

# Avoiding Discrimination: A Philosophical Approach on Diversity in Tutoring

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## Introduction

In the 13th edition of JoSch Kruchen/Linguiri (2017) describe three situations which require writing tutors to be accustomed to intercultural practices and to take into account the principle of diversity. The following situations are described in the article: 1) A student already in their later semester seeks counsel. They receive an individual tutoring session from a student who is completing their third semester of their bachelor degree. The senior student feeling superior to the tutor questions their competency. The tutor being aware of said doubt begins to question their own abilities and feels intimidated by the situation. This leads to a non-successful tutoring session. 2) A student comes to an individual session of tutoring. Said student has been brought up in a bilingual environment – Spanish and German. The tutor, confronted with a poorly written text, asks the counsel-seeking student where they come from and for how long they have been studying German. When confronted with this question, the student may feel threatened and become reluctant to the possibility of tutoring, more so as they consider German to be their native language. 3) Lastly, Kruchen/Linguiri (2017) describe a tutoring situation where a third party not involved in the tutoring session is discriminated against by the agency of a controversial subject. The authors conclude that situations 1 and 3 are difficult to overcome since the discriminatory actions are undertaken by the counsel seekers and not by the tutor themselves. Situation 2 is easily dealt with as it goes hand in hand with the professionalism of the tutor, which can be formed through workshops sensitizing to the problem of diversity and discrimination.

My paper shall try to find a solution which similarly suits all situations and deals with the possibility of discrimination coming from a person seeking tutoring. In doing this, I shall resort to philosophy in order to get to the root of possible discrimination and starting from there, work on the structure of communication to avoid discrimination. More precisely I will rely on the theory of “situatedness” postulated by Henrich Rombach (1987, 1988, 1994). Building on this, I shall show that individuals are situationally determined and that through these determinations their identity is constructed. At the same time, the situations themselves become situations only as they stand in relation to a certain subject. Thus, a co-creative game emerges in situated relations. This paper shall argue 1) that all tutoring sessions are situationally determined; 2) that the main situation of a session is constituted by the text in question; 3) that the textual situation is related to all situations that otherwise determine the two subjects involved in the tutoring process, and 4) that

through the text every other determining situation can be addressed without the danger of discrimination.

Starting from this line of argumentation, I shall try to provide an answer to the difficulties raised by Kruchen/Linguiri (2017). I shall then end by discussing a personal tutoring experience to show how situatedness can accommodate further intercultural situations. Furthermore, basing myself on this thesis, I shall argue for a flexible tutoring structure which breaks away from a hierarchical interaction. More precisely, by addressing the text through a situationally based discourse, the main function of the tutoring session shall be to invite the student seeking counsel to a situation in which he or she can help themselves. The approach I propose here is to be understood as an alternative to directly addressing meta-levels of writing when dealing with sensitive subjects.

## Philosophical Premises

Henrich Rombach (1987, 1988, 1994) tried to develop a way of thinking which would go beyond the intercultural tensions which he experienced foremost in the Second World War. He attempts this in three different manners. He seeks: to replace classical ontology<sup>1</sup> with a structural based one; to develop a philosophy of images, which acts as the crystallisation of the worldly whole, and to employ a hermetic which seeks to bring „eine Welt in ihrer jeweiligen strukturalen Artikulation zur Erscheinung, wobei sie sich auf die einzelnen Teilmomente beziehen muß“ (Seubert 2006: 25). This paper shall mainly deal with the Structure-Ontology which analyses the genesis of structures, i.e., of fundamental determinations of the world we experience such as economics, politics, labour, language, etc., starting from the reciprocal interaction between given realities and the experiencing subjects.

The structure based ontology<sup>2</sup> is described by Rombach (1987, 1988) as being 1) genetical, 2) organic, and 3) co-creative (Volpi 1995: 256). More precisely, the structure is described by Rombach as being a non-causal event which grows from itself in an organically manner and consists in its own emergence and genesis. Given this character, the structure is not to be thought of as an object<sup>3</sup> nor as an idea, but as an organic whole which presents itself in its concreteness, i.e., in its individual moments such as a museum, an artist, a work of art, a painting instrument, and so on, in the case of structures such as art. These three determinations are closely related to the idemical character of structure, namely, that it is identical to its parts and its parts are identical to it, without exhausting each other in each other. Simpler said, the structure consists in its actualisations or in its

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1 Ontology is broadly understood as the investigation of that which exists and the grounds on which they exist. For more on ontology see Hofweber (2018).

