



Schreibwissenschaft



This writing conversation centers around the adaptation of the writing fellow program from the University of Wisconsin-Madison at the German writing center in Frankfurt/Oder. The protagonists in this conceptual journey share insights and experiences from their collaboration.

Schlagworte: writing conversation center; writing collaboration; writing fellow program; interview; academic writing process
Zitiervorschlag: *Hughes, Bradley; Liebetanz, Franziska & Voigt, Anja (2023): Writing Fellows Conversation. A Journey from the US to Germany and Back. JoSch - Journal für Schreibwissenschaft, 14(1), 51-60. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3278/JOS2301W006>*

E-Journal Einzelbeitrag
von: Franziska Liebetanz, Anja Voigt, Bradley Hughes

Writing Fellows Conversation A Journey from the US to Germany and Back

aus: Ausgabe 25: Concepts, Community and Collaboration
(JOS2301W)

Erscheinungsjahr: 2023

Seiten: 51 - 60

DOI: 10.3278/JOS2301W006

Dieses Werk ist unter folgender Lizenz veröffentlicht: Creative
Commons Namensnennung-Share Alike 4.0 International

Writing Fellows Conversation

A Journey from the US to Germany and Back

Bradley Hughes, Franziska Liebetanz & Anja Voigt

Abstract

This writing conversation centers around the adaptation of the writing fellow program from the University of Wisconsin-Madison at the German writing center in Frankfurt/Oder. The protagonists in this conceptual journey share insights and experiences from their collaboration.

Franziska: Dear Anja and dear Brad, when I thought about this issue of *JoSch*, I immediately thought of our exchanges about writing fellows. As a best-practice example of transatlantic collaboration, the successful adaptation of the Writing Fellows (WF) model into the German higher education context may interest readers.

Anja: Yes, what a great opportunity to talk to both of you about WF again. I'll try to give a general description first, what WF are and what they do. They are student writing advisors integrated into writing-intensive seminars, extensively trained in supporting academic writing processes. They provide support for students in selected seminars by giving them individual feedback on their written work, but they also work closely together with the professors. Together with WF, the professors work out their expectations for students' texts as well as assessment criteria for their academic texts. WF also advise the professors on the design of writing tasks or assignments and discuss with them how understandable and feasible the writing task is for students. In this way, they take on an important mediator function between teachers and students. For me, the WF program also represents a very concrete way of bringing approaches and methods of writing science and writing didactics directly into contact with the disciplines. Seen this way, WF programs can help universities work out a new understanding of writing support as an essential part of higher education.

Franziska: Exactly! Do you remember? Our friendship with Brad Hughes and the Writing Center of the University Wisconsin-Madison began with Katrin Girsensohn. In 2011, she spent one year in Wisconsin working together with Brad and conducting her research about writing center leadership and sustainability. Her year there gave us an inside look into a writing center totally different from ours. After learning about their WF program, we decided to start a similar program within our Writing Center. The idea of having student workers giving feedback on papers from different disciplines was new for us and seemed to be a way to incorporate peer feedback and writing in the disciplines more fully into our university culture.

Bradley Hughes, Franziska Liebetanz & Anja Voigt

Anja: Already, in the first workshop with Brad back in 2013, we realized what potential a program of this kind could have, and I was sure that it would be worth adapting it to the German university system. It was clear to you and me from the start that such a well worked-out concept, which focuses on all the important actors at the same time, is well suited to supporting writing in the disciplines. We immediately felt like we also had to implement something like this at the European University Viadrina. Within our team, we had already realized that we needed to focus more on collaborating with the faculty, and the WF program, with its goals and its inherent ability to address many different actors, seemed to us to be a model worth adopting. So, Brad, can you please tell us about the WF program in the Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin?

