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TEACHING, ACTIVISM, AND *GRENZENLOS DEUTSCH*

The origin story of the open-access introductory German curriculum *Grenzenlos Deutsch* (GD) demonstrates that the material underpinnings of projects of scholarly activism can be as important as the theoretical ones. Brenda Bethman of the University of Missouri-Kansas City posted on Facebook in March 2015 that she wanted to write a textbook in which not all couples were heterosexual and not all women were »ninnies.«¹ When Brigetta Abel and Amy Young approached Bethman about developing just such a project, she declined, expressing doubts that a digital, open-access pedagogy project not published by a traditional publisher would be recognized as scholarly activity by her institution. Indeed, promotion and tenure committees or potential employers often give less merit to GD than to the articles written about it or to the National Endowment for the Humanities grant funding it, and by naming Bethman as a major inspiration for the project, even though she is not listed as an author or as an editor, we would like to practice feminist citation politics in addition to addressing the ongoing question of how to evaluate digital scholarly work in the humanities.²

The connection between an open-access textbook project and scholarly activism might not be immediately apparent. For the three authors of this essay, though, as for the other GD team members, work on this project is part of an ongoing feminist approach to German Studies. Our training has been intersectional and our careers have led us to focus on underrepresented perspectives and issues of social justice and equal access. We see teaching and activism as inherently connected,³ and the form of our teacher-scholar activism is shaped by

1 Grenzenlos Deutsch, *Grenzenlos Deutsch: An Open-Access Curriculum for Beginning German*, <https://grenzenlos-deutsch.com> (22.3.2022).

2 Cf. Modern Language Association, *Guidelines for Evaluating Work in Digital Humanities and Digital Media*, 2012, <https://www.mla.org/About-Us/Governance/Committees/Committee-Listings/Professional-Issues/Committee-on-Information-Technology/Guidelines-for-Evaluating-Work-in-Digital-Humanities-and-Digital-Media> (22.3.2022).

3 For a discussion of social activism within and beyond the academy, see *Rethinking Black German Studies. Approaches, Interventions and Histories*, ed. by Tiffany N. Florvil and Vanessa Plumly, Oxford 2018.

feminist literary and cultural studies, as well as by the material reality of German Studies in the United States.⁴ The field as such presents a disjuncture: while most graduate students are trained in literary and cultural analysis, faculty at the majority of institutions teach as many language-focused courses as so-called »content« courses. This reality has led us to reflect on the material circumstances of teaching and learning German in a non-DACHL (Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Liechtenstein) context, questions about diverse and equitable representation, and the community-driven collaborative efforts necessary for making such a representation possible.

GD's status as an Open Educational Resource (OER) is an act of economic justice. In the published textbook model, students bear the cost – anywhere from \$75 to more than \$200 – for an introductory German book and publishers are for-profit corporations. Students without the means are left to share textbooks or to use library reserve copies. Others make photocopies or go without entirely. However, as an OER, GD is available at no cost to students. In this model, multiple communities of creators support student learning rather than view students as a market to be exploited.

As the origin story of the project makes clear, one of the goals of the GD project is to create an inclusive and equitable curriculum, which gives students access to German language that reflects their lived experiences. Attempting to teach communicative language to a diverse population while limiting the breadth of language to a heterosexist, cis-normative, ableist image of the world leaves a significant number of students without words to describe their own lives and, therefore, without the ability to authentically communicate. Not only are the lived realities of students often absent from the traditional print materials used in the classroom, but the words and worlds for them are missing as well.⁵ This absence led us to think intentionally about the representation of a range of family models, gender and sexual identities, and abilities in the curriculum.

The teaching of German language and literature in the United States occurs in a bifurcated fashion: introductory language courses tend to be taught by graduate students or contingent faculty, while upper-level »content« courses in literary and cultural studies are taught by tenure-stream faculty. According to a

4 All of the authors and editors of GD were initially based in the United States. Several have since moved on to jobs abroad.

5 Cf. Maureen O. Gallagher et al., *Gender Plurality in the German-Language Classroom: Constructing Linguistic and Cultural Identities Beyond the Binaries*, in: *Re-doing Linguistic Worlds: Unmaking Gender Binaries, Remaking Gender Pluralities*, ed. by Kris Aric Knisley and Eric Louis Russell [forthcoming].

