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Using rhetorical studies to engage students and faculty at two German high schools to improve communication competencies

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Abstract: Engaging students and faculty at two German high schools through rhetorical studies to move learners from tacit to explicit and implicit knowledge.

Report on a transatlantic collaboration between two German high schools and a WAC program in the US to engage students and faculty through rhetorical studies to move student learners from tacit to explicit and implicit rhetorical knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

In fall 2018, the director of a public high school in Central Germany approached the coordinator of an established WAC Program at a university in the Southern United States about a possible collaboration. Soon after, the director of a private high school joined the collaboration to plan, organize and conduct a 16 hour-workshop for high school students in their last year of high school, in Germany known as Gymnasium. This was the beginning of a collaboration we hoped would be established for years to come. During the following months we planned the scope and reach of a workshop series that was intended to engage high school students, high school faculty and parents. Due to the pandemic, the initial workshops conducted in fall 2019 so far have been the only ones.

The overall goal for the workshop was to make visible and tangible what students already practiced and applied. At both schools, students study 3 foreign languages and take classes according to specialization tracts that will prepare them for college majors. Given these various curriculum pathways, students are figuring out themselves how knowledge in the various subjects connect to prepare them not only for the final exams (Abitur) at the end of the 13th grade, but also for the major, which they will immediately enroll in when entering university. At the planning stage, we talked about how in the UK and US, education

researchers have studied the importance of threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2003) and how teaching for transfer (Yancey, Robertson and Taczak, 2014) helps students to reach and cross certain thresholds. Interconnectedness of subject knowledge is not consciously promoted, except during “Project Days,” an opportunity to research information and present solutions to specific problems that are part of current debates in society.

Hence the series of workshops was designed for two different audiences: high school students as part of so-called “Project Days,” where they apply newly introduced rhetorical concepts to solve problems as part of case studies over two - three days and high school faculty joining the student-centered workshop, and discussing how they can employ rhetorical concepts in their teaching at one Q&A discussion. Initially we had also planned to meet with parents in the evening to attend a Q&A discussion about how rhetoric can help make (written) communication more effective in and outside of the classroom. Due to time constraints, the organized discussions with faculty and parents did not fully materialize. The paper will focus only on the student workshops at two different types of schools: a public gymnasium at the center of town and a private full-day gymnasium with elementary school and dormitories on a campus on the outskirts of town.

Rhetoric as a subject is not taught, so students struggle with the “secrets” of how communication works. Another important aspect of high school in Germany is the fact that every student studies three foreign languages. If a student does not begin immersion into a foreign language in kindergarten or elementary school, they do select the first foreign language when they join the Gymnasium in 5th grade. Most schools offer English, but French, Spanish and Russian are also offered as first foreign language. Increasingly, high schools also offer Latin as it is a desired prerequisite for admittance to language studies, educational studies, religious studies, theology, philosophy, history, law school and medical school. Gradually, the number of schools offering bilingual classes for subjects, such as mathematics, physics, history, geography, economics, politics, etc. is increasing. Within a multilingual Europe that works to offer high mobility to its citizens across national borders, being able to communicate in more than one language is highly valued.

When comparing the preparation for the major, we need to note that the Composition 1 and 2 sequence at US universities is not part of college education in Germany. In fact, university education across all countries participating in the Bologna Process does not separate the instruction of writing (or communication) and instead combines subject-specific instruction

of constructed domain knowledge with the terminology and jargon in that subject. What is missing is a systematic approach to teaching effective communication and subject knowledge, as known as Writing Across the Curriculum in the US.

THE PROJECT

This series of workshops aims to introduce participants to the field of writing studies in order to provide strategies and best practices for successful communication in academic contexts and beyond. The following theories and frameworks are being discussed: Writing and Rhetoric, Writing About Writing (WAW), Writing to Learn (WTL), Writing for Transfer, Writing and Threshold Concepts, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), and Writing to Solve Problems in Professional Environments.

The overarching frame for these workshops is to connect the theory with practical applications, so that in the end participating students and faculty will compile a toolkit with a deeper understanding of how effective written communication works. Referenced authors and texts are considered milestones in the development of writing studies over the past 70 years. Participating students and faculty learn how the collaboration addresses what parents and faculty expect in the form of moving from tacit knowledge, defined as prior personal experience that is difficult to express, to implicit knowledge, defined as the application and adaptation of explicit knowledge to new (writing) situations.

The goal was to make explicit the communication competencies students learn to be transferable to both academic and professional environments, which is in line with the goals of the Bologna Process. The B.A. requirements in the Bologna Area only stipulate 6 semesters, meaning that a student will enroll in their major(s) and/or minor(s) upon entering the university. That means that any general education requirements have to be completed in high school. Yet the structure of high school curricula often focuses on the delivery of constructed domain knowledge in various individual subjects and not on application of knowledge outside the classroom, rhetorical strategies and transfer of knowledge.

