



**Communicating with German Professionals:
Widening the Scope of the Cultural Curriculum**

Charles M. Vannette, Durham

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This paper provides a detailed discussion of a university level German Business Culture course taught fully in English. Business courses taught in American German departments are traditionally offered in the fifth or sixth semester of the language track, which is a model that greatly limits a program's ability to serve the campus community. This article demonstrates the value of a business culture course delivered in English, which is taught in the general education curriculum by cultural experts in the German program. It discusses an existing course of this nature and details its design and the materials used. The paper argues that professional cultural instruction in world language departments need not be limited to classes taught exclusively in the target language.

1. Business German in the American curriculum

The emphasis on interdisciplinarity in US-curriculum design in recent years has striven to push against the traditional insularity of programs and colleges within the American university system. Leveraging the content expertise and teaching skills available across campus better educates students and can benefit all invested programs. This paper introduces a German business cultural course that was explicitly designed to meet these changing needs at the university. The paper is written from the perspective of German studies and thus has that readership as a primary audience. However, the discussed course has proved itself to be particularly attractive to business students, and has been singled out and supported by business colleges at two separate state universities for its ability to address cultural issues within the context of international business and management. Faculty and administration in these fields, as well as in other world languages, are thus equally addressed in these pages, as a course of this nature may be germane to the mission of their programs.

The final two decades of the twentieth century saw world language programs in the United States undertaking significant reconfigurations of their curricula, with an effort to broaden their cultural mission on campus and stimulate content collaboration with

disciplines outside of their college. A significant element within this movement, particularly in German programs, was the development of courses in Business German that sought to address the realities of an increasingly global economy. Currently, German instructors at the post-secondary level will very likely find themselves teaching Business German at some point in their career, regardless of their research focus or personal background. Page upon page of course descriptions, sample syllabi, and classroom links from small private colleges to the largest research institutions are readily available online. Business German has become a staple of the German curriculum in the United States. The vast majority of these courses are offered at the fifth or sixth semester language level, with a prerequisite of introductory and intermediate language instruction. Over time, the focus of these courses has moved beyond a model of language and cultural instruction as independent learning outcomes, to an approach that attempts to merge the two “allowing each to support the other,” as Grandin and Hedderich (1994: 128) note of the program at the University of Rhode Island. Responding both to the demands of the business community and to the realities of a globalized economy, such courses seek to develop both the linguistic and cultural literacy of their students. When done successfully, this is an undeniably positive element within language curricula as it helps to reposition the study of languages within the university as a vital component to the increasing internationalization of the academic campus as well as the regional and national economies. It naturally leads to cooperation and communication with colleagues in other departments and, in the most evolved cases, creates opportunities for dual degrees. The MA/MBA program at the University of Colorado is an example of one of the field’s more recent transformations.

The evolution of business language instruction has tended towards practical application. Internships within the professions are becoming more commonplace, and projects, mock interviews, and speeches are all widely used within the classroom. Each of these developments integrates cultural awareness into the course. However, at the core of this revised approach remains a very traditional emphasis on language learning at the advanced level. In most courses, cultural instruction provides an opportunity to not only expand vocabulary, but also to refine grammar, pronunciation, fluency of speech, and listening comprehension. This course structure is designed around the advanced language learner and functions well to improve her skill set. But in certain contexts and

for certain students, such a heavy focus on language fluency may have its disadvantages.

2. Limitations of the traditional model

The first drawback of the traditional model stems from an important function served by world language programs on campuses nationwide. The majority of enrolled students at the introductory language levels, and here German is no exception, are not future German majors or minors, but are more often than not students who are taking a language to fulfill their general education requirements. At Ferris State University in Michigan, the institution of focus in this article, German language classes fulfill the student's required "Global Consciousness" and "Cultural Enrichment" credits. The majority of students in introductory German courses do not continue with their language learning long enough to benefit from offerings at the advanced levels, including most Business German classes. For instructors of both German language and Germanic cultures, this places limitations on the number of students who may benefit from existing course offerings. Many German programs, even the smallest of them, offer general education courses in Germanic culture, literature, film, Holocaust representations, and the like. These courses are offered in English and are designed to reach out to a broader student base. Missing from this repertoire are courses addressing German business culture that have no language prerequisite.