2 Understood as the constellation of determinations concerning our way of being in the world.

3 This does not mean that something cannot be objective. It solely goes against the German idealist understanding of an object as something constituted by our cognitive faculties.

moments and therefore can only be experienced through them. This is what makes them idemical. On the other side, the moments are also dependent on and emerge starting from the structure which makes them in their turn idemical to the structure. This leads to the idea that any small change of one given situation or moment alters the entirety of the structure and of the other moments. This brings us to the last determination of the structure, namely the co-creativity, which says that the structure grows only through the participation and interaction of all moments involved in said structure. On the other side, the moments involved in the structure can only grow with the structure as they remain open to the entirety of the structure, i.e. as they do not remain enclosed within themselves.

This concept of structure is according to Rombach (1987) applicable to all phenomena due to its organic and genetic character. Amongst other phenomena, social life is one investigated by Rombach (1987). This area of phenomenality best suits our purpose. The application of structure based ontology on social life involves humans within the idemical network and the co-creative game which shows great potential in dealing with intercultural conflicts (Seubert 2006: 52).

Human beings do not only participate to the world but are also part of its evolution both as active and as passive parts. We are co-creative only as we contribute to the development of structures and remain open to the entirety of the structure as a condition of being part of it. As such, human beings are an integral part of structures and are committed as parts of said structure to co-creativity and through this to obligations and actions which are all situationally determined. We are situationally determined as we can only constitute ourselves as persons within situations. Thus, the situation becomes a major part of the structure ontology and anthropology. This is described by Rombach (1987: 139 pp.) in several steps:

1. We can only be conditioned by situations, as we cannot picture ourselves independent of them. Even a non-situation would be a situation that happens to us;
2. I can only find myself within the situation and thus
3. I am what I am, only in as much as I allow myself to be assimilated within a situation. That is also why a certain situation that happens to me can be considered as my own;
4. the situation is not to be understood as its individual contents, but as something that happens to me, that addresses me. As such, the situation is not an individual nor a whole, but the individual actualization of the whole and as such idemical;
5. the situation is prior to myself – not in a temporal but in an ontological way: as a certain situation addresses me, the reflexive movement of the subject is initiated which attempts to conceptualize said situations. During this reflexive process, the subject is constantly addressed by said situation. As such, when the subject finds its self it realizes that said self already contains the situation which originally addressed the subject.

As such, the subject and the situation cannot be thought separately, but as belonging together: idemity;

6. the situation (as ontological structure) manifests itself as its modifications or as concrete situations. Through these *individual* situations, the situation *as ontological structure* can evolve and be altered. As such, we can participate to this alteration or evolution of the situation by acting on its individual modi.

As in the case of the structure, the modi of the situation are interconnected and influence each other constantly. Thus, by addressing one situation we can address any other situation in a mediated way which contributes to the evolution and alteration of the situation as ontological structure: this again contributes to our co-creativity. In a more precise manner, each situation represents a challenge or an address to which I must answer. Through my answering both the situation in itself and the entire constellation in which it stands are determined. This of course implies that I can take part in a situation which is also shared by another person thus making the situation mine and at the same time theirs. However, by addressing this shared situation, I can also address the situations which are connected to the shared situation and thus participate in the entirety of the situations of other persons – mediated of course by one shared situation. Due to co-creativity I can also participate at the shaping and forming of said situations. This also reaffirms from a new – philosophical – perspective that talking about the text already implies talking about its concurring situations, i.e. the author, the process of research, the background of research, the function of said text, the social and political setting and so on.

