

Teaching eco-translation

Reclaiming the climate crisis discourse in the time of coronavirus

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The coronavirus pandemic has kept us individually as well as publicly in a state of preoccupation that prohibited us from staying with the trouble of an ecologically damaged planet. The authors of this contribution are sharing their experience and reflections upon teaching, as an active intervention to this absent presence in everyday Covid-19 lives, an eco-translation course. For this we will first offer a short discussion of our scholarly backgrounds and biases. Second, we will describe our efforts in translating these biases into concrete teaching. The course that serves here as a case study was taught in a project format in the 2021 winter term 2 at the Faculty for Translation Studies, Linguistics and Cultural Studies at Mainz University. It was a five-day course which blended localisation and nature writing framed by a holistic approach to scholarship and teaching. Third, we will discuss the teaching experience in terms of the presences and absences it made apparent.

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1. Introduction

Over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, the “urgent now” has colonised the future of our planet. Short-term decision making established itself as the temporal radius of political activity. With weekly updates in Covid-19 data and ensuing modifications and renegotiations of Covid-19 measures, we all lived in a state of constant alert and short-term adjustments to how to live at a 1,5 to 2,0 metres distance to the world.

This “crisis hyperpresence” went hand in hand with a structural reorganisation of decision-making power-dynamics under the auspices of “realpolitik”.

“Politik ist das was möglich ist” [politics is that which is possible].¹ These were the words with which former German chancellor and leader of the federal conservative Christian-democratic party Angela Merkel defended the disappointing Government’s Green Paper, which was released in September 2019 (Merkel 2019: n.p.). This aphorism has been weaponised both by the Left (Joschka Fischer and Daniel Cohn-Behndit) and the conservatives (Angela Merkel) in Germany, consecrating their politics of the lowest common denominator or “Machbarkeit” [do-ability]. “Realpolitik”, a term that goes back to the nineteenth-century writer and politician Walter von Rochau, once signalled the turn away from idealistically fraught politics (Rochau [1853] 1972). In the wake of the Fall of the Berlin Wall and full-blown late capitalism, however, it became a tool for politicians, corporations and lobbyists to alter and control the perception of progressive environmental politics (Klein 2007; Mann 2021; Schurmann 2022).

The competition for maintaining the sovereignty over how environmental issues are perceived echoes Michael Cronin’s acute observation that the environmental crisis is played out in the arena of the attentionscape. Drawing on the insights of numerous scholars who have theorised the Anthropocene in terms of how and what we pay attention to, Cronin asserts that the role of translation “must seek [...] to make available or communicable the commons of language itself” (2017: 29) as part of the wider project of political ecology, which is

to make subjects aware of the importance of the “commons”, the water, air, climate, traditional knowledge and know-how, those things that are shared and because they are shared are “grounds” rather than “figures” in individualistic regimes of value. [...] Recovering the Language commons is about developing an ecology of translational attention that brings the wayfaring of language and cultural movement to the fore. (Cronin 2017: 29f)

Committing to such an ecology of translation means to recognise and validate the fact that instrumentalist notions of translation only speak to and for extractivist politics. Such linear, unilateral logics are, in fact, much more often troubled by translation, which is reciprocal as well as cyclic and thus inherently a sustainable form of energy in itself (Cronin 2017: 28–38). But perhaps it is time that we begin to speak of ‘translating’ instead of ‘translation’ in order to make this renewable social, economic and environmental energy more visible.

With this scholarship as our backdrop, we understand the ecological crisis primarily as a crisis of attention and language, which is reflected in the framing of the course we designed. Our goal was to offer a course that would allow students to (1) learn how to direct their attention to their everyday relations with ‘the com-

1. Also often translated as “politics is the art of the possible”.

mons' that surround them; (2) probe their radius of action in terms of practically addressing the climate crisis by focusing on their campus lives.

2. The setting

The Germersheim Campus is a satellite campus of the Johannes Gutenberg-University of Mainz located approximately 110 km away. As such, it is slightly closer to Strasbourg and Stuttgart than to Mainz. Originally founded in 1947 under the auspices of the French occupiers, the Staatliche Dolmetscherschule (National School of Interpreting) quickly became integrated into the University as Auslands- und Dolmetscherinstitut (ADI) in 1949. Since 2017, the institute has been recognised as the Fachbereich Translations-, Sprach- und Kulturwissenschaft (Faculty of Translation Studies, Linguistics and Cultural Studies). Thus, we look back at 75 years of devotion to intercultural understanding. Currently, the faculty offers bachelor, master and doctoral programmes through which students receive general as well as specialised training in 13 different languages – a unique place in the current climate of cutting minor languages from departments all over the world.

