Overview

Propaganda, disinformation, and the changing epistemologies of the information environment are a thorny and meaningful challenge to global peace, and this project focused its efforts on working with an underserved but important target audience of teachers and teacher educators. Medialogues on Propaganda was a year-long, cross-national professional learning community that used innovative approaches to support the learning needs of German and American educators and teacher educators. More than 700 educators had some exposure to one or more of the online programs during the academic year and 36 participants had a deep, intrinsically motivating professional learning experience in the Power of Two program. In Phase 1, which occurred in the Fall/Winter of 2021, educators and teacher educators gathered for Medialogues, a sequence of generative dialogues that used an online webinar format with rich content and pedagogy supplied by a range of media literacy experts. Topics included media bias, disinformation, propaganda, controversial public issues in the classroom, and the cultivation of tolerance and respect through media literacy education. In Phase 2, during the Spring of 2022, The Power of Two program helped participants develop meaningful relationships built on respect and trust as they worked collaboratively to develop lesson plans or class projects linked to the themes of digital and media literacy, propaganda, and disinformation. When the Russia-Ukraine war began, we were responsive to educators' needs and demonstrated an instructional lesson on critically analyzing wartime propaganda. Some educators who met in this program even developed an innovative educational collaboration by planning a new project, and writing a grant that was just recently funded by an education philanthropy. While our total number of German participants was smaller than we had hoped, the cross-cultural dialogue around media literacy education that emerged was beneficial in advancing the collaborative professionalism of all the educators and teacher educators who participated in the program. In this professional learning community, everyone learned from everyone.

The Problem

Two major problems motivated our work on this project: First, new forms of propaganda and disinformation are compromising the quality of people's democratic decision making.[1] Teaching about propaganda and disinformation is challenging and the rise of political polarization has made teaching media literacy controversial.[2] Secondly, digital and media literacy education are unevenly implemented in schools in Germany, the United States, and around the world.[3] In Germany, implementation of media literacy education has lagged as compared to other parts of Europe and the coronavirus pandemic has led to continuing stresses on the education system in Germany.[4]

We designed Medialogues on Propaganda with the belief that teachers who experience sustained, immersive professional learning are likely to develop leadership skills that can transfer to their own settings. Teachers are more likely to enact significant pedagogical change when they get opportunities for experiential learning that makes them feel valued as members of an on-going, inquiry-based learning

[1] Farkas, J., & Schou, J. (2019). *Post-truth, fake news and democracy: Mapping the politics of falsehood*. Routledge.

[2] Geller, R.C. (2020) Teacher political disclosure in contentious times: A "responsibility to speak up" or "fair and balanced"?, *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 48:2, 182-210, DOI: 10.1080/00933104.2020.1740125

[3] Frau-Meigs, D., Velez, I., & Michel, J. F. (Eds.). (2017). *Public policies in media and information literacy in Europe: cross-country comparisons*. Taylor & Francis.

[4] Blume, C. (2020). German teachers' digital habitus and their pandemic pedagogy. *Postdigital Science and Education* 2, 879–905. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00174-9

community.[5] We recognize, of course, that teacher motivation to participate in professional development varies at different stages of the career. Teachers who choose to participate in professional learning programs are often balancing work and family responsibilities, and their time and energy is limited. Norms and expectations about professional development are also culturally varied: German teachers expect to receive professional development during the school day and academic year, while American teachers expect to receive it during the summer.

How could an online professional development program be designed to address these challenges? This report outlines the strategies we used to address this important question and the results we achieved.

German and American Collaboration

Thanks to a grant from the Public Affairs Section of the Berlin Embassy, we invited German, American, and global educators to gather online for a unique approach to professional development during a global pandemic. We created an online learning community by using a highly interactive and participatory approach to webinars combined with a hands-on, activity-based program that enabled us to model and demonstrate how media literacy pedagogy is applied to the most urgent and relevant topics facing society today, including media bias, election propaganda, disinformation, and political polarization.

