

# Representations of Diversity in a Novice-Level Language Classroom and Beyond: An Engaging Semester Project

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## Abstract

Teacher-scholars have called upon fellow language educators to redevelop curricula at all proficiency levels to portray the lived experiences of target language (TL) speakers. This article presents a semester-long project that contributes to developing diverse teaching materials for college-level learners at the novice level. Via an ePortfolio with 10 tasks (virtual and in-person), 20 learners of a second-semester German course explored connections with the TL locally and broadened their understanding of language-community membership beyond stereotypical notions of native speakers. Participants' feedback demonstrated how this project positively impacted students' learning experiences and reflected learners' strong desire for similar assignments in future courses. The findings speak to strategies of how educators can help beginning learners find connections to the TL in local contexts and investigate the diverse lived experiences of TL speakers abroad. The project's approaches, flexible format, and outcomes are easily implemented across various proficiency levels, world languages, and institutional contexts.

## Introduction

Many German language curricula and instructional materials still associate authentic German “voices with *White personae*” (Bryant et al., 2019, p. 6) from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (Gallagher & Zenker, 2020; Randall, 2020). Moreover, German programs tend to emphasize representations of native speakers (NSs) from these countries in their promotional efforts (Chavez, 2020a). Such practices, however, have an exclusionary potential because they might discourage some students—those who may not see themselves in the stereotypical image of German speakers—from seeing themselves as plausible members of the language community in question (Chavez, 2020b). Language instructors should therefore explore how they can engage all students in seeing themselves as genuine members of the respective target language (TL) group (Anyà, 2011, 2020).

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The semester-long project for novice learners presented here responds to that goal. It shows how educators can help students find TL connections in their local surroundings and broaden their understanding of language-community membership that goes beyond stereotypical notions of NSs and includes learners. The article illustrates the assignment's 10 virtual and in-person ePortfolio tasks and discusses its outcomes based on student feedback. The materials can be applied across various proficiency levels, world languages (WLs), and institutional contexts. The project is grounded in frameworks that call upon educators to diversify WL education.

### **Review of Previous Research**

#### **On the Need to Diversify World Language Education**

Matters of diversity, equity, and inclusivity (DEI) must be an integral part of every WL course and program (Glynn et al., 2018; Kubota, 2004). Criser and Knott (2019) urge German educators to take a “critical look at the discipline and to prepare for an undoing of oppressive structures that have shaped pedagogies, theories, and curricula at the core of our field” (pp. 151-152). This process requires an ongoing commitment from teachers, including continuous self-reflection, an openness to unlearn and relearn socialization in cultures dominated by inequities and exclusiveness, and a willingness to collaborate and update teaching practices critically (Kishimoto, 2018).

The redevelopment of curricula is a fundamental step toward making the study of German more equitable and inclusive (Cooper, 2020). Specifically, students need to explore “the full range of diverse lived experiences in a German-language context” and “understand a diverse German-speaking world” while utilizing the tools learned in their German courses to critically reflect on their local environments (Criser & Knott, 2019, p. 152). Recent scholarship has demonstrated how educators may pursue these objectives. Strategies speak to matters of inclusivity (Watzke, 2020), Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Plus (LGBTQ+) communities (Cahnmann-Taylor & Coda, 2018; Rothe et al., 2023), a gender-diverse language instruction (Djavadghazaryans, 2020), critical approaches to race and colonialism (Gallagher & Zenker, 2020; Layne, 2020; Manthripragada & Mušanović, 2020; Rothe et al., 2023; Torner, 2020), social justice (Glynn et al., 2018; Tarnawska Senel, 2020), revisions of the literary canon (Cooper, 2020), and teachers' instructional practices (Dion, 2020). Many of the listed suggestions and instructional units addressing the diverse lived experiences of speakers and learners, however, have focused on intermediate- and advanced-level German classes. Much less attention has been given to these topics in introductory levels, i.e., the courses that build the foundation for language programs and comprise the majority of German learners.

Students must encounter diverse instructional materials at the beginning of their language-learning process (Brunow & Newman, 2020; Criser & Knott, 2019; Merritt, 2020). Far too often, learners (especially at the novice level) bring a variety of stereotypical notions about the German language, its associated cultural practices, and speakers—including learners and teachers—to campus (Chavez, 2020b; Rothe, 2022). The teaching units at this level, however, are often not “adequate to accomplish the goals of fostering intercultural competence and inclusion in our curricula and classrooms” (Ilett, 2009, p. 57). Additionally, historically underrepresented groups in German and other WL programs have not seen themselves and their experiences reflected in instructional materials that persist in focusing on *White*, Eurocentric communities (Anyá, 2020; Criser & Knott, 2019; Ilett, 2009). German language instructors should therefore develop engagement strategies and teaching materials that reflect the diversity among TL speakers and help all students feel connected to

the respective language communities. In fact, many U.S. language learners express a desire to connect with and belong to the community of speakers whose languages they learn. Yet, as discussed in the following section, both students and teachers often perceive themselves incapable of achieving that goal in WL classrooms (Glisan, 2012).

### **Establishing Connections between Communities Near and Far**

Research into learners' perceptions of the importance of ACTFL's five goal areas (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015), often referred to as the five C's (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, Communities)—has indicated that language students highly value the notions related to the Communities standards (Magnan et al., 2014). This goal area encompasses “school and globalized communities” that inspire students to “use the language both within and beyond the classroom to interact and collaborate in their community and the globalized world” (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015). In the WL classroom, however, Communities-oriented goals can seem elusive to both instructors and learners (Glisan, 2012; Magnan et al., 2014). For example, learners of German often associate the idea of a TL community primarily with *White* NSs who live in a different geographical location than the learners (Chavez, 2020b; White, 2016). Understanding language communities as a population whose inhabitants are exclusively (*White*) NSs excludes local groups (language learners and teachers) from group membership. It also disqualifies local settings (classrooms) as representatives of the respective language community.

Moreover, some students may not be aware of the possibilities of fitting in with certain communities of TL speakers. Consequently, these learners may not desire to be part of a language community based on their (stereotypical) notions of that group. Chavez (2020b), who introduced the concept of the “plausible and implausible foreign language selves,” explored perceptions held by college-level learners of various WLs about German, particularly its NSs, its affiliated cultures, and its learners. She concluded that “learners who do not already have [a] personal connection [heritage] or who do not possess specific ethnic [*White*; European descendants], socio-economic [wealthy], gender [male], and first-language attributes [English as first language]” are less likely to study German (Chavez, 2020b, p. 12). In other words, students without the (perceived) described personal qualities or personal connections to the group in question may simply not see themselves as plausible learners of that language.

