Let's Talk About Writing
After 13 years at The University of Alabama, Steffen Guenzel joined the UCF Department of Writing and Rhetoric in August 2012 as lecturer and coordinator in the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Program. He earned his Ph.D. in American Literature from The University of Alabama in 2006 and immediately joined the First Year Writing Program there with a primary responsibility to create and coordinate Living/Learning Communities on this medium-sized campus. In his research he now focuses on intersections between theories in writing across the curriculum, writing center studies and technical communication. Recently, he has studied how universities and colleges in East Germany have addressed the changing landscape for professional writing during two major transformations, Western educational system and the Bologna Process, since the fall of the wall in 1989. Currently, he is especially interested in a comparative approach to how these theories develop / apply to higher education in former East Germany and how writing studies and rhetoric theories in the U.S. might benefit from some developments in the European Higher Education Area. He can be reached on Twitter @st_guenzel.

By Steffen Guenzel

On the UCF campus, I encounter three perspectives and questions representing rather typical scenarios:

Students often wish for sympathetic readers of their work. Why do they not receive constructive feedback consistently?

Instructors teaching classes that increase in size wish for a grading mechanism that will save them time. Do they really have to reduce the number of writing assignments in order to manage class sizes?

Administrators stress the need to prepare students for a successful professional life after graduation. How can technology help us in that process?
The Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Program (http://wac.cah.ucf.edu/), the First-Year Writing Program and the University Writing Center are all programs in UCF’s Department of Writing and Rhetoric. Those of us In the WAC Program view ourselves as consultants. Director Pavel Zemliansky and coordinators Lindee Owens and I support faculty in creating customized projects that meet the needs of their departments and students. Our work is guided by evidence that writing research during the past forty plus years has produced: when students are given frequent and structured opportunities to practice writing, they become more engaged with their learning, think more critically, and communicate more effectively. Writing studies have also demonstrated that students engaged in “writing to learn assignments” are also better able to transfer knowledge and skills between courses and contexts which can prepare them for a successful professional career after graduation. Multiple opportunities to practice academic and professional writing during their career at UCF means better prepared students who can participate more easily in public and professional discourses.

UCF’s WAC Program follows a department-centered approach where we partner with stakeholders on campus. We assist faculty, adjuncts and graduate students in the creation and implementation of effective approaches to writing instruction in the disciplines. The goal is for faculty from all departments and disciplines to create theoretically and pedagogically sound models of writing instruction across campus, that are sustainable within departments. During the fall and spring semesters we train three to four cohorts, consisting of 5-5 WAC Fellows representing one department each, who meet during one semester to learn strategies to infuse writing on various academic levels. Participants work on a “vertical” system of writing instruction, also referred to as curriculum grids, to develop a more consistent experience for students to learn to write in their discipline throughout their university experience. We also offer one-on-one consultations for instructors who want to increase writing instruction in their classes or re-design an assignment. And we are presenting at FCTL Summer and Winter Conferences in order to engage faculty in conversation about writing instruction, feedback, and assessment.

On the UCF campus WAC is well established. We have presented at national and international conferences about our work and research (most recently at the International Writing Across the Curriculum (IWAC) conference held at the University of Minnesota). In spring 2014 the WAC program awarded the first Schell Award for Implementing Innovative Writing Instruction in the Disciplines (http://wac.cah.ucf.edu/node/226) to Dr. Daniel Murphee, a past WAC Fellow who completed the program in the spring of 2012 and who since then has developed innovative approaches to teaching students to write as historians. Furthermore, we have partnered with the UCF Library to have subject librarians join faculty training sessions and collaborate on designing assignment and sharing their expertise in library research.

Internationally, WAC programs and writing centers are a relatively new sight in the higher education landscape. Similarly to the U.S., the public in general, and university faculty in particular, complain about poor student writing performance. Using my multilingual and transatlantic background, I use a comparative approach to studying writing instruction and assessment at German universities and colleges. One of my foci is the emergence of writing centers in Germany. The first university writing center, the Schreiblabor Bielefeld, opened its doors 20 years ago at a West German university. Only ten years ago, the first writing center opened at a newly founded university in East Germany. Mostly traditional universities, however, have not recognized yet the value of a writing center. Another focus of my research are WAC programs or their current absences. So far, no such program has been institutionalized yet federal and state initiatives or Centers for Teaching and Learning across the country have promoted and developed workshops to train volunteering faculty in WAC strategies to integrate writing instruction and assessment in their teaching. Finally, I have studied the development of technical communication programs in East Germany since the fall of the wall in 1989. Before then, universities had not offered degrees in this field except as part of translation studies.

Two major transformations in higher education in Germany overall aided and hindered the process of establishing technical communication as a field in former East Germany. In the first half of the 1990s, the socialist educational system was replaced with the West German system. Then the Bologna Process, creating a European Higher Education Area, started in 1999 a second wave of transformation, which affected 29 countries originally. Currently 47 countries from across Europe participate in the process to harmonize their education systems in order to promote student mobility and comparability of degrees. The goal is to develop a broad knowledge base among its students while teaching them competencies that will enable them to successfully participate in a global data economy. Another goal of the Bologna Process is greater convergence between the United States and Europe in an attempt to adapt to certain aspects of the American higher education system. Technical communication programs have mostly expanded especially at Technical Universities while some have been discontinued elsewhere.

These challenges in the higher education landscape have led me to my current research question: Revisiting the Prussian Education Model Two Centuries Later: How Have Longstanding Practices and Values Impacted Writing Instruction in Germany Today? This is particularly interesting because this very educational model had a significant impact on the emerging higher education landscape two centuries ago in the U.S.A. One important question is then whether the Bologna Process is closing the
circle by adapting to the current U.S. system or expands elements of the Prussian Educational Model to all participating countries in Europe? In these times of reform I remember my own education and the benefits of studying in more than one place.

As a former Fulbrighter, I value and promote student exchange programs to help students see the world from different perspectives. At The University of Alabama, I taught a course on the rise and fall of political systems in Germany for six years. Three times the class was taught as part of a study abroad program: students not only researched online but discovered living history while traveling to Berlin and Munich and surrounding areas in person. It was fascinating every time to discover with them remnants of the Monarchy, of Industrial-Age Capitalism, National Socialism, Socialism and Federal Republic, which all shaped the modern country and its people. Maybe one day soon I will be able to teach that course again and combine that with my current research “on location.”