CHANGING SPACES

Writing Centres and Access to Higher Education

Editors | Arlene Archer & Rose Richards

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Acknowledgements

This is the first writing centres book to be written and edited entirely by South African writing centre people. Writing centres are a relatively new concept in South Africa and hence we value the support we received for the project.

Firstly, the editors wish to acknowledge the following people for contributing to this book in different ways (reviewing, sharing ideas about the content and more):

- Sharifa Daniels (University of Stellenbosch)
- Carel Jansen (Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands)
- Brenda Leibowitz (University of Stellenbosch)
- Rose Masha (Walter Sisulu University)
- Pamela Nichols (University of the Witwatersrand)
- Shabnam Parker (University of Cape Town)
- Fatima Slemming (previously University of the Western Cape)
- Wilhelm van Rensburg (University of Johannesburg)

Permissions

Permission has been obtained for reprinting the following articles:

Archer A. 2008. Investigating the impact of writing centre interventions on student writing at UCT. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 22(2): 248-264.

Leibowitz B & Parkerson A. 1995. A conversation about the UWC Writing Centre Project. In: B Leibowitz & T Volbrecht (eds). *AD dialogues: Language in development*. Vol.4. Bellville, Western Cape: University of the Western Cape Academic Development Centre. 161-177.
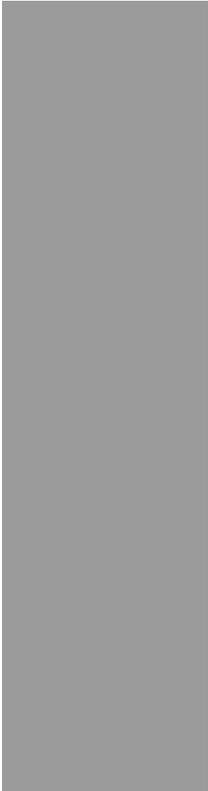
Nichols P. 1998. A snowball in Africa with a chance of flourishing: Writing centres as shifters of power in a South African university. *Current Writing*, 10(2): 84-95.

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Foreword

John Trimbur

There are moments in history when decisive events overturn the old order and present the challenge of building a new society and inventing new forms of education. Consider, for example, the establishment of public schooling by the Freemen's Bureau in the southern United States to educate emancipated slaves in the wake of the American Civil War or the nation-wide literacy campaigns in post-revolutionary Cuba. This remarkable collection that Arlene Archer and Rose Richards have put together documents another of these decisive moments and the challenges of opening access to higher education in post-apartheid South Africa to students whose learning had been curtailed and intellectual abilities squandered by Bantu education and the old order of separate development.

The two key terms in the title of this collection – 'writing centres' and 'access to higher education' – give a quick sense of the book's concerns. To be sure, there will be a good deal of interest in how writing centres operate in South Africa on the part of what is now an international movement of writing centres (organised in the International Writing Centers Association). To my mind, though, the telling feature of the book is the link between writing centres and access. Some of the chapters emphasise this connection more explicitly than others but, whether in the foreground or background, the question of access seems ever-present in these studies of how South African students negotiate the maze-ways of academic literacy and how writing centre professionals design programmes and services. The fact that the first writing centres started in the mid-1990s at University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), University of Cape Town (UCT), and University of the

Western Cape (UWC), and have now spread to most tertiary institutions in South Africa, suggests the role writing centres have played – and might play in the future – in imagining what a 'transformation' of higher education could look like in the post-apartheid era.

The questions of transformation and access are vexed ones, as writing centre and composition specialists in the US found during the days of open admissions in the 1970s (since largely reversed due to the racism and anti-democratic policies which have shaped American higher education in the past four decades). As North American and South African writing centres know, access is not simply allowing formerly excluded students to enroll in higher education. Rather, as a number of the chapters in this book show, it involves concentrated attention to the complicated identity negotiations entailed when 'non-traditional' students seek to perform the kinds of writing demanded at university and to acquire the cultural capital of academic literacy. There are complex interactions at work as students face crises in their social allegiances, pulled between loyalty to home or local community and the desire to get ahead in institutions of higher education that are often alien and sometimes just plain unwelcoming.

The situation of new university students in South Africa makes us aware that literacy is at once normative and potentially transformative. The regime of academic literacy acts, on the one hand, as a gatekeeper charged with maintaining high standards and the value of university degrees. On the other hand, it also offers students new ways of thinking and feeling, new forms of identity and participation in public and professional life, and new resources of representation, which include, as Arlene Archer importantly notes, multimodal means of communication beyond what has traditionally been defined as 'writing'. Writing centre people typically want the best for the students they serve, not just to help them write for success in any particular course (as though writing were a matter of skills transfer) but also to understand how the literate environment of the university works, what kind of discourses it values, and the larger political implications of academic power in knowledge-making and certifying professional work. This is the 'persistent tension' that Archer and Richards note in their introduction to the book, 'between helping students gain access to dominant practices and helping them to critique these same practices on which their success depends'.

Changing Spaces speaks to this 'persistent tension' by exploring in a number of chapters how writing centres can be 'agents of change' within the university. The character of writing centres as semi-autonomous units (or 'liminal spaces', as Archer and Richards put it), where writing centre consultants or peer tutors are not tied directly to grading or the academic hierarchy, gives them a particular capacity to foster conversations with students about the stresses and strains of academic literacy or in the case of the writing centre at Wits, as Pamela Nichols reports, to sponsor extra-curricular writing. Just as important are the initiatives a number of writing centres have undertaken to work with faculty on how they design and respond to writing assignments. Academic literacy, as it is taught and learned, is neither a monolithic nor static 'target' of instruction but a matter of faculty practice as much as student performance, and there are signs in this collection that discipline-specific writing specialists and writing centres can develop fruitful relationships with faculty, influence the design of writing assignments, and raise

questions about how the 'hidden curriculum' of higher education – the tacit rituals, beliefs, and ways of being that define academic life – enables and constrains access.

Part of that hidden curriculum involves assumptions about language. As Sharifa Daniels and Rose Richards comment, access to higher education is complicated by the linguistic diversity of students in a polyglot nation and, at Stellenbosch, by the status of English and Afrikaans as the dual media of instruction. In such a multilingual world, which is becoming increasingly the linguistic reality in Western Europe and North America, a number of composition specialists such as Suresh Canagarajah, Bruce Horner, and Min Zhan-Lu have started to wonder about the elasticity of academic literacy and, by implication, what role writing centres might play when students bring unsanctioned and often highly innovative linguistic resources to the university. Academic literacy, after all, is not just a set of social practices but also, at least within English-medium universities in South Africa, the US, the UK, and elsewhere, a type of standardised print English, which itself has been represented (and reified) as stable and dominant, a taken-for-granted grapholect of academic work that in fact is always variable, hybrid, and in flux, though this mutability is rarely acknowledged.

Accordingly, I want to push a bit on the language question, in terms of English and the work of writing centres, though I know there are also unresolved and underdeveloped questions that could be raised about the status and potential role of Afrikaans and African languages in the university. Are home languages (or the stylings of township lingos and other linguistic 'crossings') inevitably 'interference' in academic writing, that needs to be eliminated by learning strategies of code switching? How do you distinguish between 'errors' and 'legitimate' choices to mesh codes for rhetorical effect? Are there ways, in other words, to teach academic literacy as an open and constantly changing repertoire of language use that students not so much acquire as work with, along with the other linguistic resources available to them, to make meaning? There are no sure answers, but these are the kinds of questions that writing centres are well positioned to ask, as Daniels and Richards show, because writing centres provide a place for students (and writing centre tutors) to talk about language choices – and to examine, as Min Zhan-Lu puts it, not only what they can do with English but also what English does to them.

I like the level of detail in these chapters – all the nuts and bolts programme description, logistical issues, and institutional questions about the role and academic legitimacy of writing centres. Everything matters: who do you choose to work in writing centres, how do you train them, should tutoring be generic or discipline-specific, what is the effect of writing centre experience on consultants' and tutors' careers, what is feedback, how do you give it, how do you approach linguistic diversity, how do you work with faculty, what kind of research makes sense for writing centres to do, how do you assess writing centre work, how do you deal with institutional marginalisation and the stigma of remediation? Overall, the chapters work together to give readers inside and outside South Africa a vivid picture of how writing centres have dealt with these questions by collecting, as Archer and Richards say, 'some of our history and research in one volume', and thereby capture a 'glimpse of who we are and what we can (and do) achieve.' I'm glad they did it. The book is important now and will be a valuable archival resource. I look forward to what unfolds in the future of South African writing centres.

Introduction

Writing centres as alternate pedagogical spaces

Arlene Archer and Rose Richards

Why a book about writing centres in South Africa?

Nowadays most tertiary institutions in South Africa boast a writing centre, some of them more than one. University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and University of Cape Town (UCT) have a general writing centre each and also a Law writing centre, for example. Most of the writing centres are permanent fixtures and many have permanent staff. This book serves to outline differing theoretical approaches to writing which underpin the various centres, as well as differing implementation of some of these theories in particular social and political contexts. It showcases writing centres from seven institutions in South Africa and reflects on practices in these differing contexts. It situates all of this in terms of some of the tensions writing centres around the world experience, such as the relation between the generic and the discipline-specific in teaching writing, the extent to which writing centres need to engage with the increasingly multimodal requirements in student assignments, the placement of writing centres in institutions, and degrees of perceived legitimacy and authority. The unique South African context shows the significance of these issues in sharp relief.

One of the intentions of compiling a book about South African writing centres is to create awareness of the work of these often underrated spaces on tertiary campuses in

South Africa. As South African writing centre practitioners we inhabit a rapidly changing environment. We need to understand that environment and our own shifting identities within that if we want to continue to prosper and to serve the students who visit us. As the institutions in which we exist change, so have we and so have our practices. This book charts some of these changes and attempts to define who we are now, where we have come from and what we would like to become. In doing this we examine to what extent and in what ways prevailing conventions in different Higher Education institutions enable and constrain writing centre practices. We also explore the ways in which writing centres contribute to transformation of Higher Education in terms of research-led development, widening access, and ensuring that our graduates acquire key competencies.

A further aim of the book is to contribute to the growing sense of professional identity in writing centres. Over the last decade writing centres from different institutions have started to find each other. At conferences, particularly the annual conference of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of South Africa (HELTASA), writing centre practitioners meet formally and informally to share experiences and practices and to discuss issues of general importance, such as working with staff, training of writing consultants and tutors, reaching distance students and obtaining institutional and financial backing for projects. We also have a national listserv with almost 300 members. This book could be the start of a formal documenting of our collective growth.

Last, and most importantly, this book aims to help writing centres in South Africa to re-engage with our history of remediation and to redefine our practice theoretically. We believe strongly in the democratisation of education and in what one of the contributors to this book, Pamela Nichols, describes as 'the national project of writing new South African cultures' (chapter 1). Writing centres in South Africa have emerged from a variety of contexts and are uniquely empowering spaces which can contribute to the quest for social equality in ways that few other university structures can. As Nichols explains it, South African writing centres can function as change agents, contributing towards changing the dominant attitudes to language and culture by shifting authority (Nichols 1998:85; also chapter 6). All of the contributors to the book highlight the importance of finding ways of designing interventions to accommodate and harness student diversity.

Writing centres and access: Harnessing diversity as a resource

Few people would debate that access to education in South Africa has traditionally been limited. In the late 1970s and early 1980s historically white tertiary institutions began to open their doors to students of all races. At first it seemed that the very opening of the doors was a victory. Then the legacy of years of educational deprivation began to be noticed by educators in the mainstream, with the result that students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds were compared unfavourably with their more advantaged peers. These educationally disadvantaged students were often placed in special classes in which the aim was to help them to develop the 'skills' necessary for success at university. However, a result of this educational apartheid was a lingering stigmatisation. The stigma of deficit haunted these students, who were seen as lacking knowledge, skills and even personal qualities that were necessary to academic survival.

In the 1980s theorists on academic development began to recognise internationally that academic discourse is socially and politically located and to examine how students acquire that discourse. Genre theorists (Kress 1982; Cope and Kalantzis 1993) and theorists of explicit pedagogy (Delpit 1988; Heath 1983), for instance, maintained that learning to use genres gives people power and access to new social environments. From this approach a more integrated perception of academic development evolved. Academic literacy practices could not be separated from learning how discourse functions, from the socialising of students as academics and from the political implications of learning (or not learning) the language of academic power. It was during this decade that South African writing centres began to emerge.

In the 1990s writing centres were new phenomena on a handful of university campuses (UCT, UWC and Wits), either starting as modest projects or programmes under the general umbrella of academic development or in an English department, or the Faculty of Education. Academics and students came to see that such projects were able to help students from many different backgrounds to succeed at their academic work. As the face of 'academic development' changed, so did the approach to writing centres and so did the centres themselves. The idea that 'literacy' is the mastering of a set of social practices (Heath 1983; Street 1995; Gee 1996) opened up new fields for debate. To what extent should a student be expected to become acculturated and to conform to the dominant ideology? Would this prevent students from being critical of power structures? Does showing students how the rules of power function necessarily lead to a greater sense of social justice?

From the heart of these debates emerged a realisation that had far-reaching implications in the early years of the twenty-first century. Academic discourse is a highly specialised practice and students of all abilities and language groups struggle to acquire it (Thesen and Van Pletzen 2006). Lea and Street expand the concept of 'literacies' to include an understanding of institutional relationships of discourse and power and to recognise the contested nature of writing practices. In writing centre work there is a persistent tension between helping students gain access to dominant practices and helping them to critique these same practices on which their success depends. Students want to pass and complete their degrees so they can find work and institutions want to see improved throughput rates. Writing centres are evaluated for their role in this. (See Archer 2008 reprinted here for ways of exploring our contribution to throughput.) However, the work of writing centres cannot be understood in this way only. Writing is not only what people do, but rather what they understand of what they do and 'how it constructs them as social subjects' (Clark and Ivanič 1997:82). This is what is being re-problematised in writing centres as we enter the second decade of the new century and engage with students in a world infinitely more complex than anything we have experienced before.

The chapters in this book highlight the importance of finding ways of designing interventions to accommodate and harness student diversity. Daniels and Richards argue that writing centres are

> ideally placed to address some of the challenges posed by multilingualism
> from within complex contexts. Our ethos of student-centredness and our

> pedagogy of collaborative learning allows for a more equitable and flexible approach to language usage.

The mixture of students' languages and cultures is essential to writing centre identity. In other words, we 'define our province not in terms of some curriculum, but in terms of the writers [we] serve' (North 1984:27). Nichols, speaking of the South African Higher Education context, takes it further, arguing for writing centres 'constructing university culture' and creating 'cultural networks which can help us to retain students who would otherwise slip away' through creative writing projects, public events, links to other student bodies and initiatives. Writing centres are open to all students and staff, regardless of their academic competencies or background. We often work with students from all faculties and, while much of our work occurs within the undergraduate community, many of us work with postgraduates too.

In writing centres students can develop confidence through experimenting with genre, style and voice without being penalised for 'getting it wrong' or speaking out of turn. Effective teaching of writing involves a dialogue between the discourses of academia and those of students, offering those from disadvantaged backgrounds an empowering and critical experience, not just bridges to established norms. 'Writing Centres can play a central role in this endeavour through their unique positioning in the institution, their interdisciplinary nature (which needs to be reconstructed as a strength rather than a weakness), and their demonstrated ability to create coherent communities of researchers and writers' (Archer 2010b). For these reasons, writing centres are spaces in which 'critical conversations occur and ones where change and challenge take place' (Savin-Baden 2008:53).

Institutional placement of writing centres

Many of the chapters highlight the importance of placement for writing centres and the need to work collaboratively with other university entities. Institutional placement and funding determines much of what can be done in real terms. For instance, Skead and Twalo look at the institutional placement of the writing centre at Forth Hare within a larger Learning Advancement Unit and the benefits derived from this. Fort Hare's Writing Centre also interestingly is one of the first writing centres to establish credit-bearing training for consultants. Clarence's chapter focuses on the role of the writing centre at University of the Western Cape and how it has negotiated a challenging period of inconsistent institutional support, something that writing centres often face.

In mainstream South African tertiary education writing centres do not occupy the 'centre' at all, so much as the margins. Writing centres have existed alongside mainstream academia in South Africa for two decades, sometimes nominally part of faculty, and sometimes not. Even though most tertiary institutions in the country now have writing centres, many people working in these same universities still do not always know what writing centres really do. Interestingly, this is not dissimilar to the challenges that American writing centres face, as research from the United States has shown (North 1984; Murphy 1995; Grimm 1999). North's landmark article on American writing centres shows how and why perceptions of writing centres are often inaccurate (North 1984:22). For one thing, he shows that it is easier to describe what writing centres are not than

what they are, because they differ so much in pedagogy and theoretical underpinning from most other facets of academia. Writing centres do not teach language. They do not fix grammar. They do not fix students. They do not proofread. North describes writing centres as spaces where students learn not only how to produce better writing, but also how to become better writers. They do this by working individually with writers and, in this way, the writing centres depart from most other formal ways of teaching.

South African writing centres work as they do because they have a strong sense of community and of the value of the individual. In this sense they are not 'centres' so much as 'safe spaces' (Canagarajah 2004; Nichols, this book) in a sometimes harsh environment. Chihota (2007), for example, reflects on how postgraduate writers' circles enable a space of supportive playfulness where students are able to try out 'graduateness' in a low stakes environment. Students need such spaces to practise being academics, following Lave and Wenger's theory that students learn not through acquiring structure but through participating as performers (1991:17). Writing is learned 'implicitly through purposeful participation, not through instruction' (Ivanič 2004:235). The writing centre is a 'learning space' in Savin-Baden's terms (2008:7), a place of 'engagement where often disconnected thoughts and ideas that have been inchoate, begin to cohere as a result of the creation of some kind of suspension from daily life'.

Writing centres' institutional placement can cause tension between being part of an institution and yet not part, being outside departments and faculties and yet working with students inside these departments. A result of being a safe space, discreet from the harshness of academia, is to push writing centres (further) out of the centre of university activities. Not belonging to a faculty and not being involved in traditional forms of teaching, including not assessing students' progress, can give the impression that writing centres are not 'academic'. The 'persisting heritage' of many South African writing centres is being perceived as remedial, separate from the mainstream, and a repair shop for linguistically dented students. Many South African writing centres are still mostly autonomous of faculties and are hence distanced from being able to help with subject-specific literacies. They stand apart. One danger of this is that they can very easily revert to deficit model academic development bodies. They can also run the risk of over-simplifying academic literacies by smoothing over the differences instead of addressing them (Grimm 1999) and reverting to a genre-based method of instruction.

However, it does not have to be this way. Because writing centres work with so many different disciplines it is possible for them to combine methods and theories in unusual ways to help students. By virtue of their placement and pedagogy, writing centres are in a unique position for 'extending and redefining the dialogue on literacy education' (Murphy 1995:124). In South Africa this means writing centres have the potential to be agents of change. This is how the curiously liminal nature of writing centres can be a strength. In social terms a liminal space is a place to which members of a group withdraw and redefine their identities before re-emerging in society to play a new role (Van Gennep 1906; Turner 1969; Savin-Baden 2008; Nichols 1998, this book). Students at university are in some ways in the position of initiates, occupying a liminal space. They have left school and are learning how to be adults with significant contributions to make to society. Part of this is learning how to make the transition academically. By

the time they graduate they can use their new power and new identities to be agents of change themselves. Because of their pedagogies and histories, writing centres are spaces where students can start trying out these roles.

Keeping writing pedagogy in writing centres is not ultimately our goal. Writing is a 'curricular responsibility that must be addressed by all disciplines' (Moore 1996:26). Working with lecturers and giving feedback is one important way in which writing centres can collaborate with faculties. Clarence argues that critical reading and writing practices need to be developed simultaneously and contextually, and that writing needs to be seen as part of learning, thinking and evaluating. In her chapter she proposes that writing centres need to work increasingly with lecturers to address the reading and writing needs of students in critical and collaborative spaces in order to transform Higher Education more broadly. In their chapters, Lewanika and Archer, and Deyi, show different ways in which this can happen. One-to-one consultancy with lecturers or reporting back about how students have responded to the writing challenges of assignments can help them to develop assignments. Deyi also shows how writing centres can act as mediators between students and an institution, allowing them to succeed where otherwise they might have failed.

The danger remains that existing power structures are still not challenged to the extent that they should be but are, rather, perpetuated and replicated. If education in South Africa is really to change in a meaningful way, existing dominant structures need to be challenged. If the transformation which has been happening in the country as a whole is to be made permanent and to be taken further, students need to learn to challenge structures and to understand how dangerous it is not to do so. Perhaps the next decade of writing centre work in South Africa will be able to go part of the way to addressing these issues.

A transformational agenda: Writing centre theory in practice

The chapters in this collection fall into the ambit of academic literacies research where the ideological stance can be described as 'explicitly transformative rather than normative' (Lillis and Scott 2007:12). A transformative approach involves exploring academic practices in relation to contested conventions of knowledge making and eliciting the views of writers on how such conventions impinge on their meaning making (Lillis and Scott 2007:13). It also involves examining different ways of meaning-making in academia by utilising students' resources (Archer 2006; Paxton 2007).

Most of the writers in this book view academic writing as a social practice, meaning making in particular disciplines and discourse communities. This view of writing as a social practice involves 'a shift away from thinking of language or writing skills as individual possessions, towards the notion of an individual engaged in socially situated action; from an individual student having writing skills, to a student doing writing in specific contexts' (Lillis 2001:31). This notion of academic writing as a social practice encapsulates an academic literacies approach (Lillis and Scott 2007:11). Many writing centres in South Africa and the chapters in this collection propose an academic literacies approach to understanding student writing and its relationship to learning across the

academy as an alternative to deficit models. Deficit models such as the 'study skills' approach are based on the assumption that there are 'common features in academic writing that can be usefully taught to students independently of their discipline' (Lea and Street 1998).

The use of the terms 'literacy' and 'literacies' is a debated one in the field of academic literacies. Street (1995) argues that the plural form signals a transformative social practice approach and has a strategic importance in the institutions in which we work. Others such as Kress (2010) and Turner (Blommaert, Street and Turner 2008:140) argue that academic 'literacy' points to the written mode. The authors in this writing centre collection use both the singular and plural forms as appropriate in their specific institutional contexts, and depending on what they wish to signal, and to whom. As Lillis and Scott (2007:16) point out, this is a 'tricky space to navigate' and there can be pragmatic and situational slippage to deficit discourses, despite authors' attempts to shift and challenge these. Writing centres have to manage the disjuncture between the institution and the student on a daily basis and on many different levels in practice, and this is reflected in their research.

These chapters show the ways in which writing centres approach writing in the different institutions – providing one-on-one consultations, *ad hoc* and generic workshops at all levels, and more sustained departmental liaisons and curriculum development. Some writing centres work with small groups of students in different ways. Sometimes students are required to work on projects together for class assignments and visit their centres for group consultations. Workshops are another way of working with a smallish group of students while allowing them to do practical work and to receive individual attention. Many writing centres have developed programmes of various types of writing workshops to meet the requirements of different groups of students. Writing groups or writing circles are useful ways of empowering postgraduate students particularly. These students have a more sophisticated grasp of the requirements of academic writing and a greater sense of independence than undergraduates and they can benefit greatly through peer tutoring. These varying practices across and within writing centres demonstrate that there is no 'quick fix' where writing is concerned, and that we need multiple sites in and outside the curriculum for working with student writing.

Writing centres often attempt to link writing and the disciplines by hiring writing consultants or tutors from the various disciplines. These are usually postgraduate students, although sometimes undergraduates. Others hire permanent staff, often from specific disciplines, to consult with writers. Having a subject expert on site has a number of advantages including an improved relationship with a department, and giving the writing centre insight into the requirements of a discipline. The reasons for hiring consultants or tutors and the method chosen for the training of them are all essential for the smooth functioning of any writing centre. All the chapters in this collection address this issue in different ways. The chapters by Dowse and Van Rensburg, Daniels and Richards, Lewanika and Archer, and Simpson do so specifically. Dowse and Van Rensburg argue that the roles of a writing centre consultant are multiple, and contested. Consultants often have to negotiate and mediate the uneven power relations that may

exist between study supervisor and postgraduate student writer. They argue that the main role of peer tutors or consultants is to co-construct knowledge with students. Daniels and Richards interrogate consultants' approaches within consultations, particularly in terms of language choice and language use. Lewanika and Archer examine consultants' reflections on how working at the writing centre has improved their own academic practices and how it has equipped them as possible future academics. Simpson explores the development of one particular writing centre consultant in a detailed and nuanced way. He looks at how her understanding of academic writing changes, often through contradictory and dialogic moments in spaces created by the writing centre.

This book is a first attempt by the writing centre movement to collect some of our history and research into one volume and to capture a glimpse of who we are and what we can (and do) achieve. For that reason we have republished some key articles on South African writing centre work. Leibowitz and Parkerson's article (1995, Chapter 5) about the development of the University of the Western Cape writing centre is an early and influential discussion of the necessity of such a project and the challenges in sustaining it. The UWC centre was one of the first writing centres in the country. Nichols' article (1998, Chapter 6) is a seminal article about the political importance of writing centres in South Africa. Van Rensburg's article (2004, Chapter 4) analyses how students build identity through writing. It was one of the articles nominated in 2006 by the International Writing Centers Association as best article about writing centres. Archer's more recent article (2008, Chapter 9) discusses a subject of great importance to writing centres: how to measure impact. This article is essential because it provides a thorough discussion of how to measure our work, but it also shows how far we have come since the early 1990s. We have developed an identity, and confidence that we can demonstrate our worth. Each of the republished articles addresses an important aspect of writing centre development. Building a sense of history is part of creating an identity.

Future directions for writing centres in South Africa

As diverse as South African writing centres are, our discussions over the years have yielded certain common hopes and intentions for the future. We generally agree that we should continue to work for and with all writers on campus, not merely the struggling ones. Nichols points out that 'South Africa cannot afford to make ghettoes any longer' (1998:90). In the future we would like to see that our environments and services are completely accessible to all writers, including writers with disabilities, and also to distance students. Because of how closely we work with students and because of the harshness and alienation that students often experience on campus, it is crucial that we continue to value the affective side of our work, helping writers with compassion, even though the work is labour intensive and there is a temptation to use a more generic approach.

We can develop (or, in many cases, can continue to develop) certain aspects of our work in order to strengthen our positions at our institutions. Projects on which we work include closer collaborative working relationships with faculties, accredited consultant training, employing and retaining practitioners who are aware of our pedagogy, and insistence on appropriate and specialised methods of evaluating and assessing writing centres. In addition to this, writing centres need (to continue) to be long-term, fully

budgeted commitments on the part of an institution, 'since these conditions are necessary for a Writing Center to meet any but the most modest goals' (Simpson 1985).

Not only are we faced with a rapidly changing student population and rapidly changing institutions, but we also are faced with changing technology for written assignments. We can no longer confine literacy pedagogy to the realm of language alone, and we need to take into account the role of images and other modes of meaning-making in texts. Nowadays, the tasks set for students' assignments in higher education often require complex multimodal competencies (Archer 2010a; George and Trimbur 2010; Stein and Newfield 2006). Many assignments use images as evidence, whilst other assignments are predominantly visual in nature, such as posters, storyboards, or assignments that include CD-roms or other media. New technologies also enable a range of possibilities for individuals creating documents, including variety in layout, image, colour, typeface, sound. A growing challenge for writing centres is to train the consultants to help students understand and gain competency in multimodal composition. This process includes learning how to produce well-designed print and digital texts. It also includes knowledge about the appropriate use of visuals, and the integration of visuals in multimodal texts. This is in line with current thinking about Communication across the Curriculum (CAC) which points to a widened notion of communication (including the visual design of written assignments) and the redefined nature of texts through new technologies (McLeod 2008).

The South Africa of the future will present specific challenges to tertiary education. The increasing student diversity is a potential strength for tertiary institutions. Because of their academic placement and their pedagogies, writing centres are in a unique position to connect students to institutions and to allow both students and those who teach them an opportunity to enrich each other. South Africa needs leaders, but leaders need voices of their own and the means to challenge power structures.

Writing centre practitioners are often severely under-resourced and faced with an enormous number of students in the student-to-'teacher' ratio. We spend so much time trying to service students' needs that we are often left without time to develop ourselves and our practices. Our meetings, Special Interest Groups and the listserv are some of the ways in which we have addressed the problem, because we are aware that if we do not reflect on our circumstances and on our practices, we will, in Wenger's words, become 'hostage to history' (2000:230). As a movement we strive towards dialogue about practice and about writing. We strive to understand how we fit into the institutions to which we belong. We reflect on our identities, no matter how changeable they seem to be. We fight to maintain our liminal nature. Above all, we ask ourselves: are we developing students? But our book does more than that.

Conversation about writing practices is one of our strategies when working with students. Through dialogue and the sharing of ideas we facilitate students in the development of a sense of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers. Our intention is that this book will be one of the ways in which we can do the same for ourselves as academics and professionals.

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PART 1

ALTERNATE PEDAGOGICAL SPACES

1 Student culture and cultural change

A manifesto for writing praxis in a South African writing centre (with a participant text and 8-sentence story by Mbongisi Dyantyi)

Pamela Nichols

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explain the principles behind our work at Wits Writing Centre (WWC) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, which are about writing and about much more than writing. I hope to offer talking points about the development of a safe space and the formation of networks and specifically to suggest that the development of student culture is linked to cultural change. The setting is local and, so, exciting globally because South Africa is an extraordinary site of cultural change, resistance and diversity.

To give some context to the need for cultural change, I will first highlight aspects of the university, our inherited educational systems and the multilingual environment which effect WWC work. I write as a relative newcomer to this country, which might make this sketch starker than a more acculturated view. The advantage of not being fully acculturated, though, is that some aspects of the context are seen as strange and possible to change. After a brief description of setting I will itemise our initial five principles, and those we have developed from those first five principles. The tone is manifesto-like because the principles are strategies of action, which I then attempt to evaluate and reflect upon. The chapter ends with some creative writing of our student writer in residence, which is also a meditation on how to act.

The University of the Witwatersrand

The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) is a major university in South Africa, modelled on Oxbridge and established in 1896. It has five faculties, about 28,000 students and impressive past students including the Nobel Laureates Nelson Mandela and Nadine Gordimer. It is historically a white university, and was thought of as 'liberal' and 'Moscow-on-the-Hill' by the former apartheid government. However, the details of its history are more complicated, and more implicated. In the official history of Wits it is noted that although its constitution was modelled on that of the British universities, thus making it legally bound to accept all qualified students, in the days before official apartheid, Wits did not actually expect black students would apply. When a group of Indian medical students did apply to join Health Sciences, the Wits authorities asked the pre-apartheid government for advice on how to go about keeping them out (Murray 1997).

South African educational context

Parallel systems are still in effect, most notably in the existence of two school examining boards – one for public and one for private schools, meaning different syllabi, different standards – and a big difference in school resources, such as libraries.

There remains a legacy of suspicion about the legacy of Bantu Education which was an education designed to train and fit African peoples for their place in apartheid (Bantu Education Act 1953). Because of Bantu Education, and specifically because students were forced to learn in Afrikaans, the students risked their lives in the Soweto Uprisings of 16 June 1976. This student revolution is commonly understood to be a turning point of the long struggle against apartheid.

There is also a potent legacy of teaching methods, which were mainly lecture transmission, influenced by an official pedagogy called 'Fundamental Pedagogics' which was taught to education students and disseminated by the University of South Africa (UNISA), the largest distance teaching university in South Africa, based in Pretoria. Fundamental Pedagogics was as authoritarian in methods and content as it sounds, characterised by rote learning, hierarchical classrooms, and assessment as gate-keeping and ideology as static truth. Penny Enslin describes the mind control of Fundamental Pedagogics as its erasure of the possibility of criticism by the removal of ideas from their historical, political contexts. 'By excluding the political as a dimension of theoretical discourse, Fundamental Pedagogics offers neither a language of critique nor a language of possibility' (Enslin 1990).

Literacy and language environment

It is hard to promote a culture of reading and writing in South Africa because firstly we still have a book tax, which makes buying a book expensive relative to other necessities, and secondly because many people associate reading with punishment. Anecdotally, I realised this through a workshop I gave for writing teachers at a SAADA (South African Academic Development Association)[1] conference in 2002, at a writing retreat for UNISA Writing Centre personnel in 2004 and, also, over the years from MA students

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1   SAADA became HELTASA.

taking my course 'Writing: theory and praxis'. The workshop explores how early reading experiences affect the way that writing teachers think about writing. Over the years an unmistakable pattern has emerged. Most white lecturers write about happy early memories of sitting on the lap of a parent. Many black lecturers describe being hit in a classroom. However, on the positive and cheap side, oral literary traditions are strong. For example, many people tell of their first experiences of narrative as grandmother's stories; praise singers are still an important part of national ritual; extended names, which include family anecdote, are passed down. In rural villages where there is little print literature, there are radios, which broadcast in local languages.

South Africa has eleven official languages. In rural areas most people speak two of them. In Johannesburg black South Africans are likely to speak three or more. This means that most people are interested in language and the play between languages. This is particularly obvious in townships where peoples of different languages live closely together. Township culture is vibrant and has inspired a new form of music known as 'Kwaito', as well as being a continual source of inspiration for fashion and poetry.

