

Transcription

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Derek Bruff: This is "Leading Lines." I'm Derek Bruff.

When we started Leading Lines back in 2016, none of us on the Leading Lines team had much podcasting experience. I had produced a podcast for the Center for Teaching in the early 2000s when podcasts were young, but podcasts have had a renaissance since then. We were all excited to see what we could do with the medium as it has developed.

One member of our team, Stacey Johnson, has jumped in with both feet. After producing a few episodes of Leading Lines, she used that experience to launch her own podcast, "We Teach Languages," focused on language learning and pedagogy.

Thanks to Stacey's creativity, and energy, and the enthusiasm of the language teaching community, We Teach Languages has taken off. Stacey has released 66 episodes as I record this and her Twitter account, weteachlang, has just shy of 1,300 followers. I'm super proud of Stacey and the community she's built around her podcast.

She's less involved with Leading Lines now which is a little sad, but she's doing great work with her new podcast. I'm glad to share a bit of that work here on Leading Lines.

In this episode, we feature an interview Stacey Johnson conducted for her podcast with Gabriele Dillmann, associate professor of German at Denison University, a small liberal arts college in Ohio. Gabriele is the director of the Great Lakes Colleges Association's shared Languages program.

The program features language courses taught at one school and the consortium that are offered to students at other schools through virtual classrooms. This makes it possible for a

school like Denison to offer upper-level language courses that are often under-enrolled as well as less commonly taught languages that wouldn't ordinarily be available on every college campus.

Gabriele shares the origin of the program, the challenges it has faced, the technology that makes it work, and the value it brings to language students.

[background music]

Stacey Johnson: Gabriele Dillmann, I am so happy to have you on the show today. Thank you for making time in your schedule to meet with me.

Gabriele Dillmann: Thank you, Stacey. Thank you very much for contacting me in the first place. I appreciate it.

Stacey: Well, a mutual colleague of ours, Lee Forester at Hope College, mentioned some of the incredible work you're doing and that you would be a great guest for the podcast. I had to follow up on that. Anyone Lee recommends I have to follow up on.

Gabriele: Thank you, Lee, because Lee has been a fabulous colleague in the Shared Languages Program, too.

Stacey: We're definitely going to talk about the Shared Languages Program a lot. I was wondering if we could start by just hearing a little bit about the work you do, where you teach, who you teach, what language and level, that sort of thing.

Gabriele: Of course. I teach German literature, culture, and language at Denison University, which is a small private residential liberal arts college in the Midwest, in Ohio, outside of Columbus. I've been teaching there for about 17, 18 years now.

Stacey: That's fantastic. One of the cool things that you've gotten to do at Denison and with the Great Lakes Colleges Association is to work with the Shared Languages Program. I would love to hear about your work, what that program is, and how it's developed.

Gabriele: The Shared Languages Program has been in existence for about two-and-a-half years now. I have to go back a bit in history to make it very clear on how this idea came

about. Part of the Great Lakes Colleges Association is the Global Liberal Arts Alliance, which is comprised of about 13 or 14, now, colleges all over the world.

These are our partner institutions with whom we as faculty can connect with like-minded faculty. We can connect our students with their students for a more global intercultural experience. I jumped on the wagon right away because for German we always offer the languages in general. We always search authentic partners, speaking partners.

I connected with the American University in Bulgaria who has a German program. My colleague, Diana Stantcheva, and I hit it off really well, and so have our students. What happened is that we're in our fifth year now. It was supposed to be a one or two-semester project. We have ever since never taught without engaging our students with each other.

Stacey: That's fantastic. There are a lot of programs now to pay to get your students that contact. Where you pay and they partner you with another class, and your students get that contact. You just organically developed it through your institutional connections.

Gabriele: What we did is we actually adjust our syllabi to one another, so that our students don't just have a half an hour, quick conversation experience, but they get to know each other. It's built into the entire course. The whole project starts with an email exchange that they have to do, in German, of course, with each other to introduce themselves to each other.

Diana and I construct projects that engage both groups with each other. What we often do, I should say is, we ask our students what projects would interest them to do together. One semester, for instance, we came up [laughs] with homosexuality in German film. That was one of our best intercultural experiences yet because we teach so much in a co-joined manner.

Our students in the exo-collaboratively, and as technology over the last five years has improved tremendously, especially video conferencing platforms have become much more interactive. For instance, we started using Zoom, and that made a huge difference because all of a sudden, we could do desktop sharing, we could chat.

We would see each other in the gallery view as if we were together in the same space almost. We can share documents, films, clips. We can do breakout rooms. That means we can do pair work or small group work in the virtual space.