Curricular activities can help students reflect on their understanding of language communities in a way that goes beyond stereotypical notions of NSs afar and includes learners in their immediate environments. Previous scholarship has demonstrated how educators may assist learners in seeing connections between their lived experiences and those of TL speakers abroad (Boovy, 2016; Brunow & Newman, 2020; Fang & Yingqin, 2017). At the beginning of that process, learners should develop a sense of cultural self-awareness and self-identity through reflective activities (Brunow & Newman, 2020). Students may then investigate and reflect on “how people in other cultures have been conditioned in terms of their actions or values or how they make meaning of their cultural identities” (Brunow & Newman, 2020, p. 150). Researchers such as Brunow and Newman (2020) stressed the importance of learners' continuous reflections at all proficiency levels. Reflection topics may include learners' own identities and belief systems, including preconceived notions of the TL, its people, cultures, and students' relationships with others. According to Drewelow (2013), the goal of reflecting on one's own cultural and linguistic situatedness and exploring other people's cultural and linguistic circumstances is critical for novice learners to understand the interconnection between language, its speakers, and cultures.

Exploring this interconnection may be accomplished through research projects comparing similarities and differences between learners' immediate communities and the target groups (Fang & Yingqin, 2017). In the context of studying German, the target groups or, more likely, historical traces of them, may be found in learners' immediate surroundings, given the spread of German heritage across the United States. Boovy (2016), for instance, showed how upper-level students of German could interrogate, analyze, and critically reflect on German-speaking communities in the United States and their members' identities through a visit to a German-American heritage site. The visit was embedded in a course, titled "*Was ist eigentlich 'deutsch'?*" ["What is considered 'German?'"'] (Boovy, 2016, p. 143). Activities included readings about German immigrant experiences in the United States, introductions to new vocabulary, and an excursion to the open-air museum where students were "challenged to think like anthropologists, ethnographers, linguists, and geographers" (Boovy, 2016, p. 143). Ultimately, class discussions, written assignments, and presentations showed how the course contributed to students' critical reflections on what counts as German, a "heightened awareness of the ways differences are constructed" between groups, and an ability to "recognize important cultural differences between Germans and U.S. Americans" (Boovy, 2016, p. 145). Most importantly, by exploring concepts of Germanness locally and the "histories of exclusion that such a concept rests on," students expanded their knowledge of the diversity among German speakers and acquired the tools to reflect critically on their immediate surroundings, learning experiences, and cultural assumptions (Boovy, 2016, p. 145). Having acquired these tools for use in learners' local contexts seems particularly critical because stereotypes about respective target groups often develop in learners' native cultures, through indirect sources, such as family, friends, and media (Drewelow, 2013; Heinzmann, 2014).

However, not all language instructors and learners have access to nearby heritage sites or open-air museums. Therefore, they need other activities that engage learners in their language communities locally and help them explore the diverse lived experiences of TL members afar. Guidelines of how educators may develop engaging tasks that can address those goals are presented below. These guidelines formed the basis of the presented semester project's setup.

### **Creating engaging tasks for all learners through ePortfolios**

According to Dörnyei (2019), the following six guidelines characterize engaging tasks in language classrooms. (1) The task presentation or prompt includes clearly stated learning outcomes and the work's purpose. It also reflects how the task and its outcomes connect to students' daily lives and how the project may benefit students' "real-life agendas" (Dörnyei, 2019, p. 62). (2) The task goals are meaningful and of value to students and their learning. Additionally, the work may be linked "to a finished product or a tangible outcome," such as posters or presentations (Dörnyei, 2019, p. 62). (3) The task content is relevant and real to students and provides authentic experiences. It may also include "elements of challenge, competition, novelty, intrigue, fantasy or exotic interest" (Dörnyei, 2019, p. 63). (4) The task allows for ownership, which is the "degree of control [learners] perceive to be able to exercise over every aspect of the activity" (Dörnyei, 2019, p. 63). Additionally, it finds a balance between challenges and learners' skill levels. (5) The task structure is clear and provides information on where to start, the involved activities, and the outcome. An effective task structure also comprises "distinct subphases, whose completion provides students with a clear sense of their progress as they approach the target" (Dörnyei, 2019, p. 63). (6) Finally, an engaging task concludes with positive emotions upon completion. Specifically, the engaging element of such tasks comes from the "'social wellbeing' experienced in a cooper-

ative group [..., which] requires healthy group dynamics in the class with a general sense of acceptance and cohesiveness amongst the students” (Dörnyei, 2019, p. 63). Ultimately, instructors may design and implement engaging tasks for their learners through a variety of strategies and tools.

I used ePortfolios to present engaging tasks to students and to offer a way for learners to share and reflect on their responses over the course of a semester. EPortfolios provide a flexible and versatile pedagogical learning and assessment tool for language educators. They are digital and include “evidence of the author’s experiences and accomplishments” as well as reflection components (Reynolds & Patton, 2014, p. 8). Formats and the software used vary widely. Most ePortfolios contain artifacts created over time that students “collect, select, reflect [on], share or publish, [and] get feedback [on]” (Reynolds & Patton, 2014, p. 11). Working with the ePortfolio’s artifacts facilitates the “connection between [...] students’ course work and the world” (Reynolds & Patton, 2014, p. 9). One key component of ePortfolios is reflection. Reflective tasks allow students to deepen their learning and question assumptions, connect various aspects of their learning experience, take responsibility for their learning, and develop their identity as learners (Landis et al., 2015, p. 113). Reflections also help instructors improve “their understanding of student learning, engagement, and/or development” (Landis et al., 2015, p. 113). Given the importance of reflections in the language-learning context (Brunow & Newman, 2020), the ePortfolio tasks used in this project include two rounds of reflections in the L1, as presented in the next sections.

In sum, previous scholarship has suggested that WL educators need to develop classroom materials and tasks that engage diverse learners in their language communities locally and help them investigate the multifaceted experiences of TL members afar. These suggestions inspired the current semester-long project for novice language learners. To analyze students’ reactions to the semester project, this study asked the following two research questions (RQs):

1. How did the participating novice learners perceive the semester project’s assignments?
2. Which learning outcomes were most salient after participants completed the project?

Before reviewing the answers to these questions, the following sections describe the project’s learning objectives, components, participants, the context of the study, the data collection, and analysis process.

## **The Project**

### **Learning Objectives**

The project’s overarching goals were to help students reflect on their relationship with Germanness and discover a more diverse picture of German-speaking regions. The learning outcomes were inspired by the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements, precisely the Intercultural Competence guidelines at the Novice level (National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL) & ACTFL, 2017). These standards include learners’ ability to “chart their progress toward language and intercultural proficiency.” The statements also ask students to “identify” and “compare” “products and practices” in their “own and other cultures to help [them] understand perspectives” (National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL) & ACTFL, 2017, p. 1). Grounded in the skills outlined, this project included the following three learning objectives. As a result of this project, students will be able to

1. identify and make comparisons between products and practices of their own cultures and the target culture locally and abroad to help them understand multifaceted perspectives, using basic German vocabulary and English.

