

## **THE 'BIGGER PICTURE', FIRST IMPRESSIONS, AND MY CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT:**

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My internship at the Gerlind Institute actually symbolizes more than a 'normal' internship. For me, it was a journey. I first came across the Gerlind Institute for Cultural Studies when I was desperately searching for a way to come to the United States to improve my English skills, ever since I studied English in order to become a high school teacher at Mainz University in Germany. I am one of the few students at the University of Mainz who applied to the United States. The majority of German students prefer the United Kingdom. The United States has always fascinated me, and finally I decided to specialize in American Studies; again, most students prefer British Studies. My main focus while applying was on California, more specifically the San Francisco Bay Area.

I first 'met' San Francisco in my very first English book when I started to learn English as my first foreign language in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. I was eleven years old. Each chapter introduced different English speaking countries all over the world. Apparently, the publishers of the book chose to portray California as one of the two 'representatives' for the United States of America. I remember that I was totally amazed and fascinated when I first saw this picture of San Francisco—the cable cars, the Pacific Ocean, the hills, and the beautiful nature—all that caught my attention, and it was in that very moment that I decided I wanted to immigrate to the United States—in order to live in San Francisco. That day, when I got home from school, I told my parents that they should be prepared for my emigration in the future. It was on that very same day the San Francisco 'myth' caught me; at least, this is what I use to call it. It has never left me. On the contrary, it became even more intense when I had my Coming Out at eighteen. Then, everybody kept telling me that San Francisco 'is the place to be as a lesbian'. There it was again, the San Francisco 'myth'.

Since I did not want to study in the United States, but wanted, rather, to find a job in teaching German, I applied to various schools in the San Francisco Bay Area. After a while, I realized that it was almost impossible to find a job without having a completed (U.S. American) degree. So I started to apply for internships and jobs in the United Kingdom—without any success. I did not see any sense in continuing to apply, especially since I had now been applying for nearly a year, so instead I decided to do 'work and travel.' Unfortunately, this concept is not (yet) possible in the United States, so I chose to do it in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. Everything was decided. For me, the chapter on the United States, and especially San Francisco, was closed.

Surprisingly, I received an email from Dr. Marion Gerlind, the director of the Gerlind Institute in Oakland, CA. I will never forget that moment when I read her email. Although it was a rejection email, she gave me hope. Out of approximately 50 people, she was the first who actually promised to stay in contact with me so that "we" could figure out a way for me to come to the USA. This "we" meant everything to me because, honestly, by that time, I had lost all hope. Marion wrote that she could offer me an internship at her institute but no payment. Since I am a 'self-made' woman and thus do not receive any financial support from my parents, I knew that I could not afford to live in California without receiving any payment. It seemed as if there is an endless line of disappointments. And then, Marion forwarded me an email from Dr.

Ann Rider: Indiana State University (ISU) was searching for a Teaching Assistant for German.

I directly applied to ISU.

Tables turned one Monday when I received two messages: a phone call from London that a school wanted me as a German teacher and an email from Dr. Ronald Dunbar that I could start as a Graduate Assistant at Indiana State University in Terre Haute, Indiana. Actually, these two messages both came within one hour. Both London and ISU gave me the same deadline. I had to make my decision within 24 hours.

Honestly, despite being an American Studies student, I could not recall the exact location of Indiana on a map, deducing that it is not a prominent destination. However, there was something in the back of my head that kept on telling me "Jenny, you once came across Indiana." Sure. The second 'representative' for the United States in my 5<sup>th</sup> grade English book was: Indiana. Since I do not believe in coincidences, I think that this was my very own 'hint' to decide to go to ISU instead of going to London. Unlike California 'the sunshine state,' my old English book gave Indiana the title 'in the middle of nowhere.' I always laugh when I think of it because now that I actually live in Indiana, I must admit that I never experienced something that is as true as that title in my English book.

Now that I am here, I must say that my San Francisco 'myth' actually has some truth to it. For me, this place has an enormous stimulation in various ways: culture, art, music, diversity, individuality, nature, freedom, hope, and life. Unlike Terre Haute, which, sometimes even conveys some kind of resignation and stagnation, the San Francisco Bay Area is dynamic and vivid.

