

Reprinted from:

JOURNAL OF BUSINESS AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

"Teaching in Germany and the Rhetoric of Culture"

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 Sage Publications, inc.

This article uses the cross-cultural concepts of context and time to examine the rhetoric of German university students in an English business writing course. This participant-observer account, which includes numerous student examples and observations, provides a fresh perspective for American teachers in increasingly multinational, multicultural classrooms. It also suggests how Aristotle's concepts of ethos, logos, and pathos together with the case method and group work can help teachers respond to the challenges in such classrooms. The article concludes by suggesting that understanding the rhetoric of culture is an important step in accepting and negotiating cultural differences.

Teaching in Germany and the Rhetoric of Culture

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I hope [in this course] to acquire knowledge about how to put an unpleasant message into "a pleasant costume." This will not only influence my writing concerning English business correspondence but will also have an impact on my German and Spanish correspondence coming my way soon.

You shouldn't expect to be perfect in business writing after having taken the class. There simply occur too many different situations in business life that have to be dealt with individually and where no standard solution exist[s].

Most curious, however, is that cross-cultural differences are thus that in some cultures politeness strategies are of utmost importance and that people from those cultures will be far less direct in their letters than we [Germans] are.

*(Comments by Students of Business Writing,
Justus Liebig University, Giessen, Germany)*

Many Americans' impressions of Germans have been formed by images in films and books about the two world wars of the twentieth century. Recently, the young German intellectual has been humor-

Author's Note: I sincerely thank Annette Bergmann, Angelika Decker, Regina Derksen, Dorkas Kistler, and the other "HiWis," faculty, students, and staff at the Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Justus-Liebig-Universität at Giessen for help in the preparation of this article. I especially thank my business writing students whose voices give life to this article. They helped me understand the rhetoric of their culture. I also thank the Center for International Studies of the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee and Marquette University for distributing an earlier version of this article as a paper in progress.

Journal of Business and Technical Communication, Vol. 11 No. 3 July 1997 353-378
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ously portrayed on American television's *Saturday Night Live* in the character of Dieter, the stiff, pompous, black-clad host of *Sprockets*, a fictional German TV program. The humor works in part because it plays on those American images of Germans as stem, elitist, arrogant, and obsessively fastidious. For their part, Germans have described Americans as being "narrow in viewpoint, undisciplined, lacking in taste, profligate, unmindful of the proper care of property, vacillating in decision making, shallow, boastful, and overly self-confident. . . . On the positive side, Germans often see Americans as friendly, open, resourceful, energetic, innovative" (Hall and Hall 76). As I prepared for teaching in Germany, colleagues told me that German students typically see American professors as more entertaining and accessible than their German counterparts. To understand why such cross-cultural stereotypes are not only true but at the same time misleading and superficial is, ultimately, to understand how we can see the increasingly multinational, multicultural American classroom in a new way

In the summer of 1994, I held a visiting professorship in the English department at Justus Liebig University in Giessen, Germany I had been asked by the faculty to teach basic and advanced business writing for English majors. I was the first person invited to Giessen at a professorial rank to teach business writing, composition, or any subject involving so much practice or direct professional application. This experience was particularly significant culturally because the teaching of writing involves a deeper engagement with students than teaching a course consisting primarily of lecture and student recitation. The act of writing, indeed the teaching of writing, "is bound up with creativity cognition, language formation, personality, and social interaction" (Alred and Thelen 471). Moreover, the teaching of business writing embraces not only these elements but also the students' professional aspirations as well as their perceptions about the world outside the university--in my case, both in Germany and in America. In ways both large and small, I became deeply involved with the rhetoric of culture.

I begin this account by examining two cross-cultural concepts--context and time--that are useful in understanding the cultural themes that are played out in Germany Next, two significant German cultural themes--order and directness--are reflected both in the students' writing and in the rhetoric of the workplace. I then discuss the place of business writing within the German academy as well as illustrate how the students' professional goals result in the demand

for business writing in English. I suggest how Aristotle's concepts of ethos, logos, and pathos together with the case method and group work help accommodate cultural differences in the classroom. I conclude by suggesting that understanding the rhetoric of culture is an important step in accepting and negotiating cultural differences.

CULTURE: CONTEXT AND TIME

The term culture is problematic because there is very little agreement on its definition (cf. Scollon and Scollon 125). In cross-cultural terms and for my purpose, however, I would accept culture to mean the way a group of people understand reality or the world around them—a shared way of being, evaluating, and doing—that is passed from one generation to the next (Limaye and Victor 280). In this sense, culture is so pervasive that most people pay little attention to its features, perhaps until they visit a culture very different from their own.

Consider one feature of American culture that most Americans take for granted or do not even notice: the way we address each other. In a cross-cultural guide for business people, the authors explain why French and Germans should not be insulted when Americans call them by first name:

American informality is partly a reflection of the egalitarian society and the absence of a formalized class system. The frequent use of the first name in addressing others is an example of this informality. The use of the last name, preceded by Mr., Ms., Mrs., or Miss is a sign of respect reserved for older people, new acquaintances, or those to whom one wishes to show deference (a customer being served by a clerk, for example). Many Americans use the first name before they even know the other person, a habit most Europeans deplore. (Hall and Hall 150)

For Germans, on the other hand, the use of *du* (an informal version of you) and the first name is reserved for family members and a very few intimate friends. Further, in the workplace, protocol is carefully observed and multiple honorific titles are normally used in professional settings; for example, faculty office doors displayed titles such as "Frau Professor Dr. Schmidt." Although such practices vary in America, the exclusive use of honorific titles would likely be seen as elitist, pompous, or even arrogant. Those who study cross-cultural differences have identified many factors for explaining such practices: Two

significant factors in understanding the rhetoric of culture are context and the perception of time.

