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Teaching East German History within an Interdisciplinary Study Abroad Program

Introduction

In recent years, many once traditional departments of German Languages and Literatures underwent a transformation to German Studies departments. These German Studies departments now include the teaching of German history, art, philosophy, gender studies, European Studies, and more in addition to language and literature instruction. The implications of this progressive expansion of German Studies need to be considered. Furthermore, budget restrictions oftentimes call for the merger of several departments, and interdisciplinary approaches are increasingly supported and demanded by the administration, also contributing to the need for a restructuring of German programs. The question remains how to ensure a steady enrollment in traditional German language and literature courses and to prepare students for a much changed job market in the field of German at the same time. It is therefore important to consider new ways of attracting students to German other than through language study and the exposure to German through literature.

Another major concern of higher education in the United States is the focus on international education. Compared to their international counterparts, American students in the past have had relatively limited exposure to global education including study abroad. The US government has increased its efforts to support study abroad experiences for American students at the secondary, but also at the post-secondary

level. Generally, participation in study abroad programs has increased among undergraduates throughout the United States; however the trend seems to go towards short term study abroad programs rather than semester or year-long programs. As Cate Brubaker noted, there are numerous positive aspects of short-term study abroad programs such as minimal interruption of the students' academic year at the home institution and the ability to take courses abroad that are compulsory at the home institution to fulfill general education requirements. Furthermore, as these programs are typically faculty-led, parents and students feel more secure.¹

Although study abroad participation has increased significantly over the past decade among American undergraduates, college programs across the nation need to be proactive in their efforts to convince American students of the benefits of this aspect of a college education and attract them to such programs. In the following paper, I will describe a study abroad program at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh that is aimed at internationalizing our students' educational experience through an innovative approach. This program is not tied to a specific discipline, but is truly interdisciplinary, but nevertheless succeeds in attracting students to the German division through the inclusion of a topic course on modern German history and society. I will give a general overview of the history of this program and its components, and will then focus on the course on modern German history that I taught in Germany over the past few years.

History of the Program

In the spring of 2005, the Dean of the College of Letters and Science at UW Oshkosh called for a meeting of faculty members who were interested in learning about his proposed interdisciplinary study abroad program. During this initial meeting, he informed the faculty in attendance about his vision to increase international education of the undergraduate student body. He modeled his proposal after a similar program at the University of Wisconsin River Falls where a study abroad tour called *The International Traveling Classroom* had been successfully implemented. The essence of this program was a semester long study abroad experience during which students were taking a full course load of general education courses (five courses) to fulfill their requirements in the social sciences and humanities. The UW River Falls program took place in Europe and involved a faculty team of three to four professors teaching their respective subjects in English at two to three week intervals in several European locations. Students who went on the River Falls program had to make their own travel arrangements to get from one course location to another.

Based on this program, the Dean at UW Oshkosh proposed a similar, yet modified program. At UW Oshkosh, one faculty member would serve as the program leader and remain with the students throughout the duration of the program while teaching

two courses in his/her field of expertise. In addition to this faculty leader, three more professors would join the group, each for the duration of two weeks, to teach their courses in a condensed, intensive, interim-like course format. Unlike the River Falls program, the Office of International Education at UW Oshkosh would arrange all travel related aspects including accommodations and transportation. The Dean was convinced that parents would be more supportive of a program if all arrangements were made by the university rather than by the participating students individually. Although students are eligible for financial aid, many of them rely on the support of their families to be able to take advantage of such an extensive study abroad experience, so parental support is crucial.

Faculty members of different disciplines were to get together to design a specific program to be taught during spring semester. The program could take place in various locations in Europe or Latin America depending on the teaching expertise of the faculty members. The interruption of teaching schedules at the home institution could be limited in several ways: The faculty leader could be a retired colleague who is able to spend the entire semester abroad and not be tied to teaching responsibilities at the home campus. The remaining joining three faculty members would be scheduled in a way to minimize absences during the semester. For example, one of them would be teaching over the regular spring break so that he or she would only be absent from teaching at the home campus for one week rather than two weeks. Alternatively the program can begin before the regular spring semester during the January interim, so that one faculty member would not miss any of his/her courses at the home institution, or the program could also start later than the regular spring semester and last into the summer interim.

The program itself is geared towards students who still have to fulfill a considerable amount of their general education course requirements, but is generally open to the entire undergraduate student population provided they have a certain minimum GPA. All courses were to be taught in English to allow students from all disciplines, majors and minors to be able to participate.

