Making the Connection: A "Lived History" Assignment in an Upper-Division German Course

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　　In her book *Risking Who One Is*, Susan Rubin Suleiman asks, "Why ... write? Why tell the tale?" and reflects further that "although the double bind of 'having to tell, having to fail' belongs most excruciatingly to those whose [stories] are the most painful, the most unrepresentable, perhaps it is inherent in all autobiographical writing. No one will ever experience my life as I have, no one will ever fully understand my story. Will *I* ever fully understand my story?" (212-213). Suleiman relates at the same time the explicit impulse to write her story, brought on by reading autobiographical texts: "Reading other people's war memories," she says, "has become indissociable, for me, from the desire (and recently, the act) of writing my own" (199).

　　Suleiman's reflections convey the importance of *lived history*—the personal perspective within historical, cultural, political changes and social movements—and provided the impetus for an upper-division course I designed for the spring semester 2003 at the University of Minnesota. Taught in German and intended for students who had taken at least one introductory literature class,[1] the course concept reflected my sense of the inextricable connections between personal and political perspectives involved in narrating one's experience, connections I hoped to bring out both in the course texts themselves as well as in the students' writing assignments. Here I will discuss the design of the course and my rationale for the incorporation of a creative non-fiction writing assignment, the outcomes of the project and the challenges I faced in facilitating it, and finally will suggest how foreign language teaching, particularly at the upper levels, could benefit from a reflective engagement with the body of scholarship on college-level writing generated by the nation-wide Writing Across the Curriculum movement.[2]

　　Titling the course "Life Stories/Lived History," I chose personal narratives that covered the post-1945 period in German-speaking countries. Ranging from a Nobel Prize winner's autobiography to a controversial work of undercover journalism, from interviews exploring women's lives in East Germany to a memoir of an Afro-German activist from the west, the course texts confronted us with powerful stories of individual lives.[3] As we explored the clearly personal dimension and the wider social significance of each text, I

asked the students to consider what new perspectives emerged that may have been marginalized by dominant historical narratives. Acknowledging the fine line between the desire to voice a personal perspective on history and the challenges imbedded in adopting the narrative first-person, we worked on developing something of the postmodern sophistication necessary to consider how an "authentic" voice is constructed for the reader, how memory can be unreliable, identity fragmentary and unstable, and how the past may ultimately be, as Suleiman suggests, "unrepresentable." In light of such potential obstacles to narrating one's experience, a significant insight emerged from a character in one of the course texts who claims that the reason we write our stories is that narrating changes us (Kerschbaumer 36). The act of telling one's story is inherently a dynamic one, transforming both the narrator and the narration of a culture.

In planning this course, it struck me that an obvious implication from the texts I had selected would be to encourage students to engage not only critically but also creatively with the course material, to make the connection of writing about their personal perspective within their own culture. As I considered how to incorporate such an assignment, a cursory search of college-level curricula and discussions with colleagues supported my perception that creative writing has not been an integral part of upper-division foreign language education, at least not in the field of German Studies.[4] Moreover, the current scholarly focus in foreign language pedagogy on the role of third-year bridge courses—which provide a transition from language-based instruction towards the content-based culture and literature courses of the upper-division—has eclipsed the need for reflection on the development of mature writing in the target language. Cheryl Krueger, however, has recently assessed the drawbacks of "overpersonalization" in lower-level language courses and its counterpart, "underpersonalization" in upper-level courses. Incorporating more imaginative personalization exercises, Krueger suggests, will heighten students' awareness of the differences between their "personal and scholarly narrative voices," and will help to avoid what she poignantly calls a "solemn shedding of personal connection to the course content" (22) in upper-division courses.

