Boundary Zones as Sites for Communities of Practice:
Postmodern Mapping with Activity Theory for Change

> "I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing
> myself for another, through another, and with the help of another…
> [E]very internal experience ends up on the boundary."
> - Bakhtin (1984, p.287)

The institutional and societal task and challenge of teaching writing within and across the disciplines create opportunities for boundary crossing and spaces for lively communities of practice (CoP) within the university. CoPs like the WAC Academy function at boundary zones and promote boundary-crossing, offering a productively disruptive alternative to the restrictive nature of institutional disciplines. In spaces like the WAC Academy, differences in participant experience and positioning transform what could be the otherwise fallow soil of a WAC PD curriculum into a polycontextual, multi-voiced, and multi-scripted community that can be characterized by its alternate and competing discourses. It is these conflicts, contradictions, and tensions that create rich zones of learning and afford opportunities for transformations. Using activity-theoretical frame combined with expansive learning and concepts from transfer theory, the community creates itself and an emerging mediation in its activities, its discourse, and its objectives (Bracewell & Witte, 2003). Rather than looking to a rigid curriculum or other institutional structure for direction, we can often find more meaningful and encompassing objectives and motives for our activities and learning in the process of resolving these contradictions, transforming both the activity system itself and the individual participants.

Dismantling Disciplines

Considering the concept of *discipline* through a TPC lens offers new perspectives on a hackneyed topic to those within and outside of writing studies as the capitalistic, expert-based aspects emerge and are related to the collaborative, context-based aspects TPC. Discipline is discussed as a concept that can be understood in many different ways. They have been described as the epistemological and knowledge-making units that define and constitute scholarly communities; in institutional terms, as generally equated with academic departments; and characterized by a degree of insularity and, often, a kind of stasis (Gere et al., 2015). Carter (2007) and Cater et al. (2007) combine these two sides of the disciplines of tech comm by commenting on how a collaborative, flexible re-seeing of writing and education can lead to increased value in the capitalistic system of the institution. They form an approach to writing in the discipline that is social in nature with the goal of mastery of different "apprenticeship", or workplace, genres.

Carter (2007) introduces another way of viewing disciplinarity in his discussion of metagenres and metadisciplines. He uses the term *metagenre* to designate "broader patterns of language as social action, similar kinds of typified responses to related recurrent situations" (p. 393). He describes how metagenres are determined by examining two key characteristics: the kind of research that is done and the goal of the research. In the context of his discussion of academic writing, metagenres describe similar ways of knowing, doing, and writing in related disciplines.

These collections of disciplines that share an emphasis on certain metagenres are referred to as *metadisciplines*. Metadisciplines are made up of the various genres within each metagenre while highlighting the broader patterns of disciplinary ways of knowing, doing, and writing.

Porter, Sullivan, Blythe, Grabill, and Miles (2000) discuss *institutional critique* as a rhetorical methodology for change represents both aspects also. Although it includes a more capitalistic, macro-level grounded in pre-established hierarchy, it invites us to ask how we can better situate ourselves in our local, discursive spaces on a micro-level. Such connections can also lead to alternate constructions of disciplines. Institutional critique is also a methodology and pedagogy through which individuals can rewrite institutions via rhetorical action. It insists that institutions contain spaces for reflection, resistance, revision, and productive action. In this context, institutions are rhetorical systems of decision-making that exercise power through the design of material and discursive spaces. Grounded in postmodernism and critical action combined with material and spatial analysis, institutional critique offers tools for a plan of action that is locally responsive and informed by critique on macro-level (how our public lives are organized and conducted for and by us in an abstract manner) and micro-levels (how we can better situate ourselves in our local and discursive space to make what we wish to chance more visible and dynamic (and, therefore, changeable).