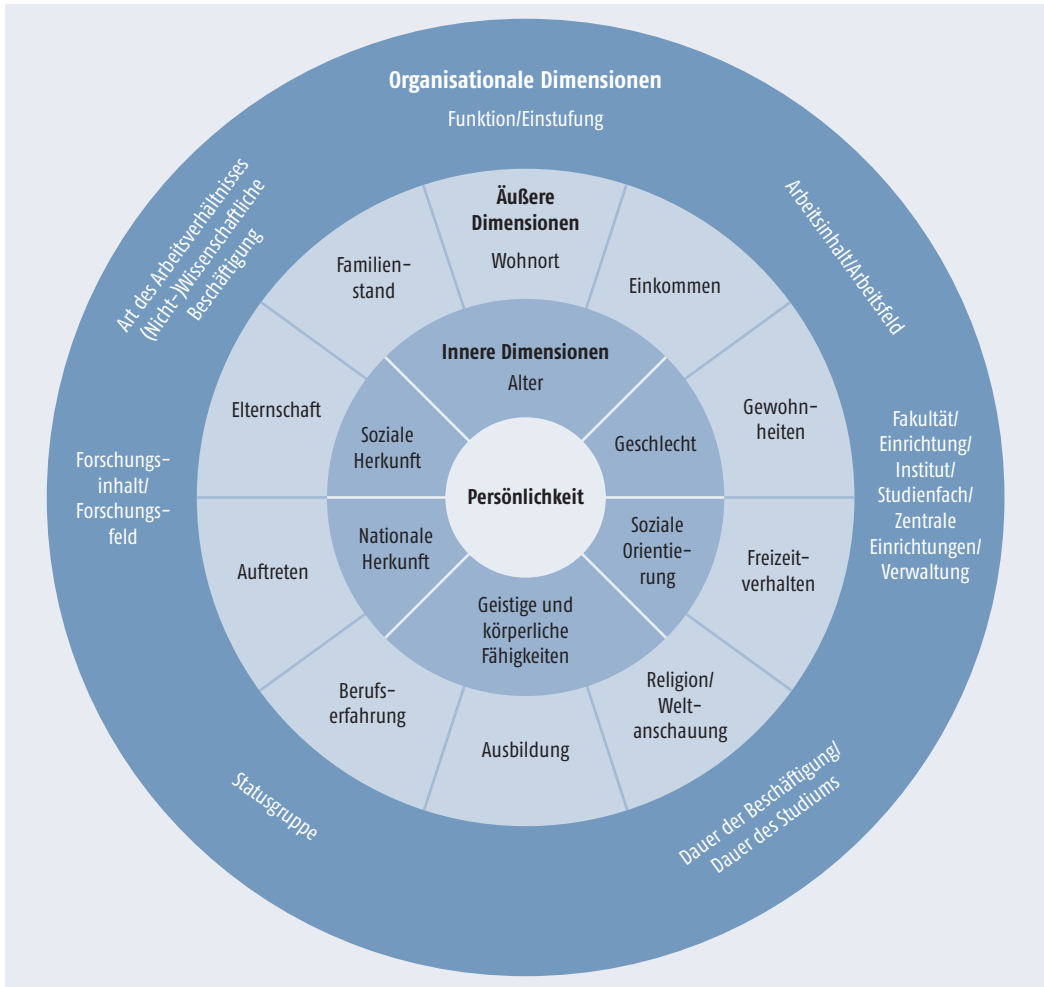
Such a shared situation would constitute a writing tutoring session where two subjects share a situation. In this case, the shared situation would be the text being discussed through which each situation concerning each subject can be addressed in a textual and not a personal manner: the text may reflect personal issues and thus may also provide access to these without naming the issues and thus avoiding a possible discrimination or insult. Based on this, I shall in the last section re-discuss the three tutoring situations proposed by Kruchen/Linguiri (2017).

## Visualisation of structures

The above described structure and situation based tutoring has been – without being directly related to Rombach – well schematized by Leicht-Scholten (2012: 9) when describing the several factors that might and do influence one's writing process:

Figure 1

Dimensions of Diversity in the Academic Field (Leicht-Scholten [2012: 19])



Even though this picture depicts in a clear manner the situational character of the writing process, it does not include the reciprocity between text and the situations that influence it. As such, the picture above describes that the writer is affected by certain situations, such as their background, family, emotions, etc. Consequently, these situations also influence the writing process and the text itself. However, they do not provide a clear manner of addressing such issues on a non-personal level. I argue based on Rombach (1987) that the text itself, the tutor, the writer, and all the other situations are interconnected, and that based on this it is possible to address every concurring situation through the agency of the text alone. Expanding on this I propose the following sketch for the situational based tutoring:

