



Sprechen Sie Interactive?

The revolution may not be televised; the German class will be.

By **Tony Perez-Giese**

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Six sophomores enrolled in German II file into room 208 at South High School and find their seats behind an array of microphones set up as if they were at a congressional hearing. There's a television where the teacher usually stands.

The kids chatter and chew on candy canes until one of them turns on the TV. Springing onto the screen is a young guy with uncombed red hair, wearing a bowling shirt and speaking in rapid-fire German. Class is in session.

After some introductory chitchat, 27-year-old cyberteacher Clark ov Saturn, aka Herr Nelson, begins today's Tele Deutsch lesson, which revolves around a taped segment called "Cooking With Herr Nelson." The video shows Herr Nelson loading up a crockpot with leftovers from his icebox-- he pauses the video at each step to query the students in German about the ingredients. The kids answer enthusiastically in well-accented German over their microphones. Out of the six students in this class, only one doesn't participate actively in the exercise, but even she isn't too cool to smile at Herr Nelson's wild exclamations and goofy expressions.

Things get serious, though, when Nelson throws in a pop quiz based on the cooking segment. The students let out a collective groan and make faces that they know they can get away with because of the poor closed-circuit picture Nelson gets back in his studio. When Suzie Woytek, the in-class supervisor, informs Nelson that she doesn't have the tests because of a printer malfunction, he makes a clowning face at her that would earn him detention if he weren't the teacher. And he is the teacher. Tele Deutsch, which Herr Nelson offers three times a day, is the only German class left in most of the Denver Public Schools. Started four years ago after the school district severely cut back its regular German classes, the program offers language lessons via interactive TV to students in several high schools where the district feels there is not enough interest to warrant an in-house instructor. The size of Nelson's classes ranges anywhere from five to twelve students.

Soft-spoken and rather shy when he's not in front of the camera, Herr Nelson is manic on the air. He's like a German-language version of Robin Williams's DJ character in *Good Morning, Vietnam*. This teacher has multiple personalities, including Herr Nelson the cook, Detective Nelson and a



Hans-and-Franz-type weightlifter. And he spices things up with guitar solos, puppets and sight gags. Literally a one-man show, he also takes care of all the technical aspects of the interactive program.

Broadcasting from a makeshift studio at DPS's Career Education Center with an old blanket for a backdrop, he works like a hip-hop DJ. Only his head and shoulders appear on the screen, while his hands frantically work the control board, cuing up videotape, controlling the camera and playing sound effects. (In fact, when he's not teaching German, he is a DJ, for the local band LD-50. As one student notes, "Herr Nelson's band kicks butt. I have their tape.")

But while his DJ gig helped prepare him for working all the technical aspects of his class, Herr Nelson says it was rough in the beginning. "At first it was really hard to work all of the equipment, let alone teach," he says as he cools down after an afternoon broadcast. "When I came into this job, I was just a teacher who could use word processing. The learning curve has been straight up."

Administrators had initial concerns that the classes would get out of control without a live teacher to handle the students, but that apparently hasn't been a problem. Although Woytek (she calls herself a "babysitter") sits in on the class, she doesn't have to do much in the way of discipline. Because the class is an elective, Herr Nelson says, most of the kids are motivated enough to stay focused without his having to threaten them with an interactive ruler.

Some parents grumble that Tele Deutsch is heavier on entertainment than it is on education, but Herr Nelson insists that his students are learning. "I've got kids in here who could blow away, or at least match, students who have been taught in the traditional way," he boasts. Yes, he says, his classes are light as far as grammar goes, but what he stresses is communication. "With the videos that we use, like 'Cooking With Herr Nelson,'" he says, "I'm hoping to show something that we can talk about conversationally, and hopefully they find it humorous as well. I think that you could put these kids in Germany and they would do well."

One of Herr Nelson's students from last year says the interactive format and his antics helped her "to learn a language in a fun way that's different from my other classes." His students aren't the only ones who tune into Nelson. Since the class is broadcast on cable (Channel 22 in Denver), he's got fans beyond high school. Herr Nelson says that many non-student viewers have approached him on the street to say that they enjoy watching him teach; he acknowledges, however, that having an open classroom also has its downside.

"Occasionally I have to chew a kid out who's acting up in class, which is not good to do on public airwaves," says Herr Nelson. "As a result, I've had people come up to me in coffeeshops and tell me that I'm being too hard on the kids. Parents sometimes watch as well, and they all want to give me their opinions. It's at times like that when I really wish I had my own classroom with a closed door so everyone with a TV couldn't scrutinize my teaching style."

Visit www.westword.com for a QuickTime clip of Herr Nelson's class.