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## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN BUSINESS GERMAN WORKSHOPS

Why do students in immersion programs usually develop proficiency in a foreign language more quickly than students in a classroom environment? The difference in total contact hours certainly plays a role, but the greater difference lies in the *experiential* character of language acquisition in an immersion setting. Because communication is necessary for achieving practical goals, and because these situations carry the possibilities of success or failure, every linguistic interaction becomes a highly charged learning experience. The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* echo the sentiment that “the more learners use the target language in meaningful situations, the more rapidly they achieve competency” (41). Practical as well as psychological and emotional rewards accompany successful communication, while failures—although frustrating, amusing or potentially embarrassing—provide even greater stimulus for long-term memory. Which of us cannot recall countless anecdotes of inappropriate language use committed by our students (or by ourselves)?

Language instructors typically incorporate some experiential learning activities in classroom instruction. Role plays and simulations allow students to act out real-life situations and to practice language use in appropriate contexts. However, because these activities carry little risk beyond peer recognition, a class participation grade and the approval of the instructor, students often lack the emotional and psychological incentives that accompany true experiential learning. Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) and Content-Based Instruction (CBI), on the other hand, are prime formats for experiential learning because students are focused on specific, content-related goals while engaged in language acquisition.<sup>1</sup> Our task as instructors of Business German is to devise

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<sup>1</sup>No attempt is made in the following article to distinguish between experiential learning and other pedagogical approaches such as LSP, CBI or FLAC; experiential learning

learning situations with “authentic” experiences that facilitate language acquisition while preparing our students for their future careers.

Language acquisition, however, is only one component of Business German. Students must not only master the technical idiom of business, but also learn to comprehend German cultural perspectives and social practices. To cite the *Standards* again, “students must develop facility with the language, familiarity with the cultures that use these languages, and an awareness of how language and culture interact in societies” (39). The ideal environment for acquiring such comprehensive knowledge is, of course, the target culture; Patricia Paulsell has shown that an internship experience abroad is the single greatest factor in hiring decisions for jobs in the international marketplace (243).<sup>2</sup> For students who cannot participate in programs abroad, and for those who desire greater preparation prior to an overseas internship, experiential learning activities in an immersion atmosphere provide the means for developing the skills and knowledge required to do business in Germany.

In the past decade a wealth of materials and resources for Business German have become available, but teaching methodologies for utilizing these materials remain largely undeveloped. The following article presents a rationale and a practical model for an experiential approach to teaching Business German that was developed for the International Business Program at Texas Tech University.

#### EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning is by no means a new idea; apprenticeships, internships, field study, studio and laboratory work all rely upon traditional methods of experiential learning. Current usage of the term, however, is largely indebted to D. A. Kolb, whose *Experiential Learning—Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (1984) utilizes constructivist psychology to present a theory of learning based on

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activities can be used in each of these instructional contexts. As Snow and Brinton note, there is a natural relationship between such content-based approaches and experiential learning: “CBI supports, in a natural way, such learning approaches as cooperative learning, apprenticeship learning, experiential learning, and project-based learning” (20).

<sup>2</sup>The objectives which Paulsell lists for internships abroad are essentially the same as those of experiential Business German courses: “It has long been the objective of such internships to afford students the opportunity to (1) acquire some technical skills associated with the career for which they are training, (2) develop familiarity with professional situations typical of their chosen career area, and (3) further develop interpersonal skills in a professional milieu...” (244).

experience and active reflection. According to Kolb, “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (38). This definition redefines the act of learning from a teacher-centered, outcome-oriented passive reception of information to a student-directed process of active exploration. In other words, students learn not by accumulating facts and concepts, but through a dialectical process of experience and analysis—in Kolb’s words, “knowledge is continuously derived from and tested out in the experience of the learner” (27). The consequences of this theory for educators, (and for teachers of Business German) is that students themselves must play an active role in the creation of knowledge.