There is a huge appetite for poetry performances both in the Township and outside. Some of the most successful South African films and plays foreground the improvisation possible in a multilingual environment. The film *Tsotsi*, which won an Oscar for best foreign film, is a good example. 'Tsotsi' means gangster, and is associated with a hybrid language called 'Tsotsi Taal'. In the film the only person who speaks a single language is the white policeman, who speaks isiZulu. Everyone else is improvising within a linguistic melange. So, while black South African culture is mainly poor in material things, it is rich in creativity and improvisation, especially in languages.

I came to South Africa in December 1994 to teach in the English department. The academic development programmes that were in place were designed to help but also appeared to separate students and were perceived by some students as being patronising. The WWC was developed as a new response to some of the challenges of student alienation and as a way to tap into facilities of language, thought and creativity. Specifically, I wanted to address the silence of black students and the need to root the university in all its contexts of place, including the local and continental African. The five initial strategies of the writing centre were the following:

1. *Creating a new space, with new practices*

   You can imagine how discouraging it must be to come to university and realise that you have studiously learnt from a teacher who didn't actually know what he or she was teaching. With an emphasis on newness, students don't need the feeling that they are going backwards, or the burden of a disadvantaged education.

2. *Ensuring that the space is seen as non-remedial and not only for a specific type of student*

   Struggling students and top students are equally attracted to a centre which has an emphasis on newness, student initiative and creativity. We aim to be an inclusive space for discussion about writing.

3. Emphasising creativity, to include new writing and discussion about new writing, and visits from local authors

Students are encouraged to see their writing as on a continuum ranging from apprentice writers to writers who publish and enlarge the possibility of what can be thought. Local authors are invited to the Centre and have been generous mentors for young writers. The Centre so becomes a real centre for writing, where writers can imagine and plan their own projects and agendas.

4. Working with the assumption that writing is thinking

This allows the brief of the Writing Centre to be intellectual development as well as the mechanics of clear language, and for us to work with writing as process as well as genre. The former is a postcolonial move in South Africa because it means the recognition of tacit knowledge, and the bringing of that tacit knowledge into awareness and then into visible thinking and dialogue.

5. Having at the heart of the writing centre the one-to-one peer tutoring model

This method allows students to talk to students, who probably have a better chance of understanding fellow students than their professors. The one-to-one method is familiar to South Africans as it is similar to a struggle strategy that was popular among youth groups, encapsulated in the slogan: 'Each One Teach One', itself adapted from a religious network strategy: 'Each One Teach One and Save One for Christ'.

The WWC was initially run by volunteers and, once funds were raised, it became formalised in 1999. During the years that it has been running, the initial five strategies have developed into the following:

1. Creating a safe space which cultivates agency

Our first principle was to create a new space with new practices. We have also seen the need to create a home-like space which cultivates agency. As indicated, we need to offer an alternative to the association of reading and writing as punishment. Many students do not feel at home in the university. So the Centre aims to be a place where students can relax a bit and be unafraid of making mistakes. It aims to be non-directive, confidential, a place that is not directly connected to grades or evaluation, a place that allows for pause and preparation. In this sense again we are echoing a pre-existing strategy. Very early on in the life of the WWC, a group of students asked me if they could use the Writing Centre over the weekend. Curious, I asked about the group's objectives and was told that this group of students, who happened to be top students from across the university, had been meeting for years to discuss ideas together so that they could work out what they thought before they went into the white classroom. Race is still a largely untouched sore in post-apartheid South Africa and the students still seem to need a place to think together before they act.

We need to create a safe space so that students can develop their own agency within the university and beyond. We don't act for the students; our aim is to help them make their own informed and unafraid choices.

2. Fostering student culture

Our second initial principle was to make the Centre non-remedial and non-separatist. A positive development of this is to work towards making it a place of student initiative or

student culture. The idea of student culture is something I learnt from the late Jim Clowes of the University of Seattle. It involves the dissemination of authority by helping students understand their terms of operation and then making these terms of operation their own: taking the initiative and translating it into well thought-out practice.

This principle has been a challenge for me, because it has meant that I have had to take risks by backing ambitious student initiatives and then being ready to pick up the pieces afterwards. We have all learnt, and this principle has resulted in things that would not otherwise have happened, such as a public book week, based at the university, which began as the visionary project of one consultant, Sam Mugabe, who wanted his fellow students to read more. Through this type of peer education the results are not known in advance. This sort of peer education is not the tool of an ideology, it does not aim to foster compliance, as many of the peer education initiatives connected to HIV-prevention or anti-smoking, anti-obesity or anti-smoking campaigns might do. This type of peer education aims to educate rather than train, for example to foster awareness, informed choice, initiative, and action. It promotes agency, which is a wild card.

Building student culture at the Writing Centre has also been important as a way of developing a cultural safety net for students who might otherwise slip through the system. Many African students drop out of university, and one reason for this is pressure from extended families. Many of these students are pioneer students, often the first in their family to go to secondary school, let alone university. Students from rural areas or townships can have a whole village or large network of people supporting them, a large number of people who have contributed to their career and who are now closely watching their progress. *Ubuntu* has been translated as 'I am a human because of other humans.' As an idea it is beautiful and open to interpretation. In practice, ubuntu can be a mixed blessing. The anthropologist Robert Thornton writes of the 'the unbearable burden of *ubuntu*' (Thornton 1996, 2000) because *ubuntu*, apart from meaning shared humanity, can also mean that 'because we helped you get to university, you have to use some of your scholarship money to buy shoes for your nephew'.

I think that the best people to help students who face such pressures of *ubuntu* – which becomes the struggle between what was once home and the constructed home of the present and future – are other students who understand the dilemmas and have come through them. Only other students can really sympathise and offer strategies that have worked. The university is a foreign culture for every new member. Therefore, there is the opportunity to construct university culture and to create cultural networks which can help us to retain students who would otherwise slip away.

3.   Supporting the intellectual exploration of personal and group identity

Our original third principle was the power of the one-to-one consultation. This dialogue between a pair continues and is expanded into the development of networks, the pair being the beginning of links with many, who in turn are ready to link to organically developing networks. Networks create and support and give credence to new ideas and ways of being. In this way, the intellectual life of the Writing Centre connects to the literary momentum of the country. Much of the creativity and energy of South African literature and intellectual debate is generated around the construction of personal and group identity. This construction involves both language and culture and an approach that understands both language and culture to be resources rather than as fixed and owned legacies. It is a coming to consciousness.

I overheard the following exchange at a meeting of the Black Consciousness Collective, which is an organisation hosted by the WWC. Two students were arguing heatedly. The young man shouted 'But I am not my father!' The young woman shouted back 'But I am not my mother!' and on the argument went. Clearly these students are treating culture and tradition as a resource from which they are forming their attitudes. They are refusing to be held uncritically to the past and instead are engaged in a dialogic construction of the present. Identities and cultures are so formed from a potent and dynamic 'bricolage'. The blankness that apartheid attempted to enforce is replaced by cultural identities that are living, agentive and unpredictable. They demonstrate what Stuart Hall expressed so well of West Indian cultural identity in London in the 1980s, that: 'cultural identities are not an essence but a positioning; identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past' (Hall 1994). This work of creative agency and respectful negotiation with the past and current contexts is keenly relevant to South Africa. The task of the student is not to break completely with the past but to find a way to rework and transform the past so as to create a hopeful and coherent present and future.

The construction of cultural identities is surely a major responsibility of post-apartheid intellectuals and is certainly a major preoccupation of recent South African literature.

4. Allowing the Writing Centre to be a public, democratic space

Our fourth founding principle was that writing is thinking. Among other things this idea has led to the need to make our thought public and democratic: to make the Centre a public, intellectual space. This is a political move, not in terms of party politics but in terms of fostering democratic practices, variety and dissent. This means allowing ideas to grow through exposure to a wider audience. To be able to have their ideas heard by large numbers of people, intellectuals need public spaces. Each person listens with his/ her own point of view, and so public arenas have the potential to develop ideas, and to gather perspectives and relevance. Also, a public workspace offers the chance to practice democracy, in that ideally it can mean respect for all members, the possibility of different leaders at different times and specific local responses to specific local situations. Simone Weil describes this vision of democracy as the finding of collective solutions to specific problems:

> It is a fine sight to see a handful of workmen in the building trade, checked by some difficulty [who] ponder the problem each for himself, make various suggestions for dealing with it, and then apply unanimously the method conceived of by one, who may or may not have any official authority ... at such moments, the image of a free community appears. (Weil quoted in Boyte 2004)

South Africa is a country where the fight for democracy is still being waged. We need to create spaces where democratic processes are consciously practiced, reflected on and developed, as well as being generative of new thinking and public forums and solutions.

5. Understanding literature as literacy

Our fifth initial strategy was to emphasise creativity and the mentorship of published authors. Among other national centres we are known for our inclusion of creative writing. This has remained central, and for the past few years we have had a student writer in residence: in 2006 Veronique Tadjo as writer in residence, in 2007 we hosted the playwright Kim Euell, in 2008 we hosted the novelist Faith Adiele, in 2009 we hosted

the story teller Nomsa Madlosa and in 2010 we offered a master class with the Senegalese writer and journalist Boris Boubacar Diop. The latter class culminated in a reading of texts written in response to Diop's novel about the Rwandan genocide, *Murambi: The Book of Bones* for the first Mail and Guardian Literary festival in 2010 and an online publication for *Botsotso* (Nichols 2010a). In 2007 we initiated, with a two city poet collectives, the first 'Jozi Spoken Word' festival. Up to sixty poets and writers participated in a four day event which included workshops, panel discussions and performance. The festival has become an annual event.

The connection between our academic work and the public promotion of creative writing, is more than the shared ground of creativity, identity construction and mentorship. The connection has developed into an understanding of literature (understood as language that foregrounds the play of meaning) **as** literacy. This is not a post-modernist sleight of hand but rather recognition of the ways in which many South Africans understand the changing culture around us. Why is poetry and the spoken word so important in the township? Why is there such a strong underground network of poets and singers? Why does poetry bring along music, hip hop and various other performances? I think because the literary medium allows us to voice the repressed, allows oral traditions to break through again, allows the non-orthodox, the confused and the uncontrolled some expression. It then also allows us to think, analyse and digest or discard. I am suggesting a Freirian principle alive in the energies of literary production in Johannesburg. Literature is a potentially revolutionary form of literacy. Not an ideology, which would close off critique, but an opening to choice. And as for the stricture that we should be concerned with academic writing only and not creative writing, why should the one be to the exclusion of the other? If academic writing cannot be creative, don't we have a problem? Let's celebrate creative intellectuals, intellectual creative writing and clear courageous language as the means of giving the freedom to think further.

I have described the strategies with which we began, and the working principles that we have learnt. The question now is whether these activities and principles have worked in any way to empower and engage students in the university and beyond. Have the initial five intentions – to maintain a safe new space, to be perceived as non-remedial and non-separatist, to allow creativity and outside connections, to work with the assumption that writing is thinking, and to maintain at the heart of our work the discussions between consultant and client – and their five augmentations – to maintain a safe space which encourages agency, to be seen as non remedial and to promote student culture, to be a creative space which also encourages networking which explores individual and group identity, to be a thinking space which is also a public space which encourages democratic practices, and lastly to understand literature as literacy – have these principles and activities resulted in cultural change? In answer I would like to consider three areas which I think are markers of change. These are visibility (meaning publication), presence within the university and other educational institutions and, lastly, participation in public projects.

In terms of visibility the Writing Centre can offer insights into how students learn through writing and publication. There has been formal research based on Writing Centre work but some of the most interesting insights have come from informal discussions in staff meetings. For example, at one staff meeting we heard what was, for me, a completely unexpected rationale for plagiarism. A WWC consultant, who had been a successful

student and then became a successful journalist, explained why she had consciously plagiarised for most of her undergraduate career. She claimed not to have understood that knowledge could be owned and in fact believed that the requirement to cite sources was a white conspiracy to deny Africans their own knowledge. Her successful act of defiance was political, could be described as civil disobedience, and was undetected. It was only as a postgraduate, watching other consultants in the Writing Centre enjoy intellectual debate, that she began to have an idea that she could participate rather than subvert (see Nichols and Linington 2003).

Academic writing about writing centres has a limited readership. In terms of creative writing, the Writing Centre has been affiliated with texts that are being widely read. One ex-consultant (Dumisani Sibiya) has published two novels in isiZulu, another (Zweli Sibiya) has been the head writer for a popular South African TV soap opera (*Backstage*), another (Mehita Iqani) started a new literary magazine (*Itch*), and several others have had short stories and poetry published in major new African anthologies. Several Writing Centre staff members or affiliates have won literary awards, the most exciting recent achievement being the first EU literary award which, in monetary terms, is the biggest literary award in South Africa. *The Silent Minaret* by Ishtiyaq Shukri has been a best seller in South Africa, has been translated into Swedish and published in America. The novel represents the viewpoint of a reasonable South African student of Muslim and activist background, living in London and contemplating 'the global war on terror'. When I asked Shukri at a book launch at Boekehuis in Johannesburg in 2005, what he hoped for the public life of his novel, Shukri replied that he wanted to explore the view point of an enfranchised South African in the world at this moment. Since the award, Shukri has been a regular contributor to the South African weekly newspaper the *Mail and Guardian*. In other words, through publications, affiliates to the Writing Centre are participating in public imaginings and forums for debate.

How much did the Writing Centre contribute to the achievements of these writers? That question is impossible to answer and their achievement is of course their own. However, these writers and agents of change are affiliates, and change and new movements take effect through networks. We can say that we are part of a network that is producing new writing.

In terms of presence and representation, we can say that Writing Centre staff members have become faculty of the University and that our practices have spread beyond the university to other educational sites in Higher Education and schools. The consultants act as role models within the Centre, some have gone on to become staff at our institution while others have gone on to be affiliated with writing centres at other universities in the country. Because of a module on the teaching of writing that I have been running since 1995, and which forms part of doing an MA in English Education, teachers in schools across the country are aware of our methods and report that they employ them. Similarly, within Wits, faculty members have participated in workshops for their own writing, formed writing groups, joined writing retreats and in one case produced a book of work written, that was initiated by such retreats (Orr, Rorich and Dowling 2006). In 2007 there was the beginning of a cross disciplinary collaboration to teach writing-intensive

courses within disciplines which has resulted in a workshop which has been taken to most of the major Universities in the country. At each workshop about 40 disciplinary staff considered how to adapt an existing course so as to make writing a vehicle for course content (Brenner and Nichols 2010; Nichols 2010b). The workshop was lead by the director of the WWC and a colleague from the Wits School of Molecular and Cell Biology, Dr Liz Brenner. Dr Brenner won the national teacher of the year award in 2010 and it was clear that her work in writing intensive science teaching was a significant factor in this national recognition. There is a network of teachers as much as there is a network of writers, and of course they overlap. The teachers provide the practice, which is given relevance and energy by being connected to the production of new writers and researchers.

Last, in terms of participation in public work we have had memorable collaborations and contacts with public initiatives. The festivals already mentioned have been major public events, we have launched numerous books from the Centre, have been involved with government literacy campaigns working with high schools, have worked with NGOs and International PEN. We have for the last five years been centrally involved in two major University transformation projects: the Bale Scholarship programme for maths and science women students and the 'Targeting Talent Programme' which has worked with about 330 maths and science learners and their teachers from three provinces for three years before the learners take their matriculation examinations. This year, with Department of Trade and Industry backing, the number of learners on the Targeting Talent programme will double. Both projects are designed to widen access to the university for talented but poor students so as to make the university more representative of national demographics. Our resources are stretched thin, but the logic of what we do, our relative lack of administrative ties, and the instincts of the student consultants, is to do work which is public work.

There are two vital concerns which we have to address better. First, we need to document the impact we have on the retention of students, even though it is nearly impossible to account for exactly why a student succeeds or fails. Second, we need to think in a more business-like way about funding so as to increase and sustain capacity. The university increasingly follows a business model, especially after the government funding formula changed so as to award funds according to throughput rather than access. This means that before the university was given money according to the number of students admitted each year. Now the government awards money to the university according to how fast the students get through. This is not an imperative which serves mature part-time students or students coming from rural areas or disadvantaged schools who are likely to need more time to complete their degrees. The University as a whole faces the struggle to balance the books and maintain our educational purposes.

The Writing Centre cannot easily be a business but we can strategise so as to align our work with existing policies, specifically language policies and policies of academic development, staff development and promote the nascent idea of a university-wide writing intensive system. We might not be able to quantify all our work but we can make it in line with government imperatives, which are not strictly business related. Somehow

we must work with the central administration so as to be valuable to it, while maintaining adherence to principles of student culture and flexibility of response. This dilemma I suspect is not just South African.

There is a constant tendency for practices to revert to type and a constant need to implement and develop new practices. There is a constant struggle to maintain the Writing Centre as a safe place for student culture to develop and grow. We still need to transform the universities and develop a new generation of multiracial, multicultural, multilingual scholars and the process of intellectual and academic transformation needs more than time. However, as a good friend said to me, the people who tell you that it takes time for South Africa to change don't live in shacks. Change takes more than time; it needs creation and critical group praxis. Individual affirmative action appointments are hard to sustain: group, cultural, and self-critical projects seem to me to have a much better chance of allowing and maintaining change.

I would like to leave you with an example of what I mean by literature as literacy with a text from our then student writer in residence, Mbongisi Dyantyi. It was written in 2006 in response to an exercise which required a participant text and it takes you into the mind of a young man waiting outside the court where Jacob Zuma, then Deputy President of the ANC, is being tried for rape. The second exercise is an 8-sentence story in a Philosophy classroom. Both exercises demonstrate how fiction can explore the possibilities of the present.

The students' work is to choose and shape their praxis, link to public work and engage in the national project of writing new South African cultures. The writing centre's purpose is to create the space and promote the agency for their attempt.

This chapter has developed from Pamela Nichols' keynote address for the South African Writing Centres indaba at the University of Johannesburg, February 17, 2007.

Participant text and 8-sentence story

Mbongisi Dyantyi

I feel like an outsider. I move like an outsider and, judging by the surreptitious looks thrown my way by my fellow protesters, I look like an outsider. The protesters are jumping up and down, and I am jumping up and down too. There is a rhythm to toyi toying that you either have or you don't, and I have it. As our leader, a big girl with a booming voice and hair straightened with gel, takes us through the taxing stamping of feet and neatly timed sideways movement that always send white people the wrong way, I faultlessly move with them. At times I stamp my right foot twice, instead of alternating from left foot to right foot, and sometimes I deliberately move to the right when the crowd moves to the left, creating a zigzag that inspires my fellow protesters to create more intricate patterns in the way the crowd moves. My voice, sometimes a major source of embarrassment for me as it tends to be high when I am excited, as now, blends

harmoniously with those of the protesters. 'Strike a woman', we sing, 'strike a rock', and without breaking the rhythm, or even stopping to change the tune, we move from that song to singing another, 'Everyday we are raped and killed. When will it stop?' But, despite all these similarities: the singing, the movement, the sentiment, that rape is an evil not to be tolerated, I am aware of the fact that I am a male, that between my thighs hangs a weapon of mass destruction. I am aware that almost all of my fellow protestors are female, and that they are here to denounce what they see as an oppressive male patriarchal system. I, a person of the autumn, of ancestors that went to take back their sheep from the white man then said, 'These are nothing but mole heaps'; I, a champion of the right, no, the necessity of Xhosa boys to go through the initiation process of cutting the foreskin; I am here right alongside the mostly black women, protesting against a system that has always given me power. 'Phantsi ngabadlwenguli! Phantsi!' screams the lead lady ('Down with all rapists! Down!'). 'Phantsi!' I say right along with the others. We hold our placards up high, careful not to brush against each other, lest the opposition, barely fifty meters away from us, see that as vindication of their beliefs that men are rendered powerless with lust in the presence of women.

After shouting and jumping for nigh on an hour-and-a-half, I move out of the circle and go to join my friends in the non-existent shade cast by the fence surrounding the Johannesburg High Court. I am careful, yet again, to make no sudden moves, to walk so that I do not bump into anyone, that I do not have to push, however gently, anyone out of my way. I lean against the fence and look back at the circle I have just left. Beyond my fellow protesters, just outside the red and white tape set up by the South African Police Service to separate the POWA[2] protesters from the supporters of the alleged rapist, is another crowd that looks determined to stay neutral. They stand slightly away from both camps and, from time to time, point at one camp or another, as they whisper to someone near them about the thing that caught their attention. I look away from them, wondering what it feels like to be neutral. I have not been neutral in such a long time. I have forgotten how it feels to be neutral. Until oppression, an idea that manifests itself through the tripartite alliance of race, class and gender is vanquished; I do not see how I can ever be neutral again. The people in the circle continue to move in complex maneuvers that make the circle appear more than just a circle. I think about this, silently laughing when I see them coming to a standstill and facing each other over the diameter of the circle. I know what is coming, I am in two minds about running to join them, but I am too tired, and my fatigue decides the issue for me. I will stay outside and watch. At a signal from the gel lady, everyone in the circle jumps up and down, up and down in a move popularised by the Zionist Christian Church, the church with the biggest following in South Africa. Up and down they jump, up and down. I wonder do they know that by this move they consecrate the ground within the circle.

1. He stood up slowly, marveling at the way objects seemed to be unstable.
2. Like water, he thought, seeing the building opposite him dwindle first into a dam, and then into a muddy puddle, and then it was gone.
3. 'Oh', he said, feeling himself starting to liquefy.

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2   POWA: People Opposed to Woman Abuse

4. 'Congratulations, today you can fully count yourselves as philosophers.'

5. 'I have been more than flesh.' he said to a decidedly unbelieving class. I have been water, and I have been fire. I am an idea.'

6. 'Does that mean that you are not real, sir?'

7. 'It means, Ms Mbongisi, that I am open to interpretation.'

8. It means, he thought later that day, a glass of wine in his hand and longing in his heart, I am open to interpretation.

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2

'We're all in this thing together'

An equitable and flexible approach to language diversity in the Stellenbosch University Writing Lab

Sharifa Daniels and Rose Richards

Introduction

Stellenbosch University is historically an Afrikaans-medium university. Since 1994 the University's profile has changed considerably in terms of its student and staff populations, becoming increasingly diverse in terms of languages and cultures. Nonetheless, the majority of students are first language speakers of Afrikaans. This creates many challenges to the University and the Writing Laboratory[1] (hereafter referred to as the Writing Lab), especially that of working with language diversity.

The Writing Lab at Stellenbosch University is one of the spaces on campus where these different languages and cultures come into contact with each other – a type of 'contact zone' (Pratt 1991), but with a difference. According to Pratt, contact zones are 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power' (1991:34). Although not quite as combatant as the Pratt metaphor, our Writing Lab's ethos and practice shares some characteristics: our consultants are multilingual and they work with multilingual writers who use more than one language or dialect. Furthermore, this meeting of language groupings takes place

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1   The term 'writing lab' means the same as 'writing centre' in this chapter.

against a background of historical and political legacies where the power relations are often far from symmetrical and language is highly contested.

Also considering the perspective that 'multilingualism is not what individuals have and don't have, but what the environment, ..., enables and disables.' (Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck 2005: 197), we argue that in South African higher education, spaces such as writing labs are ideally placed to address some of the challenges posed by multilingualism from within complex contexts. Our ethos of student-centredness and our pedagogy of collaborative learning allows for a more equitable and flexible approach to language usage. It allows multilingual writers to bring some of their own resources to academic discourse and in that way enable students to 'shuttle between discourse communities' (Canagarajah 2002:41) and not lose membership of their vernacular discourse community.

In order to do this, we briefly consider the multilingual consultants who work in the Writing Lab in terms of how they negotiate language usage during their consultant training and their feelings about language usage. Thereafter, we describe how language is used in multilingual consultations with one particular class group. All of this occurs against a background of language diversity in South African higher education[2]. Our Writing Lab has emerged from this context (as have all South African writing centres). Stellenbosch's Language Policy and Plan (2002) – itself in part a response to language diversity in South African higher education – has also, to some extent, shaped our identity.

The context: Language diversity, South African higher education and Stellenbosch University

In South African higher education use of English and Afrikaans as media of instruction has been seen as 'a barrier to access and success' (South Africa 2002) and one of the challenges facing South African universities is that of language diversity. Political changes post-apartheid have increased the use of English and decreased the use of African languages and Afrikaans (Heugh 2008). In response to this phenomenon, the South African Language Policy for Higher Education (2002) challenges South African higher education institutions to develop multilingual environments in which all the official languages are developed as academic languages. In addition, these institutions have to ensure that the existing language of instruction does not again act as a means of excluding potential students and staff.

When universities opened access to a broader student population, problems related to language and language diversity became more visible. This issue affects all students at all levels of experience, including postgraduates (Mapesela and Wilkinson 2005). For example, students may be studying in their second or third language, or they may not have adequate command of the standard language variety. Moreover, when they enter university these students also have to acquire a new academic discourse. Students can

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2   'Higher education' refers to all learning programmes leading to qualifications higher than grade 12 or its equivalent in terms of the National Qualifications Framework as outlined in the South African Authority Act, 1995 (Act 58 of 1995), and includes tertiary education as contemplated in Schedule 4 of the Constitution (Higher Education Act 101 of 1997:8).

experience language-related problems because of 'their status as outsiders to academic discourses' and 'their lack of familiarity with the literacy or 'deep rules of [academic] culture' (Boughey 2002:296).

While access to the institution has received a great deal of attention in language policy development, for most students this is not the major hurdle. The chief obstacle remains 'the granting of epistemological access to the processes of knowledge construction' (Morrow in Boughey 2002:305). This has immense consequences for the academic development of students. They will often be told that their language skills need attention, as if this will 'fix' their academic difficulties, while the underlying problem is that they do not know either how, or why, they should participate in academic discourse.

Although South Africa has eleven official languages, many South African universities have chosen only one of these as their official language of teaching and learning: English. Stellenbosch University has opted for two languages, Afrikaans, and, to a lesser extent, English. This makes the language issue at Stellenbosch even more complex and challenging. The complexity with using more than one language as media of instruction lies in the combination of the different languages and different types of student discourses, especially with regard to non-traditional students, and makes it 'particularly difficult for institutions to develop appropriate responses' (Leibowitz and Goodman 1997:6).

Stellenbosch University's response to the language issue both nationally and on its own campus was to formulate a new Language Policy and Plan starting in 2002. The details of this policy are beyond the scope of this chapter. In essence, its multilingual model emphasises the University's commitment to being 'language-friendly', with Afrikaans as the point of departure. The University states that it is 'committed to the use and sustained development of Afrikaans as an academic language in a multilingual context' (Stellenbosch University 2004). Stellenbosch University's Language Policy is also accompanied by a detailed Plan of which the objective is to deal with the practicalities of the Policy (Stellenbosch University 2002, 2004, 2006).

According to Cele, there is a tendency to glamorise language policies to the extent that policy makers create 'political expectations based on language equality' (2004:39). However, there is often a 'disconnectedness' between 'policy pronouncements and practical realities' (49). At Stellenbosch University it can be argued that the policy makers wanted to avoid this 'disconnectedness' between policy and practice and therefore drew up a detailed plan for the implementation of its language policy. The Language Plan identifies the Language Centre as the main instrument to provide language support on campus and to help develop the language proficiency of students and staff (Stellenbosch University 2002, 2004).

It is against this background of transformation in South African higher education and the process of developing a new Language Policy and Plan for the University that the Stellenbosch University Writing Lab was established in 2001. The Writing Lab, as a unit of the Language Centre, forms part of the University's initiatives to develop the academic literacy of students and thereby make the University more accessible to a wider group of students from languages and cultures beyond Afrikaans and English.

The Writing Lab and diversity

Although the main aim of writing labs is to help students develop their academic writing practices, writing labs can be much more than just places to work on writing skills development, language or academic literacy of the student (Nichols 1998; Chapter 6, this book). According to Grimm (in Newman 2003) writing labs can be agents for institutional change responding to 'difference, to alternative discourses, and to non-mainstream literacy' (43). Writing labs can be places 'where students come to "be" and not just to "receive", and where their languages from home and their images of their communities are celebrated as cultural learning resources' (Henning and Van Rensburg 2002:89). In other words, writing labs are student-centred places where difference and diversity are seen as assets. Students' linguistic backgrounds and their cultural knowledge are viewed as resources that they can draw on to help them succeed at university.

The Language Centre at Stellenbosch University has been committed from its inception to language diversity and improving academic literacy in Afrikaans and English equally. This can be seen in the appointment of two Writing Lab heads – one a first language Afrikaans speaker and one a first language English speaker. However, the heads do not work in isolation from each other just as in practice the two languages are seldom used in isolation at the University. The heads prefer an integrated approach to dealing with the two languages and collaborate on all aspects of Writing Lab work. They are both fluent in English and Afrikaans and this enables them to work as a team and deal effectively with the writing concerns of the variety of students who visit the Writing Lab. This approach towards not only the management and administration of the Writing Lab, but also to teaching and learning, has proved to be successful so far: it is inclusive and resonates with writing centre pedagogy which favours a collaborative approach to writing development.

The writing consultants, who are all postgraduate students from different academic disciplines on campus, are also appointed on the basis of their proficiency in Afrikaans and/or English. In addition to their language skills consultants have to be able to work with people and to be competent academic writers. Ideally, all consultants would be bilingual in these languages. However, in practice, there are some consultants who do not speak or understand Afrikaans and it is an advantage if they have competency in one or more languages in addition to English or Afrikaans, since a proportion of the students they consult will not be native speakers of either of these two languages. Not only this, the different permutations of language diversity amongst the consultants may be an accurate reflection of the reality of language usage on campus.

The following table shows the languages and nationalities of the consultants for 2004, 2007 and 2010:

CONSULTANT INFORMATION: 2004-2010						
YEAR	*No. of Consultants*	*First Language Afrikaans*	*First Language English*	*First Language Other*	*Details of first language other*	*Nationality*	*Other languages spoken by consultants in this group*
2004	18	12	3	3	isiXhosa; Shona; French	12 x South African (Afr) 12 x South African (Eng) Other: South African x 1 Zimbabwean x 1 Gabonese x 1	Afrikaans; English; isiZulu
2007	23	11	6	6	isiXhosa; Setswana; Ndebele; Shona; French; Ngie	11 x South African (Afr) 6 x South African (Eng) Other: South African x 1 Zimbabwean x 1 French x 1 Cameroonian x 1 Motswana x 1	Afrikaans; English; Shona; French; isiZulu
2010	25	14	7	4	Shona	14 x South African (Afr) 7 x South African (Eng) 4 x Zimbabwean	Kikuyu, Swahili, French, isiZulu

Table 3.1   *Languages and nationalities of consultants*

What is evident from this table is that a variety of languages is spoken by the consultants from year to year. This language diversity at the structural level of consultant appointments can be an advantage because it helps the Writing Lab to communicate more effectively with a wide range of students on campus. It also enables us, through discussions with the consultants, to gain a better understanding of the discourses and writing practices of students from different communities. Furthermore, it encourages students from all language groups on campus to make use of the Writing Lab's services once they realise that they can work with consultants who literally and metaphorically speak their language.[3]

Multilingualism in consultant training[4]

Consultant training is conducted intensively at the beginning of the academic year and then continuously throughout the year. Although the Writing Lab proclaims itself to be fully bilingual, consultant training is conducted mostly in English because not all the consultants understand Afrikaans. Afrikaans speakers are, however, encouraged to express themselves in the language in which they feel most comfortable. The training materials are mostly in English with a few examples of Afrikaans sample material included. The initial two-day training session is often the first time that consultants make contact with students from other academic disciplines and cultures. The training is interactive and the consultants are required to collaborate and to problem-solve for many of the activities.

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3   We should, however, note that the third official language of the region, isiXhosa, is not as strongly represented in Stellenbosch as it is at some other South African institutions, because isiXhosa-speaking students are relatively few here. Increasing the Writing Lab's body of isiXhosa-speaking consultants is something we hope to develop in years to come as our student demographic continues to change.

4   Many of the quotations in the following parts of the chapter have been translated from Afrikaans.

After the initial training session, we give the consultants a questionnaire for feedback on their experiences. There are eight questions in the questionnaire of which two refer directly to language diversity. The other questions concern mostly the content of the training session and are not relevant to this discussion. Consultants do not have to submit their feedback immediately after the training. They are given time to reflect on the training and to submit their answers electronically. What follows is a brief discussion of the responses from the 2004 group of consultants to the two language related questions.

One question requires the consultants to reflect on their experiences of training with students whose first languages differ from theirs. The consultants usually find the linguistic, academic and cultural diversity of their fellow trainees stimulating and, more importantly, regard the interaction during training as practice for what they can expect in consultations. One of the consultants captures the experience as follows: 'It [the training] in itself was a bit of a practice for the consultations where we also will have to deal with students from diverse linguistic and academic backgrounds'. The consultants are enthusiastic about this experience, describing it as 'wonderful', 'refreshing' and 'insightful'. The fact that linguistically diverse consultants receive their training together is viewed as an advantage and the input of everyone is regarded as worthwhile, as the following comment shows: 'It only emphasised that we are all in this thing together and that everyone has a valid contribution to make'.

