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Bringing it all together online: Performance, outreach, and education

The model of the *German Theater Project* at Indiana University

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Every year, the Department of Germanic Studies at Indiana University hosts a theater project for high school students from across the state. 2021 was the 8th consecutive successful year of the festival, and the second time it was held online. The main incentive of the project is to give German students of all levels a creative way to engage with the language through performance. In our article, we explore how to move the festival to a digital space during the pandemic, as well as how the project is organized in general. We write about difficulties and successes with the format, and show examples of student projects and educational workshops. The festival has thrived as an outreach program for the department, attracting more and more learners to German. Even though the project was switched to an online format, every year, an increasing number of high school students enthusiastically participate and use it as an outlet to show their love for language, culture, and performance.

1 Introduction[1]

In recent years, pedagogical journals focusing on the teaching of German have grappled with topics such as the German language's position in the global world (Bauerlein & Shertzer, 2019), German departments repositioning themselves into *Global Studies* (Hock and Peterson, 2019), challenges in developing effective undergraduate and graduate programs (Wurst, 2021), decolonializing German language pedagogy (Cooper, 2020), as well as the question of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the German language classroom (Schweiger, 2021). What all these projects have in common is that they highlight the question of how German programs and departments at the University level can retain their vibrant spirit in the face of institutional and political changes, all the while maintaining (or even increasing) enrolments. Set against this backdrop, the present article addresses this question by introducing and discussing a high

[1] There are several individuals whose work on the IUGTP the authors would like to acknowledge. First, special thanks go out to Troy Byler, who served as event coordinator for the IUGTP from 2013-2019, and to Lane Sorensen, who has served as event coordinator since 2019. Finally, the authors would like to acknowledge the IU undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty members who have worked tirelessly to make the IUGTP event happen.

school outreach program known as the *German Theater Project* at Indiana University (IUGTP) with special focus on how the program was adapted to an online format because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The article introduces the structure and organization of the project specifically in its pre-2020 form, including an overview and short analysis of the workshops and the feedback it has received from participants and instructors. The main part of the article discusses how the transition to the online medium has taken place. Finally, the conclusion of the paper offers some thoughts on how the event may continue in the future.

While there has been some attention paid to high school German programs in the recent academic literature (Bauerlein & Shertzer, 2019), we are not aware of any publications discussing and evaluating joint outreach endeavours between high schools and colleges. Recently, Sorensen and Beck (2021) have discussed the impact of Indiana University outreach projects, including the IUGTP, at the *German Studies Association* annual conference. Additionally, Wurst (2021) discusses ways in which graduate and undergraduate education can be reformed so that there is less of a strong divide between the two fields, in particular by emphasizing the role of graduate students as "active participants" in the process of making undergraduate education more interactive and engaging. IUGTP, as demonstrated below, extends this task to the level of high school education by building a bridge between the various high school German programs in Indiana and the Department of Germanic Studies at Indiana University (on the necessity of outreach in university programs, see also Wurst, 2021, p.177-178).

Although we are not aware of any published work on university-level theater projects, we are aware of other projects with a similar style and ambition. For instance, in the state of Indiana, Valparaiso University conducts a project known as the *Theaterfest.* While this project shares some things in common with the Indiana University *German Theater Project*, the differences are quite significant. The Valparaiso *Theaterfest* consists of an in-person event where high school students are invited to the Valparaiso campus to present a 10-15 minute (memorized) theater performance. According to the website, the 2022 event took place on Thursday, April 7, 2022 from 9am to 1pm. In comparison, the IUGTP functions as year-long event with a video submission component and an in-person event. Another important difference is that the submissions for IUGTP typically take on a more cinematic nature, rather than a strictly theatrical one. Another example of a university-led theater project is *German Day* at Penn State University. As the official website for this project indicates, this project has a broader focus and is attended by approximately 450-500 high school students per year. According to the program website, the event consists of a number of design competitions, a poster competition, a geography game, trivia, a spelling bee, and a poetry recitation. The *Stoffbeutel* design is a competitive contest in which the participating high schools submit design proposals

throughout the year, and the winning design is featured on the commemorative tote bags that are given out at the event itself. Unfortunately, this event has not taken place since 2020 and has not been adapted for an online format. The event organizers indicate that it is difficult to create an online event for the over 400 participants.

