

CHAPTER 6.

THE SCHREIBCENTER AT THE ALPEN-ADRIA-UNIVERSITÄT, KLAGENFURT, AUSTRIA

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The writing centre (henceforward: “SchreibCenter”) at the Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt was founded in 2004 and has since developed successfully, although it has been allotted only minimal financial means by the university. The history of the SchreibCenter is an example of how it is possible, in spite of minimal funding, to create an infrastructure and get appropriately entrenched in and acknowledged by the university. As will be shown, important steps to this goal are to find supporters and partners within faculty, acquire funds for teaching/courses, acquire funding for small projects, and find external partners and sponsors.

SIZE AND MISSION

The SchreibCenter at the University of Klagenfurt was founded in order to enhance the quality of written texts in the university. Its most prominent target group is of course students, but the mission statement in the statutes of the university (http://www.uni-klu.ac.at/rechtabt/downloads/Satzung_Teil_A.pdf, January 6, 2010) explicitly formulates that it is the aim of the SchreibCenter to “develop a high-quality writing standard in the university, in the first place with the students, but also with all other members of the university.”¹

The range of offers is thus directed at the different groups of university members and includes courses, tutoring and counseling for students as well as workshops for teachers and administrative personnel, and counseling for researchers, plus other pertinent measures that might enhance the quality of writing within but also beyond the university. The SchreibCenter is a rather small institution. The staff consists of one regular employee—the operative director (Carmen Mertlitsch) —along with the scientific director (Ursula Doleschal),

who is at the same time full professor of Slavic linguistics. Teaching and tutoring is provided by 13 lecturers and nine tutors on the basis of contracts. These personnel are paid by the university, which makes available a moderate budget for daily business and other technical equipment. The university has also put one office room and one lecture room at the disposal of the SchreibCenter. For other financial needs, the SchreibCenter relies on external funding/fundraising.

Nevertheless, the SchreibCenter offers full-fledged courses, workshops, and individual counseling as well as tutorials accompanying courses in different disciplines.

Last year, for example, the SchreibCenter offered 20 courses,² which were attended by 230 students, three workshops for university staff, and about 100 hours of individual counseling and tutoring.

LOCATION AND AFFILIATION

Klagenfurt is the capital of the Austrian province of Carinthia (bordering both Slovenia and Italy) and is located in a bilingual area of a German-speaking majority (517,000 people) and a Slovene-speaking autochthonous minority (14,000). The city has 90,000 inhabitants. Economically, Carinthia depends very much on tourism, but there is also some industry (microtechnology, wood-processing, food) and agriculture. Culturally speaking, Carinthia is a traditionalist country with a remarkable number of folk musicians and choirs. As to education and literacy, they do not seem to be highly valued among the population, let alone among local politicians. In spite of the fact that Klagenfurt is the native town of Robert Musil and Ingeborg Bachmann, two of the most distinguished German-speaking writers of the twentieth century, and although every year a literary contest for the Ingeborg Bachmann prize is carried out, the city of Klagenfurt has no common public library (beside the Slovene library of studies, which offers literature in Slovene). Many students at the University of Klagenfurt come from families without higher education.

The University of Klagenfurt is a state university and a relatively young university; it was founded in 1970 and in the beginning offered only humanities and pedagogical studies. In 1990, a faculty of economics and IT was added, and lately, IT was enhanced by microtechnologies such as mechatronics, and a technical faculty was founded. In this way, undergraduate (bachelor) students can enroll either for humanistic studies, such as philosophy, philology, history, and applied cultural studies, or for more socially oriented studies: media communication, pedagogy, psychology; and for geography, mathematics, economics, and business studies, as well as information technology studies and microtechnolo-

gies. Besides, all these studies can also be enrolled in as graduate (master) and PhD programs.

