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Integrating the Arts: Creative Thinking about FL Curricula and Language Program Direction

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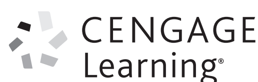
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AAUSC 2015 Volume - Issues in Language Program Direction: Integrating the Arts: Creative Thinking about FL Curricula and Language Program Direction
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Chapter 2

Talking Images: Exploring Culture through Arts-Based Digital Storytelling

Bettina Matthias, Middlebury College

Half-hidden under a gigantic yellow hat decorated with an oversized red feather, a woman stares at the observer, her eyes hollow, set too deep into an emaciated face. She is talking about herself, her name, her life, and responding to questions that we do not hear. She is a woman of the night. Like so many others, she sells her body to rich and poor, old and young; it is all she has left after the "Great War," and she is not afraid to admit that she enjoys it. As she speaks, her image fades in and out, gray fog and neon yellow lights obscure her face, her bright pink cheeks standing out unnaturally over her hungry mouth and teeth. Modernist music frames her desolate soliloquy as she offers herself to her invisible inquirer . . .

The woman: "Leonie," Expressionist-turned-New-Objective German painter Otto Dix's (1891–1969) famous portrait. The scene: An upper-level student's final project for a seminar in German on Weimar Germany (Wills, 2014),[1] a digital video animation of Dix's lithograph, which met with renewed public interest when a "sister" print was recently found amongst the many works of art hidden in the apartment of art collector Hildebrand Gurlitt in Munich. The lithograph, etched and printed in a limited edition in 1923, is a gripping example of Dix's postwar representations of Weimar German society and its traumas, and its intensity and narrative possibilities inspired the student to delve deeply into the history behind the painting.

This video is just one of 16 projects created by students to accompany a class-curated art exhibition of original Weimar art at our institution's art museum. Uploaded to iPads at the museum and available for checkout, they invited the museum visitor to engage with the art on display in a personal way, and they offered a creative interpretation of each work both in its own right and as an expression of Weimar Germany's sociocultural climate and *Zeitgeist*. Replacing the traditional didactic label—that is, the explanatory text attached to the wall next to a work of art in a museum—and the traditional response paper in class, these digital storytelling projects were the result of an experiment with art

[1]Fourteen of the class's 16 animations can be viewed at http://museum.middlebury.edu/exhibitions/current/node/1252 (retrieved April 25, 2015).

and new technologies and their potential in the context of a course on Weimar Germany. Thanks to a generous grant[2] that had made available to the class over 50 works of original art from the period, the course took these works as its lens and springboard to unlock Weimar culture before reversing the equation and reading the art as an expression of its time. Art was thus both the content and the medium with and through which students engaged with the period, and for them to respond in the same "currency"—that is, in and through contemporary works of visual art or at least imagination—was an experiment worth trying.

In the following, I will describe in greater detail the underpinnings and implementation of this experiment with art-based teaching and technology-enhanced interpretative and presentational responses to course materials. Though the actual example—the unique opportunity to work in a foreign language with original works of art and to develop an actual exhibition at a museum as a class project—might be very specific, it presents a model for integrating the arts and technology in the foreign language classroom more generally. Its premises are applicable to various contexts and language levels, whether we teach with real art or (digital) reproductions, whether we work with one image or many, or whether we present our work to a live audience or online. The project presented in this article encourages teachers to benefit from the significant advantages that art-based teaching offers, and to embrace and make productive our students' already-existing ability and willingness to work with technology. It takes seriously some of our profession's most influential organizations' (ACTFL, TESOL) call for teachers to "use . . . technology as [a] resource for integrating and teaching culture" (ACTFL, 2002, p. 16) and to "integrate pedagogical knowledge and skills with technology to enhance language teaching and learning" (Healey, D., Hanson-Smith, E.,Hubbard, P., loannou-Georgiou, S., Kessler, G., & Ware, P., 2011, *Standards* Goal 2). This project also has the potential to address the need for students and teachers alike to train further their digital literacy skills. In other words, this article, through the presentation of an actual example, wishes to inspire technology-based interpretative approaches to cultural products and practices that add to a course's general *Standards*-informed (inter-) cultural goals training in technological (digital) literacy and an exploration of interpretative and presentational modes

[2]In 2013, the Sabarsky Foundation in New York announced that they were looking for an institution of higher learning to team up with them and make educational use of their significant holdings. Seeing that the vast majority of their images were from early 20th-century Germany and Austria, our art museum's director asked me to help him submit a proposal for a three-year collaboration. I devised a master plan for teaching three courses in the German and Art History Departments in which we would focus on images from the collection and prepare three public exhibitions in our museum. Once we were chosen as the Foundation's partner, we were granted access to their collection and have since been allowed to bring selected works of art to campus for our courses. We were also granted a generous amount of money for a curatorial assistant, co-curricular programming, and the development of a catalogue for our second exhibition (growing out of a course taught in spring 2015 on the nude in early 20th-century German and Austrian thought and art, team-taught by a colleague from the Art History Department and myself).

through creative modern audiovisual engagement. Furthermore, it suggests the use of technology as a promising mode to integrate more closely academic work and cultural institutions on campus and beyond, and more specifically, to integrate language programs with programming at a school's or local museum. As an example of work in the "digital humanities," the project shows how technology can successfully support and be an integral part of our pedagogical goals and help create communities across cultures and languages.[3]

Teaching with the (Visual) Arts in the Foreign Language Classroom

General Considerations

Including the visual arts in our courses is nothing new. Comprising important cultural content, examples of paintings, drawings, sculptures, woodcuts, or photography grace our textbooks and many courses from the beginning level on. Furthermore, thanks to art museums both on campus and in towns, and the wide availability of visual materials from the target culture on the Internet, FL instructors can easily include references to and discussions of actual works of visual art in their courses. And especially in a FL curriculum, whose focus is no longer on literature alone, the visual arts now occupy a central place in the cultural studies–informed agenda of many.

