

Chapter 9

“What Makes This So Complicated?” On the Value of Disorienting Dilemmas in Language Instruction

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Introduction

On a late Sunday night in November 2015, a student enrolled in an intermediate German course contacted her instructor to express concerns about a game that was to take place in class the following day. In the previous class on Friday, her instructor had introduced *The Unbroken Treaty*, a type of “Reacting to the Past” (RTTP) pedagogy (Carnes, 2014), in which over three two-hour class periods students would take on historical roles in order to learn about German–Comanche relations from 1847 Texas. In her e-mail, the student voiced serious reservations about the role-playing dimension of the game, which included adopting the position of Comanche characters, an activity she saw as inappropriate for non-native students. Further, the student feared that the game would not be taken seriously by her fellow students, some of whom, she noted, had made offensive jokes in response to the game in Friday’s class. Over the weekend, the student had researched on her own the history of Texas German settlement in the Comanche territories, contacted a former student from the class who had participated in the game the previous semester to find out more about the activity, and sought counsel from and issued a formal complaint about the game with the university’s Campus Climate Response Team. It was clear from the student’s e-mail that she had spent a considerable amount of time thinking and talking with others about the content, pedagogy, and implications of the game, even before it had officially begun.

Upon receiving the e-mail, the student’s teacher, a graduate student instructor (GSI), forwarded the message¹ on to the Language Program Director (LPD), another instructor of the course, and one of the developers of the game who was not

¹With the student name redacted.

teaching the class at the time, and asked for guidance on how to respond to the student's concerns. Suddenly, this game, which had been played successfully over three previous semesters in multiple class sections, was raised to a new level, one, the LPD reasoned, that the teachers had neither anticipated nor were likely prepared to adequately deal with. After considering the situation—including the issue of time—the LPD wrote to the German instructors and game developers to announce that *The Unbroken Treaty* would be canceled, and in its place, teachers would discuss the content material with their students during the week. The following morning, the LPD consulted with the university's Division of Diversity and Community Engagement (DDCE), and an emergency meeting facilitated by two representatives from this unit was scheduled for the instructors and game developers later that afternoon to talk about the issues raised with the role-play activity and to develop strategies for handling sensitive topics, such as this one, in the classroom. At the meeting, the group agreed to center instruction around one key question: "What makes the game so complicated?" This question would allow students and teachers to develop deeper understanding about the content material by making space for different positions related to the historical event and the role-play itself.

This chapter chronicles the experiences of four participant groups (pedagogical designer, LPD, teacher, and student) involved in this unexpected event to show the multifaceted, interconnected learning opportunities that emanated from a crisis moment. The study draws on transformative learning theory (Johnson, 2015; Mezirow, 1994, 1997), which sees "disorienting dilemmas" as catalysts for reflection and changes in viewpoint and considers how this theoretical framework can contribute to our understanding of social pedagogies (Bass & Elmendorf, 2011). Following a short description of this framework, four perspectives on the events are presented. First, the game designer outlines the learning goals of RTTP (Carnes, 2014) and *The Unbroken Treaty*, including further game development in light of student objections. Second, the LPD explains the programmatic response to the student concerns and reflects on the professional development needs of GSIs who teach integrated language-content courses. Third, the teacher describes how an alternative lesson plan turned the game cancellation into a rich teachable moment. Finally, analysis of audio-recorded interviews conducted with students from the course reveals how guided class discussions allowed certain learners to question their assumptions and consider other viewpoints. Given this multi-perspectival approach, the contribution should be of interest to LPDs and foreign language (FL) teacher educators interested in supporting teachers in handling difficult topics in the classroom.

Transformative Learning in FL Education

Transformative learning is an ideal framework for investigating the type of learning that takes place in social pedagogies where a major outcome pertains to "the cultivation of certain attitudes or dispositions characteristic of adaptive

experts, including the ability to work with uncertainty, adapt to ambiguity or even failure, and to feel increasingly comfortable working at the edges of one's competence" (Bass & Elmendorf, 2011, p. 3). As an adult learning theory concerned with changes in perspective, transformative learning sees in moments of discord potential for individual growth. First developed by Jack Mezirow in the 1970s, the model refers to a:

process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference [...] to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (Mezirow, 2012, p. 76)

Perspective-shifting thus connotes more than developing deeper understanding (Brookfield, 2000; Cranton & Taylor, 2012). Rather, it involves reflective engagement with new understandings that do not fit into one's established frames of reference. Over the years, Mezirow's model has undergone significant revision, with 10 non-sequential learning processes identified as contributing to perspective transformation:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 168–169).

At the center of the model is the *disorienting dilemma*, a difficult, often discordant encounter that challenges individuals to question their current values and worldviews. In transformative learning pedagogy, dilemmas are viewed as opportunities for growth and transformation, and while difficult to stage—and some might argue they can never be planned—when they do occur, they are often powerful and emotional, leaving a profound effect on the individual.

For transformative learning to occur, an individual must be willing to engage with unfamiliar viewpoints. This can be difficult in practice, as our own *meaning structures* invite in familiar meanings of experience and encourage us to "resist learning anything that does not comfortably fit" our worldview

(Mezirow, 1994, p. 223).² Johnson (2015, p. 19), who studied perspective transformation in FL learners, describes a range of options available to adult learners when they encounter views different from their own, including rejecting, adapting, and adopting new understandings:

New knowledge that is not consistent with [a student's] meaning perspective will suffer one of several fates: (a) It may be discarded, dismissed as an aberration or impossibility and filtered out by the lens of her meaning perspective, (b) the new input may be modified to better fit into the preexisting worldview of the student, interpreted according to the existing meaning perspective or (c) it may cause a conflict between the previous frame of reference and the new information. If this conflict is explored, it can lead to a transformation of the student's perspective.