2. analyze authentic materials portraying a diverse socio-political image of German-speaking countries by using basic vocabulary of the TL.
3. reflect on their learning regarding this project by collecting, selecting, and connecting artifacts regularly in an ePortfolio, using basic German vocabulary and English.

It is important to emphasize that improving students’ vocabulary, grammar, and syntax proficiency was not a specific objective of this project. Instead, the use of the TL was a means for students to engage with authentic resources, practice basic words and phrases, and work toward achieving the three learning objectives stated above. As suggested by previous scholarship (Brunon & Newman, 2020; Drewelow, 2013), novice-level learners were allowed to use English when they had to express complex thoughts, which would have exceeded their German proficiency, or when answering questions about a TL text to show their understanding of the materials.

### Components

The project consisted of 10 artifacts, i.e., weekly tasks students completed over a 15-week semester. Figure 1 (next pages) provides an overview of all artifacts, including their prompts. The project was incorporated into the course section’s semester schedule with the goal to expand on required course topics presented in the textbook, such as talking about oneself (Artifacts 2 and 3), exploring everyday life and daily routines of German speakers (Artifacts 5, 6, 7, and 9), or living and studying in Germany and Austria (Artifacts 8 and 9). The course also required learners to complete vocabulary and grammar quizzes and oral and writing projects. Therefore, some of the artifacts were thematically connected to other assignments, particularly oral and written projects. The right-hand column in Figure 1 lists these assignments—which had separate grading rubrics and did not count toward the semester project’s overall grading breakdown and points—to show that other student submissions can be linked to the project. They are, however, not part of this study.

**Figure 1.** Overview of artifacts and their prompts

#	Artifact	Description/Instructions of semester project	Other related course assignment ideas (optional)
1	Setup	Set up your ePortfolio.	
2	What does Germanness mean to you?	A – Answer questions 1-3 in English and 4-5 in German: 1) <i>What comes to mind when you hear “German”?</i> 2) <i>What comes to mind when you hear “Germany”?</i> 3) <i>What do you think is the reputation of German speakers in the following countries: United States, China, and Kenya (i.e., students’ home countries)?</i> 4) <i>What 3 German words come to mind when you hear “Deutsch” [“German”]?</i> 5) <i>What 3 German words come to mind when you hear “Deutschland” [“Germany”]?</i>	Writing project: Write an <i>About me</i> page for the ePortfolio.
		B – Explore your surroundings carefully and take pictures of at least two items that somehow represent ‘Germanness’ to you.	
3	Germanness in your life	A – Same instructions as 2B.	Writing project: Reflect on your German learning experience and write a convincing advertisement for studying German.
		B – Explain in English (up to 250 words) why the items photographed represent Germanness to you.	
4	Initial reflection	Reflect on this project and complete the following statements in English: 1) One aspect I’ve really liked about the semester project was... 2) One aspect I’ve not liked about the semester project was ... 3) How, if at all, has the semester project affected your view of German/Germanness/German-speaking countries? 4) How, if at all, has the semester project affected your own role/stance related to German/Germanness/German-speaking countries?	Oral presentation: Present one item that represents Germanness to you and answer your classmates’ questions.

REPRESENTATIONS OF DIVERSITY IN A NOVICE-LEVEL CLASSROOM AND BEYOND

5	Diverse German-speaking societies I	<p>A – Translate these key words from a newspaper article that you will read for this artifact from German to English:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) <i>die Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund</i> [people with a migration background]</li> <li>2) <i>der Flüchtling, der/die Geflüchtete</i> [refugee/displaced person]</li> <li>3) <i>der Asylant/die Asylantin</i> [asylum seeker]</li> <li>4) <i>der Staatsbürger/die Staatsbürgerin</i> [citizen]</li> <li>5) <i>die Staatsbürgerschaft</i> [citizenship]</li> <li>6) <i>das Ausland</i> [foreign country]</li> <li>7) <i>das Inland</i> [interior of a country/domestic]</li> <li>8) <i>die Herkunft</i> [origin]</li> <li>9) <i>die Bevölkerung</i> [population]</li> <li>10) <i>der Anteil</i> [amount, proportion]</li> <li>11) <i>der Höchststand</i> [maximum]</li> <li>12) <i>gesamt</i> [in total]</li> <li>13) <i>steigen (simple past form: stieg)</i> [increase]</li> <li>14) <i>der Grund</i> [reason]</li> <li>15) <i>an Bedeutung gewinnen</i> [to gain in importance]</li> <li>16) <i>wichtig</i> [important]</li> <li>17) <i>die Bildung</i> [education]</li> <li>18) <i>der Unterschied</i> [difference]</li> <li>19) <i>der Schulabschluss (z.B. Abitur)</i> [degree, e.g., general qualification for university entrance]</li> <li>20) <i>höher</i> [higher]</li> </ol>	
		<p>B – Read the ZEIT article on „Every fifth person in Germany has a migration background“ and answer the following questions about the text in English:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) How many people with a migration background live in Germany?</li> <li>2) What is the percentage of people with a migration background compared to the total population of Germany?</li> <li>3) Why has this number increased in the past years?</li> <li>4) What percentage of people with a migration background are German citizens?</li> <li>5) What is the region that most people with a migration background living in Germany originally come from?</li> <li>6) What is the region that more and more people come from?</li> <li>7) What is the most important country of origin that people with a migration background originally came from?</li> </ol>	
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8) What do you learn about educational differences between people with a migration background and people without?</li> <li>9) How surprising was this newspaper article to you? Please give your response on a scale between 0 [not surprising at all] and 10 [could not have been more surprising].</li> <li>10) What did you consider most surprising and/or interesting about this article? (link: <a href="https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2017-08/statistisches-bundesamt-migrationshintergrund-einwohner-deutschland">https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2017-08/statistisches-bundesamt-migrationshintergrund-einwohner-deutschland</a>)</li> </ol>	
6	Questions for a German speaker I	<p>Prepare the first in-class conversation with a native speaker from Germany by writing <b>three interesting questions about their everyday lives in German that you can ask them. Post your questions to the ePortfolio.</b></p> <p>The goal of this assignment is for you to learn about our guest-speaker’s real-life experiences and to interact with a different native-speaker than your instructor during the meeting. You will not be graded for the conversation.</p>	
7	Diverse German-speaking societies II	<p>Explore the website <a href="https://farbenbekennen.de">farbenbekennen.de</a>. Then, describe in German what you found particularly interesting/surprising/exciting. Then, pick one ‘profile’ of one of the protagonists and answer questions about that person in English.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) What is their name and where are they from?</li> <li>2) How old are they?</li> <li>3) When did they arrive in Germany?</li> <li>4) Why did you choose this profile?</li> <li>5) What was surprising to you about their story?</li> <li>6) Why do you think this website was created?</li> <li>7) Who might be the intended audience?</li> </ol> <p>(link: <a href="https://farbenbekennen.de/award/award-2017">https://farbenbekennen.de/award/award-2017</a>)</p>	<p>Writing project: Imagine you’re moving to a German-speaking region and are in a situation similar to those of the interviewees featured on the website. How would your first six months look?</p>
8	Diverse German-speaking societies III	<p>A – Reflect on your knowledge of Germany and Austria by completing the following two tasks: In five German words/short phrases each, how would you describe</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) <b>Germans and/or Germany</b>, and</li> <li>2) <b>Austrians and/or Austria?</b></li> </ol> <p>B – Read the <i>Kurier</i> article on „Aspects that connect and separate Austrians and Germans.“ Answer the following questions in English to check your understanding of the text.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Name two differences between Austrians and Germans that are mentioned in the text and most interesting to you.</li> <li>2) Name two similarities between Austrians and Germans that are mentioned in the text and most interesting to you.</li> <li>3) What are the words for “Tomato” [“tomato”] and “Brötchen” [“bread rolls”] in Austrian German?</li> <li>4) Germans sometimes call Austrians “Ösis” [derogatory term for an Austrian]; what is the (derogatory) name that Austrians have for Germans?</li> <li>5) How surprising was this newspaper article to you? Please give your response on a scale between 0 [not surprising at all] and 10 [could not have been more surprising].</li> </ol>	

