboard as our virtual learning platform and Zoom as our online meeting software. But my journey as a teacher has little to do with the different programs I have used.

The teaching of French at the academic level is offered at nine universities in Sweden. At Dalarna University, French is taught at the beginner, basic, and advanced level. The basic level roughly corresponds to undergraduate teaching and the advanced level to postgraduate level study. As educators in a common subject area, department members also contribute to the teacher training program and offer student teachers courses with didactic variants, as well as courses in language didactics. Sometimes a few 7.5-credit courses are also offered on a specific subject, such as “French in the European Union,” “Literature and Culture in the Maghreb,” and so forth. Courses at the university level in Sweden always have a syllabus that includes goals for students to reach.

Reflection on Three Critical Issues: Group Feeling, Lectures, and Examination

I would now like to make three points, which could be called three conclusions, from my 10 years of online teaching. I am a little uncomfortable with the term “conclusion” because these are not at all immutable conclusions that I intend never to change again. These are works in progress. These points relate to group feeling, the recording of lectures, and the work on the different forms of examination (cf. also, Leblanc & Lindgren, 2013).

Group Feeling

Like other researchers before me (e.g. Salmon, 2011), I have noticed that within an online class, group feeling is fundamental. Students do not (usually) meet each other in real life, and they have less opportunity to form a united and confident working group. Of course, this depends on the circumstances: students who study in the teacher training program, for example, or those who study full time each semester (30 credits) on a regular basis get to know each other better and gain a sense of belonging to a group. Sometimes the students decide spontaneously to meet online between lectures and seminars. My colleagues and I found that some students create groups on social networks, such as Facebook, and meet or communicate outside of class hours. In my course guide, I add encouragement to students to get together in this way. In my courses, I always invite the students to present themselves at the beginning of the course on the forum and at the first seminar (I always introduce myself as well). I encourage them to upload a picture next to their name on the forum and to leave their camera on during seminars so we can all see each other. I do the same. As we have a rather heterogeneous group of students, which does not correspond to the idea of the “normal” student, so to speak, it is interesting for everyone to know who else is in the group.

According to several studies carried out on the university’s own data system, Linnéa, students who study online at Dalarna are often older than average. In 2018, only 12% were under the age of 24; 36.6% were 34 or younger. The rest were therefore over 35 years old, including almost 5% who were over 65. According to details from the Hofverberg survey (2018), 61% of students spent more than 50% of their time working. Forty percent had parents born outside of Sweden: 1% in the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway), 19% outside Europe, and 20% in another European country. Sixty-three percent had Swedish as their native language, which implies that the rest did not (including some students who had French as their native language). I believe this plurality that characterizes our student groups is a fact that most of them appreciate. Some of the teachers at our university who had previously taught at one of the traditional campus-based universities have also been surprised by this plurality. What it means in practice is that a couple of students can discover during a presentation that they live in the same town in a French-speaking country and can meet to practice French. Some may have the same native language and can help each other to study French using another language for grammatical or linguistic reflections.

With this in mind, I proposed that my department implement a mid-course evaluation, in addition to the final evaluation, which proceeds as follows: The students are told they will have to answer three short questions (“what was positive?”; “what was negative in the course so far?”; and “what could be changed this semester?”). They are told that one of them will be secretary and will take notes during the discussion in a breakout room on Adobe Connect or Zoom. They talk about these issues in confidence, without the presence of the teacher, and trust each other enough to share their opinions. The secretary records their responses in an anonymous fashion and then sends the answers to the teacher, who can study them with a view to changing some things in the course. The sense of being heard by the teacher is, in my opinion, good for group feeling.

By the way, in almost all our French classes, students are placed into real-time breakout rooms for independent discussion. Some teachers use the system’s automatic function to make the groups, while others create the groups manually. For

example, as mentioned above, native-born French speakers can either be grouped together or scattered across the different groups to act as a kind of “locomotive” for the discussion. Finally, in some courses, students are also required to do group work, such as a presentation or other written work, which they must submit to the platform and/or present online. They, of course, need to meet as a small group, so virtual student rooms are set up for this purpose. These opportunities strengthen group feeling, too. My colleagues and I work hard on group feeling and getting that right.

