EJPLT

European Journal of Privacy Law & Technologies • 2020/2 • ISSN 2704-8012

# Distance teaching in times of Covid-19 – from zero to hero?

## Experiences and best practices of a university lecturer trying to create a student-centred distance teaching approach

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**Abstract**

*This article deals with the challenges of distance teaching during the Covid-19-induced global pandemic. As hardly any university teacher was prepared for switching from traditional in-class teaching to distance teaching, and as most universities were neither personally nor technically equipped for such a dramatic change, nearly everybody had to start from zero. As a university teacher in Germany, I devised my own student-centred method of distance teaching, combining various available means and tools for distance teaching and learning, which include: Videos, WhatsApp and Zoom (VWZ). The VWZ-approach turned out to be a very promising and effective method of distance teaching and learning. It puts the students in the centre and gives them better control over their study and learning process at anytime, anywhere, and according to their own learning speed, while the teacher is constantly available for them to provide guidance, answer questions and give them feedback.*

**Keywords:** Covid-19 - Distance Teaching - Virtual Classroom - Flipped Classroom - Learning Platform - ILIAS - BigBlueButton - Blackboard Collaborate - VWZ-approach - Video - WhatsApp - Zoom

**Summary:** Introduction. – 1. Starting off from zero. – 2. Failed attempts: Virtual classroom lectures. – 3. Best practice: VWZ-teaching. – 4. Advantages of the VWZ distance teaching approach. – Conclusions.

### Introduction.

On 13th March 2020 my colleagues and I received an e-mail from our university, indicating that the university would be closed from the 16th March due to the restrictive measures in Germany because of the Covid-19 pandemic. We were asked to get in touch with our students via e-mail or the university's learning platform and provide them with some material and tasks for the forthcoming two weeks. During that time, we would receive more detailed instructions on how to provide distance teaching during the closure of the university.

This short e-mail made the scheduled and planned work for face-to-face teaching in the forthcoming weeks completely obsolete, and we all had to switch on to online teaching. Did the university provide us with any help or assistance? Was anybody prepared for this sudden and drastic change? No! We all had to start from zero. Maybe not to become a hero of distance teaching immediately, but at least to provide some decent distance teaching in the near future. This essay will examine the challenges and difficulties posed by the sudden switch to online distance learning and how we tried to overcome them.

## 1. Starting off from zero.

As a university lecturer in law and political science I have been teaching at various universities for more than a decade, I was used to face-to-face teaching in classrooms and auditoriums. This was also the part of the job I enjoyed most: being together with the students in a room and teaching them subjects in an interactive, colourful and entertaining way. For this way of teaching I had passion, was experienced and prepared. But now the university was closed, and the face-to-face contact with students was also over. So, what should I do?

The first week of the Covid-19 lockdown was still easy to handle somehow, as it was my last week of lectures in a couple of courses in which students were about to take their final examinations. Having finished my teaching prior to university closure, I e-mailed the students tasks and exercises in preparation for the examinations. I also ensured that I was available to answer questions and provide feedback via the university's e-mail system. However, the greatest challenge was delivering six new courses on German Constitutional Law, EU Law, German Foreign Policy and Public International Law a week after the university closed down for face-to-face teaching.

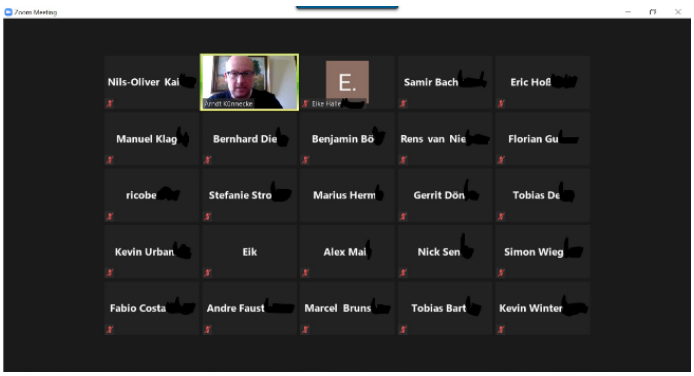
In the meantime, my university instructed the lecturers to prepare for online distance teaching in accordance with the original timetable scheduled for face-to-face teaching until the end of April. The university's main concern was obviously to ensure that all lecturers were actually working. Therefore, we were supposed to welcome the students via e-mail at the beginning of each scheduled lesson, give them teaching materials, assign tasks and be available online to provide feedback to students via e-mail or on the university's learning platform *ILIAS*[1]. My main concern with online teaching was the inherent challenge of how to replicate lecturer/student familiarity and intimacy that face-to-face teaching afforded, within the online environment?

My first idea was to schedule all classes in a virtual classroom. Some years ago, I had gained some experience with the online cloud meeting platform *Zoom*, which is a web-based video conferencing tool with a local, desktop client and a mobile app that allows users to meet online, with or without video.[2] Users can choose to record sessions, collaborate on projects, and share or annotate on one another's screens. This simplified video conferencing and messaging tool encompassed all technical features that are important for a virtual classroom. Especially, key features like video, audio, chat and the screen-sharing function provided all the necessary tools for online teaching. However, while sharing a presentation using the screen-sharing mode, it was only possible to see a maximum of four participants at the same time on a small video screen next to the shared presentation. The rest of the participants were not visible at once.




