CREATING A COMPLETE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT FOR ANCIENT-LANGUAGE TEACHING*

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Abstract

There are many reasons for creating online resources both to supplement in-person teaching and to lay the basis for a course taught entirely online. This paper aims to give an overview of the questions we ought to ask ourselves so that we can design exactly the resources or the course we need.

Even an experienced classroom teacher may not be aware of all the elements that should be in place for an online and thus possibly more student-guided course to be successful. We thus begin by looking at very basic issues of learning space, time and patterns. Next, while 'teaching a language' or 'knowing a language' are precise-sounding aims, they unite a broad variety of activities and abilities. We thus suggest a series of questions that let instructors figure out what they mean by those terms, and then go through the various practical decisions that need to be made on that basis in order to set up exactly the course needed: we go through what course elements should be included, and the best ways of creating these given the academic services available electronically and online. Sometimes, more is better, but often, basic structures set up in a way possible even for time-strapped academics who are required to focus on publishing rather than teaching can go a long way.

Finally, we introduce the examples of two complete online alt-ac set-ups (for both language and 'content' classes) as potential models for future courses.

Keywords: teaching basics, online courses, pedagogical awareness, uses of ancient languages, alt-ac

1. Some Preliminary Thoughts

Scholarly writing on pedagogical topics always is a bit of a chimera: it is intended to address thoroughly non-theoretical issues, but it needs to be based on

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theoretical considerations. What follows is not the result of a scientific study, but is based on two decades of experience in teaching ancient languages in three countries, both online and in traditional classroom settings, both in secondary and in higher education. While my time spent teaching may give me a certain amount of objectivity, which is needed if my remarks are to be useful for others, teaching is an activity supremely dependent on the individual teacher: thus I do not attempt to claim neutrality, and will be using the first person throughout the following remarks.

Different individual points made here will seem trivial to people who have already spent time teaching and/or working on language pedagogy. Yet in my experience, even the most seasoned teachers regularly come across points we have not yet considered, or not considered from a specific perspective: and so this piece aims at being reasonably complete, and will include very basic as well as more advanced or specific considerations. Also, my aim is to provide impulses for a variety of courses and instructors. Maybe you work in traditional academia, are only rewarded for your research, not your teaching, and are thus looking for a few not overly time-consuming ways of making your teaching more appealing. Maybe you are someone in alt-ac creating a completely new course tailored perfectly to your and your students' needs. Maybe you are somewhere in between these two. I hope to offer something relevant for any of you.

I would like to begin by discussing the elements of ancient-language learning independently of the teaching medium, and then continue with the question of how one might best offer or move these individual elements online. I will also talk about why one might want to offer online learning opportunities – for ancient languages or anything else – in the first place. I will mention various websites and other existing online services; this has not been coordinated with any of them.[1]

Finally, I will operate on the assumption that the goal of learning an ancient language is to read texts in that language.[2] There are lively and productive movements promoting e.g. spoken Latin or Sanskrit, but those have their own dynamics and are thus not touched upon here.[3]

[1] I am not being paid to mention those that require a fee.
[2] On this point, see also Robin Meyer's paper in this volume.
[3] For a contrastive approach, see Dirk Schmidt's paper on Tibetan in this volume.

2. Ancient-Language Teaching: Content and Beyond

One can summarise the content elements of ancient-language learning quite easily. After an introduction to pronunciation conventions and writing system(s), we need to give an overview of word formation, introduce the syntactic rules for putting these word forms together to form sentences, whether regular or exceptional/idiomatic, and begin building up our students' vocabulary knowledge. At some point (and which point that is, is a matter of some discussion) we need to begin introducing our students to primary sources and give them the ability to read longer stretches of these in the original. I think of all the former elements as skills, and the latter, the ability to apply these skills in a systematic and sustained manner, as stamina.

Yet there is much beyond the mere contents, the tables of forms and lists of words, that is required for teaching. Time and space need to be made. The instructor needs to offer not just a sensible order for material to be presented (which is easy wherever good textbooks are already available), but also a helpful speed at which to proceed: fast enough to let students see they are making progress, not so fast that they are overwhelmed[4] by the daily or weekly requirements this course has of them.

