

Teaching Language, Literature, and Culture

How Do We Teach Language, Literature, and Culture in a Collegiate Environment and What Are the Implications for Graduate Education?

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The articles by Jennifer Redmann and Angelika Kraemer are companion pieces to contributions in the recent issue of the *German Quarterly*.¹ They are the result of discussions at a DAAD-sponsored symposium at Michigan State University in September 2006, entitled “Engaged Learning: Best Practices to Invigorate German Literary and Cultural Studies”² and consequent discussions at sessions at the German Studies Association and the Modern Language Association Meeting in 2006 that problematized the continuing language/literature split in the curriculum and in graduate student training. Another context for probing questions was the report by the MLA “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World” and a conversation in the “language teaching” community, as they ques-

tioned whether ‘communicative competence should function as the preferred goal for language teaching and learning in higher education.’³ The contributions in what is conceptualized as a companion issue of *The German Quarterly* to this number of *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German*—Katra Byram and Claire Kramsch, “Why Is it so Difficult to Teach Language as Culture?” Katherine Arens “Genres and the Standards: Teaching the 5 C’s through Texts,” and Heidi Byrnes “What Kind of Resource Is Language and Why Does it Matter for German Studies?”—offer us new tools and ways to think about the literature/language split. Byram and Kramsch critically unpack some of the implications of the MLA report when they point to some of the difficulties associated with teaching “critical language awareness, interpretive skills,

¹ I would like to thank James Rolleston, editor of *The German Quarterly*, and Tom Lovik, editor of *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German*, for their willingness to include these contributions in the Spring 2008 issues of the journals, and Helene Zimmer-Loew and Anne Green for their encouragement to pursue these topics at AATG-sponsored sessions at the GSA and MLA. See also my foreword for the companion issue of *The German Quarterly*: “Winds of Change? How Do We Teach Literature in

a Collegiate Environment?” *The German Quarterly* 81.1 (2008): 5–8.

² The September 2006 conference, organized by Karin Wurst, addressed structural issues both in the curriculum and in delivery models.

³ “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World.” December 1, 2007 <<http://www.mla.org/flreport>>. See also the collection of arguments presented by seven scholars in *Perspectives in the Modern Language Journal* 90.2.

and historical consciousness” (22). Byrnes underscores the difficulties of achieving such goals when she asks: “The challenge is formidable: how do foreign language departments propose to create translingual and transcultural competence, a mandate the MLA Report prominently assigns to them, when they have yet to come to terms with the patterned links between their most important, their ‘target language’ and its cultural context, German for the German Studies context?” (11) Arens challenges both the language-teaching and the literature-teaching sides of a typical language-and-literature department by offering a “reconceptualization of what it means to teach language and literature as texts in different genres, anchored in their cultures” (36), suggesting how the *Standards* can be utilized as stages in a learning sequence that can be negotiated within local pragmatic constraints (37). She argues that: “The *Standards*, then, challenge us to pursue *patterns* of understanding culture and its texts or other artifacts: as communication, cultural literacy, and strategic competencies beyond a language’s basic grammar and vocabulary” (37).

Some departments such as the German Program at Georgetown University, have already wisely moved away from the unproductive language/literature divide and utilize a new teaching approach that emphasizes culture:

In place of the current model — two or three years of vocabulary, grammar, and conversation, followed by literature courses — the new approach incorporates more culture from the start. Newspaper clippings, fiction, video clips, and advertisements form an integral part of lessons. Students, for example, become familiar with the German used in political speeches and learn how it differs from that used in a business letter or a soap opera.

Other educators are moving their programs in a similar direction. “The sooner we bring in authentic texts — like literature, film, and TV,” says Thomas J. Garza, a professor and chair of the department of Slavic and Eurasian studies at the University of Texas at Austin, “the sooner we’ll give [students] cultural literacy.”⁴

⁴ Georgetown University, where Heidi Byrnes teaches, was in the forefront of this trend. *Chronicle of Higher Education* (9 November 2007).

⁵ The Spellings Commission Report (SCR) maintains: “The commission finds that with the exception of several promising practices, many of our post-secondary institutions have not embraced opportu-

These discussions provide a forum for critical self-reflection on the language/literature divide and urge our profession to tend to the critical issues facing higher education: the increased attention to languages (at least on those defined as critical languages) and the Spellings Commission Report with its emphasis on assessment, accountability and transparency in student learning.⁵ The subsequent institutional attention paid to liberal learning goals and the implication these factors have for curricular discussions (and by implication for the training and mentoring of graduate students as both future faculty, and also as the nation’s teachers in our field) add to the complexity of the discussion.

These issues have profound implications on pedagogies and testing, curriculum refinement in German programs as in other fields in the Humanities. The complexity of the challenge is to create on the one hand graduates who are functionally proficient in the target language (language proficiency), while at the same time fostering the whole range of humanist or liberal learning goals such as critical thinking skills, excellent communication skills, increasing global awareness and cultural sensitivity.

These areas are all in the realm of faculty responsibilities and it is up to us to be proactive by “defining educational objectives for students and developing meaningful, evidence-based measures of their progress toward those goals.”⁶ Regardless of the position one takes on the report, it does seem important that we find ways to involve ourselves in refining our pedagogies and curricula to enhance learning. New technologies could be utilized and developed to enhance learning, provide wider access, and add more flexibility to our curricula.

All these issues have significant implications for graduate student training as well. Those of us who train teachers and graduate students need to be increasingly mindful of the effect of such dynamic change on our training and mentoring programs. As we continue to explore the role of technology in the (foreign language) classroom, it is important that we not only teach the use of available tools, but that we give careful consideration to the pedagogies associated with the deployment of the digital

nities for innovation, from new methods of teaching and content delivery to technological advances to meeting the increasing demand for lifelong learning.”<http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedf/uture/index.html>» 1 December 2007.

