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WCEP -- Writing Center Exchange Project

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The Writing Centre Exchange Project (WCEP) is a collaborative research project that would like to structure the conversation between three institutions in different European countries about their centralised writing support models. It includes the writing centres or writing support structures of the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, the University of Limerick in Ireland and the European University Viadrina in Germany. Through mutual visits and a collaborative exploratory research approach, we wish to investigate and compare the institutional work of those units. Furthermore, we would like to find out which challenges the centres face and how they deal with them. The goals of the research collaboration are to get outside perspectives on the work of each centre, to learn from each other, and to develop more knowledge on the institutional work of central support units. For this purpose, we have designed a 3-step exchange with mutual visits at all three universities.

The collaboration is based on a model of institutional work of writing centre directors (Girgensohn 2017). Institutional work is defined as “purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence & Suddaby 2006, 215). According to Girgensohn’s research, institutional work in writing centres includes specific strategic action fields and uses collaborative learning as a tool to interact with stakeholders.

The research collaboration asks how the three institutions carry out the institutional work and what similarities and differences emerge in terms of the Girgensohn’s (2017) model of Institutional work of writing centre directors across the three institutions.

The study is conducted within the framework of participatory action research. The visitors meet with stakeholders and co-workers and conduct short, semi-structured interviews to gain a broader picture of the institution. The interviewers take notes and anonymise them. Based on those notes, the visitors do a first thematic analysis and present first results in a fishbowl setting to the writing centre team and interested stakeholders. The fishbowl is a special form of focus groups that allows participants to discuss the findings with the visiting delegation. The fishbowl is videotaped, and the videotaped data serves as a basis for a deeper analysis. Interview notes also become a basis for a qualitative data analysis, conducted by the research group.

The overall approach is explorative, oriented towards grounded theory methodology in the way that the first findings will influence the data gathering of the next visits.

So far, we have conducted two of the three mutual visits. We are in the middle of data gathering, but have also started analysing the data. During both visits, the visitors identified three very first and rough categories that were presented in the fishbowl and then discussed with the writing centre team and some writing centre stakeholders. They discussed the findings further and added experiences and observations. Findings from the first visit included the categories “The mission of the writing centre and how it is implemented”, “The growth of the writing centre” and “The writing centre team”. Findings from the second visit included the categories “peer tutoring”, “relationships” and “sustainability”. Within these categories, the visitors summarised and presented some observations they made that stood out to them and discussed them.

At this point, we can share and discuss the following points:

- 1) The research itself turns out to be institutional work, because it has influence towards the inside of the writing centre as well as towards the outside. Towards the inside, it seems to help the writing centre teams to become aware of some topics and make them explicit. Towards the outside, it helps the writing centre to become visible and respected. For example, the university president mentioned the research project in a meeting with the highest academic committee, because she was really impressed by the questions the visitors posed to the vice-president. We can therefore clearly state that the framework of participatory action research is a very valuable tool for writing centre work.

- 2) We use multiple ways of gathering and analysing data and so far we are not sure how well they all fit together and how they will make you of the theoretical framework that we had decided to use (Model of Writing Center Strategic Action Fields (WCSAFs), see below).
The first step are the interviews with team members and stakeholders that are based on very few and very basic questions. The visitors conduct the interviews, take notes and share the notes on a shared online document.
The second step is discussions and very first categorisations of the notes done by the visiting scholars.
The third step is to present those very first categorisations and invite team members and stakeholders to discuss them with the visitors in the fishbowl. This fishbowl is videotaped.
The fourth step is that the visitors conduct a qualitative content analysis of the interview notes sometime after the visit. This analysis is based on the Model of Writing Center Strategic Action Fields (SAF) and tries to find out if the same SAF as in the model occur. (So far, we can say from the first analysis that the same SAF can be found.)
The next steps, after the third visit, will be to code the video data and to bring all the findings together. This is a challenge and our thinking about this is work in progress.

- 3) Trying to gain an institutional perspective on writing centre work is very valuable for all of us and we can highly recommend this kind of research as a way to enhance writing centre work.

Institutional Description:

All three participating units have different institutional settings and backgrounds, and these are very much in the focus of the research project, because we expect them to influence the institutional work very much. For example, one of the units was built as a top-down initiative from the university government with a deliberately designed organisational structure. Another of the units was built as a personal initiative of a single person and then grew organically to a large unit, as a bottom-up process.

What all three institutions have in common is that they operate as central units for all disciplines. They all offer individual and collaborative writing support for students and they all work with faculty on integrating writing as a tool for learning.

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complementing national research funds. A COST Action is organised by a range of networking tools. Funding covers the cost of COST Action networking tools. The three one-week-long visits at the three units were funded as short term scientific missions within COST Action 15221.

Key theorists and frames used in the choice of methods and research design

Institutional work: "Institutional work is defined as 'purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions' (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006: 215). [...] This 'purposive action' always aims at other people, because theory of social practices shows that institutions are socially constructed and do not exist independently from social practices. Institutions exist because people *do* something. There are two general directions of institutional work: First, institutional work aims at stabilizing an organization, thus points at the inside of the institution. Second, institutional work aims at gaining legitimacy for the institution, thus points at the context of an institution. In both directions, institutional work happens in interaction with other actors. Institutional workers have to recognize stakeholders and interact with them." (Girgensohn 2018)

Strategic Action Fields (SAF): Institutional workers identify 'Strategic Action Fields' (SAFs) (Fligstein and McAdam 2011), analyse who main stakeholder within those SAFs are and which positions they have and interact with the stakeholders within those SAFs.

