

How to make a Virtue of Necessity: Teacherless Writing Group Work at the European University Viadrina/Germany

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Abstract

This paper presents a model of writing-group-work for German students who have neither composition classes nor writings centres. They are students who do not write very often and are not used to talking about the problems they might have with writing.

In my seminar with the title “let’s write!” (“schreiben wir!”) the students write in small groups without a teacher. They celebrate writing together. This is a concept I developed and examine for my PhD-thesis.

Firstly I want to explain my definition of writing-group work as group work to initiate, support and share writing *processes*: the groups never meet without writing. To support writing processes the groups follow special proceedings that remind of former times of oral literature.

Then I am going to show how I work at my university. The semester starts with a writing journey and carries on with autonomous weekly group meetings. There are three important facts for the success of this work: You have to take the idea of autonomy seriously; you have to change the teacher’s role and you have to inspire confidence among students. I summary experiences and give examples for the student’s work.

Finally I describe my research project that examines this seminar with Grounded Theory methodology and briefly show the results.

1. Writing group work

Before I started to work at the university I used to hold writing courses and writing groups outside the university for more than ten years. These groups sometimes belonged to community centres or other institutions for adult education. Others in cafes, like book clubs do.

I worked with very different people: old and young, female and male, authors and people who had never written before. I tested different ways to support people with their writing processes, for example at a regularly open stage opportunity to present and discuss texts¹; group and performance work for women only; or projects for writing and publishing a book with autobiographical stories². During this time I was able to test a lot and gain experiences with different forms of learning-to-write and writing practice groups.

So what I am now trying to bring into the university is mainly based on my practical experiences outside the university. I want to mention this as an explanation: there is no tradition at German universities with groups like these.

1.1 Stage writing

My idea of writing group work is different to the commonly known idea of writers bringing in their drafts and discussing them.

For me, a writing group is a small group of people (between five and 10 participants) who meet regularly to *initiate*, to *support* and to *share* writing *processes*.

To achieve these aims the groups follow a procedure: they *stage* their meetings. Let me explain the metaphor behind this “stage writing”: people in these groups come together for a special event. They meet each other and for a while they take a step out of their everyday life. All participants are on the one hand part of the stage crew and on the other hand part of the audience. Facilitators should prepare the room, like a stage designer prepares the stage. In the best case this design belongs to the theme and pulls the people into a special atmosphere from the very beginning of the meeting. For example when you want to write a detective story you can prepare the walls in the room with copies of newspaper articles about crimes. And you could spread hints like gloves or revolvers or something like that – like requisite properties in theatre. But even if you cannot prepare a real stage

¹ See ULR www.theodoras-literatursalon.de

² See ULR www.girgensohn.schreibreisen.de

design for a special theme it is very important to create a warm atmosphere in the room where you meet. All writing assignments refer to this theme, too.

Like a classical drama a writing group meeting follows a specific procedure: it starts with a warm-up that helps to get in contact with the theme and to start the writing processes. After this there is a certain time for one or more prompts that can include other creative forms like drawing or painting or could offer more stimulants. The participants write their texts immediately - this is the important point. Reading and talking about these fresh texts follow the writing processes. The meetings close with a last prompt, a game or at least a feedback-round (Girgensohn & Jakob, 2001, p. 12).

Due to the procedures and the stimulating environment the meetings often tend to get the character of a celebration. This remains to the beginnings of literature: Literature used to be a part of celebrations in the former times of oral literature (Huizinga, 2001, p. 135). And – as in the times of oral literature – in writing groups you profit from the advantages of oral communication because you can refer to the situation you write in and react immediately to the texts you hear.

Here is a short example to illustrate these procedures: Maybe a writing group chooses the theme “spring”: It could decorate the room with flowers and start as a warm-up with all participants choosing one of the flowers and explaining in a short freewriting if there is any relationship between this flower and their personal feelings at the moment. This helps to come in and to explain the mood each participant brings into the group.

The main assignment would also refer to the theme “spring” and could use every genre or form. Maybe it would use the flowers again, e.g., include descriptions of the flowery fragrance or set the rule to use the flower’s names in the texts. Or it would use the flowers as a metaphor and ask for a short story with the theme “Say a something under the rose”.