[1] For more details about *ILIAS* see: https://www.ilias.de/en/.
[2] For more details about *Zoom* see: https://zoom.us/meetings.

You had to scroll down to see the next couple of them. This feature was only suited to teaching a small group of 3-5 students, while all of them were using video. However, in bigger groups it meant that the great majority of participants was hidden. This could only be avoided by not sharing the screen.




But as I intended to use my normal presentations designed for face-to-face teaching, I had to share my presentations with the students. Therefore, I dropped the idea of using *Zoom* online meetings as the main tool for distance teaching. For me as a teacher, it is essential to see my students to ensure that they understand my teaching. In-class teaching allows for real time feedback partly by watching students' faces. If this feedback does not exist, it makes me feel disconnected from the students without the ability to understand their level of engagement or understanding of the lecture. It also feels like talking to my computer screen for many hours each day without knowing if the students understand the lecture or are fully engaged with the teaching. Having no visual contact with the people you teach online means that you do not even know if they are still physically present in front of their devices. It makes it possible for lazy students to just log on and fake their attendance when they are not actually engaged with the teaching material. This is what I was told by a couple of students. I also wanted to avoid making a fool of myself lecturing in a virtual classroom where in the worst-case scenario, only a few of the students who logged on were actually listening to me.

## 2. Failed attempts: Virtual classroom lectures.

Nevertheless, later during the Covid-19 lockdown, I had to practise some online teaching in different virtual classrooms, because the universities where I had additional teaching assignments required me to do so. I realised through these experiences that the current technical platforms for online teaching are inadequate for proper and effective distance teaching.

### a) *BigBlueButton* – University of Applied Sciences for Public Administration (Brühl / Germany).

At the end of March, my home university proudly announced via e-mail that a video conference system, called *BigBlueButton*, was being integrated into our university's learning platform *ILIAS*. *BigBlueButton* is an online tool, which enables teachers to share audio, slides, chat, video, and desktop with students. It also offers built-in breakout rooms, polling and recording lectures for later review.[3]

As I was facing the first lecture in a course of 88 actual distance students in the area of

[3] For more details about *BigBlueButton* see: https://bigbluebutton.org/.

EU Law which was supposed to be held as the course introduction face-to-face at university, I wanted to make use of the advantages of the new university owned virtual classroom. My plan was to prepare the whole setting in a classroom at university: computer, smart board, camera, microphone, loudspeaker. I wanted to place myself in the students' real classroom at university next to a smart board on which I could do my presentation. Via camera and microphone, they could see and hear me at home on their own devices and vice versa I could see them on my computer screen and hear them on my loudspeakers. To make sure that the whole system worked, I made a test of the technical equipment the day before the lecture at university with some colleagues from the university's IT department. During the test, everything worked out well. On the following day, at 8 a.m. I started my video lecture on *BigBlueButton*. However, the students could not use their cameras because of poor internet connectivity and low bandwidth servers. The video transmission worked quite well for about 15-20 minutes. After that, I received lots of messages in the *ILIAS* learning platform's chat that the video was frozen and that the students could not hear me properly anymore. So, I switched off my video and tried to talk to the students only via audio while sharing my screen at the same time, showing them my presentation slides. However, after a few minutes I again received messages in the chat that the students could only understand every second or third sentence I said. That made me stop the screen sharing and made me just talk with the students via audio. However, after a short while I received messages in the chat again complaining that my voice did not come through properly anymore. When I tried to respond to the students in the chat, I was wondering why my message just being typed did not appear in the chat. Only five minutes later, my message appeared in the chat, while lots of messages from the students popped up in the chat which were written a couple of minutes before. I realised even the chat had a delay of 12 (!) minutes. That made me quit the lesson. Distance teaching like that was just not possible.

### b) *Blackboard Collaborate* – MEF University (Istanbul / Turkey).

Still in March, I had to give three lectures in a course about German Law at MEF University in Istanbul. Originally, these lectures were also supposed to be held in person in Istanbul. For this course with altogether 60 students the university provided virtual classroom facilities on their university owned *Blackboard Learning* platform, called *Blackboard Collaborate*. *Blackboard Collaborate* is an online platform for delivering online courses and meetings in which robust teaching and learning tools such as an interactive whiteboard, multi-point video, and application and desktop sharing can be used.[4] When I started the lecture for my Turkish students, sitting in front of my computer in Germany, while they listened in Turkey, I had my video switched on and tried to share my screen with my presentation. The students immediately wrote me in the built-in chat that they could not hear me at all. However, I could hear their voices when they were talking. So, I switched off the video and tried to deliver my lecture just by using audio and screen sharing. However, again I received messages in the chat that still nobody could hear me. The students were only able to hear me after I stopped the screen sharing mode. They told me that they already had a couple of other lectures being delivered on the same platform, but that they did not face any technical problems with any of their other teachers. Again, it seemed that my internet connection in Germany was not fast and stable enough to successfully participate in an online meeting with a few dozen students. Just being able to talk but not being able to show anything to the students. I had to quit the lesson. Effective distance teaching was not possible this way. The forthcoming lessons I sent them my presentation before class time and explained

[4] For more details about *Blackboard Collaborate* see: https://www.blackboard.com/resources/about-blackboard-collaborate.

it only via audio while each student had to follow the slides being sent before on their computer. This way of distance teaching was also far from being satisfactory to anybody.

