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The Storying of Writing Centers Outside the U.S.: Director Narratives and the Making of Disciplinary Identities in Germany and Austria

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In *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*, Jackie Grutsch McKinney highlights the cognitive dissonance between the work of writing center directors and the stories they tell about that work. When describing their centers to stakeholders, directors all too often rehearse what she calls the "writing center grand narrative" (WCGN), namely the story that says "*writing centers are comfortable, iconoclastic places where all students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing*" (3; emphasis in original). While this narrative allows directors to assert that they belong in a professional community, it also has significant costs (5-6), preventing others from "understand[ing] the complexity of our work" and perpetuating "untenable positions" within our institutions (85). Stories are not simply interpretations of the past. When internalized, they actively construct the future by informing what seems possible in the present.

Grutsch McKinney's research shows that our stories have a direct bearing on the survival and growth of writing centers, serving as tools for educating stakeholders, asserting institutional value, and defining disciplinary identities. Yet to what extent are our stories also limited by U.S.-based frameworks? Since the first writing center was founded outside North America in Bielefeld, Germany in 1993, writing centers have proliferated across the globe (Thaiss). Despite this growth, writing studies scholarship published in North American journals remains largely monolingual and U.S.-centric in its orientation (Anson and Donahue; Horner et al.). In my contribution I turn an international lens back onto this research to ask how directors are storying the work of writing centers in other countries and what those stories tell us about the distinctness of disciplinary identities, institutional cultures, and research traditions in other countries. How universal is the WCGN even in regions, like German-speaking countries, where writing centers have strong transatlantic histories?

Based on responses from 14 writing center administrators (WCAs) from 11 of Germany's roughly 60 centers and from 1 of Austria's 8, I argue that the WCGN, as we've come to understand it, may need to

be qualified as a writing center grand narrative *in the United States*. The United States-based version often *informs* these stories, authorizing directors' work by situating it within an established discipline with a transatlantic reach. Yet the stories are also shaped by a set of unique institutional and disciplinary narratives in the region. To get at these differences, I contextualize directors' stories in German-language scholarship on writing and higher education.[1]

METHODOLOGY

I began my study by reproducing two surveys in German translation: Grutsch McKinney's 2011 open-ended survey of directors, designed to elicit stories, and Rebecca Jackson and Grutsch McKinney's 2009 questionnaire about non-tutorial activities in writing centers. Reproducing these surveys and supplementing them with questions specific to Germanic contexts allowed me to test the validity of past studies and engage in comparative research—something rarely done in the field. It also allowed me to build on existing research that uses narrative inquiry as a method (Caswell et al.; Grutsch McKinney).

In Fall 2014, I distributed this comprehensive survey to the EWCA listserv and to the 14 attendees of the 2014 EWCA conference who signed their names to a recruitment list. I also posted an invitation to the website of the Society for Writing Pedagogy and Writing Research based in Germany. From the twenty-one individuals who completed the survey, I chose to include in this study only the fourteen surveys from participants who identified as WCAs (defined in the instrument as a "director, assistant director, coordinator, etc.") or whose roles aligned with this definition. Central to my analysis here were four open-ended questions from Grutsch McKinney's 2011 survey:

1. In your own words, what is a writing center?
2. How do you describe the role of your writing center to those at your own school?
3. In what ways do you think your writing center is different from other writing centers?
4. In what ways do you think your writing center is similar to other writing centers? (62).

Surveys are particularly useful instruments for researching grand narratives because, as Grutsch McKinney argues elsewhere, they offer a "big picture description of a population, particularly of the population's attitudes and beliefs" (*Strategies* 73). However, the reliability of this snapshot depends on the collection method (77). One significant limitation of my study is my use of convenience rather than random sampling, which diminishes the generalizability of my claims. Although additional research is needed to test the representativeness of my results, the conclusions drawn are

supported by the storying of writing centers in German-language scholarship. Moreover, given that narrative inquiry is one of my methods, the meaning of individual stories was as important to me as their statistical significance.

Narrative inquiry is a methodology that allows us—in the words of D. Jean Clandinin—to see "experience as narratively composed" (12). It focuses, Clandinin and Jerry Rosiek argue, "not only on individuals' experience but also on the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (qtd. in Clandinin 12-13). In other words, narrative inquiry enables us to understand individual experience as always already situated within social narratives. Thus writing center stories are not simply windows onto individual centers or directors. They are situated in larger disciplinary histories both local and transnational in their orientation. To capture story themes, I first analyzed the responses, looking for patterns. I coded for concepts that appear in the WCGN and concepts that appear outside it. Next, I zoomed out to interpret how these themes are embedded in larger discourses about writing and writing centers.

