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# Challenging our Lineages: Lessons on Language and Writing from a Writing Center Collaboration between Germany and Australia

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## Abstract

This article describes how an unexpected observation by researchers studying writing support for nonnative speakers of English at German and Australian universities became the central insight of the work and resulted in the development of new literacy support measures. Only when the German researchers encountered Australian models of student literacy support did they realize that the German model of a writing center relied heavily on a US heritage while Australian models of student literacy support could be traced back to language and literacy support models from the United Kingdom. The central difference lay in the role that language was considered to have: while language skills were subsumed under writing in one model, writing skills were subsumed under the umbrella of academic language in another. Applying cultural anthropological approaches to the recognition of these two different perspectives allowed the German writing center staff to broaden their horizon. The staff is now able to use these new influences both in theory and practice at a time when German writing studies is establishing itself as a discipline and when many German writing centers might need to look for new allies in their institutions and secure new sources of funding.

Writing is a universal practice for all students in every context and country around the world, and as students enter tertiary (or higher) education, new demands are placed on them that require the development of a new set of skills. Among the many avenues to researching writing centers and researching how writing is learned and taught, cultural anthropology can provide a valuable perspective. Several studies have utilized this approach for research into the development of literacy skills in higher education contexts, for instance Shirley Heath & Brian Street (2008), Theresa Lillis (2008), Mary Sheridan (2012), Georganne Nordstrom (2015), and Michelle Miley (2017). Cultural anthropology teaches us that surprises in the field can yield the most interesting insights because only through challenging our expectations can we find out that we had them in the first place. In anthropology, being surprised and puzzled by our research field is a positive event because it shows us that we are becoming aware of our biases. When we encounter the new, we compare it with our existing knowledge (Heath & Street, 2008, pp. 32–38) and, in a reflexive approach, question our existing beliefs (Heath & Street, 2008, pp. 122–125). In the following, I will describe how such an experience of puzzlement due to differences between an emphasis on language and an emphasis on writing in two geographical contexts led to a better understanding of our writing center’s theoretical grounding and to new practices we are implementing.

In the early 2000s, a colleague and I were international PhD students at Monash University, Australia. More than ten years later, we became aware that we both were now working in contexts supporting student literacy on different sides of the world: she in a language and literacy support context at an Australian university, I at a newly established writing center in Germany. We also both offered support to students using English as an additional language. Over the course of 18 months, together with two colleagues in our respective institutions, we prepared and eventually secured funding for a research project funded by the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service)<sup>1</sup> to visit our respective universities and collaborate on research into student academic literacy. The focus of our work was the role of language and writing support for students with English as an additional language. Through qualitative research in our two settings, we aimed to find out more about how our approaches differed and which elements of these approaches we might be able to integrate into our home universities.<sup>2</sup>

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1 The DAAD/PPP Australia Germany funding scheme, see <https://www.daad.de/hochschulen/programme-weltweit/mobilitaet/ppp/de/23482-programm-des-projektbezogenen-personenaustauschs-ppp-mit-verschiedenen-partnerlaendern/>. At the time of writing, the other publication resulting from this research project is Meyer (2019).

2 The project was granted IRB approval by the University Human Ethics Committee at La Trobe University (#HEC18057).

Beyond what we had expected and the practical insights gained in terms of language, literacy, and writing support, our collaboration also yielded a surprising result: unconsciously, we on the German side had always assumed that somewhere in our Australian partner universities, we would find a writing center. Because our colleagues reported they were supporting students in developing their writing, we felt that there had to be a center from which this support originated at their institution. We looked for this Australian center unsuccessfully on the websites of our colleagues' universities and assumed that it might be hidden from view or possibly going by a different name. We only realized quite late how heavily our gaze was influenced by expectations that can be traced back to the influence of a US writing center heritage on German writing center work. To better understand the origin of this bias, a look at the history of our German writing center is helpful.

