Perspectives of being a writing teacher in the professional field

The first time I met Sven Arnold at a meeting of about 20 writing pedagogues who are willing to build up a network in this field and I had the impression that his vision of being a writing teacher in the professional field was quite similar to mine. That’s why I thought of him when planning this interview. He agreed quickly and so here we are meeting on a hot summer morning in a café in Berlin Friedrichshain. Since noisy construction work makes it impossible to sit outside we choose a table in the very back of the room, which is still nearly empty. I’m a bit nervous, because it’s my first interview and I’m not sure if my voice recorder will work well. But Sven is such a friendly and open-minded guy, taking all the pressure immediately off me. We start a lively discussion, during which I really admire his eloquence in speaking about his new profession, which seems to be a real passion to him.

Short Biography:
Sven Arnold studied Modern German literature and musicology at the TU Berlin. He did his doctoral degree in 1998 with a thesis about expressionism in literature. Between 1992 and 2008 he worked for the “Literarisches Kolloquium” and afterwards in the “Haus der Kulturen der Welt” as one of the people responsible for the literary programmes.

Since 2009, after becoming a writing teacher, he is working as a freelance lecturer and trainer of academic writing and writing at work, mainly at colleges and for agencies of advanced training.

Homepage: www.schreibberatung-arnold.de
1. How and why have you, Sven, decided to become a writing teacher?

It was while talking to a friend about some acquaintances of ours, who had failed to finish their writing exams. I had my own opinion about this topic and therefore I was very surprised by the way my friend was analysing this phenomenon, which was much more sophisticated than mine. She described the process of writing an exam or even deciding not to finish it as a very complex one. I was impressed and when I asked her how she knew all these things, she told me about a special training course at the Ruhr-University of Bochum with Gabriela Ruhmann which she had attended to become a writing teacher. I was so fascinated by the concept of teaching writing competency to students at university and I found it very reasonable and useful. So I started to look for ways to get a similar qualification in this field which at this time for me as a non-student was only possible at the “University of Education Freiburg” (www.ph-freiburg.de/schreibzentrum). And the more I learned and studied about the whole thing the more convinced I became about it: This is what I absolutely wanted to do.

2. Is your way a typical one to become a writing teacher?

Yes, insofar as actually all writing teachers are somehow “career changers”. They all come from different jobs and disciplines, very often from the humanities, as well the writing teachers in practice as the writing researchers. That is because there is no proper course of studies called writing pedagogy or writing research. At the moment there is this special course at the PH Freiburg and at a handful of German universities students have the opportunity to become peer tutors. This can be a stepping stone to working as a teacher for academic writing in the future.
3. Why did you choose the combination of academic writing and writing at work?

First of all I chose the field of academic writing because of my initial discussion with my friend, but also because of my own experiences in academic writing. And, besides this, the course in Freiburg focuses on this field. Writing at work is the other choice because there, too, I’ve gathered a lot of experiences in my own job for many years. Furthermore I realised that the knowledge and abilities of teaching writing competency, which are taught in the Freiburg course, are also applicable to the field of writing at work.

4. What are the main similarities and differences between both fields of writing?

The differences between the two forms of writing are determined by two main aspects, which are firstly the purpose, aim and cause of the written texts, and, secondly, the surrounding conditions of the writing process. So, the texts written at work are mostly oriented to practice. Normally they are supposed to influence activities of the addressee, for instance to buy a certain product or to make a particular decision based on a certain text. In contrast, academic writing focusses especially on content: so students have to show what they have learned and that they are able to solve academic tasks by applying the methods of their discipline.

5. And what is different about the writing conditions?

Regarding, for example, the time management: In academic writing you can more or less decide freely at what time you write and what, for how long and where you will write. Certainly, there are some constraints, like, for instance, family commitments or a part time job besides university, but normally
you can say: Well, during the next two weeks I will completely concentrate on my assignment and there is no other writing job to do besides this.