Brad: Sure. The WF program here began in the fall of 1997. My wonderful colleague Emily Hall has directed the program for decades now. We were inspired by the first WF programs (also called course-embedded tutors or curricular-based tutoring), developed in the late 1970s and early 80s by Harriet Sheridan at Carleton College, Tori Haring-Smith at Brown University, and Margot Soven at La Salle University. When we started, our WF program had 14 undergraduate fellows and now has about 50 who work with student-writers and professors in writing-intensive courses across the university. We added the WF program to our longstanding Writing Center, which began in 1969, and to a faculty WAC program, which began in 1984. Every spring semester, the WF program selects, through a rigorous application process, enough undergraduate students to become new WF the following year to replace those who have graduated. Each fellow works with about 10–12 student-writers and a professor in a writing-intensive course—reading drafts for two papers, writing revision-oriented comments on the drafts, and meeting individually with each student-writer to discuss students' plans for revising their papers. Students then submit their revised papers to their course professor for grading; along with the revised paper, they also submit the draft and their fellows' comments and a letter explaining their major revisions.

At first it wasn't easy to find stable long-term funding and to recruit faculty. But over time, the program has found strong campus partners and is now well established and admired. Key to our success was securing some modest initial funding to pilot a small WF program experiment as an overload, working with just a few courses and professors we knew well and with some great initial WF. During that year, we began to figure out how to make this complex program work, did some assessment, and earned the trust of key professors across the university teaching those courses with WF, who then became strong allies supporting our proposal to grow the program. Starting with this kind of small pilot program is what I'd advise faculty who want to develop a WF program—but alerting university leaders from the start that it's going to be successful, so it's important to begin planning to secure enough funding to grow the program. Using this initial success and partnering with other teaching-and-learning programs, we persuaded our university leaders to invest in the program long term and we raised substantial gift funds from university alumni to endow part of the program.

WF programs combine process theories of writing, especially about the importance of strengthening student-writers' revision strategies (e.g., Sommers 1980); collaborative learning (Bruffee 1984) and social constructivist theories of learning, especially the power of knowledgeable peers to help less-experienced writers (Nordloff 2020; Vygotsky 1978); and social theories of writing (e.g., Bazerman 2015) and the importance of disciplinary discourse (e.g., Bawarshi/Reiff 2010; Prior 1998). The program taps into the amazing power of undergraduates to help peers with papers in progress and to influence and support teachers as they do the hard work of teaching with writing in all disciplines.

We recognized that to succeed in this challenging work, undergraduate fellows needed substantial initial and ongoing education and support. So new fellows take a semester-long seminar on the theory and practice of peer tutoring across the disciplines, which helps them learn how to be effective writing tutors, examine their role in teaching and learning at the university, and develop further as writers. As they comment on student drafts and prepare to consult individually with students, all fellows receive individual mentoring and participate in regular ongoing education and reflection about their work. In the seminar, new fellows conduct substantial original research about some aspect of tutoring writing or about writing in the disciplines. They share their research in the seminar, and some present their research to larger audiences in our Writing Center and at conferences, and some publish that research, thus making the WF program a rich intellectual experience for our fellows. Our WF program has influenced many programs at universities around the world, including Florida International University and the University of Iowa in the US, Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, and Goethe University in Germany.

Franziska: I really believe in WF because the fellows and professors enter into a deep communicative process, an academic process of negotiating, in order to understand the process of writing and their expectations. Anja and Brad, why do you believe in WF?

Anja: In the last session of the Writing Fellow SIG, this special interest group of *Gesellschaft für Schreibdidaktik und Schreibforschung*, we recently spent a lot of time talking about that. We concluded that a WF program offers a real chance for teachers and other university actors to appreciate what writing didactics can actually accomplish for the disciplines. A WF program is essentially about linking writing to learning objectives. Working with fellows can motivate teachers to reflect on alternative performance measures, assessment criteria, and writing and feedback processes. The program can also make explicit what the Writing in the Disciplines approach has long been taking as one of its central assumptions, namely that discursive knowledge is already available in the disciplines. A WF program constantly relies on the expertise of its teachers. It can also demonstrate that academic writing and its peculiarities are strongly tied to the disciplines, and that it is therefore particularly useful when experts from the disciplines help to shape how students learn to write. In my opinion, it is precisely the interlocking of writing didactic approaches and theories, of guiding ideas and small interventions, that accumulate in a beneficial way in this program.