The consultants in general have a pragmatic and realistic response about the training being mostly in English. For most consultants this 'wasn't a problem. For practical reasons it could not have been done differently.' Further responses of the consultants to this question show a general acknowledgement about the status, value and accessibility of English as an academic language. Some consultants even express their preference for their training to be in English. Consultants who spoke both Afrikaans and English took their fellow consultants' needs into account, accepting that some could not speak Afrikaans. From this perspective, the choice of English as the language of training is fair and equitable. Our training feedback over the past nine years shows that the general predisposition of the consultants during their initial two-day training is always one of accommodation and 'we are all in this thing together'.

In addition to being the pragmatic choice, English is also seen by some consultants as the common denominator in the training. The consultants regard the use of English as inclusive because it is accessible to all the consultants irrespective of their nationalities: 'English was a fair choice because it is accessible to international and local students ...'. The feedback also shows that given a choice between the use of either English or Afrikaans during training results in the former language becoming the *lingua franca* as this consultant reported: '... therefore it is logical that spontaneously the training mostly happens in English.' For many consultants, even those who have a different mother tongue, English is the preferred language of training. Since many resources are in English, international journals being most often published in English and more terminology existing in English, it is often preferred to Afrikaans as a medium of instruction at the University. Some consultants have been studying and writing in English for years with

the result that English is effectively their academic language. This could be seen during training: 'Academically I prefer it in English although my mother tongue is Afrikaans.'

However, the feedback shows also that some Afrikaans consultants feel uncomfortable with the exclusive use of English as the language of consultant training. The ideal of linguistic equity and equality is a challenge with which some of the Afrikaans consultants grapple in trying to find a balance between asserting their own language rights and helping defend those of others. These responses ranged from English being a fair and pragmatic choice to stronger views about the meaning of multilingualism. Some did not mind having their training in English as long as 'Afrikaans students are given the opportunity to express themselves in Afrikaans'. But there were also a few Afrikaans consultants who felt more strongly about the issue and found the practice of the training being mostly in English 'irritating and inappropriate'. Even though this practice is a dilemma to them, knowing how to solve it remains a challenge: 'to say Afrikaans speakers may express themselves in Afrikaans does not mean much, because everything will be repeated in English. I don't actually know how this problem must be dealt with'.

Some of the consultants questioned the multilingualism of the Writing Lab: 'I preferred it [in English] although more of an equal space could be provided for other languages since the Writing Lab prides itself on being a multilingual environment' and 'if consultants are appointed on the basis of being able to speak English is a reflection of fact that most consultations are in English, then it is something that needs to be addressed'. This response alerted us to the need to be careful when using slogans like 'language friendly'. If the Writing Lab is to be more multilingual, in accordance with the Language Centre's policy documents (Language Centre 2008), then we need to operationalise that claim.

Multilingualism in consultations

In writing centre pedagogy writing is seen as a 'social act [where] writing and learning require us to interact with others' (Gillespie and Lerner 2000:13). In a group where most people speak both languages, but some do not have access to one, participants will choose the language everyone speaks in order to be inclusive. It seems practical to allow a student to communicate in a language that makes him or her feel confident if one's goal is to help that student acquire academic discourse instead of only grammar.

During consultations, consultants and writers are encouraged to collaborate about the writing task and to engage in 'collaborative talk' in order to achieve a common goal. Consultants are advised to be flexible and follow an approach of best practice. In other words, to encourage multilingual writers to use freely their own strategies of how they learn best. This means that writers can use their own vernacular should they wish to do so and if the consultant is able to understand that vernacular.

Furthermore, since multilingual writers enjoy membership of more than one discourse community or community of practice, they often move between them and want to use their own cultural resources to enhance their academic writing (Canagarajah 2002:33). Zamel states that it is quite natural for students who inhabit more than one cultural space to move between discourse communities and for multilingual students to 'mix discourses and merge discourse boundaries', resulting in 'multivocal texts that display

mixed genres of writing' (in Canagarajah 2002:38). This way of using language can help writers perform a subtle political activity by using more of their own voice and linguistic resources (Canagarajah 2006).

What we regard as evidence of this 'shuttling between discourse communities' is a current trend amongst consultants in the Writing Lab of consulting in Afrikaans although the student is writing in English. This way of conducting consultations is initiated by the student writers who feel more at ease expressing themselves in their first language. This situation develops naturally from the casual student habit in informal situations of mixing the two languages and adapting the mix to suit the interlocutors. While we aim to act as a link between the students and the University, students themselves develop empowering language strategies, as the following example shows.

Data from 148 consultations[5] showed a high incidence of alternating between English and Afrikaans during the consultations. In a certain sense this alternation has elements of code-switching because both languages are used for specific, but different academic purposes. These students are taking a course called 'English Studies 178', a first year English course, in which they learn about English language use and discourse in English literature and the media. Although classes are conducted in English and assignments are written in English, well over half the group (80 students) are first language Afrikaans speakers. The remainder (68) are either first language English speakers or speakers of other languages. These latter speakers consulted in English. The Afrikaans speakers, the group we are focusing on, switched between English and Afrikaans while discussing their assignment. We asked the consultants for feedback on these consultations to determine how Afrikaans speakers worked in their first language on English assignments.

The consultants who worked with these students are themselves mostly first language Afrikaans speakers. Nonetheless, they all left the choice of consultation language to the students, either by asking them what they would prefer to speak or, as one of the consultants, puts it, 'just follow[ing] the language of choice as indicated by the students'. Another consultant refers to this as the 'pre-consulting chat' that 'determines the mood of the rest of the conversation'.

Despite students predominantly choosing Afrikaans as the language of the consultation, their consultations tended not to be exclusively in Afrikaans. According to one consultant 'there was probably between 10-15% English in the Afrikaans consultations'. Both languages were used for specific purposes. Afrikaans was used most 'for additional examples and to clarify certain thoughts'. Likewise, consultants found that activities such as discussing problems or areas that were unclear tended to take place in Afrikaans.

English tended to be used to achieve specific goals by both the students and the consultants. The consultants reported that many students used English for brainstorming their ideas before structuring them into an essay. English was generally used for free writing and rewriting and some students used English for all the references to the text, structure and terminology. One consultant reported that she 'just made an effort to use English

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5   After every consultation consultants write a short report. The information from these reports is captured in a data base allowing us to track trends.

terminology [while speaking in Afrikaans] to make the jump to an English text easier'. Another used English only when 'referring to phrases taken directly from the question or story'. So her language choice and code-switching was also strategic, although in a different way from some of the others.

Sometimes the language of consultation would change naturally from Afrikaans to English. Some students would start using Afrikaans, 'but as soon as they realise[d] that I [could] also help them with English formulation and terminology, the consultation language would become more English'. An Afrikaans first-language consultant conducted his consultations mainly in English, 'even though some of the students were Afrikaans speaking'. One consultant spoke of working with an Afrikaans-speaking student who preferred his consultation in English, because '[h]e felt that, by speaking English, he'[d] improve his English vocabulary, which he had a problem with'.

Usually the language negotiation continued into the consultation, but within certain parameters and with certain presuppositions. The comfort of the interlocutor was always paramount and determined any language changes made by the consultants. Two consultants felt that 'once we've started in Afrikaans – we can't switch over to English – it seems unnatural. This is especially true for Afrikaans first-language speakers who aren't as proficient in English'. Another consultant explained that the students feared sounding stupid in their second language. Using Afrikaans gave them self-confidence and gave them back some control of the situation. She added that 'consulting in English when we both knew ourselves to be Afrikaans-speaking, would have seemed slightly ridiculous'. Another reason for using Afrikaans in the consultations is that students are 'very self-conscious about their English' and this can be 'very counterproductive'.

A case can be made for using the student's preferred language in a writing consultation and doing this makes an important distinction between the role of writing consultant and language teacher, as one consultant explains:

> The idea of using one language to discuss a [writing] project in another language may seem strange, but in this case it was justified by the fact that my role, as I understood it, was not that of language teacher, but of writing consultant. My main focus was on improving the text, and this was best achieved by consulting in the students' mother tongue, thereby making sure that they cognitively grasped what I was trying to bring across.

Despite the advantages reported by the consultants of speaking Afrikaans while writing in English in consultation, some significant difficulties remain. This group of consultations were described as 'very complex' and 'the most challenging consultations I have ever done'. The students (who were first year university students writing their first assignment for English 178) 'had difficulty understanding what all the elements were that they had to discuss'. They battled with 'order[ing] their thoughts in a logical fashion', having a central thesis and supporting their ideas with quotations from the short story being analysed. These are issues that worry most first year students, even those students writing in their first language. University writing is a new discourse that differs greatly from what students have learned to do in high school.

In addition to this, some Afrikaans speakers thought in Afrikaans and translated their thoughts into English. This caused language interference in their writing, especially in the instances where they would import grammatical structures from one language to another and end up with sentences that were not idiomatic. One of the consultants reported that some of her students were encouraged by their lecturer to think in English while writing. Despite this advice, the students found that consulting in English could impede their writing process and continued using Afrikaans in consultations because they could not convey ideas clearly in their second language.

Could mixing languages in this way have been avoided? Some consultants thought it should have been. A consultant cautioned against using too much of one language for an assignment in another language:

> During consultations, most Afrikaans-speaking students expressed their thoughts more confidently in Afrikaans. However, I think that such students may perhaps have benefited more from consultations in English – it gives them the opportunity to 'practise' expressing their thoughts in English.

In the long term, consultations in English might have helped develop English writing skills.

Other consultants have, however, raised some cogent reasons for speaking Afrikaans in consultations about English writing. One of them pointed out an important positive consequence in working towards closing the language 'gap': '[The students] could express themselves better and therefore, when something was unclear to me, they explained what they meant in Afrikaans. When they could express themselves more clearly, it was easier for me to help them and to know what they want[ed] to say in the essay'. Another consultant takes switching between languages during consultation a bit further by explaining that her own knowledge of Afrikaans was useful in the consultations:

> Sometimes when I ... came across a grammar mistake or formulation that was being consistently made due to the transfer of grammar rules that a student was making from Afrikaans to English it was useful to have a working knowledge of Afrikaans so that I could illustrate what the problem was and how the two languages varied.

Apart from the perceived difficulties the students experienced, the consultants had language interference problems of their own. Perhaps ironically, consultants who have studied and written in their second language (English) for years, found themselves influenced by their own writing background when working with second language English speakers.

> Because I usually prefer to do all my own academic writing in English, I do tend to code-switch a little, sometimes feeling at a loss for the appropriate words in Afrikaans. However, I always check that the student understands what I mean.

These consultants have developed English as their academic language but have not always developed an equivalent academic or technical vocabulary in their own first

language. This can interfere with their ability to help another student academically in their shared first language.

Conclusion

The situations we have sketched show that multilingualism is complex and that there are no neatly packaged answers that can be applied across the board. It is very difficult in a multilingual environment, perhaps even impossible, to satisfy everyone and to cater to everyone's individual language needs. Ideally, we would use more of the languages spoken by consultants and students when training or consulting. As it is, we predominantly use the two languages of instruction at Stellenbosch University, with an emphasis on one (English), for practical reasons. We are aware of the imbalance and of the irony of replacing one language of power with another language of power. We try to adjust the balance where we can. Perhaps our version of multilingualism is no more than a 'truncated competence' (Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck 2005: 197). As Canagarajah (2006) and Madiba (2010) have shown, it can be difficult in higher education to practice what one preaches with multilingualism.

Consultant training and consultations show that in the multilingual and informal setting at the Writing Lab some degree of flexibility is possible and that the nature of the interaction can determine the level of language equity practiced. Although practical considerations prevent a truly equal approach to language usage during consultant training, the collaborative ethos of the writing consultations allows for a flexible and accommodating approach to language usage. It further shows that even though the two languages of instruction may be treated separately from each other in theory, they do not exist separately in practice.

Our policy of multilingualism at this stage is an ideal towards which we strive with an awareness of the problems and pitfalls as we continue to try, but also with an awareness of the perils of not trying. We see what is happening in the Writing Lab in terms of language usage as representing, on a small scale, some of what is happening on a larger scale in our university and our country.

If the Writing Lab is truly a contact zone, it is perhaps not our task to create perfect harmony (and uniformity), but rather to allow the different voices to be heard and to let them express their own problems and dissatisfactions. Ultimately, our task – the task of writing labs/writing centres in South Africa – in developing academic writers goes beyond teaching them to speak a language. We should really be helping them to engage in academic discourse – that is, to challenge ideas, and to problematise situations, rather than normalise themselves to fit in. Working with diverse students gives consultants an opportunity to gain a clearer understanding and acceptance of language diversity. Coming to the Writing Lab should give students a chance to try out and ultimately trust their own unique voices.

Multilingualism as an ideal and multilingualism in practice may differ. It is important for South African universities to acknowledge that multilingual writers adopt empowering strategies and to regard 'deviation from academic discourse as a sign of unproficiency or failure is to underestimate the agency of students' (Canagarajah 2002:33). With so many

different ways of speaking and so many different types of students each bringing his/her own linguistic context to campus we need to make space for individual growth and self-expression in South African higher education. To this end the Writing Lab's flexible approach to language usage allows for a possibility of equity in a situation where we are indeed all in this thing together.

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PART 2

NEGOTIATING ACADEMIC LITERACY SPACES

<div style="text-align: center">**3**</div>

Feedback or feed-forward?

Implications of language used in giving
feedback on students' writing

Somikazi Deyi

Introduction

While working with students' writing, the Writing Centre staff at Cape Peninsula
University of Technology (CPUT, formerly known as Cape Technikon) often found
themselves working with lecturers' feedback too: interpreting it, rewording it and
explaining it to the students. This chapter discusses some of the findings of a study about
how students respond to written feedback on their assignments in order to problematise
the issue of feedback that is difficult to understand and to show how this limits what
can be achieved in writing consultations. While mainstream academia often works with
feedback, writing centres tend to work with feed-forward. This can be a strength for
writing centres and the lecturers and students who use them, but the writing centre's role
in helping students can be misunderstood.

Feedback has generally been a one-way process, driven by the lecturers and influenced
by their views on student writing, delivered to the student who is not usually given space
to question or discuss it. It has often been received by students in the same way that
they receive a 'pass' or 'fail', with little or no interrogation. This is contrary to what
Gibbs and Lucas (1997) posit to be the purpose of feedback. If feedback is a response,
an answer given in a word or act, such an answer should be well understood by the one
for whom it is intended. It is different from grading a paper. Grading a paper concerns
evaluating a student's performance in the past. Giving feedback means considering a

student's development in the future. If we look at feedback in this way, it becomes more appropriate to see it as a 'feed-forward', because it should allow its recipient to act upon it for improvement. This means the language of feedback must be well articulated, directive and specific.

Students enter university in order to master their studies which involve adapting to the academic discourse. Acquiring the discourse is linked to the manner in which students' writing or reading of essays, projects and proposals is conducted. This includes receiving feedback and the way students engage with it. Feedback is often not encouraging or is at a level far above students' cognition with the result that they struggle to develop the tasks or an understanding of their disciplines. Learners often expect lecturers to follow the same pattern of teaching as in high school and lecturers expect students to conduct themselves like experienced students of a tertiary institution. In the case of feedback, students are expected to understand the language or codes used to comment on their writing.

As pointed out by Street (1995) and Taber (2001), students enter the arena of first year studies frequently bearing unexamined assumptions. In part, the assumptions lie in the insufficient recognition of the university as a cultural community in its own right, made up of subcultures, each with their own discourses (Hutchings 1998). Lecturers have mostly been part of university discourses long enough to have internalised these. Gaining access to these discourse communities, however, requires a careful apprenticeship that is more problematic than many academics and students recognise (Williams 2005). Such careful apprenticeship could help students gain confidence in their efforts and therefore gain the necessary competencies and knowledge needed without feeling as if they are on the periphery of the institution. This could equip them with critical abilities to ask themselves questions about the feedback on their writing.

This chapter gives an account of the extent to which the language of feedback has a positive or negative impact on students' performances. It explores the gap that exists between the intentions of the lecturers when writing their comments and the understanding of the students when reading and interpreting their feedback. This gap is recognisable when students tend to continue using the writing style they used when submitting the initial task. Repetition, with less improvement in their writing, seems to indicate that some students have no clear understanding regarding what is required of them. This chapter suggests the need to recognise that the language used when giving feedback to students can be one of the obstacles to the improvement of students' writing if it is not well articulated and does not give careful guidance. This is where a writing centre is compelled to interpret the feedback for students, something that could better have been dealt with at the time that it was written. The language used in lecturers' comments should act as an empowering mechanism which gives those for whom it is intended a clear direction and an informed basis from which the writer can improve. It should serve as a guide towards discovering writing as another medium of learning.

Students' confusion about feedback is carried to the Writing Centre where consultants have to spend large amounts of time assisting students to interpret and use the given feedback effectively to improve writing. When the language used in the feedback is too

unclear for students to act on, it requires the consultant's assistance to work out what needs to be developed. At times, consultants are even required to call the lecturer to obtain clarity to avoid cases where students might receive conflicting messages on the same problem. This is not always an obstacle-free process. If lecturer-writing consultant relations are not well established, problems may arise. Lecturers may feel targeted and accused of not clarifying their tasks to students. This concern puts some pressure on the consultant who has initiated the dialogue, even though engaging in a conversation concerning feedback with the student would be beneficial in that they could clarify the statements in the feedback.

Lecturers' feedback may be regarded as a discourse of its own (Lea and Street 1998:169). This is judged by the relative progress in subsequent writing where lecturers are sceptical about the extent to which students utilise comments written at the end of an essay. Perhaps some of the scepticism is warranted, given the fact that such comments are not always usable. When this happens, consultants act as interpreters, helping students to learn academic discourse almost as if it were a foreign language.

All of these considerations play out against a background rife with power imbalances between academics and academic support practitioners (and the resulting lack of credibility for writing consultants), lecturers' territoriality and their exhaustion. I cannot address all of these issues in my chapter. This may give the impression that I am arguing against writing centres. I am not. The input of writing consultants is essential for students' academic growth on our campus. Consultants do succeed in helping students learn the language of academic discourse and thereby find ways of expressing themselves academically. This does alter the status quo, albeit subtly, because students who would otherwise fail and be excluded from the institution and from finishing their degrees at least have a chance of success and of being part of an environment and participating in practices which must eventually accommodate them to an extent. These small successes are indeed modest, but long-lasting.

Contextual Background

Initially, the focus of our Writing Centre's work was on first year students only, but, because of the growing demand from all other levels, it has been impossible to restrict ourselves to entry-level students. For the purposes of this particular investigation, however, first year students have remained the focus since they consult the Writing Centre more frequently than other students, and often because the feedback they receive tends not to be clear enough to serve as a pointer for them towards much improvement of writing. This can result in students repeatedly receiving similar feedback on more than one version of the same writing task, especially if they have not visited the Writing Centre. The group we observed for this study are Engineering students doing Communication Studies and who bring their assignments to the Writing Centre. Like many students they had the choice of whether or not to use the Writing Centre.

Some of the first year Engineering students visited the Writing Centre because they were not sure why they had failed their written tasks (essays, reports or projects). According to them, their essays were easy to read, straightforward and to the point. Feedback on

some of these essays did not allow enough opportunity for improvement in that students tended to be unable to use it as a foundation from which to develop or progress. Some of them struggled to interpret feedback given and mediation was needed.

For students to become full members of the discourse they must have mastery of the norms and trends of the discourse (Paxton 1998). If students are not familiar with the discourse, feedback is unlikely to permit them to improve. This is perhaps because of the literal manner in which feedback is received by some students. For instance, if the lecturer's comment is 'elaborate' students seem to write one or two sentences which may not be supporting the idea they were asked to elaborate. Lecturers expect students to understand what 'elaborate' means. It becomes clear that it is largely these dual sets of assumptions (students' and lecturers') that seem to impede students' understanding of the language used. The tension between individuals and systems in studies of language in education is captured well by Kress (1989) who explains that language is complex and dynamic and that the individual's role in communication cannot be underestimated. In the case of feedback to students about their writing, however, students seem to be on the periphery of their own work.

The role of feedback

This chapter has as its theoretical underpinning, the premise that feedback as a form of assessment should influence the way in which students respond to courses. It should provide orientation to courses while at the same time improving academic performance and changing the way in which students learn (Gibbs and Lucas 1997). Feedback should be seen as a foundation upon which writing practices are explored through scaffolding. Feedback as a form of assessment, should influence the way students respond to courses. Black and William (1998) contend that effective feedback promotes student learning where the feedback is not linked to marks. Feedback should provide orientation to courses while at the same time improve performance and change the way students learn (Gibbs and Lucas 1997). Gibbs and Lucas further assert that feedback should capture student time and attention, generate appropriate student learning activity, provide timely feedback, help students to internalise the discipline's standards and notions of quality, generate marks which distinguish between students or which enable pass/fail decisions.

In an attempt to see feedback as central to learning as opposed to a yardstick used to measure the capacity and amount of knowledge students have acquired, a question arises, 'what is the role of feedback?' Feedback could be a 'feed-forward' process through which writers are able to reflect and work on the comments made regarding their writing to develop their understanding. I have understood feedback to be a creative mechanism pointing one to a particular direction such that learning becomes transferable. The language used in giving feedback sometimes goes over the students' heads, which defeats the purpose of allowing them to use it constructively. The language used in some cases seems not only judgemental, but also discouraging and demotivating to students.

Gibbs and Lucas (1997) assert that feedback is intended to lead to changes and improvements in student writing. They emphasise the view that it should increase the number of opportunities for resubmission. Through feedback, both lecturers and learners

should develop their action points for the future. It should encourage, and not diminish, self-esteem and motivation. Constructive feedback can be more motivating than merely being graded. The process depends, amongst other things, on the language used and the ability to interpret it. Feedback should therefore be scaffolded so that it can be used as a strategy for improving student learning. It should define goals for learning that students can understand, and design performances that provide multiple opportunities to achieve these goals.

According to Ramaprasad (1983) students need to see that feedback is information about the gap between actual performance and the reference level which is subsequently used to alter the gap. This makes it imperative for two aspects of feedback to be addressed:

    a.   the meaningful understanding of the language used, and
    b.   the appropriate response by students.

The first aspect points to the necessity of making assessment feedback concrete and explicit. Students would find it easier to write to the lecturer's satisfaction if they knew what was expected. Unless markers can communicate their criteria (however professionally contestable) students may feel confused and unfairly treated. Students are unlikely to act if the advice offered is on an already completed product of writing that they are not given a chance to resubmit. Writing is a developmental process which can be attained through the use of drafts. Drafts can assist students in meeting the expectations of the lecturer while enabling them to grasp the academic discourse. During the process, feedback can be negotiated with the lecturer in which case uncertainty could be dealt with before submission of the final draft.

The students that we see at the Writing Centre tend to think that there are no corrections needed when the tasks they submit are returned blank or clean and are flabbergasted when they fail. This is due to the fact that often the language used in feedback is intended to discourage interaction. For instance, students are told 'this does not make sense'. First, the statement does not allow a response. Additionally, the statement carries a general negative connotation, which implies that they are not thinking clearly, or that something is wrong with their brain. This kind of comment does not allow students to act upon the feedback and learn to do better. Instead it takes away the enthusiasm to write essays and the eagerness to participate through writing in an academic setting. Once enthusiasm is gone, students withdraw from participating fully even in the Writing Centre and rather remain on the margins, performing at 'average' or 'just above average'. It holds them back from unleashing their full potential.

While feedback demands a lot of work by the assessor (lecturer), it often does not help the student if the language used impedes understanding. While this may not be deliberate, it seems that there is a significant gap between the understanding of language used in giving feedback and the understanding of language used to interpret it. This gap is increased by the fact that the language of feedback is not significantly seen as one of the values underlying educational practice. While recognising feedback as a form of assessment that is rooted in the process of curriculum development and review, there is a need to focus on the assessment process in which the lecturer and student meet and that also requires focusing on the language used in assessing a task (Williams 2005). Assessment

can be thought of as occurring whenever one person, in some kind of interaction, direct or indirect, with another, is conscious of obtaining information about the other person. To one extent or another, in an ideal world, assessment is an attempt to know that person (Williams 2005). Seeing assessment as a notion of knowing a person is often missing in the context of our Engineering students in that the feedback given by lecturers often does not invite students to engage more with the lecturers should they seek clarity.

This is the experience of students by the time they come for consultation at the Writing Centre seeking clarity on feedback given to them. These students are by no means unable to construct ideas, but rather are not in a position to interpret feedback given to them. Through their attempts to act upon feedback received, one can see they have different understandings or no understanding at all of comments made. This poses more writing challenges for our students and also for the consultants working at the Centre. The challenge grows as consultants deal with different layers of languages such as the language used in giving feedback, the language of academic writing and sometimes, the language of facilitating a consultation process.

Implications of feedback on students writing

While Writing Centre consultants spend time trying to figure out ways in which feedback intended for students can be conveyed in a manner that would assist them in developing their writing, they also have to deal with academic writing issues that emerge (ranging from plagiarism to repetition). At times, this process forces the consultant to seek clarity from the lecturer regarding feedback given to the student. Such a process prolongs the time spent on each student merely getting past initial issues regarding feedback. On the one hand, the lecturer assumes that the student understands the comments given and, on the other hand, the student assumes the writing consultant knows the meanings attached to comments given. While the vagueness of feedback places a huge burden on the writing consultant's shoulders it also denies the student an opportunity to forge his/her own growth in the writing process, because he/she become passive, waiting for the consultant to explain. At the same time this gives rise to the question of whether writing consultants should be dealing with this kind of work in the first place. The process requires writing consultants to go beyond their expected role. This could cause tensions with particular stakeholders involved and might negatively impact on lecturer/consultant relationships.

Below are examples of misinterpretations students have of feedback. These examples are the result of an interview held with ten out of thirty-five Engineering students who seemed to struggle to work with feedback.

ASSESSORS' COMMENTS	STUDENT'S COMMENTS TO THE CONSULTANT
This is not clear	Shall I write more and explain what I meant?
What does this mean?	Does this mean I should explain what I mean after each sentence?
Pay attention to 1 and 2	The student thinks s/he should ignore the cohesiveness of the task and concentrate on 1 and 2 as separate entities.
Explain	This means I should write more to explain the same thing.

Assessors' Comments	Student's Comments to the consultant
Cut	Cut what? It makes more sense for me for this part of the sentence to be here because it qualifies what I'm saying. If I cut it, it does not make sense to me. Do you get what I'm saying?
How do you know this?	I read it from the book. Is there a problem with the book? If there is, where is it?
Are these your words?	Meaning what? I wrote this so I used my words. I do not understand what is asked here.
Fix this.	What is wrong about it? How do I fix it? How can I fix it if I do not know anything wrong about the sentence?
Difficult to understand	It seems straight forward to me why should it be difficult to understand? What is exactly difficult about it?
Nice but elaborate	Shall I fix this too? If it is nice how do I fix it and why because she says the sentence is nice?
Organise your thoughts	How does one do that? I do not understand at all.
Correct this	What is wrong about it?
You seem not to have grasped the topic	I am not sure what this means. There is no mark allocated and I am told to redo the essay. Does this mean the whole essay is wrong?
Hard to believe	Maybe if I write one more sentence it will explain my thinking and it will be easy to believe.
This does not make sense	What does not make sense about this sentence? It makes sense to me. What am I supposed to do now?

What seemed interesting was the negative association that students have regarding feedback. When lecturers wrote 'good point' or 'nice', students wanted to know why lecturers should comment about that. They wanted to know whether that needs to be looked at as well for correction purposes. There is a pattern that emerges from this table. Students sometimes use feedback the way they understand it and this results in repeated failure of the same essay. There is no direction given because of the language gap between student discourse, feedback discourse and academic discourse. In short, comments made by the students display a gap between how they understand the given feedback and its intended purpose. This is compounded by the writing and linguistic resources they have. Dealing with this will require a scaffolding process to assist students to use feedback effectively. The process will ensure continuity in discussing problems enabling the student to ask questions, and at the same time, find answers relating to feedback given. Instead of being puzzled and demotivated by lecturers' comments, the students can begin to utilise the Writing Centre not as a means of re-explaining comments, but rather as a platform to seek clarity on other and more sophisticated issues posing difficulty.

The probing approach which consultants use during writing consultations seems to work well as a form of feedback. Attempting to understand what the students mean by statements they write helps students to develop a sense of how they might write in the future. Writing centre praxis tends to be forward-looking. During consultations, students are encouraged to think about the claims they make. Asking questions helps: 'Can you say more about this? What are you saying here? Is there no other way to rephrase, like using other words? Why do you say so?' Responses to these open-ended questions set

a foundation to guide student writing, helping students to see their shortfalls and learn from them.

The examples of feedback given above and the responses from the students affirm what Williams (2005) points out, that feedback is a genre of its own. There is a need to do some examination of the genre with first year students in particular, because students and lecturers enter the arena of the first year at university frequently bearing unexamined assumptions (Street 1995; Taber 2001). Gaining access to academic discourse requires a careful apprenticeship that is more problematic and often slower than many academics and students recognise (Williams 2005).

Lecturers' comments on ways they give feedback

Understanding feedback as situated social practice challenges assumptions about assessment being a neutral act. Drawing from this notion, lecturers should see assessment as distinct, purposive and an intentional process that exists alongside, but is also independent of, academic discourse. Failure to recognise this means that lecturers may fail to elicit knowledge from students who in fact possess the knowledge and that the assessment and learning processes will continue to be inequitable (Williams 2005). Because of this, lecturers need to become aware of the effect their feedback can have.

For this study, a group of six lecturers were consulted to share and discuss the problems highlighted by students regarding the misconceptions as a result of the language used in given feedback. The people selected were consulted because they were a group with whom I had worked very closely as individuals. They all acknowledged that they had never linked the language used in giving feedback with subsequent student writing. However, they noticed a pattern of repeated mistakes. A primary example would be where the lecturer writes 'repetition' on a student's assignment. Instead of removing the repetition from their argument, it is likely that students will do more of what they have already done in an attempt to elaborate on the point that needs correction.

One lecturer from this group indicated concerns about being explicit in giving feedback as a way to promote stagnation in that students may not be able to 'find things on their own'. This meant that students should find out independently the meaning of feedback given or else they would become passive. Some of the issues that were raised involved paying less attention to feedback because it has always been given the way lecturers offer it. These lecturers had never placed emphasis on using feedback as a method for development. While the idea of elaborating on feedback seemed beneficial to students, lecturers pointed out time constraints to give attention to individual papers/essays/projects as a factor preventing it. However, in response to the issue of time, it is generally felt that once feedback is dealt with effectively, it allows students to begin to write independently with fewer mistakes.

Since students have individual kinds of problems, addressing them through a general approach is often not helpful. One particular lecturer held the view that feedback integration means generic explanations of criteria and what is expected of a student when the essay question is given out. However, this has not stopped students repeating the same problems pointed out by the lecturer. Should her integration have included explanations,

drawing examples from previous essays, it could have been more effective. Issues raised by students pointed to a need to see the centrality of language in the feedback given. As it appears, feedback given to students is understood only to the giver not the one it is intended for. This gap increases the frequency of trips taken to the Writing Centre for the same issues because the feedback given cannot be applied across academic writing since it is not assisting the student to build his understanding.

The potential of working with the Writing Centre on feedback

It is difficult to discuss feedback without briefly looking into the processes of writing. This is because writing is one of the most difficult practices for students to master and it is also the standard to assess successful students' performance in higher learning. Writing essays/projects/examinations serves as one of the main ways, if not the main way, to display acquired knowledge through a period of study. Sometimes the feedback on these writing tasks does not help the student to grow and become an independent writer. Independence is not achieved partly because of the misunderstandings and (mis) interpretations of the language used in given feedback.

Linked to this is the cultural context in which these students embed their writing. In some African literary and educational environments, students rhyme, use idioms, metaphors and proverbial forms of language. It is expected traditionally that students would do this in order to perform well. The portrayal of this in writing indicates the scholastic performance of a student. Western thinking defines rhyming as repetition while in the African context it is emphasis. Growing up in a culture where language is made rich by its users, drawing on poetic trends of speech, one learns that to be elected to positions in community programmes one needs to portray wisdom through speech. If one is able to draw from stories of the past using a crafted way of speaking, this qualifies one to lead. An African culture judges its great leaders by speech, which is then carried over to writing. It is referred to in isiXhosa as '*ubuciko'.* This means good use of words. Often in African cultures, using the language of the author or teacher from whom one has learned shows how scholastically inclined one is. For students from this background, using other people's ideas in the ways discussed above is not plagiarism or repetition, but rather a demonstration of their ability to listen and reproduce the wisdom of the learned one. In western culture, by contrast, 'thinking for oneself' is prised, as is 'internalising' information and putting it into one's own words. In some African traditions, a scholar will enrich the given topic by elaborating on the facts and by providing certain types of rhythm. Western culture does not value this: repetition is perceived as lack of familiarity with the academic discourse in terms of writing. It is at these points that the discourses and cultures seem to clash. Lecturers often find themselves at a disadvantage when they cannot speak the language of a learner or lack in-depth information regarding learners' background. They tend to offer feedback based on a more western context. Lecturers are exposed to a situation that could see learners in possession of a knowledge capital that could be utilised and should be carefully negotiated.