What is more, integrating the visual arts has been recognized as pedagogically and neurologically beneficial for many years now, both in foreign language teaching and teaching in general. In their report *Art as a Tool for Teachers of English Language Learners* (2010), the authors of the New York State Education Department's Office of Bilingual Education and Foreign Language Studies guide for teachers quote results from a recent Guggenheim initiative called "Learning Through Art"[4] to support their call for integrating art in teaching ESL:

> *The study indicates that the Learning Through Art program improved a range of literacy skills among the students who participated in the program. The students "performed better in six categories of literacy and critical thinking skills—including thorough description, hypothesizing and reasoning—than did students who were not in the program." (p. 5)*

[3]As I will explain later, this course and the inclusion of technology do not represent an example of CALL, and I did not conceive of this project as a way to introduce hybrid learning into my class. Rather, the projects replaced traditional term papers to a certain extent, and they were meant to encourage students to improve their technological skills and work on digital literacy, also in terms of becoming more critically aware users of digital technology.

[4]Information on this program can be found at http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/education/school-educator-programs/learning-through-art.

Utilitarian as this approach may be, as it treats exposure to art as a means rather than an end, it references art's ability to unlock mental potential, and to deepen and diversify students' "ways of thinking and problem solving" (p. 6). How exactly exposure to the visual arts affects such an expansion of our students' abilities shall not be the topic of this article—as an example, the New York State Education Department study refers to a recent experiment conducted at Stanford University that found parts of the brain responsible for processing textual information (visual and phonological) stimulated when a person is exposed to the visual arts.[5] What is important, though, is that there is evidence that the arts address the important pedagogical need of "[fusing] affective and cognitive domains of knowledge. The affective domain includes emotions, attitudes, feelings, and other intuitive ways of knowing, while the cognitive domain refers to intellectual, rational ways of thinking" (Moore, Koller, & Kreie Arago, 1994, p. 1). Taken together, these two domains allow students to fully and creatively engage with material, lowering the affective filter and potentially freeing up new pathways for reflection and learning.

Research and even public opinion[6] have, by now, embraced the benefits that teaching with the arts in general offer, and they are deemed especially valuable in foreign language and culture teaching. As we ask our students to forego the safe space of taking in and acting upon the world in their own language, a lowered affective filter is often key in our students' willingness and ability to enter the new linguistic sphere. In our increasingly visual world, the visual arts can indeed help our students overcome initial barriers and linguistic inhibitions, as Knapp (2012) suggests: "the work of visual art often can be accessed by the student more quickly than the literary text—precisely because the information is not linguistic—yet the interpretation of the image requires the student to engage in language" (p. 20). Taking this idea further, Huber (2005) sees the image as the primary source of information for students in the 21st century, one that might then be—almost as an afterthought?—accompanied by text.[7] Teaching visual literacy is certainly part of our charge as teachers of foreign cultures, but to suggest that reading images is easy and almost intuitive is a crass oversimplification. However, the superficial recognizability of the image does offer a more immediate and possibly emotional point of access for students than the verbal sign. It triggers interpretive responses

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[5]"Stanford University conducted a study to measure the relationship between reading and the arts and found 'likely connections among brain regions involved in the development of reading skills . . . [and] how exposure to the visual arts might relate to phonological awareness (the ability to manipulate speech sounds), which is correlated with reading ability'" (New York State Education Department, 2010, p. 5).

[6]"Public opinion polls of Americans show that imagination and creativity are revered, and an NEA poll revealed most voters believe arts education is essential and should be considered as part of a basic education" (New York State Education Department, 2010, p. 6).

[7]Based on Huber (2005, p. 1): "Das Bild entwickelt sich also mehr und mehr zur Hauptquelle der Information, die von Texten begleitet wird"; translation mine.

in the viewer more quickly than any other perceptible phenomenon, a hypothesis that probably everybody's classroom experience will confirm. In an effort to establish meaning and share and discuss with others their own experience of the image, students are undeniably more eager and faster in responding in language than they are when exposed to more complex and more culturally encoded signs. Teaching with the visual arts is then indeed an important aid in our efforts to engage our students in the target language and pursue the important goal of meaningful L2 communication and, in the process, effective language learning.

Teaching with the Arts in the Literacy-Based Curriculum

In a more theoretical context, these considerations align with criteria that recent scholarship on literacy-based FL teaching and learning has put forth. One of the leading voices in defining and promoting literacy-based instruction and the concept of multiliteracies, Kern (2000) "identified seven principles of literacy that link closely with communication: *interpretations, collaboration, conventions, cultural knowledge, problem solving, reflection* and *self-reflection,* and *language use*" (quoted in Allen & Paesani [2010, p. 122]; emphasis in the original). As a critical response to the communicative approach, which, according to many critics, runs the danger of preferring "generic contexts rather than a range of discourse contexts" (Allen & Paesani, 2010, p. 122), literacy-based approaches challenge the language learners' intellectual and interpretative abilities. Through a mix of reliance on preexisting resources at the learners' command (what Kern calls "Available Designs")—that is, knowledge that they have already acquired—and well-chosen tasks to unlock further meaning through interpretation, collaboration, reflection, and problem solving, students can then "design" (Kern), that is, engage in the "process of shaping emergent meaning [that] involves re-presentation and recontextualization" (New London Group, 1996, p. 75; quoted in Allen & Paesani, 2010, p. 123). The final result, the students' "transformed representation of Available Designs [is] called the *Redesigned*" (Allen & Paesani, 2010, p. 123). This three-step design for teaching (in) a foreign language can be implemented especially well through arts-based instruction. Even if literacy-based teaching places a heavy emphasis on reading actual texts to activate the students' "Available Designs," and on producing written language as the result of "Designing," visual materials activate (linguistic) "Available Designs" much faster than linguistic texts, as noted in the previous section, and they challenge the learners' "intellectual and interpretive abilities" effectively. They encourage language users to voice understanding of those aspects that are immediately accessible while leaving a lot to uncover through "Designing."[8] All of these processes foster or require communication in a FL class, and for deciphering and interpretation to be

