The Writing Mentoring Program: Backbone for Disseminating Writing Process Knowledge in a Large University

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In 2013, the University of Vienna's Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) implemented a pilot project, which has since grown to become the core of the university's academic writing services for students. The writing mentoring programme was designed with the goal to create a means for disseminating knowledge about writing processes amongst students in earlier stages of their studies. The programme's organisational structure is based on the experience that, to ensure scalability, an institution as large as the University of Vienna (approx. 90.000 students) needs to rely on multipliers and on the cooperation of stakeholders in its many academic departments. Regarding the writing mentoring programme, this translates into a focus on the processes of academic writing and sensitivity towards disciplinary cultures. In this position paper, we aim to demonstrate how writing mentoring can be implemented to provide structures which allow advanced Bachelor and Master-students to support other students' academic writing in meaningful ways. In this way, a programme like ours can help in transforming organisational practices.

Keywords: academic writing development, organisational practices, peer tutoring, student life cycle, university didactics

1. Introduction

In 2013, the University of Vienna's Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) implemented its first project towards the support of student academic writing with the mandate to guide students through their diploma theses. A series of successive writing workshops targeting the phases of a

writing process was offered by external trainers. At the same time, a small pilot project was started and has since grown to become the core of the university's academic writing services for students. In contrast to the writing workshops, which targeted students about to leave the organization, this writing mentoring programme was designed with the long-term perspective to create a means for disseminating knowledge about writing processes amongst students in earlier stages of their studies. The programme's organisational structure is based on the experience that, to ensure scalability, an institution as large as the University of Vienna (approx. 90.000 students) needs to rely on multipliers and on the cooperation of stakeholders in its many academic departments. From a didactic point of view, writing mentoring builds on the consensus in writing research that academic writing is a skill that can be learned; its development, however, needs a longer period of time and cannot be based on one single intervention or course (Kellogg, 2008; Girgensohn & Sennewald, 2012). Like all CTL services, it follows the rationale that disciplinary knowledge, including writing product requirements, resides within the faculties, while the higher education professionals working for the CTL offer generic expertise on teaching, learning, and curriculum development. Regarding the writing mentoring programme, this translates into a focus on the processes of academic writing and sensitivity towards disciplinary cultures.

In this position paper, we show how writing mentoring can be implemented to provide structures which allow advanced Bachelor and Master-students to support other students' academic writing in meaningful ways. The fact that trained writing mentors are also hired in other contexts at the University of Vienna, where their qualifications are keenly sought after, shows how knowledge about academic writing processes and experience in peer counselling, giving feedback, and workshop design can diffuse into other organisational settings. In this way. a programme like ours can help in transforming organisational practices. Therefore, in the next section we provide an overview of the organisational embedding of the writing mentoring programme.

2. Organisational Embedding

(Academic) writing development occurs in several stages; it is thus advisable to start supporting the development of student writers as early as possible. Since personal development does not occur in a linear fashion and since academic writing socialisation differs widely between disciplines, writing mentoring is accessible to students throughout their Bachelor studies. In the student life cycle,

writing mentoring is situated between two other measures which target transitional phases: it is preceded by a mentoring programme targeting the first semester as study entrance and orientation phase ("StEOP-Mentoring") and followed by the "Schreibwerkstätten"-programme (literally translating as 'writing workshops'): an umbrella term for formats like kick-off workshops for theses, writing days and writing marathons, all of which are designed to support students in writing their Bachelor and Master-theses (i.e. student writers in later stages of their studies) and are complemented by a writing fellows programme (Römmer-Nossek, et.al. 2018) and services for university teachers. Bracketed by these other supportive measures, the goal of the writing mentoring programme is to provide an environment for supporting the development of academic writing from the earliest stages and to use a peer setting to provide feedback on the same hierarchical level. To do this, students receive special training for peer mentoring and writing support and then offer weekly sessions open to all students to provide writing process knowledge, peer feedback, organisational knowledge and many other kinds of support.

This means that students who want to become writing mentors need to be qualified at what at Anglo-American universities is referred to as peer-tutoring (Bruffee, 1972). This from of qualification yields students who are then able to plan and conduct weekly writing mentoring groups for Bachelor-students. After at least one semester of practice, these trained writing mentors can then be further employed as "writing assistants", who offer more advanced writing workshops and individual counselling at Bachelor-thesis and Master-level. Therefore, beyond its direct scope, the writing mentoring programme has become the backbone of a wide range of writing services for students that strategically targets the relevant phases of the development of the academic writer.

Since the CTL is an administrative unit and thus cannot per se offer courses, we cooperate with the study programme "German as a Foreign and Second Language" to ensure that the writing mentors receive ECTS for their qualification and practice. Additionally, competencies and practice are certified by the CTL.

