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## Re-Centering Writing Center Studies

### What U.S.-Based Scholars Can Learn from Their Colleagues in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria

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#### Abstract

*Although many writing centers in Germany have rich transatlantic histories, influence has been largely unidirectional with few centers in the U.S. adapting German-language scholarship in their research and practices. This article seeks to help reverse that trend, focusing on what Americans can learn from writing professionals in German-speaking countries. Writing centers in this region occupy an arguably enviable position. Unlike in the U.S., they are at the very center of disciplinary conversations about writing, driving much of the research on writing and writing pedagogies published in German. Likewise, research in this region presents a language for rescuing the value of practice at a time when scholars in the U.S. are quick to dismiss — often uncritically — local knowledge as they foster empirical research cultures. Together, these findings allow us to ask new questions about how writing studies is storied as a discipline and how its methodologies are framed and understood.*

Writing centers in Germany have had a strong transatlantic history since 1993, when the first Writing Lab was co-founded in Bielefeld after Andrea Frank returned from a visit to the Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines at Cornell University (Bräuer 2002, 62-3; Frank, Haacke, and Tente 2003, 165). Since then dozens of centers have been established nationwide from Bochum to Freiburg, Frankfurt an der Oder to Frankfurt am Main. North American research on

writing is cited frequently in the genesis narratives of early centers (e.g., Bräuer 2002, Frank, Haacke, and Tente 2003, Doleschal 2012) and in writing handbooks directed at students and faculty (e.g., Girgensohn 2007, Girgensohn and Sennewald 2012, Frank, Haacke, and Lahm 2013, Kruse 2007, Grieshammer et al. 2013). Yet the reverse — the adaptation of German theory and practice in everyday writing center work — is much more uneven. The Long Night



Against Procrastination, which originated at the writing center of the European University Viadrina, is an exception, spreading across the globe after it was picked up outside Europe by the University of Puget Sound in Washington, which is also currently experimenting with implementing into its consultations a peer-friendly Buzzfeed survey based on Hanspeter Ortner's Schreibtypen theory (Ortner 2000, Sennewald 2014). Although the U.S.-based Parlor Press has published a series of edited volumes on international writing programs that seeks to diversify readers' understanding of the field (e.g., Thaiss et al. 2012), these efforts have not informed U.S.-based pedagogies in systematic ways (Donahue 2009). The largely unidirectional nature of influence is all the more striking because Germany and the U.S. have enjoyed a long tradition of transatlantic intellectual exchange that has informed the research cultures of both countries (Teichler and Wasser 1992, Röhrs 1995). One reason for this reluctance, Chris Anson and Christiane Donahue (2015) argue, is that U.S.-based scholars are often not effective at listening closely to writing cultures outside their national borders. Instead they tend to map U.S.-based terms like «Writing Program Administrator» and «program» onto international contexts without acknowledging the uniquely American institutional and disciplinary histories of such concepts (23).

This essay seeks to challenge this ethnocentric approach, while also pushing back against some key claims in scholarship on international writing. By attending to the «local» in international scholarship, writing scholarship has not yet articulated a nuanced approach to studying the reception of ideas as they cross borders. This is important because we now operate in a globalized field, where research travels transnationally and is adapted and repurposed along the way. The German case makes clear that U.S.-based theories have not simply been «exported» or «imported» into some writing centers. Instead they have been integrated, challenged, and selectively used for local and transnational purposes. This raises a number of questions not yet explored systematically in the scholarly litera-

ture: why are some U.S.-based concepts appropriated by scholars in Germany while others are ignored? What do these appropriations — and their timing — tell us about writing cultures and research traditions in a transnational context? And how might insights gained from such inquiry inform how we story writing work on both sides of the Atlantic? Stephanie Dreyfürst and Nadja Sennewald (2014) begin to address these questions in their edited collection *Schreiben: Grundlagentexte zur Theorie, Didaktik und Beratung* (Writing: Foundational Texts on Theory, Pedagogy, and Consultations – all translations from the German are from the author) which translates canonical Anglo-American research into German and contextualizes its uses and limitations. A similar scholarly investigation or work of translation does not exist in the U.S. (see Scott 2017).

