

FDGA Research Grant Report

German Language Centers, Writing Centers, and Refugee Language and Literacy Learning: The Current State of Germany's Promise to Educate Refugee Students

Brian Fallon, Director of the Writing & Speaking Studio
May 15, 2019

I returned to Germany to follow up on a previously FDGA funded research project on German Writing and Language Centers' involvement in educating refugee students. As part of this research trip, I also presented at the International Academic Writing Symposium held at Leibniz Universität in Hannover, Germany, March 28-30, 2019. After the Symposium, I met with colleagues at Leibniz, Göttingen Universität, and Hamburg Universität to learn how the language-learning situation and refugee educational programs had developed since my visit in June 2016.

At the Symposium, I co-presented with Prof. Charlotte Brown, Educational Skills department, and Dr. Nicole Houser, Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences at Saint Peter's University. Our presentation focused on navigating institutional hierarchy by offering an array of language-learning focused activities and events. In addition, I participated in a plenary panel discussion with international colleagues on the evolution of writing and writing center scholarship.

At Göttingen Universität, I reconnected with Dr. Melanie Brinkshulte at the International Writing Center to learn about changes and challenges in the program to offer German language instruction for refugee students. Most notably, the IWC was able to secure funding provided by Germany's Academic Exchange Service to offer language learning support that integrated refugee students into their programs for international students. Initially, there were some unanticipated issues concerning students from Syria and Afghanistan without refugee status being frustrated that they had to pay for the services while those with refugee status attended the programs for free.

The IWC developed several programs and workshops that helped them develop a sense of refugee student needs and interests. Intercultural communication such as differences in body language, especially in how people look when they are listening, became an important part of understanding the students' expectations for learning. The IWC has continued in its commitment to integrating refugee students in their language programs and has been agile in its response to meeting the needs of this population while working toward creating an equitable learning experience for all international students.

At Leibniz Universität, I followed up with Ludolf von Dassel, who works in the international office. When I visited three years ago, I learned of an international student who had to decide between going back to Syria or applying for refugee status to continue his studies. He became an asylum

seeker, which cost him the ability to return home to see family and friends. Three years later, this student has almost completed his master's degree. Also at Leibniz, I spoke with a German language teacher about her experiences teaching refugees in both the university and the community. While the differences between structured and assessment-focused university settings and individual goal-focused community settings were interesting, they both require a performative and empathic pedagogy. My informant stressed the importance of communicating and making clear goals and cultural values when working with either group, especially if they hope to understand the communities to which they now live. An important goal for language teachers is to help refugees feel safer, secure, and more comfortable navigating an unfamiliar cultural and bureaucratic system.

Finally, at Hamburg Universität, I meet with Dr. Annika Becker, the program director for UHHilft, which is the student services unit for refugee student orientation. Of the programs I visited, the UHHilft at Hamburg seemed to have made the most organized progress since my June 2016 visit. The program offers a series of workshops, including writing workshops, that prepare students for university study. Their coordination center not only provides students with support and resources but also researches the most salient challenges that impede refugee students in their studies. They have identified nine factors that present refugees with their greatest challenges, with housing and finances being the two most difficult factors.

One of my goals for this trip was not only to conclude the research I began in 2016 but also to begin thinking about how I might bring what I have learned to local communities in the United States. In each of my visits, I asked follow-up questions about the importance of doing this work outside of the academy, and in each case, it was clear that this work must also be done in communities outside of the academy, where everything from understanding non-verbal communication to how systems work can make a real difference in the everyday experiences of asylum-seekers. A key takeaway from this research is that expertise in language and literacy teaching and tutoring will be in demand as mobility across borders increases and the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers inevitably grow due to political unrest, climate change, persecution, and war.

Based on this takeaway, I have been arguing for peer tutor education that prepares students not only to work with writers on our campus but also with the writers and speakers they will encounter in their communities. Now that I have been able to close the chapter on this research in Germany, I plan to begin work in the U.S. on this issue. The FDGA grant helped me develop a foundation for future projects working with local groups focused on language and literacy teaching efforts for asylum-seeking populations. The opportunity to learn from the experiences of colleagues in Germany has been at the core of my shifting perspective on writing teaching and learning in a world where mobility and global concerns shape our relationship to each other and how we communicate.