The working language of the university is generally German. One master program is taught completely in English (information technology), and English is also an important working language for some other fields of studies, such as psychology, and especially for PhD studies. Currently about 10,000 students are enrolled in the Alpen-Adria-Universität (about 87% of whom are Austrian). Although Slovene is also an official language in parts of Carinthia, this is not reflected in language use at the university.

“LITERACY” AND “WRITING”: WHY STUDENTS WRITE, IN WHAT LANGUAGES AND DIALECTS, IN RELATION TO WHAT GOALS?

During their studies, students have to write a number of course assignments and theses, usually in German, sometimes also in English; in the philologies they may also write their theses in the language they are studying. The exact number of written assignments differs significantly in terms of the respective field of studies; e.g., the undergraduate study of business administration currently has the least number (one thesis in the beginning and one—the bachelor thesis—at the end of the program of studies), whereas philological studies, such as Slavic studies, include at least six theses, including two bachelor theses. Theses are a compulsory part of Austrian academic education and aim at making students acquainted with doing research. As Otto Kruse (2009) contends, this tradition goes back to the Humboldtian reform of the university and the ideal of the unity of teachers and students, who in the nineteenth century worked together in the form of seminars. The course type of seminar is still seminal in German-speaking academia, although very often it is not a place of research any more, and neither are seminar theses. As a genre, seminar theses are usually modeled on the example of research articles. In some fields students also have to write reports (e.g., after an internship); students of pedagogy moreover have to master the genre of reflection (“Reflexionsarbeit”). At the Alpen-Adria-Universität, bachelor theses are usually understood as a form of seminar thesis, whereas master theses are considerably larger and tend to be seen as an autonomous contribution to research.

In contradistinction to the Anglo-Saxon practice and also to what pupils usually learn at school, essay writing is not common in German-speaking universities and not in Klagenfurt either (Stadter, 2003); neither is creative writing, though very recently there have been attempts in the realm of Germanistics

and Media studies in Klagenfurt; these courses, however, are not part of the compulsory syllabus.

In these ways, students usually write in order to get credit for a course or toward receiving the final degree. It seems that many professors share this view and understand written assignments as a form of examination and not as an instrument of learning or research. In the teutonic tradition, writing is something one learns once and forever at school (cf. Čmejrková & Daneš, 1996). Therefore, professors expect their students to be able to write academic texts in a correct and adequate language. Students, on the other hand, come from a schooling system where style is seen as an individual, creative, and even artistic form of written expression (in the tradition of Leo Spitzer, cf. Fix, Poethe, & Yos, 2003, pp. 26-32) and where objective exposition has not been taught sufficiently,³ perhaps with the exception of the text type “account.” In university, they are faced with totally new genres, the sense of which is unclear to them, and so they often feel lost. When they try to transfer what they have learned in school, especially what they conceive of as “good style,” the results do not usually meet the standards of academic texts. Professors are not a great help either; they often lack the instruments for adequate feedback on questions of text and style and therefore in the end resignedly accept what students deliver (cf. the interviews in Gruber et al., 2006).

THE LOBBY

Under such general conditions, the dean of the faculty of economics and informatics, Paul Kellermann, launched the idea of founding a writing centre in spring 2003, and so assistant professor Helmut Guggenberger from the department of sociology mustered a work group of about 10 volunteers—professors from different fields of study who were concerned and interested in students’ writing, plus one graduate student—who discussed necessary measures and worked out a conceptual design and a schedule which were presented to the founding convent⁴ in autumn. At that time a profound structural reform of the universities was being carried out in Austria, which proved a felicitous opportunity for the founding of new units. After a short period of lobbying by all members of the work group, the founding convent accepted the writing centre and included it in the new statutes, which were enacted on January 1, 2004. As a scholar of linguistics, I volunteered to be the scientific director of the writing centre, and this idea was accepted by the rector in February 2004, who in a conference with the work group commissioned us to start operating by the beginning of the autumn term, i.e., in October 2004, allotting the SchreibCenter

a budget of € 15,000 for the academic year 2004/2005. It was also decreed that the writing centre should function as a pilot project for two years, after which an evaluation would take place.