For instructed learners, experiences both in- and outside the classroom can trigger a disorienting dilemma, with the intensity level of the disorientation itself varying greatly depending on the nature of the situation. Kiely's (2005) distinction between high- and low-intensity cognitive dissonance is useful in understanding how individuals may process incongruent frames of reference differently, leading to different learning outcomes. With low-intensity dissonance, individuals are confronted with new perspectives that, while new and possibly even strange to them, do not fundamentally alter the individuals' frame of reference. With high-intensity dissonance, in contrast, an individual's meaning structures do not work in the situation, and one has to fundamentally rethink one's values and viewpoints. Disorienting dilemmas are not the only source for perspective transformation, however; changes in view can also develop accumulatively over time through a series of related, nondiscordant experiences (Mezirow, 1994).

Critical reflection proves an essential component in transforming meaning structures, as experience alone is not sufficient. Reflection here denotes thinking about experience in relationship to one's assumptions and belief systems, which often involves dialogue with others, especially with those who hold perspectives different from our own. This constructivist approach to learning emphasizes the individual's ability to make meaning out of experience (Cranton & Taylor, 2012) and further suggests that students must be developmentally ready, maybe even have a predisposition toward change and risk-taking, and have a well of prior life experiences to draw on and react to (Taylor, 2009). It can take time for transformative learning to happen—if it does at all—with age and life experience serving as important factors (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Activities that involve extended

²Meaning structures (Mezirow, 1994 p. 223) consist of both *meaning perspectives* ("broad sets of predispositions resulting from psychocultural assumptions which determine the horizons of our expectations") and *meaning schemes* ("constellation[s] of concept, belief, judgment, and feeling which shape a particular interpretation").

dialogue and reflective time to examine one's assumptions in light of new viewpoints have been shown to contribute most to perspective transformation (King, 2000). Teachers can play an important role in holding space for learners in this process, especially in providing students with "*high challenge and high support*" as they learn to interrogate and reframe their positions (Taylor & Elias, 2012, p. 155, italics in original). FL instruction can be a particularly productive site for learners to explore complex content matter from multiple perspectives (e.g., Kearney, 2016; Knutson, 2012; Kramsch, 2009, 2011), with the language teacher in a key position to guide students' reflection on disorienting dilemmas as they arise in instruction (Johnson, 2015). Indeed, transformative pedagogies are compatible with leading intercultural language learning models that see the complexities and ambiguities of intercultural communication as a resource to be exploited in the classroom (compare especially Kramsch's [2009] construct of *symbolic competence*, further elaborated in Liddicoat and Scarino's (2013) discussion of dissonance and consonance and Kearney's (2016) notion of *perspective-taking*).

How to support teachers and learners in handling difficult topics that represent diverse viewpoints is explored in the following analysis, as different participant responses to a disorienting dilemma across a collegiate FL program are recounted. Each of the four perspectives addresses two central questions: (1) How did the participants (game designer, LPD, teacher, and students) make sense of the game cancellation? and (2) To what extent did participants undergo a shift in perspective through their experience?

Method

With the unplanned cancellation of the game, a unique opportunity to study disorienting dilemmas in FL instruction presented itself. Student data in the form of structured reflections, written surveys, and focus groups were already in the process of being collected as part of a larger research project on perspective-shifting by one of the authors (also LPD). As it became clear that multiple stakeholders (teachers, administrators, and game designers) had been affected by this event, the decision was made to expand the study's scope to include these additional voices. Teachers and game designers were invited to participate, with two participants (Fingerhuth and Huenlich) self-selecting. The first three accounts presented (game designer, LPD, and instructor) were written over the year following the incident, offering first-hand retrospective reports of each role and providing relevant background information on the game's development, its placement within the curriculum, and its instantiation in the course, respectively.

At the end of the fall 2015 semester, following the week-long instruction devoted to Texas German history, written surveys were administered across the four intermediate German classes to capture the extent to which students perceived their views, values, or behavior to have changed through the course. Of the

51 students who completed the questionnaire, five agreed to take part in follow-up focus group interviews conducted by the LPD. Shortly after classes concluded, these five students participated in hour-long interviews that probed changes in the students' perspectives, including those surrounding the role-play game. Three of the interviewed students were in the same section taught by the instructor profiled in this chapter. To provide a complementary student view of the instructor's account, the analysis focuses primarily on the experiences of these three students. Students' survey responses and interview transcripts were analyzed to determine the extent to which the three learners experienced changes in viewpoint. This section employs direct quotes from the interviews to render the students' individual voices as authentically as possible. Following presentation of these four perspectives, a concluding discussion considers how the individual experiences reflect different developmental processes found in Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning framework.

Four Perspectives

A Game Developer's Perspective (Huenlich)

The Unbroken Treaty is a series of intermediate German language lessons designed as a fully contextualized role-playing game set in 19th-century Texas. The game was tested in a week-long version at the University of Texas at Austin between fall 2014 and summer 2015 in several sessions and is currently being revised as a course module for intermediate/advanced classes that can be played over several weeks. The plot underlying the game is based on a historic event. In 1847, the destinies of two peoples intersected at the Texas frontier: German settlers made a peace agreement with the Penateka Comanche tribe in order to found the settlement of Fredericksburg. The agreement continues to attract attention today as it developed despite years of bloodshed between Anglo settlers and the greater Comanche tribe in the 1840s, and as the main signing parties on the German and Comanche side never violated the treaty—making it an unbroken agreement to this day, at least in theory. The point of departure of the game deals with the difficulties of keeping peace under the terms of the contract: Would it be possible for the Germans and the Comanche to live side by side in peace as the document suggests?

The authors of the game included Adams LaBorde and Devon Donohue-Bergeler and myself who all taught German at the University of Texas at Austin until 2015 and had, prior to the development of the game, little to no knowledge of the history behind Fredericksburg.³ Coming from different gaming communities

³The department's expert on Texas German history, Jim Kearney, introduced our team to the topic. He had translated the novel *Friedrichsburg* (Strubberg, 2012), an eyewitness account of the events surrounding the treaty and pointed us to non-fictional literature (e.g., Penninger, 1896).