[8]"[S]ome representational aspects [of visual works of art] are immediately understandable, some culturally marked details need to be deciphered, and some indicative elements . . . require interpretation" (Meyer, 2009, p. 89).

successful, students have to hone their reflective skills, activate and increase their cultural knowledge, and, often, engage in problem-solving to come to a deeper and more satisfying understanding of the image that needs to be read. General literacy, and in particular visual literacy, thus get trained in many of the categories identified by Kern (2000) when we work with images. For students to develop a specialized lexicon that refers directly to their work with images and their (cultural) context is then one possible and useful literacy-based (starting) activity in the "Design" phase (also pedagogically categorized as the phase of "reflective framing"). A final assignment such as dramatizing images in a culturally, historically, aesthetically, and psychologically appropriate manner is equally well in line with literacy-based teaching as the result of "Redesigning" (also called the pedagogical component of "transformed practice").[9]

Engaging the *National Standards* with the Arts in the L2 Classroom

Effective as any image may be in the FL classroom for inviting students to engage quickly with it, the visual arts' real power in the context of this article needs to be located in what Walter Benjamin, in his seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936/1968), has famously coined the "aura." Deeply embedded in a specific culture and an artist's aesthetics and vision, the work of art, "be it painting, sculpture, or fine-art photography, brings with it the richness and texture of the time, place, and space in which it was created" (Knapp, 2012, p. 20). As hermeneutically complex authentic materials, they need to be explored both in their own right and as products from a different culture, acting as cultural ambassador and mediator and challenging students' multiple literacies. It is this particular quality that prompted the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) already in the early 1990s to issue their report *Integrating the Fine Arts into the Foreign Language Classroom: Toward Global Education* (1992), pointing out art's power to offer "opportunities to engage with various aspects of culture while inspiring student self-reflection" (summarized in Knapp, 2012, p. 20). As a means to encourage intercultural reflection in various modes, works of visual art are not only products of a different culture but also offer a particular culture's perspective. In this regard, they inspire extensive work on almost all aspects of what ACTFL identified as *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century* (1996, subsequently revised as *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* [1999, 2006, and

[9]Allen & Paesani (2010) summarize the four "curricular components" of literacy-based instructions that the New London Group developed in 1996 (p. 123). These four components are: situated practice (characterized by spontaneous language use and recourse to "Available Designs"); overt instruction (characterized by systematic analysis of the source material); critical framing (characterized by the use of newly developed metalanguage to reveal the relationships between the various components and influences that shaped the source material); and transformed practice (characterized by the creation of new texts and refashioning of the source material to make it available for new contexts).

again as *World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* [2015]).[10] Teaching with the arts allows for content-based L2 instruction on almost all proficiency levels, encouraging all three modes of communication (*Standard*s 1.1–1.3, interpersonal, interpretive, presentational), sharpening the learners' abilities to relate cultural products to cultural perspectives (*Standard* 2.2) and to "access and evaluate information and diverse perspectives that are available through the language and its cultures" (*Standard* 3.2) while also making cultural comparisons (*Standard* 4.2). The clear potential for (inter-)cultural *Standards*-based (or at least *Standards*-mindful) learning then ties in well with our profession's increasing responsibility to educate students for and in what Kramsch (1993) has coined the "sphere of interculturality" (p. 214), a realm in which the Other is both the object of study and the inspiration for self-reflection.

Learning Goals and the Inclusion of Technology

As the previous sections have shown, the visual arts have enormous potential as content and medium in a foreign language and culture class. Spontaneously—if not always correctly—readable works of visual art trigger neurological processes that make it easier for our students to express themselves in the target language as they decode the image. As culturally authentic and hermeneutically complex material, they foster engagement in various modes and in the interest of a number of educational goals that have been formalized in the nationally accepted *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*, and they lend themselves well to a literacy-based pedagogical exploration. All of these considerations played an important role in my decision to "flip" my advanced-level Weimar Germany course in the manner described above. The opportunity to work with original works of art of the caliber described allowed my students and me to fully explore the cultural significance of the works—Benjamin's "aura" at its best. The goals in this advanced-language course were thus formulated chiefly as cultural.[11] In this class, students could expect to (1) learn about historical, political, social, and artistic developments that shaped Germany's first experiment with democracy through

[10]A quick comparison of the descriptors for ACTFL's *Standards* and some of the key categories of literacy-based learning shows striking similarities between these. If communicative, reflective/self-reflective or cultural literacy is an overarching goal, ACTFL's *Standards* also define ways to achieve or measure these in a more empirical manner, especially by applying so-called benchmarks set by the organization to assess students' proficiency levels. Not all categories line up cleanly. Communication, for example, is the first *Standard* and is subdivided into three modes, whereas it is an overarching goal in the literacy-based curriculum. But the combination of both sets of guidelines helps fine-tune thinking about what FL instructors want to achieve and how they want to go about it.