For the purposes of this article, I'd like to tackle a very small corner of this conversation by redirecting the current of influence, focusing on what Americans can learn from their colleagues in German-speaking countries. Writing centers in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland occupy an enviable position to some degree. Unlike in the U.S., they are at the very center of disciplinary conversations about writing, driving much of the recent research on writing and writing pedagogies published in German. The notion of writing centers as «the centers of consciousness about writing on campuses» is, of course, not new to writing center studies (North 1984, 446). It dates back to the inaugural issue of the *Writing Center Journal*, when Lil Brannon and Stephen North (1980, 1) described these institutions as «the absolute frontier of our discipline» promising «great new discoveries» about student learning and the composing process. Yet this central informative position has remained an elusive goal in the U.S. In addition to offering a capacious vision of what writing center research can be, German-language research presents a framework for rescuing the value of practice at a time when scholars in the U.S. are quick to dismiss—often uncritically—local knowledge as they foster empirical research cultures. Writing scholars in Europe remind us all that developing



and sharing innovative pedagogies is generative and indeed essential to writing center knowledge.

### **Writing Centers as the Disciplinary Center**

Writing centers in Germany have experienced exponential growth in the past few years, proliferating from thirty-five centers in 2013 (Grieshammer et al. 2013, 276) to over sixty by the summer of 2014 (Lahm 2014). This rapid growth has been accompanied by a rise in writing scholarship. During writing centers' early histories, research was largely synthetic with a focus on producing guidebooks for university practitioners. Dozens of handbooks on writing and writing pedagogy now exist—with many of the most influential books penned by writing center directors (e.g., Frank, Haacke and Lahm 2013; Gieshamm, Liebetanz, Peters and Zegenhagen 2012; Girgensohn 2007; Girgensohn and Sennewald 2012, Kruse 2007, 2010; Bräuer and Schindler 2011). Handbooks now complement a rich research culture, cultivated in part by the presence of the peer-reviewed *Zeitschrift Schreiben* [European Journal of Writing], founded in 2006, and *JoSch: Journal der Schreibberatung* [JoWri: Journal of Writing Consultation], co-established by peer tutors in 2010. Many of the journals' multidisciplinary editors serve as writing center directors, consultants, or freelance writing coaches, which elevates the status of research on writing centers in these venues. Still others have played leadership roles in the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW), founded in 1999, and the European Writing Center Association (EWCA), established in 1998. This institutional positioning at the center of the field of writing pedagogies and practices differs significantly from the status of writing center scholarship in the U.S.

Writing center professionals and freelance coaches likewise constitute most of the membership of Germany's *Gesellschaft für Schreibdidaktik und Schreibforschung* [Society for Writing Pedagogy and Research], which was founded in 2013, following the creation of the Swiss-

based *Forum wissenschaftliches Schreiben* [Forum for Academic Writing] in 2005 and the Austrian organization *GewissS: Gesellschaft für wissenschaftliches Schreiben* [Society for Academic Writing] in 2009. On its webpage the Society for Writing Pedagogy and Research claims to promote the exchange of research on «writing processes and the facilitation and support of writing processes (writing pedagogy research, applied writing studies)». This definition of writing studies as fundamentally interested in the writing process is distinct to the region. While writing centers in the U.S. still claim to be places engaged in process-oriented pedagogies, most of the emphasis on process focuses on studying the process of tutoring (Grutsch McKinney 2016, 17)—a departure from Brannon's prediction in 1980 that writing center research would be guided by a «central concern for composing as a process» (1). As Neal Lerner's recent empirical study shows, the canonical theorists of writing process research have not been cited frequently in *The Writing Center Journal* since the 1980s (Lerner 2014). By contrast, writing process research, as I have argued elsewhere (Scott 2017), is on the rise in German-speaking countries, with new publications appearing regularly (e.g., Heine 2014, Honegger 2015, Keseling 2004). Writing centers in the region are thus actualizing two principles that have fallen by the wayside in the U.S.: they are playing a central role in generating writing pedagogies and they are using their institutional positions to study composing processes. The question is: what might we do collectively with this knowledge?

