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Exploring Culture, Meaning of Space

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David Sumner and his family, from left, Heidi, Silas, Camilla and Penn, spent six months in Bayreuth, Germany, while Sumner taught as a Fulbright Fellow at the University of Bayreuth. Bicycling was their primary mode of transportation, along with trains and buses, and the experience was an educational opportunity for the entire family.

Exploring culture, meaning of space

“Space,” I heard myself saying. “To understand western American literature, you have to get your brain around space.”

Teaching as a Fulbright fellow in Bayreuth, Germany, I was looking out at the 35 students who had signed up for *Western Dreams*, *Western Landscapes*. We were discussing Wallace Stegner’s *Angle of Repose*, a novel based on the papers of Mary Hallock Foote, and I wasn’t sure my students under-

stood how geographically isolated the protagonist was; I wasn’t sure they understood the expanse of the American West.

Set in the late 19th century, Stegner’s novel traces the life of East Coast artist and intellectual Susan Burling, a character who – like the historical Foote – corresponds with and publishes alongside some of the brightest lights of her day: William Dean Howells, Samuel Clemens, Henry James. Married to a mining

engineer, Susan finds herself not in the Northeast – the center of American intellectual, artistic and publishing life – but in the remote West. Her husband’s profession takes them from lonesome western town to lonesome western town following the boom and bust reality of the 19th century West.

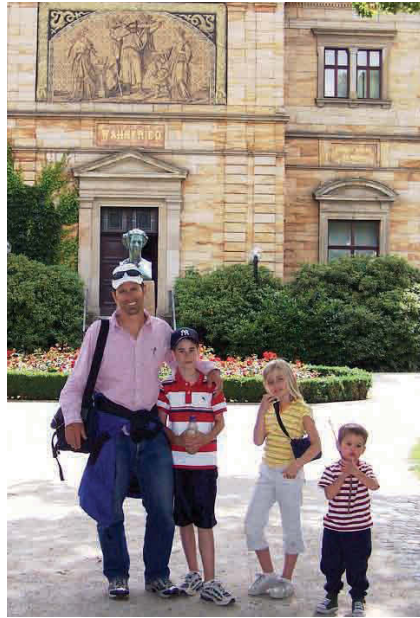
I wasn’t sure my students understood how isolated Susan felt – how removed she was from her country’s artistic and intellectual center. They

were not all German; there were some Italians, Spaniards, a couple of Turks and even a couple of Chinese. But without exception, all had lived only in places that by western standards had a high density population. If I were teaching Stegner in Oregon, most of my Linfield students would know about space, not just intellectually, but viscerally. They would know what it's like to drive from La Grande to Ontario. They would have hiked in the eastern Cascades, Wallawas or Steens and looked out across the empty sage and juniper of eastern Oregon. They would know you grab a bite in Juntura because otherwise, it's a long hungry ride to Burns. And it's probably easier to understand Susan Burling's isolation if you grew up in Drewsey or Wagontire, if you have driven on Highway 244 or wandered among the giant junipers in the badlands east of Bend.

The Germans taught me a lot about careful land use and planning. I marveled at the efficient and convenient rail service and ubiquitous bike paths. I was impressed with the well-planned towns, that despite the density – or perhaps because of it – the Germans have carefully preserved farm and forest. I would often run in the woods and by the farms surrounding Bayreuth and think about both the beauty of the place and the intense and careful land use. I would ride my bike to town delighted as I counted the trout in the creek the path followed. A 50-kilometer bike ride would take me from town to farm to forest to farm and back to town again several times. I was continually amazed at the livability of a country with 83 million people in a space the size of Montana; it didn't feel crowded.

"Oregon is 70 percent the size of Germany," I continued, "but has only 4 percent of the population – and that's in 2007. In the 19th century, in Colorado, Idaho, California – the places Susan lived – the population was much smaller."

I learned about population from



David Sumner with Penn, Camilla and Silas at the Richard Wagner Museum in Germany.

the Germans. I learned about careful land use and planning, about living with others, about communities built to human scale rather than car scale. What did my students learn from me? As a teacher you never know. I drew maps, quoted statistics, shared first-hand experience and made them read, read, read. I hope I taught them a little bit about the literature and culture of the American West; I hope I taught them something about space.

– David Sumner

(David Sumner, associate professor of English and director of the college writing program, is an outdoor enthusiast specializing in American nature writing and Western American literature. He taught at the University of Bayreuth in Germany last spring under the prestigious Fulbright Junior Faculty Lectureship Program. The courses he taught were: Western Dreams, Western Landscapes: Reading Western American Literature, and Literature and the Object World: Empiricism, Ethics and American Nature Writing. He has a bachelor's from the University of Utah, master's from Brigham Young University and Ph.D. from the University of Oregon.)

Students, faculty earn Fulbrights

Linfield College faculty and students alike have taken part in international exchanges sponsored by the Fulbright Program.

Since 1999, Linfield has had three faculty, one administrator and 15 student Fulbright scholars. The college was named a top producer of Fulbright awards for bachelor's institutions in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* last year.

Several Linfield faculty and an administrator have earned Fulbright awards, including most recently, David Sumner, associate professor of English, who taught in Germany; Eric Schuck, associate professor of economics, who consulted in South Africa; and Dawn Nowacki, professor of political science, whose research took her to Russia. Sandy Soohoo-Refaei, associate director of International Programs, earned an administrative Fulbright to study in Japan.

Student recipients include Angie Jamison '99, Nicaragua; Staci Bryson '00, Germany; Seth Otto '00, Bolivia; Lynsey Farrell '01, Kenya; Melissa Koosmann '01, Austria; Sarah Montfort '02, Croatia; Jennifer Cregg '02, Germany; Paul Beck '03, Germany; Alexis Lien '05, Austria; Maria Davis '05, Iceland; Kari Blankenship '06, Tunisia; Holly Brause '06, Uruguay; Rachyl Stupor '06, Chile; Julia Back '07, Australia; and Ryan Jones '07, Austria.

The grants are designed to fund study, research and teaching in other countries to promote a greater global understanding of different cultures and nationalities.