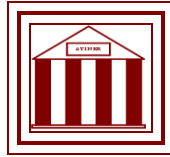


Athens Institute for Education and Research

ATINER



ATINER's Conference Paper Series

SOC2014-0983

**A Study on Academic Writing:
Development, Implementation, and
Evaluation of a Coaching Program at Alice
Salomon University Berlin (ASH)**

Ingrid Kollak

Professor

Alice Salomon University Berlin

Germany

Rosaria Chirico

Research Assistant, Writing Coach, Program Developer

Alice Salomon University Berlin

Germany

Nils Lahmann

Research Assistant, Epidemiologist

Alice Salomon University Berlin

Germany

An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

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Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute for Education and Research

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Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209
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Professor

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Abstract

Objectives

To enhance student's mental, social, and technical skills of academic writing research strongly recommends coaching programs (Grieshammer et al. 2012, Girgensohn et al. 2012). With the financial support of the Berlin Senate a coaching program was developed, implemented, and evaluated at Alice Salomon University in Berlin (ASH).

Method

154 students took part in the study. Students of the intervention group received seven hours of group and two hours of individual coaching by experienced writing counselors. Prior to and after the coaching the participants evaluated the program and its organization.

Results

The evaluation of the program revealed that most of the participants would recommend the coaching program and use it again to overcome writing problems. They especially expressed the advantage of the coaches not being their professors. Three quarters of the participants stated to be more aware of their strength and weakness (Kollak et al.2013).

Conclusion

A low self-esteem was the main obstacle to the writing abilities of students tested in our study. The coaching program worked well for the participants, it improved their technical skills and enhanced their self-esteem. The program can be recommended for other educational institutions.

Key words:

Corresponding Author:

Introduction

Problems with academic writing are common among students in Germany and have a strong impact on those who leave the university without graduating. To enhance students' mental, social, and technical skills of academic writing research strongly recommends coaching programs (Kruse 2003, Dittmann 2003, Grieshammer 2012, Girgensohn 2012). Moreover, coaching programs for students have already been introduced in many European countries with the exception of German universities and colleges. We wanted to develop, test, and evaluate a coaching program that fits the needs of our students. With financial support of the Berlin Senate's "Masterplan", we were able to accomplish this goal.

Our study had three components: First Development of a coaching program for students to enhance their abilities of academic writing as an intervention. We also had to develop a questionnaire to measure the outcomes of the intervention and a second questionnaire to measure the satisfaction of the students regarding the coaching program. Second Test the coaching program and the questionnaires. Third Evaluation of the program.

The Setting and Background of our Study

Alice Salomon University (ASH) is an old institution in a new building. Its predecessor organization was founded in 1908 by Alice Salomon. She was a social reformer and feminist. She was the first woman who received a doctoral degree at Humboldt University Berlin, known as the Kaiser Wilhelm University, at the time of her dissertation in 1906. During the Third Reich, she was forced to resign from her position as a director of her school and to leave the country. She went into exile in the United States and died in Brooklyn in 1948, without ever going back to Germany.

2014 ASH has about 3.000 students, 60 professors, and 180 teaching assistants, offering five bachelor and seven master programs that are free of charge, and other bachelor and master programs that students have to pay for (www.ash-berlin.eu). The university's programs focus on social work, health care, and early childhood education.

Background: Unequal Chances for Education

A social survey conducted 2013 by the German students' organization Deutsches Studentenwerk (DSW), showed that 77 of 100 children came from academic families and only 24 of 100 children of non-academic families become students (Middendorf et al. 2013). ASH opposes these unequal opportunities in education by supporting first generation students, students with a migrant background, as well as students with children.

A recent survey on students with second chance education¹ showed that at ASH, 6.8 % of the students completed such an education, compared to the average number of 2.5% in other colleges in Germany (Hochschulstatistik der Statistischen Aemter des Bundes und der Laender 2012).

Our Study Design

The financial support allowed us to employ two research assistants with 20 working hours per week, a student assistant with a full-time contract of 40 hours per month, as well as the reduction of four teaching hours for the leader of the study. The whole study covered a period starting April 2011 until January 2012.

