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Beyond the Essay: Digital Documentary Productions in German-Americana Courses

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century is marked by the global expansion of digital technologies and a thriving visual culture. The familiarity with new media and an image-saturated environment is especially noticeable among the current generation of undergraduate college students. As instructors of German-Americana courses, we encounter this new generation of students who have grown up using innovative communication media for the purpose of social interaction and entertainment. Digital video, YouTube clips, video blogs, and personal recordings on smart phones, to name but a few, have become central to students' everyday interpersonal communication and access to information.[1] It therefore comes as no surprise that these new means of interaction have made their way into the university classroom, raising the question of how, rather than whether, audio-visual and digital technology ought to be incorporated into course curriculum and student assignments.

Within the field of humanities, German-Americana courses particularly benefit from an electronically enriched and digital oriented facelift. The study of the German diaspora in the United States and its effects on American culture and society draws from a rich collection of primary sources that include artifacts of German-American life, as for example: diaries, photographs, literary texts, church records, almanacs, letters of (intercontinental) correspondence, works of art, and so much more. Digital technology provides easy storage and opportunities to represent such materials and associated intellectual works in new and exciting ways.

Furthermore, digital technology not only allows for students of German-Americana Studies to have easy access to these materials through online ar-

chives and collections and to become steeped into the history and research of the German heritage in the United States; new media also provides learners with tools and platforms for tracing the influence and importance of the German element in American society, productively engaging with the results of such search, and sharing their intellectual work with a larger audience. The visual and personal nature of German-Americana Studies supports a variety of productive tasks that involve new media, such as digital role playing of historical personas, 3D modeling of historical German neighbourhoods, developing research specific websites and digital timelines, digital stories of diaspora experience, video blogs, and digital documentaries. Through many of these tasks, learners are able to connect to German-American communities, bring attention to their history, culture, and contributions to society, and support a recognition of their legacy in the digital world.

The current article outlines a digital documentary project that encourages students' productive examination of German-Americana topics with the goal of visualizing research and portraying the German experience in America in innovative ways. These short documentary films produced by learners aim to present a collection of materials and interviews that are intended to document and depict German diaspora in the United States with the main purpose of maintaining the historical records of such migration experiences. The project was implemented by second- and third-year undergraduate students in a US context core course on the subject of German-Americana taught at a large Midwestern university. The study examines how digital documentary projects in German-American Studies courses cater to students' familiarity with new communication media, thereby raising learner motivation and engagement with the historical and intellectual material, creating interaction and cooperation within the classroom, and facilitating connections to both content and German-American communities. The project, as part of an initiative toward innovative pedagogy, aims to spark more active student participation and creativity in German-American Studies courses while simultaneously adhering to specific parameters that correspond to the learning objectives and outcomes summarized in the core curriculum syllabus.

When first being confronted with a project as complex and time-consuming as digital documentaries, it may seem overwhelming both for students and teachers. Instructors of German-Americana courses may fear a loss of quality academic writing when switching to electronic literacies. Furthermore, they may be concerned about having insufficient knowledge and skills in the field of digital production, and worry that they may have to sacrifice valuable class time to answer students' questions regarding specific technological components. Students, on the other hand, may be concerned about additional workload and unfair assessment of electronic assignments.

To eliminate fears and avoid technical pitfalls, it is essential that the project is well organized and structured in a series of steps that help students with issues such as workload and time management. It is also necessary to include technical support from campus sources in order to relieve instructors from the pressure of having to become technology experts. In this paper, I will discuss the benefits of implementing digital documentary projects in courses on German-American Studies by examining multi-literacy and its application in the context of German immigration/diaspora courses. Furthermore, I will present a concrete example of the employment of digital documentary production in an undergraduate core course. Describing the stages by which the documentary project was implemented, this paper may serve as an inspiration and resource for instructors who plan to integrate video-based project learning into their curriculum for courses in the field of German-American Studies.

2. Multi-literacy

Digital documentary productions in culture, literature, and composition courses focusing on German immigration to America are new and innovative tools to encourage learners to more productively and self-reliantly engage with class material and additional sources and institutions. To be sure, this newness comes with challenges and obstacles: anyone who has been involved with digital video production may recall the expenditure of time when editing hours of footage into seconds of film clips; or the panic attacks in moments when software is malfunctioning, hard drives are crashing, or students confess to having accidently saved their edited work on university computers that automatically wipe their memory clean from one day to another. And yet, when creating digital material, students seem to be thrilled with the ability to overlay images, words, and sounds to produce effects highly appealing in the multimodal world. And instructors particularly appreciate the mesmerizing effect of the screen that promises sustained students' attention, both when producing and watching these digital documentary course assignments.

