



BLENDLED LEARNING PROGRAMS

CUSTOM E-LEARNING

SIMULATIONS

German Is Just a Game  
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## **Enspire Learning**

Enspire Learning was founded in 2001 with the mission to create effective online learning. Headquartered in Austin, Texas, Enspire Learning develops award-winning e-learning courses and simulations that motivate learners with interactive multimedia and engaging scenarios.

Enspire's primary areas of focus include:

- Custom E-Learning Development – Enspire's custom applications motivate learners with meaningful interactions, driving retention and changing behavior.
- Simulations and Game-Based Learning – Enspire offers both custom-developed and templated simulation development services.
- Blended Learning Programs – Enspire's transformative learning programs address major business challenges including sales training, leadership development, and consumer education.

### **German is Just a Game – Summary**

The following white paper was written by Enspire Learning's Director of Content Development, Nathan Kracklauer, and is based on his consulting experience at the Dutch College for Fashion Management.

In this white paper, readers will see how a game-based approach to learning can be extended to frame an entire ten-week curriculum. In particular, readers will see how to:

- Create a game-like framework that is flexible, engaging, and does not require technology
- Improve retention and engagement by empowering the learner to participate in curriculum development
- Harness competitive and collaborative drives to meet a broad range of learning styles

### **Nathan Kracklauer's Biography**

Nathan Kracklauer is Enspire's chief writer and instructional designer, and has developed, refined, and documented Enspire's unique and award-winning approach to e-learning. Nathan is particularly interested in how storytelling, interactive case studies, and simulations increase learner motivation and knowledge transfer. In addition to training and guiding Enspire's content development team, he has led numerous instructional design workshops at companies such as National Instruments. Nathan holds bachelor degrees in mathematics, philosophy, and liberal arts honors from the University of Texas at Austin.

## **German Is Just a Game**

### ***A Case Study of a Learning-Game Approach to Foreign Language Instruction***

#### **Abstract**

In this case study, we'll look at an application of an experiential learning approach to foreign language instruction. We'll see how game-based learning can apply to language instruction and how experiential, game-based learning can be implemented in an instructor-led classroom setting, with minimal or no information technology.

#### **Introduction**

In the summer of 2005, Katja Sund visited the offices of Enspire Learning. An instructor of German language at the Dutch College for Fashion Management (TMO), Katja was in the process of creating a curriculum for a newly introduced seventh semester of German. While on vacation in Austin, Texas, Katja toured e-learning provider Enspire Learning's facilities and several of Enspire's flagship learning solutions. Afterwards, Katja asked herself: "How can I transfer these experiential learning concepts to my classroom?"

In this case study, we'll explore Katja Sund's German for Buyers Curriculum (GBC). Katja implemented this solution in the fall semester of 2005, based on a design created in informal, pro bono consultation with the author. GBC applied design concepts from interactive, multimedia-based learning experiences to a ten-week, paper-based classroom game.

#### **The Business Context**

TMO is a fashion management college located in Doorn, a picturesque Dutch town just outside of Utrecht. The campus is surrounded by farmland and some of the Netherlands ritziest real estate – the area is littered with old castles and chateaus, including a modest little palace that was the last German Emperor's final home. A private school, TMO has faced the challenges of wild success, working hard to accommodate a steadily rising tide of applicants. At around 160 students per year, its facilities are already bursting at the seams. The year 2005 brought a new challenge: thanks to new regulations, TMO had to expand its two-and-a-half-year program into a three-and-a-half-year program to comply with European Union standards for accreditation. As administrators struggle with the demands on the school's physical facilities, teachers like Katja struggle to develop an additional year of relevant and valuable curricula.

In addition to English, German language skills are a requirement for all of TMO's degree programs. Students parlay their degrees into jobs at all manner of clothing retailers, from department stores, to boutiques, to discounters. German skills are a must, as the majority of wholesale suppliers are located in Germany, and most of the important fashion tradeshows take place at convention hubs such as Düsseldorf, Berlin, Frankfurt, and Leipzig. TMO's graduating class of 2004 was the last class to complete the three-year program that involved five semesters of German. That curriculum had to be expanded.

Katja had very few guidelines about what a sixth semester might contain. As much as this blank slate presented a daunting task, it also presented a singular opportunity for innovation. Katja used this leeway to design an experiential learning program: a ten-week game in which two student teams competed to sell a clothing collection to a fictional German department store.

