

“Every historical event has many truths”: Australian Students of German Staging German History

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Abstract: In this article we reflect on a theatre production about World War I staged by university students of German in Melbourne, Australia. The project was conceptualised by German language program academics and postgraduate students. The project explored WWI using German cultural and historical primary sources. We find that students perceived a range of benefits as individuals and learners of German as a foreign language and culture through their participation in the project. In terms of improved understanding of German history, we argue that taking on a foreign – German – perspective allowed for the acquisition of nuanced historical and cultural knowledge.

„Jedes historische Ereignis hat mehrere Seiten“: Australische DaF-Studierende führen deutsche Geschichte auf

In diesem Artikel reflektieren wir über eine Theaterproduktion, die von Deutschstudent:innen in Melbourne, Australien, zum Centenario des Endes des Ersten Weltkriegs aufgeführt wurde. Das Projekt wurde von Akademiker:innen und Postgraduierten zweier australischer Universitäten konzipiert und untersuchte den Ersten Weltkrieg anhand literarischer und kulturhistorischer Primärquellen. Wir stellen fest, dass die Studierenden durch ihre Teilnahme, sowohl bezüglich des Spracherwerbs als auch bezüglich der Entwicklung ihrer kulturellen Kompetenz, Erfahrungen machten, die im regulären Sprachunterricht so nicht möglich sind, da vor allem die intensive Auseinandersetzung mit und performative Einnahme einer ‚fremden‘ – deutschen – Perspektive den Erwerb von differenziertem historischem und kulturellem Wissen förderte.

Keywords: L2-acquisition, theatre pedagogy, intercultural competency, student theatre / Zweitspracherwerb, Theaterpädagogik, Interkulturelle Kompetenz, Studententheater.

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1 Introduction

Second language (L2) learning, particularly in a tertiary educational environment, cannot be limited to the application and understanding of the language itself, but has to be accompanied by an exposure to, and engagement with, the cultures in which the L2 is used (i.e., Altmayer 2004). The importance of historical knowledge for the understanding of another culture has also been emphasised (cf. Koreik 1995; Wierlacher/Bogner 2003). In modern language learning environments, intercultural communication skills and the understanding of cultural differences that this approach foregrounds have become a key skill, a “Schlüsselqualifikation” (Altmayer 2004: 1). At the same time, research indicates that the relationship between creativity and learning is powerful, and that creativity should be used more widely in an educational setting (see Fasko 2010; Shaheen 2010). Musical training and aptitude, for example, have been found to contribute to a number of aspects of L2 learning (cf. McCarthy 1990; Rukholm 2015; Zeromskaite 2014). Moreover, teamwork has long been understood to be an important aspect of higher education, with implications for students’ employability and graduate attributes, although it has been criticised as often lacking in authenticity when practised in an education setting (cf. Rossin/Hyland 2003). The co-creation and live performance of historically inspired theatre by L2 students combines all the above desirable elements of L2 learning. In this article, we document and examine two German Student Theatre productions staged by students of the University of Melbourne and Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. Inspired by the First World War (WWI) centenary, the piece was informed by the cultural history expertise of academics and post-graduates of German Studies at both universities. The project was very successful, most notably in terms of the enthusiasm of participating students, indicating strong effects for student wellbeing. While loosely tethered to the formal curriculum, the theatre project has succeeded in developing a “connected community” of L2 learners across the two universities, a group of students who are “more likely to volunteer, participate and share resources, and (...) will be more resilient in the face of natural disasters and other rapid changes” (McCrea/Walton/Leonard 2016: 209). This resilience was in evidence in 2020 when live performances were interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic; students pressed on with a Zoom theatre performance and there remains a strong appetite to continue mounting similar performances. We conclude that theatre can contribute in myriad ways to the experience of students in a higher education setting, in terms of L2 acquisition, but also related to cultural and historical learning, wellbeing and connectedness.

