



WE'RE MORE EQUAL ON ZOOM: INCLUSION AND PERSONAL RELATIONS IN THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM. WHY WE SHOULD NOT ABANDON WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED DURING THE PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT: Foreign language teaching as well as courses on culture and civilization have had to switch to an online format during the pandemic. During this time, instructors had to defend their teaching methods against reproaches that these course contents could only be adequately taught in a face-to-face setting in a physical classroom. This article shows how online tools create inclusion and closeness in virtual settings and explains that for some learners, online teaching might generally be the better option. Based on our own opinion poll, a brief literature review and a presentation of our best practice examples, we argue that before, during and after the pandemic, online teaching has its advantages that can be applied in a meaningful, targeted way.

Keywords: *Online teaching; Inclusion; Virtual classroom; Closeness; Social anxiety disorder*

1. INTRODUCTION

Online courses have been in demand for several reasons even before the pandemic. We are now in a situation where teaching on-campus is possible, yet some learners choose online classes. Online teaching has generally been accused of being aloof and uncommunicative since personal contact is missing, blocked by the screens between people.

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The purposes of this paper can be divided into three main points. First, we would like to understand whether the majority of students really wants to go back completely to on-campus teaching after the pandemic and what the rationale behind their choice might be. Second, we want to explain that online courses have advantages for a certain type of students, namely what we call anxious learners. Third, we wish to show how online tools can create direct communication on an individual level in virtual classrooms and this way overcome distance between course participants as well as between these and their teacher in foreign language and culture and civilization courses. By doing so, we suggest guidelines for future formats of communicative teaching in a volatile situation during and after a pandemic that creates uncertainty among institutions, teachers, and learners.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Chapter two presents the methods applied in this paper. In Chapter three we outline the main results of our own opinion poll on the preference of online or on-campus courses. Chapter four takes a brief look at literature from the fields of Psychology and Neurodidactics to describe the needs of learners in general and anxious learners in particular. Chapter five is a collection of our own best practice examples to create closeness and inclusion in online courses. Chapter six summarizes the main findings and suggestions and offers an outlook.

2. METHODS

We carried out an opinion poll at a university in northern Bavaria on an internet platform to find out what students' current preferred form of instruction is: online or on-campus. All enrolled students at this university were sent a link to the online poll about courses in all fields of study by e-mail. The poll comprised four short questions to keep it as brief as possible and thus obtain the highest number of complete replies possible. Preliminary results are presented here and a more thorough analysis will be published elsewhere.

Through a brief literature review we collected basic facts about two topics relevant for teaching in general, and for teaching groups of anxious young adults in particular: Emotion and learning, and anxiety and learning. We chose these topics because we consider them highly relevant for the groups of students we have been teaching in the recent years, namely young adults in foreign language and culture and civilization courses. The reviewed papers were chosen from encyclopedia for the general academic public and standard literature on foreign language teaching. It should be stressed at this point that the findings can be applied to teaching in general and are not limited to foreign language teaching.

Drawing on our own experience as teachers of foreign language courses and courses on communication skills, we compile some best practice examples to show how anxiety can be reduced and closeness can be created in online courses.

3. OPINION POLL: DO WE ALL WANT TO GO BACK INTO THE PHYSICAL CLASSROOM?

Our poll was carried out at the beginning of the summer term of 2022 on an internet platform. All students of one Bavarian university were invited by email to take part. The fact that roughly one thousand students took part within the first 24 hours shows how relevant the topic must be for them. The first question was about participants' spontaneous preference: online or on-campus courses. Out of the 1323 participants, 710 (53.63%) voted for online courses, 549 (41.47%) for on-campus courses.