### **«Writing Center Self-Centeredness»: A Note of Caution**

Before answering this last question, I'd like to acknowledge that occupying a place at the center of the discipline may not always be cause for celebration. Over twenty years ago, Richard Leaky (1992) warned his U.S. colleagues about writing center «centrism,» which denotes «monopoly and self-importance» and is encapsulated in the sentiment that «the writing center should be the center of all writing on campus—



particularly in the area of writing across the curriculum, but also in tutoring» (43, 48). Writing centers would be better off, he suggested, if they saw themselves «as part of a network of people and services on campus that value and nurture writing» (51). Boquet (1999) highlights how overwhelming it can be to have such a capacious vision of one's mission. She reports feeling most challenged by the «excessive institutional possibilities that the writing center represents» and most interested in the writing center for its «post-disciplinary possibilities, for the contradictions it embraces, for its tendency to go off-task» (478). In other words, writing centers too invested in centrism may find themselves hyper-professionalized—too focused or too frazzled to pay attention to the more interesting, less conventional aspects of their work. Alice Gillam (2002) has surveyed metaphors for writing center research, showing how scholarship in the U.S. was represented in its early stages as a frontier «bright with promise» in an effort to «produce research and scholarship that is recognized and valued by the 'parent' discipline of composition» (7). In this version of the argument, claims about belonging to the center can sound defensive and self-legitimizing.

Swantje Lahm recently echoed a version of these cautionary tales for the German case. In her keynote address at the 2014 EWCA conference in Frankfurt Oder, she reminded colleagues of the dangers of what she calls a «writing-centered self-centeredness»—the hubris by which writing center professionals may become so convinced of their value as experts in the teaching and tutoring of writing that they may underestimate their institutional vulnerability and miss opportunities to forge partnerships with faculty in the disciplines—a key to their long term survival and support. While writing centers may have institutionalized their authority through publications, conferences, and professional organizations, most nonetheless rely on third-party funding to support their operations—money that is scheduled to dry up in 2016. Lahm also alludes to the drawbacks of disciplinary siloing, whereby writing center professionals run the risk of talking only to one another.

She gets at a tension between those who see writing center scholarship as a self-sustaining discipline and those who prefer to subsume the work of writing professionals under larger conversations about the scholarship of teaching and learning. Indeed the institutional positioning of some writing centers in centers for teaching and learning—like those in Bielefeld and Frankfurt Oder—speaks to the close ways in which writing center work can complement larger commitments to pedagogy in higher education.

Yet Lahm's choice of the very term «writing-centered self-centeredness» suggests that writing centers are now institutionalized enough to envision their work as central to university pedagogies, which positions them to be reflective about their relationships to their institutions and each other. Writing professionals are confident—and sometimes even boastful—precisely because writing centers are now part of a professional community. *And this remains true even if many writing centers still struggle to find inroads to departments and stable funding streams.* In the wake of the Bologna Accords in which universities are striving to become more competency-based and student-centered, writing centers may be positioned to bridge the rhetorical understanding of writing in policy documents with genre-based models of writing and tutoring in the disciplines.

### **What U.S.-Based Writing Center Scholars Can Learn From Our Colleagues in Germany: Rescuing Practice in an Empirical Landscape**

The narrative I have just outlined challenges histories of writing studies as a discipline in the U.S. While writing center scholarship is now firmly institutionalized in the U.S. with its own journals and professional organizations, historically it has been marginalized within the broader discipline of writing studies, rarely appearing in flagship journals like *College Composition and Communication* and *College English* (Boquet 1999, 476) and often excluded from definitions of writing program administrators (Balester 1992). This limits writing center professionals'

opportunities to publish peer-reviewed research and serve in professional organizations.

Perceptions of marginalization, despite new evidence challenging these beliefs (Salem 2014), causes U.S.-based writing center research to be inward-looking often at the expense of cross-institutional collaboration. In «A Game of Solitaire with Many Players: US Writing Centers from a German Perspective» Stephanie Dreyfürst (2015) recounts her surprise at visiting the «*Mutterland* of Bruffee's concept of collaboration and the sharing of knowledge» only to find that writing centers in the U.S. seem to be operating in a bubble—playing largely individualistically at the same game. As she and her colleagues visited writing centers across the U.S. they found themselves in the ironic position of acting as messengers to their American colleagues. «[E]veryone was very focused on creating programs that worked well for their institutions,» leading her to wonder why there was «virtually no or very little exchange going on between the directors of Writing Fellow programs at other places, and especially not on a tutor/Writing Fellow level.»

