

Project Based Curricula

Creating Screen Adaptations in the Introductory Course to German Literary Studies

LAUREN BROOKS

What does learning look like in the twenty-first century? Now more than ever, there is the need for an additional digital component to be added to curricula. Whether it is creating videos on *Youtube*, making podcasts, creating ePortfolios or even websites, the digital age is here to stay and it can help us rethink the ways we create curriculum. Rather than see digital media as an unfortunate intrusion or a supplement I would argue that project-based uses of digital methods allow us to intensify what we have always valued in language learning. This paper discusses how we can still teach canonical literature, even though the way we teach has changed. Changing the way students produce work may have been necessitated or facilitated by digital media, but the end result – I will argue – has significant pedagogical outcomes that may well inflect the ways in which we teach in non-digital courses and assignments. This paper explores a way to implement project-based assessment either in place of a traditional high-stakes exams or in addition to already existing course models. The outcome still allows for an assessment of students' knowledge of various German literary texts, but it also generates an active role for the student in their assessment. I firmly believe that assessment should promote active learning, foster creativity and decision making, and have students be able to demonstrate knowledge effectively through real-life application of the material. Rather than test students' ability to recall information, I want them to put to use what they have learned in a fun and creative way.

As an example, I want to turn to *Introduction to the Study of German Literature*: a 5th/6th semester course offered for the German major. This course offered a survey of works and functioned as a »transition« course to the upper-level offerings on literature and culture. A focus of the course was an introduction to how to read and talk about various kinds of literary texts. The texts were not read in chronological order and the course did not offer an extensive historical overview of German literature, but rather equipped students with the necessary tools to approach German literary texts. We read most texts with a »tabula rasa« method, by not focusing on the author, title, or year the work was written until after the

text was read, so that we could explore more interpretive flexibility and creativity. With the exception of two texts, most texts were »short« in length. The goals for the course were as follows: successful completion of the course meant that students would be able to interpret and analyze German literary texts with more confidence and ease in classroom discussions and group work, critically evaluate German literary texts through response papers, produce an adaptation of a German literary text, investigate one particular text and present to the class, and summarize main themes of the different German literary genres and epochs.

For the course, student's read Franz Kafka's *Vor dem Gesetz* and *Das Urteil*, Heinrich von Kleist's *Das Bettelweib von Locarno* and *Über das Marionettentheater*, E.T.A Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann*, Heinrich Böll's *Die Waage der Baleks*, Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Mutterzunge*, Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, selected poems from Else Lasker-Schüler and Gottfried Benn, Ingeborg Bachmann's *Der gute Gott von Manhattan*, and *Das Muschelessen* from Birgit Vanderbeke. The overarching theme in the course was authority and the refusal and/or submission to its function as depicted in these texts. My main goal in teaching literature was not to make students feel as though they are being forced to read or do something, but rather to encourage them to want to read and analyze these texts. In order to do that, I had to give students some control when it came to their learning so that they might not only enjoy it, but also see the benefit. It is crucial to connect the texts to issues we are currently facing in the world, and by finding these commonalities, it makes the readings more meaningful and gives them purpose. Getting students to generate opinions on the texts that they approach *without* a teacher-imposed rubric would make them feel more comfortable engaging in dialogues today, since it is our responsibility as global citizens to have opinions and be able to express them confidently. Not exposing the name of the author or what year the works were published allowed students to make their own conclusions and not base them on supposed aspects of the author's life or the time period in which the text was written. It was also was fun to have them guess.

At the beginning of the semester, and to give students a feeling of choice and contribution, they signed up for two response papers and a presentation slot. In order for students to understand what was expected of them, they all wrote a response paper for the first text. I also asked them all to write a response paper for the last text, since that text was the one novel in the course. Instead of offering a final exam, their final project was adapting one of the texts they had read (preferably not the text they presented on) to a screenplay that they then either filmed and showed to the class, or performed in class during our final week of classes. Part of the inspiration behind this assignment was that I had just spent the past two summers in the German Literature Archives in Marbach (Deutsches Literaturarchiv [DLA]) and one portion of my research involved reading reviews of Kafka adaptations to the stage. I was fascinated with the large number of critics who disliked the stage performances due to supposed liberties

that producers took with Kafka's texts in the adaptation to the stage. It seemed that the more producers »deviated« from the original, the less likely the critics were to give the performance a positive review. Now, when adapting a written text to the stage, no matter how theatrical the author may have been with their writing, there will have to be alterations made, and this can come in the form of costumes, additional characters or interpretations of characters, music, dancing, make-up, and set design to name a few. I wanted students to do the same with their interpretations, to take the texts we had read and make an adaption of the text to »stage.« Although this was not an adaptation class by any means, nor did we read adaptation theory, I believed that through engaging closely with the texts, through discussion, quick papers, mini quizzes, and response papers, students were well-equipped with enough knowledge to make decisions on how they wanted to interpret their texts. By giving students freedom – something they truly value – it makes them feel more accountable, and less like they are being »forced« to do something.

