



2021

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Recommended Citation

Martin, Cynthia L. (2021) "Afterword: Looking to the Future after the Pandemic," *Russian Language Journal*: Vol. 71 : Iss. 2 , Article 18.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rlj/vol71/iss2/18>

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Afterword: Looking to the Future after the Pandemic

CYNTHIA L. MARTIN

1. Introduction

At the time of publication of this special issue of *Russian Language Journal*, most language programs will have been teaching remotely or in a hybrid format for more than a year. This volume is a testament to the collective effort of administrators and instructors determined not to lose sight of the opportunities to learn from the pandemic and the emergency transition to remote learning. Although students are not represented here as authors, they contributed to these efforts, and hence they figure prominently in every article of the volume. Initial expectations for learning outcomes for them for online teaching may not have been very high, but as Merrill, Dengub, and Pastushenkov point out, it appears that language proficiency results from teaching online may be more encouraging than anticipated. As we prepare to return to in-person instruction in the Fall of 2021, there is no doubt that many of the lessons learned during the pandemic will impact both the short- and long-term future of our field. In that regard, a number of recurrent themes appear in this special volume: 1) we learned to make better use of our *existing technologies*; 2) *student autonomy* is crucial and we should be intentional about developing more autonomous, self-regulated learners from the very earliest levels of language learning; 3) *differentiating instruction* to meet diverse needs is possible in a more robust way given our experiences this year when many discovered new ways to teach to the whole class; 4) *increasing student engagement and building a sense of community* are key to our programs and student success; 5) *cultural engagement and enrichment* is an integral part of language learning not to be sacrificed because of a change in the medium of instruction; 6) we should perhaps *rethink assessments* to be more diversified and better reflective of student performance and progress.

In what follows I expand further on each of these overarching themes and refer to the articles in this special issue for representative examples.

2. Making better use of existing technologies

A number of authors in this volume share how their institutions used existing technologies in the emergency situation. Klimova, Comer and deBenedette, and Garabrandt and Six in particular share how the switch to remote learning was not as abrupt as it was for so many of us as a result of their respective programs having already developed a number of online learning options. For those who had not had much experience teaching remotely, it became clear that designing online instruction is not simply a matter of trying to replicate what happens when we are teaching in person, but rather requires rethinking what parts of a course or curriculum might work best online, what can be done, perhaps, even more effectively, by students working independently, and how to maximize the synchronous time together by spending it on activities that cannot be done by students working on their own asynchronously (Doludenko; Evans-Romaine et al.; Kolesnikova). One unintended positive consequence of the emergency transition to remote learning was the extensive, and intensive, faculty development that occurred. Most faculty have now become more experienced with a wider range of available learning technologies, not only those available on campus, but also those provided by private entities that offer students real-world language experiences (Klimanova and Vinokurova; Vinokurova). As a result of our forced use / experience with online course delivery, in the future we are likely to see increased remote and hybrid offerings that appeal to learners for a variety of reasons, not because this model is required by outside forces such as a pandemic or because of institutional financial constraints, but because such courses will actually help our learners reach their goals more efficiently (Comer and deBenedette). Although most of these technologies and online resources have been available for some time, this year forced us to take a closer look at many of them, and we are now much more likely to incorporate them into our standard curricula to the benefit of all.

3. Developing student autonomy

A second recurrent theme in this volume is the importance of student autonomy, agency, and self-regulation in the learning process. In addition to wanting our learners to grow their language proficiency, we also have the goal of creating independent learners. Language instructors recognize student autonomy as crucial for long-term success, but our pandemic experiences, in which students were asked to learn in isolation with more asynchronous work than before, placed a particular emphasis on this factor, and lessons learned can help us reflect on our strategies for developing

students as independent learners. Evans-Romaine et al. discuss the notion of “agency” extensively in their article about the Flagship experience this past year; Klimanova and Vinokurova analyzed and encouraged student self-regulation by having learners reflect on their experiences using an outside service provider for oral practice; Garabrandt and Six highlight the importance of student self-motivation and direction in a bichronous elementary Russian course, ideally leading to the inculcation of the habits of an independent, lifelong learner from the very beginning of instruction; Kolesnikova and Sivachenko and Nedashkivska directly address issues of student engagement, both in terms of boosting it and how students perceive that engagement as conducive to more impactful learning experiences.

As Kolesnikova notes, technological environments play a significant role in sustaining students’ continuous investment in the online learning process. It is much easier to keep track of learner engagement and progress in a well-designed learning management system (LMS) than when we are working in our traditional classroom setting. Regular use of an LMS can facilitate greater learner accountability since we can easily monitor “time-on-task” for differentiated activities, work can be completed and/or submitted online, and synchronous sessions can be recorded in real time to document student participation. Perhaps, just as importantly, effective use of an LMS allows students to track their own participation, reflect on their individual strengths and weaknesses, and become more fully engaged in the learning process.