Time and space are automatically set in any in-person degree course. Yet in any other situation – e.g. in courses that cannot be taught 'on the books' for lack of students, in independent studies, in courses aimed at learners not enrolled in a degree programme – you may well have to offer your students guidance on how to make time for the desired learning and what the right space for them might be. As for time, more is not always better! Consider encouraging your students not to go for the 'as long as it takes' method of completing tasks, which can easily lead to them feeling overwhelmed and thus giving up; instead suggest a specific period of time and ask them to do whatever tasks they can in that time. Whenever the aim is not to understand something, but to straightforwardly memorise, stress how much better they will learn when they aim for repeated short blocks of time (10 to 15 minutes at most, several times a week) rather than one long chunk on

[4] The importance of not overwhelming students – or better put, of ensuring student wellbeing – has long been recognised by teachers and pedagogical researchers; see e.g. Ashwin (2005) on Oxford tutorials; Blair *et al.* (2013) and Brinko (1993) on useful feedback, and Chen and Hoshower (2003) on evaluations.

one day.[5] When it comes to learning space, encourage them not to be prejudiced about what a 'good' learning environment is. Some need quiet, others need hubbub around them. Any learning environment that works for an individual is a good learning environment.[6]

A sensible order for introducing the material is easy to establish wherever a good textbook is already available. But maybe you are interested in creating (or required to create) your own materials. Whenever I made any comprehensive teaching resources, I first went low-tech. On small pieces of sturdy paper or cardboard (such as the back of a used-up writing pad), I wrote out all the formal language elements I needed my students to know about: sounds plus pronunciation and the various nominal and verbal paradigms, but also important syntactic rules and constructions, important exceptions/irregularities, sources of frequent confusion I wanted to address explicitly, or secondary elements such as guides to the most important reference literature. Then I asked myself what, in my experience, was needed most (always with an eye on which language elements would allow students to access original texts the soonest), what depended on what other prior knowledge, what was comparatively easy and could thus be introduced after something comparatively difficult, and so on. I arranged and re-arranged the scraps until a workable order emerged. Each time, the order I then wrote down only needed to undergo marginal changes.

But what level of detail do you want to go to? What do you want your students to have active knowledge of, what do you want them to just be able to look up? Do you want to properly explain everything right from the start, even the stuff so rare your students are likely to have forgotten all about it the first time they actually encounter it in a text? This makes sense if you will not have contact with your students after the initial introduction and thus need to send them off fully prepared for whatever study they may be engaging in in the future; and also if your students are interested more in the language itself rather than in reading specific texts. Or do you want to get them reading original texts as early as possible and know that you will be reading those texts with them, aware of what they know and what they do not know yet?[7] Then you might consider introducing just the basics, teaching your students the principles they need to transfer their knowledge to

[5] This is particularly useful if done just before sleeping; see e.g. Gais *et al.* (2006) or Backhaus *et al.* (2008).
[6] For more on such metacognitive considerations, see e.g. Vos and de Graaff (2004).
[7] On this question, see again Robin Meyer's paper in this volume.

other material (e.g. from understanding the processes that lead to the forms of one noun declension to those that lead to other, more complex ones), referring them to a grammar, and then presenting them with a text annotated by you in such a way that they can easily access all the information they need to read that text themselves.[8] This might be preferable and/or beneficial whenever your students are likely to come to you in order to read specific texts, rather than being primarily interested in the language and its structures.[9]

The nature of the resources you use or create for your course will depend greatly on the above questions. Do you primarily want to provide your students with a textbook, a resource from which to learn a language in the first place, or a grammar, a resource for looking up things you already have been introduced to, albeit cursorily? Many use these two terms interchangeably, and often grammars are used as textbooks, which usually is less than ideal for the learning process.[10]