### **The Learning Objectives**

In GBC, students learn business German for the buying function, with concentration in oral communication skills. During their time at TMO, students are expected to acquire a C1 competency level (as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) in the following areas:

- Describing common fabrics, models, clothing items, and clothing components
- Conducting buying discussions
- Negotiating prices
- Negotiating payment and delivery terms
- Scheduling, rescheduling, and canceling appointments and business meetings by phone
- Socializing in a variety of settings

GBC is meant to deepen and solidify the language skills acquired in previous semesters. Moreover, students are to become acquainted with German culture and gain insight into cultural differences between Germany and the Netherlands, especially in regard to their impact on business relations.

### **The Learners**

As a specialized, private college, TMO attracts a fairly homogeneous student body. Students tend to be from upper-middle class households. Classes are taught in Dutch, so the international contingent is very small. Graduates find employment in all manner of clothing retailers. Some students aspire to work at Dutch locations of international chains such as H&M and The Gap; others are learning the ropes to take over small family stores. A substantial majority (85%) of the student body is female. Freshmen typically arrive straight out of high school at around age 17.

Students are motivated when it comes to fashion management; this motivation does not necessarily extend to their language-learning. TMO students are bright, but not academically-oriented.

In the language department at TMO, students are accustomed to traditional classroom instructional methodologies. Instructors strive to lead as much of the class as possible in the studied language. They use textbooks and vocabulary drills, hold quizzes and finals, assign group and individual work, and require presentations. Instructors take a lexical approach rather than a grammar-based approach. A focus is placed on conversation skills rather than written skills, as conversation will be more relevant to the students' prospective jobs.

German is not an especially popular language; it does not have the pop culture appeal of English, it's too similar to Dutch to have exotic appeal, and for many Dutch, there is an abiding post-WWII disinterest in all things German. Although Dutch and German are closely related, Dutch students frequently complain about the difficulty of German compared to English. This perception is mostly due to the relative complexity of German grammar and the fact that, traditionally, German language instruction places a very heavy emphasis on grammar.

The Netherlands is a wired country, and TMO students are fully immersed in today's technology. Gaming is a popular pastime for the age group, but as in other parts of the world, there is a significant gender gap in the gaming landscape.

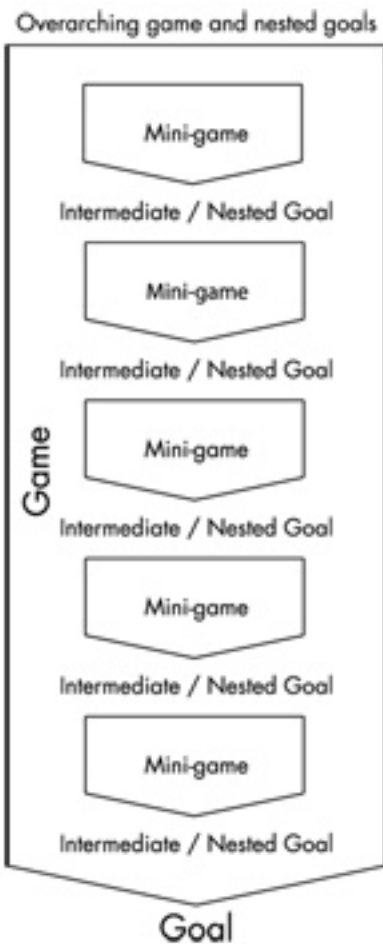
Katja had three groups of eight students, all in their fourth year at TMO. Some of them had taken Katja's German classes in previous semesters, so some rapport had already been built. However, previous instruction had used conventional instructional approaches, and Katja did not feel that she had made very good connections.

**The Game**

Katja's game is structured around a scenario that many of her students will experience in real life. As buyers, TMO graduates will analyze market trends. They will identify the most hip new clothing collections. They will attend trade shows at which they will negotiate for the hottest collections, and finally, they will sell them to retailers. GBC simulates this scenario.

Katja divided each of the three groups of eight into two teams of four. Each pair of teams competed against each other. The objective was to sell a clothing collection to the fictional Leipzig department store, "Express." To achieve the overarching goal, teams had to achieve a series of nested intermediate goals:

- To sell the collection, they had to give a good presentation to Express's buying committee (played by Katja and the opposing team);
- To give a good presentation, they needed to attend a fictional German fashion convention and purchase a collection from a supplier (again played by the opposing team);
- To purchase the collection, they had to first identify the best collection by researching fashion trends for the next season (in German).



- To “earn” a budget to buy the collection, they had to complete mini-games throughout the first few weeks; the mini-games consisted of language drills and presentations.

