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Extending writing center work toward the community: Writing and reading support for asylum seekers in the city of Leipzig

1. Introductory episode

Susanne is a student at the University of Education in Freiburg (Germany). She wants to become a teacher of Chemistry and English. In her final portfolio at the end of her writing tutor training, she defined her role as a future writing/reading specialist for grades 5 through 9 as key to the learning in all other middle school disciplines. She notes in her training log:

Learners need as many opportunities as possible to experience the power of writing and reading as individual learning tools and as an even more powerful combination for enhancing knowledge: For example, when reading helps to shape the imagination of a writer and writing is used for gaining deeper understanding of what is being read.

Susanne outlines a concrete action plan for her own future professional practice when she concludes in her portfolio:

As a teacher, I want to empower my students to continuously shape their writing and reading skills by including them autonomously into the learning process. From witnessing the learning practice of their peers, from self-learning materials or through peer tutoring in the writing/reading center, they will find out, for example, which genres can help digest what they read in Chemistry and Biology and how to share this knowledge in a way that is perhaps easier to understand for weaker learners or younger students.

When the same student, Susanne, visited the writing center at the University of Education in Freiburg, Germany, for the first time about a year before she handed in the portfolio I was just quoting from, she demonstrated—at first glance—a rather different view on writing and reading. I remember her coming to the writing center demanding quick help from a tutor with editing a semester paper while she wanted to head off for a cup of coffee.

It may come as a surprise to you when I claim this: Reading her final remarks in her portfolio, I wonder if her attitude really changed that much. A year ago, when the writing tutor

asked her to stay (and not go off for coffee) to contribute her own ideas for editing, she explained she had nothing to do with what she wrote and so why bother: The writing task was provided by her teacher. The topic she was supposed to pick came from a departmental list. The genre, an argumentative essay, was part of a fixed curriculum. The way to write that essay was set up by a handout as part of her course reader. Finally, she had been sent by her instructor “to bring proof”—she quoted her teacher with a grin on her face— of one writing center visit during the process of writing her paper. When the writing tutor listened in awe to the cascade of explanations and didn’t know what to reply, she pushed her paper swiftly to his side of the table suggesting: *Why don’t you just seal and sign it and we both save time and trouble.*

Let me quickly sum up this introductory episode: Susanne, as a student and writer, had obviously experienced the destructive power of formal assignments herself. She noticed that a certain kind of learning seems to happen this way: learning to stick to the rules of the institution and the person in charge of grading, the instructor. While I don’t want to underestimate the importance of these skills completely, they don’t seem to be working to shape **autonomous learners** who are able to think critically, make conscious choices to meet their individual needs as human beings, and strive for more knowledge and improved skills. Reading Susanne’s portfolio identifying her as a writing specialist who wants to enable others to become good writers themselves, it seems she understood the importance of **authentic involvement of learners** in their own education. This way, Susanne did **not really** change the attitude she showed during her first visit to the writing center: Writing assignments meant solely to please administrative powers can hardly lead to anything else but obedience on the side of the learner. My interpretation here is that Susanne made use of her prior experience in this regard as a point of reference for constructing her personal conclusion: I, as a future teacher, challenge myself to practice a different kind of assignments – truly authentic tasks that are focused on the unfolding of both the immediate *and* long-term needs of the students and the challenges they may face in school and during their later professional lives.

In this presentation, I would like to introduce an example of **how to create this personal involvement in learning** as something which not only provides fertile ground for autonomous learners but also helps shaping institutional development in general and the writing and reading center in secondary education in specific. Before I outline my project with an initiative to facilitate asylum seekers in Leipzig (Germany) as writers and readers, I will start with providing a theoretical framework for authentic learning. I will then show how the notion of authentic learning can be applied to the model of a high school writing and reading

center and, later on, point out briefly what role this model plays in my project in Leipzig. Last, but not least, I want to draw a few conclusions and suggestions for the further development of the writing/reading center model in secondary education.