When we started our writing center at the University of Konstanz in September 2012, we were given a brief: to develop systematic and sustainable support for student writing throughout the course of their degrees as well as offer further education and training for lecturers. At the same time, we were given substantial freedom in terms of exactly how we wanted to achieve these goals. Because of a federal grant scheme from the German Ministry for Education and Research aimed at improving the quality of teaching in higher education contexts,<sup>3</sup> Germany experienced a surge in the foundation of writing centers as well as the expansion of many existing writing support schemes from 2011 onwards (Knorr, 2016). Many of these new centers benefitted enormously from the work done by a few pioneering German writing centers from the 1990s onwards, such as the ones in Bochum, Bielefeld, or Freiburg (Girgensohn & Sennewald, 2012, p. 87), and the scholarship, expertise, and peer tutoring models that these centers had brought to Germany. In our case, in the first year of our work, we drew, for example, on a book published by Katrin Girgensohn & Nadja Sennewald (2012); we participated in a peer tutoring conference in Jena that reinforced our decision to establish a peer tutoring system at our university; we visited the Research and Writing Center as well as the Diversity Oriented Writing Center at the nearby University of Tübingen; and we participated in a “train the trainer”-style conference on peer tutoring organized in Nuremberg with writing center staff from the United States. In our own training workshops, we showed prospective tutors a YouTube video from the Minneapolis Community and Technical College Writing Center to help them understand what peer to peer writing support looked like.<sup>4</sup> We knew that the models we looked to had origins in the United States—but we did not realize that this led us to believe that this was the case all over the world. We

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3 The Quality Pact for Teaching, see <https://www.qualitaetspakt-lehre.de>.

4 <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=M72kus14uSo>.

continued to hold this belief throughout the first year of our Australian-German research cooperation when our Australian colleague visited our writing center, and only when we went to visit our Australian partner university did we begin to recognize the assumptions we had made.

When we arrived, some things seemed familiar. For example, we both employed trained peer tutors and offered tutoring sessions in the library. However, where we expected writing to be at the center, we found language instead. Language did not only refer to the spoken word, but also to all language used, whether written, spoken, or read. In the Australian higher education context we encountered, language was the key to becoming academically literate, and language was a key element of the name of our colleagues' discipline: Academic Language and Learning.

This emphasis on language puzzled us and led us to rethink our assumptions. While my original training in cultural anthropology had certainly influenced the methodological approach of our research project in terms of its qualitative orientation and the implementation of research tools such as expert interviews and participant observation, it took this initial puzzlement to reflect on the potential of choosing an anthropological research approach. Far more strongly than before, we aimed to understand the point of view of the insiders, follow their lead, and understand their perspective on the world, in this case, the world of Academic Language and Learning support in a higher education context. Only through leaving our comfort zone were we able to reflect more critically on our use of the US teaching and tutoring models that had influenced our expectations and that had shaped our assumptions.

At our Australian partner institution, we slowly began to understand that our sense of something lacking, and our interview partners' surprise at our focus on writing, was due to our different academic heritages. While our Australian interview partners were aware of US writing center work and scholarship and while certain core texts and insights were also prominent (see, e.g., the references in Chanock, 2012, or Johnson, 2018), we found there to be a much stronger influence that could be traced back to language and literacy scholarship from the United Kingdom (Marton & Hounsell, 1984; Lea & Street, 1998; Russell, Lea, Parker, Street, & Donahue, 2010).<sup>5</sup> In this context, instead of a writing center heritage, scholarship in the teaching of Academic Language and Learning formed the basis for designing support measures for university students. In other words, academic language was placed at the center as the cornerstone of student learning and enculturation into an academic context.

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5 For a discussion of Australasian heritages of writing instruction, see also the contribution by Karen Orr Vered, Susan Thomas & Lisa Emerson (2019).

Our research partners pointed us to their umbrella organization, the Association for Academic Language and Learning, its associated *Journal of Academic Language and Learning*, and the list of centers at Australian universities that offer support in Academic Language and Learning.<sup>6</sup> In the theoretical base of Academic Language and Learning support, we found that our two approaches have many similarities as well as points of intersection.

While in the United States, the Writing Across the Curriculum tradition has been influential since the 1970s, in Great Britain and also in Australia, a similar role has been played by academic literacies since the early 1990s (Russell, Lea, Parker, Street, & Donahue, 2010, p. 395). Simply put, the academic literacies approach assumes three different but interconnected perspectives or models of student academic literacy: study skills, academic socialization, and academic literacies (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006). While the study skills perspective focuses on deficits and technical or instrumental skills, academic socialization concentrates on the acculturation of students into the world of academic discourse. The third perspective, that of academic literacies in the plural, emphasizes that students need to negotiate conflicting literacy practices they encounter at the university and therefore need to develop a variety of communicative strategies and the ability to switch between them (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 172).

