

## **Paving the Way for Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC): Establishing Writing Centers and Peer Tutoring at High Schools in Germany**

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**Abstract:** This article reports about the effort to raise awareness for writing across the curriculum (WAC) and to establish writing centers at German high schools through a pilot project, initiated by a university writing center. The project was run by graduate students from the European University Viadrina (EUV) who in this article share their experience based on their ethnographic field notes. They explain the concept of the pilot project, reflect on their practice with high school students, high school teachers and within their own team and draw conclusions for further projects. The project showed that although the experience of starting a university student-maintained WAC initiative at high schools was a valuable learning experience for the everyone involved, sustainable structures could not be established.

Writing across the curriculum? In Germany, the idea of using writing as a tool for learning in all disciplines still does not play an important role at high schools. This is even more irritating as writing does play a crucial role for the assessment of students' learning outcomes. For example, three of four exams during the "Abitur," the final high school exam that qualifies for university, entail extensive argumentative papers, written in class over the course of three to five hours. Students are used to this kind of writing on the spot assessment; they practice it often during their school career in Germany (cf. Foster, 2002). Nevertheless, writing seems to be nothing else for students than assessment, the effort to reproduce knowledge in a given format in a certain time and for one certain audience, their teachers. There is not much awareness of writing writer-based texts to develop ideas and to prepare reader-based texts. Neither is there awareness of writing for different audiences or for improving texts with feedback and revision.

This attitude—to understand writing merely as a means of assessment rather than as a tool for learning or for communication with real audiences—often makes it very difficult for students to manage the transition from high school to university where they most likely have to write extensive research papers on their own. In fact, university students in Germany often struggle with the demanding task of writing these papers (cf. Bargel et al., 2008; Dittmann et al., 2003; Pydde, 2011). Support to handle writing difficulties is rare at German universities, because composition is not taught, meaning that students have to learn academic

writing on their own. Faculty see themselves as instructors of their disciplines and not as writing teachers, as David Foster illustrates in his study about writing in higher education in Germany:

When I tried to explain my background as a US writing teacher, I usually drew blank looks and puzzlement at first. Why are you interested in writing? Our students are students of the subject, they said, not students of writing – historians (sociologists, literary interpreters), not writers. You really want to ask how we teach our subjects, don't you? Because we don't teach writing. (Foster, 2002, p. 192)

Therefore, the recently developed writing centers at some German universities are not only the unique places where students can get feedback on their writing, but are also the institutions that offer writing instruction and pave the way for the idea of WAC at university (cf. Bräuer, 2012; Macgilchrist & Girgensohn, 2011). This context explains why the idea and the background for WAC projects at two German high schools arose at a university writing center, the writing center at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder). University students who profited from initiatives like peer tutoring or process-oriented writing workshops at the writing center frequently expressed how much they wished they had already had these experiences during high school. The Robert Bosch Foundation, offering grants for cooperation between universities and secondary schools, encouraged us to develop the project and funded it for almost three years.

Our young writing center is a very successful institution. It serves a growing number of students and earns visibility within the university and beyond. This success is not self-evident because there is no tradition for writing support at German universities. The rapid development of our writing center seems extraordinary, and every member (director and peer tutors) shares the same amount of responsibility and has great influence in the writings centers' growth and development. The tutors not only tutor writing, but also develop new ideas, initiatives, workshops and materials, and take active leadership roles in these new endeavors (cf. Girgensohn, 2011). In the understanding of Katrin Girgensohn, the writing center director, it is a central factor for success that the writing center is supported, fostered and developed further by the university students themselves. Drawing from these experiences and bearing the well-functioning procedures of our own writing center in mind, the concept for the collaboration with high schools and the establishment of WAC was based on the idea of peer tutoring and on empowering and deploying peer tutors as promoters for WAC.