A second limitation, and one that has a profound effect on smaller, less established programs, stems from their relative lack of bodies. This is particularly the case at small colleges, technical universities, and community colleges where small faculty numbers and low student enrollment in world languages results in a limited curriculum that does not allow for, or cannot sustain, regular language courses beyond the second year of instruction. A third year Business German course at institutions like these is often beyond the scope of what is logistically, or linguistically possible. At the same time, however, students at these institutions are actively seeking out courses that offer instruction in fields that they feel will be practical, applicable, and most importantly marketable to future employers. And should these courses fall within the general education curriculum, then they are doubly attractive.

Business German courses traditionally seek to prepare students to work in Germany and in the German economy. Thus, a heavy focus on advanced language instruction is

appropriate. Increasingly, more advanced programs are designed with international internships as a key component, which as Paulsell (1991: 243) already noted over two decades ago, is the “single most important factor in the development of international expertise”. These remain, however, courses designed for the advanced language learner who is already aware of the intrinsic value of studying a language foreign to him or her, and who is thus open to employment opportunities abroad. Many, if not most of these students, have arrived at this point only after completing introductory and intermediate language sequences. They have enrolled in four or five semesters of German language instruction and may have already studied abroad. These students have attended conversation tables and movie nights. They are active in the German club and are friends with other students of German. German programs are thus successfully educating their own. But as educators, we have a responsibility to contact students outside of our programs and serve the larger campus community. How successfully does the current Business German model address the needs of students outside of the Humanities?

3. The global economy at home

Charles Grair (2010: 3) argues that the survival of German programs is dependent on their ability to “appeal to increasingly career-minded students who seek positions in the international marketplace”. With Grair, I would argue the necessity for being aware of, and sensitive to the needs of the twenty-first century student, for whom future job opportunities are a central concern. I would expand on his statement, however, by stressing that the international marketplace is not tied to geography in the same way that it previously has been. International trade agreements, multi-national corporations, and in particular technology have created an environment in which international trade takes place daily in large and small towns alike.

There is an underserved community of students at our institutions, students who will be participating in the global economy upon graduation and often communicating with their German counterparts. However, the overwhelming majority of these will never work or live in a German speaking country and may feel that they have very little use for advanced German grammar or vocabulary. Even those who eventually do carry out business in other countries will most likely do so in International English, the “true

lingua franca” of international business (Carté & Fox 2008: 138). Some studies show that as much as 97% of outgoing international business communication of U.S. companies, and 96% of incoming communication is done in English (Chaney & Martin 2007: 138). What this tells us is that almost all students will be conducting business, even transnational business, in English upon graduation.

Consider also that much of a graduate’s future participation in the global economy may happen within the borders of his or her home state. Indeed, many may be directly employed by a German, Swiss, or Austrian owned company. To give but one example, a recent report by the *Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie* and the *Deutsche Industrie- und Handelskammertag* showed that Michigan, the state in which the course to be discussed was developed, ranks very high in the number of jobs provided by German owned affiliates. According to the Representative of German Industry and Trade (2011), the liaison of the *Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie* and the *Deutsche Industrie- und Handelskammertag*, over 27,000 people in Michigan are employed by German owned affiliates, more than by any other foreign country. And the numbers are even higher for states like California, Texas, and Pennsylvania.

As the economy continues to improve, not only in Michigan but across the country, these numbers are likely to remain strong. A 2015 report by *Die Deutsch-Amerikanischen Handelskammern* suggests that the impact of German owned companies in the United States will continue to have a positive effect on the economy. Of almost 2000 surveyed German affiliates, 97% of respondents expected positive revenue growth in 2016, and 87% reported equivalent or increased sale volumes in 2015 when compared to the previous year. Overall, three quarters of respondents expected to hire new employees. Currently, German companies and their US subsidiaries employ over 580,000 people in the United States, and American companies employ almost 600,000 people in Germany (Die Deutsch-Amerikanischen Handelskammern 2015).

