

die hochschullehre – Jahrgang 11 – 2025 (73)

Herausgebende des Journals: Svenja Bedenlier, Ivo van den Berk, Sarah Berndt, Jonas Leschke, Peter Salden, Antonia Scholkmann, Angelika Thielsch

Beitrag in der Rubrik Praxis

DOI: 10.3278/HSL2573W

ISSN: 2199-8825 wbv.de/die-hochschullehre



Monuments, Memory, and Democratic Dialogue

A Transnational Project Seminar as Case Study

MARYANN SNYDER-KÖRBER, JEANETTE VIGLIOTTI KING & PETRA ZAUS

Zusammenfassung

Der Kurzbeitrag präsentiert das laufende Kooperationsformat Monuments & Memory Transatlantic Seminar (MMTS) und beleuchtet dessen Bausteine durch eine zweifache Perspektivierung: zum einen im Hinblick auf die ursprüngliche didaktische Planung des Formats mit Fokus auf Schreibdidaktik, Ansätze des Embodied und Asset-Based Learning, Small Teaching und Projektarbeit, zum anderen vor dem Hintergrund aktueller bildungspolitischer Entwicklungen in den USA, deren Auswirkungen das Bewusstsein für die Relevanz demokratischer Bildungsprinzipien. Die Formatskizze endet mit Überlegungen zum Transferpotenzial, insbesondere im Hinblick darauf, wie kontroverse oder sensible Themen in der universitären Lehre konstruktiv und reflektiert angesprochen werden können. Die Zusammenarbeit zwischen dem Flagler College in St. Augustine, Florida, und der Philosophischen Fakultät der Julius-Maximilians-Universität (JMU) Würzburg wird durch das Schreibzentrum am Zentrum für wissenschaftliche Bildung und Lehre (ZBL) der JMU strukturell unterstützt.

Schlüsselwörter: Transnationale Kooperation; Multiphasen-Hybridlehre; Writing to Collaborate; Public Digital Humanities; Lehre zu kontroversen Themen

Monuments, Memory, and Democratic Dialogue

A Transnational Project Seminar as a Case Study

Abstract

The contribution outlines the building blocks of the ongoing transnational cooperation format Monuments & Memory Transatlantic Seminar (MMTS) through a two-part perspective: first, the original didactic planning with a focus on writing-to-learn pedagogies, embodied and asset-based learning, small teaching, and project work combined with, second, a newly heightened awareness of democratic education principles in the context of recent US government targeting of education. The format sketch concludes with thoughts on transfer potential, particularly for engaging with potentially contentious topics in the higher education classroom. The collaboration between Flagler College in St. Augustine, Florida, and humanities disciplines at the Julius-Maximilians-Universität (JMU) Würzburg is structurally supported by the Schreibzentrum|Writing Center at the JMU Centre for Academic Education and Teaching (ZBL).

Keywords: Transnational Collaboration; Multiphase Hybrid Teaching; Writing to Collaborate; Public Digital Humanities; Teaching Contentious Topics

1 Centering Democracy

Faculty in American Studies and History at Julius-Maximilians-Universität (JMU) Würzburg, alongside faculty at Flagler College in St. Augustine, Florida, developed the Monuments & Memory Transatlantic Seminar (MMTS) with the aim of transforming teaching through transnational collaboration, along with the more immediate goal of training students' media, communication, and writing competencies. The project proceeds from the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) understanding of writing as a key learning technology whose importance only increases in digital and AI-shaped cultures (Andrews et al., 2025). Accordingly, forward-facing student media projects are a central course component.

The collaborating institutions differ markedly. Flagler is a small North American private liberal arts college with around 2,500 students. Contrastingly, JMU is a major public Bavarian research university with approximately 25,000 students and significant enrollment in teaching-focused degree programs. However, the Covid-19 pandemic levelled out many of these differences. Higher education went online in 2020 and stayed there until at least 2021.

Compelled online migration opened opportunities. If we were all going to be teaching online, why not collaboratively? This expansion required didactic retooling. Funding from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) allowed JMU and Flagler partners to lay this groundwork from 2020 through 2022: first with a fully online version of the seminar in 2021, followed by a hybrid variation with online and on-site phases in 2022, which has become the model for the course moving forward.

Offered once yearly within the German summer semester at JMU (April–July) and the supplemental summer term at Flagler (May–June), MMTS provides a form of virtual mobility for students less able to commit to traditional exchange programs due to familial commitments, among other reasons. It is, however, not an either-or proposition. The course adapts WAC pedagogies to make writing a medium of authentic and “meaningful” collaboration (Eodice et al., 2016). Mentored, but otherwise autonomously developed, projects afford students opportunities to enact knowledge transfer as well as to develop key skills that can be documented in the form of a certificate, but, yet more compellingly, in a published digital project.