LESSONS FROM CODING

In the process, I discovered something striking: participants rehearsed very few commonplaces from the WCGN. When prompted to articulate *what is a writing center*, there was wide consensus that writing centers attend to "writing," but references to the center being "comfortable," "iconoclastic," and welcoming to "all students" occurred infrequently. The plural for students ("*StudentInnen*" or "*Studierende*") was often evoked but rarely in self-conscious reference to *all* students. Only the familiar notion of centers as "places" emerged often. The only other key concept invoked frequently was writing-in-the-disciplines (WID)—a keyword absent from the WCGN. More distantly, study participants defined writing centers as places for research and faculty development. In other words, if a grand narrative exists at all for writing centers in this region, it appears to be *writing centers are a place where students learn how to write in the disciplines, where faculty may receive support in the teaching of writing in their disciplines, and where professional faculty and staff, including peer tutors, can engage in research*.

The narrative became even more capacious when WCAs were asked to describe the role of their centers to university stakeholders. They most frequently invoked a mission to advance writing or WID. In fact, writing was often referred to as "academic writing" (*wissenschaftliches Schreiben* or *akademisches Schreiben*) and mentioned in the context of students' disciplinary pathways. This reflects the WID-based approach to writing at universities in the region, where students begin specializing in their fields right away. The next most

frequent categories to appear were faculty development and one-to-one tutoring, followed more distantly by a focus on students' personal development; workshops; tutor training; support for core competencies; a sense of writing center work as iconoclastic; and career readiness and professional writing. In other words, the story that WCAs collectively tell stakeholders might go something like this: *diverse in pedagogical orientation, writing centers advance writing in the disciplines most often through faculty development and writing consultations. They are sometimes iconoclastic, but equally often they further the teaching and learning missions of their universities by supporting the development of key competencies. They do this in multiple ways: facilitating disciplinary and professional writing, supporting students' and tutors' development as writers, and offering workshops and tutor training*. WCAs seem to perceive writing center work as comprehensive and often unique within the higher education landscape. Moreover, they appear to be quite good at making this work visible to others.

Not surprisingly, there was less consensus among WCAs about how their centers differed from others. WID initiatives emerged as the most frequent response, followed more distantly by research and, more distantly still, by attention to students' personal development; networking and engagement with debates in higher education; writing pedagogies; tutor training; and an iconoclastic institutional identity. As expected, WCAs evoked what their centers are known for best, suggesting that some centers, at least at the time of the study, have specialized identities in one or more categories: writing in the disciplines, multilingual tutoring, literacy management; peer tutor autonomy and teamwork; multimodal writing; and engagement in higher education policy.

When asked how they thought their centers were similar to others, there was greatest consensus around the presence of one-to-one tutoring and the value placed on peer tutoring and collaborative learning. This isn't surprising given the tremendous growth in peer tutoring since Gerd Bräuer established the first peer-tutor writing center in Germany in Freiburg in 2003 and Katrin Girgensohn followed suit in Frankfurt (Oder) in 2007 (Bräuer and Girgensohn). Girgensohn's center has since become a hub for \center research. Her peer tutors have gone on to direct their own centers and undertake some of the country's first B.A., master's, and doctoral theses in the field. Peer tutor participation in the discipline is arguably one of the newest and most exciting developments in the region.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF DIRECTOR STORIES

While coding renders visible conceptual patterns, it doesn't capture how these stories often feel quite different from the WCGN in the U.S. Take these three definitions of writing centers[2]:

A. We see disciplinary writing and reading as a learnable craft. We make it easier for students to learn and for faculty to teach academic writing. The point of a university [education] is to learn how to think in a discipline and apply this acquired knowledge meaningfully beyond the university. Through the use of pedagogical strategies in writing and reading, we as a writing center ensure that disciplinary information can be handled intelligibly, and disciplinary perspectives can be more easily acquired, disseminated, and used.

B. A writing center is an institution dedicated to the key competency of writing. In writing centers, writing is viewed as a process that is individual and capable of being learned. At university writing centers trained facilitators (student peer tutors and academic staff) support writers in teaching and learning activities and consultations that enable them to develop their own writing strategies and to find their own answers to challenges during writing processes. Writing also encompasses more broadly multiliteracies, including academic literacies and multimodal communication, as well as writing in other languages and engaging critically with the personal challenges inherent in the transition into new discourse communities.

