Journal für Schreibwissenschaft

Volume 25 (1/2023), 14. Issue

JoSch

Concepts, Community and Collaboration

Schreibwissenschaft

wbv

This contribution focuses on academic writing, especially for PhD students, and the support structures at German universities. Drawing on our own biographies and collaborative writing experiences we argue that the institutionalization processes of PhD writing support fall short as they rarely conceptualize writing as a collective endeavor. Rather, they tend to incorporate US-American models only to maintain the idea of the academy as a collective of autonomous intellectuals. The article describes existing writing support structures, discusses the needs of PhD students and postdocs, before closing with reflections on the benefits of understanding writing as (collaborative) work and how this could improve German academia.

E-Journal Einzelbeitrag
von: Fanny Isensee, Daniel Töpper

Working Together, Writing Together

A Call for Collaborative Writing Support Structures

wbv

Working Together, Writing Together

A Call for Collaborative Writing Support Structures

Fanny Isensee & Daniel Töpper

Abstract

This contribution focuses on academic writing, especially for PhD students, and the support structures at German universities. Drawing on our own biographies and collaborative writing experiences we argue that the institutionalization processes of PhD writing support fall short as they rarely conceptualize writing as a collective endeavor. Rather, they tend to incorporate US-American models only to maintain the idea of the academy as a collective of autonomous intellectuals. The article describes existing writing support structures, discusses the needs of PhD students and postdocs, before closing with reflections on the benefits of understanding writing as (collaborative) work and how this could improve German academia.[1]

Focus

Introduction

During two semesters I, Fanny Isensee, spent at a liberal arts college in New England, I experienced a crucial moment that altered my position on academic writing. When the time came to start writing the papers we had to hand in for our classes, a professor suggested visiting the writing center. When I showed my paper to the writing tutor, they started out with the basics of academic writing (how to structure your paper, devoting a separate paragraph to each of your arguments, composing meaningful topic sentences) before going into the details of the paper I had written so far. Initially, I was taken aback when what I had come to know in Germany as a skillful and meticulous craft was reduced to simple guidelines. However, the explanations provided indicated that I could rely on basic structures. This helped me to understand the writing process itself, which in turn allowed me to think about my writing and my audience. Through the encouragement of the professor, who valued the writing center, and the meeting with the tutor, I encountered writing as part of a larger and collaborative university culture. Back in Germany I encountered very different customs – the writing process itself was rarely addressed during classes. If addressed, most professors remained on the level of formatting hints and I received very little feedback on papers aside from the grade.

---

1   Note to the Reader: this is an abridged print version, you can find the full-length article online: https://www.josch-journal.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2023-03-11_josch-online_working-together.pdf

Academic writing is a burdensome process, which changes constantly and is influenced by experiences, backgrounds, and institutional cultures. (Trans-)national contexts, disciplines, institutions, generations, and individuals all shape and are shaped by these (unstable) traditions and uncertainties. In this essay, we address this writing socialization from an analytic-autobiographical perspective and combine observations of ongoing institutional change with personal experiences to search for fractures, additions, and contradictions. We will discuss where the current reform processes in German academia stand and whether they actually improve writing socialization. This essay aims to add personal voices to the debate as these differ from aggregated individual opinions collected in social studies. By reflecting about and abstracting from our experiences in a dialogical process, we raise possible new perspectives which in turn provide starting points for empirical follow-up studies. Our contribution is situated in German academia, more specifically in the field of German-speaking history of education.

As a frame, we first describe existing writing support structures at German universities and situate our alma mater Humboldt University in these. In a second step, we present our PhD writing biographies and connect these with existing support structures. Thirdly, we reflect upon our experiences with collaborative writing and which kinds of structures and settings support it. The article closes with an outlook on what the future of (collaborative) writing might hold for us and why it might improve current university structures.

Writing Support Structures – PhD Students' Woes (and Silver Linings) in the German Academic System

Starting, conducting, and completing a PhD is a complex and time-consuming task. It requires a large set of specific skills and activities (Carell/Reis/Szczyrba 2011: 1 f.). To set the process in motion, usually a doctoral student and a professor agree on a potential PhD-project idea. The third entity in this triangle is the university that provides the organizational framework and has the right to grant doctoral degrees. This constellation forms the basis for a PhD candidate's "socialization into science" (Schneiderberg 2018: 121 ff.).