A simplified version of Kolb’s model of experiential learning follows a four-stage cycle: planning or active experimentation, concrete experience, reflective observation and abstract conceptualization (Kolb 40; Cotton 112–119). In the initial stage, students must be allowed to plan and organize their own projects and set their own objectives. The role of the teacher is not to impart a set body of knowledge, but to establish the structure and the ground rules for each activity, to assist the students in their exploration of the material, and to create a supportive classroom atmosphere that encourages the students to value their own experience. In the second stage, students complete their activities and compile a list of observations concerning their project, the challenges faced and the learning and problem-solving strategies involved. The experience itself can be enriched through teacher guidance, preparatory research and training in observation skills. In order for the activity to be meaningful, it should relate to students’ interests and prior experience. For students of Business German, this means that projects should focus on authentic tasks related to the real world of business in Germany.

Experience by itself does not automatically entail learning. Students are often only dimly aware of the content and skills which a specific activity should develop. Before they can absorb the experience on a conscious level, it needs to be objectified, transformed from an apprehensive understanding to true comprehension. Kolb writes that “the central idea here is that learning, and therefore knowing, requires both a grasp or figurative representation of experience and some transformation of that representation” (43). The reflection stage is the first step in that transformation. The observations gathered in the previous stage form the basis for a review and critical reflection on the experience. This may take

the form of a class discussion, peer appraisal or a more formal debriefing. During reflection, students analyze the content and the presentation of their projects, identify and define unexpected difficulties, and discuss their methods of overcoming these problems. Students of Business German will often reflect on differences and similarities in business practices and cultural perspectives between the US and Europe; through reflection, they thus develop an awareness of the complexities of international business.

The final stage, abstraction, focuses student attention on the knowledge acquired during the experience. According to Cotton, “there must be a time when the appraisal of a learning experience is turned into theoretical application and abstract ideas” (118). Students begin by analyzing the topics discussed in the reflection stage and formulating a theoretical explanation of what was learned. This may take the form of group or class discussions, project reports or portfolios in which students summarize their learning experiences. An abstract understanding of their experiences and accomplishments allows them to see further applications for their acquired knowledge and to transfer their skills to new situations and challenges. This ability is of particular importance to students in international business who require flexible cross-cultural skills while working abroad.

For Kolb, the learning process continues with active experimentation, in which students test what they have learned in new, more complex situations. This is, in essence, a new planning stage that begins the cycle of experiential learning on a higher level.

For students of Business German, experiential activities allow them to *learn by doing*, by completing the tasks and confronting the challenges that await them in a German business environment. Because they are *actively engaged* in the experience—rather than passively acquiring the material from a lecture or a textbook—they are more likely to remember the content (and the language) of a class project. Although experiential learning does not focus directly on language acquisition, student interaction in authentic, contextualized, goal-oriented activities fosters the development of oral proficiency and the retention of vocabulary.

The cooperative learning aspects of this approach are valuable not only for foreign language acquisition, but for the refinement of interpersonal and critical-thinking skills in general. A common criticism within business schools is that they focus “too much attention on theories

and concepts and not enough attention on communication, decision-making, and other skills that are at least as important to career success as content knowledge” (Lamb, Shipp and Moncrief 10). Experiential learning in marketing classes—and, of course, in Business German classes—can rectify this situation by engaging “students in an active learning environment that promotes teamwork and team building, team leadership, oral and written communication skills, and listening skills and fosters the talents needed to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills” (Gremler, Hoffmann, Keaveney and Wright 43). Furthermore, because experiential learning grants students the freedom to become “co-producers” of knowledge, this approach tends to increase interest, motivation and class participation while fostering student self-confidence.

