

# Writing Fellows as Support for Digital Introductory Lectures: Advantages and Challenges

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## Abstract

This teaching practice paper discusses the implementation of writing support into subject courses at an early stage of university students' studies, with a particular focus on the courses' digital transformation during the Covid-19 pandemic. The paper presents a pilot project in which the original concept of the German *writing fellow*-program was adapted to a digital introductory lecture series in winter term 2020/21. 12 subject teachers received support for developing writing tasks for the lecture session they taught asynchronously. Six peer tutors were trained to support the 60 freshmen through text feedback and video consultations. The learning platform Moodle was used to provide all project participants with materials and information. The project results show a reduction of anonymity in this large online course, leading to less loneliness felt among first-year students. Additionally, the lecturers' workload was reduced, the freshmen felt more secure in mastering their first writing task that took place off-campus and the writing fellows gained expertise for online consultations including respective tools and procedures. Consequently, this paper argues that it is worth implementing writing fellow support not only in smaller groups of advanced learners but also in introductory subject courses.

## 1. Contextualisation and Theoretical Background

### 1.1 Institutional context: Establishing writing support from scratch

Writing support for students in higher education has gained increasing attention in Germany in the past 30 years, which is reflected especially by the growing number of writing centres at German universities (Girgensohn, 2017, p. 54). Despite the proven success achieved at numerous other institutions, the university in which this study was conducted lacks a central facility that organises and offers cross-faculty student writing support. Therefore, in the context of a bottom-up initiative, we formulated a concept for the development and implementation of an interfaculty writing centre that covers three central aims:

- (1) training students with some experience in academic writing to become peer-tutors,
- (2) offering individual peer-to-peer writing consultations for all students and
- (3) integrating writing support in the subject teaching of all faculties.

Since the 2019 winter term, the first aim has come within reach in that, by the time this report was published, three groups of interested and suitable students (24 in total) had successfully completed their training as writing peer tutors. This peer-tutor-training comprises two modules of which each covers between 75 and 90 working hours (three credit points). In the first module, the students gain knowledge about the writing process in general, different writing and reading strategies, factors that influence one's writing, the discursive nature of disciplinary writing,

writing in a foreign language and how to cope with writing difficulties. The second module supports the students' consultation skills, which means they get to know the principles of non-directive peer-to-peer consultations and the typical structure of a writing session; they learn and practise important conversational strategies and finally begin to develop their individual peer-tutor personality.

Since summer term 2021, individual peer-to-peer writing consultations have been launched at the university under investigation. The demand for such consultations is increasing the more the implementation of this second aim spreads among university members.

### **1.2 Theoretical background: Integrating writing support in subject teaching with the help of writing fellows**

This teaching practice paper presents a pilot project, conducted to approach the third aim mentioned above. Integrating writing support in subject teaching requires a close collaboration between future writing centre staff and subject teachers of all faculties. Through this collaboration, the writing centre staff gain essential subject-specific perspectives on writing processes and products and, in turn, subject teachers are supported in creating appropriate environments and tasks to help their students to successfully write academic texts (Dreyfurst et al., 2018, pp. 47-48). Next to workshops and individual office hours for subject teachers, the concept of our future writing centre contains an adaption of the *writing fellow-program* for particular subject courses.

The concept of the *writing fellow-program* originates in the US-American model of the Brown University (Richmond/RI) (Haring-Smith, 2000). It was first adapted for German universities in 2013 by the writing centres of Goethe university in Frankfurt (Main) and Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder) (Dreyfurst & Opitz, 2018). Other writing centres at German universities followed this example and adapted the program to their needs, for example in Göttingen, Hamburg or Munich.

The core idea of the *writing fellow-program* is that specially-trained peer-tutors support a particular subject course for a set period of time (usually one semester). Their main tasks are:

- giving feedback to the subject teacher concerning their writing task(s) for the course, a) from a student perspective and b) from a writing expert's perspective,
- reading drafts produced by every student of the subject course and giving written feedback and
- meeting every participant for an individual writing consultation in which they a) discuss the feedback and b) support the student in planning their next steps for the writing project.

Peer-tutors do not necessarily need subject knowledge to work as writing fellows in a particular seminar. Consequently, writing fellows do not advise the students in terms of content issues, which can be quite advantageous since the students remain responsible for the content of their written text. Instead, writing fellows usually give feedback on the structural level of the texts discussed (*higher order concerns*) and take on the perspective of an interested reader. For example, they address issues like text coherence, an appropriate focus on the target audience or the fulfilment of the writing task. The overall aim is not to offer text corrections, but to help the students understand and develop their roles as writers, which leads to better texts in the long term. Therefore, *later order concerns*, such as spelling or grammar, play a minor role and might be addressed only in the form of general advice (Dreyfurst et al., 2018, pp. 41-42).