Democracy was not a foregrounded consideration in the original course design. As a teaching and project team, we have certainly always seen the format, with its focus on collective memory practices and further emphasis on collaborative project work, as building skills that support democracy. But this deliverable seemed so fundamental that it hardly needed to be mentioned.

That assumption changed in 2025. Donald J. Trump's inaugural address on 20 January targeted “an education system” that, he asserted, teaches shame and hatred of the United States and which the new administration intended “to completely and totally reverse” (Trump, 2025). Not quite four weeks later, the US Department of Education alerted institutions from elementary schools to universities to the targets of this reversal program: measures associated with “‘diversity, equity, and inclusion’ (‘DEI’)” that purportedly “smuggl[e]” racism into learning (Trainor, 2025, 2). Assessing this “Dear Colleague” email along with the many government communications and executive orders issued since the inauguration, PEN America has compiled more than 350 words—including activism, cultural heritage, prejudice, race, and stereotype—likely to trigger government action (Connelly, 2025). The consequences of keeping these terms in course descriptions, for example, can be loss of federal funding (Trainor, 2025, 2), which flows to private as well as public institutions. Consequences can potentially also be personal. On 27 February, the Department of Education launched an “End DEI” portal to which perceived infractions can be reported anonymously (US Department of Education, 2025). And this surveillance is going international. Institutions in Germany, among them JMU, have been asked to report on collaborations. Like the “Dear Colleague” communication, questionnaires focus on so-called “DEI” issues (Pauli, 2025).

These developments impact our course. How can we understand debates around monuments to the Confederacy or approaches to memorializing the Holocaust, two consistent foci, without men-

tioning injustice, oppression, prejudice, and discrimination: further terms highlighted by PEN (Connelly, 2025)? It is impossible. Thankfully, all US colleagues are committed to continuing the collaboration. The platform for publishing completed projects is based at JMU, which is a safeguard. Confronting these issues has, however, sensitized us to the centrality of democratic principles for this course. Writing more than a century ago, John Dewey highlighted the promise of mobility “to bring people and classes into closer and more perceptible connection.” The challenge for a genuinely democratic education is to give this connection “intellectual and moral significance” by fostering intellectually free interaction with varied positions in the community (Dewey, 2024, 82). Of particular importance for the humanities, Dewey’s touchstone model looks back to “intellectual and cultural heritage,” as Nicholas Tampio summarizes, with the “problems of the present” in view (Dewey, 2024, viii). We aim to do the same.

This report outlines MMTS building blocks through the double perspective of original planning combined with heightened attention to democratic principles. In terms of broader applicability, we particularly highlight asset-based learning, project commitments, and meaningful writing pedagogies as key resources for negotiating contentious topics in the higher education classroom.

Our principal source for this reflective report is ongoing playbook documentation. In sport contexts, a playbook collects tactical formations for gameplay as well as continuous notes on how the formation played out in practice, might be combined with other moves, or otherwise adjusted. The playbook approach differs from quantitatively driven education research by putting emphasis on practice, actionability, and instructors’ perspectives as well as more qualitative narrative presentation. Feedback from students, collected via the standard student evaluation forms of the participating institutions, is factored into instructors’ playbook evaluations of measures as they functioned in one year and their proposals for adjustments in the next course iteration.

2 Monuments & Memory Transatlantic Seminar

2.1 Topic Focus

Looking at monuments in terms of built historical landscapes and cultural practices suits the interdisciplinary mix of the collaboration. The core teaching team brings together colleagues from American Cultural Studies, History, Liberal Arts, and Religion. These disciplines as well as Education, Political Science, and Gender Studies are regularly represented in the featured case studies sessions.

However, the topic choice had a more immediate impetus. Monuments were in the news. A statue of the transatlantic slave-trade profiteer Edward Colston was tipped into Bristol Harbor in June 2020. The already criticized large-scale monument to Confederate Civil War General Robert E. Lee in Richmond, Virginia was illuminated with images from ongoing Black Lives Matter protests in May 2020. Should such monuments be destroyed, removed to alternate locations, contextualized, or transformed on-site, as in Richmond?

These questions have real-world stakes. Connecting with ongoing, socially relevant subjects sets the stage for a multiperspectival engagement with the present in relationship with the past in the spirit of Dewey.

2.2 Course Design

The basic components of the MMTS have remained consistent since 2021. The course begins with an asynchronous online onboarding phase in which students introduce themselves and their interests. This introductory phase is followed by a compact four-week schedule of biweekly synchronous online meetings. Each session showcases a key case study and features a speaker from one of the collaborating institutions. Students prepare for the session through readings as well as guiding questions sent by email a few days in advance. The questions prompt exchange in short breakout-room phases as well as full-group discussions. Finally, student groups develop forward-facing public digital humanities projects during and following the compact meeting phase. After Covid-19 pandemic restrictions

were largely lifted in 2022, project work has been a key element of an on-site week in Würzburg with dedicated project workdays involving all participants.

