Learning and Teaching Grid Exchange[1]: Peer-to-Peer Support and Innovative Learning Spaces, Bielefeld University, 19/06/2012 – 21/06/2012

Compiling the notes from this trip has been a daunting task. There was so much information to assimilate and so many ideas to ponder it is hard to know what to write about. What needs to be said more than anything else though is that the visit to Bielefeld University was a fantastic and thought-provoking experience. The city was lovely, the hotel comfortable, the people friendly and enthusiastic, the hospitality second-to-none, and the university intriguing and exciting. Perhaps most memorable was just how starkly different Bielefeld University is to Warwick. Bielefeld University is one building. All of its departments, staff, learning facilities, societies, shops, campaigning, advertising, and so on, are under one roof. When you walk in, there is a single, huge atrium that is constantly buzzing with people. It does not have the money, greenery, or variety of Warwick, but it is a student community that abounds with a kind of life and texture that I have not experienced here. Perhaps I will somewhat romanticise it in reflection because the sheer difference makes it appealing, so to offset this idealisation at least a little, Bielefeld's own students did have a tendency to summarise the university as simply "functional". However, without a doubt, it reminded me that at times Warwick can be a sterile and corporate place. Don't get me wrong, I love Warwick and it has an abundance of its own positives – I would not have remained here for so long or invested so much of myself into being a part of and improving its community if it did not – but Bielefeld re-awoken an awareness to the fact that there are still things we are lacking. We must not lose sight of the fact that the atmosphere of a university, composed of the people, building-design, interaction, and so on, is just as important in how we support student learning and "enhance the student experience" (a favourite phrase at Warwick at the moment) as technology, training, and having state-of-the-art facilities are. Nor must we allow ourselves to become too complacent in our Warwick 'bubble'. We must not only look at how other places feel and work, but we must continue to experience them first-hand if we are to improve Warwick on every level.

Wednesday

Even though we were arriving fairly late after a flight, train, and walk, there was no point in wasting time after arrival and we dived straight into a session run by Bielefeld's MitLernZentrale. This was the penultimate instalment of what is a year-

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[1] Take a look at Bielefeld's visit to Warwick here: http://www.reher.de/dateiupload/trailer/ It is in German though!

long programme called 'Train the Tutors' offered to their equivalent of seminar tutors. This session was structured around how to give presentations and communicate complex ideas in tutorials and seminars.
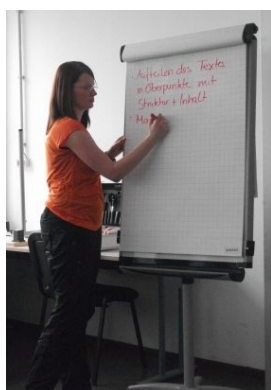
We began with simply writing the distinctions between the "typical" characteristics of written and oral presentations, and discussing their differences. This then developed into a task where the tutors were given ten minutes to adapt a short but complex piece of text on the definition of 'competence' into a brief presentation for a seminar. The key concerns were basic presentation skills, body language, and how well the text was adapted to become an accessible and presentation-worthy piece without losing meaning. As the presentations would be in German, Alice and I were asked to watch and give feedback on the presenter's body language. It was interesting to focus on giving feedback that was entirely physical as we could not understand the presentation itself, and we gave some useful comments. It brought to mind an old theatre exercise where we spoke in 'gobbeldygook' and had another person improvise the translation. Perhaps, in presentation training, we could fuse these and have an exercise where one person can only speak in 'gobbeldygook' but must still concentrate on conveying something and showing confidence and good presentational body language.

We then discussed certain strategies for this kind of text preparation and preparing yourself. For example, structuring your presentation and text by dividing into major points, having a visual aid for major points, making sure you have a solid and concise introduction and conclusion, stressing key words and sentences, giving practical and relatable examples, preparing yourself in relation to further questions and problems, and so on.

Next, there was an exercise based around improving memory and explanation skills. Essentially, the exercise was Chinese whispers but with a drawing. Four people went and stood outside whilst one drew a picture. The first person was then allowed to look at the picture before it was covered. The first then had to describe the picture to the second, the second to the third, third to fourth, and finally the fourth had to re-describe the drawing and create what they thought was the picture. The idea was to see just how well the picture had been communicated. It was interesting to witness where the passing on and explanation started to break down – where people stopped using logical methods and 'tricks' to remember details. Where the first couple of people repeated the instructions back, created acronyms for themselves, or acted out parts of the drawing, the last couple tried to remember it straight off and simply as a list.

Finally, it emerged that the tutors at the meeting had been shadowing each other's seminars and they ended the session by offering each other feedback. I certainly hope this is something I can implement in my own teaching next year and encourage my

department and wider tutor community to engage in, as the positive impact on the tutors' confidence and ability was evident even from this short taster. The things raised here as feedback and in the session were also going to be added to their 'tutor wiki page' that acts as a database for seminar tutoring methods, ideas, plans, and so on. This kind of centralised and accessible vault of ideas is clearly an asset, and another thing I hope to establish at Warwick.