Participants were then asked, "Do you see advantages in online courses?" and "... in on-campus courses?" and several advantages were suggested based on personal communication with students in a multiple-choice menu, all starting with "Yes, because...". They might have been influenced by the suggested reasons but had the chance to add further advantages, deny all of them and comment on any of them in a text field right next to the indicated advantage. The following reasons to see advantages were suggested, figures are listed in table 1. Advantages for online courses: It gives me more flexibility on learning location; I am afraid of an infection with the Coronavirus; I feel more comfortable than in the classroom; I see other advantages (please specify); No, I don't see any advantages. Offered reasons to see advantages for on-campus courses: Personal contact is important; One can use university infrastructure such as the cafeteria and library; There are less technical problems; I see other advantages (please specify); No, I don't see any advantages.

Table 1. Example table

Online courses	%	On-campus courses	%
Flexibility on location	73.49	Personal contact	61.03
Fear of Covid infection	29.00	University infrastructure	39.50
Comfort	25.91	Less technical problems	20.69
Others	29.91	Others	16.54
No advantages	8.01	No advantages	16.39

The main reason for a preference of online courses is local flexibility, the main reason for on-campus courses personal contact. Only 8 % see no advantages in online courses whereas twice as many participants, 16.39%, say they do not see advantages in on-campus courses. It is obvious from these figures that not everyone wants to get back into the physical classroom.

Next, a question was included whether their personal preference was based on their individual character. Again, several justifications were suggested that could be commented on or denied, and further reasons and comments could be added. This part of the poll was conditioned, so that participants who had chosen online courses as their preferred mode were asked if the reason for this preference was connected to any, several, or none of the following attitudes (shares given in brackets): I am open for modern media (32.25%); I am rather shy (11.18%); Yes, for another reason (5.21%); No (9.74). Participants who had chosen on-campus courses as their personal preference were given the following possible justifications for their choice: I enjoy being with others (25.00%); I don't like spending time on the computer (5.06%); others (3.85%) or No (8.91%).

Finally, the chance to comment on the combination of online with on-campus courses was given. For reasons of space, only a rough summary of responses is given in brackets. Participants were asked to rate the following formats as positive (“+”) or negative (“-”): Hybrid courses, in which a part of the students meet on-campus and another part takes part online (overwhelmingly positive); Blended learning, in which a part of course contents has to be dealt with online and another part on-campus (mainly positive); A flexible change between online and on-campus (clear positive tendency). No further choices were included to keep the poll short, but participants had the chance to comment on these two formats and suggest further ones. A more detailed analysis of responses and comments will be published elsewhere.

As can be seen, online formats are welcome as a modern way of learning and in some cases due to shyness. One should keep in mind, however, that there might be a bias since the poll was carried out online and less digitalized students might have felt inclined not to take part because of this form. A reviewer points out that another bias might be found in the fact that recent experience could only be made online, particularly affecting beginning students. We believe, however, that a minimum of 12 years of in-class teaching at school would certainly level that out.

4. ANXIETY IN THE CLASSROOM AND WHY WE NEED TO REDUCE IT

We have been observing growing numbers of shy learners at smaller universities in southern Germany and elsewhere. Whether learners suffer from social phobia, social

anxiety disorder (SAD) as a pathology or are simply shy, introverted or generally anxious is not up to us to judge, so we will use the term “anxious learners” to refer to them. School anxiety is known to affect around fifteen percent and this number is growing (Florin 2022), and a lifetime period of this anxiety is estimated to affect around seven percent (Sartory 2021). School psychology has identified anxiety as one of the contributors to rejectionist attitudes (Florin 2022). One of the manifestations of this shyness is the phenomena of black tiles on Zoom. Who has not experienced situations that might lead to slightly frustrating situations for teachers as this one: Well prepared and enthusiastic about modern online teaching, the teacher starts their online meeting—and faces a dull mosaic of black tiles. Hardly any participant seems to be willing to show their face and accompanying your learners along their way to success becomes talking to a mainly black screen. Even when asked to turn on their camera, many students claim to find themselves in an “unpresentable state” and prefer to leave their camera off, even without displaying a picture instead. Having talked to many of our students, we believe that one of the reasons for this behavior is (classroom) anxiety. Another reason might be the estrangement due to the perception of the own presence in the physical space and simultaneously on the screen.