(e.g., board gaming, drama-based instruction, and live-action role-play), we enjoyed playing games in our classes. Recognizing the immense energies our students funneled into video, online, and board games, we set out to create a role-playing game with an engaging plot, fascinating characters, and thought-provoking rules and hoped it would not only provide suspense and captivating challenges but also offer a context for transformative experiences. Because this was our departure point, we borrowed techniques from RTTP pedagogy that have proven successful in engaging students with serious topics through role-playing. FL teachers have made use of similar techniques in the form of global simulations (GSs) (e.g., Dupuy, 2006; Levine, 2004; Magnin, 2002; Mills & Péron, 2008), where students' adoption of characters can act as a gateway to meaningful engagement with multiple genres and discourses in different sociocultural settings (Michelson & Dupuy, 2014). Engagement with reality, however, differs in that RTTP games spell out victory conditions and playful mechanics for their characters (see later in the chapter), while simulations tend to engage more realistically with a specific task.⁴

Reacting to the past

In 1996, Marc Carnes decided to replace his conventional history lectures with student-led debating sessions in which students assume specific roles and debate historical situations (e.g., Socrates's execution) from their character's intellectual position. Over time, Carnes developed elaborate game sessions with roles and rules eventually arriving at the present shape of RTTP games, that is, full-immersion role-play classes conducted over four to six weeks in which students take the lead, embody historic characters (real or contrived), and—by actively engaging with classical texts—redefine the course of history in the classroom. The built-in game mechanics (e.g., assassination attempts, incarcerations, or temporary abductions of characters) can further alter the outcome of a class. Post-hoc sessions then serve to contrast the classroom with the actual events in history. While one may criticize the partially ahistorical events that are bound to unfold in these classes, Carnes (2014) summarizes the evidence for the pedagogy's positive effects as shown in several studies (e.g., Gorton & Havercroft, 2012; Kelly, 2009; Lightcap, 2009; Stroessner, Beckerman, & Whittaker, 2009): RTTP classes are taken more seriously by students than other courses, and they foster a strong sense of classroom community. Importantly, students leave these courses with a higher capability to take on another person's perspective and show empathy toward others.

For these reasons, we thought presenting the treaty between German settlers and the Penateka Comanche in 1847 as an RTTP-style game offered a crucial social learning experience: by stepping into the shoes of people whom they did not

⁴In defining the "reality of function" parameter found in GSs, Levine (2004, p. 27) cites Jones (1984, p. 4): "[t]here is no play—either in a theatrical or in a gaming sense—in a simulation, and if there were, then it would stop being a simulation."

immediately understand, students could try out new behaviors and make mistakes in these situations without serious consequences. Reality, however, presented a different challenge.

Including the Comanche experience

During our first trials of the game, the topic of the Native American characters did not arise as a problem. To my own surprise, several students identified themselves as of Native American descent and expressed great interest in the idea of a game that lent a voice to their own ancestors. One student even reported she had grandparents of Comanche and German descent. This feedback led us to see the presence of Comanche characters in the game as even more important. We subsequently rejected a suggestion by an experienced RTTP teacher to simplify our game by taking out the Native American roles.

While we were aware that the Comanche voices in the game would not be original, we saw it as our job to provide good context and not to write a tight script on what Comanche tribe members in the game would or would not be allowed to say or do. Our hope was that the more students engaged with the materials, the better able they would be in moving past superficial representations. Intriguingly, one of the last free Comanche warriors was an ethnic German from close to Fredericksburg who had been abducted as a young boy. Providing German interviews with a family member of his and with family of other abductees was one of the highlights of the contextualized game materials.

A deeper problem arose as we learned that Texas K-12 curricula are largely silent about the dark chapters of ethnic cleansing in the Lone Star State: by the beginning of the 20th century the Comanche had been practically eliminated from all parts of the state and their forced resettlement in Lawton, Oklahoma, had been completed. These circumstances made our game not only innovative in the way it treated history in a language-teaching context but also made the matter more sensitive than initially anticipated. Having been raised in Germany where the remembrance of the Holocaust is institutionalized and the Shoah is frequently revisited, I was not aware of the lack of reappraisal of the Comanche experience in Texas until late in my engagement with the available materials.

Difficult dialogues and the cancellation of The Unbroken Treaty

The complaints that led to the game's cancellation illuminated new challenges. A student reported that after certain students in a German class had made disturbing racial comments following the game's introduction, other students shared her view that "playing Indian" would be inappropriate.

Carnes (2014) reports similar situations in RTTP games where students deal with roles they deem uncomfortable (e.g., Israeli students embodying Palestinian resistance leaders and Palestinian students taking on the role of Zionists). In one particular instance, an African American student shocked his friends by choosing

the character of John Calhoun to figure out "what made Calhoun tick" in order to "move closer to the eye of the hurricane of this nation's legacy of troubled race relations" (Carnes, 2014, p. 220). These dialogues all take place at extreme levels of discomfort. While students may be aware of such conversations, many seem far less aware of the traumatic history they share with Native Americans.

Our group was deeply disappointed when the game was cancelled in response to the elaborate argument the initial student wrote against our work. It appeared to us that our intentions, namely, bringing to life an exceptional counter-narrative to current views of the 19th-century Comanche, were being interpreted in exactly the opposite way. It took time for me to gain distance from this criticism and see its benefits. Today, over a year after the event, we understand two important problems.

First, Native American genocide has not attained the attention it deserves from the society our game addresses. Consequently, of all stakeholders involved, we had spent the most time reading and studying about Comanche history in Texas, and it would have been our job to properly embed the game in a historical framework before it was called off. Structured preparation of all players is now a mandatory part of the game, which ends with a classroom contract in which students acknowledge the difficulties involved in the game.

Games represent different things for different people, the second issue addressed in the contract. For most people the word *game* evokes associations (e.g., diversion, fun) that can be hard to reconcile with serious engagement with a historical topic—let alone with deeply problematic parts of the past. This understanding of games might have contributed to the feeling that cancellation was the safest route when discord appeared. Making students think about their own understanding of games raises the level of awareness for inappropriate behavior in class and strengthens a commitment to the actual historical situation students are engaging with. We hope this will lead to moments of more intense perspective shifts for players of the game.