Maybe you are like most people and have no interest in writing (or no time to write) a complete new textbook. In that case, writing a guide to an existing grammar, one that suggests an order in which to approach relevant material, together with a suggested amount of material to cover per week, may work very well. Writing exercises to help students internalise the material takes a fair amount of time; yet you might consider it, as it will be very helpful for your students. Depending on the set-up and the nature of your students, you can ask one student to work ahead each week and write the exercises for that week, for you to check and for the students to get credit for.[11]

In a degree-course setting, the speed at which we advance is often not determined by what is best for the learner, but by the number of weeks a semester has, and the number of hours a course is given every week. The former we as teachers never have control over; the latter may well have been decided on a

[8] As an example of this approach: with some minor variations, this is what *Reading the Buddha's Discourses in Pali* by Bhikkhu Bodhi does.

[9] And of course, no matter what you choose to aim at, you will want to avoid cognitive overload: guide your students through what at this point likely is a deluge of information available online. See e.g. Bawden and Robinson (2009) for a variety of thoughts on this, and Fani and Ghaemi (2011) on how this is relevant for teachers.

[10] As one prominent example of this, take Stenzler's Elementarbuch der Sanskrit-Sprache. First published in 1868, its 19th edition came out in 2003. It has long been the main Sanskrit 'textbook' in German academic environments, even though its main part is a straightforward reference grammar (that is complemented by a selection of sentences and readings with hardly any annotation, and a glossary).

[11] The same applies to the creation of flash cards: outsourcing this to students may be helpful for them, and save time for you.

general rather than a case-by-case basis, so that e.g. all introductory language courses are assigned the same number of contact hours. In an online environment, you may have the possibility of setting the pace that makes the most sense for the learner, rather than that which makes sense for an educational institution.[12] The goal in any truly student-oriented course is to set or suggest a speed that does show them they are making progress without overwhelming them with its demands.[13] Keep reminding them not to let perfect be the enemy of good: we only become truly familiar with language materials when we regularly apply them in a natural context (that is, when we start reading texts). My rule thus is that we aim for reasonable familiarity in the part of the course where the focus is on introducing new material; I suggest to students that they not worry about their knowledge having settled until we start reading texts and thus apply that formerly new material over and over and over. This is the more important the more freedom a specific course set-up gives students. Whenever students can easily diverge from the suggested speed/timeframe, there will be hesitation to continue on to the next unit/chapter until material has been properly mastered. But material can only be mastered after it has already been applied for a while, and so perfectionism may need to be gently reined in.

Whenever you have any freedom in deciding on any of the above factors, maybe the thoughts offered here will help you in making your decisions.

3. What's For Homework?

We learn by doing. We may think we know or understand something, but only when we are required to apply our knowledge – by doing grammar drills, translating practice sentences, trying our hand at understanding actual, original texts – do we discover where the gaps are.[14] For our students, regular written assignments thus are a crucial component in the process of learning something big and complex, such as a language.

[12] One of the goals of such an institution will certainly be to give students an education, but in systems where we try to offer this to as many as possible, the idea of 'fairness' often means that rules are the same for every person and every course, where certain courses might be much better taught differently, and sometimes accreditation – getting a degree – becomes as important as education.

[13] One could think of this as a temporal analogy to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development; see e.g. Zaretskii (2014) on the ZPD.

[14] This of course applies not just to doing exercises on given material, but also to teaching it to others.

But who has time to go through and correct all those assignments? I could make the time, but I do not want to. Instead, I do the following: I assign written homework. I tell my students the point is not to do it perfectly, but to show me they have given everything a good try. I give them the answer key, and then ask them to correct their own work, ideally in a different colour. This work they then hand in to me (in person or as a scan via whatever electronic system we use).

This has many advantages. Students go through several levels of learning: when they first hear about the material, when they then try their hand at the exercises, and when they go over their own work to find their mistakes and check what went wrong. They are constantly required to think actively, but there is no pressure to 'perform':[15] a reasonably complete assignment with various mistakes will not lower your grade. I need simply to look over each submitted assignment, rather than spending hours on going through everything in detail. In my classes, you pass just on regularly submitted homework; you only need to take the final exam if you want a good grade. Many students have told me this greatly helps them with their exam anxiety.

