

Northern European Studies – and then what?

A video series on career prospects by j o l n e s

Transcription episode 8: Language school founder

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Hello, I'm Silja, I'm 32 and I've been living in Leipzig for six years. I have had my own language school since 2018. I studied Media Studies at the University of Marburg for two semesters straight after graduating from high school, then I studied the combined Bachelor's degree in Media Cultural Studies and Media Law in Cologne for four semesters, then I had a short break while I was in Aarhus and then I did the double Bachelor's degree in Media Cultural Studies/Scandinavian Studies.

Was it difficult to find a job after graduation? What happened afterwards?

Well, it wasn't difficult at all for me to find a job after my studies. That was because I started working as a language teacher during my studies. After I came back from Aarhus, my Danish was pretty good and I had the opportunity to teach Danish a few hours a week at NordiKa. And it was totally exciting for me to put myself on the other side and see how to actually teach a language after having learned a language myself. And I quickly found out that I really enjoy teaching. After my studies, I moved to Leipzig for purely private reasons. I was very keen on the city, already had a lot of contacts there and knew that the jobs in this city don't grow on trees, so I moved with a mindset that I would first keep my head above water with jobs. So, I didn't have the focus on pursuing a career or anything like that directly, but wanted to arrive in the city first, I was able to continue teaching a few hours online at Nordika and also taught Danish at the community college. And when I realised at some point that there just wasn't much of a market for Danish here in Leipzig, that is, there just wasn't that much demand for it, I looked for a second mainstay and took the initiative and applied to language schools for German as a foreign language, immediately got a great response because of my teaching experience, and was able to start directly at several schools and take an analytical look at my own mother tongue, which was also a very exciting challenge.

What question preoccupied you in the transition from study to professional life?

The biggest question during my studies was definitely the question "What do I actually want?", but I didn't let this question drive me crazy, rather I very openly seized every opportunity that came my way. And every experience was totally helpful for me and brought me step by step closer to where I am today. The transition between my studies and professional life was, as I said, smooth and felt very natural because it grew organically. And during my studies I gradually gained more self-confidence and found out more about my interests and where I see myself in the future.

Can you tell us something about the orientation of your school?

Well, my language school is called Sprachschule Paroli and I quickly noticed in the courses I taught at other language schools that there were a lot of people participating who were learning German, but who were left a bit alone. And I thought about my time in Aarhus, where I was in exactly this situation, that I didn't know anyone, that I was in a new city and actually wanted to experience the city with people my own age. And so it rattled around in me a bit and I developed a concept together with my best friend in which we thought about how people can learn German and get to know the city and what moves them. And the top priority we had at that time was to create an atmosphere in which people can try things out, in which they have the courage to make mistakes and in which they get to know other people and also open up. And for us, Leipzig's art and cultural scene was a bit of a hook, so we looked at how we could work together with museums and with any events that were taking place, in addition to language teaching, so that people would still have a very natural connection to the city.

What are your tasks as head of a language school?

If you have a language school, then of course you have to take care of administrative tasks, first and foremost, you have to look after participants, you have to answer questions. I coordinate a team of currently four freelance teachers who work for me, I plan their courses, their timetables, I also have a lot to do with the Foreign Office when it comes to visa issues and my top priority is actually to create a feel-good atmosphere in the school.

How do you establish a language school?

If you want to start a language school, then of course you first need an idea and you need premises, but of course you also need money. We presented our concept to various banks and convinced them that our business concept was an eligible project and that it wasn't just the brainchild of two twenty-somethings who wanted to try something out. And then, of course, you need a strong internet presence and somehow the possibility to find us.

What is important if I want to pursue a career in language teaching?

I think that language teaching always has something to do with a personality. I don't know if you can learn that much, to be honest. I think you need a lot of empathy to get into other people's heads and yes, you need a certain personality to impart knowledge to other people in a sustainable way. And I don't know if you can really learn that. So, of course, I think professional skills are important, but you can also learn all that somehow. I think ultimately it's about being present in front of a group, having a desire to meet people and somehow having the desire to dive into their heads and make a difference.

What skills from your studies help you at work today?

It is difficult to answer which one soft skill is somehow really important to me for my current work. One thing that I particularly enjoyed during my Scandinavian Studies, compared to other departments, were the thousands of opportunities and freedom to try things out, because of the relaxed atmosphere and also my work at the department, I was in the organization team for the conference of German-speaking Scandinavian Studies, for example, and yes, I also had the opportunity to go to Amsterdam as part of another seminar and give a lecture there. So, there were a lot of opportunities to do things, because the department is so small and because people know each other, and for me, an incredible self-confidence developed, because I realized that I am trusted with something here and that I can do it, and I think I do it quite well. And that was totally exciting for me, simply in terms of the learning effect. So, I think these are soft skills that you can't really name, but just this doing, that totally helped me later on to establish my own business and to do things a bit bravely.

What are the advantages of studying a rare subject like Scandinavian Studies?

Well, I see the advantages of studying a rare subject like Scandinavian Studies quite clearly in the personal contact, in the exchange among each other, in the opportunity to simply try things out. I always had qualms about participating at all in such large seminars, you always kind of get lost in the crowd, and I used to sit somewhere in the back of Media Studies and was a bit buried in my books, and suddenly that wasn't quite possible anymore. All of a sudden it was a bit unpleasant when the lecturers didn't get their questions answered and you were suddenly a bit forced to make a move. And it really helped me to be actively involved in my studies.

(Transcript by Paula Ordejón)

Credits

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