A busy summer

We had a very busy and productive summer and we are happy to share some of its highlights with you in our second joint newsletter.

We are proud to announce that the Centre for Teaching Excellence at our university awarded Belinda Kleinhans with this year’s Award for Exceptional Teaching by a Student. In an interview, she talks about her teaching philosophy and why receiving this award is a great honour for her.

In a second interview, Dr. David John sheds some light on the complex processes that were involved in founding and leading the WCGS for its first five years.

We are also reporting on two conferences that took place at or in cooperation with our department and the Centre: The 8th Germanic and Slavic Studies Conference in April and the Traditions and Transitions: German Curricula conference.

Happy reading!

The editorial team
And the Award for Exceptional Teaching by a Student goes to… Belinda Kleinhans! An interview.

Belinda, how do you understand your role as a teacher at the university level?
I see my role as a teacher two-fold: First, I want to familiarize my students with a topic that is new to them, in this case German culture and language, and get them to understand the connections. Second, I also understand my role as a kind of stepping stone in the personal development of the student. The students I teach often just started their path at university, so I try to help them figure out what might be important or interesting to them, to show them where their strengths and weaknesses are, and also how to possibly counterbalance them. My goal is always to foster critical thinking and enable the students to try out new things: new ways of thinking, new languages, new perspectives.

Which role do students play in your teaching philosophy?
To me, students are the most important thing; I always make sure to get to know my class as well as possible and to try to figure out which way of teaching matches their learning styles. You can’t teach each group of students the same way. Each student has particular needs, strengths and weaknesses, and there is also the dynamics of the group, which can influence the teaching a lot. I try to offer a variety of teaching styles like group work, individual projects, games, inductive teaching, lecture-style and so on, and in the middle of the term I have the students evaluate what they liked and what they didn’t like; that way they can influence my teaching as well.

What are some of the challenges and rewards of teaching a language?
It is very important for the students to feel comfortable and relaxed to minimize the anxiety that can come with the language learning process. So the first challenge for the teacher is to create an atmosphere that is friendly and relaxed, and to give the students the feeling that making mistakes is a natural occurrence along the path of mastering a language. In fact, each mistake is an opportunity to learn. It also can be a rather big challenge to get the students to talk in the language classroom, and without talking there can be no teaching of a new language. The reward for me is to see and hear students experiment with the new language; it opens a whole new world for them, and it’s just wonderful to see this and be a small part of it.

What does receiving the teaching award mean to you?
Receiving this teaching award is first and foremost a confirmation that I am doing something right in the classroom! It is really nice to have my work appreciated, especially by students. We all have days when a lesson doesn’t work out quite the way we imagined, and then it is nice to know that students still appreciate the work and effort that went into teaching – and that it influenced them positively enough to fill out the form to nominate me. It is a huge honour.

Conference Report: 8th Germanic and Slavic Studies Conference 2010
On a sunny Monday late in April, the Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies’ 8th annual Departmental Conference brought the Winter 2010 term to a positive close by showcasing some of the research being carried out by members of our department. This year’s presenters were a diverse group of undergraduate students, MA and PhD students, and professors who took the opportunity to share their research projects with other members of our department. Those in attendance were enthusiastically active during the discussion period following each paper. The 2010 Conference Planning Committee really pulled the event together. Belinda Kleinhans, PhD candidate in German, and Steve Mason, MA candidate in Russian, worked together with Dr. Barbara Schmenk to plan a wonderful day for the presenters and attendees, which included lunch during the day and a potluck dinner following the conference. Forty people attended the conference, some staying the entire day and others coming and going throughout the event. After some opening words from Dr. James Skidmore, the chair of the Department, and a word of welcome from the planning committee, the conference got underway.
Part One, the shortest of the three sessions, featured two papers that dealt with the difficulties of translation and with German and Turkish literature, respectively. Part Two featured three papers in literary studies that each emphasized this field’s connections with and influences from feminism, homeopathy, and linguistics, respectively. After the free lunch (who says there’s no such thing?) Part Three of the conference wrapped up the day with three papers on topics in the field of applied linguistics. These papers focused on the tools used in and outside the language classroom to facilitate and assess language learning.
Thank you to all those who organized, attended, or presented a paper at this year’s GSS Conference – because of you, it was a great success!

You can find the conference program in our previous newsletter.
Second-year Russian students have been practicing their language skills by getting to know the local Russian community here in Kitchener-Waterloo. In the winter term the students submitted articles about their experiences of learning Russian to the local Russian-language newspaper, The Tri-Cities Herald (Вестник трех городов). The editor of the newspaper, Ms Irina Markovich, named the article written by Clair Macaulay-Newcombe as the star submission (congratulations, Clair!), but she and her colleagues found the others so interesting as well that in the end they decided to publish them all. Irina visited the class of Prof. Sarah Turner at the end of term and talked with students about her life in Russia and her experiences of coming to Canada.

If you would like to receive the Tri-Cities Herald, please send an e-mail to kwgazeta@rogers.com

The spring term was wrapped up successfully by the long anticipated conference Traditions and Transitions: German Curricula, which took place from August 26th to 28th.

The conference provided a forum for over thirty delegates including members of the Centre, graduate students, and professors from universities across Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Germany to present and discuss their thought-provoking scholarship on aspects of both teaching and learning the German language in post-secondary education. Many topics were discussed, including: Computer assisted language learning, identity, the learner, language in culture, language-to-literature, and German as a foreign/second language. As the conference title indicates, elements of tradition and transition were a central focus. Scholars were interested in how German curricula have evolved and what boundaries exist between traditions and transitions in teaching and learning German.