Unfortunately, this approach has proven unsuccessful. In the course of the project, it became obvious to all participants that we were not able to establish sustainable structures for WAC in the participating high schools. A concept that had successfully worked in higher education could not be transferred into secondary education in Germany. This experience, however, does not lead us to the conclusion that the whole project is a failure. It led to numerous moments of learning and contributed to the personal growth of many of those involved. Nevertheless, a clear insight we gained from this project is that WAC cannot be implemented through peer tutoring alone. Strategic pedagogical school development and teachers' involvement, likely through the implementation of steering groups, are necessary initiatives to complement the work of peer tutors.

## Our Methodological Approach to WAC

Jeffrey Jablonski (2006) explains different approaches to writing across the curriculum. Drawing from interviews with experienced WAC specialists and from the literature, he divides service-oriented and research-oriented approaches to WAC. Service-oriented approaches offer workshops for teachers to develop WAC programs or to offer consulting for teachers to help them establish WAC. Research-oriented approaches reflect and inquire ways to improve the pedagogy of a subject in a collaborative act between teachers and WAC specialists or to use research approaches of a discipline to explore the effects of WAC

tasks. Within this spectrum, our approach seems to be service-oriented in a more radical way than Jablonski had identified in his studies; writing support and fostering awareness for writing processes came from outside the institutions. The participating high schools experienced our project as a service offered to them by the university. Furthermore, our approach was also research-oriented, because it was accompanied by systematic research at all times. Ongoing external evaluations, including SWOT-analysis<sup>[1]</sup> (Appendix A) and participant observations, were combined with ethnographic inquiry; all EUV members of the project wrote ethnographic field notes, shared them with one another and with the external evaluator on a regular basis.

This approach allows us to now examine the whole project and to draw the following conclusions that will lead to the improvement and guidance for further, similar projects.

- Changes in the school culture and the writing culture that would be necessary to establish WAC in German high schools can not take place through external service alone. A bottom-up-process, initiated by the high school students and facilitated by external experts, does not work at school.
- Peer tutoring should play an important role in future WAC projects at schools in Germany because, besides all negative experiences, our project showed both high school students and university students the value of developing leadership experience while working as peer tutors.

## The Concept of the Project

The project aimed at establishing sustainable new structures for writing support for all disciplines at two high schools by training high school students as peer tutors and by introducing teachers to a process-oriented writing pedagogy. The project was solely run by EUV graduate students, who were all employees of the university writing center. Due to the positive experience made in previous projects, it seemed appropriate to use only EUV peer tutors. We therefore formed a team with two peer tutor trainers for students and one coordinator for the whole project. Gerd Bräuer, based on his experience gained in an EU project where high school writing/reading centers were established in 7 European countries (cf. Bräuer, 2009), agreed to evaluate our project and serve as an external consultant for the team.

## Getting in Contact with Schools

We worked with different schools: one academic gymnasium, one technical secondary school and one integrated school. All of these offer the students the "Abitur" as the highest level of high school certification. One high school was chosen through personal contact between the school and the director of the university's writing center. The other school was chosen after two teachers had already made contact with the writing center and had expressed their explicit desire to actively work on changing the writing culture in their school. However, after 18 months the cooperation with this school had to end prematurely, due to lack of resources from the school's side. A third school was chosen through personal contact, but this time with more in-depth negotiation of the goals and agreements as a prerequisite for joining the project. After coordinating our steps with the contact persons (faculty members and administrators) at the schools, we presented the project to all 10th graders who then had the chance to send in applications in order to participate in the program.

## Training the High School Students

Applicants were invited to the EUV and the writing center, where they had to participate in a three-day training. Here the focus lay on instructing the students in composition, the use of writing as a tool for critical thinking throughout the curriculum and in the craft of peer tutoring in writing. The high school students' training was largely based on the training EUV students receive when becoming a peer tutor. In order to

comprehend and reenact what the future peer tutors learned we invited teachers from participating schools to take part in our teachings and workshops.