An LPD's Perspective (Crane)

A year prior to this incident, I had observed David Huenlich stage *The Unbroken Treaty* with his intermediate German class and saw firsthand the unique learning opportunities that this game afforded as learners engaged actively with local history from a German cultural viewpoint while practicing their German meaningfully across different communicative modes. Earlier that semester, David had pitched the game idea to me, and we agreed it would fit well as a final activity in the course situated within the textbook's final chapter on Germans abroad (see Augustyn & Euba, 2015). When I received the e-mail from the concerned student a year later—after three successful runs of the game—I was surprised and uneasy. The student's arguments had given me much to ponder as I found myself

now questioning our own pedagogy (e.g., how could I not have seen the obvious complexities inherent in the simulation?) and wondering how the game might be interpreted by different stakeholders, including by those not officially participating in the role-play. As I played out different scenarios and responses in my mind, two major courses of action appeared: to move forward with the game as planned or to cancel it altogether. To drop the game could send a confusing, mixed message about our own stance toward RTTP pedagogy. After all, the students had not actually played the game, and I knew the game developers' intention was to broaden—not limit—cultural understanding about German–Comanche relations. Indeed, this represented my original frame of reference vis-à-vis the game. Yet, to continue *The Unbroken Treaty* would likely mean additional, time-consuming work for the teachers, who were not the game's original authors. Moreover, the serious student concerns could not be ignored.

The seriousness of the situation and the timing of the student's e-mail led me to not move forward with the game as planned. Foremost in my mind was the issue of providing meaningful teacher support at this (literally) eleventh hour. While I felt confident in the instructors' knowledge of the materials, I was concerned they might not have adequate tools to guide what I imagined would be a rather complicated class discussion in which students would have space to express different viewpoints freely and safely. Indeed, the teacher's call for help that accompanied the student's note made me acutely aware that I needed better preparation to support our instructors. Within an hour, I wrote to the four teachers asking them to cancel the game and suggested they adapt the text materials, which students were to have read for homework over the weekend, into a text-based class discussion focused primarily on comprehension and interpretation. I would be in the office at 8 a.m. for anyone who needed help with their lesson plan—well aware all the same that the instructors needed more urgent, hands-on support than simply "being available."

The next morning, I called our university's DDCE office. The director, already informed of the concerns surrounding the game through the formal student complaint filed over the weekend, was ready to help us and offered to facilitate an afternoon meeting with a colleague where the instructors, game developers, and I would try to make sense of the situation and develop strategies for moving forward. In the meantime, I apprised my department chair of the situation and was relieved to receive his support in the decision to cancel the game. We were both on the same page about not putting the GSIs into a classroom situation that they may not be ready to manage given the tremendous sensitivity required in a game whose dynamics had suddenly and quite dramatically shifted.

From my standpoint, this emergency meeting—which lasted two full hours—offered one of the most important learning moments for our group as it gave us space to explore different participant perspectives in the game and see in this crisis situation seeds of a powerful learning experience for our

students. During the first hour, we talked about our concerns surrounding the game and its cancellation; all the while, I was aware that my decision made the night before might be disappointing to both designers and teachers, especially given the amount of preparatory work that had already gone into setting up the game. At the meeting, we discussed the difference between intent and impact, as well as the ethics surrounding whose narrative(s) we were telling in the story.⁵ Throughout the discussion, we found ourselves repeatedly returning to a central question: "What makes this game so complicated?" Toward the end of the hour, one of the facilitators suggested we use this question, which spoke to both the game's content and its intended pedagogy, as a leitmotif for the remaining lessons. Everyone supported this move, the facilitators and game designers left, and the teachers and I continued to meet for another hour to map out additional discussion questions and strategies to ensure a meaningful experience for all students.

As we got into the intricacies of the lesson plan, the role of English in class discussion became an area of concern. One instructor in particular argued that the new direction of this activity was now detracting from a central goal of the course, learning German. This led to an intense discussion about what we were doing in this intermediate German class, who we were as "language" teachers, and, importantly, what role the target language should play. The consensus we reached was that we could not ignore the urgent issues surrounding the game and needed to provide an environment where students could fully participate. Consequently, we agreed this part of instruction would have to take place in English. That week, I checked in regularly with the teachers and was delighted to hear how well their individual class discussions had gone and to learn of the additional exciting pedagogical work they had produced (see, e.g., Matthias Fingerhuth's contribution in the next section). Far from being a failure, this experience had proved to be a tremendous learning opportunity for many of us.

For me professionally, an important insight gained in the wake of this event was the recognition that as a language teacher educator I needed to better support our instructors, especially GSIs, in handling sensitive and controversial topics in the classroom. The lack of preparation some of the instructors felt—understandably so—in leading and mediating complicated conversations with their students in *The Unbroken Treaty* game underscored for me how my own GSI orientations and teaching methods coursework lacked in this area. Furthermore, I suspected I was not the only LPD who had little experience in training GSIs to manage difficult topics in the classroom and further wondered the extent to which other

⁵To help us reflect on the narrator's role in historical storytelling, the facilitators shared the case of Andrea Smith, a controversial scholar of Native American studies, whose misrepresentation as Cherokee prompted public criticism among indigenous female scholars (Various Scholars, 2015).

faculty members felt sufficiently experienced in leading students through highly sensitive, complicated material.⁶

It is worth noting the timing of this incident, which occurred a week before the annual ACTFL conference as I was preparing to present on perspective-shifting within our lower-division curriculum through the lens of transformative learning. The irony of going through a real-life disorienting dilemma in my own program was not lost on me, and throughout the week I found myself thinking about the perspective-shifting in which we (teachers, game developers, students, and administrators) were invited to take part as a result of the student's initial objections. I believe the transformative learning framework enabled me to grasp this sudden and complicated—even uncomfortable—event as an opportunity for further growth. Without that lens, it is quite possible that the situation could have led to feelings of failure and overwhelming stress. While it was certainly not a stress-free situation, the knowledge of disorienting dilemmas as powerful resources for learning about the self helped me gain the perspective I needed to work with and help others around me, as well as understand new aspects to my own program coordination work.