Germersheim itself is a small district town of around 20,700 inhabitants in the Rhineland-Palatinate, which, due to its moderate climate, is a major wine-producing region. Situated in what is also called Germany's vegetable garden (PFALZ-bewegt 2011), the town is a fitting place to think about the natural environment in terms of everyday ecologies. At the same time, it is important to note that the southern Rhein valley is one of the least populous parts of Germany and that we are not teaching within an urban setting, such as the one in Mainz. Our classes are often smaller than one would expect. On average, a third of our classes speak three or more languages and some students know up to six. German and English still are the main operating languages, although, in a context in which plurilingual and pluricultural competence constitutes the norm, they find themselves naturally decentered.

All of these factors impacted our planning and teaching eco-translation. However, the main constituent of this course consisted in a “project-week” framing. Called “Projektwoche” in German, this teaching format designates a week-long project seminar that encourages cross-disciplinary and experiential teaching. It was recently introduced as part of a reform process, which aims at developing more short-termed and job-market oriented training. Participation, it should be noted, is not mandatory and the brevity and intensity of such a format does not suit all learner types – although it offers a very good frame to simulate real translating and interpreting work-life conditions.

While five students had signed up for our class, only four eventually participated and successfully concluded the course. Our more recent courses related to eco-translation suggest that the low number does not reflect insufficient interest but rather needs to be attributed to the effects of Covid-19 restrictions. Indeed, many of our students still preferred or were dependent on remote teaching, which we could not offer for this course. The lower number also meant that we did not team-teach this class as initially planned. All original course-planning group members, namely Spencer Hawkins, Melina Lieb and Angela Kölling, however, presented a lecture summarising relevant aspects of their approach to teaching ecocritical translation studies.

Kölling is Professor of Anglophone Studies with a focus on Indigenous Studies and Eco-Translation. Lieb is a third-year doctoral student in British Studies with an emphasis on ecocriticism, while Hawkins is a Research Fellow in Inter-cultural German Studies with a focus on transatlantic relations. Thus, we are all deeply connected to the global Anglophone humanities discourses shaping contemporary environmental debates. We conceive of our role as academics in responding to the hegemonic power structures emanating from European and American energy, weapons, military, information technology and entertainment industries. In concrete terms, this means that we keep a keen eye on disappearing narratives, such as the vanishing of the environmental crisis during the pandemic. In 2019, Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future movement dominated the German media landscape with about 438,000 media contributions. In 2020, this attentionscape was reduced to 127,000 publications (Schätzing 2021: 14). Understandably, the pandemic and its consequences has been the main focus of the media not only in Germany. But given that spending time in nature played such a major role in self-care narratives and how-to-cope-with-the-pandemic guides, it was concerning to see that climate goals negotiations were subsumed under economic pressures caused by Covid.

Our three lectures constituted the starting point of our activist-oriented course. They determined the theoretical and practical lens through which we wanted to examine how the pandemic had managed to drain everyone's attention and emptied the public discourse of the possibility of turning to the climate crisis. Hawkins addressed the different ways in which media represented responses to and measures against the Covid-pandemic and the climate crisis, and how the first displaced the other in terms of media attention. Lieb provided insights drawn from her research about how nature writing contributes to the environmental discourse by offering incentives to enable a change of perspective. Finally, Kölling laid out the epistemological and pedagogical ideas that informed the course – namely the holistic approach, the intent to activate inter-personal, post-anthropocentric relationships – and the focus on embodied knowledge. In terms

of course requirements, such a holistic approach meant that students needed to design and carry out a small-scale project which considered practical benefits for the local community. They were also asked to provide mutual support and assistance, whether they decided to go for a joint or an individual project.

The lectures were complemented by a campus walk-through during which the students undertook a small number of “active noticing” exercises. The theoretical basis for the latter was our engagement with new materialism approaches (Barad 2007; Haraway 2016) and Pacific Island philosophies of teaching (Smith 1999; Teasdale & Rhea 2000; Thaman 2003). Although place-based, our teaching is not “founded in a romantic conception of the redeeming and educative possibilities of epiphany in nature” (Garrard 2010: 234). Rather, we wanted to explore these “redeeming and educative possibilities” of critical environmental epiphany in the everyday commonplace.

