

Review of “Traditions and Transitions: Curricula for German Studies”

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“Traditions and Transition – Curricula for German Studies,” published in 2013, is a collection of 19 papers written by international academics specialising in German as a foreign and second language and in culture education. This volume focuses on the necessity of curriculum reform for German Studies at North American Universities in the light of a report published by the Modern Language Association (MLA, 2007).

As Plews and Schmenk write in the introduction to the book, the MLA report, often judged to be “[...] undertheorized, under-reported, [...] unacknowledged, and frequently even neglected” (p. 2), called existing curricula into question and urged academic departments to assign curriculum design a bigger role in the process of adapting Modern Foreign Language programmes to changing student, social and economic demands. In identifying two (new) goals of modern foreign language teaching – *translingual and transcultural competence* – the MLA committee spurred a nationwide debate amongst experts on the value of language education at Canadian Universities (and elsewhere). Following the report, a conference with a similar title as the book was held at the University of Waterloo, Canada, in 2010 (26th to 28th August 2010). Most of the issues raised at the conference in 2010 are reflected in the comprehensive volume at hand.

In the book, several authors discuss the issue of curriculum design and curriculum reform from very different perspectives. While some of the contributions deal with the topic on a course- and/or subject-specific basis, others favour a more indirect stance towards curriculum design and/or revision. In the current review, I will first summarize the former ‘group’ of contributions (consisting of all chapters except for Chapters 2 and 5), before I turn to the latter ‘group’ (Chapters 2 and 5).

In the first chapter, Claire Kramersch focuses on the aspiration of language programmes to educate students to become translingually and transculturally competent. Drawing from literary examples from Kafka, Heine and Celan, the author demonstrates how imagination as a “[...] capacity to mold experience [...] or to sympathetically project oneself into the position of another [...]” (p. 23) can be part of an underlying way to construct meaning in language and literature texts. On the basis of mental framing, Kramersch argues that students can approach foreign language texts by being taught to implement imagination as “[...] a cognitive and social process in the

construction of meaning” (p. 34). Kramersch proposes to make this approach part of any revised German Studies curriculum.

In Chapter 3, John L. Plews draws upon the distinction between ‘Postsecondary Germanistik’ and German as a Foreign Language. He states that it is the latter that is prevalent at Canadian universities since “[...] GFL in Canada is not a free subject” (p. 54). Establishing that most curricula for German Studies had their roots in colonized Canada, Plews strongly argues for the revision of current German Studies curricula. In favour of what Bhaba calls a “decolonized curriculum” (p. 56), he firmly believes that dropping the current system – as “[...] a hegemony of knowers” (p. 55) – could enable “students and professors of German [to] draw more from their respective pasts and ongoing speaker identity shifts” (p. 62).

Barbara Schmenk, in Chapter 4, discusses curriculum reform with respect to a far more familiar topic in language teaching (but less so in curriculum design) – textbook choice. While she argues that most textbooks available in Northern America are either designed based on the principles put forward by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) or from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), she is – by means of a short textbook analysis – able to show that none of the two reference frameworks, and thus the analysed textbooks, meet the requirements laid out in the MLA report of 2007. Concluding that current textbooks are short on translingual tasks and exercises, Schmenk calls for a new curriculum that takes the ongoing social and educational changes better into account.

Teaching pronunciation with(-out) a (German) native speaker is discussed by Mareike Müller in Chapter 6. By opposing the native speaker principle with the intelligibility-orientation, she concludes that although “[nativeness] relies on the assumption that nativelike pronunciation is the desirable and achievable objective of L2-instruction” (p. 108), it doesn’t live up to the principles of curriculum reform stated by the MLA as it “[...] is largely based on a hierarchical distinction [in which] learners [are] following an idealized norm that may be difficult to emulate” (p. 108). Although she proposes to concentrate on intelligibility as a goal of pronunciation classes, she also finds that the same ‘model’ falls short when addressing the issue of inter/(trans-)cultural communication. She, thus, expands intelligibility by an intercultural ‘dimension’ and proposes this expanded intelligibility-model for any updated curriculum for German Studies that includes pronunciation classes.