### c) *Zoom* - V. N. Karazin National University (Kharkiv / Ukraine).

In April I had to give a couple of online lectures about EU Foreign Policy at V. N. Karazin University in Kharkiv. These lectures were part of a Jean-Monnet-Program and they were originally supposed to be held in person in Kharkiv. As the university did not have any virtual classroom tools being incorporated in their university's learning platform, I was asked to hold the lectures on *Zoom*.[5] In comparison to the other lectures I held online, the number of participating students here was much lower, just about 15. As some of the Ukrainian students had no sufficient knowledge of English language, a Ukrainian colleague was translating my lecture consecutively. The translator, one of the students and I used video, the other students did not. While I was lecturing, I was sharing my screen so that the other participants could see my presentation slides and the translating colleague had some written reference for her translation. Technically, everything went well: no problems with video, audio or screen-sharing. However, I had no idea if the students who did not use video could follow and understand what I had explained, or what my Ukrainian colleague had translated. That was very irritating for me as I did not get any feedback during the whole lecture apart from questions being asked by the only student using video who had a good knowledge of English. He was also the only one who tried to answer the questions I posed. This made me feel like lecturing just to two people (the participants with enabled video). The other participants did not say anything during the lecture, so that I had no idea if they were still physically present in front of their devices or if they only stayed logged on while doing something else. These issues made me feel very uncomfortable throughout the lecture.

## 3. Best practice: VWZ-teaching.

As I was not satisfied with any of these solely virtual classroom-based distance teaching models, I decided to create my own approach. This approach is based on my experiences of teaching according to the *Flipped Classroom* approach. It combines introductory videos being taken from the *Flipped Classroom*, *WhatsApp* as quick and comfortable communication channel and *Zoom* as online meeting platform for face-to-face consultation hours. **V**ideo + **W**hatsApp + **Z**oom = **VWZ**.




### V = Video introduction.

The idea to provide an introductory video for each lesson is derived from the *Flipped Classroom* teaching method. The *Flipped Classroom* generally provides a pre-recorded introductory lecture (video and/or audio) which is followed by some in-class activities. The

[5] See: n 1.

students watch and/or listen to this pre-class lecture somewhere outside the classroom and in time before the class starts. When they come to class, they are already equipped with some basic knowledge about the topic of the class so that the freed in-class time can be used for interactive tasks, such as exercises, discussions, Q&A sessions or other learning activities.[6] Flipping the classroom in this sense means changing the process of traditional teaching: instead of introducing the students to the topic physically in class and giving them follow-up tasks for home, the teacher already gives them a pre-class introduction and builds on that basic knowledge to guide the students through learning activities in class which helps them getting a deeper understanding of the topic. In short, taking into account the technical means being used for its realisation, *Flipped Classroom* can be defined as "*any teaching model which replaces in-class lecture modules with video or audio lectures with the goal to use the freed in-class time for interactivity*"[7].

The core feature of the pre-class activities of the *Flipped Classroom* teaching approach are the introductory videos/audios. In comparison to audios, videos have the big advantage that they appeal to more senses than just audio. As some students prefer reading, some listening and some others watching, videos include all three of these learning preferences: they offer text and pictures for the visual needs and sound and speech for the audio needs. So, the audio-visual content of videos serves the different needs of students more comprehensively than only audio or visual content. And it gives the teacher many more means to deliver his/her content. Therefore, as in the *Flipped Classroom*, I chose videos as a central feature of my own distance learning approach.

In law classes, the introductory video to a lesson needs to understandably introduce a legal term, concept, problem or case in short. Ideally, the big idea of the lesson should be included in the video, easy to understand and to remember for each student. The way I do it is mainly by producing an introductory video of 5-15 minutes in length for each lesson. In this video I start with defining the learning objectives, shortly explain the core concept and content of the lesson, emphasizing essential points which should be marked in legal texts or kept in mind, and finally give the students some assignments for their individual space at home. To provide the students a clear and recurring typical structure of each lesson, each video is divided into three parts: (1) learning objectives, (2) key content and (3) assignments.