⁶ Spellings Commission Report.

tool in question, be it a wiki, a blog, or the creation of the information architecture of a website. Just as it is important for faculty members, so, too, is it important for graduate students that we help them understand the value of collaboration with the colleagues across disciplinary boundaries, be it in educational technology or in writing in digital environment programs. The nexus of humanities in the digital environment has only just begun to be explored in earnest, and we must ensure that our students (both undergraduate and graduate) possess the grounding and curiosity to both delve into and critically assess the potential of technology for teaching in the humanities.

If German programs want to be seriously involved in a strategic, i.e. future-oriented way, we need to re-examine best practices in training our graduate students so that they will be able to, for example, negotiate the literature/language split and thus overcome some of the challenges that the Byram and Kramersch article alludes to.

When we observe our graduate assistants in the classroom, we notice that TAs are frequently unprepared to respond to cultural or literary issues that their students raise and thus miss valuable “teachable moments” when more in-depth cultural content knowledge could or should have been conveyed. Byram and Kramersch ask: “If the goal of foreign language instruction is to get students to understand other worldviews, and to see themselves through the eyes of others, how can the instructor recognize and exploit the similar teaching moments that occur in almost every lesson as we teach the language?” (29)

It comes as no surprise that there is a perception that graduate students are ill prepared to teach in their subject matter, in our case in literature and culture courses. Search committees and, most often, new faculty mentors complain that job candidates and budding new faculty members are not only ill equipped to talk about teaching in the field during the job interview, but that this inability also translates into the first years on the job—and at times beyond. While it has become thankfully quite common to provide graduate students in German experience in teaching beginning language classes, this has not become a widespread practice with more advanced subject matter in the disciplinary

field. Part of our mentoring needs to make the themes, topics, pedagogies, and forms of assessments explicit. In the absence of explicit training in the teaching methods beyond the beginning language classroom, graduate students might easily fall back on the lecture-discussion models of their professors.⁷ Instead we have to assist our students in acquiring more active learning strategies, in which they not only have ample opportunity to hone their language skills in environments and contexts that are as varied as possible, but at the same time also practice the skills that they need to thrive in any work environment of the 21st century, including how to efficiently function in a team, how to clearly define goals and outcomes of activities, how to effectively communicate these to classmates in oral, written, and visual forms. In other words, the students

must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems. Most important, to be actively involved, students must engage in such higher-order thinking tasks as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Within this context, it is proposed that strategies promoting active learning be defined as instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing. (Bonwell and Eison)

As job interviews, even for positions at research universities, tend to focus at least 50% on teaching, this imbalance in preparation for a significant portion of a faculty member’s job seems ill-considered. When preparing for the largest segment of the job market—the teaching intensive institutions—a more sustained conversation on the teaching of content seems even more important.

Questions for such reflection when we conceptualize a course include: what are the key topics and concepts, what questions will we explore, what will inform the assignments we design, how are we integrating broader issues of teaching and learning in the discipline, how will we engage students to foster learning, what technologies do we anticipate using and why, how will we use small groups or in-class assignments to stimulate learning, how will we evaluate student learning throughout the semester, what kinds of exams, essays, reports, and other assignments are most appropriate in the field, how

⁷ “Research consistently has shown that traditional lecture methods, in which professors talk and students listen, dominate college and university classrooms.” Charles C. Bonwell and James A.

Eison, *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom* (<http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/bib/91-9dig.htm>).

will an experiential learning component enhance student motivation and learning, and what are some low-stress assessment strategies that we could use? In order to be responsive to these questions, graduate education needs to embrace both deep subject matter knowledge and a comprehensive pedagogical toolkit.

Many universities have professional development tools in teaching methods for faculty, some also for graduate students. Some have teaching resource centers. Are we as mentors making sure that our graduate students are making use of these resources even though they do not directly pertain to language teaching and thus might escape their attention? At Michigan State University, the German program instituted a portfolio-type comprehensive exam that includes a focus on teaching in the discipline, because we see this as excellent preparation for the profession. In colloquia and workshops and as part of their job-shadowing experience graduate students are asked to reflect on a range of issues, e.g.,

- a personal reflection on teaching in the discipline
- examples how they foster learning and comprehension
- ways to incorporate technology
- means of evaluation of learning

After all, a graduate experience that does not compartmentalize too rigorously between training in Second Language Studies and Literary and Cultural Studies might serve our profession better in the long run. To this end, our German Studies Graduate Program seeks to train our graduates in a more holistic way aiming at better integration of

literature, culture, and language. Moreover, our University and College are in the planning phase of a Language Support Center, which will encourage the sharing of best practices across all languages, and which will bring the latest insights from research in Second Language Studies to bear on teaching practice, encourage the creation of a full set of co-curricular activities to support language learning (film series, language tables, clubs, foreign language television etc.), promote proficiency testing, the use of technology, curricular innovation, increased integration of literature, culture, and language throughout the curriculum, experiential learning opportunities, innovative study abroad opportunities and international internships, as well as foster external connections to the community. This language support hub is not only designed as a resource for faculty, but will also play a central role in the training of graduate students and teaching assistants.

The more we are able to involve graduate students in the many dimensions of professional development in a language department and its role in the university and larger community and the more we allow them to participate in the kind of advocacy, outreach, and publicity efforts that we as faculty members engage in, the more competitive they become as candidates in their first job search. With comprehensive training they will have the opportunity to develop into successful fast-track faculty members.

With the set of coordinated articles in *The German Quarterly* and *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German*, we hope to stimulate discussion on these issues that seem vital for the success of our programs.