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Setting up a Language Learning Environment in Microsoft Teams

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Abstract

The Language Zone at the University of Leeds, UK, is well established as a hub for language learners across the campus, both those on language courses and those studying languages independently for a variety of reasons. It has been operating entirely online since March 2020 and will do so until the campus fully re-opens. This written account gives a brief overview of the changes made to the Language Zone's services and provision of learning materials in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, including how the team members' roles were adapted to ensure staff skills were taken into account. In addition to showing how services were maintained when the campus was closed at short notice and teaching was moved online until further notice, the study outlines how the Language Zone developed a platform to support the 2020 summer pre-sessional programmes to be delivered completely online. Finally, reflecting on the recent achievements and considering how to support students in the future, it aims to inspire other self-access centres to think about what they can do to develop their services in response to the crisis and beyond.

Keywords: Microsoft Teams, student engagement, staff training, online learning environment, language learners

The Language Zone is a self-access centre that provides free learning materials and resources to language learners, both students and staff, at the University of Leeds, UK. The centre supports students enrolled on modules in the Language Centre and the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, as well as independent learners who might be learning a new language for work, study, or leisure.

The Language Zone team run a range of workshops and weekly activities to help students practise and improve their language skills. Students can also get involved in language exchanges and student-led language groups. For example, in the Language Groups programme volunteer native speakers receive training and support in order to lead conversation sessions, helping non-native speakers to develop their proficiency in the language used outside the classroom. These activities usually take place in face-to-face settings but have been offered online since the campus lockdown in March.

Response to the COVID-19 pandemic

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the University of Leeds closed its physical campus on 20 March 2020. The Language Zone had closed a few days earlier already, giving the team a chance to obtain required equipment working from home while developing a plan for online service delivery. From the start, it was established that clear communications with students would be essential (Soehner et al., 2017). Not only were we in crisis mode where clear communications can be vital, but in general online learning can be difficult in terms of relaying body language and facial clues that aid conversation for most people (Sklar, 2020). Students would still be able to access the Language Zone's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), which is primarily used for sharing resources for independent study. Most student interaction took place in the physical Language Zone spaces, with few opportunities to interact with each other online.

As a team we were already used to working asynchronously, as most team members are working part-time and do not meet face-to-face very often due to different shift patterns. Before the pandemic lockdown, a system of keeping in touch via emails and shared logs was already established within the team and those we work with closely, so a move to Microsoft Teams was straight-forward. We duplicated our existing communication channels, with a bonus of synchronous chat and phone/video call facilities, and we have not looked back since. Staff have since attended training sessions delivered by the IT department to become more familiar with the tool, and there are many helping guides available to resolve any outstanding issues.

It would not be possible to offer regular stock while our physical space was closed, as core texts would not be available digitally through online suppliers, so it was essential to create an online environment that incorporated the Language Zone's strengths: human interaction, language advice, and resource recommendations. We had already established a Language Zone area on the VLE, referring learners to good online resources and incorporating guidance created for specific purposes, but we needed to find a way to engage with students on a more individualised level.

Choice of Tools and Technology

When it became clear that the campus was going to be closed within the next few days, I explored the tools available through the University, and asked students what they would find useful, using a combination of an online survey and discussion boards on the Language Zone's

VLE. It was important to build a platform that would enable us to keep in touch with our existing language learning community and give them a space to still engage with one another.

I dismissed Blackboard Collaborate Ultra as it proved too clunky for our student engagement purposes, but I value it for its benefits for training and delivery of teaching and self-access materials, as well as group sessions that require break-out spaces. For the Language Zone space, something that felt more informal and intuitive was needed as students would be able to join it at any point and we would not be able to deliver training to get students used to the tool. Microsoft Teams had recently been made available for students, so I attended a training session to find out more about how it could be used and get some ideas on how to use it for student engagement. The training, conversations with colleagues in IT, and the brief experience of using it with my own team convinced me that this may be the tool I was looking for. I outline some of the strengths and weaknesses of the tool in Table 1.