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall, a pioneer in cross-cultural research, developed the concept of "context" to assess the predominant communication style of a culture. By context, Hall means how much or how little an individual assumes another person understands about a subject under discussion. In a "high-context" communication, the participants already understand the context and thus do not feel a need to exchange much background information. Twins who have grown up together, for example, would communicate economically and exhibit high-context communication. On the other hand, in a very "low-context" communication, the participants assume they share little knowledge and must communicate in great detail (*Beyond 79*). For example, two people from different countries meeting for the first time would need to make their ideas explicit and thus communicate in a low-context way. Americans living in large apartment buildings where tenants frequently move in and out also demonstrate relatively low-context communication: Rules are posted in writing, leases are signed, written notices are distributed, and so on. Because people in low-context cultures tend to assume little prior knowledge on the part of those with whom they communicate, thorough documentation is important—written agreements (contracts) are expected, and rules are spelled out in detail.

People in high-context cultures, on the other hand, depend more on shared history (or context) in their communications. Thus, words and written contracts are not so important, whereas personal relationships are paramount. Recently, an administrator at my university visited an Arab country with a very high-context culture. His objective was to have his hosts sign a contract with our university. Although his Arab counterparts seemed very friendly, inviting him to dinner and to meet their families, they did not seem much interested in discussing business. They treated him very well, so it was not until he was in a taxi on the way to the airport that he realized *the contract had not been signed*. In this case, the agreement was ultimately concluded; however, people from societies at the extremes of high and low context often experience difficulties in such encounters. Basing their study on Edward Hall's notion of context, German researchers Martin Rösch and Kay Segler created a scale to show the relative position of nationalities according to context. Notice their positioning of the German as opposed to the Arabic or Japanese cultures:

Japanese (High)
 Arabic
 Latin American
 Italian
 English
 French
 North American
 Scandinavian
 German
 Swiss-German (Low) (60)

Another central feature of any culture is the way it conceptualizes time. In his seminal work about cultural perceptions of time, *The Silent Language*, Edward Hall argues that many cultures view time as primarily “monochronic” or “polychronic.” Monochronic-time cultures, he suggests, are those that view time as tangible and linear: Time can thus be “spent,” “lost,” “saved,” and “wasted.” Hall views monochronic time as an artifact of the Industrial Revolution, in which factory life required the labor force to be on hand and in place at an appointed hour. As a result of their experience with industrial production, monochronic cultures place great importance on scheduling and emphasize the completion of one task at a time (178).

Polychronic-time cultures, on the other hand, view time as flexible and circular: Time is seen as renewable and thus not wasted when tasks are interrupted (Limaye and Victor 287). Because many activities typically occur simultaneously and schedules are often interrupted for conversation, polychronic-time cultures often seem chaotic and undisciplined to those in more monochronic societies. One of my German students, for example, even after rationally understanding the concept of polychronic time, still asked with utmost incredulity, “Why would anyone *want* to be polychronic?” The United States is generally seen as monochronic; however, Germany is even closer to an absolute monochronic culture (Hall, *Silent* 31).

GERMANY: ORDER AND DIRECTNESS

As would be expected in an essentially low-context, monochronic culture, order (and orderliness) is especially important to Germans.² In fact, anthropologists Edward Hall and Mildred Hall state, “Order is a dominant theme in German culture. In Germany, there is order in

all things" (43). One small but fascinating sign of orderliness as well as timesaving appeared on my university stationery. The letterhead sheets were printed with fine horizontal hash marks one-third of the way down from the top and up from the bottom. Not until the end of my visit did I learn that these marks facilitate the folding of a letter in precise thirds for inserting into an envelope (and they also save time).

As that example suggests, one significant effect of the theme of order is the cultural valuing of perfection, which my German students reflected in many ways. In the final writing assignment, for instance, many students (like the two below) felt it essential to *warn* their classmates not to expect perfection after taking a business writing course:

This [course] takes into account that there is no one single correct answer to a problem but various possibilities, some of which may be better than others. Therefore, be warned, don't expect to get the answers to all your questions in this course and don't think you will leave it as a perfect writer.

I should warn you about expecting too much from this course, you will not be a perfect business writer after it. And you might be a little bit disappointed about the outcome of the course. But after your revisions you can see some improvement in your writing but it will be far from perfect.

Although the stress on writing as a process was new to these students, they understandably welcomed the orderliness of a step-by-step approach (Brusaw, Alred, and Oliu x). However, they appreciated most the idea of revision:

[The revisions were] the most helpful part of the course, as we were forced to think about our faults and about how to avoid them.

*I found the revision of the assignments very useful because you had to think about your mistakes and had to find alternative structures and **passages**.*

Each time [something was written], we had the possibility to revise our writing. Thus, we could directly apply the things we learned.

For the Giessen students, my stress on revision enriched the course by fostering an important cultural imperative--to perfect one's work, not merely to get a better grade.³ In America, a similar preoccupation with perfection would be viewed by some as a sign of obsessiveness; however, for these German students, the expectation of perfection and precision is merely the natural order of things. For them, it is not a *matter of personality--it is a matter of culture*.

A related feature of German culture is directness. Americans, of course, value directness, as suggested by terms like *straight talk* and

clichés like “Don’t beat around the bush.” But Germans tend to communicate even more directly in personal relations than Americans do, expecting that “frankness, honesty, and directness will govern human relations” (Hall and Hall 64). Indeed, many of the student comments quoted throughout this article reflect such directness.