The European Odyssey Program

After the initial meeting of the Dean with interested faculty members, groups of four professors were to get together to design such a program which then would have to be approved at the college level. Although several meetings among faculty members followed, only one such study abroad program has since been proposed and realized at UW Oshkosh: the European Odyssey Study Abroad Program. This specific program was the brainchild of four faculty members from the departments of International Studies/Foreign Languages, Geography, History, and Art & Music. I was one of these faculty members, and we met several times to discuss which courses to offer in such a setting

and how to design a program to make the most efficient use of the different course locations around Europe we agreed on. The planning stage for this program lasted throughout the summer of 2005. By the beginning of the fall 2005 semester, our basic program outline was completed. Our goal was to begin recruiting students immediately to be able to offer the program for the following spring 2006 semester. To be able to run the program, we only had about two months to recruit between twenty to twenty five students to make the program affordable for the students. The program itself was to take place in the following locations (called residence cities) and to cover the following courses:

- Paris: History 305, History of the Late Middle Ages
- Oxford, Edinburgh, Rome: Liberal Studies 200 & Music 219: Cultures and Values and Introduction to Humanities / Encountering the Arts
- Berlin: International Studies 250 & Interdisciplinary Studies 350, Special Topics: Modern Germany from Division to Unification
- Berlin, Amsterdam: Geography 331: European Geography.

Each course also offered several field trips to places around the residence cities, e.g. London, Potsdam, Leipzig, Pompeii, Ravenna, and Florence. Students' accommodations were reserved in youth hostels or student dormitories to keep costs reasonable. In each city, we reserved classroom space at local universities or in the students' accommodations. Classes were to be taught in the classroom but also at relevant local sites such as museums, galleries, government buildings, and on walking tours - wherever the course content would lead us. Most weekends were to be kept free to give students the opportunity to explore the foreign culture and cities on their own and outside of structured class sessions. As in courses at the home institution, students were required to prepare for class by completing readings in books and articles relevant to the course content. Course requirements included short papers (which were to be hand written as we could not rely on the availability of computers, libraries, and such facilities), classroom discussions, opinion papers, journals, and at least two exams in each course. The courses themselves were structured into lectures, classroom discussions, projects on site such as in museums, and in several instances discussions with local experts and/or eye witnesses to historic events discussed in class.

We were able to recruit twenty five students in about two months for the first European Odyssey to run in spring 2006. Students were selected based on a lengthy application process, which included a minimum GPA requirement, two recommendations of faculty or other supervisors, as well as a faculty interview. Prior to the program, students were required to attend several orientation meetings organized by the Office of International Education as well as the European Odyssey faculty. Since the first European Odyssey in spring 2006, the program has since been offered with different faculty members, courses, and course locations throughout Europe in 2007, 2009,

and 2010 and is also scheduled for 2011. It included locations such as Florence, Athens, London as well as courses on the Holocaust and British Literature besides the above mentioned topics.

The design of this program allows undergraduates at UW Oshkosh to spend a semester abroad taking a full load of required general education courses and electives with faculty members from UW Oshkosh while experiencing a variety of European cultures. The selection of courses allows for a truly interdisciplinary education, and students easily connect all five courses to each other while traveling Europe, and in doing so, gain a first hand experience of cultural differences, are confronted with identity issues, and become more globally aware individuals.² Undeclared majors often return with a clearer understanding of what they are interested in and in what direction they may want to direct their college education. Others return changing majors or adding minors to their already declared majors. All return with a widened horizon and an appreciation of cultural learning as described by Daniel Hess.³ In addition to these attributes, students return as changed individuals who for the most part gain what Joshua McKeown calls “an alternate worldview”⁴.

Teaching a course on Modern German History and Society within the European Odyssey Study Abroad Program

As part of the European Odyssey faculty, I have taught within this program four times. I offer my specific course as an International Studies / Interdisciplinary Studies Special Topics course entitled *Modern Germany: From Division to Unification* for two weeks, covering the historical period of the end of the Second World War to the present while focusing on the Cold War, German-American relations, and especially the history of East Germany. The course is based in Berlin, and includes day trips to Potsdam and Leipzig. Only about half of the class is actually spent in a classroom setting. A large part of my course is conducted “on site”, mainly at relevant historical museums and in discussions with eye witnesses to important events in recent German history. The intensive pace of this two week long course proves to be both stimulating and challenging for the students who for the most part have very little knowledge about recent German history and know almost nothing about East Germany. Therefore, the course has to be planned and conducted differently than a course designed specifically for German majors and minors.⁵ My focus in this course lies on the human and personal significance of this time period, along with a general overview of major historical milestones from 1945 to the present. In lectures, I cover historic facts using a wide array of mainly American news broadcasts or documentaries to illustrate the historical background to German division.⁶ A portable projector and a laptop computer allow me to bring at least a minimal amount of technology into the classroom. My students appreciate the