Table 1

Strengths and Weaknesses of Microsoft Teams for Self-access Activities

Strengths	Weaknesses
Central space that integrates a range of collaborative tools, seamless backup and updating of resources	Preparation of online resources that are fully accessible can be time-intensive.
Accessibility of online provision, e.g. not location-bound, a central space that allows interaction.	Not all live sessions will be suitable for different time zones.
Flexibility, e.g. no rooms required, available 24/7, no travel required for guest speakers. Discussions can happen outside scheduled sessions or carry on after a session.	Working with learners of English in small groups can be easier face-to-face in an informal environment, as it is easier to encourage individual students to speak up and get involved, so that sessions are not taken over by more confident students. Using MS Teams means that students have to take turns to speak: there are no opportunities for multiple conversations as there would be face-to-face.
Screen-sharing can replace the need for prepared presentations during sessions, and seems more natural and spontaneous as a stimulus for conversation. Being able to write in the Chat box during a discussion helps overcome pronunciation issues or references that are not immediately clear. Live captions can also aid students' understanding.	

I created some materials to get students started, such as guidelines on how to use the tool and how to engage with others. I further created several discussion channels, such as “For book lovers” and “Wellbeing, cooking, being at home”. I chose topics that would appeal to a wide range of learners and would encourage students to engage with one another, therefore encouraging community building. A lot of the channels and initial discussion threads were also based on activities that the Language Zone was already providing in our physical space before the pandemic, such as giving advice, dealing with enquiries, and running conversation activities.

In terms of unexpected benefits, the interactions we have in the Teams space online have increased the number of sessions we run, partly because of eluding physical restrictions such as room availability and having to cover an information counter all day, which frees up staff time, an unexpected but welcome benefit of the campus lockdown. The sessions have also developed in terms of who gets involved and who students get to talk to. For example, students can sign up for one-to-one chats that last 15 minutes, which are staffed by the Language Zone team and colleagues who usually work in student support, administration, student admissions, management, and teaching. This involvement of a wide variety of staff was unprecedented and made possible by the unusual circumstances and how colleagues’ homeworking arrangements developed. In addition, giving students the opportunity to get involved in creating and running activities as well as giving resource recommendations is much easier online, because the space can be used to create a more equal space between staff and students, perhaps because we are less restricted physically by counters and appearances. Students can now interact with the Language Zone 24/7, contrary to physical opening times that somewhat restricted access to around 60 hours a week, excluding the online resources we already shared on our VLE. In addition to providing a wide variety of asynchronous resources and activities, we also deliver about 45 hours of synchronous activities every week. During a typical week, this includes nine hours of staff-led group sessions, 19 hours of staff- and student-led one-to-one chats, and 12 hours of self-guided sessions, which offer students a dedicated space to meet other learners.

I am aware that online spaces can also increase inequalities, which we aim to mitigate by offering a range of synchronous and asynchronous activities, keeping in mind issues such as accessibility, available equipment, and bandwidth (Stanford, 2020; University of Leeds, 2020). Students were also encouraged to contact the Language Zone with any issues or ideas.

Service development

Having established a platform on which to deliver the Language Zone’s online offer, I encouraged my team to run their own sessions and develop ideas of how to engage students, either synchronously through the established “Let’s Chat” format or through asynchronous activities. My aim was to empower them to make their own decisions and develop their own skills while engaging with students. I made it clear that this would be a collaborative learning journey, during which we would learn with, and from, students, and that we could be frank about not knowing something or trying things out. Asking students what they thought about our activities and developments was important for student engagement and helped to establish good relationships between colleagues and students. For example, the student survey helped us to decide which times would be most suitable for synchronous group sessions and encouraged us to develop a Film Club session during which students could watch a film together and discuss it afterwards. At the moment, the films are chosen by a member of the Language Zone team and include British classics, such as “Love Actually” and “Chicken Run”, but we are planning to invite students to suggest films for future sessions. It also confirmed that students perceive the Language Zone’s activities as useful for their language development, as well as social interaction.