Britt (2006) argues for criticism aimed at the middle ground of micro-institutions as it extends beyond organizational borders by "attending to the power relations inherent in particular spatial and material conditions" (p.135). She describes institutional critique as a labeling strategy that calls attention to power by characterizing organizations as kinds of institutions - powerful entities and, therefore, possible sites for critical analysis and change. The resulting institutional critique is a fundamentally pragmatic effort to use rhetorical means to improve institutional systems by examining structure from spatial, visual, and organizational perspectives; seeks gaps or cracks as paces where resistance and change are possible; and undermines the binary between theory and empirical research by engaging in situated theorizing and relating that theorizing through stories of change and attempted change.

Other scholars encourage us to look beyond the imaginary boundaries of the university and find new ways to see the work we do. Gere et al.'s (2015) introduce Marcovich and Shinn's (2011) *new disciplinarity.* As Prior's (2013) explains, disciplinarity embodies a complex configurations of networks shaped by what they study, methodologies, theories, institutional sites and roles, audiences, and personal relationships, a concept that stands in opposition to the more static notion of disciplines. This is a more dynamic view of disciplines as flexible entities whose elasticity enables its members to engage in activities that bring together different kinds combinations of disciplinary representatives. New disciplinarity also offers the concepts of borderlands, temporality, and elasticity to the conversation on disciplinarity. *Borderlands* allow one to recognize the remaining boundaries of disciplines while identifying and designating spaces for interdisciplinary collaboration, called borderland interactions, that are temporally bounded. It is *elasticity* that refers to the fluidity and movement of participants into and out of such borderlands along how they change and are changed by these projects.

Boundary Zone Communities of Practice

As traditional academic institutions have the explicit boundaries of disciplines and departments composed of experts with specific specializations, it becomes more difficult for one to connect and mobilize herself across practices to avoid fragmentation. The challenge becomes creating possibilities for participation and collaboration across a diversity of contexts within and beyond one's discipline and institution. Boundary zones and communities of practices are both central concepts in both cultural historical activity theory and situated learning theory that can work together to create alternatives to the traditional notion of disciplines.

A *boundary* can be described as a sociocultural difference that leads to a discontinuity inaction or interaction (Engestrom, Engestrom, & Karkkainen, 1995). Boundaries offer a kind of complexity as they suggest a sameness and continuity in that within discontinuity, two or more contexts are relevant to each other in a particular way. While *boundary zones* can be seen as sources of potential difficulty, they also offer opportunities for innovation and renewal. As his quote at the beginning of this paper implies, Bakhtin (1984) reasons that others and other meanings are necessary for any cultural category to generate meaning and reveal its depths.

Boundary crossing and boundary objects are two concepts considered central in maintaining a kind of continuity in these situations. While *boundary crossing* refers to a person or group's transitions and interactions across different contexts, *boundary objects* are artifacts doing the crossing by serving as a bridge of sorts (Tsui & Law, 2007). They are artifacts that inhabit several intersection worlds and satisfy the informational and rhetorical requirements of teach. Boundary objects themselves embody a certain complexity in that they are both flexible enough to adapt to local contexts, needs, and constraints of the parties employing them but robust enough to sustain a common identity across contexts. As Star and Griesemer (1989) explain, "They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual site use" (p. 393). For example, a teacher may engage in boundary crossing by sharing their teaching portfolio (a boundary object) with instructors from other disciplines. Discussions of boundaries can also be a rich topic for learning in groups like communities of practice.

Wenger (1998) describes *communities of practice* (CoP) as groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact on a regular basis. The scope of this concept does not include intentionality, but learning can be the reason the community's interactions or just an incidental outcome of their meetings. Three key characteristics of a CoP are the domain, community, and practice that indicate the group cares about the same interests, interacts and learns together, and have the same (or similar) approach(es) to practice.

