

# Transcript

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**Derek Bruff:** This is "Leading Lines," I'm Derek Bruff. This fall, two members of the Leading Lines team, working completely independently, brought to me interviews with university educators about shared languages programs. Each case, a group of colleges and universities got together, to offer online language courses.

The courses were ones that wouldn't have had enough enrollment to run at a single institution, but across three or four institutions there was a healthy demand. Two independent interviews, and two independent programs both creating virtual spaces for language learning across multiple campuses.

I can take a hint. This is something we need to explore here on Leading Lines. With declining enrollments in higher education, and with colleges and universities looking for creative ways to collaborate, I think we'll see more shared course programs like these, and not just in the languages.

In our last episode, Vanderbilt's Stacey Johnson spoke with Denison University's Gabriele Dillmann about teaching German and Arabic across multiple institutions. In this episode, we consider another shared languages program, one in which Vanderbilt participates. It's called the Duke-UVA-Vanderbilt Partnership for Less Commonly Taught Languages. These are indeed less commonly taught languages -- Haitian Creole, Tibetan and K'iche' Maya.

My Vanderbilt colleague, John Sloop, talks with Ingeborg Walther of Duke University, who coordinates the program, about the origins of the partnership, how language learning works, in hybrid and virtual spaces, and where the partnership is going.

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**John Sloop:** Hi, this is John Sloop with Leading Lines podcast. I'm talking today with Ingeborg Walther, who is Professor of the Practice and Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures at Duke University. I'm talking today with her about what I think is a really interesting project in education.

The project name is the Duke-UVA-Vanderbilt Partnership for Less Commonly Taught Languages. There are three less commonly taught languages, one at each university. Duke teaches Creole, Virginia teaches Tibetan, and Vanderbilt teaches K'iche'.

I'm going to get into a little bit about the history of the beginnings of this project and how we first got interested in something that was already started here, at Vanderbilt. First, Inge, I'd like to welcome you to the podcast.

**Ingeborg Walther:** Thank you so much. I'm happy to be here.

**John:** I'm really happy to talk to you. I think it's very exciting. I was in on part of the beginning of this, and I'll talk about that in a second, and then I'd like you to pick up the history after I finish my part.

In -- I don't remember the exact year -- 2013, 2014, I was at a conference of provost and others at the University of Michigan. While I was there, I ran into Teresa Sullivan, the President at Virginia.

She started talking about a partnership that Virginia had with Duke, teaching these two languages, Creole and Tibetan. Doing it on, I think the software was telepresence...

**Ingeborg:** Right.

**John:** ...she was very excited about it. Very excited about how well the students in one classroom in real time, synchronous time were able to be taught by a professor at another university.

Not online teaching in the sense that we often use it where it's asynchronous or on a computer. These were specifically built classrooms, telepresence rooms, where she said, "What you see is what you get." It's as if the professor's in the room.

I was very excited. I talked to her and my Dean, Carolyn Dever at the time, about whether this could be something we could pursue because we taught a course in anthropology that at best had five or six people signing up per semester.

I thought if we join this, setting up a classroom we'd end up with three languages for the price of one. I know there's other costs involved, but we could offer our students Creole or Tibetan, and Duke could offer Tibetan and K'iche' in terms of theirs. The same thing for Virginia.

I went down with one of our associate provosts at the time to Duke, saw the classroom, sat through one of the sessions, I was amazed. I've got to be honest with you. Especially, it was the second-semester classroom, and I don't think a word of English was spoken.

**Ingeborg:** [laughs] Exactly.

**John:** It was working. It looked like it was working. All the information said it was working. At that point, we got approval to do this. We're working in MoU. At that point, my job changed. I moved into a different position.

Here at Vanderbilt that was passed off to Karen Campbell and then to André Christie-Mizell, who's now the partner here.

Inge, can you pick up on the history and talk to me a little bit about...I wasn't even part of the project once we started teaching. Can you tell me a little bit more about how it goes from there?

