

# Siegfried the Dragonslayer Meets the Web: Using Digital Media for Developing Historical Awareness and Advanced Language and Critical Thinking Skills<sup>1</sup>

Ann Marie Rasmussen

Duke University

In the spring semester, 2010, I taught a small, German-language seminar for advanced non-native speakers that used the legend of Siegfried the Dragonslayer as a tool for teaching German culture and history: “Identity and Nationhood: The Myth of Siegfried and the Nibelungs in German Literature and Culture.” We read *Das Nibelungenlied* and the *Volsungasaga* (source language Old Norse) in modern German translations.<sup>2</sup> We studied the Sigurd (Siegfried’s Old Norse name) carvings in the Norwegian stave churches and the magnificent rock carving in Eskiltuna, Sweden (dating from around the year 1000, it was our oldest artifact).<sup>3</sup> We also studied nineteenth- and twentieth-century works of art; listened to selections from Richard

Wagner’s Ring Cycle; watched parts of Fritz Lang’s silent Nibelung films; read Göring’s infamous “Stalingrad” speech from January 1943 and Heiner Müller’s play, *Germania: Tod in Berlin*; and watched the recent, made-for-German-TV movie, *The Dark Kingdom*.

In recent years, advanced German-language courses have moved away from the traditional focus on literature, responding to “the prevalent student trend to gravitate towards courses that deal with either culture or language rather than literature” (Blake 7–8). Regardless of whether advanced German language courses focusing on culture treat, for example, environmental policies in contemporary Germany or the Siegfried legend, they

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers whose comments and suggestions improved this article. Special thanks to my colleague, Dr. Andrea Grafetstätter, who generously shared her treasure trove of contemporary Nibelungen materials, to the staff of the Center for Instructional Technology, Perkins Library, Duke University, and especially technology specialist Amy Hendrix. I also want to thank my colleague, Professor Emeritus Jochen Vogt, for teaching the class on Heiner Müller’s *Germania Tod in Berlin*.

<sup>2</sup> For useful reference works in English focusing on the *Nibelungenlied* and related texts, see both McConnell and Gentry. Heinze and Waldschmidt’s volume is an invaluable resource containing myriad primary materials related to the *Nibelungenlied*. The students read the entire text of the *Nibelungenlied* in the Reclam edition, which contains the Middle High German original and a modern German translation. I could not find a modern German translation of the Saga of the Volsungs, so I used “Geschichte der Völsunga” from the 1920s Thule-Sammlung. Although it is in *Fraktur*, the students managed fine. I also put English translations of the Saga of

the Volsungs on reserve. It is critically important to read this text because it provided the basis for Wagner’s Ring Cycle. Students were also assigned short excerpts of Hård’s book on the reception of the Nibelungen material in nineteenth-century Germany, which gave them the opportunity to gather pertinent German vocabulary. In future years I will assign articles from the popular-scholarly German magazine for history and culture, *Damals*, which produced a thematic cluster of articles on the *Nibelungenlied* in 2011 (issue 3).

<sup>3</sup> See Sigurd stones and Sigurd rock carving in the bibliography. The website of the Sigurd rock carving at Ramsund, Eskiltuna, Sweden, deserves special mention. This interactive website allows the user to pan 360 degrees around the site, to zoom in on the actual rock carving, and to activate a graphically designed view of the site as it might have been one thousand years ago. The Old Norse inscription, carved in runes, is transcribed and translated into Swedish and English. All commentary is in both Swedish and English. This site is a great teaching tool.

are well placed to use web-based materials and digital media to enhance student learning of the language and to capture student interest. The Siegfried course addressed fundamental linguistic learning goals of improving German by providing opportunities for learners to expand vocabulary, develop complex syntactic structures, further reading strategies for diverse texts, enhance aural comprehension, become better writers overall, and use a variety of opportunities for speaking German. It did so by pursuing an interactionist approach focused on student's agency, on their negotiation of meaning in L2 with one another, and on collaborative activities using authentic materials and situated knowledge (van Lier). Digital media and web-based activities were integrated into the course, with the aim of enhancing students' critical thinking skills through self-reflection.