Brad: I believe in WF for several additional reasons—first, the model leads disciplinary teachers to incorporate writing process into their pedagogy. As writing and WAC-WID specialists talk with disciplinary teachers in workshops and consultations, we're always encouraging colleagues to build carefully designed assignments, drafts, feedback, conferences, revision, and reflection into cycles for student papers. But that's sometimes impossible for teachers to do, because they have competing priorities and too many students. But a WF program makes it possible for more teachers to integrate writing-process pedagogy into selected courses. And, as Anja was saying, when they work with fellows, teachers reflect more critically on how they design writing activities and talk more with their students about disciplinary discourse and genre expectations. From their fellows' written comments, teachers also learn new ways to give feedback about writing.

Second, a WF program taps into the power of collaborative learning, expanding collaborative learning among students far beyond those who choose to go to writing centers, thus embedding writing center pedagogy into courses across the curriculum. The students who work with WF not only receive detailed, individual, critical, and encouraging feedback on their drafts, but also learn how to talk about their writing in progress. The WF themselves learn so much from the experience—not only about writing and tutoring, but also about leadership and about listening, collaboration, and teamwork (Hughes/Gillespie/Kail 2010). And the fellows conduct exciting original research about writing, so undergraduates contribute to our discipline.

Finally, writing centers and WAC-WID programs grow stronger when they add WF programs. A WF program widens the circle of teachers engaged with WAC programs and writing centers, teachers who deepen the understanding that writing centers and WAC programs have of disciplinary discourses. Anja, can you please tell us a bit about your journey implementing the WF program at the European University Viadrina?

Anja: It began in 2013, when Brad and Stephanie White came to visit the “big” and the “small” Frankfurts. In multiple workshops, we learned about the WF program and had an intensive exchange about Brad's and Stephanie's experiences. They also brought materials from faculty members as well as their handbooks for WF and for teachers. And I remember how impressed I was with the handbook for fellows (see material). The team at Wisconsin-Madison had transformed a very complex learning process into an easily understandable manual format. Inspired by this, I started to rework the materials for the German context, modifying the content and adapting the “language” to German universities. As a result, I produced handbooks for WF and faculty members, both of which I later revised and updated, often with the help of our wonderful WF. As more and more requests from German colleagues came in, together with Stephanie Dreyfürst (former director of the Writing Center, Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main, Germany) we published our handbooks and a few theoretical discussions in 2018 (Dreyfürst/Liebetanz/Voigt).

Franziska: In 2015, together with Stephanie Dreyfürst, we became part of an alliance for university teaching (LehreN Netzwerk). The aim was to promote excellent teaching projects, to strengthen committed actors, to support transfer and practice, and to form a

network of excellence on teaching-related university development. Through this alliance, we were able to develop our WF program, discuss it with our colleagues from different disciplines and from different German universities, test the program, and adapt it to the German university system and to German academic culture. That process included adapting the writing tasks to ones familiar in German universities, observing the feedback culture at our university, checking whether professors need more context about writing didactics and knowledge about writing processes, and gauging whether we have to give more context about theory and practice about Writing Across the Curriculum. Because writing center theory and practice are not that well known in German universities, we always have to provide more background information, develop handouts or short talks to inform colleagues, and help them see the benefits of WF.

We presented the program at conferences, we received feedback from different universities, and, most importantly, we became part of a very effective network of teachers, professors, and specialists in didactics. Our work with this group contributed significantly to making WF programs known at German universities. This alliance gave us time to reflect, talk about WF programs with specialists from German universities who are experts in higher education, and as a result of this process shape this model into a form that would match the German university context.

I received from the Volkswagen Foundation (in 2015) a grant to travel to the US in order to learn more about WF program. I visited the Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where Brad was a wonderful host, introducing my colleagues and me not only to the WF program but also to the work of his Writing Center. There, I learned what a great WF program can look like and saw the professionalism and passion with which the WF worked. Because we were going to import the program to our country, it was very important for me to see firsthand and to understand the setting and the university culture and practices in which a program like the WF program works, so that I could then think deeply about how it might work within my own university culture.