The idea for IUGTP was developed in 2013 at Indiana University by the outreach coordinator and a group of graduate students of the Germanic Studies department. The goal was, and is, to engage German high school programs from all over the state of Indiana in a project that enhances collaboration and outreach between the schools and the university. The event combines performance with language learning and helps recruit new students for the German program at IU as well as for the high schools. Furthermore, the project is structured so that participating students are engaged throughout the school year. It culminates in an event day on the campus of Indiana University with workshops, live performances, a viewing of the submissions, and an awards-ceremony. Aspects of literature, language, culture, performance, theater, and film have all been incorporated into the project and provide a potpourri of possibilities for students to be creative and engage with German.

2 Format and organization

Throughout the year, the outreach coordinator of the IU German program is in contact with high school German teachers and promotes participation in the IUGTP. The first step is a video submission of a short performance by students. Each high school can have multiple submissions and each submission can be completed by a group of students or individually. A selection committee, consisting of IU graduate students and the outreach coordinator, views all submissions and selects the top four for each category. The categories have changed slightly over the years, but have always included *Original Screenplay*, for a submission that the students wrote and performed themselves, and Adapted Screenplay, for creative adaptations. In 2013, during the first event year, the theme for submissions was *Fairy Tales*, however, to allow for greater creativity and a wider variation of topics, IUGTP did not restrict submissions to a specific theme in the following years. Instead, new award categories were added, such as *Outstanding Use of German*, *Best Costume*, *Best Ensemble*, and *Best Acting*, to increase the number of students and schools that could be nominated and receive an award. All video submissions must be exclusively in German, must be limited to 10 minutes, and may not include any graphic depiction of violence. The last two rules were added as a reaction to some inappropriate or too lengthy submissions in one year. Additionally, after a year of great discrepancies in the number of submissions by different schools, which also affects the chance of being nominated and winning, schools had to be limited to four submissions per year. This new rule, implemented in 2017, promoted collaboration among the students and resulted in

more elaborate video projects which often resemble short films. The deadline for the video submissions is usually in February, so that high school classes can work on writing, acting, and filming during the fall.

After the committee at Indiana University selects the top four submissions for each category, the high school German programs, including all contributing students and their teachers, are invited to an event day at Indiana University. Usually, the event is on a Saturday in March or April, and the number of participants varies between 60 and 100. The whole day is organized and led by graduate students from the Germanic Studies department at Indiana University with the help of the outreach coordinator and some faculty representatives. The day starts with a welcome ceremony which often includes a short skit performed by the graduate students. The high school students spend the main part of the day in workshops, one before lunch and one after lunch, which they are able to pre-select.

The workshops are organized and hosted by the graduate students who are part of the IUGTP committee. They are offered both in German (various levels) and in English to allow students of all German levels to participate. Also, there is always one workshop specifically designed for the high school teachers (and other accompanying adults) who attend the event. About a month before the event, the IUGTP committee sends out a file with a short description of each workshop, including their maximum capacity and the German level necessary to participate. The high school students then have the chance to send the names of their three top workshop choices back to the committee until the week before the event. However, even though the students are able to pre-select their preferred workshops, they may not end up in their first choice on the day of the event. This may happen because the graduate students responsible for organizing the workshops need to ensure that there are enough students in each workshop and that the participants' German level corresponds to the prerequisite of the workshop selected. On top of that, when assigning the participants to the workshops, the graduate students have to take into consideration not only the preferred workshop of each student, but also the distribution of schools among workshops, so that no student is left completely without others from their own school – a situation that could cause discomfort for some students.