For the learning objectives it is important to give the students some clear guidance through the lesson and make them focus on what they should have learnt by the end of the lesson. The key content needs to be explained in a clear and precise way, as there is not enough time in a video to provide the content of the whole lesson. It is also important to give the students some useful hints and leads on how to understand and remember the most important parts of the explained topic. This includes directing their attention to key words or paragraphs of legal texts and concepts, to tell them which words of legal texts to mark or underline, to visualise legal concepts, to connect newly introduced content with students' prior knowledge in other areas, or to provide them with some mnemonic tricks to remember

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[6] Compare Centre for Academic Development and Quality, Nottingham Trent University, *CADQ Guide – The Flipped Classroom* (June 2013) < https://www4.ntu.ac.uk/adq/document_uploads/teaching/154084.pdf > accessed 23 June 2020; LE Davis / MA Neary / SE Vaughn, 'Teaching Advanced Legal Research in a Flipped Classroom' (2013) 22 Perspectives: Teaching Legal Research and Writing 1, 13; Educause Learning Initiative, *7 Things you should know about Flipped Classrooms* <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eli7081.pdf> accessed 23 June 2020; J Lihosit / J Larrington, 'Flipping the Legal Research Classroom' (2013) 22 Perspectives: Teaching Legal Research and Writing 1, 1; WR Slomanson, 'Blended Classroom: A Flipped Classroom Experiment at the Lectern' (2014-15) 64 Journal of Legal Education, 95; A Upchurch, 'Optimizing the Law School Classroom through the 'Flipped' Classroom Model' (2013) The Law Teacher, 1.

[7] L-C Wolff / J Chan, *Flipped Classrooms for Legal Education* (Springer 2016) 13.

the topic more readily.

It is important to mention that the recordings should not be too long, and they should not try to replace the whole lecture. This material is only the introductory part of the lesson. Evaluations showed that the attention span of the students watching and/or listening to content delivered online is restricted to maximum 15-20 min.[8] Keeping the video short and to the point – that is the key to keep the student's attention.

In general, for producing pre-class videos, there are three main ways: the 'screen capture approach', the 'white board approach' and the 'green screen approach'. In the screen capture approach, the teacher creates a visual presentation, such as PowerPoint, Pdf or a Word document, and records his or her voice while showing and running the presentation or document on the computer. The video then shows the movement of the presentation or document on the computer screen synced with the recorded audio of the teacher.[9] For this kind of recording, screen capture software such as *Camtasia*[10] or *Snagit*[11], are quite easy to handle and can be used. In contrast in the white board approach, the teacher films him- or herself in front of a white board, flip chart or screen.[12] In the green screen approach, the teacher records him- or herself in front of a green screen. The advantage of the screen capture is that a PowerPoint slide show and the audio recording can be played simultaneously on the students' device, serving both visual and auditory learning styles. In addition, it is relatively easy to update certain parts of the recording, just by changing some slides and re-recording the related audio part.[13] This is rather difficult in the white board and green screen approach. Even for updating a small part of the content, the entire video has to be re-recorded, unless the teacher could appear in front of the camera again in the exact same style and outfit as in the original video. Inserting an update with a teacher looking different to the appearance in the original video would make the whole video look unprofessional and not convincing. Therefore, to avoid needless updates, it is strongly recommended to avoid any unnecessary update references, for example to the names of people holding a specific office, as they can change, and in that case make the whole video look outdated. The advantage of the white board and green screen approaches is the personal touch which is created when the teacher appears on screen him- or herself and directly speaks to the students.[14] As with pre-class introductions only based on audio, the screen capture approach is lacking in developing this personal bonding with the teacher prior to the face-to-face sessions in class. However, it is very important for the teacher to feel comfortable with appearing in front of the camera and to stay authentic. I have seen many colleagues who do not feel comfortable in front of a camera speaking to invisible students. This is something you can see from the first moment of watching their videos that they feel uncomfortable and lose their way in front of the camera. In this case it is strongly advised to use the screen capture approach or to simply use audio only. It will suit the personality of the teacher much better. But this not only counts for the pre-class introductory options where the teacher is not visible. Also,

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[8] Davis / Neary / Vaughn, 'Teaching Advanced Legal Research in a Flipped Classroom' (n 6) 14; J Ireland, 'Blended Learning in Intellectual Property: The Best of Both Worlds' (2008) 18 Legal Education Review, 150; M Le Brun / R Johnstone, *The Quiet Revolution: Improving Student Learning in Law* (Law Book Company 1994), 260; P McKellar / P Maharg, 'Virtual learning environments: The alternative to the box under the bed' (2005) 39 The Law Teacher, 48; M Şahin / C Fell Kurban, *The New University Model* (FL Global Publishing 2019) 157; Upchurch, 'Optimizing the Law School Classroom through the 'Flipped' Classroom Model' (n 6) 5.

[9] Upchurch, 'Optimizing the Law School Classroom through the 'Flipped' Classroom Model' (n 6) 3.

[10] For more details on *Camtasia* see: https://www.techsmith.com/video-editor.html.

[11] For more details on *Snagit* see: https://www.techsmith.com/screen-capture.html.

[12] Upchurch, 'Optimizing the Law School Classroom through the 'Flipped' Classroom Model' (n 6) 3.

[13] Wolff / Chan, *Flipped Classroom for Legal Education* (n 7) 50.

[14] Wolff / Chan, *Flipped Classroom for Legal Education* (n 7) 50 (n 382).

when the teacher decides to appear in front of the camera, it is very important that he or she stays authentic. The students know their teachers and see them regularly in class. Therefore, they expect their teacher to be the same person in class and in front of the camera. If the teacher tries to be someone else in front of the camera it will irritate the students and diminish the credibility of the teacher's message on video, unless he or she plays a certain role for didactical reasons.