In addition to creating both challenges and benefits for faculty and students, digital documentary productions in courses on German immigration to America, as in other literature, culture, and composition courses, raise the fundamental question on whether alphabetic literacy is not enough anymore for our students or for us as instructors. In the past decades, courses addressing German immigration and diaspora included assignments such as interviewing immigrants or producing a research paper on German-Americana related topics. At the end of such courses, students were asked to present their findings in form of a class presentation and detail the outcome of their aca-

demic investigation on that topic in form of an essay. While the essay assignment allows students to engage thoroughly with the chosen topic, improve their ability to analyze and synthesize information, and further develop writing skills, it does not address students' current multimedia and multimodal horizon and their familiarity with and inclinations toward digital technology.

The complaint about the limitations of essay assignments has been more pronounced in the field of humanities in past few years. In 2013, for example, Rebecca Schuman postulated in her somewhat provocative *Slate* article to put an end to the college essay, pointing out that students put little effort and time into the production of end-of-semester papers; in fact, some students buy, borrow, or steal essays rather than putting their own thoughts to paper. She further argued that the baccalaureate is the new high school diploma: "abjectly necessary for any decent job . . . (and) as such, students view college as professional training, an unpleasant necessity en route to that all-important 'piece of paper.'"[2] While perhaps not fully agreeing with Schumann's assessment of the role of college education and the production of essays, many educators have also observed that this current generation of college students utterly lacks engagement and effort in the process of writing texts. As I previously taught an undergraduate German-Americana course with the traditional form of submitting a term paper at the end of the semester, I became acutely aware of students' disinterest in writing such essays and the lack of motivation and engagement in the writing process. Although students were asked to produce outlines and bibliographies during the course of the semester and seemingly enjoyed the field work of collecting information and interviewing people, they often could not muster enough energy, concentration, and interest for the act of writing the paper.

Looking for ways to solve the challenge of making sure that there is sufficient motivation and responsibility for writing processes, I probed the use of new media in the German-Americana classroom and noticed that students prefer tasks in which they can put aural, textual, visual, and multimodal literacies to work as they best reflect the world's current mode of communication and sharing of critical thought and ideas. In fact, the integration of new technology for productive outcome encouraged learners to a greater degree to take ownership of and responsibility for their own work. However, the use of new media does not imply an abandoning of the skill practise of writing essays altogether. Instead, I propose to expand the writing skills training and to include the use of motion and sound to create new semiotic channels and text.

As Michael Rubin explains in his publication on digital film editing, multimedia composition has the quality to engage students in combining design, production, and literacies in the classroom. He argues that "the future lies in

the convergence of media: the useful control over images and sounds."[3] The future of German-American Studies is closely connected with a multimodal and technology-enriched experience of the German element—its history, culture, and language—in the United States. The use of new media allows for a more tangible representation of that element and a larger audience to be contributor and recipient of research and its findings in the field of German-American Studies. When Rubin proposed a future of useful control over images and sounds in 2000, digital technology was in the fledging stages. Since then the development of new media and communication technology has created a plethora of means by which concepts and ideas can be depicted more visually and precisely, and with greater accessibility. As the German-American Studies classroom adapts to technological innovations, it facilitates connection and communication within and beyond the research field and encourages students to more creative and critical thinking concerning the German experience abroad. People that are involved in the preservation of German-American memory become useful resources for learners who not only have opportunity to ask questions and seek opinions from the experts but also state their particular findings in ways that resemble the current communication modes and knowledge production and reproduction through multi-literacy.

Naturally, alphabetic literacy still serves as the prime mode of communication and is in fact required when working on new technology projects such as digital documentaries. In the production of digital film, alphabetic literacy is employed in activities such as creating storyboards and writing scripts—but, unlike the traditional essay, the design of digital content exceeds alphabetic literacy and involves students in a rich composition process by which they work simultaneously in several modes and mediums, multiplying the rhetorical strategies they utilize to create meaning.

3. Benefits of Digital Documentary Projects

Students are largely familiar with new media and the availability today of affordable multimedia devices and refined digital video editing software allows for low- to no-cost and easy access to the means of producing and editing moving images.[4] The latest technologies have made digital video productions remarkably easy. The non-linear video production in digital bytes—in comparison, linear video refers to the traditional videotape editing process in which the only option for editing is to start recording at the beginning and keep recording until the end—enables revisions and reorganizing of video material such as deleting, adding, and moving of clips so that students do everything they could do in a draft workshop on text to video.

