

A Story on (International) Collaboration Among Peer Tutors

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General Introduction

Starting in 2012 we, the writers of this article, collaborated on many projects together. We met each other on different occasions, such as at the annual German-speaking *Peer Tutor Conference* (PTC), the *European Writing Center Association Conference* (EWCA) or video-conferences. With each project initiated, our insight in the processes of collaborative working, writing and learning grew, and we began reflecting on the structure of our work. This article is one result of this reflection: An in-depth look into our collaborative projects and how these add value to the (scientific) peer tutor community.

This article is split into two parts, the first one is this article, the second one will be featured in the next issue of JoSch. Article I gives a detailed insight in the collaborative projects we realized in the past and are working on in the present. The focus of Article I will be on the aspect of crossing borders - the borders between writing centers, cities and even countries. Our motivations for collaborating with each other are founded in the belief that we will benefit from it through sharing knowledge and broadening our social and professional skills. In this first article, we will show these benefits by chronologically displaying what we have achieved and what we have learned from these projects. In Article II, we will connect our work to the theories of Communities of Practice (Lave/Wenger 1991) and Connectivism (Downes 2012). With these concepts as base, we will

discuss how we practice an effective way of learning through connecting in a network across various borders.

First Steps of Collaboration

In 2012 we (gradually) realized that our writing centers were not as connected as they could be. Many writing centers were experiencing a sudden growth in projects, and to handle this, we concentrated much on ourselves and our own progress. We developed many projects in a short period of time and simply did not have the time to look across our own writing center borders. Some forms of institutional collaboration already existed, like the *Long Night Against Procrastination* or the already mentioned PTC. We regularly met each other at these events, talked about each other's progress, but finally went back home to work on our own stuff. It seemed too complicated to work together in addition to completing all of our own tasks. Some popular questions often raised at these meetings were: How should we communicate? When do we have the time to do something together? What could possibly be the benefit of collaboration and how could we transfer the outcome to our *own* writing center?

The first important step on the road of autonomous collaboration¹ took place in March 2013, when Daniel Spielmann, who trained peer writing tutors at the writing center of Hamburg at that time, was invited to the writing center of Frankfurt/Main to host the workshop *Digital Literacies and Student Academic Writing*. The attendees learned a lot about online writing tools and certain ways to connect and work together collaboratively. Spielmann encouraged us to initiate an autonomous exchange on topics regarding writing didactics and writing center work. In this early stage of collaboration we met via *Google Hangout* and by using this tool we overcame the distance between the writing centers of Frankfurt/Main and Hamburg. We called it *Schreibberater-Hangout*² (Writing Tutor-Hangout) and wanted to

¹When we speak of autonomous collaboration, we mean that we want to work and connect autonomously from our institutions, but always with them in mind. Nearly all of our efforts have been initiated out of our respective writing centers, but also aren't part of the work we are hired for.

²The protocol of the first Schreibberater-Hangout can be read here: <https://goo.gl/ewnCJW> (last access: 23.03.2015)

pursue it in a monthly succession. Immediately we realized that this form of digital discussion had the potential of sharing personal views, receiving feedback, and generating new ideas through this process. We therefore discussed the use of online tools to connect peer writing tutors from multiple writing centers. In the following months an idea started to develop between peer writing tutors from Frankfurt/Main and Hamburg: The PTC 2013 in Bochum should be used to highlight chances and potentials of collaboration in the writing center community. To do so, we began to use the videoconferences and digital writing tools to generate a convincing concept.

Peer Tutor Conference 2013 in Bochum/Germany

Conceptually, our workshop *Specific Ways to Digital Networking for Peer Tutors: Some Suggestions* presented the creation of the very workshop held in Bochum as a suitable example for functioning collaborative thinking, working and writing. Thus, we introduced *Google+* to the German-speaking peer writing tutoring community (i. e. a digital forum for online exchange). We wanted to initiate a networking process inside this community – at this time with a scope on German speaking countries. The provision of this digital space should enable interested tutors to transcend the barriers of spatial distance, thus paving the way to cross borders between cities and countries. Furthermore, we intended to deliver a set of online tools for collaborative working in general and writing in particular: The participants of the workshop were introduced to the possibilities of *Google Drive* and thereby to the use of Cloud-based text processing tools and data storage (cf. Dreyfürst/Spielmann 2014: 18-20). The workshop concluded with a practical exercise, which allowed the participants to think, discuss and write together online, therefore discovering the potentials of collaborative work in digital space.