According to my own experience of many years teaching following the *Flipped Classroom* approach, the most effective way to deliver pre-class content in the form of videos aiming at attracting the students and keeping their attention is the advanced green screen approach. Therefore, I also used this approach for the first part of my distance teaching concept: I record myself in front of a green screen, talk to the students while looking in the camera and addressing them directly. This puts me in the centre of their attention and makes the students feel as if I am communicating the message only to them. Seeing me as their teacher in person on video also creates a familiar and comfortable classroom atmosphere for the students as they know me as their teacher and instructor of the course. Using a green screen as background of my video shooting also enables me to place myself in the scene of the topic when I exchange the green background with a photo or picture. In other words: I can already visually connect myself and my message with the topic I explain and thereby create a setting which I would even not be able to create inside the classroom. For example, when I explain some procedural rules of parliament proceedings, I place myself in the plenum of the parliament, where I explain something about the composition or competences of the EU Commission, I place myself right in front of the Commission building in Brussels. I also make use of written text in my videos, for example by slides or pop-ups including some keywords or short headlines corresponding with the things I am explaining. This visually underlines the core content of my introduction and helps the students to keep these points in mind. And, if appropriate, I sometimes also include some interactive elements in my videos, for example by interspersing some questions inside the video or by using tools like *EDpuzzle*[15] or *PlayPosit*[16] for adding images, text, quiz questions and discussions to existing videos. These little technical effects have a big impact on how effectively the students receive and remember my explanations.




To be able to record these videos, I made use of the technical equipment I bought some years ago when I was regularly using the *Flipped Classroom* method at my former university in Istanbul and produced most of the pre-class videos at home on my own. I set up my own little studio in a corner of my living room with a camera, tripod, green screen and lighting. There, I record the videos for my distance teaching lessons. After recording, I transfer the video from the video camera to my computer. For the editing I use some professional editing

[15] For more details about *EDpuzzle* see: https://edpuzzle.com/.
[16] For more details about *PlayPosit* see: https://go.playposit.com/.

software called *Avid Media Composer*. This software is a powerful SD and HD video editor for the PC that offers integrated DVD authoring, surround sound audio processing, and thousands of amazing real-time effects.[17] It enables me to edit the recorded videos in a way that they look professional and include all features and effects which I have in mind to make the content more interesting and to keep the students' attention.

After having finished the video editing, I convert the fully edited video to the MP4 format. MP4 files are MPEG-4 video files, which stands for a compressed file format that can contain not only video but also audio and subtitles. The file compression can be chosen according to the desired resolution of the video. Average quality HD resolution is sufficient for social media, higher quality HD resolution should be chosen for tablets or computer monitors. In general, MP4 format is commonly used for videos uploaded on the internet.

With the recording and editing of the introductory video, the first part of my distance teaching approach is done: the provision of the lesson's main content including learning objectives and assignments for additional material and further reading.

### W = *WhatsApp* group discussion.

The introductory videos being my key instrument for addressing the students at the beginning of each lesson, must be made available to the students. Therefore, I had to make up my mind how to distribute the videos. My aim was to find an easily usable and accessible platform which is already part of each student's normal life. The university's learning platform would have been an option. But the *ILIAS* learning platform is not easily accessible on every device and not very convenient to handle. Therefore, social media sources turned out to be the better option for me. They only had to provide the possibility of being suitable for sending and receiving messages of any kind (text, audio and video) and for creating a closed group chat for each course. As all students at my German university used *WhatsApp* on their smartphones, this messaging service became my first choice.[18] *WhatsApp* is a messaging app that uses the internet to send messages, images, audio or video.[19] So, I created a *WhatsApp* group for each course and asked the course representative to add the whole amount of course participants. As the students already used *WhatsApp* as a communication platform among themselves, it was easy to create these *WhatsApp* groups for each course and add all the participants. I first thought that some students might have some concerns in terms of data protection. However, among the more than 500 students who I taught during the Covid-19 virtual learning period, there was only one student who complained about using *WhatsApp* as a communication tool for the course. She pointed out that by using *WhatsApp* as communication platform for a university lecture, there was no clear separation of business and private sphere anymore. Therefore, I did not make it compulsory for the students to join the *WhatsApp* group of our course. However, at the end all the students did join the group. Even the student who was reluctant at the beginning joined at the end after her classmates argued that there was no significant difference between using *WhatsApp* only among the students in their private group and using it for a course including the teacher. Just to offer an alternative communication channel for students who might not have wanted to join the *WhatsApp* group of the course, I also opened a special folder for each course on the university's *ILIAS* learning platform.

After a *WhatsApp* group was set up for each course, it became the key communication

[17] For more details about *Avid Media Composer* see: https://www.avid.com/en/media-composer.

[18] In other countries some students preferably use *Viber* or *Telegram* as their main messaging app. These two messaging apps would have also been technically appropriate for my aims as they include the same features as *WhatsApp*, however, there might be some confidentiality concerns with these messaging apps.