**Ingeborg:** Yeah. I think the partnership actually was started...It was actually founded by the former Deans of Arts and Sciences at Duke and UVA in 2013 with the intention of providing a cost-effective and even cost-neutral way of extending the opportunities for the students at our universities to take and get credit for courses in languages that we couldn't otherwise afford to offer necessarily.

It was really their belief, and their vision that we have the potential to demonstrate, as research universities with global aspirations, our capacity to engage with world languages. Not just on the basis of long-established departmental offerings, but in educational, and research collaborations in diverse communities, and world locations, and on a footing of

linguistic respect and mutual cultural exploration.

When you joined in 2015, when Vanderbilt joined, that's when we developed the memorandum of understanding with the provost, and administrators at our universities. Just this past year, last spring, the MoU, which initially was for a period of three years, has been extended for another three years.

That's basically in a nutshell what's been happening [laughs]

**John:** I want to situate you. What is your role in the consortium, or in project?

**Ingeborg:** As you said, I am actually a professor of German. I had been serving as associate dean for curriculum and course development in our school of Arts and Sciences when I was brought on to direct the consortium on the Duke side in 2013.

Each of our universities has a dean, or a faculty director who is responsible for overseeing the consortium at each institution. We three, collaborate closely to discuss issues and determine which courses will be offered each semester.

We oversee the course approval processes, and coordinate the scheduling of courses. Of course we also work with our respective departments and others offices to, hire and train instructors and language assistants, and publicize courses, recruit students, monitor course quality, and make improvements as necessary.

We really work collaboratively a lot. According to the MoU, one of the directors assumes the primary responsibility for convening meetings, maintaining records, and communication, and all of that. Up and until now I've been the one to assume this role. [laughs]

**John:** Wow! You've been doing that [laughs] the whole time?

**Ingeborg:** Yeah [laughs]

**John:** Wow. I was picturing you were going to say, "We pass it round each year," but wow! That's...

**Ingeborg:** I think this will be my last year, then somebody else, probably maybe UVA, or

Vanderbilt will take over. [laughs]

**John:** Moving on, when I'm teaching in one classroom, I face different issues with the students. In this case you've got three different classrooms that you're dealing with, the live one and two others, each professor.

**Ingeborg:** Right.

**John:** What are some of the special issues, or problems that you face with a program like this one?

**Ingeborg:** That's a great question and it's hard to know where to start. Some of our continuing challenges have been in various areas, pedagogical, technological, and logistic. As you can imagine, they are all inter-related.

I think I'll start just by talking first about some of the technological challenges. As you mentioned, when we started the consortium in 2013, we were determined that these not be online courses, that these be quasi live, face-to-face synchronous classes.

That's when we made the decision to use these very high quality, and also very expensive, by the way [laughs] Cisco TelePresence classrooms, that were available on our campuses at Duke and UVA. We had one such classroom at Duke, and UVA also had one classroom. When Vanderbilt joined, I believe you built a classroom. I'm not sure if you had one already.

The advantage was that the audio and visual quality was extremely high. You could talk to, and see the group of students on the other campus on a large screen, almost as if they were in the same room, and you witnessed that.

The disadvantage though, was that these telepresence rooms were set up primarily for meetings and not for classes, especially not for highly interactive classes such as language classes.

Students had to pretty much remain glued to their seats and instructors had to learn how to deal with multiple cameras and screens so as to be able to be seen and heard by all the students. For small group activities, classrooms had to be muted. Sometimes, students at remote locations had problems following the class and hearing conversations or seeing the

whiteboard.

It's really complicated to juggle all of those things. There were also some logistical challenges since our technology staff at each institution had to be available to setup the connections at the beginning of each class and also to troubleshoot if the connections got lost during the class, which would happen from time to time.

Also, the fact that there were only one, or at most, two telepresence rooms available on each campus that were also used for other things, other departments and programs, made scheduling six to eight classes per semester very difficult. You can just imagine.

Scheduling became quite challenging also because each school has different class meeting time periods, and so finding suitable times to accommodate interested students was difficult. For example, there were all these students who wanted to take this or that course but couldn't because it conflicted with other classes that they had, or wanted to take, at their home institutions.