Walking around the campus grounds, focusing on what they could hear, see, feel, touch, smell, taste, almost all of the students noticed very quickly that the clothes they wore did not properly protect them from the cold. This gave us an opportunity to discuss what we were instead dressed for. The responses were diverse but they all agreed that it was for work and life indoors, at least at this time of the year, rather than spending time outdoors. In this regard, we focused on the mainstream clothing industry and briefly discussed how the choices made for us by them restricted our engagement with the outdoors. During the walk-through, we spotted some daisies that were still in bloom, although covered in a thin layer of frost. Research about this very common and surprisingly hardy plant reveals that it is an edible herb, rich in kalium, calcium, magnesium and iron. But none of us knew that at the time. We also noticed that we were not able to identify some of the trees on campus. Who had selected these trees and for what reason? was also a question that preoccupied us. One tree in particular caught our attention because it was growing thorns from its stem. Again, some quick online research showed that this plant possessed medicinal qualities. Called a honey locust, the tree is native to central North America and part of the food and medicine culture of the Indigenous peoples of the region. This exercise provided the means for our students to experience their own “Analphabetismus im Umgang mit [der] Natur” [illiteracy in our encounters with nature], as Jürgen Goldstein calls it (2019: 15). Postcolonial and Indigenous scholars in particular have pointed out the interdependency of language and ecology. The impact of linguistic restructuring during colonisation, westernisation and modernisation from polylingualism to monolingualism set off a mass-extinction of languages all over the world. Whether based on ill-will or ignorance, the loss of linguistic diversity goes hand in hand with the loss of ecological diversity (Mühlhäusler 1996). Indigenous translation studies scholars thus emphasise the links between the severely reduced ability to respond

linguistically and culturally to common plants and animals in natural surroundings and the lacking ability to recognise and respond to past and current environmental crises (Cronin 2019, 2021; Noodin 2019; Hermann 2011).

As a growing body of western linguistic scholarship substantiates, shortcomings of science communication to reach society relate to the “absolute dichotomy of ratio and emotion” (Neverla 2017 qtd. in Taddicken & Reif 2020:102).² Contributions in Taddicken & Reif (2020) thus investigate a number of so-called “emotional exclusion factors” (Humm *et al.* 2020:164–176), arguing for a thorough rethinking of the relationship between affective and cognitive engagement (Taddicken & Reif 2020:102). The renewed academic and practical interest in botany as a discipline in which the lines between scientific specialisation and common knowledge are often blurrier than one could expect in western scientific and specialist discourse, might offer another indicator of a shift in knowledge culture in western societies.

This rethinking of western ontological and epistemological practice also finds expression in current “reconfiguration strategies” in ecopoetics, which focus on the inclusion of “endangered thought species” (Hume *et al.* 2012:763). Thus, in a discussion with Angela Hume, Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman and Evelyn Reilly, Jonathan Skinner points out that

any poetics is always already an *ethnopoetics*. It traces the boundaries of a logocentrism that will go unquestioned by even the most radical poststructuralist poets and philosophers when they fail to link the foundation of Western rationalism (the *cogito*) to the repression of subaltern, indigenous [sic] writing systems. These are modes of literacy that entail different senses of what counts as a subject, but with as much mediacy and agency as any writing, only their languages are now on the verge of extinction. It could be argued that the extinction of species is tied, very closely, to the extinction of these languages.

(Hume *et al.* 2012:763, original emphasis)

Again, we want to highlight that romantic notions, such as those crystallised in the trope of the “noble savage”, have no place in these considerations of endangered Indigenous linguistic systems. Critical ecopoetics has rather “more to do

2. This translation of “die absolute Dichotomie von Ratio und Emotion”, provided by Taddicken and Reif, refers to an expression from Irene Neverla’s introduction to the symposium “Öffentlichkeit im Emotionsmodus Wendezeiten im wissenschaftlichen und journalistischen Diskurs” (26 October 2016, University of Hamburg). Henrik Bødker & Irene Neverla use a similar phrase: “Finally, since climate change is threatening to inflict great upheaval through famines, and migration waves, the question arises of whether traditional professional dichotomies between ‘objective’ and ‘balanced’ versus ‘advocacy’ journalism are adequate in the face of such social and environmental challenges” (2012:152).

with attention to modes of performance, orality, and writing, *especially* those of one's own ethnic group, that undermine the enlightenment outlook that dominates so much contemporary writing" (Hume *et al.* 2012: 763).

