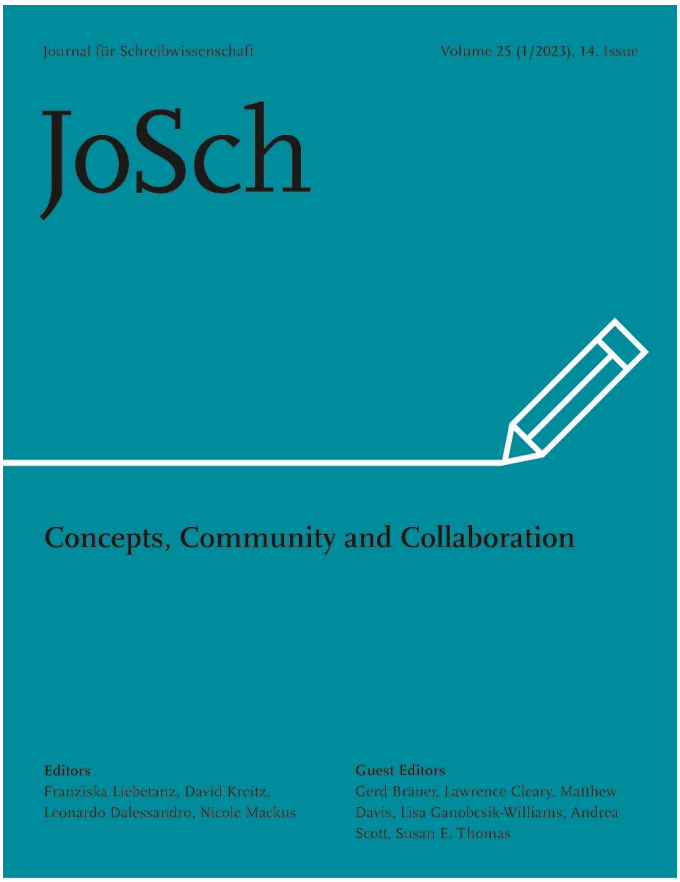

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Trampelpfade and Sheep Lines

The Benefits of Sustained Transnational Collaboration

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For more than seven years, there has been an international sustained collaboration between researchers and experts in the teaching of writing in Germany and Australia, involving visits and ongoing discussions about our work. In this article we aim to explore what it is about these experiences that has motivated us to keep on meeting and working so enthusiastically and productively. To do this, we identify two metaphors, Trampelpfade and sheep lines, that describe informal information pathways, and ways of working as writing experts while traversing complex academic terrain. Applying these to three examples of our work as writing experts allows us to demonstrate the value of our transnational collaboration for finding pathways and gaining clearer visions of our respective contexts in ways that both sustain knowledge and enable us to instigate change in our workplaces.

Schlagworte: teaching of writing; academic writing; informal information
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Trampelpfade and *Sheep Lines*

The Benefits of Sustained Transnational Collaboration

Britta Schneider, Stefanie Everke Buchanan & Shem Macdonald

Abstract

For more than seven years, there has been an international sustained collaboration between researchers and experts in the teaching of writing in Germany and Australia, involving visits and ongoing discussions about our work. In this article we aim to explore what it is about these experiences that has motivated us to keep on meeting and working so enthusiastically and productively. To do this, we identify two metaphors, *Trampelpfade* and *sheep lines*, that describe informal information pathways, and ways of working as writing experts while traversing complex academic terrain. Applying these to three examples of our work as writing experts allows us to demonstrate the value of our transnational collaboration for finding pathways and gaining clearer visions of our respective contexts in ways that both sustain knowledge and enable us to instigate change in our workplaces.

Introduction

"Why do we keep meeting?"

It is a valid question that Australian researcher Britta asks in our Zoom call in August 2022. It has been five years since her DAAD/Universities Australia research stay at the German partner university, four years since German researchers Stefanie and Heike came to do their fieldwork in Australia at Shem's university. Several job changes, restructures, and a pandemic later, we still meet every few months as we work with and through what we have learned from our cooperation, and the Call for Papers struck a chord with all of us. Why do we feel that even though our grant project has been completed and we have published our data (Meyer 2019; Everke Buchanan 2021) and delivered on our promises to our research funders, we are not done yet? What is it that sustains our conversations about language and learning, writing, and teaching?