		6) What did you consider most surprising and/or interesting about this article? (link: <a href="https://kurier.at/politik/ausland/liebste-feinde-was-oesterreicher-und-deutsche-trennt-und-was-sie-verbindet/282.797.045">https://kurier.at/politik/ausland/liebste-feinde-was-oesterreicher-und-deutsche-trennt-und-was-sie-verbindet/282.797.045</a> )	
9	Questions for a German speaker II	Prepare the 2 <sup>nd</sup> oral project (a 3-5-minute conversation between you and a person from Marburg at the end of the semester) by writing <b>three</b> questions about life and studying in Marburg that you can ask them. <b>Post your questions to the ePortfolio.</b>	Oral project: Imagine you will live and study in Marburg. Before you go, you have so many questions about life there. This is your chance to talk to someone from Marburg.
10	Final reflection	<p><i>Reflect on the entire project and complete the following statements in English:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) One aspect I really liked about the semester project was...</li> <li>2) One aspect I really did not like about the semester project was ...</li> <li>3) Name at least one aspect related to the semester project that you found particularly surprising or interesting.</li> <li>4) Name at least one aspect related to the semester project that you would have liked to learn more about.</li> <li>5) Name one aspect that you would suggest changing in future projects.</li> <li>6) How, if at all, has the semester project affected your view of German/Germanness/German-speaking countries?</li> <li>7) On a scale from 0 [the learning experience was not enriched at all] to 10 [the learning experience could not have been enriched more] would you say that the semester project has enriched your learning experience in this class.</li> <li>8) How strongly would you suggest that the instructor should implement this project (or a very similar project) in future language classes again. Rate your response on a scale from 0 [not at all] to 10 [most definitely].</li> </ol>	

Learners reported their responses in individual ePortfolios that they set up via the university’s learning management system (Canvas) at the beginning of the project. Only I, as the instructor, and the respective student had access to his/her own ePortfolio. The semester project counted 10% of a student’s final grade.

All artifacts—except the first one, which required students to set up their ePortfolio—fell into three categories that broadly reflect the learning outcomes. The first category encourages learners to explore and reflect on Germanness in their local environments and lives (Artifacts 2 and 3). These artifacts were inspired by an ACTFL presentation by White (2015) illustrating a photo diary project on learners’ perceptions of Germanness in America. The presenter asked her students to create a photo diary by taking three to 10 pictures of anything in their “local city/on campus, surrounding areas, or hometown”—“as long as [students] can justify its Germanness.” Like White’s project, the current study required students to take four pictures overall and justify their decisions.

The second category of artifacts requires students to investigate the diverse lived experiences of people in German-speaking countries, specifically Germany and Austria (Artifacts 5 through 9). These tasks work with a newspaper article on the German population with a migrant background (Artifact 5), a website featuring success stories by refugees who came to Germany around 2015 (Artifact 7), a blog post on cultural and linguistic differences between Austria and Germany (Artifact 8), as well as the preparation of in-class interviews with people living in Germany (Artifacts 6 and 9).

The third category (Artifacts 4 and 10) includes learners’ feedback and reflections on the artifacts. Students describe which aspects of the project they enjoyed or did not enjoy and how the respective tasks might have affected their view of “German/Germanness/Germany/German-speaking countries,” and how these perceptions might have impacted learners’ own identity or role as a learner of German.

**Assessment**

All artifacts were assessed using three categories: completion, creativity, and language (Figures 2 A–C). For all artifacts, students received up to three points for completing an assignment (Figure 2 A). The points for the other two categories, creativity and language, varied depending on the assignment. Every point assigned to these categories represent-



ed about 5 minutes of work required to complete the instructions. Learners were able to receive full points, half points, or no points for these two categories based on their performance (Tables 2 B and C). Furthermore, the possible points for creativity and language also varied across artifacts based on an artifact’s scope. Specifically, when learners were asked to complete (parts of) an artifact in English, they received creativity points (Figure 2 B). However, if (parts of) an artifact required students to answer in German or to use their German language skills (e.g., reading a text in German), they were given language points (Figure 2 C). For example, Artifacts 2 and 3 may look similar at first as both assignments ask students to engage with the concept of Germanness. For Artifact 2, however, learners can receive up to 7 points for creativity and 3 points for language, and for Artifact 3, they only receive 7 points for creativity. This is because both artifacts require students to engage with the concept of Germanness via questions they can answer in English, i.e., creativity points. Only Artifact 2, however, asks them to use their TL skills by providing German words or phrases they associate with German and Germany, i.e., language points.

**Figure 2A: Overview of grading categories: Completion rubric**

	0 points	1 point	2 points	3 points
Completion	No submission	Student missed substantial parts of the assignment.	Student completed the artifact but did not submit it on time.	Student completed the artifact and submitted it on time.