The Writing Centre needs to have conversations with lecturers regarding the feedback they offer. Tied to this is the way in which assignment questions are posed or structured. Some of these are closed statements that are not directive since they are not clear

enough to give students a direction for action. The process to work out the 'process' would become the role of a writing consultant. This leads to longer and more frequent consultations over the same writing task to ensure that the students ultimately understand the instruction or the language of feedback used. Consultants' work is also multiplied because at times they play mediator between student, feedback and lecturer/assessor, sometimes placing them in a vulnerable position. There are cases where feedback is not clear enough and this creates a situation where some of the lecturers are asked to explain or clarify the meaning of the suggested feedback. Many lecturers could use this collaboration to their advantage. They could make going to the Writing Centre a prerequisite for essay writing. As it is, each student gets a note that reads, 'I have been to the Writing Centre and received help on topic decoding, essay structure'. The note has a part in which a consultant must sign his or her name and provide the date. The note also has the lecturer's name. The process works well even though some lecturers refuse to collaborate with the consultants as they prefer to deal with questions at hand during lectures.

Lecturers should point out what needs to be cut, for instance, 'this is a good point but keep your sentence short by using another verb which captures your argument; you have already said this, how about deleting this sentence? Why is this so?' Instead of saying, 'how do you know this?', it would be more helpful to tell them to reference. Being explicit in giving feedback helps students find their way.

The language used in giving feedback should guide learners to articulate their views or thoughts clearly. It should help students to improve their work because at times seeking assistance from elsewhere stagnates their pace of working and understanding. As a result, they take time to learn to write independently since they are not sure whether they understand the feedback suggested clearly. Williams (2005) suggests that promoting student learning can be provided within sessions as opposed to waiting after completion of the module as that would allow integration of feedback and clarify criteria as students deal with written tasks.

It is clear from students' comments that lecturers' scaffolding of feedback criteria could be used as a teaching practice (Race 2005). Such a process might limit uncertainty about feedback given. In the process of scaffolding, questions could be asked and clarity offered. This would be in line with Writing Centre practice and therefore not confuse students. Integration of feedback during lesson planning may give clear guidance and may resolve the language related issues that may crop up later. This could be used as a session where the meaning of comments made by lecturers could be explained as well as problematised for the benefit of both the lecturer and students.

If this were followed by lecturers, the Writing Centre staff could avoid any involvement with these kinds of issues and could refer students to the staff development programme run by the Centre for Higher Education, so that the Writing Centre is not seen as overloaded with staff development issues. Through staff development programmes lecturers can be equipped to reflect on how they use the language of giving feedback and the implications it has on students. This could be done through seminars, workshops or

roundtable discussion. The process will enable lecturers to explicitly spell out issues of concern by embedding feedback into lectures.

Conclusion

My contention is that the language used in giving students feedback should be carefully considered by lecturers and classroom activities on essay writing should be used to help scaffold student writing development by making clear lecturers' expectations. This integration would ensure that students are equipped enough to understand the lecturers' use of feedback language. This would allow the gap between the lecturer's expectations and the students to be bridged. It would help students understand beforehand the kind of response expected from them. Integrating feedback in teaching would ensure that students are able to develop their writing further (Gibbs 1999). They would use the remarks as a checklist and a point of reference encouraging, reflection, interpretation and enquiring about the given feedback with understanding (Race 1999, 2000). When they consult with a writing consultant, the writing consultant would be able to spend more time in facilitating further development of skills and a more sophisticated understanding of academic discourse. The student would no longer be the passive recipient of 'authorities'' (both lecturer and consultant) points of view.

Furthermore, integration would ensure that there are no tensions arising between lecturers and writing consultants. Student development can be a contentious issue in terms of roles and the extent to which the lecturer is willing to cooperate with the writing consultant. For example when writing consultants enquire about the meaning of a particular statement the lecturer made in giving feedback, the responses are often, 'we did that in class, I'll explain to the large group in class; why did s/he not tell me that he did not understand what I wrote?' All of these questions attribute to issues of space and territory. If these could be resolved and feedback could be seen by lecturers as feed-forward, then the Writing Centre could help address student needs through further integration of its activities with those of the (mainstream) classroom.

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4

The discourse of selfhood

Students negotiating their academic
identities in a writing centre

Wilhelm van Rensburg

This chapter first appeared in 2004 as an article with the same title in the* Journal for Language Teaching. *In 2006 the article was one of the articles nominated by the International Writing Center Association for the best article about writing centres in an academic journal. This and its topic make it a landmark article in the South African writing centre context.

Introduction

The issue under discussion in this article is the way postgraduate African students negotiate their academic identities in the Writing Centre of the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg. Concomitant with major political changes in the country, the University has changed its policies of access to higher education under a previously discriminatory political dispensation with regard to African students. These students have to redefine themselves continually at various levels: they are social engineers, forging a new South Africa by commencing graduate study and research in order to take educational leadership in the country. Although relatively new to the roles, they are expected by the institution to become expert researchers and report writers, as a consequence becoming almost 'fixed' in their academic identities. For instance, they are labeled as 'poorly educated', 'previously disadvantaged', 'underprepared', students from 'historically black universities', being fast-tracked through agendas and programmes of equity, redress and access stipulated in, among other documents, the

National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa (2001). When these students present themselves to the academy, they are positioned as lacking real academic literacy, as 'novice' researchers and 'apprentices', as 'amateurs', as 'trainee researchers' to be 'initiated' into the discourse community, thus maintaining the unequal power relations in society: the Supervisor-Student relationship can easily be equated with that of the Master-Apprentice in the workplace.

Not all students, however, are willing to conform to these makeshift academic identities, a stance which often leads to confrontation and contestation. I argue that one of the most important ways in which they 'assume' alternative and perhaps 'real' academic identities in the University, is in and through their writing. Apart from mainstream writing-intensive courses, scarce as they are, with a suitable infrastructure, the Writing Centre is the best space to posit the developing academic identities of these students, shaped by their *academic literacies*, (Lea 1999; Lea and Street 1998) their skills, their experiences and their socio-cultural background, against the expectations of the academy, and with the *academic discourse of transparency* (Lillis 2001; Lillis and Turner 2001; Turner 1999) that often characterise expectations of student work and writing. The problem therefore revolves around the fixing – and unfixing – of academic identities.

Considering the discourse of transparency

The discourse of transparency is the dominant conceptualisation of language in Western intellectual tradition. When language is working well, in this tradition, it is invisible. Academic thinking, it is also assumed, is rational and logical. When language is not working well, it draws attention and it becomes an object of censure, marking a deficiency in the individual students using it, marking their writing 'illogical', and/or 'irrational'. The discourse of transparency assumes that writing should be done with absolute clarity when representing knowledge. Academic writing should be representing the universal, intellectual tradition of objectivist epistemology. If one takes academic literacies seriously, if one values the students' experiences and the processes they engage in while crafting their written products, one has in fact to question the academic discourse of transparency, one has to reveal the workings of the written language and the value systems behind the works. In other words, the epistemological role of language has switched from that of perfectly reflecting and revealing reality and reason, to that of communicating knowledge clearly. Academic literacies shatter that mirror image, revealing the shape *of* language and the shapes *in* language.

The assumptions of a transparent discourse of writing are that students have to write an introduction to their topics; that they cite authorities in the field; that they use faultless grammar and punctuation; and that they avoid plagiarism (Johns, drawing on Elbow, Geertz and Purvis 1997). Most importantly, students are supposed to argue intelligently and structure their arguments coherently and logically (Lillis 2001). As a result, written feedback on student writing often contains such comments as 'Say exactly what you mean', 'Express your ideas clearly', 'Be explicit', 'State clearly', 'Spell it out', and so on. Although the rhetorical organisation of academic writing is *highly significant*, it is also socio-culturally situated and hence subject to change. Students are supposed to be viewed as inherently a heteroglossic grouping in a homoglossic environment –

the University – but such a difference only leads to a chasm between students and the academy and, furthermore, to the notion that students and institution should develop new pedagogies and new epistemologies in order to bridge the divide. These pedagogies, I argue, should be less concerned with simply developing such key skills as academic writing and communication, but more about creating and utilising new spaces such as the Writing Centre in order to allow for negotiation of academic identities.

With regard to new epistemologies, I maintain that the role of the academy is not for students to reproduce knowledge but to create new knowledge and participate in doing that. It is not enough for institutions to give students access to the academy and to socialise them into the dominant practices. Students have to work through the different voices in a written text and explore which voices to own; students have to problematise the transparency of language; and they have to open up 'talk back' spaces. In other words, student writers are to make their own meaning; to contest the dominant conventions of the academy. Students, in fact, have to flout the *discourse of belonging* to the academic community because it does not ensure automatic admittance to the community. Graduate students are, in fact, constantly subjected to a *discourse of surveillance* when they embark on their research. They are subjected to various standards of graduate research supervision which spell out such things as admission and selection criteria; doctorial committees; advanced degree committees; doctorial seminars; codes of conduct listing the responsibilities of the student and the responsibilities of the supervisor; support structures of the students; monitoring of studies; termination of studies; and formal assessment (Standards for Graduate Research/Supervision 2004).

Shedding light on other discourses

There is another discourse, that of 'selfhood', that the students can perform in the Writing Centre. This discourse of selfhood centres on the self as author, on how authoritative or committed the students are to their ideas; on how the self is represented in the written text, on how the students mask or disclose their own personalities in the text; and on how students deal with conflict of the constraints of academic writing conventions and what they ideally want to convey about their socio-cultural identities in relation to academic discourse (Clark and Ivanič 1997; Ivanič 1998). Consequently, students can be positioned in another way by and in the academy. No longer are they the disadvantaged, the under-prepared, the illogical, irrational novices: they can be treated as having significant expertise as well. Pemberton (2002), for example, uses the age, experience and motivation of graduate students, together with their disciplinary knowledge and their expertise with texts and documents to argue that they are quite active in Writing Centre tutorial sessions in asking questions, suggesting ideas, and listening intently to any suggestions the tutor makes. Because they think of themselves as serious students, Pemberton goes on to say, graduate students are therefore exceptional conference participants. Leverenz (2002) calls this the *discourse of expertise*, the participants in this discourse being the graduate students and their expertise in a particular discipline; the tutors with their expertise in writing and tutoring; and the disciplinary professor with his or her expertise as a teacher-mentor. Interaction between the three parties results in the formation of the professional identity of the student. Leverenz further argues that identity is inevitably relational, and

the politics of identity centres on managing the inevitable tensions or hostilities in the relationships between the three parties. I argue that these tensions are best negotiated in the Writing Centre.

Tracking the negotiation process

This article reflects on a research project investigating how students negotiate academic identities in a faculty writing centre for graduate students. The research attempts to answer such questions as: What processes are involved in the negotiation of an own identity within an academic discourse community? How do students establish authority over the content of their work in their academic writing?

A group of nine multicultural and multilingual Master's in Education students has been purposively selected in order to describe how their authorial identities are negotiated. They have been observed in their interaction with Writing Centre tutors, they have been interviewed about their participation in the activities of the Writing Centre, and their written texts that they have composed while attending the Centre have all been sources of data. Interview data have been constituted as forms of Narrative Analysis. The data emanating from the interaction with tutors have been analysed in terms of the principles of Mediated Discourse Analysis; and the students' written work has been analysed in terms of an Appraisal System, identifying the specific ways in which writers establish authority in, through and over their own writing.

Narrating academic identities

The narratives I elicited from the participants reveal much about their academic identities. I used this form of inquiry primarily to capture stories in action, performances of experiences, negotiation of identity. I trace four structural elements of their performances in the narratives. I look first at the kind of story in which the narrator places himself/herself; second, at how he/she locates the other characters in the story in relation to himself/herself; third, at how the narrator relates to himself/herself, i.e. what are the identity claims that the narrator makes about himself/herself, and last, who the narrator sets up as the audience while narrating his/her story?

Andrew, a black, Zulu-speaking male studying towards a Master's degree in computers in Education, tells of a Damascus-type experience with regard to academic writing. He relates how he has always been under the impression that his use of English was very good, until he attended a workshop in the Writing Centre, only to see the real nature and possibilities of academic writing. The other characters in his narrative are mainly fellow students who struggle with English. The identity marker that he claims throughout the interviews I conducted with him is that of a linguist, offering language-related insights and explanations for his own difficulty and the difficulty others have with academic writing. In fact, he sets up his audience as having to be impressed with his linguistic knowledge that he continually flaunts during the interview. He wants the audience to acknowledge his linguistic knowledge, thereby seeking membership of the academic writing discourse community.

Bill, a black, Sesotho-speaking male student, studying towards a Master's degree in Educational Management, narrates a story of alienation and ostracism. He relates how

his teaching colleagues and his community marginalised him because of the fact that he embarked on graduate studies, purportedly thinking himself better than them. The other characters in his narrative are represented as people not understanding him and not valuing the difference he can make with his newly acquired knowledge gained and produced at university. His identity claims during the interviews are about those of a 'prophet' not recognised in his own country, and he sets up the audience of his narrative to sympathise with his plight of changing their attitudes towards him.

The narrative of Charles, a white, Afrikaans-speaking male, studying towards a Master's in Environmental Education is about judgement. He condemns the Faculty of Education because, judged from his perspective of having obtained a first degree in the 'hard sciences', the 'woolly education department' is found wanting. The other characters in his narrative can therefore never quite live up to the standards and expectations of those set by the Sciences. Charles's identity claims are that of an objective scientist who has to follow scientific rules in pursuit of universal laws. As such, he uses impersonal language such as agent-less passive forms of the verbs. He sets up the audience as an objective body, as a jury having to side with him on criticising the Faculty he is studying in at the moment.

Denise, a Tamil-speaking Indian woman, studying towards a Master's degree in Inclusive Education and Learning Support narrates an oppression-emancipation type of story. The rural happiness she enjoyed while teaching at a farm school was shattered by the discrimination at university for her first degree. She, however, was 'freed' when attending the Writing Centre and getting the support of and intellectual relationship with the tutors in the Centre. The characters in her narrative are all presented as contributing towards togetherness, interaction, and racial harmony. The identity claims in her narrative centre portraying her as a fighter for emancipation, yet in setting up the audience of her narrative, she adopts an obsequious stance, calling me 'sir', 'mister', and seeking affirmation by tag phrases such as 'you know' after her statements.

Ester is a black Venda-speaking woman, studying towards a Master's degree in Educational Linguistics. Her narrative is about 'straying from the flock'. Similar to Bill's story, her family and community blames her for abdicating her role as servant of the community, for the life of researcher at a university. The other characters in her narrative, she signals, tear her between her loyalty to her community and her yearning for academic freedom. Throughout her narrative, she emphasises her Venda identity very strongly, and her resolution to 'go back' with her knowledge and 'uplift' her community. The audience, consequently, should view her endeavours as brave and courageous.

Fran, a white Afrikaans-speaking woman, studying towards a Master's degree in Educational Psychology, narrates a tale of conformity and its rewards. She represents herself as a dutiful daughter, a hard working student, and a privileged person under the previously apartheid political dispensation in South Africa. The suite of characters in her narrative is subsequently also divided into the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', the privileged and the underprivileged. She, with all of this 'performance' in front of the audience, is supposed to elicit their sympathy for her awareness of inequality and her attempts to redress, however small.

Gloria, a Hindi-speaking Indian woman, studying towards a Master's in Adult and Community Education, provides a narrative about the life of the misfit. The other characters in her narrative are portrayed as not understanding her. Her identity markers are those of an aloof, marginalised outsider, and she presents herself as detached from her audience.

Hester, a black Tswana-speaking woman, studying towards a Master's degree in Computer Education, narrates a rescue mission. She tells about her attempts to help her black teacher colleagues, her fellow Master's students, and other undergraduate students she tutors, and about all the dangers along the way, such as white students setting traps for her by asking her to change their marks on the schedules. The other characters in her narrative are represented as in continual need of rescue, such as under-qualified fellow teachers, unmotivated fellow students, and misguided undergraduate students. The identity markers she chooses for herself are those of the hero of the story, of the spokesperson for the oppressed. The relationship she sets up with the audience during her narration is that of compelling appreciation of her efforts and acknowledgement of her plight as a black students' right campaigner.

Irene, a white English-speaking woman, studying towards a Master's degree in Technology Education, narrates a confessional type of story. She relates how her academic plagiarism has gone undetected for so long. No wonder the strongest identity marker to emerge from her narrative is that of academic fraud. She confesses that the Writing Centre and its tutors have 'saved her' because of the support they provide to students. The major characters in her narrative are also not surprisingly the valiant tutors in the Centre. She sets up a relationship of atonement with the audience to whom she is narrating her story, pleading for forgiveness and understanding.

What is clear from all these narratives is the fact that students identify in almost periphrastic mode with certain elements in grand narratives. They do not model their narratives on archetypal ones, but rather 'cut and paste' their own academic identities on to the general structure of the narrative. This 'cut and paste' function is also evident in another process of negotiation in the writing centre; that of performing their academic writing identities.

Performing academic identities in the Writing Centre

In this section, the data emanating from tape-recorded interaction between writing centre tutors and students are analysed in terms of Scollon's (2001) system of Mediated Discourse Analysis, which in this article is preferred to Conversational Analysis or even Discourse Analysis because whereas they take language as their unit of analysis, Mediated Discourse Analysis employs social action. Because the aim of this article is to trace the way students negotiate their academic identities in the Writing Centre, it was deemed better to analyse their performance as social action. It needs to be pointed out, however, that Mediated Discourse Analysis does not exclude language as discourse. In fact, it views the use of language as a social action itself. Social action takes on many forms: the tutoring session in the Writing Centre, as site of engagement, enables such actions as *entering* the space, in a voluntary capacity, by invitation, and/or by referral.

The tutor and the student then *exchange* a greeting of some kind. This is followed by the student and the tutor *negotiating* the activity that benefits the student best, for example, going over a paper copy of the student's writing, looking together at an electronic version of the student's writing, or scheduling a later meeting, negotiating the length of time suitable to both tutor and students, and discussing the writing. The next action may be *sitting* next to each other at a table, or opposite each other across a table or next to each other in front of a computer.

Social action can also assume acts of production, such as speaking and writing down notes, as well as acts of reception such as listening and reading. This is arguably the part of the Writing Centre practice where most of the academic writing identity of the students is performed. The action here is concluded when the student or the tutor brings the discussion to a close and the student leaves the Centre. The analysis, however, revealed that the students have an enormous range of actions that they add which, alongside interaction with the tutors, constitute a range of practices, and that these practices together form a nexus of practice performed in the Writing Centre.

Their actions constitute academic practices that in turn enable students to perform as full members of an academic discourse community. In other words, the site of engagement is the ideal rehearsal space for developing academic practices that are vital in participating in academic discourse.

The academic identities that students negotiate in the Writing Centre are directly related to three types of ways in which they act in the space: consensual academic writing practice, oppositional writing practice, and alternative academic writing practice. Although each of the nine participants can be placed broadly in one of these three categories, the evidence is clear that their academic writing identity is not fixed but that any one participant can perform actions ranging from one dominant position, say, a consensual one, to features of oppositional and/or alternative academic writing practice. *Consensual* academic writing practice is performed in a variety of ways. These practices are related to the conventions of academic writing and students performing these may interact with the tutor about the correct way of referencing, the correct way of spelling and editing, and so on. Students performing *oppositional* academic practices may show the tutor that they question academic writing conventions held by their supervisors. Those who perform *alternative* academic writing practices, show, for example the ability to reformulate their argument continuously as they explore ways of expressing their academic writing identities different from what would normally be expected from them.

Andrew was captured interacting with one of the tutors in the Writing Centre about his proposal for a dissertation. After greeting the tutor, and taking a seat next to him, Andrew immediately took action by negotiating with the tutor over what academic practice they should engage in: discussing the comments the tutor had made on the draft Andrew had submitted to him the previous day. In the subsequent interaction, Andrew performed a vast range of actions, including the following: explaining concepts when the tutors asked for clarification; offering alternative formulations of ideas to the suggestions on his writing made by the tutor; asking for affirmation of the alternative ways of expressing his ideas; elaborating on his problem statement; reorganising information in his writing;

asking for instructions on how to include footnotes in his writing; reformulating tutor advice in his own words; assessing his own argument; establishing his own authority over the content of his work; contradicting his supervisor in the presence of the tutor; distinguishing between such language registers as poetic and academic language; using academic discourse; listing his research aims; elaborating on his research aims; using metaphorical language; defending his own position; and coming to new insights about his argument. What has become clear about Andrew's interaction, as well as those of the other participants, is that he oscillates between consensual, oppositional and alternative forms of interaction with the tutor.

In the short time Denise, for example, had interacted with the tutor in the taped session, she had been introduced to academic discourse and although she took little part in it, she acknowledged this discourse and was being challenged to justify and argue why she had written things the way she did. Her actions include asking for affirmation; affirming advice given; justifying her academic work; asserting her role as teacher and researcher; offering her tentative insights; challenging academic conventions such as ethno-methodology; and complying with academic conventions.

The actions Fran took in the Writing Centre included the following: reading her written text to the tutor; asking how to quote sources; making notes on her written work; scanning in pictures to accompany her written work; indexing the different sections of her chapter; indenting the quotes she was using; quoting sources within sources.

Gloria took the following actions in the Writing Centre: finishing the sentence for the tutor; negotiating her ability within academic conventions and other possibilities within academic discourse; punctuating and editing her written work; elaborating on tutor questions; explaining concepts to the tutor. Interestingly enough, she continually sought affirmation for what it was she had to do, asking 'I must do this?', 'I must do that?'

Hester's actions performed in the Writing Centre included: negotiating roles for herself and the tutor; questioning comments made by the supervisor on her writing in front of the tutor; asserting the thesis she was defending in her dissertation; invoking previous research done on her topic; offering intuitive knowledge about her topic to the tutor; echoing comments made by the tutor; articulating her thesis more convincingly.

Revealing academic identity in writing

The next section looks at the way the students present their academic identities in their written work. In the interaction with the tutors they assume certain aspects of their academic identity as was the case with the narrative interviews with the researcher. These students assume a different side of their academic identities each time they engage with another member of the academic discourse community, ranging from the tutors in the Writing Centre, the supervisors of their studies, or the researcher interviewing them and eliciting the narratives of their academic writing literacy. I argue that students also assume, equally convincingly, their academic identities in their written work. Although it is important to recognise the importance of text as research data (Silverman 2001), the way in which these texts have been analysed in educational research, as listed by Silverman, namely content analysis, analysis of narrative structures, ethnography, and

membership categorisation device analysis, omits analysis of the way students position their academic identities in and through their texts. This is called the 'Appraisal System'.

White (2002) holds that the Appraisal System is an approach to exploring, describing and explaining the way language is used to evaluate, to adopt stances, to construct textual personae and to manage interpersonal positioning and relationships. It explores how writers pass judgements on people generally, on other writers and their utterances, on material objects, happenings, states of affairs and thereby form alliances with those who share these views and distance themselves from those who do not. It explores how attitudes, judgements and emotive responses are explicitly presented in texts and how they may be more indirectly implied, presupposed and assumed. It explores how the expression of such attitudes and judgements is, in many instances, carefully managed so as to take into account the ever-present possibility of challenge or contradiction from those who hold differing views. Student writers, then, position themselves in terms of attitude, dialogue and inter-textuality.

Andrew writes:

> A most significant event of the last decade has been the appearance and subsequent explosive growth of the World Wide Web and its effect on learning with multimedia (Allessi and Trollop 2001:5). Web-based learning has emerged as the new buzzword in education and the subsequent scramble by tertiary educators to adopt new teaching methods can be clearly seen by looking at the number of courses that have recently evolved under the banner of web-based, online or e-learning.

With regard to attitudinal positioning, Andrew fully endorses the rapid technological revolution as a direct consequence of globalisation and the profound effect it has on learning. He refers to recent authors but it seems as though he is not paraphrasing them – rather using them to back up his statement. In other words, he equates the status of his own claim with that of two authorities in the field. In the next sentence, however, Andrew criticises labeling web-based learning, calling it a 'buzzword', a fad, a passing fashion in education. His use of the term 'scramble' carries an equally negative connotation as the use of 'buzzword'. With regard to dialogical positioning, Andrew does not invite comment/interaction with his statement: he presents his views as fact, as indisputable. With regard to intertextuality, he positions his statements as equally important and valid as those of other authors in the field.

Denise writes:

> Singling out Piaget for particular attention, the paper argues that, whilst the inadequacy of assessment models has been researched, and the resulting developmental, behavioral and biological theories have been used as a basis for educating children, they are not useful in diagnosing learning impairment.

With regard to attitudinal positioning, Denise singles out the educational theorist, Piaget as above criticism. She presents herself as objective in the reification of her written word by using the words, 'This paper argues'. The 'objectivity' is continued in her use of the agent-less passive voice when referring to previous research: assessment models

'have been researched', and to its impact: 'theories have been used' to no avail. In fact, it almost seems as if Denise exhibits a disdainful attitude to other research in her field: her emphatic use of a negative statement ('they are not good enough') almost implies that no theory is good enough to explain/diagnose learning impairment. So she positions herself as quite authoritative about the literature and/or the theories informing her topic. However, if one keeps in mind that this text fragment was written after Denise has become aware of the need to use academic discourse, her 'authority' seems somewhat compromised. With regard to dialogical positioning, Denise seems to curb dialogue with the reader, expecting him/her to be swayed by her assertive claims with regard to the lack of adequate theories about learning impairment. With regard to intertextuality, Denise invokes other texts by implication, such as assessment models and developmental, behavioural and biological theories, but she makes these relative to her own research on the topic.

Esther writes:

> I am a Curriculum Advisor at the district office in the Eastern part of the Northern Province. In my capacity as a Curriculum Advisor, I am responsible for advising teachers on how to teach English in grade 12. I am also a sub-examiner of the end-of-year examination in the same grade. The schools that are under my supervision all use English as a second language. The medium of instruction in the schools is predominantly English although they have Sepedi as the mother tongue. The English teachers in all the schools also use English as a second language. In my capacity as sub-examiner, I have come across essays in the examination written by learners, that are not well constructed and that are not focused on the topic. This has led to the learners failing the writing paper and ultimately the whole English examination.

With regard to attitudinal positioning, Esther positions herself firmly in her community and her society by mentioning her title and describing what she does in her working environment, indicating that she understands its problems and saying that she is fully prepared and equipped to take responsibility for solving these problems. She also seems to question the power of English; she signals that English may not be the preferred medium of instruction by the teachers, because the mother tongue, Sepedi, could equally well serve as the medium of instruction. She also points out that educators are not fully conversant with the English medium and endorses the transparent discourse with regard to writing, mentioning conventional issues such as essays not 'well structured' and not 'focused on the topic'. However, she is fully aware of the fact that the ability to write leads to academic success, i.e. passing grades. She positions herself strongly as having a dual identity: a mentor to composition teachers, but also an examiner of the products that their students produce in the examinations, and she is careful to deploy both identities while researching academic writing. With regard to dialogical positioning, she indicates that she is going to take the lead solving the writing problems of this teaching community, and thereby uplifting the whole society.

With regard to intertextual positioning, Esther invokes other texts such as curriculum documents dictating teaching practice, and examination papers assessing that practice – but no detailed or critical analysis of these texts appear as yet.

Fran writes:

> Once known as 'brain damage syndrome', concentration is focused on the incidence, diagnosis and educational ramifications of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). A lack of understanding among teachers is cited as the problem, the disorder having largely been seen and studied from a medical perspective. The proposal advocates analysis from an eco-systemic perspective with qualitative data collection and analysis used to provide recommendations to the Education Support Unit of the Department of Education and relevant stakeholders.

With regard to Fran's attitudinal positioning, she signals her negative attitude towards one-sided research and her understanding of the complexity of the problem is evident from words such as 'ramifications' and 'eco-systemic' solutions to the problem. She also positions herself with a particular research discourse: 'qualitative data collection and analysis', without really qualifying it, implying that she is a member, rather than an 'applicant' to this discourse community. Concomitant with this is her understanding of her role as graduate student and researcher: the knowledge that she is producing in and through her research should be useful to policy makers and teachers equally.

Gloria writes:

> During 2002 I developed and facilitated a workshop for the general assistants. The workshop was a success and left me with a challenge of how to develop them in a school situation. During my interaction with them, I was able to identify the urgent need for personal and interpersonal development, that include; self-awareness, communication, relationships, problem solving and conflict management. I feel that my school, a special needs school could be more inviting. We need to address the issue of developing a healthy school environment, specifically giving attention to General Assistants. The reason is that in most cases when we talk about whole school development only the needs of educators are met and the GA's are excluded. From my observation, there is a great need for their development in order for them to perform better in their different job descriptions as well as in their family management. Most of them (70%) did not have an opportunity to be educated until secondary school level, hence they have poor communication skills.

Gloria positions herself as competent and confident, with good organisational skills: she has 'developed' and 'facilitated' a 'successful' workshop. She signals her versatility and creativity by implying that she is able to translate her skills and knowledge about one context into another, where there seem to be problems. She signals that she is sensitive to the needs of others, wanting a 'healthy' working environment for them, because she seems critical of her own workplace, a special needs school where the needs of all are not apparently taken into consideration. Of most significance is her use of the personal pronoun; after presenting her own skills and knowledge in the first person, she then

switches to the plural 'we' to signal a collective, inclusive research and problem solving endeavor. Her dialogical positioning is also contingent on this; the use of the plural pronoun invites the reader and the members of her research community, her unit of analysis to participate, to respond to the problem that she has identified, to endorse her concern about the issue and to acknowledge her ability as a competent researcher seeking answers to complex problems. Gloria's intertextual positioning is equally interesting: many different 'texts' are invoked in her writing, such as the workshop itself that she has conducted previously; the special needs school that invokes educational policies of inclusion; reference to general assistants that invokes texts of workplace ethics; and reference to lack of learning opportunities of these workers, to texts of apartheid discrimination and disadvantaged educational backgrounds.

Irene writes:

> Technology was introduced as one of the compulsory learning areas in the National Policy Document and its introduction was intended to help learners to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to solve problems pertaining to technology, as well as problems of a general nature, effectively (Department of Education 1997:3). Its aim was to develop learners' thinking ability so that they would be able to contribute towards improvement and also to contribute towards the effective use of technological products and systems. As well as evaluating technological products and systems from functional, economic, ethical, racial and aesthetical, for designing and development of appropriate products (DoE 1997:89). With the knowledge and skills learners acquire from the technological process they should be able to apply these skills to solve problems and to satisfy the needs and wants of the society since the process is regarded as the essence of teaching Technology Education. It is the only learning area that emphasises the acquisition of effective thinking skills and that considers the effect of the design and the making of the products on society and the environment (Scanlin 1992:25). Good quality education to produce productive learners depends on the effective application of proficient thinking skills in problem-solving. This should develop learners to become responsible citizens who should participate proficiently in problem-solving in their world of work as well as uplifting the economy of the country.

Irene's attitudinal positing has an extensive social equity agenda: she highlights the ability to solve problems, to contribute towards harnessing technology to improve life, to people being productive, responsible, and economically independent citizens. Her argument is further strengthened by stating that because the government has mandated the inclusion of technology as a school subject/learning area, one should not question such a social agenda. She expresses a high regard for technology as a learning area because it focuses on developing 'thinking skills'. She aligns herself with a rational individualist philosophy of life, the ability of the individual to solve problems in a rational way. The use of the word 'upliftment' suggests her association with issues of equity and redress in society. With regard to her dialogical positioning, Irene sounds like a government agent advocating the implementation of technology as a learning area at school attempting to persuade the reader of the merits of her argument. With regard

to intertextual positioning, Irene draws on National Policy documents with regard to educational change.

In concluding this section, it is noticeable that student writing is a very significant indicator of the degree to which these masters students adopt a specific and powerful attitudinal stance, inviting or deflecting dialogue with the reader, as well as adopting or refuting intertextual positionings.

Transparency in the negotiation process in the space of the Writing Centre

In the Writing Centre one gets a sense of who the students are through the way they present themselves to the reader, the way they represent themselves and their academic identities through their writing and the way in which they establish authority over their work in their writing. Transformation of the way these students are perceived by the academy and inadvertently positioned in a negative way by the academy, can only occur when responding to the whole student: to what they tell us about their academic identities in their narratives; to how they represent their authority over their work and their research and their practice in their writing; and to how they interact with tutors in the Writing Centre. Although most of the students seem to emulate a discourse of transparency, there is some evidence in the data that students also use another type of discourse: questioning the discourse of transparency, flouting the discourse of surveillance, and initiating a transparent discourse of conversation.

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PART 3

TRANSFORMATIONAL SPACES

A conversation about the UWC Writing Centre Project

Brenda Leibowitz and Andrea Parkerson

This chapter first appeared in 1995 as an article in* AD dialogues: Language in development*. This historic article marks the birth of the South African writing centre. The first writing centre in the country began in 1994 as a project at the University of the Western Cape.

Introduction

The University of the Western Cape (UWC) Writing Centre was set up in 1994 as a pilot project of the Academic Development Centre (ADC) with funding provided by the Desmond Tutu Educational Trust (DTET). The original impetus for the project was provided by the favourable impressions our colleague, Terry Volbrecht, had gained of writing centres while visiting the United States. Impetus for the project was also provided by the work of the ADC's Language Project which involved collaboration of the Language Project members with lecturers across faculties, in order to foster students' reading and writing skills.