The workshop themes vary each year, as they depend on the graduate students who create them. The IUGTP is a great opportunity for the Indiana University graduate students to work with a topic they are interested in, developing teaching materials, and seeing the response students have to the activities. The topics range widely, encompassing many different interest areas. These are a few examples of the workshops that have been offered in previous years: "Advanced Chemistry-Zwieback: Hip-Hop Culture in Germany;" "Aller guten Dinge sind drei: Spaß with Proverbs (All good things come in threes: Fun with proverbs);" "Quatschen,

schnaken, babbeln – German dialects;“ “Improv Theater & Spontaneous Acting;” “Enacting Fairy Tales for the Modern World.”

Developing, organizing and leading a workshop creates an opportunity for professional development for the graduate students, as it demands abilities that differ from their usual teaching responsibilities, but also help enrich them. The high school students also appreciate working directly with the Indiana University graduate students, since it gives them the chance to learn a little bit about what college life is like, and to picture themselves in that position.

After the workshops, the day ends with the award ceremony, in which all nominated submissions are viewed together in a big auditorium. Additionally, many workshop groups present their final product, which might be a short skit or a live performance. All participants then vote for a winner for each of the categories and after a short break the winners are announced and receive certificates and prizes. Prior to 2019, clickers provided to all of the participants, including the IU professors and graduate students, were used for voting. However, in 2019, the voting process changed and was conducted using marbles which each event participant placed in a specific box for the video submission of their choice. Prizes and celebration conclude the event day, which normally lasts from 9am until 4pm.

The participation numbers for IUGTP fluctuated only slightly between the years 2014 and 2019 and show the positive engagement by high schools with the theater project. The number of participating schools started at four schools at the first event-day in 2014 and peaked in 2018 at nine schools. In a similar fashion, the number of students on event-day almost doubled from 2014 to 2018, and only declined in 2019 because of scheduling conflicts for some schools. The increase in video submissions from the first year to subsequent years demonstrates that students motivated their peers to contribute to the IUGTP by sharing their positive experiences and their willingness to participate repeatedly. The number of video submissions peaked in 2017 after which new restrictions were implemented which limited each school to a maximum of four submissions to avoid the domination of one high school over another in the awards process. Overall, the participation numbers for the IUGTP show that the project increased its popularity steadily and successfully reached German high school programs in Indiana.

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Average
Number of schools participating	4	7	6	6	9	7	6.5
Number of students at event	48	48	70	66	88	54	62.3
Number of total video submissions	9	13	27	31	24	23	21.2
Number of schools with submissions	5	6	8	10	11	8	8

Table 1: IUGTP Participation Numbers from 2014 until 2019

The festival day, including pre-and post-event communication with the schools, the workshops and ceremonies, the design of the promotional material including the event T-Shirt for all participants, catering for breakfast, lunch, and snacks, and the whole of the logistical organization is managed by the graduate students with the support of faculty and staff of the Germanic Studies department. The funding comes from a mix of university-internal and university-external sources and covers not only the event-day, prizes, and food, but also travel cost for the high schools and a small stipend for workshop leaders and committee members. Overall, the IUGTP and especially the event-day provide a creative outlet for students and teachers to engage with the German language in combination with a field trip experience. They also serve as very successful recruitment tools, not only for the university German program, but also for the high schools that can offer their students a fun and unique experience as part of their curriculum. Indiana University benefits from the exposure that potential future students have to the campus and the insights that they gain into the Germanic Studies department and its affiliated personal. In an attempt to include more undergraduate German students, the 2019 event introduced a Walk-in Lunch Break Info Session in which one current and two recent undergraduate German majors from IU offered an informal information session for the high school students. However, many high school students are sufficiently impressed by the organization and the opportunity that the IUGTP and the event-day provide and regard it as one of their highlights of the school year to participate and enter a submission. Many Indiana high schools have attended repeatedly since 2014, and teachers promote IUGTP as one of the main events for their German program.