A Teacher's Perspective (Fingerhuth)

The student who had filed the complaint was not in my class and I had not checked my e-mail prior to teaching that Monday morning. Accordingly, I had prepared my German class for what was supposed to happen but never would. The decision to call off the game made sense to me from the perspective of campus politics, though I did not agree with the concerns brought forward. Retrospectively, however, I do believe we could have prepared our students better.

Initially, it was not clear how we would replace the canceled content. One option would have been to just substitute the lesson with content from the book, which addressed German migration in general terms, not specifically related to Texas. Yet, by doing so, we would have missed an opportunity to broaden the students' understanding of German and Texan culture and history. Further, it seemed to me as if such a move might encourage negative speculation on the role-play. Thus, I was pleased when we agreed to center the pedagogy around the incident and the game during the emergency meeting. Much of this meeting was spent explaining the role-play to the DDCE representatives, which yielded for me relevant, though somewhat limited, pedagogical advice for my classroom. Specifically, it was the adoption of ground rules for class discussion that I found most helpful:

⁶ Such mentorship was all the more important in our specific educational context where the state legislature had recently permitted concealed carry weapons in our classrooms, leading to concerns among faculty and students about the compromised ability to teach sensitive and controversial topics in open dialogue. Viewed from this perspective, the sophisticated skills involved in carefully staging difficult conversations in the classroom can be seen as a core pedagogical survival strategy.

to foster a climate of mutual respect, students were to bring forward their own opinions and perspectives rather than to speak through generalized statements. However, the lessons had to be developed from the ground up with little time, and repurposing the existing materials and exploring new ones was labor-intensive and stressful for me.

After learning about the cancellation, I had communicated the news to my class by e-mail but had not explained the reason for the change of plans or what would happen instead. At the beginning of class, I described the circumstances, avoiding details of the exact concerns the student had voiced against the game, and explained the discussion guidelines mentioned earlier. For our first task, I asked students to consider what aspects of the role-play could have made the game offensive, first individually and then in small group discussions. We then moved to a larger discussion where the entire class could share their ideas. Here, some students found that impersonating a member of a different culture could be indeed problematic. In particular, they argued that resorting to stereotypes or caricaturing when taking on the role of Native Americans could make the game inappropriate or offensive.

As a next step, I directed the students in groups to critically read certain character sheets from the game, briefly introduce their character, and discuss whether the descriptions may potentially be problematic. Among their observations, students found one of the Native American characters portrayed in a negative light, with one particular game mechanic posing a significant potential for conflict: that of Native Americans abducting children from the German settlers, a concern I was able to address in more detail the next class period (see later in the chapter). Following these short presentations, I asked students to compare and contrast the character descriptions with online historical accounts. This yielded different results: they discovered that information on leading figures among the German settlers was readily available, while information on the Comanche figures was sometimes scarce, a discrepancy that revealed uneven research and records in Texas German–Comanche historiography. For individuals who did exist, the class found no strong mismatch between the historical accounts and the game's character descriptions. This research brought up two connected questions at the core of RTTP pedagogy: Can we act as historical figures, and is it appropriate to add fictional elements to a historical setting (Carnes, 2014)? Students seemed to reach the consensus that historical role-playing was not the same as revising history. In this discussion, some students identified their own agency in the game and found that, although the materials seemed appropriate, there was significant potential for portraying the historical events inaccurately or offending through inappropriate behavior.

This brought the first class period to an end. As homework, students would listen to an account of how a child of German settlers was abducted and raised by Comanche and remained strongly influenced by this upbringing until his death

after he had integrated back into a non-Native American community. Two days later, we further explored on this basis how appropriate it was to use such events in a game. Some students did not find it problematic, while others felt less at ease about using this mechanic in the game context. In the discussion, we also considered how moral judgments may differ between different cultures: Child abduction from a present-day American perspective is a serious crime; from the perspective of a 19th-century Comanche, however, it could be seen as a legitimate way to grow the community, shedding new light on the question of Native American identity and ethnicity.⁷

This discussion raised students' awareness of different subject positions concerning the treaty and prepared them for further text analysis work in class. Part of the unused preparatory materials for the game consisted of an interview with a historian on the treaty's circumstances and relevance: The treaty was one of integration, not separation, and presented an alternative way of interacting among settlers and Native Americans. Although instances of conflict between the two parties continued, the treaty remained largely respected, showing further that the Comanche were willing to negotiate peace if given a chance. Students additionally listened to a recording of a Comanche Nation member, Charlotte McCurtain, who described how following the 150th anniversary of the treaty in 1996, members of the Comanche Nation celebrated the peace agreement through an annual pow-wow in Fredericksburg till 2011 when the city abruptly ended its support. This suggested that not only academic historiography valued the treaty but it was also remembered as a significant event in the Comanche community.

So what changed for me as a teacher? The incident led me to question the pedagogy we had tried to implement, but ultimately did not alter my view of it. Rather, it changed my experience of American culture as a non-native and of colleges as a part of this culture. I had read and heard much about identity politics in the United States, the case of Rachel Dolezal and others (see Brubaker, 2016), yet I had never been personally affected. Through this incident, American history had suddenly touched my own German class and impacted my understanding of curriculum planning and classroom dynamics. I understand my supervisor's decision to call off the role-play. I wondered how I would have responded and concluded that I would have acted similarly; the threat of public outrage was too real. While remaining sensitive to the potential for offensive content may have always been part of curriculum design and teaching, the events in our program highlighted for me the current importance of this responsibility. Yet to me, the response cannot be to avoid any controversial subject from the start. Instead, teachers and curriculum designers should find ways to make space for students' concerns. The way my

⁷The circumstances surrounding Comanche abductions have been explored by Hämäläinen (2008), and in more detail by Rivaya-Martinez (2012). The latter reveals diverse individual patterns ranging from forms of enslavement to far-reaching integration into Comanche society.

class dealt with the incident showed me students are capable of discussing controversial issues and are open to considering different perspectives.