In contrast writing at work is characterised by a high degree of multitasking. People writing at work always have to manage many writing jobs at the same time. This creates an enormous pressure.

6. **So what do you teach them to help them deal with this pressure?**

First they should learn to assign priorities. Why not ask the boss or manager which text is the most important at that moment – the answer to a business letter, the minutes of our last meeting or the report of the project I have to write for a main client? For most people it is a completely new idea, to ask the boss for help to decide what has to be done first.

Another aspect is that in most offices there are so many sources of distraction. Writing requires concentration and, preferably, quiet surroundings. But in the office normally people come and go, colleagues discuss things and the telephone is ringing constantly. To be aware of those conditions is the first step to change them into suitable writing conditions, blocking for instance an hour for my writing, which is accepted by the colleagues, so that they won’t disturb me during this time. Or forwarding my telephone calls coming in during my writing time.

7. **In academic writing there are special writing techniques to be taught, especially structuring techniques like mindmapping.** Which role do they play in writing at work where most of the texts are normally much shorter and written more spontaneously?
It is true that in writing at work people often think, that they have to write the final text at once, with a single effort, because of the enormous time pressure. In fact, text production always happens in several loops from the first concept to the final version. Especially in delicate sorts of texts, such as rejections, disagreements, queries, when it is not only about the content but also about striking the right note in writing, you should definitely take the time to think of the addressee and how he might react and then maybe review the text according to your findings. This means you actually need the same writing techniques as in academic writing to produce a consistent, understandable text that catches on. For instance, an important first step when writing may be to express the quintessence of my text to make the purpose of it clear for myself. Last but not least there is the important question of feedback, which I could get from colleagues; this can be a very effective way to improve my text, which isn’t commonly done at all, neither at university nor at work.

8. **In your teaching and training practice you especially focus on e-mail correspondence. How did you choose this focus, writing at work being such a wide field?**

First of all because of my own job experiences. I find e-mail communication so interesting that I started to read books about it. There is so much potential for misunderstandings, especially in internal e-mail communication because e-mails are often written under an enormous time pressure, which often makes them imprecise and ambiguous. Additionally e-mails are often used like an oral medium even though they lack some essential elements of spoken language, such as mimic and gesture. The latter is a dangerous source for misapprehension and conflicts, which then have to be resolved later on. For many companies this means that e-mail communication wastes valuable resources, that’s why the bosses say more and more often: “This can’t go on like this anymore. We must establish rules, we must create an awareness of the limits and dangers of e-mail
communication.” This field is so important in terms of teaching writing competence because e-mailing completely penetrates all levels and departments of work.

9. Are companies becoming more aware of these kinds of problems caused by e-mail communication and has this led to many enquiries about your services? How do you get your jobs?

I get my writing at work jobs through agencies of advanced training. They offer special training packages for companies, who rely on their competence. So it is impractical for a writing teacher trying to make acquisition on their own. Besides this it would be impossible for a single person to contact all relevant companies in Germany. In contrast, in the field of academic writing I’m doing my acquisition on my own. So academic institutions call me directly because they find my homepage in the internet.

10. How do the agencies react to your concept of teaching writing at work?

Most of the time reserved. Positive reaction on my requests is rare. The reasons might be that the agencies have their fixed programmes which actually include communication training, but this usually means verbal communication. Whereas the only offers regarding written communication are training of spelling or issues regarding format, for instance how to design a letter on the basis of DIN 5008. The dominant point of view is still: Either you are able to write or you are not. So I suppose that it will still take time until the psychological strain within companies, caused by wasted energy and resources due to a lack of e-mail competence, will become big enough to prompt an investment in this field.
11. And the agencies you end up working with, how do they help generate requests for your writing at work courses?

Firstly, they publish the courses in their annual schedule, either as one of their open seminars or as an inhouse seminar: So companies can try out first by sending just one or two members of staff to an open course, before, maybe next time they book an inhouse seminar. Secondly, the agencies always try to optimise their use of online search engines to advertise their courses. So, when they have decided to work with me, they are great for generating interest and gaining new customers, but to get there, the hurdle is still quite big.