During the workshops, the *Writing About Writing*, along with the *Teaching For Transfer* and *Writing Across the Curriculum* pedagogies, were introduced as theoretical frameworks

to workshop participants to provide rhetorical knowledge that can be articulated, referred to and applied through transfer in 12th/13th grade high school classes that function similarly to the General Education Program (GEP) in the US.

THE PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

The public high school at the center of town offers full-day teaching and learning through curricular and extracurricular activities to about 1,100 students. The school does not include a dormitory. Classes start at 8:00 am and end at 1:10 pm. After school programming is available till 4:30 pm.

The school partners with area elementary schools. Parents have a choice where to send their children in 5th grade, so a clear articulation of the gymnasium's mission is important to attract a diverse and motivated student body.

The school's motto is: everyone is unique, everyone is different. Faculty strive to create an atmosphere of reciprocal respect and mutual appreciation and promote motivation and persistence, openness and creativity, and create opportunities for students to assume responsibilities for themselves while solving problems and caring for others.

The school's pedagogy is grounded in the development of the individual with the goal to develop subject-specific, methodological and social competencies that lead to self-confidence and a successful completion of the Abitur (final comprehensive exams at the end of the 13th grade). Students can also complete the exams at the end of 10th grade and enter a professional pathway to AA degrees.

The high school has developed various foci that students can concentrate on:

Languages

For the past ten years, the high school has offered one subject in English: Biology.. Starting in 11th grade, students can learn constructed domain knowledge and subject-specific language that prepares them to pass the bilingual certificate for the Abitur.

As the high school only offers limited bilingual classes, the learning of the foreign languages is expanded to offer 5 hours a week. Contrary to many other high schools, which offer English as their first foreign language, this public high school offers French.

- 5th grade: First foreign language: French or English 5 hours a week
- 5th/6th grade: Students who participated in Immersion English in elementary school can participate in 2 hours a week of English to continue immersion when they select French as their first foreign language.
- 7th grade: Second foreign language: English or French or Latin
- 9th -13th grade: Third foreign language: Latin (Language certificate desired for language studies, theology, religious studies, philosophy, German, history, law school and medical school). Other language choices are: French, Spanish, Latin or Russian.

Some extracurricular clubs students can join are: Library, Foreign Language Clubs for languages taught and for Korean, Student Newspaper, among others.

Natural Sciences / MINT

Besides offering pathways in the arts, languages, music and humanities, the high school offers a clustered pathway for students interested in what we refer to in the US as STEM: Mathematics, Informatics, Natural Sciences and Technology. The school is part of the MINTEC Schule © network where students can graduate with the MINT Certificate. Some of the groups students can join are: Mathematics Club, Robotics Club, Technology Club, School Garden, Chemistry Club, Sustainability Club (as part of the ERASMUS sponsored Project)

Sport

An active mind lives in an active body. The high school offers outdoor activities, Adventure Club, Kayak Club, Climbing, Gymnastics, Chess, Zumba, among others. And indoors, Futsal offers soccer fans a way to be active.

Music

The school offers the subject music to learn about the history of music. Extra-curricular groups include brass orchestra, choir, folk and pop music, rock music, big band orchestra, the big orchestra and the violin orchestra.

Individual and Society

One noteworthy aspect of extra-curricular activities are students mentoring and tutoring younger students in writing, reading, and mathematics. Students also run the library by selecting books and organizing events. Additionally, the high school offers open care for any student from 1:10 - 3:25 pm organized by a social worker.

THE PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL

The full day school offers educational pathways from elementary school to the Abitur (13th grade) and the option for students to live at a dormitory. The concept for this school is rooted in pedagogical concepts, ranging from multi-channel learning (Pestalozzi), development of the independent individual according to their strengths (Montessori), competency-based teaching and learning with a focus on action and activities (Dewey), and the practicing of person freedoms in authentic situations. (Freinet). Furthermore, the pedagogical approach to teaching and learning at the school is informed by John Hattie's meta-analysis of educational research which he summarized in *Visible Learning*.

The mission of the school is to value each student as an individual according to the principle of equality while also designing curricular and non-curricular activities to experience the individual within a networked community. The faculty aims to model this type of interactions in the classroom as well as outside of it. Students learn by themselves and collaborate in groups in the tradition of reform pedagogies.

This pedagogical model starts in elementary school, which offers an additional way to experience the world: it offers bilingual classes through immersion. Two faculty members teach using one language: one teacher only speaks English while the other speaks only German. Most days, content is only delivered in English by a native speaker, while the other teacher provides support, which can be described as either "English as a second language" or "German as a second language," depending on the student's origin. The goal is to develop language competencies in both German and English simultaneously.