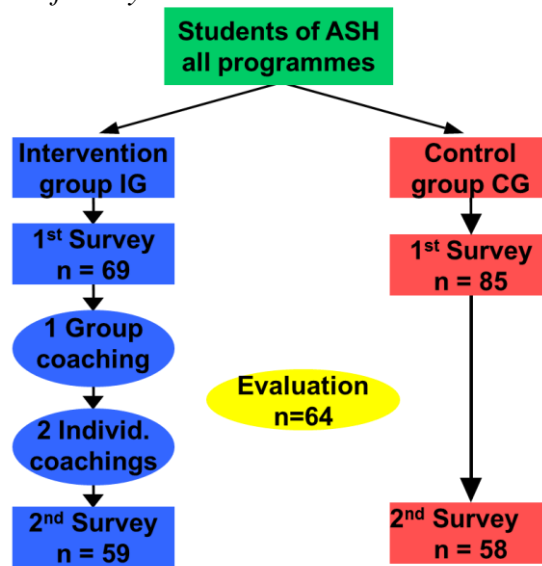
We developed the coaching program and the questionnaires in a very short time (about three months including testing). During this time, we also wrote and distributed flyers and posters to inform students on our program. From June 1 through Dec 31, we offered group coachings of seven hours per group of a maximum of 12 students. Our message was clear: we are dealing with popular problems that can be solved. We talked about common questions, like how to find the right topic and proper literature, how to develop and design an academic text, how to quote correctly. We also offered two individual coaching sessions per participant of one-hour duration each to go into details of individual problems.

We co-operated with ten coaches who were associated lecturers of the master's program Biographical and Creative Writing, with a background of coaching writing programs, psychologists, teachers, reviewers. They received information about the whole study as well as about the group counselling. Furthermore, they were introduced to the handouts of useful exercises to overcome writing problems that we used in our group teaching sessions.

As the flowchart indicates, 154 students took part in our study with 67 being part of the intervention group and 85 of the control group. 64 students of the intervention group evaluated the coaching program (fig.1). At the beginning and end of the study, the participants of both groups filled out our questionnaire.

¹Students with second chance education are often educated professionals who took night classes while working to meet the universities admission criteria.

Figure 1. *Flowchart of Study*



Source: Kollak, I., Lahmann, N., Chirico, R. 2013. *Writing coaching with students*

Main Characteristics of our Sample

The 154 participants were studying in the bachelor programs of social work, physical therapy, and nursing management. The median age was 27. About 80% of the participants were female. There were more senior participants in the intervention group. Senior participants had to prepare for their final thesis and exams. Given the average number of 6 to 7 semesters (depending on the program) to get a bachelor, there were also participants who had to re-sit exams and thesis.

Our socio-demographic data give also information on the social situation. There was a visible difference in the number of parents who had already studied: 42% intervention and 49% control group. We found a similarity in the number of participants with kids, and a remarkable difference in the number of participants working more than 15 hours per week: 40% of the participants of the intervention and 21 % of the participants of the intervention group (table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample

	Intervention Group n = 69	Control Group n = 85
Sex	58 (84 %) female 11 (16 %) male	65 (77 %) female 20 (23 %) male
Graduated parents	40 (58 %) no 28 (42 %) yes 01 missing	42 (50 %) no 41 (49 %) yes 02 missing
Number of completed semesters	01 sem --- (-- %)	01 sem 07 (08 %)
	02 sem 09 (13 %)	02 sem 35 (41%)
	03 sem 02 (03 %)	03 sem 21 (25 %)
	04 sem 21 (31 %)	04 sem 22 (26 %)
	05 sem 08 (12 %)	
	06 sem 13 (19 %)	
	07 sem 07 (10 %)	
	08 sem 06 (09 %)	
Children	21 (30 %) no 48 (70 %) yes	27 (32 %) no 57 (68 %) yes
	15 (22 %) no 26 (38 %) < 15 h 28 (40 %) > 15 h	26 (31 %) no 41 (48 %) < 15 h 18 (21 %) > 15 h

Source: Chirico, R., Kollak, I., Lahmann, N. 2013. *The Whole is more than the sum of its parts.*

Our Questionnaire

Our quantitative study aimed to explore the most relevant factors contributing to the students' problems with academic writing. Therefore, we wanted to develop and test a short questionnaire that would allow us to identify possible causes of writing problems in students of Alice Salomon University in Berlin in order to measure the effects of writing coach training in a trial.