We take for granted that it is not the medium itself, but the instructors’ attitude and technological as well as didactic competence that contributes to creating inclusion, closeness, and a reduction of anxiety in the classroom. Using the right tools is a question of learner and teacher personality, and certain tools can contribute to an anxiety-free learning setting. Ever since the Affective Filter theory was suggested in the late 70s (Dulay and Burt 1977), the importance of this type of setting has been generally acknowledged as a necessary starting point to make learning possible: “Low anxiety appears to be conducive to second language acquisition, whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety.” (Krashen 1982). Negative emotions, such as fear and anxiety, are depicted as a filter that keeps the learner’s brain from absorbing input and learning. One of the teachers’ goals is, therefore, to create a low filter learning environment. Pennington and Richards (1986: 217) point out that anxiety and stress also affect performance. As we know from neurodidactics investigations, emotion plays a role in (foreign language) learning and especially for language and culture courses appropriate teaching methods that foster communication skills are paramount, since linguistic actions imply emotion as part of expression (cf. Donnerstag 2010). Experiencing authentic real-world linguistic acts may well form the center of foreign language learning, and this can be achieved through methods based on virtual or drama pedagogy. The roots of drama pedagogy reach back to the 18th century, as considerations were already made for an action-oriented foreign language teaching in connection with theater methods (Sambanis 2013). The PDL-method (Psychodramaturgy for Language Acquisition, abbreviated after French

Psychodramaturgie Linguistique) is an approach to foreign language learning, initiated in 1977 by Bernard Dufeu, that takes its origin both from the Psychodrama of J. L. Moreno as well as from dramaturgy and theater pedagogy. Dufeu describes his approach as a “pedagogy of being”, in which language is a means of communication and encounter, as opposed to a “pedagogy of having”, in which linguistic structures are the object of the learning process and instructors are purely mediators of knowledge (Baudracco-Kastner 2022).

Our suggestions are supposed to help teachers understand these reasons and reduce these frustrating moments: For some students, it may feel embarrassing or even threatening to show their face in a group and “hiding” behind a screen is not to be interpreted as a lack of interest. Could a certain adjustment of the setting and methods lead to a more positive teaching and learning situation, in which both parts feel more comfortable?

5. REDUCING ANXIETY AND CREATING CLOSENESS FOR ANXIOUS LEARNERS IN ONLINE COURSES

It has been shown that online courses are the preferred mode of instructions for many learners. Anxiety is a hinderance in the learning process, and a growing number of students are facing challenges in connection with anxiety. We consider it paramount to offer an anxiety-free virtual learning environment in order to reach out to our students and suggest the teaching methods described in the following.

5.1. *How to contribute to an anxiety-free virtual learning environment*

Foreign language courses can touch upon at least two methods used in therapy (Gordon and Wong 2014): Social Skills Training, since socializing is a part of communication, and Relaxation Techniques, since taking part in a course from home, the comfort zone, contributes to being less tense. Furthermore, aspects of Mindfulness-Based Therapies can be incorporated by using portfolios as performance records that take out the pressure of exams (cf. Gebhard 2020). Online courses may present a safe learning environment since it provokes less anxiety than real-life interaction according to a study of 2,348 college students (Yen et al. 2012). This explains why some people opt for online courses even after the pandemic and it explains black tiles, since these offer anxious learners the protection they are looking for. Black tiles should not be seen as the long-term solution for these learners though. In fact, it might appear even counterproductive to offer this kind of “hideout”. As Andersson et al. conclude, internet-based cognitive therapy is a “promising new treatment option” and “effects seem to be stable over long-term follow

up” (p. 581). We certainly do not suggest turning teachers into therapists but rest assured that internet-based instruction serves as a mean to reach out to anxious learners and offers them a first step into an anxiety-free learning environment. An announced invitation to turn on the camera only for a quick salutation after some time (or even lessons) showed effect in several courses taught by one of the authors of this article: half of the students left their camera on. With due patience, anxious learners can be led to get out of their comfort zone step by step. One of the later steps should be communication with native speakers of the target language or culture. Doing this through tandem apps (such as *Tandem*, *HelloTalk*, etc.) again gives anxious learners the chance to start this journey from the safe setting of their comfort zone.