The Medialogues on Propaganda program was designed to advance the quality of media literacy education in Germany by developing the knowledge, confidence, and leadership skills of German and American teachers and teacher educators. Seven free online webinars were offered in the summer and fall of 2021, followed by four free events that were offered in the Spring 2022 semester. In this final report, we review our experience in developing and implementing the program. We share observations about the program based on the quantitative and qualitative evidence we have gathered and the experiences we have had. Our team leaders included:

- Renee Hobbs is an internationally recognized expert in digital and media literacy education, author of 12 books on the topic. She is Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Rhode Island, where she directs the Media Education Lab.
- Silke Grafe is Professor of Education at the University of Wuerzburg (JMU), Germany where she is Director of the Media Education and Educational Technology Lab MEET and the Competence Center for Digital Teaching and Learning at JMU. Her research interests include media literacy education in schools and teacher education in an international and interdisciplinary perspective.
- Troy Hicks, PhD, is Professor of English and Education at Central Michigan University, where he collaborates with K–12 colleagues to explore how they implement newer literacies in their classrooms and teaches master's and doctoral courses in educational technology and media literacy.
- Bekir Cakmak (University of Wuerzburg) served as lead researcher for this program.
- PhD students Kristina Förster and Jannis Hahn (University of Wuerzburg) served as research associates for the program.

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[5] Girvan, C., Conneely, C., & Tangney, B. (2016). Extending experiential learning in teacher professional development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *58*, 129-139.

We are happy to report that our colleague Bekir Cakmak has arrived safely at the University of Wuerzburg after escaping Turkey where he had experienced a credible threat that was assessed by the Scholars at Risk Network (SAR). He has received an award from the Philipp Schwartz Initiative, a program of the Humboldt Foundation that enables universities and research institutions in Germany to host researchers at risk. He is now in residence in Wuerzburg as a member of Dr. Grafe's research team.

Digital Learning During a Global Pandemic

COVID-19 affected schools and universities in Germany, the United States, and around the world throughout the 2021-2022 school year. During the first and second waves of the pandemic, German educators struggled to support students during the school closures and teachers only carried out a fraction of their usual teaching operations during the school closures. For example, only 29% of students had online classes more than once a week, and only 6% had them daily. Students had even less individual contact with their teachers: Only 17% had contact more than once a week.[6] Many school leaders were unable to compensate for the loss of in-person instructional time with appropriate distance-teaching concepts.[7]

Even before COVID-19, Germany had a school system with a rather low degree of digital and virtual schooling, at least compared to other EU member states. Only 1 in 3 students has access to online learning platforms, compared with more than half in other countries across the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.[8] The pandemic placed a public spotlight on the need for digital infrastructure and teacher training. The practice of teacher preparation was also impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic because most face-to-face courses were replaced by online education.

To be successful in digital learning, new ways of communicating become important. In a study of high school students in eight German federal states, most reported daily delivery of learning material by email. But students wished for a stronger personal exchange between teachers and students to intensify digital learning.[9] As researchers from the Center for Economic Studies and ifo Institute in Munich explain, the pandemic's new distance-teaching requirements impacted "the stress situation and mental health of teachers themselves, which may partly depend on whether the teachers have to care for their own children at home during the time of distance teaching."[10] In the Fall of 2021 and the Spring of 2022, new laws were passed in Germany to limit school closures. But in Saxony, more than 100 schools were placed under temporary restrictions for specific classes, age groups, and even entire schools. According to Germany's Conference of Education Ministers, 45,500 school-age children were registered as infected,

[6] Grewenig, E., Lergetporer, P., Werner, K., Woessmann, L. and Zierow, L. (2020). *COVID-19 and educational inequality: how school closures affect low- and high-achieving students.* CESifo Working Paper 8648.

[7] Freundl, V., Lergetporer, P., & Zierow, L. (2021). Germany's education policy during the COVID-19 crisis. *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, *31*(1), 109-116.

[8] Chu, L. (2021, March 30). Germany has money. Why don't its schools have computers? *Christian Science Monitor.*

[9] Anger, S., Dietrich, H., Patzina, A., Sandner, M., Lerche, A., Bernhard, S., & Toussaint, C. (2020). School closings during the COVID-19 pandemic: Findings from German high school students. In *IAB-Forum. Nuremberg: Institute for Employment Research of the Federal Employment Agency*.

[10] Werner, K. & Woessmann, L. (2021). The Legacy of Covid-19 in Education, CESifo Working Paper, No. 9358, Center for Economic Studies and ifo Institute (CESifo), Munich.