

Teaching What, Where, Whom, and for What Purpose? – This Volume Leaves Readers Puzzled, at Best

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Abstract:

Teaching Cultural Studies aims to provide ideas and models for course designs and learning techniques, to suggest suitable secondary and primary sources to be used in teaching, and to reflect on the methodological thinking that should feed into cultural studies teaching. Unfortunately, the volume remains unfocused: it is unclear what 'cultural studies' is understood to be and whether the volume is directed toward instructors or students; issues specific to teaching cultural studies in "German tertiary education," (p. 7) which the volume claims to address, are not in fact raised. Due to this lack of positioning, teaching goals remain undefined. It is similarly unfortunate that the individual essays focus on 'matter,' that is on content, much more than on 'methods,' 'models,' and a reflection on those methods. These shortcomings arise from the conception of the volume rather than from the individual contributions: some articles provide great teaching inspiration as well as reflections on specific challenges.

How to cite:

Christ, Birte: „Teaching What, Where, Whom, and for What Purpose? – This Volume Leaves Readers Puzzled, at Best [Review on: Linke, Gabriele (ed.): Teaching Cultural Studies. Matters – Methods – Models. Heidelberg: Winter, 2011.]“. In: KULT_online 33 (2012).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2012.743>

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Linke, Gabriele (ed.): Teaching Cultural Studies: Methods – Matters – Models. Heidelberg: Winter, 2011 (Anglistik & Englischunterricht). 334 pp., paperback, €23. ISBN 978-3825358938

Teaching Cultural Studies: When I came across this volume in the library, read the title, and glanced over the first paragraph, I was thrilled. This was a book I had to read. At the beginning of her introduction, Gabriele Linke bemoans the fact that "authors have rarely asked the question of how much systematic and methodological thinking has fed and should feed into individual courses in British and American cultural studies in German tertiary education" (p. 7). And how right she is! As an instructor of American literature and culture at a German university, the main issues of teaching within the cultural studies paradigm that I find challenging, and that many of my colleagues have expressed as finding challenging, too, are encapsulated in that sentence. First, how much meta-reflection on what we are doing when we do cultural studies should I and can I introduce into my courses? How much contextualizing of this specific approach and contrasting it to other ways of looking at 'texts' in the widest sense, from biographic readings to deconstruction, can beginning and more advanced students benefit from; how does one introduce such meta-reflective discussions at a level appropriate to students; and how does one fit these issues into courses in which one's main goal is to get down to the 'real' work of enabling students to perform historicized, contextualized close readings of texts and to gauge a text's cultural work? Second, how does one do this within a German university programme, where these problems may be more pronounced than in American and British ones? German students study texts of a culture that is not their own. Hence, there is an increased need for what Linke calls "reconstructionist sessions" (p. 11), i.e., for an extended period in which contextual, often historical knowledge can be (re)constructed through readings, discussions, and other activities in and outside of class. Furthermore, contact hours, reading discipline, and resources for individual advising are more limited than in many American and British contexts, something that cultural studies textbooks designed for the US and UK clearly demonstrate. While scarcity of resources is a problem in almost any teaching context, it is particularly difficult in cultural studies, as "reconstructionist" and "interpretive" sessions (p. 11), and – I would add – sessions in which cultural studies methodologies and theoretical tools are reflected upon need to be fitted into a single course. As Linke correctly states, no publication has addressed these issues adequately. Sadly, Linke's volume fails to do so, as well.