There are the continuing challenges of coordinating different academic calendars and exam schedules. You notice that I've been talking about Cisco in the past tense because some of these challenges have since been mitigated by our recent decision to switch to Zoom as our primary platform, which actually eliminates the need for the Cisco codec system and even the need for any dedicated classroom space.

I'm told by our technology experts that any space set up to support integrated Web conferencing -- cameras, noise-canceling microphone, speakers, and projection on large screens, would be able to support a Zoom session for multiple participants located in a single space.

However, Zoom also supports the ability to allow participation from anywhere using an individual's portable device, laptop or smartphone, as long as the device has a working camera and a reasonably good Internet connection, preferably on-campus, they can participate.

Our Tibetan instructor, Franziska Oertle at UVA, piloted this platform for her classes last spring semester and found it far preferable, both technologically and pedagogically, to the Polycom and Cisco classrooms that we've been using up until now.

Zoom is actually similar to WebEx that those who have used it report that it is more user-friendly, higher quality, and less susceptible to glitches. Franziska reports that, not only does Zoom make it easier to collaborate across schools, also in small group and partner work, but also allows students to participate in class who would otherwise not be able to make it to their respective physical classrooms, such as when they're attending conferences or athletic events off campus.

She's also been able to invite colleagues at very remote locations, such as India, into her classroom for special lectures or other activities. We also feel that the use of Zoom to create these virtual classrooms, synchronous classrooms, will also lessen the labor cost for our technology staff who would no longer need to connect classrooms for six or more classes across three schools every semester.

For example, when connections get lost, Franziska and her students simply use Whatsapp to communicate and they were able to reconnect themselves very quickly and easily. Those were some of the advantages, I think, to Zoom over the Cisco telepresence classrooms that we've been using heretofore.

But we've also had challenges attracting as many students as we would like to see. We're constantly still exploring ways to publicize courses more broadly and possibly offer to other potential students in other schools and institutes, such as Nursing, Global Health, and so on.

We are also trying to seek out ways to connect to our students at each language to other university and community resources more broadly, such as faculty and grad students who are doing research in areas where these languages are spoken. That remains sort of a constant and ongoing challenge. [laughs]

Even though there still maybe challenges, we think that the possibilities, especially with Zoom, for expanding opportunities, for even relatively known low number of students to learn languages that are important, makes it definitely worth continuing this initiative.

We also think that Zoom will also allow us to potentially add other schools and add more languages so that was also very difficult to do when we were bound to the Cisco classrooms.

**John:** One of the things I like about your response there is that it's a story. For any of those experimenting with new ways of teaching and technology is that there is no endpoint. These

are changing, there's ways to improve, there's ways to constantly look at them. It sounds like you're always doing that to all the schools. You're trying to find ways to make this more productive.

**Ingeborg:** Right.

**John:** I think something everyone's going to be interested in is, is there a difference in the performance of the live students to those that are in the video conference classrooms? That is, those who have the professor in real presence compared to those in the other classrooms, is there any difference in their performance?

**Ingeborg:** That is a great question. By all accounts, from teacher perceptions and students' grades and some of the assessments we've done, there actually really is no difference between the performance of students on the home campus and those in remote locations.

One of our instructors using the Cisco telepresence classrooms told me that she's noticed students in the remote classrooms occasionally tended to zone out when they were not directly engaged by the instructor.

Sometimes explanations of issues that were meant for all didn't quite reach everyone, but with Zoom everyone is on an equal playing field with everyone connected on their own individual devices and I don't think it will be possible to zone out because you're always visible to each other and to the instructor and pretty much always forced to participate.  
[laughs]

Our Tibetan instructor reports that the attention of the students in the virtual classroom is just as good as in the live one but that for students to do well they just need a little more self-discipline that is to not let distractions get in the way. [laughs] .

**John:** You've got to learn that discipline in real classrooms...

[crosstalk]

**Ingeborg:** Exactly.

**John:** Do you give any special help to the students in the remote classrooms, or are they



there by themselves, how does that work?