2. Authentic learning

Historical excursus

Authenticity in education has been realized as an important issue for decades if not for centuries. To my knowledge, it was probably Renee Descartes, the French 17th century philosopher, who first proposed the concept of authenticity with his famous dictum “cogito ergo sum” (I am, I exist.). A century later, another French philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, supported Descartes’ notion of authenticity by stating that this, together with moral sense, is a feature of human nature. Johann Gottfried Herder, a German poet and philosopher of the Weimar classics, expanded Rousseau’s view on authenticity by using the terms “creativity” and “originality,” two key concepts of the European Enlightenment both proposing that our identity is shaped by single experiences and the way we interpret those experiences. John Dewey, the 20th century American pedagogue and philosopher, extrapolated the concepts mentioned above with his well-known approach of modern reform pedagogy, “learning by doing.” Let’s finish this brief historical excursus on authenticity in education with the Russian psychologist , Lev Vygotsky, who explored the framework of individual activity and social interaction in which authentic learning unfolds. His concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and its central method, *scaffolding*, fostered our understanding of helping learners help themselves by maintaining an individual’s threshold of authentic learning.

Based on research of cognition, learning, and instruction, it has so far become clear that learning which is supposed to become personally meaningful, longer-lasting and with impact on the learner’s individual practice, requires information and tasks that are deeply linked with the learner’s prior experience and knowledge.

Research on cognition, learning, and instruction

Since the meeting between prior knowledge and new information in the context of certain learning circumstances seems so powerful for the unfolding of authentic education, let me elaborate a little bit on what research has shown to be fruitful circumstances under which learning happens. I will provide my comment here through the lens of research on cognitive development and learning recently summarized by Manfred Spitzer (2007), one of the most prominent figures in this field in Germany:

Learning, from the view of neurobiologists, happens, as a response to any stimulus received by the senses, whenever synapses develop between neurons and that way initiate over time so-called “cognitive maps” to spread throughout a certain area of the brain. This kind of learning happens continuously no matter what circumstances exist for the individual.

However, learning happens *more efficiently* when the following phenomena can be observed in the brain:

- A **faster processing** of incoming information (input) due to synapses growing thicker when used often and in changing learning environments/conditions,
- A **more complex processing** happens within a network of neurons (cognitive maps) growing larger as a result of higher speed in information transfer and multiple usage.
- **Response actions (output) have a greater chance of success** due to a larger number of regulators for the action within the expanding “cognitive map”. Or, in other words, actions will be more “thought through” when rehearsed repeatedly in changing environments.
- Through sudden hormone release (especially Endorphin) enhancing the electric exchange between neurons, learning success triggers **hunger for more and deeper knowledge** and leads to a growing number of cognitive maps related to a single piece of information.
- **Information and experience gained will be longer-lasting** due to the multiple interconnectedness of each individual piece of information. If one cognitive map is not being used any more, other maps will and, in this way, they will keep the one alive which is currently not in use. In addition, the reanimation/restoration of temporarily abandoned cognitive maps will function quicker within a strong network of cognitive maps.

Key terms for authentic learning

What are the **pedagogical consequences** of the research findings I have just summarized? Even though learning happens always and under all circumstances, it is proven to be **more efficient** under the conditions described so far (See Bransford et al 2001 and Donovan et al 2001) and in the context of the following pedagogical principles of social constructivist education:

1. Inquiry-based/problem-based → A real problem is to be solved for a real audience (users).
2. Learner-centered → Meet the zone of proximal development of the individual learner.

3. Active learning→Involve the learner in the process of unfolding knowledge and gaining insight (sharing, questioning, presenting, feedback).
4. Process-based learning→Use different steps (requiring different actions and social contacts) on the way of reaching an educational goal.
5. Peer learning→Let them practice scaffolding.
6. Real users→Ask the learners to present the results of their work to the people who are going to benefit from it.
7. Reflecting on the learning path→Ask them to make visible the story of the work progress in regard to a specific assignment and the influence of this story on their biography of learners.
8. Authentic assessment and assignment→Ask them to look twice and reflect on what happened in the learner's work progress in order to prepare for the next task (What strategies, methods, techniques need to be adapted or developed?).

To summarize this second part of my presentation: **social constructivism** (among others see Brooks/Brooks, 1999) emphasizes the necessity of providing learners a chance to follow their naturally existing desire to build new knowledge upon the foundation of previous learning and the critical reflection and revision of previous practice.

3. Authentic learning in the writing/reading center

Definition of the WRC

Based on what I have just said about authentic learning and the knowledge provided by the pioneers of US high school writing centers such as Pam Childers (1989, 1994), Richard Kent (2006), and many others, I understand the writing/reading center (WRC) as an entity that facilitates learners in the effective use of writing and reading as tools to construct personally relevant knowledge, experience, and skills. The WRC helps to organize learning as a means of social interaction by bringing together writers and readers across the educational pyramid dealing with problems to be solved across the disciplines, professions, and different realms of personal experience. Last but certainly not least, this institution provides guidance in efficient processing of information from print, electronic media, and oral sources into new understanding and new texts.

