# Students Exploring Dystopias in Fiction and Film - A Classroom Practice Report

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last years, the market has been flooded with an enormous number of teenage dystopias and their filmic counterparts, adding to the already extensive corpus of dystopian fiction and film. Taking this as a starting point, the aim of the present article is to look at the genre of (young adult) dystopias from the perspective of English language and literature instruction in higher education. More specifically, it reports on the outcomes of a project in which English students from two German universities participated in an academic conference where they presented their own research results in the form of posters on the issues prevalent in dystopian fiction and film.[2]

In recent years, universities across the globe have been increasingly challenged to ensure a transferability of knowledge, skills, and competences from the university to the workplace, moving further away from the ideal of education envisaged in the Humboldtian model. This development has also led to a re-evaluation of the role of literary texts in the EFL classroom at both schools and universities which "reproduces the marginalisation of literature" because it focuses on "testable output in the areas of communicative, intercultural, and methodological competences".[3] While we see this development as highly problematic, in the following we would nevertheless like to present a project that illustrates how aesthetic approaches to teaching literature and an orientation towards subject-specific as well as extra-curricular skills and competences cannot only be compatible but mutually fruitful.

Students from both the University of Koblenz-Landau and the University of Education Karlsruhe who participated in the project each attended a seminar on present-day dystopias. While the students at the University

of Koblenz-Landau focused on issues in contemporary dystopian film, the students at the University of Education Karlsruhe mainly concentrated on young adult dystopian narratives.[4] In both seminars, participants were given the opportunity to develop their own small-scale research projects focusing on contemporary novels and film respectively. The results of the projects were summarised in posters and presented at an academic conference on young adult dystopias organised by two of the authors of this article.

The first section of the present contribution considers the role of posters as a learning tool in the context of research-based learning in the higher education English classroom, while section two describes the project in more detail and offers insights into its planning and execution. The last part provides examples of posters presented at the conference, elucidating how the students' individual research projects contributed to their individual and collaborative learning processes and helped them to build a community of practice.

## 2. Posters as a Tool for Learning in Higher Education

The aim of this section is to discuss how posters can function as a tool for student learning and development in the 21st century when students live in an increasingly visually-dominated, multimodal culture.[5] This requires schools and universities to support students in developing their capacity for en- and decoding visual representations of information and communicating across a range of different media. Moreover, it is shown how students' active participation in an academic conference increases their awareness of the knowledge, skills, and competences acquired through the study of literary texts and other media. The chapter further demonstrates how creating posters for and presenting them in an academic setting can enhance the students' perception of posters as a medium of communication in professional contexts.

"Chalk and talk" still remains the predominant method in many university classrooms, paying little or no attention to the fact that classroom dynamics which initiate student-centred and student-initiated interaction may facilitate better acquisition of the foreign language. Constructivist approaches to foreign language learning and acquisition emphasise the importance of authentic, meaningful interaction and communication

in the target language. One of these approaches is foreign language learner autonomy which, as stated by the father of autonomy, Henri Holec, is defined as ''the ability to take charge of one's own learning".[6] This requires a fundamental shift in the professional self-conception of teachers and learners as well as classroom interaction as students become active participants in all stages of the learning process from selecting the content matter to evaluating the outcomes of learning in a learning environment that strives towards authenticity.[7] According to David Little, this freedom of choice is a central element of autonomous learning as it gives students the opportunity to exercise their agency. As Little posits:

> [...] the most successful language learning environments are those in which learners [...] develop proficiency by exercising agency in the target language. In foreign language learning we engage learners' agency by giving them choice, which begins to root learning in the individual learner's identity and interests.[8]

Contrary to common misperception, the students' agency, i.e. their "capacity to act",[9] is subject to a dynamic but nevertheless gradual development and, as any exercise of agency, a "social event that does not take place in a void".[10] In other words, it is a "social-interactive as well as an individual-cognitive phenomenon",[11] which leads us to one of the key elements of autonomous learning, namely interaction.