I have found that there are extraordinary benefits when writing centers have transnational collaborations. For developing our WF program, we were able from the beginning to work with a well-established and solid program. We got fantastic materials. We could speak to our colleagues from the US, get important information, reflect together and share our concerns and difficulties a new program always goes through. We could rely on articles and research results; those resources help a lot, not only with inventing a program but also with convincing faculty and colleagues to work with WF. The benefits also go beyond the program. Somehow if you work together on developing a program, if you share ideas, if you visit each other (Brad has been multiple times to the Writing Center of the European University Viadrina), you learn much more. You learn about different academic cultures, not only theoretically but also in practice. I saw as an observer—and then experienced even more clearly when I worked together with Brad and his team—the power of collaborative and cooperative ways of working, in order to communicate and achieve goals and consensus. Another thing I really appreciate is what a good listener Brad

is, which I observed from seeing him at his Writing Center. For our work, that is one really important skill. If we understand students and colleagues through careful listening and if we help them explore their knowledge, thoughts and ideas through dialogue, they will be able to make their implicit knowledge and ideas explicit, so then other people can really see and work with their explicit ideas in (ideally well-written) academic papers. As good listeners, we can help build bridges between writers, students, professors, faculties and knowledge. Writing is one of the best instruments to communicate sciences, and the better we are in writing the better we can contribute to sciences. And I am sure everybody will have these kinds of experiences or reflective thoughts if they step into international cooperation. Developing international academic friendships, which allow us to exchange ideas, concepts, and programs, is also a very important means for fostering friendship and peace in the world.

Anja: And then the second WF-Book-Adventure came up. Since 2013, in German-speaking higher education an increasing number of WF programs have been launched in writing centers or in related institutions. One after another, the WF programs emerged from their respective trial phases, so 2018 was a good time to put the WF program to the test. By then, there were several theoretical considerations about the use of WF, initial evaluation results in different disciplines at the university, and other adaptations of the Wisconsin-Madison/Viadrina model. With the second WF book, I wanted to present an interim assessment of the program and thus help to continue working on the WF model as a way of promoting Writing in the Disciplines.

The SIG Writing Fellows also started their work around the same time. We are currently addressing three major sets of issues. The first concerns strategy development: How can a WF program support strategic goals of the university, which are normally expressed in “Leitbildern” (mission statements) and as concrete measures in “Struktur-und Entwicklungsplänen” (structural and development planning)?

Furthermore, we continue to explore the question of advantages and disadvantages that the subject-specific and/or cross-disciplinary deployment of WF can have in the disciplines and to what extent the collaboration with the faculties and disciplines can be particularly supported by a subject-related deployment. And of course, we always talk about how we can keep our programs running successfully under very different conditions. In any case, it's clear that many of us have to deal with a shortage of resources, so it's not so easy to keep WF programs running. As a result of the phase-out of the so-called “Qualitätspakt Lehre” (Pact for Quality in Teaching) led by the federal ministry of education in 2020, many writing centers and other related institutions in Germany have had to realign themselves in new situations. Either they had to find new external funding resources, or they had to become (fully) integrated into the university structure. In this context, WF programs may be a particularly suitable starting point, for they provide a very concrete, manageable, and dependable “package” of a writing didactics intervention.

Franziska: One challenge is to sustain WF program even if your institution is being restructured. Since 2021, our Writing Center is completely and forever financed by our

university. Securing this long-term funding has been our biggest success so far. We are still in the process of restructuring, so we have had to change much in order to make things work. Our WF program also seems a bit “lost.” Everybody wants the program to continue, but we have to find ways to integrate it a new university structure. We had to do a lot of compromising, which is good in ways, because we are now more accepted by our faculties, and our work is now included in the university’s description of its programs. I already talked about how much I learned from transnational cooperation, but I want to stress one more valuable thing beyond the program: especially valuable was fostering the friendship between our Writing Center and the Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin. I am lucky to still have this friendship and to be able to get in touch with Brad, meeting him regularly over the years. Having a friend who shares my passion for writing center work and who lives and works on almost the other side of the world is invaluable not only to my work and to our WF program but also to me personally. Anja and Brad, let’s talk about what we learned from each other!