Below we outline the scholarship on theatre and L2 learning before describing the process of developing and staging a German Theatre Project piece live in 2018 in Melbourne. We then consider separately the scholarship on music and L2 acquisition in light of the musical components of the performance. Having explored the pieces largely in terms of their processes and utility in an L2 learning context, we unpack the ways in which theatre performed in an L2 learning environment opens up questions of transcultural historical understanding

and affect. We conclude with some observations – particularly in the light of the disruptive effects of the pandemic on both theatre performance and student wellbeing – on the role of the project in the sense of connectedness and wellbeing for student participants.

2 Theatre and L2 Acquisition: The German Student Theatre Project

Following the definition of Schmidt and Charney (2018: 272): “creativity is the generation of a product or behaviour that is characterised by originality (Hennessey/Amabile 2010), is germane to a specific domain (Carson/Peterson/Higgins 2005) and is valued and useful within a specified context (Martindale 1989)”. The use of pedagogical theatre aligns creativity with educational purposes. It also fosters interaction, collaboration, and students’ active role in learning, which makes theatre education a valuable teaching strategy, as highlighted in the curriculum design at schools and universities worldwide (see Jackson/Vine 2013; Prendergast/Saxton 2009; Toivanen 2012). L2 learning in particular can benefit from the use of theatre either in the classroom or in an extra-curricular environment. Following an action-oriented and student-activating approach to literature in L2 learning, promoted since the so-called *kommunikative Wende* (communicative turning point) in Germany in the 1970s and ‘80s (see Bredella/Legutke 1985), the discussion of authentic, particularly shorter dramatic texts can promote reading and listening skills and speaking competence of students, as diverse communication tasks are required for a theatre project (see Hallet/Surkamp 2015; Ryan-Scheutz/Colangelo 2008). Studies on the results of full-scale, authentic-text theatre productions in L2 learning reveal general tendencies towards an improved proficiency in reading and speaking and an increased level of comfort using the foreign language. Moreover, the motivation generated by a common and public goal – a live theatre performance – as well as positive student perceptions with respect to the individual gains in various skill areas, make L2 theatre productions especially conducive to learning (see Ryan-Scheutz/Colangelo 2008). On the other hand, L2 and culture learning driven by intrinsic motivation – based on the purpose of gaining knowledge in a certain field of interest without expecting external rewards – is proven to increase the creativity of learners (see Fasko 2010: 319; Hennessey/Amabile 1987: 6–11).

Academic staff and postgraduate students in the German Studies programs of the University of Melbourne and Monash University came together in 2018 in the final year of the commemoration of the centenary of WWI. Researchers in both programs had an interest in cultural aspects of WWI Germany and decided that a German Student Theatre production that staged German experiences of WWI would provide an interesting – and potentially provocative – intervention in the centenary ‘celebrations’. Performances of plays in German had been a feature of both programs in the past, but the approach with this project centred on its timeliness and on the co-creation with students of an original piece of theatre,

drawing on primary historical, literary and musical sources in German. The focus of the piece was not on the renowned and celebrated battles of WWI – a focus that would have accorded with the celebratory approach common in Australian culture – but on the *Kleine Momente im Großen Krieg* (Small Moments in the Great War). The title of the piece reflected its incongruous focus on longing, loss, and the intimate realities of war amidst an Australian commemoration criticised by historian Bruce Scates as a “spectacle that doesn't tell us anything new about the impact of war” (Donegan 2015). The researchers provided a database of primary sources about WWI Germany that included excerpts from plays, literature, diaries, letters, army newspapers, memoirs, songs, and the like. The students, under the guidance of a member of teaching staff, a recent postgraduate as director, and a current postgraduate as musical director, worked on the texts provided to gain an understanding of the nature of personal experiences of WWI Germany as portrayed in the primary sources. The students elected to craft a fictional plot around selected primary sources that would serve the purpose of structuring the material around themes, as well as providing an English-language narrative context for the audience. Primary cultural texts, including songs, were arranged around themes, with an original narrative written by the students themselves serving as an organising device. The theatre project was lightly embedded in the intermediate-level language subjects German 5 and German 6 (level B1, Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)), with students in those subjects able to devote an hour per week of class time to script development and rehearsal. These students could submit work related to the project for 25% of their assessment in these subjects. The majority of those who took part in the project were however not enrolled in these subjects, which speaks to the intrinsic motivation of those involved. What had started as an open call within the German programs at both universities, attracted students from diverse German levels, disciplines and backgrounds and led to the development of a core group of students and academic staff, connected through their multiple interests in history, theatre, music and German language.

