
Business booms for German students

"SpeakEasy" German language and student business course expands

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Professor William Fischer does not teach a typical German class.

Instead of memorizing vocabulary and preparing for quizzes, Fischer's students take a dive into the real world of business.

His students do not sit in rows or wait to respond to an instructor at the front of the room. Students in this classroom are moved into conference-style seating, given individual as well as "departmental" responsibilities and expected to develop, market and sell a self-made product.

This is, after all, a profitable business as well as a German class.

More than 10 years ago, Fischer was teaching a conventional third year German course when he realized that he was teaching mostly occupational material in his class. Less than a year later, in 2000, he began to use this material in his classroom to simulate a company.

Shortly after, Fischer decided to take it to the next level.

Instead of simulating a company, the class would create a company, using only German as the "company" language. Thus, the "SpeakEasy" course began.

Alex Sorenson, 21, is a German major who took the SpeakEasy course during fall term 2009.

"It was an excellent opportunity to speak German in an active and productive environment," Sorenson said. "There was little to no 'lecture' dynamic at work in the class. The goal was immersion more than direct instruction."

Fischer's students, which include German speakers in 300-, 400- and 500-level courses, have been a very productive bunch. During the first years of the program, students designed playing-



Photo courtesy of William B. Fischer

Professor William Fischer

card-sized vocabulary lists organized by different themes.

One side of each card has English-to-German translations. On the reverse side, there are German-to-English translations. The cards are sold 50 to a package, including grammar aids and other helpful tools.

“It seemed natural that such a company would develop products that would serve language learners, in the larger sense—not just students in a classroom, but anyone who wanted or needed to use language skills,” Fischer said.

It was not until 2008 that his classes began creating multilingual holiday cards.

By the end of fall term 2009, they had designed and produced an entire line of holiday cards, including greetings in 23 different languages. Completely made out of recycled material, these cards consist of 75 percent recycled elephant dung.

The class sold a few hundred biodegradable cards, pulling in over \$500 of profit. This money will be reinvested in the company in hopes of expanding the product line.

As a student-run company, Fischer does not earn anything from the profits. He does hope to see the day when the money his students earn is enough to pay them for their hard work.

During winter term, Fischer hopes to bring the company’s profits up to \$1,500. His class will continue producing multilingual holiday cards, cashing in during Valentine’s Day.

Already, the SpeakEasy company is growing.

Maggie Elliott, an adjunct French instructor, started an experimental version of the company for French students with the help of Fischer.

Elliott has worked for Portland State for four years, but this winter will be her first term teaching a SpeakEasy-style course.

“We are trying to show [students] language is a tool, and it provides more than just cocktail-party knowledge,” Elliott said. “It can also be used to get you jobs and help you in your business pursuits.”

This addition to the company comes at a perfect time. Not only will SpeakEasy need more student-power in the coming months, but with Valentine’s Day on the horizon, having employees versed in the “language of love” can only be a positive addition, according to Fischer.

With 31 years of teaching at Portland State under his belt, Fischer has made quite an impact with his innovative course—two of his classes won the Portland State Teaching with Technology prize in 2005. The \$500 prize was donated back into the SpeakEasy company.

“My basic approach is ‘proficiency,’ teaching and learning for the purpose of communication in real-world circumstances,” Fischer said.

After Valentine’s Day cards have all been sent, expect to see more from the SpeakEasy company.

Fischer and his students have many more projects in the works, including a line of thank-you cards and graduation announcements.

Further in the future, Fischer hopes to produce multilingual Portland State office-branded stationary, produced on the “elephant-poop” paper he has grown fond of using.

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