### **1.3 The aim: Writing fellow support in introductory subject courses**

Though part of a larger program of provision, this paper mainly focuses on writing fellow support in introductory subject courses. This was decided because doing so (1) affords access to students who are confronted with writing tasks and supported in their individual writing process at an early stage in their studies and (2) will ensure that all students get the chance to participate in the *writing fellow-program*, since the introductory courses have to be attended by all students

within a course of studies. This approach involves the willingness of subject teachers to adjust at least parts of their teaching, for example, including appropriate writing tasks instead of a final exam at the end of the semester. This might be a challenge especially for subject courses in the natural sciences. However, arguably, it is important for students to learn to talk about text production including its challenges as early as possible. Once they encounter difficulties at a later point in their academic development, they will more readily make use of the individual peer-to-peer consultations mentioned above (aim number two).

## **2. The Teaching Project: Writing fellow support in a digital introductory lecture series**

### **2.1 Teaching project background**

The starting point for the particular teaching project presented in this paper was a discussion among a group of lecturers that teach subject courses for the bachelor program named *Language and Communication*. Their wish was to introduce academic work and writing in their subject field to as many students as possible and as early as possible. Since this need overlaps with the third general aim described in the previous section of this paper, we developed a pilot project. For this, we chose a particular lecture series for two main reasons: (1) It is a course that all students of the bachelor's program *Language and Communication* have to attend and (2) the students have to complete it in their first semester. Consequently, the project could reach as many students as possible and at a very early stage in their studies.

This lecture series usually comprises 12 lecturers and approximately 80 students and is coordinated by one additional person. In order to achieve the aforementioned aim, six of our specially trained peer-tutors were employed as writing fellows (cf. 1.1) to support the students of this course. The lecturers and writing fellows were trained and supported by the two coordinators of the pilot project. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the lecture series was conducted in a digital format for the first time.

### **2.2 Teaching project procedure**

#### **2.2.1 Before the lecture period**

Before the winter 2020 semester started, several preparatory steps had to be taken. First, the 12 lecturers of the lecture series agreed on a standardised target text type that all students would have to write in the course, namely the German text form Diskursreferat. A Diskursreferat is a critical and reflective summary of two or more scientific texts that represent different positions towards the same topic (Decker, 2016, pp. 175-179).

In a next step, all 12 lecturers individually a) decided on two or three scientific texts that the students would have to work on in their writing task and b) prepared a more concrete description of the writing task. In addition, each lecturer developed individual (topic-related, structural, linguistic and formal) criteria on which they would base their final evaluation. Simultaneously, the coordinator of the lecture series prepared a course platform in the learning management system Moodle on which all data would be uploaded and communication would take place. Moodle was chosen because this is the digital platform that is most frequently used at the university under investigation and the first semester students had to get to know it in any case. We as project coordinators conducted a full day workshop for the six writing fellows, which focused on the particular tasks they would be confronted with in this project. For example, the workshop introduced the text form Diskursreferat, discussed how to best formulate written text feedback and considered particular difficulties students could have at the beginning of their university studies. In addition, the writing fellows investigated the texts chosen and the writing tasks and evaluation criteria formulated by the 12 lecturers. As a short written feedback, they formulated their impressions from a student's perspective, for example stating where additional information or supporting material was needed.

### *2.2.2 During the lecture period*

At the beginning of the lecture period, all course participants met in a Zoom meeting. The requirements of the course were explained; the coordinators of the writing fellow project presented its procedure as well as the target text type the students were supposed to produce; additionally, the writing fellows introduced themselves as well as the general concept of peer-tutoring. Taking part in the *writing fellow-program* was obligatory for the students to obtain the credit points for the course.

Subsequently, every single student was assigned to one of the 12 topics of the lecture series taking account of their reported preferences. For their assigned topic, they had to write their Diskursreferat. Even though the 12 lecture sessions were recorded, the uploads were organised in a weekly format. Consequently, a student that was assigned to, for example, topic four had access to the recorded session, the texts that form the basis for the Diskursreferat and the respective lecturer's evaluation criteria from week four of the lecture period.

Two weeks after a respective session, the students handed in the first draft of their Diskursreferat on the digital platform so that their assigned writing fellow had access to it. The writing fellow saved their feedback by adding comments in the margins of the student's text and in the form of a feedback letter. The written feedback was then uploaded on the platform as well. During the following week, the student and the writing fellow met for an individual consultation via Zoom to talk about the feedback, answer additional questions and plan the next steps for revising the draft.

After the student's revision phase, they uploaded their final version of the Diskursreferat in Moodle so that the respective lecturer had access to it. Once the lecturer had finished the grading process, the student obtained their credits and received lecturer feedback. The form of the lecturer feedback, for example written feedback and/or individual office hours, depended on the decisions of the individual lecturer. In total, 58 out of 60 students finished the project.