The power that images and sounds have over us and our students cannot be underestimated. To be sure, the relationship between digital video and academic discourse is still met with some hesitations in many humanities departments around the country. Indeed, essays remain an important part of most students' collegiate experience. Yet, the work on digital videos may help students rethink their strategies for composing academic texts. Multimedia compositions, especially the ability to play digital videos, enables students to visually and acoustically process their composition in a way few can process text-based essays. According to Meeks' and Ilyasova's study on digital video production, students working on digital projects tend to revise early and often, without direct provocation by the instructor, and they come to appreciate revision as an integral part of the composition process.[5]

Additionally, video-making projects enable students to move beyond the role of the passive media consumer, and instead become an active media producer. To be sure, there are excellent video productions dealing with German immigration to America, such as the PBS documentary series "Germans in America." Those documentaries can and should be included in the classroom instruction for further visualization of historical and diaspora concepts. In fact, enriching instruction with a number of short documentaries may even inspire students to produce high quality in their own digital documentary projects. Specific multimedia assignments then assist students in moving beyond the passive consumption of moving images and involving them in the production of digital documentaries which encourages self-access learning, collaboration,[6] and creativity.[7] Students become active participants in the production of knowledge and meaning in a visual and graphic form. Through the different steps of the digital documentary project, learners reflect and keep track of their progress and showcase their academic growth and level of achievement in the final project product.

Recent studies have shown that the current generation of learners tend to be more motivated when working with visual media.[8] It enables active involvement of the students in the learning process and promotes learners' ownership of their learning.[9] Video projects initiate a fusion of social and digital competencies necessary for today's global and highly technological world. Not only are students actively involved in the construction of knowledge but, through the development of digital technological skills, they also become more prepared for and therefore more competitive on the job market, which, according to Goulah, is largely influenced by digital media culture and thus requires technological know-how.[10]

The hands-on work with media technology makes it possible for students to understand and engage in the technological means of knowledge produc-

tion that surrounds their everyday lives. As they become familiar with the visual logic of knowledge production, they reflect on the possibilities and misuses of media in today's technology driven world. Especially in the most recent discourse on fake news and new media exploitation for means of ideologically motivated information sharing, it is imperative to encourage critical and reflective thinking in students so that digital image and text do not become seductive techniques for the spreading of discriminatory, supremacist, or nationalist sentiments, a concern that becomes perhaps more pronounced in a field such as German-American Studies that is invested in aspects of heritage, achievements, and experience of a particular nation abroad.

4. Implementation of Digital Documentary Project in German-Americana Course

4.1. General Scope of the Course

The digital documentary project was first implemented in the German program of a large state university located in the Midwest. Most class participants were undergraduate students who enrolled in the general education course dealing with the German experience in America because of interest in their German heritage or they entertained a general interest in German culture and history and were looking for a class to nurture that interest without having to learn the language. Some of the students majored in German, others were enrolled in non-German humanities programs, and yet others pursued their degrees in engineering, business, or the sciences. A few of the enrolled students were senior auditors who mostly functioned as advisors to individual project teams.

During the regular classroom times twice a week, the course discussed the impact immigrant groups to America have made on U.S. culture and society. More specifically, it analyzed the influence of German immigrants on American demographic development, politics, work culture, arts, literature, and architecture, spirituality, and community life. In a somewhat diachronic approach, students became familiar with substantial contributions made to the population growth, cultural development, social structure, and economic dynamism of the United States. Furthermore, they read and discussed primary and secondary texts dealing with diaspora studies pertaining to the large wave of German refugees who entered the United States in the twentieth century and significantly shaped the country's artistic, scientific, and academic landscape.

Embedded in the core course on US context, course readings and discussions addressed U.S. values and ideals as they appealed to Germans during

immigration waves from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century. Constitutional rights such as the freedom of speech, press, and religion, the right to equal justice, and freedom to own private property were discussed with respect to specific issues of German immigration to the U.S. In addition, the course pursued questions regarding U.S. immigration and acculturation policies. It analyzed (with respect to the German immigration experience) the country's historically grown process of both assimilation and cultural pluralism, and the conflicts arising during times of war such as issues of nativism and anti-German hysteria during World War I and II.