In terms of teaching critical eco-translation, ecopoetics also means paying attention to those modes that continue to undermine necessary environmental transitions: the rhetorical displacement of responsibility and counter-productive moralisation, the power-imbalances that hinder systemic change, as well as temporal hegemony. Understanding the climate emergency primarily as a crisis of language and attention, several writers and scholars have begun to develop remedial counter-strategies, such as practising "staying with" (Haraway 2016) and being in control of our own "serious noticing" (Kathleen Jamie in Lieb 2021: n.p.). For our course, we drew explicitly on Terry Gifford's idea that the preference of the human mind to focus on the here-and-now can be trained to find meaning in the everyday, to build an ecology of the everyday, a concept we translated through the term "Alltagsökologie" in the title of our course (Gifford in Lieb 2021: n.p.). We took Kathleen Jamie's suggestion, "Why don't we just take an hour to look?" quite literally with the campus tour described above. "Serious noticing" also applies to recognising and cultivating knowledge about more-than-human or post-human temporalities. Recent literary ecocritical studies have already started to theorise these alternative temporalities. Rhian Williams, for example, puts forward the notion of "proto-rhythmanalysis" to describe the way in which British writer Gilbert White's diary-letters display a "moment-by-moment sensitivity to flux and shift" (2017: 445). In this daily act of noticing and recording,

White engages in a proto-*rhythmanalysis*, evident as his observatory method is directed at sensing the timescales within which his observations take place. White's noting of the daily differences in his garden are continually checked and cross-referenced with his habituated knowledge of seasonality and broad migratory patterning; as such they anticipate Lefebvre's identification of the reciprocity between [the cyclical and the linear].
(Williams 2017: 438)

The twentieth-century philosopher here referred to, Henri Lefebvre, would later offer his concept of rhythmanalysis as a "curative" to the modern disturbance of natural cyclical rhythms and a way of "rehabilitating rhythm as an animating, bodily principle" (Williams 2017: 441). Mark Cocker's comment on the importance of repetition connects very nicely with this:

Our society is sometimes too fixated with relentless novelty to appreciate that much of life is a routine. We derive most from it when we learn how to revisit the same experience again and again, but with renewed sensitivity. No one will benefit from yoga by doing it once. Its meaning lies precisely in the repetition. It is the same with nature.
(Cocker 2019: 3)

Repeated serious noticing allows us to transcend our everyday and to imaginatively span larger scales of time. It also fosters the development of familiarity and a sense of communion with all living beings, helping us to realise that we are all implicated in the crisis, and that we need to acknowledge our “becoming-with” each other in order to develop resilience and calm in the face of disaster.

After the campus walk-through, the students entered their first brainstorming session. This served to clarify concepts that remained unclear and also to elicit which concepts from the lectures and which impressions from the tour they each regarded as the most important. These “highlights” were then used as a starting point to discuss possible research questions for their projects. Although this first project-design session was very collaborative, all the students came to the conclusion that they would rather plan and carry out individual rather than group projects.

With this session we ended the first day. As a preparation for the second day, the students were asked to sketch a first outline of a project plan for the rest of the week. These sketches would be used to provide feedback on the students’ research questions, suggest further theoretical material if necessary, assess whether their chosen method was suitable, as well as consider the scope and feasibility of their chosen projects. The major part of the project was supposed to be carried out autonomously during the five days of the project-week, although the students were granted time until the end of the term to continue and finish the project. Finishing was defined as ending the project when and where the students had done everything they felt capable of doing and could produce a summary reflection from their course-diary. In this way, the focus of the project-work laid on the process, while the reflection would give students a satisfactory sense of conclusion. The students could also freely decide how they wanted to present their findings. We only required that they consider a format allowing all other students at the faculty to profit from their project work. Possible formats we suggested included, for example, posters, short audio- or video-presentations. Through this, we wanted to sensitise the students to other than traditional essayistic modes of science communication.

For the rest of the week, the students worked on their projects with minimal interventions on our part. This may appear as a risky decision, as it left us with little opportunity to observe how the students were faring unless they asked us for help. At the same time, we thought that exerting more influence during the project-work phase would prevent students from getting a realistic sense of their own abilities to plan and carry out a project. We also felt that it would naturally skew the course towards pre-station instead of process.

As part of their course work and examination, the students were supposed to put together a portfolio which included the following items:

1. a brief description of their expectations about this course
2. a haiku written as a response to the campus walk
3. a mood board or notes capturing their impressions about the walk
4. the initial project sketch and revisions
5. the final project essay
6. a brief reflection on what they took away from this course.