It is my argument that communities of practice formed in the boundary zones of the university can create spaces for meaningful learning while offering an alternative to the traditional construct of a discipline. Considering the WAC Academy as a community of practice reveals the common grounds on which the participants stand while also providing a lens for seeing the broader scope and purpose of the academy itself. Actively seeking to create spaces for

boundary zone CoPs can provide faculty productively disruptive experiences, forcing them individually and as a group to take a fresh look at disciplinary and pedagogical practices and assumptions. While we are all expected to have and continue to cultivate a locus of expertise in specific areas, engaging with others at boundaries between communities can produce innovative and creative insights and developments (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). In these boundary zone CoPs, elements from multiple activity systems and other communities are present, creating a group that is polycontextual, multi-voiced, and multi-scripted. The threads that pull the group together and maintain it come from its domain, interaction, and practice. In this context, boundary objects act as metagenres that can work to reveal metadisciplines in the commonalities and values represented in genres and disciplines that are otherwise considered to be very different

Activity Theory & Postmodern Mapping as Tools for Change

Maps are useful tools and theorizing techniques that can provide a better idea of abstract and sometimes messy concepts and processes. *Postmodern mapping* (Sullivan & Porter, 1997; Grabill, 2001) is a strategy for exploring social, disciplinary, and institutional relationships in order to destabilize and re-temporalize what is being mapped via a focus on the map's construction and the partiality of any one map, calling for the use of multiple maps in discussions of social spaces (see Appendix 1). An emphasis on how space is designed, constructed, and inhabited to achieve certain purposes (and not others) results in the idea that all relationships exist all at once in the now.

Postmodern mapping of boundary zone CoPs using the activity-theoretical frame can be a productive method of research for transformational learning experiences and institutional critique. Boundary interrogations are identification processes that focus on how exclusionary practices and devices are used to maintain and extend groups' social identities and powers. They consider zones of ambiguity as opportunities and spaces for change, difference, or conflicts of values or meanings because of the boundary instability they highlight. In this section, I consider why activity theory is an appropriate tool for this work, start considering how it can be applied in this context, work to develop a flexible tool for postmodern mapping of boundary zone CoPs, and consider the insights this method could reveal.

The cultural-historical view offers activity theory as a method for analysis of activity as the mediation between individuals and social dimensions human developments and actions that are historically evolving, collective, and artifact-mediated. Knowing is a living process in which knowledge is generated in the course of acting, thinking, and talking with fellow practitioners (Wegner, 1998). An activity-theoretical frame (see Appendix 2) highlights the intertwined natures of the learning of an activity system and the learning of an individual. In this context, an individual's learning is only understandable if we understand the learning of the activity system, a concept also known as collective developmental transfer (Tuomi-Grohn, 2003). Activity theory assumes that activity systems driven and directed by motive, and such activities are realized by goal-directed actions that are subordinate to motives. In this context, an activity is a theoretical construct that functions to explain or account for a collocation of human behaviors and

behavior outcomes that are centered around some set of performance parameters (Bracewell & Witte, 2003). These actions must be understood within the context of the motive of the collective activity system, and the object of the activity is the factor that distinguishes one activity from another, whether or not the participants are aware of it.

Activity theory research aims to capture the influences and interactions of cultural, historical, and social factors of particular human acts, like creating or using discourse, with the primary goal being change (Tsui & Law, 2007). Contradictions are inherent within and between activity systems, and, as the expansive learning process shows us, they are the source of change of innovation. The expansive learning process (see Appendix 3), a part of activity theory and type of a transformative pedagogy, is a process in which a system or organization, like a workplace, resolves such pressing internal contradictions by constructing and implementing new ways of functioning for itself (Engeström, 1987, 2001). It starts when an individual is involved in the collective activity of questioning pre-established knowledge or an existing practice or structure. The group then engages in a collaborative analysis of contradictions existing within the system, resulting in the development of a new activity.

<Below is where things get *very* fragmented.>

Combined with strategies from postmodern mapping (Sullivan & Porter, 1997; Grabill, 2001), this can be a tool to determine various moments and perspectives in the WAC Academy, participants' artifacts, and the curation of their artifacts. Postmodern mapping can be used to

- (re)consider relationships, development, activities, contexts, objects, artifacts, objects, and outcomes;
- (re)conceptualize identities, and communities; and
- empower participants to reflect on their experiences.

This approach will also encourage questions like

- How were these tools created and transformed during development of activities during the WAC Academy?
- What are evidences of the culture(s) that tools carry with them? The historical remains of their development?
- How are these artifacts an accumulation and transmission of social knowledge? What is that social knowledge
- How may these artifacts/tools influence external behavior and mental functioning of individual(s)/group(s) in writing classrooms?