The Language Project work suffered from a number of limitations which we believed a writing centre might counteract: work in departments relied on the goodwill of committed individuals, as the idea of collaboration sounds burdensome to many lecturers; the

work has in some cases been ephemeral, in that departments did not guarantee that a successful project would continue once the lecturer who initiated it severed links with a particular course; we were always involved in someone else's courses, thus had little autonomy over our work, or conversely, took too much responsibility for an initiative involving someone else's students. Our intention was not to begin the writing centre in order to supplant our other 'Language Across the Curriculum' activities, but rather, to use it as a complementary strategy, and one which would advance our other academic development work.

In 1995, the second year of the Writing Centre's existence, we have thirteen consultants who are UWC graduates from a variety of disciplines, mostly the Arts and Social Sciences. The consultants are selected on the basis of being able to demonstrate a strong background in writing or knowledge about word processing, and an interest in student learning. Consultants meet with students for one-on-one consultations lasting an hour, in which the student's draft of an essay assignment is discussed. The Writing Centre is able to service approximately 150 students a week at full capacity, although due to student cancellations and quiet periods, this target is rarely reached. Together, the consultant and the student choose aspects of the essay, such as the structure, argument, conclusion or analysis of the title on which to concentrate. Our consultants receive approximately 20 hours of training at the beginning of the year and weekly one-and-a-half hour training sessions. Training includes: topics related to the writing process; the provision of oral feedback to students about their essays; and how to prioritise issues to discuss in the one hour consultation.

Some students approach the Writing Centre on their own initiative, but most visit on the basis of 'contracts' or formal relationships arranged between the writing centre and lecturers around a specific assignment. The management team of the Writing Centre Project, Andrea Parkerson, Brenda Leibowitz and Kenneth Goodman, all Academic Development Centre staff, manage these relationships with the lecturers. These formal relationships usually involve compulsory or highly recommended visits to the centre by a specific group of students. The lecturer will often discuss the title of the essay with the consultants beforehand, sometimes changing the wording after this discussion. Documentation about the consultations, students' writing needs and their responses to a particular topic or assignment is recorded by the consultants and forwarded through reports from the management team to the lecturers. Lecturers also provide oral or written feedback about their impressions of the contract to the Writing Centre. An additional service provided by the centre is word processing training, as well as the use of six computers, for students who are familiar with word processing.

This chapter is a record of a conversation between Brenda Leibowitz, the Director of the centre, and Andrea Parkerson, the Coordinator, in which we discuss the first one-and-a-half years of the project. Since the project is still in its pilot phase, we are evaluating the usefulness of a writing centre in the South African multilingual university context, and seeking to improve the practical aspects of its implementation. As the conversation which follows reveals, evaluation of our project provides us with an opportunity to reflect on central aspects of the writing process, such as the relationship between writing

and understanding; the difficulties associated with measuring student improvement; or the value of training and employing senior students as writing consultants.[1]

Writing and writing centres

Andrea: Consultations are the primary activity of our Writing Centre Project. They are guided by a number of philosophies about writing, the major one being that writing is a process. While a consultation aims to enhance a particular piece of writing, in other words, the product, it also concentrates on the process, that is, making the student aware of the kinds of activities a successful writer engages in when writing. The emphasis is therefore on the writer as well as the writing, an idea endorsed by Stephen North in 'The Idea of a Writing Centre'. As he puts it: 'Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing' (1984:439). The idea of writing to learn, as opposed to simply learning to write, is also an important one. We hope to impress upon students that it is possible to learn more about a subject through the process of writing. The vital process of drafting and redrafting is stressed by the consultants. We have also come to see how a student's writing ability is not separate from the students' understanding of the content.

Brenda: This connection between a student's understanding of the content and writing skill is well illustrated, for example in *Literacy by Degrees* where Taylor (1988) shows how not having an adequate sense of the nature of the academic enquiry will impact on the way that a student writes, and even on the grammatical forms s/he uses. The example he gives is of a writer of an English Literature essay who gets his prepositions all wrong, and on closer analysis Taylor discovered that the student was very unsure about how to go about analysing the novel, in this case Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. I suppose this is where the project could seem contradictory, as we talk about students' understanding of the content yet they come to us to talk about the writing.

Andrea: But the writing centre sees itself as having a wider function than just dealing with the student's piece of writing. Stephen North wrote a number of articles about writing centres. He has been the coordinator of a writing centre at SUNY, New York, for many years and a number of his ideas have influenced ours. Even though he says that it is not possible for a writing centre to influence the context of the essay (North 1984) in other words how the question is set and possibly how it will be marked, our aim is to attempt to do just that by setting up relationships with departments and lecturers where we offer to discuss the setting of the task, sensitising them to the way a poorly formulated task might influence the quality of a student's essay.

Brenda: It's interesting to see where our writing centre fits in politically. In the Landmark *Series on Writing Centers*, Murphy (1991) periodises the history of writing centres in America. She looks at stages starting off with the 1940s when a lot of the work was very remedial and centres were called writing labs. These labs operated from the premise that you could 'fix' a person's grammar. According to her, North would fall into the liberal tradition, where the concern is with the individual writers and their expression. She identifies later trends, one of which is more in the computer supported education direction which she regards as grammar orientated and technicist. But the other recent

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1   For more information about the project, see Leibowitz and Parkerson 1994.

trend, which she describes as radical (others call it 'social constructivist'), is much more politically activist in the sense of expecting the writing centre to challenge the status quo. It seems as if our writing centre straddles the liberal as well as the social constructivist views of writing centres.

Dialogue with lecturers

Brenda: But despite our aim to challenge the status quo, in our evaluation report on our work in 1994 we mentioned that we were more able to influence task related aspects of writing in the disciplines – such as the setting of tasks – than substantial aspects of how writing in a course interrelates with the curriculum, or how the course content is taught.

Andrea: Yes. In fact, here are some examples of the kinds of things we've learnt in the writing centre about task setting. A number of lecturers try to provide their students with assistance in answering essay questions by giving them a list of guidelines or hints below the essay title. This can work quite successfully depending on the kind of guidelines given. But the guidelines can become a problem if their effect is to regiment students' essays and focus them very narrowly on what they then tend to regard as subheadings. Sometimes the guidelines serve as distracters, drawing the students' attention away from the central focus of a topic. We also see essay questions which use vocabulary which is too advanced for the level of students for whom the task is set. This has the effect of many students' simply guessing what the topic requires. Sometimes lecturers feel justified in using this type of vocabulary as they feel that learning new words is part of students' education, but if this has the effect of making students misread a question and answer it wrongly, then perhaps other ways need to be found to teach vocabulary.

There are also examples of essays where the wording is ambiguous, or specific parameters are not set. One example of an essay which did not give a sufficiently specific time frame was an essay about the ANC today. We have found students who wrote about the history of the ANC instead of what the ANC is doing at the moment, because the question did not specifically say within which time period the answer should be set.

Brenda: But I have heard lecturers say that students squeeze what they know into the questions, so if it's about the ANC and it's implied that it's about the present and they happen to know a lot about the history of the ANC, there are definitely students who would try and write on that.

Andrea: That is true, although I can give at least one example of a student who came for a consultation and who did know his work, but who totally misunderstood the question because it wasn't clear enough. He was horrified when he discovered that he had answered it incorrectly, but what was fortunate was that it had come out in the consultation and there was time for him to go back and rewrite the essay. Had that not happened he would possibly have failed.

There have been a number of instances where lecturers have actually changed the topics they have given to the students after contact with the writing centre. And there have been times when lecturers have sat in on our training sessions with the consultants – mainly so that consultants know what to expect when the students come – and the lecturers have said: 'I should have come here earlier, because I didn't realise that this is the way my

topic could be understood by the student'. It has happened that a lecturer has actually changed a topic even though the students have received the topic because there were two sections to the question and the second section was very confusing. He actually asked the students to disregard the second section of the question. It would of course be the ideal situation where the topic is re-phrased or adapted before the student gets the topic. It also happens that it is only as a result of a number of consultations with students that it becomes clear that a question is problematic in some way, and by then it is too late to have it amended. We hope, though, that in providing feedback to the lecturer about the reasons why students had problems with the question, either in the meeting between consultants and the lecturer, or via our written reports to lecturers at the end of a relationship, this will influence the way future questions are set.

The writing centre and the curriculum

Brenda: I can see that the writing centre plays a valuable role in for example the way that essay writing tasks are set, but research of the Language Project at UWC (see Woodward and Leibowitz 1993; Leibowitz 1993, 1994; Leibowitz and Parkerson 1994; Mabizela 1994) has pointed me to an understanding that language is, as you said earlier, *intricately* bound up with the nature of academic discourse and with the way people understand their subject matter. So an activity designed to facilitate student's writing is limited by students' own abilities and by what else happens in the curriculum. If a course that a student is doing is confusing for that student, then our impact on their writing will be limited by this confusion.

Let me give you an example from my own experience with History 2 in 1995. I ran a short journal writing project, involving consultants from the centre as journal respondents and, in addition, the History 2 students were required to visit the centre for their first assignment. In the writing centre we saw over half the class. What we managed to establish from the journal writing project was that, at the time we were seeing History 2 students in the writing centre, many did not understand the central point in the course about representation. Many believed that the concept of representation implies that truths become distorted by colonial historians, whereas 'representation' is intended to suggest that there are many representations of reality, rather than one single truth. So, many students failed the essay and, to make matters worse, would say, 'but we went to the writing centre, so how could we fail the essay?' Some students were very angry with us for failing to help them more significantly.

The fact is that there are many factors influencing students' writing which are beyond our control, including the actual conversations which take place in the consultations. But where I disagree with North is that I feel that since the departmental context influences the outcome of our work, we should be seeking to interact with the departmental learning context directly. I have been able to feed some of this evaluative commentary about aspects of the curriculum to the department (Leibowitz and Witz 1995) but it is always up to the department to decide what to do with this information in the future.

Andrea: Another example of the attempted link between the writing centre and departments is the work of Kenneth Goodman, who manages the contract between the

writing centre and the Social Work Department. He has extended that relationship to work with lecturers and tutors in the department as well, working very closely with one lecturer in particular. In this collaboration Kenneth and the lecturer are seeking ways to introduce reading and writing activities into the lectures, and Kenneth is providing the lecturer with feedback about her lectures. At the end of the year he will also be able to provide her with feedback about the students' learning from the data gathered by the consultants in the writing centre.

Brenda: In documenting these processes as they unfold, at least one contribution the writing centre can make is to try and make some sense of the inter-relationship between the curriculum, teaching, learning and writing. Hopefully we will be able to make more useful suggestions in the future about the role of language and writing in learning, and about appropriate teaching methodologies, based on our own experiences with our writing centre.

The word processor as a writing aid

Andrea: One of the items we fundraised for initially was six computers, with the hope that word processing would encourage our students to adopt a multiple draft writing approach to their essays. We have very recently introduced word processing courses for students which are so popular, and are so effective in advertising the consultations to students that we plan to extend this activity in 1996. Before we began these courses the computers were not popular with all students, especially as tools for drafting. When students have reached the stage where they want to type their essays they don't seem very keen to want to look at what goes into the essay or what shouldn't go in at that stage. Usually, this is when the essay has to be submitted in the next couple of hours. It shows that students are not aware of the value of using the computer as a drafting tool. I think that's where educating the student comes in. We need to make students aware that typing up isn't the last stage after an essay has been written, and that typing up can facilitate the drafting process.

Brenda: So you have to teach them the value of drafting, you can't assume that it will simply emerge once they learn how to use a computer (Harris 1985; Selfe 1985). I came to the same conclusion after a word processing workshop I ran with postgraduate English students a few years ago.

Andrea: Yes, you have to teach them the value of drafting, but it is difficult to teach people anything once they've got a due date staring them in the face and all they want to do is get done so that they can hand in by four o'clock.

Brenda: So I suppose the due date is yet another factor affecting our work – not that you can't set due dates, for essays, I'm not suggesting that.

Some successes

Brenda: We have recently organised a national Writing Centre Forum, together with UCT, PenTech and Cape Tech. It was hosted at UWC in July and approximately 60 people attended from tertiary institutions across South Africa. The forum arose out of a need to encourage inter-institutional co-operation in the region, in terms of which it was

indeed successful. Delegates from other centres reported finding the forum very useful. But another aim of the forum was to show others how writing centres can be set up, and how valuable they are. But are we already in a position to argue that ours is a success?

Andrea: I'd like to say that the Writing Centre Project is a runaway success, but this depends on how we define success, which in turn depends on what our priorities are. It also depends on our expectations of what we are able to do. There are definite limitations to what we can do as there are many factors which influence what happens in a consultation. Some of these are the expectations of staff and students, the skill and commitment of each individual consultant, or how often students come. Just take the issue of due dates you mentioned earlier: students often don't even have time for a follow up consultation. What we have found at the writing centre is that, when we have follow up consultations, the quality of the essay and the writing ability of the student is greatly enhanced because the student is able to redraft the essay in response to increasingly targeted and fine-tuned feedback. The whole drafting process then begins to make sense and students get rid of the idea that once you put something down it is cast in stone and cannot be changed.

If we look at the project globally I would categorise it as a success for a number of reasons. It is up and running, the writing centre is always booked up except for before the exams or at the beginning of term. Demand has increased since last year: we have more relationships with departments than we had last year and because of our relationships last year, there are students who visit without a lecturer telling them to come.

But I think a big success lies with the consultants themselves. By the end of last year, every single consultant that worked at the centre reported that they found that it was a good working experience. More importantly, they found that they had learnt immeasurably about their own writing as well as about student writing in general. It was a great learning experience for the consultants and their interests are the same this year. The consultants are very involved in what they are doing, they don't just do it mechanically because it's a job, they want to learn about writing issues.

Brenda: Yes, I remember last year, towards the end of the year, the consultants complained that we had not given them enough scope for participation in the project, saying they wanted to be more involved in determining its direction. At our final training meeting of the year, one consultant said: 'for most tutors it's just a job, but for us, it isn't just a job, it's more than that'. In addition to the fact that some of the consultants are considering a career in Academic Development, at the moment we have five consultants doing research projects on work in the writing centre, which we hope will become chapters in a book we plan to write about the project. In fact, two of them are presenting papers at the 1995 South African Association for Academic Development (SAAAD)[2] Conference in December. And even more exciting for us is that two of our consultants are working towards registering for a dissertation masters in the Education Faculty, using our writing centre as a research base.

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2   SAAAD became SAADA and eventually became HELTASA.

Student responses

Andrea: There are also the smaller successes that are not publicised, such as a consultation where both the student and consultant report that it has been a positive and enjoyable learning process. Or when a student comes back after having an essay returned and says, 'thank you for the consultation, the feedback was wonderful'. In some of the questionnaires from last year, students said things like they could see improvement in their marks or they could see more clearly the problems in their writing. So these are the moments that provide the consultants with a sense of accomplishment and keep them going.

Brenda: I remember yesterday in the training session the one consultant said how lovely it was that at some point in a recent consultation a student had suddenly burst out, 'Oh, Eddie, thank you so much you're really helping me' and he was totally taken aback because he hadn't prompted the student at all.

Andrea: Another type of good moment is when a consultation doesn't go too well and the consultant can see that the student has a negative attitude, often because the consultation is compulsory. Then at some point she can see that the student is not indifferent any more, that the student is actually finding something to learn and something to discuss. The consultants often come out of these sessions glowing with a sense of victory. According to the surveys we have done in some departments in 1994, the average rate of satisfied students is approximately 70%. I think there is one department where it was considerably less than 70%, and I think this was largely due to mismatched expectations.

Brenda: Many students report a favourable impression because they are so grateful for having someone to pay attention to them, or their writing, that they'll be appreciative as long as the consultant has a friendly face. I often wonder whether it is more important for an evaluation to analyse the reasons for students' positive responses, or the reasons for negative responses. I suppose that we need to reinforce our good points, but, we also need to make sure that as many as possible of our negative features can be eliminated – where possible, of course.

Andrea: Some of the negative response are tied up with the fact that although writing is a process, it is not always understood as such by students and they often expect a consultation to work miracles in terms of high marks.

Brenda: An interesting example of how students evaluate their visits in terms of the mark they receive for essays comes from the video we made of a consultation you had with a student doing Political Studies. You asked her if she had been to the centre before and how she found it. Her response was so informative, as it dramatised how she, like many students, tend to evaluate the consultations in terms of the mark received for the final draft, not in terms of the quality of the consultation or what she learnt in the consultation. She said 'I like the writing centre because the last time I came to the writing centre I got a high mark for my essay. I'm going to come to the writing centre for every essay'.

Disappointments

Andrea: When students do not receive these anticipated high marks, they become disappointed, even angry. But negative responses occur for a range of reasons: sometimes students just feel they didn't learn anything, sometimes they feel they came out confused; sometimes they feel very discouraged because they feel their efforts have not been acknowledged; sometimes they come out discouraged because what they have written has been broken down and they have nothing to replace it with. For instance, take the case of a student who comes in there with factual, yet plagiarised sections from various books and when he or she finds out that that is unacceptable, the student feels left with nothing at all.

Sometimes students are frustrated because they come seeking a particular kind of help which the consultant feels is inappropriate and they don't get it. For example, a student will come in and just want a good editing job, saying 'I want you to check my grammar please' and the student is frustrated when the consultant actually wants to deal with the student's argument. At the other extreme, the student comes in expecting a tutorial, expecting the consultant to explain the content, the poem or the whole subject. The student doesn't get that and leaves feeling frustrated, hard done by. Sometimes the student feels that the essay is good enough and that s/he does not need help and that it's just a waste of time to come. So they simply endure the consultation to get the draft stamped.

Brenda: What you say about students' feeling their essay is 'good enough' is interesting. It is evident from our 1994 evaluation and from our mid-year report to the English Department this year that there is a great discrepancy between how the students view their needs and what the consultants have to say. In both reports the consultants have indicated that well over half the students have needs with regard to structure, understanding and grammar, whereas the minority of students have indicated having needs or problems, and when they do report needs, it's usually in terms of grammar. It's about students not having an adequate meta-cognitive awareness of the writing process and their own writing in particular.

Andrea: I think that is why we find that we actually can identify a student on whom the writing centre has the most impact. That is the student who is not very weak, has some grasp of the material and who can understand where some of the problems in the writing lie.

Measuring success

Brenda: In fact Dr Peter Hannon from Sheffield University, who came here last year, and who is collaborating with us on our evaluation, has suggested that we do a little research project, in which we try and isolate which students we are most able to help. He has suggested we use a questionnaire which is filled in by the consultant at the end of a session. If we could arrive at a picture of the ideal student, we would be able to concentrate our activities more effectively. My one problem with that idea is that it is not clear to me what we mean by a successful consultation. For instance, we might make measurable successes with some students in the sense that they say the consultation is a success or their marks go up because of the consultation. But it doesn't allow you to look

at the finer gradations, the less noticeable impact you could have, for example where the student is still failing, but he's learnt something and he might be able to build on it with something else he's learnt somewhere else along the line, so I think it's quite difficult to look at success and failure in absolute terms.

Andrea: A frustration that I felt when I was trying to measure our success, in reply to one of the DTET's questions, was when I realised that there are so many things that impact on the learning process. It is particularly difficult to cite a class of students' marks as a measure of success. In one instance last year, we compared a set of marks of a class where the majority of students had visited the centre, with the same assignment that the students had done the previous year in that course, but who had not visited the centre. The average mark had actually gone down; I think it was on average 1.5%.

Brenda: But according to Peter Hannon, the difference in statistical terms is so small that it is irrelevant, firstly, and secondly, a variable is who does the marking. As I believe it, the previous year the essays were marked by the tutors and this year they were marked by lecturers. Thirdly, we didn't measure the average of those who visited the writing centre, but the marks of the whole class. So if we were to use statistics of this sort, we have to go to a lot of trouble – in order to learn very little.

Andrea: Well, it still doesn't show an impact. And yet we had the same students later on in the year for another assignment and the consultants generally felt that there had been an improvement in the way that the students had formulated the conclusion, or the introduction, and had actually written working paragraphs. So the impact was noticeable in that sense, but not in terms of marks.

Brenda: Although, couldn't you argue that they would be writing better essays the second time around anyway, seeing they had been at university longer and had more practice with writing?

Andrea: Exactly, and that supports my earlier point, that there are so many factors that impact on the learning process. It all started discouraging me when I realised that we can't measure success definitively in this way, and then I realised that you have got to almost take for granted that you are making an impact even though you can't trace it in scientific terms.

Brenda: If it's any consolation there is a fair amount written by experienced writers on evaluating the teaching of writing. Knoblauch and Brannon, for example, refer to the 'myth of improvement' (1984:164). They argue that attempts to measure short-term improvements lead to a fairly sterile measurement of the acquisition of skills, and that improvement in terms of attitudinal changes, such as the development of student autonomy, would be more useful. In any case, it would be arrogant for any one teacher to assume responsibility for another's learning. I can give a direct example of this: assuming you compare two drafts of the same essay, one written before and one after a consultation; you cannot say that each change has been made due to the conversation which occurred during the consultation. The student might have read more afterwards, might have shown the script to someone else, and so on. I know that when I show a rough draft of a paper to various people, I take their comments into account, but I am constantly

revising according to my own criticisms of what I write. I suppose a description of success would have to be very careful, very detailed and will take us a long time to accomplish. As I understand it, you are about to embark on a process of examining students' scripts for this purpose for your Master's dissertation.

Andrea: Yes, I hope that an examination of the factors that influence transfer will contribute to our evaluation.

Consulting across the disciplines

Andrea: One of the issues that cropped up during the evaluation, which we had not thought of in the beginning, is whether writing centre consultants can consult generically, across disciplines. Whenever people question the value of the writing centre to me, this is always one of the points they bring up, 'Can you help students from right across the university, can an English graduate help a science student?'

Brenda: What is beginning to emerge for me through the training, is that there are ways to prepare the consultants to work generically. As a consultant you do need to know what writing is supposed to look like in broad terms, about the different academic genres and perhaps a little about the dominant methods of enquiry in different disciplines, for example close analysis of texts, such as in English Literature, or the qualitative approach to research papers in a Social Work course. Another thing you can teach consultants about is to look for coherence in students' drafts. When a consultant investigates why a draft is incoherent, the answer will occasionally lead to students' not using cohesive devices such as 'and' or 'but' properly. Most often, though, it will lead to a discussion with the student about gaps in his or her understanding of the content, or gaps and contradictions in the argument, even to the students' misunderstanding of a reading used for the essay.

Andrea: In fact, as a consultant you can act as a reader and very few readers are more knowledgeable about the subject than the writer. You normally read something to find out about a subject. This way you are also less likely to tell the student what to write in the essay. Nancy Sommers argues (1982:148) that in commenting to the writer as a reader, we are teaching them to become better writers:

> Thus, we comment on student writing to dramatise the presence of a reader,
> to help our students to become that reader themselves, because, ultimately,
> we believe that becoming such a reader will help them to evaluate what
> they have written and develop control over their writing.

Brenda: It is quite interesting, because in the consultants' training session yesterday one consultant was saying they felt they could not, as an English graduate, discuss a Botany essay in a way that would be useful for the student. But another consultant was echoing more of the argument that a person who is ignorant about Botany is in the position to ask those innocent, naive questions which would force the writer to look at whether their writing is in fact clear and consistent. This consultant had had a student with whom she did this, and the student did respond in this hoped-for way, saying, 'Oh, I realised I have just written something inconsistent here'. But for me, this ability to work generically should not be taken for granted, and I don't know if you can do that if you are not confident, or sufficiently skilled. But just to digress, lecturers or even students

do sometimes complain that our consultants are not sufficiently skilled in the lecturers' disciplines to help their students. There is some truth in this, and Chemistry seems to be a particular case in point, but I am convinced it sometimes has to do with the expectations the lecturer or student has of what should occur in the consultation, for example that the consultant should perform miracles with the student's essay, should in fact be doing some of the work of the subject tutor.

Andrea: Our consultants do feel the pressure of what they imagine the lecturers and the students will regard as a successful consultation. This is why we try to boost our consultants' confidence and ability by providing them with an extensive training programme as well as direct supervision, and for some, training in research techniques.

Consultants' career paths

Brenda: That brings me to a dilemma about the writing centre, where we are using senior students for reasons of their availability and funding and we are very happy to do that, because they are fresh, sometimes more enthusiastic, and they are closer to the students' experiences. But the down side to that is that once they get all of this experience they are going to move on because we don't have jobs to hold them to.

Andrea: Especially those consultants who were showing an interest in continuing this line of work. Nevertheless, in response to consultants' expressed wishes, we are going to try and make the writing centre work more varied next year so that the more experienced consultants can do mentoring of the newer ones, some in-depth research about the writing centre and students' writing, as well as possibly take sessions in ADC workshops around writing. And for those who don't stay with us, provided that they have met with certain agreed-upon criteria, from this year already we will be issuing certificates which indicate that they have had training and experience as consultants.

Affirming the student

Andrea: Another issue which has cropped up through our evaluation and our experience is the need to be able to deal effectively with the good student. We firmly believe that every writer's writing can be enhanced, but very often the consultants don't feel skilled or confident enough to work with the good essay. I've as often heard consultants talking about bad consultations in terms of weak students, as bad consultations in terms of good students. They say things like, 'what can I tell the student, I had to tell the student there was nothing wrong with the consultation,' feeling the pressure to find problems in order to give advice.

Brenda: It's funny, (and I can't remember where I read this, but I think it's true) as academics, when we read each other's papers or drafts, we don't look for the problems, but as soon as we mark students' scripts, we have their faults uppermost in our minds. For me it's a bit of a hangover from being a schoolteacher, when you made annotations on the students' script to be diligent and to justify the mark you were about to award. This connects with a current obsession of mine about the language of pathology which surrounds Academic Development work, certainly at our university. If you look at SAAAD sessions where Academic Development practitioners talk about students – even if they say they are not going to – they still talk about them in terms of linguistic or

cognitive deficiency. This is an enormous problem because we look for the negative things in a person's writing rather than what can we build on. It goes back to your point earlier about students feeling discouraged.

Andrea: What you were saying about what we can build on – I'd say that students often need to know what they do right as much as they need to know what they do wrong, because they haven't necessarily done something right consciously. I'm talking about my own experience as a student, sometimes I would get a good mark and I really wouldn't know why, and I would actually have appreciated the lecturer saying 'This is what you did well' so that the next time I would know that and build on my strengths.

Brenda: You're talking of the ability of the writing centre consultant to enhance the student's meta-cognitive awareness as a writer, which is very much the claim for the writing centre consultation which Thomas Flynn (1993) is making. He stresses the cognitive as well as the affective benefits of the one-on-one consultation.

To return to the issue of pathologising the student: this also possibly has to do with the way we as educators set ourselves up as authority figures. And it's perhaps the banking notion, that Freire (1972) talks about, the blank slate, where the student is the person with nothing to offer, and we the educators have got something to offer. This harsh reality, as it were, contradicts our own ideas of what consultants should be doing. As trainers we have argued that important ingredients for a consultation are negotiation, democracy and being non-directive, taking the cue from many of the North American writing centre people such as North (1982, 1984) and Harris (1994). But Kenneth Goodman's evaluations of some of our consultations have shown, and other researchers such as Jacoby (1994) and Lunsford (1991) have pointed out, that we cannot take this negotiated, democratic consultant-student relationship for granted.

What's in it for us?

Brenda: We've been speaking a lot about our consultants and about what the writing centre can and cannot achieve, but I feel we need to consider what the project can and cannot achieve for us as Academic Development practitioners. From my point of view, the writing centre seems to present us with a bit more direct worry and responsibility on a daily basis than most of our other Academic Development work, but it brings with it enormous advantages. I enjoy the regular contact with the consultants and the students, and this contact provides me with some of the experience, inspiration and authority I require for my work with lecturers in the Arts Faculty and elsewhere on campus, where I am advising lecturers about the setting of tasks, running writing workshops or talking to students directly about their writing. I also find the project valuable as it affords us the opportunity to conduct research and theorise about students' writing at UWC.

Andrea: There is a certain sense of exhilaration in the challenge of working on new projects which have the potential of making a change – a change in students' attitudes towards writing, amongst other things. A comment made by Brenda Gourley at the opening of the SAAAD Conference at the end of 1994 has stayed with me, which is that 'Change comes through small initiatives that work.' For me it is a challenge to be a part of making this initiative work towards the process of change. The flip side, however, of

being part of something this new in South Africa, which means that we are learning on our feet, is that it does not have the support and security of long-established methods of teaching and learning. We constantly feel called upon to justify what we are doing, while knowing that traditional methods of delivery such as lectures have to be reviewed as well. I also believe that in a time when we need to find solutions for educating large groups effectively there remains a place for the one-on-one, individual approach to learning, and that one method of instruction should not replace the other. It has been, and is, a challenge for me to negotiate the two faces: scrutiny and promise, individual and mass approaches – and still remain sane!

Acknowledgements

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6

A snowball in Africa with a chance of flourishing

Writing centres as shifters of power in a South African university

Pamela Nichols

This chapter first appeared in 1998 as an article in* Current Writing*. Wits Writing Centre was the second writing centre to emerge in South Africa and it too emerged as a project. Nichols' article theorises South African writing centre work in a way that is very specific to the South African political and social context, problematising the Centre's complex role as an environment to empower students, but one that can easily become part of their oppression.

A writing centre is a North American invention. It is a place where any members of the university can talk about or read a draft of their written work to an attentive consultant. The consultants in North America are usually postgraduate students who have been selected and then trained to work in the writing centre and receive tuition remission for their services. The facility does not cost the university much, and in return it offers a place where people can walk in, think through, revise and then get on with their writing. The one-to-one conference is a simple, obvious method and it works. Many times I remember asking students in the Writing Centre at New York University, 'but what do you mean?', and the magic question worked: they told me eloquently and forcefully and I scribbled down their words as fast as I could in order to return them to their author. It is a simple

method but also a revolutionary one when contrasted with a lecture transmission mode of teaching. Writing centres are based on the paradigm that language and knowledge are created socially – through conversation or dialogue with people and texts. They offer an alternative to the belief that knowledge is handed down from master to disciple; in fact, they can galvanise the disciples to talk back to the masters.

Writing centres seemed a good idea to me when I began teaching in the English Department of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg three years ago. I was struck by the sense of entrenched hierarchies among students and staff and haunted by the silence of some groups of black students in the classroom. When I read essays, it was clear that all the students could benefit from writing their work with a sense of audience in mind. Some of the white students were writing pompous rubbish and some of the black students were writing sense but without any fluency in English. The crisis is twofold: white students are more likely to pass but have missed the opportunity to place, shape and sharpen their views within the new potential community of the whole class; black students are likely to fail in disproportionate numbers because they have not yet fully acquired the language or the culture dominant in the university. We need to address these failings, find out what students are thinking, where they begin from and to listen and speak to everyone in the room. This might not be always possible in a forty-five minute class with examination material to cover. It is possible in a one-to-one conference. Writing centres can be a force to change the dominant language and culture, and they do so firstly by shifting authority.

The shift of authority has to be more than theoretical; it has to be regularly experienced in the practice of the writing centre. In a writing centre conference the student sets the initial focus for the session and should do most of the talking. The idea of the writing centre has to be its practice, has to be this maintained shift of authority to the client, or it becomes a continuation of passive reception to lecture. Regression into the latter mode in the consultation is obviously very easy in a country where the majority of people have been taught through lecture transmission. I realised this when I went to an excellent and stimulating conference on writing centres three years ago at the University of the Western Cape. The rhetoric and theory of the conference were familiar. In video tapes of actual sessions, however, clients sat quietly while the consultant read their work from behind a big desk. Then the consultant, in teacher mode, told the client what to write. We saw several such sessions with different consultants all of whom maintained their authority at the expense of the student's. The last was introduced by the consultant concerned who apologised – this was a difficult client, she said. In this last session, the client argued, talked all the time, and let slip that she had been to the Writing Centre before and intended to come again. In my opinion, that session was the only successful one shown. Habits of power are much harder to shift than theories, and it is the habit we must address, internalise and maintain.

I am not suggesting that South Africa should adopt American ideas unquestioningly. I first came across American language-teaching methods in the American University of Beirut and made acquaintance with the five paragraph essay and its kin. According to that system we were meant to give a good grade to a paper that followed the formula, even if

it was boring and inane. When I first went to New York University, I was asked by the director of the Writing Programme what I thought of the methods practised in Beirut. Because I was recently off the plane, jet-lagged and culture-shocked, I told him the truth and he instantly hired me. In fact, the American way of teaching writing at NYU was far away from the controlling forms of an international outpost. New York City is a place that is receptive to immigrants, receptive to difference and dynamic in its assimilation. The melting pot is a violent metaphor but not one that suggests restraint or division. As a newly arrived Brit in New York, I was curious and impressed by the informality of classroom discussions, the ease, habit and fearlessness with which students traded, and responded, to drafts. I remember observing with envy the way two Writing Centre consultants late at night worked together on a draft of a thesis and actually seemed to be enjoying the process. I remember observing with a teacher's magpie eye the way a class of undergraduates would easily workshop papers in pairs or in groups and realising that the general buzz of assertion and response was a much more efficient way of learning than listening to one lecturer droning on and on. Arriving in South Africa I hoped to transpose something of the noise, pride and energy of NYU into a Johannesburg classroom. At the UWC conference, I met Irene Broekman of Wits Education Department and Ishbel Hingle of the Applied English Language Department who had also decided that writing centres could work here. Together we began to look for funding for a formalised writing centre. In the meantime, I established the Writing Project in the English Department as a pilot writing centre which is now in its third year.