#### THE TTU INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS MODEL

Although experiential learning activities can be used in any Business German course, the International Business (IB) program at Texas Tech University has devised one-credit business language workshops on the third and fourth year level specifically tailored to this approach (Grair 112–115). French, German and Spanish coordinators each devised three separate IB workshops which were intended to fill a perceived gap between theoretical instruction in the US and practical work or internship experience abroad.<sup>3</sup> Unlike traditional Business German courses taught by a Germanist, the workshops are led by foreign MBA students (IB instructors) who assist the undergraduates in dealing with situations they would face in an international business setting. The goals of the workshops stress the practical skills that will enhance the students’ marketability: (1) oral proficiency in the language of business in Germany; (2) familiarity with business practices and current trends in Germany; and (3) sensitivity to foreign cultures and to their perspectives and ways of doing things.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Because of the differences in German, Spanish and French-speaking countries, each language track developed workshops with different formats and topics. All the IB workshops, however, retained the basic pedagogical approach of experiential learning with a native-speaker.

<sup>4</sup>In a major survey of international marketing professionals (1996), Lundstrom, White and Schuster found that oral proficiency in a foreign language and a general understanding of cultural differences ranked in the highest level of importance. Written proficiency in a foreign language, language training and business language competence, as well as a business internship abroad were ranked in the second of four tiers (9). After identifying

In an experiential learning environment, the teacher plays the role of “coach” or guide (Gremler et al., 36; Brooks-Harris and Stock-Ward 7f.).<sup>5</sup> The IB instructor, therefore, does not actually *instruct* principles of international business; rather, he or she leads the students in planning, organizing and discussing projects dealing with business in Germany. In other words, the IB instructor *guides and facilitates* the students’ own exploration and mastery of the subject matter. As a native speaker, the IB instructor can share personal information about his or her country, explain specific business and cultural practices, and help students improve their language skills. The IB instructors are uniquely qualified to fill the role of cultural intermediary because they are near the age of their students, share similar interests and career goals, and are knowledgeable about professional and social aspects of business abroad. The intimate, secure environment of the workshops as well as partner and team activities, encourage student interaction and communication in German. Oral work with a native speaker also aids students in developing discourse strategies that will enable them to interact effectively with their counterparts abroad and to accomplish such culturally sophisticated tasks as expressing opinions, arguing and persuading in a foreign environment (Bolten 285). The IB instructors who have taught the courses enjoyed the workshop approach and felt that their interaction with American students was as beneficial for them as for their students.

The workshop approach gives students the opportunity to transform theoretical knowledge into an operational understanding of business principles and cross-cultural complexities. Unlike the passive acquisition of material from textbooks or lectures, experiential learning activities require students to perform the tasks themselves, to make decisions and to test their knowledge and skills in challenging activities. This practical

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language and cultural studies as specific areas of deficiency in American MBA programs, they concluded that “this study suggests the need for an interdisciplinary, andragogical approach—one that *combines* area studies, political science, language training, communication, and general business and marketing classes” (15, emphasis in original). These findings parallel the results of a study by the German-American Chamber of Commerce (Heddrich 43–48). A review by Kennedy Vande Berg, however, found that while human resource experts do value cross-cultural competence, they often consider foreign language “survival skills” useful, but not essential for international negotiations (17–19).

<sup>5</sup>Georgia Tech also uses native speakers as experiential learning guides in their intensive summer program “Language for Business and Technology”; they refer to their assistants as “animateurs” or “facilitators” (Bettina Cothran and Catherine Marin, personal communication).

orientation also enhances motivation; by having the students assume responsibility for the course of classroom activities, they experience the excitement and anticipation that come with real-life situations and participate more strongly in the outcome of their actions. The informal workshop atmosphere of collaboration and friendly competition creates what Bisson and Luckner term “eustress,” an environment of low stress and high challenge that generates intrinsic motivation (and fun) among the students (110f.).