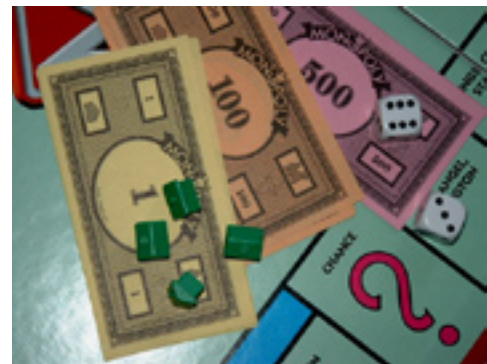
The course’s ten meetings were built around the nested goals. In general, meetings consisted of the following:

- Review, evaluation, and scoring of assignments – at the beginning of a meeting, each student could present a current event in German and earn ten Euros towards his or her team’s purchasing budget (for a total of 40 Euros per team). In the later meetings, additional presentations were required. These presentations were assigned to pairs of students and covered the topics “German Celebrations,” “Fashion in Germany,” “German Culture,” “Tourist Destination Germany,” and “Germany – United or Divided?” Topic presentations were worth 100 Euros each.
- An interactive, discussion-based lesson about topics and vocabulary relevant to the stage of the scenario.
- A Game Quest, usually based on role-playing a stage of the scenario with Katja (e.g., conducting a phone call or presenting a sales pitch). Katja evaluated the teams’ performances in the quest and usually awarded game money.

### Game Materials

Aside from student preparation, GBC took place entirely in classroom space at TMO. GBC is a largely non-technological training solution, as is evident from the list of materials that Katja used. Studying the list of materials also reveals many of the details of the design:

- **Play money:** The game used a currency metaphor to communicate rewards and success. Students earned money through successful mastery and performance of skills and knowledge. The money had real value and meaning within the game’s context – students needed money to achieve the final game objective. It’s interesting to think about how the system of exchange between German skills and money may have affected student motivation. Mastery of German translates into play money, which translates into game success, which translates into academic success, which translates into a good job and real money. Using money as a reward – even if it is only play money – helps link the learning objectives to the students’ personal career objectives.
- **“The Bank”:** Katja carried the game world’s money supply in a briefcase.
- **“Team Wallets”:** Teams kept their earnings in Ziploc® bags, guarded in the Bank (Katja’s briefcase) between classes.
- **Handout folder:** Katja created handouts for the class, detailing exercises and assignments.
- **“Group Vocabulary Cards”:** Every lesson, Katja would write new vocabulary on the blackboard



in a “parking lot,” as new words came up naturally in the discussion of the day’s topics. New idioms and expressions also found their way to the parking lot. At the end of the lesson, the class would determine which words they thought were relevant. A student was selected to write down the chosen parking lot items and their translations on index cards. The class kept the cards in a special vocabulary card box. Students took their own notes on the vocabulary that made it into the box. Katja found that, once students were empowered to choose what vocabulary to learn, they were willing to learn nearly everything that came up. The discussion of which terms to keep and which to throw out was itself an important step in the retention process.

- **Cultural artifacts:** Katja went to great lengths to provide her students authentic German cultural artifacts, including travel and tradeshow brochures, postcards, menus, and even typical German cuisine – packaged, non-perishable supplies of food she had purchased in her hometown of Weimar. As in many other arenas, it’s often a few elaborately staged details – such as boxes of authentic German “Semmelknödel” (breadcrumb dumplings) – that make all the difference in helping the imagination embrace a virtual world.
- **Index cards for role-playing:** To practice business conversations, Katja frequently had students role-play different functions; the index cards served to identify the assumed roles.
- **“Threads”:** In the final stages of the game, Katja brought in the desirable “collection” the students had purchased – the latest items from TMO’s own workshops and labs. Again, a few well-chosen artifacts from the real world help lend plausibility to the virtual world.
- **Culture quiz:** Teams sorted index cards bearing names of German cultural icons into groups (writers, composers, musicians, athletes, politicians, actors). The first team to complete its set of cards won 50 Euros. Each correct identification was worth ten Euros. This quiz was a favorite among students.
- **Multimedia:** Katja used some audiovisual resources (e.g., a short film about fashion buying as a career choice, popular German music, etc.), and an e-learning course (on CD-ROM) about German and Dutch business culture to enhance the students’ learning experience. These resources constituted the only major inclusion of technology in the program and were only used because they were already available. No new technology tools were developed for GBC.