Online courses offer direct private communication between teachers and students. Receiving corrective feedback in front of fellow students is certainly more face-threatening than receiving a private chat message within one’s comfort zone. They also offer the chance to participate in small groups (breakout sessions on Zoom) in which the perceived threat by “the public” is reduced due to the small group size.

Furthermore, hypersensitive learners only have the chance to reduce the amount of sensory input in virtual classrooms, thus reducing their level of tension.

After these brief introductory suggestions, we would like to give some more detailed examples on how to create closeness and overcome physical distances in digital formats in the following section.

5.2. How to reach out: Closeness and distance in the virtual classroom

“Imagine sitting in a room full of people, and nobody is there”. “Imagine sitting in your living room and being together with people in Australia, Spain and Mexico at the same time”. These seemingly contradictory statements perfectly describe the paradox of closeness and distance (Krauskopf 2021) caused by video conference formats.

In the following, the terms closeness and distance with regard to relationships in a group setting will be shortly outlined. We differentiate between emotional closeness and physical closeness, whereby these influence each other in the context of physical presence. The need for closeness and distance differs individually, depending on culture, situation, and personality structure. For describing group structures and actions, the personality model by Fritz Riemann, described in its book *Basic forms of anxiety* (1961), and the resulting “Riemann-Thomann Cross” are often referred to. This model describes the contrasting orientations of humans (closeness/distance, continuity/change) in their individual manifestations as expressions of their underlying personality structures (schizoid, depressive, compulsive, hysterical). The structures originally described as

pathological are adapted in this model for the description of “normal-neurotic” characters (Stahl 2007). For instance, the need for closeness correlates with characteristics such as people orientation, extroversion, the need for recognition and harmony. The need for distance, on the other hand, correlates with factual orientation, rational thinking, and the need for detachment. The orientation of individual group members towards the four basic needs influences communication and social behavior. Rules also contribute to establishing a relation between closeness and distance in any situation. Moreover, cooperation in a didactical context is influenced by shared notions and expectations related to social roles (Krauskopf 2021: 219). It stands to reason that individual needs and behavior towards closeness and distance and the commonly acknowledged social rules affect the dynamics (and hence, the ability to work and learn) of a group.

These reflections seem particularly interesting when observed from the perspective of online meetings through video conferences. They emphasize the paradox of feeling close despite being distant and raise questions concerning the perception of our virtual activities. Besides the aspect of reduction, a point frequently used to argue against online classes, virtual participation might also offer a sense of protection (familiar domestic surroundings) and advantages such as the comfort of not having to move or commute. This enables anyone to easily connect with anybody around the world. Anxious learners can particularly benefit from a virtual classroom that facilitates integration and participation by all.

For all these reasons it strikes us as plausible to free the digital learning space from its reputation as being just a workaround. We should establish it as a distinct, complementary, or alternative format. The question is how the benefits of the format can be optimized and how downsides can be minimized to enable interaction and group dynamics to develop. The aim is to develop a virtual learning space that incorporates and adjusts the relations in the new medium. This way, it is possible to achieve and sustain a positive, fostering atmosphere within a secure and trustful frame. In the following, we will particularly elaborate on the reduction of perception caused by the absence of physical presence and the simultaneous presence in two dimensions in the online formats. The mentioned methods and activities refer to the context of online teaching, but also apply to other areas of digital cooperation (e. g. in management training, team, and project work) with some adjustments.