Anja: I have learned that our writing didactic interventions and offerings have to present themselves in more “explainable” and “digestible” terms. When working with teachers, it is very important to meet them where they are and to find the right tone. In some of the SIG WF sessions, we have talked about “Beziehungsarbeit,” a German word that, on a very literal level, reflects the fact that relationships are not something statically given but something that demands active engagement. In the case of the WF program, this means that it’s not just about making an offer that teachers can accept or reject. A WF program in itself can seem rigid and strict, so you need a flexible vocabulary. It is also very helpful to have a ready-designed program that you just apply to the context. Teachers have little time, and when asked to implement writing literacy instruction, over and above their usual preparation, it is not uncommon for them to get stressed. However, the WF program offers a very practical, hands-on and easy approach to this topic. This is why teachers most of the time greatly appreciate the support for their disciplinary teaching provided by the WF and the Writing Center.

Brad: When I had the honor of introducing WF concepts and practices at the two Frankfurt’s Schreibzentren, I learned about writing assignments and instruction in German university contexts, which differ from US universities, and I saw how smart and theoretically sophisticated German undergraduate writing tutors were, how eager tutors and professors were to learn about WF models, and how critically they thought about how to adapt this model to local contexts. I have been inspired by all the work that you and others have done to introduce WF models to universities in Germany, including all the resources you have shared with colleagues and by the enthusiasm you have for WF. It’s a perfect example of what Bromley, Girgensohn, Northway, and Schonberg (2021), using concepts from organizational studies, describe as the “reflective, intentional translation” of writing center models and concepts from one educational culture to another. From collaborating with colleagues at Viadrina, I also learned much about sponsoring writing groups, which we later adapted for our Writing Center.

And I'm still learning, even from this conversation—I love the term “Beziehungsarbeit,” which captures perfectly the careful listening, collaboration, and relationship-building among WF, teachers, students, and program leaders and the flexible ways in which writing specialists work with disciplinary teachers. From observing WF programs in both German and US universities, I see some of the tensions in goals that Bastian (2021) identified when WF (or embedded tutors) work in different kinds of WAC programs. Going forward we need to think more holistically in order to theorize WF program administration within institutional contexts, using some of the theories Cox, Gailin, and Melzer (2018) used to characterize WAC program development— complexity, systems, social network, and sustainable development theories. Finally, this collaboration has given me a priceless gift of enduring international friendships. As Franziska said, I honestly think of international collaborations as a form of citizen diplomacy.

Franziska, Anja and Brad: We hope that our conversation has inspired readers to consider developing WF programs. We've shared some resources below to help get started, and we're genuinely eager to talk with you by email. If, however, it's not the right time for you or your university to consider this, we would still strongly encourage writing professionals to experiment with small international collaborations. If you read a publication or hear a presentation by an international colleague that interests you, try writing to the author or talking with the presenter to show interest, which could lead to inviting that colleague to speak by videoconference with the staff in your writing program or center or collaborating on a future research project and presentation. Almost all writing scholars are thrilled to have colleagues interested in their ideas and eager to talk and learn together.

References

- Bastian, Heather (2021): Sustaining WEC Through Peer Tutors. In: Anson, Chris M./Flash, Pamela (Eds.): *Writing-Enriched Curricula: Models of Faculty-Driven and Departmental Transformation*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press/University Press of Colorado. 221–234.
- Bawarshi, Anis S./Reiff, Mary Jo (Eds.) (2010): *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Parlor Press and WAC Clearinghouse.
- Bazerman, Charles (2015): Writing Expresses and Shares Meaning to Be Reconstructed by the Reader. In: Adler-Kassner, Linda/Wardle, Elizabeth (Eds.): *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press/University Press of Colorado. 21–23.
- Bromley, Pamela/Girgensohn, Katrin/Northway, Kara/Schonberg, Eliana (2021): From the Special Issue Editors [Introduction to Special Issue on Transatlantic Writing Centers]. In *The Writing Center Journal*. Vol.38. No.3. 11–21.