Class meetings were a combination of presentation and discussion, similar to traditional courses on German-American Studies. Short writing assignments for each session helped students to prepare for class discussions. While specific and manageable reading questions guided students through the material, other writing prompts engaged them in short research tasks and more creative text production. Students were also quizzed on course materials and completed a midterm exam that made up 30 percent of the course grade.

4.2. Teambuilding and Research Topics

Class participants were informed in the syllabus and on the first day of instruction that the course served as an introduction to the history, culture, and literature of German immigrants to North America, from the seventeenth into the twenty-first century and that they would be working in small teams throughout the semester to pick a topic, conduct research and interviews, and plan, prepare, film, and edit material to put together a short digital documentary about a topic related to the German immigrant experience. It could likely have been a challenge to convince students who have frequently encountered single authored texts during their academic studies and class assignments to work as a team on a written project. However, their familiarity with long lists of end credits in films they had previously watched in the movie theaters helped raise their awareness of filmic material being a collaboratively achieved product so that they quickly adjusted to the concept of working in a team to approach the multimodal and technological demands of digital video as a medium.

In week three, students were asked to choose two partners for their team. They were subsequently given an information sheet outlining the project and providing details on individual components, technical equipment and software, deadlines, and forms of submission. Students were also given a list of German-American institutions in the area such as German language schools, a German-American sister city program, German singing and sport societies, German businesses, historical (German) buildings, and German settlements/

ethnic groups in the area. Furthermore, they were asked to do an online search on these institutions and settlements to determine which of them is of particular interest to the team.

In the following week, students were assigned with the task of setting up a (free of charge) wordpress blog site to which each member and the instructor had access to contribute and comment. As a homework assignment, each team member then submitted a short biography about her/himself to the blog outlining her/his interests in the German immigrant experience and the selected topic. Students were also asked to provide a list of special skills/competences that would be useful for project work, e.g. digital technology skills, interest in locations/audio-visual art, organizational skills, etc. Through the reflection and presentation of their interests and skills, students developed a personal connection to their work and to their team members. They came to identify multiple, equally important tasks that are necessary for digital production work. The variety of tasks involved in the digital documentary project allowed students to both specialize according to their own interests and develop a sense of interdependency.

4.3. Research and Source Collection

As the next step, students were asked to do research on their respective topics. Similar to individual essay projects in previous courses on German-Americana, they were asked to do a search for primary and secondary literature either in form of monographs or scholarly articles. But unlike the traditional essay project, students listed their bibliographical information on the team's blog site. The benefit of posting their lists on the blog was an effective sharing of literature resources with all team members and the ability of quick intervention by the instructor to ensure the quality of sources. As a follow-up step, students were required to write a summary of two of their sources (100 words each) to inform fellow team members about the content of these sources and their relevance for the project topic. They thereby collaboratively developed an annotated bibliography outside of classroom time.

In week 7, students started to seek contact with the respective institutions and historical societies or settlements. They were asked to arrange for a meet and greet and interview session and began a source collection on their blog site comprising of graphics, music, and visuals that can be downloaded copyright and royalty-free, for instance from the *American Memories Collection* site of the Library of Congress. Some of the groups also received access to private collections and the right to publish such materials in their documentaries and blog sites. In some of the projects, especially the work with German businesses, owners were particularly grateful for the students' interest in the history of

their family businesses. They shared stories of migration from ancestors and documented cases of xenophobia during World War I and II. Reaching out to local German businesses and societies/settlements allowed for opportunities to bring together heritage Germans of the community to collaborate with university students to broaden their knowledge of the German immigrant experience to North America. The project work was enriching to both parties: students received information and material to be included in their documentaries and community members appreciated the visualization of their ancestors' migration experience in form of a short documentary production.

4.4. Technology Training

Since few instructors are experts in digital video production, it is important to involve knowledgeable technology consultants on campus. Developing a positive, working relationship with information technology consultants and technology integration specialists is instrumental to the success of the project and promotes a curriculum that values multimedia and collaboration between IT staff and faculty/students on campus. For that matter, the entire class participated in a digital editing workshop/tutorial organized by the technology integration specialist of the languages and cultures center of the university. In this workshop that took place in week 8, students became familiar with digital editing software and its many possibilities in form of cutting, sound, visual and special effects, end titles, etc.

As a follow up assignment to the "techtorial," students were asked to pick 2–3 still photographs from their source collection, create a sound file, and put them together in a 0.5 min clip to communicate a coherent message. Through this task, students were encouraged to explore the interface of the movie editing software presented in the workshop. Not only did they practice their new skills of overlaying images and sounds but they also became aware of how much time is required to produce a short video segment.