In this article, we demonstrate how our sustained collaboration and exchange has allowed us to see that while our fields of work and the student needs we address are comparable, we are on different timelines in terms of our academic contexts. Figuratively speaking, we are riding asynchronous waves and bumps. Our day-to-day work is largely shaped by immediate responses: to requests from deans and administrators, from funding bodies and students, local politics and higher education policies. Yet when we meet at our interdisciplinary, international level, we can see beyond the current wave. To demonstrate

what we mean by this, we will use two metaphors to visualise how we can navigate within our respective institutions and find alternative strategies and ways for managing the always unforeseen present, one from German and one from English, to consider the respective routes we are travelling and the different stages we are at along these routes: *Trampelpfade* and *sheep lines*.

Stefan Kühl evokes the image of "kommunikative Trampelpfade" (2018: 25 f.) that form within institutions and allow its members to exchange information beyond the established formal ways of communication. These informal pathways allow writing experts like us the opportunity to use communication to make change, sustain change and find ways to work within our systems. A *Trampelpfad* is an unofficial track that only becomes visible because there are a number of people using this route - and if it is no longer used, this track will become overgrown and invisible.

The second travelling metaphor that helps us to understand our collaboration is the notion of the tracks or lines that sheep make by finding and following the easiest/most practical route through difficult or steep terrain. This may not be the most direct route – straight up a hill – but may involve working one's way around the contours of the hills. The use of sheep lines as a metaphor for ways of working in a university helps to understand the approach often taken by people working outside the traditional academic structures of school or department. As writing experts, not content area specialists, we are most often outside these structures. Our specialism is writing and therefore we often need to find our own ways to reach our destinations.

With these metaphors in mind, we will focus on three examples, moving from most specific to most abstract, to demonstrate how our sustained collaboration has helped us work within our respective institutions far beyond the grant phase: First, we use the example of the development of "Shut Up and Write", collaborative writing sessions that the German researchers encountered at the Australian partner university, into a context-specific writing arrangement in Germany to show how a concept can travel across contexts. Our second example stems from the experience of travelling from one's home context to a less familiar one interviewing students only to find out more about the universal needs of student writers and the scope of the writing expert's role. The final example is a critical look at the de-skilling of writing support work that has been worsened by the effects of the pandemic but was already evident beforehand in frequent organisational restructures: the constant reinventions that are being made which suggest novelty but bring with them the danger of loss of expertise. Our collaboration has provided the Australian colleagues with an opportunity to find pathways through the challenges that this situation has presented so that we keep sight of our professional strengths and are inspired to persist with contributions to advancing knowledge about academic writing.

What these examples have in common is that they show how our sustained collaboration has helped us see the challenges we face from a different perspective and supported us to act within our institutions as agents of change in a way that Bronwyn Williams (forthcoming) describes: Through our collaborative reflections on our practices, we use

the opportunities to articulate to each other our values and beliefs about language and learning, and about writing pedagogy. This has given us clarity of insight and deeper understandings which have enabled us to effect positive changes from within the institution (see examples 1 and 2). It has also offered clearer perspectives on what we can continue to offer the field and our own development in light of the de-professionalisation of writing centres and staff imposed through ongoing restructures (see example 3). Such clarity supports us and provides a line of sight or pathways through this adversity by keeping open the tracks of our discussions with a focus on what is central and important to our work and needs maintaining (Trampelpfade). This also offers us better understandings of our choices and the directions, or sheep lines, we can use to navigate within our institutions in the most efficient and effective manner without losing momentum in difficult territory. And once the tracks have led us up the hill, we use the clearer view from the top to help us figure out our next steps.

Making connections to a specific place and time: Travelling from "Shut up and Write" (SUAW) to *Gemeinsame Schreibzeiten*

Our first example of how our sustained collaboration has helped us work within our respective institutions is "Shut Up and Write" (Fegan 2016; Mewburn/Osborne/Caldwell 2014; Khoo 2016). It is a concept as powerful as it is simple: Meet with a group of fellow writers. State your goals for the session. Then type away in 25-minute pomodoro sessions with small breaks in between. At the end, share how you went. The SUAW session that Stefanie attended at La Trobe University in August 2018 was a transformative experience that sparked the slow but steady establishment of such joint writing sessions in Konstanz. From a once-a-week session in the campus cafeteria, several different formats have evolved: a regular format of four sessions a week (invaluable for sustaining our writing on Zoom during the pandemic) and an intensive week-long hybrid format offered during the semester breaks, both face-to-face (on campus) and online. Even though the event at which Stefanie first encountered SUAW was designed for experienced writers, namely higher degree research students and academics, she found that it also offered relatively inexperienced writers, students in their first semesters of their bachelor degree, an opportunity to create what Rauter et al. have described as a community of practice that empowers them (2022).