Everhard, in her attempt to define learner autonomy, emphasises the fact that it is not simply a method but rather a "way of being or sense of self achieved through co-operatively making decisions about learning".[12] While this is certainly true, interaction in the autonomous classroom goes far beyond mere co-operation, which represents "the most carefully structured end of the collaborative learning continuum".[13] In other words, cooperative learning is much more dependent on and guided by the teacher. Quite in contrast, collaborative learning environments are characterised by students reaching out to one another for knowledge-sharing and problem-solving as they share the same learning goals. As Burkert states based on the experiences from her own classroom:

> Through collaborating with their peers, learners take over more responsibility for their own learning and become less teacher dependent. They also learn to share the responsibility for the outcome of a joint endeavour with

> their peers, which in turn creates an atmosphere of cooperation instead of competition.[14]

This brief excursus makes clear that actively involving students in their own learning by giving them choices can have a positive influence on the students' performance. In the ensuing section, it will be shown that posters can play a vital role not only in the autonomous classroom at primary and secondary but also tertiary level, particularly as a medium for students to exercise their agency through expressing their voice.

According to Leni Dam, posters are a highly effective medium in developing learner autonomy in the classroom.[15] They serve many different purposes such as supporting the acquisition of new or revision of language items learners have already encountered. At a meta-level, posters are employed to make class rules, learning strategies, or distributions of tasks visible in the learning environment. In the following, we suggest moving away from the traditional purposes of posters in classroom learning and focusing on posters functioning as presentation aids in the professional context of an academic conference.

In recent years, learner autonomy has been related to methods and techniques such as discovery and enquiry-based as well as research-based learning which advocate increasing the students' involvement and authentic learning experience by encouraging them to carry out their own research. In our case we applied a research-based approach similar to Healey and Jenkins'[16] concept of undergraduate research, which is based on the idea that students are encouraged to conduct their individual research, modelling it on the discipline's and the lecturers' own research (interests).[17] Instead of setting the students the task of reporting on their research procedures and results in a written essay or project report, they were asked to disseminate their results in form of a poster project. In this context, the poster project is an active learning strategy which requires students to do independent research on a subject related to class material, select the most important ideas and information, and present their findings on a poster, which constitutes a visually appealing, structured record of their work. The presentation, the final stage of a poster project, is generally defined as "an experiential learning activity that stimulates curiosity and interest, encourages exploration and integration of concepts, and provides students with a novel way of demonstrating understanding".[18] In addition to this, it has come to be routinely used in many disciplines to

present and discuss new research projects. To sum up, posters not only are a medium commonly used in professional academic contexts but, for example through authentic poster sessions, help to create authentic learning activities and experiences. The ensuing section describes the project at hand in more detail and illustrates the advantages and constraints of posters as a way of disseminating research results.

## 3. The Project

In the winter term 2015/16, two project seminars on young adult dystopias were offered. While the seminar at the University of Koblenz-Landau primarily dealt with contemporary dystopian film, the course at the University of Education Karlsruhe focused on coeval young adult dystopian narratives.

The film seminar started with a discussion of the concepts of utopia and dystopia, focusing on the characteristics and conventions of the genre and its overlaps with science-fiction narratives. Based on a brief overview of the history of dystopia and its interconnections with socio-historic developments, several film dystopias were analysed and compared. Using Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) as not only an early but also influential example, the course proceeded to more recent films, including Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002), John Hillcoat's *The Road* (2009), and the *Hunger Games* trilogy (2012, Gary Ross; 2013-2015 Francis Lawrence). On the basis of class readings and discussions, students (individually or in pairs) had to choose their own dystopian film(s) and topics for the poster presentation at the end of the seminar. The thesis statement and argument developed for the poster presentation could then serve as the blueprint for the written term paper that is required in this module. Students chose a variety of different film dystopias, ranging from Michael Bay's *The Island* (2005) and Andrew Niccol's *In Time* (2011) to *Cloud Atlas* (2012, Tom Tykwer and Lana and Andy Wachowski) and George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015).