The meeting could end with phonetic poems, performing spring-feelings. Or the participants could make a present of the flowers to each other, together with a short written regard.

Of course, reading would follow every assignment and all participants would get the opportunity to read their texts.

Obviously there are thousands of possibilities to create writing group meetings.

Important is: The groups never meet without writing. Writing is their main purpose. The procedure of writing with other people around, for a certain time and reacting to special stimulants and rules doesn’t give the participants any chance to avoid writing.

1.2 Writing and eternity

One might ask why it should support writing processes to stage meetings in the way I described. As I already explained this is a method that was developed, improved and confirmed during my practice. Later on in this text I’ll come to some more conclusions concerning this question. At this point I just would like to add one observation:

I’ve got the impression that writing is very common in other places in the world. In many countries you find writing programs, writing centres, journals about writing etc. People who want support can choose between lots of different writing offers. In Germany the idea of *learning* writing is still unusual. I think this could result from the idea that writing has something to do with eternity.

The famous German 18th Century author Friedrich Schlegel said that writing is magic for him because it is “surrounded by a twilight of eternity” (Schlegel, 1982 [1799], p. 86)³. As far as I can see this is exactly what people associate with writing: eternity. A common proverb in Germany is: “who is writing is staying”⁴ But something you do for eternity is very grave, isn’t it?

Many people never start writing because they think if their writing would not be good enough for eternity it was not worth it. Or they write secretly and do not want to share their texts for the same reason. Writing is something very grave, hard and big. This impression is supported by several writing teachers who talk about the difficulty of writing, the hard work that writing has to be and by the picture of many authors who like to spread that writing means suffering. So when people think about writing they think it has to be grave work. I don’t want to be misunderstood: of course writing often *is* hard and of course it *is* important to formulate carefully – but, as Lex Runicman asks: “If writing is this complicated, why would anyone do it? If writing itself is so problematic, why would anyone want to encourage or teach it?” (Runicman, 1994 [1991], p. 201).

³ Original: „Die Schrift hat für mich ich weiss nicht welchen geheimen Zauber, vielleicht durch die Dämmerung von Ewigkeit, welche sie umschwebt.“

⁴ „Wer schreibt der bleibt“

The writing group work is the contrary of this idea: when you write after getting a prompt and you have only half an hour no one will expect the texts to be for eternity. When you hear others with more not-eternity-compatible texts eternity would loose fright. What you are writing is initially dedicated to the strictly staged meeting with its ending in a few hours.

This survey was brought to reveal my idea of writing group work in general, now I come to the university:

2. Writing-group work at the university

2.1 The European University Viadrina

The European University Viadrina is located in Frankfurt/Oder, a German city at the polish border 80 km from Berlin. It is a small public university with three faculties and about 5.000 students⁵. I am the only one at my University who is engaged with writing. There are no writing centres, no composition classes or any other forms of writing instruction. My students are BA-students of cultural studies which can choose my seminar to get credit points in “practical skills”. Depending on the classes they take these students do not have to write very much except from take-home-exams at the end of the semester and their BA-thesis⁶.

I worked at my university as an adjunct teacher for two semesters and tried to teach academic writing the traditional way in front of a class of 25 students (from 100 students who wanted to join this course) and with a budget of only 90 minutes per week⁷. This was not satisfying. I tried to use forms of group work and collaborative learning and gave as much hints and rules as possible. But what I felt was missing was that they really started to think about writing, to practise writing voluntarily and that they felt responsible for their own writing processes.

And so I began to think about new models and how I could transfer my experiences from writing-group work outside the university to the inside.

2.2 Autonomous writing groups

I formulated several aims for a new model of writing classes at the university. Here they are:

First of all, most important and very simple: I want the students to write and I want them to enjoy writing! I stress the hedonistic aspect, because the students normally do not have the chance to explore this at the university. Furthermore they are not forced to write very often. The only way to make them exercise writing is voluntarily. And voluntary work will only come hand in hand with hedonistic feelings.

This leads to some other aims: I want

- students to write regularly;
- to offer encouragement for writing;
- to help them search different ways, strategies and methods of writing;
- to make students aware of their own writing processes;
- to encourage students share their writing in progress;
- to give students an audience for their writing;
- to delegate the responsibility for the learning process to the students themselves

and last but not least:

- to give the teacher the chance to teach 30 students with a budget of only 90 minutes a week.

