

Teaching the Unknown: The German Graduate Student TA as Facilitator in the Process of Knowledge Production

Most graduate students in German Studies will have had most of their teaching experience as instructors in beginning and intermediate language classes by the time they receive their PhD. While the distinction between language and topics courses, and the politics that come with it, is problematic in and of itself, positions to teach a so-called topics course are much sought-after among graduate students. Therefore, the opportunity to hold such a teaching assignment is commonly seen as a distinction and a great chance to broaden one's teaching portfolio. In this paper, I want to address, however, a big challenge that graduate students, and really any teacher at a university, often see themselves faced with as instructors for a topics class. It is the challenge of having to teach what you do not know, or better: the challenge of teaching as a non-expert.

Departmental curricula often strongly dictate the kinds of courses that can be offered. It is thus rather unlikely that a graduate student teaching assistant gets to teach a class on a topic that completely lies within her area of expertise, ideally the dissertation topic. Having to teach a class on materials that are not all that familiar to the graduate student herself can be a frightening thought: "Will the students know more than me about the topic?", "Will they be able to tell that I am only exploring these materials myself as I prepare for class?", "Will they respect me and my authority if they realize that I don't know everything about the topic?" These may all be questions that make the prospect of being a topics class instructor not all that appealing.

Building on the great work of Therese Huston in *Teaching What You Don't Know*, I am arguing that teaching under such circumstances requires a fundamental rethinking of the role of the teacher in the classroom. It is important to give up the idea of the teacher being "the full

pitcher pouring the knowledge into the empty vessels." Rather, she should function as a facilitator helping the students to develop and refine their own interests in order to master the complex materials. Instead of reflecting on these issues theoretically, I will draw heavily on my experience of co-teaching a class in which students curated an exhibition on the topic of "Rivalrous Masculinities: Changing images of the male body over time." While I am not an art historian, I was able to create assignments, activities, and exercises that ultimately allowed the students to make the art objects their own, and to produce outstanding research. My presentation today will be structured as follows: First, I will briefly introduce the "Rivalrous Masculinities" project, and the course that I co-taught. Second, I will outline some of the challenges that I saw myself faced with in planning this course, teaching this course, and advising students on their individual research. Third, by way of example, I will present three activities in order to showcase the implications of seeing the instructor as a facilitator in the process of knowledge production rather than an expert source of knowledge transmission.

"Rivalrous Masculinities: Curating an Exhibition on Changing Images of the Male Body over Time" is a two-time course that is part of a larger research project funded by the *Humanities Writing Large Mellon Grant* at Duke University. It is housed in the German Department, but cross-listed with art history, medieval and renaissance studies, as well as women's studies. The first course was taught in the fall of 2013 in which 7 undergraduate students curated a virtual exhibition on changing images of the male body over time. They used art objects like paintings, sculptures, and photographs from the holdings of the Nasher Museum at Duke University, in order to explore and showcase how masculinity, like femininity, is a social and cultural construction of gender; that constructions of masculinity change over time; and that different forms of masculinity co-

exist, often in sharp competition with one another, no less so in the past than today. My Co-PIs and I believe that students would discover through this learning experience that representations of the body and gender intersect with political, racial, and religious discourses that have changed in salient ways over time. The second course is currently being taught by my Co-PIs Professor Ann Marie Rasmussen and Christian Straubhaar, and the students this fall build on the work from the 2013 team with the goal of curating a real, physical exhibition at the Nasher Museum with a scheduled opening date of December 28. When sourcing the objects prior to teaching the first course, it soon became obvious that for most of them hardly any information and secondary literature existed. “Rivalrous Masculinities,” thus, became a class in which the students were to do original research with which they contribute to the scholarship in art history.

We were, of course, delighted that our students would get to produce “real” art historical research that would be shared with the public. However, we also very soon started to ask ourselves what our role would be in this process since neither of us are art historians by training. Let me describe some of the thought processes we went through from my perspective, the perspective of a graduate student TA who himself has been trained as a foreign language teacher and a scholar of German literature. My biggest fear was that the students could be disappointed when they realized that I lack the expertise to profoundly guide them on their journey of doing art historical research. I had never curated an exhibition myself, I had never even taken an art history class, and I quite frankly felt like I was not ready to be an expert teacher for our class. Looking back, this insecurity was actually a blessing in disguise. It was a blessing in disguise, since it made me pause, and really think about what it is that *I* can give them in order to equip them with what they need to successfully research their art objects.

The first insight was simple yet eye-opening. “Doing art historical research” is not possible without certain basic research skills. Already in the first week of class, my colleagues and I realized that almost none of the students had ever worked with databases to find secondary literature on any given topic. Some of them did not even know the difference between a database and the library catalog. It dawned on me that there was indeed a lot I could give the students, since they first needed to learn how to do research in general, before we could worry about the art historical component of the research. We started out by introducing them to Duke’s Western European librarian who gave them an in-depth introduction to “using the library” as one of their primary research tools.