I should like to consider now where and how power shifts through the practice of a writing centre: to look firstly at how power shifts towards and within the consultants as a group, then how power is transferred within the consultation, and finally how the idea can snowball, attract and gather power.

The first shift of power in the establishment of a writing centre is located in the consultants as a group. In their selection, training, and current practice, there has been a change in the Department's evaluation of the consultants as students and the development of a group ethos among the consultants. When I first mentioned that I was going to try and organise a writing centre, called the Writing Project, I was given a list of the top students I should employ as consultants. These were the golden students who had been marked as high-flyers as they progressed through their years in the university. I insisted that I would rather select through interviews, because I was looking for good listeners, intelligent students with a 'negative capability' who would allow other students to talk and develop their thoughts. This method of selection worked very well and placed value on quiet rather than competitive students, who subsequently have become valued by the Department.

The training course lasts six weeks, taking up two extended lunchtimes a week. Ideally it should be an accredited course: we certainly do enough work to warrant this and the qualification has already helped consultants find subsequent teaching work or helped them gain graduate assistantships in the United States. The course has been adapted for a South African context in that the first session of each week is devoted to readings and theory. This was not necessary in New York where the idea of writing as process and

the habit of talking about writing was learnt in high school. Here we have to go against a prevalent system and so need an intellectual armoury to help us understand, internalise and then monitor our practice. The second session of each week is always a practical, be it role play or writing, and is premised on the idea that by going through the process ourselves – writing or the consultation – we become better facilitators of writing.

As I have developed it so far, the explicit, theoretical structure of the course begins with an introduction to ideas of the social nature of language, and the idea of writing as thinking. Then we move to a discussion of the principles and goals of a writing consultation and the role of audience; then the activities of a consultation with an emphasis on the role and nature of effective questions; then strategies, including a discussion of error analysis, and questions of cultural translation; then a discussion of evaluation and the promotion of self-evaluation. We conclude with a discussion of ethics and logistics. All of these sessions are introduced with readings and with writing exercises, and the practical of each week usually raises questions for the subsequent theory session. After the course, when they are fully fledged members of the Writing Project, it is still vital for the consultants to attend weekly staff meetings. These staff meetings are structured according to need: they can be about present problems or offer further inquiry into an area of interest. The important thing is to continue the self-monitoring of our practices, because without regular reinforcement it is all too easy to slip back into the habits of earlier schooling.

In their training the consultants learn to workshop their own writing and to begin to think that a judgement of their writing is not a personal judgement of themselves. This latter thought is the most revolutionary, they have told me. Now, in their practice the consultants have formed a co-operative group which takes responsibility, forms initiatives, and spreads such practices. They read their own work to each other, have independently organised a creative writing group, and have plans to put together a publication of student writing. Some of the consultants have also elected to tutor small groups of foundation students. The scene for this tutoring is Victorian: we jointly plan the material for the foundation course's writing workshop and then, on the day, I hover, as the large foundation class divides itself into eight small groups. The foundation students have become fiercely loyal to their group tutor, their tutor to their group, and every Friday afternoon we have some difficulty getting the foundation students to leave.

In the old system senior students were employed to buy milk for secretaries and to offer unsupervised coaching to students. In the Writing Project they are coordinated into quite an impressive force. As individuals they have risen to the responsibilities given to them with enthusiasm and as a group they are a powerful point of change which is potentially a more forceful and cohesive generator of change than any staff grouping. For instance, last year the consultants decided to draw up a proposal for changes in the way their own Honours course was taught. They came up with a written proposal and staff responded to their initiative. How could staff refuse a reasonable proposal which called for more written assignments and more student presentation? Writing Project consultants have developed what James Clowes, director of the Comparative History of Ideas programme

at the University of Washington, calls a 'student culture'[1] or a culture of initiative and agency among a group of students acting together. Such student culture can jump start the stymied mechanisms of our old universities, and does not involve endless meetings.

The sense of group responsibility among the consultants and sense of ownership of their education is echoed in the practice of the consultation itself. Clients come with drafts or just ideas, sit next to the consultant and have to lead the discussion. The consultant asks questions about the process of the client's draft, helps the client to find and communicate her thought, enables the client eventually to internalise the questions of a reader so that the client becomes independent. The most provocative description I have read of this process is Donald Murray's in his article 'The Listening Eye' (1994). Murray writes from an American context where – as I have said – the process approach to writing has been familiar to students from their high school learning. The approach will have to be modified here – made to incorporate developing directives to ways of writing – but Murray's message struck home to the consultants as they read and discussed it in their training course. In the training course for Writing Project consultants, Murray's article impressed the would-be consultants in its art of saying very little as a consultant: of developing negative capability which prompts clients to unfold. This is a revolutionary idea of not telling people what to think but rather believing that they know something already and actively listening for their words and their tacit knowledge. It is amazing what such attention can achieve. And it does not propose that writers can empathise themselves into expertise, but that they must begin with a personal engagement with their subject. As Michael Polyani puts it, inspiringly, 'Every act of knowing involves the passionate engagement of the knower with what is being known' (1958:viii). What is actually written might not be personal, but the act of writing is, because it always involves the personal intention of the writer. Once the personal hook into the written discussion has been made, students spend the rest of their careers learning the rules of the discourse. The personal hook, their active engagement, is a prerequisite for empowered fluency and is a stage that we cannot overlook in our teaching.

We need to be affective in our approach, given the number of students in South Africa who have been brought up to think their experience and culture is of lesser worth. In a Writing Project consultation the client sets the agenda and then reads or talks. Many clients are uncomfortable at the transferral of attention onto them, but most eventually, after long pauses sometimes, gain a voice. Power is given to the clients even when it is a case of learning a new skill. A one-to-one consultation allows a consultant to model or write with the student, constantly asking the student to explain her own understanding. The student in a consultation is forced to be active, to venture ideas, to use the act of writing as a form of learning (Emig 1977).

Apart from this conferral of authorship and authority to the client in the consultation, writing centres are democratic because they are open to everyone in the university. In the older South African academic support system, support was given primarily to black students who had English as a second language. Some of the students saw this is as a

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1   For more information about James Clowes's programme, The Comparative History of Ideas at the University of Washington, Seattle, contact <chid@u.washington.edu>.

racist division and though it was never meant as such, it did appear to be a prepared route for black students only. By contrast, clients at the Writing Project range from lecturers in other departments to people in their foundation year prior to English 1. This variety fosters a sense of community, incorporating a desire to redress with a desire to work and learn and transform as a whole community. Writing as a social generator of knowledge is, after all, the central activity of the university, not a side-lined, remedial pursuit. A writing specialist from an Australian university suggested to me that we should concentrate only on ESL students in order to be completely proficient in a limited field. Though she had other excellent ideas, this one was not acceptable in a South African context. South Africa cannot afford to make ghettos any longer and actually many of our clients have said that they appreciate the fact that both the most experienced and the least experienced writers use the Writing Project. Practically, it is also more stimulating for the consultant to meet with a variety of clients and work with a range of writings. Lecturers, too, could find a few hours consulting in the writing centre to be illuminating. I have found it a useful chance to find out how people are learning and writing, how they are constructing knowledge, which is something one has little time to observe, or facilitate, in class.

This practice in the consultation cannot survive for long, however, if it is conceived in isolation or in opposition to mainstream practice. In order to establish frequent channels of communication, with the client's permission, we send a practical summary of the session to the lecturer concerned, who is asked to sign and return the form, which is then filed at the Writing Project and open to the students concerned to read the comments and look back on their progress. We try to include rather than exclude staff, because we know that our survival depends on the number of people who understand, approve and perhaps even adopt our practice.

This is the snowball effect. The director of the Academic Development Programme for the English Department participated in the first training course and went on to deploy some Writing Project staff in her workshops. Writing Project consultants joined me in a workshop for peer tutors in other disciplines and proved to be eloquent proponents. And the best snowball effect yet is that lecturers and students from other departments have approached us for training so that they can set up their own departmental Writing Projects. This is ideal, because it means that in each department there will be one lecturer especially interested in keeping a Writing Project going and there will also be a body of specialised student tutors. The more we develop senior students as writing specialists, the more capable we will be of offering extra writing support to our students. Two years ago, I circulated a proposal for an extra discussion and writing class tied to the lecture and seminars and led by a senior student working in close liaison with the lecturer. Staff were unimpressed by the idea, I think primarily because they feared a loss of control over ideas and feared the thought of having to read an endless number of drafts. Now this idea is becoming more attractive as staff hear of the success of the writing tutors in the foundation class, are aware of calls for 'writing intensive' courses as discussed in the Arts Faculty's Teaching and Learning Committee and as practised in UCT's English Department, and also see writing courses as a way of initiating interdisciplinary study. The development of student writing is becoming an unmistakable priority and our senior

students are well suited to change a problem into a productive site of transformation. In America, graduate students form a middle army which does a great deal of the university's teaching in return for tuition remission, and which ferments and initiates new ideas. We need to develop such an army for change. Lecturers do not need to feel threatened: there is more than enough teaching to go round and the supervision of senior student tutors is vital and takes time. More than that, it is very heartening to work with the young and idealistic, who make immediate connections with those just a little younger than themselves. An empowered body of bright and responsible senior students is likely to teach well, and in ways we could not, and to galvanise staff – such students certainly have often lifted me from resignation to sudden optimistism. Wits has traditionally envisaged change from above, from the upper echelons of the administration. I am also hoping for change to begin and gain momentum from below.

Nationwide, writing centres have also encouraged a spirit of inclusion. Mike Davidson of Rhodes University, East London, Academic Development Centre, in February 1998 exemplified this by organising a Writing Centre Forum involving most of the practising writing centres in the country. The oldest of these is only about four years old and so we are all learning. Davidson very generously gave us the chance to compare notes and discuss strategies as well as introducing the ideas to his new consultants. Out of this has emerged a newsletter and plans for a journal and a conference. Writing centres will work if such a spirit of co-operation continues.

When I review the successes of and resistances to the Writing Project; various voices ring in my head. The successes include the student who told me 'Now I know that the English Department isn't only for white students'; the consultant who reported 'I had a really great conference, didn't say anything, but just gabbled on'; and another consultant who read her work to a friend and commented that 'It was just one word she said that opened up a whole other line of thought'. I feel that something is going right when lecturers from other departments request that WP consultants attend their lectures to advertise the Writing Project, or when peer tutors from other disciplines ask to attend the training course. At the beginning we encountered resistance, mainly from staff. 'But I'm sure they're teaching content'; 'They'll learn from my comments after I've marked their paper, I don't see why I need to know anything about their draft'; or 'I feel morally compromised by this progress report from the Writing Project. If I know that this student is putting in extra work I'll be tempted to grade him more leniently'. These resistances reveal the old system, where lecturers were gatekeepers, where marks were bestowed according to the favour of the lecturer, rather than something the students knew they had earned by the quality of their essay. We need to change such attitudes to show that power is not lost but rather differently and more efficiently disseminated. This year complaints have not reached me and I have heard nothing but support from staff and students. Our consultation schedule is nearly full and staff are regularly recommending the Writing Project to students who now nearly all seem to know what to expect and what not to expect from us. As Rob Moore, co-director of UCT's Writing Centre, told a colleague of mine, Irene Broekman, it takes at least three years for a writing centre to establish itself, three years for the idea of the writing centre to permeate. This seems to have been exactly the case.

This leads to questions of the development of the project. Firstly we have to deal with evaluation. To empower the students in achieving their own success we have to encourage skills of self-evaluation, and if the students begin to write better, we must hope that the marks will follow. Members of staff are aware of our methods via the report form. The next stage of tackling evaluation as gate keeping is to work towards a reconsideration of evaluation as practiced by staff, particularly the emphasis on language facility in the final mark. This is tricky territory, but certainly on the horizon, and information and communication from the Writing Project can only help a continuing reconsideration of what we are asking of our students and what we are judging to be good writing in the discipline. Second, there is the question of approach. Coming from NYU, I have understood and replicated an understanding of writing as process. Elsewhere at Wits, people have been more influenced by Australian genre theory. I do not see why South Africa has to choose between American or Australian models, or actually why any sensible person would divide process and genre teaching absolutely[2]. Here we can choose and adapt according to need, as Pat Hill in the Engineering Department is adapting process methods as a way into a mastery of scientific reports. Writing centres deal with individuals. Their great advantage is flexibility according to individual need, and so the consultants can decide for themselves which approach or combination of approaches is suitable for their client. Thirdly is the question of whether writing centres have to be discipline specific. I, personally, favour the satellite model, with a central, interdisciplinary training programme; although the consultants have had successful conferences with clients who were forced to explain the language of their discipline to someone from the outside. At Wits, the satellite model is evolving naturally through the approach of the other departments. It seems a flexible and efficient model and, if formalised, funding could be channelled into each department to give teaching relief to the lecturer concerned and an hourly wage for the departmental consultants.

With Broekman and Hingle I have been involved in looking for funding for a formalised faculty-wide writing centre. The need for a writing centre and the success of the Writing Project will ensure its eventual formalisation. The first year my consultants were volunteers, who put in hours because they saw the need, realised the value and wanted the experience. Since then the consultants have been able to use bursary hours, a form of tuition remission, as the hours they spend in the Writing Project. We use rooms that would be vacant anyway. The Writing Project needs a quiet space, pen, paper, a specific method and a group ethic. As an idea in practice it can be quite resilient. As Salman Rushdie writes:

> Literature is the art least subject to external control, because it is made in private. The act of making it requires only one person, one pen, one room, some paper. (1991:424)

Writing centres are unstoppable if conceived as a method that works, which is learnt, shared and then propagated within the university, and even elsewhere as successive groups of consultants leave with particular habits of writing themselves and facilitating writing in others. Writing centres, and the alternative paradigm of learning in which

2   See Frank Smith's models (1982:66, 89, 106).

they operate, could be part of positive change in South African tertiary education. This sounds like a bold claim, but bold measures are necessary at a moment when South African tertiary education is balanced between great things and disaster. The debate, as I have heard it, is between the desire to maintain 'standards' and to open the universities to 'massification'. The camp which focuses on standards represents a nostalgia for past competencies, achieved by one ruling part of the population. This obviously has to change. Massification, however, as practised in the huge, formally black universities, is also a mirage. Colleagues have described huge lectures on trendy western themes, which pass students by, but give their lecturers kudos among their peers as well as conference material. If such lectures, as I have heard, have not a chance of making sense to their students who just sit there uncomprehending for three years, then the university is teaching passivity and helplessness. Rather, we need to create an opportunity for all the people in the room to talk, we need to empower senior students as teachers themselves and create a student culture, we need to allow all students to reveal where they begin from and to formulate, respond and listen to others. The rhetoric of standards and massification is just theory. Instead of arguing theory we need to get on with a practice which allows an emerging democratic culture to develop. I would like to see something of the arrogant self-confidence of an NYU class, proud and creative in its cultural differences, in Johannesburg. And here such a pride could be combined with intelligent and committed engagement because the students, far more than most lecturers, are ready and desirous to find new voices, individually and together.

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7 Writing in the academy

Collaborative writing development with students and lecturers at the UWC Writing Centre

Sherran Clarence

Introduction

There is contestation in the field of student writing development in higher education. One debate concerns whether writing can and should be taught outside the disciplines in which the writing needs to be done. There is also still debate about whether or not 'writing courses' or writing places (that tend to divorce the actual practice of writing in the disciplines, and the disciplinary content and value systems that inform what is written and how it is written) have a valid place in higher education. Academic writing is not a generic skill that can be taught, and then applied uncritically or unadapted across the disciplines with students 'picking up' the implicit disciplinary rules and conventions as they move between different disciplinary spaces (Coffin *et al* 2003:3). Academic writing is, in fact, a social as well as a knowledge practice that is informed by the values and academic conventions of particular disciplines and the ways in which knowledge is constructed and disseminated by these disciplines (Lillis 2002). Furthermore, viewing academic writing as a practice instead of a 'skill' allows us to move away from seeing student writing as an individual act done by an 'autonomous, socially neutral' person using language as a 'transparent medium of communication' in which the meaning just has to be uncovered by the writer, and where literacy is 'universal' (Lillis 2001:31). Instead, we can more accurately understand student writing as 'a social act' that uses

language to make meaning and construct identity, which is done in socio-historically contested academic spaces where literacies are 'numerous, varied and socially/ institutionally situated' (Lillis 2001:31).

Learning to be a capable, thoughtful and critical thinker, reader and writer is a challenging process that develops over time, and must happen at a disciplinary and departmental level, with all teaching staff actively engaged in academic literacy practices. Boughey (2002), drawing on the work of Street (1984, 1993, 1995), argues that academic literacy is a set of 'social practices' and this means that 'the way in which meaning is derived from, or encoded into, print is perceived to be dependent on factors such as the way individuals perceive themselves in relationship to the texts they encounter and on the value they ascribe to those texts in their daily lives' (3). Literacy is always 'multiple': there are many 'literacies' which students need to become familiar with in the academy (Gee 1994:xviii). This ties in with Burke's argument that writing is an inherently social practice, and one cannot think about teaching it or doing it without also thinking about the context in which one teaches and writes, and the factors informing that context, such as 'complex intersections and inequalities of age, class, dis/ability, ethnicity, gender, race and sexuality' (2008:200). This is the notion of literacies used in this chapter.

It must also be added that writing is a knowledge practice, informed by the content that is being drawn from in the writing tasks, that influences the form and purpose of what is written. It is clear, then, that a support structure such as a writing centre or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course, functioning in a space outside this disciplinary context, cannot fully develop students as practitioners of the academic literacy practices, and ways of knowing and making knowledge, in a deep and meaningful way. But this does not mean that there is no role for writing centres and academic literacy practitioners in higher education environments.

Writing is a powerful tool for thinking and learning about disciplinary content, as well as a necessary means of assessing content knowledge. This view of writing in the academy is not a new one. Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) started in the 1970s in the United States, building writing-intensive courses and campus-wide writing programmes in many universities and colleges (Maimon 1992). There is a wealth of research and scholarship, as well as experiential knowledge, on the role writing can and does play in helping students to learn in a more engaged and critical way. Yet the practices in many university classrooms and lecture halls do not necessarily or extensively reflect this theoretical and experiential knowledge. There is a gap between what academic lecturers and tutors think students need to do to develop as competent writers and thinkers, and what these lecturers and tutors are doing to help students to achieve this goal. A writing centre, focused as it can be on holistic student writing development, can reach out to academic lecturers to begin to close the gap, and grow from knowledge to practice through collaboration and joint production of research and scholarship. Writing centres cannot act alone, or apart, from the disciplinary contexts in which students write, because, as Boughey, Street and Gee would argue, these disciplinary contexts have specific literacy practices that students must be socialised into and this involves learning to write effectively (Boughey 2002; Gee 1994; Street 1995).

Further, student writing development within a space like a writing centre can be sustainable only if the writing centre is working to consolidate and extend the literacy and writing development already embedded in the disciplines. Partnerships between writing centres and disciplinary lecturers and tutors are needed to ensure that student writing development is more holistic, and more sustainable in the long term. Focusing on the work currently being done by the Writing Centre at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), this chapter will argue that writing centres have a valuable role to play in collaborating with academic lecturers to develop more writing-intensive teaching methods and materials. It will also contend that there is a need for writing centres to work collaboratively with students as well, to guide their own writing development across all faculties and disciplines.

A brief background of the UWC Writing Centre

UWC initiated the Writing Centre Project in 1994, as part of a broader Academic Development Programme (ADP) designed to give the large numbers of non-traditional students from disadvantaged schooling backgrounds who were entering the University the necessary support in navigating and negotiating the new academic environment in which they found themselves (Leibowitz *et al* 1997). The idea behind the ADP was to provide students with what Morrow (1993) termed 'epistemological access' to the institution – inducting students into the new academic discourses in which they were required to work in order for them to produce primarily written work of an acceptable standard. Many of the students who were accepted at UWC, then and now, speak English as an additional language (EAL). Many UWC students come to the University from socio-economically disadvantaged households, finding the gap between high school and first year large and difficult to bridge on their own. Building this bridge for themselves is the first hurdle they encounter on moving into the academic environment and discourses. A second, and significant, hurdle is the way in which these discourses are communicated to students once they are in the Higher Education (HE) environment. Teaching staff often believe they are being transparent in making their assessment criteria, expectations and requirements known to students, while students often struggle to decode the academic conventions they are required to conform to, and so struggle to produce acceptable written work (Lillis and Turner 2001). This seems to be an especially challenging process for EAL students from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (Lillis 2001).

The Writing Centre, as it is at present, aims to support students with their writing task, in order to help them produce work of an acceptable standard by assisting them with decoding and making sense of these academic conventions and assessment criteria. It is a walk-in Centre where students can bring drafts of their work to trained writing consultants for a one-on-one consultation, and in this respect works in a similar fashion to the way it has done since 1994 (see Leibowitz *et al* 1997). Students are also referred to the Writing Centre as part of specific relationships created with course convenors and lecturers. They are invited to approach the Writing Centre for assistance, and to brief the writing consultant/tutor on the assignment task and criteria before referring students. In these cases the lecturers receive detailed feedback on the group of students they have referred, and how they were assisted with the consultant/tutor. The Writing

Centre provides its writing tutors with ongoing training, as well as an initial block of orientation and training, before consultations with students commence.

Resources are an ongoing concern in terms of hiring and retaining qualified and experienced tutors. All the tutors employed at present are MA and PhD candidates, with a great deal of relevant experience. However, they are paid from a limited pool of funding that pays a low hourly rate; lower than senior postgraduate students should be paid for tutoring work. This means that most of the tutors have to find other tutoring work to make ends meet, as well as do their own research. Each tutor works a maximum of twenty hours per week, and none of the tutors are presently involved in planning and running writing workshops on campus, as time and budget constraints do not allow this. This creates extra work for the coordinator, and hinders tutor development in the necessary areas of planning and facilitation of writing workshops, and collaboration with lecturers on writing development in the disciplines. This then restricts the extent to which the UWC Writing Centre can support students in their disciplines, in interactive workshops beyond the one-on-one consultations. It also limits the extent to which we can become involved in collaborating with lecturers and tutors on student writing development.

The Writing Centre has undergone several changes since 1994, under the leadership of different coordinators. It is difficult to say with any authority how the previous coordinators approached their work with students and academic lecturers. Apart from the initial few years of the Writing Centre little concrete documentation remains to tell us about the theoretical and practical underpinnings of Writing Centre work. However, from a report written in evaluation of the Writing Centre in 2003 by the UWC Academic Planning Unit it does seem that the Centre was operating without a coherent plan for its long-term role in student writing development and teaching support and development. While well-organised and clearly passionate about reaching out to students at all levels using a 'process approach' to writing, there was a clear sense of the Centre experiencing 'mission drift' and straying too far from its 'core business' by trying to take on too many projects in response to individual requests for help (Wood 2003). The concern in 2003 was that there was no clear mandate given to the Writing Centre and that without any permanent appointments, or structured institutional support and guidance, the Centre would remain in this drift, and lose its ability to have an impact on students, or on academic lecturers. Institutionally, much has changed since 2003. The Division of Postgraduate Studies now provides writing support and development to all postgraduate students and their supervisors and lecturers, allowing the Writing Centre to focus on the undergraduate student community. There is also a new Strategic Plan for Teaching and Learning, incorporating the introduction of Graduate Attributes into existing and new curricula. There is a clear institutional commitment, and need, to create a defined mandate and role for the Writing Centre as it adapts to these changes, and to support the work it is doing into the future. This is exciting, as there is now scope for changing the way in which the Centre can, and will, try to work with students, and in particular with academic lecturers.

The response to the Writing Centre since it has resumed work with students in August 2009, after being closed for a semester, has been very encouraging. The number of

students coming to the Centre and academic lecturers reaching out for advice and assistance has increased monthly, especially since the beginning of the 2010 academic year. The writing tutors have consulted with 446 students in the first semester, with 21% of these students returning for follow-up appointments (UWC Writing Centre 2010a). Three lecturers have approached us, explicitly for assistance on behalf of these students, and the initial feedback from the writing tutors to them has been well-received. It has also resulted in further requests for similar relationships in the second semester with the same, and new, lecturers. It is clear from this response that there is a great need for the Writing Centre at UWC. For the present coordinator and academic leadership there is therefore a need to create a firm mandate for the Writing Centre, to align the work it does with the current Institutional Operating Plan, the plans for teaching and learning and the embedding of Graduate Attributes into existing and new curricula. It is also necessary to think very carefully in terms of resources about how to plan for the present and build towards the future of the Writing Centre as a relevant and useful partner in the writing development of UWC students.

Key to this process is an understanding of what the Writing Centre can practically do, in terms of resource and personnel availability and in terms of its institutional role and mandate. Also key to this process is realising the limitations of the work any Writing Centre can do in terms of having an impact on the development of student writing, and sustaining this. As Archer notes, in writing about student writing interventions at the University of Cape Town (UCT) Writing Centre: '[s]tudents write in a range of courses, get feedback, do a range of reading, and it would be difficult to ascertain the extent to which one or two visits to the Writing Centre' could impact 'on their writing within this larger context' (2008:249). She adds that Writing Centre practice at UCT (and this is true for UWC and indeed most writing centres in South Africa) is rather '*ad hoc*', with students coming for once-off consultations with writing tutors, while a smaller portion of these develop and maintain a long-term relationship with the Writing Centre and writing tutors (Archer 2008:249). However, having recognised that it is difficult to determine the exact impact a writing centre intervention or consultation can have on students' writing in terms of improving it, one can (as Archer has done), indicate clearly that the Writing Centre plays an important role in helping novice academic writers to locate their own voice and clarify their position in relation to the texts they are reading and drawing from for their writing. Writing tutors make the writing process a less solitary and anxious one and the Writing Centre can help students to develop a meta-awareness of their writing, and can help them to improve their writing through a critical and supportive evaluation of the written work as a response to a particular task or set of assessment criteria (Archer 2008). This sense of the Writing Centre as a safe, non-judgemental space in which to develop their own confidence and ability has been echoed by UWC students in recent focus group interviews (UWC Writing Centre 2010b).

Working with student writers and academic lecturers at UWC

The current practices of working with student writers and academic lecturers and tutors at the UWC Writing Centre are influenced by New Literacy Studies, and the WAC movement. In terms of working with students, we are informed first and foremost by

the view that writing is indeed a practice, rather than a generic skill, and that it always happens in a social and disciplinary space informed by certain values and ways of knowing and disseminating knowledge (Archer 2008; Lillis 2001). Writing tutors do not correct or edit students' work, but rather 'provide [them] with an audience prepared to draw their attention to the academic norms of writing' (Bharuthram and McKenna 2006:497). Writing tutors thus approach students' writing by looking first at issues like whether the student has correctly interpreted the task; the way in which the relevant ideas and concepts have been discussed in response to the set task; the internal coherence of the written work; and the way in which the student has structured the written text in response to assessment criteria and departmental guidelines. Tutors ask questions of students, and each consultation is conversational as opposed to didactic. The student is being encouraged to think through their own work with the guidance of the tutor, who can explain and intervene where necessary to help the student understand more clearly what is required of their writing, and how to go about fulfiling the requirements more consciously (Goodman 2010). Surface errors like poor grammar, spelling, and punctuation are referred to and examined only once the writer can express their ideas more clearly, and in such a way as to allow students to learn to find the errors in their own work and do corrections on their own. This is achieved mainly by pointing out a small sample of common errors, explaining why they are problematic and then working through examples with the student that will enable them to continue to do further and future corrections independently. Although many lecturers and tutors complain mainly about the students' inability to write in full sentences, and their poor grammar and spelling, we find that very few students have a genuine inability to produce a sensible piece of written work. The majority of students we consult with at the UWC Writing Centre need assistance with task analysis and directing their answer towards the task in a more focused and relevant way, with clear reference to source texts (UWC Writing Centre 2010a).

In terms of writing as a social practice, the Writing Centre offers students a supportive, 'all-inclusive, writing environment to which all students, irrespective of their levels of writing proficiency, can come, and benefit from conversing with peer tutors for whatever writing problems they encounter' (Xudong 2009). As Harris eloquently argues, a writing centre provides 'a focal point, a place for writing on campus, a center for writing.... Here is a place where writers write, where they talk, where there is institutional commitment to writing, where ... collaboration is a normal part of writing and that writers really do write for readers' (1992:157-158). Through the conversational approach, the writing tutors meet students at the point at which they are in their writing process, whether they are doing a task analysis before reading or writing, or whether they are polishing a final draft before submitting it. Regardless of the disciplinary background of the tutor or student, the two can have a conversation that provides the student with a critical reader who can see their written work in a different light, making visible and clear some of the missteps or misunderstandings that the student may have made. The student can then begin to work out, with the tutor as a guide, ways to redraft the work so that it responds comprehensively to the task or assessment criteria.

Taking the concerns of the lecturers and tutors together with the concerns the students bring to the Writing Centre, there seems to be a correlation of sorts. When students bring their work into the Writing Centre, they fill in a form that allows them to indicate (by ticking boxes), what they would like to work on in their consultation. This form has been in place prior to this year, but it has now been adapted to suit the present needs and orientation of the Centre as we try to find out more about what in particular students need assistance with. There are boxes for 'language use – grammar, punctuation, spelling, vocabulary and style' and 'plagiarism and referencing' as well as boxes that address the structure and coherence of writing, reading and research, and task analysis. A preliminary survey of these forms thus far into 2010 seems to indicate that students ask for help in two main areas: working on coherence and structure (and the way in which they have used evidence and research); and the polishing of the final draft. Slightly lesser concerns are task analysis and referencing and plagiarism. The help given by the writing tutors based on their assessment of the written work in relation to the task indicates that students are assisted in two key areas: clarity of ideas and the linking of ideas and concepts across paragraphs; and logic of argument, including assignment plan and structural conventions. Far fewer students than those who ask for help polishing their drafts receive this help because tutors report that few students are at the final draft stage when they come to consult. Many need to be encouraged to go back to task analysis, clarifying their ideas and structuring their writing more coherently (UWC Writing Centre 2010a). According to tutor feedback thus far, it seems that the students who fall into this category are unable to see these errors in their work, and struggle to articulate their difficulties with academic writing. This is specially so with first year students, who have yet to become familiar with their disciplinary contexts and often misunderstand or miss altogether their lecturers' and tutors' expectations of their written work.

Speaking to lecturers and tutors about their students' writing reveals, anecdotally, that the chief concerns seem to be language use and plagiarism and referencing, followed by structure and coherence. In terms of the statistics gathered thus far, students seem to require more assistance with understanding their task correctly and responding in an appropriately structured written task containing well-researched content, than with polishing their grammar or correcting their referencing. This feedback reinforces the sense of a gap between what the academics see as the main problems with student writing, which seem to focus on students' use of English as a formal language of instruction, and the actual writing needs of the students, which relate to the deeper issues, such as understanding and responding accurately to the task. This gap is a central part of how and why the Writing Centre wants to work at UWC into the future.

It is fairly clear that the way in which the Writing Centre currently works with students is not very different from the way in which it has done so in the past, and our practices are closely aligned with many other national and international writing centre practices, like Stellenbosch University Writing Lab, University of KwaZulu-Natal Writing Place and the London Metropolitan University Writing Centre as cases in point. What is new, for the UWC Writing Centre, is the way in which we want to reach out to academics, and work with them to change the way in which literacy practices are understood and taught within the disciplines, with a particular focus on writing development. The ambitious goal

is to develop, with academics as partners, a campus-wide WAC approach to encourage academic lecturers not currently doing so to use writing for learning, evaluation and thinking in their classrooms as well as for assessment. The starting point is to approach a few interested lecturers and slowly and steadily build a community of practice which will take on its own momentum and become a part of the institutional culture of teaching and learning over time. Practically, the Writing Centre has started doing this by collating short reports on groups of students linked to certain courses who have come into the Centre for help. This feedback is sent to the lecturer for their information and, hopefully, action in some cases, and to establish a wider network of relationships between disciplines and the Writing Centre. This approach has thus far achieved positive responses from the lecturers concerned, and is a building block in the overall process of creating these collaborative relationships. Two new potential relationships between the Writing Centre and course convenors have developed out of this practice so far. The Writing Centre will become involved in these courses in the second semester, jointly working on ways in which to create more space for students to write in different ways, for assessment and learning. The challenge is to keep the momentum going so that the concept builds and becomes more widely practiced over time without over-extending the Centre's limited personnel and financial resources too soon, and, so that the faculties and lecturers will take on full responsibility for these courses and the students' writing development within them with the Writing Centre as partner in, rather than driver of, these disciplinary ways of working.

For the UWC Writing Centre, working on a WAC approach means working collaboratively with lecturers over time to develop more writing intensive courses, a key feature of WAC. WAC proponents define the movement loosely as encouraging a culture of 'writing to learn and learning to write', with an understanding that WAC programs or approaches are not 'additive, but transformative – they aim not at adding more papers ... but at changing the way both teachers and students use writing in the curriculum' (McLeod 1992:3). Central to this approach is an understanding of what students need to write in particular disciplines, how they need to write, and the purpose of what is written in terms of the objectives and outcomes for the course (Nichols and Brenner 2009). In spite of much literature on WAC and using writing as a tool for learning and not just for assessment, much of the writing being done by students in higher education is 'high-stakes', meaning it is for assessment and there are marks attached. There is a clear sense, from the UWC Writing Centre's engagements with lecturers and tutors thus far, that low-stakes writing – writing that is not for marks and is used as a tool for processing and evaluating information as a way of learning and understanding it – is not highly valued or readily used. This is largely because lecturers fear that they will not be able to monitor whether students are learning effectively because of having large classes and no time to read and comment on all students' work, and that students will not come to class and do the writing unless there are marks attached. Neither of these arguments is particularly convincing, even though lecturers and tutors with large classes and heavy teaching loads do have some reason for concern about setting more writing tasks for their students.