Of special note are the keynote speakers: Alice Pitt of York University, Claire Kramsch of the University of California, Berkeley, and Dietmar Rösler of the Universität Gießen in Germany. These leading scholars elucidated their research and provided meaningful dialogue about the emotional world of language learning and teaching, the translingual and transcultural imagination, and the communicative orientation of German as a foreign language, both inside and outside of Germany.

A big thank-you goes to Dr. Barbara Schmenk and Dr. John Plews for organizing the conference, as well as to the conference committee members Allison Cattell, Christine Kampen Robinson, Dr. Grit Liebscher, Mareike Müller, Tetyana Reichert, Kyle Scholz, Dr. Mathias Schulze, and Dr. James Skidmore.
An interview with Dr. David G. John, Founding Director of the Waterloo Centre for German Studies

David, what inspired you to found the Waterloo Centre for German Studies?
Starting in 1974, the year I became a professor of German here at our university, I began to notice the tremendous contribution of German heritage to our community in Kitchener-Waterloo. The German community had originally settled in this area in the 19th century and founded what is now Kitchener, and I wanted this contribution to be recognised. I knew that this would also be an opportunity for the university to raise its profile in the community and do something meaningful for us both. I also thought that funding would come to establish it as an independent entity.

How did the founding of the Centre happen?
I already knew that the German community was enthusiastic about the idea of such a centre. Now I needed the support of the university, which was a very political endeavour, especially because university policy demanded that centres be self-sustaining. As one of the deciding factors was to show that such a centre could raise money, a university-wide capital campaign in the mid-1990s to increase funds beyond government support was a great chance to put this project forward. On just two pages I proposed a project for a German centre and although our department was among the smallest in the faculty, and the Dean only considered 10 out of 16 departments for the campaign, we won! I fought hard for this project because it makes sense in this community. We won because there was an historical rationale for having such a centre here, as well as a community of senior German-Canadians who might be inclined to make it strong and independent. To convert an idea within an institution is often a matter of politics, timing, conviction, and the ability to advocate. Thanks to the support of six important members of the German community who became part of the central steering committee – Manfred Conrad, Ernst Friedel, Willy Huber, Paul Tuerr, and Marga Weigel – we had an initial financial commitment of $750,000, even before the Senate Research Council had given their administrative approval.

What were the biggest challenges during the time of your directorship?
Raising money and becoming comfortable with the point of view of many older German community members with regard to European history of the last half century. But because these attitudes stem very much from their personal histories, I learned to understand why they held to them with such passion. There is a fine line between being honest and being sympathetic to the views of others. It was also challenging to convince some of my colleagues to support this project, as some were not interested in it.

How has the Centre matched the diverse interests of each group?
The Centre’s programming focuses on blending research and outreach. This is challenging because of the sophistication of some research in our general field of Germanic Studies, which sometimes doesn’t even spark the interest of close colleagues. But while the older generation in the community may never feel comfortable with it, the younger generation will be increasingly so. I looked for opportunities to create popular cultural events with a broad community appeal and a certain niveau. It was important to make people comfortable at the university.

Are there differences between your and Mathias Schulze’s leadership?
Mat has a different managerial style and philosophy than mine, and also a somewhat different concept of programming, but both fall comfortably within the mandate of the centre and I think he has been highly successful. Has a strong research program going and is keeping the community in mind for many events. For example, he recently brought in a speaker to talk about the expulsion of German groups from their homelands during and after World War II. There was enormous support from the community, with over 200 attendees. I admired him for that. While many at the university did not agree with that speaker’s views, we all felt, as Mat, that the university should be a platform for many viewpoints, as long as they are presented responsibly. I am very happy that the Centre has flourished and that it has now passed on to good hands.

Dr. David G. John is a Professor of German in the Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies.
Wat’s Upcoming

Margaret Derry: A German Canadian’s Impression of the European Situation in 1938: the Diary of Franklin Wellington Wegenast

Historian Margaret Derry has recently edited Wegenast’s travel diary and provided extensive commentary and contextualization. Her presentation is based on her research for this book.

Please join us on Tuesday, 21 September at 1:30 pm in Hagey Hall 373A at the University of Waterloo.

This talk is organized and hosted by the German-Canadian Studies research group.

Mathias Schulze: What Happened to the German Language in Kitchener-Waterloo?

When you walk or drive through Kitchener and Waterloo or flip through the area phonebook: German names abound. Waterloo is the region with the highest proportion of German-Canadians in the country, but is German still spoken? To approach this question from a variety of angles, Schulze will look at some historical as well as current data to identify ongoing sociolinguistic development. He will highlight and discuss a number of factors that influence the situation of bilingual speakers in English-speaking Canada.

Please join us on Thursday, 14 October at 12noon at the Kitchener Public Library.

This talk is organized through the UW Centre for Extended Learning as part of the Kitchener Public Library Lecture Series.

Inaugural Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm Lecture
David Blackbourn: Nature and Environment in Modern Germany; A Difficult History

David Blackbourn is Coolidge Professor of History at Harvard University. His latest single-authored monograph is entitled The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany. David Blackbourn will talk in broad terms about how Germans have changed their environment since the eighteenth century, and the problems that face historians who write about this process.

The lecture will take place on Thursday, 18 November in the evening. A venue and the exact time will be announced.

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