4. Missed opportunities

What does this mean for world language programs? It appears that there are two distinct student populations that can benefit from culturally specific business programs. The core of upper level language courses is populated by those students with the linguistic skills required for a third year Business German course. Many of those are minors or majors in language programs, who are interested in obtaining professional accreditation like the *Zertifikat für den Beruf* and who may dream of one day living and working abroad.

On many American campuses, however, one finds a second student population that is either uninterested in, or as yet unaware of the benefits of language learning. There are many more who might like to pursue their interests in foreign cultures, but who have very little room in their schedule for courses outside of their major. Yet these students are serious, motivated, and career-minded. They are not naïve to the fact that their careers will demand their engagement with the global community and with customers and colleagues from all over the world, Germany included. Indeed, globalization has become a ubiquitous term for a generation of students that has come to age in this millennium. Students understand the importance of gaining access to the rest of the world in order to stay competitive.

As tuition costs in the United States continue to rise, the issue of time-to-degree becomes an increasingly important hurdle discussed not only by university administration and politicians, but among the students and their families as well. This poses challenges to intermediate and advanced language offerings, which require a significant investment of both time and money. Although the existing Business German model provides a very solid understanding of a foreign professional culture, for many students, the prerequisite of five or six semesters of language courses is not feasible. At the moment, however, few institutions offer an alternative in the form of a culturally specific course in professional communication and etiquette offered outside of the language learning sequence, but delivered by faculty who are experts in the target culture. Indeed, it appears that the opportunities of this nature that do exist are available almost exclusively in the private sector, often in the form of a workshop rather than a course.

Yet, as business scholars Washington et al. (2012: 217) note, “recent events and developments have repositioned etiquette and intercultural communication as fundamental topics requiring critical analysis in light of the increasing number of countries participating in global business transactions, various strategic international alliances, and multinational joint ventures”. The terms “etiquette” and “intercultural communication” here refer to the manners and behavior acceptable in international social and business situations, rather than to fluency in any particular language. As Germany remains a major player in the world economy, both because of its position in the European Union and because of its strength as a leading exporter, German programs have the opportunity to reach out to an underserved and diverse student population by offering general education courses in professional German culture.

5. German Professional Culture in the general education curriculum

Faculty at Ferris State University developed the course described below in 2006 in direct response to the needs articulated in the previous pages. It has been offered at least once per academic year since 2007. From 2012 to 2015, it was offered once in the spring semester as a traditional face-to-face class, and again online during the summer semester. Both face-to-face and online sections were consistently full, and overall the course enjoyed the strongest enrollment percentage during these years of any German course on campus, including the program’s first semester language class. This is a reflection of the pedagogical and programmatic goals that lie at the heart of this class, as it was specifically designed as an addition to the general education curriculum.

For readers unfamiliar with the American educational system, the general education curriculum refers to the set of courses required of all students at many colleges and universities. These required courses, often taken in the first two years of a student’s tenure, stand outside of the student’s major and are generally open to students from all disciplines. They reflect the broad-based learning and skill acquisition that individual institutions value as the core education required of educated persons. The exact parameters of the curricula vary by institution. At Ferris State University, all graduates regardless of major successfully pass courses that address writing and speaking; quantitative skills; scientific understanding; social awareness; cultural enrichment; global consciousness; and issues of race, ethnicity, and gender.

The general education curriculum constitutes a large portion of courses taught in US-colleges. Brint et al. (2009: 605) report that general education requirements constitute on average 30% of all undergraduate courses in the United States. As such, they are often the lifeblood of small departments, such as German, ensuring student enrollment and protecting a program's position in the college (Brint et al. 2009: 608). The presented course in German Professional Culture was created as a means of reaching out to students who might never have considered enrolling in a German offering. In this regard, it has been very successful. Since its development, 304 students have completed the course, 294 of whom had no prior experience with the German program. Thus, for almost 97% of these students, this course was their first contact with German culture at Ferris State.