The last point explains the title of my presentation: “How to make a virtue of a necessity”. I have to deal with big classes and a very small time budget. How can I make a virtue of this?

This led to the concept of autonomous writing groups as a form of classes. The term “autonomous writing group” follows Anne Ruggles Gere (Gere, 1987, p. 101):

„Although groups take a variety of forms they can be categorized into three main types – autonomous, semi-autonomous and non-autonomous – depending upon locus and degree of authority. The voluntary constitution of writing groups within literary societies, young men’s associations, women’s clubs, and in a myriad other self-sponsored gatherings identifies them as autonomous. Authority resides within individual members of autonomous groups because they choose to join other writers with whom they are friendly, share common interests, backgrounds, or needs.”

⁵ See ULR www.euv-frankfurt-o.de

⁶ - the German “Hausarbeit” that causes many problems because the students have to manage these demanding research papers without support during the vacations. See also Ulrike Lange’s paper on this CD-Rom.

⁷ For adjunct teachers, who tend to overtake more and more of the university classes in Germany, this is all – you are not paid for time to prepare the lessons or to read and comment the papers. You just work for the honour to be a university teacher. Young teacher often are not paid at all – but this is another chapter...

In Gere's opinion, university writing groups can never be autonomous "*because of the authority invested in the educational institution and its representative the instructor*" (101). On the other hand I had the experience – from my work outside the university – that the autonomy of a writing group is the key for its success: all members have to get the same authority and to be "stage crew" and visitor at the same time. So I decided to let the groups meet without me, the "representative authority". The groups would have to be teacherless groups, which means that they are prepared and moderated alternately by the participating students. Furthermore this decision solved my practical needs: I knew that I couldn't supervise several groups as a leader. With no more than 90 minutes I would not be able to lead even one.

But how could I make the students work in a way they never did before? I mean, what I want them to do is a lot: they should build up groups with students they do not know before. They should write together - most of them normally do not write at all. They should read their texts aloud and talk about these products as well as about their writing processes. And they should do this without direct teacher-control.

There are three very important facts for the success of this idea: I have to take the idea of autonomy serious, I have to change my role as teacher and I have to inspire confidence. Let me explain these facts:

1. I have to take the idea of an *autonomous* writing group serious. This means that the groups have to be self-elected. Furthermore the students are free to choose the themes and methods or strategies *they* like. They can do it the way they like and they do not have to show me the products until the end of the semester – there is no pressure to release the results of their work⁸. There is no doubt for them that *they* are responsible for their work. They are free to meet wherever they want – inside and outside the university
2. My role as teacher changes: I become a facilitator, a resource for them and their learning processes. I *offer* them help with preparing the meetings. The students have to consult with me in the office hours and explain what they are preparing for the next group meeting. For these preparations I compiled a lot of useful books and recommendations in the library. I also suggest some methods that all groups should try during the semester, like clustering, freewriting, writing different versions of one text and some forms of peer review. After the group meetings I get written proceedings from the students that help them to reflect their work and the group processes.
3. I give a practical introduction to writing group work and combine it with strong efforts to inspire confidence among the students.

For this, we start the semester with a writing journey. For three days we are all together in a house far away from the university where we live, cook and eat together. A big part of these days is dedicated to get to know each other. You have to know that in most university classes the students do not even know the names of their peers. We play games that force the students to interact, to talk to each other.

Maybe I should add that our university is not a campus university. Some of the students live in Frankfurt, a big part comes from Berlin every day and another part lives on the other side of the border in Poland. So living together with other students, like we do it on this journey, is new for them.

Then we start with writing and talking about our own writing experiences. As background I explain to them that there are very different strategies and types of writing in existence. Using an idea of Ingrid Böttcher and Cornelia Chapla (Böttcher & Czaplá, 2002), I developed a station-learning module: at ten tables the students find different writing assignments which are following ten different strategies to come to a text. The strategies follow the research on different types of writers by Hans-Peter Ortner (Ortner, 2000). The students can choose different stations and write a lot of texts during this time. The texts are read and discussed in small groups. Here the students begin to talk about *how* they write for the first time.