[11]This course did not have as an explicit goal a specific quantifiable improvement in language proficiency (as measurable, for example, through ACTFL's proficiency levels). The development of a time- and culture-specific lexicon as well as an increased sensitivity to register, style, and tone and work on pronunciation were the three more explicit linguistic goals for this course. They were assessed both in class discussions (especially students' lexical development) and in the scripts and voice-overs for our animation projects.

engagement with original works of art from the period (factual content goals). They would (2) analyze the ways in which artists and their art both reflected and shaped political and cultural discourses at the time (reflective goals). Through class discussions, readings, work on their projects, and formal writing assignments accompanying in-class work, they would (3) develop a lexicon specific to and appropriate for discussing this historical period, characterized by war, hunger, and poverty, political experimentation/extremism, advances in technology and the visual arts, and social contrasts (linguistic goals). Finally, students were charged with (4) curating a public art exhibition, featuring 25–28 works of art from the 50 available works, and creating L2 responses for about 15 of them (interpretative and presentational goals). These responses would offer visitors a possible reading of the individual works of art as well as of the "chorus" of voices represented in our show as expressions of individual artists' vision and of the social, political, and cultural climate during the Weimar years.

This last charge presented an opportunity for developing an appropriate presentational assignment in the target language that would both hone my students' visual literacy abilities, with the help of technology, and fulfill the often-neglected "Communities" *Standard*[12]—and led me to consider the use of technology. Mindful of logistical limits at the museum, but interested in creating innovative bridges between the work of art, my students' explorations, and the museum visitor, I developed an animation movie project: student authors would work with one work of art to create a one- to two-minute video to make the image talk and encourage the viewer to connect with it as an informed empathetic audience member.[13] These short movies would then be made available to visitors on iPads in the exhibition hall. All mini-movies were supposed to be in the target language, but their multi-medial nature, and also subtitles, added to each movie by museum staff later, made sure that even those visitors with no knowledge of German would be able to engage and appreciate the project in the target language. In this way, technology really did play a "role . . . in addressing Communities" (Glisan, 2012, p. 518) in my L2 class project.

Furthermore, the format of digital storytelling—defined by Kern (2006) as "one example of multimedia authoring in which textualization is a central

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[12]Glisan (2012) discusses in depth the neglect with which this "most visionary of the five goal areas of the *SFLL*, Communities" (p. 517) has generally been treated in the foreign language teaching community. She states: "While there are 'pockets' of service-learning projects underway in language programs, the Communities goal has been described as 'the lost C' since it occupies a far from central place in language curricula (Glisan et al. 2010) [referring to an earlier publication by the same author]" (p. 518).

[13]This assignment can be understood as the digital equivalent of the traditional (written) dramatization that drama-in-education pedagogy promotes. In a literacy-based teaching unit, it is the result of applying what students learn during the phases of "overt instruction" and "critical framing" to congeal in "transformed practice"—the "Redesigned" is the result of such transformative effort. And in the context of training students' digital literacy, this assignment clearly falls into the category of encouraging "Reproduction Literacy," as explained later in this section.

concern . . . [by] developing filmic narratives using videos, photographs, drawing, animation, voice, text, and music" (p. 197)—combined goals for improving students' digital literacy and the *Standards* goal of Communication (especially *Standard* I.2, interpretive mode, approached creatively), and it accommodated an additional objective. While the traditional didactic label, placed next to the work of art on the museum wall, normally confronts the viewer/reader with a rather specific and often academic reading of a work on display—an "explanation"—the creative response to a work of art allowed for a more complex engagement, one that reflected both my students' academic research and their movement within Kramsch's "sphere of interculturality." An interpretation of art that was in itself again open to interpretation allowed the viewer an open-ended dialogue with the works and my students' readings of them, bringing the dynamics that often characterize class discussions into the museum itself, and sharing the openness of the interpretative process with museum viewers.

In practical terms, the decision to experiment with digital storytelling in this class also responded to my institution's demand for greater engagement with new technologies in the classroom and the exploration of digital humanities in the service of making use of and improving students' digital literacy. Though it was not an explicit goal of the course to train students systematically in various audiovisual technologies—and what a future permutation of this course could include—the challenge to identify the best possible platform or app for their animation concepts inevitably led students to acquaint themselves with available options and explore their feasibility and viability. Students explored many aspects of technology both practically and theoretically: they played with colors, zoom, and angles, de- and reconstructed shapes and lines using Photoshop or PowerPoint, and animated objects and bodies by creating a sequence of minimally altered versions of the same visual (manually or with Photoshop) that they then fed into a movie-making software. If digital literacy is defined as "survival skill in the digital era" (Eshet-Alkalai, 2004, p. 102) and training is achieved through use (Armstrong & Yetter-Vassot, 1994, p. 479), the course fulfilled the task of training students well. But it also involved them in the second of five areas of importance that Eshet-Alkalai (2004) identified as important for digital literacy, "Reproduction Literacy, or: [t]he art of creative recycling of existing material" (p. 97).[14] As students experimented with the best possible technological solution to the vision

[14]The five areas that Eshet-Alkalai (2004) identifies as relevant in defining the conceptual framework for developing digital literacy are: (1) photo-visual literacy (as it relates to graphic interfaces in digital environments); (2) reproduction literacy ("The art of creative recycling of existing material"; p. 97); (3) branching literacy (regarding hypermedia and nonlinear thinking, p. 98ff.); (4) information literacy (subtitled "the art of skepticism," p. 100); and (5) socio-emotional literacy (or how to "survive" socially and emotionally as a trusting, yet critical participant in a very crowded cyberspace).