The course is a three-credit offering, with three fifty-minute classroom lessons per week and roughly three to five weekly hours of homework. A four-pronged approach towards teaching professional German culture lies at the core of the curriculum design, and each learning track comprises approximately 25% of the student's time investment. The overall goal of the course is to provide students with a broad English language introduction to German business culture, so that they are prepared for professional relationships with Germans and German companies upon graduation. The four areas of focus are: German Professional Culture, the German Professional World Today, Professional Communication, and a Basic Introduction to the German Language. The delivery of these tracks is contemporaneous throughout the semester. Rather than four abstracted modules, students engage each of these topics on a weekly basis. Each of the learning tracks is discussed in more detail below.

5.1. German Professional Culture

The primary learning objective of the German Professional Culture track is professional cultural literacy. The track introduces students to the unique challenges of U.S.-German professional relations. The readings strongly emphasize the differences between German and American cultural values as they pertain to the professional world, while providing in-depth analysis of expectations and professional etiquette in Germany. This track functions as the foundation of the course and serves to support the objectives of the other three learning tracks.

The infrastructure of this focus area is provided by two principle texts: Patrick Schmidt's *American and German Business Cultures* and Sylvia Schroll-Machl's *Doing Business with Germans: Their Perception, Our Perception*. The breadth of topics that the authors address provides the students with their cultural introduction into who the Germans are. They also introduce students to the complexities of intercultural communication and require that students view their own culture as objectively as possible.

Schmidt's book takes a comparative approach to both German and American values, dedicating approximately the same amount of text to each culture. Schmidt begins his book with a brief discussion of the social-psychology of Geert Hofstede and the cultural-anthropology of Edward Hall. The terminology that is introduced in Schmidt's opening pages provides students with a basic vocabulary with which they can begin to talk about cultural differences, particularly in the professional sphere.

The focus of Schroll-Machl's book is on the cultural standards that orient German behavioral tendencies. The book opens with a lengthy discussion of the concept of culture and cultural norms, posing working definitions, while highlighting the ambiguity of the terms. This discussion, as well as the author's informative historical analysis of the roots of German cultural standards, is a strong compliment to Schmidt's text.

Schroll-Machl's text was introduced into the curriculum as a replacement for Greg Nees' book *Germany: Unraveling an Enigma*, which for many years had provided the cultural and historical discussion for the course. Nees' book is less academic in its approach than either that of Schmidt or Schroll-Machl, but like Schroll-Machl's text, it is dedicated almost exclusively to German cultural themes. When it was included in the syllabus, it was a favorite among the students for its wide use of anecdotes. However, there are significant hurdles when using Nees' book, of which instructors must be aware. The first challenge, and one that continuously provided moments for discussion and clarification in the classroom, is the perspective from which Nees writes. *Germany: Unraveling an Enigma* was originally published in 1999 and has not been significantly updated. Much about which Nees writes, particularly in reference to unification, is dated. Thus, time must be set aside for the instructor to update the image of Germany that is presented in the book. The second challenge with Nees pertains to

the author's approach to discussing German culture. The extensive use of anecdotes can quickly lead to generalizations on the student's part. This necessitates numerous teaching moments in which regional and generational differences in particular must be discussed. Despite these limitations, *Unraveling an Enigma* is engaging and provides material for class discussion. It is a useful text within the course, provided the instructor knows ahead of time that clarification and supplemental readings will be needed to reflect the realities of Germany in the twenty-first century.

While the foundation for the discussion of cultural differences is provided by Schmidt and Schroll-Machl, students are also assigned numerous articles that address the role of culture in more specific instances. Among others, scholarly studies of the Daimler-Chrysler merger, Walmart's failed entry into the German market, managerial practices at Siemens, and the structure of the Dual Education system function as case-studies upon which the cultural values outlined by Schmidt and Schroll-Machl can be discussed in detail. The experiences of Daimler-Chrysler and Walmart in particular provide a scaffolding for the practical application of cultural knowledge.

