

From one day to the next

Caroline Knight describes taking a hundred students online.



On Thursday 12 March 2020, the parent of one of our young learners put a call in to our academy's reception. The secretary was out and so the head of studies answered the phone. 'Are you still going to open tomorrow?' 'And next week?' Having fielded 20 similar calls throughout the afternoon, Sammy politely replied that yes, we would be opening as normal. Afterwards, the teachers began to ask the same questions. The public schools were poised to shut their doors for the foreseeable future, and that was all very well, but we are a discretionary service, teachers needed to be paid and the show just had to go on. We were not blind to the crisis, nor were we flippant about the growing number of casualties,

but we also did not see another way around it. Would you pay for a service that you were not receiving? Of course you wouldn't.

More calls came in, the teachers were getting worried, and the usually bustling classrooms and hallways looked more and more like a Wild West town; one could almost imagine the tumbleweed. It became clearer to everybody involved that students were making the decision for us. The following day, sooner than anybody had expected, the Spanish government declared a state of emergency – legislation that had been dusted off only once since the reintroduction of democracy. As a result, and although we had quickly been

convinced of our need to shut the doors, the choice was taken out of our hands.

The week before, when there were just over 1,000 cases of Coronavirus in the whole country and nobody seemed to be that worried, my partners and I had been in the planning stages of opening a new language school. The two of them already ran a very successful academy and although I had worked there for five years and would gladly have fought tooth and nail to protect it, it was their baby. I therefore could not fully understand what it must be like to watch something you had been building for nearly 10 years, slip through your fingers in a matter of days. A huge source of pride to them

was providing employment: this year the academy had expanded slightly and was home to 10 employees. Given, however, that the money was not going to start rolling back in any time soon, they were obliged to furlough everybody in order to stay afloat. At least, if nothing else, teachers could now stay safe at home and be assured of some income to last the coming months. That left the three of us.

Enough of the self-pitying then. Luckily, I am not writing this while I am myself wallowing in unemployment, uncertainty and despair. You see, for months we had wanted to dedicate some time to exploring the possibility of an online school, and at least try to join the digital arena and expand our earning potential. We just had not found that time yet. Like every other language academy, we were just about to enter exam season, and had our hands full with maintaining a decent pass rate. Also, like all those other academies, we were now being forced online. A great opportunity to get it done and tick something off the list.

We followed the masses in joining Zoom, the videoconferencing platform, whose daily participant count has jumped from 10 million to just over 200 million in the space of a month. Lord knows how they upped their game in such a short space of time. On the first day we made WhatsApp groups for each level, and just over 300 students in total were sent text messages with updates on our progress in setting up an online platform. We started uploading tasks and exercises to the virtual classroom and then set about finding a way to retain the students we had. This was not the time for a marketing campaign, even if we had had the time, as we were now competing with thousands of providers that were simply much more prepared than we were.

The first two weeks were spent like that, trying to get on top of everything while running around putting out fires. Since all students had paid for classes in March beforehand, we needed to give them something, lest we risk them not signing up for April and putting their hand out for a refund that we could ill afford.

We figured that busy students were happy students, or at least students who did not have time to worry about getting value for money until we could work something else out. To this end, we started uploading things for them to do. Happy days! We thought.

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Big mistake. In our haste and giddiness, we had given them way too much. We realised this a few days later when the tasks started coming back completed, and we had to mark them. The side effect of giving them a million things to do was us spending hours chained to a mark scheme and trying to stem the tide of submissions. If you consider that one entry sometimes took half an hour to mark, and multiply it by the roughly

75 students who had done it, you paint a picture of how much the three of us weren't eating or sleeping during those first two weeks.

Never mind, hindsight is a wonderful thing. At least we had carved out some breathing room to cobble something together for April that was worth paying for. Next challenge accepted. Hopes of turning any kind of profit during the crisis were secondary; the important thing was to keep our heads above water, stay standing, all those clichés. Since we found ourselves with a disappointingly uncompromising landlord, the rent on now unused premises still had to be paid, along with various labour costs and other bills. Time to start making money.