2007 Modern Language Association report, this two-tiered system devalues language education, but the practice persists.⁶ GD intervenes in this dichotomy by taking language learning seriously as a way to develop students' critical and analytical faculties. For example, gender is taught both as a grammatical and as a social concept, with various strategies for gender-neutral German language incorporated throughout, and gender studies experts offering reflections on the meaning of the German word *Geschlecht* in one lesson. These and other lessons prompt students to think about the multifaceted connections between languages and cultures through a critical lens.

One of the places where materiality, criticality, and representation come together is in the area of disability. The authors of this essay would hesitate to claim that they work in the field of disability studies, but as disability scholars and activists remind us, we are all only temporarily able-bodied.⁷ Disability is often described as a forgotten aspect of diversity in spite of its prevalence: approximately 15% of the world population lives with a disability.⁸ Therefore, some of the characters in GD are disabled and a lesson in »Soziale Gerechtigkeit Einheit 1« is devoted to this important topic.

While researching for this lesson, we discovered just how invisible disabled people or people with disabilities⁹ were in curricular materials. When disabled people were included in curricular materials, their representation was often problematic. One of the top search results for disability and German language teaching materials was a worksheet that used disability to teach modal verbs. It focused on what people with disabilities could and could not do: »Jolina ist geistig behindert. Sie _____ nicht so gut lernen wie andere Kinder.« Students were supposed to fill in the missing modal verb (*kann*).¹⁰ The textbook *Netz-*

6 Cf. MLA, Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World, 2007, <https://www.mla.org/Resources/Research/Surveys-Reports-and-Other-Documents/Teaching-Enrollments-and-Programs/Foreign-Languages-and-Higher-Education-New-Structures-for-a-Changed-World> (22.3.2022); Jennifer Redmann, Leveraging General Education Language Requirements to Strengthen Language Majors, in: ADFL Bulletin 46 (2020), No.1, p. 134–141.

7 Cf. Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Bloomington 2013.

8 Cf. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Disability, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/resources/factsheet-on-persons-with-disabilities.html> (20.3.2022).

9 The dual formulation here acknowledges that individuals within the disability community differ in their preferences regarding »person-first« (person with a disability) or »identity first« (disabled person) language.

10 Monikaauras, Behinderung Modalverben, Internet Second Language Collective, <https://de.islcollective.com/deutsch-daf-arbeitsblatter/grammatik/modalverben/behinderung-modalverben/80036> (22.3.2022).

werk included a different, yet equally problematic example in a short biographical text about Markus Holubek, a man who was paralyzed in a skiing accident and wrote a book about his experiences. Titled *Gelähmt sind wir nur im Kopf*, the text explained how Holubek, through training, strong will, and optimism, regained the ability to walk and »freed himself« from his wheelchair.¹¹ This is an example of what comedian and disability activist Stella Young termed »inspiration porn,« the use of disabled people to inspire non-disabled people.¹²

By contrast, GD teaches disability through the lens of accessibility (*Barrierefreiheit*). Resources like service dogs, *Blindenstreifen* and wheelchairs are introduced not as signs of deficiency, but as tools that help disabled people participate fully in society. Instead of modal verbs, GD teaches about disability using the imperative:

Inspired by this discussion of *Barrierefreiheit*, you and some friends decide to make a *Behindertenrat* (a disability council or advisory board) for the campus. Work with your small group to brainstorm ideas for how you can make your campus or school more accessible and then write a list of demands (*Forderungskatalog*) using the Sie-imperative.¹³

Instead of thinking about what people can and cannot do, students are prompted to shift their thinking to activism and social justice, taking a critical look at their campus and its physical environments, and thinking about improvements in accessibility. This lesson emphasizes as well that disability is a social construct, which is to say, the product of societal failure to accommodate as opposed to an individual deficit or defect.¹⁴

GD seeks to remove as many barriers to access as possible. As an OER, the curriculum is freely accessible to anyone with a device and internet access. There is no need for an expensive book or software license. The open-source platforms on which the curriculum is built – WordPress and H5P – conform to

¹¹ Stefanie Dengler et al., *Netzwerk: Deutsch als Fremdsprache (B1)*, Stuttgart, n.d., p. 30.

¹² Stella Young, We're not here for your inspiration, 2012, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-07-03/young-inspiration-porn/4107006> (22.3.2022).