We could have read about SUAW, but experiencing it and realising that its strength lies in giving writing a space and a time, making it visible for each other and sharing this experience, was far more powerful. It is the emotional connection to a specific place and time and the empowerment that is possible through it which has made the difference. Yet even though we set up such writing sessions immediately after we returned from our research stay, there was a significant delay of three years until we reshaped and renamed the format into the weeklong *Gemeinsame Schreibzeiten* (joint writing sessions). The sus-

tained effects of our research collaboration only surfaced long after the original contact, but these long-term effects carry great weight.

Finding universal student needs and professional growth in unexpected places

Our second example of our sustained collaboration and how it has helped us work describes how travelling to a foreign country to do research interviews with students at a German university about their writing experiences enabled insights and professional growth for an Australian writing expert.

Prior to Britta's journey to the German site, the research team had met online and discussed the types of writing students were expected to do at each university, the type of difficulties students commonly encountered and the support available to them. Similarities between the two contexts were found in the writing support offered, e. g., one-off workshops in undergraduate or postgraduate courses; one-on-one appointments between writing experts and students or between students and trained student peer mentors.

In addition to the team's discussions on the approach to writing at the two research sites, the qualitative research interview was essential for probing deeper into the particularities of each student's experiences with writing. During the interviews, Britta noticed that the students in Germany raised similar topics to those raised by Australian students. They talked frequently about the intellectually challenging new ways of thinking and writing. Students expressed both creativity and perplexity in the way they tried to integrate new knowledge into existing knowledge. In the absence of explicit teaching on the genres students had to write, some reported accessing informal writing support from more senior students or family members. All students expressed a range of emotions when talking about their writing, e. g., feeling overwhelmed or a little bit sarcastic about the university's expectations of their writing.

Doing all the interviewing in an unfamiliar place helped Britta realise something else. She was surprised about how openly students talked to her about their writing. It mattered for each participant to talk about their writing and to be listened to by someone who cared about writing. Britta observed how students developed knowledge about and stances towards writing in the interviews with her. Maybe because as a visitor Britta was not fully knowledgeable about the workings at the German university, she was able to just listen, prompt and listen more rather than asking too many specific questions.

Travelling abroad, in part to do qualitative research interviews, allowed Britta to make the connection between teacher-student conferences and those interviews: In the Australian higher education context, with its institutional focus on measurable outcomes, the practice of conducting one-on-one conferences with students is often misjudged as inefficient and thereby devalued as teaching practice (cf. Chanock 2007). Doing the research interviews helped Britta to re-evaluate her one-on-one writing consultations with

students in Australia. Just as the research interviews in Germany enabled students to access and develop their knowledge and understanding of writing processes (see Macdonald/Schneider 2020 for an example of how student writer identities emerge during such interviews), Britta's conferences with individual students in Australia enable her to reflect more deeply on their writing processes. Recognising that meaning is actively and collaboratively constructed in both the interview and the teacher-student conference has reaffirmed to Britta the value in continuing to use them as informal pathways or Trampelpfade despite their contested status.

The knowledge generated during the international collaboration has made Britta more confident in her professional judgement and practice to see beyond the current wave. Pursuing the pathway of taking the time to talk about writing with students has led her to make better choices and give clearer directions when teaching writing, not only to individual students but also in larger groups. The value of this 'talk in the middle' (Harris 1995) lies in providing students with different options or pathways towards becoming better writers rather than writing better texts (cf. North 1984).

The (d)evolution of writing expertise in Australian universities

Our final example takes a bigger view; that of the (d)evolution of writing expertise in Australia. It focuses on how working with colleagues from other parts of the world has helped the Australian colleagues to respond to larger structural changes that have resulted in the winding back of positive developments in writing expertise in their contexts. This example is valuable for illustrating how our collaboration with our German partners has allowed us to find a pathway through the adversity to be able to continue contributing to knowledge in the field of academic writing.