Similarly, the literature course at the University of Education Karlsruhe started with introductory sessions on the theoretical basis and generic conventions of utopian and dystopian writing, including the specific characteristics of the recent wave of dystopian writing for young adults and its relevance for the foreign language classroom. The main

focus of the seminar was then to explore the genre through detailed analysis of selected textual examples. These included Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993), *Feed* (2002) by Matthew T. Anderson, and Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008), which were read and discussed by the entire class. In addition, students were encouraged to bring in additional examples from the genre; this was done both through individual presentations required of some students for their module grade and the posters which were created by different groups. These examples included *Divergent {*2011) by Veronica Roth, Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* (2011), and James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* (2009). Despite the fact that the application to the EFL classroom was not the main focus of the seminar, some didactic elements and classroom activities were also included and tried out, since the vast majority of the participants were future teachers of English.

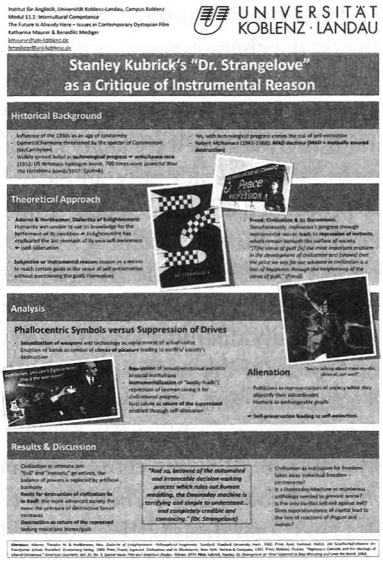


Fig. 1: A critique of instrumental reason in *Dr. Strangelove* (University of Koblenz-Landau)

While essays and term papers are a more or less regular text genre (and form of examination) in university courses, posters are - particularly in

the humanities - still rather rarely used. Considering the fact that a poster is a medium in its own right with its own unique conventions and ways of getting a message across, creating an academic poster requires a myriad of skills and competences on behalf of both the students and the teacher. To name but a few examples, it involves traditional academic skills such as finding and evaluating (re)sources, developing a research question and thesis statement as well as building a coherent and cohesive argument but also contemporary skills such as bringing together written and visual language and fusing on- and offline materials, e.g. linking the poster content to relevant websites for further research.

Therefore, the participants of the film seminar in Koblenz were provided with a tutorial on the designing of academic posters, which took place three weeks before the conference.[19] In two 90-minute sessions, students were introduced, on the one hand, to the technical aspects of poster design (e.g., which programs to use or what kind of image resolution would be needed) and, on the other hand, to more content-oriented ones, including the question of which elements a poster should contain and how it can be structured. While a number of academic posters were used as both positive and negative examples in the tutorial, students were asked to bring their own projects (thesis statement, possible structure, film stills and other images that could be used etc.) to work on during the tutorial. Having already worked on thesis and basic structure of their project's argument, students had to assess their own ideas critically in view of the information provided by the tutorial. In discussions during the tutorial it became clear that the format of the poster challenged students to reconsider their argument and forced them to make it more concise and coherent. Space restrictions made it necessary, for instance, to select the most important information for inclusion on the poster, while the visual possibilities offered by a poster provided different, alternative ways of structuring one's argument. Next to technical skills, students' analytic and interpretive as well as their communicative competences were not simply enhanced but broadened. While this certainly challenged students, they came up with creative and convincing solutions for the poster presentation; moreover, the feedback after the conference suggests that they, in fact, enjoyed the preparation of the presentation despite the work that it meant.