## **The Design Process**

After touring Enspire, Katja and the author brainstormed the foundation of GBC. To understand the design and the process, it's helpful to look at some of the background ideas the designers were working with when they first brainstormed.

The effectiveness of immersion for learning languages: When a student studies in a foreign country and is “immersed” in the culture, she learns language much more quickly and much more deeply than she ever could in a classroom. Both designers had experienced immersion learning. The experiential learning methodology of GBC tries to mirror some of the aspects of immersion.

The effectiveness of immersion is partly due to the sheer volume of exposure to the language. However, the immersion experience is situated in a context and an almost classical narrative framework: the student-protagonist experiences a crisis event (being plopped down in the midst of an unknown country) that takes her far from her comfort zone. In this new environment she is alone and friendless, her tried-and-true approaches to life no longer work, and even her everyday tasks (like finding food and restrooms) suddenly pose enormous difficulty. She learns new skills (the local language and customs) with which she surmounts these obstacles, makes new friends, and eventually triumphs, having established a viable life for herself. This is the stuff stories are made of.

Immersion is more than exposure to a torrent of unfamiliar sounds. It's a high-stakes adventure. GBC seeks to replicate some of that adventurous quality with its narrative framework and from its structure of nested objectives.

In terms of career objectives, the students at TMO are not necessarily competitive. Nevertheless, competition is a feature of the careers to which they aspire. Business German skills can give them the competitive edge in the small Dutch market that relies on trade with its larger neighbors. Injecting competition into the classroom leads to a more visceral experience, but also to a more relevant experience by affirming the competitive advantage of German skills.

Framing the entire course within a context which the students were already highly engaged – the very real fashion management problems of identifying, purchasing, and marketing the latest trends – serves not only to motivate the learners. Real business problems also form a filter that helps an instructor identify the material that is most relevant to her students, helping TMO establish itself as an institution that delivers real value to its customers.

Language is not only communication, but collaboration. Language is communication. Reducing a game to a competition between two teams (instead of eight individual players) greatly reduces its complexity, as well its time and resource intensity; more importantly, however, a collaborative team dynamic forces students into structured interaction and communication. Student collaboration and communication greatly affects retention, especially when it comes to language-learning.

In some sense, the design of GBC followed logically from these initial considerations, which the designers discussed after Katja’s visit to Enspire. The basic concept for GBC came together in the time it takes to wait for a table on a Friday night at the Clay Pit, a popular Austin restaurant located across the street from Enspire’s offices. Working out the details and creating the materials took about three weeks of preparation time.

An advantage of a simulation or game that is not technology-based is that it can be adjusted on the fly. This is especially true of a game that is played over the course of ten weeks. Katja was able to make refinements in midstream. For example, the original design included only pictures of the potential clothing collections. Once a collection had been selected, Katja realized that having a more tangible resource would greatly improve the quality of the learning experience. She borrowed suitable clothes from TMO’s laboratories and asked students to build their sales presentations around them. The students were able to take their descriptions and sales pitches to a greater and more interesting depth, thanks to the fact that they had something real and tangible to discuss. Of course, the collection the students selected from the pictures did not correspond to the laboratory clothes. However, students didn’t stumble at this leap of logic and simply adapted to the conceits of the new game “world.”

### Assessment

As much as GBC was a game, at the end of the semester, its results had to be translated into terms of academic accomplishment. In some sense, GBC took place on two separate tracks. First, the game and its intrinsic rewards gave the course its structure and captured the students’ imaginations. Second, academic assessment took place alongside the game, on the periphery of the students’ attention, providing evaluative measurements for the instructor. In this regard, GBC could be compared to a baseball game. On the field, players care about runs and outs and the final score. Coaches and trainers, meanwhile, measure and track vital stats like batting averages. Monitoring these stats is important to growth and development, but nobody plays ball only to improve their scores. Meaning lies in the game itself. In GBC, students were also focused on the game and not on their scores; because of this, they took more risks, which is essential when learning a new language.

Student performance was assessed on the following “deliverables”:

- **The portfolio:** Every student assembled a personal portfolio, which included select homework assignments, handouts from all students’ presentations, market analysis data, tradeshow information, their own vocabulary list, and the student’s “reflections” – students were required to keep a journal about their experiences and insights into cultural differences. These reflections could be submitted in Dutch or German (for double game-money value). The portfolio was collected and graded at the very end of the class, after the last meeting.
- **The final sales presentation:** Katja not only used the final sales pitch to the fictional “Express” clothing company to determine a winner of the game, she also graded it.
- **The topic presentation:** As mentioned earlier, pairs of students gave presentations on the topics “German Celebrations,” “Fashion in Germany,” “German Culture,” “Tourist Destination Germany,” and

“Germany – United or Divided?” Topic presentations were graded, as well as scored in play money.