Having a number of smaller items (points 1–4) to complete for the portfolio was geared towards giving the students a sense of accomplishment before going into their projects. We hoped complementing the project essay (point 5) with a personal reflection (point 6) would give them a space to share their feelings about their projects as well as the course. Asking them to include suggestions on how the course could be improved also aimed at helping them to develop a critical distance to the lecture requirements and to consider the fact that our teaching should also be evaluated in order to determine if and how it contributed to their community.

3. The four projects

The heterogeneity of the projects reflected that of the group taking the eco-translation course. Two students were in their first semester of the Master in Conference Interpreting (MAKD), the other two in their third and fourth semester of the Master in Translation (MAT). Both MAKD-students had French as their main language, the MAT-students a focus on English and German respectively. The MAKD-students took the course as part of their cultural studies training, the MAT students as part of their literature and media translation course work. However, the projects they developed did not adhere to the text/verbal-divide often associated with the two different courses of study.

One MAKD- and one MAT-student each focused their projects on language. One student (S₄) looked at how the so-called Eisenhower-Decision-Making-Matrix might function as a tool to identify how political decision-making norms shape the political language of climate discourse.³ Another student (S₂) developed a creative writing and translation project, compiling a bilingual day-to-day nature diary through which they explored possible shifts of perception between immediate and mediated nature experience. In the sense that these two projects took two concepts from the introductory lectures (Eisenhower-matrix, nature writing),

3. In this article, the four participants to our course remain anonymous for ethical reasons and the sake of privacy.

we considered them localisation projects. The third project by the other MAKD-student (S₁) analysed and compared the campus design of the FTSK with the campus design of a Chinese university under ecological aspects. The fourth project by the other MAT-student (S₃) focused on the campus canteen as a space for ecological action and undertook a small-scale online survey to investigate which factors influenced their food choices. These two projects took their inspiration from the campus walk, thus being considered lococentric projects. The categorisations localisation and lococentric are merely used here to indicate the starting point of the students' work.

Since the focus of the teaching lay on the course as process, we will refrain from an in-depth discussion of the individual student project outcomes. Instead, we will share our analysis of the student feedback, while also considering how the course altered the vision of our future teaching. We divided the feedback in three categories: notes referring to the activation exercises on the first day (brainstorming the students' expectations about the course, the campus walk, and the composition of a poem as nature writing exercise), comments about the project work, and statements about the course in general.

Of the different student activities, the exploration of the campus attracted the most attention in the student reflections and feedback. The guided visit of the campus, during which all bodily senses were mobilised, helped students to effect a better connection between the conceptual and the practical constituents of the course. In particular, the students pointed out that the concept of "glocalisation", the idea that universalising and particularising occur simultaneously and in response to each other (Robertson 1995), became more graspable to them after the spontaneous discussion about clothing. When voicing their expectations, the students considered the course as external to their core studies because its subject-matter did not lie on interpreting or translation proper. They did not view this as a negative factor but as a way of sharpening their understanding of how the term translation and its use shift with context. None of the students alluded to the haikus they produced on the first day. We had included the haiku exercise as a way to put into practice the theoretical aspects of nature writing presented by Melina Lieb. Perhaps this was not framed well enough to elicit further comments in the portfolios. However, only one student took up nature writing as their project work, so the haikus may have appeared too unrelated to their project to deserve any attention.

The individual project work dominated each student's feedback about the course, as we had hoped. After successfully identifying the problems they encountered while carrying out the project, the students explained how they were addressed or could be addressed in the future. While some of the problems were recognised as external, such as restricted access to research facilities due

to Covid-19 lockdown measures, some other issues were perceived as personal, for example a lack of experience with interdisciplinary research and feeling overwhelmed with carrying out an entire project in such a short time. We were therefore pleased to learn that the students found it helpful to discuss project options and plans as a group while not being forced to work as a team for the entirety of the course. They considered this as a setting which enabled them to work in the most efficient way. On the one hand, the peer feedback helped them to concretise their ideas and develop a schedule for their project. On the other hand, developing their projects individually allowed them to pursue their own interests, which kept them motivated and enabled them to work at their own speed.

- S1: I particularly think that the chance to exchange and brainstorm with all the fellow colleagues in the project designing and reviewing process can be really inspiring.
- S2: [I]t was hard for me to think about a topic to choose for my project, but with the help, feedback and suggestions of the other course participants, I was able to come up with a project I was really interested in.
- S3: I was able to recognise that I have a consensus-seeking group-personality and that I struggled when this need was not met. This is something I would like to work on in future group-constellations.⁴
- S4: I think the fact that we had only one week, a fairly limited amount of time, could have influenced our inability to concentrate on one specific project [if we had worked as a group for the entirety of the course].

(Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, Student 4 2021: n.p.)

The students also sensed that the small size of the group was an advantage, as it gave everyone the space to voice their interests and also to notice different teamwork behaviour in others and themselves.

As expected, some of the comments implied that they would perhaps have profited from more guidance by the teachers. However, as they all were able to identify suitable solutions to the problems they encountered by themselves, we agreed this issue could be addressed through a debriefing explaining the rationale of our approach, rather than through an intensification of supervision during the project phase. Assessing their own skills, the students discovered that they had particular needs and shortcomings, for which they were able to formulate specific solution options. None of the students reported they felt they had failed the pro-

4. Student 3 preferred to write their feedback in German: “ich konnte mich als nach Konsens suchender Gruppenpersönlichkeit wahrnehmen und habe mich schwergetan, wenn dieser Zustand nicht eingetreten ist. Hieran möchte ich in zukünftigen Gruppenkonstellationen arbeiten” (Student 3 2021: n.p.). The English translations are Kölling’s.

ject. Each identified gains from conducting their project, as well as possible spill-over effects if they employed some of the planning and team-management skills they learned in their future studies and work life.

- S1: To simplify the project to a scale which I can handle while maximising its relevance to the everyday life at FTSK, I decided to change the target of the project to finding possible improvements on FTSK campus in terms of ecology with inspirations from the design of the DUFL campus.
- S2: For the next time, I would set the deadline for the contribution during the project-week or maybe the week after that, so that people who were actually interested in writing about the topic would not forget to contribute.
- S3: Initial feelings of being overwhelmed gave way in the course of the working phase to astonishment about the fact that my project idea could indeed be realised.⁵
- S4: For me the course was a way to think about climate in relation to my studies. I think such courses are rare and more of them should be offered to teach students how they can incorporate environmental protection in their working life.

(Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, Student 4 2021: n.p.)

Overall, we were very pleased that the students shared openly how they felt and specified whether the course met their emotional and intellectual needs or not.

Nevertheless, we were somewhat concerned by the fact the students did not regard their projects as actual or relevant forms of critical environmental action:

- S1: Further improvement suggestions inspired by the Technion Team are (1) surveys among students for their opinions about the topic [of] campus ecology should become a routine task instead [of] ad-hoc ones as is suggested repeatedly in several academic sources (NASPA 1987); and (2) departments in charge of ecological and environmental topics in the student self-governing organisations should be endowed with more power as well as budget to carry out possible ecology redesign projects, since such projects, considering the size of the FTSK campus [...], will be so insignificant that the student organisations are very likely competent to carry them out.
- S2: Although nature writing seems to be a perfect tool for addressing environmental issues, I do not think it necessarily has to be so. Deliberately spending time in nature and writing about it definitely made me more attentive towards it, but it did not evoke a greater responsibility in me to care for it.

5. "Anfängliche Überforderungsgefühle wichen im Laufe der Arbeitsphase dem Erstaunen, dass meine Idee tatsächlich umsetzbar ist" (Student 3 2021: n.p.).

- S3: Having evaluated the survey, one can conclude that in terms of climate protection *as well as* in terms of student preferences, more vegetarian and vegan meals should be offered by the university canteen.⁶
- S4: The same amount of attention must be paid to the environment as to economic issues. Courses on how to fill in the forms for taxpayers should be followed up by courses on how to reduce the carbon footprint while working, for example.

(Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, Student 4 2021: n.p., original emphasis)

Only two students made concrete suggestions for change. S1 formulated implementation options for the FTSK, based on strategies formulated in a research paper they found, while S4 made a suggestion unrelated to their project, which for us implied that they considered their own project less relevant. S2 explicitly came to the conclusion that their project did not produce motivation for environmental protection action. Even S3, whose project appeared the most promising in terms of (pro)claiming a form of environmental food action, did not seem entirely confident that their findings meant alterations in food options can be regarded as impacting one's environmental consciousness. Indeed, the results of their survey showed that meal options were based on multiple aesthetic and religious preferences rather than on political environmental will. Luckily, we were able to follow-up with the students and to address this concern during the *Freitagskonferenz* a few months later.