The concept of offering specific support to PhD candidates by providing, among others, writing support is still fairly new at German universities (see e. g., Gruber 2010: 18). Although predominantly anchored in the image of a task that should be performed in "solitude and freedom" ("Einsamkeit und Freiheit", Schelsky 1963: 209 f.), PhD programs at German universities increasingly involve structured support. These developments open up the aforementioned triangle and introduce new actors. The structured PhD program, which entered the discussion in German higher education in the 1980s, takes its inspiration from US-American models of graduate schools and centers (see e. g., Bosbach 2009; Nünning/Sommer 2007).

Although the significance of academic writing skills as such is extensively addressed in discussions on doctoral studies, the details and possible support structures are less central in the literature on PhD programs in German universities. This differs from the US case, where academic writing and writing centers are much better researched (Siegel Finer/White-Farnham 2017; Rose/Weiser 2002). We can find an overview of such institutions (Isensee/Töpper 2023) as well as literature on the institutionalization process of writing support institutions (Girgensohn 2017). There is literature on specific aspects of writing support (Dayton 2015; Girgensohn 2007, 2014; Girgensohn/Liebetanz 2010; Simmons/Singh 2019) as well as the specific disciplinary needs or otherwise defined target groups that are addressed with specific (trans-)national structures and traditions in mind (Saxalber 2010; Badenhorst/Guerin 2016; Schneijderberg 2018; Templeton 2021; Doleschal/Gruber 2007). Further, there is a lot of advice literature (see among others Carell/Reis/Szczyrba 2011; Korff/Roman 2013) and some social studies that explore specific needs – e.g., for PhD candidates with children, special needs, a non-academic background, or for part-time PhD students (Dülcke et al. 2021). We also find studies on the future and prospects of writing support (Bammer 2015; Kuh/Ehrenberg 2011); and there is literature providing reflections and support for doctoral supervisors (Brentel 2019).

However, this literature does not provide a comprehensive overview of practiced standards and established institutions of writing support. While advice literature is necessarily written from a general perspective, most of the studies frame academic writing in quantitative terms and propose measures of individual support. Yet, these measures do not factor in or specifically address the context of writing. Possible obstacles, such as an imbalance between time devoted to work and time devoted to writing, or potential problems like writer's block only receive attention in the form of categorizable individual problems. In most cases, support only starts when problems occur. There is not enough knowledge about academic writing in practice or about structural influences on individual writing.

In the following, we present some findings on support structures in the German university system. It is not easy to find an overview about what is offered to PhD students in German universities. Mostly there are empirically aggregated statistics on student numbers. To gain more detailed insights, we decided to conduct a *standardized website analysis* based on Korff and Roman's approach (2013: 42 ff.). For our review, we considered universities located in Germany that offer PhD programs and award doctorates, in total 51 institutions. Drawing from this sample, we focused on universities with more than 1,000 completed PhDs in 2020 (Statistisches Bundesamt 2021) as these institutions have the funds to create support structures for graduate students. We developed an explorative analytical framework to identify possible support structures in general and structures targeted at academic writing in particular. We investigated if there were any support structures on the central university level and if they included writing centers or offered academic writing courses on the PhD level. We looked at the central university structure, the faculties, and the department of educational research. Within the writing support struc-

Fanny Isensee & Daniel Töpper

tures, we looked at which kinds of formats were featured and whom these formats addressed.

Our results showed that the majority of universities featured some type of graduate school, mostly as a central structure, and sometimes as a structure for specific academic fields; in many cases additional grant-based structures existed. The larger universities (e. g., Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and Freie Universität Berlin) try to feed research grant resources into the structure of the central graduate school. The majority of universities (35 out of 51) offered some type of writing support: Some universities offer specific "writing centers" (eight in total: Universität Köln, Universität Tübingen, Universität Bayreuth, Universität Bielefeld, Universität Göttingen, Universität Bremen, Universität Jena, and Universität Stuttgart), others offer so-called "welcome centers" (e. g., Universität Konstanz, Universität Regensburg, Universität Potsdam) – structures that address the particular challenges of the PhD process for specific groups but most often for international students. Many universities also offer counseling, which is often designed to accompany the entire PhD process. On a very formal level, most universities saw the need to aggregate and combine information on the PhD process. They integrated this information into graduate school structures and (overarching) consultation services for faculty, staff, and students.