- Day 1: Students were introduced to the process of writing. Methods like clustering, ways of researching literature, reading techniques, and how to take excerpts from a reading source were presented, practiced and reflected upon.  
Day 2: The students continued to learn and practice additional methods of writing, such as freewriting, mindmapping, and how to write a draft. They then turned from writing to giving feedback to other writers. Afterwards we discussed principles of peer tutoring in writing and gave practical examples by staging typical scenes of peer tutoring as role plays. The high school students then gathered their first experience in tutoring through mock tutorials.  
Day 3: The last day of the workshop was dedicated to reflecting on the role of writing in the participating high schools and on the next steps to be taken in our collaboration. With great enthusiasm and creativity, the high school students gathered ideas about the implementation of peer tutoring in writing at their schools and created posters with their ideas and visions, which they first presented to the group and later took back to their schools in order to decorate their future writing centers. After participating in the workshop, the high school students met for team meetings in their schools, which were supported by graduate students from the university writing center.

This initial three-day workshop was evaluated and slightly modified for the other three groups of high school students that we trained during the project. After the first training, we realized that the team building process played a greater role than we expected. Thus, we put even more emphasis on the achievement of this goal in the following three-day training. Our own evaluation of the workshop and the feedback we got from the high school students demonstrated that it would be necessary for the ongoing work at the schools to first create an atmosphere and environment that motivates and encourages the students to dream about how they could change the environment in their schools.

After the three-day training, the biweekly meetings between high school and grad students started. Also, the graduate student team met approximately once a month and more often if problems had to be discussed. During team meetings, we reflected on what had been achieved so far, often based on our extended field notes, and we considered the goals that had been set and negotiated the next steps. Thus, the project itself had a cycle of recurring times of preparation, training times, team meetings, and times of reflection and documentation.

## Reflection on Our Collaboration with High School Students

Throughout the course of the project, the high school students learned more writing techniques, which they were able to use for their own writing in school, but also for their work as peer tutors. They learned how to spread the word about peer tutoring at their schools and how to motivate peers to focus more on writing, feedback, and revision. They started to offer peer tutoring in writing and conducted workshops for their peers. This helped them to develop their own presentation and communication skills. Two schools even set up a room, which the student tutors could use as their own writing center.

High school students greatly appreciated the workshops their fellow students presented to them. Comments on these workshops include: "I learned new writing techniques," "I learned new approaches towards writing, such as planning the writing process," "I found out that writing does not have to be a painful experience," and "I enjoyed the overall atmosphere in the workshop and working within small groups." Topics of some of these workshops included: "How to write an argumentative essay," "Writing as a Process" (for 13/14 year olds), "study/term paper" (for 15-17 year olds), and "How to write an internship report" (for 17/18 year

olds). At the third school we held a workshop with and for students from pedagogy, psychology and economics and received similar feedback as stated above. This workshop has proven to be a good WAC approach.

What made the project truly worthwhile was the collaboration between university students and high school students. As EUV peer tutors, we built and maintained healthy and productive relationships with the high school students by being closer to them in age and experience than, for example, their high school teachers. This way, we were able to develop ideas together and talk about many issues high school students might not have talked about with their teachers or other persons of authority.

However, working with the high school students became a challenge. Besides finding the right amount of authority, we had to establish basic rules of communication and teamwork. At times we had the feeling that some high school students were not able to cope with our authority-free attitude, which eventually forced us to exercise more authority in order to keep students focused; i.e., when giving workshops in front of whole classes. It became obvious to us that the interaction that we enjoyed with our writing center director at the university could not be transferred directly into a high school environment. Accordingly, for the interaction between high school students and university students, more thought has to be put into hierarchical decisions. Other difficulties for our team meetings were also the time, pressure and exhaustion from which our high school collaborators suffered. Every hour of the students' timetables were scheduled and demanded high level attention, meaning that students sometimes spent 10 hours at school switching between different disciplines with only 5-minute breaks between lessons. We therefore had to hold our team meetings after school when the students were fatigued and their attention span was extremely diminished.

## Reflection on Our Collaboration with Teachers and High Schools

It did not take us long to discover that teachers and administrators play a far more crucial role on the way to achieving our goals than we expected. Bearing in mind our own experience from our writing center where peer tutors achieve a lot on their own despite scarce support from their professors and university, we underestimated the importance of the teachers' involvement in high schools when wanting to establish writing center with or without writing across the curriculum.