David Victor argues that directness is related to context: “To the extent that members of low-context cultures rely on verbal self-disclosure to communicate their primary message, they can be seen as *direct*” (139). In my view, however, German directness is also a matter of orderliness as well as not wasting time. One example of preserving order through directness, which newcomers to Germany often report, is the public correction of others when they are out of line. I not only witnessed strangers correcting each other in stores and at street crossings but also experienced such correcting myself. At my first class meeting, for example, I admitted to the students that I was still trying to learn how to pronounce their major, *Neuere Fremdsprachen*. Immediately one student said aloud, in a rather matter-of-fact way, “You should.” Although I was a bit stunned, I did not sense that the student was being impertinent, sarcastic, or contentious—she was merely stating the obvious, and not wasting time doing it. Nevertheless, such matter-of-fact directness can seem blunt and even rude to Americans and others. However, Martin Cannon et al. suggest why directness can also be welcome, especially to Americans. They point out that it is

easy for foreigners to know how Germans feel on an issue, for Germany is a low-context society where subtle messages are not conveyed by silence and slight physical movements. For many American negotiators who have had to contend with subtle, high-context behavior, Germany is a welcome relief. (76)

From the German perspective, directness is a matter of honesty as much as it is propriety. Consider the candor of the following statement from a student to her business writing instructor whom she has not yet met:

Although I haven't got a clue yet what exactly I'm going to do after having finished my studies, that is what specific profession I would like to get I'm sure it's got to be something that has to do with people, working at different places, different countries. . . . Working in an office such as in one of those huge buildings in industry areas would actually not be my cup of tea. After my apprenticeship as a “Industriekauffrau” [business apprentice] of 2 1/2 years at Nestlé Frankfurt, where I come from, I'm more or less cured of that kind of profession. In fact, I would like to work in the touristic line, something I always

wanted but frankly, the prospects do not seem to be too optimistic. Meaning we will have to see.

Along with such directness, however, goes an impatience with mixed messages from others. Cautioning American business people working in Germany, Hall and Hall suggest that Germans tend to be confused by the American style of routinely including positive reinforcement with negative messages:

In the United States, when employees need to be criticized, good managers usually begin by complimenting employees on something they have done well before telling them what change or improvement is needed. Germans won't understand this sort of communication; in fact, they will be made quite anxious by the ambiguity of a compliment joined with a criticism and will wonder what is really being said. (63)

That statement by itself, however, is somewhat misleading because Germans (like most people) appreciate positive comments: What they find objectionable are compliments or positive statements that they feel are not truly based on actual performance or experience. Although many Americans would say they feel the same, the difference in perspective is illustrated in an anecdote related by a Giessen student. This German student had just met an American student and, after five minutes of small talk, the German student told the American student that she would have to leave in a couple of weeks. The American student responded, "Oh, we'll miss you." The German student felt this statement was "very insincere" (because it was not "honest") and therefore objectionable.

In the classroom, as might be expected, German students strongly object to positive comments at the end of an essay that they feel are "not true" (e.g., because they are not reflected in the grade). A Giessen faculty member explained that at one time in German universities, students were given no positive comments—professors only "corrected" the students' work. Now, graduate students preparing to teach in the academy are told that they should try to point out the strong points of the students' work. However, German professors do not necessarily begin with positive comments, as is typical in America. Rather, an instructor's concluding comments might point out problems first, then suggest how the student can build on the strong points of the work. For me, such an instructor's comments would also demonstrate the rhetoric of culture.

As a number of these illustrations suggest, along with German directness goes a determined seriousness, particularly in the workplace. Hall and Hall warn Americans:

Don't expect to see [Germans] smiling a lot, but remember they are not unfriendly; they are simply much more reserved and serious than Americans. . . . Germans as a whole are quite serious and take themselves very seriously. They certainly don't expect to have fun at work; work is serious business. (52-53)

University students also make a distinction between the classroom (their workplace) and leisure. German students' demeanor in the classroom is quite serious in comparison to American students. During the course, I learned to understand and adapt to my Giessen students' rather stoic facial expressions. Nevertheless, for American teachers who look for smiles and other expressions to confirm that students are or are not engaged in the class, teaching in Germany may be a cultural shock. At the same time, after learning to know my students as individuals, I would agree with Gannon et al.'s observation that "those who mistake Germans for cold, calculating people may mistake firm belief [in what is right or wrong] for lack of emotion" (73). Certainly when I saw students socializing with friends outside the classroom, they enjoyed each other's company as much as American students—perhaps even more because they so rigorously distinguish between work and play.

Germans' directness and seriousness are, again, matters of culture; they do not represent any indifference to civility. On the contrary, as most observers report, Germans are devoted to manners and politeness (Gannon et al. 77; Gerulaitis 9). One of my students, in fact, expressed shock that in a course she had taken earlier from a visiting professor, "*what sounded like normal standard to us Germans was considered rather rude and impolite by our Canadian teacher.*"

As this student's statement suggests, directness and politeness can produce cultural conflicts for Germans. This conflict was apparent when I surveyed students and other Germans as to whether they thought negative messages should be given directly or indirectly. All those I surveyed stated that they wished to receive negative messages directly but *give* negative messages indirectly. After receiving this identical response from everyone I surveyed and finding no one willing to acknowledge its inherent contradiction, I suspected that

culture must play a key role in the conflict. After working with negative messages in class, I concluded that because they expect frankness and efficiency, it is reasonable that Germans would wish to receive a negative message directly. On the other hand, their desire to be mannerly and polite would motivate them to favor giving negative messages indirectly. This conflict was expressed quite well by one student: “*Personally, when I had to give bad news to someone, I always used to plunge into it directly and then to go on apologizing forever.*”

In suggesting reasons for the German effort to be mannerly, Hall and Hall find

one obvious vestige of the class system in Germany is the emphasis on good manners. Educated, responsible people are expected to display good manners, especially in business. . . . [And thus German workers expect that] formality and politeness, including proper respect for social and business status, will pervade daily business life. (48,64)

At a deeper level, however, I believe that politeness and manners can also be viewed as a natural result of the effort to establish an orderly society—even at the expense of individuality. Gannon et al. use the metaphor of the symphony to describe the subordination of individuality to orderliness: “Germans see themselves as integral parts of the whole society and, like musicians in the symphony, each must subordinate some individuality so that all of society may benefit” (73). The cultural value of submerging individuality to achieve order and orderliness is one most Americans would find difficult to understand and to accept. For American culture, a more fitting metaphor is the jazz ensemble, which depends on collaboration within polyphonic improvisation—and, of course, the occasional solo that can demonstrate the musician’s skill.

