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Michael Hager
University of Toronto

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Michael Hager
University of Toronto

TEACHING BUSINESS GERMAN THROUGH PROJECTS

In today's business world, students need practical experience to augment their academic knowledge base in order to have an edge on the globalized job market. In business language instruction, we can provide our students with the next best thing to practical experience by giving learners the opportunity to apply their newly acquired knowledge in ways that simulate real-world situations. The use of the project method can play a key role in this type of learning. Michael Hager (2005) asserts that students confirm the importance and usefulness of learning through projects for later use in their professional lives.

Various experts (Shor, 1987; Kirshner and Whitson, 1997; Lave and Wenger, 1999; Stein, 1998) have suggested that learning should take place in a given situation. David Kirshner and James Whitson (1997) maintain that we acquire knowledge and skills in learning environments that show how knowledge is acquired and used in everyday situations. Learning is a sociocultural phenomenon, not merely the acquisition of general information from a decontextualized body of knowledge. Learning is not separate from the real world. It exists in thriving, complex, social environments, consisting of actors, actions, and situations. Knowledge is acquired through situations and is transferable to similar situations (Anderson et al., 1996; Wilson, 1993).

In real-world learning situations, students acquire content through tasks or activities. Bettina Lankard (1995) claims that content is inherent to doing an activity and the activity or task should not be separated from real work environments. However, Lankard maintains that learning is dilemma- and not content-driven. Learning situations should challenge the intellectual and psychomotor skills that learners will need to apply later at home, in the community, or at the workplace. This type of learning could be perceived as a tool. It explores the idea that concepts are both situated and developed continually through tasks and activities (Brown et al., 1989).

Consequently, the implementation of situated learning in foreign language instruction expands cultural horizons and at the same time influences our continuing development. Through the implementation of projects, foreign language instruction can provide learners with real-world learning situations. In the following discussion, I show how this can be achieved in Business German. But a short review of research on using projects in education is needed.

THE PROJECT METHOD

Hager (2005) has pointed out that the project method has a long tradition. It was already well established in Italy during the Renaissance when wealthy citizens and nobles assigned architects and architecture students *progetti*. More recently, John Dewey has been credited with the Project Method of Teaching and the implementation of projects in the classroom.

But what is the project method? Various experts (Gudjons, 2001; Frey, 1998; Bastian, 1997; Meyer, 1987; Cowan, 1967) have provided definitions and characteristics of what the project method is. Karl Frey (1998) sees this method as a group of students working together in a certain field of interest, planning and carrying out work, and creating a tangible product in the end. This work is carried out only with assistance from the teacher at the explicit request of the learners. According to Herbert Gudjons (2001), project learning is social learning because interaction is the basis for learning in a group environment. Hager (2005) has found that students confirm these aspects of project learning.

Some other aspects of the project method are

- Student initiative in the project
- Development of a reasonable working realm
- Interaction agreed to
- Set-up of a time-frame to meet deadlines
- Discussion of project goals
- Comprehension of students' roles in the project
- Flow of information
- Confrontation with real situations and real topics

According to Hager (2005), students feel that the experience acquired using the project method has relevancy to their future professions. This confirms Dewey's (1959) contention that the most vital point of the project method is experience. He asserts that real-life experience is more beneficial than theoretical discourse that has not been practiced, or is not relevant to real life. Through the use of this method, the learner's role in the learning process is strengthened.

THE BUSINESS GERMAN COURSE

At the University of Toronto, I designed and taught a third-year Business German course that implemented Situated Learning and the Project Method. There were 26 students, and all were taking this course because they wanted a German course without literature. All of the course partici-

pants had German as either their major or minor, but none of them had Business Administration as a major. Consequently, few if any had any real background in business.

At the University of Toronto, there are only two Business German courses: one at the third year and one at the fourth. The third-year course occurs in the fall, and the fourth-year one in the spring. Most students take the courses consecutively. In the third-year course, students receive an overview of German business, while selected German business topics are covered in more detail in the fourth-year course.

A third-year business course that provides students with a general background to business is the ideal context for using the Project Method. However, I had to decide what kind of project I wanted to use in such a course. I felt that developing a business plan would present students with the opportunity to use such general information in a real-world context. After reviewing several German business books about developing a business plan, I chose the following topics: personnel, facilities (i.e., furnishings), marketing, business types, and location (see Hofmeister, 1999 and Schlembach and Schlembach, 2003). For this course, I used the textbook *Deutsch im Berufsalltag* because it most closely followed the structure I was looking for. It provided general information about the topics I wanted to cover and it also supplied general guidelines for setting up such a project.