First of all, peer tutoring in writing was often perceived by teachers as a means of supporting students receiving poor grades in the subject of German. Peer tutoring in writing was often considered as being a deficit-orientated concept. Thus, the general potential of WAC, to support students in reflecting on their writing, thinking and learning to improve was dismissed. When asking teachers to be involved in the project, we were often turned away and referred to the teachers of German language. Obviously the importance of writing and the development of writing skills are still strongly associated with first language teaching. Even though writing plays an important part for assessment reasons in all disciplines of the curriculum, it is not being considered as a tool for learning, neither within individual academic disciplines nor across the curriculum.

Secondly, our role as facilitators was frequently misunderstood as one of substitute teachers. We often felt that our efforts in facilitating writing at the high schools were pleasantly welcomed by the teachers and administrators; however, the same people were not involved in planning and connecting the activities carried out by us and the high school tutors. Moreover, as facilitators and as outsiders in the school's daily life, most of the time we were lacking the insight into planned writing projects within the curriculum. As teachers did not take responsibility for the project and were not well informed about the benefits and procedures of their student peer tutors, a school's activities between different subjects and peer tutoring in writing were usually not combined. There were only a few occasions where writing projects were outlined in a way that students would have had the time to visit their fellow peer tutors and receive consultations for and about their writing project.

## Our Experiences with the Project Team

A challenge we faced from the beginning was the small number of working hours for which we received financial compensation. Another difficulty, which arose several times for our team during the course of the project, was the fluctuation of team members. Each member of the team is or was studying a masters program and most of us also wrote our master thesis while working at the writing center and in other jobs. Hence, it became unavoidable to lose some of our team members. Each time a change in the team occurred, the distribution of responsibilities within the team had to be negotiated anew. This turned out to be quite difficult, since every member who dropped out of the project was deeply involved in all aspects of the project and had to be replaced accordingly.

During the project we learned that there were different tasks we had not anticipated before. Due to limited resources, we could not dedicate as much effort to different tasks as we actually needed. To work in such a project, one needs full attention and energy for a number of tasks: establishing peer tutoring in writing (training students, communicating peer tutoring, conceptualizing and organizing workshops), communicating with teachers and boards of schools (exchange, collecting information on planned activities), and coordinating activities within the project (communicating with sponsoring body, keeping track of financial situation, public relations). Furthermore, we struggled to set clear roles within our team for taking care of all those different tasks. Thus, decision-making was negotiated amongst all of us on most topics because no supreme authority existed to keep track of the broader issues of the project. It would have been necessary to have an additional, professional staff director for this program. However, having to negotiate issues amongst ourselves, we had many fruitful discussions on how to solve problems or how to plan next steps. It made us all feel responsible in setting up and maintaining the project goals. We tried to keep each other motivated and truly collaborated with one another.

## The Steering Group Initiative

In one of our conversations with Gerd Bräuer, he suggested the implementation of a steering group at each school in order to foster better collaboration among all participants of the project. This group should ideally consist of teachers, parents and members of our project team. The role of the steering group would be to actively support the development of a writing center and the establishment of WAC structures through peer tutoring in writing. The long-term perspective would be to transform the existing culture of writing, which focuses on assessment, towards a role of writing as a mode of learning. Teachers belonging to the group would be asked to spread the ideas and concepts of the steering group meetings among colleagues and through this smoothen communication and organisation between the board of school, teachers, high school students and us, the external representatives of the project. One concrete initiative of this steering group could be the creation of writing tasks, which would include required peer feedback and thus the use of the newly established peer tutoring.

Trying to build such a steering committee, we faced challenges mostly concerning the integration of the teachers into the project and also with integrating the project itself into the institution and into everyday school life. To change, let alone enter, school structures is extremely difficult since the German school curriculum is very tight and packed with content because some states in Germany decided to reduce high school from 9 to 8 years of study but retain the same syllabus. Therefore, teachers as well as students are exhausted, stressed and have very little spare time for what seems an extra-curricular activity. Since teachers did not get any extra reward, such as a certificate, release time or additional payment for participating in our project, there was very little interest in joining our endeavor. For the same reasons, the workshop for teachers that we planned never took place.