**Figure 2B: Overview of grading categories: Creativity rubric**

	No points	Half points	Full points
Creativity	The content did not reflect instructions, or the artifact was not submitted.	The artifact either lacked in well-organized content or did not show reflective ideas, questions, and thoughts.	The content was organized well. The artifact showed reflective ideas, questions, and thoughts.

**Figure 2C: Overview of grading categories: Language rubric**

	No Points	Half Points	Full points
Language	The artifact did not reflect any grammatical structures (e.g., word order, conjugation, declination) and vocabulary introduced during the semester and/or the artifact, or the used grammar and vocabulary were overall incorrect.	The artifact reflected grammatical structures (e.g., word order, conjugation, declination) and vocabulary introduced during the semester and/or the artifact. But there are many or frequent grammar and/or vocabulary mistakes.	The artifact reflected grammatical structures (e.g., word order, conjugation, declination) and vocabulary introduced during the semester and/or the artifact. The used grammar and vocabulary was mostly correct.

Figure 3 (next page) provides a summary of the point distribution for the respective artifacts. The maximum overall score one could achieve was 100 points.

**Figure 3: Point distribution for semester project’s 10 artifacts**

#	Artifact	Points for each artifact			Points
		Completion	Creativity	Language	
1	Setup	3	0	0	3
2	What does Germanness mean to you?	3	7	3	13
3	Germanness in your life	3	7	0	10
4	Initial reflection	3	7	0	10
5	Diverse German-speaking societies I	3	0	7	10
6	Questions for a German speaker I	3	0	7	10
7	Diverse German-speaking societies II	3	0	7	10
8	Diverse German-speaking societies III	3	2	5	10
9	Questions for a German speaker II	3	3	5	11
10	Final reflection	3	10	0	13
Overall Points		30	36	34	100

### Methodology

#### Participants

Twenty learners of a second-semester German course section at a large Midwestern university taught by me as the instructor participated in the study. Figures 4 and 5 provide further information on participants’ demographics and the final grade distribution for the project. The institution is located in a state where about 40% of the population claimed German ancestry, one of the highest rates among all U.S. states (United States Census Bureau, 2021). In addition, representations of ‘German culture’ occur regularly in the community, such as at buildings on campus and around the city, at festivals, in advertising, or colloquial expressions.

**Figure 4: Participants’ demographics**

Number of participants	Average age (years/months)	Number of respondents who...			
		described their gender as...		indicated their home country as ...	
		female	male	USA	other
20	19/9	10	10	14	6

**Figure 5: Participants’ final grade distribution for semester project**

Grade (points)	A (92 - 100)	AB (89 - 91.9)	B (82 - 88.9)	BC (79 - 81.9)	C (70 - 78.9)	D (60 - 69.9)	F (0 - 59.9)	Mean
Number of participants	13	2	2	1	0	2	0	91.9 points

#### Data Collection and Analysis

According to the Institutional Review Board’s protocol, I did not know who of the 21 students in the class were part of the study until the final grades were submitted. Every

student's submission was graded as a regular assignment during the semester. After grades were finalized, I learned that 20 students participated in the study. I then reviewed and reanalyzed their materials.

To answer the RQs (see next section), I focused my analysis on responses to Artifact 10, the final reflection. This artifact was chosen for two reasons. First, it included learners' final feedback about the project's setup and scope (RQ 1). And second, participants' responses offered insights into what students learned through the project (RQ 2). From learners' answers, I created quantitative and qualitative data sets.

Regarding students' perceptions of the assignments (RQ 1), descriptive statistics were used to analyze rated items and compute their mean scores, and to illustrate the percentage of participants who liked or disliked certain aspects of the project. Open-ended responses were analyzed using principles of thematic analysis, as described by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). This method is a form of pattern recognition based on a reflexive and iterative process of careful reading and re-reading of the data to find emerging themes/categories that "are being important to the description of [a] phenomenon" (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 82). The coding process is guided by both inductive (i.e., recognizing patterns from within the data) and deductive (i.e., comparing the data to previously developed templates, such as desired learning outcomes) approaches to the data.

To analyze learners' responses to two open-ended items inquiring about the aspects of the project they liked and disliked (RQ 1), I copied their ePortfolio entries (sorted by participant) into two spreadsheets—one including all verbatim responses about the features students liked and the other including all verbatim responses about their dislikes. The coding process included reading and rereading of the data, finding similarities and differences between responses, comparing answers to the project's learning objectives, and categorizing responses to organize the data and develop overarching themes. I applied the same approach to participants' responses to two other open-ended items asking learners to comment on what they considered particularly surprising or interesting regarding the assignments and how the project may have affected their views of German, Germanness, Germany, and/or German-speaking countries (RQ 2). The results of these qualitative and quantitative analyses are described in the next sections.

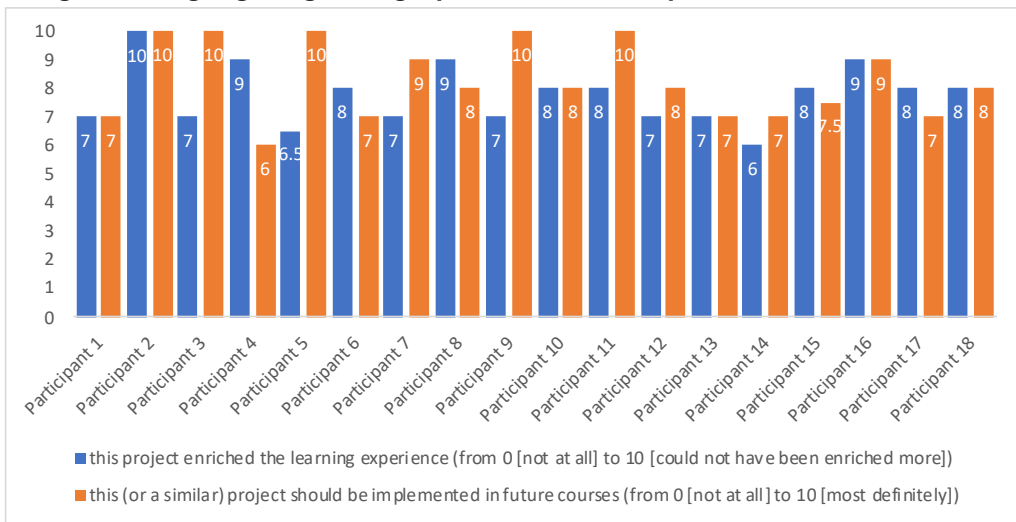
## Results

### **RQ 1: How did the participating novice learners perceive the semester project's assignments?**

Two rated items of the final reflection (Artifact 10) provided quantitative insights into (1) how much this project had enriched the participants' learning experience (from 0 "not at all" to 10 "could not have been enriched more") and (2) whether they wanted to see the same or similar assignments implemented in future courses (from 0 "not at all" to 10 "most definitely"). Figure 6 (next page) shows the feedback provided by 18 participants. Responses were overwhelmingly positive, with mean scores of 7.75 (item 1) and 8.25 (item 2), respectively.