In order to make the workshop experience as real as possible, contact with German businesses is essential. The course therefore includes guest lectures by German business people and class excursions to German firms in the area.<sup>6</sup> Outside points of contact enhance the authenticity of the workshops and enable students to see the relevance and applicability of the topics and skills they are learning. Within the workshops themselves, the IB instructors strive to recreate the same authenticity through their choice of activities and materials. As Egbert and Vlatten emphasize, “task authenticity is a primary goal of business language instruction” (*Primer* 10); materials, role plays, simulations and projects should prepare students for the actual tasks they will be performing in the international marketplace. Although it is impossible for classroom activities to carry the same weight as real work experience, the instructor can organize assignments to cover the same material and the same sorts of tasks. Having the students research stock prices in Germany or apply to current listings in a newspaper’s *Stellenmarkt*, for example, will essentially re-create situations they might face later on.<sup>7</sup>

Because the IB workshops aim to reproduce an immersion environment, they rely almost entirely on authentic materials from the Internet and broadcast sources such as *Deutsche Welle*. Since authentic business materials in German often require sophisticated language skills, the workshops use shorter selections that require little or no didactic preparation. *Kurzmeldungen* from the business sections of German newspapers, for example, provide current information in a form that students can readily digest. Audio materials, such as short radio

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<sup>6</sup>Although visits by German business people can be arranged without too much difficulty, a geographically isolated area such as Lubbock, TX offers few opportunities for class excursions. In the future, we hope to arrange field trips to Dallas or Austin in order to include corporate visits in the German IB workshops.

<sup>7</sup>Egbert and Vlatten present a good discussion of the criteria for selecting “authentic” materials and activities. (*Primer* 11).

broadcasts from *Deutsche Welle* or the Internet are useful for practicing listening comprehension and for familiarizing students with the tone and rhythm of German media. Video materials are especially useful because they can be analyzed carefully in the classroom.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the business content, students can also examine many non-verbal aspects of communication that are important for cross-cultural interaction, such as body language and gestures, etiquette and manners, styles of dress and behavior, etc.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the workshops also include a few examples of contemporary popular culture (*Spielfilme, Popmusik, Fernsehsendungen, Werbung*); such non-business materials provide additional insight into cultural themes and an entertaining diversion from the more serious aspects of Business German.

Cultural information by itself, however, does not provide adequate preparation for dealing with the complexities of intercultural communication (Wright 333). Bolten argues that exclusively content-oriented training tends to cement rather than break down prejudices and national stereotypes (271). In order to navigate the ever-changing contexts of conversation, students require process-oriented training that enables them to recognize and adapt to perceived cultural differences. According to Bolten, this ability is best described as a general cultural sensibility:

Grundlegend hierfür ist die Fähigkeit zur Rollendistanz während des Interaktionsprozesses, also das Vermögen, generierte Kontexte im Vollzug ihres Entstehens rekonstruieren und in gewisser Weise auch antizipieren zu können. Dies setzt einerseits Empathie, andererseits aber auch Reflexionsvermögen in bezug auf den Interaktionsvorgang voraus (279).

In other words, students of Business German must be sensitive to differences (*Empathie*) and possess the ability to analyze them quickly within a German cultural framework (*Reflexionsvermögen*). This is a tall

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<sup>8</sup>Egbert and Vlatten have compiled authentic video segments from *Das Wirtschaftsmagazin* in *Aktuelle Videos für Geschäftsdeutsch*, which includes didactic materials to accompany the videos. Very useful, though not authentic and now somewhat outdated, are the video segments produced by the Goethe Institut (*Ein eiliger Großauftrag, Eine Reklamation, and Gründung einer Tochterfirma*).

<sup>9</sup>Beach and Somerholter cite additional uses of authentic video in Business German (30–35).

order for students with little or no international experience; even while abroad, Paulsell cautions, “changes in attitude do not follow automatically from mere exposure to another culture. Changes in attitude involve a ‘reordering of the individual’s cognitive structures’ which cannot be achieved in a setting from which one is unprepared to extract experiential learning” (245).<sup>10</sup> The IB workshops aim to provide students such a setting, a sheltered training environment for practicing and studying cross-cultural communication. The IB instructor, therefore, is expected not only to familiarize students with typical German perspectives, opinions and expectations, but to compare these with American views and to highlight similarities and differences. As an accessible, non-threatening cultural representative, the IB instructor is able to present engaging and personally compelling views that challenge American cultural assumptions. Through reflection in an experiential framework, students can learn to see their own culture differently and thus begin the process of “reordering their cognitive structures.”