- **Vocabulary exams:** The closest thing to traditional assessment GBC had to offer, the exams tested students on the vocabulary they themselves had chosen to study.

Because students received quantitative feedback throughout the course through the scoring mechanisms, Katja chose not to assign a final quantitative grade; instead, students received either a “pass” or “fail.” Katja feels that quantitative scores beyond pass/fail are mainly useful for extrinsic motivation. In the case of GBC, the game and its quantitative and qualitative outcomes provided sufficient (and intrinsic) motivation.

### The Outcomes

**Student engagement:** Katja reports unprecedented levels of student engagement in German classes. The course and instructor evaluations (see appendix) support the following hypotheses about what contributed to student engagement:

- **Novelty:** Certainly, students were receptive to any break from traditional language instruction. The notion of playing a game was appealing in its own right, even before the game was played. Simultaneously, Katja’s own excitement with her experiment was infectious and contributed to a higher than normal energy level.
- **Competition:** Competitive language-learning was a new concept for the students, and one that worked well, at least in this first iteration of GBC. The rivalry between teams was sporting but serious, and GBC got favorable buzz around campus, thanks to student chatter about the latest developments. Unlike any class Katja had ever experienced, students of GBC clamored for the opportunity to give presentations. On one occasion, Katja suggested that they skip the current events presentation for that day; she narrowly avoided mutiny.
- **Student ownership:** Putting more of the responsibility for learning in the students’ hands – for instance, by allowing the students to decide what vocabulary to learn – helped motivate them to learn more than they would have in a traditional format. Student ownership was manifest in other ways, too. Simple choices like team names, team colors, and the literal “ownership” of game resources contributed to an identification with the game and an experience that drove engagement.
- **Small group size:** The intimate size of the groups (eight), made even more intimate by the split into teams of four, created a learning dynamic in which even weaker students felt safe enough to participate and take risks. As Katja readily admits, this is a luxury that all too few educational institutions can afford.
- **Focus on vocabulary and conversation:** For better or for worse, students were delighted not to be overly concerned with grammar and written communication.

**Student performance:** Insofar as performance in language is closely connected to the student’s willingness to attempt communications in the new language, GBC was an immense success. Students expressed a strong interest in traveling to Germany. At the end of the semester, students were given the choice to submit their journal about cultural differences in either Dutch or German, and to Katja’s surprise, a large number (20 out of 24) submitted theirs in German. This confidence and positive attitude is invaluable when

a student has to actually perform language skills on the job. When communicating in a foreign language, a “where there’s a will, there’s a way,” attitude and effort alone are usually rewarded with good-will from native speakers. On the other hand, students’ command of the language still left a lot to be desired, especially in written communications and grammar.

### Lessons Learned and Open Questions

#### **Designing a game-like experience for classroom training requires creativity and a willingness to experiment:**

It does not require much more preparation time than conventional instruction – Katja’s preparation time of three weeks for an entirely new ten-week (twenty-hour) course is in line with standard preparation times for instructor-led training. It also does not require any technology.

**Combining competition and collaboration engages the entire audience:** Although competition can be a powerful motivator to some people, it isn’t everyone’s cup of tea. However, when we engineer competition between teams, we can meet the needs of students who prefer a collaborative learning style as well as the needs of those who are compelled by competition.

**Experimentation drives engagement:** Students welcome experimentation for its own sake, and they also benefit from an inspired and excited instructor. The instructor’s creativity inspires students’ creativity. In the GBC model, teams turned their final presentations into actual fashion shows, including masters of ceremony, catwalks, and models. They named their fictional clothing designs and developed slide presentations, going far beyond Katja’s wildest expectations.

**Student empowerment improves engagement and retention:** In GBC, Katja provided a framework which German vocabulary became relevant and valuable to students. With this framework in place, students were willing to choose vocabulary that they wanted to learn, and retained the self-selected vocabulary better.

**The instructor must beware “Stockholm Syndrome”:** For an instructor, so much student excitement can be a heady experience. Students and instructor build strong rapport – students started to invite Katja to their parties – and it can become hard to maintain objectivity. In reviewing students’ portfolios, Katja noted in herself a willingness to let mistakes slide in the face of so much student enthusiasm and effort. Coming from a strong background of conventional language instruction, Katja is concerned that students need more grammatical and orthographical discipline. An open question remains: Can the game-like approach be adapted to a more rigorous language course?

