

The Koblenz Model within Anglo-American Area / Cultural Studies at German Universities

What's the best way to motivate listless, uninterested students? Simply turn them into teachers! The technique practised at several schools and universities, most notably at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, and at more and more grammar schools in Germany is called Learning by Teaching and requires a radical shift in the traditional roles of teacher-learner. The results are overwhelmingly positive, especially in the field of foreign language instruction. Learning by teaching is not an exclusively modern didactic method. Seneca wrote 2000 years ago, *docendo discimus*: "We learn by teaching." At St. John's College, students teach each other philosophy and physics, ancient Greek and the integral calculus by using the "Great Books," the original works of Euclid, Shakespeare, Newton, and Freud. There are no textbooks and no professors; the "tutors," as they are modestly called, see themselves as guides who know what questions to ask and, more importantly, know when to listen. St. John's students are not extraordinarily brilliant, but they are extremely motivated and critical. By the end of the first semester at the latest, they realize that they themselves are responsible for the quality of the seminars and tutorials.

But can we expect average students who are used to being spoon-fed at school to take suddenly the responsibility upon themselves for their education? While not every institution of higher learning can make the demands on students that St. John's does, every foreign language class can profitably use the methods of learning by teaching, as Dr. Jean-Pol Martin at the University of Eichstätt in Germany has proved.

Dr. Martin has done considerable research on a teaching technique he developed and named "Lernen durch Lehren," "Learning through Teaching." He began by assigning German students in his secondary-school French classes small tasks such as asking in French for volunteers to complete exercises. The students already knew the expressions in French needed to complete these assignments and were speaking simple French to each other instead of passively responding to the teacher. Dr. Martin found that by turning the students into teachers he increased dramatically their motivation. They not only spoke far more in each class, by working together they also overcame their inhibitions more quickly. A feeling of solidarity developed, the division of the class into an authority, the teacher, and a passive audience, the students, evaporated. The teacher remained, of course, the final expert and could always interrupt and correct. The students assumed, however, many of the other tasks formerly routinely and unnecessarily carried out by the instructor.

For teachers who enjoy exerting a role of authority and hearing themselves talk this method requires, of course, a tremendous adjustment. The necessary energy

and patience can be rewarded, however, by an astounding increase in motivation and efficiency on the part of the students.

The philosophy of a St. John's education and the idea behind Dr. Martin's didactic method can also be easily applied to university level courses of practically all sizes and in almost every subject. As a concrete example, I would like to describe to you my experiences in a three course module in Area Studies, where students are given the opportunity to improve their English oral, reading, and writing skills in addition to practice in teaching in a foreign language. Before I describe the Koblenz model to you in more detail, I'd like to very briefly give you a little background information about the status of cultural or area or regional studies at German universities in general.

Cultural Studies has not only become a very popular subject in the UK and the US but has also grown dramatically in German academia over the past ten years. Once considered only as an aspect of language practice in degree programs in English as a foreign language or confined within the narrow school subject *Landeskunde* (more or less superficial fact-based summaries of political and educational institutions), cultural studies – now often carrying the more academically reputable title *Kulturwissenschaft* or *Landeswissenschaft* or even Cultural Studies in German – has expanded into a subject in its own right with courses offered in classical cultural studies topics like feminist and queer theory, post-colonial pop culture and with more and more chairs and professorships. Sometimes *Landeskunde*, which is still taught at most German universities by British or American native speakers, has been turned into Area Studies or Regional Studies, where the emphasis is more on geography and history, education, political systems, religion and immigration, for example.

I have been teaching this subject with so many names like *Landeskunde*, *Kulturwissenschaft* and *Landeswissenschaft* now for the last 15 years in Germany and have been searching for a curriculum for almost as long. What makes the subject so fascinating for me is the lack of a fixed canon, the lack of an agreed-upon set of things to be taught and learned. Actually every university discipline, each academic subject, is faced with the same problem, if we think long enough about it: what exactly are the objects of study? If we teach literature or linguistics or practical language, then perhaps this problem of definition isn't so obvious because of a longer tradition and more textbooks. With cultural studies or area studies or American or British Studies, the problem is more obvious because these subjects don't yet have the same traditional more or less tried and tested background. When first told to teach *Landeskunde* I simply relied on my background (I began teaching just American *Landeskunde* in Bamberg in southern Germany as an exchange student from Georgia many years ago) and on whatever books I could get hold of. I also made use of my undergraduate education at St. John's College, and I came across the didactic theory of learning through teaching, especially as developed by Dr. Jean-Pol

Martin. The combination of these personal experiences led to the development of the Koblenz Model of teaching Area Studies, which I would like to briefly describe to you now.