Because a semester at the University of Toronto has only thirteen weeks, I was limited in time for what I could do in class. After calculating time for tests and presentations of the business plans (roughly three weeks), I decided to allot one week for the introduction to the course and the project, three weeks for the topic “personnel,” two weeks each for the topics “facilities” and “marketing,” and one week each for the topics “types of companies” and “location.” On the first day of class, students received the course syllabus, which included a short description of the project (see Appendix 1). All aspects of the project represented 50% of the semester grade: 20% for the written portfolio, 15% for presentation, and 15% for writing assignments.

During the first week of class, I divided students into five groups (roughly five students per group). Students have told me they felt it was better that I divide the class into groups because many students in the course do not know their peers and have no idea with whom they would like to work. After discussing the general set up of the project in class, students worked in their groups to decide upon the name and the type of product or service their fictive German company would offer to the public. Students had the option to develop a company in any of the German-speaking countries and the company

had to be located in one of these countries. Students could not change these items after the third week of class.

Until the final presentations of the business plans at the end of the semester, we covered material out of the textbook that was relevant to setting up a business plan. The material in the textbook that had nothing to do with the five topics I had selected for the semester project was omitted. I occasionally supplemented materials from other sources that were helpful to the semester project. For example, when we talked about marketing I supplied my students with more information about business cards and logos (see Lengenfelder, 1996).

I also decided to divide the semester project into a sequence of smaller projects. Frey (1998) and Hager (2005) suggest using this technique. Through the use of smaller projects, Frey (1998) maintains that students are better able to handle the amount of work that would otherwise be overwhelming in a large project. Hager (2005) asserts that smaller projects provide more feedback at various intervals throughout the semester. By using this approach, students have the opportunity to correct and supplement the information from their smaller projects before compiling the final semester project. One example was found in the smaller project for marketing. One group's company was a bakery, and the logo they developed was not totally appropriate for German culture. In their logo, students used a loaf of bread that was not typical for Germany. They used the standard type of loaf (rectangular shape) found in North America (see Figure 1). After the presentation of the smaller marketing project, I explained to the class that this type of loaf can be found in Germany, but it is not typical for German bread. The typical loaf is oblong or round in shape. For this group's final presentation, students changed their logo and used a loaf that was more common in Germany (see Figure 1).

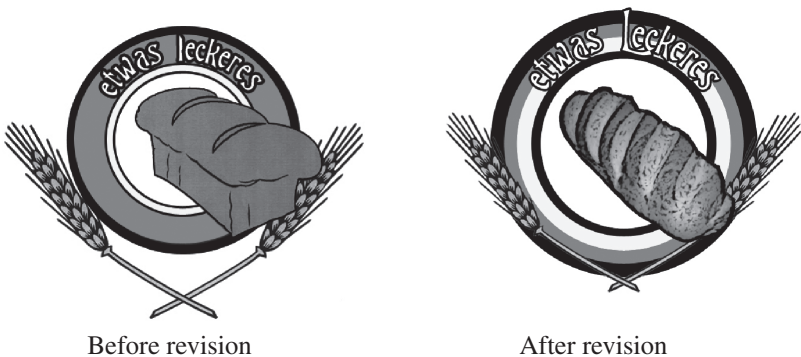


Figure 1. Logos.

The smaller projects were personnel planning and the development of a job want-ad, the planning of the company's office, the development of a logo and its application to a business card for the company, the selection of company type, a company history (*Firmenprofil*), and the company's location. These last three topics were combined into one smaller project. Hager (2005) has suggested a mini-project for the job application process that approaches the topic from the perspective of the employer. This approach seemed very beneficial to my students because they would cover the standard approach to the job application process in Germany in another course they were required to take. For this mini-project, students had to decide on the number of employees they would need, then select one of these jobs in order to write a job want-ad (first writing assignment). However, before doing so, students had to compile a list of qualifications for this selected job in their groups and also decide the kind of candidate who would be suitable for the position. Through reading assignments and class discussions, learners were prepared for this task. At the end of the period for this mini-project, students gave a five-minute presentation about the results of their endeavors.

In the second mini-project, students conceived an office for their company. As for the first mini-project, reading assignments and class discussions prepared learners for this task, and all groups did more than was required. For example, the bakery group not only developed an office for their company, but they also designed a floor plan for the bakery and café as well as the interior of the café. Another group whose company was a firm that developed solar panels designed their complete office building with a floor plan (see Figure 2). This group, for example, explained in their presentation how the building was designed to be environmentally friendly, such as its use of solar energy and the use of environmentally friendly building materials. They also explained that this building was located next to a park so employees would be able to be near nature during their breaks if they wanted. The location incorporated cross-cultural information discussed in class.