Chapters 7 and 8 discuss the potential and pitfalls of multi- and/or bilingualism in the classroom. Based on the argument “[...] that no research has ever shown how much target language use is conducive to learning” (p. 125), Grit Liebscher, in Chapter 7, studied the use of L1 and L2 in so-called heritage classrooms. For the purpose of her research, she examined student-teacher and student-student-interactions and found that code-switching is an essential asset of multilingual (heritage) classrooms, since students use their (foreign) language skills as a means of constructing identity amongst each other. The (heritage) L1 common to most students in class has a “[...] functional and identity-related” (p. 129) purpose only. Thus, Liebscher proposes to integrate multilingual approaches into language curricula.

In Chapter 8, Susan Even and David Dollmeyer discuss the use of bilingual texts (German-English) for the purpose of fostering reading comprehension with emphasis on contextual understanding. With the help of their “Freshman Learning Project” (FLP) at the University of Indiana, they were able to identify problems in reading comprehension among third-year German students. In deploying bilingual novels¹, both are able to show that “[...] a bilingual text can exploit adult learners’ natural tendency to use the L1 as a useful tool in learning the L2” (p. 155), as it may bridge the gap in comprehending another language and culture.

Alison Cattell discusses curriculum design with regard to the philosophy of language in Chapter 9. In the light of *postmethod* pedagogy that strives to overcome the discussion of the best and worst methods to teach and learn foreign languages, she finds that Wittgenstein’s “Philosophische Untersuchungen” can “[...] assist in the field of language pedagogy as it comes to terms with the future of the teaching of languages and cultures at the tertiary level” (p. 173). In Cattell’s view, a key component to both teachers and curriculum designers, reflection, which “[...] is not a skill to be acquired, [but] rather [...] an attitude to be fostered” (p. 165), can best be

achieved by applying the philosopher's ideas on *Sprachspiel*, *Lebensform* and *Regelfolgen* to everyday classroom organization and observation.

In Chapter 10, Morgan Koerner argues for the liberation of *Literatur* from *Wissenschaft* and for a greater variety of literary texts to be taught in undergraduate German courses. In her own courses, she observed that parodic texts at both the beginners' and intermediate levels, can assist students in developing a thorough understanding of the German language, while creative writing courses can further learners' understanding of literature as such.

Also on the topic of literature, Kim Fordham Misfeldt, in Chapter 11, argues that contemporary fictional texts (e.g. "Der Vorleser") are to be employed in literature classes rather than didactic material. Against the experience of her own literature classes for intermediate learners at a German university, Misfeldt proposes to not only read but to act parts of the novel at hand so that "students are able to live other lives – by proxy" (p. 205).

Examining issues in Foreign language teaching and learning from an ecological perspective, Chantelle Warner and David Gramling, in Chapter 12, argue that Contact Pragmatics – a merge of *Contact Linguistics* and *Literary Pragmatics* – can be useful for advanced learners of German, as it allows for learners to interpret and analyze the "socio-pragmatic kinesic or energy that is striking them through the text" (p. 212).

On the issue of content-integrated language learning (CLIL), Marianna Ryshina-Pankova, discusses the role of textual analysis in Chapter 13. She suggests employing a genre-based approach that allows for an integration of different courses (which is most common in Australia, as her arguments prove). Ryshina-Pankova claims that all sorts of texts (political, scientific etc.) are manageable through this approach; her classroom-observation is, however, based on literature texts only.

One of the most salient contributions with regard to curriculum design and reform is Cheryl Dueck's and Stephan Jaeger's chapter with a 'guide' on how to transform a literary history curriculum into a cultural studies programme. The reform, which took place at the University of Manitoba between 2005 and 2007, achieved positive results: "The University of Manitoba German program can claim high student satisfaction with the current curriculum and the relevance of the program to Manitoba's community and economy." (p. 268). The authors discuss the potential challenges (e.g. class-size), chances (e.g. new courses) and threats (e.g. external programme assessment) that curriculum designers might face.