All humans experience the world in a spatial way and constantly face the choice of either being close to other humans and things, or seeking distance. Our freedom of choice, however, is limited. No matter how hard we try to distance ourselves from the external world (emotionally and physically), we cannot just escape it. In a group situation such as classes, we continuously question our place in the group and try to balance

closeness and distance. In the context of presence classes, it first happens in a physical way: We enter a room at our own pace, we receive signals such as glances, postures and movements that guide us to our choice between consciously involving ourselves in a situation or just observing it. At the same time, we are part of a group and find ourselves exposed to a situation. If we do not feel comfortable, we cannot just escape and avoid being seen. We may not even be free to choose who we want to be close to or distance ourselves from. Entering the room at the beginning of a group process, but also at the beginning of every meeting, is a demanding situation that can create different levels of stress, depending on individual personalities. This situation requires a “frame” that acts like a protective film and provides space for every individual. In the context of classes, it is the task of the teacher to create this frame. If classes are conducted with physical attendance, this frame consists of distribution and equipment of rooms where the work will take place, as well as procedures and rituals such as joining up in front of the classroom, having a coffee together or greeting rituals. People connect with each other, and this contributes to everybody joining in and making themselves comfortable with the group before the start of the actual work. In the course of the classes, this frame connects the group members with each other and with course contents and provides orientation and security.

What does the phase of arrival look like in the digital environment? This topic implies different questions related to closeness and distance, but also to the axis of continuity and change of the “Riemann-Thomann Cross”, namely how we experience closeness and distance in a room that we can only perceive two-dimensionally on a screen; which dynamics develop when somebody is at home and at the same time participates in a virtual group; how continuity-oriented people deal with the uncertainty of a new setting; how much trust or skepticism people show towards technology; and whether they understand it as a chance or a threat.

The lack of three-dimensionality and sensory impressions makes it impossible to arrive in a group in the known and socially accepted way. The virtual setting also features a lack of orientation that presence situations usually provide in the form of social and interactive rituals. But for individuals as well as the group itself, the same identification phase takes place. We choose more or less consciously between closeness and distance, search for our comfort zone and either feel good or not. Online formats should also be designed in a way that allows all participants to arrive within a secure frame. This is the requirement for active participation in a fostering atmosphere.

When comparing the arrival at a virtual room to the arrival at a class on site, it appears that this happens very fast in videoconference. Our choice between physical closeness and distance disappears. We find ourselves in a group and feel the pressure to

say something and break the silence, which can be unpleasant. We do not choose who is going to appear in the tile next to us. Mutual and simultaneous eye contact does not take place. Even seeing one's own image can be irritating: how do the others perceive me? Am I on screen or in my own room? Which private information do I reveal through showing a particular background? From this perspective, it seems comprehensible that anxious learners often leave their tiles black. The immediate appearance on screen can overwhelm these learners and trigger them to stay invisible in order to avoid an unpleasant situation. A purposeful approach to entering the virtual room can reduce the hesitation to turn on the camera and encourage the group members to participate. When starting a meeting, teachers can share an image on screen or play music to make the silence less uncomfortable. This also enables the participants to observe and estimate what to expect from others. Every individual can choose when to turn on their camera. Images and music may connect to the contents of the subsequent lesson. In language classes, for instance, it can be a song in the foreign language. To create a relaxed and informal atmosphere, teachers can choose to stay in the background until all participants show up, and just welcome everybody in the chat. From this observing position, the teacher can also analyze how the group comes together, what moods they show and what conversations arise and thus prepare for the lesson.

The arrival in the virtual classroom can be mentioned and designed explicitly. This makes sense when the group includes members who refuse to participate with image and sound and leave their tiles black. A short explanation of how social dynamics in a group take place and how they are perceived differently by every individual shows learners that they receive attention. Subsequently, teachers can invite individuals to experiment what the arrival in the online group feels like and which possibilities are at hand to design it. At the beginning of the "experiment", everybody is asked to turn on their cameras when they feel ready to start. Learners can stand up, leave the camera image, regulate their distance to the screen and find their own pace and position. As a sign of arrival, learners can be asked to adopt a posture or to say a short welcome sentence (in language classes, in the foreign language). After this conscious arrival, it is relatively likely that all cameras will stay on. Through observing the arrival of the other group members, learners can discover similarities in behavior that strengthen group cohesion and the emotional closeness between them.