All of the above should be provided to the learner in an action framework that matches the current phase of his/her learning process. In other words, anything that a person engages with in the WRC shall have a specific function in the individual's continued development as a step closer toward intellectual and creative self-fulfillment. Instead of resembling the often fixed

and inflexible curriculum of a school, the WRC is supposed to provide resources and experiences helping to find out about one's own needs for immediate or situated learning and for a lifelong striving for new insights. In short, instead of forcing the institution's traditional understanding of education onto the learner as extrinsic motivation, the WRC, ideally, initiates/triggers *intrinsic motivation*, still embedded in the institution's requirements in regard to the development of literacy, but shaped by the learner him/herself taking action and carrying out responsibility for his/her own learning. I claim, and I feel very encouraged to do so by the presentations so far at this conference, there is a need for writing/reading centers with the doors wide open for students wanting to follow their personal interests, maybe by doing arts, drama, music, and other creative activities that – eventually -- will lead to more writing.

Application toward the Leipzig project

Let me characterize the learning scenario described in part 2 of my presentation as *personally relevant* and the tasks arising from this project as *authentic*. From a pedagogical point of view such tasks would match the criteria I used earlier to describe a constructivist framework for learning. I want to illustrate these criteria with key information about a community-based literacy project in Leipzig (Germany) where high school writing/reading centers play a major role:

Problem-based

Students of four different high schools in the city of Leipzig receive a special training as writing and reading tutors. The training is provided in their schools in so-called special interest groups, one of which each student must attend every school year.

For real users

Before they decide to join the project, students get introduced to the fact that many institutions in the city of Leipzig want to make use of the project, among those are elderly homes, kindergardens, homework support initiatives, libraries, shelters for immigrants, youth centers (etc.).

Learner-centred

When students start the training as writing/reading tutors, they can, beyond a basic level of training, decide themselves how far they want to continue. The highest level would include an introduction on training and facilitating new student tutors.

An additional aspect of learner-centredness students practice themselves when they prepare to serve for a specific target group. Their first step is to conduct a need-based analysis with their target group with help of an interview worksheet.

Active learning

Active learning happens in the Leipzig project on three levels:

- a) **Students** adapt the material they receive during their training as writing/reading tutors toward a personal tool box for their tutoring practice. It is one of the central tasks of the writing/reading tutors to continuously shape the content of their tool box to the needs of their target group.
- b) All **target groups** are actively involved in the unfolding of the tutoring measure, such as tutoring writing through the non-directive approach.
- c) All participating **institutions** are required, based on a written agreement with the project management, to incorporate both design and goals of the project into the concept of the institutions' long-term development such as training writing /reading teacher specialists and student tutors in-house in order to help spread the main idea of the project – helping learners help themselves -- across the curriculum and across all grades.

Process-based learning

Even after the formal end of the training program for the writing/reading tutors, students continue their training through learning logs, team meetings, and the use of an e-learning platform where they communicate with other tutor teams across the country and where additional training material is provided for them and their instructors.

Peer learning

The ultimate goal of writing/reading tutor trainings is to enable students to train other students as tutors. In addition, all tutors are trained to initiate methods of peer learning, such as peer feedback on writing tasks, in their original learner groups.

Reflecting on the individual learning path

During the tutor training, students assess their own learning frequently. Later on, they exchange peer reviews and receive outside evaluation for their performance as writing/reading tutors. Also, participants in the target group reflect on their personal growth in a variety of ways, such as reading/writing logs and portfolios.

Authentic assessment and task planning

Students frequently evaluate the development of the Leipzig project within their own school. They adapt current strategies and suggest or design future activities and, this way, provide valuable feedback to the overall project management.

4. The Leipzig project design

Description of the design

In Leipzig, a city in former East-Germany, a project which is called “Language is colorful – Writing, Reading, Opening up Horizons” was originally initiated with the goal of bringing together the native people of Leipzig and its growing number of immigrants and refugees. So far, immigration centers and refugee initiatives were eager to create what one of the immigrants called in an interview “islands of temporary well-being” instead of taking steps toward real integration.

Instead of isolating members of different cultures and speakers of other languages, this project wants to bring together the new and established inhabitants of Leipzig, one group mostly disadvantaged and the other often rather privileged, by learning from their cultural, social, and religious differences, and, at the same time striving together for strengthening linguistic competences, including writing and reading, in the target language.

