

DAAD Alumni Meeting, 20-21 March 2010

Panel: Tomorrow's Dialogue and Cooperation Between NZ and Germany

'In their Shoes, in German': A University Lecturer Experiences the Student Perspective

Nancy November, The University of Auckland

My conversation began hesitantly. 'Ich bin... ummm... gar nicht sicher... vielleicht ... Musikwissenschaftlerin? Sagt man das?' It was 1996 and I was learning German from scratch at night school at the Goethe-Institut in Wellington, in a rather desperate attempt to get up to speed with my needs. When I embarked on a research career with a focus on instrumental music of the Austro-German classical composers, I realised pretty soon that to pursue my chosen area adequately I would need to be able to read and communicate fluently in German. I needed to have dialogues not only of the metaphorical kind—those with German composers, philosophers, listeners and performers of the past—but also numerous conversations with living, breathing German research colleagues, librarians, archivists, and scholarship granting authorities.

Any discussion of dialogue and cooperation between NZ and Germany—whether it be between music scholars, scientists, business people, or friends—can move quickly and naturally to language learning. Language learning, I started to find, fosters not merely cooperation of the superficial kind, but a kind of 'deep dialogue', which arises from an increasing understanding of the ways of thinking of another nation, a knowledge of the humours, concerns, passions, and social codes of a society, which are all arguably well inscribed into its language. In my classes the Goethe-Institut conversations had quickly grown more interesting, even irresistible. 'Gemütlichkeit', 'Laune'—words that are hard to translate, require puzzling out, sound delicious as they roll off your tongue. As I learned German, I was discovering much more than just how to get by with basic answers to my basic research needs and questions. Indeed these music research needs were now becoming somewhat secondary to the fascinating new soundscape of the German language itself—the singular Satzmelodie and attractively convoluted Satzrhythmus of the German phrase—and of course the links that these phrases offered to new layers of meaning.

On the research front, though, the puzzling out of German was paying off. My DAAD-sponsored trip to Cologne in December 2006 allowed me to work for an extended period at the Haydn-Institut. During that time I made invaluable connections with colleagues at the Institut and at Cologne University. I would probably never have made the university connections, which led to a later conference collaboration, were it not for my desire to try out my rusty German conversation on the student helper at the Haydn-Institut as soon as I arrived. She, I decided, would likely be a more sympathetic listener than Herr Dr Direktor (actually I was wrong to be worried about that—and I've since found that almost all Germans that I have met are eager to encourage those who make the effort to speak German). With the student I conversed about her desire to see NZ and her PhD dissertation topic, and then she showed me around the city and university, and introduced me to the librarian and musicology staff there.

I became a student of German in Germany the following year, and then began to see more clearly the power of 'deep dialogue' that language learning engenders. Among the twenty plus students in my classes in an intensive two-month course at the Goethe-Institut in Bonn, no less than seventeen different nationalities were represented. What was so wonderful to experience was the way that we were united by our ability (comparatively good by now, but still slightly hesitant) to converse in German and by a mutual thirst to find out more about things German in general. An amazing sense of group spirit emerged as we talked about our various understandings of concepts like 'Heimatland' and, I should add, our mutual fears of the dreaded Goethe-Institut Prüfungen. I visited the Humboldt-Stiftung down the road in Bad Godesberg and had a fairly fluent conversation with a representative there. This has led, in the end, to a Humboldt research fellowship, which will take me back to Bonn for fourteen months spread over the next two years. In Bonn I worked at the Beethoven Archive, which is where I will return to work on my project on Beethoven's middle-period string quartets.

The best conversations are never linear, and my dialogue with German language learning was never simply going to take me further into my music research. The next step in improving my German was to enrol in German courses here, at the University of Auckland. It was at this point, placed firmly behind a desk and confronted by a lecturer, that it dawned on me that there was another layer of learning

that I could access through my experiences learning German. I realised, namely, that I was constantly placing myself in the position of being a student and that, as a lecturer, this was an absolutely invaluable chance to delve into ‘their world’ (that is, the students’ world) and, as it were, try on ‘their shoes’. So in the final part of this paper I want to talk about how an academic’s experiences as a learner can enable another kind of ‘deep dialogue’—that between learner and teacher.