Stereotypical German dinner 1: Schnitzel, washed down with Weissbier.

Thursday

The second day began by sitting on a MitLernZentrale tutor team meeting. As well as the 'Teach the Tutors' programme they run various other workshops and events throughout the year based around their two major objectives of increasing presentation skills but also connecting students with the same learning goals. They focus upon setting up a "learning pool" and a goal-orientated "dating-agency". So, like a car pool, they seek to put students in contact with each other who have the same learning and developmental goals – very much like our postgraduate network in the Research Exchange. They run group workshops on things such as how to deal with nerves, prezi, time-management, and atmosphere control. They also offer one-on-one coaching. It is also MitLernZentrale who have initiated their own small version of our Grid. They have incorporated the more comfortable, collaborative, and student-owned aspects, but have added their own colourful touches!

We then moved across the hall to a Skript.um team meeting. Skript.um is a service set up where students tutor students in essay writing and development. It embodies precisely the notion of peer-to-peer support. Each Skript.um team member is given a course in the didactics of writing and tutoring before undertaking this work. They work on the basis of open counselling hours (although they want to change this term "counselling" as it brings with it too many negative connotations) and individual appointments. They are very much like our writing mentors insofar as they do not focus on grammar and proof-reading, but on aiding the student with subject choice and general feedback on a piece of writing. However, they also prepare students for having to speak to examiners about their work and they run additional one-off workshops and events. For example, an event I am very keen to bring to Warwick is their "Long-Night Against Procrastination" where they have team members available throughout the night with food, drinks, advice, and other motivational workshops. It is a great community event but, according to them, also motivates many students to get one solid, prolonged period of work done with feedback and advice readily available.

We were taken to a session with the Team Teaching and Learning group. After introductions we did a group task called 'The Hero's Journey'. This was a creative and fun way for us all to think through the problems and triumphs we face in The Learning Grid, and is a good format not only for groups trying to think through or reflect on large and small problems, but also a good tool for helping to structure a

presentation. We then discussed as a group the various issues we faced as Teaching and Learning institutions and shared ideas. From my own point of view, looking forward to the projects I hope to undertake next year, their advice on approaching individual departments was invaluable. Whether it is simply not getting defeated and showing tenacity or structuring my approaches in ways that always emphasise what we are doing for the department, that this is an in-demand service, and getting the students and other "stake-holders" to speak on my behalf as well.


After a sumptuous lunch we were given a tour of the Maths and Physics centres to look at their new learning space and how their building has been laid out to facilitate learning. Unfortunately, due to it doubling-up as a venue for the department's summer party, the space was not in the shape it usually was. However, speaking to one of the advisers who works there and the coordinator of Bielefeld's 'Richtig einsteigen!' programme (which seeks to enhance the experience and learning of first year students), the prospect for expansion was very positive. As it was, it was only a single, small(ish) room, but it was very well used and received.

Even more intriguing though was the department's economic use of space so as to facilitate as much group collaboration and work as possible with a very limited budget and number of rooms. The halls were wider than normal allowing for most of them to have a desk and chairs for working as well as chalkboards for collaboration. Even, the backs of many of the classrooms had mini-chalkboards. Whilst it may be the case that many universities have these (our own maths building has corridor chalkboards for example), these were clearly in constant use and almost every table had a group working on it. Again, the collaborative and student-led atmosphere in the face of a lack of equipment shone through.

We were then taken to the university's ZiF centre for Interdisciplinary Research. I have to say this was something inspiring and one of the highlights of the trip. The ZiF supports and funds outstanding interdisciplinary research projects, and welcomes scholars from all academic disciplines and countries on the basis that the core belief of its founder, Helmut Schelsky, was that interdisciplinarity is needed to fuel

scientific and academic progress. The ZiF funds research groups (long term collaborations that involve scholars of various disciplines living and working at the ZiF on a broad research theme), cooperation groups (facilitating and developing

already existing interdisciplinary cooperation by inviting visiting researchers to become part of the project for anywhere between three weeks and six months), and interdisciplinary workshops, conferences, and lectures. It also hosts a Network of Young Scholars for three meetings a year working on various interdisciplinary projects, and, in its attempts to promote interactions
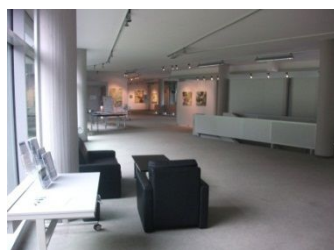
between art and science, houses art exhibitions at different points in the year. Whilst we were there, for example, the visiting scholars were working on 'The Cultural Constitution of Causal Cognition', there had just been workshops on the 'Evolution of Disgust', 'Moral Compromise', and 'Early Literacy under the Focus of Language and Cognitive Development', there were plans for a conference on 'Animal Social Networks', the Young Scholars had been discussing 'What is Science', and there were photographs from Hamideddine Bouli's work on the Tunisian Revolution. Situated on the edge of Teutoburg Forest and on a slight hill, with a library, recreation room, pool, food (they were barbequing whilst we were there), you feel isolated and calm but are in reality only a ten minute walk away from the university and easy travel to the city. This is a truly international, interdisciplinary, and inspiring place for a young PhD student to see – I hope to be back and to be more involved with it in the future!