Dreyfürst speculates that this phenomenon may be caused by geographic distance, the large number of writing centers, lack of funding, and the difficulty of traveling quickly and inexpensively in the U.S. Yet it also seems likely that Dreyfürst's observations can be traced back to conditions that shape the disciplinary identities of writing center directors on this side of the Atlantic. Melissa Ianetta et al. (2006) call writing center directors «Local Professionals» when they derive their authority from success within their local institutional contexts (15). By contrast, «Universal Professionals» stake out claims to authority through research, taking cues from the more established discipline of composition studies (14). Both Local Professionals and Universal Professionals are not incentivized to exchange practice unless it helps them articulate a strong local or national identity.

Another reason for this difference may be that German-language writing research as a whole seems less anxious about lore as a knowledge practice (for an account of U.S.-

based anxiety, see Gillam 2009b, xviii-xxiii). Muriel Harris (2002) defines lore as «the accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs about what has worked, what is working, or what might work» in our centers (85). According to North (1987), it is characterized by a «pragmatic logic and experience-based structure» (24). In the U.S., practitioner inquiry, which takes lore as its subject, has been critiqued for its lack of systematic methods, its reliance on anecdotal evidence, its prescriptive frameworks, its biasing of research questions, and its inability to produce generalizable claims (Driscoll and Wynn Perdue 2012, Kjesrud 2015). North devotes a whole chapter to practitioner inquiry in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* only to announce the need for more viable alternatives because researchers «make knowledge; [but] Practitioners apply it» and are «essentially...technicians» (21). Sarah Liggett, Kerri Jordan, and Steve Price (2011) synthesize this common feeling in their recent influential study of methodologies: «[m]ost readers will gladly move on [from practitioner inquiry], hoping to find in the methodological communities of scholars and researchers a more engaging way to work, and perhaps a group of colleagues with more intellectual cachet» (103). The *applied* research of practitioners offers too little prestige.

Things look quite different across the Atlantic where the practical dimension of writing center work is incorporated into the very definition of its scholarship. The Society for Writing Pedagogy and Research defines one of its two major fields as *angewandte Schreibwissenschaft*, or «applied writing studies.» Dreyfürst and Sennewald (2014) refer to their field by this name in their recent edited volume *Schreiben* (9). The editors state explicitly that one of their goals was to solicit contributions synthesizing the most influential practices that have informed writing center work during the last twenty-five years (9). The collection's nearly 100-page section on writing consultations is an example of this robust effort to document and theorize practice in the region (Bräuer 2014, Lange and Wiethoff 2014, Stahlberg 2014, Dreyfürst, Dieter, and Fassing 2014).





The writing center community in German-speaking countries also appears to be less concerned about what Liggett, Jordan, and Price (2011) call «methodological awareness» (115). Both research communities celebrate methodological plurality, but only in the U.S. has there been a wave of research focused on codifying methodologies. Melanie Brinkschulte and David Kreitz's forthcoming edited volume on writing methodologies *Qualitative Methoden in der Angewandten Schreibforschung* [Qualitative Methods in Applied Writing Research] and the Interdisciplinary Summer School on empirical-didactic writing research in Hannover in 2016 may shift this focus in Germany. Now that several doctoral and habilitation theses are completed or in progress in applied writing studies (e.g., Girgensohn 2007, Breuer 2016, Karsten 2014), there may be renewed interest in methodological training. Yet for now it seems that the field in Europe is younger, more multidisciplinary, and thus perhaps less anxious about developing consensus around methodologies.

