

The Upcoming Digital Semester at American Studies Leipzig

In the upcoming winter semester 2020/21, all instruction at ASL will be done remotely, mostly via Zoom and Moodle. The decision to do so is driven by three considerations:

- 1) While the kind of intellectual work we do thrives in the immediacy of in-person contact, it can also be done online, offering an alternative that is safer and that works reasonably well given the circumstances. As Americanists, we do not need labs or other specialized equipment; we need our books, our brains, and the ability to talk to one another, and as much as we would prefer to do the talking in person, it can also be done online. Doing so allows us to avoid unnecessary health risks to the student body, the ASL community, and the larger public.
- 2) In our assessment, hybrid teaching arrangements are less practical and come with their own sets of problems. Hybrid teaching scenarios, with some students present in the room and others tuning in from home, create a disparity between these two groups, splitting up the seminar group into those who can be there in person and those who cannot. It makes for easier conversation among those who are in one room, at the expense of the others. For students with preexisting health conditions, unable to ever join for an in-person session, they create a form of structural inequality. This is a dynamic we want to avoid.
- 3) We believe that our resources are better spent if we focus on delivering a good all-digital learning experience rather than experimenting with the complexities, shortcomings, and frictions of hybrid instruction. We hope to be back with some form of in-person teaching in the next summer semester. In the meantime, we will look for strategies that make the fully remote classroom as good as it can be rather than trying to create a semblance of in-person learning when the real thing is still out of reach. If you have ideas or suggestions on how to improve this experience further, please contact us at americanstudies@uni-leipzig.de using the subject "Digital Semester Suggestion."

How to Study in a Digital Setting

These guidelines are meant to help you navigate the digital semester. They are based on the experiences instructors at ASL made during the first 'Corona Semester' in the Summer of 2020. If you have questions about these, do reach out to one of your instructors. You can find their contact information online at: <http://americanstudies.uni-leipzig.de/faculty>.

What You Need

At ASL it is our goal to allow you to participate as much as possible irrespective of the technology or infrastructure you have access to. Still, the following should serve as a guideline as to what you should have available in order to study successfully. These requirements hardly go beyond what we would recommend every student have, but the pandemic has encouraged us to spell this out explicitly. You should have:

- A **device to connect** with your class:

Ideally, this will be a computer (Desktop PC or Notebook) with internet connection and a webcam. Most Notebooks have a webcam built in, in which case you obviously do not need an external one.

We recommend you use a headset for audio. It makes it easier for you to focus, and it makes it much easier for others to understand you well.

Other setups are possible: you could use your phone to live-stream seminar sessions, or a tablet, but you will have to do a lot of typing throughout your studies, so we strongly recommend you have access to a device with an actual keyboard, not just an on-screen one.

Whichever setup you choose, be sure that it allows you to see and hear your fellow students and to be seen and heard.

- A **place to work**:

Before the semester starts, think about where you will work, do readings, prepare classes, etc., and where you will be for the Zoom sessions. If at all possible, find a space in your room or apartment that is distraction-free and that allows you to focus on the seminar sessions and on getting work done.

- **Routines** and **time management**

During these unusual times, without the commute to and from campus, and without the spatial separation of academic work and the rest of your life, setting up and sticking to routines and managing your time become ever more important skills.

Leipzig University has compiled some advice on how to hone them:

<https://www.studentenwerk-leipzig.de/en/news/useful-tips-our-psychosocial-counselling-service-organizing-everyday-life-times-coronavirus>

Also, without running into fellow students that remind you of deadlines, it's easier

to lose track of what is due when: Be sure to keep a calendar or an overview sheet with deadlines for paper submissions, homework, etc., and keep it in a place where you actually see it.

- **Availability via E-Mail**

During the digital semester, it's even more important not to miss out on important information. Be sure to regularly check your official studserv.uni-leipzig.de email address. Ideally, set up your email program to check it automatically so you don't have to remember checking for new emails manually. Alternatively, you can also set your studserv account to forward all email the the address you regularly check.

Skills

To participate in classes, to submit homework, and to take digital exams, you need to master a number of digital skills. Among these are:

- **Videoconferencing**

Most seminars will use Zoom for the live sessions, but some may use other platforms, such as BigBlueButton. In any case, make sure that you know

- how to set your screen name;
- how to use the chat function;
- how to provide nonverbal feedback with the raised-hand / thumbs-up buttons;
- how to share your screen or individual windows on it;
- how to minimize a call so you can do other things on your computer while the call is active.

- **Being able to create PDF files**

Throughout the semester, you will have to be able to create and submit PDF files for homework and for exams. Make sure you know how to do so on your setup.

How to Interact Online

In a way, all of us are still new to interacting online-only. The following guidelines and etiquette are meant to reduce the insecurity and ambiguity that may come with this new territory.

- **Set your screen name**

Make sure to set your screen name to the name you want to be addressed by, typically your first and last name, so that your instructors can more easily call on you and your fellow students can more easily refer to you in discussion. If you want to, you can also add your preferred pronouns (he/she/they) in parenthesis so others know how to refer to you.

- **Use your webcam**

We all constantly communicate using facial expressions. Being able to actually see each other will thus be an important component of your online learning

experience. A puzzled look can tell your instructor to spend more time explaining a point, nodding can move the discussion along. In order to have a working, communicative seminar atmosphere, participants will thus be expected to have their webcam on.

If for any given week you cannot have the video on for technical reasons (such as limited bandwidth), be sure to tell your fellow students and your instructor why they can't see you.

- **Mute your microphone** (when not in use)

Especially if you are in a noisy environment, or if you are working in a particularly large group, be sure to put your microphone on mute whenever you don't talk. If everybody does so, the background noise of the digital classroom will be drastically reduced.

- **Use nonverbal means of communication**

Videoconferencing is bad at having several people speak at the same time. That's why nonverbal communication is even more important. Use hand gestures and facial expression to provide feedback to questions, to let people know that you agree, that you have a question, or that you'd like to object.

- **Use the chat feature**

Whenever you would like to contribute something that is too small to warrant a full speaking turn, or if you want to add something without interrupting, make use of the chat function.

- **Be mindful of others and of floor dynamics**

In real-life conversations, we all rely on microsignals to determine who gets to speak when. Without these signals, turn-taking becomes much more complicated. Make sure that you let others finish, but also make sure that you don't monopolize the floor by giving endless speeches. Also: keep an eye out for the often gendered quality of these dynamics. In our society, men tend to talk more and longer than women, and they tend to interrupt women more frequently. These tendencies can be amplified by the digital setting, and so the digital semester presents an important opportunity for all of us to work on that.

- **Stay in touch**

As the pandemic so far has shown, perhaps the greatest loss in going all-digital is the lack of opportunities for informal conversation: the brief chat after class, hanging out in a seminar room before the instructor arrives, etc. We at ASL will try to offer alternatives for these, but you should also be more proactive in your communication than you usually would be. Reach out to your instructors if there is a problem, use the office hours, and stay in touch with your fellow students!