If we accept academic literacy as a set of social and knowledge practices, with the insight that academic literacy proficiency is achievable over a lengthy time period only, which goes beyond simply learning and mastering certain cognitive skills, then we need to accept that all disciplinary lecturers, not just those who work in EAP-type courses or writing centres, are academic literacy practitioners. Accepting this and implementing teaching and learning strategies that recognise it are two different matters for many academics though. Thus, in order to achieve success in this area, the Writing Centre needs to tread carefully to strike the right balance between offering support and ideas, and being more closely involved in the development of different kinds of writing-intensive interventions in different departments and disciplines.

A starting point here is to acknowledge the resource and teaching constraints placed on UWC staff. Many academics, especially those teaching first year students, who need much of the writing development help, teach large numbers of students – as many as 400 in a first year politics module, and as many as 650 in a first year law module. It is thus challenging to engage students in a more interactive teaching process that attempts to model academic behaviour that students need to master, like engaging deeply with readings, and unpacking arguments to assess evidence and the validity of claims. Many lecturers feel immense pressure to cover a certain amount of content in a limited amount of time. This means that many feel less able to interact with the class because students are often under-prepared for lectures as they struggle to engage with the course readings and materials, and furthermore many feel too intimidated to speak up in large class settings, so interacting can be a slow process. Academics need also to engage in increasing amounts of administrative work, and feel great pressure to conduct research and publish in their areas of interest and expertise. All this means that many academics could truthfully acknowledge that they are under-resourced, and even unwilling, to take on a greater role in building an institutional culture of academic literacy as a set of ongoing social practices, rather than skills that can be learnt apart from the content.

A writing centre can work with lecturers to provide them with valuable support in terms of discussion about the objectives of writing in their courses and disciplines, and to assist in the development and collation of materials and other resources that can practically help them to support and develop their students' writing. In this way, a collaborative relationship can grow and begin to critically examine the assumptions and objectives underpinning the kinds of writing tasks that are set for students, and the way in which the questions and assessment criteria are phrased and communicated to students. As outsiders to the discipline, writing specialists can ask questions that will encourage lecturers to think about why their students write what they do and how they assess what is written. Lecturers can also be encouraged and supported in thinking through how they learnt to become confident and proficient writers in their discipline and to take some of these insights into their own teaching and engagement with students – all part of the process of making the tacit knowledge and practices more explicit (Jacobs 2007). Writing can be used effectively as a tool to deliver, think about, and learn, as well as to assess, content knowledge, and there is a clear space emerging at UWC for lecturers to work with the Writing Centre to re-imagine ways in which to use writing.

It is possible to bring low-stakes writing into lectures and tutorials regularly in ways that will benefit students, and that will not necessarily create more work for the lecturers and tutors. For example, designing lectures so that there is a clear summary that could be made of each one, and asking students to take the last ten minutes to write one paragraph summarising what they understood as the key points of the lecture, or asking them to write down three questions they have related to the content or readings referred to in the lecture, can be very simple and useful ways of getting students to write in a focused way. Even in large classes, lecturers and tutors can take this work in and read a percentage of the total, as a way of monitoring what students are taking away from lectures and tutorials. In this way the content and style of the lectures and tutorials can be adjusted as the course progresses, taking the students' own reflections as part of the teaching and learning process. Talking to students about the purpose of this process, and highlighting the value to them in terms of their learning, and the writing they will eventually do for assessment, can go some way to ensuring 'buy-in' from the students. Having these discussions will also go some way to making explicit some of the tacit dimensions of the discipline (Jacobs 2007), such as the importance of being able to summarise a core text, reading, or lecture, or the value attached to writing in a clear and focused way that expresses an idea or set of ideas accurately.

Working from within writing centres in South African universities

I would like to suggest here that there are two ways in which a writing centre can play a role in developing a meta-awareness of writing practices in the institutions in which they are located, in the thought processes of both disciplinary lecturers and students. Students need to develop their reading ability and level of comprehension in order to do effective research before they can think clearly about their own position or opinion on any given topic they are being asked to respond to. Once they are able to read strategically and with understanding they can decide on a position and find evidence and explanation to justify that position. Only once those practices have occurred can they begin to write back to the task and meet the assessment criteria. Thus, one cannot view a writing centre's role as focused only on developing students' writing, and on nothing else. One could ask, then, how a writing centre would work differently or uniquely compared to academic literacy specialists already working in the faculties at various levels; how could a writing centre make a unique contribution?

Bharuthram and McKenna argue that '[m]ost lecturers are hired for their content knowledge' and 'are often unaware of the extent to which academic literacy is specific to the academy and that it comprises fairly significant differences across disciplines' (2006:497). They further point out that by the time most academics become lecturers, they have absorbed the literacy practices of their disciplines to such an extent that these have become 'ways of being in the world'. It can, therefore, be difficult for academics to step back and 'see' these practices from the perspective of their novice students or of those outside their discipline (Bharuthram and McKenna 2006). Jacobs, drawing on various writings from New Literacy Studies and Rhetorical Studies, argues in a similar vein that 'knowledge of disciplinary discourses has a tacit dimension, which makes it difficult for experts to articulate, and therefore difficult for students to learn' (2007:869). Data

from Jacobs' research shows that the 'rhetorical' processes through which disciplines communicate 'domain content' are rendered largely invisible to students, while emphasis is placed rather on developing content expertise – that these processes are thus 'tacit' (Jacobs 2007:870). This tacit knowledge, according to Jacobs, is acquired through being inducted or socialised into particular disciplinary 'communities of practice' (Jacobs 2007:870; see also Bharuthram and McKenna 2006; Boughey 2002), and the literacy practices of academic disciplines 'are best acquired by students when embedded within the contexts of such disciplines' (Jacobs 2007:870).

However, in spite of these claims, Jacobs in particular questions the premise that disciplinary lecturers must be the ones to teach these literacy practices to their students (2007:870). She argues, as do Bharuthram and McKenna, that while disciplinary lecturers may indeed have content expertise, and know the tacit knowledge and practices that have become 'ways of being in the world', many are not able to 'see' these invisible dimensions and unpack these literacies in ways that make them explicit and overtly learnable for the students (Jacobs 2007:871; Bharuthram and McKenna 2006:497). Thus, Jacobs (2007) argues for a collaborative pedagogical approach, where academic literacy practitioners work from outside the discipline to make the tacit elements of the discipline explicit to the lecturers working inside the discipline, so that both parties can work together as equals to explicitly embed the teaching of these literacy practices into the curriculum. She argues that through these collaborations, academic literacy practitioners can help lecturers to develop a meta-awareness of the 'generic structures and discourse patterns' of their disciplines, and that through developing this meta-awareness, lecturers can begin to have a critical understanding of the importance of, and ways of, teaching discipline-specific literacy practices (Jacobs 2007:872). One of the key literacy practices is writing.

If we look at the disciplinary lecturers first we can see that there is indeed a space for a writing centre to work collaboratively to create meta-awareness around writing in the disciplines. At UWC, in the faculties where teaching and learning specialists are employed to work with disciplinary lecturers to create awareness around teaching and learning and academic literacy issues, like critical reading, writing and research skills, it is often the case that these specialists are in some ways disciplinary insiders. The concern with this positioning of these specialists is that they would, certainly in Jacobs' thinking, be more likely to perpetuate the tacit dimensions of these disciplines by not making these fully apparent to either disciplinary lecturers or students. It is the contention of this chapter that a writing centre has a unique voice, and can be positioned in one or both of two ways within an institution like UWC. The first is to collaborate with the faculty-based teaching and learning and academic literacy specialists as 'co-outsiders' if you like, and therefore with the lecturers indirectly. The second is to carve out a role and mandate to work with disciplinary lecturers by bringing them into the process of co-building and sustaining a WAC approach to writing intensive teaching and learning. Regardless of how it is positioned in relation to faculties and lecturers, a writing centre can, and should, continue to play a valuable role in providing students with a supportive and critical academic space in which to further their reading and writing development, and in which well-trained peer tutors can make the writing process less solitary and

intimidating (see Archer 2008). This is the second way in which writing centres can work within South African universities (as has been discussed in the previous section).

It is likely that there will be resistance from lecturers and tutors within academic literacy and academic development programmes and departments to collaborate in the development of a WAC approach. This approach would ideally see their role shift from being lecturers working almost completely outside the disciplines in more generic 'skills'-type courses that they can create and own, to being collaborators and facilitators who would advise on and even co-create courses with disciplinary lecturers, but which the lecturers would ultimately be responsible for teaching and assessing. There is also likely to be resistance from disciplinary lecturers who do not necessarily see themselves as either willing or able to bring what many of them see as 'skills development' into a content-governed classroom space that already feels overburdened. The challenge is then how to build a bridge between the two spaces, and create room for collaboration and joint curriculum development that benefits the students, first and foremost, in terms of enabling greater 'epistemological access' (Morrow 1993:33) and also greater retention and throughput, and that also benefits the academic lecturers who are likely to have more engaged and confident learners in their classrooms and lecture halls, without threatening their sense of academic identity or adding to their workload significantly.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed ways in which a writing centre can be a part of this bridge-building process, and how it can make a unique and valuable contribution to the development of undergraduate student writing across the disciplines. Using the current revisioning and restructuring of the Writing Centre at UWC as a case study, and drawing on current and recent research into academic literacies and Writing Across the Curriculum and in the disciplines, this chapter has argued that a writing centre is an important tool in developing both the capacity of academics to bring writing into their classrooms in new and innovative ways as a tool for learning, thinking and assessment, and in developing the capacity of student writers through one-on-one consultations in a safe and supportive extra-disciplinary space.

It is important to reiterate that the UWC Writing Centre is part of a wider community of teaching and learning, as is any writing centre in a higher education environment. Writing centres should not be the sole initiators and drivers of faculty and departmental writing programmes, or writing intensive courses, although they most certainly have a valuable role to play in co-creating and co-sustaining these initiatives. As has been pointed out, there are gaps between what students consider to be their writing difficulties and concerns, and what disciplinary lecturers and tutors consider to be their students' writing concerns and problems (although there are indeed overlaps). There is a role for the Writing Centre at UWC to step into this gap to work with both students and lecturers to foreground, theorise, research and sustain an environment that focuses on writing as a social and knowledge practice that must be embedded in the content and context of the disciplines in which it is done.

Informed by New Literacy Studies as well as a WAC approach, the Writing Centre provides students with a voluntary, walk-in place where trained peer tutors support and encourage their development as student writers. The tutors work from the position of critical but non-judgemental readers who guide students to help them understand and critique their own writing as they develop an awareness of the academic conventions to which they are being asked to adapt. Alongside this student support, the Writing Centre aims to extend its promising work within faculties and departments where it can support and collaborate with teaching and learning and academic literacy specialists who in turn work in collaboration with lecturers and tutors, or collaborate with lecturers and tutors directly. Working in either way, the goal is to build sustainable communities of practice that will critically evaluate the aims and objectives of writing in the disciplines, and work creatively and in partnership with the Writing Centre to bring different kinds of writing into the teaching and learning spaces to enable students to write to learn, and to learn to write, more effectively.

There is room in higher education institutions in South Africa for writing centres. They are an invaluable part of an institutional response to the learning needs of students and the teaching requirements asked of lecturers. However, a narrow and limiting concept of a writing centre as a remedial space where 'weak' students can have their writing problems 'fixed' or have their work corrected for grammar and spelling mistakes disables conversation and collaboration between writing specialists and academics, and between writing tutors and students. A writing centre can only provide the kind of support both students and academics need and desire if it can position itself as a place for the consolidation and extension of academic behaviours and practices around writing that are already, continually and collaboratively, being developed and practiced in content and context-embedded teaching and learning environments. Thus, writing centres need a clearly defined and institutionally supported and resourced mandate that enables them to play a unique and sustainable role in the development and innovation of writing development and research in South African universities.

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8 The Fort Hare Writing Centre

An integrated collaborative model for writing
and language advancement

Melanie Skead and Thembinkosi Twalo

Introduction and background

In 2004, the East London campus of Rhodes University was incorporated with the University of Fort Hare. At this time, the former Rhodes University campus had a well-established Writing Centre functioning under the auspices of the Academic Development Centre. Upon incorporation with Fort Hare, staff soon established a more comprehensive response to key learning needs in the student population.

The Writing Centre Coordinator subsequently visited three institutions in order to observe models of good practice: The University of Stellenbosch, the University of the Western Cape and the former Cape Peninsula Technikon (presently Cape Peninsula University of Technology). The latter institution was formed as result of the National Plan on Higher Education's announcement in March 2001. This plan changed the higher education landscape and formed Cape Peninsula University of Technology through the merger of the Cape Technikon and Peninsula Technikon in January 2005. The observed collaborative learning opportunities at the three institutions informed the conceptualisation of a writing centre model that responded to institutional writing needs and eventually culminated in the implementation of an integrated collaborative model for promoting academic literacy acquisition among students.

Critical reflection on the general trends in writing centres globally, as well as in the Fort Hare academic community, encourages the conscious use of available literature to inform the Fort Hare Writing Centre model and practice. Fort Hare's Writing Centre is located within the Teaching and Learning Centre's Learning Advancement Unit. The Learning Advancement Unit's aim is to provide students with a variety of learning opportunities to empower them to learn effectively and become independent learners. It offers various learning advancement programs to fulfil its mandate. A key observation is the frequency with which the study skills approach, dating back as far as the 1950s, is still commonly used in the academic community. According to Lea and Street (2007), the study skills model approaches literacy as 'an individual and cognitive skill' (368) and 'focuses on the surface features of language form' presuming that 'students can transfer their knowledge unproblematically from one context to another' (368-369). In contrast to the study skills approach which assumes that students can acquire and internalise specific writing skills via instruction and explanation, the Fort Hare Writing Centre approaches writing development as an integral aspect of the overall process of academic literacy acquisition. It is therefore tied to the students' identity as learner and writer. This chapter explicates the approach adopted by the Writing Centre, in particular its theoretical orientation, model overview, challenges and benefits as well as recommendations for further research and development.

Theoretical framework: academic literacies perspective and process writing

Fort Hare Writing Centre practices have been informed largely by what has been termed 'an academic literacies approach' (Lea and Street 1998) partly in an attempt to address the limitations manifested by approaching student writing in higher education as a transferable set of skills. As an academic development centre, it has rejected the emphasis on 'remedial' or 'skills' support for students in favour of approaching literacies as social practices. It regards 'student writing and learning as issues at the level of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialization' (Street 2004:15). By implication, the act of writing in a particular discipline is a means of learning which, in turn, is constructed by the writer/learner who actively participates in a process of discovery, enquiry and construction of understanding. In this way, writing provides the impetus for sustained and meaningful engagement with knowledge creation. Additionally, the writer constructs her or his identity as a learner writer which impacts significantly on the willingness to engage deeply with process (writing and learning) and product (discipline knowledge).

Lea and Street (1998:2) suggest that the academic literacies model incorporates both the 'study skills' and 'academic socialization' models 'into a more encompassing understanding of the nature of student writing within institutional practices, power relations and identities'. Just as each perspective influences the interpretation of academic writing in terms of how to teach and research it, the same is true of academic development practices. In light of the need to promote students' transition into academic discourse and enhance their academic performance in the various courses they do, the Writing Centre's model embraces the tenets of the academic literacies model. Although this approach is similar to that of 'academic socialization', it 'views the processes involved

in acquiring literacy as more complex, dynamic, nuanced, situated, and involving both epistemological issues and social processes' (Lea and Street 2007:369).

In the Fort Hare Writing Centre, the belief that students are challenged to interpret and acquire various literacies and 'modes of writing across disciplines' (Lea and Street 1998) has translated into the recruitment and appointment of discipline-specific peer consultants. These consultants assist students in various ways, primarily through one-to-one discussions and responding to written drafts. Rather than providing feedback through 'categorical modality' (Lea and Street 1998), consultants are trained and encouraged not to take ownership of the text, which would indicate a position of authority and power in relation to the students' writing. Categorical modality denotes the expression of unmitigated assertions in response to students' writing. Comments and punctuation marks are used to indicate mistakes rather than an authentic intention to engage the student writer in explicating meaning. In contrast, Fort Hare consultants attempt to evoke a different modality through centring ownership in the student by not writing extensive comments on the student's text. Feedback is presented through suggestions and comments as developmental impetus rather than instructions and criticism on deficits, with the writer firmly in control of the text development. Within the academic literacies paradigm, consultants are trained to engage students on issues of interpretation and understanding of the task at hand rather than 'categorical modality' (Lea and Street 1998).

Within the process of literacy acquisition, ownership and authority remain with the author. Writing Centre staff are positioned among students in an interactive process that allows students not only to develop multiple literacies but to forge identity as writers and learners. To this end, students are encouraged to find their own voices (Hutchings 2006) and express their personal creativity by engaging in process writing (Boughey and Van Rensburg 1994) by producing multiple drafts of writing tasks for response and discussion. As suggested by Lillis (2003) and Lea (2004), the academic literacies model is being developed as a 'design frame' not only as means of Writing Centre support to students, but also to inform curriculum and teaching development. Process writing and the academic literacies model intersect when the writing process functions as a framework for identity construction as well as for understanding and knowledge of institutional, discipline-specific and social dynamics. In privileging the construction of meaning, identity and learning through the writing process, Writing Centre practices focus on the student's understanding of the task at hand and utilise a dialogical process to support the student in recognising various genres and modes while constructing knowledge on various levels. This active involvement in the writing and learning process enables learners to increase their confidence levels and sense of personal achievement while higher order thinking and reasoning modes such as analysis, synthesis, critical response and evaluation are enhanced.

The Fort Hare Writing Centre practices acknowledge that writing is more than a technical skill that must be transmitted to a deficient learner. It actively discourages academics from adopting a deficit model of student writing. Writing is seen as integral to the learning process which, in itself, deserves attention given the general impoverishment of the

learning environment that many of our students experience. Both writing and learning are viewed as processes rather than products within a humanising pedagogy. The writing process is a personal act of meaning-making (Lea and Street 1998) performed to fulfil potential and the Writing Centre's role is to facilitate holistic development through self-directed learning and writing. This process illustrates Lea and Street's (1998) contention that models of student writing in higher education are 'not mutually exclusive' but rather 'encapsulate' each other. Similarly, aspects of academic socialisation and process writing are visible in the Fort Hare Writing Centre practices. Students reluctant to engage in the writing process often experience the learning environment as unsafe or threatening. Feedback shows that students fear making mistakes in the quest to produce whatever is required by the lecturer. We concur that 'the gaps between academic staff expectations and student interpretations of what is involved in student writing' might be one explanation for problems in student writing (Lea and Street 1998).

The Fort Hare Writing Centre *modus operandi* is aligned to the institutional objective of permeating the learning environment with humanising principles. It is a peer collaborative learning system in which non-judgemental guidance creates an enabling space for individual development. In approaching the consulting task, it accepts that 'human beings have a natural potential for learning, much significant learning is acquired through doing and learning is facilitated when the student participates responsibly in the learning process' (Rogers 1969:114). This approach is underpinned by the recognition that significant, deep learning is acquired through practice and active involvement in the learning process. The benefits of active learning are widely documented and include higher levels of student motivation, learning at higher cognitive levels and increased retention (Cherney 2008:154). Active involvement helps students learn how to learn, increases their confidence levels and 'enhances student retention of concepts, particularly when the students are the authors of their own learning' (Cherney 2008: 155). Stewart *et al* (2010) and Stappenbelt (2010) report similar findings on the impact of active learning on learning, retention and writing as well as 'student performance, their ability to cope with the stresses associated with managing a large research project, the depth of learning, the development of autonomous learners and student perception of the research project experience (Stappenbelt 2010:9).

In keeping with recent studies on students' transition to higher education, the Writing Centre approach is sensitive to the potential impact of both student perceptions of learning and facilitators' training and development on the complex process of literacy acquisition. Hultberg (2008) suggests that 'the way students are received tends to establish their understanding of academic life' (54). We believe that this writing centre model contributes to a positive student experience when faced with a long-term and challenging transition process in gaining 'epistemological access' (Cooper 2011:49) while valuing individual and collective reflexivity.

The Fort Hare model: An overview

The Fort Hare model is an integrated Writing Centre which functions as part of a diverse and multi-faceted Learning Advancement Unit whose aims include the establishment of an effective learning community within the institution. The first step was to establish a

student resource centre which has developed into a fully-fledged Peer Assisted Student Services (PASS) programme. Within this centre, we have adopted the Stellenbosch University Writing Laboratory model of open space consultation as well the principle of dedicated computers for Writing Centre use from the Writing Centres at University of the Western Cape and the former Cape Peninsula Technikon. The open space model accommodates multiple, simultaneous learning activities. These include consultation bookings, consultation sessions, assignment submissions, assignment typing and internet research. To facilitate this, staff who offer the services and monitor the smooth running of the activities are on duty in the venue. During initial conceptualisation of the model, it was important to consider the resource needs of existing Fort Hare Learning Advancement Programs such as Supplemental Instruction and Tutor Development. Subsequently, the Writing Centre was developed within a broader Language and Writing Advancement Programme which functions in tandem with Peer Assisted Student Services, Supplemental Instruction and Tutor Development.

The Writing Centre functions in the framework of the Peer Assisted Student Services (PASS) programme and resources. Its overarching philosophy drives a strong peer collaborative learning culture within the institution. In line with the principles of an integrated model, we were concerned about separating consultants from other peer facilitators and subsequently adopted an approach which allows for the development of facilitator teams consisting of a range of peer facilitators supporting students in particular Faculties and Departments. The result is that these facilitators draw on each other for support, actively market their availability collectively to academic staff and students, and draw students into specific opportunities aimed at effectively enhancing their learning and development. If a consultant identifies a particular learning issue that pertains to content mastery while consulting with an individual or group of students, that student is referred to Supplemental Instruction sessions that focus on content mastery and learning skills as well as additional consultations with a Supplemental Instruction leader. This enables us to assist students not only with literacy acquisition, but also with content mastery and the development of effective learning skills. Peer facilitators subsequently collaborate closely for the benefit of the students.

Academic development opportunities offered through the Writing Centre are free, voluntary and confidential in keeping with a philosophy of self-driven and active involvement of the student. In such a system, it is essential to communicate and illustrate the value of engaging in the writing process while enjoying support and encouragement from a trained peer facilitator who has successfully completed similar courses.

Full-time and part-time staff members are collectively responsible for developing, coordinating and implementing the learning advancement programs. Although dedicated venues are used as the base for learning activities on multiple campuses, the long-term objective is to support literacy development within the mainstream teaching and learning activities in the lecture halls. A similar initiative is detailed by Boughey and Van Rensburg (1994) through their experiences around integrating reading and writing into mainstream teaching and adopting a process approach to writing. The centralisation of the academic support services in the PASS venue is an advantage to the students as assistance is easily

accessible. In cases where students' learning needs fall beyond the scope of the Writing Centre, they are immediately referred and linked with an appropriate facilitator. This system enables dynamic and focused guidance for Writing Centre users as direct result of the scope and quality of assistance on offer.

The Writing Centre

Language and Writing Consultants are employed on a one-year part-time contract basis on the Alice and East London campuses. In collaboration with academics, they are recruited from all faculties: Education, Law, Science and Agriculture, Social Science and Humanities as well as Management and Commerce. This practice is informed by the belief that 'disciplinary specialists are best placed to induct students into the discourses of their disciplines' (Jacobs 2007:78). Face-to-face learning spaces may take the form of workshops conducted during or outside of lecture time, individual and small group consultations. Writing Centre users may also submit hard copy or electronic texts for written response.

The Writing Centre has a maximum of 30 consultant positions per annum supplemented by a small number of Student Assistants depending on availability of suitable applicants and adequate funding. According to the university's human resource policy, consultants may not work for more than ten hours per week while assistants could work up to twenty hours per week. This time is divided between administration, supervision of the PASS venue and resources, assisting students at the venue, attending training and meetings, delivering workshops as well as user consultations and responding to student submissions. Consultants work on a forty-eight hour turn-around time for responding to students' work.

Consultants are encouraged to pro-actively set up consultations with students who have significant literacy needs. The developmental cycle includes facilitating faculty and/or course workshops targeting new undergraduates and new postgraduate students followed by pre-consultation sessions focusing on task analysis, steps in process writing, referencing and sourcing appropriate data. The next step is to encourage first draft submission and a follow-up consultation to discuss feedback. Students are then invited to redraft based on the feedback and to submit a second draft. The most significant degree of improvement in student writing has been observed during this stage when the first and second drafts are compared. After receiving the second draft as well as possible verbal feedback from the consultant, the student prepares and makes the submission for assessment to the relevant lecturer. The final step in the developmental process is to encourage post-consultation after receiving the assessed work from the lecture as well as to provide quarterly feedback reports to the lecturers making use of the Writing Centre. The objective is to impact on teaching and curriculum development through ensuring close collaboration with academics whose students utilise Writing Centre services. This approach confirms the belief that the analysis of writing in the university is an institutional issue (Lea and Street 1998) and that the developmental process outlined above informs institutional and disciplinary writing practices.

The availability of computers at the Writing Centre facilitates the drafting and redrafting of assignments in the presence of the Writing Centre staff. The environment is conducive to process writing as it enables users to consult with peer facilitators during this process. Consultants use a feedback form to respond to the assignment by way of comments and suggestions for improvement. If verbal feedback is required in addition to written feedback, a consultation is booked. The student receives written and/or verbal feedback while the consultant submits a report to the Learning Advancement Unit indicating the problematic areas as well as suggestions made for assisting the relevant student. This information is captured as part of the unit statistics for tracking and developmental purposes.

Consultations take the form of individual or small group (no more than four students) sessions. Consultants establish a welcoming and supportive learning environment in order to establish a trusting relationship with Writing Centre users. The purpose, expectations and intended outcome of the consultation are identified in conjunction with the students. Students are expected to participate – ask questions, answer questions, make comments, write notes – and ensure that they achieve their intended outcomes after the consultation. This active learning approach involves learners in constructing their own knowledge and developing their competence, approaching student writing and learning on the level of epistemology and identities (Lea and Street 1998).

Consultant training

At the time of incorporation of the Rhodes University East London campus into Fort Hare, a need for credit-bearing training for peer facilitators was identified. These facilitators include the Writing Centre consultants, Supplemental Instruction leaders and tutors. The outcome was credit-bearing training in the form of the Certificate in the Facilitation of Learning worth twenty credits offered at National Qualifications Framework Level 6. All consultants and facilitators employed by the Learning Advancement Unit are expected to register for the certificate and participate in development opportunities although a measure of flexibility is allowed on the option to submit a summative portfolio for credit. This is communicated clearly during recruitment and appointment. On average 50-60 facilitators and consultants register for the course annually. Additionally, institutional policy requires the training of all peer facilitators and assessors. Subsequently, students do not pay a course fee and are remunerated for time spent on training and development of facilitation competencies. This incentivises interest in consultant positions.

The course commences before the start of the lectures with a two-day session and continues with 2-hour sessions monthly over eight months until the end of lectures in October. Selected topics are offered in the Certificate in the Facilitation of Learning to all groups after which participants are streamed into programme-specific training. The specific course outcomes are to train the facilitators to prepare the learners and the learning environment; create communication and support strategies within groups; relate new knowledge to prior learning; scope the learning intervention; implement the learning strategy; consolidate learning; evaluate the learning process and maintain an effective and efficient administrative system. The ongoing training is customised for each academic development programme and includes the academic literacies and process writing model; how to give effective verbal and written feedback; effective consultation

strategies; marketing the Writing Centre; strategies to encourage active learning and portfolio building.

The key assessment and developmental tool is a portfolio, developed over eight months by all course participants and customised for the particular role the peer facilitator has assumed. During portfolio-building sessions, participants are trained in portfolio-building strategies as well as peer assessment. Participants have the opportunity to submit portfolios quarterly for formative feedback while summative assessment takes place towards the end of the year. Participants whose portfolios are found compliant with assessment criteria are awarded credit-bearing certificates. The reflective portfolio serves as catalyst for an inquiry process which includes self evaluation, peer observation and supervisor feedback in a collaborative space. A reflective philosophy statement lies at the heart of the portfolio which essentially aims to 'scaffold students for self-directed learning' (Hultberg *et al* 2008:55).

The monthly two-hour shared learning sessions form an essential part of the contact learning opportunities in the course. Academic staff members are invited to attend these sessions since their input and exposure are invaluable. Indirectly, such sessions contribute to the development of teaching practice within the institution since this dialogue on learning and teaching by students (peer facilitators) and lecturers in an environment where all seek to learn from each other yields positive results. These sessions are a useful and unique forum for teaching and learning development in the Fort Hare academic environment in that they serve to encourage participation in the conversation around ways of knowing and doing in higher education, to 'enter the conversation' (Stacey and Granville 2009: 338).

The Certificate in the Facilitation of Learning course forms a significant part of the quality assurance mechanisms within the system. It integrates peer and supervisor observation during consultations and workshops as key developmental strategy within its overarching practices. Consultants are developed as reflective practitioners which promotes a high degree of experiential and collaborative learning. In observing consultations, evaluators specifically focus on facilitation strategies such as the effectiveness of the introduction and opening of the session; the degree of active participation of the student(s); the relevance of consultation strategies used, closure and consolidation of the session; suggestions for follow up; general suggestions and feedback for the improvement of consultation practice. All observations are followed up by a face-to-face discussion during which the consultant is given opportunity to share self-evaluation impressions and challenges s/he may have identified. Responses and solutions are sought collaboratively.

Feedback is integrated in the facilitation portfolio. Consultants are encouraged to use feedback from others as a means to inform the development of their practice and to document and reflect on such development. Observations are valued since consultants have the opportunity to use various lenses to evaluate themselves on an ongoing basis. Upon receiving assignments from consultants, the Writing Centre Coordinator monitors feedback to see if it enhances critical thinking, independence and understanding of task requirements. Such quality assurance mechanisms are integrated into the Writing Centre

practice to develop an efficient cohort of consultants who support the development of optimally performing students.

Writing Centre marketing

In the light of voluntary Writing Centre services it is critical to market such services effectively to the academic community. During the annual academic orientation programme for new students, the Writing Centre and related services are marketed extensively. In turn, newly appointed academics receive detailed information during the biannual induction programme. Consultants and student assistants assist during orientation, which familiarises new students with the peer facilitators who will be available in the Writing Centre. Facilitators are encouraged to form teams in order to market their services collaboratively to the various faculties. In practice, SI leaders often identify writing challenges in the groups they work with and refer students to the Writing Centre for assistance from the consultants. In turn, consultants refer students to SI leaders when they identify course content and learning challenges they cannot adequately address.

Consultants are trained in marketing strategies in order to increase visibility and awareness of Writing Centre services in Fort Hare. Such strategies include lecture hall presentations, the design and preparation of marketing material and how to build a close relationship with the relevant lecturer. All planning and preparation for workshops is done in collaboration with lecturers who, in turn, provide course-specific learning and assessment information for use during workshops. Lecturers are requested to include Writing Centre information in all learning guides and assignment information provided to students and to give Writing Centre staff the opportunity to address students in their respective classes. Additional marketing strategies include attractive, brightly coloured and branded T-shirts, notice-board displays with take away marketing brochures, and programme-specific logos on all learning materials. Word-of-mouth marketing from satisfied users is a powerful marketing tool. Consultants are the Writing Centre users' peers and are able to build supportive friendships thereby supporting higher retention and throughput rates.

The benefits of effective learning advancement and student participation in active learning through the Writing Centre are phenomenal. The positive feedback from students and staff attests to this. Students' testimonies of how their performances improved once they had made use of the Writing Centre services abound. In 2010 an evaluation of workshop participant satisfaction yielded an 86% combined rating across campuses while 719 students made use of the opportunity to submit a first (and in some cases second) draft of their assignments to the Writing Centre for response. A survey indicated that users found consultations and group work among the most useful learning opportunities. They also commented positively on the opportunity to discuss difficult concepts, exchange ideas and receive guidance in assignment writing. The survey indicated clearly that students found writing workshops useful and that they would like to experience increased access to such active learning environments. Academics making use of the Writing Centre for their students were surveyed simultaneously. In this group the satisfaction rating was 72% for workshops and 70% for assignment response. A positive outcome of the

open-ended survey questions was the indication that academics are aware of the need for writing-intensive modules, in particular the first year of university study. However, a detailed and measured study has not yet been conducted to measure the impact of Writing Centre services at Fort Hare.

The art of giving feedback

Ellis (1985:296) defines feedback as a 'response to efforts by the learner to communicate'. Communication between students and lecturers is mainly through writing and feedback is the means by which learners can assess the effectiveness of their learning. More recently, Duijnhouwer *et al* (2010) documented their findings on the impact of feedback in enhancing 'university students' writing motivation and performance' (53). This study indicates that 'the self-efficacy beliefs of students who have little academic writing experience are sensitive to teachers' comments on their writing capacities' and that 'progress feedback affects task motivation' (69). In keeping with such findings, the dynamics and processes of giving feedback are prioritised.