**Ingeborg:** They're there by themselves. Again, we've only used the Zoom classrooms on a pilot basis in Tibetan last spring. Most of our classes have had native speaking teaching assistants on their home campuses, at the remote locations. For example, when Creole is taught here at Duke, but students who take Creole at UVA and Vanderbilt have had native speaking undergraduate students or graduate students helping to facilitate the class.

I've been told it's not absolutely necessary to have a TA, these TAs can be very helpful also in meeting students outside of class for extra conversation and tutoring, also for proctoring exams, if necessary. The TAs participate in the virtual classroom as well. I think we will very likely be keeping the TAs, even with our Zoom platform.

**John:** The next question, you've sort of touched on already and it sounds like the answer's going to have to be somewhat continuum because it sounds like it's in movement. I was wondering if all of the schools needed to utilize the same equipment, or if they did utilize the same equipment.

I guess what I'm really trying to ask here is, how much did the classrooms, and the equipment need to be exactly the same, or how different can they be?

**Ingeborg:** I think that they do pretty much have to use the same equipment. I know that when we were using our Cisco TelePresence Rooms, everybody had similar Cisco TelePresence Room. I know that when our telepresence room went offline, we equipped another classroom with Cisco SX80 Codec, and this was integrated with, I'm told, a Creston AV Control system, and some other types of other types of U-cameras, and then we replaced that with a Polycom system.

That was able to integrate very well with the Cisco classrooms that UVA, and Vanderbilt were still using. I'm not an expert in all these technology, but there could have been some small differences. As of this fall, we've pretty much all decided to use the Zoom Platform.

**John:** Given that, at this point if a university wanted to join this consortium, or if they were setting up another consortium, and someone was coming to you for advice, and they said, "Can you estimate, for budget reasons, how much is it going to cost me to set up a classroom to make this work?" What would your answer be?

**Ingeborg:** I think that if one wants to go with the Cisco TelePresence type classroom, that can be quite expensive. I think that the cost there is around \$50,000. I think it can also be also quite expensive setting up the Polycom type classrooms that we've been using.

If one wants to go that route, you pretty much have to limit yourself. It's really hard to have more than three schools involved, because I think it's very difficult to set up the connection -- I'm told -- for more than three schools with those types technologies of telepresence technologies.

The Zoom platform, if you want to use Zoom, it costs practically nothing. Each instructor, all you need is a Zoom license per instructor.

Each instructor can get a Zoom license for about \$15 per year. Presumably, their universities would pay for this. For students, the cost is zero, because whoever initiates the Zoom session is the one that has the license. They just have to authorize the students to use it.

Of course, students will need to have laptops and headphones. If they don't already have these, they need financial support for that.

**John:** Even if it's fascinating, like every other technology, I shouldn't be surprised by the story about all of these technologies become more accessible and less expensive as time goes on, it's a great story.

When I was visiting Duke to first watch this, one of the stories that I was told by, they're people from Virginia down as well, when we came down to visit, one of the stories I was told was that -- I think it was in the first or second semester, at least in the first year -- you had a partnership that the students, they had been in a virtual classroom with each other and wanted to meet each other.

At some point they got together, drove, and met somewhere. Can you talk a little bit about that, or has this happened again, or do the students have a need to see each other in the flesh at some point?

**Ingeborg:** Yes, exactly. I think they really do. I remember that semester that you're talking about. It was when the Tibetan students felt so compelled to meet in person that they actually organized a weekend to get together in Charlottesville at UVA during the semester.

The students said that it was as if they already knew each other, because they had been seeing and talking to each other already over telepresence, but it was great to see each other in person. That led to them all being on Facebook together and they plan to keep in touch after the course ends.

I have one quote from one of these students who said, "Language is a way of communication, and communication is not just in class. It was really good. It expanded our friendship and just expanded my world. It's like a window, and we opened it." That was really, really cool.

**John:** Wow, that's really wonderful.

**Ingeborg:** In the meantime, our new Tibetan instructor at UVA came down to do class semester and had a wonderful encounter with her students here. That confirmed for her how the virtual classroom creates a feeling of connectedness just like an actual classroom. She said that when she first met her Duke students, it wasn't strange at all. It was as if they had always been together.