#### **THE GERLIND INSTITUTE FOR CULTURAL STUDIES IN OAKLAND, CA:**

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Usually, when we people think of learning German at an Institute, the Goethe Institute is the first one that comes to mind. I had the same experience. I first thought of the Goethe Institute (GI) for my internship. I applied at GIs in different US cities. However, after some correspondence with the Goethe Institute, I realized that an internship at the GI is, first of all, not tremendously challenging since interns are only allowed to observe classes and work in the administrative sector. Secondly, I got the impression that the way German language and culture are taught at the GI is, unfortunately, enormously traditional and on a so-called 'mainstream' level.

When I discovered the Gerlind Institute for Cultural Studies (GICS) in Oakland, I was fascinated right away. The combination of German language, culture, as well as political and feminist foci is a unique and highly innovative concept. For me, GICS not only represents an Institute to learn German language and culture, it also epitomizes some kind of a 'Gerlind-Institute-family' and thus stands for an incredibly pleasant atmosphere that is crucial when learning a foreign language/culture. For me, learning a foreign language is comparable to looking into a mirror. This metaphor of the mirror is related to learning a foreign language insofar that it depicts the way we alter personalities when we speak a foreign language. When feeling comfortable in the new language, we are fond of our new personality. Thus, when looking into an imaginary

mirror, we like our new reflection. Many aspects are bound to this alternation: having or not having an accent in a language, gaining knowledge on pragmatic levels, improving grammatical structures, etc.

Being part of GICS for one month, I came to the conclusion that those reflections I just mentioned are one of the most significant factors when learning a foreign language. Since GICS has an extensive diversity of students, the mirror metaphor is underlined even more. The innovative uniqueness of GICS comes down to several different factors: besides connecting culture and language, various events such as representations on linguistic, cultural, political, and feminist topics, as well as regular movie nights and meetings at 'conversational tables' highlight the creation of a strong community and hence a feeling of 'belonging' together among the students. Dr. Marion Gerlind, GICS's founder and director, accentuates an overall gender-inclusive and non-racist language usage of German. When observing classes, I noticed that this approach works very well and that students' perceptions and point of views are challenged.

Another original aspect of GICS is that classes are not bound to a specific location or class size. Instructors offer individual, as well as group instruction. Also, by not having a specific location, GICS could be depicted as a 'mobile' institute, i.e. classes can be held at cafes, the institute itself or at student's homes. Since this was my first time experiencing this innovative concept that GICS has adopted, I was very interested and learned many new ways how to teach German language and culture.

#### **ASPECTS OF INSTRUCTION AT GICS AND HOW THEY CHANGED MY WAY OF TEACHING:**

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One of the biggest differences I noticed right from the beginning is that GICS students sincerely *want* to learn German. They are interested in German language and culture. Despite knowing that one of the most significant tasks of a teacher is to motivate her or his students, I must admit that the factor of having, or not having, interest plays a tremendously important role when teaching. However, the more essential disparity is an exclusively student-centered way of teaching. Especially when observing individual instruction, I recognized a daily or at least weekly enhancement. Marion is an amazingly patient and sensitive teacher who, on the one hand, completely focuses on the student's interests and strengths. On the other hand, she always sees the 'bigger picture' and although it seems as if she takes the student's hand in order to go into the right direction, the student actually walks on her or his own.

While observing her way of instructing, I once more realized how crucial a basic grammatical knowledge is when learning German. Marion's students have an astonishing knowledge of grammar, and apparently this knowledge leads to the fact that the students are truly capable of seizing the concept and structure of German. Having taught for 20 years, Marion showed me different ways of teaching German, for example, when dealing with adjective endings. When learning adjective endings in German, students need to pay close attention to grammatical gender, number, case, and definiteness of nouns. Having taught German 101 and 102, I came to the conclusion that adjective endings are an enormous step for students and I have always searched for a way making it easier for them instead of just saying "well, I am afraid but all I can say is

that you have to memorize the endings.” My own experience when learning Latin in school made me even more aware that memorizing is not always helpful. On the contrary, I am convinced that ‘building bridges’ in student’s minds is almost the only successful way to establish a robust foundation of grammatical structures such as adjective endings in German. In this case, Marion utilizes song and dance to introduce the adjective endings. This song is called *Das doofe Fischlied* (the stupid fish-song).