Teaching a course on the Siegfried legend brought the aim of deepening students' cultural and historical knowledge into the language-learning mix. This meant addressing two additional learning challenges more commonly associated with the teaching of history. First, there is the enormous historical range of the Siegfried material, which mirrors the legend's remarkable long life and resiliency. The story of Siegfried the dragonslayer spans nearly two thousand years of Western European history, from its genesis in the time of the so-called Barbarian migrations of the fourth and fifth centuries to its most modern incarnation as an open-air theatrical spectacle now performed every summer before the cathedral in Worms. The danger was that the course would result in a jumble of dates, names, events, and geographical terms that would leave students confused and disoriented rather than grounded and knowledgeable. Indeed, given the reach of the topic, access to the "previously unimaginable amounts of historical information—texts, images, music, video—[...] available to our students (and us) at the click of a mouse" (Kelly) could be potentially disabling or even paralyzing.

Another pedagogical challenge, then, was teaching students how to navigate the long time-span or big picture of historical change suggested by these materials while deriving meaningful knowledge from it. To be successful, the course had to teach the cognitive skill of chronological think-

ing, defined as organizing events and persons in relationship to one another chronologically. This valuable critical thinking skill, foundational for the practice of history, was a prerequisite for mastering the Siegfried material. Or to put it the other way around: the Siegfried course presented an opportunity for students to grapple with and integrate into their knowledge base an active understanding of the big picture of change in German history and culture over time. Improving students' ability to think chronologically might also make them more critically competent users of the vast amount of Internet materials, because it could help them build robust comparative frameworks and categories. Individual, web-based research projects seemed highly unlikely to achieve these goals. But could a different technological tool help here? To support student mastery of this sort of chronological thinking, I assigned work with an e-learning, timeline building tool, Google Docs Simile.<sup>4</sup>

The second, related challenge emerged from the enormous variety of the surviving evidence. The Siegfried legend circulated in the entire northwestern region of Europe, whose long, vexed history precedes and shapes the national boundaries of Germany, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries. It survives in an extraordinary variety of materials, from rock carvings, sculpture, painting, opera, and film to texts from different eras and in different, Germanic source languages. This geographic, linguistic, and evidentiary diversity challenged students to acquire a high degree of cultural literacy for an entire region and to apply appropriate interpretive tools to different kinds of evidence. The pedagogical approach of using situated knowledge and authentic materials prompted the creation of a task-based activity that could integrate and foster linguistic, cultural, historical, and technological literacy and critical thinking skills. For their final project, the students worked collaboratively as a team to design a simulated alumni tour. The syllabus offers this description: "design a ten-day, Siegfried tour of sites, museums, and any other highlights, for college alumni, including extensive lecture notes for the tour guide." The students used a blog tool to carry out and present this work.<sup>5</sup>

Using Simile and Wordpress was new for me. After talking with the library's academic technology

<sup>4</sup> There are many such timeline-making programs on the market, for example, xtimeline, timelinemaker, and SmartDraw, «<http://www.smartdraw.com/>», which is a business tool.

<sup>5</sup> Wordpress MU is the version that was in service at my university in the spring 2010. The current, supported version there is now Wordpress 3.

consultant, I chose these tools, which Duke University Perkins Library's Center for Instructional Technology (CIT) recommends and fully supports. The outstanding support that CIT offers was an incentive for me to experiment with new forms of e-learning in the first place. My priority was that the technology was a tool that should serve learning, and not the other way around.

The small class size, with just four students, allowed me to make explicit pedagogical experimentation within the course, reframe the seminar as a student-centered instructional environment focused on research collaboration, and enlist the students as critical thinkers whose reflection and feedback on technological methods and tools was crucial in developing my understanding of the potentials and pitfalls of using this academic technology.<sup>6</sup>

In sum, the interaction and task-based pedagogy embedded the acquisition of linguistic and cultural proficiency within the development of critical thinking skills while putting the students, as it were, in the driver's seat. At semester's end, in April 2010, they presented the course, demonstrating their use of innovative learning strategies, at the Tenth Annual Duke University CIT Showcase, an in-house conference.

## Timeline Building with Google Docs Simile

The four students worked together to construct a timeline for the Siegfried material using Google Docs Simile. The library assisted with the technology and provided software support. A staff member came to class and introduced the tool, created a data entry form for Simile and mounted it on the class blackboard website, and acted as all round troubleshooter and consultant.