12. Why?

Although more and more companies and institutions realise that they have a need to improve the writing and communication skills of their staff, it is still not self-evident to see writing as something that can be learned or, respectively, taught. The agencies are very cautious and reserved. They tend to wait for the companies to announce their need for training.

13. So much about e-mail communication. But are these experiences also transferable to other sectors of writing at work?

Yes, I think so. There is for example the field of documentation which many people have to do as part of their job – documentation of their work and its quality, project reports and so on. Here companies frequently complain that those documentations are often deficient but they don’t know how to deal with this problem. So in many cases the quality of the documentation doesn’t reflect the quality of the project at all! This would be a very interesting field for me to work on but at
the moment I don’t know how to get in there. Definitely, there is a need, but to satisfy it, there must be the will to invest in those skills.

**14. In order to enter this field wouldn’t it be necessary for the writing teachers to have specific knowledge of the professional domain or branch because each has their own specific sorts of texts, language, vocabulary, style etc.?**

Yes, this would be the ideal case. However, as most of the writing teachers come from the humanities and no one can be an expert in all professions, this is not realistic. Rather there should be close co-operation between the experts of the domain or discipline in the company and the writing teachers – this would be a great thing, indeed! But, from my point of view this is still a long way away: First there must be an awareness that writing at work is not merely a troublesome appendage, but rather an integral part of work. But surveys show that writing at work usually is not seen as ‘real work’ but as something outside of it – and this has to be changed first!

**Thank you for the interview.**

**Commentary**

Teaching of writing in the field of writing at work is, in this country, still in the fledgling stages. So freelance writing teachers presently are rarely able to live only from this work. They behave like freelancers often do: They work, more or less, everyone on his own, as “lone fighters”, to get one of the – still – rare jobs in the field, seeing other writing teachers mainly as their competitors, who could lurch their ideas and their clients. But actually there is a big need in the companies and organisations concerning the development and training of writing competency.
So the problem is not the market being too small for all competitors but, instead and first of all, the market has to be unlocked. There is an awareness of a lack of writing competency in many companies and organisations. But there is a misconception that the ability to write well is something you either have or lack. There is a clear lack of awareness that writing competency can in fact be taught and learned successfully. This is what needs to be addressed first. For instance by advising decision makers in human resources departments of what training in rhetoric and writing competency has to offer, both in terms of personal development and improving the quality and efficiency of written communication. To achieve this ambitious goal, writing teachers should work together and join forces.

Secondly there is the basic problem that many, if not most, of the writing teachers come from the humanities, thus not knowing much about marketing or even having a certain aversion against it. Furthermore we don’t have the heart to demand adequate remuneration for this work and not only to exist from what we earn. That’s what we normally know from the text or teaching branch which is characterised by a very strong tendency to beating down prices, a tendency that, by the way, we ourselves are quite often responsible for. But we cannot avoid dealing with the subject of marketing if we really want to be successful.

Concerning those necessary marketing efforts I see two possible ways to enter the market of teaching writing in the professional field: Firstly, like Sven Arnold does according to the interview, the access via the agencies of advanced training. There are some good arguments for acting like this: So the companies naturally trust them and their competency in this field when looking for training offers. On the other side they probably won’t take a single freelance trainer seriously, who is directly knocking on their door. Apart from this the agencies do all the acquisition work which a single writing teacher rarely will be
able to do on her own for reams of companies and organisations.

But there are also some serious reasons against this strategy: So the agencies seem to be too conservative and defensive, thus waiting for the signals of the companies instead of offensively offering new training ideas and conceptions to them. So we would depend on what they think is needed and their marketing knowledge, although they seem to be far removed from the individual problems and needs of the companies.

