

FDGA Research Grant Report

Writing Centers and the Syrian Crisis: Effects of Political Migration on Writing Tutor Preparation in Germany

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During the course of this research project, I visited eight German universities and met with directors of writing and language centers. In total, I met with nearly 75 different people and conducted 11 official interviews with tutors, students, faculty, and program directors. My original research question asked how German writing centers were preparing to educate the large number of refugee students predicted to enter the university system.

On the ground in Germany, I quickly learned that plans to educate refugee students were rapidly unfolding under less than desirable time constraints. As a result, many of the writing centers had no immediate plans to work with refugee students as they did not anticipate meeting with these students for another year. The real action was happening at the language centers, many of which are closely related to the writing centers, and I had access to faculty and staff working in these areas.

The primary challenge for these language centers focused on German language proficiency, ensuring that refugee students possessed the requisite language skills to be successful at the university. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages helps determine linguistic skill level in any language, ranging from A1 (very basic beginner) to C2 (proficient mastery). The German language centers were told that students enrolling in their classes would be at a B2 and needed to achieve C1 to enter the university. The reality in many language classes is that students were at an A2 or B1, meaning there was little chance these students would be prepared to start their studies on time. It also meant that the language centers often had to turn students away even though the refugees had been told the Universities would welcome them--they simply were not equipped to handle the initial demand in some cases.

Many teachers reported to me that, in addition to linguistic demands, there were a number of psychological, emotional, and cultural issues that became clear as courses got underway. The German system prides itself on treating learners equally, but there is a difference between a student studying abroad from the United States and a student who experienced the trauma of political and/or environmental distress and an arduous migration. Instructors at Göttingen Universität, for instance, reported that many refugee students are glued to mobile phones during class waiting to hear news from home, and when that news is delivered, it can be devastating.

In the writing centers, I met a number of student tutors participating in community organized efforts to teach refugees German. In addition to community organizations, campus groups also organized meetings where students could develop and practice conversation skills. I participated in

one of these classes with two students from Syria and one from Afghanistan. (Their German was far more advanced than mine.) These meetings provided opportunities for language practice and getting to know refugee students better. The goal is to understand better the students' preferences in order to communicate more effectively and genuinely with this population.

While at Leibniz Universität in Hannover, I learned of an individual whose story highlights the complexity of refugee status and education in Germany. This particular student was already studying as an international student in Germany while the crisis in Syria advanced. His hometown was destroyed and along with it went his family's financial security. He no longer had the €8,700.00 required to meet the financial resources needed to secure a visa. Consequently, this student was faced with two difficult options: 1. Discontinue his education and return to war-torn Syria or 2. Seek political asylum as a refugee but forfeit the right to return to Syria to see his family. He chose to remain in Germany as a refugee to continue his studies.

The German language centers are witness to a number of stories like the one above and are working closely with other offices on campus, like the international student offices, to provide adequate support for students both linguistically and psychologically. At the time of my visit, language and writing centers had a number of questions about the feasibility of matriculating nearly 70,000 refugee students across Germany's university system. Their budgets are already strained and tentative, and they are being asked to prepare students for learning and communicating in the German academic system.

Despite their tremendous budgetary struggles and worries, my findings suggest that writing and language centers across Germany are theoretically and pedagogically prepared to meet the demands of multilingual refugee students. Most of the writing and language centers I visited take an approach to language learning that sees diversity as a resource. Their practices are often guided by a translanguaging approach, which "sees difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading, and listening" (Horner et al. 303).

Furthermore, many of the applied linguists teaching in these programs discuss rhetorical and language differences to help the students make informed decision about how to communicate. These approaches are important because many of the students are not learning German as a second language. In fact, one of the refugee students I met spoke German as a his sixth language. To deny the rich tapestry of language traditions that this student experienced before learning German would be like focusing on a single thread and missing the beauty of the tapestry in its totality.

In addition to the experience of refugee students at these Universities, I was also able to learn about German approaches to writing center work, peer tutoring, and writing pedagogy. While the German writing center community has adopted many practices from U.S. writing center scholarship, their unique educational context makes for differences that are fascinating and instructive. German students tend to work on longer, more involved writing projects and are more likely to spend several sessions with a tutor over the course of that writing process. Although the notion of peer

tutoring and collaborative learning have been adopted to the point where Germany has a national peer tutor conference, the concept is held suspect by even the peer tutors themselves. This is due to the translation of “peer” into German and to the cultural accessibility of U.S. scholarship on collaborative learning and writing centers to German tutors. Likewise, it became evident that the U.S. academic community is missing out on the copious German writing pedagogy scholarship simply because the concepts are difficult to translate across languages and academic/cultural contexts.

Since my site visit to these eight campuses, I have been accepted to present this research at one of the leading conferences in my field, the Conference on College Composition and Communication. My paper, entitled “Writing Centers and Political Migrants: Cultivating Pedagogy in Response to Geopolitical Crisis,” will cover the issues addressed in this report and share a more detailed account of the interviews conducted for this project.

On a practical note, I learned a great deal from my German colleagues and have brought back several practices from their writing centers, which like the FIT Writing Studio, often act in a writing across the curriculum capacity. I am now strengthening our workshops, marketing, and session tracking based on my experiences at these writing centers. Furthermore, I feel confident that our investment in translanguaging approaches to writing center pedagogy are important, especially given the number of multilingual students we tutor at the Writing Studio. I am grateful to the Faculty Development Grants and Awards committee for helping make this research possible. The opportunity to observe the courage, dedication, and intellect of refugee students, peer tutors, and my German colleagues was awe inspiring.

Research Activities

University	Activities	Dates
Bochum Universität	Met with writing center directors, attended staff meetings, interviewed directors and tutors.	6/20/16 - 6/22/16
Osnabrück Universität	Met with and interviewed language center director and teacher.	6/24/16
Hamburg Universität	Met with writing center director, attended staff meeting, spoke with tutors, and interviewed leader at the UHHift program for refugee students.	6/25/16 - 6/27/16
Leibniz Universität	Met writing center director, multilingual writing center director and staff, language center director, faculty, and interviewed a student volunteered. Attended a language learning group for refugees and guest taught an English language class.	6/28/16 & 6/30/16 - 7/1/16
Götttingen Universität	Interviewed international writing center director and German language instructors. Attended staff meeting.	6/29/16
Darmstadt Universität	Met with writing center and language center directors.	7/4/16
Goethe Universität (Frankfurt)	Met with writing center director and directors of the refugee program. Interviewed a tutor/student involved with the refugee outreach program.	7/5/16
Studentenwerk (Berlin)	Met with writing center director and attended a staff meeting.	7/6/16