So far, most evidence had been gained by qualitative research. Predominant aspects of academic writing were identified as the following: Psychological, sociological, organizational, technical skills of the writing process (citation, hypothesis generating, etc.) and internal motivation/attitude.

With this background a questionnaire was developed with 37 items to be rated by the participants on a 6 point Likert scale (1=fully agree to 6=fully disagree).

The a priori theoretical dimensions were

- “writing process” (17 items): find a topic and literature, structure material, write a first version, review and rewrite the text, conclude etc.

- “psychological components” (9 items): capacity to fulfil the requirements, confidence in writing ability
- “sociological components” (6 items): support through family and friends, belief in others as sources for the help needed
- “planning and time-management” (5 Items): organizing the material, planning, keeping to the schedule

To measure the amount of self-considered writing problems, participants should also rate the statements “I have problems with academic writing!” – “I don’t have writing problems, but I am curious” – “I don’t have writing problems but might do even better” on a 6 point Likert scale.

At the end of the questionnaire demographic data were gathered which allowed us to characterize the sample (table 1).

After a pre-test was performed, eight more items were eliminated. The study was carried out among 155 students at Alice Salomon University Berlin. 154 questionnaires could be analysed by performing an explorative factor analysis. To measure the impact of each dimension on the self-reported “academic writing problems” a regression analysis was performed.

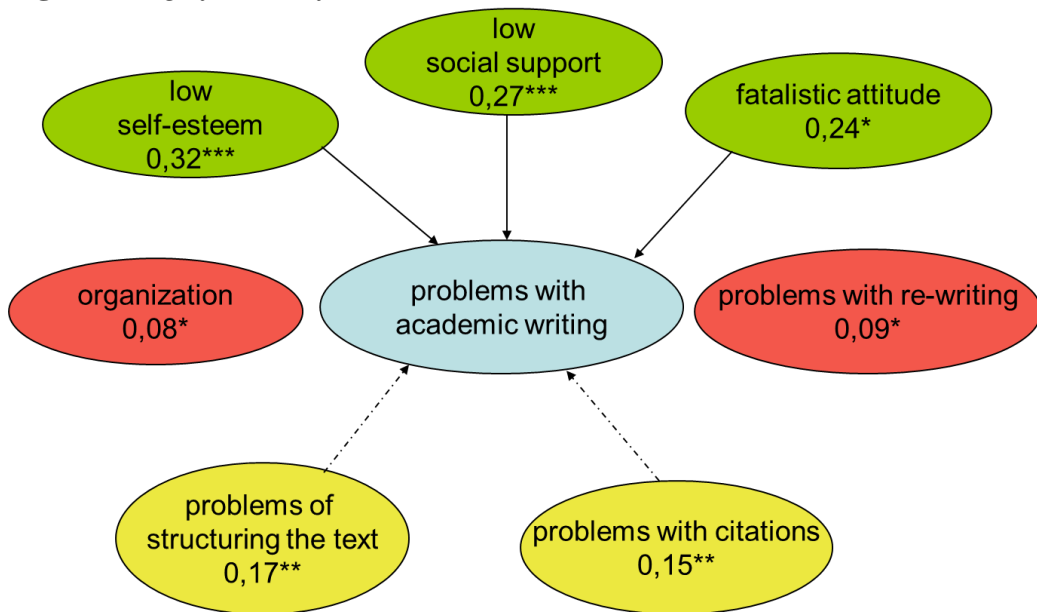
Construct validity was established using explorative factor analyses (PCA) with varimax rotation. PCA revealed that 10 factors accounted for 67.6% of the variance. Most dimensions/ sub-dimensions were confirmed. Five items (15, 21, 39, 45, and 47) could not be assigned to a factor. Rerunning the PCA with 32 terms, the explained variance increased to 68.8%.

Correlations of predicted relationships between the dimensions and the psychometric outcome variable were performed to quantify the influence of each dimension on the outcome score.

32 items of the scale could be clearly assigned to ten dimensions (Eigenwert >1) explaining 68.8% of the total variance. Regression analysis indicated “low self-esteem”, “low social support”, and a substantial “fatalistic attitude” as statistically significant (fig. 2).

The developed questionnaire showed good psychometric testing results.