That’s why I feel it is worth thinking about an alternative way of entering the market: to search for direct access to the companies. This would cut out the agencies which are often far removed from the issues an individual company faces with regards to writing competency. This also refers to the experiences of Sven Arnold, but instead of waiting until the knowledge about those needs is leaked out to the market of advanced training I would prefer contacting the companies directly. The advantages of this strategy seem to be very clear to me: Firstly, they are the first being aware of what they need. Secondly, we as writing teachers can create an individual concept for every company based on direct communication with the decision makers. For me this seems to be the appropriate way seeing that every branch and profession has got its own questions and tasks concerning the domain specific writing. That’s why an effective work on the writing competency can only be done in the companies and organisations, during an intensive exchange and cooperation with the experts there instead of standardised programmes for external writing trainings.

But, of course, we must consider the arguments against this strategy, which are at the same time the arguments for the first strategy: So how can we win the trust of the companies for our concepts? How can we let them know that there is a way to develop the writing competency of their staff? There are two
aspects about this question to discuss here a little more: firstly the format of the message to the companies or organisations, secondly the instrument of networking.

Above I mentioned the tendency in the companies to become aware of the big lack of writing competency, confirmed also by the observations of Sven Arnold. Our task would be to link in here and to analyse this general dissatisfaction with the writing performance as a proper “bottleneck”, because this lack of writing competency can result in considerable problems for the company, like the waste of resources and energy, damage of the company’s image or a deficient base to take important decisions on. Afterwards we must, of course, present our solution for these issues to the companies. The challenge will be to translate our own conviction and fascination with writing competency into a convincing presentation to someone who is completely unfamiliar with this concept, but, potentially, could greatly benefit from it.

It seems unlikely that any potential competition between writing teachers could threaten our professional existence, considering the ratio of companies and organisations that could benefit from our services and the number of writing teachers. Indeed, it appears that it would take a long time until the market – once it has been opened-up and developed – becomes saturated. However, publicising our services and developing a market is a huge task which will decide our professional future.

The main strategy I see at the moment should be building a strong network, in order to bundle the forces and energies and professional know-how, because in such a professional network, marketing, for instance, could be much more effective. The networkers could share resources, such as working or coaching rooms and offices. A network would facilitate the sharing of knowledge, exchange of experiences and help developing contacts with other people in the field. We would be able to develop our professional discipline while discussing
questions and issues of the writing pedagogy. The network would be an appropriate base to find colleagues to cooperate with allowing you to take on a wider range of projects. It would also help to complement each others professional know-how. But the main point of this marketing strategy is that as a network we can present ourselves in a much more professional and stronger way, thus step by step establishing a new professional field.

Recently in Berlin, about 20 writing pedagogues have started to build a platform to communicate and work together in terms of public relations, work concepts and professional structures. At a meeting I attended it was decided to form task groups, concerning various issues such as writing at work and building up a writing center integrating all sub-disciplines of the field. However, clearly there were fears of competition and a certain scepticism about the idea of working together and sharing ideas and conceptions with colleagues. But, gradually the notion is becoming accepted that it is better for everyone to share strategies and conceptions rather than hide them for fear of giving away ideas or losing potential clients. The latter is unfounded because of the individuality and distinct approach of each writing teacher. Furthermore coaching and training depend to a large degree on the personal relationship between the client and coach or trainer. As there is still no standard training to become a writing teacher, every teacher has their individual methods and concepts, based on which they teach and communicate with clients. That is why I am convinced, that the benefits of communicating and networking between writing teachers outweigh the problem of competition. However, this is providing that everybody is contributing something to the network and that we really work together in terms of PR and marketing, opening up this potentially enormous market.

Thus I’d like to advocate a strategy not relying on the established market of advanced training but closer to the field of business consulting. To get there the necessary conditions are:
- A strong marketing strategy is needed to unlock the market!
- Cooperation outweighs competition!
- Fees need to be adequate!

Further questions remain: Where to start? Which companies to contact first and how to get in contact with them? However, this is an issue for the task group “Teaching writing at work”.