Collaborative Learning: Collaborative Learning, according to Bruffee (1999), aims at creating knowledge through bringing together the expertise of two or more person in an interaction where both parties respect and value each other. Collaborative learning practitioners are active listeners. They mirror and reframe what they hear and direct interactions towards concrete results that are fruitful for both. Collaborative learning practitioners apply collaborative learning deliberately, as Ted Panitz (1999, n.p.) says: "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."

For the institutional work of writing center directors, Girgensohn (2017) has identified a stance collaborative learning as a mighty tool for the interactions that writing center professionals conduct within the strategic action fields.

Model of Writing Center Strategic Action Fields (WCSAFs): Based on an extended explorative study and on the theoretical framework of institutional work (see above), Girgensohn (2017) has developed a Model of Writing Center Strategic Action Fields (WCSAFs) that includes seven SAFs and diverse contextual influences (fig.1).

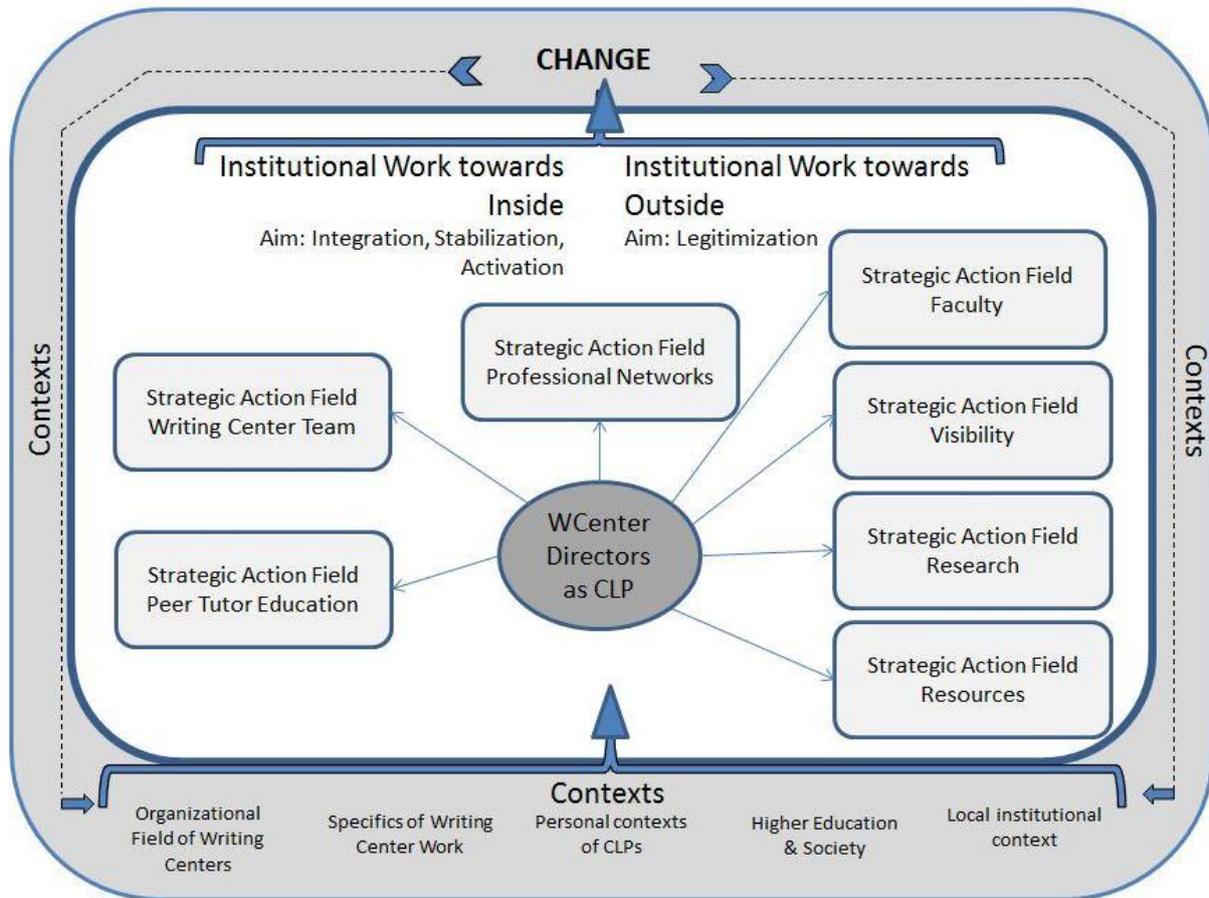


Fig. 1 Model of Writing Center Strategic Action Fields (WCSAFs)

In our research, we use this model as heuristic. We try to find out if we identify the same strategic action fields in the institutional work of the three writing centres. This helps us to structure our observations.

Participatory Action Research means not to conduct research about people, but with people. You integrate others into your research as co-researchers (Bergold & Thomas 2010). We do this with researching each other's' writing centres and also by using the fishbowl as data gathering tool.