Second, doing research does not only mean finding the existing body of secondary literature, but the students had to learn how to engage with it in a way that helps them to advance their own research projects. That brought us to the second and third skill we practiced with the students: reading and understanding the scholarship of art historians, and scholars of gender and sexuality studies, and writing about it. For one class period, for example, we had the students read a short excerpt from Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*. Rather than directly applying her theoretical contemplations to our objects, we first had the students, read, and re-read the short excerpt, we had them formulate it in their own words, and explain it in a way that someone who has never heard of gender performativity would be able to understand her main arguments. The students really appreciated that we took the time to practice reading comprehension for research purposes, since it taught them that approaching a text with clear research questions facilitates the often-difficult process of unpacking a complex argument. I will go into more detail about a possible writing exercise later on.

Third, I realized that I had always taken for granted that undergraduate students have a lot of experience working on semester-long research projects. This turned out not to be the case. In the first week of class, we talked frequently about what it means to work on such a long-term research project, and the students expressed the fear of not knowing how to make sure to stay on track, since the ultimate deadline was the implementation of the virtual exhibition. Together with the students, we developed a timeline with intermediary deadlines that allowed them to break down the overwhelming task of producing original research into smaller, more manageable chunks. We, as teachers, developed a set of activities to make these intermediary deadlines meaningful and always with the goal in mind that the totality of all exercises should lead to the “final product,” namely the wall texts for the online exhibition. In what follows, I want to go into more detail about three different types of exercises, all of which show that ultimately, this class on changing images of the male body over time was as much a class on *doing research* in the humanities, as it was an *art historical* class.

Sticking with the order of the three insights I just presented, I first want to share with you an idea for an exercise on how to do research. The first part of this exercise may sound superfluous, but we made it a mandatory requirement that all students personally met with a librarian to consult about the best ways of finding information on their specific topic. Some of the students—and I suspect that’s the case at other schools as well—had no experience in working with librarians, and simply did not even know how valuable a resource they are. Every student had the task of finding two secondary sources on the same sculpture. After consulting with a librarian, they had to look for sources, read them, and then “review” them in a short blog post on the course blog, so that it was accessible to all seminar participants. Using the blogs for this exercise served a triple purpose: the students saw the benefits of creating an annotated

archive for future reference for the secondary literature they engage with, they experienced the advantages of working collaboratively, and it also forced them to stick to high quality standards in the way they presented the information, since it was visible not only to themselves, but everybody else in the class.

Practicing academic writing became one of the main foci of our class. When we developed the syllabus, we decided to have a weekly writing exercise, so that the students use different formats of writing as a way of thinking about their research on the objects. This was also a way to show them that writing is a form of communicating with the “outside world,” and that, like every other form of communication, it is really important to consider with whom one is communicating. One exercise that worked really well when engaging with the Butler text was the following: After practicing our reading comprehension, we had compiled a list with the most pertinent points that Butler brings up. As a writing exercise, we had the students write three different letters—one to their best friend, one to their 80-year-old grandmother, and one to their 5-year-old niece—in each of which they had to explain that they just read about gender performativity, and what that means. By choosing three radically different age groups as imaginary recipients, we were able to bring to our students’ attention that it does not just matter what they write about, but for whom they write. The question of audience is especially crucial when producing wall text for an art exhibition.

As a last “exercise,” I briefly want to elucidate how we managed to break the large research projects into smaller, meaningful chunks. Rather than just having us, the teachers, present the students with a set of deadlines, we made everybody part of the very process of establishing the timeline. We had several short group discussions during which the students assessed how far they had gotten with their research, and when they felt like they would be able

to complete the next step. Whenever they came across a problem, like not being able to meet a deadline, we always had them propose a solution that was brought up for discussion in front of the whole group, so that everybody was always in agreement with and aware of the course of action that our collaborative project was taking.

This last example, in a nutshell, stands for the whole pedagogical approach that we, as literary scholars and teachers of Germans, brought to this art history and gender studies class: When teaching as a non-expert, the learning experience has to be a group effort. Students and professors likewise have to be responsible for how the learning happens. By giving up the expert role, we fundamentally redefined our roles as teachers: Rather than presenting them with the knowledge they needed to curate a successful exhibition, we equipped them with the tools they needed to engage with their own research, and to ultimately produce a final product that could be shared with the public. We were able to meet the challenge of teaching as non-experts by offering our guidance on the level where we felt comfortable, like practicing reading comprehension, writing proficiency, and doing research, and by providing them access to a network of other experts when we did not feel comfortable to give them the advice they needed.