Let me underline this here again: The main goal of the project is not only geared toward immigrants, elderly and others with special educational needs, but also targets people who are economically and educationally privileged to take on responsibility to share their material and intellectual wealth by helping the disadvantaged to help themselves. This project goal is intended especially for the young people of Leipzig, the second largest city in the East, who, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, tend to leave East-Germany after having completed high school due to a weak economy. It is this group of people who need to learn from early on in their lives to feel connected to the city and its people and to take on the problems and tasks existing in their hometown.

In the beginning of the conceptual development of the project, we wanted to follow the concept of a community writing center, an entity related to and complementing an already existing neighborhood initiative such as the community writing center, called “826 Valencia St.” in San Francisco which serves as a model for several similar places in large US cities. Also the Community Gardens in Lincoln, Nebraska, as a site for teaching English seemed a perfect role model for how to situate the literacy project in Leipzig. Brückenschlag e.V., a non-profit organization for asylum seekers has been running a well-established community garden since the year of 2000 where fresh produce from the gardens are being sold on a regular basis to the community. Different from the sites in San Francisco and Lincoln where a

mingling of target groups already takes place and, therefore, a central place (The Garden in Lincoln, the Pirate Store in SF) seems to work for these projects, it is important in Leipzig *to bring the project to the different places* where people disadvantaged in their education reside needing support in often very different ways.

The unifying element of the Leipzig project is a system of “train the trainer” which not only helps spread the ideas of the project efficiently, but also guarantees that each institution involved, besides sending out its tutors to other places in the community, takes action to cover its own needs by using the tutors in-house as well.

Therefore, the Leipzig project consists of a network of writing and reading centers in local high schools where students receive training as tutors from students of the University of Leipzig, one of the major project partners. These M.A. students, all majoring in German as a second language, fulfill a required, credit-bearing internship comparable to the US service learning approach. Tiffany Rousculp (2006), in an article on community outreach of writing centers provides the following definition for service-learning in US higher education which also fits the design of the Leipzig project:

Service-learning combines community service and learning objectives together with the intention that all partners experience change through structured opportunities for service, self-reflection and acquisition of new knowledge.

This approach is also being applied to the high school students working on behalf of their writing/reading center as tutors in their neighborhood. I will, in the remaining time of my talk briefly discuss two major aspects of the project design as a service-learning opportunity: First “Train the trainer” – the way of spreading the word about community literacy – And secondly “discursive mobility” – the main competence gained through participation in this project.

Train the trainer

During the project a train-the-trainer network developed in three layers:

- a) We train student teachers at the University of Leipzig and in-service teachers in issues of writing/reading support and strategies for training adult volunteers and students in secondary schools;
- b) High school students and adult volunteers facilitate the learning of their various target groups in different institutions in the city of Leipzig and, at least some of these students and

volunteers, also train their peers.

This approach is applied in order to maintain the project also beyond its official funding period. All participating partners have a genuine reason to be involved in the project by fulfilling specific requirements within their own institution:

- the Freiburg Writing Center (*that's me in this case*) wants to push its research in institutional development and blended learning environments
- the City Library of Leipzig needs to create stable connections to local schools in order to secure federal funding
- the Community College wants to broaden its course system on reading and writing pedagogy and by doing so serve the needs of the city
- the University of Leipzig wants to maintain service-learning internships as part of its educational mission
- the local schools want to maintain their in-house service-learning requirement as part of their educational mission
- Volunteer-based literacy initiatives want to collaborate with schools and libraries due to the mission they see for their work

This rather elaborate system of project partners creates powerful effects of synergy where partners learn how to make use of the competences and resources offered by others and themselves.

Discursive mobility

The last aspect of the project design, I would like to spend a few more minutes on is due to the fact that all the other design aspects mentioned so far find themselves unified and consolidated in an e-learning platform. I want to briefly introduce this e-learning platform as a **learning environment** in which all participants can learn by doing, collaborate across different learner communities (here: different schools, university, project team, community members), receive feedback, continually refine their understanding and learning strategies and, last but not least, build new knowledge.

In moving between learner communities, sometimes as different as a group of 12 year-old writers working on an assignment, on the one end of the platform, and a group of college students dealing with theoretical aspects of the writing process on the other end of it, the user of the e-learning platform learns how to adapt to these different communities in order to make use of their potential for ones own learning.

In this process of adaptation, *discursive mobility* is being shaped, the ability to adapt one's own linguistic knowledge and skills to the needs of a different group of speakers in order to be understood.