**It’s just a game:** When the overall framework is compelling, the actual game mechanics can be adjusted on the fly. When Katja made adjustments, such as introducing real clothes midway through the game, the adjustments were absorbed in spite of leaps of logic. As long as the overall system of motivations and narrative are left in tact – in this case, the competition to find, acquire, and sell a clothing collection to “Express” – players are willing to adapt to changing rules, if they are consulted and feel that the changes are fair. Moreover, as a strict “game,” GBC was highly flawed – in the end, the opposing team judged whether or not the sales presentation was a success, and of course, opponents don’t make impartial judges. The result was that everyone “won”, which is not a compelling game outcome. However, this didn’t disturb students in the slightest. GBC should be understood as “play” of the sort that children engage in when they play free-form “cops and robbers” or “house.” Other open questions are: How well can this concept of “play,” without the rigor of strict game rules and “win” conditions, be deployed to learning experiences for other

audiences? Can multi-semester curricula be expanded into game-like experiences?

### **Conclusion**

The German for Buyers Curriculum demonstrates that a flexible game-based learning approach can be used to frame an entire ten-week curriculum, with minimal design effort and little or no technology. The game-based approach drives engagement and retention, and empowers the learner to take part in the creation of the curriculum. Well-designed games address multiple learner personalities by harnessing both competitive and collaborative instincts.

As more and more interest in game-based learning develops, models like that of GBC will form platforms for further experimentation. These experiments will lead to an enriched instructional design toolset that de-emphasizes linear, didactic processes and places the learner's experience front and center.

## Appendix – The Lesson Plan

The meetings followed this schedule:

Meeting 1: We are Buyers – What does that mean?

- Watched a brief video profile of the fashion buyer career (part of TMO's extensive library)
- Discussed students' dream jobs
- Learned and practiced new vocabulary around the buying function
- No initial Game Quest

Meeting 2: Defining the Target Audience

- Read a description of the Express clientele (in Dutch)
- Conducted web-based trend research
- Used the web to identify German brands that could satisfy Express customers' tastes in trends
- Learned and practiced vocabulary around clothing and fashion trends
- Game Quest: Team summarized research in a short presentation – this Quest was worth 30 Euros

Meeting 3: Qualifying Suppliers

- Role-played qualifying calls with prospective suppliers in advance of a tradeshow
- Learned and practiced vocabulary around telephone conversations, setting up meetings, etc.
- Discussed cultural differences between Germans and Dutch and how differences might affect business communications
- Game Quest: Team researched German fashion trade shows, selected one to attend, and put together a presentation justifying their choice

Meeting 4: The Tradeshow

- Role-played small-talk conversations
- Role-played communicating needs and inquiring about collections
- Learned and practiced vocabulary surrounding the collection (price, origin, quality, etc.)
- Identified a supplier and collection from a set of cards (see Game Materials below)
- Game Quest: Topic Presentation

Meeting 5: Wining and Dining

- Ate at a fictional restaurant (typical German food brought by Katja)
- Role-played casual interactions with business partners
- Discussed cultural differences and how to avoid common pitfalls
- Learned and practiced vocabulary surrounding food, restaurant etiquette, and casual conversation
- Game Quest: Topic Presentation

Meeting 6: Deepening the Relationship – Follow Up

- Role-played telephone conversations
- Learned and practiced vocabulary around telephone conversations, etc. (Note: in retrospect, Katja felt that this meeting was redundant and therefore, less successful)
- Discussed cultural differences around notions of time and punctuality
- Game Quest: Topic Presentation

#### Meeting 7: The Business Meeting

- Role-played face-to-face discussion of delivery and payment with the supplier (played by Katja)
- Learned and practiced vocabulary surrounding terms of delivery and payment
- Game Quest: Topic Presentation

#### Meeting 8: Business Negotiations

- Role-played negotiation of delivery and payment with the supplier
- Discussed German styles and conventions of negotiation
- Learned and practiced vocabulary of negotiation
- Game Quest: Topic Presentation

#### Meeting 9: Marketing

- Picked up the collection
- Prepared sales pitch to Express
- Learned and practiced vocabulary around sales presentations
- Game Quest: Topic Presentation

#### Meeting 10: Closing the Deal

- Presented sales pitch to Express's buying committee (Katja and the opposing team)
- Received final score and outcome
- Learned and practiced vocabulary around sales presentations