#### IB WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES

The IB workshops utilize a variety of activities designed to encourage communication and student involvement while recreating “authentic” tasks and situations.<sup>11</sup> The relatively simple activity of extracting information from newspapers and other sources appears in the workshops as media reports and discussions. Because one can easily obtain current information from Germany, media reports offer great flexibility in dealing with ongoing issues or in accommodating student interests. Audio and video segments need to be selected by the instructor and often require didactic preparation and multiple viewings to be effective, but have the advantage of authentic spoken language. Items from print and electronic media, on the other hand, can be selected by the students themselves and are useful in teaching students how to extract, summarize and present pertinent information. In the IB workshops, students are typically assigned a general topic (e.g. recent stock market developments in Germany) and asked to prepare a very short summary of a current news item. Using the Web sites of German newspapers, students

<sup>10</sup>Paulsell cites here Steven Bochner, *Cultures in Contact* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1982) 23.

<sup>11</sup>Because learning styles vary among students, it is important to select a variety of experiential activities that will appeal to each preferred learning strategy. Brooks-Harris and Stock-Ward present a thorough overview of individual learning styles and corresponding workshop activities (75–101).

independently select a *Kurzmeldung* and compose an oral report for the class. In the ensuing discussions, the students field questions about their reports while the IB instructor provides any needed commentary on the historical, political, economic or cultural background of the topic. Media reports can be used either as a class warm-up or as an introduction to more detailed discussions or other activities (e.g. a *Börsenspiel* e-simulation).

Although students generally enjoy their research on the Internet, they often experience difficulties at first in navigating the Web in German and in locating appropriate materials without expending a great deal of time. One can limit student frustration by providing useful vocabulary and by structuring the initial tasks so as to simplify the search for information. Progressively more challenging tasks teach students to search effectively, to sort information quickly, and to evaluate materials critically. The students in the IB workshops eventually became quite adept at using German sites and they ranked the opportunity to explore the Web and contribute their findings to the class as one of the chief attractions of the course.

In addition to the factual content of media discussions, students in the IB workshops are also expected to assimilate information of a more interpersonal nature. Guest lectures and class excursions to German firms, for example, allow for personal contact with German business people and a first-hand perspective on business practices and issues. Interviews with German nationals and foreign students on campus (on such topics as education and training, career plans, consumer habits and lifestyles) help to illuminate cultural differences while providing opportunities for further interaction with native speakers. Likewise, social activities with the IB instructor and invited guests (“business lunches,” receptions, parties) allow students to become acquainted with proper etiquette and styles of behavior in a less formal atmosphere. Such interpersonal contact helps prepare students for working and socializing with German colleagues and others in a multi-cultural environment.

Because Business German examinations (*Zertifikat Deutsch für den Beruf* and *Prüfung Wirtschaftsdeutsch*) consist largely of simulated business situations and tasks, such oral and written activities typically comprise a large portion of Business German instruction. In order to ensure experiential learning and the development of critical thinking skills, however, it is necessary that the assignments be authentic and

contextualized.<sup>12</sup> Reinhart, for example, has students compose business letters expressing their particular needs in a simulation, to which he responds as the representative of his own fictional company (105–120). His students then analyze his letters and produce a suitable reply, thus creating a cycle of “authentic,” contextualized correspondence. In addition to composing résumés, letters of application, and various types of correspondence, students can also prepare memos, write or respond to print advertisements, and take notes on presentations. Note-taking is a particularly valuable exercise since it practices a necessary skill while requiring students to remain attentive during others’ presentations. Their notes, in turn, aid in later class discussion and reflection. Finally, one can also assign business translations or practice simultaneous translation if such specialized skills are included in one’s course objectives.

More involved simulations combine Web research with writing assignments; students can, for example, assume the duties of a travel agency and plan a city tour that includes cultural and historical sites as well as practical information on transportation, lodging and dining.<sup>13</sup> Alternatively, they can plan a business trip in Germany and organize logistics, itineraries and expenses. In addition to providing the resources for such activities, the Web also offers e-simulations on a number of topics (from insurance comparisons to stock market games).<sup>14</sup> Such simulations, which are nearly authentic versions of the real thing, provide invaluable feedback at the conclusion of the activity. This information gives students a sense of immediate gratification and, just as importantly, allows for detailed class analysis and reflection.