Due to the limit of class time, the students in Karlsruhe merely received a crash-course in creating academic posters by drawing on freely available examples. Here the focus was on poster design by taking a critical look at layout issues, e.g. the use of colours and the relationship between text and images. Moreover, formatting issues such as spacing, margins as well as sizing and positioning photographs, images, and illustrations were addressed. Analysing already existing academic posters raised the students' awareness of the importance of a healthy balance of written text, graphics, and other visual images as well as the importance of linking the different areas and items of a poster. In addition, possibilities of designing a poster in such a way that its narrative can be understood with and without an accompanying presentation, e.g. facilitated through a pathway indicated by numbers, symbols, or colour signs, were discussed. In the following, we briefly describe two poster projects from each course in more detail, each focusing on different filmic or literary examples of dystopia.

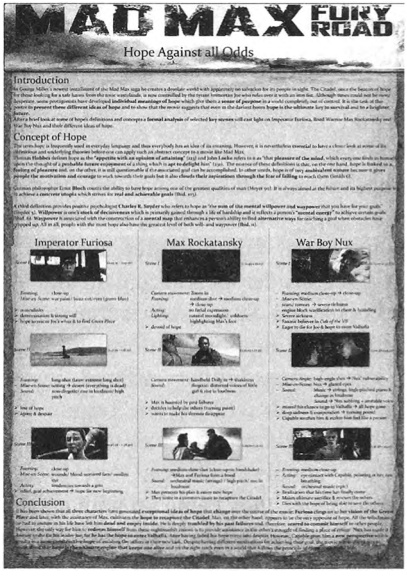


Fig. 2: The concept of hope in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (University of Koblenz- Landau)

Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) is not a typical dystopian movie but a political satire whose plot and ending clearly reveal the dystopian elements and consequences of cold-war politics. In fact, most of the film is about the inability of the military and political 'elite' to stop the consequences set in motion by unhinged American General Jack D. Ripper, who single-handedly launches a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union, ending with the nuclear destruction of the earth. The students who chose this film focused on reading the movie as a "Critique of Instrumental Reason," using Adorno's and Horkheimer's notion of the dialectic of reason as well as Freud's ideas about (sexual) repression (fig. 1). Their poster contains not only the historical background of the cold war era (notably McNamara's MAD doctrine), it also highlights briefly the two main ideas used in the analysis of the film: instrumental reason and the repression of instincts it can lead to. Following this, the next section summarises the main ideas of the analysis, focusing on Kubrick's sexualisation of weapons and technology, which can be read as a sign of repression. As a conclusion, the poster's last part both discusses and evaluates the ideas sketched in the analytic part as a possible reading of the film. Using a more conventional structure, which is clearly marked with the help of headlines and coloured boxes, the poster shows that even the analysis of and argument about a film, including theoretical concepts, can be visualised and summarised on a poster. Moreover, the possibility to include film stills as well as to visually highlight central statements (such as a film quote or a theoretical concept) have been successfully utilised.

The next poster deals with the concept of hope in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the latest instalment of the franchise directed by George Miller (2015). The film pictures earth's future as a dystopia in which almost all resources have been depleted and destroyed and in which lawless marauding bands controlling water and fuel rule the rest of humanity. The students decided to combine aspects from different concepts of hope (Hobbes, Locke, Bloch, and Snyder), thus working out its ambiguous nature which combines the desire of achieving a certain goal with the fear of not being able to do so. On the basis of a number of characteristics, they analysed three different protagonists, Mad Max, Imperator Furiosa, and Nux, and their development and function throughout the movie. Moreover, they combined the different characterisations with an analysis of filmic means to show how these underline differences and similarities

between the characters as well as the changes they undergo. For this, they used one of the options that the poster format provides, namely the possibility of presenting the points and results of their analysis side-by-side in table form. Furthermore, the students used film stills to illustrate their analysis. In the conclusion, a flow text with highlighted key words, they put together the different results, coming to the conclusion that *Fury Road* insists on hope being a central element of both individuals and human communities, something which might be quite independent of any actual probability of a hopeful ending, even for a character as traumatised as Mad Max.