THE RHETORIC OF THE WORKPLACE

The workplace is another site that reflects the rhetoric of culture—and cultural themes in conflict. For example, whereas their need for directness might tend to produce a rhetorical style that is brief and to the point, the Germans’ need for thoroughness (inherent in a low-context culture) pushes in the opposite direction. Recognizing that text is more important than subtext (or context), a Japanese executive states, “I advise foreign managers to learn to express their thoughts . . . *in detail* and to put them in writing. Otherwise they will

never reach German employees” (Hall and Hall 64, emphasis added). I experienced thoroughness in documentation myself during the process of renting an apartment at the university guest house. This process required my signature on nearly as many documents as would be required for buying a house in the United States; one document required me to confirm items in my apartment-including the eight shower-curtain rings in the bathroom.

In examining German memo and letter style, Arthur Bell, Tracy Dillon, and Harald Becker observe suggest how thoroughness affects arrangement and style:

Most American managers have been schooled to emphasize a purpose early; to advance their argument linearly by connecting paragraphs with clear, concise topic sentences; and to omit any material that does not obviously contribute to this linear progression. By contrast, the German tradition promotes a logical progression but imposes fewer restrictions on the inclusion of material. Germans may appear to digress from the main point at hand if they feel the additions contribute to their purpose. Thus lengthy German sentences and paragraphs typically signal a more varied and recapitulated content than American managers may be accustomed to encountering in business prose. (225)

Closely related to thoroughness, another element that tends to make business writing elaborate is seriousness. Business is serious work, and thus German business writing tends to be serious-meaning complex as well as thorough. Hall and Hall observe that

Germans usually regard concise writing as simple-minded and not worthy of serious consideration. Many highly regarded German authors are noted for their complex, reticulated styles. The more difficult it is to understand, the more valuable the ideas must be, according to German standards. (50-51)

When I asked several Giessen students if they agreed with Hall and Hall’s statement, two responded as follows:

Yes. Especially in regards to Business Administration this becomes very obvious. German books are usually very impersonal and complicated while English or American books are in my opinion much more reader-friendly. They try to keep sentence structure simple and give better introductions to subject matters and most important of all, good summaries at the end of each chapter, they “guide” the reader and always give examples to show the practical implications. German books leave the practical applications aside and concentrate mostly on theory. I do believe that German academic writing has to fulfill the need to employ language as a vehicle in order to show (through complicated sentence structure, many latinized words or other special vocabulary) the “worthiness” of the contents the author is trying to bring across. A state which

many students are not necessarily happy about but to which they have to conform when writing their term papers and thesis.

I agree with this opinion. Beside long and complicated sentences, German academics love to use (or even better to invent new) technical terms. If you want to make sure that your paper is regarded as brilliant, pick out one or two abstract terms, define them in their special context and give them a new name.

My exchange colleague from Giessen, noting the students' answers, responded to the contrary:

Well, I don't [agree]. But I am more familiar with writing styles in my own discipline. And even though it is true that English scientific writing is generally easier to read, I would not really claim that complexity is held to be a virtue in itself by anybody. But I can of course understand the frustration of the students. I certainly do not agree to the claim that a paper gets a good grade just for being abstract and complicated. (Jucker)

Another Giessen faculty member likewise suggested that these students misinterpret the situation: Although the faculty encourage students to use the "technical terms of the trade" for the sake of economy the "foremost feature of scholarly writing should be clarity" Although my colleagues' objections seem quite reasonable, it is nonetheless understandable why, as Bell, Dillon, and Becker report, an

expansive, extended style . . . is considered prestigious by educated German business people. Therefore, American managers who choose to present ideas in somewhat more complex sentences than are common in U.S. letters can gain persuasive advantage. [But they caution] Mere rambling or superfluous words, however, will be received no better by a German audience than by American readers. Length of sentences and paragraphs should reflect sophistication of thought and the amplification of detail necessary to communicate clearly and completely. (226)

This analysis together with the earlier reactions of the Giessen students and their professors suggest that German students will continue to deal with many of the same rhetorical conflicts when they leave the university and enter their workplaces.⁴

Consider another example of conflict in the rhetoric of the workplace. The demands of politeness and the "sophistication of thought" that Bell, Dillon, and Becker find in German business writing would seem to call for personal, individually composed letters and memos (226). However, the themes of order and hierarchy in German culture produce another result. Specifically, the need to observe protocol and keep informed departments that are highly compartmentalized

within complex German management structures results in business writing that is often formulaic with large sections of boilerplate (Gannon et al. 75; Hall and Hall 60,61). Moreover, although the trend toward democratization in German businesses and the use of such popular management techniques as “quality circles” might make Germans more inclined to personalize their business writing, the cultural values of thoroughness and protocol remain formidable obstacles (Bungard 54; Gerulaitis 6). One Giessen faculty member complained that the advent of word processing simply increased the ability of organizations to create very “complex” formulaic writing. In fact, all the faculty, lecturers, secretaries, and others I interviewed identified “formulaic” as the most notable feature of business writing in Germany.