4. Testing, testing

Ask yourself if you want to administer tests, quizzes, exams or similar evaluative elements. On the one hand, exams can be a stress-producing evil necessitated by the requirement for degree courses to produce measurable, comparable, easily quantifiable results. On the other, if there is a gentle stream of assessments intended for students to see what they already know and identify gaps they can then focus on in their study, this may be a supportive rather than a stressor element of a course. From Alexander Angelov, Professor of Religion at the College of William and Mary, I learned the term 'celebration of learning'.[16]

[15] Research in this area commonly distinguishes between this kind of assessment (termed 'formative'), and the kind of 'summative' assessment consisting of end-of-semester or end-of-year exams, final projects etc.; on formative assessment, see e.g. Yorke (2003), Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) or Irons and Elkington (2008).

[16] Summative assessment typically exists not for the direct good of the students, but for that of the instructor working in a system that requires the production of a numerical grade (which can then be used to measure a student against their peers, make decisions on granting graduate funding, give an applicant a job etc.). Standard summative assessment is not designed to further learning. There are many ways of changing this, though; whichever of them one chooses, they should make the assessment have a point beyond just the determination of a grade, they should reduce pressure and encourage students

If you think of your assessments in that way, and especially if you create them in such a way that this is not just a label, your students may well start looking forward to them. And if you ever find that dread of the time needed to mark assessments is making you reluctant to set assessments in the first place: multiple-choice quizzes can be considerably more useful and interesting than the reputation that precedes them.[17]

5. Going Online

Let us say you have decided on what to offer your students. The question now is *how* best to do that. But as so often, much of the actual creation of the learning resources is likely to be fairly straightforward once you have thought about what it is that you want and/or need.

Face-to-face teaching often is seen as the gold standard of instruction at any level. In my experience, this only holds true for a part of what is involved in 'teaching'. Flip the classroom for all matters of straightforward **knowledge presentation**: that is, provide materials, whether just written or also with an audio or video component, that students are required to have gone through before they come to class; in class, you then answer their questions and guide them through all relevant exercises and activities. For you, this means needing much less time for your course in the long run: once you have prepared those materials, you just give them to each cohort of students. In my case, I sat down at some point and put all the formal contents of my introductory Sanskrit textbook into very simple videos in which I present the material the way I would if I stood at a board in front of my students. For these videos, one per chapter, I created very basic PowerPoint presentations and narrated the slides; PowerPoint lets you save such files in video format (I used mp4). Recording yourself gives you the chance to do several takes, which means there likely will be fewer *umms* and *aaahs* in your speech, and your explanations may end up being clearer. I ask my students to watch the relevant video before class, and even though the presentations are *very* low-tech and dry compared to instructional videos available on YouTube, TikTok or other social media, student feedback shows me they are greatly appreciated.

to experiment with what they know without fearing the automatic 'punishment' of a non-perfect grade. See e.g. Harlen *et al.* (2002) for further discussion.

[17] On this view, see e.g. Little *et al.* (2012) and also the literature quoted therein.

For your students, the availability of prepared/pre-recorded materials means they can access these whenever this is most convenient. Only some students work well in class at 8am or 6pm or right after lunch (or whenever a class may be scheduled). For online courses, not all students are necessarily in the same or in adjacent time zones. Outside full-time degree programs, many students fit their studies of interesting materials around jobs that are there to pay the bills. With prepared materials, they can read, listen or watch in one go or with breaks, with quick interruptions e.g. to look up background details, and with as much repetition as needed. Also, this allows you to use your actual time together with your students in much more interactive ways; more on that below.

For anything that needs to be memorised, you can provide your students with **electronic flash cards**. I personally use Quizlet (easy to gamify, structurally simple, free) and Brainscape (more 'serious' interface, offers spaced repetition, originally cost me a two-figure sum for a lifetime subscription, and is free for my students). A student at one point created Anki cards for all memorisable forms and words in my textbook.