Instead, calls for empirical research have thus far been accompanied by a call for cultural sensitivity to the localness of contexts. Girgensohn and Nora Peters (2012) issued a «plea for European Writing Center scholarship» in a bid to gain public recognition for writing center research as its own discipline and to recognize the distinctiveness of European cultures and institutions in shaping writing center work (1). While Girgensohn and Peters look to the U.S. as a model of the importance of research to institutionalizing centers, they also recognize the limits of North American scholarship for addressing European needs. U.S.-based writing center scholarship is not widely accessible in Europe in part because of language barriers, differences in the developmental stages of continental Writing Centers, and differences in university cultures (2). They argue explicitly for a culture of *European Writing Center Research* (as opposed to German Writing Center Research) in part because European universities share an institutional structure through the mandates of the Bologna Accords.

Of particular interest to U.S. scholars is Girgensohn and Peters' insistence on the need to provide a network of support for writing center practitioners, while preserving what they call «methodological pluralism» and an «openness in relation to the engagement with theoretical concepts» developed by the field's multidisciplinary practitioners (8). Even though writing center scholars in the U.S. support methodological pluralism in theory and Jackie Grutsch McKinney's (2016) new guidebook *Strategies for Writing Center Research* enacts it in practice, a number of recent articles focus on defining methodologies in ways that risk becoming as prescriptive as the lore they seek to trouble. In their prize-winning article «Theory, Lore, and More: RAD Research in *The Writing Center Journal*, 1980-2009,» Dana Discoll and Sherry Wynn Purdue speak of the importance of conducting replicable, aggregable, and data-driven (RAD) research. «If writing center researchers are to better represent the efficacy of our practices and if we are to influence the way we teach and talk about writing across the disciplines,» they argue, «we must speak a common research language, one that allows others from both within and outside our field to retrace our steps and to test our claims» (36). While RAD research is a welcome and heretofore underrepresented methodology, this sense that we *must speak a common research language* gives me pause. International research—with its awareness of multilingual practices and research traditions—raises questions about the desirability and feasibility of this demand. Likewise, U.S. scholars in writing center studies often borrow their methods from other fields (e.g., anthropology, sociology, and composition) yet rely on North's methodological framework in composition studies to define what various approaches can and cannot do (Liggett, Jordan, and Price 2011, Driscoll and Wynn Purdue 2012, Liggett 2014). This can lead to claims about methodologies that would raise eyebrows in other fields. For example, humanities scholars outside writing studies (think Martha Nussbaum or Elaine Scarry) would likely balk at Liggett's recent claim that it is «inappropriate» for theoretical research to make claims about practice and

«unfair for readers to expect practical advice from a study grounded in narrative theory» (141). In our efforts to be rigorous in our methodologies in the U.S. we may be underestimating the explanatory power of humanistic and embodied ways of knowing.

What if my colleagues in the U.S., for example, were to retain an understanding of practice more sympathetic to its claims for knowledge-making? Georganne Nordstrom (2015) begins to do this in her recent article titled «Practitioner Inquiry: Articulating a Model for RAD Research in the Writing Center.» While she brings in useful interdisciplinary lenses from education research, the article still reproduces recent trends to generate methodological rubrics and checklists that reify approaches and define their validity by RAD standards. While lore-based assumptions limit the field when based on *a priori* assumptions, it's important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. After all, disciplinary histories are impossible to write without attending to lore. As anthropologist Dominic Boyer (2005a) asks, «how could any investigation of meaningful action and experience not also, at once, be an investigation of local schemes and settlements of knowledge and modes of knowing?» (141). In a special journal issue on the anthropology of knowledge, he (2005b) argues that anthropologists are sometimes made to feel they practice a «soft» social science for having «sacrificed a properly austere and decorporeally «empirical» relationship to the «objects» of their field research» (247). In response he asks a question that's useful to scholars of writing: «Why is it that intellectuals experience (and are encouraged to experience) their mental activities rationalistically and to consider as genuine knowledge only that which originates in pure cognitive process?» (247).

My hope is that writing center scholarship in the U.S. and German-speaking countries will remain open to the messier, less tightly defined methodologies practiced in the humanities and interpretive social sciences as our field continues down its collective path of professionalization. Praxis is, after all, embodied social knowledge. In writing centers in particular it's relational and dialectical and thus always subject to

change. Our research methods need to be attentive to that and as varied and contextualized as the disciplinary training and practices of writing professionals across the globe.

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