When it comes to writing support, we found that the courses offered were often, but not always, included in the PhD program structures of graduate schools. In some cases, i. e., in Stuttgart, Tübingen, and Bielefeld, the writing schools/writing centers shape this specific curriculum. Further, interesting cases of pioneering structures are the Universität Bremen, where special courses and counseling on English academic writing for PhD students are offered. When looking at the general content of the writing structures, we found courses designed for specific text types (exposé, introduction, journal articles, essays, etc.), a specific academic language and style (English, German), and courses on specific parts of the PhD process (beginning, writing phase, defense etc.). There are further problem-specific offers, e. g., writing counseling (for groups and individuals), net- and co-working opportunities as well as writing retreats and workshops. Some universities feature distinct writing guidelines (e. g., the diversity-oriented writing approach at Universität Tübingen), with the levels of differentiation varying between the writing structures and the way they are connected to the PhD programs.

When we look at Humboldt University, we see a similar constellation to the picture above. Based on their specific roles, a lot of actors offer different courses, lectures, and talks geared towards PhD students, yet there is no overarching structure that provides information about these services or guides PhD students along the way. There are several graduate schools, with some of them offering writing courses and different workshops that are accompanied by offers from the so-called career center, the university library and the "Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin", the Berlin State Library which is one of the largest libraries in Europe. The student union also maintains a writing center. However, despite this broad range, there is no distinct institution that focuses solely or in large part on writing

support, the closest being the Interdisciplinary Center for Education Sciences, which offers some activities on writing, but does not have a designated writing coach or a structured curriculum. As in many cases, writing represents only one of many tasks and thus there is no specific actor or group that focuses on the improvement of academic writing at Humboldt University. Hence, our personal journeys were a mixture of inputs and advice from different expert positions offered in a peer format, but neither was this training provided by academic experts nor was it a part of our work environment, where writing seemed to happen behind closed doors at odd times in the form of a solitary and opaque task.

Writing is highly valued in academia, little discussed, taken as a given but hardly explained, highly individualized, yet it represents the results of combining the thoughts and perspectives of many. We have argued that this might be connected to the German understanding of academic research as a result of "solitude and freedom" (Isensee/Töpper 2023). However, this myth actually (re-)produced ensuing problems and hierarchies, as the ideals of solitude and freedom affect individuals and social positions quite differently. Though some universities offer interesting new approaches, we argue to rethink academic writing even more by understanding it as consisting of both individual and collective components. This evolving and shifting understanding of the specific individual-collective compound should be addressed in writing research and practices. A first step in this direction might be to create a basis for discussing the connection between individual writing and institutional context, to which we hope to contribute to.

In the subsequent part, we will discuss how we learned and practiced academic writing and propose some considerations for discussing a different writing culture, which informs our claim for structural changes that enhance collective writing. From our perspective, the more appropriate future of academic writing takes place in the form of collaborative co-working instead of collective loneliness (for some considerations on collective writing see Ede/Lunsford, 2001; McNenny/Roen 1992). This includes an understanding of writing as work that is open to discussion and sensitive to process (see e.g., Blake Yancey 1998: 199 ff.), rather than as a covert and result-oriented pastime.

Making Collaborative Research and Writing Work

We would like to turn to some lessons we have learned from each other through collaborative work. Although we underwent a similar academic socialization, our experiences still differ to an extent and are influenced by our individual positions and expectations when it comes to academic writing. Before we started our collaborative writing journey, we first of all needed to establish a basis of trust that allowed us to share unfinished thoughts and texts with each other and find adequate forms of critique. Working together showed us the need for a more detailed planning at the project start, which helped us flesh out well-rounded and robust argumentations. Our writing styles and attention to stylistic and lin-

Fanny Isensee & Daniel Töpper

guistic details improved, and we have picked up terms in both German and English from one another. What precedes these learnings is an acknowledgement of our different takes on academic writing, and that these different positions are both valuable. In this way, we can both challenge our writing and contribute to its improvement at the same time.

Although the structures at German universities regarding writing support have changed in the past years, and innovative approaches for support structures have emerged (e. g., at the universities in Bielefeld, Bremen, and Stuttgart), there are still too few efforts to further collaborative writing opportunities and far too few discussions on academic writing. In the US research literature on writing support, apart from writing centers, we can find further possibilities in the form of "writing across the curriculum" (see e. g., McLeod 1992: 1 ff.), "writing in the disciplines" (see e. g., Bizzell 1992), or scholarship on the "writing-enriched curriculum", which map out other support structures.