Recorded Lectures

For a study on the perception and learning of French online by older students (in collaboration with Monika Stridfeldt, published in French, 2019), my colleague and I asked students in French to take an online sound perception test during a normal seminar on Adobe Connect. In addition to this test, the students had to answer a questionnaire that, among other things, focused on their perception of French during the seminars and in the audio documents that had been used in the course. The perspective used was gerontological, but we involved all students who volunteered, regardless of age. It then appeared to me, in the answers we received, that the students really appreciated the opportunity to listen again or to listen more slowly to some of the audio documents. It also appeared to me, having lived in a doxa arguing quite strongly against “lectures,” that, on the contrary, the lectures were greatly appreciated by the students.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a debate evolved within Sweden that lectures could be an outdated concept. The prevailing view was that students should be active in their learning and not passive. It was argued that, in lectures, students at best simply took notes. At worst, they merely listened or dozed off. Memorizing class notes by heart and copying them as answers in the final exam do not stimulate students’ deep learning. Instead, more active, personal student work was encouraged, and final exams were written that appealed to students’ critical thinking and analytical skills. Even better, some courses were designed with no final exam at all but with a series of smaller exams or assignments. These ideas fit well within online teaching paradigms as well because, given the limited contact time between students and teachers, there was often not enough time to give long lectures.

Distance or not, in 2018 a report from the Swedish Higher Education Authority showed that the average number of teacher-led hours in the humanities, social, theological, and legal sciences was only 8.3 hours per week (compared to 13.8 hours in medicine and 14.7 hours in the natural, technical, and social sciences). These hours were divided on average into lectures (4.4 hours), seminars and group work (2.9 hours), and “other” (1 hour). At my university, in the French program, the students have quite few hours of classes per week in full-time mode. It therefore seems obvious that if we spent 1 hour giving a lecture, not much time would be left for the interaction that characterizes our online teaching!

To replace the “missing” real-time lectures, the French teachers adopted different methods: in addition to assigning reading of the course literature, they could also provide students with handouts, record their lectures, or encourage students to study additional, open-access courses. After the results of the above-mentioned survey, I decided to record as many lectures as possible. I do not mean to say that I am against active student learning—far from it. But, in Sweden, lectures have had, at one time and in a certain milieu, an exaggeratedly bad reputation. My opinion is that they



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are good as a complement to other activities. Recorded lectures give students the opportunity to listen whenever they want, once or several times; to take notes at their own pace; and to read the course literature more slowly if they so desire. This then gives them the chance to discuss more reflective questions and ask their own during the seminar with other students and with the teacher.

The Question of Examination

Finally, I have also given a lot of thought to the question of examination. In parallel with various research projects, such as the one upon which the French version of this article is based (Lindgren, 2013), I thought about the fairest way to organize an exam so students could pass. As I said, students must show that they have achieved the course goals contained in the syllabus, and each course goal is evaluated. For instance, in some of our French courses, we have final exams that must be taken online in real time. When I first started teaching in Dalarna, teachers like me were also exam supervisors.

Running real-time online exams could be a complicated business. Dalarna University now has an online examination center, with clear rules and specially trained supervisors. When students arrive at the exam online in the room on the usual online meeting place, they must have their identity checked by presenting their ID cards. The students are then monitored by camera during the examination. The supervisor sees both the student and the screen. If there is a technical problem, the supervisor will call the disconnected student (the main problem is that the student sees himself disconnected and is therefore no longer visible on the supervisor's screen). The time of disconnection is noted, as are any requests for comfort breaks. A student who has been offline or away from his or her screen for too long will not have the exam recognized. A student who would prefer to take the exam on campus can always do so (but of course not currently during the pandemic). Only in two courses in the French department—in writing proficiency—must students go to an approved exam center at another university or designated study center (it can also be an embassy if they are abroad).

It seems to me after all these years that the fairest way to enable students to pass their exams without creating extra work for the teachers is to vary the methods used: written and oral exams that can be done either in real time or recorded and submitted later; final exams and continuous assessment (e.g., handing in several small assignments scattered across the semester); tests on the platform; oral presentations; and so forth. Not all methods can be used for every single 7.5-credit course, but when a student obtains points for an entire 30-credit course, varied methods demonstrate that the individual has been evaluated in different ways and has been able to show fairly that he or she has personally achieved the goals of the course.

Concluding Thoughts

In this article, I wanted to show the educational journey I have taken as a teacher in French over the past 10 years at Dalarna University in Sweden. The three points discussed illustrate how I changed my method, alone or with my colleagues and sometimes with the help of the university administration (for example, via the establishment of the online test center). First, I now work more on group feeling. For example, I spend more time encouraging students to collaborate outside of classes. Second, I record many more lectures so that students can listen to them as they

wish, at their own pace, and in addition to reading the course literature and using the course materials. Finally, after a long reflection on the fairest way to evaluate whether or not students have achieved the course goals, I think I have arrived at a good solution that uses a plurality of evaluation methods.

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