One of the ways I prepared students to begin critically thinking about the texts was through group collaboration, presentations, and by discussing their response papers in class. For the presentations, students had to analyze an aspect of the text by providing leading and discussion questions. Guidelines for the screenplay adaptation projects required groups of three to four students to choose one text we read during the semester and to produce one screenplay or script with a short explanation (a half-page at the beginning of the script) of why they chose to adapt the text in the way they did. Students had the option to either perform the text »as is;« however, since most were *not* dramas, students were encouraged to take liberties and be creative. The students had the option to either perform in front of class, or create *Youtube* or one-button-studio recording. I allowed students the choice to use either German or English, hoping to get even more depth when it came to the adaptations. And for some students, as you will read below, English was the only suitable language. And finally, after the project, students completed a reflection with guiding questions, also provided below.

The goal of this assignment was to have students engage critically with the work by posing questions and trying to provide an answer to their own questions through their interpretation. They were encouraged to be creative and have fun and to incorporate as many props as they liked. After each »performance,« we had a question and answer session in class, which is something one needs to take into consideration when planning a unit such as this. Oftentimes the discussion can last 10-20 minutes after the performance, which depending on class size could take a bit of time.

Below are some examples of the rationales from the students. Each example demonstrates the way in which students critically engaged with the texts and applied them to contemporary settings:

Über das Marionettentheater

Wir wollten unseren Vortrag mit Puppen darstellen, weil wir dachten, dass Kleist uns überzeugt hatte, Puppen als Perfekt oder Fehlerfrei oder gegen die Fehler der Menschheit zu vergleichen. Puppen haben aber kein Selbstbewusstsein, wie wir als Menschen. Kleist wollte den Leser zeigen, dass es eine Falle ist, Selbstbewusstsein zu besitzen. Kleist wollte damit beweisen, dass Puppen viel mehr Anmut als Menschen haben, weil sie keine Gefühle haben und nicht denken können! Wie sich die Zeit des Theaters auch verändert hat, wollten wir leichter einen Zugang zu der Geschichte finden können. Wir wollten auch die Geschichte an unsere Generation anpassen.

Die Waage der Baleks

Wir haben diese Interpretation gemacht, weil es sehr relevant heutzutage ist. Dieser Text ist auch einer unsere Lieblingstexte von diesem Semester. Für uns sind die Themen in diesem Text sehr wichtig und zeitlos, und wir wollten diese Themen in eine andere und zuordenbare Weise darstellen. Unsere Adaptation ist am meistens die gleiche Geschichte als das Original, aber natürlich hat eine Adaptation andere Elemente und Ereignisse. Zum Beispiel die Baleks sind jetzt ein amerikanischer Präsident aus dem Jahr 2017. Wir haben auch aktuelle Referenzen wie soziale Netzwerke verwendet und Fotos mit Handys geknipst. Wir basierten unsere Interpretation auf Donald Trump, weil die Themen in dieser Geschichte gut zu der aktuellen politischen Situation passen. Wir haben dieses Drehbuch auf Englisch geschrieben, weil in einer »Trump Welt«, die Gelegenheiten, andere Sprachen zu lernen, verringert wird. Wir leben in einer Zeit, in der öffentliche Schulen unter schlechten Finanzierungen Möglichkeiten leiden, oder leiden werden. Wir wollten eine Zeit in der Zukunft zeigen, wo die Schäden schon gemacht worden sind. Wenn es kein öffentliches Schulsystem gäbe, hätten wir keine Gelegenheit Deutsch zu lernen. In dieser Welt gibt es nur Englisch. Wir hoffen, dass diese Adaptation nie die Wahrheit wird.

Das Muschelessen

Das Ende der Geschichte hat uns mit einem »Cliffhanger« gelassen, also wissen wir eigentlich nicht was mit dem Vater und der Familie am Ende passiert ist. Aber das ist auch der interessanteste Teil daran, weil wir ihn so interpretieren können, wie es uns am besten gefällt. Man könnte das Ende von einem pessimistischen Standpunkt ansehen, oder eine optimistische Aussicht nehmen. Wir haben uns für die »gute« Interpretation beschlossen, weil es impliziert, dass es doch ein Ende von der Geschichte gibt, und dass die Familie nicht als Opfer für den Rest ihres Lebens sein muss. Der Vater hatte eine strenge Autorität über die Familie, mit Ausnahme von der Tochter, weil sie eine mehr hartnäckige Disposition hat. Sie hat die Wahl ihre Meinung auszudrücken, und in einer »richtigen Familie« ist so eine Äußerung notwendig.

Das Urteil

Wir machen Georg lebendig. Wir wollen zeigen, dass auch im Tod Georg die Quäle seines Vaters nicht entkommen konnte. Wir haben die sexuelle Szene am Anfang, weil Kafka von dem unendlichen Verkehr wie eine unendliche Ejakulation dachte. Dies mit dem »Jesus« Kommentar, zeigt uns was passiert. Georg spricht nie wieder mit seinem Freund, weil er seinen Vater vergessen wollen. Sein Freund war eine Verbindung mit seinem Vater. Der Kaufhausjob war erfolglos und nur eine Änderung ist, dass der Vater Tod ist.