Utilizing Foucaultian archaeological approach combined with critical theory and Longo's (2006) five themes of discourse as an object of study to examine teaching artifacts from WAC Academy participants and their curations. Each of the objects below could be considered in the application of Activity Theory to the WAC Academy.

Advice for postmodern mapping:

- Locating binaries operating in your research can be a useful place to begin.
- As a researcher, position yourself in the scene.
- In some way, account for changing stances over time.
- Be sure you are working with a continuum, not a set of categories. But, you could map a continuum against a set of categories.

On forming dual and intersecting continuums into a grid:

- Better to not map time on the X (horizontal) axis because that disrupts the notion of mapping space. Because time is important in this kind of research and theory, researchers could consider making two maps at different times.
- It is often better to make multiple maps rather than trying to fit too much in one map. For example, if you are thinking through several continuums, it may be helpful to coordinate several maps.
- Keep one continuum as the X (horizontal) axis in all maps.
- Make sure the Y (vertical) axis continuums are all oriented in the same direction. For example, all conservative positions should be at the top and all liberal at the bottom.

This process will lead to questions like: How do their artifacts and curations reflect the idea of discourse as a struggle mediated by culture (Longo)? How is it that particular statement(s) appeared rather than another (Foucault cited in Longo)?

What does this mean for the idea of identity as a threshold concept?

Conclusion

Multiple layers of research tool → rich contextualization and options for consideration in the reconsiderations and reconstruction of maps

Identity work – teacher-writer identity as a threshold concept

I end where I began: With the complexity of dynamic and fluid identities. While much of this synthesis does not directly relate to my research, it has provided a space to think about what were familiar concepts to me in a different way. It was a refreshing process, and I feel rejuvenated. I am especially excited about looking in more depth at boundary crossing, considering how boundaries may play a role in my larger research project. I am also interested in learning more about how TPC discusses identity in general, workplaces, and the classroom. This aspect of my research could benefit from TPCs ideas on the expert-novice binary and professional development. Although I have started collecting some sources that I could use for

this course's final project and my research overall, I am still early in the process. I welcome recommendations and ideas.

Carter et al. (2007) metagenres and metadisciplines

<mark>Daybook p. 125 – movement across boundaries of activity contexts – knowledge/whole person moves. Because of movement, reconstruct herself in relation to the next context.</mark>

How can PD that is situated in a boundary zone promote transformative learning (and therefore a shift in identity) and transfer? How can/are boundary zones and threshold concepts [be] related?