Two elements need to be considered here: content and presentation. Think carefully about what information you want to convey that cannot be understood and that students shouldn't just know where to look up, but that they should have active command of: that is what needs to go onto your flash cards. Many different platforms for these have sprung up. Search for 'electronic flash cards' online and find one that is right for you: should it be free or do you have the budget to get an account? Should it be 'serious' or should its focus be on fun, lighthearted, gamified learning? Do you have students for whom this course is a priority, who would benefit from the work involved in creating those cards for themselves and their course mates? Then it will be useful if the platform allows for collaboration. Do you already have your material in e.g. an Excel spreadsheet? Then use a platform that lets you import that. If your student groups are likely to have unified learning needs, figure out what those are and focus your time and energy on creating materials on a platform that addresses those exact needs. If you have a diverse group of students, consider spreading your offerings across a variety of platforms.

As soon as you go beyond print materials, it is easy to create units of learning materials that foster the 'short and often' approach to memorisation. Even for, say, the learning vocabulary in one unit, consider creating several sets of flash

cards that can each be mastered within a quarter of an hour (and then add a cumulative set for each unit).

Finally, it may be a good idea to have some kind of VLE or **virtual learning environment** – a starting place from which all the resources you offer can be accessed. If you are employed at a college or university, they may already have one, such as Blackboard, Canvas or Moodle. There are commercial and open-source VLEs; if your goal is to make money with your course, the former may make things easier for you. Using your employer's VLE means only students at your institution can access what you put up. This is good when you need to share copyrighted material with a group; in most other situations, having something that is openly accessible may well be better. Especially if you teach something unlikely to make people rich, you will probably attract students from universities that have already cut your subject or have never offered it,[18] and also people who studied something that lets them pay the bills and who are now using their free time to learn what they have always wanted to learn.

But a VLE need not be something marketed as a VLE. A website also is a possibility. Go for a simple, clear layout and use the site to link to your flash cards, your videos, your audio, your live sessions, to anything not created by you that you nevertheless want to point your students to. Offering downloadable files of any format also is a possibility, but may require higher bandwidth and thus make the running costs of your site more expensive; so it may be better to host your files on one of the many sites where this can be done for free.[19]

Maybe the time and cost involved in having a website of your own is not appealing, and what you offer can be summed up in a small number of links and relatively small actual documents (that you can for whatever reason not make accessible on the internet but need to pass on individually, such as exercise keys)? Just having a standard, pre-formulated email that you forward to anyone interested in your materials can be plenty. Mention the existence of this summary email on your departmental profile, if you have one, or in your email signature; mention it on social media.

[18] On this point, see again Robin Meyer's paper in this volume.
[19] Pages like academia.edu, Researchgate, Github or also Google Sites are just a few among the many possibilities here.

6. Going Live

In my experience, these various online components *can* be used on their own; but for overall teaching provision to truly be good, they should to be accompanied by actual **contact time**. It does not matter so much whether the space you then share is physical or virtual. Having made the knowledge-presentation part asynchronous, use your time together to have your students ask all their questions about that week's material. Ask them questions about it to check they have understood the main points or tricky details. If the group size allows it, do exercises (drills, readings, etc.) together. Maybe consider giving a brief overview of the new material at the start so that those who were not able to prepare in a given week still can profit from (and are thus more likely to attend) the in-person class.

Yes, this may backfire: as much flak as 'traditional', frontal *ex cathedra* teaching may get, some students *want* to just come in and consume whatever you tell them. If your course is a requirement for a degree, depending on this kind of student involvement may not be ideal. Especially the less self-assured students may not want to have to answer questions in class; they have been taught that making mistakes in front of others, in front of *you*, is a sign of weakness. So, start celebrating mistakes. So often, a 'mistake' merely is a wrong turn after a lot of thinking that has gone in the right direction. Show your students what they got right, and where they went wrong, and why.[20] Is the mistake due to a train of thought gone astray, or due to a gap in knowledge? What similar or adjacent topic did they confuse the topic at hand with? What other kinds of knowledge (e.g. of another language) may have interfered? Is this a common mistake? If so, say that, and thank the student for 'taking one for the team', because many others likely would have made the same mistake. The classroom is not a space for performing, but for learning, and making mistakes is one of *the* best ways to learn.