Figure 2

Text as a Situational Channel

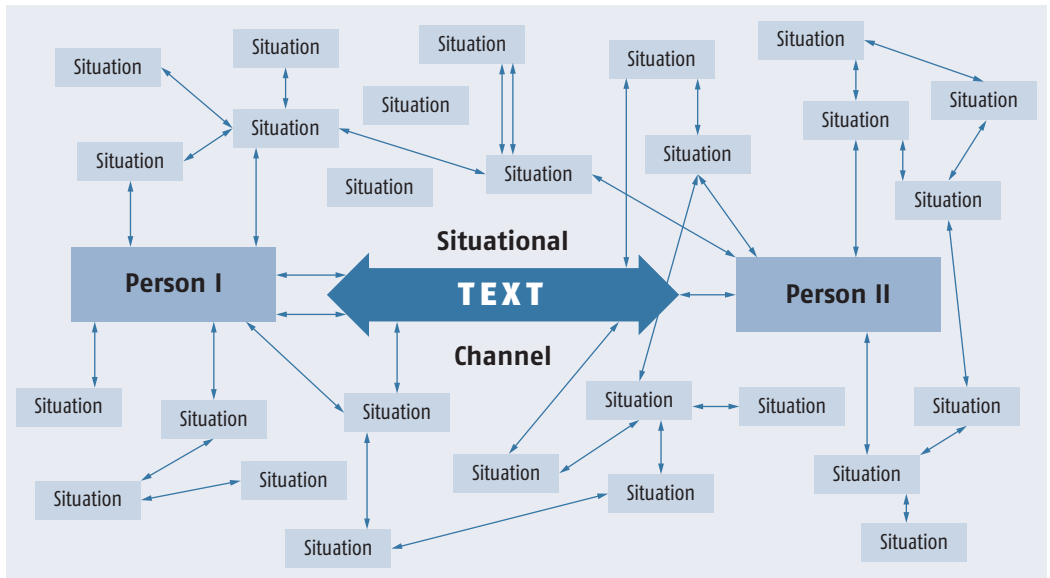


Figure 2 presents a rather more chaotic perspective than figure 1, since it is meant to depict not only a static representation of the influences on the writing process but also how these behave in an actual tutoring situation. As such, figure 2 represents a number of undetermined situations – based on the philosophical premises described above – situations become determined only as they are inscribed in the co-creative game – which may or may not be addressed within a session. Furthermore, the access to said situations is obtained via the agency of the text and solely based on the response of the tutee.

### Avoiding Discrimination

Finally, based on the philosophical premises expounded above, I shall argue here that discrimination can be avoided, even if said discrimination is initiated by the one seeking tutoring. This can be achieved by addressing the text and through the agency of the text addressing all discrimination-inducing situations. The tutor can as such address discrimination while remaining neutral.<sup>4</sup> I have presented in the introduction three examples of discrimination. These have initially been presented by Kruchen/Linguiri (2017), who argue that only one case of those presented can be controlled by the tutor. The first example states that a tutor just completing their third bachelor's semester can be looked down

<sup>4</sup> I wish to stress here that this textually mediated approach is only needed when the topic may lead to discriminatory statements. The textually mediated approach does not exclude the possibility of addressing meta-levels of writing directly. It just provides an alternative to this when dealing with sensitive subjects.

upon by a more advanced student who seeks counsel. This can lead to the intimidation and discrimination of the tutor based on biased expectations, and thus lead to a failed tutoring session. I have stated that the common situation (understood philosophically as presented in the previous section) is the text being discussed in tutoring situations. Through this and based on the identity and its implicit co-creativity of situations, the entire constellation – which addresses the subject seeking counsel – can be addressed and shaped. As such, the tutor can address the textual issues at hand, instead of focusing on the distrust of the more advanced student. By addressing said textual issues they not only assert their competency, but may also defuse the preconceptions of the counsel-seeking student: Said student seeing that the tutor identifies situations of great interest in the text – which can also be resolved – may choose to ignore their preconceptions and work together on the text. As such, addressing the text may not only shape the text itself but also the perspective of those discussing the text.