The "Life Stories/Lived History" course I was designing offered a compelling opportunity to link analytic scholarship with personal reflection. So in addition to a textual analysis paper earlier in the semester, the linchpin assignment of the course asked students to write an essay on their own "lived history." Switching from discussions on issues posed by postwar German-speaking authors to writing knowledgably about their own position within American culture, I admit, may seem to be a counterintuitive curricular direction within the German literature classroom. As theoretical validation for this move, I propose the critical work of Claire Kramsch, who has argued convincingly that

foreign language education could benefit from acknowledging "each language user's unique place in history" ("Language" 10). In her attempts to de-mythologize the monolithic native-speaker construct as the ideal against which to measure student progress, Kramsch questions why non-native speakers should "disregard their unique multilingual perspective on the foreign language and on its literature and culture to emulate the idealized monolingual native speaker" ("Privilege" 251-252). Although the response to the native vs. non-native speaker model has been somewhat contentious,[5] I will suggest that the challenges imbedded in Kramsch's scholarship lie perhaps more immediately in her focus on the distinctive, socially situated voice of the language user and in the opportunities we offer our students for creative self-expression in the target language.

Theoretical implications aside, I tried to anticipate the practical issues my students would face by dividing the "lived history" assignment into five stages over approximately five weeks. Early on, I asked students to consider possible topics by writing short descriptions of issues they identified as important to them and which, they could argue, also clearly had wider significance in our society. Students displayed an interest in writing about the war in Iraq, abortion, unemployment, vegetarianism, feminism, and religion. The second stage of the assignment asked students to write about how a specific experience shaped their perspective on the issue they had chosen in a personal and unique way. Here students explored their family histories, including a parent's struggle with job loss due to corporate downsizing, a sister's journey toward the Baha'i faith, and a father's Vietnam combat experience. Others focused on their own experiences with overcoming anti-Americanism in Germany, questioning anti-German sentiments in the U.S., or dealing with frustration at being a minority in engineering courses.

In the third stage of the assignment—the first draft—I wanted to encourage students to go beyond a straightforward, experiential style in narrating their experience towards an ultimately more expressive and persuasive tone in the target language. Here the course texts served as models: throughout the semester, we engaged in attentive analyses of the craft of writing and how the various authors awakened our interest: for example, using a key moment to set the tone, sequencing the text through flashbacks, creating a sense of intimacy by infusing the text with detail, or tantalizing the reader through a conscious use of ambiguity. In short, I encouraged the students to explore stylistically creative narrative strategies to relate their experience and ideas. During a workshop day devoted to peer review, students exchanged rough drafts of their essays and filled out a page with commentary, responding in particular to the narrative strategies they could identify in their partner's paper, and finally discussing their comments and suggestions with each other.[6]

Although the students' prose naturally did not approach the sophistica-

tion of the German-speaking authors we had read, I was impressed with the range of narrative strategies they employed to create lively and energetic renditions of their experiences. One student had read a newspaper article about a Tennessee high school that had decided to call off a planned student exchange to Germany in the spring of 2003. Outraged, the student penned a letter to the principal and followed up with a phone call in order to express her strong commitment to the concept of international exchange. The paper for my course was written in diary form, relaying her reflections as she dropped off the letter and waited for a response. The phone call was transcribed as well, interspersed with italics indicating her thoughts as the principal spoke. Other students also used multi-genred montage forms, including personal narrative combined with poetry in the essay on religion, and memories of family scenes interspersed with recalled nightmares in the essay on vegetarianism. Two students peppered their personal stories with media slogans, one to demonstrate the unreflective nature of American public opinion on the Iraq war, the other to show the double-speak of the corporate world amidst wage freezes and downsizing. Another student discarded the memoir tone entirely and wrote a short story that used color in clothing as a metaphor while exploring his realizations about nationalisms, society, and the possibilities for international understanding.