Students' Perspectives

We now explore how students perceived the cancellation of the game and the pedagogies developed in its place through analysis of surveys and interviews, focusing on three students enrolled in the same German class: Katie, Lydia, and John (all pseudonyms).

Students' potential transformative learning moments were first determined using the written surveys. Table 9.1 (Question 11 from the survey) depicts students' responses to 12 possible perspective shifts with which students could

Table 9.1. Changes Reported by Students

Q11: "Here is a list of some changes you may have experienced as a result of learning German this semester. Please check off any that apply to you." (Note: Statements are adapted from King's (1998) Learning Activities Survey.)

	Katie	Lydia	John
1. Something happened that made me question the way I usually act.	x	x	
2. Something happened that made me question my ideas about social roles (i.e., how people act/are expected to act).	x	x	
3. As I thought about these things, I realized that I did not agree with my previous beliefs or role expectations any more.			
4. Or instead, as I questioned my ideas, I realized I still agreed with my beliefs or role expectations.	x	x	
5. I realized that other people also think about their beliefs.	x	x	
6. I thought about acting in a different way from my usual beliefs and roles.	x	x	
7. I felt uncomfortable with traditional social expectations.			
8. I tried out new roles so that I would become more comfortable or confident in them.			
9. I tried to think of a way to adopt these new ways of acting.			
10. I gathered the information I needed to adopt these new ways of acting.	x		x
11. I began to think about the reactions and feedback I received from my new behavior.			
12. I took action and adopted these new ways of acting.			
13. I do not identify with any of the statements above.			

choose to identify. In the audio-recorded interviews, this question served as a form of stimulated recall to elicit specific examples that would illustrate changes students experienced in or through their German classes.

Changes experienced by two of the three students (Lydia and John) related primarily to questioning and reflecting on one's actions and social roles, as well as others' beliefs. Katie, in contrast, reported only one shift in perspective: that is, seeking out new knowledge. When asked about their thought process as they marked the changes from Question 11, students mentioned cultural topics discussed in class that resonated for them personally: public nudity (Lydia), higher education (Katie), gun control (Lydia), and the Texas German–Comanche game (John, Lydia).

Katie's experience

Katie checked only one item from the list of changes experienced through the course (see Table 9.1), noting in the interview that this change did not relate to the Texas German lesson. While Katie "underst[oo]d why [the game] didn't happen, because someone was offended," she expressed frustration in the class discussions that occurred in its place, particularly in light of assessment issues that surfaced later in a unit test:

What bothered me was [...] what we did in [...] the two days we were supposed to do it. [...] all we did in class really was discuss if it was really offensive. And we didn't go over the material that much. And so when I took the test, I felt I hadn't been taught it properly. [...] I couldn't answer the questions. [...] And so I kind of wish that we would have still learned that information in a different way.

The disconnect Katie perceived between her class discussions and the testing on the historical material led her to question the focus of that week's new instructional goals, stating: "I feel like that wasn't what we should have learned."

Lydia's experience

For Lydia, perspective-shifting moments associated with the course referred back to a host of different topics covered (i.e., public nudity, gun control, and the Texas German–Comanche game). In class discussion, Lydia noted how fellow classmates regularly took time to listen to and learn from each other:

[I]n this class, I've actually had one or two classmates say: "Well, this is what I think and that's what you think, but I don't really understand what you thought. So can you explain it to me?" And then the person explained it and they said: "Oh, okay, well, I don't really believe that still, but can we talk about it a little bit?" And then there was a discussion between the two people. And they were, like: "Okay, I'm not totally convinced yet, but I'll think about it."

This open debate format, which Lydia noted was absent in her other college courses, appears to have been a feature of class discussion cultivated by her instructor throughout the semester, not merely something emerging through the role-play unit. “[W]ith all the information that I had,” Lydia reported asking herself after each class discussion, “what was going to be my course of action with swaying to either gun control or no gun control? More modesty or more nudity? Or which way should I sway with the Comanche thing?”

Lydia additionally described how her class analyzed narratives on the game’s different historical characters, prompting students to consider how accurately the materials depicted the settler and Comanche roles:

I think that our class had a really good discussion on it. [. . .] we looked up the characters and then we decided in groups whether or not the character was historically accurate [. . .] we found that there were some parts on it, like the kidnapping of the settlers [. . .] and then the fact that there were some Native American characters that were just completely negatively displayed. And we found that that was a point of contention that could be very, very bad. But then overall we also found that we only looked at five or six characters. And so we didn’t know how evenly these positive and negative characters were distributed.

For Lydia, the analysis and discussion provided “a good alternative” to playing the game. At the same time, she suggested such work could have served as strong preparation before participating in the role-play, particularly in communicating a “sense of responsibility with the game” to the students. The class as a whole, Lydia noted, had “all [come] to the agreement that this game [. . .] can go either good or bad because the game is something that is done out of trust.”

Lydia not only grasped the concerns surrounding the game (“I understand that someone could be offended by it.”) but also expressed disappointment in not playing it (“I was excited to do it, so I was a little bit upset that we ended up not doing it once I ended up learning more about it.”). She also reported not experiencing any changes in perspectives on the game, commenting that the social issues were “already really salient in [her] mind right now” through exposure to media.

John’s experience

Of the three students, John reported undergoing the most profound perspective shift through the Texas German unit. In explaining his reasons for checking six changes in the survey (see Table 9.1), John noted that the “big role-play game thing” was “at the forefront of [his] mind” for all of them. Indeed, he remarked that the very idea that “this game could be offensive” had “never crossed [his] mind.”

John found the alternative instruction in which students discussed “how we felt about [the game], how we thought other people might feel about it, why, and

what we could about it" as "very valuable." Through the class discussions surrounding the game's complicated nature, John was able to explore the ethical dimensions of historical role-playing and questioned his own views and actions:

[A]s a couple of points were kind of brought up from the other side, I started to really try to think about that mindset and think how they might be thinking and why. And so that kind of motivated a lot of this about: If this had continued unchallenged, how would it have gone? And how would *I* have acted in it? How *should* I have acted in it? How *should* I be acting *now*? A lot of those sorts of questions.