A further step is integrating sensory impressions and three-dimensionality in the virtual environment. In the "real" world, we are constantly exposed to sensory impressions. These influence our behavior, our well-being and our choices of closeness or distance. During the initial phase of a group situation, we "sniff" at the room we are in and the others around us. Body language and postures allow us to inspect our fellow people, their character traits and status in the group. This contributes to us finding our

place and interacting with others adequately. Furthermore, it provides security and stability because we can see what is going on. In the virtual realm, we see as many settings as there are participants in the group. These settings have their own circumstances and mostly remain hidden. This crucial factor can complicate the creation of a trustful group atmosphere and a secure frame. It is important to reflect on the circumstances of online formats and their impacts to understand ways of behavior. Some activities can contribute to establishing mutual trust and integrating the “realities” of individuals in the group process. At the beginning of an online session, walking through the room can help individuals to focus on the two dimensions of the physical and virtual room and their presence in both rooms. The learners are invited to move mindfully within their surroundings and to gather sensory impressions (looking out of the window, colors and sounds in their room). Impressions like images or sounds can be brought back to the digital experience. In an initial plenum, everybody can imitate a sound or describe an image and thus reveal their experience in the physical room to the others. The technique of role reversal, originating in the psychodrama of J. L. Moreno, can create an introductory plenum that at the same time includes the surroundings and let people share information about them with the group. One popular activity is the role reversal with a “familiar object”. With this method, learners are asked to display an item in their room that would tell something about them if it could speak. Subsequently, learners act as the chosen item and tell something about themselves (“I am X’s coffee cup, and we spend a lot of time together when X studies”). In language classes, this activity not only strengthens perception, but also becomes an oral expression exercise. The role reversal itself provides a sense of shelter for anxious learners because they speak through an item and feel less exposed. Revealing their domestic surroundings can make some people feel uncomfortable. But by leaving it up to participants if and how much they would like to show, nobody is forced to strip off their privacy.

These are just some methods to tackle the new and unfamiliar ways of being together in the virtual environment and to handle the new perspective on closeness and distance. The aims are:

- To support members to find their place in the group,
- To provide the basis for regulating the tension between closeness and distance that is different from physical settings,
- To encourage everybody to consciously perceive themselves and their presence within the group in two dimensions,
- To involve sensory impressions in order to use more channels than just speaking,
- To create a shared realm of experience where individuals can get together as a group,

- To introduce the learners to the virtual setting and its rules, enabling them to discover it,
- To offer security and orientation and satisfying the need for structuring the new situation.

So far, we have mainly put our focus on overcoming distance in the digital setting. We asked ourselves the question: how can we handle the reduction that we experience in the virtual realm and how can we integrate processes of group dynamics? Concluding this paper, we would also like to address the question of how the novel properties of digital media can contribute something new to the learning process.

From our point of view, digital settings, besides being a new form of togetherness that still requires further research and the establishment of social rules, also provide a protective function. This sense of protection can particularly be understood as a chance for successful integration into the group for anxious learners. Coming back to the Riemann-Thomann Cross, introverted people and anxious learners rather have an orientation towards distancing themselves. They need room for themselves, distinction, and individuality. Participating in classes from their own domestic surroundings can mean a sense of protection missing in physical settings. As a consequence, they can reduce stress and develop a positive attitude. The twofold presence on the screen and in their own room might seem awkward at first, but also constitutes a frontier that cannot be trespassed by others. Some learners in language classes reported that it was easier for them to express themselves in the foreign language because of the sense of “shelter” in front of the screen. Instead of being in the midst of the attention of a group, they can act out of a familiar position and pose in their known surroundings, which contributes to spontaneous expression. This can be more uncomfortable when being exposed to the reactions of a group physically present. One of the main techniques of the didactics method of Psychodramaturgy for Language Acquisition by Bernard Dufeu uses symbolical, neutral, and blind masks that also provide a sense of shelter for beginners of foreign languages. It allows the learners to focus on listening and expressing linguistic utterances in an individual exercise. In the digital realm, this effect gets amplified by the familiarity of the surroundings. We furthermore offer the learners to turn off their camera image when working on individual exercises, in order to assure their focus.