Taking into account financial and human resources, the first step, in order to get started that autumn, was to begin with a course program and to develop other services, especially individual counselling. This approach was also a natural consequence of the fact that there were some people who were able and willing to teach writing courses at once. Most of them, especially Maria Nicolini, who for years was the only person in the university who regularly offered seminars on academic writing, relied on experience in this field.⁵

They argued for the pedagogical value of discussing the problems and facets of writing in groups. This teaching concept was built mainly on the findings of applied linguistics, taking into account on the one hand the academic proficiency of students, on the other disciplinary groupings. This approach draws on the writings of Ken Hyland (2004) and on projects in writing proficiency (especially the one carried out in Vienna under the guidance of Helmut Gruber, cf. Gruber et al., 2006, but also Pohl, 2007). Furthermore the findings of contrastive rhetoric (Clyne, 1987; Čmejrková & Daneš, 1997; Duszak, 1994, etc.) led to the designing of special courses both in English and in German for students with another native language. Last but not least, the differences among academic, journalistic, literary, and administrative styles, as studied by functional stylistics in the East European tradition (Fleischer & Michel, 1979; Mistrík, 1985; Riesel, 1959; Tošović, 1988) led to a differentiation between courses for academic writing and creative and/or journalistic writing. In the end, the possibilities and competencies of the people available on the spot were also taken into account. Therefore, the concept resulted in a pluralistic approach to individual teaching methods, which the newly constituted work group fervently discussed in many sessions and workshops.

These core concepts have been developed since and have resulted in variations as part of a three-layered program for beginners, intermediate students, and (postgraduate) students who are writing a qualification assignment (master or PhD thesis). This program is further differentiated into fields of studies, aiming at disciplinary groupings including business studies, philologies and history, technical studies, etc. But there are also courses for all students, regardless of their field of study, for academic, creative, and professional writing. Recently, a special form of peer tutoring was added, the “open writing lab” (Offene Schreibwerkstatt, cf. Halfmann, Perschak, & Doleschal, 2009), a course or forum where students from all disciplines and grades can discuss their problems and receive input and support from peer tutors. This innovation was designed by Carmen Mertlitsch drawing on Roth (1999).

The idea to work with student peer tutors goes back to a workshop with Gerd Bräuer in 2004, but only in 2006 were we able to start with a pilot project, and in 2007 with a first version of a training program (see Mertlitsch & Doleschal in press). Theoretically the work of the SchreibCenter continues to be based on applied linguistics. Therefore, the peer tutors, who come from different fields, are trained for identifying categories of language, such as text structure or elements of grammar and style, and design their feedback in accordance. Peer tutors are deployed for the open writing lab, tutorials, workshops, and individual counselling for students. The tutor is paid individually (currently € 15 per hour). At present we are educating a group of peer tutors to give support in English in collaboration with the English department.

Collaboration and networking have turned out to be the SchreibCenter's main key to success. In the pilot phase of the SchreibCenter (until 2007), when there was no regular staff, Carmen Mertlitsch and Jürgen Struger, who had graduated in linguistics and German from the University of Klagenfurt and ran a bureau for counselling and correcting academic texts,⁶ worked for the SchreibCenter on a contract basis. They initiated a survey of demand regarding writing skills of students, during which the three of us sought conversations with faculty who were responsible for course programs. We learned about the concerns of professors and were at the same time able to make the new institution of a writing centre known among faculty and to propagate the idea of supporting students' writing skills. Reactions were very different, but some people were immediately in favour of the initiative and keen on getting support in their own fields. As a consequence we organized a workshop for a research group of PhD students and assistants and a tandem course with a seminar in psychology, both in English. In 2006, we succeeded in implementing tutorials with peer tutors for seminars, first in informatics, later in psychology. Furthermore, consultations were given to professors on how to care for students' writing skills, drawing on the model of dissemination proposed by Gerd Bräuer (cf. Bräuer, 2007).