4. The *Freitagskonferenz*: Becoming presences in a damaged world

The *Freitagskonferenz* [Friday-conference, also *FreiKo*] is a teaching format introduced at the FTSK in order to train consecutive and simultaneous conference interpreting under real-life conditions. Every Friday during the weeks of the teaching term, academic speakers or professionals are invited to share their expertise. The audience for these events mainly consists of FTSK staff and students, although some conferences are also recorded and published on the FTSK YouTube channel.

The decision to present their projects and findings at the *FreiKo* was entirely a student initiative. The students decided against a publication on the FTSK's YouTube channel, however, as not all of them felt comfortable with the idea "of

6. "Nach der Auswertung der zugrundeliegenden Umfrage lässt sich demnach der Schluss ziehen, dass es sowohl im Sinne des Klimaschutzes *als auch* im Sinne der Studierenden indiziert wäre, mehr vegetarische und vegane Gerichte in der Mensa anzubieten" (Student 3 2021: n.p.).

seeing their faces on the Internet” (S1). One of the MAKD students (S4) liaised very efficiently between the eco-translation course and the Conference Interpreting course. As all presentation slots were taken for the current semester, we had to wait for an opening in the following summer term, which created a temporal distance of about five months between the completion of the projects and their presentation. This also meant that some of the participants found it difficult to fit this into their study-work situations. As a result, we lost one student (S2). Melina Lieb filled the vacancy with a presentation of the student’s central project findings, which she contextualised by relating them to her own research results about the importance of the everyday in British nature writing.

Although many seminars at our faculty include student presentations as part of the course work, this setting demanded a different kind of preparation and energy both from the students and the teachers. Mostly teaching cultural and literary translation, we have limited exposure to the interpreting equipment and facilities. Therefore, the classroom was managed by the three teachers from the MAKD program and their students, including those enrolled in our eco-translation course. This, combined with the fact that we moderated and participated in the panel, displaced us as teachers. Moreover, as we had already handed out the grades, this session was completely pressure-free from the examination point of view. All students had already passed the course.

The questions the panel received reflected diverse critical but friendly interests in the overall topic and individual presentations. The materiality of the session also provided a very remarkable experience. Actively noticing that all the talks were mediated through the headphones and multiplied in other languages generated a vivid notion of language as grounded in the body and social interaction. Moreover, although voices and motions were overlapping the whole time, they were not competing for attention with each other. Rather, they reflected a concerted effort to bring everyone into conversation with each other.

This noticeably friendly atmosphere perhaps originated in the fact that, as a “constructed classroom”, the panel was meant to be a safe space. In any case, the conditions of the meeting seemed suitable to give voice or voices to the prevailing tension between critical thinking and practical change. It felt important to provide our students, as well as the audience, with the opportunity of discussing the political resistance to act upon scientific knowledge. As one student (S3) put it in their reflections:

I sometimes face difficulties living in the society I live in which does not (enough) respect nature and draws a thick line between it and humans. I think that I can learn a lot from the Antispeziesismus-movement [anti-speciesism movement] [because it] considers that we (which means everybody including animals and sometimes even plants) are the same and should be treated as such. While I can

mostly cope with the injustice that I see in society by trying to follow my principles, seeing the goodwill in everybody and trying to simply be nice, I find it sometimes very difficult to bear [this situation]. The FTSK field trip underlined this once more. (Student 3 2021: n.p.)

The feelings described here may be referred to as “eco-anxiety” (Albrecht 2011), “pre-traumatic stress syndrome” (Van Susteren 2018) or “climate burnout” (Gillian Caldwell qtd. in Richardson 2018: n.p.).⁷ Receiving this feedback after the course meant that we had not been able to address this issue with the students during the project-week. In “Teaching for transformation. Lessons from environmental justice”, Robert Figueroa writes that feelings, and despair in particular, can be instrumentalised positively in the classroom as a way of stretching one’s moral imagination, in order “to personally grasp a notion of the injustices involved, as well as the potentialities for alleviating and ameliorating the injustices [...] [and] to envision political changes” (2002: 325). “It is most imperative though”, he warns,

that the classroom transform despair into a proactive lesson rather than one of paralyzing helplessness. The excitement of the course is getting students to face the despair and develop tools for understanding and transforming this state into intellectual, personal, and hopefully, social, action. As students come to this process, the ethos of the classroom begins to shift into a closer involvement with the material and the issues at hand. (Figueroa 2002: 326)

Figueroa’s foundation for his eco-critical teaching is laid out through a survey of the philosophy of environmental justice, starting with canonical works such as Aristotle’s *Nicomachean ethics* (1941) and John Rawls’ *A theory of justice* (1971) and encompassing grassroots literature and anthologies such as those edited by Richard Hofrichter (1993) and Jonathan Petrikin (1995). With a focus on practical project work and with a course duration of only five days, we could not expect our students to read and digest these or similar works. Nevertheless, deeply agreeing with Figueroa that theory constitutes an important tool for developing certain dimensions of understanding and the transformation of emotions in general into intellectual, personal and social action, we used the *FreiKo* as a forum to discuss this matter with the students.