¹³ Grenzenlos Deutsch, Soziale Gerechtigkeit Lektion 4: Behinderung und Barrierefreiheit, <https://grenzenlos-deutsch.com/sozial/e1/l4/> (20.3.2022).

¹⁴ This innovation is further evidence of GD's iterative, collaborative nature, as the inclusion of an explanation of the medical and social models of disability was introduced in response to feedback from a disabled student who participated in the GD pilot. The resulting text can be read at <https://grenzenlos-deutsch.com/sozial/e1/l4/#Kultur> (25.3.2022).

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) accessibility standards, and we use alt text and image descriptions throughout for maximum compatibility with screen reader devices and other accessibility tools. People with disabilities and other minoritized groups face many barriers to equal access to education and resources, but GD aims to accommodate all students not as an afterthought but in the very design and structure of the curriculum.

In addition to offering a diverse, inclusive, and equitable curriculum, GD originated as a collaborative, socially-engaged project based on the GD team's commitment to intersectional feminism: it is community-created and -driven. This meant that multiple voices and feedback loops were necessary. Hence, we visualize the collaborative and community-engaged work as overlapping circles. The Project Directors recruited a ten-person Collaborative Working Group to author the curriculum. This working group gradually transitioned into a twelve-member Board of Authors and Editors. The team brought their collective German Studies training and work in a variety of types of colleges and universities to the collaborative design of the curriculum, collecting content, didacticizing content, and transforming it into an online curriculum, followed by editing and ongoing revisions. This work was only possible through the multiple additional collaborations built into the project.¹⁵ Interviews with volunteer community partners provide the authentic language around which the curriculum is structured; their words, experiences, and opinions appear in the form of edited video and audio clips and transcribed texts throughout the curriculum. Macalester College, the institution from which the NEH Digital Advancement grant¹⁶ was based, offered multiple campus partners, including Studio Art faculty and students for designing illustrations, the Digital Liberal Arts Initiative for supporting the project in its early stages, and the DeWitt Wallace Library for managing open-access and digital components of the project. Faculty-Student Collaborative Research grants from multiple institutions allowed us to work closely with students as illustrators, interviewers and photographers, data management partners, and users of the curriculum. Indeed, our pilot instructors and students constituted another ring in our collaboration. They provided

15 Cf. Grenzenlos Deutsch, Credits, <https://grenzenlos-deutsch.com/about/credits/> (20.3.2022).

16 For detailed information about the NEH grant, see the corresponding White Paper including an illustration of the overlapping circles of collaboration: Brigetta M. Abel, Louann Terveer and Amy Young, *Grenzenlos Deutsch: An Inclusive Curriculum for German Studies*, National Endowment for the Humanities (Digital Advancement Grant through the Office of Digital Humanities White Paper), 2021, <https://securegrants.neh.gov/publicquery/main.aspx?f=1&gn=HAA-256186-17> (22.3.2022).

feedback and ideas for the revision of the curriculum along with contributing resources and materials to share with future classrooms.

Every step of the development and implementation of GD has been and will be enhanced through community participation and collaboration.¹⁷ As more German instructors use GD in the classroom, our collection of resources grows through crowdsourcing, continuing the sustainable practice of curricular activism.¹⁸ The development of GD draws on the active and collaborative efforts of students and teachers alike, and the process of using the curriculum pushes the participants to self-reflection and critical thinking about their own learning and teaching practices. While many of the topics emphasize social justice, we hope as well that the process of working with the GD curriculum will empower students and instructors to think critically about their learning environments, to center their own voices, and to play an active role in their linguistic and cultural education.

17 On GD and the nature of its feminist collaboration, see Brigetta M. Abel, *Feminist Collaboration. A Conversation*, in: *Cultivating Feminist Choices: A FEMiniSTSCHRIFT to Honor Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres*, ed. by Brigetta M. Abel et al., Victoria 2021, p. 135–152 or Brigetta Abel et al., *Grenzenlos Deutsch: Co-Creating Open Educational Resources through Feminist Collaboration*, in: *Feminist German Studies* 36 (2020), No. 1, p. 1–23.

18 The Creative Commons license under which GD is released allows for the free adaptation of the curriculum. It enables instructors and learners to download, remix, and reuse the content and its components in their own classrooms or learning contexts as they see fit. The open nature of the project is another way in which the curriculum engages with the broader community of German instructors and learners.