After visiting the ZiF – it was back to the hotel for a quick change before our tour of Bielefeld, given by two of the MitLernZentrale tutors. They were fantastic guides and we got a good sense of the city's culture. The 'Old Town' is quite lovely and has a real sense of history, the 'New Town' is bustling and modern, and its castle is perfectly quaint. Dr. Oetker is the city's main claim to fame!

Stereotypical German dinner 2: Roast pork with sauerkraut, washed down with Weissbier (dunkel).

Friday

The final day began with a meeting with some of the university's Service Centre Media staff and a discussion of their project 'meko:bus' which aims at promoting media competency in education and schools. They focus mainly on integrating media tools into the classroom and educating tutors and lecturers in how e-learning works. This meeting gave me a lot to think about, as whilst I was very familiar with some of the software, devices, and techniques they used (wiki-projects, recording lectures, blogs, turning point, smartboards, and so on), I realised I was well behind in relation to virtual leaning environment software such as Moodle and other eLearning tools such as Adobe Presenter. It was also refreshing to hear a different point of view on the issue of students stopping attending lectures if they are recorded: "why should the student not study the subject when they are awake?" It is a valid question that demands an answer from a lecturer and asks them to defend the necessity and value of their lectures to students – something which I think is sorely needed.

The concluding event of our visit was participating in and presenting at the first day of a two day conference organised by the German Network 'Netzwerk Tutorienarbeit an Hochschulen' focusing upon 'Working with Tutors'. This was a fantastic

opportunity to see how a national network of ideas and collaboration is developing and growing. Indeed, the enthusiasm of many of the people there was infectious and I hope we can set up such a network in England, and, potentially, then link this with the German network and beyond for an international network of tutor support and guidance. A pipe-dream perhaps, but this will not stop me from attempting to take the first steps. Watch this space for a conference in England on peer-to-peer support in the next year or so!

We began with a speed networking exercise that involved being separated into groups by coloured cards. Each card had a question on it – same colour, same question. We then had to ask people with different colours our question, then come back together as a group and report on the various responses we got. I had "What will you need to take away from this event for you to consider it a success?" and the answers were all centred around taking away contacts and fresh ideas – exactly the kind of thing you want from such an event.

After this it was time to give our presentation on The Learning Grid and other learning spaces at Warwick University. The pressure was on as the Bielefeld representatives who had visited us introduced The Learning Grid as the inspiration and model for their new space. I only hope the short presentation we gave lived up to the hype! Becky introduced our spaces, what they were and why they were needed. Dean then explained our roles as tutors, linking us back to the theme of the conference. Then it was my turn. I spoke about my project for the year which had been to improve feedback in the Learning Grid spaces and related this to feedback in peer-to-peer support models. I talked about our survey at the end of the year and various other ideas, but mainly focused upon the new feedback webpage. Most importantly for peer-to-peer support was the point that no matter how many times you have been asked a question you always need to make the asker feel as if the question matters and that their feedback and opinion is valued. It is too easy to dismiss an oft asked question without giving the proper response each time. I also wanted to focus upon feedback not only as a way of getting information about yourself (as this is something that Bielefeld was clearly good at) but as a way of communicating information as well. For example, using survey question such as; "Which of our services did you not know about?" with a list of our services. I also conveyed that much of the negative feedback concerned the way other students use the space and impact on each other – noise, mess, food, etc. There is an obligation on us then to not just keep that feedback to ourselves but to make everyone aware of their role in the atmosphere of the place. In such open spaces where we are trying to foster a sense of student ownership, it is also important that students develop a sense of responsibility towards the space and other users. Alice then talked about her own tutor project and the overhaul the Learning Grid's website which sought to make it more user-friendly and interactive.

To finish we had one more task designed to network us and to get us to share our experiences of working with tutors. One of us was given the role of facilitator and had to explain the task, monitor time, summarise, and so on. The task was to discuss what we would want to say over a cup of coffee to a new colleague who was just starting to as a tutor. After discussion we had to bring together our five most important ideas for

one other member to present in a "fish-bowl method" with the other groups – i.e. each group nominated a 'fish' to go into the 'bowl' where one of the conference organisers asked the 'fish' various questions. Everyone was pleasantly surprised to have very similar answers, such as having a tenacious and positive personality or being able to structure your time well with realistic visions, and no one felt out of their depth. But there was one surprise answer: "Happy, Healthy, Sexy" – feel it and make those you tutor feel it!

Stereotypical German dinner 3: Currywurst washed down with Warsteiner.

There are so many people I wish I could thank here, but if I were to try name them all I would worry that I would forget some and you know who you are. If we met you over these few days, then thank you, for there was no one that was not helpful or it was not a pleasure to meet. However, my own biggest thanks have to go to Christian Gauner who led us through our trip and translated for us with a willing, patience, and a smile, and Melanie Fröhlich for being the perfect host and keeping things running smoothly.