Understandably, then, many of my students assumed that I would give them formulas for business writing (like the three below):

I want to become familiar with the formulas and structures which typically have to be used in business correspondence.

I would like to get familiar with some characteristics of business writing regarding special formats, conventions and expression. I am sure that the language used in business writing is quite different from everyday language, particularly concerning the vocabulary and different aspects of style.

What I expect from this course is to learn the conventions of English Business Writing that are different from the German ones as well as English standard expressions and phrases for offers, orders, invoices a.s.o. [and so on].

At the end of the course, the students naturally expressed their surprise at the intensely individualized, rhetorical nature of American business writing-what they called its “private touch.” One student, for example, wrote to a classmate, “*I must warn you that [in this class] you won’t be given a standard, rigid model of a certain type of letter. It will always depend on the reader, or on the situation.*” Another student was puzzled and asked in class, “I don’t understand-we were polite at the end of the ‘Computer Time’ case but not so polite at the end of the ‘Buddy McMahon’ case [shown later]. Don’t we *always* end a business letter with a polite close?”

THE ACADEMY AND THE WORKPLACE

Ironically, a formulaic and elaborate style in business writing was rejected by the eighteenth-century German rhetorician Johann Carl

May.⁵ May bases his work on Christian Fürchtegott Gellert's 1751 book, which called for breaking with the *stylus curiae*, or formulas to be used when writing official documents. May adapts Gellert's principles for business letters and reports, giving advice similar to what we might see in American business communication textbooks, May advocates that business writing be *deutlich* (clear), *nützlich* (useful), *natürlich* (natural), and in conversational German—that is, “the conversation of educated people” (Hildebrandt and Vamer 107,108). May also places a surprisingly modern emphasis on the value of clarity in international business communication (Hildebrandt and Varner 121).

May demonstrates his understanding of the rhetorical situation throughout his work. He advises, for example, opening a letter with important points first, but he cautions, “It is not unwise, if one has to be the messenger of bad news, to put certain other news first” (qtd. in Hildebrandt and Varner 109). At the same time, May rejects any formulaic classification of letters into groups such as good news and bad news. May concludes that business writing is as important as belles lettres because “philosophy, art, poetry, pleasure are only possible after the necessities of life have been secured” (qtd. in Hildebrandt and Varner 106). What seems most significant about May's work, as I hope to illustrate, is that it demonstrates theory in conflict with practice and, ultimately, theory in conflict with the force of culture.

It is perhaps instructive that during my time in Giessen and through correspondence afterward, I have found no one among the Giessen faculty or students who has ever heard of Christian Fürchtegott Gellert or Johann Carl May. That Gellert and May are unknown may represent another example of theory in conflict with practice—that is, the lack of a close relationship between traditional universities and German businesses. Indeed, it is ironic that although approximately 60% of German manufacturing companies are headed by engineers with PhDs, “the German CEO probably learned management skills on the job without any formal management training” (Hall and Hall 59). Robert Crane points out, in fact, that much management education takes place within the companies themselves rather than in the universities (3). Historically, business studies have been offered at the *Fachhochschulen* (technical colleges), which maintain closer contact with businesses than the traditional universities. As Crane points out, however, the *Fachhochschulen* have an image problem much like vocational training in America. The universities have a good image as centers for science and liberal arts but have not embraced management education (3). Not surprisingly, then, business English courses

(perhaps seen as low-level vocational training) have been relegated to Fachhochschule as well as *Volkshochschule* (adult evening school) and *Berufsakademien* (vocational schools) (Gerzymisch 1).

Perhaps also not surprising is that these courses have generally not taken a theoretical or rhetorical approach. As one observer notes, in Germany business English courses have focused on vocabulary and thus have not achieved their hoped-for success (Gerzymisch 3). Nevertheless, programs that combine the two subjects of business and English are becoming increasingly fashionable in the academic community.⁶ In fact, most of my students were majors of *Neuere Fremdsprachen* (newer foreign languages). These students major in English, French, Spanish, or Russian; another modern language (either one of the previous or Italian, Portuguese, or Arabic); and a third area, such as business administration, economics, geography, agrarian studies, or language teaching (pedagogy called didactics).

In the diagnostic writing sample administered prior to my arrival, many students reflected on why a business writing course would fit their professional aspirations:

*What I would consider as interesting to do is to work for a company **that** is dealing with foreign clients so I can fill the gap in communication if there exists one.*

After having finished my studies, I would like to work either as a journalist or to start as a trainee in an international company, in which I can make use of the languages I speak.

I am preparing for a job in the import/export field where foreign communication and translating is required.

I have chosen English as my academic major because of the daily need at work in case of having a job at an international company and, in fact, to get around in the world without a problem.

After finishing my degree, I want to work in an international company, possibly abroad. My long-term career goal is to work as a manager in the entertainment industry.

The students' assumptions about the need to be flexible and "international" are confirmed by Robert Crane: "In Europe, with the tightening of commercial ties among member nations of the European Economic Community, an ever clearer demand has been heard for professionals trained in language and management to be the top and mid-level executives of tomorrow" (4). Moreover, even within Germany, it is important for business people to use English. One

survey in the area of Cologne and Dusseldorf "lists 253 different positions-primarily in middle management-in which English is needed" (Gerzymisch 5).

Whereas many students hoped to work for international businesses, others were more undecided. Perhaps most interesting were the students' ambitions not simply to do well in their work life but to rise above traditional roles, as one student describes:

Our studies "Modern languages" are said to lead--almost forcedly--to the career as a secretary. Interestingly, this rumor is mainly spread by male business students. . . . Nevertheless, a course which offers students to prepare them for a management career--at least that is what I understood by its name [Writing for Business Management]-raises hopes!