At the end of this journey the students choose the groups they want to work with during the semester. It seems very important to me that they make their own choice, because confidence is so important in a writing group. It is a long and sometimes painful process for the students to find their partners. For me it's not so easy to stand aside and to avoid "helpful" proposals. But in the end they always split into four groups that stay together for the next twelve weeks.

After the journey the groups come together every week. The altering moderators choose a theme and assignments and explore ideas how to stage the writing group meeting. They discuss their plans with me in my

⁸ I do not grade the texts but how the students engage in the writing processes as I know from the proceedings and the consulting hours. The textbook in the end is part of the grade as group work result – I don't control how much every individual member contributes.

office hours. Afterwards they reflect their ideas, the meeting and the results in written proceedings that they send me within one week.

2.3 Impressions

After three semesters with this writing group work I can summarize the following impressions:

- All groups worked together in a nearly enthusiastic way until the end of the semester. They always met for three hours and more - voluntarily.
- All groups wrote a lot of texts.
- In all groups I realized awareness for writing processes: students talked about different styles and strategies. I realised that because it was pointed out in the proceedings and the consulting hours. Sometimes students came and asked for help because they wanted to find new ways or use different strategies of writing – I never before experienced something like that in my university classes.
- I was really surprised about the variety of ideas the students had for their writing group work. I often thought that I as a teacher would never have the possibility to suggest themes like that. Let me give you some examples: The students wrote poems and stories, speeches and journal articles, soap operas, criminal stories and fairy tales. They wrote about themes like German-Polish relationships, death, Christmas, ways of life, love and sex etc. They wrote in the Underground, on the cemetery, in bars, hotels or museums. Some groups also gained experiences with writing academic papers, finding arguments, finding the right style, etc.

I have a funny example here: In one group the students wanted to practise a form of academic writing and decided to write short presentations. But they did not want to have a boring meeting and so they planned a little congress. They wrote very formal invitations to the other members, calling them Dear Prof. or Dear Doctor and asking them to come in formal dresses to the lobby of a big hotel in Berlin. They sent name-buttons with this invitation, with a logo they created especially for this meeting. In the lobby there was a formal speech held by the moderators and a list of themes to choose from. All themes referred to theme number One: Why do young people have changing relationships; what different names for having sex exist, how are they used and what does this mean for our society; what do we know about having sex with kitchen tools and so on. The students had 40 minutes time to prepare their presentation. They told me that all speeches were held in a serious way and in an academic style. Students enjoyed both: writing and listening.

- All groups handed out a very beautiful compilation of texts at the end of the semester. I only wanted them to give me an ordinary folder but what I got was put together very carefully and nicely designed. The students told me that this collection was a souvenir for them, something that reminds them of a valuable time of their life.
- Obviously, the writing groups meant more to the students than a university class. They told me that the writing group was home for them; they compared it with an oasis at the university. The writing group work helped them to express themselves, which led to very close relationships. They felt secure amongst peers and without a teacher judging their development in writing immediately.

3. Research

As I already mentioned, the development and exploration of this seminar concept is part of my PhD-thesis. I'll explain my research in a brief survey.

3.1 Methodology

I use Grounded Theory methodology, following up the practical suggestions of Anselm Strauss and Juliette Corbin (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). Grounded Theory is based on “*systematically and intensively analysing data*” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 278). You do not only order data, but also try to find general relationships and to generate theory. This means that a researcher has to code data systematically in a series of passes until a theory emerges inductively from the material. The analysis has to be proven by theoretical sampling: You select data on the basis of your emerging concepts and see if it proofs (or contradicts) the relevance of your ideas.

The researcher uses code notices, different types of memos, graphics and special paradigmatic questions to document the way of research. Very important to the method is the “*back-and-forth interplay with data*” (282), which means you have a circular research process that allows you to collect more data during the process or to start again with open coding of some data in a later stage of the process. Furthermore it is important to be part of a research group to discuss the codings and analyses to validate them.

I decided to use Grounded Theory methodology because obviously there is no existing theory that fits in with a seminar concept like mine. This idea is new and this methodology allows me to let theory emerge inductively from the practice. Besides, Grounded Theory methodology allows and encourages a blurring of the researcher-participants positions. This is important for me because I have a background myself as part of many writing groups, I do not stand outside like a stranger would do.