Considering some characteristics of our target group, it is also vital to mention the “democratic” character of a video conference. In an analog setting, personalities reveal and produce information physically, in how they occupy space: Anxious learners mostly have a rather secluded attitude (shoulders inbound, head and sight downward) and move in a smaller radius. Extroverts, in contrast, tend to have a solid erect posture and attract attention with their verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal behavior. Unlike introverts, they are

seldomly overlooked. In physical classrooms, there is a particular danger of introverted students receiving too little attention, falsely assuming that their performance and participation are insufficient. For these learners, the tile in a digital surrounding provides the chance to be on equal footing with everybody else, to be granted the right to be equally present and important. They receive more attention without doing anything proactively, just by turning on their camera. This can strengthen their confidence and, consequently, their willingness to learn, and their performance. Instructors might want to focus on treating everyone in the same way as far as participation in class, turn taking and the like are concerned, for example with apps that display a countdown on screen for equal speaking time, going through the list of participants in a foreseeable way so that learners can get prepared when to speak, etc.

As opposed to the aforementioned reduction of closeness that the virtual realm brings with it, it is also important to look at the chance of overcoming physical distances. Through reducing the logistical requirements, there are more possibilities of participating in virtual meetings and less limitations regarding the composition of groups. This also promotes the inclusion of people with handicaps, who have the chance to participate in groups without logistical difficulties or physical restrictions.

At the same time, it may also contribute to an increased diversity of backgrounds and nationalities in the groups, because it does not matter where participants are. We would also like to mention a recently conceived voluntary project to improve the linguistic integration of Ukrainian refugees with free German lessons on Zoom. The participants are spread all over Germany and other countries. Under the title “Internationalization at home”, Gebhard (2018) deals with the independence of space and time provided by the digital realm. He describes different methods for digital language classes that have proven successful at Ansbach University of Applied Sciences, such as the communication with native speakers in chats and video tandems with partner universities. These methods also make it easier for students who have little affinity for traveling and communication with foreigners to get to know a foreign language and culture.

Viewing closeness and distance through the perspective of digital media offers completely new perspectives and, at the same time, poses many research questions. We find it important to investigate the new and distinct qualities of virtual settings and to cast a positive light on them, freeing them from being seen as a mere replacement for traditional concepts and emphasizing their own dynamics.

6. SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

The three questions raised at the beginning of this paper were: Do students really want to go back to on-campus teaching? What role play anxiety and emotions in the learning process? And how do we contribute to an anxiety-free learning virtual environment and reach out to our students in online courses? They can be answered as follows.

According to our opinion poll summarized in chapter three, a majority of students prefer online courses, mainly due to the flexibility this offers. At the same time, personal contact matters to most of them. Anxiety was identified as a main hinderance of learning in chapter four, that also found that emotions play an important role, at least in courses in which expression and communication skills are to be acquired. Online tools can be used in ways to reduce anxiety and create closeness in online courses as described in our best practice examples in chapter five.

Most of us have become acquainted with tools for online teaching. Many teachers embrace the idea to turn back to on-campus teaching and some institutions seem to rule out any alternatives to this mode of instruction. It is our believe that the lessons learned during the pandemic should guide us into a future of flexible modern language teaching with a plethora of methods targeted at diverse groups of students. There is no need to force anyone to any kind of method. We hope to have shown that some reservations against online teaching are groundless and that it certainly has its advantages for many learners.

A further look into how anxious learners develop their communicative skills and work on their readiness to actively approach others, thus reducing inhibiting factors of their shyness may well be worth a longitudinal study.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Christian Alexander Gebhard is mainly responsible for chapters two through four. Monica Baudracco-Kastner is mainly responsible for chapter five. All other responsibilities and chapters were equally shared.

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