The undergraduate students from both universities who took part in the project had extremely divergent levels of German from roughly beginner and elementary level A1/2 through to advanced level C1 of the CEFR. While the students who chose to perform as singers and musicians came from specific studies in their respective fields and already had stage experience, the students who were considering performing as actors mostly had no prior experience. Only one student had previously studied musical theatre. This difference in performance background caused a notable gap in preparation both between musicians and actors and among the group of actors. In the early rehearsals the director therefore divided time between trust exercises, movement games and other physical activities to build group cohesion and some acting practice in English to build confidence. Thereafter the work became more focused on the performance and the usage of German. As the students had already expressed interest in Bertolt Brecht's play *Trommeln in der Nacht* (1922), they were asked to memorise the lines of every character in one of the most relevant

dialogues (Kragler's return to Anna's house) and to perform the scene. The first goal of this exercise was to expose the students to an unconventional German that every student, regardless of their level, would have found challenging. At this stage, the language gap was partially levelled and the learning of new words and structures was facilitated using gamification and the "playful frame" as discussed by Cruaud (2016: 335), who shows how through playful activities – theatre games and rehearsals leading to a performance, in this case – students are more autonomous and self-assign language-related tasks, which they are then more motivated to complete.

Once the theme of the piece had been established, the rehearsal process started with the only scene that had been unanimously approved, taken from Brecht's *Trommeln in der Nacht*. The group started rehearsing the scene that eventually became part of the final performance, mixing up actors and characters and their gender representation, and playing with potential subtexts and character motivation privately assigned by the director. This process allowed the actors to experiment with the expression of their intended emotions in a L2, noting differences from expressions in their first language, a process that is often underestimated in more traditional L2 classes (cf. Dewaele 2014). At the end of every version of the scene, the actors were asked to share what they noticed about the performance, what they thought worked, what they would have done differently and how that motivated them. It would be outside of the scope of this article to enter into the details of the process, but it is interesting to mention that the actors stressed on several occasions how they would have liked to express certain emotions that could not "come out as [they] wanted them" (class comment). In particular, the disagreement between two students became particularly productive. One of them, who had played Kragler returning home, found it unfair that, after having experienced unimaginable trauma and abuse while in war, he could not find peace once home. The other, who had played both Anna and her mother in different moments, found it more important to justify the family's reaction to life and their desire to move on when Kragler disappeared and was confirmed dead. These two perspectives inspired the contraposition of sections describing how both soldiers at the front and people at home coped with everyday life. At some point, it was suggested to have the actors write original pieces to then perform, but eventually it was thought more appropriate to give voice to people who had genuinely experienced those moments. This allowed students to empathise with the words contained in the original letters and theatre pieces, thus stimulating the L2 learning mechanisms mentioned before. At this stage, the key elements for the performance had been established and the rehearsal process continued in a traditional way, with actors being assigned roles to memorise and discussing their interpretation with the director. The performance *Kleine Momente im großen Krieg* was creatively framed by the students as an English-language narrative of two Australian teenage siblings, Jessica and Nathan, who come across family heirlooms dating to WWI while cleaning out their German great-grandmother's Australian attic. The clothes, letters and diaries they discover cause them to recollect the story of their German great-grandparents. The exploration of their ancestors' past

brings to the fore the three themes of the performance. First are the experiences of those on the German homefront, represented by the longing for different foods in Ilse Langner's *Frau Emma kämpft im Hinterland* (1979, original 1928). The focus then shifts to the fighting front; the soldiers' homesickness, loss of patriotism and fraternal conflict is represented by poetry, letters, and a scene from Otto Kretzschmar's *Halali* (1921). Finally, Jessica and Nathan discover that life after the war was irrevocably changed, as portrayed by a returning soldier who finds his lover betrothed to another (Brecht's *Trommeln in der Nacht*) and the return from the front of a husband who finds post-war domestic life transformed (Langner's *Frau Emma kämpft im Hinterland*). The scenes are interspersed with songs (on which more below) that reflect the same themes of longing, loss and the realities of war and its aftermath.