historical footage of many short documentaries, especially when we visit the historical sites in Berlin, Potsdam, and Leipzig throughout the course. In addition, I try to take advantage of several special exhibitions in Berlin throughout the duration of my course. For example, in 2006 the *Museum Europäischer Kulturen* in Berlin Dahlem⁷ ran a special exhibit called *Die Stunde Null*. In this exhibit, students were able to experience the immediate post world war era through a very well organized display of artifacts, photographs, and stories of Berliners who reported about living in the city in 1945. In 2009, we were able to take advantage of many events related to the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall while being in Berlin. The same was the case this year as we commemorate the 20th anniversary of Germany's unification. Besides special exhibits, I rely on permanent exhibitions in museums and at historic sites when teaching this course.

After giving the students a general overview about the situation in Germany at the end of World War II through lectures and the use of historical footage, I take them to the *Alliiertenmuseum*⁸ where students learn about the Berlin Airlift and the role of the American military in Berlin and Germany following World War II. I also include a visit to the *Deutsch-Russisches Museum* in Berlin Karlshorst,⁹ the site of the signing of Germany's unconditional surrender in 1945. The museum is now dedicated to interpreting the role of the Soviet Union in WW II and Germany's occupation in the following years. These visits to two very different historical sites give my students a dual viewpoint on this important time in German history. They usually only hear about the American perspective when learning about this topic in the US or through the media. To give them a different perspective, I decided to include the *Deutsch-Russisches Museum* in my two recent European Odyssey courses. Another site visit takes us to Potsdam to *Schloss Cecilienhof*¹⁰, the site of the Potsdam Conference of 1945. After dealing with the historical aspects of the 1940s and 1950s, I introduce the issue of German division and the events leading up to the Berlin Wall. Classroom lectures are enriched by a visit to the *Haus am Checkpoint Charlie Museum*¹¹ where students spend several hours researching divided Berlin, the issue of human rights, and escape attempts by East Germans to the West. In an evening session, I show the movie *Der Tunnel*¹² which in connection to the Checkpoint Charlie visit serves as the discussion base for the issue of escape attempts to the West. We strongly focus on the topic of the Wall and its effect on people's lives in divided Berlin and Germany. At the end of the first week of classes, we visit the *Dokumentationszentrum Berliner Mauer* in the Bernauer Straße.¹³ After a lecture on the site of the former Berlin Wall about the nature of memorials (traditional memorial versus tourism oriented like Checkpoint Charlie), I take advantage of the center's service of organizing a meeting with a historic eye witness to the time of Germany's division. In a lively and moving discussion with Hartmut Richter¹⁴, students find out first hand how life had been in East Germany for a person their age who refused to conform to the Socialist Party's ideology. The students are espe-

cially fascinated by his story of escape and his repeated actions getting fellow citizens out of East Germany. In students' evaluations at the end of the course, they commented on the impact this experience had on them.

The second week of class continues with the topic of life in the East. We take a closer look at the East German secret police *Stasi* and its functioning to control citizens. We visit both the Stasi headquarters at Normannenstrasse¹⁵ and the former Stasi prison in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen¹⁶. In 2006, our tour guide at Hohenschönhausen referred to the book *Stasiland* by Anna Funder¹⁷ which I use as part of the required readings for my course. In this book, a young Australian woman reports about her findings when she visits East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall to learn about life under Stasi surveillance as she interviews friends and strangers she meets. I chose this book as the primary text for my course as it offers both a personal view on life in the East through interviews the author conducted with East Germans, but also portrays the topic from a person from Australia, thus giving my students yet another perspective on this theme besides the American, Russian, and German viewpoints they encounter in lectures, tours, and documentaries. In preparation for the visits to the Stasi sites, we watch the movie *Das Leben der Anderen*¹⁸. Equipped with the information my students receive through the movie, the readings, and lecture information, the site visits complete the unit on life in a dictatorship under constant surveillance. Students have commented on issues such as freedom of speech, democracy, and the freedom of personal rights in relation to their own lives as citizens of the United States. Taking their knowledge about East Germany's secret police into account, they developed a deeper understanding of these issues and how they affect peoples' lives in other parts of the world. Some students even draw parallels to the situation in the US after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001 and the Patriot Act passed in response to these events. Many commented that through the study of East German history, they became more aware of issues in their own country, and overall they became more critical and more aware of political affairs at home and abroad.