I thought to myself, "You know, this is fabulous. If I can do this with Bulgaria, why I can't do this with our partner schools here in the Midwest? Kenyon, Wooster, Oakland, or Kalamazoo?" I thought, "Well, this is an idea that's worth pursuing." I did pursue it with the GLTA as a consortium.

Initially, the president told me that, "This was not really who we are as liberal arts colleges because bringing students together virtually, is not necessarily representative of the philosophy, technology, or virtual, or online." It's almost a taboo word online because it's associated with this MOOC movement that we saw a few years ago.

That's, of course, not what this globally connected, and Shared Languages Program connected environment with Zoom is like at all. It is not a big MOOC atmosphere. On the contrary, it is an atmosphere, where the instructor and the students interact with each other virtually as if they were in a physical space.

I have my office hours. I stay before. I stay after. [laughs] I leave the room open, so to speak. The only thing we cannot do is we don't smell each other.

[laughter]

Stacey: How long did it take for people at your institution to feel like it was working, and this was a good decision? Are you there yet?

Gabriele: That's a very good question. Let me just go back to the point where the idea came of the Shared Languages across the consortium. Of course, the biggest hurdle, initially, was faculty buy-in. Student buy-in wasn't really so much of an issue, because students are very used to this virtual environment. You know, they even text each other when they're in the same space.

[laughter]

Gabriele: In their dorms. They don't go next door and knock on the door, they text each other. Students are very open-minded to this environment, in general. Faculty buy-in was a bit of a bigger issue. Let me perhaps say a couple of things first.

The Shared Languages Program consists of two strengths. It's trying to address two major

issues that we have in the languages. One of them is upper-level under-enrolled traditional languages courses.

That means, for instance, traditional languages such as German, which is the one we piloted in this project, does relatively well these days of attracting students into the elementary level German and maybe even the intermediate level. But we have fewer and fewer majors and minors.

Thus, the upper-level courses are chronically under involved. Now, some institutions do a little bit better in the consortium than others. Overall, one can say that this type of language teaching is not sustainable in the long run.

We cannot have two full-time tenure track, or tenured, or full professors to teach a handful of students to share literally five students with each other on the upper-level in a semester. That's just not sustainable. It's not affordable.

The other thing is it's not quite fair to the students to trap them -- I'm sorry for this harsh word, [laughs] but they trap them in a directed studies environment or independent studies environment. With just a professor or just another student, that's not a course.

Language learning relies heavily on interactivity on speaking, on group working with others who speak the language.

With your professor in the office twice a week, that does not constitute a course. I'm sure students still get a lot out of it, but for language pedagogical purposes, I don't think I need to explain why that is not an ideal solution.

The other strand is the fact that in our increasingly globalized world, students need to know languages that are not traditionally taught in their institutions.

For instance, especially in other fields like anthropology, or sociology, or in environmental sciences, students go to places to do projects where the languages, such as Swahili or Arabic in some areas, is also considered a less commonly taught language.

Not one school could afford to offer all of these languages, but as a consortium, we can. Let's say, for instance, at Denison, we offer Arabic.

We cannot offer it as a minor, but we can offer the first to two-and-a-half years of language instruction. Now that's more than most other schools in our consortium offer. If they offer Arabic at all, they offer it only for maybe a year or maybe two years, but nothing beyond that. Now there's a real problem with that which is a true Catch-22.

Why would a student start learning a language that had so heavy upfront, like Arabic, learning a new script, learning a very different culture, very different core grammatical system, and so forth?

Why would they even begin learning Arabic when they know after a year, they can't go anywhere. Even one year, even if we argue that they can always go study abroad in an Arabic-speaking country.

One year just isn't enough. They don't start. What happens is that, of course, understandably, an administration will say, "Well, you have to show us first that you can attract students in your program before we give you a tenure track position in your department." That's what I mean by that Catch-22. Now, we are in a very different situation with the Shared Languages Program.

Hanada has been working with Kelly Tuttle at Orlem who is an Arabic professor there. Basem Al-Raba'a at Oberlin and just recently Qussay Attabi has joined us from Kenyon. Now, these students from these colleges can take Hanada's upper-level course and can take Kelly's upper-level course. They're no longer limited to just that one year or that intermediate level by sharing.

Hanada is currently offering the first semester course of the intermediate level which is also amazing. That addresses students who come out of one-year programs and they can continue. Eventually, we hope to build a minor.

Right now, I'm working on a certificate for those students who have taken several Shared Language courses already. They eventually will work on a minor.

I think that we can even manage a major without adding positions necessarily. We would benefit from, at least, one more tenure track position. If the early one was a tenure track position, that would be a dream because then we could build a major in Arabic. That's the story of Arabic.