In addition to functional simulations designed to practice specific business activities, one can also use global simulations to structure an entire course. In one of the three German IB workshops, for example, students establish their own fictional company and guide it through an entire business cycle. This approach, developed by Walter von Reinhart

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<sup>12</sup>Egbert and Maxim note the lack of authentic, contextualized tasks that engage higher learning skills in these exams and the unfortunate consequence that many Business German programs also fail to address these skills (20f.). They suggest: “(a) a modification of test tasks to reflect greater authenticity and contextualization, and (b) an integration of critical thinking and problem solving into the tasks of all the tests” (20).

<sup>13</sup>Most German cities have Web-sites (with the format <<http://www.nameofthecity.de>>) which contain all the necessary information for such an assignment.

<sup>14</sup>The Institut für Internationale Kommunikation (IiK) in Düsseldorf maintains annotated Internet listings for a wide variety of Business German resources and topics, including e-simulations. The “Webliographie” is at <<http://www.wirtschaftsdeutsch.de/webliographie>>.

at the University of Rhode Island, allows students to become German entrepreneurs and to experience the challenges and rewards of running their own business. In this simulation, students themselves are responsible for designing their firm, planning production and distribution, executing transactions and overcoming difficulties created by the instructor (e.g. incorrect shipments, partial or late payments, etc.). The final project in their portfolios is an annual report with a profit and loss statement which allows the students to review and reflect upon their strategies and decisions throughout the course. As Reinhart points out, the simulation emphasizes practical applications of knowledge as well as critical thinking and problem solving: “This process forces students to think through all possible solutions, to weigh advantages and disadvantages, and to apply the theoretical knowledge they have gained in their previous course work” (101). The hands-on experience also helps students develop a functional understanding of business transactions and of their rights and obligations in the business world. Furthermore, the goal-oriented approach focuses students’ energies in collaborative projects and role play activities and leads to enhanced satisfaction: “The students’ identification with a company of their own leads to a high level of motivation, commitment, enthusiasm, and last, but not least, fun” (120).

Like simulations, role plays enable students to apply theoretical knowledge and develop communicative skills in an “authentic” professional environment. More useful than simple exchanges of information in practice dialogues (such as opening a bank account or completing a business transaction) are activities which require negotiation and decision making. Situations which present opposed priorities—e.g. requesting a raise from a boss who wishes to lower costs and increase productivity—require students to assemble and prioritize information, plan strategies and present persuasive and culturally relevant arguments in order to reach a satisfactory outcome. Role plays are especially effective when contextualized within a larger simulation; for example, students write résumés and letters of application under fictitious names which are then evaluated by teams of students who decide whom to interview during the role play activity. By monitoring the role plays and providing commentary during reflection, the IB instructor can highlight successful communicative strategies as well as the professional and cultural aspects of the interactions. In order to deal with more

sophisticated cultural themes, role plays can also be taken from the real world. According to Bolten, “geeigneter als z.B. fingierte Verhandlungsanlässe sind solche, die auf den realen Wirtschaftsalltag verweisen und entsprechende Situationen simulieren. Als Materialgrundlage bieten sich hier insbesondere Fallstudien aus dem internationalen Wirtschaftsalltag an” (281). In his example, students are introduced to the issues (but not the outcome) of a recent case study; they then assume the roles of the parties involved and conclude the negotiations on their own. During reflection, the students have the opportunity to compare their results with those of the actual case study. Such an approach not only familiarizes students with issues in the real business world, but illustrates how cultural perceptions and expectations can influence international negotiations.