Appendix 1: A Brief Guide to Post Modern Mapping

Appendix 2: Activity Theory

Activity Theory

Appendix 3: Activity Theory of Boundary Zones

Activity Theory of Boundary Zones

Appendix 4: Activity Theory of Boundary Zone Communities of Practice

Activity Theory of Boundary Zone Community of Practice

Appendix 5: Integrating Activity Systems

activity system of participant's discipline
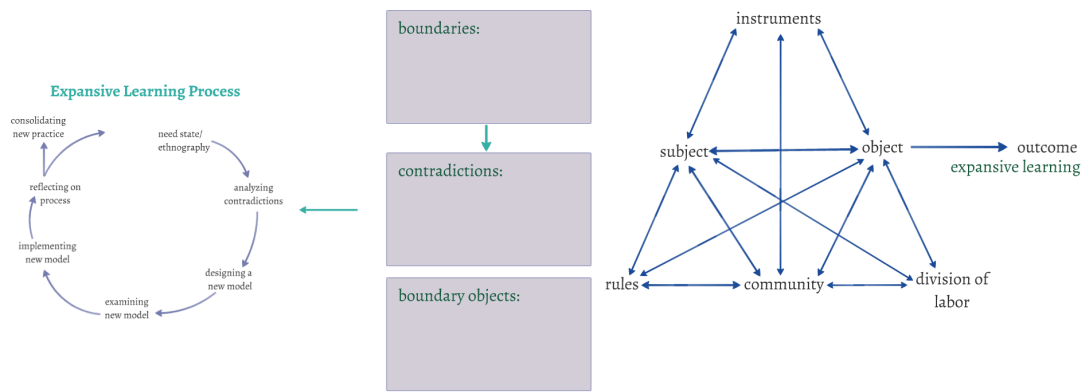
activity system of WAC Academy
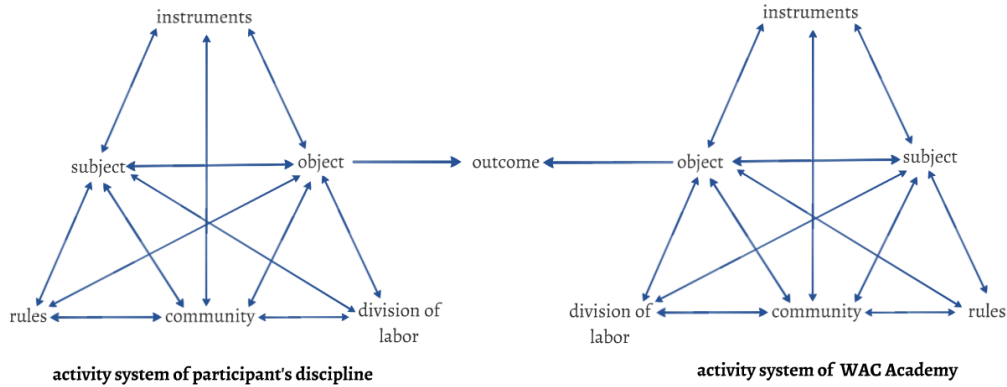
Appendix 6: Activity Theory - WAC Academy's Draw Your Writing Process

instruments
mediating tools: week 2 Prezi , instructions, daybooks, paper, colored pencils/markers, post-its

subject
WAC Academy participants

object
· visual representations of individuals' writing processes
· discussion of comparisons to others' processes
· consideration of application of activity (or ones like it) within individuals' writing classrooms

outcome
reflection on self as a teacher-writer

rules
· instructions for drawing activity and gallery walk
· WAC Academy mission statement
· rules of collaboration and discussion

community
WAC Academy - writing instructors at East Carolina University

division of labor
· everyone bring their own experiences
· everyone is a teacher and learner
· everyone draws and responds
· everyone reflects together in discussion

Activity Theory: WAC Academy's Week 2 Draw Your Writing Process

Appendix 7: Activity Theory & Boundary Crossing - Draw Your Writing Process
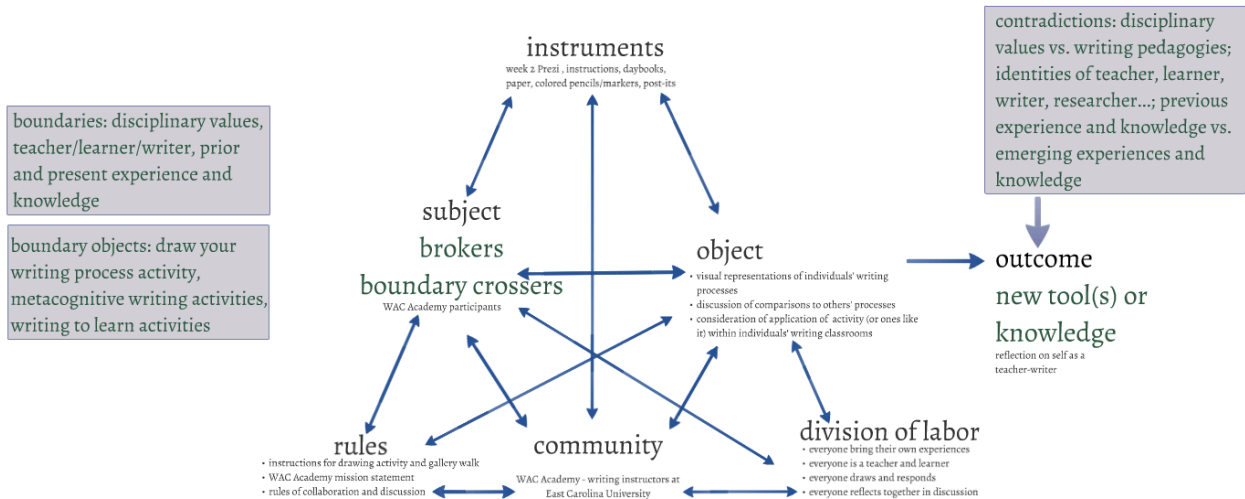
Draw Your Writing Process as a Boundary Crossing Activity