The onboarding “Monuments, Memory, and Me” assignment invites multifaceted self-presentation, closer to the information that might be exchanged in informal on-site conversations. Students additionally go out into their surroundings to document examples. In this way, embodied experiences (Hrach, 2021) enliven the online course phase, thereby offsetting a peril of digital formats: disengagement. Ultimately, the most important addition that this writing opportunity brings into the course is student expertise. An “asset-based approach” is established (Adler-Kassner, 2022, 61); this, in turn, favors a more equitable and fundamentally democratic learning environment, in which all participants, students and the teaching team, can learn from each other.

While such a preliminary assignment is somewhat unusual, the two-hour online meetings follow conventional patterns. In a warm-up phase at the start of the first hour, students are welcomed by a designated moderator and provided with a session overview, which is also posted in the meeting chat box. Welcome transitions into a discussion phase in which students are distributed into breakout rooms to dialogue on responses to guiding questions. As mentioned, questions are distributed in advance, but are also reposted in the meeting chat box. Care is taken in small-group constitution to mix students from participating institutions. As James M. Lang and Flower Darby emphasize, such small adjustments to established teaching patterns “stick,” as they work with existing structures and habits (Lang, 2021; Darby & Lang, 2019). Seen from a student perspective, reliable structures aid orientation, which makes course contents more accessible and offers a securer grounding for participation (Hogan et al., 2022, 18–22). Digital formats require more explicit written scaffolding, which we, for example, provide by posting information initially related verbally also in the meeting chat box. This increases accessibility and, thereby, equity.

Breakout-room discussions are set up with the aim of empowering students to participate in the larger group conversation through warm-up in a peer-to-peer context. The opportunities for authentic dialogue in this setting are equally important. Teaching team members only enter the breakout rooms upon invitation. This combination of structured support and autonomous interaction continues in project work.

2.3 The Power of Projects

Learning through experience, and especially collaborative experience, is the central means by which Dewey’s ideal of democratic education is realized. William Heard Kilpatrick summarized this approach as the “Project Method”: “purposeful activity proceeding in a social environment” (1918, 4).

Connections made in the smaller group and plenary discussions, as well as suggested by the interests laid out in the introductory “Monuments, Memory, and Me” texts, form the basis for project workgroups that focus on a specific topic. Initially, these contributions could take the form of a visual-textual essay, podcast, or videocast. Starting in 2024, StoryMaps was established as the central multimedia anchor format with texts, images, and interactive possibilities.

Project groups meet independently during the online phase of the course. By the time that the Flagler group arrives in Würzburg, peer relationships have been established through collaborative research, planning, and writing. Transnational interactions are the most consistent motivation for participation given by JMU students in course evaluations. Project work is also regularly highlighted as a positive feature in written and informal feedback, although students also consistently describe it as challenging. Challenge, however, connects to meaningfulness according to the criteria laid out by Michelle Eodice and collaborators: “opportunities for agency; for engagement with instructors, peers, and materials; and for learning that connects to previous experiences and passions and to future aspirations and identities” (Eodice et al., 2016, 4).

Contributions published in the Monuments & Memory Project Space (<https://www.uni-wuerzburg.de/schreibzentrum/monuments-memory/>) can further be meaningfully utilized as learning materials in later course iterations and additional educational settings.

3 Applications

After five course iterations, we can recommend multiple elements for adaptive transfer. The small teaching intervention of an onboarding assignment that brings in outside expertise (asset-based approach) and experiences (embodied learning) in the online course phase, for instance, mitigates tendencies to student disengagement as well as instructor dominance. From the start, students reference each other not only by name, but also utilize examples and ideas from colleagues' submissions in full-group discussions. This networking of thinking would also occur on-site. In either setting, the atmosphere created by the initial assignment facilitates the free interaction with varied positions in the community central to Dewey's ideal.

Such measures transform the classroom into a space in which even contentious topics can be productively negotiated. Asset-based approaches, as previously noted, distribute expertise and, with it, authority and responsibility. Instructors shift into the role of mentoring collaborators, diffusing the possible perception of instruction as indoctrination. Additionally, the course's onboarding assignment specifically prompts embedded expertise: based on local knowledge and personal experiences, but also at times involving positions on issues that generate heated discussion in the wider public sphere. The personal presentation encourages more respectful interaction: a tendency further strengthened by project work. In collaboration, dialogue is a necessity. As MMTS follows meaningful pedagogy principles emphasizing agency, dialogue is also a choice. Groups come together through shared interests. Differing perspectives are negotiated within a largely self-chosen frame, which increases engagement as well as civility.