Simile proved to be very useful for making sense of two thousand years of history and the vicissitudes of the Siegfried material, which would be daunting for any undergraduate course. In Eleanor's words: "As students we were flooded or ambushed by information from all sides and all time periods." Yet at course's end the students had integrated into their thinking a robust grasp of European history. In an end-of-semester evaluation, one student responded to the question: "Did your knowledge of European history and culture improve?"

I think the main area of European history and culture that I feel I have learned about is the time between the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of the Holy Roman Empire. I had very little background in the Huns, the Goths, the Burgundians, or the Vandals, and seeing how those groups mixed really helped me understand a bit better the modern day cultural similarities existing throughout parts of Europe.

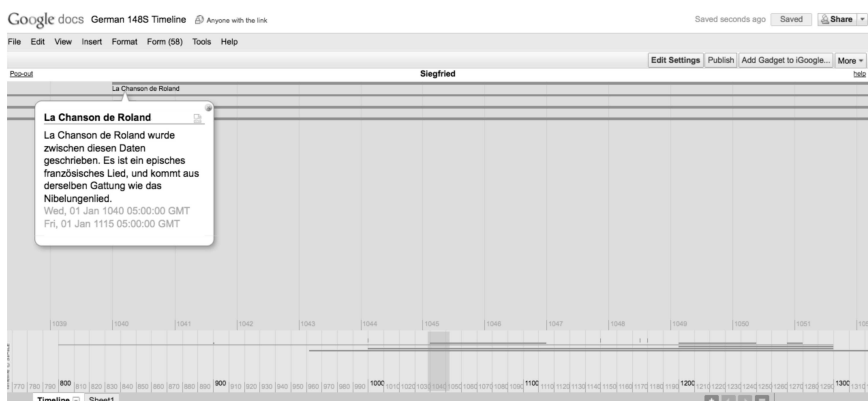


Figure 1. Screen Shot of Timeline

<sup>6</sup> I will call the four students Lisa, Mike, Morgan, and Eleanor, which are pseudonyms.

This answer is especially interesting because it demonstrates not only an understanding of historical dates and events, but also the ability to engage historical knowledge to make sense of the current world. By the end of the course, this student was able to construct, on her own, powerful and meaningful links between past and present.

The timeline assignment was simple. For their midterm, the students were to work together to construct a timeline of the Siegfried material, from its historical origins to the present. Part of the assignment was finding dates, events, and materials, and evaluating their relevance. As data, students were encouraged to use assigned readings and to mine introductions and footnotes. The assessment standards, posted on our blackboard website, were as shown in Figure 2.

Spring 2010 Timeline (Midterm Exam)	
Assessment Standards	
Accuracy	
Dates	10%
German Language	25%
Content Tags	25%
Selection	
Relevance	15%
Contextual Dates	15%
Design and Added Features	10%
<i>Please note the following guidelines.</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• —The content tags must be concise, yet readable.</li> <li>• —Dates should be selected with a view to advancing the timeline's overall narrative. The relevance of a contextual date to the timeline's narrative should be apparent from the content tag.</li> </ul>	

Figure 2. Handout, Midterm Assessment Standards

The timeline assignment was successful; the students found it easy to use Simile; they liked that multiple users could work together seamlessly and effortlessly; because it is web-based, they were able to use it any time of day and update as they went along, whenever, as Eleanor expressed it, they stumbled on something interesting. That is to say, students were both archiving information and manipulating it at the same time. They accommodated themselves well to the timeline's eccentricities, the chief one being that every entry had to have a specific start and stop date, a requirement

that made no historical sense for this diffuse material. Thus the late thirteenth-century manuscript known as the Codex Regius, a foundational witness to the tradition because it contains the Old Norse Sigurd/Sigfried poems, was arbitrarily assigned the date Wednesday, January 1, 1270, in order to get it into the timeline, even though the Codex Regius, like most medieval manuscripts, lacks dates and can at best be dated to a span of decades based on the scientific analysis of its parchment (or paper), ink, and book design, and the stylistic and linguistic analysis of its contents. In any case, this mechanical, technical requirement provided an immediate lesson in the fact that Simile's very mode of construction presumes modern conventions that information can and should be highly specific and precise (day, month, year), whereas working with evidence from the distant past, for which such narrow dating is impossible, requires one to think in more general, and contextual, chronological terms.