Our experiences got more positive with the third school we worked with, since we had received the chance of a fresh start after having gathered quite some insight from the first 18 months of the project. This time,

when talking to the school staff, we emphasized the importance of implementing a steering group and the active involvement of teachers in the unfolding of the project to secure its continuation after the support of our project team ended. From the beginning, the cooperation with teachers at this school was much better compared to our previous experience. Today we are especially proud to have found a teacher at that school who will be introduced to writing pedagogy and hence become a writing tutor himself. This teacher will receive a reduction in his weekly teaching load in order to invest time and effort directly in the project. Later on he will be in charge to recruit students and instruct them to become writing tutors. With this goal achieved, writing across the curriculum might be a possible next step at this school.

## Conclusions

The largely shown lack of institutional participation shows that it is extremely difficult to change existing patterns in institutions through external partners. Those structures seem impermeable against new theories and methods of writing, especially if these question the status quo of this key competence; here, using writing as the most important mode of assessment. Furthermore the challenges we faced indicate that our experiences with the EUV writing center and peer tutoring as a means of WAC cannot be transferred into high school settings easily. Instead, various factors need to be taken into account.<sup>[2]</sup>

1. Transferring the idea of a writing center and thus interdisciplinary learning and instruction within high school settings needs to be tackled strategically at a higher institutional level than those represented by high school students, university students, and discipline teachers. Developing WAC structures, either with or without a writing center or peer tutoring is a matter of intentional school development and needs to be carried out as a social and pedagogical developmental process from within the institution.
2. The successful unfolding of an initiative that truly shakes up fundamental beliefs – here the role of writing as a mode of assessment – needs to be administered by a steering group and include a need for analysis for the initiative, a mission statement, a working program with responsibility shared widely among colleagues, and a systematic in-house assessment.
3. We consider it to be crucial for the success of initiating WAC structures, that these schools need to feel responsible and accountable for creating and maintaining an environment in which peer tutoring and interdisciplinary learning can take place. This will require careful negotiation between heterogeneous goals and needs presented by different parts of the teaching faculty, administration, parents, and students.
4. Teachers of various disciplines, not only those teaching the first language, need to be involved in setting up WAC structures and, as a result, challenge the existing mainstream understanding of writing and the existing writing culture in the institution.
5. Planning and pursuing such a project should not be underestimated with regard to all necessary resources.

Even though we faced many challenges throughout the project, we definitely see that all of us grew over the course of time, especially with regard to communication and coordination skills. The high school students we worked with developed in a sense that they learned to be aware of the writing process and how to steer and optimize the latter with the help of writing strategies. In addition, they also grew in regard to their social skills, which will be of use for them in their final high school year and in the transition to college. For us as graduate students, this project allowed us to take responsibility to make decisions and develop our skills as tutors and leaders. We would therefore suggest that WAC initiatives should always integrate peer tutoring because it allows unique leadership experiences for students.

All in all, we learned much about the processes each one of us had to go through in terms of communication with the participating schools, teachers, students and the project team. We developed a clearer picture about possible and impossible improvements for future WAC collaborations between university and schools. We experienced that introducing writing center work to high school needs to go hand in hand with redefining teaching, learning, and the writing culture within schools.

## Appendix A - SWOT Analysis (SLZ Network Berlin/Brandenburg) by Gerd Bräuer

1. Are you participating in the project voluntarily or under constraints?

	I want to
	I feel obligated to do so
	I have to

2. Describe in one sentence what led to your participation in the project.
3. Do you know what the main goal of the project is? If yes, check YES and write down a keyword describing the goal. If you do not know what the main goal is or if you are not sure, check NO and write down a keyword that describes the goal assumed by you.

	Yes
	No
	I am not sure
	Your keyword

4. Do you know which role you play within the project? Or asked differently, What are you mainly doing within the project? If you know your role, check YES and write down a keyword that describes your function. If you are not sure which role you are playing, then check NO and write down a keyword that describes the role that is presumably expected from you.