they wanted to realize—that is, their version of the image and its story—they proved correct Hubbard's (2013) assumption that "it is not just the technology that matters, nor is it just how teachers use technology that matters. What really matters is how *learners* use it" (p. 175). But the course did much more in the area of digital literacy training: it also made students aware of technology's ethical and aesthetic consequences. Questions of authorship and originality and their relationship to new media (e.g., we had to secure permission to share on the web our animations of artwork, to which the Sabarsky Foundation has the rights) became as relevant as did the issue of the "[c]omputer impos[ing] [its] own aesthetic logic on the creation of the material" (Kramsch, A'Ness, & Lam, 2000, p. 95). As students struggled to find the best way to realize their ideas, they recognized the limits of their own literacy, but they also discovered new and original ways to express themselves, letting technological possibilities guide their interpretative discoveries and aesthetic and narrative choices to a certain extent.[15] Their willingness to explore technology extensively and fearlessly proved their ability to improve their digital literacy as long as the results of technology's "creative and imaginative application" (Armstrong & Yetter-Vassot, 1994, p. 476) made their effort meaningful.

Implementation and Discussion

All of these considerations translated in the following setup: in the first week of the semester, as we looked at all the works of art together, students started to extract a cultural and artistic narrative from the collection. As Expressionist woodcuts by Erich Heckel and Käthe Kollwitz coexisted with representatives of the New Objectivity movement (Otto Dix, George Grosz), with works by Kokoschka and Beckmann, with a few *Bauhaus* works (Gropius, Schlemmer, Baumeister), and with two drawings from Max Liebermann's late work, the group understood well the diversity of styles, concerns, topics, and perspectives represented and taken in these images, and we developed a set of questions to research further, all still within the context of what Kern (2000) calls "situated practice" and drawing from the group's preexisting rudimentary knowledge about the period and the general phenomena depicted in the images (hunger, prostitution, or the veterans' fate). Over the next weeks, we explored these questions as they related to the early years of the Weimar Republic through readings, audiovisual material from the period, and in-class discussions.[16] After three weeks, students were asked to start work-

[15]Upon reflection, I should have included a few practical workshops on digital technology in my plan to more explicitly address the practical challenges of the assignment and the impact these challenges might have on students' interpretative freedom.

[16]This phase during the semester featured the most traditional forms of instruction—lectures, student presentations, factual reading assignments—Kern's (2000) "overt instruction" that naturally led to the development of a lexicon to be used by all, and to a critical engagement with certain terms such as "inflation," in general, versus its specific meaning in this particular era.

ing in teams on their first animation assignments, keeping in mind our leading questions and delving deeper into particular aspects thereof as they pertained to the image of their choice. Later in the semester, we repeated a similar "algorithm" with a second set of works from the entire period; at this point, however, students had to work on their projects alone, building on their experiences from the first round.

In this first round, students had to work in groups of two or three. Each group had to select one image and develop a project proposal—the basic narrative direction and stance, plans for the video's soundtrack, a concept for animating the image, and a research program (about the artist, the work itself, its context, the time when it was created, and information on the story that they wanted to tell and the media they would use). All of this groundwork served to make sure that students met expectations derived from the "Communication," the "Connections," and the "Comparisons" *Standards*. The projects had to adhere to a set of guidelines; all animations could not run longer than two minutes, accommodating a museum visitor's patience with such a project when standing in front of a work of art. They should feature an original story (and thus not be a simple adaptation of a text we read), and they had to be told from the perspective of the character(s) depicted in the image, either through monologues or dialogues. The purpose of this particular requirement was twofold. For one, this special dramatization activity (indebted to basic exercises in drama-in-education pedagogy) forced students to forego the safe distance that they usually keep as observers and readers of a foreign culture and language and asked them to fully assume the perspective of the Other, either through full identification (in the case of the first-person monologue) or at least partial identification (if the script featured a dialogue in which at least one voice had to represent an aspect of Weimar German consciousness). Adopting this perspective meant espousing all the communicative (rhetorical and psychological) conventions and preferences that a German of the time, and of a particular age and social group, might have displayed.[17] Secondly, such a shift in frame of reference—a hallmark of meeting the interpretive and the presentational expectations for the "Communications" *Standard*—also brought about an ability to relate cultural products to cultural perspectives (*Standard* 2.2). Finally, as students prepared for their projects, they necessarily began to compare their own cultural system and the one they had to emulate (*Standard* 4.2).

To connect the projects to a special and often-neglected goal pertaining to language acquisition on the advanced level, namely pronunciation, students had to record their narratives themselves or at least be part of the recording "team." An additional linguistic expectation was for the stories to be lexically and socio- and

[17]The example in the Appendix illustrates this challenge well. The scene, based on Max Liebermann's "Frau und Kind auf Bank" (ca. 1921), challenged the team to adopt the perspective of a young girl from an upper middle-class family, confused by political and social turmoil, and to find ways to express this confusion in an age-appropriate style, register, and tone.

psycho-linguistically appropriate, as explained above, to satisfy an important aspect of the "Communications" and "Comparisons" *Standards*.

Finally, the actual stories that students derived from studying and researching the works and their context needed to be historically viable, psychologically plausible, and culturally sensitive, and they had to feature soundtracks that would give a historical aura to their clips (requirements that relate to the "Cultures," "Connections," and "Comparisons" *Standards,* especially *Standards* 2.2, 3.2, and 4.2). Where possible, ideas for animating depicted bodies and objects should adhere to the aesthetic and technical visual code of Weimar Germany (as observable in movies and other audiovisual materials form the period that we studied together).