Furthermore, Grounded Theory methodology fits in the criteria that William F. Irmischer formulates for research on writing processes (Irmischer, 1994, p. 194-196). For example he suggests to “prefer case-studies and ethnographic inquiry” and to “have confidence in one’s own knowledge and perceptions” (196). These reflections became very meaningful for me when I was looking for an adequate methodology for my project.

For my research question I try to leave the teacher’s perspective behind. I want to explore what is important to the students. What helps them to support their development in writing? Why do *they* find the idea of autonomous writing groups useful, what is meaningful to *them*?

As data basis I have ten interview transcripts with different students, four group discussions, the complete proceedings of eight groups, the text compilations of the students and my notes from the office hours.

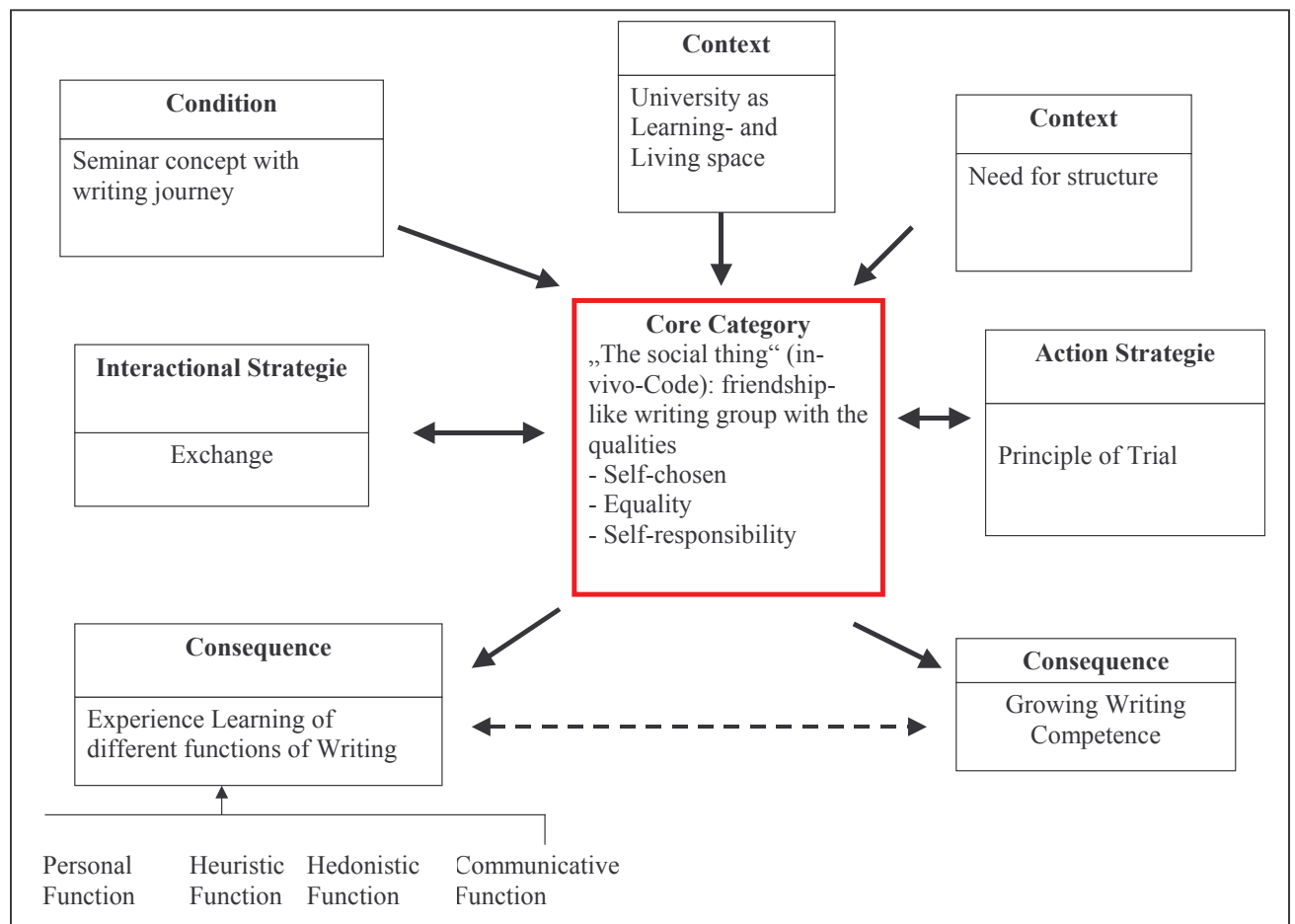
After a first step of open data coding I summarised the most striking phenomena into several temporary categories. In the next step, the axial coding, I examined these categories in alternating steps, deductively and inductively. I sorted the data within these categories in the rubrics conditions, context, action and interactive strategies and consequences. This is a way to support systematical thinking and to find the relationships between the categories.