You asked me what were some of the hurdles for buy-in. For the less commonly taught languages, the buy-in from faculty was much stronger than from the traditional languages and very understandably so because the Shared Languages Program is an immediate solution for all the problems I just described.

Stacey: Honestly, it occurs to me that the Shared Languages Program is responding to a crisis moment, but this is something that would have been beneficial for us all along.

The reality of a small liberal arts college is even if you have a robust upper-level language program, you're probably going to bounce back and forth between the same, as you mentioned, two professors or three professors who were teaching these upper-level classes. You don't get a wide variety of perspectives when you take upper-level courses.

The benefit to students just to be able to see what's happening at other institutions and get different perspectives and participate in other classrooms just seems so tremendous. It's unfortunate that it took a crisis for us to get here, but it seems a really good place.

Gabriele: The other aspect actually what you mentioned when there are only two faculty members. Let's not forget there are some programs that only have one faculty member, period.

Those students don't know any other German faculty member than that one colleague. Now these are often extremely engaged colleagues because of that. Of course, they can also get a little lonely. They don't have colleagues either in their field.

This is another thing that's so beautiful about this program, is that it also gives faculty a community who otherwise wouldn't have one, especially in the less commonly taught languages.

Most programs, most schools, are run by one person, if they have a less commonly taught language offered at all. This program also addresses professional development for faculty members. It helps, like I said, faculty to feel like they're part of a community. They exchange ideas.

For instance, myself with my global partner, we have published several articles together. We have created research projects together. We see that happening in the Shared Languages

Program, too. That's another very positive aspect.

Stacey: That's already reflected in the story you told of how Arabic built their community through Shared Languages. These individual faculty members at different schools, most of whom are not tenure track. Is that correct?

Gabriele: Right. For the less commonly taught languages, not only are they not tenure track, but they're also often just part-time temporary colleagues. Which, of course, is also an issue, because then there is no continuity that's guaranteed.

The other thing too is, for instance, I'm not a linguist. My colleague, Lee Forester, at Hope College is a linguist. Sometimes, we have students who would love to study German linguistics. I'd be hard-pressed to offer that.

Why should I when we have a perfectly qualified great colleague and teacher who can offer that? That's exactly what Lee Forester at Hope College is doing just now this fall semester.

Two of my German students at Denison joined his course. This way, they get the breadth and depth in an area that they are interested in and are not just simply stuck with the limited courses that one program can offer.

Stacey: That's fantastic. This has been a really fascinating conversation. There have been several guests on the podcast who have talked about ways that they are innovating to make sure that they're keeping their enrollments up and keeping students interested in the content. This is just such an innovative approach.

I like that it's also very community-oriented and collective that you're not on your own, trying to figure out how to solve your college's program. You're working with a consortium to solve everyone's problems. I love that.

Gabriele: It does take a lot of logistical work. One of the reasons is that our 13 colleges are not all on the semester schedule. We do not share the same course grids. We have very different cultures on the different campuses. Overall, we're close enough to where we can make it work.

It's the hosting college's schedule that will be binding for everyone else who wants to take

that course, just as if you took any other course outside of your college. So far, this is our second year. We're offering another round, another set this spring semester.

I have to say our registrars have been absolutely fabulous. They have been so engaged. The students do not pay extra to take these courses. The students get credit from their own institution for the course that they take through the Shared Languages Program at another institution in the consortium.

This is truly a collaborate project across the entire spectrum of any college. Logistics can be a bit of a challenge, but I think we've managed well with that. The other thing we have to keep in mind -- this is, of course, always the biggest question -- what does it take to make this happen in terms of technology?

Not everybody is, of course, familiar with what a virtually interactive teaching environment looks like. Like I mentioned in the beginning, some people are very hesitant to even think about it, because they associate it with distant mass learning without the proximity of the professor.

The technology question is a big one. Let me just briefly describe how simple it is, which is the beauty of it all, which makes this entire program happen in the first place. We don't need a fancy Zoom room. We don't need a fancy classroom, fancy equipment, cameras, and everything. All we really need is for each student to have a laptop.

What we do is we use the Zoom platform. Zoom recreates a classroom environment that very much mirrors the physical classroom space in terms of interactivity, plus adds all these other forms of communicating with each other that the traditional physical space cannot offer.

For instance, we use a combination of the Zoom platform with the Google Drive. Now Google Drive, we all go to school, so everybody has access to the Google Drive. This is where we do our file sharing.

Some instructors use it for just about anything. They put their syllabi up. They put their teaching materials in folders. Then we create individual folders for the students to be able to drop off their homework, their assignments, their video files. This is what we use the Google Drive for in combination with the Zoom interactive platform.

