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LEADERSHIP
Writing Center Leadership: an Empirical Study
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Abstract
What contributes to the success of writing centers? What is needed to implement them sustainably at a university? How can directors handle the typical challenges writing centers face? This study, based on 16 expert interviews with writing center directors at large and small colleges and universities around the United States, seeks answers for these questions. The analysis follows a grounded theory approach and reveals that a stance of collaborative learning seems to be crucial for writing center leadership.

Introduction
Writing centers are very common in the US, all colleges and universities seem to have at least one. Seen from my point of view as a writing center director in Germany, this appears to be a writing centers' paradise. Although the first writing center in Germany opened 20 years ago in Bielefeld, we are far away from having writing centers at most universities. During the last six years, however, changes started and we now have about 30 writing centers across Germany (Europa-Uni, n.d.).

This development might partly be related to the so called Bologna Process, a reform of European Higher Education that let to major changes all across Europe (Macgilchrist & Girgensohn 2011). As a reaction to critiques and students' strikes in 2009, the German government launched an initiative to raise the teaching quality in Higher Education. Universities could apply for funding with new ideas for their institutions and apparently many came up with the idea to start a writing center.

Another reason for the recent upcoming of writing centers in Germany certainly is the networking and general engagement of some enthusiastic European scholars, writing teachers and writing center founders, who organized themselves in the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW, n.d.), the European Writing Centers Association (EWCA, n.d.) and other local organizations during the last decade. However, writing center work is still at a beginning stage in Germany and even more in most other European countries (Macgilchrist & Girgensohn 2011, Thaiss, Braeuer, Carino, Ganobcsik-Williams & Sinha 2012).

At any rate, there is a growing of writing centers in Europe on the one hand and a lack of experience with the administration and leadership of writing centers on the other hand. When more and more people sought advice from my colleagues and me about implementing writing centers I reviewed the literature on this theme. Collections like Mauriello, Macauley and Koch 2011, Macauley and Mauriello 2007 or Murphy and Stay 2006, as well as many articles in the writing center journal, such as Harris 1991 and 2000, and the writing lab newsletter, such as Cogie 2002, certainly provide some answers. But more important: they reveal that even in what I had imagined as writing centers' paradise, certain problems seem to be common. Problems which were very familiar to me, like the standing of writing centers within the institutional hierarchy (Whalen 2011, Gardner & Ramsey 2005), or problems with misconceptions of writing center work (Mullin 2000, Lerner 2007 and 2009). Writing center work, I concluded, is even in the US not as self-evident as I thought. I also realized that there seems to be little empirical research dedicated explicitly to the sustainable implementation of writing centers and the

important role that writing center directors play in this process (one exception is Barnett 2007). The German Research Foundation (DFG) therefore agreed to fund a year-long research project in the US. In the following, I will share some insights into this study.

Research Design

The design of this study is based on expert interviews. Bogner, Littig and Menz (2009) constitute: "(…) there is no such thing as *the* expert interview. The spectrum ranges from quantitative measures through to the use of experts as a form of information source (…) and the theoretically demanding, resolutely qualitative approach (…)." (6, emphasis in Org.). For this study, I used the latter mentioned, qualitative approach that is described and discussed e.g. by Meuser and Nagel (2009). During the academic year 2011/2012 I conducted 16 expert interviews with writing center directors across the United States. Since I assured anonymity to my interview partners, I can't list their institutions here. However, the following description of the sample will provide an insight into the diversity represented by my interview partners.

I chose to interview mainly experienced writing center directors who had developed a high expertise during a long career. However, I also interviewed some directors in earlier stages of their careers when they were recommended as interview partners by other directors. I would classify seven of my interview partners as very experienced, with more than 24 years in their job as writing center directors, six as experienced with more than ten years of experience, and three of my partners had worked for several years as writing center directors, but not more than ten.

With regard to the institutions I tried to cover different types of schools. 11 interview partners work at public institutions and five work at private institutions. Nine interview partners work at large universities with more than 20,000 students. Five came from middle size institutions and two from very small institutions with less than 2,000 students. The institutions included a technical school, an all-women's school, an overall Afro-American school and a school with a very high percentage of non-native speakers and non-traditional students. Thus, the sample represents the differences that can occur between the institutional contexts of writing centers.

Most interviews lasted one to two hours. As far as possible I tried to embed the interviews in participant observations. I observed tutoring situations, participated in workshops, tutor educations, staff meetings and other activities, talked to tutors and staff members, browsed documents and media provided and gained a picture of the space of the writing center as well as of the school. Additionally I often got written documents like annual reports, training materials, internal newsletters, etc.

For the analysis, I decided to combine the expert interviews with a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin 1990, Birks & Mills 2010). This allowed me to start transcribing and coding in the mean time that I conducted more interviews, using the software MAX QDA [1] to handle the large amount of data that I generated through constant comparative analysis, memo writing and transcribing. Strauss and Corbin distinguish three different stages of coding, although they do not follow each other in a linear way: Open coding, axial coding and selective coding. To explain the different steps in detail would go beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, through sorting, comparing, contrasting, reflecting, scribbling and drafting I could finally generate a theory grounded in data. Following, I introduce this theory.

Results

My analysis mainly focused on exploring how writing center directors deal with challenges and what they see as important for successful writing center work. The core category of a grounded

theory is "the central phenomenon around which all other categories are related" (Strauss & Corbin 1990, 116). As central phenomenon, in this case, emerged "collaborative learning".