Moving on to the second example the same procedure can be applied. The second example concerns a counsel seeker who was brought up in a bilingual environment. The discrimination – and thus intimidation – appears when the tutor decides to ask the counsel seeker whether they are a native speaker or not. Instead, I propose that the tutor addresses the text and points out that the language of the text may or may not be adequate for a scientific paper. This addressing of the text does not involve the person who is seeking tutoring but the actualization of their bilingual situation. Addressing said situation in a mediated way – through the text – can thus invite the one seeking tutoring to open themselves to the possibility of discussing their situation. Again, by addressing the text, the tutor remains neutral and discusses solely that which is at hand in the text as a reflection of all converging situations. This opens the door for discussion of the latter in an objective manner and *solely on the initiative of the one seeking tutoring*. As such, the discussion becomes co-creative. The tutor invites for a discussion of the text – influenced by the background of the one seeking counsel – and the other student either accepts or refuses to participate and/or to discuss the situation of their bilingual education.

Finally, the third example discusses discrimination towards a third party. The discrimination may occur either by discussing or by writing about said third party. As in the first example, by addressing the text or the topic of the discussion and not the discriminatory views directly one can alter the perspective of the counsel seeker. Alternatively, the tutor can also address the argumentative flaws of a discriminatory discourse without calling the person out on being discriminatory in order to draw attention to the logical issues on said subject. Moreover, by addressing the text or the theme of the discussion, the tutor can also mediate address their own concurring situations, which may consist in her feeling irritated by said subject. As such, an entire constellation of situations can be discussed and brought to light without leaving the plain of neutrality and professionalism behind. More importantly, the situation based tutoring invites most of all to a state of openness regarding diversity. Said diversity is being grounded in a shared situation – the text – which opens the door to discussion of all concurring situations.

As a concluding remark of this section I wish to discuss a case from my own experience as a tutor. This case presents the possibility of openness towards diversity in two ways: concerning both myself as tutor but also the counsel seeker. The student S. came into tutoring after struggling with writer's block for about a year. His writer's block was severe given that he also struggled with depression for which he was also in psychological therapy.<sup>5</sup> Upon hearing his struggles, I at first felt discouraged, especially as a non-native speaker. I have decided however not to address his personal issues, but the issues of the text. By questioning his writer's block it became clear that the problem consisted in two conflicting situations: 1) his great expectations and demands for high quality texts; 2) the lack of time and the lack of quantity of text (at the time he had only notes and a few pages written from his bachelor thesis). The demand for high quality was keeping him from producing any quantity. I have as such decided to address the quantitative problem in order to deflect from the qualitative one. My proposal to him was for him to begin to write during tutoring sessions without considering the quality of what was written. By addressing the quantitative *textual* situation and by differentiating between quality and quantity, the student was able to soon produce text. This also influenced his psychological state as well as his view on the qualitative situation: having a written text before him, he was better able to analyze the quality of his work. Also, by focusing on the text and on the task at hand, my lack of faith in my own abilities was also addressed and resolved by the yielded results.

## Conclusion

I have tried here to approach the issues of diversity based on three concrete examples provided by Kruchen/Linguiri (2017) which show the difficulties of tutoring when ignoring the danger of discrimination. My goal was to provide an answer to the problem of discrimination which could accommodate a broad horizon of tutoring situations which may develop into discriminatory occurrences. More precisely, I have tried to argue for the possibility of avoiding said occurrences regardless if they are initiated by the tutor or by the tutee.

My approach was based heavily on philosophy as I wanted to ground my argumentation in a broader context, which addresses the nature of communication and interaction. As I have showed above though, these philosophical premises are also in accordance with the literature concerning writing tutoring. The philosophical considerations have tried to show that tutoring is situationally determined and that the text discussed in the session provides a communicational channel for addressing the several aspects influencing the text. Based on this I argue that the tutoring session can always remain grounded in interpersonal neutrality while still being able to address the issues at hand. Furthermore,

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5 It is unclear whether a causal relation between his depression and writer's block exists.



based on the consideration of situations as something which address us I have argued that each tutoring session acts as an invitation for opening up to the possibility of the tutee receiving help for helping themselves. Moreover, this kind of addressing or of inviting to open up provides a flexible medium orbiting around the text, in which the tutor can adapt themselves to each situation that presents itself. This finally defines tutoring as based on diversity, namely, the diversity of situations reflecting themselves in the text.

Finally, I wish to highlight that the arguments exposed above do not aim at establishing the text as the sole subject which can be addressed in a tutoring session. I argue rather that the text provides a shared and neutral channel for addressing sensible subjects and that through the text the tutee can be invited to discuss certain situations which are textually grounded. Once the invitation is accepted, the discussion also opens itself for a diversity of topics which can be addressed.

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