What we would have needed to hear early on is that you should start writing as soon as possible, prioritize writing projects, and find a group of enthusiastic writers to exchange ideas and texts. These needs cannot necessarily all be met by an external structure focused on writing support, but have to be addressed within the concrete working structures and their respective cultures. Even though PhD support structures modeled after their US counterparts have been established, certain critical aspects that are characteristic of these structures in the USA (such as the need for the establishment of a writing-friendly work culture) hardly exist in German academia. Hence, when we understand writing support as an aspect of a "traveled concept" of improved PhD support originating in the USA, we would argue that attitudes towards and cultures of writing (and PhD support) in the departments are not necessarily considered in the reforms, but instead all changes are outsourced to writing centers, with little collaboration between the two. Along these lines, discussions on how writing support could be improved have remained superficial, with the writing center remaining as the established fallback option. This externalization preserves the idea of the primary responsibility of the individual and the individual structure that at best tries to implement cultural change on their own terms. But we would argue that the institutionalization processes of PhD writing support need to understand and support writing as a collective endeavor. Writing should be visibly recognized as the (collective) work it is.

We would like to stress the significance of talking not just about *what* you are writing about but give priority to the *how*. We argue for a move from knowledge about scientific content to knowledge about scientific content *and* academic writing. Writing support structures at German universities can only change if there is a change in attitude as well – merely transferring writing centers from one academic context to the next does not significantly change the views on writing and how it should be conducted. Hence, a simple transfer of the characteristic US writing experience would not suffice as the German academic writing culture with its specific style and customs would need to be integrated as well.

Collaborative writing projects start interpersonal exchange on writing and thereby enhance necessary public discussions by providing and shaping ideas and models on how to support (collective) writing. To encourage this form of work and allow text production to combine different thoughts and perspectives and produce more multi-faceted takes on questions and knowledge production, universities need to promote collaboration not only in research output but should encourage the idea to conceptualize the academy itself as a collective thinking and research space.

Focus

Bibliography

Badenhorst, Cecile/Guerin, Cally (Eds.) (2016): *Research Literacies and Writing Pedagogies for Masters and Doctoral Writers.* Boston: Brill.

Bammer, Angelika (2015): *The Future of Scholarly Writing. Critical Interventions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bizzell, Patricia (1992): *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Blake Yancey, Kathleen (1998): *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Bosbach, Eva (2009): *Von Bologna nach Boston? Perspektiven und Reformansätze in der Doktorandenausbildung anhand eines Vergleichs zwischen Deutschland und den USA*. Leipzig: Akad.-Verl.-Anstalt.

Brentel, Helmut (2019): *Doctoral Supervision. Handbook for Establishing a Productive and Supportive Supervision Culture.* 2 ed. Frankfurt a. M.: Helmut Brentel.

Carell, Angela/Reis, Oliver/Szczyrba, Birgit (2011): Promovieren zwischen Anpassung und Eigenständigkeit: Promotionscoaching als Begleitung eines komplexen Leistungsprozesses. In: Wergen, Jutta (Ed.): *Forschung und Förderung. Promovierende im Blick der Hochschulen*. Berlin/Münster: Lit Verlag. 179–198.

Dayton, Amy E. (2015): *Assessing the Teaching of Writing. Twenty-First Century Trends and Technologies*. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Doleschal, Ursula/Gruber, Helmut (Eds.) (2007): *Wissenschaftliches Schreiben abseits des englischen Mainstreams*. Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang.

Dülcke, Dana/Moes, Johannes/Plietzsch, Anton/Schülein, Jessica/Steidten, Torsten (Eds.) (2021): *Promovieren mit Perspektive. Das GEW-Handbuch zur Promotion*. 3, fully revised ed. Stuttgart: utb.

Ede, Lisa/Lunsford, Andrea (2001). Collaboration and Concepts of Authorship. In: *Rhetoric PMLA*. Vol. 116 Nr. 2. 354–69.

Girgensohn, Katrin (2007): *Neue Wege zur Schlüsselqualifikation Schreiben. Autonome Schreibgruppen an der Hochschule.* Wiesbaden: DUV Deutscher Universitäts-Verlag.

Girgensohn, Katrin (2014): Kollaboration und Autonomie. Wie Peer Tutor*innen die Schreibzentrumsarbeit fördern. In: Dreyfürst, Stephanie/Sennewald, Nadja (Eds.): *Schreiben: Grundlagentexte zur Theorie, Didaktik und Beratung.* Opladen: Verlag Barbara Budrich. 377–394.