As I do not intend to end up as a secretary, I am looking forward to your course and am curious whether it will fulfill my hopes.

Consequently, when I offered to teach literature rather than business writing, one Giessen faculty member responded (very directly, of course): "No, No. Anyone can teach literature-we need you to teach business writing." Since my return, a course in business English has been offered by a Giessen instructor, and it drew over 70 students in a classroom designed to hold 40.

THEORY AND PEDAGOGY

Even with my German colleague's endorsement, I was still concerned about what I (as an American) could offer business writing students in a German university classroom. So, I began my classroom preparation with the premise that I would teach business writing as if the students were being transferred to America. However, I also hoped to give them a theoretical base that could transcend American culture. To accomplish this goal, I decided to apply Aristotle's rhetoric-specifically, ethos, logos, and pathos-to business writing. Although the application, or working out, of ethos, logos, and pathos must be culturally specific, the notions themselves seem capable of moving across cultures. Herbert Hildebrandt and Iris Varner, for example, demonstrate that May's business writing principles can be cast in Aristotelian terms. From May's examples, they find that "one infers that the entree to business relationships could be speeded up, that the ethos of the letter was enhanced through [referring to] the right people" (Hildebrandt and Varner 114).

The Giessen students could easily understand why ethos (as the image a writer projects) is central to communication whether in Germany or America. One student wrote, "*Communication is always important, but especially so in a professional environment. After all, you are representing your company with every letter you send.*" But by defining ethos as the character and trustworthiness that the writer creates, I hoped the students would also understand that ethos can help define the relationship a writer wishes to establish with a correspondent. Ethos was certainly helpful in explaining cultural differences—from the Japanese who would promote the collective nature of relationships to Americans who might wish to demonstrate individuality or decisiveness. With its stress on the speaker's character, ethos could also help emphasize the role of ethics in business writing. As George Kennedy points out, the predominant meaning of ethos in Aristotle is " 'moral character' as reflected in deliberate choice of actions and as developed into a habit of mind" (163).

Whereas ethos might require students to develop a "habit of mind," the concept of logos (as the appeal to reason through logic, rhetorical arrangement, and precise word choice) fit quite nicely with the students' cultural expectations. That is, logos could be seen as orderliness—a powerful image for German students, certainly more so than for American students. Yet again, the working out of logos as an appeal to reason through arrangement depends on the cultural understanding of *reason* and *reasonableness*. As David Victor points out, for instance, those in high-context cultures may be offended by a rhetorical arrangement that is based on a rationale of economy and directness:

On an interpersonal level, the use of [a direct approach] in business communication is frequently seen as brusque or rude. In Spain and a number of other countries, for instance, the U.S. direct plan approach is less likely to demonstrate a courtesy for not wasting another's time than to suggest that U.S. business people dislike their Spanish counterparts so much that they wish to make any communication as short as possible. (2)

Finally although some might find pathos an unusual topic for business writing, it became a powerful concept for students. Understood as the emotional impact of a message, pathos helped students see why goodwill and empathy (as embodied in a business writing principle like the "you viewpoint") must be genuine (cf. Brusaw, Alred, and Oliu 720). On this point, one student wrote:

I have to keep in mind who exactly I am writing to. . . . I then cannot foret to stick to the "you-viewpoint," that is that I am not writing to satisfy my own feelings about a point, but to make my correspondent see my point without sounding arrogant or servile.

May also understood this principle and proposed, perhaps more radically, the place of pathos in establishing an emotional connection with the reader in business writing:

One judges wrongly if one believes that the feelings of friendship are inappropriate in letters of business people. . . . Expressions which talk the language of an affectionate friendship are always welcome. . . . And should people, who have become really good friends, not be allowed to express the feelings of friendship which gradually grows by itself just because they are business-people? (qtd. in Hildebrandt and Varner 110)

Although many Americans might agree with this statement, May's rhetoric seems in contrast with the traditional German cultural expectations of work-leisure separation, acquaintance-friendship patterns, and observance of protocol in the workplace (Gannon et al. 77). May's statement brings into sharp relief, as I suggested earlier, theory in conflict with practice, and theory in conflict with culture. And it raises interesting questions: Specifically, should we teach students to assume a particular rhetorical stance that may be contrary to practice or cultural reality? Should we teach a practice so specific that it cannot transcend time or an individual culture? Perhaps the answer lies in finding theories like Aristotle's ethos, logos, and pathos that are powerful enough to accommodate changes in time and to span cultures, and in finding pedagogies that can animate theory as practice.

For my particular course, the case method became an effective pedagogy for translating theory into practice. As one student stated, "*Combining theoretical information with case studies, we could apply the acquired knowledge to practical situations and receive feedback on our work.*" The cases also fulfilled the call by those involved in cross-cultural English education to base pedagogy on role-playing or situational approaches (Gerzymisch 13; Crane 10). Even May presented a version of the case method (Hildebrandt and Varner 112).

As in the following case, I focused on situations in which the writer is asked to deliver negative messages because such cases tend to demonstrate rhetorical complexity and cultural differences, and their problematic nature stimulates discussion (Alred 30).

BUDDY McMAHON CASE

Assume you are the new Marketing Manager for British Band Instruments Company of Liverpool, England. Two months ago you sold, by mail, a £325 guitar to a 17-year-old U.S. high school student named Buddy McMahon, 3178 Harding Street, Starkville, MS 39795. In your morning mail, you get the following letter:

Dear Sir or Madam:

When I bought my guitar from you, it was my understanding that it would not crack. In fact, I found a brochure packed with the instrument-giving details about workmanship, etc. And I found this wording: ". . .oil-pressure seasoned to prevent cracking." Was this just a sales pitch?

The guitar seems to be coming apart! I'm sending it back to you and want a new guitar-free and fast.