The students also made excellent use of the multiple modalities in building the timeline; they reported enjoying its multi-media capabilities and made good use of them. They quickly figured out how to add photos and drawings.

One student, Mike, added Youtube links, including national flags waving while national anthems played, and snippets of Wagner arias. The sense of creative fun and play balanced well with the learning objectives of the task.

In her CIT showcase presentation, Eleanor stressed that the benefits of using the timeline tool extended to the collaborative nature of the timeline work. The students elected to divide responsibility for the material among themselves: Morgan was the expert for medieval Scandinavia; Eleanor for medieval Germany; Mike for the nineteenth century; and Lisa for the twentieth century. They maintained this division of labor for the final project as well. Creating a timeline collaboratively meant that the students were responsible to their classmates for the accuracy and relevance of the information they found and shared. No single student could have done all this, but by using the timeline they were able to gain and share expertise, and so learn from one another. The individual group size of four students was also ideal; the students suggested that groups should be no larger than five for the timeline work to be maximally beneficial to learning; thus a larger class size could have multiple groups carrying out the project.

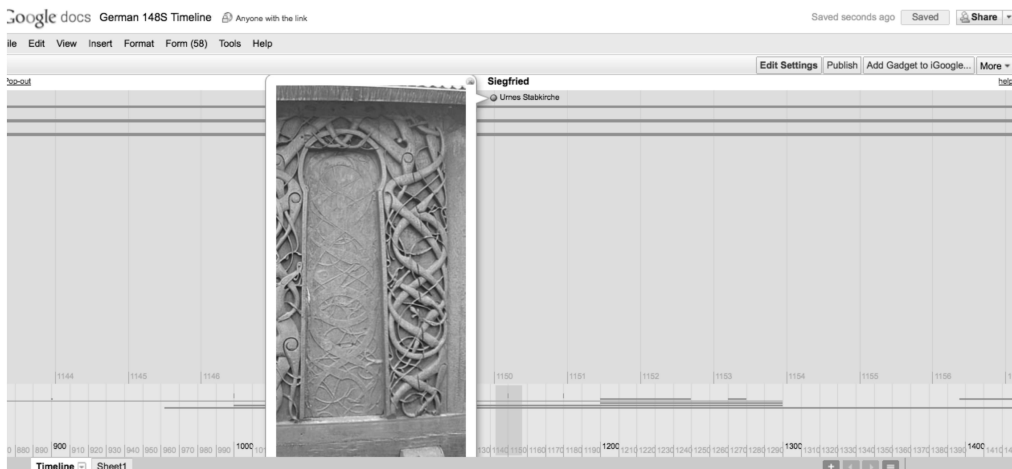


Figure 3. Screenshot of Timeline with Photograph

The timeline assignment achieved the potential identified by T. Millis Kelly who noted that

one reason it is likely that student learning is being transformed by digital media is that the use of networked information transfers control over the exploratory aspect of learning from the instructor to the student. When our students pursue their own lines of reasoning, rather than just trying to answer a question posed by their professor, it is *possible* that they will arrive at new insights that neither they nor we anticipate. (no page number)

I do not believe that my students arrived at linguistic, cultural, or historical insights that were new to the field, but it does appear that this sort of exploratory learning anchored in their minds a robust framework for describing and analyzing historical change.

Above all, building the timeline meant that the students grappled concretely with the complexities of chronological thinking. There was the actual task of making a timeline, which made them responsible for understanding and manipulating data and information in a way that reading, for example, a perfectly adequate two-page encyclopedia article on the Siegfried legend likely could not do. Equally important was studying the timeline that finally emerged. When it was complete, the students noticed that there were epochs with lots of entries and others with none. This pattern of hills and valleys, or evidence and gaps, was visually immediate and

called out for discussion and interpretation. Thus we found ourselves directly confronted with the need to talk about the course theme: why did the legend of Siegfried the Dragonslayer gain relevance and currency around the years 1200, 1800, 1870, and 1925? What else was happening at those times? Why wasn't the legend particularly significant or active at other times? What connections could we draw between political events at these times and the need or desire to create a national identity? The timeline project led seamlessly into the final project because it made manifest the key locations and time periods that had to figure in the simulated alumni trip.