The Koblenz model covers in three semesters eight topics dealing with American and British life.

[framework transparency]

Framework: The Koblenz Model

three semester module in
Area Studies UK / US involving

I. education, political life

II. environment, immigration and
minorities, religion

III. arts, media, social issues

plus selected topics in geography and
history (based on 140 questions)

Since many of the sources I came across after first being thrown into the cold water of teaching were books used in German secondary schools with a strong

bias towards the factual based kinds of things tested in German school leaving exams, I adopted at first the topics I found. Later I added the topics of environment and social issues like the Death Penalty or Health Care in Britain since I found these were topics often found in the media even though they had not been covered in much detail in any of the basic school handbooks available.

An important criterion to determine which topics to include in the module was the consideration that students should be able to understand and criticize articles in the Anglo-American press. In order to understand newspaper and magazine articles students need to have basic information about, for example, the political and educational system, about religion, environmental attitudes, important social issues like gun control, the death penalty, the health care system as well as an understanding of some basic aspects of geography and history. A beneficial side effect of learning about the Anglo-American world is then being able to compare aspects of German life with those in Britain and America. This framework for the Koblenz model could be looked at as the missing canon in Area Studies, a canon that should of course be always open to criticism and questioning. In a graduate seminar that I led for the first time last semester, I invited students who had gone through the entire module to step outside the given framework and to consider some of the suppositions involved in setting the objects of study just this way. The result was an increase in critical awareness on their part and some suggestions for me on how to improve the module in future.

But how does the Koblenz model work exactly?

Within a module of three courses, each course lasting one semester and meeting once a week for 90 minutes, students cover the given topics in student-taught lessons and answer 140 questions in Anglo-American geography and history in brief individual presentations. While the variance within such topics as university education or political life covered in the first course is somewhat limited, in the advanced courses with topics like arts or social issues students have much more freedom to choose what they are interested in, what they would like to learn more about – and what they think their students would also like to learn more about. I have intentionally arranged the topics in order to provide more structure in the first course for beginning student-teachers, a structure they don't need as much in the following courses.

Students who chose to take the course as group teachers are required to register in advance – usually by the middle of the previous semester by e-mail. Students can, however, also attend as individual students with no teaching requirements but with an oral exam at the end of the course. Group teaching students meet with me during the break to discuss preliminary planning for their lesson, the overall topic of which they have chosen during registration. I take notes during the first consultation session about their interests, the questions that I ask them

that they cannot answer, and the tasks that I give them to fulfill. During the second and third consultation sessions, they have the chance to show me how much they've learned and begin to discuss which aspects of all that they have researched they would like actually to teach in their lesson. We also discuss teaching strategies. In the final week before their lesson they give me all written material they wish to use in the lesson for correction and they also meet with a graduate student assistant to have the rehearsal of their lesson filmed.

The problem of what content to use in Area Studies is to a limited degree passed on to the student-teachers – who based on what they have read and based on our discussions – then choose the aspects they consider important. Of course they have learned far more about their topic than they can teach in a lesson. By putting them in the driver's seat there is no problem of motivation. Their students – knowing that their turn to teach is coming up – are also motivated and always very cooperative during the lesson. In the AS I course we spend the last third of the lesson clarifying any content areas that were not made clear and discussing the value of some of the teaching strategies used. In the two advanced seminars, the students are responsible for the entire 90 minute class. Afterwards I meet with the student teachers and discuss the lesson in detail with them providing them with copies of my written notes.