Also, do not just give your students the right answer; show them how *they* can arrive at it. Normalise admitting to ignorance. I thank my students when they ask me something I do not know the answer to, because they are helping *me* learn;

[20] The ability to identify the origins of or reasons for mistakes is something a teacher acquires over time. They differ among the various constituent groups your students may come from. That this important skill can only be acquired over time and with practice is yet another reason why the internationally common practice of regularly giving introductory language teaching to graduate students, in order for them to gain their *first* teaching experience, is problematic.

and then I show them how I would go about finding the answer to that specific question. What can we know, and how? What counts as a source in our field, as 'data'? That is so important far beyond the reaches of any individual class.

So: if you are teaching in an environment where students are present because they do want to learn (and I think this usually is the case when the topic of study is an ancient language, knowledge that usually is neither societally prestigious nor likely to make you rich), flipping the classroom in all matters of knowledge transfer, as described above, may be just what you need.

7. Two Examples

To perhaps offer more inspiration, below are two concrete examples of successful online learning environments – one for profit, one not.

Yogic Studies (YS) is an alt-ac platform offering lecture classes, reading seminars and language courses on a variety of South Asian topics (going far beyond yoga at this point). YS offers a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning in its courses (an online "flipped classroom"), with combinations of both pre-recorded and live lectures and discussions. In the end, everything is recorded, to accommodate learners across time zones and hemispheres. It uses Kajabi as its overall VLE: each course offering has its dedicated page from which students can access everything they have subscribed to, and thus log on to the live sessions, watch provided recordings, download written materials, or follow links to all relevant materials provided externally, e.g. by the individual instructors. Kajabi also offers the possibility of automatically graded multiple-choice tests and exams, which instructors can use, or not, in whatever way they deem best. To allow students to communicate amongst themselves, YS uses Circle to provide a communication forum. Live sessions are recorded using Zoom and made available in perpetuity via the Kajabi course pages. This setup, adapted and improved over the course of several years, has allowed for the creation of a course programme that rivals that of top universities but can be offered at a fraction of the cost for the student.

I personally realised fairly soon after my Sanskrit textbook came out in 2017 that the majority of anglophones who learn Sanskrit do not do so within a formal learning environment or degree course. I thus set up a complete and free course for anyone to access from anywhere. To replace the knowledge presentation

component of a traditional class, I recorded simple videos (see above), which I made freely accessible on YouTube. To allow students to ask questions, I started a Facebook group.[21] For all components that need to be memorised, I created flash cards on Quizlet and Brainscape. As a unified starting point from which to link to all materials I provide (and others that I consider useful and that are freely available online), I had a website made. To offer a pathway through all these materials and suggest a suitable speed, I set up annual Google groups. Starting once a year, I send around simple weekly emails that a) specify the material to be covered that week, b) list and link to the videos, flash cards, etc. I created to help students with that material, and c) offer a simple quiz on the preceding week's material. Setting this up, and especially creating the videos, cost me a fair amount of time, but since this has been in place, I have not only had several hundred students go through the course, I also have the perfect learning environment to complement my in-person classes. Finally, I have a standard email with the key to the exercises in my textbook, a list of errata, and basic information on my courses (the free one just described and the fee-paying ones with contact time).