Though I expected my students to be adventurous with technology, I built an important backup into the plan: for those who were intimidated by the prospect of having to work with technology they had never used before, I hired a student from our studio art program who was available to hand-animate works of art based on precise instructions from and in close collaboration with the students. Admittedly, this backup really meant that students could opt out of experimenting by themselves with digital technology during this first round (but only during this first round). However, it proved an invaluable safety net, as collaboration with our artist on the technological aspects of the task without having to manipulate images themselves right away lowered anxiety to the point where students were then encouraged to experiment with their computers after all without undue pressure.

Before they started their actual work, students had to meet with me to discuss the feasibility of the plan and resources, and in some instances, these meetings brought about the first important "teachable moments." One team had decided to work on Otto Dix's *Der Erhängte (Selbstmörder)* (1922), a gruesome etching depicting a bald man hanging from the ceiling in a very narrow room, flashing a massive erection, his shoes placed neatly underneath the chair from which he seems to have jumped to his death. Next to him, seated on a chair, sits a specter, holding a newspaper or magazine in his hands. To the right, a man's coat hangs on the wall, completing the strange symmetry and orderliness of the haunting scene. My students had decided to read this complex etching, featuring German tidiness and ridiculed masculinity, as the depiction of a high-ranking retired or rather dismissed army officer who had decided to commit suicide in response to the lack of public support for their fallen military leaders, translating the "Dolchstoßlegende" (the "stab-in-the-back legend") into a personal tragedy. The white ghost on the chair was then to provide the backstory to the suicide, reading out loud a report of an officer who had gone missing. In the students' initial plans, this story of a missing person was then to be connected to a report on a recent press conference in which a high-ranking army representative would have been attacked by journalists and asked to justify the army's actions during the war and its ultimate defeat.

When we met to discuss the draft, it became very clear that these students had imposed upon their story a modern American model. The fact that German

army officers would not have been cross-examined and attacked in public after the war by a critical national press—that a (hostile) press conference like the ones we often see after lost sports games or even a failed army operation was not likely to have happened after a defeat of such existential scope—was an eye-opener to these students who have grown up in a media-dominated time and who have never known the moral realities and consequences of losing a war. As they realized their cultural bias (an important moment in the students' engagement with the "Comparisons" *Standard*!), they went back to research further the troubled relationship between Germany's defeated army, the press, and the public, and they revised their plans to base the backstory on a concrete historical event, a due date for Germany's reparations payment to the Allies. This idea prompted research into the way in which German newspapers reported and commented on these dates. The final project featured the specter reading a missing person's report, followed by a semi-fictional editorial in which the students mixed references to actual newspapers of the time with their own storyline, narrated in the linguistic register of the time and medium, ending the specter's reading and the clip with the gripping statement: "*Wer immer die Schuld trägt, wir tragen alle das Leid*" ("Whoever may be to blame, we all have to bear the sorrow").[18]

The example shows two things. First, the task of identifying with (fictional) human beings from the Weimar period proved very productive; it revealed to these students their own cultural preconceptions and assumptions, creating a perfect situation for historical and social cultural comparisons and reflection. Second, the problem they encountered motivated them, much more than any "top-down" research assignment, to dig deeply into available (archival) material and its historical context and to understand the nuances with which Germany negotiated the trauma of a lost war and the search for responsible parties. As the fictional editorial and especially the poetic end to their piece shows, extensive study of the time and its textual manifestations made them more astute and sensitive users of the language themselves.

This project, just like two others, ended up being hand-animated by our hired art student. This meant that teams came up with a detailed outline of the movements they wanted to include in their movies, and the artist then set out to draw or rather trace the necessary many versions of the image, which were then fed into a high-quality scanner and sent to Photoshop, where my students further edited the sequence of images. Since it takes at least 21 images to produce one second of moving image, the task was enormous, and results were necessarily limited as cycles had to be looped, creating numerous repetitions of the same visual effect in a clip of about one minute in length. Two other groups, seeing that their visions would not be fully accommodated that way, started to experiment on their own, looking at what they could do in programs like Photoshop and iMovie

[18]For a full transcript of this animation (linguistic corrections in square brackets), see Appendix B.

and adjusting their ideas to these limits while discovering aspects of the images through the lens of what would be technologically feasible. One student in particular developed astounding abilities in animating Käthe Kollwitz's woodcut *Hunger* (1923) in Photoshop and produced such an impressive animation that several other students later turned to him and his advice for their second projects—a wonderful example of successful teamwork that I could not have designed better.[19]

After our first individual meeting about animation projects, students went to work in the above-described manner. Researching a possible backstory for their image, they delved deeply into individual aspects of everyday life in Weimar Germany, finding out about the fate of war veterans and those left dying on the battlefields during the war, examining more closely the increasing gap in mentality between the older and the younger generations and their attitudes toward the war, the body, and modernism, Germany's guilt, and political extremism, to name a few examples. In all of this, the actual visual and the perspective the artist conveyed still guided their interpretation and thus the quest for knowledge; in other words, they no longer took for granted facts and figures that scholarly resources presented, but checked their viability against the work of art that inspired their search. A case in point: the team animating Kollwitz's *Hunger* decided to juxtapose the depicted hungry woman's lament and plea for food with a (background) reading of one of Gustav Stresemann's speeches. In this speech, he shows his keen awareness for the people's plight during Germany's disastrous famine in the crisis year of 1923 and blames it on the French and their outrageous reparations demands.[20] As the woman's voice gets drowned out by the soundtrack of Stresemann's speech (which the students recorded themselves and manipulated acoustically to sound like it was recorded in 1923, since no such historical recording was available), they understood and presented the politician's generally well-received gesture of solidarity with the poor as a political move that could not change the fate of those on whose behalf he presumably spoke; in short, the helplessness of even those politicians who did care in the face of complete crisis.