For the weekly reading assignments, students complete worksheets of comprehension questions, primarily in short-answer form. These worksheets are collected in class. Students also engage in online discussions with their classmates through the course homepage, where the instructor provides a question prompt. Students type their own response to the prompt, as well as a second post in meaningful response to a classmate's contribution. For the scholarly case-studies, students likewise complete worksheets and engage in online discussions. Additionally, classroom activities divide them into small teams of cultural consultants. Students address specific moments of cultural conflict evident in the case-studies and create proposals designed to avoid these conflicts in order to facilitate the ventures. These instructional strategies help ensure a rich student-centered dialog focused on cultural issues, thus deepening conceptual understanding.

5.2. Professional Writing

The third learning track is composed of two professional writing assignments for which the students prepare both rough and final drafts. Discussions with faculty in the College of Business as well as faculty in the Technical and Professional

Communication program at Ferris State University formed the guideline for the development of this learning track, which was designed to support the objectives of these two programs. In this learning track, students apply their theoretical knowledge of German culture and professionalism in two assignments that mimic professional communication.

These writing assignments have two distinct learning objectives. The first is to familiarize students with International English. As Carté and Fox (2008: 137) note, some of the greatest communication challenges in an international setting do not come from a non-native speaker's struggle with English, but from native- or near-native English speakers' failure to consciously adjust their vocabulary to conform to international standards. To this end, students work to recognize and avoid vernacular, idioms, and language that may be confusing to an international audience. The second goal of this learning track is the production of documents that will be useful to the students upon graduation, particularly form cover letters and résumés. As opposed to using German letter and résumé formats and standards, students are asked to follow American standards, as this will likely be the format that will be of greatest use to them once they enter the job market.

For their first writing assignment, students research a career with a German owned business, either in the United States or abroad, and compose both a cover letter and an accompanying résumé specific to that position. For many of the students, this is the first professional form letter and professional résumé that they produce in college, and becomes a working document to which they can return and update throughout their career.

The second correspondence writing assignment comes in the final third of the semester, once students have had significant exposure to German business culture and practices. This assignment promotes the practical application of learning by requiring students to write a letter of apology to a potential German partner. Students are provided with a writing prompt that describes a professional scenario in which cultural and professional faux pas take place. Students analyze the situation and write a professional letter of apology that addresses any cultural missteps. The focus of the assignment is not only on cultural literacy, but also on genre, audience, and professional writing.

The rough drafts of these documents are work-shopped in small groups in class and then submitted to the instructor for closer evaluation. Both writing activities require students to think of themselves as culturally specific individuals participating in an intercultural communicative experience, whereby exchange and the potential for misunderstanding are ever-present.

5.3. German Language

The fourth and final learning track for this course is a light introduction to the German language. The learning objective of this track is the student's acquisition of basic and field-specific vocabulary. Although International English will almost certainly be the language of communication, some exposure and familiarity with German benefits the students. In his book *Mind Your Manners*, John Mole (2003: 12) addresses the importance of etiquette in international business. Although it is unlikely that business will be done in a language other than English, he writes, it is advantageous and productive to know at least the most basic expressions of courtesy in the partner's language. Basic linguistic familiarity also grants insight into a people's attitudes and behaviors. None of this is of course news to language instructors, but it is important to point out that with the rise of globalization, there has been an increasing appreciation in the business community for the need for culturally sensitive interlocutors (Robbins; Abramson & Hollingshead. 1998: 23).

The language learning portion of the course focuses almost exclusively on standard phrases that the students may use to elicit information while abroad, or to illustrate to potential business partners that they have had at least some exposure to the language. The goal is not to develop an ability to communicate fluently in German, but to provide students with the tools that may open doors along the way. True language production is not the goal of the course and this learning track should not be understood as a substitute for an introductory language course.