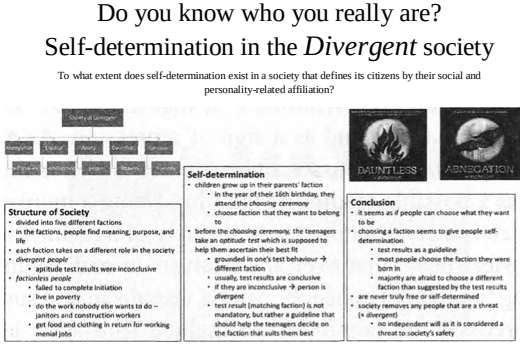


Fig. 3: Self-determination in the faction system of *Divergent* (University of Education Karlsruhe)

One of the most dominant characteristics of society in Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011) is the faction system: every citizen is a member of one of five factions, each of which represents and values a different human virtue and puts it at the service of the community by serving a particular civic function, depending on their strengths and abilities. This system, in turn, is strongly connected to questions of belonging, self-determination, and making choices. One of its ruling principles is that citizens actively decide which faction they want to become a member of, based on the results of an aptitude test taken at the age of sixteen, which is supposed to serve as a guideline for their decision.

The students who chose to work on *Divergent* for their research project decided to focus on these aspects and their mutual influence on one another when creating their poster. They developed a research question aiming to determine the extent to which self-determination plays a role in a society which defines its citizens by their social affiliations and personality. In order to develop an answer to the question, they first provided an overview of the different factions as well as general information on the structure of society. They then proceeded to consider the importance of self-determination within this framework, focusing in particular on the choosing ceremony during which all sixteen-year-olds decide which faction they want to belong to henceforth. Even though this procedure seems to offer a free choice to the characters in principle, in reality the number of options is limited and, more importantly, non-conformity (or *divergence)* is severely punished, as citizens whose test results are inconclusive are expelled from society. Thus, as is the case in many other dystopian societies as well, citizens are only given a *quasi-choice.* Accordingly, the group concluded that free will and self-determination are highly restricted in the social order presented in the novel. They successfully managed to display their result on the poster in a comprehensive manner by visually structuring it in three different sections, each focusing on a different aspect of the central research question.

Rather than work on a specific research question, the group of students who chose James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* (2009) for their poster presentation opted to give a more comprehensive overview of the novel's central elements. In doing so, they focused in particular on the microcosm of the Maze and the issues of manipulation and control which shape the life of the Gladers inside its walls. In addition to providing an overview of the character constellation and relationships between the Gladers, they also provided information on the conditions and regulations governing life inside the Maze by quoting central passages from the novel. An illustration provides an overview of what the Maze may look like; moreover, key vocabulary specific to the context of the Maze and, thus, unfamiliar to the reader, is also explained.

To a certain extent, exploring the material presented on the poster mirrors the situation that the characters find themselves in: in the novel, Thomas is thrown into the confinement of the Maze without having any information about his surroundings or memories of his previous life. Only

gradually, through systematic observation and exploration of his new environment, is he able to decode the vocabulary the other Gladers use and piece together the information which can also be found on the poster. Thus, in a way, the audience is put in the protagonist's shoes when considering the different elements of the poster to form a comprehensive idea of the experiment conducted in the novel. This notion is supported further through the layout of the poster: The main body of information is displayed in the centre of the poster between an introductory paragraph outlining the plot, placed at the top, and a short conclusion which identifies the main themes of the novel at the bottom of the poster. The audience thus has to visually 'navigate' their way through the information, an impression which is strengthened by the outlines of a maze structure outlined in the background of the poster. The sense of confinement and confusion central to the Gladers' experiences is thus nicely transferred to the poster.