[teacher evaluation transparency]

Topic: UK / US Topic... (Date:)

α β γ δ ϵ θ Students: Names

Aspects	Impressions and Details
Preparation	
Teaching Techniques	
Student	

Participation	
Media / Props Used	
Highlights	
Problems	
Pronunciation	
Idiom	
Grammar	

In addition the students are also required to turn in evaluations of the lesson with notes about content, didactics, and language. Student-teachers can have a look at all evaluations, which I have made of course fully anonymous.

While I can't always raise theoretical discussions during the Area Studies' courses themselves – a definite framework is required as a structure for the students – I do continue to try to provoke students into considering critically what they have researched. During the consultation sessions before their lesson I always use the “Who cares” response after they have very conscientiously regurgitated the information they've gathered. Usually I get shocked responses from beginning students; students in advanced seminars have learned how to respond to the “Who cares?” question because they have learned to critically analyze the topics they have chosen.

I've used what I call the Koblenz model now for the past six years with continual changes and modifications. Student response has been phenomenal – colleagues have often expressed their admiration and envy about my students spending so much time preparing for the courses that I teach – or actually don't teach. The preparation time and the consultation time is roughly equivalent to the time I would spend outside of class if I were to do the module traditionally – between double and roughly triple the amount of time spent in class: for a class of 90 minutes a week, a total of around three to four hours per week. I find the time in class to be more strenuous for me as teacher since I have to pay close attention to what's going on and to take extensive notes.

And the results for the students?

[Results transparency]

Results

- ✓ lots of practice and improvement in foreign language skills:
- ✓ speaking,
- ✓ reading,
- ✓ writing,
- ✓ and in critical thinking,
- ✓ knowledge of basic aspects of Anglo-American and cultural studies,

- ✓ teamwork and teaching experience,
- ✓ internet and html experience,
- ✓ research experience,
- ✓ fun!

At the beginning of the module students are naturally hesitant and uncertain, but they assume their new roles as teachers very quickly and speak much more English per class than before. Since all the students know that they will also have their turn as teachers, they are understanding and supportive of the others. Of course, the students have to spend far more time preparing for this new type of class than for the traditional lectures, but they do just that willingly and with enthusiasm. Not only do they learn and practice far more English, they also develop the important skill of communicating information to a group, and they begin to learn to think critically and independently.

By giving students the chance to use their English actively in class, I have noticed an increase in fluency, a use of vocabulary that flows naturally, increased self-confidence and after three courses fundamental knowledge of various aspects of American and British life. Do they actually learn more about area studies by using the Koblenz model? Honestly, I don't know. Empirical data is needed here to make the necessary comparison with traditionally taught courses. Intuitively I assume that learning is easier if it involves as many senses as possible, that active learning is more effective than passive consumption, and that the mere fact that connecting content with different voices and different faces using different teaching techniques should make learning more effective.

In the Koblenz model students certainly gain experience in teamwork and in teaching and presenting information to a group. Because one of the course requirements is to prepare a critique of a reference work or CD-ROM or website that they have used in preparation for their lesson, students are required to learn the rudiments of html programming. Because they have to do research themselves before coming to see me during the consultations, students gain experience in critically reading primary and secondary sources. They can

intensify their research experience by writing papers on a topic of their choice. I encourage them to involve original research during their obligatory stay abroad.

My students have responded with overwhelming enthusiasm to the Koblenz model of learning about America and Britain. Of course, I have had to adjust my role as teacher, have had to learn when to keep quiet and how to listen more carefully. The satisfaction I gain from having become a partner in learning and not just a dispenser of information is priceless and has made the classroom experience a joy for both me and my students. If I were to teach the class traditionally, each lesson would be simply my umpteenth performance; for the student teachers who are unanimously well-prepared and very enthusiastic it's their opening night. And it's their enthusiasm, their questions, their dedication that keeps Area Studies in Koblenz for me as fresh and exciting now as it was when I was given the module years ago. Although it's nice to reassure myself that the students seem to be learning more and are certainly getting much more practice in speaking and presenting than they would be in a teacher-centered classroom, the real reason why I've continued to use this model is the fun that we all have each and every lesson. Thanks for letting me share the Koblenz model with you today.

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