It certainly helped that I was a member of the university senate and thus had the opportunity for informal talks with full professors and the rector. Both Carmen Mertlitsch and Jürgen Struger, on the other hand, were active among peers, trying out all forms of collaboration, such as projects for other departments (e.g., a practical guide for teachers, Mertlitsch, 2010), workshops for staff, individual counseling for staff, workshops for external partners, etc. These projects were at the time a vital source of funding, because until 2007 the SchreibCenter had to finance its workforce with the help of fundraising. At the same time, all these collaborations became the basis for external relationships, e.g., with the academies of health care, a post-secondary school, where 10-14 workshops for students have been carried out each year up to now, and which

are financed by the governmental office of the province. Equally important, such projects were a challenge that called for and stimulated professional development in all members of the SchreibCenter.

SUCCESS AND UNFULFILLED AMBITIONS

The most sustainable success of the Klagenfurt SchreibCenter is probably that it initiated a process of consciousness among faculty and students. Especially younger professors actively take up advice and design their own courses in a way that includes writing assignments and feedback to the students. Others invite us to give input on academic writing in their seminars. As to students, they show a constantly growing interest in the courses and consultations of the SchreibCenter, especially in the open writing lab.

The second main success, to my mind, is that the SchreibCenter as a permanent and autonomous institution of the university is now beyond question. This was not always the case, since the idea that writing as a key competence should be learned before coming to university is still very much alive among professors.

Thirdly, it is a great success for me personally that Jürgen Struger got a regular job as assistant in the AEEC Deutsch (“Österreichisches Kompetenzzentrum für Deutschdidaktik”) in 2006 and Carmen Mertlitsch was regularly employed at the SchreibCenter in 2007. Similarly, I consider it a great success that we can train students as peer tutors and advisors, and in this way give them the opportunity to do a job that is in demand—and earn money with linguistics.

Of course, there are also unfulfilled ambitions as to writing skills of students. Usually, students who have attended any activity of the SchreibCenter feel empowered and confident in their newly acquired skills. This is not congruent with my own rating of their competence; e.g., two of my own students went to workshops and tutorials and were convinced that they had learned a lot. The master theses they handed in, however, did not reflect this self-assessment; they were still rather badly written. On the other hand, I have to admit that they were able to revise their papers on the basis of my comments and then signed in very good theses. Reactions by faculty show that all people who attend courses of the SchreibCenter benefit from their learning of the revision process.

NOTES

1. Cf. The original: “Die professionelle Auseinandersetzung mit der Schreibtätigkeit ist eine Aufgabe einer auf internationale Wettbewerbsfähigkeit bedachten Universität.

Ziel des SchreibCenters der Universität Klagenfurt ist die Entwicklung eines qualitativ hochwertigen universitären Schreibstandards insbesondere bei den Studierenden aber auch bei allen anderen Universitätsangehörigen. Dies wird durch ein entsprechendes Kursangebot, durch Beratung sowie durch interdisziplinäre Zusammenarbeit gewährleistet. ” (http://www.uni-klu.ac.at/rechtabt/downloads/Satzung_Teil_A.pdf, January 6, 2010).

2. Courses were financed by other departments, but organized and supervised by the SchreibCenter.
3. Although the syllabus for German in grammar schools gives equal significance to both subjective and objective text types (cf. Lehrpläne der AHS-Oberstufe http://www.bmukk.gv.at/schulen/unterricht/lp/lp_ahs_oberstufe.xml and “Deutsch” http://www.bmukk.gv.at/medienpool/11853/lp_neu_ahs_01.pdf), it seems that both teachers and pupils are on the whole more inclined to the genre of interpretation of literary texts (Saxalber Tetter, 2008).
4. “Gründungskonvent” —a work group of university members who had to formulate the statutes of the university on the basis of a new university-law.
5. See, e.g., Nicolini, 2001, 2008.
6. See Mertlitsch & Struger, 2007.

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