Wir haben dieses Drehbuch, wie wir als sehr Kafkaesk interpretieren, gemacht. Deshalb haben wir genau geschrieben, was Georg denkt und was er macht. Es ist unserer Meinung nach, typisch Kafka, alles in Frage zu stellen, was wir als normal empfinden und was wir als Realität betrachten, zu befragen. Zum Beispiel, in unserem Drehbuch, denkt Georg etwas obwohl es nicht wahr ist. Deshalb haben wir die Unterschiede zwischen was Georg denkt und wie es wirklich ist, übertrieben. Die Handlung nimmt eine überraschende Wendung, deshalb haben wir ein paar komische Personen und Taten eingeschlossen.

After the project students wrote a short reflection of the script adaptation project with these guiding questions: Did you find the assignment useful? Why or why not?; Do think this kind of assessment helped you to critically engage with the text you chose?; Did you like the assignment? Did you enjoy watching the other performances?; Do you think the screenplay project was effective in dealing with the variety of texts we read throughout the semester?; Any other comments or thoughts? I believe it is important to require students to reflect on their work; it not only allows them to revisit what they have written, but also provides valuable feedback for the instructor moving forward. As you will see in the responses, student's comments also reflect the nature of project-based assessment and that students are achieving the goals and outcomes I set in the beginning.

These reflections demonstrate the acknowledgement of critical engagement, the value of giving students creative freedom and the accountability it produces. However, there was also some criticism of the use of English, which is something I may reconsider in the future.

This project encouraged us to dig deeper into the text and figure out why/how we were going to adapt certain scenes/parts. This assessment requires both critical and creative thinking to be successful.

Projects with creative freedom like this are my favorite kind to create for any class. In the case of working with the stories and books we read this semester, we had a solid base that really let us take our own interpretations and just go nuts with it. Not only that, it makes you reread pieces and decide what themes you think are important. When I listened to other people's presentations, I got to hear what they thought was important to the story, or how they thought it should end. This was especially enlightening.

ning, since some of the ideas brought to the table were so original that I did not even consider them until that point. It was also extremely helpful that this could be completed in English. The course was in German, but while writing I felt more comfortable letting my creativity take the reins since I did not need to worry about my grammar and vocab. Overall, I loved this project. I wish more classes would allow this kind of project without huge stipulations.

I really enjoyed doing the screen adaptation project. I think that it was a good assignment for the students to analyze the text in a fun and creative way. I also enjoyed watching the other students screen adaptations, because it actually helped to bring some clarity to some of the questions I was having about certain texts. For example, in »Die Waage der Baleks« I would wonder why Franz didn't seek justice in his later years, and Matt and Olga did a good job on explaining why. In conclusion, I'm an advocate for the screen adaptation project, and would recommend that it be used in your classes in the future.

I honestly really enjoyed this project. I thought it was useful in helping to develop a greater appreciation for the readings. By using our creativity to create an adaptation, we had to show that we understood what we had read and learned in the first place. My particular group used Die Waage der Baleks for our adaptation, and in order to put it together, we had to go back into the original text to find details we could use to create our own characters and storyline. Two of the other groups basically modernized or related their readings to current events, and that clearly shows connections being made between literature and real life. As a result, I would say that this kind of assessment definitely helps one to critically engage with a particular text. The best part, however, was watching everybody else's adaptations. There's always a bit of humor involved when students have to put together a 'play' or a video, but all of the projects were very well thought out, insightful, and well made. Most people said that they chose their favorite texts to interpret, which shows the diversity of perspectives in the class as well as everybody's ability to create something new and original. My only suggestion would be to require all of the projects to be in German. Although working in English was a lot easier in allowing us to convey our thoughts, the point of a higher-level German class is to be challenging and improve our use of the language. Giving the option to work in English allows students to 'cop out' and can be frustrating with group work, because there may be differing opinions on which language to work in.

I will continue to do these types of project-based assessments in my class; not only do students value this type of assessment, but the benefits of growth and development are extremely high. Students are able to develop higher order thinking skills and put these to use in a real-world applicable setting. While sticking to practical assignments with many interactive components involves a lot of planning, input, and instruction, students almost always prove that they are capable of doing such a higher order level thinking assignment. It is crucial for

students as future global citizens to learn how to ask questions and how to think differently about things such as literature, and these types of projects teach students how to ask questions and become independent decision makers. At the beginning of the course, some students initially expressed frustration because they just expected answers, and they did not quite enjoy »getting philosophical.« As the semester progressed and as we continued to »get philosophical,« students adapted more and more turning the adaptation into culmination of their work. If we approach canonical literature in the twenty-first century with a view to rethinking the humanities; we neither can simply accept canonical works as they are, but rather have a different sense of the different methods the texts ask us to read and ultimately interpret.