I’ve been influenced in my thinking about this topic by the work of Daniel Pratt, on teaching perspectives (see <http://teachingperspectives.com/>). Pratt outlines five different relationships that teachers might adopt with regard to students, which he labels respectively transmission, nurturing, social reform, developmental, and apprenticeship. For the teacher, the advantages and disadvantages of these relationship types, and one’s own preferences and strengths as a teacher, can become much more apparent when one adopts the role of a student. Let’s take myself as an example, to see how this works. I am a typical transmission-heavy lecturer. I am most comfortable when I am talking, and getting through all the material that I have planned for a given lecture. But sitting in my German courses, I grew very quickly bored with such an approach. Most deadly was the grammar monologue. Not that these were often given, though. My German teachers here and at the Goethe-Institut are creative with approaches to learning and they realise that even sitting down can be the wrong approach for teaching and learning grammar. I clearly remember Barry Empsom leaping across the room at the Wellington Goethe-Institut to illustrate what happens when the prefix of a separable prefix verb gets bumped to the end of a sentence. Of course! It goes flying through the air and lands heavily. Plonk. Now I really understood and would not forget.

I am also a ‘nurturing’ lecturer, in terms of Pratt’s categories. I want to encourage my students by seeing things from their perspectives and helping them to build on their strengths. The influential pedagogue Stephen Brookfield counsels lecturers to ‘know thy students’ (*The Skillful Teacher*). My version of that epithet would be: ‘first be thou a student!’ To this end, it’s ideal to have a good disguise! A backpack and jeans can help. For women, I recommend long hair unless you’re cultivating the ‘mature student’ look. Men, leave your shirts untucked. Then, it’s not a good idea to mention to your new student friends about the lecture you’re about to give, complain about late work from students or piles of marking, or to take the side

of the lecturer when your fellow students complain about the type and amount of assessment in their courses. Just nod and make sympathetic noises. What you then stand to receive is a wealth of inside information about what it's like *to be them*. They have deadlines. Many. They have flats that break up in study week, sick housemates, back-to-back lectures, four part-time jobs to raise funds for the OE... Against this somewhat grim backdrop of real student life, one starts to think more than twice about the type and nature of the assignments that one is setting.

In my conversations with my new peers, I found out how much students dislike 'busy work'—assignments that seem pointless. Again, the German teachers and lecturers who I encountered as a student were good at getting around this. Readings, test topics, and assignments often had a social or political interest, concern, or even reform dimension. I think in particular of my forays into concepts of 'Kiwiana' for a Wikipedia article writing task in GERMAN 302. I realised that I wanted to do more of this socially- and student-relevant kind of assessment in my music history courses. From Pratt's 'developmental' perspective, I could see how mind expanding it was to then stand up, as a student, and have to give a lecture on my group's kiwiana topic, in German. As a lecturer I'd suspected that this kind of reverse role-playing, with students taking on the voice of authority, was valuably empowering. Certainly my students had always seemed to rise to the occasion. But now that I'd actually experienced this role reversal (and back again, you might say), I knew it for a fact.

Finally, I could also now see a way to really help students to think like a music researcher, which is arguably a key task for me as a university-level music lecturer. As a lecturer-turned-student I've realised how insightful it can be when a lecturer starts talking about his or her own research processes, how one fumbles, learns from mistakes and experience, and arrives at results (or tries again). In other words, it's valuable for a teacher to actually make visible his or her process as a learner in front of other learners: students then get some understanding of the realities of research. Ideally, in Pratt's apprenticeship model, the teacher designs learning tasks that enable the student to follow this process and hence experience it first hand.

All this might seem to take us some distance from the panel topic, 'Tomorrow's Dialogue and Cooperation Between NZ and Germany', or the

conference theme, ‘Bridging the Distance: NZ and Germany in Dialogue’. But has it?

I now have far more dialogue with Germany and its culture, past and present, than I could have imagined. My study of the German language has influenced my research and teaching in ways that I never envisaged. When we want to think about tomorrow’s international dialogues, what better way to approach the topic than to ‘act locally’ today—Global denken, lokal handeln, as my German colleagues also say. My music research in Germany will continue to keep my thinking at a global level, while my experiences as a German language learner continue to influence my teaching locally. For me ‘acting locally’ means finding ways of bridging distances and encouraging cooperation and deep dialogue in the classroom—dialogues between all learners, the lecturer included.