The Gymnasium offers bilingual classes in select subjects from 5th -13th grade. Until recently, students only started in the 5th grade with English as their first foreign language. Spanish, Latein and French are other foreign languages students can choose from, depending

on their interests or projected educational pathway: associate or college degrees, which require at least one semester study abroad, or select majors require at least 4 semesters of Latin prior to enrolling in university. In 7th grade, students enroll in a second foreign language, and in 11th grade they enroll in the third foreign language.

Subjects currently offered for bilingual learning to support learning of subject-specific language:

- 7th grade: Geography
- 8th grade: History with travel to England
- 9th grade: History
- 10th grade: Politics and Economy
- 11th grade: Mathematics
- 12th grade: Physics
- 13th grade: Physics and preparation for DIA Diploma (Deutsches Internationales Abitur or “German International Abitur”)

Generally, students learn in class settings, in groups and individually, at their own pace and with guidance from their teachers.

The Workshop

High schools host so-called Project Days, where an entire class (e.g. sophomore) or the entire upper division (freshmen - seniors) shifts to projects and problem-solving. Faculty prepare authentic learning situations and monitor the progress students make. Students join teams based on interest and are highly motivated to work towards the goal of solving the problem(s) and presenting their findings to the school.

This workshop was offered as part of a distributed Project Days. Only a few teams worked on projects. All students self-selected into the workshop or other projects. This workshop option about rhetorical studies garnered a lot of interest for various reasons. Seniors as part of the high-achieving English course wanted to see how well their English stacked up in an English only workshop. Some students had received invitations to study in Great Britain or in the United States and others were attracted by the scope of the workshop. Others were

interested in learning more rhetoric and writing rules that go beyond grammar and style. At both high schools, seniors self-selected into the workshop, which was capped at 30.

Initially, the workshop was planned for three days. Due to time constraints, the workshop was hosted on two days at the public high school (Monday/Tuesday) and over a three day period at the private high school (Wednesday / Thursday / Friday). For this paper, I will elaborate on the three day workshop.

The workshop is divided into three blocks:

- Literacy and Rhetoric Practices
- Research and reflection
- Professional vs Academic Writing

All students would sit at tables that formed a large rectangle, thus facing each other and the front. Discussing concepts and following up to previous contributions appeared as a natural flow.

Day 1	Focus	Activity / Exercise
8:00-8:45 AM	Introductions and Goals for this workshop <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What does good writing look like? · Writing as Process and as Product: Writing Makes Thinking Visible · Writing to Learn as guiding principle 	Mind-map about prior knowledge and sharing
9:00-9:45 AM	What is literacy and who / what are literacy sponsors?	Thinking about and outlining one literacy along a timeline

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Deborah Brandt: Sponsors of Literacy 	
10:00-10:45 AM	<p>Introduction to Writing About Writing (WAW) and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Discussion of relationship between English as Second Language, Academic Writing and Writing in the Disciplines (WAC) <p>Lucille McCarthy: A Stranger in Strange Lands</p>	Mapping of individual academic work after learning about McCarthy's research
11:00-11:45 AM	<p>Discussion of Writing Threshold Concepts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What are the Thresholds? · John Bean: What Expert Writers Know <p>Keith Grant-Davie: The Rhetorical Situation and its Constituents (rhetor, audience, exigency, constraints, kairos, discourse)</p>	Application of concept of rhetorical situation
noon-1:00 PM	Lunch	
1:00-1:45 PM	<p>Writing and Rhetoric: logos, pathos, ethos; canons, narrative ways of knowing ecology, embodiment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Doug Downs: Rhetoric: Making Sense of Human Interactions and Meaning-Making 	Creating a flow-chart of various rhetorical elements

2:00-3:00 PM	The Role of Reflection: CCC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The goal is to see what part of what we studied and discussed helped us Confirm what we have already known, Challenge our own previous experiences, and Complicate our understanding and perceptions of the subject 	Writing of a reflection on Day 1 and sharing within group > one of each group with workshop
Day 2	Focus	Activity / Exercise
8:00-8:45 AM	Review of previous day activities; Q&A Introduction to Habits of Mind	Write down: one new insight, one question about writing
9:00-9:45 PM	Writing as part of Larger Conversations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stuart Greene: Argument as Conversation: The Role of Inquiry in Writing a Researched Argument 	Application of theory to the “parlor” metaphor and sharing of examples within group > one of each group with workshop (laptop, MS Word?)
10:00-10:45 AM	Genre Analysis: Genres as maps to provide orientation for rhetor and reader <ul style="list-style-type: none"> John Swales: Create a Research Space: (CARS) Model of Research Instructions 	Textual Analysis of an academic paper: Stephen Sakalicky: Was this analysis helpful?
11:00-11:45 AM	Revision Strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nancy Sommers: Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers 	Revising and editing of “parlor” metaphor