My introductory course makes up the core of my online offers; but incorporating the resources for my 2021 Sanskrit reader once that had come out was simple: I could simply add the flash cards for the learning vocab that forms part of the reader to my Brainscape account, without any further costs.[22]

8. That All Sounds Great, But Who Has Time For This?

Following the various steps I have outlined above probably takes much more time than anyone fully employed is likely to have. Academia does as a rule not value time and resources spent on developing and improving our teaching. Yet in a traditional academic environment, a full online set-up also is not required. You can create a very useful structure for an independent study course simply by

[21] This is not going well. The group has grown quite big over the years, and I suspect many feel hesitant to ask questions – and thus admit to ignorance – in front of a large anonymous audience. I am thus trying to identify an alternative forum that is (a) big enough so students can help each other, but not too big to have the effect just described, (b) free of charge, and (c) easy to moderate for me.

[22] The reader contains selections from six different Sanskrit texts, all with vocabulary and grammar annotations on the same page as the text they refer to. This central part is preceded by an overview of the main syntactic difficulties that intermediate students reading longer stretches of Sanskrit for the first time encounter, and followed by transliterations and a literal translation of all texts, as well as a 900-word learning vocabulary, split into basic and intermediate.

naming a good textbook and offering a timeline that students are suggested to follow. Then offer a Q&A hour maybe once every other week. If a course you teach requires memorisation of something, creating electronic flash cards in useful-sized batches is free on many platforms and does not take a lot of time. You can reduce that time even further by involving current or past students in the creation process. They learn how to think about teaching, and entering the material always helps in the memorisation process. Or maybe consider making a single, simple video on a subject you find yourself being asked about/coming back to repeatedly in class. Putting it on YouTube is free; you can decide whether the video is visible just to the people you give the link to, or to the internet as a whole. No need to make it fancy. And maybe at some other point you will do this again, and thus slowly build up something you may someday wish to make more systematic. Try it, it's fun! And if you make it publically available online, it may well serve as part of your institution's outreach.

9. And Finally, a Plea.

Most ancient languages are taught within small academic units in the Arts and Humanities. Especially when the economy is not that great, and especially in systems where tuition fees are steadily rising, these subjects lose students and are often forced to justify their continued existence.

This does not have to be like that. The treasures, wisdom, beauty, questions, ideas we have to offer, that we can give our students access to by teaching them the languages in which they are expressed, are an embarrassment of riches. Yes, learning a language is hard, because it requires commitment. Do not aim for this mystic concept of language 'mastery'. Languages are beautiful in themselves, of course, but for most disciplines, they mainly are a tool. What do your students want to use this tool for? Give them an overview of what they will need to know, break this down into its components, and show them where they can find the information they do not actively know yet. There is no need to already have mastered a language in order to start working with it intelligently and productively.

Over the past few years, I have been working in a system where the main purpose of a small arts or humanities subject is seen as training the next generation of researchers in that subject. I find this incredibly sad. Not only is it

the best way to make sure we become obsolete and are shut down sooner rather than later, it also means we are not good representatives of our disciplines. Yes, academic research in non-monetisable fields can only be done at certain institutions, and we need to make sure that these places remain academically rigorous, that they are involved in actual scholarship. But at the same time, if we limit engagement with our materials to 'the experts', we destroy the reason why those fields exist in the first place. Teaching an academic discipline means imparting certain knowledge; but it also means using this knowledge to give students information literacy. In a world flooded with information, we need information-literate citizens to keep liberal democracies working. In a world where everything is seen as new and unprecedented (and much is), the perspectives we can gain by studying ancient cultures and ancient thought are more valuable than ever. The view that 'anyone can teach (insert name of language basic to the study of your discipline)' is not only incorrect, it is dangerous, as it deprives our disciplines of their basis. By taking this attitude, we shirk our duties as good academic citizens.

Offering a language course online, to the broader world, in as much or as little detail as you have the time and money for, is one very good way of not just supporting your discipline, but also of properly honouring the knowledge that has been guarded and fostered by so many of us all these centuries.

Some links:

- cambridge-sanskrit.org (the website uniting the resources for my introductory language textbook)
- youtube.com/@study_sanskrit (my YouTube channel)
- yogicstudies.com (a platform offering university-level, student-friendly courses online)
- quizlet.com, brainscape.com, anki.com (providers of online flashcards)
- kajabi.com (a V(irtual) L(earning) E(nvironment))

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