4. Differentiating instruction to teach to the *whole* class

In comparing gains in both face-to-face and online immersion programs, Merrill, Dengub, and Pastushenkov quote Collentine and Freed (2004), who concluded there is “no evidence that one context of learning is uniformly superior to another for all students, at all levels of language learning, and for all language skills” (64). Teaching during the pandemic has pushed us to examine new ways to differentiate learning activities and expectations to be more inclusive of all of our students. Many articles in this special volume reference, either explicitly or implicitly, meeting the needs of diverse students not only in terms of what we normally think of as different learning styles or differing levels of skills and proficiency (Evans-Romaine et al.; Klimova; Comer and deBenedette), but also in terms of varying content, for example for STEM students (Blasing), addressing physical challenges to learning languages, such as visual impairment (Pomarolli), as well as in terms of the socio-cultural diversity of our contexts and learners so as to make our curricula more equitable and inclusive for all learners

(Garza). One of the most significant impacts of the pandemic may be that we will be much better at differentiating instruction in order to teach to the whole class, a long-standing goal of ours but one that is difficult to implement when all the learners are physically together with the teacher for the majority of instructional time. Integrating learning technologies into our standard practices will unquestionably help us better serve the needs of diverse learners.

5. Encouraging student engagement and building a sense of community

Since the very nature of our endeavor is interpersonal communication, a great strength of language programs has always been their ability to create a community of learners, both inside and outside the classroom. Our programs have always connected students to one another, to faculty, to their campus, to the target culture(s). We may have to accept that although neither the organized nor especially the incidental interactions students have when we are in person can be replicated entirely online, efforts made to find new ways to form connections were remarkably successful (Erushkina et al.; Evans-Romaine et al.; Klimanova and Vinokurova). At my own institution, we had great attendance at our online informational sessions, such as ones we offered for students to get to know all the instructors in the department, or to discuss the major and minor, internships, or study abroad and scholarship opportunities. At major state institutions with large numbers of students who commute or are unable to attend in person due to work or family obligations, the opportunity to join such sessions remotely helps to promote greater access and inclusivity. We concluded that informational sessions may actually be more effective and reach more learners if done online, and we can then devote in-person gatherings to social and cultural events that are better experienced together. Additionally, visiting speakers are more easily and inexpensively able to join a class or program-wide event virtually than in-person. Though clearly possible pre-pandemic, virtual visits were less common than they are likely to become in the future because previously we were never forced to try them. Though we lamented the inability to hold our final departmental community event for majors – a graduation reception – in-person during the pandemic, one of our greatest surprises was the success of our online graduation event. Many attendees found the online event to be more intimate and personalized than the large in-person receptions, and the excellent attendance included many family members and friends who most likely would not have been able to join an in-person graduation under any circumstances. This event

was so well received that we plan to host a virtual reception in addition to our traditional graduation events for our majors in the future.

6. Integrating cultural engagement and enrichment opportunities

Another recurrent theme in this volume is the importance of cultural engagement and enrichment opportunities no matter the medium of instruction. Moving the academic content that usually forms the basis of our courses to an online format was challenging enough, but adapting cultural engagement experiences seemed especially challenging from the outset, due to the perception that there is no satisfying substitute for “being there.” Efforts to do so did bear fruit, as we see in examples shared by Evans-Romaine et al., Garabrandt and Six, Erushkina, Smirnova, and Ngoma, Blasing, and Garza. Shmeleva, in exploring the new linguistic phenomena that have appeared as a result of the pandemic, provides an example of how language both adapts to and shapes social and cultural realities, providing rich material for discussion. We can also use the linguistic adaptations and neologisms related to the pandemic to reveal for students the remarkable creative potential that the very structure of Russian *slovoobrazovanie* (“word building”) allows.

7. Rethinking assessment practices

As we improve our facility with various technologies, we are also finding new ways to diversify our approach to assessment. Current tools allow us to differentiate, customize, and accumulate a portfolio of student work throughout a course and even across the curriculum. Taking up limited in-class time to conduct one-size-fits-all assessments appears to be on its way to obsolescence in our post-pandemic practice. Current learning technologies allow us to develop a more robust range of assessments aimed at capturing student progress rather than at assigning grades. New approaches to assessment may result in activities that much better reflect our students’ knowledge, skills, and abilities (Comer and deBenedette; Gunn). Many of the tools we have become more comfortable using during the pandemic can capture and organize evidence from formative and summative assessment activities across the communicative modes, automatically creating portfolios of learners’ work throughout a semester, academic year or even the entire curriculum. Such evidence, organized and archived in an LMS, for example, not only allows both instructors and learners to see tangible results of their collective efforts, but in the aggregate, it can inform professional development of instructional staff, as well as help us

reflect on and adjust program goals and learning outcomes. Furthermore, as the results of Gunn's student survey suggest, a more varied approach may be better received and more motivating than more traditional types of assessments.

In summary, many of the lessons learned from the shift to online learning in 2020-21 such as those shared with us in this special issue of *Russian Language Journal* will reverberate inside our programs and our field long into the future, resulting in many positive instructional innovations.