Another benefit came to the fore clearly in Eleanor's presentation as well. When Eleanor said that "the timeline helped us find and pinpoint key locations that were important for our final project," she was talking about correlating time and place. As they built their timeline, the students began linking time and geography in meaningful ways. They began by looking up dates; they ended by mapping and visualizing time and space together.

### Final Project Using a Blog Tool

For their final project, the students designed a simulated 14-day (it couldn't be done in ten days, they said) alumni tour of Europe organized around the Siegfried theme, which they named "Siegfried

the Dragonslayer: An Epic Tour through Europe about an Epic Work.”

Supported again by the Center for Instructional Technology, Perkins Library, Duke University, the students used the blog tool, Wordpress, to create and publish this multi-media project. The final project built on and expanded the knowledge students gained by constructing the timeline. The students retained the division of research expertise they had devised for the timeline work. The tour began in Scandinavia, moved south to Worms and Xanten and on to Bayreuth and Munich, ending in Berlin. The students researched travel arrangements and hotels, but the main focus was on Siegfried-related activities, from visiting the stave churches in Norway to the Nibelungenmuseum and summer theater performances in Worms; the opera in Bayreuth; and so on. The website was well illustrated and well designed. Itinerary, activities and venues were extensively annotated and discussed in both German and English.

alumni tours, we talked about budgets; the different needs and interests of different age groups; and the problems of travel logistics (for example, why alumni travel groups never take the train). The students found interesting this opportunity to measure their imagined tour against real-world standards.

Because Wordpress is basically a blog tool, the students were intrigued by the possibility of building a website for a tour that could also function as a group blog. They imagined creating a blogging site within the tour website that would allow tour participants to chronicle their journey and to stay in touch with people at home, while generating marketing text for subsequent tours. Such a possibility was less interesting to the Alumni director and myself than to the undergraduates, but as I reflect on the students' enthusiasm for this aspect of their imagined trip, I am struck by the eagerness they imagine that others will have to communicate and share their experiences.

The students found the blog tool we chose,



Figure 4. Screenshot of a Final Project Web Page

The final result was impressive. The then-director of Duke University's Alumni Education and Travel Office met with the class and gave them "real world" feedback on the completed tour. Like the CIT staff support, this portion of the class was conducted in English. Yet the value of these collaborations to the overall project outweighed, in my mind, the exit from a classroom immersion environment. After she explained the real-world business of

Wordpress, easy to use. In Mike's words: "I know a decent amount about computers but about website design I know absolutely nothing. ... Wordpress provided an easy way for four people who were not very well versed in this sort of website design to produce a rudimentary website."

The version of Wordpress we used had aesthetic issues. After an hour or so of failed experimentation with drop-down menus on the prettier

templates, the students elected to stick with the odd-looking one that actually worked. More problematic was that the version of Wordpress we were using did not have a function to make collaborative work transparent. A user editing in this version of Wordpress could not tell if others were also working online, so users could and did delete one another's work by accident. Since each student was responsible for a specific section of the trip, this became a problem only when merging everything. Accidental deletion of someone else's work was not a problem with Simile, which lists who is online and what each user is changing in real time, showing exactly what is being typed. Therefore, for others developing projects based on this article, I would recommend exploring a range of blog tools to identify one that suits the needs of the teacher and the class. Finally, I made the decision not to correct the students' German before "publication" of the website. This decision followed the rationale stated for the course, namely, that students were in charge of correcting their own grammar and usage, which in earlier assignments figured as a part of their grade.

### Other Challenges and Some Solutions

The reader may wonder, more prosaically, how the course dealt with the gargantuan, virtually megalomaniacal length of the nineteenth and twentieth-century German Siegfried classics that are probably most responsible for its continued popularity in the modern world. After all, Wagner's Ring Cycle consists of four operas (*Der Ring; Siegfried; Die Valküre; and Götterdämmerung*), and is about fifteen hours long: while Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen*, an ambitious, two-film cycle from 1924 consisting of *Siegfried* and *Kriemhilds Rache*, is, depending on the version, four to five hours long.