Although the possibilities for experiential learning activities are endless, all the projects in the IB workshops follow the same general pedagogical framework outlined above. A fairly simple project—creating television commercials for the German market—illustrates how each stage of the experiential learning process appears in the IB classroom. The primary objective of this activity is for students to recognize cultural differences in consumer tastes and advertising; secondary objectives include familiarizing students with technical vocabulary, contemporary German styles and trends in advertising, and the practical and theoretical considerations involved in advertising a product in a foreign market. In the initial stage, *planning*, students are shown German commercials and asked to compare the imagery and presentation to typical American versions. By activating their past experience as television viewers and consumers, they are able to note similarities and important differences immediately, such as a different sense of humor, of class distinctions and preferences, and styles of dress and music. After identifying these characteristics, students view the commercials a second time and, in a brainstorming activity with the IB instructor, speculate on the reasons for the differences. After thus gaining a basic understanding of television advertising in Germany, the class is divided into teams of two or three students and asked to plan and create their own commercial. The IB instructor reminds them that they should not copy familiar American models, but “speak the language of the consumer” if they wish to be successful. Since the students will have to defend their commercial later,

they are required to prepare a short report explaining and justifying their decisions.

In the second stage, *experience*, a class period is set aside to videotape the commercials. Students are encouraged to be as creative and as innovative as possible while striving for a thoroughly professional product. If their commercial contains vocabulary or references that may be unfamiliar to the other students, they should compose a short handout explaining the material. The use of videotape in the classroom heightens student energy and motivation and, more importantly, provides a documentation of student performance that can be analyzed later. This technique is useful not only for theatrical activities such as commercials, but also for role plays and class presentations (Bolten 280). During videotaping, the IB instructor makes no effort to correct or improve the performances; such “authoritative” commentary at this point would influence students’ perceptions and slant reflection of the experience toward the instructor’s point of view.

The third stage, *reflection*, is presented as a role play activity in which each team defends its commercial to the rest of the students who act as representatives of the firm marketing the product. During the initial viewing, the class takes notes on each of the commercials and prepares questions for the role-play (they will be graded later on their participation). The IB instructor advises the class to pay particular attention to the following issues:

- Who is the intended audience? Why was this demographic chosen?
- What aspects of the product are emphasized? Why?
- How does the commercial present the product?
- Will this presentation be effective *in Germany*? Why or why not?
- Are the language and the presentation clear and correct?
- How could the commercial be improved?

During the role play discussions, each team of students presents their commercial and delivers a brief rationale outlining their deliberations and advertising strategy. The students then pose their questions and discuss their concerns with the advertising team. The IB instructor guides the discussion carefully to clear up misunderstandings and to ensure that

students offer useful comments without becoming overly critical or blindly supportive. The goal of the role play is to negotiate a consensus as to whether the class should accept the commercial as it is or insist upon specified changes.

The final stage, *abstraction*, consists of a class discussion reviewing the commercials and the role play. Up to this point, the IB instructor has played a largely passive role introducing the material and coordinating class activities. In the final discussion, however, he or she should offer personal observations on the cultural and professional aspects of the commercials and clarify any misperceptions. The IB instructor can also offer culturally authoritative opinions that serve to validate and reinforce the topics raised by the students themselves. After reviewing the commercials, the discussion is turned over to the students for self-evaluation. What has this activity taught them about business in Germany? By sharing their experiences and observations, the students conceptualize what they have learned and describe their acquired knowledge in abstract terms. In addition to vocabulary and content material, they should also consider the learning strategies and problem-solving techniques utilized in the activity. The purpose of the discussion is to make the students aware of the knowledge and skills they have acquired and to provide them with a theoretical understanding of the topic that can be transferred to new situations. The abstraction of experiential learning is absolutely vital if the students are to recognize and assimilate what they have learned. Some of the questions for students to consider include:

- What objectives were set during the planning stage and did the students reach them?
- Did the students acquire the knowledge and skills they set out to learn?
- What did they learn unexpectedly during the activity?
- What difficulties did they face and how did they deal with them?
- Which strategies were most / least successful?
- How will the knowledge and skills acquired be useful in the future?
- How could one test this knowledge? (active experimentation)