As avatars of the non-German audience members, Nathan and Jessica experience the three themes as revelatory, offering as they do a very different perspective on WWI from that which dominates in Australia and throughout the Anglosphere. Their perception and personal imagination of WWI and its consequences evolve as the family heirlooms and their associated cultural sources reveal more of the German wartime experience. For example, an initial cheerful and jesting atmosphere when the siblings find an old WWI jacket in their great-grandparent's attic disperses when Nathan and Jessica picture fighting on the front as represented in letters written by soldiers at the front and in Kretzschmar's *Halali*, in which six soldiers describe dealing with the cold and the lack of food. The arrangement of scenes here depicts an intertwining of different perspectives on misery – of *small moments* from women at home and soldiers on the front – that are transformative for the perspectives of the Australian siblings Nathan and Jessica, and, via them, for the non-German audience members.

The performance offered undergraduate students the chance to engage with historical cultural content on an emotional and intellectual level, while collaborating creatively with each other, as well as postgraduates and teaching staff. Thanks to the public performance – a tangible outcome of their work – the experience for these language learners had heightened meaning and significance. Students commented on linguistic, cultural, and motivational impacts of the project on their learning through some class comments on the project:

It was the most engaging and rewarding thing I took part in at university. We all shared in our passion of German, our passion for theatre, and for German history. We were also able to collaborate creatively, and were forced to share in the exhausting and nerve wracking, but ultimately exhilarating experience of performing on stage in a foreign language!

[It was most rewarding] to explore the intersection of German high/popular culture and history, i.e., to make the connection between theatrical/musical/etc. works and my broader studies in German language and culture.

I would say that all aspects of language are covered. Speaking, reading, and listening through learning and performing the text, and writing (...). The content of the text provides plenty of immersion in German culture.

It increases your confidence with the language, allows you to be immersed in elements of German culture and history, and the social aspects of meeting regularly with other students with mutual interests.

It helped me a lot with pronunciation. (...) having a more dedicated extracurricular way to study the language helped. I also was more engaged with learning about German culture than I was in a [regular] classroom setting.

The performances were mostly attended by fellow students, postgraduates, and staff of both language programs, by sponsors, benefactors and members of the German community in Melbourne and their associates, and by family and friends of the participants. These public performances lent the project urgency and authenticity. Given the mix of German speakers (native and L2 speakers from the levels A1 to C1) and non-German speakers in the audience, it is fair to assume that the performances held some educative value for the audience (this will be discussed further below). Moreover, in sharing their own learning process performatively, students shared the fruits of their studies with friends and family (see Jackson/Vine 2013: 3). This sharing can be satisfying for undergraduate language students, as one student commented:

Having a tangible show to perform was a great aspect, because a lot of studying at university is very insular. It is hard to show family and friends what you are learning when assessment is done purely within a classroom, and it was refreshing to be able to showcase your learning to an audience (Class comment).

3 Music, Emotion and L2 Acquisition

Musical items played an important part in the performances. This was driven by the abundance of musical talent among a student body, many of whom study music formally (German being a useful language for music careers) and among postgraduates. There are also important pedagogical reasons to place music at the centre of the L2 curriculum. Both language and music are unique to humankind (cf. Patel 2008; Talamini/Grassi/Toffalini/Santoni/Carretti 2018: 1; Zeromskaite 2014: 78). The connections between these phenomena have been studied across a wide range of areas including cognitive performance, auditory capacity and perception, vocabulary knowledge and even performance in visuospatial tasks (see Talamini et al. for a detailed review). Regarding the potential benefits of musical activities for L2 learning, scholarship has suggested that “musical training and aptitude, as well as the resulting musical expertise, positively alter aspects of L2 proficiency” (Zeromskaite 2014: 84). Among the sites identified as being advantageously influenced are