Figure 2. Significance of Dimensions



Source: Kollak, I., Lahmann, N., Chirico, R., Leiske, M. 2012. Development and testing of a questionnaire

The decimal number defines the standardized beta-coefficient (the higher the decimal number the higher the significance of a dimension). In the graphic, the green fields with three stars mark three statistically significant dimensions: low self-esteem, little social support, and a fatalistic attitude. The yellow fields with two stars show almost statistically significant dimensions: problems with structuring the text and with citations. The red fields with one star show dimensions that were not statistically significant: problems with organizing the work and with re-writing the text.

Here are some of the statements that articulated the three statistically significant dimensions. Number 1 “low self-esteem”. Students agreed to statements like: ‘I am worrying about being unable to meet the requirements of academic writing’ or ‘I am afraid to make mistakes and feel like being under high pressure’. At the same time, they disagreed with a statement like: ‘I have confidence in my writing ability’. Number 2 “low social support”. Students agreed to statements like: ‘I have no place to go when I need to focus on writing’ and ‘The bigger my writing problems the less I am able to talk about it’. They disagreed to a statement like: ‘I have sufficient support through family and friends’. Number 3 “fatalistic attitude”: Students agreed to statements like: ‘I don’t think my writing problems can be addressed’ or ‘I regard my writing problems as a personal failure’. At the same time, they disagreed with a statement like: ‘I believe writing problems can be solved’.

Evaluation of the Coaching Program

We wanted to find out, if the content and design of the coaching program matched the needs of our students. How can one evaluate a coaching program? This question led us to look into existing evaluation questionnaires measuring the grade of satisfaction in reaching one's personal goals.

Our evaluation questionnaire provided 19 statements concerning the satisfaction in reaching one's goals and the value of the intervention itself. The participants could chose the strength or their agreement/disagreement on a scale from one to six (Likert scale): 1 = I fully agree, 2 = I agree, 3 = I mostly agree, 4 = I mostly disagree, 5 = I disagree 6 = I fully disagree. At the end of the evaluation questionnaire, there were two questions/invitations, which could be answered in a free text. First: What were your goals with regard to the coaching? Second: Write down suggestions, critical comments etc. We received 64 evaluation questionnaires.

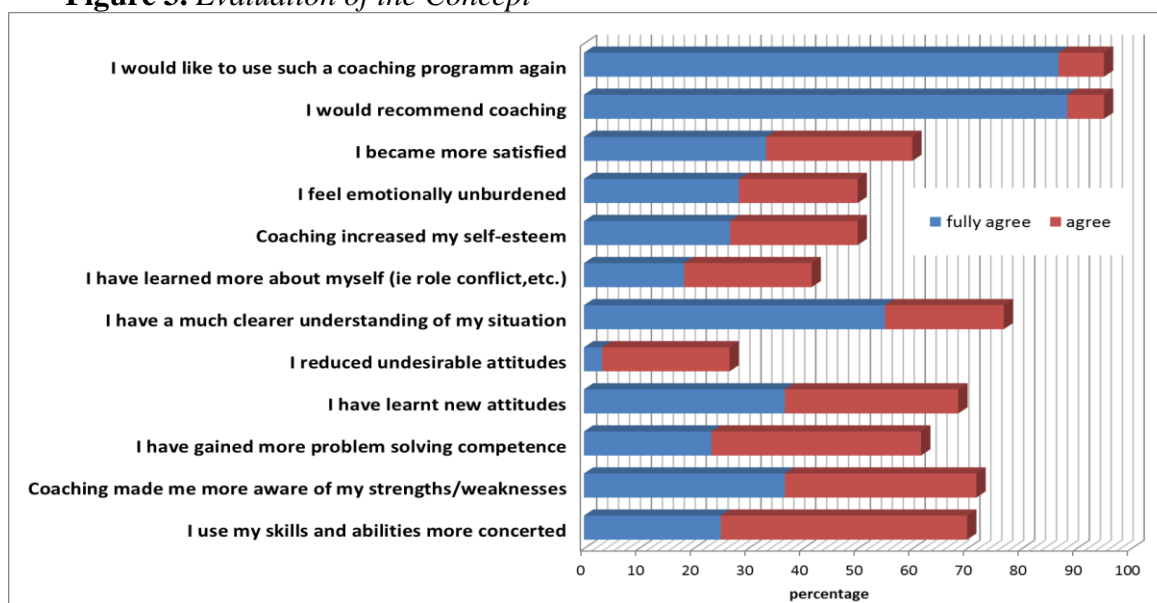
Evaluation of the Concept

45 students (75%) fully agreed to the statement „The concept of one group coaching in the beginning and following individual coachings was good“, 9 students (15 %) agreed, and 3 students (5 %) mostly agreed. No one disagreed. Three participants did not answer the question.