During the workshop we encouraged discussions and sharing content by posting questions into the group that had been discussed during the Hangouts prior to the conference. As a result, the *Peer Tutor*innen* community on *Google+* gained a lot of members. Nonetheless, only a few members attended the following videoconferences and we learned that we need to create a strong and mutual benefit for every collaborative offer to sustain engagement.

Peer Tutor Collaboration during the EWCA Conference 2014

The online collaborations within the peer writing tutor community received new energy after the international EWCA conference which was special insofar, as the EWCA board particularly supported the participation of peer tutors engaging in this field. Specific time slots in the overall conference program and a special pre-conference day for peer tutors (*European Peer Tutor Day*) from around the world allowed peer tutors to connect, learn from each other and, in a long-term perspective, build professional partnerships. Forty peer tutors took part in different sessions created *by* peer tutors *for* peer tutors. Future collaborations, such as digital networking, hospitations, consultations and supervisions between peer tutors, were discussed during the *World Café*³. One highlight of this special peer tutor day was the contribution on Virtual Peer Tutoring Conferencing by Brandon Hardy from the Middle Tennessee State University Writing Center. These contributions emphasized a need for us to examine our own national, institutional, and cultural contexts and the importance of learning about others, which is relevant to reinforcing our commitment to connecting across borders.

At the EWCA Conference, the number of attending and presenting peer tutors increased thanks to special peer tutor slots in the program. One of the workshops, *Chances and Challenges of Collaborative Writing*, carried out by peer tutors from the writing center of the Goethe University Frankfurt/Main, presented a perfect approach for working collaboratively, i.e. *Text-Merging*⁴. Combined with online tools such as *Google-Docs*, their method is adaptable for peer group work and hence has great potential for creating and implementing new collaborative writing (center) projects across borders. According to this method, two people team up to write down individual expert knowledge on a topic (in our case “the ideal writing center”).

³The World Café is a concept which engages the communication between the participants by collecting topics we are interested in and dedicating each topic to one table where one facilitates a discussion with rotating participants.

⁴You can find the exercise here:
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/qy88e7y3kr71qks/Collaborative-Writing-Exercise.pdf> (last access: 23.03.2015)

They then merge the best ideas into one new text. The advantage of this approach is to quickly generate (related) ideas after agreeing on the text form. This two-stage process is done individually and in written form at first, while the second part happens collaboratively in oral and written form. This method can be used for working on publications and conference workshop preparations with members from your own or different writing centers as it can be done online or offline, so no physical face-to-face exchange is required to connect in a meaningful and productive way.

Peer Tutor Conference 2014 in Frankfurt (Main)/Germany

In the *Open Space* (similar to the World Café) of the PTC, collaborations were once again a popular topic. Many peer writing tutors were working on forming border-crossing feedback-tandems for different purposes, such as feedback on the work as a tutor or the collaborative effort of overcoming writer's block together⁵. Once more, it became obvious that the peer writing tutor community feels a need for connecting on a larger scale. The conference was also used to promote the idea of the *Academic Text Talk*⁶. This project was presented in an *Open Space* slot. Some of the participants were familiar with digital literacy tools, and some of them could be described as beginners in this field. The discussion that followed the presentation showed that there is no need to exclude oneself from a project, just because one is lacking the technical knowledge. As long as an initial interest is present, the digital obstacles can easily be overcome with the help of the community. As a striking example of the possibilities of collaboration, we connected with Brandon Hardy in a Google-Hangout live at our conference and recorded it⁷. This video gives great insight into how digital tools can enable a group to work

⁵One example for such a collaboration is the collaborative academic journal of Birte Stark and Dennis Fassing: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-eQLnRKmTdlUNSFjakDG2fA2W21hp1-gnt4CC8B8JEM/edit> (last access: 23.03.2015).