Collaborative learning is one of the most influential theories for writing center pedagogies. Based on Bruffees texts (e.g. 1999), collaborative learning is usually the framework for one-to-one or group peer tutoring in writing centers. Although collaborative learning was and is debated with regard to power hierarchies (Truesdell 2008, Grimm 2009), it still is in the heart of writing center pedagogies. Writing center directors, it turned out, have internalized this pedagogy as a general stance that influences their everyday work in many regards. In other words, they have become (or always been) collaborative learning practitioners in the way Parnitz (1996, n.p.) defines it:

> Collaborative learning (CL) is a personal philosophy, not just a classroom technique. In all situations where people come together in groups, it suggests a way of dealing with people which respects and highlights individual group members' abilities and contributions. There is a sharing of authority and acceptance of responsibility among group members for the groups' actions. The underlying premise of collaborative learning is based upon consensus building through cooperation by group members, in contrast to competition in which individuals best other group members. CL practitioners apply this philosophy in the classroom, at committee meetings, with community groups, within their families and generally as a way of living with and dealing with other people.

As collaborative learning (CL) practitioners, successful writing center directors apply this philosophy to the actions and interactions they undertake to sustain the writing center. Those actions and interactions could be subsumed under the following categories:

- Finding and maintaining staff
- Tutor education
- Working with faculty
- Financing writing center work
- Enhancing the visibility of the writing center
- Researching the writing center
- Developing and reacting to institutional changes
- Networking

Within the scope of this article I will not be able to summarize all my findings. Instead, I am going to illustrate them exemplarily with one of these categories: the example of enhancing the visibility of the writing center.

To make the writing center visible is one important leadership strategy of writing center directors who aim for sustainability. This strategy includes numerous actions and interactions which all involve the director as a CL practitioner.

The most obvious action is to produce marketing material like posters, bookmarks, flyers and a homepage. To be successful with producing this material, writing center directors rely on the expert knowledge of different groups of persons. They ask peer tutors and incoming students for ideas and opinions to be able to address the audience best. They might also ask their university's marketing persons for help, not only to meet the university's corporate design guidelines, but also to engage them in the writing center's work. Additionally, there is the larger writing center community who can support the writing center director as a CL practitioner for this task, be it with literature like Harris' essay on how to make institutional discourse sticky (2010) or be it by exchanging ideas on conferences, visits and listservs.

The same CL approach is true for all the other actions to enhance visibility that I list in the following. To make them effective, writing center directors involve many interactions with different groups of people instead of just doing what they personally think might be best. They share their authority in the way one of my interview partners puts it: "I always try to seek advice from people. Not just people who are more powerful or in higher level positions. I really believe deeply in talking face to face with people." (Interview)

Every direct communication is of course a very effective way to make the writing center visible. Writing center directors therefore seek multiple opportunities for this. They ask for appointments with new faculty, go on committees, send reports, work close with IT-units and create steering committees. All these opportunities are used to tell stories of the writing center in a rhetorically conscientious way. This also includes that writing center directors have to be very patient, because they have to be able to tell the same things again and again:

> There is a burden on us to educate people about what we do and to earn confidence and respect. And we have to do that over and over and over again. Because our audiences change, our partners change, and I think we think we just have to accept that that is part of the work that we do. (Interview)

Besides this, writing center directors also take care for the spreading of success stories: writers or peer tutors who won prices, got accepted for stipends or just could solve writers' block.

What other strategies do writing center directors use to enhance the visibility of the writing center? Workshops announcements can talk for the writing center and its mission:

> I really think offering workshops in an advanced level with topics associated with particular research writing, writing in particular disciplines, writing at high levels, writing with new media, all of this send messages about who the writing center is for. (Interview)

Messages are also sent by the physical location of a writing center, not only in the way where at university it is located but also in the way it presents itself: Cozy? Businesslike? Like a research library? My research contains different opinions on this. However, it is obvious that those are not mainly based on the director's personal taste, but on a careful evaluation of the stakeholder's expertise.

Another advice is to have different target groups who all can spread the word about the writing center. It seems to be useful not only to work with students, but also with doctoral students, faculty, or people from the community: "There doesn't have to be one face of the writing center. It can be different faces. If it's all about writing support in a variety of ways." (Interview)

Within a university context, it also seems to be important for the visibility to place the center as an academic unit. This could be done by using disciplinary knowledge of the writing center community in conversations with other units as well as by conducting and publishing research or by aiming for faculty positions in the writing center. Also, writing across the curriculum programs can be a way to be perceived as academic unit. Additionally, WAC programs are a good way to get faculty involved – a strategy which is so important that it became its own category.

Another important strategy, that appears obvious on the first glance, is to care for quality in the writing center work. However, the following citation illustrates how close quality is intertwined with the visibility of the writing center: "I think that a key to our success is that we try to work really hard to do everything well. And to get *known* for that. I have been committed to excellence, knowing that we are working in an organization that respects excellence. Just that. That's the nature of universities." (Interview).

Writing centers can also become visible through innovation. Frequently, they are the units on campus that experience first which needs students have or which new developments happen. Maybe it is the interdisciplinary nature of writing center work that keeps writing center directors open minded. They often seem to earn a reputation for being innovative: "I think we are known, not all across campus but by many people, for trying new things, for trying to meet the evolving needs of the university's writers here." (Interview)

Conclusion

My empirical study revealed that writing center directors have to be ready to take a leadership stance that is consistent with one of the most important writing center theories: the stance of collaborative learning. As I have illustrated with the example of caring for the writing centers' visibility, this means that writing center directors seek advice from others all the time and negotiate different expectations. They appreciate students, peer tutors, faculty, administration, colleagues and community people as experts. Obviously, this attitude will not always be an easy way to deal with leadership tasks. Collaboration can be challenging and is always demanding. But, as I learned from my expert interview partners, it is the most promising way to sustain a writing center.

Endnotes

[1] MAXQDA is software for qualitative and mixed methods data analysis. It helps to manage the growing body of data during analyses of data like transcripts, video or audio files, supports memo writing and includes tools for visualizing connections between codes.

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