In the course, this model has, for example, united students who identify as Antifa activists with self-described military family patriots to work through approaches to remembering war dead without war celebration. MMTS strategies might lend themselves to discussing other similarly polarizing issues: from Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) initiatives in legal as well as political science settings to transgender health care from medical and ethical perspectives. Contemporary society has contentions enough. To meet these challenges, our pedagogies require retooling through some of the small but, we believe, ultimately impactful steps that our case study highlights.

Acknowledgements

We thank Helmut Flackenecker, Timothy J. Johnson, and Wayne Riggs for co-initiation and concept development.

References

- Andrews, C. D. M., Kalodner-Martin, E., O'Connell, N., Wang, H., Wilkes, L. & Woods, C. (Eds.) (2025). *The Proceedings of the Annual Computers and Writing Conference, 2024*. <https://doi.org/10.37514/PCW-B.2024.2296>
- Adler-Kassner, L. & Wardle, E. (2022). *Writing Expertise: A Research-Based Approach to Writing and Learning Across Disciplines*. <https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2022.1701>
- Connelly, A. J. (28 May 2025). Federal Government's Growing Banned Words List Is Chilling Act of Censorship. <https://pen.org/banned-words-list/>
- Darby, F. & Lang, J. M. (2019). *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science to Online Classes*. Jossey-Bass.
- Dewey, J. (2024). *Democracy and Education*. Edited and with an introduction by Nicholas Tampio. Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/dewe21010>
- Eodice, M., Geller, A. E. & Lerner, N. (2016). *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education*. Utah State University. <https://doi.org/10.7330/9781607325802>
- Hogan, K. A. & Sathy, V. (2022). *Inclusive Teaching: Strategies for Promoting Equity in the College Classroom*. West Virginia University Press.

- Hrach, S. (2021). *Minding Bodies: How Physical Space, Sensation and Movement Affect Learning*. West Virginia University Press.
- Kilpatrick, W. H. (1918). *The Project Method: The Use of the Purposeful Act in the Educative Process*. Teacher's College Columbia University. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811801900404>
- Lang, J. M. (2021). *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*. 2nd edition. Jossey-Bass.
- Pauli, P. (6 May 2025). Abfragen der US-Regierung (University Listserv Communication).
- Trainor, C. (14 February 2025). Dear Colleague Letter. <https://www.ed.gov/media/document/dear-colleague-letter-sffa-v-harvard-109506.pdf>
- Trump, D. J. (20 January 2025) Inaugural Address. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2024/01/the-inaugural-address/>
- US Department of Education (27 February 2025). U. S. Department of Education Launches "End DEI" Portal. <https://www.ed.gov/about/news/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-launches-end-dei-portal>

Authors

Prof. Dr. MaryAnn Snyder-Körper. Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, Neuphilologisches Institut, Würzburg, Deutschland; E-Mail: maryann.snyder-koerber@uni-wuerzburg.de

Prof. Dr. Jeanette Vigliotti King. Flagler College, Classical & Liberal Education, St. Augustine, Florida, USA; E-Mail: JKing@flagler.edu

Dr. Petra Zaus. Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, Schreibzentrum|Writing Center am ZBL, Würzburg, Deutschland; E-Mail: petra.zaus@uni-wuerzburg.de



Zitiervorschlag: Snyder-Körper, M., Vigliotti King, J. & Zaus, P. (2025). Monuments, Memory, and Democratic Dialogue. A Transnational Project Seminar as Case Study. *die hochschullehre*, Jahrgang 11/2025. DOI: 10.3278/HSL2573W. Online unter: wbv.de/die-hochschullehre



die hochschullehre

Interdisziplinäre Zeitschrift für Studium und Lehre

Die Open-Access-Zeitschrift **die hochschullehre** ist ein wissenschaftliches Forum für Lehren und Lernen an Hochschulen.

Zielgruppe sind Forscherinnen und Forscher sowie Praktikerinnen und Praktiker in Hochschuldidaktik, Hochschulentwicklung und in angrenzenden Feldern, wie auch Lehrende, die an Forschung zu ihrer eigenen Lehre interessiert sind.

Themenschwerpunkte

- Lehr- und Lernumwelt für die Lernprozesse Studierender
- Lehren und Lernen
- Studienstrukturen
- Hochschulentwicklung und Hochschuldidaktik
- Verhältnis von Hochschullehre und ihrer gesellschaftlichen Funktion
- Fragen der Hochschule als Institution
- Fachkulturen
- Mediendidaktische Themen

wbv.de/die-hochschullehre



Alle Beiträge von **die hochschullehre** erscheinen im Open Access!