3 Feedback

In order to keep the festival attractive to the high school teachers and students, all feedback received is taken seriously and reflected upon by the IUGTP committee. There are two types of feedback collected on the event day, one for the specific workshops each participant took,

and one for the entire event, and sometimes a short survey is sent to the high school teachers after the festival to ask for suggestions for the next year.

More specifically, each individual workshop leader has the possibility of asking for written anonymous feedback from the participants at the end of their workshop. There is a short questionnaire available to the graduate students for this purpose. The feedback for the entire event, however, is given at the awards-ceremony at the end of the day, once every participant is gathered in the auditorium. At that moment, the IUGTP team asks questions to everyone about the festival (usually projected at a screen in the front of the auditorium) and, using a polling device such as clickers, collects the participants' answers. These general feedback questions have been repeated over the past few years, so that the results could be more easily compared.

Over the years, the IUGTP has received massive numbers of positive feedback. On average, for example, more than 80% of the participants have said that they anticipated to be able to apply what they have learned in the workshops to their academic life (the teachers, for example, would apply it to their high school curriculum). Also, more than 90% of the participants have said that they enjoyed the day or that the festival was the best part of their day.

Some of the feedback received has clearly shown the committee how the objectives of the project are successfully achieved each year. One student said, for example: "I had a great time learning new things in German and I feel as if my German skills have improved quite a bit from this." In the same positive tone, another student commented: "I had a lot of fun today! I met new people, learned new things [...]. It was awesome!" Impressively, even the feedback received that could be considered negative, or that presented suggestions for the next projects, also carried a positive note from the participants. Regarding the workshops, for example, one student said in the general feedback of the project: "Absolutely loved it! Although I wish I had more time in the workshops." IUGTP impacts not only the participants experience with the German language, but also their social skills. On that topic, one student commented: "I'm a shy person and the theater made me come out of my shell and act out skits and body language. I wish there was more time as a group."

After the event day, the outreach coordinator gathers with the graduate students and faculty that participated in the organization of the festival, and they talk about individual experiences and go over the received feedback. This reflection moment is crucial to the continuation and success of the IUGTP. Together, the team sketches a rough plan for the next festival, where suggestions, possible changes and updates are written down and kept until the start of the following year's event organization.

4 2022-2021: Transition to online

In an email on March 15th, 2020, addressed to the entire university, Indiana University President Michael McRobbie announced that all in-person instruction would be cancelled for the remainder of the 2020 Spring Semester. On April 2nd, 2020, Indiana Governor Holcomb declared in Executive Order 20-16 that all K-12 instruction should take place via remote learning for the remainder of the school year.

Due to these official policy changes, both at the university level and for high school, it became impossible to host an official 2020 IUGTP event, which had been planned for mid-April 2020. The project had to transition to a fully online event or be cancelled. The remainder of this article describes the changes undertaken by the IUGTP committee to ensure the continuation of the event under these new circumstances. As described in section 2, the IUGTP has always had both a digital and an in-person component, meaning that certain tasks did not need to be significantly changed in the transition to the fully online event in 2020. This includes the videorecording of a staged play, which the schools submit, as described above, and the work of the selection committee which nominates the top 4 for each category and invite schools.

However, the traditional event day, which has usually taken place on a Saturday in April, had to be adapted. Since IU and the state of Indiana officially began COVID-19 protocols in mid-March of 2020, this meant that the transition to a fully online event had to take place less than a month before the originally scheduled event day. Thus, all aspects of the IUGTP related to the event-day itself had to be rethought or reformulated. In lieu of the traditional workshops, handouts and materials were sent out to the high school students online and the students were given the opportunity to complete the materials over the course of a week and submit them to IU graduate students via email. Additionally, the voting process, which was previously conducted during the final assembly at the end of the event day, had to be revised. In April of 2020, all videos were made available for viewing online and the students were given one week to view submissions and vote for winners in the different categories.

Finally, the 2020 event included a pre-recorded Awards Ceremony created by the IU outreach coordinator and two graduate students). The video included some comedic skits and an announcement of the 2020 IUGTP awards winners. The skits were filmed primarily in German and the awards ceremony was filmed in English.

