

Teaching Idea 5: A Seminar Co-Taught With Freiburg University: „Serial Reading, Serial Watching – From Dickens to Quality TV”

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The following is not the presentation of a single “teaching idea”, but of a seminar developed and taught with my colleague Dr. Michael Butter in WS 2010/2011. I will first describe our concept and experiences and then draw some more general lessons from them which you might use as an inspiration for your own teaching.

The seminar had the following goals:

- to teach students about literary and TV culture from the 19th to the 21st century – and to do so in a way that would connect to their own experiences as 21st-century consumers of TV series

- to focus on the form of the serial, and in particular on the effects of reading and watching serially

- to re-create the (fan) communities that discuss serial narratives in letters, or today on blogs

We studied three serial narratives over the course of the semester: Charles Dickens’ Little Dorrit (1855-57); Stephen King’s The Green Mile – a novel that was published in six installments, imitating Dickens, in 1997; the first season of the TV series Damages (2007). The three texts shared a thematic focus on issues of crime, punishment, the prison, and corruption. The seminar was taught simultaneously each week in Giessen and Freiburg. In October, we had one weekend seminar for which all students met in Freiburg; in February we concluded the seminar with a joint weekend in Giessen. Students hosted each other – and, we hope, had a lot of fun partying on both occasions (Saturday nights were off!). Students had access to the same resources and discussion forum via the Giessen online teaching platform ILIAS. In addition, each student had the task to upload and introduce one piece of relevant secondary literature by the end of the semester; thus, a shared PDF-library for everyone’s use was created.

Students were asked to read Little Dorrit in one go over the semester break in the summer. We started the semester with a discussion of Little Dorrit and conventions of serial publication and serial form in the nineteenth century on one the weekend in Freiburg. Over the next six weeks, students read one installment of The Green Mile each week. The discussion focused on serial structure, but more particularly also on the difference between “reading in one go” (as we had done with Little Dorrit) and “reading serially.” Each week, one student from Giessen and one from Freiburg reported on the week’s session in a blog; all other students were invited to discuss questions raised during class, in the reports, or any other issue that came to mind – and thus form an online fan community. After christmas, we began each session watching one episode of Damages and discussing it during the remainder of the session. Again, students discussed their serial watching experience on the blog. The Friday night of our second weekend seminar was devoted to a “binge watching session”: lots of pizza in B9 helped us sit through the remaining 6 episodes of Damages. Group work and discussions focused on again on serial form and the specificities of TV and its market context in comparison to the novel.

The lessons I learnt with regard to seminar content:

- Discuss “difficult” forms that students rarely have immediate access to – such as serial novels of the nineteenth century – in conjunction with contemporary forms they enjoy

- Integrate students’ reading/watching experiences more firmly with discussions of form

The more important lessons I learnt:

- Do more co-teaching (if you have wonderful colleagues who you want to talk to at least on a weekly basis – here or at other universities). I learnt so much from my colleague and about myself as a teacher – and this was the most enjoyable seminar I ever taught!

- Spend more non-regular class-room time with students (if you can afford that at all because you have a privileged position and only need to teach two classes per term as I do). I learnt so much from my

students, about serial narratives and about themselves – and this was the most enjoyable seminar I ever taught!

In other words: invest time and energy, if you can, to make this university a better place to learn for us all, at least a tiny little bit – it's worth it! Create intense learning situations (weekends) which neither students nor teachers will ever forget! Create moments of leisure (dinner and drinks) which allow everyone to discuss the seminar topic as well as "the rest of the world" in a less formal way! Make this university the place of learning it should be.