It became clear to us that while our work and approaches resembled those of our Australian colleagues, the emphasis on language had caused our initial puzzlement. From our perspective, language was what has been called one of the “smaller issues” regarding grammar (e.g., Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2010, p. 87), a necessary but “later” or “lower order concern” (Girgensohn & Sennewald, 2012, p. 91). In our writing center work, we first focused on structure, organization, and content of a text, on supporting writers in their writing process. Without realizing it, we had developed a bias in which writing was the umbrella and language the element under it. But, as we discovered, this view can just as well be turned around.<sup>7</sup>

Language in the Australian context was seen as encompassing far more than grammar and sentence-level support. Language was the key to decoding the academic environment that students encountered at the university and for which they had to develop a new skill set and new literacies. In the higher education environment, academic English was seen as foreign to most of the newcomers for a variety of reasons (Schneider & Daddow, 2017). Some had to write long and referenced texts for the first time. Others had already gathered

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6 For more information, see <http://aall.org.au>, <http://journal.aall.org.au/>, and <http://aall.org.au/australian-all-centres>.

7 Interestingly, our Australian colleague found that the focus of our work, as she saw it on site, was not writing, but rather the pedagogy of learning.

experience in an academic environment but had done so in a different country and/or a different language. Others again were unfamiliar with English as an academic language because even though they were locals, they were first-generation university students. In this context, it is important to know that the university at which we spent most of our research time has declared as one of its goals to attract students from nontraditional backgrounds, for example, Indigenous, first generation, lower socioeconomic background, or international. Viewed from this perspective, all students need support in developing their language skills for the purposes of a new context, for a variety of reasons. And in a higher education context, language can take many forms, writing being one of them. In this way, our research focus, initially on international students, could also be applied to many more learners, contexts, genres, and sets of problems.

Nonetheless, we could also find value in our initial assumptions. In our research conversations, interviews, and participant observations in the field, we found that we did share a vocabulary with our Australian colleagues and were able to exchange thoughts on how to offer support to overcome the difficulties our students were encountering and that there were indeed similarities across the globe in these difficulties. Our fields are united by putting student learning at the center of our work, work usually located outside of a discipline and in which a view on academic literacies (plural) and on the conflicting literacy practices in tertiary education can clarify student difficulties with developing study skills and academic socialization.

Another similarity was that, both in Germany as well as in Australia, our work is often misunderstood; just as Stephen North (1984) did, our Australian partners lamented that often they were seen as the fix-it people for students whose essays seemed unacceptable to lecturers for a variety of reasons. And in both contexts, we found our work to be contested. As Swantje Lahm (2016) and Carolyn Malkin & Kate Chanock (2018) have pointed out for the German and the Australian context respectively, what we do is not always accepted as being part of a university's responsibility towards students. Budgets are small and futures uncertain. We all constantly need to justify what we do. Whether it is frequent organizational restructures, as experienced by our colleagues in Australia, or limited-term, third-party funding, as is the case for many German writing centers, our positions at the university are often precarious. Both in Australia and in Germany, our work is usually extracurricular, and we need to work hard to have our voices heard in departments. To succeed and further develop, we have to be both clear and confident about what it is we do, fulfill student as well as organizational expectations, and still manage to act on our core beliefs.

One such belief relates to peer tutoring as a valuable instrument of student learning. In the Australian context we visited, trained peer learning advisors give feedback and advice on writing tasks to students. The setting of

this peer learning support varies depending on the university and the faculties, but the support is available to students from all disciplines, with a focus on supporting those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, but by no means excluding other students. In our German writing center, we also employ trained peer tutors to offer writing support to students from all disciplines and aim to support diversity in the student population. In both contexts, the non-hierarchical setting of the tutoring sessions facilitates student learning and serves to strengthen the students' own resources for future tasks. In such a setting, it becomes apparent that mistakes and misunderstandings are normal and helpful parts of learning and that perfection is not what is expected, but rather improvement and development in a gradual, scaffolded and reflective manner. One highly important aspect of offering this in-between space (Harris, 1995) is allowing room for error. In our increasingly competitive higher education environments, such opportunities for trial and error are becoming rare.

Another shared belief we identified was that in our constant efforts to establish a space for language, learning, and writing support at our universities, we found that the view from the outside could be helpful. Both in Australia and in Germany, we were facilitators with a background in which language, learning, and writing were important, regardless of how they were labelled. As experts outside the disciplines, we could facilitate dialogue between different parts of the university and thus offer both support outside the disciplines, through interdisciplinary tutoring or workshops, and the integration of our offers into disciplinary courses, through, for instance, embedding tutors (Chanoock, Horton, Reedman, & Stephenson, 2012; Macdonald, Schneider, & Kett, 2013). This role is often tenuous, and we depend on having contacts in the disciplines who are willing to talk to us. It becomes easier to find these people the longer we work in our contexts when we can point to successful models in other parts of the university and suggest that these be first adapted and then adopted. As it is frequently junior lecturers we are working with, however, we also experience time and again a loss of knowledge and connections we have established as academics proceed to the next steps in their careers and often change universities. On the other hand, as more universities establish support structures such as ours, we also receive enquiries from lecturers who have worked with similar units at other universities and would like to continue obtaining this pedagogical support from us.