In the classroom itself, as in the virtual space, everybody connects via a link they receive via email. Then we all see each other beautifully. I can use the chat function. I use the chat function instead of the blackboard in a physical space.

Instead of getting all messy with chalk, I type my comments, my vocabulary items or spelling items, grammar items into the chat function. Everybody sees that. Then Zoom does something very beautiful.

At the end of the Zoom meeting, it creates a separate file with just the chat dialog that I then upload into the Google Drive and share it with the students. This way, they have all the vocab they need from that class, all the comments readily handily available in a nice document.

I used to be in a traditional classroom, take my iPhone, and take a snapshot of what I had written on the board.

[laughter]

Gabriele: I would forget afterwards what all I had written on the board. I wanted to include those items in tests, vocab tests, or just in structuring my teaching and learning. Now, the program does this for us.

There are other ways to share, interact with each other, as if it were a traditional classroom and writing on the board. That is simply by opening up a Word document or a Google Doc and desktop sharing that with the rest of the class.

Another beautiful thing that's really, really important are breakout moves. In a traditional language classroom, we rely heavily on partner work and small group work to enhance the amount of time students get to speak but also for them to enhance the quality of their speaking as they're speaking.

In the virtual environment, I can put students into small groups, into their own virtual space, or with a partner. I can enter that space any time, just like I walk up to a group who works in a traditional classroom, sitting together.

I can enter that space, and I can see how they're doing and listen in. If they have questions, I can answer them. It replicates very much that small group work environment with the

advantage that it is instant, which is wonderful. There's no time lost.

As a language teacher, you know how long it takes for students to get up from their chairs, grab their backpacks, fall all over everything, [laughs] and then gather in a group. Then they start speaking English before they do anything else in the target language.

In this environment, there's no time lost. When they speak English, all it takes is for me to pop up once. They have no warning that I'm coming. They know right away, "Oh, oh. We better not...We better stay in the target language." This is really beautiful.

[laughter]

Stacey: I like that.

Gabriele: They also do their own homework, including projects with the Zoom platform. They connect with each other. They speak. They desktop share. They show each other video clips that they discussed, and they record that and send that file to me. This is basically a project.

We engage them also in the Shared Languages Program. The students also benefit from the globally connected courses element.

That means that, now, a student from Hope College, DePauw College, and Denison College can all benefit from connecting with AUBG, the American University of Bulgaria students in Germany. They do their projects together, too. They use Zoom for that as well. Basically, that is the technology.

Stacey: Thank you so much for being here today. I really enjoyed hearing about the Shared Languages Program. I'm going to put links to all the resources you sent me in the show notes, so anyone listening can learn more.

Gabriele: Wonderful. Thank you so much for this really exciting interview.

Stacey: Thank you for being here.

Gabriele: Let me emphasize to our listeners that they are very welcome to contact me via the information that Stacey will share with you.

[background music]

Stacey: Thank you so much.

Derek: That was Gabriele Dillmann, associate professor of German at Denison University, interviewed by Stacey Johnson for her podcast, We Teach Languages. Thanks to Stacey for a great interview and for helping us with this special crossover episode of Leading Lines.

We're interested in the future of educational technology here on Leading Lines. The Shared Languages Program that Gabriele directs is part of that future. We know that college enrollment in the US is declining largely due to population shifts.

Small programs are likely to get smaller in the coming years. It's not going to be sustainable for every college and university to offer every academic program. We're going to see more of these shared courses in higher ed in the future, and not just the language departments.

We'll see them in the humanities, more generally, and in other areas, too. We're going to continue exploring this possible future on Leading Lines. Our next episode looks at another Shared Languages Program, one in which Vanderbilt participates with an interview with Ingeborg Walther from Duke University.

Check the show notes on this episode for more information on Gabriele Dillmann and her work, as well as links to We Teach Languages, Stacey's excellent podcast on language learning and teaching. You can find those show notes on our website, leadinglinespod.com, where you'll also find past Leading Lines episodes with full transcripts.

We're on Twitter and Facebook, too. Just search for Leading Lines Podcast. If you're a fan of Leading Lines, would you take a minute to share your favorite episode on your social media platform of choice? We would appreciate your help in getting the word out about the show.

Leading Lines is produced by the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching, the Vanderbilt Institute for Digital Learning, the Office of Scholarly Communications at the Vanderbilt Libraries, and the Associate Provost for Education Development and Technologies.

This episode was edited by Rhett McDaniel and Stacey Johnson. Look for new episodes the first and third Monday of each month. I'm your host, Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening.

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Transcription by CastingWords