Our Creole instructor here at Duke, Jacques Pierre, he actually travels to UVA at least once per semester to meet his students there in person, and they all really appreciate this. Jacques is a very warm and friendly person, but some of the students said that this comes across even more so when he's there in person [laughs] , which I thought was really interesting.

Of course, it's easier to travel between North Carolina and Virginia, and that's a little harder for students at Vanderbilt to get together with their counterparts.

**John:** That makes sense. I hope the opportunity rises sometime when someone happens to be in the area, that they visit each other.

**Ingeborg:** We'll have to work on that. We certainly hope that our K'iche' instructor, Mareike Sattler, will be able to come Duke or UVA at least once year. We're working on that.

It's funny, because it's important to note all this need to meet in person points to one of the slight drawbacks of the virtual classrooms, and that is the lack of all the bonding and even the education that can take place among students, and even between students and the professor before and after class.

Students can certainly get to know each other in the virtual classroom but there's something intangible. I don't know, perhaps something different about what happens in those spaces outside of class, and even in the live classroom.

I think it's like the difference between watching a concert or hearing a lecture on video and doing it live when you're all together in the same physical space. [laughs] It's just something I've noticed.

**John:** Nothing's that's important in what you're pointing to there is something we're going to have to assess. Not just in this type of consortium, but what you're talking about is even going to be more magnified in traditional asynchronous online courses.

**Ingeborg:** Exactly.

**John:** How do you get that interaction? How do you work that? I'm assuming all of us are going to continue working on that as time evolves, as technology evolves.

In addition to the students traveling to each other, are there any other stories from the program that you think might be of interest to anyone considering this or thinking about it?

**Ingeborg:** Yeah. I think that the best stories are from our students. Just seeing their success and also seeing the many things, interesting things that they're doing.

For example, in Mareike's intermediate-level K'iche' class, students are working on a really great project transcribing K'iche' texts from the K'iche' oral history project that's housed at the University of New Mexico.

They're transcribing these oral texts into the new standard orthography for Guatemalan Mayan languages. I'm told these texts were collected during the late '60s and early '70s before a unified orthography was in place. These transcriptions done by the students make the stories found in this collection better accessible and more user-friendly.

The students also are gaining experience in dealing with primary language source materials, and are really exposed to interesting cultural themes that come up in these stories.

That's just one example. Some of the students in Jacques' Creole classes have been

collaborating with the Center for Latin and American and Caribbean Studies to develop online video teaching tools for Haitian Creole.

They're really doing great work in real live work that's very important beyond the classroom. [laughs]

Then also regarding the Zoom platform, I have a story from our Tibetan instructor, Franziska Oertle, who told me that Tibetan language students are so dedicated that she had somebody join the class while she was in the taxi driving to an important meeting. [laughs]

**John:** [laughs]

**Ingeborg:** She was reading, and participating, and totally enjoying the class from the back of the taxi. Another student of hers connected himself to Zoom at 2:00 AM from Taiwan because he was attending a conference there and didn't want to miss his Tibetan class. [laughs]

I think that these are just amazing stories. The student at Duke was an athlete. They were able to connect her when she was traveling when she was off campus.

As Franziska said that these are such amazing possibilities we have nowadays if we just have enough openness and flexibility of mind to use them.

I also, since I love the students' own voices, I have another quote from a Tibetan student who wrote the following about the Zoom Virtual Classroom.

He writes, "I would argue that the benefits surely outweigh its hindrances. Not only am I, who am located a few states away, able to meet three times a week to practice a language not offered to me in New York, but we are also able to connect a native Tibetan speaker located in India quite often.

"This function combined with the breakout room feature allows maximum speaking time for students studying a less spoken language. Furthermore, the whiteboard screen share feature allows for students to follow along on the teacher's screen board without any hindrance of not being able to see the board or perhaps poor handwriting. Two problems I have had to face in the past.

"The Zoom platform allows for numerous geographically displaced students to be right there with the teacher, effectively allowing professional and seemingly one-on-one guidance regardless of time or place.