At first I laughed when I read and heard it, but I totally admit that it only works because it is so easy and funny that the students are able to keep it in mind. Marion introduced the song and let students sing and read the song out loud. The following session I carried my guitar and one student brought his tabla drums so that we could sing and dance together. The dance basically reflects the usage of the different cases. In order to fortify the student’s concept and ‘bridges’, the students then took a brief quiz testing the various adjective endings. The majority, if not all of them did well on the test and almost all students confirmed that the song helped them a lot to truly comprehend adjective endings.

Another very helpful model of how to introduce and instruct the usage of prepositions in German is the so-called *DOGFU* mnemonic. The initial letters stand for five different German prepositions: *D* = *durch* (through), *O* = *ohne* (without), *G* = *gegen* (against), *F* = *für* (for), *U* = *um* (around). All these prepositions are used with the accusative case and once the students know the initial letters, they are able to identify and apply the correct preposition with the correct case. For me as an instructor, introducing and clarifying the usage and especially the concept of the case system in German has always been one of the most complicated concepts in German. Now that I know about *DOGFU* and the way to explain its utilization, I feel much more competent and secure.

An additionally significant method when instructing is to practice as much listening and reading as possible. Especially when students start to learn a foreign language, the very first steps are listening and reading, i.e. read out loud to themselves. Only then, students are able to catch the sound and the rhythm of the foreign language. First of all, students need to establish a foundation, i.e. a mental entity, in their minds. Their next step is producing the foreign language. When students had written homework, Marion corrected all grammatical errors together with the students. Then she asked them to read the text out loud to themselves when they were at home, so that they could see and hear the differences, i.e. so they can develop a feeling for the language.

Not only did I learn new ways of teaching certain grammatical problems, but I also got to know a new German book and we (Dr. Rider, Dr. Dunbar, and I) finally decided that we want to replace our old textbook with the textbook that is used at GICS. I am definitely looking forward to working with this new textbook, and by having had a first-hand experience with the book at GICS, I now feel more confident.

Also, I came to realize that it is extremely helpful for students if they work with an additional grammatical textbook explaining both English and German grammar. By having a separate grammatical book for both languages, students are able to see and understand the context of grammatical problems.

Besides having observed various ways of teaching, it also was very interesting for me

to witness the diversity of students at GICS. It was very exciting to see how to interact with different age and language levels, as well as the distinction between group and individual instruction. I had never observed an individual instruction and it is amazing to see how fast students are able to expand their knowledge.

After having already gained a lot of highly significant knowledge by observing various classes, I was asked to teach a class on my own. It was an individual instruction and since I am used to teaching larger groups of students, this class was a totally new and very important experience for me. I truly learned to sincerely focus on my student. The two main topics of my class were on the one hand, a text about a woman in Germany and the problems she has to face as a psychologist with physical disabilities, and on the other, the German education system. It was such a challenging experience how my student and I solved grammatical problems together and discussed topics dealing with morality and life in general. For our second topic, by preparing a concept map beforehand, I was able to clarify differences between the US and German systems. Together, we then found similarities and disparities. I sincerely enjoyed interacting with my student and in addition to that, I experienced a completely new way of teaching.

#### EVENTS AT GICS:

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GICS offers individual and group instruction at all levels of German. As I stated before, GICS's philosophy emphasizes the creation of a strong community. In order to achieve and maintain this, there are several regular events such as German movie nights, conversational tables, as well as oral history-telling evenings, German music afternoons, wine-tasting seminars (of course with German wines), and presentations on cultural, linguistic, and political topics.

One event I was part of during my internship was an oral history-telling evening about the second and third wave of the Women's Movement in Germany. Marion and I, as the event's 'main protagonists' talked about our lives and experiences. Marion, as a part of the second wave of the Women's Movement, talked about the experiences she had in Germany. I consider myself part of the third wave of the Women's Movement, and I talked about my knowledge and experiences I had when growing up and living in Germany. Both of us prepared a PowerPoint presentation about our different steps and active involvements in the Women's Movements, and it was incredibly fascinating to see how realities have changed or how they have not changed at all. Furthermore, it was extremely interesting to get to know our friends', mostly US-citizens, opinions.