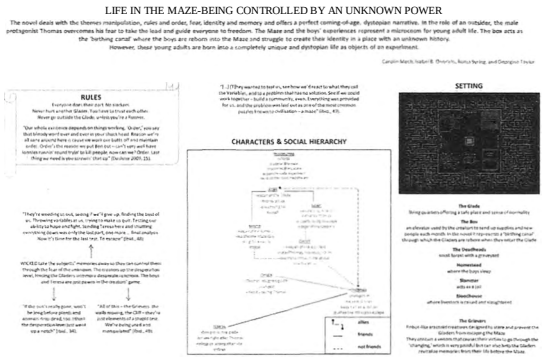


Fig. 4: Life in the maze: manipulation and control in *The Maze Runner* (University of Education Karlsruhe)

The posters from both universities were freely accessible during the whole conference day, while the official poster presentations took place during the assigned poster session slots as well as during the coffee breaks. At least one student from each group was required to stand with their poster while the others were allowed to move around and look at the other parts of the poster exhibition. Each group member was equally prepared to briefly present the content of the poster and answer questions from the audience.

As can be seen from these examples, posters and poster presentations can be successfully used in the university classroom. However, like everything, they come with certain advantages and disadvantages. As the various examples show, students are willing and able to use the alternative form of structuring and presenting their research project. Much less difficult and challenging than a full-fledged paper to be held in front of an audience of peers and - possibly - scholars, the poster and its presentation offers a more 'informal' way to present something in written and oral form. Moreover, it also provides an opportunity to make use of and enhance competences in the realm of multimodal communication and design as visual and language-based elements have to be combined. Particularly for the analysis of film scenes, this can be utilised in a variety of ways. Furthermore, the open format of the poster - less linear than a conventional written text - invites students to think and express themselves in alternative ways, helping to explore a topic from different angles. The fact that a poster presents the structure (if not the content) right at first glance also forces them to dwell on this point, maybe more than they would have to do in a term paper. However, the poster format is not without its pitfalls. Particularly the fact that it is so visually prominent might invite students to use images and illustrations as mere decorations devoid of real function or content. Moreover, because everything has to be designed and arranged on the page (type of font, colour and size of letters, decision on frames, to name but a few aspects), this can also be overwhelming, resulting in posters that are confusing and crowded simply because of their design. And while it is certainly possible to present results of research projects coming from literary and cultural studies in an academically adequate way on a poster, it is decidedly not easy. In disciplines that are based on analysis, interpretation, and argument (i.e. in which the way a text is written and phrased might be part of the argument), a brief enumeration of results is not as easy or as satisfactory as it might be when presenting, e.g., the results of a study. Hence, posters can easily contain too much text, which makes it hard to 'read' them in a way posters are supposed to be read.

As mentioned previously, academic student presentations are usually restricted to the classroom, with the audience being limited to the teacher and peers, and only offer limited options for dissemination of the students' research results. In contrast to this, the conference presentations did not occur in a vacuum but as part of a real and authentic context which

situated students in authentic scholarly discussions, resulting in high levels of audience and speaker participation and forcing all student speakers to communicate in order to acquaint the audience with topics unfamiliar to them. In addition to this, the eclectic audience of scholars and students from two universities required the poster presenters to articulate their ideas within different discourses varying in formality and subject knowledge, training the presenters' skills to communicate effectively with diverse groups, particularly on an academically adequate level. Last but not least, the high number of posters (16 in total) allowed minimal time for shorter statements regarding research context and outcomes, stimulating concise communication and discussion with a regularly alternating audience.

## 4. Conclusion

As this contribution illustrates, preparing a poster and delivering it in a professional context beyond the four walls of the classroom engages students in a meaningful learning experience and stimulates them to develop their own academic voice as autonomous learners and researchers. From a content perspective, the posters as well as the input at the conference broadened the students' understanding of young adult dystopias in theory and practice. Furthermore, creating posters in a collaborative learning environment offers students the opportunity to engage in a dialogue about learning through which they share the responsibility for the outcome of a joint endeavour with their peers, which in turn creates an atmosphere of collaboration instead of competition. Moreover, in both courses the posters were not graded and could thus truly serve as an opportunity for students to creatively try out the role as a researcher as well as the possibilities of the poster format.[20] Last but not least, the research projects increase the participants' transferable skills and competences such as creating a poster, delivering a poster presentation as well as translating knowledge and content from one medium into another.