After the problematic topic of living in East Germany under Stasi surveillance, I focus on everyday life in the GDR. The newly opened *DDR-Museum* in Berlin¹⁹ provides me with a background to these aspects. Students learn from this visit, from my personal experience which I share with them, as well as in conversations with other East and West Germans, how life in East Germany was different from the life in West Germany or the United States at that time, and yet still a very normal life for someone growing up in the Eastern part of Germany. Students prepare for this aspect of the course by reading selected articles from *National Geographic Magazine* covering the time period from 1970 to 1982²⁰. The course furthermore examines the changed situation in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. In preparation for our day trip to Leipzig, I show the movie *Nikolaikirche*²¹ and discuss the role of churches during East Germany's 1989 peaceful revolution. In Leipzig, we visit the *Zeitgeschichtliches Forum*²², a mu-

seum dedicated to East Germany's history. The highlight of our Leipzig visit has been a discussion with Protestant Pastor Christian Führer at the Nikolaikirche where students learned first hand about the role of this church in the protest movements in East Germany beginning in the early 1980s through the peaceful revolution in 1989 to its present function. The conversation with Pastor Führer after having seen the movie *Nikolaikirche* had a great impact on the students. I was able to organize this discussion for two of my European Odyssey courses. When Pastor Führer, who has since retired, was not available in 2009 and 2010, I organized a discussion with one of the participants of the protest movements of Leipzig's Nikolaikirche. My students were equally fascinated to hear his story as others had been in previous years talking to Pastor Führer himself. Besides the site visits, the ability to meet and talk to native Germans while they are learning about Germany's divided history has had the most lasting impression to my students in all four courses I have conducted in this arrangement since 2006.

It is important to me to also include information about current German society with its problems overcoming years of division as well as its dealing with the Nazi past. The last part of my course is therefore dedicated to this issue as we visit the *Reichstag* building to study current German government structure as well as a visit to the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*²³ to examine how Germany deals with the issue of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Besides the serious discussions we have at these two sites, we end the course with the screening of yet another movie, *Good Bye, Lenin*²⁴. The following movie discussion always shows how much information the students are able to absorb throughout their two weeks in Germany while taking this particular course. I am always impressed by the way students respond to the topic of my course and get involved in the subject matter considering they are usually not German majors or minors.

Learning on site gives them an opportunity to explore a specific topic under much different conditions than in a regular college classroom at home. The faculty members of the European Odyssey Program are very pleased that students are able to recognize the truly interdisciplinary nature of their study abroad semester experience. Students make connections among all five courses taught during the European Odyssey. I, for example, was quite impressed how they began to discuss the architectural aspects of the Brandenburg Gate based on what they had previously learned in a course in England. In their geography course, the urban landscape of Berlin was no longer a mystery to them after having been introduced to the city's divided history. Students commented that it was to them less like taking five separate courses, but more like taking one long course.

Assessment

Students' learning outcomes are measured in several ways:

1) Students take two exams during the course, a shorter exam after the first week in Berlin, and a final exam at the end of the two week course. Both exams consist of several longer essay questions and test factual knowledge as well as connections between the topics, understanding of reading assignments, and interpretations of acquired information on tours, during discussions, and movie screenings. Possible exam questions include:

- Summarize the information you learned by visiting the Holocaust Memorial. Why is such a place so important for modern Germany? Why, do you think, was it placed at the current location?
- With the knowledge you acquired throughout the past two weeks, summarize in what way this knowledge has or will affect yourself. What did you personally learn by being introduced to German history following World War II? In what way has this experience perhaps changed your perspective on national and international political affairs and different cultures? What was the most significant experience for you throughout the past two weeks?

2) Students are evaluated through their involvement in group discussions and conversations with guests on tours.

3) Students write two article reviews on selected articles from *National Geographic Magazine*²⁵.

4) Students write a reading journal for the book *Stasiland*.

5) Student write a class journal in which they comment on class topics, lecture content, and tours/visits to historical sites.

6) Students complete a course evaluation.

Connections to other disciplines

I stated above that such a course in English could motivate students to take German courses or even become German majors or minors. Of the twenty five students who took part in the first European Odyssey, three signed up for elementary German courses the following fall semester. From the 2009 European Odyssey group, one student who was a German minor at that time decided to complete her German major

upon return to the US. Another student from that group has since begun taking elementary German courses.