In this context was also stated: “I would recommend the coaching program to other students”. 53 students (88.3 %) fully agreed, 4 students (6.7 %) agreed, 1 student (1.7%) disagreed (fig. 3). One participant did not answer the question.

53 students (86.7 %) fully agreed with the statement: „Would you decide to take part in a coaching program in case a writing problem would show up again?“ and 5 students (8.3 %) agreed. Once again, there was 1 disagreement (1.7 %) and two participants did not answer the question.

Figure 3. Evaluation of the Concept



Source: Kollak, I., Lahmann, N., Chirico, R. 2013. *Implementation and evaluation of a coaching program*

Evaluation of Satisfaction in Reaching One’s Goals

The 64 students who filled out our evaluation questionnaire named 140 personal goals concerning the coaching program. 22 students (36.7 %) fully agreed to the statement „The coaching programs helped me to become more aware of my strengths and weaknesses“, 21 students (35 %) agreed and 10 students (16.7 %) mostly agreed. 4 students (6.7 %) mostly disagreed and 1 student (1.7 %) fully disagreed. Two participants did not answer the question.

33 students (55 %) fully agreed to the second self-assessing statement „I have a much clearer understanding of my situation“, 13 students (21.7 %) agreed, and 10 students (16.7 %) mostly agreed. 2 students (3.3 %) mostly disagreed and 1 student (1.7) disagreed. Two participants did not answer the question.

Table 2. Ranking of Personal Goals

Contents of Free Statements	Frequency of Statements
Change and reflect my attitude towards writing	39
Get advice, information, and learn methods for academic writing	26
Enhance my time management	22
Receive a concept for my thesis	11
Learn how to find the proper literature	07
Be able to structure a text	07
Improve my writing style	06
Receive feedback on my text	06
Get into the process of writing	05

Source: Chirico, R., Kollak, I., Lahmann, N. 2013. *“That was helpful for me”*.

Feedbacks, suggestions, and critiques

27 of 64 students also noted comments and suggestions like: 'free coaching for everybody' or 'the coaching was very helpful for me'. As a critique, students stated 'free choice of a coach'. During our study, the students signed for a certain appointment and a coach who they did not know.

Summary

What we have learned from our study can be summarized in the following way. The psychometric testing showed that our questionnaire worked well. Our survey revealed a low self-esteem being the number one obstacle in academic writing. The coaching program worked well as an intervention and met the needs and interest of our students. Our evaluation showed students would recommend the coaching and take part in it again. Group teaching was well received, because students could see they are not alone with their problems and that these problems can be addressed. The individual counsellings were welcomed, if they were carried out by counsellors who are not members of the faculty – favourably by coaches that can be selected by the students. The limitation of the study was that we asked students to take part and did not randomly take them into the study.

Latest Developments

What happened after our study was accomplished? With renewed funding from the Berlin Senate, free coaching for all students of ASH has been offered since April 2013. The service is offered twice a week at ASH. More appointments are possible, if students want to meet the coach outside of the university. The coaches are one alumna and one student of the master program Biographical and Creative Writing. (They also offer an internship for students who want to become coaches.) They can be reached via email. The address is listed in official information as well as on flyers and posters. The number of students seeking help for their writing problems is constantly rising. Starting with 6 coaching sessions in April 2013, they have increased to 32 in February 2014.

Our questionnaire is still in use and allows the coaches to address the self-stated needs and find out if the problems were solved. The ongoing data collection shows that 56 % of the students seeking counselling come from a non-academic background, 32% work more than 15 hours alongside their study, 24% speak German as a second language, and 40% have children

The data show the needs and benefits of the coaching. The study as well as the new data reveals that coaching for academic writing helps to overcome the unequal chances to study.

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