### *2.2.3 After the lecture period*

The final evaluation of the pilot project described above took place after the lecture period in February and March 2021. Students (26 out of 58) and lecturers (10 out of 12) filled out questionnaires adjusted to their role in the project. The rather small number of students who took part in the online survey reflects the general challenge not to lose students in the course of the digital semester (for more challenges as well as advantages, see section 3 below). The lecturers had the opportunity to discuss their impressions in an additional meeting in May 2021. The writing fellows summed up their experiences in a final meeting in March 2021 that was summarised in a written form as four reflective meetings that took place during the lecture period (November 2020-February 2021).

## **3. Conclusions**

With the help of the evaluation data collected from all three groups that were involved in the project (see sections 2.2.2 and 2.2.3), several advantages as well as challenges concerning the support for digital introductory lectures through writing fellows can be derived.

The context for an introductory course includes two major factors: (1) The students do not have any previous experiences with university writing and (2) the course is composed of a large group of students that receives input to gain subject knowledge needed for their future seminars. For both factors, the writing fellow project seemed especially helpful. Regarding the first factor, most students reported that receiving feedback from a writing fellow before they handed in the first academic text strengthened their confidence and reduced anxiety. As concerns the second factor, the lecturers emphasised that the writing fellows' support constitutes a strong benefit since offering such detailed written and oral feedback on structural, linguistic and formal aspects for every student is not possible for a single subject teacher. This is an even stronger advantage regarding the particular context of the lecture series at hand, since the 12 lecturers prepare their topic session on top of their general teaching load. Finally, the writing fellows noted that they encountered students from extremely diverse backgrounds

who, consequently, needed very different types of support. Notably, even though all students were confronted with the same task (for the sake of the lecturers' workload), equal opportunities were promoted by offering individual writing fellow feedback for each student of the course.

In almost all writing fellow programs that exist, it is frequently reported that the writing fellows serve as important contact persons for the students. This is largely because the students are not left alone with their writing task. Instead, they learn to talk about their texts and the writing process. In this particular digital context, however, the first-year students who never met their teachers or their fellow students in person, were forced to explore university procedures at home alone in front of their computers, which included understanding and performing academic writing tasks. They did not have the chance to ask a teacher before or after the session or to chat with other students during breaks. Therefore, the writing fellows' role as digital conversation partners for the first-year students grew more important during the pandemic.

Both students and writing fellows highlighted several advantages of digital writing consultations. The writing fellows reported that they were able to devote more time to the actual conversation with the students in the online consultations because they did not have to include travel time in their work schedule to get on campus. In addition, the use of screen-sharing in the Zoom meeting was positively highlighted. A crucial principle of peer-tutoring is that the writer retains responsibility for their text. Several writing fellows reported that this principle was more easily maintained whenever the student shared their screen with the writing fellow to talk about the student's text rather than the other way around. Additionally, information material could be shared much faster than in meetings on campus. Of course, technical problems due to interrupted internet connection were possible. Nevertheless, this was only problematic for the Zoom consultations. All other parts of the project were designed in a way that the students could access the information any time.

Concerning the learning platform of the course, the fact that all material and tools (see 2.2 above) could be found in one place was mentioned as an advantage. This aspect, however, was regarded as a challenge at the same time. Since it was the students' first year, they were unacquainted with Moodle, the online learning platform used. Being confronted with all material and tools in an unfamiliar structure, several students experienced an overload of information and did not find additional information material.

All in all, the whole project required a high organisational effort as might have become apparent throughout this teaching practice report. Still, arguably, it was worthwhile since the evaluation shows that the advantages of writing fellow support in digital introductory lecture series outweigh the disadvantages. Additionally, most challenges can be reduced by slight adjustments, for example rethinking the structure of the online learning platform. In fact, this pilot project forms a promising basis to elaborate on aim number three presented in the beginning of this report, namely *integrating writing support in subject teaching of all faculties*. Implementing writing support by writing fellows particularly in introductory courses, alongside smaller subject courses with more advanced students, as it has mostly been practiced in other writing fellow projects so far, has the great advantages of a) reaching as many university students as possible while b) introducing them to the practices of academic writing at the beginning of their studies. Overall, the advantages drawn from the project would not be confined solely to writing support for a specific lecture series, but also could be valuable when adapting the concept to general introductory courses with one or two subject teachers. Likewise, the advantages of integrating writing support in introductory courses do not have to be restricted to lectures in the humanities but can also be adapted to disciplines within the natural sciences, for example (see Stahlberg, 2018).

Finally, discussions among lecturers and curriculum designers at the university at hand already show a tendency towards maintaining large introductory subject courses in a digital (and thus recorded) format, even after the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, in order to respond to these changing circumstances, even more attention will have to be paid to supporting programs such as the one described in this paper.

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