To better interpret these ratings, participants also provided feedback on which activities they liked and disliked about the project (Artifact 10). As illustrated in Figure 7, participants primarily enjoyed tasks related to the following topics: the exploration of and reflection on aspects of Germanness in their immediate environments and learning more about the diverse lived experiences of people in German-speaking countries. The former relates to Artifacts 2 and 3, which asked students to find, share, and reflect on four items in their immediate environments that represented Germanness to them. Learners, for in-

Figure 6: Ratings regarding learning experience and future implementation

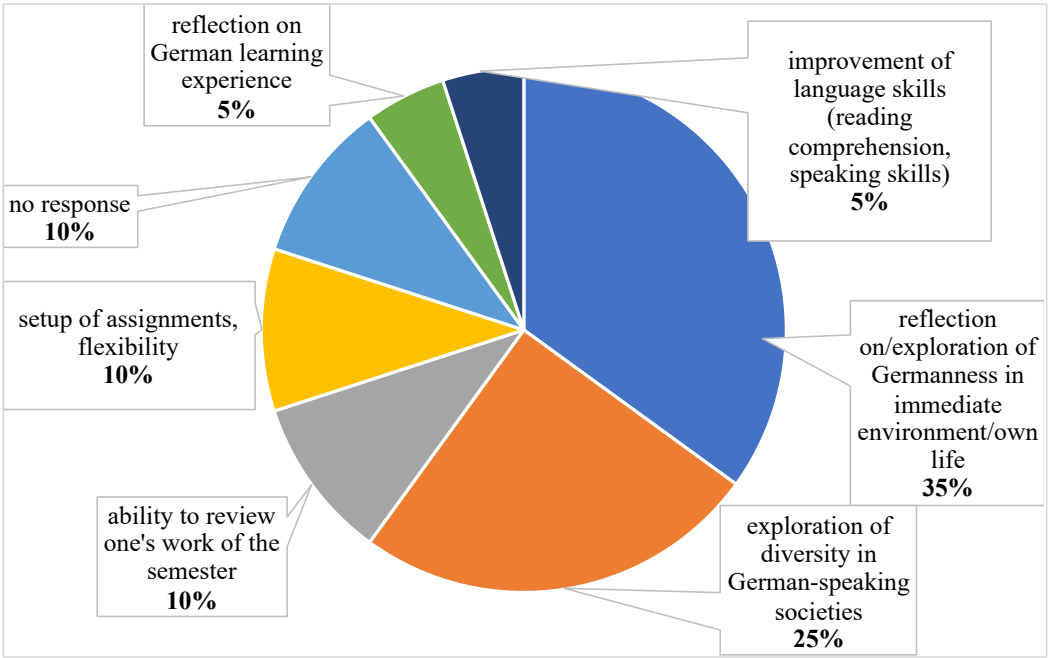


stance, shared pictures and stories regarding chocolate they purchased in Switzerland, their Mercedes car, a German-themed restaurant they like to visit, or their family members with German heritage.

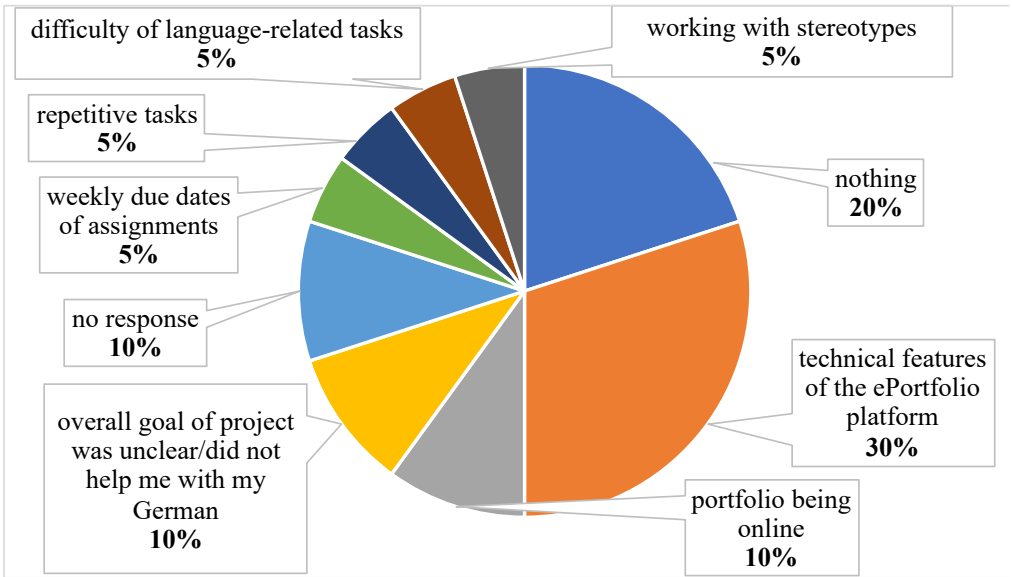
The other aspect of the project students liked most refers to three websites describing the diverse lived experiences of people in German-speaking regions (Artifacts 5, 7, and 8). The newspaper article for Artifact 5 provided demographic information on the immigrant population in Germany. Some students, for example, were surprised about the percentage of people with a migration background (20%) or the fact that there is a large Turkish-German population (“*Statistisches Bundesamt: Jeder Fünfte in Deutschland hat einen Migrationshintergrund* [Federal Statistical Office of Germany: Every fifth person in Germany has a migration background],” 2017). Artifact 7 illustrated success stories of refugees who immigrated to the Berlin area in 2015. Each student had to choose a featured person and answer questions about their personal story. Additionally, learners explained what they found interesting or surprising regarding that person. According to participants’ responses, some learners found it meaningful to read about positive and successful stories of refugees settling in another country. Furthermore, learners liked reading about the differences between Germany and Austria (Artifact 8). Some of them had not known about the linguistic differences, such as different vocabulary or the complex neighborly relations between the two countries. Participants’ verbatim responses analyzed under RQ 2 provide further insights into how these artifacts have affected students’ learning experience and their views of Germanness. (See Figure 7, next page)

Aside from the aspects that participants liked about the project, there were also some features they did not enjoy (Figure 8, next page). Almost half of the participants described frustrations with the technical side of the ePortfolio platform (which was part of the university’s learning management system, Canvas) or the fact that the portfolio was online. Examples included complaints about the user interface. It made it difficult to create and organize entries, upload images, or share one’s work with the instructor. Twenty percent of the participants stated that they could not think of any specific aspects they disliked.

