

2005

Speak Easy
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TECHNOLOGY AS MEDIUM OF DELIVERY AND AS CONTENT OF LEARNING: GERMAN 320
"BUSINESS SIMULATION" AND GERMAN 399 "SCIENCE FICTION"

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My application for a 2005 Scholarship of TLT Award is based on two courses which not only carry out "teaching and learning *with* technology," but also involve teaching and learning technology itself, as a subject area – while at the same time language instruction and learning are going on. Since both courses are, after all, language courses, their chief overt goal is the same: progress in language proficiency, that is, competence in using language for realistic communication.

Several reasons motivated making technology not just a medium of delivery but also the content of learning: 1) Many progressive language teachers believe that not only children, but also adults, learn languages better when they are using them to learn something else. 2) K-12 language teachers, because of class-scheduling constraints, have had to explore content-based instruction (CBI), where content from other subject areas is delivered in second languages; their experience can encourage the rest of us to choose CBI even when it is not an absolute necessity. 3) While a teacher might select some other content area for CBI instruction, for example music, technology is a very apt choice, since it is part of daily life and of most occupations and many personal interests. 4) Despite that, not a few students lack technological proficiency, a problem which is being addressed by PSU's innovative curriculum; there is a place in that curriculum for second languages as well as other subjects, and a place for that curriculum in second language instruction. 5) Language courses which include CBI, especially when the content is technology and business, fit PSU's mission of "knowledge serving the city," and they also further the Globalization Initiative of PSU's president.

Courses and learning objectives; technology employed

German 320: German 320 is something completely different from a conventional "business German" course: it is a business simulation, conducted wholly in German, and it is close to becoming an actual business. Its name is "SpeakEasy," and it produces resources for language users. Right now its lead product is the ever-popular "SpeakEasy Cards," pocket-sized and plastic-laminated specialized word-lists ("Skiing," "Emergency Room"),. With as little overt direction from me as possible, the learners continue to develop the little "Existenzgründung" (start-up) that has been under construction for several years now. The are in charge of management, personnel issues, design, marketing, work out production, and, at the end of each version of the course, plans for the future. In June, "instead of" a final exam, SpeakEasy holds its company exhibition and new-product rollout, before invited guests (friends, family, language faculty and students). Presentations are made in German, with simultaneous translation. The company website presents the company and is being developed to distribute its products. For the purpose of this application, however, the important use of technology has to do with the production process: the students use German to learn word-processing, databasing, graphics processing, sound processing, and equipment setup and maintenance. It is not at all easy to do those activities when you are still learning the language you must use in order to carry them out. Those who do know those skills help teach them—in German.

German 399: A unique feature of German Science Fiction, as of modern German literature, is the importance of the *Hörspiel* or radio drama. While no longer a major form in

American culture, it has remained important in the German-speaking countries, in part because WWII left Germany and Austria with many blind military and civilian casualties, and also delayed the introduction of television. The hands-on use of technology to produce a German SF radio play, again while speaking German, is the core activity of the course. In method and goals it thus overlaps German 320, but it also adds much of its own. The play must be discussed as literature—and here the focus on actual production helps greatly. Acting skills must be developed—a way to encourage speaking practice and improve pronunciation without causing boredom. Facilities must be setup for acting and recording.

Both courses promote “teaching and learning with technology” by some of the usual means, including websites, email, etc. (My other work, including projects that have won the TLT award and a WebCT “exemplary site” award, also makes intense use of technology.) In fact, student use of email is particularly vigorous in German 320 and 399 because the learners are made responsible for getting their business or project team up and running. But the essential use of technology is the hands-on activity with hardware and software while speaking German.

In terms of language pedagogy, both courses aim to move learners from the upper end of the ACTFL “Intermediate” level of everyday proficiency to the “Advanced” level, whose goals include proficiency for limited occupational activities. Examples of Advanced-level activities include adding detail to the description of people, such as employees (“She leads well and makes great websites”) and things (“We’ll need pliers and a small screwdriver to fix the hard drive”); narrating multi-step but still concrete procedures (“First unplug the hard drive, and then...”). These are activities that an upper-level language student who undertakes a business internship might expect to encounter, whatever the language.

