

Foreword

Prof. Anne Koenen, Sebastian M. Herrmann
Leipzig, Germany

In its second year, with its second issue, this experiment that is *aspeers* has entered a new phase. After the success of the first issue, which gave a snapshot overview of excellent work done on the graduate level in American studies, this volume, with its focus on questions of migration and mobility, marks the journal's shift towards topical issues and a submission process that asks student contributors to respond to a topical call for papers.

This second issue also marks another transition: The first editing cycle in 2007/08 was one of mostly uncharted territory. It was characterized by the difficulties of beginning, of developing, in the most practical sense, the format of the journal: its layout, profile, style sheet, and target audience. As a didactic project, it was very much about exploring and understanding how the graduate-level peer review process can work best and how, in the format of a graduate project seminar, students can learn the intricacies of a full-scale editing process while professionally performing it at the same time. With the specific challenges of beginning now over, the project reveals an even clearer sense of its more everyday, routine opportunities and possibilities.

The result as well as the process of this second round of editing *aspeers* powerfully underscore the didactic value of project-driven learning, a hallmark feature of Leipzig's American Studies programs.¹ In a single round of editing, students acquire and practice a wide range of professional and scholarly skills. Among other tasks, they critically and constructively engage their peers'

¹ Cf. the 2008/09 projects in the BA American Studies program at Leipzig, as well as the teaching and research project *Ambivalent Americanizations* that has also resulted in a book publication on Americanization in central and eastern Europe.

Foreword

academic work, select the ones most promising for an attractive volume, discuss and assess the qualities of pieces of art, provide concise and structured feedback, communicate effectively, and revise and edit the final, camera-ready manuscript. Even more fundamentally, they learn, alone or in smaller groups, to self-organize for the often highly complex subtasks within the larger project and to manage, with increasing professionalism, their own resources and those of others. The unique quality of learning within a real-life project, then, lies in the immediacy with which all decisions matter, with no safety net and no backdoor, and with considerably more at stake than ‘just’ a grade; it lies in the unexpected situations, the turns, near-catastrophes, and surprises only a real-life editing process can provide; and in the immense and impressive energies, in the earnestness and the professionalism this immediacy sets free in both the student editors and the student contributors. Last year’s foreword described the learning curve, the content and the dynamics of the project in more detail (Koenen and Herrmann), and this year’s editing cycle underscored that they indeed are a reproducible feature of the kind of project-driven learning *aspeers* implements.

In this second round of the editing process, some ‘difficulties of the plains’ have also become more discernible. There hardly is a culture of graduate-level professional exchange, not to speak of graduate-level publishing, among advanced students of European American studies. As with the first issue, the lack of professional networks among European graduate students made the distribution of the call for papers difficult. With the topical restriction already limiting the number of potential contributors, the geographic spread of this issue—all academic contributions are from German universities—underscores the difficulty of reaching students effectively. There are newsletters and distribution lists, but they are read mostly by professors in the field. In addition to that, it seems that students tend to take topical restrictions in a call for papers more literally than more established scholars might. While the overall number of submissions for this issue was once again most impressive and forced the editors to make very difficult decisions, one future task of *aspeers* emerges more clearly as the project enters its third year: the need to provide not only a publication platform, but to continue to foster a culture of graduate-level professional exchange and professional, academic networking.

More than anything else, the past two editing cycles have thus underscored the great demand *aspeers* meets as a professional, peer-reviewed platform for academic work done on the graduate level. In both rounds, feedback from

contributors and comments on the learning curve experienced by submitters and participants emphasize the project's unique value. In between the two cycles, reports in magazines and on German national radio have emphasized the project's power to fascinate beyond the discipline. The positive reactions by professionals in the field have provided additional encouragement and support. Lastly, the steadily increasing interaction through the journal's webpage is another token of the interest the project and the work it publishes can attract. By now, *aspeers* is listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), Google Scholar, the ASA's journal directory, and other databases. As a project, it has already helped to enliven debates on new forms and formats of publication within the field of German American studies.² More importantly, it continues to prove the productivity and the possibilities of project-driven learning on the graduate level.

NOTES

"BA 2006 Project Modules." American Studies Leipzig 2009. 25 Feb. 2009
<<http://americanstudies.uni-leipzig.de/blogs/11/ba-2006-project-modules>>.

Koenen, Anne, and Sebastian M. Herrmann. Foreword. *aspeers* 1 (2008): iii-v.

2 Cf. the panel on "Neue Publikationsformen" at the upcoming 2009 annual convention of the German Association for American Studies (DGfA) at Jena.