7. These terms and the wider psychological strains that climate scientists experience through their work were discussed very accessibly in an article John H. Richardson penned for *Esquire* magazine called “Ballad of the sad climatologists”.

5. Conclusion: Towards an eco-activist academe

Originally, we had planned to link this course more strongly with existing environmental activist structures at the University and at the local level, but due to Covid-19 restrictions this became impossible to implement. One of the prevailing tensions in this course resided in the relationship between critical thinking and practical change. In particular, the systemic resistance to act upon scientific evidence not only evoked negative emotional responses but also *caused* forms of paralysis. Our students explicitly expressed their frustration with and inability to bear this perceived injustice. The origin of this discontent was clearly identified as the mismatch between the expectation of the outcome and the actual outcome of their individual goal-directed activities in their everyday lives.

As the university has become a more secular and politically independent institution in recent decades, its commitment to knowledge-production has inevitably become connected to the envisioning of new practices and ways of acting. We believe this offers an opportunity for theory to be re-thought in terms of lifting the burden of change through contextualisation. If we cease to perceive theory not as the stereotypical non-practical element of learning and teaching and rather stress its relational, solidary function, then theory can contribute to bearing the burden of change. We read theories of the posthuman, the more-than-human, and Indigenous wisdom as immediately informing practical choices.

At that point, because we could not do much more than passionately advocate this appropriation of theory for change, our exhortation largely resembled a motivational speech. But when teaching another project week a year later – in the form of two separate courses this time – we revisited the issue of environmental despair. One course focused on crisis translation, discursive and performative interventionism, as well as the immediate social commitment by interpreters in conflict and crises settings. The other concentrated on fostering environmental consciousness, as it examined the interconnections between local self-care and global flows of production and consumption. In both courses, the students were compelled to ask, “Where should we be?” instead of “Where are we?” These questions were followed up by interrogations such as “What skills do we have to get there?” and “What are our responsibilities with regard to these skills?” Our teaching has thus evolved from a critical consideration of the absence of focus on the trouble of climate change during the Covid-19 pandemic to an examination of how our students can become active presences in the everyday ecology of a damaged planet. The next step would be to include a form of “service learning”, that is to develop a course in which students would work directly in placements with other members of the community. In such settings, Figueroa explains that

Students realize themselves as political entities whose experiences help to inform, generate, and conduct the political meanings of the education process. The interaction with other members of the community who are working in dimensions of environmental justice helps students to see which social epistemologies are dominant because of institutional habits and personalities, and which epistemologies are made silent and subversive because of oppressive social mechanisms.

(2002: 323)

Of course, such teaching might produce other problems (organisation causing extra workload or delay, exploitation of the students, students failing to satisfy the needs and expectations of their cooperative partner). However, given the moral and psychological benefits of such service learning, we too are willing to “un[do] [our] fears” (Figueroa 2002: 321).

Teaching courses with an environmental focus to future translators and interpreters in our department is vital to developing a sophisticated language force within the global environmental movement. Related to this way of teaching, though, is the problem of becoming an academic activist. Debates about the hazards of developing passionate views and falling victim to cognitive bias have become the fodder of climate change deniers and have strengthened the unreasonable position of responding with calls for a blanket rejection of political activism in academic circles. As was pointed out by Ben Jones, “this duty wrongly implies that academia offers a relative haven from bias compared to politics” (2020: 234). Moreover, as we can see on a daily basis, “not all forms of political activism pose an equal risk of bias” (Jones 2020: 234) – or simply a risk to life in general. Not all cognitive bias in academia has wider political consequences, but more often individual career-changing ones.



In this context, as we go forward, we are determined to reinforce our eco-translation course’s connections with environmental activist structures at the University and locally. In so doing, we hope that this course, together with other eco-courses developed at Mainz and elsewhere, will generate a movement advocating programmatic renewal, which will subsequently transform into structures of change. In this way, during the transition towards a society maintaining a more sustainable relationship with this planet, the eco-activist academic will no longer inspire suspicion, shame, or ridicule, but rather will stand as a figure of the ordinary, planetary everyday ecology.

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