In contrast to the 2020 project, where the transition to online had to take place at a moment's notice, it was clear from the beginning of the academic year 2020-2021 that the 2021 project would be online. During this academic year at IU, in-person instruction was limited to smaller upper-level courses only and general education courses, such as the lower-level German classes, were all instructed on Zoom. Additionally, many high schools were online for parts, if

not the entirety, of the year. For this reason, it seemed most logical to retain the online format from the previous year.

The first part of the project, the video submissions by the high school students, went ahead with no changes. In order to avoid violating any local high school policies, the IUGTP committee made it clear to all high school teachers and students that video submissions did not have to be made in-person and that students could create videos via Zoom if they preferred. As it turned out, however, nearly all of the video submissions had in-person skits. Thus, the video submissions did not differ substantially from previous years (aside from the facial coverings worn).

However, there were more substantial changes in the other aspects of the 2021 project. Unlike in 2020, there was no submission selection committee to pre-screen the videos and place them into their respective categories. Instead, the video submissions were collected into a (private) digital format on Google Drive and only IU-affiliated faculty/grad students voted for the two primary categories of *Best Comedy* and *Best Drama*, with the votes being tabulated in a Doodle poll. In addition to the video submissions, there was also a Zoom trivia night hosted by a graduate student from the Department of Germanic Studies, which took place in April after all videos had been submitted. The Zoom trivia night was an attempt to recreate some of the spirit of the event day in the online format.

Finally, in early May, after the voting process had ended, an Awards Ceremony video was filmed to be sent out to the schools later that month. Similar to 2020, the video contained comedic skits featuring one of the authors of this paper and the event coordinator. For the awards ceremony section of the video, it was decided that all submissions should win prizes and new categories, including Best Special Effects, Wackiest Plot etc., were created. This was a good way to reward the high schools who had participated in the project throughout the 2020-2021 academic year, regardless of the adapted format and other challenges that they faced.

5 Conclusion

Over the course of 2020-2021, IUGTP faced many challenges and problems, including funding cuts, less departmental involvement, and a lack of in-person workshops. For example, the 2019 IUGTP received funding from six different sources[2], while at present, only the IU Department of Germanic Studies itself funds IUGTP. However, the program was successfully

[2] The program has received funding from The Max Kade Foundation, IU Department of Germanic Studies, IU College of Arts and Sciences, the German Embassy, IU Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning (CITL) & the Center for the Study of Global Change.

able to maintain its spirit via the online video submissions, both from the schools themselves and via the Awards Ceremony videos, which were sent to the schools.

Indeed, as described in Section 2, the project has always had both a digital and in-person component, making the transition to a fully online event significantly easier than it otherwise might have been. Of course, there is an immense benefit from high school students coming to campus and engaging with undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty members from the Department of Germanic Studies. Anecdotally, it can be observed that many of the students who attend the IUGTP end up becoming undergraduate students at IU, and attending the IUGTP, especially if students attend multiple times throughout their high school career, may play a role in their decision to attend IU.

It is to be emphasized that the transition to online was a productive challenge, but nonetheless a success. For example, the number of video submissions received in 2020 (8 submissions from 7 schools) and 2021 (15 submissions from 5 schools) were comparable to previous years. Additionally, there was an increased variety of the types of submissions received, i.e. some recorded in-person and some on Zoom, demonstrating that creativity could be maintained regardless of the medium of recording. Finally, the online-only format allowed for participation from schools who cannot attend in-person, which is specifically beneficial to German programs for whom traveling to Bloomington is inconvenient due to finances or distance.

Finally, as Berman (2012) and Wurst (2021) emphasize in their work, the traditional divisions between secondary education, post-secondary education and post-secondary research have become less useful in the 21th century. Therefore, it is essential that projects such as the IUGTP continue to thrive in order to further the integration of education from high school to college and beyond.

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