Similar to the other interviewed students, John still expressed an interest in wanting to play the game despite understanding the reasons for its cancellation. After weighing different opinions, John returned to the issue of personal responsibility and trust in others as an argument for keeping the role-play, stating that "a lot of us [in the class] would have been respectful and appropriate had we played the game."

Of great interest to John in these class discussions was how Germans might perceive and respond to the role-play situation. "Would it be a big deal?" he asked. "Would it be taken so far, in terms of being cancelled?" For John, such questions were obvious ones to ask, as he reflected on the unique juxtaposition of the two cultures: "because it [the concerns surrounding the game's cancellation] so directly relates to American culture and we're in a German classroom." This self-evident connection, John noted, "really made [him] start to compare how this would be received in a German classroom," and he wondered what his instructor as a native German thought about the series of events, especially in light of current critical issues on race in the United States:

Because here in America, you know, especially anything racial right now is a really big deal. And it's very curious to me how that is in Germany and how it's been in Germany. Like, has it ever been an issue like it's been here?

Importantly, through this experience John recognized that certain issues might be perceived and felt differently by different groups of people:

And so then I realized, even though I feel like it's not an offensive game, I should still be mindful of whether or not other people feel it offensive, especially if I go to another country, like say Germany. I'm not going to be 100% aware of what is and what is not offensive. [...] It just made me realize that I need to be more conscientious about things as I go into them, in terms of how other people think, especially when it comes to other cultures where it's very different from how *I* was raised. So that was a really big thing, was the discussion prompted by the cancellation of the game.

John's words reveal not only an awareness of diverse culturally based values potentially different from his own but also an ability to see the relevance of this insight for future intercultural contexts that involve interacting with people from the target language culture.

Student learning and perspective-shifting

All three students expressed the desire to have still played the game, despite understanding the complications that led to its cancellation. However, the class discussions appear to have impacted them in different ways. While Katie felt they prevented students from learning the "real" content, ultimately reflected in the testing materials for the unit, Lydia and John found the discussions providing important space for students to exchange differing viewpoints. For Lydia, students' willingness to listen to each other was a regular feature of class discussion in the course throughout the semester. She noted that in the Texas German-Comanche discussion this dialogue was supported by the alternative text analysis activities in which students interrogated the game materials by questioning the depiction and representativeness of certain historical figures. For John, the two class periods allowed students to openly engage in dialogue, "bouncing ideas off of each other and getting somewhere." Overall, both John and Lydia described their class environment in positive, respectful terms, even when "people had pretty firm opinions," as John noted.

The three students responded differently to the game cancellation. Unlike Katie, Lydia and John appear to have experienced shifts in perspective. Both Lydia and John acknowledged the different viewpoints expressed in their class and talked about the importance of maintaining respect and responsibility in playing a game that takes on difficult histories of marginalized communities. For John, in particular, who explicitly stated that the game's offensive potential had never occurred to him before, the events seem to have presented him with a real disorienting dilemma, one that he accepted as an opportunity to question his own beliefs and (possible) actions, as well as those around him.

The classroom experiences described here present a relatively optimistic picture of a highly sensitive situation that despite well-intentioned efforts could have turned out much differently. Amy (a pseudonym) was also interviewed for the study and was in the one German section where the conflict surrounding the game initially erupted. During the interview, she talked at length about the difficult interpersonal dynamics within her German class, leading her to believe that "there [was] a great possibility that it wouldn't be a neutral role-play." In their class discussion, Amy lamented that her classmates held on to their own opinions and "no one really changed their viewpoint." Instead, discussion surrounding the game "got really personal really fast" and "everyone just kind of talked at each other." While this experience represents the view of just one class participant and more information about the instructional context is needed to understand the

specific dynamics at play, it raises an important question regarding the level of teacher support needed in successfully facilitating difficult conversations, especially in cases where classroom dynamics might impede an instructor's ability to go deeper on challenging topics (for a similar discussion, see Kramsch's (2015) account of native language instructors who expressed reluctance in presenting certain cultural topics and perspectives with their FL learners).

Discussion

Interconnected Disorienting Dilemmas

Applying a collective lens to these different participant experiences, it becomes clear that the initial disorienting dilemma regarding the ethics surrounding the game ignited multiple, other disorienting dilemmas for the various participants involved: from the LPD's dilemma of how best to support the teachers in this process, to the dilemma surrounding the game cancellation itself, which impacted all connected to the German classes, to the teachers' dilemma in developing sound pedagogy that would thoughtfully respond to the concerns voiced. Additionally, new questions arose in professional dialogues that extended well beyond the program: What does it mean to teach a foreign language and culture? How can we support teachers in handling difficult dialogues? How should we assess deep learning from social pedagogies like RTTP that may not easily map onto traditional testing tools? In this way, the student's voice from the initial e-mail opened the door to a cascade of related dissonant experiences felt by key participants.

Critical Reflection and Perspective-Shifting

As the participant accounts show, these individuals responded to the dissonances in both similar and unique ways that reflect different aspects of Mezirow's processes of perspective transformation. Disappointment at the news of the game's cancellation was felt by all, including the game developers whose frame of reference regarding the game's goals collided with a frame of reference (as represented in the student's e-mail) focused on the positionality of certain participant roles within the game. The very concerns brought up by the student clashed with the game developers' intention to help learners develop understanding for new perspectives on Texas German history—an explicit goal of *The Unbroken Treaty* game and a cornerstone of RTTP pedagogy. This discord, however, spurred the game developers to reassess their own assumptions and integrate awareness of the game's complexity into role-play preparation through a set of concrete actions. In particular, the development of a contract for students and teachers to build understanding of these issues before they enter the game world would raise awareness while expanding the potential for deep perspective-shifting among the game participants.