As students backed up their plans with research, they also started to write their monologues or dialogues, featuring language that was either exclusively modeled after L2 sources on which they drew or included original text from the period (editorials, literary texts, letters from the front). They searched for sounds in archives on the Internet and also on YouTube, and they started mixing and recording their soundtracks in iTunes and Garage Band. Before recording their texts, they had to consult with me once more to check for linguistic accuracy and

[19]The movie, for reference, can be found here: Amir Firestone, Ria Gerger, Animation of Käthe Kollwitz's *Hunger*, available at http://museum.middlebury.edu/exhibitions/current/node/1252.
[20]"Rede in Hagen vom 25. Oktober 1923." Gustav Stresemann, *Reden 1923–1929*. Ed. Wolfgang Elz (online at http://www.geschichte.uni-mainz.de/neuestegeschichte/801.php), p. 183; retrieved January 21, 2015, from http://www.geschichte.uni-mainz.de/neuestegeschichte/Dateien/Stresemann-Reden_1923.pdf

appropriateness. Since this was an upper-level course in German and students all possessed at least advanced-low proficiency, accuracy was not as much an issue as it would be on the lower level. However, awareness for appropriate social register was an area that we needed to develop further. The two teams worked with original texts from the period and took their stylistic-linguistic clues from these models. Other groups struggled harder to find the right tone; one group, for example, wanted to use a dialogue between a young girl of four or five years and her grandmother, yet both characters initially spoke in the same register. Encouragement to research the register of a child, ideally from the period, helped them find more age-sensitive language, and the group eventually enjoyed not only diversifying their stylistic register but also toying with vocal tones when recording their tracks.

When all of the individual pieces were in place, they were combined into a movie, either using iMovie, Photoshop, or even FinalCut Pro, in which sound- and visual tracks can be combined and edited. We subsequently work-shopped all projects in class for further fine-tuning, and students also had to respond to a long questionnaire about their experience with the project. Questions about motivation, depth of research, technological challenges, and the insights that they gained about Weimar culture and the artist on whom they had been working through reflection and their digital work were the foci of this survey. I subsequently synthesized answers into a “best practices” guide that I shared with the class before they embarked on their second project. As mentioned above, the repeat process brought about additional moments of reflection on the relationship between culture, history, and its representations, as well as the animation strategies employed in their “reading” of the image.

A final example, which I consider one of the most intriguing solutions, involves a student who chose to animate a very abstract *Bauhaus* lithograph, called *Kleines reitendes Paar* (Oskar Fischer, 1920–1921). Instead of inventing some story about the riders or the horses, the student decided to animate the idea behind this *Bauhaus* work. Choosing a soundtrack that blended the sounds of a running horse with music from the 1920s, a voice-over that reads a short sentence about the *Bauhaus*’s inception, followed by just individual words from that sentence, she identified the three basic geometrical forms (circle, triangle, square) in the print. She then added the colors that *Bauhaus* artists and teachers Kandinsky and Itten assigned to the forms (triangle, yellow; square, red; circle, blue) and let these colored figures fly into or onto the actual painting throughout her PowerPoint-generated movie, finding additional uses of basic shapes in the image all the time and thus showing the very mathematical, yet dynamic foundation of the *Bauhaus’s* graphic work. Since the work itself features numerous and intersecting lines, animating it in any other way would have been tremendously complicated. Her simple solution was inspired by two factors: the feasibility of the idea in PowerPoint and the desire to simplify the project in order to show

the "simple" thoughts behind the artist's work and *Bauhaus* aesthetics. Language was kept to a minimum but followed the visual aesthetic principles of both the *Bauhaus* and her class project, but the overall message of the animation itself was clear and powerful.

Once all projects were submitted from both rounds, we reviewed them together in class again, and we then decided which additional works that did not have an accompanying video would be included in our exhibition. The final selection—and our 16 animation projects—were sent to our institution's museum, where an assistant proficient in German added English subtitles to the clips when the semester was over. In a new version of this course, this last step could be included as a class assignment, as it is an interesting exercise in translation. However, since that was not a goal of my course, I decided to "outsource" the work.

The exhibition opened in early September 2014 and closed in early December 2014. Based on the comments we received and the notes left in the museum's comment book, our goal to reach the visitor through our project was fully reached. Reactions such as "[s]uch a mature understanding of a beautiful and terrible era," "inspiring," "beautiful exhibition," or "amazing" abounded. Student evaluations also showed a most positive response to the experiment. They appreciated the 21st-century take on class assignments and noted an increased confidence *vis-à-vis* digital technology. They treasured the urgency and relevance of our work beyond the classroom, and they seem to have felt some sort of intimate relationship—or, in *Standards* language, connection—to the works and human fate that the image depicted for them. As they reached across the century to engage with people who might very well have existed, and with a culture that they had depicted from within, they felt a sense of belonging to a community that less personal and less creative approaches to this material would not have inspired.

Conclusions

"[C]an technology transform teaching?" (Armstrong & Yetter-Vassot, 1994, p. 475). A cursory look at research literature on the topic suggests a "*jein*," the typical German noncommittal yes/no answer to a polar question. For, as much as technology enables teachers to try out new things in the classroom and "pick up students where they are" in their everyday life, most everybody agrees with Armstrong and Yetter-Vassot (1994), who state that "technology is essentially impotent without creative and imaginative application" (p. 476) and that it "does not constitute a methodology" (Arnold, 2013, p. 234). Increasingly, technology has allowed us to connect our FL classrooms to the countries in which the target language is used, and it has helped us relegate tasks to cyberspace that we would have tried to address in the real world even just 20 years ago, but this alone did not cause a sea change in FL teaching.