The second writing assignment for the semester was included in this section. Students had to write an inquiry (*Anfrage*) in which they requested information about furniture or equipment needed for their office or facilities. After learners completed suggested corrections to their inquiries, I gave each revised inquiry to another student to which they wrote an offer. The information necessary for writing an inquiry and an offer were covered in class before learners started the writing assignment.

The third mini-project for developing a logo and business card followed the suggested steps provided by Hager (2005). In presenting their logos and

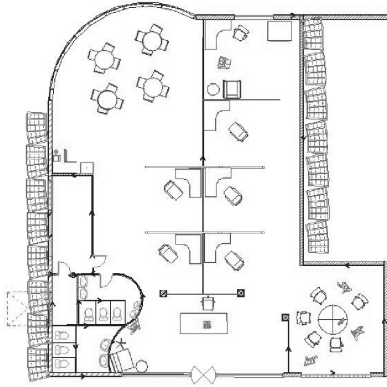


Figure 2. Floor plan of Sonnenergie.

business cards, students explained how and why the logo and the business card were designed (see Figure 3 for logo example). Students in this particular group explained that the brown background of the logo represented the warm color of coffee. The letters “O” in the name “Automokka” stood for the wheels on the van they used to deliver their products. And the coffee cup symbolized their primary product and how it was always served piping hot. This last comment provided an opportunity to talk about how Germans prefer their drinks and meals much hotter than most North Americans.



Figure 3. Logo for Automokka.

After the marketing presentations, learners wanted to know if they would have to present these items again at the end of the semester. They did, but they needed to present them in another manner. Examples of variations were (1) the bakery demonstrated how their logo was used for marketing on the bakery’s bags, (2) the brewery presented their logo at the end of the semester through the use of a marketing campaign based on beer coasters and beer labels, and (3) the coffee company showed how they used their logo on their delivery vans.

The last mini-project was the selection of the type of company for the students' firm, a history of the company, and its location. Before completing this project, we had read and talked about several types of German companies (*Rechtsform*), how a presentation of the company's history is very important for German businesspeople, and how to select a good location for a company (*Standort*). The presentations for this mini-project were interesting because they showed how learners applied the discussed material. The bakery had a very interesting history starting during the riotous 1980s in Berlin. The father of the present owner (one of the students) had the opportunity to buy a building on Winterfeldplatz that had been badly damaged during one of the riots in the early 1980s. At that time, the father felt that this building was very appropriate for a bakery. Today the bakery flourishes because Winterfeldplatz is one of the most popular areas in West Berlin.

The compilation of these mini-projects into a full-fledged business plan followed the guidelines provided by Hager (2002). At the request of learners, I also showed them examples of projects by former students before participants began putting together their own business plans. Students turned in the written portfolio of their business plan on the day of their final presentation. This was a good idea because the content and structure of the written portfolio could serve as the basis for the final in-class presentation of the business plan.

At the end of the semester I asked each member of the group to evaluate their peers in their group. They wrote several sentences about each group member and his/her work within the group. In all cases except one, students evaluated their fellow students very positively. In the one negative case, I was not surprised and I consequently lowered the student's grade for the written portfolio by 10%. At the beginning of the semester I told students that they would be evaluating their peers and these evaluations could have an effect on the final grade for the written portfolio.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding discussion we have seen how a semester project can be divided into smaller ones to reduce the stress of a large project and to facilitate students' productivity. Because the students had never completed such a project before, the use of smaller projects was very conducive to the learning process. Judging by the materials produced, it is easy to see that they were very motivated and engaged in completing the project. Several students remarked about how much they had learned in the process and felt it was very beneficial to them.

APPENDIX 1 PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The project: The project has been conceived to provide students with the opportunity to practically apply the knowledge they acquire by using *Deutsch im Berufsalltag* and reading any other supplemental information. The guidelines provided in the textbook (pp. 245–46) should be used for this project. The project can be done either as an individual or a group endeavor. The project will be turned in as a written assignment (the project portfolio) as well as an oral presentation upon completion.

The length of the written assignment will depend on the number of students in the group. The oral presentation will normally last one class session. The amount of time for the oral presentation will be equally divided up among each of the members of the group. The written project portfolio will be handed in on the day of the project presentation. Students in groups will be expected to produce more detailed information about their company than individual projects.

At the end of the semester, each group participant will evaluate each group member. This evaluation will express your views on your peers' work within the group.

The project portfolio: The portfolio is a complete written description of your fictive German company including all points listed in the textbook for the project (except the information on finance). In addition, *all writing assignments will be included in the appropriate part of the portfolio as an integrated part of the portfolio.* This means that the essays are not just attached to the portfolio but really integrated as an essential part of the project.

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