Noon-1:00 PM	Lunch	
1:00- 1:45 PM	Responding to Writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Richard Straub: Responding-Really Responding-to Other Student's Writing 	1, explore previous experience with peer-review 2, revisiting list after introduction to role, importance and strategies for peer-review
2:00- 3:00 PM	Mapping Writing Lives: Discussion of student lives and their writing habits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Grabill et al.: Revisualizing Composition Reflection on Day 2 Confirm what we have already known, Challenge our own previous experiences, and Complicate our understanding and perceptions of the subject	Mapping of individual writing activities and share group > workshop
Day 3	Focus	Activity / Exercise
8:00- 8:45 AM	Review of previous day activities; Q&A Writing Beyond High School and College: Professional Writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · William Hart-Davidson: Patterns of Technical Communication 	-Write down: one new insight, one question about writing -Create a list of genres in technical and professional communication

9:00- 9:45 AM	Professional Communication in the Workplace <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Stanley Dicks: Managing Projects · Burnett et al.,: Diversity in the Workplace · Brenda Bailey-Hughes: Building Trust · Blake Scott: Ethical and Legal Matters 	Design a flowchart to reflect the various aspects of professional communication
10:00- 10:45 AM	Transfer between Academic and Professional Writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Robertson et al.: Notes toward a Theory of Prior Knowledge 	Drawing on the discussions and what you have learned from the presentations, discuss the role of transfer in your writing
11:00- 11:45 AM	Reflection (Day 3) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Confirm what we have already known, Challenge our own previous experiences, and Complicate our understanding and perceptions of the subject Presentation of Certificates	Writing of a reflection on Day 3 and sharing within group > one of each group with workshop

In order to create a particular rhythm, the workshop was divided into hour-long sequences. Over 45 minutes long, each sequence consisted of an introduction and summary of a concept, followed by a written activity to apply the concept to students' lives, and ended with a discussion of the application in round robin style. To help workshop participants focused, a slide presentation included the titles of the texts with author pictures, the concepts, terminology, definitions, and models / examples. To guide the written activities, a work book accompanied the workshop with prompts. Including the prompt and access to the presentation slides was intended to allow students to continue their thinking about newly gained insights.

Between these sequences we had planned breaks, which sometimes got shortened due to the enthusiastic discussions and Q&A. Sometimes, faculty in attendance joined the discussions, and conversations about the workshop spilled over to lunch (with faculty and some students meeting at a table in the cafeteria or a nearby restaurant) and after school. Everyone contributed from their point of view to the discussions, thus creating a diverse environment with mutual respect. Grammar was no longer the focus of the interactions (as is in the language classroom) and learning about how language and communication works anchored everyone's attention. And once I discussed Writing Across the Curriculum and the importance of levels of comprehension, the last remaining students hesitant to speak up would raise their hands. This lesson alone prompted a change in mind-set among a few students. The discussion of habits of mind offered another approach to thinking about thinking and the role the mind plays in becoming a successful student and future professional.

Each day was bookended with reflection. At the beginning of each day, workshop participants would establish a basis of their understanding, either by referring to prior knowledge or new concepts and applications from the previous workshop days (on day 2 and 3). And at the end of each day, a reflection allowed students to review the concepts and applications and make connections. Granted, this is not an easy task. Yet, when participants shared their reflections, others learned from them and expanded their learning.

CONCLUSION

Students at both high schools follow individual learning paths, yet the students participating in the workshops were able to understand and apply the concepts discussed in the workshop to their education and projected some of them to their probable future. The concepts introduced to them made the invisible visible. The discussions and applications of select theories and concepts moved participants from tacit to implicit knowledge. In the reflections, and especially in the final round of sharing reflections, students realized the connections across classes and no longer viewed one subject as an isolated task list; the rhetorical concepts, introduced in the workshop, helped them see how the various subjects or disciplines are all part of a larger, individual Discourse (see Gee, 1989).

Once students received their certificates, we would go outside and have pictures taken with certificates in hand at both schools. For some students, it marked a moment of self-actualization. They were able to follow the workshop, learn new concepts and be able to not only apply those to their lives, but to also talk about them. The focus was no longer on a certain grammar rule that they were not able to master.

A three-day workshop has its limitations, as concepts and application are not anchored in students' long term memory. But it offers new ways of thinking how written and oral communication works in discipline-specific settings. In the final reflection, students shared how much they liked the fact that they are now more aware of rhetoric as a subject that can be studied and researched. Furthermore, knowing that rhetorical strategies exist motivates them to ask questions about these in case they cannot identify them.

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