I will return to the issue of responding to the final stages of the assignment—the second and final drafts—below. First, however, in assessing the overall outcome of the assignment, I can say that these essays were easily the most intriguing and compelling student papers I have read to date. I was pleased with their spirited engagement with issues and the array of creative experimentation. On a written curriculum evaluation the students' assessment of the creative assignment (in contrast to the analytical essay in the first half of the semester) was comparatively effusive. One student wrote, "Yeah! Very rare in upper level courses. Nice to see. Also important. Made us think about writing styles that we've read, and consider or actually try using them." Another wrote, "*Such* a nice change, a really good idea, made me pay attention to style." And yet another: "I thought this was the most beneficial aspect of this course. Need more German classes that allow you to be creative." Even students who expressed some level of difficulty with the assignment responded positively to the idea: "It was hard writing about personal issues, but I thought the assignment was good and I liked being creative in the style of writing." Another wrote, "A big challenge, but I am enjoying it immensely." And finally, one student commented that the assignment was "a little scary to do also—scary is good." Reading their evaluations, I was struck with how enthusiastic they were about the creative nature of the assignment and with their unsolicited affirmation that this was a rather rare experience.

As sure as I am that this assignment was pedagogically sound and worth repeating, I also faced some thorny challenges in facilitating it, and not every-

thing worked as well as I had hoped. Specifically, I found it difficult to grade this assignment, in part because it seemed almost contradictory to assign a letter grade to these highly personal papers. At the same time, I wanted to react meaningfully to their writing. The last two stages of the assignment involved my responses to their second and final drafts. In the assignment handout, I had stipulated that one-third of the grade would be for the warm-up stages (including the peer-reviewed first draft), one-third for the second draft, one-third for the final draft. I clarified that in grading their second and final drafts, I would consider grammar, as well as creative style and the personal dimension of the topic. As I look back on it now I can see how subconsciously vague these terms are; my own uncertainty about the grading process produced a set of difficult to define rubrics. Although no student asked me to clarify exactly what I meant by "creative style," in retrospect I would have been hard-pressed to articulate ahead of time what would have constituted "enough" creativity to do well on the assignment. In the end I decided it was sufficient if students employed an identifiable narrative strategy that contributed meaningfully to the theme of the essay. All students fulfilled this criterion satisfactorily; some were clearly more skilled than others. Nearly all students needed encouragement to develop more expressively the personal dimension of their topic. Both the second and final drafts were assessed with a composite grade, rather than with separate marks for grammar, creativity, and the personal dimension. My response to the second draft consisted of extensive written comments including questions and suggestions coupled with a copy of the essay marked for structural accuracy. Marking texts with correction symbols is a widely used practice in the foreign language context, one which is often implemented already in the beginning stages of language learning.[7] In this course, however, my written response seemed to be counteracted by the accompanying error markings. In general, I saw very little revision between drafts. Some students made minor additive clarifications to their final drafts; most concentrated on correcting the line-by-line grammar markings in their essays, a process that clearly impeded their ability to consider meaningful revisions to the essay as a whole.[8] After grading the final drafts, I struggled with how I might have restructured the assignment in order to improve the students' structural accuracy in German (which is generally still a concern at the upper-division level) while also creating an atmosphere that would encourage revision of a more comprehensive nature.

Let me suggest that second language teaching at the upper levels could benefit from a wealth of scholarship on college-level writing in English that has been grappling with similar issues for some time. Since teaching the "Life Stories/Lived History" course, I have had the opportunity to teach in a freshman seminar program, an experience that quickly initiated me into strategies common to freshman writing programs but little discussed in second-language research. Upper-division language classrooms, for example, could easily ex-

pand in-class partner review to writing groups of three or four students for which the written peer reviews are completed as homework, allowing each writer to receive a broader range of comments and allowing more time in class for a discussion of each paper. Upper-division courses could consider adopting the portfolio approach, redirecting the sentence-level accuracy model, so important initially in language study, to emphasize rather the development of mature writing only achievable through a focus on revision. If we agree that revision—a major re-working of ideas beyond structural issues—will result in more polished writing, it certainly seems worth experimenting with one of the main features of the portfolio approach: not assigning grades until the final draft. Nedra Reynolds, among others, persuasively advocates for postponed grading when it is coupled with the instructor's ongoing and rigorous assessment of student writing throughout the semester (31).