The assessment and evaluation of such an experiential learning activity pose special difficulties for the instructor. Because each activity is student-driven, one cannot expect the experience to lead to preconceived results; outcomes will vary among different classes and even among individuals of the same class. For this reason, project guidelines and objectives need to be clearly stated to minimize frustration and misunderstandings on the part of the students. The commercials themselves are graded according to content, professional correctness and linguistic accuracy, the role play according to the students' preparation and participation. The subjective nature of such evaluations can be avoided to some extent if students are required to complete the abstraction phase on their own by composing a portfolio report outlining the results of their project and enumerating what they have learned. Although a written self-evaluation favors students with superior language skills, it does provide the instructor with an objective basis for assessment. In general, experiential learning activities require process-oriented methods of evaluation which demand greater flexibility and engagement on the part of the instructor than traditional methods of outcome assessment. This is rarely a problem in small workshop courses that permit intense monitoring of student progress; it does, however, pose a serious challenge in larger classes.

#### CONCLUSION

Experiential learning offers a valuable approach to Business German instruction, but it is not without its limitations. The most obvious drawback is time. It takes considerably longer to work through an experiential learning project than to present the same material in a lecture format. If one must cover an entire textbook in a limited amount of time, then only a few carefully selected activities can be used to complement the textbook material. Moreover, not all topics fit easily into an experiential framework; many linguistic aspects of business language acquisition, for example, cannot be addressed thoroughly with this technique. The lack of instructor control over the course and outcome of activities is also an important consideration. For example, when detailed content objectives are primary, open experiential activities run the risk of confusing students rather than strengthening their comprehension of the material. Likewise, the attainment of prescribed standards becomes problematic when students are allowed to set their own objectives and

pursue their own projects. As noted above, assessment of student performance under such circumstances is beset with its own difficulties, and, as Schibrowsky and Peltier note, the potential for academic dishonesty also increases when students are given greater responsibility for their own learning. Finally, an oft repeated criticism of experiential learning is its lack of depth; although this certainly need not be the case, it is true that without thorough reflection and abstraction students will often fail to transform their experiences into useful knowledge.

Despite these limitations, experiential learning represents a very effective methodology for Business German. Beyond the general pedagogical benefits of active, student-centered learning—such as enhanced motivation and participation, increased freedom and responsibility in exploring new topics, the creation of “personalized” knowledge, and the development of interpersonal skills—experiential learning provides the important advantage of combining the disparate elements of an interdisciplinary field like Business German. In the workshop activities, students must grapple not only with the professional subject matter of international business, but with the linguistic terminology and usage of a foreign language and with the cultural practices as well as social and political issues of a foreign country. Such an holistic approach enables students to see the complexities of international business and to become sensitive to the interdependence of language and culture. The immersion environment and the “authentic” hands-on activities of the workshops also provide benefits not typically found in traditional methods of instruction. While the value of practical experience in business cannot be overstated, its utility for foreign language acquisition and for cultural awareness is equally great. Cultural themes, in particular, are difficult for students to internalize without direct contact with native speakers. Thus, by integrating personal experience into business language instruction, students can acquire the communicative skills as well as the cultural sensitivity and self-confidence needed for a successful career in the international marketplace.

The students who took the first workshops were very enthusiastic about the approach. In a course assessment survey, they surprisingly listed as “most positive” many of the aspects they had initially found difficult, including exclusive use of German, team work, and unstructured assignments that required them to plan, organize and

execute their projects themselves. They especially came to enjoy the freedom to pursue independent research on the Internet. They ranked the current information of media reports and discussions as the most interesting part of the course. For the business majors in the class, the workshops offered many of them their first chance to put into practice the theories they had previously studied; for this reason, they found the practical aspects of the course particularly rewarding. Although language acquisition was a secondary objective and very little class time was devoted to the mastery of new material, all the students reported learning “voluminous” amounts of German business vocabulary. Finally, a word of caution for Germanists; when asked about creating their own businesses in the IB workshops, one student replied: “Was fun and a neat idea. Maybe I will change my major to business.”

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