It may be unfair to ask a single volume to suggest solutions to all of these problems, or even to spell out, as I have done, what Linke's introductory paragraph might be understood to set up as goals for the volume. Yet this is one of the introduction's problems: it states many things the volume wants to achieve but remains unfocused. It is unclear whether it is directed toward instructors, as the title suggests, to the "novice to the field" (p. 7), or to students, which one is left to infer based on the simplistic introductions to topics such as 'gender' or concepts such as 'habitus.' One is led to inquire why it is that introductions to American and British cultural studies directed toward beginning students such as 'UTB Basiswissen' are taken to indicate a general lack of meta-didactic reflection in the field. And, while the concept of 'interdisciplinarity' receives lip-service, the issue of how 'cultural studies' is situated in relation to other disciplines goes unexamined. Cultural studies is alternately evoked as a discipline in its own right or as an interdisciplinary endeavor, or as the equivalent of 'Landeskunde,' or as something very much like 'Kulturwissenschaften' ('the study of culture' as opposed to 'cultural studies'). But what any of these approaches hopes to achieve is not addressed.

The contributors come from disciplines ranging from English language didactics to sociology. Inevitably, they have different conceptions of what 'cultural studies' means. Yet the volume does not render these different perspectives productive for the reader. As a result, teaching goals are not defined in the introduction or the individual contributions. Nevertheless, the introduction engages in ex cathedra 'thou shalt' advice for teaching that may strike the reader as banal. This includes pronouncements such as: "it may help to [...] have students store key terms, quotations, and theses in forms which allow easy access" (p. 11); or "the impression of a monolithic culture should rather be avoided" (p. 12). Other imperatives for teaching remain unqualified ("the combination of theories from various disciplines such as literature, sociology and history is recommended" (p. 12 f.)) or are debatable ("Instructors should encourage students to practice [...] creative and productive skills" (p. 13)).

Quite worryingly, it is also unclear to whom the teaching of cultural studies is directed. Laurenz Volkmann, in his section on "Dealing with Stereotypes in Pedagogical Contexts," for example, appears to be writing about teaching cultural differences to pupils in primary school. One may ask what this has to do with cultural studies; and even if it is related to cultural studies, why was this essay included in a volume on tertiary education? If the prime strategies to address the issue of national stereotypes in a university context were really to "[p]resent [students with] individuals and scenarios aimed at creating empathy concerning the target culture" or to "[discover] [s]imilarities in everyday life," I think we might calmly close our universities, cross words such as 'analysis' from our vocabularies, and shovel a grave for Western academic thinking.

Perplexingly, while many of the contributions mention 'critical' thinking and contextualization, they refrain from placing cultural studies practice within the German university context. Hence, this context does not become object of a critical analysis: to state that a "reduction of course material is [...] imperative" (p. 13) or to mention in passing that "this class required

very much preparation and a much higher frequency and intensity of individual teacher-student contact than other classes" (p. 101) means to accept and not to question the systemic constraints we face in our teaching. A volume on teaching 'critical' cultural studies could very well be used to argue that if we want to uphold the standard of teaching that befits universities and takes intellectual excellence as well as students' needs seriously, we may need to change the context of our teaching and our teaching techniques.

The most rewarding section of the volume is certainly the one on "Materials." Andrea Zittlau, Claus-Ulrich Viol, and Linke reflect on courses they have taught, suggesting useful texts and teaching strategies. Unlike most of the other contributions, these articles are not encumbered by lengthy introductions to the topic to be taught but get right down to issues of course design and teaching, thus providing a host of ideas and inspirations. Other essays, such as those by Eckart Voigts-Virchow and Renate Brosch, open with excellent considerations of specific issues related to cultural studies, such as the development of Web 2.0 and theories of visual culture. Nonetheless, it remains unclear why these fine essays have been placed in a volume on teaching: didactic suggestions are tacked on rather than integrated into the discussion.

Many of the volume's problematic aspects have to be attributed to its editor's conception and to the introduction. One might muse about whether some of the pitfalls could have been avoided if the editor, who is also the series editor, had had the benefit of having her own work edited by her peers. While it is unfortunate that the volume fails to address the complexities of "teaching cultural studies," it stands to hope that it will kick off a broader and very much needed debate about – as I would phrase it – how to teach cultural studies approaches within British and American studies in the German university context.