In response to the issue of students "feeling unclear about 'where they stand'... without having a series of graded drafts" (158), Edwina Helton and Jeff Sommers suggest an alternative approach: "describ[ing] student writing in terms of its stage in the process of becoming a completed portfolio draft" by identifying the writing as an Early, Middle, or Late draft (158). Such rhetorical markers, Helton and Sommers argue, reorient the students' focus on imagining their work along a path towards more substantial, more polished writing instead of viewing their text as qualitatively graded and thus branded as "good" or "bad" (159). Their approach seems especially useful in articulating an academically meaningful response aimed at encouraging students to develop the complexity and maturity of their writing.

My experience revealed that upper-level German students craved writing assignments that offered a creative release. Their energetic response seemed fueled by a sense of connection to their writing: the assignment had become *their* text. The challenges I encountered in responding to their writing at this level, however, are generally unexplored in second-language scholarship. Fortunately, we do not have to look too far afield to find insightful discussions on student writing at the college level. Foreign language practitioners would clearly benefit from an exploration of this body of WAC research and experience; correspondingly, it is certainly time for us to join this conversation and reflect on how we can contribute to it.

Notes

1. In addition, most students in the small class of eight had spent time abroad. The course was cross-listed with Global Studies as part of the Foreign Language Immersion Program (FLIP). FLIP students engage in an "immersion" semester at the University of Minnesota, taking all of their courses in the target language.

2. Regrettably, the foreign language contribution to WAC scholarship has been

minimal. See Estes, et. al. for a thoughtful discussion of writing assignments in German, Spanish, and French classrooms. See also Gerd Bräuer's *Writing Across Languages* from his series *Advances in Foreign and Second Language Pedagogy,* which serves as a compelling example of scholarship aimed at increasing scholarly collaboration and exchange between ESL and foreign language studies.

3. A list of course texts appears in the Appendix.

4. One notable exception is a creative writing course offered by Allegheny College (see http://webpub.allegheny.edu/dept/german/ger_writers.html), taught annually by a German-speaking writer-in-residence. Currently I am teaching a creative writing course for upper-level German students at Valparaiso University. The relative scarcity of courses specifically focused on creative writing does not necessarily imply that writing assignments of a creative nature in literature or culture classrooms are lacking as well, although typically, formal writing assignments in upper-division German courses focus on text analysis or research.

5. See, for example, the responses published alongside Kramsch's "The Privilege of the Non-Native Speaker" in Carl S. Blyth's edited volume, The Sociolinguistics of Foreign-Language Classrooms: Contributions of the Native, the Nearnative, and the Non-native Speaker. Koike and Liskin-Gasparro focus on the loss of a pedagogical model; Siskin offers a reevaluation of the motivational effect of the native-speaker ideal.

6. I found this exercise particularly useful. Students took each other's work seriously and were quite animated while explaining their comments. They appeared to be sensitive to each other's strengths and weaknesses, pointing out what was effective and compelling, followed by direct, but constructive criticism. I overheard comments (in German) such as, "I like this episode, but it could be better. I don't know what you're feeling here." In their written commentary (also in German), one student wrote, "I'd like to know more about how you were changed by this experience." Another wrote, "Your text reads a little cold and distanced because there are no feelings—is that your strategy? That we've become cold because of these events?"

7. At the beginning stages of language learning, students are obviously not expected to have full control over structures. Instructors often follow a set pattern of increasing difficulty when marking student texts, beginning perhaps with subject-verb agreement, and gradually adding word order, tense, case, adjective endings, and so on. Typically texts are marked with symbols that indicate the type of error rather than with the correction itself.

8. A tactical mistake more easily remedied also contributed to the lack of revision: I had failed to specify a page length for the initial draft at the peer review stage and was thus disappointed that several students came to class with only a page or two of a five-page assignment.

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Appendix: Course Texts for "Life Stories/Lived History: Personal Accounts of Social Change in Postwar German-Speaking Countries"

Theoretical Introduction:

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