A second goal of both courses concerns the larger foreign-language curriculum. In order to serve the learner population better (and in the case of German and perhaps any language but Spanish merely to survive), language programs must develop beyond the traditional fare of literature and “highbrow” culture. Given the huge role of science and technology in German history and present-day Germany, and considering the importance of Germany among Oregon’s trading partners, technology is a natural candidate for the content of German language courses. (Even so, the idea merits expansion to other languages, and that is being considered for introduction soon.)

Each of the two courses has its own third goal. In German 399 it is acquisition of knowledge about German Science Fiction, an area of literature which is of course related to technology; and German authors made important contributions to international SF, especially Anglo-American SF. In German 320 the course-specific goal is to develop basic business skills with German as the language of development – not just technological skills, but also management, product design, marketing, etc.

In the German SF course we also use a spectacular audio technology: “binaural” or “synthetic head” stereo.

Student learning and assessment

Progress in language proficiency is defined by the nationally-used Proficiency Guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (www.actfl.org), which in turn serve as the basis of standards in Oregon and Portland. The ACTFL standards are applied to both speaking and writing skills. For speaking we use an unofficial rating obtained through an oral proficiency interview (OPI), or regular observation of student classroom speech. Writing activities are assessed as “snapshot” (synchronic) evaluations of current samples. When the groups present publicly their major projects (this year’s radio play or the annual

company report and exhibition), the audience is asked to fill out a score sheet and offer spoken comment, which they do eagerly.

Objective scoring guides with multiple rubrics are used for every major activity. The students also do self-evaluations with them.

Subjective but rewarding assessment of student progress shows up in personal responses: the colleague who attends the SpeakEasy annual exhibition and says he has never seen a more impressive presentation of a student group project; the German SF student who says that never before in a German course has he spoken so much; the enthusiasm of the project teams when—usually slightly before the mid-point of the course—they realize what the whole idea is about.

What learned about TLT

It's not so much that I learned something about TLT through these two courses, but rather that, from other courses where I do use advanced instructional technology, I knew at least some of what I had to expect in creating these two courses. But because of these courses I did learn *from* using technology in teaching and learning something of great value for introducing project-based and "team-based learning" (TBI): You can't short-cut the process of building the teams; it has to work itself out through each stage (though you can help it along if you know what you're doing). I also learned that building teams in a foreign language takes the learners probably five times the time and effort of doing it in the native language, and that doing technology in another language takes them five times as long too. But with language-learning, the quest is as important as the goal—at least until the SpeakEasy stockholders start demanding some sign of a return on their investment, or the people at KBOO's weekly radio-play program need the finished version of our radio play.

Dissemination

The assessment is precise enough that the results can be published as scholarship of

teaching. I have given several presentations about both courses to teachers' groups, and a discussion of the move toward student-centered learning was part of a chapter I contributed to the book *Teaching German in America* that the American Association of Teachers of German published in 2002. I have started an article about "SpeakEasy" and am confident I will be accepted by a major refereed journal; the working title is "Give 'em the Business: Turning the Business Language Course into a Simulation and Then into an Actual 'Startup.'"

The course websites, and particularly the SpeakEasy company website, show both the administrative aspect of the courses (goals, assignments, etc.) and the group projects as they are developed and presented.

Not to be overlooked as "dissemination" is the effect beyond the class of what the guests experience at the project presentations and then report to others.

Supporting materials

The "gateway" to supporting materials in digital form are the links to German 320, German 399, and "SpeakEasy" on my website: <http://web.pdx.edu/~fischerw>. Since the German SF radio play project for this year is not ready yet (but it will be in March), the link "Projects & Publication" on the left of the opening page leads to links to an earlier such project; look for "Papa Joe Project," which also has samples of the "binaural stereo" technique in action. The same list also links to the book chapter mentioned above; look for "Goethe, Schiller and Me."

The student initiated website for the current German SF course is:
<http://argotnaut.com/deu399/>

I have attached sample "SpeakEasy" cards in their older and newer versions. The T-shirts with the company logo that we hand out as door prizes at the annual June exhibition were too unwieldy to include, but anyone can attend and have a chance to win one, or perhaps another prize, such as a surplus thumb drive.