In addition to stock phrases, students also focus on vocabulary that is relevant to business. This includes key words that professionals may encounter on a daily basis, for example *die Rechnung*, *der Vorstand*, *das Konto*, or *die Bilanz*. Students are also required to learn culturally specific terms, and to summarize their meaning and cultural significance. This includes terminology like *GmbH*, *der Mittelstand*, *IHK*, *Ordoliberalismus*, or *Mitbestimmung*. In all, the vocabulary learning in class is geared

towards the development of the student's receptive language skills, rather than towards their expressive capabilities.

6. Professional Culture in the Curriculum

A course of this nature raises questions pertaining to its role in language curricula. Perhaps of central concern is whether it undercuts a core value common to all language programs, namely that language learning is key to cultural literacy. As the focus of the course is global interaction, it does initially appear to stand apart from more traditional English language offerings centered on Germanic literature and culture. Instructors of world languages are often keen to associate communication with active language use. And perhaps we are correct to do so. However, at the heart of courses on the Holocaust, and German literature, culture, and film are learning outcomes that are designed to increase the students' understanding and appreciation not only of cultural artifacts, but also of the target culture itself. The course outlined in this paper is designed around those same values. Interaction, in any language, is hindered by misperception and cultural naiveté.

Additionally, there are practical concerns that need consideration. For the financial pressures felt by students, referenced earlier, as well as the priority at some institutions of STEM programs over the Humanities, many language programs may find themselves in a position that requires them to adapt to their changing surroundings. The closing of language programs across the United States in recent years has been widely discussed in print and departmental meetings, and does not require further explication here. Needless to say, language instruction in the United States is changing and small programs, in particular, are feeling the pressure to innovate.

A course that attracts students from 'the other side of campus' serves numerous goals. Most importantly, it allows language instructors to better promote cultural studies and global communication. It also provides a vehicle for their contribution to the academic missions of colleagues in the College of Business and other professional programs. From an administrative point of view, it can increase overall enrollment in language programs, which helps to offset smaller enrollment numbers in the upper levels, thereby protecting those courses. Furthermore, if designed strategically and in cooperation with colleagues outside of the department, a course of this type can help

build bridges between a language program and the College of Business. Horizontal growth will be an important ingredient in the future health of all programs on campus.

As this course focuses primarily on culture rather than language learning, it is very flexible in its delivery. As mentioned, it is regularly offered online during summer semesters and, with careful design, preparation, and engaged instruction, runs well as a web-based course. The course is currently being adapted in cooperation with a business college for implementation at a New England university and will be taught in conjunction with a summer study abroad program. This will create opportunities for experiential learning and summer internships abroad, making the course increasingly attractive to students and administration.

A class of this nature is not intended as a substitute for traditional offerings in Business German, nor as a competitor. Likewise it cannot function as an alternative to a traditional introductory language course. Indeed, there is very little overlap in the targeted student bodies. Rather than preparing students to communicate in German, and in Germany, this cultural course prepares students to effectively communicate *with* Germans in a professional setting. As such, it should not be redundant in a program's curriculum, but can be seen as an opportunity for close cooperation between language programs and colleagues in other disciplines.

A professional culture course, designed to meet the needs of the general education curriculum, can become a reliable offering at a time when German programs are in need of boosting enrollment. In recent years, this course, more than any other in Ferris State's German program, has attracted students from all over campus. It also provides the German program with a reliable foothold in the general education curriculum, the lifeblood of the Humanities at many institutions, and serves as the initial contact with the German program for the majority of the students enrolled. It is a model that surely will not meet the needs of every school. However, its scope is both wide and flexible. It is readily adaptable to benefit programs in need of expanding their outreach on campus, securing their position at the university, and broadening their offerings that address the realities of globalization.

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Author Biography:

Charles M. Vannette is an assistant professor of German at the University of New Hampshire in the United States. Prior to this, he was an assistant professor at Ferris State University in Michigan for four years. Dr. Vannette's primary research focuses on Robert Walser, as well as on cognitive approaches to literature. He has published one article on Heinrich von Kleist's *Die Hermannsschlacht*.

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Business German; culture course; professional culture, general education curriculum