The powerhouse of this operation was my two partners, who were both self-isolating with a very young child, and construction work continuing outside their living room window. Not conducive to a healthy working environment. Among these distractions, they crunched the numbers. We needed to retain 100 students to make the online division viable, to cover the costs. Out of over 300 that we had on the books, some of whom had been with us for years, this did not seem like a difficult task. However, with a huge number of people now in ambiguous positions at their own jobs, more that couldn't see the value in classes imparted online, and others who simply never responded, we signed up only 50 in the first two days. They had all had the chance to try out the system for a week before signing up, and many had seemed keen. But we were now finding that only a few were willing to pay for it.

The enterprise was set to be a complete failure if we did not get sign ups. Apart from losing our income until we could return to normal classes, which was likely to be October given that this had happened at a very trying time of the year, I was personally worried about losing the thing keeping me sane. In all the rush to set it up, I had not really had time to consider what two months or more at home alone would feel like. I really did not want to find out.



A few more were dribbling in each day, but with only three days left until we had to get started with the new-look classes, we still only had 64. At the weekend, we sent reminders to all potential students, telling them that we were going to close access to the platform to those who were not continuing in April, and that also won us a lot more. Now we were up to 80 something, which was a lot healthier. We could now keep things going even if it meant operating at a small loss, but at least we would have something to come back to when it was all over. Reaching 100, however, became somewhat a matter of personal pride. Could we set up something in a week and get 100 people to pay for it? With this looking increasingly unlikely, Sammy and I sat down with a glass of wine on the last day of March and did exactly what we said we were going to do. We removed over 100 students from the online space, many of whom had expressed interest but had never gotten back to us. We just could not chase people. Much as we wanted to, some consideration had to be given to them as well – everybody was struggling with their own problems.

When we woke up the following morning, Sammy found emails and text messages from perplexed students – why could they not access the platform?

Apparently, our little purge had finally done the trick. Although there were subsequent calls from annoyed students and angry parents about their removal from the classes ‘without warning’, to us it was like Christmas. At the end of that day, the number was up to 107. By the next, it was 115. Not only had we covered the costs, we were now making a profit, albeit a small one.

By the arrival of week four, things had calmed down enough to sleep more than a few stress-filled hours, and we found a new determination not just to stay in business, but to thrive. Ambitious though this may have been, we were finding many surprising benefits came with teaching online. For one thing, contact with students was so much easier, we could also save all our lessons for posterity and easy reference, and no more needing to explain something twice. I personally felt that my students might even be progressing more quickly than ever, as the online platform made it easier to follow each student individually. It does not come without its drawbacks, naturally, as spending all your free time two feet away from your computer means finding it difficult to switch off. But compared to the thousands of people who were at home with nothing to do, my position was enviable.

In almost any other economic landscape, what we have achieved in such a short space of time would be a cause for great celebration. Although we still have a long way to go, including once again being able to provide employment for a full team, we have at least managed to stave off bankruptcy. We do occasionally smile to ourselves and have had our fair share of pats on the back, but the closure of many of our fellow schools and centres of learning has been a sobering experience. These are well-established, highly regarded institutions which, for one reason or another, were not able to make the jump online in time. Nor can we open the champagne for a job well done when it comes at the expense of literally thousands of lives. Once the crisis caused by Covid-19 has died down, I have no doubt that we will see plenty of comeback stories from the millions of other affected businesses. What is less clear, though, is just how many ‘For sale’ signs there will be in academy windows, and how many fellow teachers we might have to see looking for work.

Our fight to come back better is not unique, and stories of other business owners and their own struggles continue to be a constant source of inspiration to a small outfit like us. We are now grateful for every piece of homework handed in, every small problem that reminds us there is still something to fix, and most of all to the students who still believe in us.



Caroline Knight lives in Galicia, Northern Spain. While she has experience with a wide range of teaching contexts, Caroline particularly enjoys teaching higher-level learners and wouldn't be without the occasional class of teens. Since earning her CELTA qualification, she has become a Cambridge Speaking Examiner and exams co-ordinator of the language school where she works and soon plans to dive into the world of school ownership herself, setting up an innovative take on the traditional English academy.