However, technology, taken seriously and explored in its own right, with its own logic and aesthetics, *can* and has indeed changed teaching. It has enabled us to think more creatively and boldly about the things we do and can do in the classroom. It has freed up some important classroom and office time, delegating "busy work" to cyberspace, and it has diversified the media in which we can easily work. It has also forced FL educators to think about its inclusion in courses as they educate students for the 21st century, pointing to potentially modified pedagogical responsibilities and reversing the order in which instructors tend to think about technology and teaching (content first, means second). But most importantly, it has helped us FL educators connect our classrooms much more closely to the target culture and those sharing our interest in it, thus fulfilling what Glisan (2012) considers "the most visionary of the five goal areas of the *SFLL* [*Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st century*], Communities" (p. 517). Enabling us to think and reach outside the (sometimes geographically narrow) box of our foreign language communities on campus and barely beyond, technology does not only require but also inspires "creative and imaginative application" (Armstrong & Yetter-Vassot, 1994, p. 476). I would not have thought of an alternative to the traditional didactic label next to an exhibition piece in the museum if it had not been for the feasibility of such an alternative—much like my students, who would not have thought of certain animation strategies and the potential for meaning if it had not been for certain technologies that they wished to have or were able to use.

Technology really does inspire the creative pedagogical mind, and training the next generation of teachers in "[using] the community and technology as resources for integrating and teaching culture" (ACTFL/NCATE, 2002, p. 16) is key in their future success in the profession. Being able to use the Internet, word processing, and class management systems have become commonplace by now, but there is much more to discover. Enabling students to do digitally what they might not be able to do manually (draw, animate, mix, or edit) and challenging them to express themselves in media that we consume every day has turned out to be a most worthy endeavor. Learning how to work with programs like PowerPoint, PhotoShop, iTunes, Garage Band, Audacity, and iMovie or even FinalCut adds an important skill set to a teacher's toolbox and allows him or her to devise modern assignments and approaches to class content that excite students and help improve their digital literacy as well. At the same time, inclusion of technology also requires us to reflect critically upon it—how we and others use it, what is at stake when we do, and how to become responsible participants in a digital world. The above-described class did so anecdotally. A revised version should make such critical reflection part of the course's goals.

What the use of technology enabled me to do in this class was to connect "the old" creative order and the culture in which it was rooted with our modern times, to reap the benefits of working with the visual arts and connecting them

to modern modes of interpretation and communication. Digital storytelling projects helped students reach the goals set for this class in new and sharable ways, fulfilling some of the *National Standards'* goals and adhering to principles and pedagogical processes that literacy-based teaching advocate. Through team work, discussions, but also through their animation projects, they deliberated, interpreted, and expressed themselves in the three modes delineated for the "Communication" goal (interpersonal, interpretive, presentation mode), and they improved their interpretive, collaborative, and reflective literacies. By working on works of art, they connected with cultural products, practices, and perspectives, and they predictably reached points in their work where comparisons between the target culture and their own one were inevitable (*Standards* 2 and 4, in "literacy language": improving their cultural knowledge and their ability to self-reflect). By approaching the works of art as cultural representatives of a community and as aesthetic expressions of a particular artist, students necessarily applied approaches from a range of disciplines that helped them come to a complex reading of the works, which then translated into their animation projects (*Standard* 3), results of what proponents of literacy-based approaches call "transformed practice" or "Redesigning." Finally, by sharing these projects with the general public visiting our exhibition (and eventually with the Internet community when a slideshow of our exhibition was uploaded to our museum's homepage), students reached far beyond our classroom and the (limited) community of language learners and users, leaving our museum's visitors touched and enriched (*Standard* 5).

In the introduction to this article, I maintained that my experiment with animating works of art could serve as a model for similar arts/digital humanities applications in various contexts. To be sure, the concrete situation—the challenge and opportunity to curate a real art exhibition—adds an element of relevance and excitement that not all permutations of this approach can offer to that extent, and it requires participants in the project who can do thorough research and express themselves easily. However, there are numerous other variations in which this idea can still be productive. The combination of text and visuals in such animation projects accommodates language learners at various proficiency levels—in fact, the example of our *Bauhaus* project shows that animations can be very effective with very little and potentially very basic text. Let students in beginning FL classes develop and apply a basic lexicon for talking about art (colors, angles, geometrical forms, perspective, characters) and ask them to animate particular images for the purpose. Encourage students to understand communication as a mix of textual and visual cues and let them experiment with the balance, depending on linguistic abilities. Choose only one image and let beginning students create their own animation based on their spontaneous and human understanding of the image, let more advanced students base their animations on thorough research—and make the resulting polyphony

of takes the object of reflection. If you do not want to work with reproductions and want to add a sense of real-world relevance, take your class to your school's or your local museum, ask students to find an image that they would like to use for an animation, and collaborate with the museum to acknowledge such works. If such a project is not possible, mount an online exhibition (on sites like omeka.org or collectiveaccess.org) of works that accompany or even feature prominently in a course you teach and add to the site student videos. Applications are numerous, and the benefits—motivational and pedagogical—are exciting. Combining work with the visual arts and digital storytelling approaches may not revolutionize your teaching, and Kern (2006) poses important questions when he asks: "What benefits might multimedia authoring have for linguistic expression (or communicative potential)? Is there a relationship between or important difference to discern between, say, digital performance (storytelling) and the performance aspects of writing for an audience or face-to-face speech?" (p. 202). Only further experiments with and systematic research on this kind of work will help us answer these questions. But in the meantime, let us enjoy the creativity such assignments inspire and encourage our students to push the envelope. It is well worth the effort.

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