**Figure 7: Aspects liked by participants**



**Figure 8: Aspects disliked by participants**



**RQ 2: Which learning outcomes were most salient after participants completed the project?**

Two open-ended items of the final Artifact (10) provided valuable insights into participants’ main takeaways from the project. The questions asked learners to describe what they considered particularly surprising or interesting regarding the assignments and how the project may have affected learners’ views of German, Germanness, Germany, and/or German-speaking countries. Participants’ responses to these items were grouped into four categories of learning outcomes. Overall, participants’ responses showed an increased awareness of both Germanness in learners’ local communities and the ethnic diversity among German speakers. Artifacts also helped students to reevaluate their own biases/stereotypes and encouraged them to engage with the TL beyond classroom assignments. Figure 9 illustrates the outcomes, including example verbatim answers.

**Figure 9: Participants’ learning outcomes, including example responses**

Learning outcomes	Verbatim responses (examples)
Increased awareness of Germanness in local communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· [...] they made me more aware of how much “Germaneness” there was in “non-typically German areas.” They forced me to be aware of German words that are around and used in daily life [...]</li> <li>· I liked the assignment where we looked for things that represented Germany in our daily life. It was good to appreciate the cultural presence it has.</li> <li>· This project ‘forced’ me realize the German impact on some of the closest things to me (as an F1 enthusiast and a mechanical engineer). [...] Like my Puma shoes [...] and Mercedes (<i>Silberpfeil</i> [Silver Arrow]). [...]</li> <li>· This project provided the opportunity to talk about my personal connections with German speakers in my family.</li> <li>· [...] Learning so much about Germany excites me a lot and makes me want to explore the Germanness around me a lot more.</li> <li>· [...] I have thought more about the German in my life. I didn’t realize how many things were so German until this course.</li> <li>· It has motivated me to look for Germanness around me, which gave me a better understanding of Germany as well as German-speaking countries.</li> <li>· After this project, I’m more aware of the ‘Germanness’ around me. Gradually, I tend to start permeating the German culture into my life as well as those of people around me. I started to teach my roommate some German sometimes. [...]</li> <li>· I found the <i>farbenbekennen.de</i> assignment the most interesting. This is due to the fact that not only do they have these problems in their culture in Germany we also have them in the United States as well.</li> </ul>
Increased awareness of ethnic diversity among German speakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· I had no idea that there was so much immigration to Turkey and Germanic speaking countries. Reading biographies from some of the immigrants were quite enlightening.</li> <li>· I think the refugee/migration into Germany is very interesting, especially as someone interested in international relations I’d like to look into that specific cultural divide and assimilation as it occurs. [...]</li> <li>· I guess I never really knew how diverse German culture is. The fact that there are so many different types of people in Germany really makes it diverse. [...]</li> <li>· It allowed me to explore topics which I would not have learned about since they are not in the textbook.</li> <li>· I liked the <i>farbenbekennen.de</i> section because it was neat to learn about real people’s experiences as refugees in Germany.</li> <li>· The assignment that had to do with the refugees was extremely interesting and surprising. The reason I wanted to take German was because I feel like German is a well-known language for many different peoples.</li> <li>· They do teach me more about German cultures compared with my previous personal experience, especially in topics like receiving refugees.</li> </ul>

<p>Re-evaluation of own biases/ stereotypes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· I found it really interesting—almost introspective to a point—to inspect my own biases with regards to the stereotypes related to Germans.</li> <li>· They have informed me on some of the realities of life in Germany. They have broken some of my preconceived notions about stereotypical Germans (Intimidating, constantly getting drunk, etc...)</li> <li>· I don't think it has changed my own identity on the topics, instead, just some of my opinions.</li> <li>· [...] they've given me opportunities to become more knowledgeable and informed as well as making me express opinions [...]</li> </ul>
<p>Self-directed engagement with the TL</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· They have shown me that there is still so much to learn and that likely the best resources for learning about German/Germanness/German-speaking countries lie in German media from these countries themselves, so I should keep exposing myself to these to keep enhancing my view.</li> <li>· I have found myself listening to German songs more and German TV shows. I also say German words in my head whenever I see a noun that I know in German. For example, whenever I see water I say 'Wasser' ['water'] now.</li> <li>· [...] the surprising part was how much of most of the articles I understood. I would be able to get the basic idea of most articles when I read through it and then just look up more complex words to get exact details and it proved I had a much better understanding/comprehension than I had believed.</li> <li>· I enjoyed exploring and trying to navigate German-language websites. It was a good but challenging experience with limited German. I can't wait to do the same when my German is better so it's easier!</li> </ul>

The following sections discuss these results in light of the project's initial objectives and consider pedagogical implications for similar projects in the future.

**Discussion**

**Exploring the diversity of the target language, its cultures, and speakers locally and abroad**

Teacher-scholars have called on fellow WL educators to diversify their curricula and classroom materials at the novice level (Criser & Knott, 2019; Merritt, 2020) and show learners local gateways to the community of TL speakers (Magnan et al., 2014; White, 2016). This project spoke to both objectives. By completing 10 artifact assignments, students were encouraged to (1) identify and make comparisons between products and practices of their own cultures and the target culture locally and abroad to help them understand multifaceted perspectives; (2) analyze authentic materials portraying a diverse socio-political image of German-speaking communities; and (3) and reflect on their learning regarding this project.

As presented under RQ 2, learners' verbatim responses indicated that they were able to work on the skills described in the project's three learning objectives. First, participants were able to identify and compare German-related products and practices found in their immediate environment and connect them to the realities of the German-speaking world (learning objective 1). Many of them had not realized "how much Germanness" there was in "non-typically German areas," which encouraged some to do more research on these items. An engineering student who shared information about his Mercedes, for instance, had started investigating universal principles of engine development grounded in work by Mercedes engineers after completing Artifact 3. Most answers showed excitement about exploring Germanness in learners' local environments. One student even said that it "motivated [him] to look for Germanness around [him]" after completing the task. Such activities help students realize local connections to the TL community, showing how Germanness relates to their daily lives (Anyia, 2011; Boovy, 2016).

Admittedly, for some WL learners it may be more difficult to find traces of the respective language community represented in public spaces, products, or personal heritage. Nevertheless, similar investigations would most likely be possible for students of any WL. Even if those learners cannot find (tangible) traces of the language on their campus or in the city, they probably have some kind of (virtual) item that represents the TL community to them. Students may reflect on a photo they have of/from the target community or a show they watched on television.