- Bruffee, Kenneth A. (1984): Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind. In *College English*. Vol. 46. No. 7. 635–652.
- Cox, Michelle/Galin, Jeffrey R./Melzer, Dan (2018): *Sustainable WAC: A Whole Systems Approach to Launching and Developing Writing Across the Curriculum Programs*. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Hughes, Bradley/Gillespie, Paula/Kail, Harvey (2010): What They Take with Them: Findings from the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project. In: *The Writing Center Journal*. Vol. 30. No. 2. 12–46.
- Nordloff, John (2020): Vygotskayan Learning Theory. In: Mackiewicz, Jo/Babcock, Rebecca Day (Eds.): *Theories and Methods of Writing Center Studies: A Practical Guide*. London: Routledge. 11–19.
- Prior, Paul A. (1998): *Writing/Disciplinarity: A Sociohistoric Account of Literate Activity in the Academy*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Sommers, Nancy (1980): Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers. In: *College Composition and Communication*. Vol. 31. No. 4. 378–388.
- Vgotsky, L. S. (1978): *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Suggestions for Further Reading about Writing Fellows and Course-Embedded Writing Tutors

- Carpenter, Russell/Whiddon, Scott/Dvorak, Kevin (Eds.) (2014): Course-Embedded Writing-Support Programs in Writing Centers [Special double-issue]. In: *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*. Vol. 12. No. 1. 1–109. www.praxisuwc.com/12|journal
- Dreyfürst, Stephanie/Liebetanz, Franziska/Voigt, Anja (2018): Das Writing Fellow-Programm. Ein Praxishandbuch zum Schreiben in der Lehre. Bielefeld: wbv. (OER: <https://www.wbv.de/shop/Das-Writing-Fellow-Programm-6004576whf>)
- Hall, Emily/Hughes, Bradley (2011): Preparing Faculty, Professionalizing Fellows: Keys to Success with Undergraduate Writing Fellows in WAC. In: *The WAC Journal*. Vol. 22. 21–40. DOI:10.37514/WAC-J.2011.22.1.03.
- Hughes, Bradley/Hall, Emily B. (Eds.) (2008): Rewriting Across the Curriculum: Writing Fellows as Agents of Change in WAC [Special issue]. In: *Across the Disciplines*. Vol. 5. wac.colostate.edu/atd/special/fellows/
- Neely, Michelle E. (2017): Faculty Beliefs in Successful Writing Fellow Partnerships: How Do Faculty Understand Teaching, Learning, and Writing? In: *Across the Disciplines*. Vol. 14. No. 2. DOI: 10.37514/ATD-J.2017.14.2.03
- Spigelman, Candace/Grobman, Laurie (Eds.) (2005): *On Location: Theory and Practice in Classroom-Based Writing Tutoring*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press.
- Voigt, Anja (2018): Lehren und Lernen mit Writing Fellows. Beiträge zur Forschung, Evaluation und Adaption. Bielefeld: wbv. (OER: <https://www.wbv.de/shop/Lehren-und-Lernen-mit-Writing-Fellows-6004628>)

Material

The handbook for Writing Fellows (unpublished) by the UW–Madison Writing Center. <https://writing.wisc.edu/writingfellows/current/>

The handbook for professors working with Writing Fellows (unpublished) by the UW–Madison Writing Center. <https://writing.wisc.edu/writingfellows/faculty/>

Authors

Bradley Hughes is the Director Emeritus of the Writing Center and Director Emeritus of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the US. Together with colleagues, he developed the Writing Fellows Program at Wisconsin in 1997. He has published widely about writing centers, writing fellows, and WAC, and he has consulted with universities around the US and with universities in many parts of the world.

Franziska Liebetanz directed the Writing Center of the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder) between 2011 and 2020. Since 2021 she has been directing the Viadrina Center of Teaching and Learning with Anja Voigt. She is Vice-Chair of the European Writing Center Association and founded JoSch with her colleagues.

Anja Voigt is co-director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder). For several years, she directed the Writing Fellow Program there. Since 2020, Voigt has been chair of the SIG Writing Fellows of the Gesellschaft für Schreibdidaktik und Schreibforschung. She is also author of several publications on the topic.