Keeping the overall course goals in mind helped make the solution to this potentially off-putting dilemma clear. The course goal was not mastery of this material, but rather learning about it contextually for its importance in creating notions of German identity, and for improving German language skills. To accomplish this, the class again engaged in collaborative learning. Fortuitously, Reclam published an inexpensive edition of the en-

tire Ring cycle just in time for this class. We were able to read the libretto (which is not so long), and the edition's clear, concise, and short contextualizing essays. In class we discussed basics of Wagner's unique musical style, especially leitmotifs and highly emotive music, features of his style once controversial and innovative and now familiar to American students from film scores. Then each student was responsible for one of Wagner's operas, presenting in German a synopsis that focused on musical highlights. Extensive use was made of YouTube. This approach may come across as superficial compared with a comprehensive classroom treatment of these works, but it allowed the class to cover a lot of material in a short time and to practice using German with new modalities; this time, using the discourses of art and music. Mike was a Wagner fan, and so the class was able to profit from his knowledge of, and enthusiasm for, Wagner.

The class also used this collaborative approach to learn about famous works of art based on the Siegfried myth, with each student researching and presenting a different artist: the paintings and drawings by the Swiss artist, Henry Füssli (Morgan); the early nineteenth-century Nibelung frescos in the royal palace in Munich (Mike); the expressionist drawings of Ernst Barlach (Eleanor); and finally, Anselm Kiefer's moving and enigmatic modern paintings (Lisa).<sup>7</sup> Discussing paintings was another way to use and practice German at a sophisticated level, since it involved description and analysis as well as interpretation.

I varied this approach for the Lang film. We viewed the film in class time during the penultimate week of class, while the students were working on their final project. Two students volunteered to be, as we put it, in charge of the fast-forward button. Lisa and Morgan each previewed one film, provided plot synopsis, and shared selected sequences (again, all in German). Because the students had read the medieval sources (both the *Volsungasaga* and the *Nibelungenlied*) they skillfully analyzed the mix of artistic license and historic reconstruction that typifies Lang's vision. They discussed historical changes in film-viewing behaviors, the ways in which films themselves are constructed with certain viewing behaviors in mind, and the ways in which technological advances (DVD and so on) are

<sup>7</sup> The most valuable teaching resource for this assignment was the illustrated exhibition catalogue edited by Wolfgang Storch, *Die Nibelungen: Bilder von Liebe, Verrat und Untergang*, whose sumptuous, magnificent,

color illustrations are accompanied by excellent articles. (Please be reminded that fair use permits us to make one copy of any image for instructional purposes.)

changing viewing behaviors. The monumental, theatrical qualities of Lang's filmic concept certainly stood out as a specific, historical idiom that sought to legitimize a specific understanding of German identity.

The class spent two sessions in the library's Rare Book Room, working hands-on (white-gloved of course) with remarkable examples of exquisite nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German art books. After browsing holdings made available on a cart, students chose one book to research in more detail and present to the class. It became clear to the students that these books testified, as well as contributed, to the making of the cult of Wagner and the modern mythology of German-ness.

Our twentieth-century texts included the recent-feature film that was shown on German Sat 1 television as a mini-series in 2004, *Dark Kingdom*.<sup>8</sup> We read Goering's infamous 1943 speech inciting German officers to the defense of Stalingrad (the German army had in fact already lost the battle), which was important as background for understanding the allusions to the *Nibelunglied* in Heiner Müller's play, *Germania Tod in Berlin* (1971), a brilliant, dense montage of historical and political allusions that are virtually unintelligible to American undergraduates.<sup>9</sup> These class sessions were all conducted in German.

When I teach this course again, I will include contemporary material. The possibilities are endless, ranging from Oscar Straus's 1904 operetta, *Die lustigen Nibelungen*, comic books, children's books, and comic films such as *Siegfried* starring comic and actor Tom Gerhardt, to more serious works such as Moritz Rinke's play written for the Wormser Nibelungenfestspiele in 2002.<sup>10</sup> This contemporary material supplies a host of opportunities for new, collaborative projects. Students taking this course, thoroughly familiar with the medieval and nineteenth-century Nibelungen materials, would, I believe, find it fascinating to analyze and interpret the meanings attached to the Nibelungen legend in modern Germany.