The investigations into Germanness in students' immediate environments can build the foundation for critical reflections in future coursework on how European immigrants have shaped life in the United States and the consequences of settler colonialism (Boovy, 2016; Manthripragada & Mušanović, 2020). In order to address those matters, educators must develop activities that go beyond this project's assignments of asking students to find and describe German-related items. Those tasks must delve below the surface of what is visible as a German—or French, Italian, Spanish, et cetera—street name, restaurant, or festival in the United States. Such tasks should discuss European settlement in this country, along with its intended and unintended consequences, which was only possible due to the forced expulsion of Indigenous Peoples (Manthripragada & Mušanović, 2020).

Second, participants developed an increased awareness of ethnic diversity among German speakers (learning objective 2). Some students did not know about the large percentage of Germans with a migration background and were surprised by the difficulties many of them face in the educational system, for instance. Others found it meaningful to read the refugee success stories because they provided insights into “real people's experiences.” One participant stated that “[the artifacts] allowed [her] to explore topics which [she] would not have learned about since they are not in the textbook.” These comments speak to the importance of extending textbook content to present topics about the TL communities that are often not featured in large-scale resources. Instructors may begin this process by having their students reflect on the textbook materials and canonical texts typically used in class and ask questions such as: Who is not portrayed? Whose voices are missing from the narrative? Why are these voices not featured? How could these voices contribute to the story? (Cooper, 2020). Additionally, teachers must employ teaching materials that include examples of the diverse lived experiences of TL speakers. Instructors of German and other WLS wishing to redevelop their curricula should review the instructional guidelines and units developed by the *Creating Safe Spaces* task force of the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG). They created free online materials that span various language levels and thematic units, focusing on Black, Indigenous, and other Persons of Color (BIPOC) and LGBTQ+ communities in the German-speaking world (Rothe et al., 2023). The resources can be accessed by AATG-members and non-members at the GETMAPP platform (<https://aatg.app.box.com/v/GETMAPP-GermanTeaching/folder/131085665439>).

Finally, the novice learners of this study were able to reflect on their preconceived notions about the target culture and their language learning skills and practices. Supporting previous scholarship on the importance of self-reflections in language classes (Brunow & Newman, 2020; Drewelow, 2013), findings demonstrated both learners' interest and ability at the novice level to reflect on topics related to diversity and inclusivity critically. For instance, one participant described how the project informed him on “some of the realities of life in Germany,” which helped break “down some of [his] preconceived notions about stereotypical Germans (e.g., intimidating, constantly drunk).” Another student described a similar experience with the project, which she found “introspective.” It invited her to “inspect [her] own biases [...] related to Germans.” Reflection responses hinted at learners'



self-directed engagement with the TL community beyond the materials presented in class. The comments demonstrated some learners' developed desire and practices to explore authentic and real-life materials and information from the TL community. One learner—recognizing that there is still much more to learn about the diversity of German speakers—realized that “the best resources for learning about German/Germanness/German-speaking countries lie in German-language media from these countries.” That student expressed the desire for more exposure to these resources “to keep enhancing [her] view.” Other participants were surprised by “how much of the articles [they] understood” and felt encouraged to listen to German songs and watch German TV shows more often.

Despite these successful outcomes and the positive feedback, this project should not be misunderstood as a simple solution to systemic issues of social justice. Instead, it contributes to the discussions about what and how we teach (Merritt, 2020). It can serve as *one* tool to embed DEI matters into novice-level classes. As described in the next section, the project provides ample opportunities for adjustment and expansion to create engaging tasks addressing underlying DEI topics.

### **Creating engaging tasks: Implications for WL courses**

The project's setup followed all six of Dörnyei's (2019) guidelines for engaging tasks. In order to discuss suggestions for future implementations of this project, this section focuses on two of the guidelines that were most relevant to this study: (1) The tasks' outcomes connect to and benefit students' daily lives, and (2) the content is relevant and provides authentic experiences.

Findings indicate that the project's learning outcomes were connected to students' daily lives, demonstrated by an increased awareness of Germanness in their local environments. And these tasks benefitted students' language learning practices, visible in participants' practices to engage with diverse real-life materials and information from the TL community beyond materials provided by the instructor. By engaging with these materials, whether through classroom instruction or self-directed learning beyond the course, learners benefit from access to the variety of thoughts and lived experiences that German-speaking communities offer (Criser & Knott, 2019). Future iterations of this project may take learners' ability to understand the diversity in the TL community as a starting point to investigate systemic inequities. For example, learners may analyze the German educational system and the disparities it creates based on social class and ethnic background. In addition, future activities should invite students to transfer the skills they learned in their WL class and apply them to their local contexts. For instance, prompts may ask students to analyze how DEI issues they learned about in German/Spanish/French/Italian-speaking areas compare to those in their communities (Tarnawska Senel, 2020). Consequently, students may be able to describe how social justice issues, such as racism, are deeply embedded in many societies. Critical discussions may address a region's colonial and imperialist past and its consequences, or a country's treatment of people not conforming to governmental and political ideologies (Rosa & Flores, 2017).

Similar to the learning outcomes that relate to students' lives, an engaging task's content must reflect relevant and authentic materials and experiences for learners. Most participants of this study described how the project provided an intriguing experience as they were able to search their campus, hometown surroundings, and family histories to find connections to Germanness locally. Moreover, the tasks offered them an opportunity to work with authentic materials from the target community abroad, such as online newspaper articles and websites. In addition to the content provided in this project, educators may

also include artifacts surrounding (virtual) events by guest speakers that address DEI matters in the TL community. Examples include students' participation in a question-and-answer session with Black German filmmaker Sheri Hagen to learn about her work and the obstacles she faced as a *non-White* filmmaker in Germany. Other ideas include workshops with author Katharina Warda to explore activist efforts by BIPOC groups in East Germany. Instructors may also encourage their students to create a city tour, combining students' individual artifacts into a more comprehensive project that investigates traces of WLS on campus or in the city. Such a tour may also be turned into a social justice city tour that critically reflects on how settlers of European descent have shaped a city and its inhabitants.

### Final Thoughts

In light of this project's findings and previous calls by teacher-scholars to diversify WL education (Anya, 2020; Criser & Knott, 2019; Glynn et al., 2018), the author invites other educators to redevelop their instructional materials to address topics related to DEI in their language classes. Language learners must realize that the TL communities they study—as well as learners' own communities—denote social, cultural, and linguistic pluralism. Students who do not understand this reality because of instructional gaps will be unable to reconcile their classroom learning with the realities they may encounter in the TL regions. Moreover, they will be unable to reflect on biases they encounter locally and abroad. The fact that so many students participating in this study were advocating for the implementation of similar tasks in future courses may inspire other teachers to create their own projects across various WL courses, starting at the novice level.

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