Several managers of other teams, such as student support and administrative staff, had already contacted me before the lockdown to ask if their staff could help with anything the Language Zone would deliver during the lockdown, as they could envisage that their staff would be interested in being involved in some development opportunities while working from home. In response to this, I suggested that staff could get involved in delivering online sessions to give students the opportunity to practise their speaking skills. As mentioned above, building on an established face-to-face offer of speaking activities, such as the Conversation Club and Language Groups, allowed me to create an extended online programme delivered by voluntary staff from other Schools and services, student volunteers, and Language Zone staff.

Feedback from colleagues and student volunteers who got involved in delivering Language Zone activities has been very positive, with some commenting that they enjoyed working with students like this even though they had not done anything similar before, while others mentioned that they had noticed how running group sessions had helped them to increase their confidence. Involving colleagues from other teams across the University has also had the

unintended and positive effect that more people now know about the Language Zone and will refer students to us for language learning and intercultural engagement.

To enable students from around the globe to take part in Language Zone Activities, we scheduled daily sessions that are advertised as “self-guided”, meaning that these would provide a dedicated space for students to meet one another and chat, without a staff member present. Offering students these sessions throughout the day and night gives them further opportunities to meet other students and practise their English in an informal environment. While anecdotal evidence suggests that synchronous opportunities for communication appear to be favoured, asynchronous activities are included in the online offer to ensure that the space is accessible for everyone. This includes students in different time zones, and those who prefer asynchronous communications for a variety of reasons. In order to offer an organised asynchronous activity rather than self-guided sessions only, one English language tutor is using the Language Zone’s online space to engage students in her research project about how drama activities can support language learning.

Based on student and staff feedback, the Language Zone sessions have evolved during the first few weeks of the lockdown. For example, in addition to the informal “Let’s Chat” sessions run during the first few weeks of lockdown, we established a more formal Conversation Club, based on a previous face-to-face activity which revolves around a specific topic and sometimes includes contributions from guest speakers, as well as Book Chat, a 60-minute session about reading and books. This allows students who prefer a more focused session to participate and explore the online offer.

The language learning opportunities run by the Language Zone are complemented by other services in the University, such as wellbeing activities offered by the student union, Leeds University Union, and activities offered by other service departments. For example, the Lifelong Learning Centre and Careers Centre offer webinars on their respective specialisms open to all students, while the University Library has expanded their online sessions and provision of e-resources.

Reflection

The move to online service delivery was a steep learning curve for the Language Zone team and colleagues, as new tools had to be explored, training materials created (for staff and

students), and quick decisions were made daily. As one colleague commented, “it was all ready and organised in my head but if I had had to communicate (rather than just act on) my ideas and plans, the setting up of our remote service would have taken a lot longer.” This confirms that the most challenging aspect of this project was communicating ideas to staff and students and getting their buy-in. My continuous interest in online learning meant that I was already familiar with many tools available at the University of Leeds, and my “instinct to play” enabled me to create an online environment quickly. I was also able to share my existing knowledge with teachers before the campus closed, giving them hands-on training by using the tools in question to communicate and explore ideas together.

At times, I was very conscious that I was moving and developing the online space and services very quickly, and that my team may struggle to keep up, but they rose to the challenge and embraced new ideas, environments, and pace. Overall it has been very rewarding to develop the Language Zone’s new online space, and I am confident that the unexpected benefits of moving services online, such as involving staff members from different teams to interact with students for informal language development, will continue to inform our service developments.

Conclusion

The Language Zone team was already well respected for their delivery of co-curricular activities under pre-pandemic circumstances, which meant that students and staff quickly got involved in the online space, accepting it as a viable extension of the physical space while the campus was closed. With initially over 400 users, the Language Zone’s online space was one of the first large Microsoft Teams in campus, and the first student-facing one on this scale. Since its inception, it has served as an example and template for other University services to develop their own spaces, allowing the Language Zone team to share their expertise to help other teams develop their services as well as improving our own.

Looking forward there are several scenarios the Language Zone will consider for future service delivery and development, such as offering some speaking opportunities online once we are back on campus. As usual we will adapt and aim to ensure that we keep in mind what students and staff need to stay well and succeed in their endeavours.

Notes on the Contributor

Carolyn Schneider manages the Language Zone at the University of Leeds. She is a chartered librarian and her current research interests include languages, online communities and creating a sense of belonging while helping people achieve what they need and want.

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