

WEEKEND SEMINARS FOR REFRIGERATOR REPAIRMEN IN BERLIN

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Newly hired professors with UMUC's overseas programs quickly learned that their students were very different from most of those they had taught at more traditional colleges and universities in the United States. With rare exceptions, all of UMUC's students held a military identification card—as active-duty members of the U.S. armed forces, or U.S. civilian government employees, or family members of those serving abroad. Many of the students were also older than their professors. I was 29 when I started teaching for UMUC in Europe, and during my first few years there at least half the students in all of my classes were over the age of 30.

They also seemed more motivated than their counterparts in the U.S.—even if many of UMUC's students were, initially, less well prepared for college than most stateside students were. Some of them took UMUC courses because they needed college credit to help get promoted to the next rank in the military. Others knew that college credits would boost their résumés whenever they left the service and applied for civilian jobs back home. And some were in class because their sergeant told everyone in their unit to sign up for that course—and to make a passing grade, or the sergeant would deal with them accordingly.

Discipline was never a problem in my UMUC classrooms. Students always arrived on time, paid attention, took notes, and did their assignments. There were no smart-ass kids who sat on the back row, disrupting class with constant talking and stifled laughter. And in the era when I taught on those American military bases abroad (1975-1993), there were no cell phones or other electronic devices to distract students from classroom lectures and discussions, or tempt them with easy access to outside information for cheating on exams.

But since full-time professors usually moved from one military base to another (sometimes even to a different country) at the end of every eight-week term, we seldom got to know much about the students we saw in class only twice a week, for just two months. So, at the beginning of each new course, I gave everyone in my classes a Student Information Sheet to fill out—asking their MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) or type of civilian job; their major field of study; how many hours of college credit they'd already earned (and at which colleges, overseas or stateside); and if they had taken any previous courses (e.g., film, photography, theater arts, creative writing) related to the subject of my own courses in Film and Mass Communications. (And since I was often teaching in a part of Europe where I'd never been before, the last question on that form was: What are your restaurant recommendations in this area? If you answer "McDonald's" or "the snack bar on base," then you don't understand the question.)

In the spring of 1986, during the two-week break between the regular Terms III and IV, my husband Tom and I were assigned to team-teach two weekend seminars, on consecutive

weekends, in Berlin—one-credit courses that met for eight hours on Saturday and again for eight hours on Sunday. We were scheduled to teach "Soviet Film: 1918-1945" on the first weekend and "The German Golden Age of Film: 1918-1933" on the second.

That was the kind of plum assignment that UMUC professors always hoped for. UMUC would pay for our flights to and from Berlin, plus a hotel for four nights of our stay there. We could even fly to Berlin a week before the first seminar met, hence getting to spend two weeks, total, in the city. The ten days when we weren't teaching were free time for us in Berlin, to do whatever we wanted, at our own expense. Neither of us had ever been to Berlin, so we were especially excited about our "working vacation" there.

Eighteen students, all male, had enrolled in the seminar on Soviet films. After I took roll that Saturday morning, Tom handed out the Student Information Sheets to everyone in the class. For regular eight-week courses, I would always read those forms before the next class meeting, so I'd have some idea about the background and experience of the students sitting in my class. But after eight hours of teaching on the first day of that weekend seminar, both Tom and I just wanted to take the evening off and enjoy some good Prussian food and Berliner beer at a local *Wirtshaus*. And since we had to be in class at 8:00 the next morning for another eight hours of team-teaching, we put off reading the Student Information Sheets until after the weekend was over.

The eight hours of classroom time, on both days of the weekend, allowed us to show several films in the seminar: Vsevolod Pudovkin's masterpiece, *Mother*; Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*; and three of Eisenstein's other classic films, *Alexander Nevsky*, *Ivan the Terrible (Part I)*, and *Ivan the Terrible (Part II)*. Before each film, Tom or I gave a lecture about the film's historical and political context, its director and main actors, and the technical and artistic innovations associated with it. After each film we then had a class discussion about what we'd viewed. And after the seminar was over, the students had two weeks in which to write a paper based on the lectures, film viewings, class handouts, and assigned readings—and mail it to us at our next teaching location.

The silent movies we showed in that Soviet film seminar had intertitles between key shots—written in Russian, with English captions that appeared on the screen a few seconds later, below the Russian titles. The sound films were all in Russian, with English subtitles. But on the first day of class, I noticed that the students were reacting differently to those films than previous students had done. They were chuckling at, or quietly commenting to each other about, the Russian-language intertitles before the English translation appeared on the screen—and sometimes even verbally correcting the translation. And the next day, it was obvious they were listening carefully to the Russian dialogue on the sound films—and reacting to it well before the somewhat sparse English subtitles showed up on the screen.

When the class reconvened after lunch that Sunday, I asked how many of them spoke Russian. A couple of the guys glanced at each other, but no one raised his hand. All of them just looked at me with a blank expression on their faces.

Several days later, when I finally got around to reading their Student Information Sheets, I discovered that the Military Occupational Specialty of every student in that class was "Refrigerator Repairman."

"Well, that makes sense," quipped Tom when I showed him those student forms. "After all, they're serving on the front line of the Cold War here in Berlin."

But both of us wondered why all of them were using the same cover story instead of claiming a variety of innocuous MOS's, which would have been much less suspicious.

The next weekend's seminar was on "The German Golden Age of Film." Sixteen of the eighteen students from the Soviet film seminar, along with two new students, were in the course. When I saw all those familiar faces in class that Saturday morning, I joked, "Nice to see so many of you signed up for another course in refrigerator repair." The response was silence—and another purposely blank expression on the face of everyone in the room, although a couple of guys looked like they were about to break into a smile. And when we showed the German silent films (with their German intertitles) and the German sound films (with their English subtitles) that weekend, it was obvious that those same refrigerator technicians understood the German language, too.

A month later, I finished grading all the final papers from those two film seminars in Berlin. Everyone in the Soviet film course had earned a solid A—the first time that had ever happened in any of my UMUC courses. And all but one student earned an A in the German film seminar, too. Smart students, those multilingual American soldiers whose job was to repair refrigerators in Germany.

So you never knew who might register for your UMUC courses abroad. Sometimes you could even end up with a whole class full of highly intelligent cold-storage technicians who just happened to be fluent in Russian and German—and surprisingly interested in old Soviet and German films, too.

After that experience, I felt more confident that our U.S. military stationed in Berlin would be able to hold the line against any incursions by Soviet forces bent on destroying our American way of life by attacking our high-tech refrigerators (still a rarity in Russia) and looting all the food in them before it spoiled.

Dates and divisions of overseas service with UMUC:

European Division (1975-1978; 1981-1993)

Asian Division (1978-1979)

Munich Campus (1985, 1989-1992)

Augsburg Campus (1992-1993)

Russia Program (1993-1995)

Other: Writer of UMUC history books (1996-1997, 2007)