C. Our writing center addresses the needs of international students, who pursue their studies in the foreign language of German and compose scholarly texts. It is a central "service provider" and a place of learning in higher education where multilingual students can complement their studies by accessing resources to further develop their knowledge of the German language at the university and in their disciplines. To this end, we take into account the language proficiency requirements for admission to a degree program as well as various discipline-specific genres and the requisite technical language of disciplines during a course of study. The writing center offers […] courses (also blended learning), workshops, [and] individual consultations that address writing as both process and product. [….] Active participation counts towards the degree […]. Staff are experts in foreign language acquisition.

These examples reflect the diverse activities and emphases of writing centers, while also signaling that these approaches are embedded in transatlantic and regional research traditions. We see the invocation of U.S. scholarly discourse on WID, multimodal writing, and self-efficacy. However, texts B and C invoke European traditions in multiliteracies (Cope and Kalantzis) and writing process research (Keseling; Knorr et al.). Text C points to the importance of research from German didactics and applied linguistics to a number of writing centers in the region, where multilingual writing is routine, given the diversity of the German population, inter-university mobility within Europe, large numbers of international students, and the prevalence of English as a lingua franca in the sciences (Brinkschulte et al.; Knorr and Neumann). Such centers are often led by

linguists active in the development of writing pedagogies. Text C also emphasizes an awareness of debates—that originate in the U.S. but have migrated across the globe—about whether writing centers have "service" missions or are sites of inquiry.

In her account of narrative analysis as a methodology, Riessman highlights the importance of attending to *what* is said and *how* and *why* it is said (11). Studying narratives requires what Riessman calls a "close study of the particular" (18), including the "nuances of language, audience, organization…, local contexts of production, and the circulating discourses that influence what can be narrated" (18). When this framework is applied to writing center narratives in Germany and Austria, we see that they often signal an understanding of regional and transnational scholarly discourses about writing centers and pedagogies in order to assert their membership in the field and educate stakeholders about what writing centers do and why. They also often link the center's mission to the university. To cite writing as a "key competency," for example, is to invoke the transnational discourse of the Bologna Accords with their focus on student outcomes and transferrable credit. At the same time, text C shows how writing center stories can resist the "general skills" discourse of generic outcomes by framing them in the context of disciplinary practices.

Yet stories alone can't ensure the sustainability of writing centers in the region. Writing centers' missions may be capacious, but institutional longevity will depend on stable funding streams and strong disciplinary standing, which most centers in the region still lack. As one respondent puts it:

> It's a difficult role that's currently under discussion. On the one hand, we are constantly relegated to administrative "service," though we are employed as academic staff in teaching and research [in Lehre und Forschung Wissenschaftlich Arbeiten]; on the other hand, many individuals and institutions at the university want to work with us, which means our personnel resources are quickly depleted, tending us toward self-exploitation. We aren't a department, though we offer elective modules; we aren't a service institution and aren't taken very seriously by the governance structure because we're a small unit, and yet at the same time our charge is very large.

In a survey question, half of the study participants reported believing their center was at risk due to a pending loss in funding. When asked how institutional operations might be made more secure, nine commented on the need for permanent university funding. "We are funded entirely by third-party grants," wrote one WCA, and "all our staff […] are on temporary contracts." Given these constraints, it's perhaps unsurprising that so many WCAs self-consciously evoke disciplinary discourses to stake out a claim to legit-

imacy in the academy. As Girgensohn and Nora Peters put it: "at [the] university nothing speaks louder than research."

Since external funding from federal grants is scheduled to expire at the end of 2016 for up to half of Germany's writing centers (Lahm), it remains to be seen whether university administrators will find this argument compelling. If WCAs are successful, directors across the globe may learn that engaging both regional and transnational discourses on writing and writing centers may be essential to argue for their permanence. As evinced by the recent "Open Letter to College and University Administrators on Retaining Highly Qualified Writing Center Directors," even the positions of established directors in North America can be eliminated when their expertise isn't understood and valued. Yet at the same time, our colleagues in Germany and Austria may serve as models of persistence and ingenuity in the face of these challenges.

NOTES

1. Thank you to the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation for funding this project.

2. All translations are my own.

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