Although I am not arguing that teaching about Germany in English abroad is the ultimate solution in saving our German language programs, I believe that reaching out to other means of teaching German Studies, also in the English language, and possibly in conjunction with a study abroad experience, draws students to begin or continue German language study. As Gregory Wolf and Kathleen Condray have argued, study abroad programs in the English language can have an impact on German enrollment.²⁶ The program which I described here has been partly successful due to its nature of offering students a variety of different courses at different locations throughout Europe which they can count as general education requirements or electives. To include a course on Germany in this longer program has given the German division a more pronounced presence on campus in addition to offering regular language, literature, and culture courses. Taking advantage of what faculty members in other disciplines have to offer is also crucial. For example, combining educational goals such as internationalizing students' education can be accomplished through a study abroad program like the European Odyssey at UW Oshkosh. Another approach is to promote special events like a series of lectures on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 2009 by faculty members from the departments of Geography, History, Political Sciences, and Foreign Languages at UW Oshkosh. Through such programs and events, we as German faculty can promote our discipline.

Lara Ducate points out: "Considering that many students who study abroad are not necessarily foreign language majors, language programs must think creatively to design programs that will draw students with a range of interests and majors."²⁷ Speaking from personal experience, the German Studies course as part of the larger European Odyssey program enabled me to reach out to a larger student body than I normally would have been able to in a regular German language classroom. It increased visibility of German across disciplines, and helped attract students who would probably not have considered studying German to the German division.

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Notes

¹ See: Brubaker, Cate. "Six Weeks in the EIFEL: A Case for Cultural Learning during the Short-Term Study Abroad."

² Karen Jankowsky's work on using video as a tool in a study abroad course in Berlin examines among other issues the question of students' perception of identity as she points out that "many students from the United States do not easily see a cultural identity as something that is constantly undergoing change" (see Jankowsky, "Foregrounding Foreignness ...", 27).

³ See: Hess, Daniel, J. *The Whole World Guide to Cultural Learning*.

⁴ See McKeown: *The First Time Effect* (99). McKeown examines in his study the intellectual effect on students participating in study abroad programs.

⁵ I have taught a course on East Germany and Germany's division and unification to German majors and minors in a non-study-abroad format at UWO using German sources and teaching materials, including literature. My study abroad course within the European Odyssey had to be planned to be more general in nature and more directed towards American-related issues such as the Cold War to be able to reach a wider student body that is not as familiar with a solid German background knowledge as one would expect from German majors and minors.

⁶ A very valuable source was the CNN series on the Cold War: *Cold War* (videorecording, 1998), (Dir. Jeremy Isaacs)

⁷ <http://www.berlin.de/orte/museum/museum-europaeischer-kulturen/>

⁸ <http://www.alliiertenmuseum.de/>

⁹ <http://www.museum-karlshorst.de/>

¹⁰ <http://www.potsdam.de/cms/beitrag/10001021/34080/>

¹¹ <http://www.mauer-museum.com/>

¹² *Der Tunnel*. 1999 (Director: Roland Suso Richter).

¹³ <http://www.berliner-mauer-dokumentationszentrum.de/>

¹⁴ <http://www.stiftung-hsh.de/>

¹⁵ <http://www.stasimuseum.de/en/enindex.htm>

¹⁶ <http://en.stiftung-hsh.de/>

¹⁷ Funder, Anna. *Stasiland. Stories from behind the Berlin Wall*.

¹⁸ *Das Leben der Anderen*. 2006 (Director: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck).

¹⁹ <http://www.ddr-museum.de/>

²⁰ Articles included: *Berlin on both sides of the Berlin Wall* (1970), *East Germany. The Struggle to Succeed* (1974), and *Two Berlins* (1982).

²¹ *Nikolaikirche*. 1995 (Director: Frank Beyer).

²² <http://www.hdg.de/leipzig/>

²³ <http://www.holocaust-mahnmal.de/>

²⁴ *Good Bye, Lenin!* 2002 (Director: Wolfgang Becker).

²⁵ Besides the three mentioned articles in end note 20, they could choose among these articles focusing on changed Berlin after the fall of the wall: *Berlin's Ode to Joy* (1990), *The Morning after Germany reunited* (1991), and *Reinventing Berlin* (1996).

²⁶ See: Condray, Kathleen. "Using RISE to Promote German: Making the Case for Practical Work Experience Abroad to Engineering Students and Faculty." & Wolf, Gregory. "Studying Abroad in Berlin and Achieving Cultural Competence using English." Tina Badstübner und Peter Ecke further point out in their study on student expectations of a study abroad program in Germany that was conducted in German for majors and minors, the greatest gains were achieved in the category of cultural learning compared to other skills (see "Badstübner, Ecke "Student Expectations, ...").

²⁷ See: Ducate, Lara. „Service Learning in Germany: A Four-Week Summer Teaching Program in Sazony-Anhalt.“,