Sincerely,
Buddy McMahon

The mail also brought McMahon's guitar. Upon inspection, you found the guitar was, indeed, cracking-apparently the result of being left out in the rain and hot sun. But you send it to your technical staff anyway, and they give you a report that describes how this guitar had been oil-pressure seasoned but that it has been exposed to extreme conditions of heat and moisture. You simply cannot grant an adjustment: when you saw the President of British Band Instruments in the hall you told him the story, and he said "under no circumstances should we grant this adjustment." Your experts do tell you that it could be restored to some sort of working order for £65 (company cost). Your brochure also includes this statement: "Adjustments granted only when defects in workmanship appear or when, in normal usage of the instrument, imperfections are noted." Another concern: Buddy is the son of the Music Director for a very large school district, and you don't want to make enemies.

Write McMahon a well-thought-out adjustment refusal. If he will send you a draft for £65, you'll put the guitar back into workable shape.

In response to this case, one student bristled at being *at all* polite to the fictional US high school student who did not properly care for his guitar, stating in class, "Buddy McMahon is a jerk. If I worked at this company, I'd have someone else write the letter." Like this student, many others became deeply involved in the case method. Another student wrote, "*The case method gives you the impression of dealing with a 'real life problem' and directly shows you the value of this theoretical class.*"

Just how “real” was evident in the final in-class assignment, which asked students to write to “a fellow Giessen student” about the class. I expected students to write to an anonymous, perhaps generic, Giessen student. However, many wrote very personal responses--addressed to specific readers and written within fictional contexts. The following opening and closing from a student’s in-class letter, for example, create an elaborate context that frames her discussion of the business writing course:

Dear Sascha:

How’re you doing down there in Giefesen? I’m sorry we missed each other at the Mensa [cafeteria] on Friday. That’s actually the reason why I’m writing you this letter since I’m already in France by the time you’ll receive it. Remember I wanted to give you some information about the English “Fachsprache” courses in which you wanted to take part in next semester.

In fact, I can only tell you about the course I went to last semester. The course was called “Business Writing” and was held. . . [The student follows with the reasons why Sascha should take the business writing course. She closes below.]

Anyway, I’m back from my language course on August 13th, so if you want to know a little more about it, just give me a call. Otherwise see you in October (maybe in a Business Writing course?). And have a splendid holiday in Greece!

An appropriate complement to the case method was the use of group work. Forming the class into groups animated the students and helped achieve the goals of those who argue that teaching English for business across cultures “should use a business-related situational approach emphasizing formal and informal communication” (Gerzymisch 13). Indeed, one student noted the value of groups in fostering collaboration:

The group work was a good experience since it helped us learn how to work and cooperate within a team which is not always that easy. We had to write papers in that group, and sometimes it was really difficult to agree on one version. But as I mentioned before, this was a good and also important experience.

Another student said the group work was very helpful “because later [in a professional setting] you also have to work with others in order to solve a complex problem in a relatively short time.”

Groups also helped those students who were reluctant to participate because, as a Giessen professor observed, they were worried about their use of English, especially when asking complicated questions. One student expressed her concern at the outset: “My expectations concerning this class are to learn how to avoid syntactical

mistakes and confusion, which are often caused by having the German structure in mind." Many students were as fluent as that one, others were weak but improved dramatically in their writing, and a few were the best I have taught at any level. Nevertheless, nonnative speakers of English in America would most likely share these students' concerns:

Out of class, we did two case studies which I found quite difficult because it is not easy to find the adequate tone when English is not your first language.

Frankly, I thought Business Writing would be a little easier, but it's really a language for itself that is very worth studying.

One of the students who was most fluent and idiomatic in her use of English had corresponded with an American pen pal for years. For me, this reinforced the idea that improvement comes with practice in contextualized situations.

Both the case method and group work were ideal for introducing cross-cultural theory, which I now believe should be included in any business writing course in Germany or in America. To demonstrate contrasts, I often used the American and Japanese cultures to illustrate cultural differences, then asked students to describe where the German culture would fit. Perhaps the larger pedagogical lesson is that both the case method and group work may be useful in making courses generally more accessible to students in America from diverse cultural backgrounds.

As I do in my US business writing classes, I distributed 3" x 5" cards and asked students to pose questions anonymously about business writing, language, and the course. Some of the questions are ones that students in the United States would ask, and others were obviously stimulated by my comments on their written assignments. Most interesting were the questions about cultural differences and the rhetoric of the questions themselves:

What do Americans expect you to say when they ask: "How are you?" Do they really expect an answer?

What do semi-colons imply to English-speaking people? Are there differences between a period and a semi-colon?

Paul said "I'm tired." I don't like the movie "Back to the Future." .? Punctuation?

Usage of Gerund and Infinitive (after certain verbs)? e.g. I like doing / I like to do.

Differences between German and English way of writing business letters:

- *Short and formal style*

- *private touch*

Shall we more refer to the German or the English "way of writing"?

Applying at an English or American company-What are the required documents? Is it comparable with German requirements?

How to write a curriculum vitae. Could you give an example, e.g. of a student applying to an editorial for a job?

More than 15% of the questions asked about German application letters and "curriculum vitae," which the students felt were very important in the weaker job market since the reunification with East Germany

At the semester's end, both students and faculty told me repeatedly how important it was for Giessen students to have opportunities to take courses from American instructors. Several faculty emphasized that world trade, mobility, and cross-cultural communication make it essential for German students to be able to adapt to different cultures. In other words, they felt that it is as important for their students to understand my culture as it is for me to understand theirs.