Critical assessment of assumptions regarding the game happened on many levels, and multiple stakeholders beyond the game developers acknowledged that the situation caused them to see the game's potential to offend. In their reevaluation of the role-play, many individuals tried on new perspectives regarding the game, even if some eventually returned to earlier positions.

The LPD and teachers' assumptions about the game—particularly regarding the responsibility required of its participants—were challenged through this experience, which led to a number of actions that involved not only *responding to* the concerned voices but also *making space for* those voices in moving forward. For the LPD, perspective-shifting centered largely around the expansion of her coordinator role, as she realized that GSIs needed more sophisticated tools in setting up social pedagogies and supporting class discussions. Additionally, she became acutely aware that "participants" involved in the game existed beyond the current classroom walls and that any response to the issues raised against the game would have to be sensitive to that fact. The LPD's series of actions at this time thus represented attempts to acknowledge these different viewpoints and hold space for open dialogue.

Critical reflection for the teacher could be seen in the questions surrounding the ethics of the game and the decision to cancel it. His account, including the pedagogical actions described, showed a new awareness for the high level of responsibility teachers and programs carry in staging social pedagogies and a recognition that, when presented with the task, students can handle this work sensitively in the classroom. To maximize student involvement in the discussion, the teacher introduced ground rules for class discussion and developed lessons in which students would compare different perspectives in Texas German–Comanche history and contextualize these viewpoints in the game. A major theme seen across all participants' narratives is an attempt to empathize with others, including displaying an understanding of decisions made at the programmatic level.

The three student accounts remind us that perspective transformation is highly individualized and cannot happen without certain conditions in place, including the individual's developmental readiness to engage with one's assumptions. Two of the students, John and Lydia, explicitly mentioned actively trying to adopt the point of view of those offended by the role-play during class discussion. John, especially, went so far as to question his own responsibility in the game and to wonder how individuals from his class as well as those from a different culture might have responded had the game been played. Above all, John exhibited not only an understanding that viewpoints and attitudes may clash when individuals do not share the same cultural values but also a sensitivity for what this could mean for future interpersonal dynamics.

While perspective transformation is a well-established goal within FL education (see, for example, Byram, 1997; Kearney, 2016; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), FL learners are not always immediately aware of its importance in language study.

Johnson's (2015) qualitative study on the experiences of beginning collegiate FL learners of Spanish revealed a disconnect between what students reported learning ("content and skills that could be reproduced in real-life interactions," p. 94) and what the researcher actually discovered through learning journals and interviews with the students ("grappling with social issues, confronting their own biases or assumptions, or making sense of the world in new ways," p. 93). This point reflects the situation for Lydia, who reported not experiencing any new viewpoints in her thinking about the game, yet described how critical reading activities in class led her to interrogate the representation of Comanche characters in the game. From a transformative learning perspective, Lydia displayed an ability to critically assess assumptions, although she may not have fully integrated these insights into her meaning perspective. Finally, while Katie reported and displayed no perspective-shifting as a result of the game, it is possible that more critical reflection on the incident may emerge later for her and become part of a series of encounters that contribute to an incremental perspective transformation.

Social Interaction

Many participants noted the role of social interaction in the form of structured and informal conversations as supporting their developing understanding about the different aspects of the game's contents and pedagogy. Kegan's (1994) notion of a "holding environment" in which a teacher, or facilitator, simultaneously supports and challenges individuals as they reframe their position (Taylor & Elias, 2012) reflects in many ways the difficult, yet transformative learning moments that some of the individuals described experiencing in this process. In the classroom, the teacher introduced students to clear discussion guidelines and created tasks that encouraged students to entertain different perspectives on the materials. This echoes King (2000), who found that activities involving sustained dialogue and reflection contributed to English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' perspective transformation. At the program level, the meeting immediately following the game cancellation afforded those involved in administering the pedagogy a crucial safe space to talk about the complexities of the game.

Limitations

Some limitations regarding this study should be acknowledged. First, the analysis presents the experiences of a limited set of individuals whose personal perspectives may not be representative of larger groups. Thus, the study cannot directly account for how other students, instructors, and game developers were impacted by the incident. Similarly, the voices of additional actors involved in this situation—the student who filed the complaint, her teacher, and the university's DDCE office—were not heard in the current study.

While this study takes a multi-perspectival approach from the standpoint of FL pedagogy and teacher education, certain viewpoints are absent in the discussion, including notably the communities represented in the game. Furthermore, discussion of the main participants' positionality in terms of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and other social structures of power goes beyond the scope of the current study. Additional research on how FL teachers and learners can critically reflect on their own power and privilege is, however, urgently needed.

As noted earlier, reflection is a required component of transformative learning. The current study—with its ongoing reflections from the game designer, LPD, and teacher, as well as embedded structured outlets for the participating students in the form of written surveys and interviews—provided participants with extended opportunity to process more deeply their experiences and learning (see also Crane, 2018). Such an acknowledgment reminds us that providing space to reflect on disorienting dilemmas can help support perspective transformation and that critical reflection is often an enduring process.

Social Pedagogies and Language Teacher Education

In describing the learning that resulted from this crisis situation, the study highlights inherent challenges in working with social pedagogies in FL classrooms. Katie's comment about the disconnect in assessment reflects the difficulty in testing students' ability to see and adopt other perspectives. Encouraging students to critically reflect on content and pedagogy requires of teachers' flexibility, openness, and tolerance for the unexpected. As their accounts revealed, all participants' level of responsibility is raised in social pedagogies.

For teacher educators, the study emphasizes the high level of support collegiate instructors require in staging and responding to social pedagogies such as RTTP that involve engagement with multiple perspectives in complex relationships. This holds especially true for pedagogies not originally developed with FL learning in mind. Helping students to process disorienting dilemmas in the classroom is qualitatively different than the traditional "communicative breakdowns" that relate to comprehension or pragmatic failures associated with communicative language teaching. Thus, the type of mentoring needed for GSIs is likely best realized through the concerted work of an active faculty team committed to long-term teacher development. Such a collaborative approach would provide the future professoriate with further perspectives on the value of disorienting dilemmas for FL education.

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