“pitch perception, subcortical processing of acoustical regularities and WM [working memory]”, and that “musical training may benefit reading acquisition and phonological awareness of time and pitch of L2 sounds in both acoustical and categorical analysis of speech” (Zeromskaite 2014: 84). In a study of the effectiveness of song on the capacity of adult learners of Italian to recall vocabulary, Rukholm (2015: 186) finds that the results “show convincingly that song can promote the rehearsal of lexical items, a necessary ingredient in vocabulary retention”. The use of popular music and song for the purposes of L2 learning is by no means uncommon. However, Rukholm argues that while the use of song in L2 learning is favoured by learners and educators alike: “it continues to remain generally unexplored because of its widespread rejection as a valuable language teaching tool” (Rukholm 2015: 185). Participating students in the Theatre Project reported positively on the effect the experience of both acting and singing had on their German language skills. While one student found acting to be the more helpful of the two activities, in a class comment they went on to say “[a]lthough learning songs is a really helpful way to remember vocab – because of the storytelling, you remember better and the repetition helps retention, too.”

We support the hypothesis that song can contribute to L2 learning, agreeing with research indicating that students of music may perform better in L2 learning. A recent study, which investigated whether music training and/or music aptitude may be linked with a better performance in L2 learning among young students, produced results that supported “a relationship between music training (but not music aptitude) and L2 skills”. This was “related mainly to the phonological aspects of L2 learning” (Talamini et al. 2018: 5). Students in this case performed better in L2 dictation which was in accordance with scholarship positing a connection between “learning to play an instrument and learning the phonological aspects of a foreign language” (Talamini et al. 2018: 5; see also Marie/Magne/Besson 2011; Sadakata/Sekiyama 2011).

Music also carries a particular emotional and therefore semantic payload, particularly for students and audience members who might struggle to otherwise fully comprehend a performance in a foreign language, as one student observed:

though I am not a singer, I found it easy to memorise the words as they were put to music than I found the playscript to remember. I did not learn all the translations to the songs I sang, but as a listener to the soloists I could decode the overall emotional weight to the lyrics (class comment).

The chosen songs reflect emotionally on the themes of each performance’s themes. For *Kleine Momente im großen Krieg* these were longing, loss and the realities of war: The ironic opening piece, *Der Soldat* by Hermann Haller, Willi Wolff and Walter Kollo (1914), mocks the stereotypical, self-important German soldier. As the play deals with the harsh reality of the front, the popular carol *Stille Nacht* by Franz Xaver Gruber and Joseph Mohr

(1816) is interspersed with a reading of a letter from the front – dated the 18th of December, 1918 – in which a soldier wonders whether he will still be alive at Christmas. The shades of despair, disillusion and grief grow in the following scenes with excerpts from Bertolt Becht and Ilse Langner and the chanted songs *Rote Melodie* by Kurt Tucholsky and Friedrich Holländer (1920), and *Ich hatt' einen Kameraden* written by Ludwig Uhland (1809) with music by Friedrich Silcher (1825) both deal with the death of a young soldier, as told by a grieving mother and by a friend who laments the loss of his comrade in battle. The performance concludes with *Es ist an der Zeit*, by Hannes Wader (1980), a piece of music with a particular historical connection between Germany and Australia about the grave of a young soldier who fell in WWI. The German singer-songwriter Wader adapted an original song *No Man's Land* (1976) by Eric Bogle, a Scottish folk singer who emigrated to Australia at the age of 25, writing German lyrics while staying true to the song's anti-war refrain. With Jessica and Nathan joining in the song, the final message of the performance is a sombre call for an end to war in which past and present finally melt together and national borders blur.