	Yes
	No
	I am not sure
	Your keyword



5. Which personal gain do you expect from the project? Name your expectation in a clause.
6. Which three competencies (e.g. What are you good at? What do you know already?) would you definitely want to bring into the project? Please decide on a ranking order (1= most important competence).
7. Which further competencies (e.g. What are you good at? What do you already know?) do you see or assume other participants to have that you consider essential for the project? Please do not list more than three competencies and if possible list the participants' name in brackets right next to the competency.
8. Which other resources (e.g. working material or time) will you bring into the project? Please do not only think about the resources, which are directly linked with the project. For example, chocolate brought to team meetings by you can be motivational support. :-)
9. Which resources are, in your opinion, sufficiently available in the project?

	training staff
	training material
	space (rooms)
	financial resources
	time

10. Which goals of the project do you believe to be feasible? Please choose from the following options:

	The writing competencies of the participants (peer tutors) will be developed further.
	The high school student peer tutors will successfully complete their tutor training.
	The high school students will be regularly working as peer tutors in their schools.
	Teachers will continue to autonomously study on and about the learning platform ("Scriptorium").
	Teachers will initiate the setup of peer tutoring.
	A writing(-reading) center will be established at the school.
	High school students and teachers will be working together closely after the project has ended.
	The project team will develop further ideas for future projects on peer tutoring in schools.

11. What resources are missing or are not sufficient enough in the project?

	training staff
	training material
	space (rooms)
	financial resources
	time

- 12. Which competencies that you do not possess yourself (knowledge and skills) do you consider essential for the success of the project?
- 13. Which of your competencies or resources do you NOT want to provide for the project? Please justify your decision.
- 14. Which of the competencies (knowledge and skills) that you consider essential for the success of the project are, in your opinion, momentarily not available among the participants?
- 15. In which of the following areas do you already see problems or assume problems in the further development of the project?

	the main goal of the project
	the sub-goals of the project
	the organization of the project
	the implementation of the project
	the cooperation of the project's participants
	working material
	the project's supervision
	the project's evaluation

16. In your opinion, which of the project's goals cannot be pursued. Please check the following options:

	The writing competencies of the participants (peer tutors) will be developed further.
	The high school student peer tutors will successfully complete their tutor training.

	The high school students will be regularly working as peer tutors in their schools.
	Teachers will continue to autonomously study on and about the learning platform ("Scriptorium").
	Teachers will initiate the setup of peer tutoring.
	A writing(-reading) center will be established at the school.
	High school students and teachers will be working together closely after the project has ended.
	The project team will develop further ideas for future project on peer tutoring in schools.

17. How do you imagine positive external perceptions of the project?

	Somebody wants to donate money for continuing the project.
	A journalist wants to report on the project.
	Parents, colleagues, friends, acquaintances offer their support.
	Other schools want to establish peer tutoring in writing.

18. Name a person you know, that will, if asked, definitely support the project in any way. Note the form of support in brackets next to the name.

19. Which possibilities can already be used effectively under the current project conditions? (Yes No Response:)

Yes	No	
		Sponsoring
		Media interest
		Dedicated people
		Schools interested in cooperation
		Other (Please name and state YES or NO)

20. Which of the competencies and resources that the projects lacks, according to your opinion, should be cast externally? Where? Who?
21. What do you consider as a negative form of external perception of the project?

	A friend reacts with a helpless gesture, when asked if he knows about peer tutoring in writing.
	School mates talk behind backs about the weird peer tutors in writing.
	Parents, colleagues, friends or acquaintances discontinue their support.
	Schools interested in cooperation decide not to establish peer tutoring in writing.
	Other

22. Name a factor that you consider as the greatest external threat to the success of the project.
23. Do you know somebody that definitely has to be convinced to support the project, because he/she is currently an opponent of the project? Please name the reason that you assume to be responsible for the rejection.

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## Notes

[1] SWOT-analysis measures the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the project. Gerd Bräuer developed an online questionnaire for all participants to state their opinion on the four aspects mentioned before.

[2] Herbert Altrichter (2012), pedagogue and university professor, who examines the Austrian school system, draws similar conclusions.

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