<sup>8</sup> At the time I was not able to find Reinl's 1966 feature film, *Die Nibelungen*, starring Uwe Beyer. One modern film beyond Lang is probably enough, however.

<sup>9</sup> Heinze and Waldschmidt's volume includes the entire text of Goering's long, rambling, largely incoherent, and delusional political speech. Reading at least excerpts of such a primary document provides students with an

## Concluding Remarks

Regarding German language skills, the students encountered a wide variety of authentic materials in a range of linguistic domains and registers of German. They read difficult scholarly writing on art, opera, the nineteenth-century creation of a German national identity, as well as narrative translations of medieval texts and contemporary materials written in informative and more colloquial styles, gleaned from web-based final project research, from descriptions of museums to medieval-themed menu offerings at specialized restaurants. They encountered and engaged with a wide variety of authentic genres: texts, translations; movies; opera; painting; buildings. All class presentations were in German. They wrote copious amounts of German, again, in different genres and registers. Additionally, they extensively edited and corrected one another's German texts so that the documents posted on the timeline and the final project website would be as grammatically and idiomatically accurate as possible.<sup>11</sup> Students noted how much easier it is to recognize and correct grammatical errors in someone else's writing.

The course's explicit focus on improving L2 proficiency provided a unifying framework for the wide variety of texts and objects studied. It was also our good fortune that so much of the surviving Siegfried material consists of wonderful, memorable, image-based compositions of all kinds. The visual nature of this evidence worked extremely well with the "'intensely visual nature of multimedia,' [which] automatically privileges the visual over the textual" (Moss).

The value-added unique to this course came in the area of fostering the cultural-fluency, historical-knowledge, and chronological-thinking skills necessary for understanding German history and culture. The increased focus on contemporary Germany in undergraduate German courses may respond well to students' professed interests. However, they may not always serve students well if they do not equip them to see and describe, much

educational view into the mind of a political architect of National Socialism.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of very recent German works adapting Nibelungen material, see Schindler.

<sup>11</sup> For a recent discussion of some of the ways in which computer-assisted, collaborative writing enhances second language acquisition, see Elola and Oskoz, and Warschauer.

less interpret and analyze, the mediated versions of the deep past that permeate—indeed saturate—German culture at every level. The figure of Siegfried provided a series of excellent signposts around which students could generate and grasp a conceptually sophisticated “big picture” of change over time in German-speaking lands.

In the end-of-semester evaluation and assessment, one student wrote the following in answer to the question, ‘Did your knowledge of German history and culture improve?’:

Most definitely. I had not really ever approached the idea of a “Germanic” people before, at least not before about the 19<sup>th</sup> century during the movement towards unification. I had no idea that Das Nibelungenlied was so ingrained in German culture; that it is their version of King Arthur—it pops up everywhere! I had really only heard of Siegfried in relation to the Ring Cycle, which is clearly only a small portion of the myth. I also really enjoyed how we were able to travel through time by focusing on one theme. If anything, having one benchmark throughout time allowed a better, more clear comparison between the time periods, and really allowed us to mark growth and change against a constant, rather than just blindly searching for a measure of “development.”

In an essay, “Teaching and the ‘Telescoping’ of History,” historian Kristen Neuschel writes eloquently about the general sense among historians that contemporary students struggle much more than students in the past with understanding and using a basic foundation for understanding history: chronological thinking, defined as organizing events and persons in relationship to one another chronologically. The Siegfried material provided an opportunity to address this deficit. The students in the Siegfried course took on what Neuschel describes as “the more challenging work of using dates as one set of data with which to think, synthesize, explain” (49). Those “knots of data [...] demand [...] speculation in their proximity, their clusters, or in their distance from each other” (54). Building the timeline and the simulated tour put the students in charge of finding knots of data and assigning meaning to them. The completed timeline itself became a powerful learning tool. As Eleanor put it more colloquially in the showcase presentation: “Just reading through the [data entry] sheets, for example, where we entered lots of dates wouldn’t have helped me at all. I’m a really visual learner so seeing a picture of where important stuff happened is what made it stick.”

It may be that relatively little attention is paid nowadays to fostering critical, historical thinking skills in language and literature courses. Yet surely these are higher-order cognitive and analytical skills that are fundamental to a liberal arts education, which also have their place in the foreign language curriculum.

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