Girgensohn, K. (2017). *Von der Innovation zur Institution: Institutionalisierungsarbeit an Hochschulen am Beispiel der Leitung von Schreibzentren*, Bielefeld: W. Bertelsmann Verlag and SSOAR - Social Science Open Access Repository.

Girgensohn, Katrin/Liebetanz, Franziska (2010): Schreibberatung für in- und ausländische Promovierende als institutionelles Angebot. In: Girgensohn, Katrin (Ed.): *Kompetent zum Doktortitel. Konzepte zur Förderung Promovierender*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. 179–197.

Gruber, Helmut (2010): Modelle des wissenschaftlichen Schreibens. Ein Überblick über zentrale Ansätze und Theorien. In: Esterl, Ursula/Saxalber, Annemarie (Eds.): *Schreibprozesse begleiten: Vom schulischen zum universitären Schreiben*. Innsbruck: Studienverlag. 17–39.

Isensee, Fanny/Töpper, Daniel (2023): "Fusion Models" in the Making– Academic and Writing Support for PhD Students in the Humanities in US-American and German Universities. In: Jenßen, Lars/Mayer, Tanja/Töpper, Daniel/Uhlendorf, Niels (Eds.). *Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zur Bildungsforschung 2023.* Berlin: Berlin Universities Publishing. https://depositonce.tu-berlin.de/items/f907ea2a-ed4e-4084-ba42-453f52152714

Korff, Svea/Roman, Navina (Eds.) (2013): *Promovieren nach Plan? Chancengleichheit in der strukturierten Promotionsförderung.* Wiesbaden: Springer.

Kuh, Charlotte V./Ehrenberg, Ronald G. (Eds.) (2011): *Doctoral Education and the Faculty of the Future.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

McLeod, Susan H. (1992): Writing Across the Curriculum: An Introduction. In: McLeod, Susan H./Soven, Margot (Eds.): *Writing Across the Curriculum: A Guide to Developing Programs*. Newbury Park: Sage. 1–11.

McNenny, Geraldine/Roen, Duane (1992): The Case for Collaborative Scholarship in Rhetoric and Composition. In: *Rhetoric Review*. Vol. 10. Nr. 2. 291–310.

Nünning, Ansgar/Sommer, Roy (Eds.) (2007): *Handbuch Promotion. Forschung – Förderung – Finanzierung.* Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler.

Rose, Shirley/Weiser, Irwin (Eds.) (2002). *The Writing Program Administrator as Theorist: Making Knowledge Work*. Portsmouth: Boynton.

Saxalber, Annemarie/Esterl, Ursula (Eds.) (2010): *Schreibprozesse begleiten: Vom schulischen zum universitären Schreiben.* Innsbruck: Studienverlag.

Schneijderberg, Christian (2018): *Promovieren in den Sozialwissenschaften. Eine sozialisationstheoretische Erschließung des Forschungsfeldes Promotion*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Siegel Finer, Bryna /White-Farnham, Jamie (Eds.) (2017): *Writing program architecture: Thirty cases for reference and research*. Colorado: University Press of Colorado.

Simmons, Nicola/Singh, Ann (Eds.) (2019): *Critical Collaborative Communities. Academic Writing Partnerships, Groups, and Retreats*. Boston: Brill.

Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis) (2021): Bildung und Kultur – Statistik der Promovieren-
den 2020. Wiesbaden: Statistisches Bundesamt. https://www.destatis.de/DE/The
men/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bildung-Forschung-Kultur/Hochschulen/Publikationen/
Downloads-Hochschulen/promovierendenstatistik-5213501207004.pdf?__blob=pub
licationFile (Accessed: 1.7.2022).

Templeton, Emerald/Love, Bridget H./Johnson, Onda (Eds.) (2021): *Elevating Marginal-
ized Voices in Academe. Lessons for a New Generation of Scholars.* Milton: Taylor &
Francis.

Focus

Authors

Fanny Isensee, MA, is research assistant at the History of Education Department at Hum-
boldt-Universität zu Berlin and editorial assistant for Paedagogica Historica: International
Journal of the History of Education.

Daniel Töpper, MA, is research assistant at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Educational
Research and coordinator of the research project "The Disciplinarity of the Specialized
Administration" at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.