Also, Marion and I focused on feminist linguistics in German and English daily language usage. We presented our research projects and pointed out how we all can actively change our individual language so that we speak in a gender-inclusive and non-racist way. In her research, Marion focused on gender-inclusive and non-racist language usage in daily German. In a co-production with some colleagues of hers, she established a book called *Sprachgewaltige Frauen* (Speak Out Powerful Women) in which they pointed out discriminatory language usage and how we all can make a change by utilizing gender-inclusive and non-racist language. For instance by using the so-called *Binnen-I* in German, i.e. the capitalized I: Instead of *alle Lehrer sind hier* (all male teachers are present) we can say *alle LehrerInnen sind hier* (all female and male teachers are

present). Marion and her colleagues proved that the generic masculine definitely discriminates against women and thus needs to be replaced by the *Binnen-I*.

My topic dealt with the (in)visibility of women in the language of lexicographers. For this research I focused on American dictionaries; in fact I compared three editions of Merriam Webster dictionaries from three different decades: 1973, 1984, and 2009. I looked up several items such *woman vs. man*, *girl vs. boy*, *she vs. he*, *husband vs. wife*, *human being*, *mother vs. father*, etc. and found out that although the dictionaries were published within a time period of three decades, the entries demonstrated (or contained) discrimination against women throughout. I analyzed the entries in two different ways: I examined them in a qualitative, as well as in a quantitative way; i.e. I looked up how long the actual entries are and in what respect the contents of the different entries differ.

The entries mainly focus on the fact that women are bound to family, marriage, and their apparent passive roles in society. Men on the other hand play an active role in society. Not only are they totally independent, they are also portrayed as subjects whereas women are depicted as being objects and hence not autonomous at all. Furthermore, gender stereotypes are enforced and an obligated heterosexual paradigm is established.

Since the majority of the evening's participants were convinced that the American language is not as discriminatory as the German language, especially since it does not have grammatical gender, it was very interesting to observe the different reactions and discuss innovative possibilities in order to make a change.

The 'key-sentence' in that context is the following: language serves us; we do not serve language, i.e. we can alter language. The general perception is that language is a constant and static concept and thus it is not dynamic or changeable at all. Additionally, language challenges people's behaviors and perceptions; thus, the way we utilize our language is a political statement and hence a 'tool for change'. Especially when teaching young children in school, it is highly significant how you utilize your language. For me, our history-telling evening was a very important event and it was an amazing experience to observe how people started to become aware of the importance of language and how they started to think about their own language usage.

The second event I want to focus on is the German movie night. For that movie night, we chose the movie *Sophie Scholl – The Final Days*. The evening started with a PowerPoint presentation that I created in order to give a brief introduction and basic background information about the White Rose, its purpose, and its members. Since our GICS-community unites all levels of German, I created a 'bilingual' PowerPoint presentation, i.e. my oral presentation was in German, whereas the PowerPoint slides were in English and thus functioned as subtitles. After the movie, we had a discussion about perceptions and realities of the resistance movement during the Nazi-Regime in Germany. It was a unique experience to get to know all different kinds of opinions about this topic and I had the impression that we all were challenged – everybody in her or his individual way.

## MY CONCLUSIONS:

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Not only did I observe classes, create presentations, and teach classes; I also was involved in the process of converting GICS into a non-profit organization. Since I never dealt with the different steps of an organization applying for tax exemption and becoming a non-profit organization, it was a challenging and very interesting experience for me. I found out about the significance and the value of being considered a non-profit organization.

My internship at GICS not only changed my views and opinions on instructing German language and culture, but I truly have the impression that it also challenged my personality and my attitude toward teaching and utilizing language. For me, being conscious and fully aware about language has always been very important. It was such a relief to work and interact with Marion who feels and thinks the same way. I came to realize that one of the only ways to actually change discriminatory language usage in daily German is to educate people about the possibilities they have. In terms of instructing German, I got to know an incredible diversity of students and a new way of teaching.

GICS symbolizes an innovative and unique concept of teaching German language and culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. My internship made me aware that we really need a change in teaching German language and culture. I am not saying that we should replace the Goethe Institute with another Institute. It is more important to rethink the way we teach and convey German language and culture to students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and hence to be able to establish a respectful and non-discriminatory environment in schools and universities as well as in any location where we educate. For me, GICS represents exactly that – an alternative way of teaching German language and culture, and, therefore, it represents the future.

I am honored to be associated with the Gerlind Institute for Cultural Studies and its cause. In July I will return for a German music afternoon where I will play the guitar and sing German songs for and with the amazing GICS-community.



For more information about the Gerlind Institute for Cultural Studies, and current, as well as past events, please refer to the following homepage: [www.gerlindinstitute.org](http://www.gerlindinstitute.org)