The CTL is responsible for the conceptualisation, development, and coordination of the writing mentoring programme with its various stakeholders. The infrastructure for the weekly sessions

(rooms, paper, and support in advertising the programme at the respective departments/study programmes) is provided by the participating departments/study programmes. To get assigned a team of writing mentors, the study programmes have to respond to a call, which is sent out once a term.

In the following section, we describe the profile students need to become writing mentors and how they are then qualified.

3. Writing Mentoring

Basically, all students who have successfully passed the study entrance and orientation phase and gained first experience in academic writing in their disciplines can apply to become a writing mentor. Practically, most Bachelor-students come from disciplines that allow for a minor field of study (Erweiterungscurriculum) or from MA-programmes for which the programme offers an attractive additional qualification or from teacher education. Most potential writing mentors come from disciplines in the humanities or social sciences. Yet lately, the acceptance in the MINT disciplines is on the increase, and we notice more applications from these subjects.

Writing mentors work in teams of two or three, usually in another discipline than their own. This is to ensure that they can focus on the writing process and are not mistaken as "disciplinary tutors". Regarding academic writing, this supports the differentiation of expertise between discipline (writing product) and CTL (writing process). The writing mentors' task is to offer weekly group sessions for students from the participating Bachelor study programmes throughout the term. Ideally, students (mentees) join those sessions early in their studies (and early in the term) to find an environment that fosters the development of academic writing competencies as early as possible. However, since writing mentoring is an extracurricular activity and thus does not earn the mentees ECTS points, quite a few mentees discover only later in their student career that attending writing mentoring might be worthwhile. Bachelor-students with problems in writing their thesis are frequent guests. Further, Master-students and, occasionally, even PhD-students attend and benefit from mentoring sessions hosted by a team of trained peer mentors who are either BA- or MA-students themselves.

In 2013, when the programme was launched, only two study programmes requested writing mentors, and there was much scepticism whether pre-PhD students would be capable of supporting other students in academic writing. A continuation of the writing mentoring programme after the first term was only possible because writing mentoring was perceived as a means to support students speaking German as a second language. In the years which have since passed, this perception has changed. In the winter term of 2020/21, the programme consisted of 25 writing mentoring teams serving a total of 28 Bachelor und 3 Master-degree study programmes and of one group who was open for all Master-students at the University of Vienna who are writing their thesis in English but were not pursuing a degree in English and American Studies. At any given term, around 65 writing mentors work in teams of two or three and offer weekly group sessions of 1.5 hours per study programme. Some large study programmes like Art History or German Literature have two writing mentoring groups, most participating study programmes have one, some writing mentoring groups are open for several smaller study programmes at once.

During their training (which we describe in more detail in the next section), mentoring teams develop a term curriculum which usually addresses all phases of a writing project (finding a topic, structuring an academic paper, researching literature, reading, writing strategies, drafting, revising etc., see Figure 1) and also issues like writing difficulties or self-management. Each session is dedicated to one of these topics, questions, text-feedback and, upon request, individual counselling. For mentees, the participation in the writing mentoring sessions is voluntary, and, in principle, they may attend any group offered.

As we already mentioned, mentees do not only come from the primary target group of Bachelor-students, as also Master-students and occasionally even PhD-students take part in some groups (and sometimes even students from other universities sneak in). While there is fluctuation in attendance throughout the semester, mostly due to approaching deadlines or because some mentees need exactly one single piece of advice, the majority of writing mentoring teams manage to build a group of 6-8 mentees who attend regularly.

Preliminary schedule:	
26.03.21	Introduction: the writing curve and me
	Easter break
	Easter break
23.04.21	Stages in the writing process and writer types
30.04.21	Planning for who you are: writing strategies
07.05.21	Managing your writing, your research and yourself
14.05.21	Formulating a good research question
21.05.21	Getting and staying motivated
28.05.21	Formulating arguments and making a point in academic writing
04.06.21	Clear, concise and coherent texts

Fig. 1: Semester program of writing mentoring in English, summer semester 2021 (*https://ctl.univie.ac.at/services-zur-qualitaet-von-studien/wissenschaftliches-schreiben/schreibmentoring/ueberblick-studien-mit-schreibmentoring/center-for-teaching-and-learning/*; June 22, 2021)

4. The Curriculum Fosters a Writing Mentoring Community

The education of writing mentors has evolved in three major phases to reach the current stage, the curriculum "Developing, Teaching,and Researching Academic Writing: Educating Peer Tutors" (the expression "peer-tutors" was chosen to be compatible with the terminology in writing centre research). Constituting a minor field of study (Erweiterungscurriculum), it can be chosen as part of a Bachelor programme but can also be attended by interested Master-students as a (primarily) extracurricular addition (for reasons of space we here omit the institutional specifics). The curriculum consists of three modules of 5 ECTS each.