This brings me to my closing point: beyond the perspective on language, which provided so much puzzlement to us initially, we learned some important lessons from our research cooperation. In our precarious contexts, it can be difficult to justify why we need to invest the time to look beyond our immediate university work and why networking with others in contexts of higher education is indeed highly beneficial to our home institutions. Yet the gaze of the other can act like an outside peer review. By submitting ourselves to this

gaze, we can receive feedback on our work from unexpected perspectives. This helps us understand the idiosyncrasies of our systems as well as advantages of our positions and helps us establish ourselves within our respective contexts. Seeing what has worked elsewhere can enable us to meet challenges at home. For example, we are using the insights we gained during our research stay on the importance of peer learning in the development of academic language and literacy to create new peer-to-peer workshops for international graduate students.

Most importantly, though, to do our work successfully, we all need allies. The perspective from academic literacies permitted us at our German universities to think more in terms of students acquiring academic literacy at all the different levels involved: discernible study skills, socialization into an academic context, and the negotiation of conflicting literacy practices. Writing is a current that runs through all these different levels, and our writing center should focus on looking for allies with whom to promote all these different skills. At the level of study skills, this can, for instance, relate to language proficiency. In Germany, many universities have language centers in which expertise on the teaching of academic language skills can be sought and paired with expertise from a perspective on academic writing. At the level of academic socialization, libraries have valuable expertise that combines well with a writing center approach (Elmberg & Hook, 2005; Sühl-Strohmer & Tschander, 2019). And at the level of the negotiation of conflicting literacy practices, the writing center's view from a third space can be used to bring together faculty from different departments to make these distinctions visible and comprehensible for students. This search for allies can be particularly helpful at a time when German writing centers are at a turning point in their existence. The funds from the federal government grant that helped set them up ran out at the end of 2020. For many of us, at present, the future is even more uncertain.

While I do not, by any means, intend to suggest that the German reliance on US writing center heritage is wrong, the models on which much German writing center work is based were developed in and for a different higher education context; it is wise to reflect on them and broaden our perspectives to discover other approaches and learn how we can make use of them, adapt them, and further develop them to support students at our own universities. For example, in Germany, there are no general first-year courses or compulsory composition classes in which literacy education could begin. Because students take only subject-specific courses in degree programs from the start, German writing centers are even more dependent on working with faculty and embedding tutors. Working with our colleagues in Australia showed us how literacy support can be integrated in the socialization into academic discourse and academic language for all students in discipline-specific courses.

What we have learned may also be helpful in the context from which we took our initial inspiration. US writing centers might benefit from extending their gaze towards approaches stemming back to language and learning to further strengthen their inclusive perspective on writing in contexts of higher education in order to address all students, regardless of their background or preparation, as novices. This perspective could continue to promote the writing centers' role as facilitators of dialogue within the university—a dialogue about access, inclusion, and learning—and, in a context in which everyone is a learner, provide students with a new way of thinking about the resources students already possess and the skills they need to acquire.

Building on the valuable work of a US writing center heritage, German writing centers have established themselves as important institutions to help students arrive and achieve in higher education. Writing centers in Germany may currently be at a crucial point in their development: entering the teenage years. A little rebellion against our heritage and experimentation with influences from a different context may come with the territory and lead to the adaptation of new models. And expanding on scholarship from the United States, a German language *Schreibwissenschaft* (writing studies) is beginning to establish itself as an open and diverse inter-discipline with connections to linguistics, anthropology, education, philology, and others (Huemer, Doleschal, Wiederkehr, Girgensohn, Dengscherz, Brinkschulte, & Mertlitsch, 2021; Hirsch-Weber, Loesch, & Scherer, 2019).<sup>8</sup> In this endeavor, a view from the outside and the insights generated from our encounter with Australian Academic Language and Learning can help us develop both theory and practice: it adds to our perspective in promoting the growth and consolidation of a diverse and exciting field, and it leads to context-specific offers to support the academic socialization of all our students.

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8 See <http://www.schreibdidaktik.de/> as well as conference results at <https://padlet.com/schreibcenter/schreibwissenschaft2019>.

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