Through the musical items in performance, students connected not only with the content – that is, the historical events and cultural memory of WWI – but also with cultural elements that emerge through the close contact with a text that occurs over the course of many rehearsals. “Song”, as Rukohlm explains (2015: 186), “while also promoting cultural competence in the L2 learner, provides a context through which learners can experience lexical items being used in a realistic way as well as a relevant and meaningful context for those language learners by virtue of the issues that are typically broached in popular song”. The students' agency in choosing specific music and texts as suitable for the final performance further encouraged a deeper connection to the meaning within song lyrics. It is precisely in the combination of a deepened contextual understanding with the practical results of repetition, which forms the basis of rehearsal, that we would expect to see benefits reflected in the students' experiences of performing German musical pieces on stage as part of the theatre production. The intensity of the schedule of rehearsal together with the practical requirements for organising a public performance create the circumstances for continued and active engagement with these two elements in particular: L2 skills (especially lexical and phonological development) and a marked increase in cultural and historical knowledge of the events that formed the basis of each theatrical performance.

4 Performing Transcultural History: Theatre Pedagogy and “Szenisches Spiel”

The German programs at both Melbourne and Monash Universities include cultural studies topics taught in German as integral to their German Studies curricula. We therefore evaluate the German Student Theatre Project not just in terms of L2 learning, but also with

respect to its impact on students' learning about German-language culture and history. The project used a hybrid between the dominant understanding of cultural studies in the Anglo-sphere as an engagement with a variety of cultural phenomena and the more focused German concept of *Kulturwissenschaft* as a methodology for textual analysis. The aim was for students to immerse themselves in the German perspective through primary sources of various kinds, as well as through the denser literary representations provided by dramatic texts. To phrase it with Jan Assmann, the idea was to let the students create their own cultural memory (cf. Assmann 1995: 130–131) through the tension between the familiar and the foreign perspective. As Barbara Schmenk and Jessica Hamann (2007: 384) have pointed out, “membership in cultural remembering is not dependent on belonging per se, but on active participation, on sharing interpretations, and on taking part in acts of negotiating meaning, be they real or not”, as in the case of the German Student Theatre project. The engagement with a variety of literary and non-literary texts allowed for students to identify cultural identification patterns known to members of the German speaking community, in order to reflect on their own perspectives through a foreign lens. This method enabled participants, students as well as project leaders, to use the aspects of a foreign culture to reflect on, and become aware of, their personal biases and to create an intercultural competency that directly relates to their personal and cultural background (see Altmayer 2004: 7). The context of WWI provided a realm of memory in the sense of Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1984–1992), allowing all participants to experience this tension between identification and alienation.¹ The practical result of the students' processing of this tension was the integration of the German texts into a contemporary Australian setting.

The intense adaptation to a foreign perspective created a dialogue between the two cultural perspectives, or “discourse communities” (Schmenk/Hamann 2007: 381), which initiated students' reflection on the cultural memory that surrounds the topics with which they engaged, within their familiar discourse community. Alred, Byram und Fleming (2003: 3) have already emphasised the importance of this second aspect for transcultural encounters. It enables the realisation that culture and history are not static entities but depend on perspective and interpretation. The rather vague idea of “some kind of experience” that Alred et al. (2003: 3) understand as central for such development is, in the case of the German Student Theatre project, represented by the intense experience of creating a theatre production with its productive and reflective challenges. Through this method, participants engage with the two modes of cultural memory identified by Jan Assmann: the mode of potentiality, the archive (represented by the texts the students engaged with), and the mode of actuality, the creation of a new script as the result of a contemporary interpretation and perspectivation of the historical topics (see Assmann 1995: 130). As a result, participants actively contribute to the creation of a cultural memory that incorporates their own cultural-

¹ Nora's concept has been very popular and seems to be a very beneficial approach as a number of studies on the topic indicate (see Chudak 2015; Schmenk/Hamann 2007; Schmidt/Schmidt 2007).

historical perspectives, as well as that of the L2 culture. As one student reflected, personal experiences of historical events can usefully complicate existing historical narratives: “Every big historical, cultural event has many truths when you look at the personal experiences. They can be collective – but also divergent” (class comment). Students developed an understanding of German WWI memory by a certain incorporation of the German sources into Australian modes of commemoration.