Appendix 8: Activity Theory & Boundary Crossing of WAC Academy as Community of Practice

domain: teaching writing	community: writers teaching writing	practices: reflective practitioners, informed instructors, writer-researchers

instruments
week 2 Prezi , instructions, daybooks, paper, colored pencils/markers, post-its

contradictions: disciplinary values vs. writing pedagogies; identities of teacher, learner, writer, researcher...; previous experience and knowledge vs. emerging experiences and knowledge
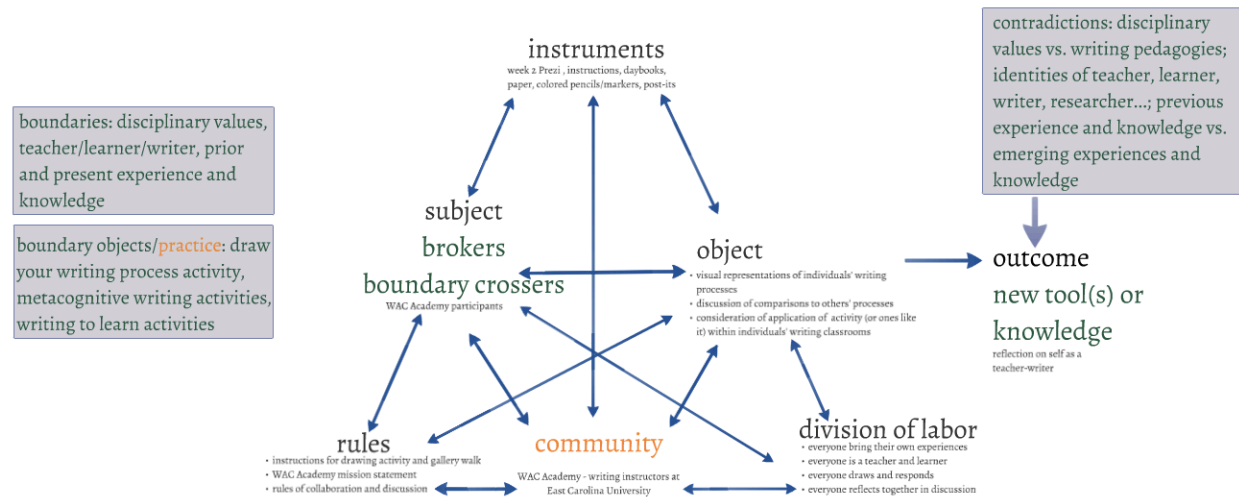
boundaries: disciplinary values, teacher/learner/writer, prior and present experience and knowledge

boundary objects/practice: draw your writing process activity, metacognitive writing activities, writing to learn activities

subject
brokers
boundary crossers
WAC Academy participants

object
· visual representations of individuals' writing processes
· discussion of comparisons to others' processes
· consideration of application of activity (or ones like it) within individuals' writing classrooms

outcome
new tool(s) or knowledge
reflection on self as a teacher-writer

rules
· instructions for drawing activity and gallery walk
· WAC Academy mission statement
· rules of collaboration and discussion

community
WAC Academy - writing instructors at East Carolina University

division of labor
· everyone bring their own experiences
· everyone is a teacher and learner
· everyone draws and responds
· everyone reflects together in discussion

Prezi

Draw Your Writing Process as a Boundary Crossing Activity
& WAC Academy as a Community of Practice

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