To handle the data and the amount of notes that result from the analysis I use computer software called MaxQDA that was developed for qualitative research. But the most useful help comes from my research group that is part of a German online network for qualitative research⁹. We are seven young researchers and are in a close contact through a lively E-Mail-list. In weekly chats we discuss our transcripts or any other questions concerning our research projects. I mention this because it also touches the theme of this EATAW-conference: we are an online peer group of thesis writers.

The final research step in Grounded Theory methodology is the selective coding. You try to find a core category that bundles up all categories. Strauss and Corbin explain that you have to tell the story of a something, a story that includes all phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1996, p. 96).

3.2 Results

I am now going to explain the paradigmatic model that expresses the student’s point of view. Figure 1 shows the core category and its relationships to the other main categories.



⁹ See ULR www.methodenbegleitung.de

Figure 1: Paradigmatical model

The core category is called “the social thing”. This is an in-vivo-code that is taken directly from the student’s language. It expresses how much the experience of being a member of a social group matters for them. The common qualities of all groups are that they are self-chosen; that all members are equal and that they are self-responsible. The groups become friendship-like during the semester. The importance of this category is strongly influenced by the context of the German university and by a lack of structure in the student’s lives. This “social thing” allows the students to have exchange as an interaction strategy. An action strategy for them is the principle of trial, which is the opposite of the idea that writing is for eternity.

All these qualities, the interactional and actional strategies can emerge in different dimensions. E.g. the groups can be very self-responsible or less self-responsible. They can engage in the trial principle or refuse it. In the best case this leads to the consequence that the students experience writing in different functions. I found proof for four of these functions in the data:

The personal function lets the student explore writing as a medium for self-development. The heuristic function leads to the experience that writing helps to discover and connect ideas. Writing is a medium of thinking. The communicative function makes the student see that writing is a medium to communicate: they express their ideas and others understand them. The hedonistic function shows students that writing can be a pleasure even if it is hard work. All these functions are aspects of writing that the students normally do not get to know at our university. Their university writing tasks usually stress the rhetorical function of writing: Writing serves to present knowledge and for this purpose follows specific rules. It is strictly product-orientated and eliminates the traces of the writing process.

The writing group with its friendship-like qualities allows experiencing writing in an integral way. By integrating at least four other functions the students get a broader idea of writing. They can use it for different purposes and they know that they are responsible for it themselves. Writing is no longer something mysterious that they do to satisfy their teachers.

Like the data shows and theory confirms, this experimental learning of writing in different functions leads to a growing of writing competence. As e.g. Kirchhöfer explains, *competence* means all potentials of self-organisation of an individual (Kirchhöfer, 2004, p. 63) The more different experiences writers have with writing, the more potential for self-organisation they have for their writing processes.

4. Conclusion

My research shows that it *is* possible to have autonomous writing groups at the university. The university can profit from the experiences of writing groups outside the university (see also Gere, 1994).

Due to their friendship-like character these groups help the students to reveal writing competence and get a good base for the work with all academic forms of writing.

A big advantage of this special form of writing group work is that it can be done with all students, across all disciplines.

I usually reserve one third of the seminar for foreign students – for them it is the best chance to get integrated in a learning community and to improve writing skills in German.

And finally, writing group work means more than *writing* education. It helps students to feel comfortable at the university, which means it supports learning in general.

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