[19] For more details about *WhatsApp* see: https://www.whatsapp.com/features/.

channel between the students and I as well as among the students of each course. At the beginning of each lesson, I posted some introductory remarks in the *WhatsApp* group and then uploaded the introductory video for the lesson. This was the quickest and easiest way to distribute the material to the students. In parallel, I also uploaded the videos on the university's learning platform *ILIAS*. As the university-run learning platform it is the usual place where teachers and students find all necessary information about their courses, including the syllabus, the course content, the dates of the lessons, announcements, assessments and all necessary material for their classes, it is also a suitable place to store the introductory videos for each lesson.

From that moment on, when the introductory video was uploaded on *WhatsApp* and made available for the students on the learning platform, the students became the active part of the distance lesson.




To enable the students to understand and to become familiar with this new way of distance learning, I had to explain my approach and teach the students how to view the pre-class videos effectively. This had to be done right at the beginning of each course, otherwise the whole idea of effectively practising the video-based distance teaching would have failed as most of the students did not have any experience of this approach.[20] The students especially needed to become familiar with using the video as a learning tool. Therefore, they had to experience how to grasp the main content of the video by using pause, go back and replay (parts of) the video, in order to make their notes. To explain my distance teaching approach and to demonstrate the students how to use the introductory videos effectively, I recorded a general introductory video for each course before we started with the actual course content. To create some familiar course atmosphere for them, I placed myself in their actual classroom at university via green screen and illustrated my concept of distance teaching. The after-class evaluation showed me that the students highly appreciated this personalised course-tailored approach.[21]

With the uploaded introductory video to each lesson, including related assignments as well as links to additional material and further reading placed in the course folder on the university's learning platform, the students are equipped with the information they need to work on the lesson topic on their own in the so-called individual space. The uploaded material provides them with an introduction to the lesson, explains the main content and

[20] Şahin / Fell Kurban, *The New University Model* (n 8) 158.

[21] Student comments from the course evaluation of my courses in "German Constitutional Law", "EU Law" and "German Foreign Policy" in June 2020 at the Federal University of Applied Sciences in Brühl / Germany.

gives them short assignments preparing them for and making them curious about the lesson topic.

The preparation for this kind of distance teaching is much more time-consuming than simply giving a lecture, either face-to-face or in a virtual classroom. Firstly, you need to write a screenplay, set up the technical equipment for recording, record yourself, transfer the recorded video to your computer, edit the video and finally upload it for the students. For each video this is a workload of several hours. However, the work for the teacher is not done by having uploaded the introductory video plus some additional material. Mainly during the originally scheduled class time but also beyond, the teacher needs to be available for the students. In my case, it usually takes at least about half an hour before the first students post some questions or comments concerning the introductory video, material and assignments in our *WhatsApp* group. Either I reply in form of a text message or I record a voice message to explain what the students asked me about. As all posts in the *WhatsApp* group are visible for all members of the group, it quite often happens that the students themselves try to give the answer to a question being raised by somebody else or that they start discussing the topic among themselves. This is always good feedback for me, showing me that the students are really engaged with the topic. Some of the raised questions or comments even show how deeply some students are getting into the topic. Another advantage of the *WhatsApp* group is that students do not ask the same questions twice. Everybody is aware of the questions and comments which were posted already. So, there is no redundant waste of time because of the same questions being asked several times by different students. And if so, I just refer to the answers being given above.

As some students – as is the case in the normal classroom – do not feel comfortable asking questions in front of their classmates because they are afraid of asking something stupid, I also offered the students to send me a private message on *WhatsApp* in case they do not feel comfortable posting anything in the *WhatsApp* group. When students do so and when their question including my answer might also be of interest for the rest of the group, I ask the student who contacted me in a private message for the permission to share the posed question including my answer in the *WhatsApp* group of the whole course. Until now, none of the students refused that request. I even had the impression that it made these students more confident when I told them that it was a good question which was worth being shared with the rest of the group.

It is important to mention that teachers should always keep in mind not to overload the students with work while practising this kind of distance teaching. This encompasses both, introductory videos and additional material and assignments: watching an introductory video plus reading some additional material and doing some related assignment is already lots of work for the students.[22] Therefore, the total workload for the students should be kept short and simple, in order to motivate and not frustrate them.

The additional material and/or assignments added to the introductory video, always need to be clearly and understandably connected with the video. This can easily be done by referring to this material or by introducing an assignment already inside the video. Ideally, the legal term, concept, problem, or case being introduced in the introductory video should be reinforced in assigned links or reading. Questions should also be included in the middle and at the end of the video. Questions inside the video are meant to support the process by checking the students' understanding and memory. Questions at the end of the video enable the students to already think about how to use the information being provided for the lesson

[22] P Redmond / C Roper, *Legal Education and Training in Hong Kong Preliminary Review: Summary of Consultation Paper* (2000) 22, 25, 35 <http://www.hkLawsoc.org.hk> accessed 23 June 2020; Wolff / Chan, *Flipped Classroom for Legal Education* (n 7) 59.