Developed in the 1970s and 80s, theatre pedagogy has almost always had a political impetus. Modelled on practices like Augusto Boal’s (1931–2009) *Theatre of the Oppressed*, (see Boal 1979) which in turn is based on the *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Freire 2007), theatre pedagogy aimed at ‘liberating’ the subject, helping it to find its political voice and become an agent of change. But – and this is Hans-Joachim Wiese’s critique of a pedagogy (2005: 18) that is based on experience and the subject as a self-realised agent – it implicitly or explicitly buys into the bourgeois rhetoric of “Bildung” or self-formation; it is therefore always in danger of being affirmative rather than revolutionary, at least as long as it insists on developing a subject-centred, identificatory self. We could say (and this in some way is a critique of Scheller (1998) and other theatre pedagogues) that identificatory processes which operate on the basis of empathy, on evocation of one’s own experience or memory, cannot NOT subsume the Other under the umbrella of the Self, thereby always maintaining the bias of the subject and its social context. To remain aware of these ‘biases’ or to continuously question one’s own positioning is – we would suggest – imperative in any theatrical and/or pedagogical practice. Theatre pedagogical practice at least has the advantage that it is not bound by traditional aesthetic parameters and can therefore more readily deviate from a normative and habitual reality and can explore the interface or “crisis” between aesthetics or ethics by allowing the participants “freedom” to explore their social, political, and historical situation or constraints (see Wiese 2005: 18).

Theatre pedagogy in the L2 classroom adds another layer of complexity. Learning a language is always already performative (see Schewe 2007). It involves speaking ‘differently’, that means assuming a language and a voice, as well as social behaviour, habitus, and patterns, which are alien and alienating. Angelika Mairose-Parovsky (1997) suggests that working dramatically or theatrically in the L2 classroom should go beyond mere role playing and should instead enable the learner to master the transcultural *Sprechhandeln* (speech acts). We believe that, while mastery of the L2 within its social context seems to be a laudable goal, the experience of alienation is actually integral to the L2 learning experience. We as teachers might too readily encourage “identification” with the German language context, for the epistemic potential of such a situation also lies in the fact that we tolerate at times unsettling differences. Empathetic identification needs to always be balanced or counteracted by allowing for differences to unsettle us.

Working with history in the pedagogical context of theatre is not an unproblematic undertaking. It includes a particular way of conceptualising the historical event in question, i.e.,

WWI.² For example, students framed single scenes taken from Brecht or Langner, letters from soldiers, poems, and songs, by developing and writing a framing narrative in English to create a coherent storyline. The event or the imagined experience of the WWI became accessible by way of a family story. Through the familial link presented in the framing narrative, the students appropriated or contextualised the past, connecting empathetically with the events across the temporal and transcultural divide. They inscribed themselves into the German war story as a “witness”, albeit a vicarious witness, attesting to the hardship, stoicism and the occasional heroism proclaimed by the characters they played. Their affective investment became visible over the course of the production process, producing an increasing sense of identification with their characters and with the language and habitus, which was at first so foreign to them. But they also produced an effect, which we would like to call with Joy Damousi, the “sentimentalising of wartime experience” (Damousi 2010: 101). That means, the distant historical event was integrated into a present-day narrative which attests to a very particular Australian approach to the memory of WWI. A narrative allowing the individual and their family to “locate themselves in the national story” (Damousi 2010: 103) and which is prone to be used or, better, misused for political and nationalistic purposes. While WWI from a German perspective is largely an unintegrated, disembodied event, which seems to resist an experiential, identificatory approach, our students were informed by the emotional response which favours a personal, familial engagement with WWI. It deconstructed the German history of WWI and reconstructed or translated it into an Australian culture of remembrance. This approach reduced the alienating effects of the material the students had to deal with. At the same time, it produced an alienation effect in the German audience members, who could see their own history presented as relatable. To conclude the process of production and the work in general, this approach to the material and to the history of WWI required to be reflected and interpreted by all participants to understand the social and political parameters and biases which informed both the students and the project leaders.