As long as you have some quiet, a computer, Internet, and will to learn, who would have thought this would be available in our lifetimes? Furthermore, who would have thought this capability could be utilized for such a benefit." That's the end of the quotes.

I just should say that we actually allowed this student from New York to take Tibetan, even though his university is not in our consortium. He had to and was willing to pay tuition for this course.

I think the Zoom platform will indeed allow more students outside the consortium to take our courses, provided they're willing to pay.

We hope to explore the possibility of adding more schools to the consortium itself, and even adding more languages and expanding the numbers of potential students.

**John:** That's really a wonderful story. I look forward to watching how this evolves.

I've only got a couple more questions for you. One of them, I'll give you a little bit of context for. When we were first joining the consortium, I had a, and I was explaining it to faculty in different colleges here, I had a faculty member from the School of Engineering ask me, "Could something similar be set up because every area of specialty has certain areas that are smaller or that one university doesn't cover."

I think in this case it had some type of liquid mechanical engineering that our school didn't do. I could be wrong about the example. That doesn't matter.

That another university did, so he was asking could we set up something with this other university? For all types of reasons that question didn't go very far, but it got me thinking once you have learned the lessons of the technology, do you see this type of arrangement being useful for other topic matter -- other than language -- either in arts and science or anywhere else in the university?

**Ingeborg:** Yeah, certainly. We all know video conferencing technologies like Zoom are

already being used to connect our students to other students and faculty at remote locations in all kinds of courses.

These kinds of consortial and course sharing arrangements, they work well for less commonly taught languages that are not offered at many institutions, to begin with. I think it's important to note though, that I don't think it works when you have certainly the Zoom platform.

The Zoom virtual classrooms really don't work if you get much beyond 15 students or so. If like for engineering, I don't what their courses are typically like, but if you want to have real interactive classrooms, seminar-type classrooms, I think they could work.

I also think that I wouldn't want to see a scenario in which our administrators use such consortial arrangements to cut courses and faculty from their own institutions and curricular. I wouldn't want to see a scenario in which our administration decides maybe not to replace our retiring expert in, say, German romanticism, because there's already a scholar in that area down the road at UNC.

The danger in having courses in any given subject area taught to students at multiple universities by a single professor, also lies in the lack of diversity, the lack of different voices and perspectives from multiple scholars in conversation with each other.

That's a huge, complex area to contemplate, and politically, as you can imagine, very sensitive. We're living in a world where new technologies have obvious benefits, but also come with some drawbacks and even potential dangers, I think.

**John:** Yeah, absolutely. I'm going to close with a question that we ask every guest on Leading Lines. What is your favorite non-digital education technology?

**Ingeborg:** [laughs] Oh, my gosh. It's hard to think of non-digital.

[laughter]

**Ingeborg:** I would say, certainly, hands-down the blackboard, or the whiteboard [laughs] now. I still like being able to write and draw spontaneously in real time in the classroom, when students can follow along, follow my thought processes.

I also like to have students come up and write and draw things. I'm noticing more and more that, in my own teaching and live classrooms, I'm moving more and more away from using PowerPoints and getting more back to just using blackboards and whiteboards. [laughs] I still like that.

**John:** This made a great conversation. I think this is going to be very interesting.

This is John Sloop. I've been talking to Ingeborg Walther from Duke University. We've been discussing the Duke-UVA-Vanderbilt Partnership for Less Commonly Taught Languages. Thank you very much.

**Ingeborg:** Thank you. It's been a real pleasure. Thanks.

[music]

**Derek:** That was Ingeborg Walther, Professor of the Practice of Germanic Languages and Literature at Duke University, interviewed by John Sloop, Associate Provost for Education Development and Technologies, here at Vanderbilt.

See the show notes for more information on the Duke-UVA-Vanderbilt Partnership for Less Commonly Taught Languages. You can find those show notes on our website [leadinglinespod.com](https://leadinglinespod.com), where you'll also find past Leading Lines episodes with full transcripts.

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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.

[background music]



**Derek:** Look for new episodes the first and third Monday of each month. I am your host, Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening.

Transcription by CastingWords