topic, for the whole course and for their future legal practice.[23] The idea behind using questions of any of these types is that the students will increase the transfer of the given information into their long-term memory by doing short retrievals during their learning process. This effect is scientifically proven by the learning strategy of retrieval practice.[24]

### Z = *Zoom* online consultation hour.

The most important part of a traditional lesson usually takes place inside the classroom when teacher and students meet face-to-face. Although the introductory video plus related additional material and assignments provided understanding and memory of the introduced topic, they cannot fully replace the in-class time. Because the time inside the classroom shows if the students have understood and internalised the topic and if they are able to apply, analyse and evaluate it for their studies. Having provided my students with the necessary material and input for a specific topic of a single lesson, I needed to find a way to check their understanding of the topic. In other words: I was looking for a way to assess if the students actually achieved the learning objectives. Although the communication in the *WhatsApp* group of each course was rather lively, not all students actively participated in the discussions there. As I did not know the students face-to-face from the real classroom, I could not assess if all of them were able to fully follow the course. Therefore, I was thinking about means to hold an additional meeting for the whole course in a virtual classroom. Because I made the best experiences with the *Zoom* for holding a meeting online, this platform was my first choice. *Zoom* unifies video conferencing, simple online meetings, and group messaging into one easy-to-use platform. Apart from easy use and accessibility, its big plus is that it is cloud-based and therefore does not suffer from poor university servers as *BigBlueButton* does, which is incorporated in our university's learning platform *ILIAS*. For holding online meetings with each of my courses in a virtual classroom in addition to the video and *WhatsApp* group, I was considering two options: the first option was to schedule an online meeting for the last 15-20 minutes of each lesson to check if all students successfully understood the core content of the lesson. The second option was to hold a separate online meeting at the end of each week or latest after having finished a set of connecting topics to check if the students achieved the learning objectives of the lessons of the entire week. At the end I opted for the second option. The reason was that, according to my understanding of distance learning, I did not want to force the students to watch the introductory video and to do the additional reading and assignments exactly at the time when our lesson was officially scheduled by the university. For me, distance learning means that each student must have the freedom to wade through each lesson topic anytime and anywhere he or she prefers and, maybe even more important, according to his or her own learning speed. Practising distance learning, each student should also be able to benefit from its positive features. Therefore, it would have been counterproductive to force the students to do their work exactly at the time of the originally scheduled lesson. In case some of them did not finish the lesson in time, an online meeting checking if they understood the lesson content would not have been reasonable. And the reality confirmed this estimation: in many cases, I received questions and comments on the lesson content far beyond much later after the official lesson time. Sometimes, students even wrote me close to midnight because some questions came up while there were working on the topic. So, it was a good choice to choose holding an online meeting on *Zoom*

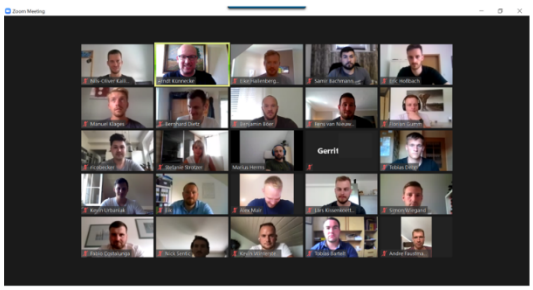
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[23] Compare Şahin / Fell Kurban, *The New University Model* (n 8) 160.

[24] PK Agarwal / HLIII. Roediger / MA McDaniel / KB McDermott, *How to Use Retrieval Practice to Improve Learning* (Retrieval Practice 2013) 4 <https://firstliteracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/RetrievalPracticeGuide-for-FL-Workshop-on-Brain-Based-ESOL-Instruction.pdf> accessed 23 June 2020.

in each course just once a week or at the end of each set of connecting topics, to give the students the opportunity to finish the workload of the whole week in time with their approach to learning.