Module 1, "Peer-Tutoring for Academic Writing", consists of an intense training phase in process-oriented writing didactics at the beginning of the term (as described e.g. by Ruhmann & Kruse,

2014). Nine half-day workshops are complemented by a term of practice under supervision and further education, particularly in German as an Academic Language. The training supervision does not only guide writing mentors' reflection as they gain experience, but also draws on models from coaching and organisational development relate individual experiences to organisational structures and behavioural patterns. The safe space created in the supervision sessions provides a unique environment for sharing experiences, confronting uncertainties and a framework for resolving tensions that might surface in mentoring teams, thus offering a "turbo" towards professionalisation as a writing mentor (Kuntschner, 2020). As a stand-alone course this module has existed since 2013 and fulfils the standards of the German society of writing didactics and research "gefsus" for peer-tutor education (gefsus, 2016).

In modules 2, "Advanced Peer-Tutoring for Academic Writing", and 3, "Academic Writing Peer-Tutoring and Research", writing mentors continue their weekly practice and receive supervision upon request. Teaching is now aimed at deepening knowledge in particular areas of writing research and didactics, e.g. multi-lingual writing, genre theory, writing as a cognitive developmental process or writing research methodology. Writing mentors then choose one of these topics for specialization by forming research groups and developing a small but feasible writing research project in one of the areas taught. They thus do not only acquire skills in writing didactics. They also experience what it means to conduct research quite early in their studies, experience several roles in review processes, and get to know relevant academic genres. In module 2, they are required to write a proposal and present a poster. In module 3, after carrying out their projects, they need to write a research paper and present it at the end of the term in a student conference.

In this conference, students of all modules, teachers and guests come together for poster sessions and talks. The final version of the research papers is then published by OJS in the study programme's journal *zisch: Zeitschrift für interdisziplinäre Schreibforschung* ('Journal for Interdisciplinary Writing Research'). In addition to their first academic publication, graduates of the minor field of study-curriculum receive a certificate listing their competencies and experiences. Furthermore, writing mentors are invited to participate in the academic writing community and join its conferences. The fact that their teachers are also involved in this community facilitates the students' join-

ing it as well. This way, the writing mentoring programme contributes to forming a local community of writing mentors as well as to facilitating students' entry into a larger, more international scientific community.

5. Quality Assurance and Development

To assure quality, the CTL evaluates the program every term (in addition to the regular evaluation of teaching by the university's Unit for Quality Assurance). The evaluation focusses on the acceptance of the programme by student mentees and on the experience of the writing mentors (the latter with a particular focus on the training and supervision provided). The evaluation for both groups – writing mentors and mentees – is conducted using the open source online survey tool Limesurvey with a questionnaire posing quantitative as well as qualitative questions. The evaluation data serves as a basis for quality assurance and for further development (here, the open questions are of particular importance) and has shown that the acceptance of the programme is high, both among the writing mentors and among the mentees.

6. Closing Remarks

To our knowledge, the scale and scope of the writing mentoring programme at the University of Vienna are quite unique. Since its initial conceptualization in 2013, the writing mentoring programme has become the backbone of a number of other academic writing services offered by the CTL. Not only did we learn much about the development of writing competencies in the different disciplines by cooperating with the study programmes and with the writing mentors, we were also able to use this knowledge to begin a dialogue with some study programmes that have since partnered with us to improve their teaching.

7. Lessons to be Shared

The writing mentoring programme presented in this paper has grown out of a small pilot project, but it did so embedded in the structures of a well-established Centre for Teaching and Learning. This has enabled us to build on the acceptance and trust earned in years of work in other higher education projects.

As a central service unit, the goals and actions of the Centre for Teaching and Learning are aligned with the university's development plan. Knowing the goals of the institution and being able to design one's own programmes in synchronicity is relevant to communicating the benefits of writing didactics to the relevant stakeholders. At first sight, it may seem to be quite a stretch from a BA-student's confusion about how to start their paper to an institution's strategic goals; however, considering that higher education institutions want to prevent advanced students from dropping out, the potential benefits of such a programme become obvious.

With the Covid-crisis, writing mentoring switched into digital mode, using the university's learning management system Moodle (previously, its use for writing mentoring had been optional) with integrated webinar software. The transition was surprisingly smooth and swift. The acceptance of the programme not only prevailed, it has even expanded its scope to reach hundreds of students who did not or only rarely participated in the writing mentoring sessions, but used the Moodle courses to pick up handouts and other materials. The evaluation data, weekly supervisions and informal feedback during the "corona terms" have shown that the weekly writing mentoring sessions were a highlight for mentors and mentees alike. For many students the programme served as an anchor, providing structure and the informal means to get or to stay in touch with colleagues in a time when the university as a physical place became inaccessible. Because of this, we have become fully aware that the implementation of peer-mentoring programmes and the developments sparked in their wake add an organisational level to the university that is incommensurable as it can neither be replaced by traditional teaching contexts nor by interactions of peers not specifically trained for this very purpose.

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