⁶For more information on Academic Text Talk, please see: <https://plus.google.com/u/0/communities/101524268544278291462/stream/d66a7beb-274d-4ee5-b519-02e7615b6677>.

⁷The recorded Hangout can be found on the G+ Community-Page: <https://plus.google.com/u/0/communities/101524268544278291462> (Last access: 23.03.2015).

together collaboratively. From his home in the U.S., Hardy was able to join a live discussion in a physical space in Germany. This hybridization of physical and digital space allows for a more interactive collaborative experience than working in one space alone.

Our Current and Future Projects

New social media groups were founded and are maintained as places of connectivity and collaboration. Some of these groups are: the *Facebook*-Group *EWCA Peer Tutors 2014* and the two *Google+* communities, the German *Peer Tutor*innen* and the *International Peer Tutoring* group. All three communities enhance communication across regional physical borders. Members can exchange news and pictures, document visits by peer tutors (e. g. German and U.S. peer tutors visiting the Dutch writing center at Radboud University in Nijmegen, Netherlands) or plan meetings at conferences (e. g. U.S. peer tutors that attended EWCA 2014 getting together at IWCA/NCPTW⁸ 2014 in Orlando, Florida).

The most current project is the *Academic Text Talk* starting in January 2015. The project aims at reading and discussing academic texts together in a digital surrounding in order to create new experiences and knowledge. The *Academic Text Talk* also advocates connecting across borders and developing an international community of people who are interested in the theory of writing and peer tutoring (everyone interested in or working with this concept is welcome).

As a response to the lack of professional development opportunities in the field of writing center studies, a Virtual Peer Tutor Conference was proposed at the European Peer Tutor Day. This free virtual conference, open to all peer tutors and writing center professionals, will be held in a digital space using *Google Hangouts on Air*. This way we eliminate the need for a physical space to be present in, which means there is no need for a venue to host a conference, which concludes in no hospitality costs and no registration fees. Presenters and attendees will engage with each other in a digital space with no travel involved, saving additional time and further financial resources

⁸IWCA = International Writing Centers Association and NCPTW = National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing.

and, as a result, minimize disruptions to work and personal obligations. Virtual conference participation is a significant professional development opportunity born out of technological innovation, one that provides substantial benefits for those working in the writing center field by promoting cultural awareness and allowing peer tutors to share ideas and collaborate faster and more efficiently than ever before.

These projects demonstrate a few ways of engaging with the international writing center community and offer opportunities for new conversations that will inspire collaboratively-written scholarship and the development of innovative practices in writing center work to grow our field and our connections with each other.

Summary and Outlook

Based on our experiences with working collaboratively across all kinds of borders for almost two years now, we want to conclude the following:

We wish to have more participants to have a higher variety of interactions. Nevertheless, all of us learned that one of the main points in creating a strong community is not trying to gather as many people as possible, but to reach out for the ones who are actually interested and motivated to connect and collaborate.

Events like the *European Peer Tutor Day* or the proposed *Peer Tutor (Virtual) Conference* can function as important milestones for getting together, reinforcing exchange and initiating further collaborative projects. Peer tutors create their own (scientific) community, which is able to grow and flourish further through collaborative projects. There is also the possibility of peer tutor collaboration across borders based on visits and internships, which has the potential for improving writing center work and fostering sustainability of writing centers. This goal, with a positive effect on writing centers as institutions within universities, is easier to achieve when peer tutors are already interconnected. That means, if peer tutors get the chance to attend (international) conferences and different events, e. g. the PTC, EATAW, EWCA, and further strengthen connections via online collaboration by starting new, even writing center-independent projects such as the *Academic Text Talk* or academic publications,

they are more likely to reach out for internship or visiting opportunities in writing centers across borders and maybe continue professionalizing in this field. We therefore would like to encourage peer tutors from all over the world to shape the writing center community by engaging in existing discussions and projects and creating their own, not only offline but also online and enrich each other's perspectives on writing, writing research and tutoring.

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Read more

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Brandon Hardy is a Peer Mentor and Writing Consultant at Middle Tennessee State University, where he is a second-year M.A. student of English. His research is focused on writing center studies, theory, and pedagogy, with an emphasis on digital collaboration tools.

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