5 Beyond “Group Work”: Theatre’s Role in Connectedness and Wellbeing of L2 Learners

We conclude that our German Student Theatre project provided opportunities for students to harness their intrinsic motivation, to improve their L2 skills and vocabulary, to explore different cultures of remembering, and to gain nuanced knowledge of key historical events. We conclude our discussion by reflecting on an overarching benefit of the project, namely

² For a discussion on how to explore history through theatre practice, see Schreiber (2006).

its fostering of connectedness and, relatedly, student wellbeing. The first two years³ of the project saw the formation of a strong core of students and staff for whom the German Student Theatre was the key event of their German study, or even of their undergraduate degree:

It was the most engaging and rewarding thing I took part in at university. We all shared in our passion of German, our passion for theatre, and for German history. We were also able to collaborate creatively, and were forced to share in the exhausting and nerve wracking, but ultimately exhilarating experience of performing on stage in a foreign language!

The benefits were obviously in the amount of practice with all aspects of language you are able to achieve in such a fun way, but also the amazing people and friends/colleagues you meet in the process (class comments).

The project thus created in a very compressed timeframe what we would call, with Bridgstock and Tippett, a “connected community” of learners. Connected communities “are cohesive and well-connected[,] offer[ing] greater levels of support, sharing of resources, and the potential to restore and maintain a state of positive wellbeing for all community members” (Bridgstock/Tippett 2019: 4). The connected learning that occurs within such a community is characterised by the integration of students’ interests from other spheres of learning and life (such as musical or dramatic interests). According to scholars of connectedness learning, education is more meaningful and effective where there are “supports and mechanisms for building environments that connect learning across the spheres of interests, peer culture and academic life” (Ito/Gutiérrez/Livingstone/Penuel/Rhodes/Salen/Schor/Sefton-Green/Watkins 2013: 5). The collaborative project’s explicit inclusion of musical elements was based on staff’s knowledge of the large number of German Studies students with musical interests and experience, however the project also attracted history buffs and those with interests in theatre and design.

While teamwork or group work have become a mainstay of higher education (see Rossin/Hyland 2003), especially in the L2 classroom, due to the need for communicative approaches and practice, the German Student Theatre project managed to transcend the shortcomings of group work in an education setting. Group work in a classroom often lacks authenticity, as Bridgstock and Tippett (2019: 9) point out:

Assigning students from the same course to small groups to work on a problem in class is in many ways unrepresentative of how a group would function in the true working environment. Teamwork in the real world involves interacting with people from different disciplinary backgrounds, with different agendas and perspectives.

³ In 2019 many of the same staff and students collaborated using a similar method on a project commemorating the fall of the Berlin Wall thirty years earlier.

In the real world, the problem is rarely presented neatly, with people assigned to roles, but can be highly emergent and both the aims and roles contested.

The collaborative, creative approach used in the German Student Theatre project, with joint participation from students of all levels, postgraduates and staff, made for a far more authentic experience, where roles and aims were indeed contested and interactions interdisciplinary and intercultural. Relative to group work in the L2 classroom, or elsewhere in the university, this project offered students a highly authentic and connected experience. As one student noted:

Working in a group with other students on a creative project – in my experience the only other collaborative work I'd done through language studies at university was group projects, which are often short and difficult to coordinate, and which often include very little face to face working time with group members. Thus, working together on a piece of theatre was really fun and rewarding (class comment).

The connected community created by the project was faced in 2020 with a profound rupture to learning, the performing arts and all social connections in the pandemic. Like many universities around the world, the Universities of Melbourne and Monash University moved to online teaching and students in Melbourne were locked down for most of the year. The German Student Theatre project continued throughout this disruption, and in December the students mounted a live Zoom performance of scenes from Christa Winsloe's Weimar-era play *Gestern und Heute* (1930). Framed as a 'teaser' for a planned in-person performance in 2021, which eventually took place in December of that year, with comparable results reported by students and audience members. The Zoom performance attested to the resilience and connectedness of the students, as well as their undimmed desire to approach German history and language through theatre performances. As students return to campus at the time of writing, further in-person performances before live audiences are being planned with a new cohort of students.

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