Writing expertise in Australian universities has undergone an evolution followed by a devolution over the last four decades. In the late 1980s and 1990s universities in Australia began to recruit large numbers of full fee-paying international students.[1] This presented novel challenges for academic staff in adjusting to different levels of the students' preparedness to study in a new academic context, often in a language that was not their first. To address these challenges, additional staff were employed to work with these students. These were typically those with training in teaching English to speakers of other languages and related fields, often with postgraduate qualifications, and employed as tenured staff in writing support centres at universities. They developed approaches and programs to effectively orientate and support international students to build on the skills the stu-

1 International students in Australia pay full fees for their courses. As an example, a student studying an undergraduate degree in business in 2022 pays around 24,000 Euros per year. An Australian student in this same course pays around 8,000 Euros per year. In response to cuts in funding to Australian universities by successive governments, attracting full fee international students has been a priority for Australian universities since the 1980s.

dents brought with them and to lead them to develop new skills that would assist them to succeed in a new academic culture. The writing experts also often had opportunities to work with academic staff and to collaborate with them to create materials, activities and assessments that supported the development of students' understandings and skills and that were integral to the learning, though this has not been without its challenges (Grossi/Wright-Neville/Gurney 2021). Importantly, these writing experts evolved forming a professional association with statewide annual meetings, a bi-annual national conference and a journal (see https://aall.org.au/).

However, sustained periods of disruption and change, recently made worse by the pandemic but beginning a couple of decades ago, have heralded the devolution of writing expertise in Australian universities. The frequent organisational restructures and the constant reinventions of ways to support learners all suggest novelty but typically have brought with them the loss of expertise. One by one, many writing support centres have been wound back or closed, with many of the highly skilled and experienced writing experts sacked. Libraries and peer tutor programs have stepped in and are increasingly being tasked with seeing students and running generic skills workshops (Malkin/Chanock 2018), while commercial online study assistance (typically grammar checks of writing) is subscribed to (see Barber 2020). In short, much of the specialised and expert knowledge, skills and experience about writing work has been lost. Seeing the well-evolved writing support in Australia decline, with the increasing emphasis on generic support provided by less qualified and less experienced staff, has been disheartening for the Australian colleagues (see Chanock 2011a, 2011b for an overview of this process). However, the international collaboration has provided a valuable opportunity for the Australian colleagues to reflect on what has taken place and to refocus on our core strengths in teaching, writing, and learning. While we could not stop the planned restructures, (and in fact both Australian colleagues changed employment, and one moved from working directly with academic writing to a related field), the pathways we have found through our extended discussions with our German partners have enabled us to keep sight of, and value our professional strengths even when our organisations did not. Our continued collaboration inspires us to apply the skills and knowledge we developed in language and learning and contribute to advancing knowledge nationally and internationally about academic writing through conference presentations (Schneider/Macdonald 2017, Macdonald/Schneider 2019, Schneider/Macdonald/Everke Buchanan 2023) and publications (Macdonald/Schneider 2020).

Conclusion

So, in answer to our question at the beginning of this article: We keep meeting because it gives us different and clearer visions and pathways, sheep lines and Trampelpfade, of and through our respective territories. Time and again, our sustained collaboration has al-

lowed us to step back from the need to prove a quick, direct and immediate effect of our work and see the bigger picture. Amongst each other, we can talk freely and find ways of approaching our contexts that do not contravene the rules but make use of informal pathways to overcome roadblocks, difficult terrain or times of change. In doing so, our transnational, intercontinental collaboration has shown us that our academic contexts are asynchronous. Developments in higher education in one country may have happened earlier or might come later in the other, like offset waves. This means that the ones placed in a different context may be able to see much more clearly what the other place is currently going through and be able to point to a similar development in their own context. These different time and sight lines allow us to look across at the evolution of such processes beyond the immediate surroundings and find responses which deal with problems in novel ways or look for more global inspiration to continue our work and maintain the professionalism of our field and of ourselves.

We are certain that we would not have had such fruitful discussions if we had just met at a conference. It was the personal contact, sustained over time and distance, and our ongoing collaboration that have given us a greater sense of recognition and confidence in ourselves as professionals allowing us to see pathways forward. We are deeply grateful to funding institutions such as the DAAD and Universities Australia[2] which made it possible to begin such conversations. Yet what makes travelling concepts truly powerful and meaningful is their connection to travelling people and real, lived experiences - and the ability to sustain these connections over time. The impersonalisation and de-skilling of expertise means that such sustained knowledge of the terrain and the Trampelpfade and sheep lines in it that allow us to remain agents of change within our institutions are rare. Also, sustaining these conversations has to happen in our spare time, voluntarily and without funding. Ideally, we would like to advocate for opportunities to not just initiate but also sustain such transnational cooperation. And in contexts where this is not possible, we would like to encourage researchers to keep talking to each other informally. It is worth it.

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2 https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/media-item/australia-germany-research-collaboration-flourishes/ https://www.daad.de/de/infos-services-fuer-hochschulen/weiterfuehrende-infos-zu-daad-foerderprogrammen/ppp/

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