Notes

1 The author was still a lecturer at the University of Education Karlsruhe at the time of the project and taught the seminar discussed in the article.

2 The conference "'Tell Freedom I Said Hello': Issues in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopias" took place at the University of Koblenz-Landau, campus Koblenz, on January 22, 2016.

3 Nancy Grimm, Michael Meyer, and Laurenz Volkmann (2015). *Teaching English*. Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 176.

4 The authors of this article are grateful to the University of Koblenz-Landau and the University of Education Karlsruhe for funding the project.

5 Gunther Kress (1998). *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication.* Abingdon: Routledge.

6 Henri Holec (1981). *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon, 3.

7 See Maria Eisenmann and Christian Ludwig (2016). "Authentische Lernprozesse in komplexen Web 2.0-basierten Kompetenzaufgaben zur Förderung von Lemerautonomie. *Web 2.0 und komplexe Kompetenzaufgaben im Fremdsprachenunterricht.* Ed. Carmen Becker et al. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 98-108, 93-95, for a more detailed discussion of the role of authenticity in developing learner autonomy.

8 David Little (2017). "Language Learner Autonomy: What, Why and How?" Web. 4 September 2017 <http://languagesinitiative.ie/images/Language_LeamerAutonomyWhat WhyHow.pdf>, 5.

9 Leo van Lier (2008). "Agency in the Classroom." *Sociocultural Theory and the Teaching of Second Languages*. Ed. James P. Lantolf and Matthew E. Poehner. London: Equinox, 163-186, 163.

10 *Ibid*., 163.

11 Little (2017), 3.

12 Carol J. Everhard (2015). "The Assessment-Autonomy Relationship." *Assessment and Autonomy in Language Learning* Ed. Everhard and L. Murphy. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 8-34, 11.

13 Jean MacGregor and Barbara Leigh Smith (1992). "What Is Collaborative Learning?" *Collaborative Learning: A Sourcebook for Higher Education. National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment.* Ed. Anne Goodsell et al. Pennsylvania State University. Web. 4 September 2017<http://www.austincc.edu/pintutor/newsite/_source/WhatIsCollaborative Leamin g.pdf>, n.pag.

14 Anja Burkert (2017). "Two Heads Are Better than One: Collaborative Learning under Scrutiny." *Fostering Learner Autonomy - Learners, Teachers and Researchers in Action.* Ed. Annamaria Pinter et al. UK: IATEFL, n.pag.

15 Leni Dam (1995). *Learner Autonomy 3: From Theory to Classroom Practice*. Dublin: Authentik, passim.

16 Mick Healey and Alan Jenkins (2009). "Developing Undergraduate Research and Inquiry." York: Higher Education Academy. Web. 23 Aug. 2018 <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/developing-undergraduate-research-and-inquiry>, 23.

17 While the students from Karlsruhe were, indeed, undergraduates, the students at the University of Koblenz-Landau were graduate students.

18 D.S. Handron ( 1994) qtd. in Lee Bracher, Jane Cantrell, and Kay Wilkie (1998). "The Process of Poster Presentation: A Valuable Learning Experience." *Medical Teacher* 20.6, 552-557, 553.

19 This was only possible because the course (including its poster tutorial) was financed by the Hochschuldidaktische Arbeitsstelle of the University of Koblenz-Landau as an innovative teaching project.

20 While the poster projects were not graded, students still received feedback in both courses. Based on the elements and characteristics to be considered when designing a poster, which were discussed beforehand, feedback was given during and after the creation of the posters regarding the poster's content (e.g., originality, complexity, clarity) as well as the way it was organised (neatness and correctness, layout and structure, colors, font size, use and relevance of images, text length etc.).

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Secondary Literature

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