

Sabbatical Report for Jeff Baker—Fall, 2018

Background

While teaching at the University of Cologne during my 2008-9 sabbatical, I had given a guest lecture at the University of Antwerp. Dr. Luc Herman at that time invited me to consider applying for a Fulbright Specialist Project to be carried out at the university there, whose application process I initiated during academic year 2017. I was notified this past year that I had been approved for the Fulbright, and, in the meantime, I had applied for a one-semester sabbatical, which had been granted by the Board. At that point, it was all-systems-go for the Fulbright in Antwerp.

Professor Herman went above and beyond all expectations, made all the necessary arrangements, and has made our stay quite friendly and pleasant throughout.

Work

I have accomplished the following during my stay in Antwerp:

- 1) I gave an opening lecture for the American writer Thomas Pynchon-portion of Professor Herman's seminar on the American Historical Novel post-1950, during which I reviewed with the students the parameters and requirements for their group assignments and presentations on the history of World War II as well as the American counter-cultural and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s. These assignments were designed by myself and jointly reviewed with Professor Herman so as to dovetail with his subsequent term paper assignment on Thomas Pynchon's novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*.
- 2) I supervised the following weeks' group presentations through December 11, after which, during each 3-hour class meeting, we held seminar discussions on the day's presentation as well as the assigned reading for that day's meeting.

The seminars were conducted in keeping with the American scholar Donald L. Finkel's (late of Evergreen College in Olympia, Washington) seminar precepts as outlined in his book, *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut*. I specifically chose this approach to give the seminar discussions a more

"American" flavor, which in this case translated into a student-centered approach toward discussion punctuated by my own mini-"spot lectures" where necessary to keep the student-led discussions on-track and relevant to the semester's broader concerns of looking at American historical fiction through the lens of "for every past there is an emergent present," a focus previously agreed upon by Professor Herman and myself.

- 3) For the final class meeting, I lectured for approximately 1 hour, tying up loose ends left by our class discussions and earlier group presentations, and then led our final seminar together with these excellent students. We made use of the final half-hour by allowing the students themselves to assess the work we had done during this grant period, the outcomes of which are summarized below.

Outcomes

I had hoped to proceed in this master's seminar by both teaching an American novel concerned (in my view) predominantly with post-1945 American history, and I had hoped to do so while employing an "American" seminar style that would be a change of pace for these Belgian students. The degree to which I succeeded might well be better measured by the students themselves, than by my own estimation. Accordingly, I am summarizing below the culmination of their written comments provided as feedback for the class.

--Despite his academic knowledge, it was his personal view that interested me the most. The professor lived in the States at the time the book came out and therefore was present at most of the events that occur beneath the surface of the book's text. He has a thorough knowledge of the politics (historical and present day) and history of the USA, and him being a native speaker it was great to listen to his elucidation.

Also the way he taught the class, by putting up a conference/seminar setting, was superb. It's a marvelous way of letting students speak up more, something I miss in other classes. It was scary too, but in a good way. Professor Baker created an atmosphere of trust, so it was easier to speak your mind.

--I also think that Professor Baker's personal insights helped us in understanding the novel. Giving us a different perspective as an American who lived in the US during the cold war and when the book came out.

--While other master courses in the program are often characterized by more conventional teacher-student relationships or uphold some sense of passivity on part of the students, Jeff Baker's active intervention, starting from the first session, in the class setting resulted in critical and lively discussions—students did not shy away from making analytical and constructive remarks about their reception of the novel, American politics, economics, and social-historical events.

--Having an American teacher brought insights in the book that otherwise we would surely have missed.

--I think that a Belgian professor would've taught the course in a completely different way. Doing the presentation made me actively engage with the novel and therefore I understood it better.

--The Fulbright program definitely brought an added value to the course in my opinion. For any other book, it might have been a little unnecessary, but since it was a course on *Gravity's Rainbow* it most certainly helped to have an American native speaker here to help us. ... The technique of the course, namely the round-robin formation, was a little uncomfortable in the beginning, but after a while we became used to it and it was no longer weird.

-- [The classes] with Professor Baker gave us an authentic American perspective on the subject matter. The way of teaching in which the students do most of the talking was relatively new to me, but I really enjoyed it. It gave us the opportunity to hear different interpretations and opinions.

--It was really nice being able to discuss *Gravity's Rainbow* from a more American perspective. It really adds to the experience when an American teacher can share with you what the novel means to an American audience, which we could then contrast to our Belgian background. We had some really interesting discussions on politics and history that we wouldn't have had in a purely Belgian context.

--It was ... interesting to be confronted with an attitude that was different from a Belgian one and to be able to discuss the aspects of the novel from these different points of view.

Rather than interpret the above comments, I believe we can allow them to speak for themselves, insofar as, it seems to me, the students' experiences both echo what my original hopes for the course had been, and, perhaps as important, also seem to embody much of what the Fulbright Program aspires to achieve. In any case, the whole experience would not have been

possible without the generous support of the Ventura County Community College District and the sabbatical which I was granted by the board to do this work.

Conclusion

In terms of what benefits can be said to have been derived for our district and the VCCCD student resulting from this sabbatical, I see at least two:

The first effect that my second teaching overseas experience has had upon my career and upon this institution is the obvious honor and prestige bestowed upon myself as the recipient of a Fulbright Scholar Award: the global recognition that such an award represents constitutes the culmination of a lifetime's work as a professional scholar. Additionally, for our college, and district, as well, I believe the Fulbright award accrues prestige and scholarly acknowledgement to an institution already recognized for its outstanding place in the world of American community colleges, particularly as we hope to educate our students toward a better preparation for the "global community."

The second, and equally important effect I hope this sabbatical has had regards my teaching. Both in my classroom and at my college, this sabbatical experience helps me remain as current as possible on trends in global curriculum, scholarship, and most importantly, "diversity locally, nationally, and internationally," so as to best prepare my students for their undergraduate and graduate education. As Moorpark College is primarily a two-year transfer institution from which my students, by and large, will successfully transfer to a four-year university, my increased familiarity with American Studies programs here and abroad has helped me to foster in them (and in myself) an increased confidence in my students' ability to succeed in whatever program they eventually transfer to. The sabbatical experience has enhanced my ability to educate both the English majors here, as well as the Freshman composition students that comprise four-fifths of my teaching load.

I thank the board most deeply for the opportunity to have experienced teaching at the University of Antwerp this past Fall as a Fulbright Specialist.