**Zoom consultation**

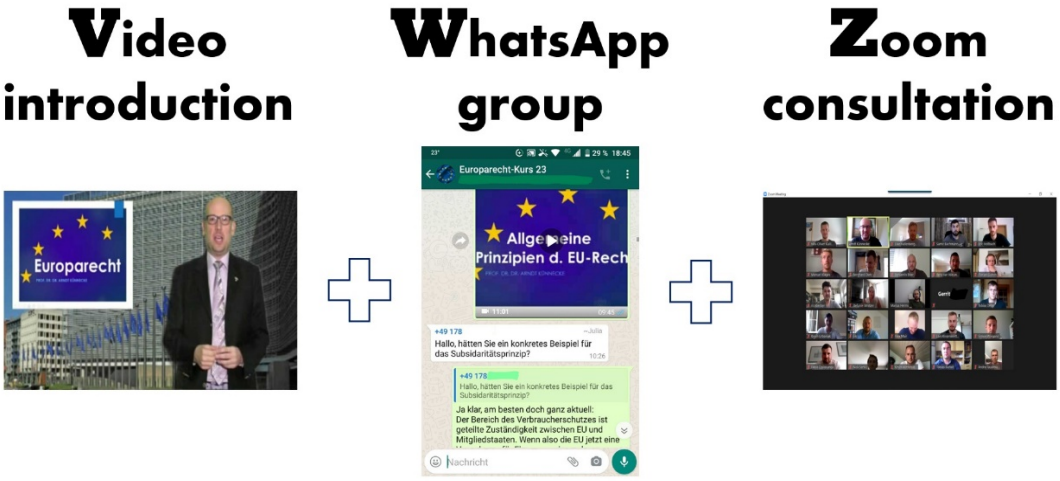



In our *Zoom* meetings I asked all the students to use their camera so that I could see everybody on my screen and directly address a person when I had doubts about his or her understanding of the course content for the week. The fact that I did not have to present any new topic using screen sharing allowed me to see all students of my course (maximum 30) at once on my computer screen. I started with asking the students if they had any questions concerning the topics of the week. Afterwards I asked them some questions to check if they achieved the learning objectives of that week. These online meetings on *Zoom* formed the last part of my distance teaching approach and completed each week of distance teaching in each of my courses.

### 4. Advantages of the VWZ distance teaching approach.

Every type of educational strategy or teaching and learning approach has its strong and weak points. The course evaluations of my students were overwhelmingly positive. As most of my teaching colleagues only carried out a one-sided distance teaching approach by either solely doing online classes in a virtual classroom or by just sending the students some reading material, my own VWZ-approach combines various means of distance teaching. In particular, my students highly appreciated the introductory videos for each lesson and the 24/7 availability on *WhatsApp*. They praised that the videos included the most relevant content of each lesson topic providing them with useful guidance through the topic and explanations on how to make best use of the additional material and legal texts. They also emphasized that the videos offered them distance learning at their own speed and time preferences. Beyond that they mentioned that they felt being taken care off even better than in normal classes being held at university, because they felt directly addressed in each video and also had the feeling that they could get in contact with their teacher anytime they wanted.[25] No questions remained unanswered, neither in the *WhatsApp* group nor on the weekly *Zoom* meetings.

[25] Student comments from the course evaluation of my courses in "German Constitutional Law", "EU Law" and "German Foreign Policy" in June 2020 at the Federal University of Applied Sciences in Brühl / Germany.




From the teacher's perspective, the VWZ-approach showed to have the following advantages: A first main advantage of the VWZ-method is that it promotes student-centred learning. The students have more control of the whole learning process. They can access and watch the introductory videos and additional material that is provided online anytime and anywhere and as often as they want or need. This offers the students the possibility to learn at their own pace, according to their own technique and in their preferred learning environment. The lesson content is more and easier accessible than usual.

Closely connected with this advantage is the benefit that students who are not able to attend a certain lesson for some reason such as illness, are easily able to catch up on the missed lesson by accessing the videos and additional material online and work through the lesson content on their own. In case of any questions, they can also easily contact their classmates or the teacher on *WhatsApp* and ask for help or assistance.

Beyond that, the VWZ-approach enhances collaboration between the students and the teacher as the teacher can answer questions and intervene in the group discussions on *WhatsApp* anytime to assist, correct, or clarify during the learning process.

Finally, as a benefit for the teacher, once prepared, the implementation of a VWZ distance teaching lesson takes less time when holding it for a second or third time. The time-consuming preparation of the introductory video and the design of controlling the learning objectives falls away. The teacher can build his or her own database of introductory videos that can be reused. If desired, the teacher can even share these videos with colleagues and edit them based on the feedback received.

## Conclusions.

When universities were suddenly closed due to Covid-19 lockdown in Germany and other countries, no university teacher was really prepared for switching from traditional in-class teaching to distance teaching. We all had to improvise. And, depending on our own experience and the assistance our universities provided, most of us had to start from scratch. Having taken this new situation as a challenge, I tried to create my own way of distance teaching. My driving force was to make the best out of the situation and, first and foremost, try to provide the best possible distance teaching for my students. Because they suffered from the changed situation much more than we teachers. Therefore, I did not think about how to get through these difficult times as easily as possible, but to provide the best possible outcome for my students, no matter what efforts it takes. The outcome was an approach combining various available means and tools of teaching on distance: Videos, *WhatsApp* and

*Zoom* – VWZ. This VWZ-approach, which I invented by myself in times of Covid-19, turned out to be a very promising and effective method of distance teaching and learning. This is the result of my personal evaluation and the evaluation of my students who successfully finished at least one of my courses in which the VWZ-approach was practised. Of course, it did not take me from zero to hero. But it left both students and their teacher without any major complaints about distance learning and teaching in times of Covid-19.

However, it is a very elaborate and time-consuming approach. Therefore, its success mainly depends on the teacher's commitment and openness for innovation and the students' motivation to work on their own conscientiously and continuously at home. This responsibility of the students should be expected at University. Therefore, provided with a suitable learning environment, the VWZ-method provides great opportunities to effectively use means of distance teaching by relocating much of the theoretical background from the traditional lecture to the students' individual space, while accompanying and assisting them by electronic means on distance. And the students are even in better control of the learning process as they can work on the learning matters anytime, anywhere, and according to their own learning pace, while the teacher is constantly available for them to provide guidance, answer questions and give them feedback.