In Chapters 15 to 17, the authors deal with computer-assisted language learning (CALL) on different levels. While Mathias Schulze in Chapter 15 focuses on examining the opportunities and challenges of CALL, for instance, in opening new paths of communication and forms of assessment, Glenn Levine argues in Chapter 16 that there are "[...] several theoretical and practical dilemmas relating to the integration of digitally mediated communication into foreign language pedagogy" (p. 295). One of the most distinct issues, in Levine's opinion, is the gap between teacher's current expertise in media application and students' high affinity to digital tools and gadgets. He thus proposes to make use of a *digital participatory* culture in modern foreign language curricula that also target interculturality and transculturality.

Gillian Martin, Helen O'Sullivan and Breffini O'Rourke's chapter looks at the introduction of a blended learning course at the university level. The project, called "SpEakWise," which was initiated in 2007 and "[...] developed with Business Studies and German finalists in mind" (p. 329), bears great potential and can be applied to "a wider range of foreign-language curricula" (p. 329).

In Chapters 18 and 19, the authors focus on the development of transferable skills (e.g. teamwork and social skills) that are 'gained' in class and valued by students and employers alike. Deidre Byrnes, tutor for a Legal German course at the National University of Ireland, argues: "[T]he development of these skills in the language classroom is not simply a response to economic imperatives; it can and should be part of a holistic approach to language learning" (p. 346). There could soon be a response to this call at Newcastle University, where a module called "Student Ambassador" – developed by Elizabeth Anderson and Ruth O'Rourke Magee – could soon enrich the university's curriculum and help develop much needed transferable skills (amongst others).

The Student Ambassador Programme for Languages in the UK – an extracurricular scheme funded and introduced by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2006–7 – takes extracurricular activities back into the classroom.

The last two chapters to be discussed here are devoted to more general issues in language learning. In Chapter 2, Alice Pitt discusses the social and/or psychological effects of language learning and teaching on learners. Drawing on her own language education experiences, she identifies *loss and renewal* and *mastery and forgiveness* as two prevailing themes that accompany the acquisition of a new (foreign) language. “We are in possession neither of the language we speak nor of the languages we learn” (p. 47), concludes the author in summarizing her contribution that looks at language learning more from the perspective of psychoanalysis than curriculum design.

Chapter 5, by Dietmar Rösler, focuses on methodology and didactics in language learning. He discusses the communicative language teaching approach, taking into account often over-rated principles such as *Alltagsorientierung*, *Authentizität* and *focus on meaning*. He identifies potentially negative effects that these principles can have on language teaching outside Germany: “Die Aufgabe von Lehrenden [...] wird es sein, weggehend von einseitigen theoretischen Konstrukten zu akzeptieren, dass für diese Vielfalt unterschiedliche Lernwege aufgebaut werden müssen [...]” (p. 102).

The present volume of papers provides an avenue for a remarkable debate on curriculum design and well beyond. It is a must-read for all those interested in foreign language teaching at the university level (for all proficiency levels and a wide range of courses) and in the complexity of the subject as a whole. The book has been well put together and comprises papers that deal with some of the most current international trends in language education.

Note

¹The two bilingual novels named in the chapter are “Mensch, be careful!” by Emer O’Sullivan and Dietmar Rösler as well as “Voll easy” by Susanne Even and David Dollenmayer.

References

Modern Language Association of America [MLA]. (2007). *Foreign languages and higher education: New structures for a changed world*. Retrieved from <https://www.mla.org/Resources/Research/Surveys-Reports-and-Other-Documents/Teaching-Enrollments-and-Programs/Foreign-Languages-and-Higher-Education-New-Structures-for-a-Changed-World>.