4.5. Scripting, Filming, Storyboarding

Halfway through the semester, students were asked to write the script for their documentary. Guidelines regarding length and format were communicated and students were encouraged to include interview questions. Although the script was largely a collaborative effort, each group member submitted an individual draft on the project blog that clearly indicated her/his contribution. Students were then asked to comment and edit script from group members and make suggestions regarding locations and filming schedule.

Week 10–12 were used for the recording of material, especially interviews and location shoots. Students particularly enjoyed this hands-on aspect of the project. It provided a real-world connection to their lives and allowed

them to work outside of the classroom. The benefit of digital video projects is the variety of social spaces that they are required to enter. They work outside the classroom, share their materials online, connect to IT experts, and meet with the community to film. The mobility of multimedia compositions puts learners into the workflow of the university and into the world outside of campus that makes them aware their membership in the larger community.

With respect to the audio-visual equipment necessary for filming, students had the choice of borrowing digital cameras from the information and technology service at the university or simply shooting with their own recording devices such as personal cameras or tablets. Even the ubiquitous smart phone provides remarkably good film quality. Students chose a combination of formats, both interview sequences and digital stories in which they combined a number of still photographs and "voice over" recording of speech to communicate historical background and current situations.

In week 13, team members divided the 8-minute documentary time equally among each other and created storyboards based on the script and footage taken from interviews and location shoots. Weeks 14 and 15 were designated for cutting and editing the material. Students were advised to use no/low-cost editing software such as Windows MovieMaker, iMovie, and VideoWave Movie Creator, and to seek help from the digital union at the university. They were also asked to write a project report for the blog site in which they outlined their contributions to the project, difficulties they encountered in the making of the documentary, and approaches to solving these difficulties. Furthermore, students reflected on the way the work on the project topic has influenced their perspective on German immigration and diaspora experience in general.

4.6. Assessment

In the last week of the semester, all teams submitted the final product of their digital documentary projects. Videos were submitted either through Google Drive or as an upload on YouTube or Vimeo (there are no FRPA rules against students posting their work publically). Students were informed about the documentary components to be considered in the project evaluation before starting production. Learning about the parameters of assessment nudged them toward achieving the project's particular learning outcomes such as expertise in the topic and accuracy of content, integration of sources, and choice of graphics and language suitable for academic audience. While it is difficult to grade creativity and technological skill, the former being highly subjective and the latter not directly related to the skill development and knowledge growth referred to the class syllabus, the evaluation of the digital documentaries did include the category "editing" in which transitions and

audio quality were graded as well as "creativity" that assessed the use of music, animations etc. used to convey the focus of the documentary in a creative, innovative way.

The multimedia compositions—documentary and blog—made up 50 percent of the overall course grade. However, these 50 percent were divided into 5 percent research summary, 10 percent script, 5 percent comments and feedback, 5 percent storyboard, 10 percent documentary report, and 15 percent digital documentary. Dividing the project work in several components and grading items ensured students' involvement throughout the productive stages of the project. Thereby, the production of the digital documentary offered students the opportunity to become actively involved in the learning process by combining content research, technology, and creative thinking. As writers and producers of their documentary compositions, they were involved in making decisions and assumed responsibility for and control over individual stages of the production.

5. Conclusion

Corresponding to the reality of students' lives in today's digital media culture, the German immigration to America course can be transformed into a place where students develop an understanding of and active engagement with immigrant history/diaspora studies while employing multi-literacy. The digital documentary project described in this article allowed students to work as authors and producers in a medium in which learners have traditionally been positioned as consumers. By linking the students' communication world to the German-Americana culture, literature, and composition course, the digital documentary project also offers opportunities to increase student numbers. The project involves technology that is complimentary to the careers of students majoring in disciplines such as film studies, communications, computer science, and engineering. Seeing how this core course addresses their interests in and need for developing digital technology skills, these students may choose the German-Americana course over other general education classes and perhaps find interest to continue their study of German culture and literature.

Digital documentary projects add variety to the curriculum, create a spirit of collaboration among learners, and inspire them to become more invested in their work. Despite the benefits which learners and German programs gain from multimedia compositions, it appears that instructors are hesitant to include video-making assignments in course syllabus. In order for a digital project to be successful, instructors need to consider all aspects of documentary planning and production. Only if the project is clearly structured, well

organized, and in alignment with learning objectives, will it become a powerful pedagogical tool to communicate the story of the German experience in America.

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Notes

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