Coined originally as *discursive mobility* in the field of social history in the context of research on human migration, the term becomes more widely used now in the fields of cultural studies and applied linguistics. Jonathan Monroe (2002) introduced the term to writing pedagogy and writing center work with a slightly different terminological focus. While *discursive mobility* has so far been more or less limited to linguistic aspects in order to fit into a desired community, Monroe defines it as the ability to move, as needed, between different knowledge communities and gather information necessary for one's own personal development.

As such, I value *discursive mobility* as a key competency of the 21st century where learning has changed from a *commodity of arrival* into a *mode of transition* enabling its owners to not only expand one's own horizon but also stimulate different discourse communities with his/her own presence and even initiate or foster the creation of new communities of learning and knowing.

I would like to make *discursive mobility* visible based on one example of reflective practice in the reading/writing project in the city of Leipzig: Through ongoing reflection of her own learning during the 20 hours of training we require for high school student writing tutors and careful material selection based on what Marika, 16 years old, started to understand about the process of writing and tutoring, she transformed the collection of the original training material into a personal tool box (graph 1). While the personal tool box in graph 1 focuses on the student's own needs and the anticipation of what other students coming to the tutoring session may need, graph 2 provides us with the changes that happened after three months of tutoring practice for an international homework center. The tool box took shape in regard to the specific needs of the students of all ages, most of them L2 writers. The demand for grammar knowledge and exercises was high, so she found appropriate material for herself. She also stocked up on her collection of genre descriptions since some of the genres related to professional training, e.g. job profile, job application, and CV were not included in the original training package.

Glancing over the change that happened over time in Marika's practice as a writing tutor in the Leipzig project, it becomes rather obvious that she truly developed *discursive mobility*. She stepped into a new community of learners and started to see the specific needs of its

members. She transferred and adapted her tutoring skills accordingly, and took care of the deficits she detected in her own preparedness as a writing tutor for the group of learners she was working with. In this process, I am convinced, she became what we call an autonomous learner, able to move into new discourse communities and see what knowledge and skills are necessary and to provide herself with the appropriate resources (see Bräuer in Becker-Mrotzek 2006).

5. Suggestions for developing writing/reading centers

Please allow me to finish with a few remarks on what I, based on my own experience with the project just described, see as necessary to be changed in writing center work. This writing center work I often see, in both secondary and higher education, limited to enabling writers to meet the requirements of the writing center's home institution. Instead of just helping students graduate, we should also provide preparation and guidance for the successful transition between knowledge communities. We can make that happen by providing plenty of opportunities for practicing discursive mobility what seems to be a key competence for lifelong learning and professional success in the 21st century.

Initiating and practicing discursive mobility requires authentic tasks in the writing/reading center but it also provides such tasks for our work on a long-term scale. If we are able to push the traditional walls of our institutions beyond the home-grown community, we invite new ideas into our practice. If we want to make a difference not only among the learners of our own institution but also in the local community and if we want to strive for a community building of a different kind – carried by the responsibility for educating ourselves in order to be able to help others to learn – we need these writing/reading centers without walls, as described in Rodacker/Siebler (2006) and as seen on a daily basis in 826 Valencia Street in San Francisco, in the Community Gardens in Lincoln, Nebraska, and in community writing/reading centers in a growing number of places around the Globe.

Ginger Cooper (2004) entitled her article for the Fall issue of PRAXIS 2004 with “Building a community around the writing center.” I am sure this will happen when we are willing and able to take the ideas, methods, and enthusiasm of our work wherever it is needed. What we bring back home will help us construct new insight and knowledge.

I am aware of the difficulties when it comes to creating authentic learning in the midst of political battles of institutions that often feel like ivory towers instead of places with open walls. If we really want to make a difference in our students' lives (such as the student Susanne I talked about in the beginning of my paper) we need brave-hearts, people with skills

for careful planning, who are also able sometimes to carry out cunning actions in order to lure others into what seems a worthwhile undertaking.

In order to not lose sight of the ideals I outlined in my presentation today, I would like to suggest to keep the following seven goals in mind which social constructivism identified as guiding principles for the development of curricular and institutional structures (Honebein 1996, p. 11):

- Provide experience with the knowledge construction process.
- Provide experience in and appreciation for multiple perspectives.
- Embed learning in realistic and relevant contexts.
- Encourage ownership and voice in the learning process.
- Embed learning in social experience.
- Encourage the use of multiple modes of representation.
- Encourage self-awareness of the knowledge construction process.

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