CONCLUSIONS

The most significant result from my teaching in Germany and coming to understand the rhetoric of culture is that I view my American multicultural classroom in a new way. Nothing made that point clearer to me than when I returned to my American classroom that included two Arab students, an Asian student, two Hispanic students, two African American students, a Native American student, and 17 other students of various European ancestry. One of my Arab students phoned me after having missed two classes. He told me that he had missed class because of his "newly discovered" illness-and wanted to see me about the course. Before I understood context, I could have been on the defensive. On the basis of a stereotype of Arab students; I might have assumed that he planned to use a negotiating ploy to convince me that he should be allowed to make up the missed assignments, even though my syllabus states that missed assignments receive an "F." Understanding that high-context Arab cultures view personal relationships as more important than contracts (the syllabus in this case), I focused on my concern for his health when we met. I

told him that his health was “more important than this class or any grade he might receive.” No, I did not allow him to make up assignments; I told him he should work very hard on the upcoming assignments so that he could make the best grade possible. Then we talked about his diet and how difficult it is to eat a low-fat, low-sugar diet at restaurants in America. From that point on, we formed an understanding that I would have not thought possible.

It is easy for us as Americans to view our own values of individuality, informality, and spontaneity as “right” and the German values of order, formality, and directness as obsessive, elitist, and harsh. It is also easy for us as Americans to be put off by German directness as well as the apparently servile manners of Asians-perhaps trying to “correct” such behaviors. At a recent national conference session on exchange programs, for example, an American teacher lamented that the Asian students in the country in which she had taught did not wish to “speak out as individuals.” She said that she tried “all sorts of techniques to stir the discussion.” What she seemed to overlook is that “individualism” is an American cultural value, whereas collective decision making is uppermost for many Asian cultures (Scollon and Scollon 133).

At the opposite extreme, some people idealize other cultures and cultural differences. As an example, I told my Giessen students that I had met a German military officer who could find nothing wrong with America and hoped to move to the United States after leaving the military. I also told them of an American I knew who felt Germany was perfect and hoped I could bring back tips on gaining employment in the Frankfurt area. The students laughed and said that they could easily tell my American friend about the flaws in Germany. Outside of class, during a discussion of differences between America and Germany one Giessen faculty member quipped, “We Germans don’t always do things right, but we do them very thoroughly.”

In helping those from other cultures understand America, Hall and Hall observe the following:

Americans value fairness, which means treating people impartially and without favoritism. They believe in equal opportunity for all and in equality before the law, that is, justice for every person regardless of social or economic circumstances. However, while most Americans profess a belief in tolerance and democratic ideals, women and minorities still face enormous barriers to achieving acceptance of their rights despite some progress in the past forty years. (150)

Although many Americans would endorse this statement and while it recognizes obvious cultural conflicts, it overlooks a deeply embedded contradiction. Specifically, the American belief that we must treat others "impartially and without favoritism" slips so easily into the notion that we must treat people the same, that difference does not-indeed, should not-matter. Egalitarianism too easily smooths over difference. We wish to celebrate diversity, yet we want to achieve equality. We want to honor difference, but we hope to abolish stereotypes. The rhetoric of our culture seems in conflict with itself. Of course, many recent articles on the multicultural classroom in America have called for cultural issues to be discussed in classes; however, I have seen few calls to make use of such cross-cultural organizing principles as context and temporal conceptions. Perhaps in America we might look at cross-cultural theory as one way of helping us understand better our own multicultural difficulties.

In comparing experiences soon after our exchange, my Giessen counterpart and I agreed it would be ideal if we could select the best features from both the American and German cultures. But it is difficult now to imagine how that could happen-perhaps it should not. Perhaps the best we can do is accept that differences exist and try to achieve intellectual understanding with goodwill. Perhaps all we can do, perhaps all we should do, is view our cultural differences as *differences*-- nothing less and nothing more.

NOTES

1. Some statements throughout this article come from a diagnostic writing sample that students completed prior to the course. The assignment asked students to introduce themselves as students of business writing. Other statements come from a final writing sample that asked students to write a letter to another Giessen student recommending a business writing course but telling the student what *not* to expect. All statements of students are reproduced verbatim and *in italics* to preserve their character, tone, and even errors that often reveal the writer's thinking.

2. Hall and Hall state, "When we use the term German we refer to those [Germans] who inhabit industrialized areas of the north in such centers as Frankfurt, Düsseldorf, Köln, Stuttgart, and Hamburg" (33). There are certainly cultural variations throughout Germany, but this area embodies the central features of German culture. Justus Liebig University (JLU) at Giessen is located about 40 kilometers north of Frankfurt, although many JLU students were from other areas of Germany.

3. A student research assistant in Giessen explained why grades are not as significant in the German educational system as they are in America:

None of the credits students get for the courses they take contribute towards their final grade which they get after having passed the final examination (after app. 5 years of studying). Even the grades of the pre-diploma will not count in any way. Everything depends on their theses and the final examinations (5 written tests and 3 oral exams). However, students still like to obtain good grades for their own satisfaction and in order to judge their performance although knowing that this effort might only to a very little extent contribute towards their final grade at the very end of the course (e.g. the impression they made on the professor which might influence which grade s/he will give that student).

4. Not surprisingly, when I analyzed the student's writing assignments, I found that the major problems were overly long, complicated, loose sentences as well as unusual word order and faulty idiomatic usage (although not as much as I had expected).

5. May's book is titled *Versuch in Handlungs-Briefen, und grosseren Aufsätzen, nach den Gellertschen Regeln. Nebst einer Abhandlung von dem Guten Geschmack in Handlungs-Briefen* [Attempt in Business Letters and Longer Reports According to Gellert's Rules. Including a Treatise on Good Taste in Business Letters] (Hildebrandt and Varner 97).

6. Gerzymisch specifically refers to Justus Liebig University, which he points out has offered such a program since the end of the 1970s (4).

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