Students usually receive feedback on their writing from lecturers in the form of a grade, often accompanied by much red ink throughout the essay, a kind of 'bleeding to death'. The effect of this kind of feedback is potentially negative because it does not adequately engage students' understanding of the activity and the specific reasons for a particular grade. Such feedback may leave students confused and unable to constructively develop their writing as means of gaining epistemological access. Writing Centre users report that, in some instances, academics do not provide comments or suggestions in response to written work and, if they do, the feedback is excessively negative, focusing on what is lacking in the writing without concomitant suggestions for improvement.

Since academic discourse is complex, comments such as 'your points are unclear', 'poor essay structure', 'irrelevant details' and 'weak organisation' are not self-explanatory. Such subjective connotative remarks do not assist students in responding constructively. Lea and Street (1998) confirm this understanding in documenting the difficulty students have in making sense of feedback on their writing. They indicate that notions of good writing are not generic but are rather epistemological. Writing practices are therefore related to ways in which academic knowledge is constructed. Given this realisation, it is clear that it is not possible for students to respond meaningfully to generic feedback or to transfer 'ways of knowing' and writing from one discipline to another (Lea and Street 1998). William and Kaplan (1996) believe that feedback should be as helpful as possible because responding to students' writing can greatly influence their attitudes to writing and motivation towards future learning. Unclear, vague or ambiguous responses are confusing and students may become frustrated with the writing process while constructing a negative self-image. Evans *et al* (2010) confirm the value of what they term 'dynamic written corrective feedback' (445) and document the findings of an exploratory study using this methodology. They recommend that written feedback as means of correction may be a sound pedagogical practice which, in turn, should be contextualised 'within the framework of learner, situational, and methodological variables' (459).

In the Fort Hare Writing Centre consultants are not authority figures but peer facilitators who do not allocate marks to assignments or do any form of rating. This approach is informed by the belief that institutions of higher learning should move toward criterion-referenced assessment. Learning takes many forms and processes. Naturally, students have varied information processing and retention systems. Some grasp complex concepts faster than others and retain them longer due to interpretation or meaning attached, prior knowledge and environmental influences. These include noise levels, climate, state of mind and the general conduciveness of the environment to deep learning. In the Fort Hare Writing Centre, Consultants are discouraged from giving feedback on how well or how poorly students are doing in their tasks in the form of results or marks. Instead, they are encouraged to engage students through facilitation strategies that promote reflection, self-evaluation, dialogue and collaboration in the writing process. Such strategies include active participation in planning and task analysis, focus on higher-order concerns and face-to-face consultation and dialogue.

Mackenzie (1974) found considerable evidence of qualitative and quantitative variations of feedback when he explored comments on assignments. The quantitative approach mostly focuses on the surface level and takes learning for granted. The qualitative approach seeks mostly to develop the writer by engaging her/him in critical thinking so that s/he may become an independent learner who assumes an increased level of responsibility. Hounsell (1987) expresses concern about students who put little effort into essay writing, caused by the detrimental effect of ineffective feedback. Academic discourse is not fixed or precise, which means that dialogue should guide increased understanding. Hounsell suggests that students should be given space to question and explore tacit requirements on a regular basis and believes that in order for students to understand feedback they should grasp the nature of the assumptions underlying academic discourse. During feedback, consultants can determine students' degree of understanding of the task requirements. In turn, this elicits increased insight into possible preconceptions and misunderstandings.

In the Fort Hare Writing Centre, feedback is used as a means of guiding the students' formative development in constructing deepening understanding of discipline-specific academic discourse. Features of such feedback are highlighted by McGarrell and Verbeem (2007) who indicate the importance of 'an inquiring stance'; avoidance of 'evaluative statements'; and provision of 'personalised' comments as essential to motivating process writing in the form of multiple drafts and revision (234). They conclude that formative feedback 'addresses writers at a level where their own communicative purposes are the primary consideration' (236).

Researchers and practitioners differ with regard to the potential value of written commentary as an effective form of feedback for students. Evaluation of Fort Hare writing centre practices suggests that written feedback is an efficacious tool for revising. Written feedback can always be revisited by the student unlike verbal feedback which is not accessible after consultation. Written commentary is a viable and effective approach when used appropriately, although its impact may be enhanced by verbal feedback.

In keeping with these understandings, the Writing Centre uses a consultation system designed to supplement and enhance written feedback. Effective feedback is essential to enhance and fast-track students' writing development. Students may submit assignments online and receive electronic feedback similar to that given to students who submit written assignments in person. Through quality feedback, students are able to grapple with multiple features of writing. This involves deeper understanding of content (factual information), organisation (logic of presentation) and surface aspects (lexis, syntax and punctuation).

When Writing Centre users present significant challenges with proficiency in English, they are referred to the Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) programme housed in the same unit as the Writing Centre. This programme tests participants at registration so as to ensure accurate placement at the correct level. Students are expected to sign up for at least three hours per week and consultants guide students working on the computers. Participants are expected to reach a pre-determined level of competence and must illustrate that competence before being allowed to move to the next level. Levels range from foundation phase to post-secondary level which ensures highly accurate placement of students at individual competency level. Writing Centre consultants therefore do not engage in attempts to 'correct' students' language but rather motivate them to view writing as a process that culminates in the construction of academic discourse, discipline-based knowledge and individual identity as student and writer.

The Writing Centre has adopted elements of the questioning approach which William and Kaplan (1996) have found to be effective in enhancing students' writing development. This approach holds that consultants should raise a number of specific questions which allow students to revise and make suggestions for changing the organisation of essay content or elaborate parts of the essay. They suggest that comments made on a text should avoid exclusive attention to surface conventions such as spelling, punctuation and paragraphing while avoiding vacuous commentary or notation. Focusing on the interpretation or intention of the text is essential if writing is to be considered a mode of communication. Subsequently, consultants do not assume that they share students' understanding and interpretation of the writing task.

Challenges and benefits of an integrated and collaborative Writing Centre model

The integrated collaborative model for Writing Centre development presents several challenges. The reinvention of established initiatives in order to integrate them with new initiatives calls for innovation in the sense of retaining Writing Centre services but customising them for a different context and user. The Rhodes University Writing Centre which was incorporated into Fort Hare had a strong culture of independence and it was challenging to integrate it with other academic development programs. The process required extensive mentoring, coaching, capacity and team-building among staff members. The integrated model rendered the Learning Advancement Unit programmes and services interconnected which is a significant advantage in providing purpose-focused learning development and in referring users to extended learning opportunities.

The most pressing challenges of effective service delivery devolve on staffing. The majority of Writing Centre consultants are postgraduate students who often have additional part-time employment. When pressured by their own academic commitments, consultants may compromise their Writing Centre responsibilities by not reporting for duty, not adhering to the turn-around time for responding to assignments and not attending training or meetings. Uncommitted consultants do not effectively refer Writing Centre users to peer facilitators such as SI leaders when required and students experience significant challenges in meeting assignment submission deadlines. Where funding allows, it is recommended that consultants are appointed on a full-time basis in order to establish a sustainable, deep and evolving knowledge base on the part of those responsible for impacting on student writing and learning via Writing Centres or comparable programmes.

An integrated model is labour-intensive in the sense that it requires adequate supervisory and monitoring capacity and mechanisms. The extensive credit-bearing training programme requires full-time staffing in order to present workshops and provide formative feedback on portfolio development throughout the year. However, the benefits outweigh the challenges in that consultants report significant progress in their understanding of learning and how to effectively facilitate the learning of others. In turn, this understanding has impacted positively on their identities, learning, and writing. Unfortunately, not all consultants are able to manage their increased workload which can lead to resignation. This leaves the Writing Centre with a significant challenge in recruiting and training a replacement at any given time of the year.

Potential negative effects of credit-bearing training for consultants are largely mitigated by the internal flexibility of the programme. While consultants are required to participate in the programme, they may choose to not submit a summative portfolio for credit while benefiting from development opportunities afforded all consultants.

The establishment and long-term development of an integrated model calls for a high degree of top level leadership and support as well as trust and accountability among those tasked with coordinating and rendering the services. Despite extensive quality assurance mechanisms, the system relies heavily on ethical and professional conduct of all staff. The Writing Centre enjoys institutional support and funding but its sustainability depends on ongoing financial support in the light of reduced budgets which directly impact on service delivery. It functions as an integral part of a wider learning advancement system that aims to provide students with learning opportunities for the development of academic discourse and identity in multiple authentic sites of learning. The integrated model allows for responsible, systematic expansion of services through the implementation of a consultation system which includes SI leaders and Student Assistants, thereby giving students access to substantial peer collaborative support. Writing Centre initiatives are planned and delivered within the curriculum framework and in close collaboration with lecturers, simultaneously impacting on the development of teaching practices

Consultants assist with academic orientation for new students which has increased the number of Writing Centre users from this target group. Writing Centre users enjoy the full benefit of peer support by fellow students who are friends and partners more than

teachers, thus giving them access to peers who understand the challenges they face in achieving academic success at tertiary level especially since English is not the first language of the vast majority of Fort Hare students.

The Writing Centre operates from within a multi-purpose resource centre where it is housed with other services such as consultations, submission of academic essays for written and verbal response, computer-assisted language learning and internet research when writing assignments with the result that the institution needs to fund only one student academic support centre per campus.

Peer facilitators function in student teams that support academic development across faculties and departments within the institution. Writing Centre consultants enjoy the support of a substantial group of other peer facilitators such as tutors and SI leaders through a peer observation system which aids their development and broader understanding of effective facilitation practice. The integration of the Writing Centre with other key academic development programs such as SI has enabled the transfer of core quality assurance principles from established programs to this more recent addition. Peer learning development is therefore scaffolded on various levels: Writing Centre user, Consultant, Student Assistant, Learning Advancement staff and academics. The long-term objective is the establishment of a dynamic and meaningful learning community distinctly aware of the benefits of collaboration in the promotion of broader understanding of literacy construction and acquisition.

Conclusion: Further research and recommendations

The Fort Hare Writing Centre's integrated and collaborative approach to language and writing advancement seems to be a system that benefits the students (learners and facilitators), the academics and the institution through making a wide range of academic support opportunities accessible to potential users while making optimal use of human and financial resources and promoting quality. The hallmarks of the Writing Centre are effective verbal and written feedback given to students; accessible and effective consultation processes; inculcation of the culture of active learning and insistence that students must own their writing. It is believed that these processes greatly assist students to meaningfully engage with academic discourse on their journey to academic independence.

Although more scientific research is required to determine the impact of this system on the ability of the institution to effectively respond to the students' learning needs, it is clear that this integrated collaborative model has the potential to meaningfully contribute to retention and throughput rates as well as curriculum development and the ongoing improvement of teaching practices. Further investigation is required to identify effective mechanisms for supporting the acquisition of academic literacies among higher education students rather than criminalising student error. It is advisable for teaching staff to reflect on the extent to which students are empowered to develop their own identities as learners and writers who learn through writing and make sense of the conventions of academic discourse through process writing. Such reflection could address the enormous challenges surrounding the development of independent, successful learners in the current higher

education context, and the extent to which students are enabled to perform optimally by becoming fully versed in the discourses of the higher education environment. Current institutional practice necessitates reflection on attitudes to student learning. 'Empathetic dialogue' could lessen the distance between lecturer and student while the student voice should be positioned as a resource for the construction of institutional knowledge (Hutchings 2006:260). Therefore, analysis of student writing is an institutional issue and should contribute to the construction of academic conventions and accepted practices.

Overall, the establishment and ongoing development of the Fort Hare Writing Centre has highlighted the urgency of the need for in-depth reflection on assumptions and conventions of student writing and the teaching practices of academics who challenge students with specific expectations en route to becoming versed in the required discourse. While, at institutional level, much focus is placed on rooting out 'plagiarism' and misuse of the internet, our interaction with Writing Centre users has reminded us that academic literacy and discourse are inseparable from discipline-specific knowledge construction, that students do not enter the higher education system fully competent and familiar with academic conventions, and that 'literacy must indeed be regarded as an end product of, rather than a prerequisite for, an undergraduate degree programme' (McKellar 11). Clearly, further investigation is needed to consider ways in which the attainment of this end product can be facilitated more effectively in mainstream sites of student learning by enabling lecturers to reflect on their own understanding of academic discourse and the extent to which student learning opportunities integrate the acquisition of academic literacy in discipline-specific and authentic contexts. We believe that the Fort Hare Writing Centre practices outlined in this chapter models such integration and reflective practice as the means of setting the tone for expanded exploration and development.

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9 Investigating the effect of writing centre interventions on student writing

Arlene Archer

This chapter appeared for the first time in 2008 as an article in the South African Journal of Higher Education. **The chapter was included in the book for its detailed discussion about measuring impact, which is essential to writing centre work, because it is one of the ways in which we measure our own achievements and how we often need to justify our existence to the institutions for which we work.**

Writing is one of the main means of assessment in tertiary institutions. In some cases, support in writing helps students improve their academic performance and may mean that the student stays in the tertiary system, and proceeds to graduation. The teaching of writing and academic literacy practices in Higher Education is thus inextricably linked to student access, which includes both retention and throughput. Street (1996) shows how joining a particular 'literacy club' can be problematic for those trying to learn its rules of entry from non-dominant or disadvantaged positions in the power structures of the university and the society in which the university is embedded. Lillis (2001) argues that confusion is often an all-pervasive experience for 'non-traditional' students in Higher Education, that it signals an 'institutional practice of mystery' (53) which can work against those least familiar with the conventions surrounding academic practices. Social, political and economic power is closely associated with knowledge of certain discourse forms and writing centres need to play a vital role in equity redress in tertiary

institutions. Having said this, it must also be noted that writing centres are not involved in access issues *only*. The philosophy of the Writing Centre at the University of Cape Town (UCT) is that all students can improve their writing, whether they are highly experienced academic writers or complete novices. So, students may not be 'at risk' of exiting the system, but may consult the Writing Centre to improve their academic performance. Any investigation into the effect of a writing centre on student writing would have to take this into account.

There are numerous challenges involved in trying to ascertain the influence of writing centres. Firstly, the one-to-one basis of the Writing Centre is rather unique in the tertiary context and is also difficult to 'measure' in any systematic way. Second, there are many factors affecting student writing other than visits to the Writing Centre, and it would be artificial to attempt to construct a 'control group'. Students write in a range of courses, get feedback, do a range of reading, and it would be difficult to ascertain the extent to which one or two visits to the Writing Centre had impacted on their writing within this larger context. Thirdly, Writing Centre practice tends to be somewhat *ad hoc*, with some students coming for once-off consultations and others maintaining a relationship with the Centre throughout their degree. A methodology of evaluation that focuses on a few in-depth case studies of student writing is thus probably more appropriate in this context than looking at breadth of impact.

Given the challenges considered above, this paper argues that we need to look at student development in terms of assessed writing and consequent performance in particular courses. It outlines a study conducted at the Writing Centre at UCT. The focus was on improvements in student writing, both perceived and actual. This was achieved through interviewing forty first year students about their perceptions of the Writing Centre and its influences on their writing, looking at consultants' comments on the student's writing, and noting the marks obtained for the essay in question and for the course as a whole. Finally, independent assessments of the students' improvement from first to final drafts were made using three criteria: organisation, voice and register, and language use. The detailed findings of this study are presented in a report compiled by Archer and Klein (2001).

UCT Writing Centre

The Writing Centre at UCT began in 1994. It is based within a larger Language Development Group which focuses on research-driven developmental work, particularly through curriculum involvement. 'Language development' is understood to include teaching, research and curriculum development centred on the discipline of Applied Language Studies and the related idea of academic literacy (Thesen and Van Pletzen 2006). Both Language Development Group and Writing Centre aim to promote and facilitate access to higher education, within an ethos of social justice and national redress. The Centre itself is designed to provide a walk-in, one-on-one consultancy service to students from all faculties and all academic levels of the university. Most commonly, students bring a draft of their essay, which forms the basis of the consultation. Some students also come before they start writing in order to analyse the task and discuss what the essay requires. Specifically, the Writing Centre at UCT aims to assist by:

- ▪ increasing students understanding of writing as a process
- ▪ enabling a 'thinking-through-writing' approach
- ▪ helping students to focus on the task
- ▪ heightening students' sense of 'audience' in writing
- ▪ alerting students to academic writing conventions and disciplinary discourses
- ▪ educating students on academic voice and plagiarism
- ▪ helping students to understand how to select information from a variety of sources
- ▪ improving students' sense of coherence, cohesion and logic in writing
- ▪ equipping students to self-edit their own work and improving their ability to proof-read for some common grammatical errors.

When investigating the effect of the Writing Centre on student writing, evidence of improvement in these specific academic literacy practices needs to be demonstrated, whilst taking cognisance of the larger institutional and socio-political context.

The consultants are postgraduate students from a range of disciplines and they undergo an initial 20-hour training course and ongoing training throughout the year. The focus of this training is an introduction to the theoretical underpinnings of Writing Centre work, including issues around access and redress, and the practical application of these. Specifically, we outline an 'academic literacies' approach to student writing which takes into account institutional relationships of discourse and power and the contested nature of writing practices (Lea and Street 1998). We use the term 'practices' rather than 'skills' in order to emphasise the social nature of what we do as writers. The term 'skills' suggests a set of neutral techniques, separate from the social context that favours them. Also, 'skills' seems to represent a deficit view of the learner writer as someone who does not have the desirable package of techniques. The concept of 'practice', on the other hand, offers a way of linking writing with what individuals as socially situated actors do, both at the level of context of a specific situation and at the level of context of culture (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999:21).

Approaches to investigating effect on student writing

One way of trying to investigate our interventions on student writing in the past was to get students to fill in evaluation or feedback forms after each consultation. Students were asked to comment on the most and least useful aspects of a consultation and then place these anonymously into a box at the entrance to the Centre. In collating these responses, it became clear that there were a number of problems with this approach. First, we were obtaining information on the students' perceptions of the consultation, rather than on their actual writing. It is clear that a student's perception of improvement may not necessarily translate into demonstrably improved writing. Second, the actual student responses were often thin and did not allow for in-depth data analysis. This could be due to students' time pressures, but also the actual construction of the form (Archer 2002). Thirdly, there may have been a bias in the evaluation process to give positive feedback since the students filled in the forms at the Writing Centre. And finally, since not all the consultants encouraged their students equally to fill in the forms, the evaluations did not reflect the services of all consultants equally. While the forms gave an indication of the general level of satisfaction with the Centre service, they were not rich in helping us gain more detailed insight into what aspects students found particularly helpful or less helpful.

In attempting to evaluate our practices in this way, it also became clear to me that this approach was incompatible with our theoretical point of view and view of writing. UCT Writing Centre is theoretically based in New Literacies Studies (NLS) which gives a social practices account of literacy (Heath 1983; Baynham 1995; Barton and Hamilton 1998; Gee 1996). According to this view, to be 'literate' does not simply mean having acquired the technical skills to decode and encode signs and symbols, but means having mastered a set of social practices related to a set of signs and symbols which are inevitably plural and diverse. The extent to which students learnt particular roles, forms of interaction, and ways of thinking was difficult to ascertain from the 'feedback form' approach to measuring assessment. The forms were not contextualised in, or framed by, the context of the students' actual writing practices. Thus, in order to triangulate students' perceptions and to obtain a more holistic picture, I decided to look also at consultant's perceptions, the grades obtained, and the actual student writing.

Collection of data

Forty students were selected for the study (15% of the total number of students seen in that semester). These students were selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, they were selected to represent different faculties, including Humanities, Science, Commerce, Engineering and the Built Environment. In the period of the study, 69% of the students who attended the Writing Centre were from the Humanities faculty. We targeted essays from courses from which we see many students, including particularly the 'foundation' courses in Humanities, Science and Commerce. Secondly, first year students (19 men and 21 women) were chosen as the focus group because one of the goals of the Centre is to enable access to the institution as well as to academic and disciplinary discourses. Also, generally about 60% of the students who use the Centre are first year students. Thirdly, we were interested in issues pertaining to English Second Language (ESL) students. About a third of the group claimed to be first language English speakers, with the others speaking Setswana, Tsonga, Shona, Venda, French, Sotho, Xhosa and Zulu.

Data was collected in the form of information from interviews with the forty students, consultants' comments (which are recorded and stored in a database after each consultation), marks for essays and examinations, student comments on perceptions of the effect of the Writing Centre on their work. Finally, we conducted an independent, critical comparison of the drafts and marked assignments according to set criteria. Three undergraduate student assistants were hired to assist with the research, particularly the interviews, in the hopes that the students would perhaps feel less threatened about saying what they felt if they were talking to peers. The information gathered on each student from interviews, consultation records, grades and essay drafts was compiled into small 'vignettes' or student profiles.

Criteria for judging improvement in student writing

I decided to pursue a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach to analysing the data. Although the marks of the forty students across a range of courses were collected, it was not possible to say anything conclusive based on these figures. The sample of students was too small and amorphous, and they were all from different courses. In addition,

these marks represented different marking criteria, which did not necessarily include writing proficiency.

For these reasons, I realised there was a need to develop a template for tracking individual improvement in student writing and for comparing student writing across the disciplines (see Figure 9.1 below). Marks out of ten were given for three categories, namely organisation, voice and register, and language use. 'Organisation' is a key issue in all student writing and refers to the focus and structure of the writing, including paragraphing, coherence and cohesion. Crucially, organisation is related to questions of 'argument' which is the basic tenet for all academic writing. 'Voice and register' refer to the appropriate ways of representing social relations between the writer and reader. This category also refers to the ways in which the writer establishes a presence in the text in relation to the subject matter, sources and constructed audience. It thus includes integration of secondary sources and issues of plagiarism. As Angelil-Carter (2000) has demonstrated, plagiarism is often a reflection of students grappling with mimicking the academic discourse. Voice and register are inextricably linked to notions of context and appropriacy and often form key components of the 'institutional practice of mystery' (Lillis 2001) mentioned earlier. The last category, 'language use', refers to the mechanics of the text, namely vocabulary, punctuation, sentence construction, use of tenses, articles, pronouns, prepositions.

ITEM	SCORE RANGE	CRITERIA
Organisation	8-10	VERY GOOD TO EXCELLENT • The student focuses on the task and answers the question. • There is a clear and detailed introduction and conclusion. • Ideas are clearly stated and supported. • There is a logical sequencing of ideas and paragraphs. • Paragraphs have a strong internal structure, namely one main idea, topic sentences, and connectors. • The essay is coherent (includes links between paragraphs). • Graphs or other visuals have been explained in the written text.
	5-7	AVERAGE TO GOOD • The essay is not sufficiently focused on the task and has some irrelevant detail. • There is a fair introduction and conclusion. • The essay is loosely organised, but the main ideas stand out. • The paragraphs are fairly well formulated. • The argument is logical, but there is problematic sequencing at times. • There is elaboration and support for arguments, but not enough. • Graphs or visuals are not adequately explained in the written text.
	3-4	POOR TO FAIR • The essay lacks a clear focus on the task. • There is a weak introduction and conclusion. • The ideas are confused and disconnected (rambling, repetitive). • The essay lacks logical sequencing and development. • There is insufficient elaboration. • Graphs or visuals are not referred to in the written text.
	0-2	VERY POOR • There is hardly any focus on the task. • There is no organisation or not enough to evaluate. • There is no clear paragraphing. • There is no link between written text and graphs or visuals.

ITEM	SCORE RANGE	CRITERIA
Voice and Register	8-10	VERY GOOD TO EXCELLENT • The language used is appropriate for an academic context (i.e. no colloquialisms or slang; no inappropriate jargon). • The writing is not long-winded, verbose, repetitive. • There are few euphemisms, cliches, or exaggerations. • The first person or third person voice has been used appropriately and consistently for the particular audience. • All the sources have been correctly referenced. • There is a clear bibliography with all the relevant information.
	5-7	AVERAGE TO GOOD • An attempt has been made to reference in-text, but there may be problems around the mechanics of this. • The language is generally appropriate for an academic context. • The essay has a bibliography with some of the necessary information missing.
	3-4	POOR TO FAIR • The student has used some secondary sources, but has not referenced them correctly. • The language is inappropriate to the audience and academic context (overly personal style, emotional adjectives, colloquialisms). • There is not enough referencing to external information and too much reliance on own experience. • The bibliography is sketchy and does not follow standard conventions.
	0-2	VERY POOR • The student has plagiarised secondary readings – using phrases from these readings without referencing. • The language and organisation is inappropriate for an academic assignment. • There is no bibliography.
Language Use	8-10	VERY GOOD TO EXCELLENT • There are few errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalisation. • The piece is written in clear, complete sentences. • Effective complex sentence constructions are used. • There are few errors of agreement, and tenses, articles, pronouns, prepositions are used correctly. • The sentences are neither too long nor too short.
	5-7	AVERAGE TO GOOD • The student uses effective but simple sentence constructions. • Some minor problems in complex constructions exist. • There are several errors of agreement, tense, articles, pronouns, prepositions. • There are occasional errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, but the meaning is not obscured.
	3-4	POOR TO FAIR • There are major problems in simple/complex constructions. • Frequent errors of negation, agreement, tense, concord, articles, pronouns, prepositions, sentence structure occur. • There are frequent errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, poor word processing. • The meaning is confused or obscured.
	0-2	VERY POOR • There is virtually no understanding of sentence construction rules. • It is difficult to understand the meaning. • The writing is dominated by errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalisation. The poor word-processing hinders meaning.

Figure 9.1 *Template for measuring improvement from students' first drafts to final essays*

I will now present two student 'vignettes' or profiles, in order to provide a flavour of the data, before moving on to identify some of the key trends and findings.

Student vignettes

The first vignette (Figure 9.2 below) is typical of a struggling first year ESL student who just managed to pass his first essay with 52%. The essay was a requirement for one of the big Humanities foundation courses.

Consultant's response	The student was concerned about referencing and bibliography.
Student's response	The Writing Centre taught me to have a point of view (agreeing or disagreeing), that is supported by a strong argument and that is clearly referenced from books obtainable from the library or from course material.
Final essay mark	52%
Final course mark	52%
Student's perception of writing centre impact	At first I used to get less than 40% in my essays, but now I do manage to get more than 50%, which is a great improvement for me. The Writing Centre encouraged me to work before the time because they always stressed that it is better to bring a draft to each and every consultation. Visiting the Writing Centre has disciplined me to work before the time and I now have courage in doing my work even though I would still contact the Writing Centre.
Organisation	First draft: 3 Final: 5 The final essay has a more focused introduction with specific time frames and goals even though it includes some irrelevant detail. There is also evidence of a conclusion, however, loosely substantiated. This was not found in the draft. The paragraphs show a main idea which they attempt to develop. Much work still needs to be done on developing and sequencing ideas.
Voice and register	First draft: 2 Final: 3 The bibliography is now present but referencing still needs attention. The essay is still too reliant on generalisations.
Language	First draft: 3 Final: 4 The language needs work.

Figure 9.2   *Profile of a struggling first year student*

Although this student expressed concern about the 'skill' of referencing and the bibliography, this masked the larger and more problematic academic discourse concern identified by the consultant, namely 'point of view' and 'strong argument that is clearly referenced'. According to the external marker, there was only a minimal improvement

in the student's use of secondary sources with the student being 'too reliant on generalisations'. However, the sense of an 'argument' improved a little in the final essay, which had a more focused introduction. The student also mentioned that the Writing Centre helped him in terms of time management. The comment about time management or managing the writing process came up again and again in students' responses. This points indirectly to the success of our aim of raising students' awareness of writing as a process rather than a product.

It is interesting to compare the above profile with that of a stronger student writing the same essay on the same course (see Figure 9.3 below). This student did not have a language problem, although English was also his second language. His difficulties lay more in structure and organisation, as well as in academic voice.

Consultant's response	He had good statements but needed to focus more on the case study rather than giving examples outside of the Shaka case study. I suggested that he use topic sentences to introduce new ideas.
Student's response	Before I went to the Writing Centre, I had a lot of information but did not know how to put it in the essay. However, after the consultation I knew where to start. When you have an idea the consultants show you the correct way to put across that idea and you eventually come up with good writing.
Final essay mark	75%
Final course mark	67%
Student's perception of writing centre impact	I became open to more interpretations of how I should write my work. They told me to put more insight in the essay and told me that there is no idea that is wrong as long as one puts it correctly. There is an improvement in my ways of brainstorming the question and my marks have improved as well.
Organisation	First draft: 5 Final: 7 The focus on the task improved in the final essay with the inclusion of a statement of intent and a focus on the texts which would be explored. Important information was better contextualised to allow for fluidity of thought. The conclusion has also been 'tightened' by summarising the findings with regard to the three texts.
Voice and register	First draft: 4 Final: 7 Colloquialisms or fatuous statements were fewer in the final essay. There was still no use of footnotes.
Language	First draft: 7 Final: 7

Figure 9.3   *Profile of a good student*

The student emphasises the dialogic aspect of Writing Centre work, and the fact that we often need to engage at the level of ideas first, before we turn to issues of form. The consultant's response coheres with that of the student's, as they both emphasise the need for more focus and improved organisation. The external marker noticed the resulting improvement of focus in the writing. The data thus triangulate to provide a credible and nuanced picture of the effect of the Writing Centre intervention on the student's writing. In general, across the data, the issues, identified by the consultants as the main issues to be addressed, were similar to the students' responses. I will now look at the students' perceptions of Writing Centre interventions in more detail.

Students' perceptions of writing centre interventions

None of the forty students in this study failed the essays they consulted about, although some did fail the course as a whole. The main areas of assistance that the students identified in the interviews were increased focus on the task, voice and register, macro-structural issues (introductions, conclusions, paragraphing) and micro-structural issues (arrangement of sentences, language usage).

Task analysis was identified by both students and consultants as crucial in getting students to focus. This is how one student described the process of task analysis:

> The consultant clarified what the important words meant and he emphasised that I should always break the essay question into different parts so that I would be able to understand what the essay requires ... The input he gave resulted in me understanding what I was required to do in the essay because I was clearer on the task.

From an academic literacies perspective, task analysis is also a crucial activity to help students understand the 'bigger picture', which includes thinking about why the course and discipline frame particular essay questions, and what those questions say about the knowledge practices that that discipline values.

In terms of voice and register, many students commented on how the consultants encouraged them to develop a 'point of view' in their writing. According to one student, the consultant had

> corrected my essay on the fact that I did not state my point of view, I just wrote on what the authors were saying not paying attention to what I thought of the topic and I did not take a side (agree or disagree).

This emphasis on student voice and point of view highlights an important aspect of Writing Centre work. Many students approach academic writing without a sense that they have anything worth saying. Feeling the right to exert a presence in the text is related to personal autobiography and is often associated with the gender, class and ethnicity of the writer (Clark and Ivanič 1997:136). Although problematic in some of its uses (see Cope and Kalantzis 1993, for a critique of the notion of voice), voice in 'progressivist' pedagogy is a critical term for formulating an alternative pedagogy. According to this view, making a space for student voice entails 'replacing the authoritative discourse of imposition and recitation with a voice capable of speaking in one's own terms, a voice capable of listening, retelling, and challenging the very grounds of knowledge

and power' (Giroux in Cope and Kalantzis 1993:50). One of the roles of consultants is to help students adopt a new identity, that of educated people who have something important to say. An assignment written within the university community is the result of serious reflection about a specific topic. The act of writing about the topic makes public the reflection and the assignment becomes part of an ongoing dialogue among scholars. Consultants act as guides to help students understand and assume those new roles.

The students identified macro and micro structural issues as a key area of assistance from the Writing Centre.

> I had a better understanding what was actually required in the essay and how to structure my points in a more coherent manner ... In changing the structure and helping me focus, the Writing Centre made me pick up certain points and follow them through.

Dealing with structural coherence is perhaps one of the more straightforward aspects of Writing Centre work and provides the most immediate and rewarding results. In an individual consultation we prioritise a hierarchy of needs beginning with the macro issues including focus on topic, construction of audience, overall argument, and planning. If there is time, we turn to the micro issues such as grammar and spelling. Students tend to become demotivated by approaches that focus too heavily on grammatical errors, especially in essays that are riddled with second language errors. This focus can leave students feeling inadequate and also with a misguided sense that improvement in writing is on the level of syntax, spelling and grammar.

When talking about Writing Centre interventions, students mentioned improved writing and working practices, increased confidence in their writing abilities, improved understanding of requirements, improved performance in other courses, and the ability to work independently. These aspects point to the students' perceived ability to transfer what they have learnt from one context to another. One student commented on transference and independence-training in a useful way:

> It was just a case of putting everything together into one essay but the way she said I should do it impacted on my ability to write another essay, which I passed with flying colours. After this essay I wrote another one which I did not bring to the Writing Centre, but I obtained 70%. This is because of the tips the consultant gave me.

In general, it was encouraging to see that more than half the students found that their marks had improved, and this improvement was felt across courses. Students' perceptions of the Writing Centre's interventions show that the consultations leave them with an increased awareness of their own writing, and an ability to articulate their own writing processes.

Improvements from first drafts to final essays

The averages showing improvement across drafts are reflected in Figure 9.4:
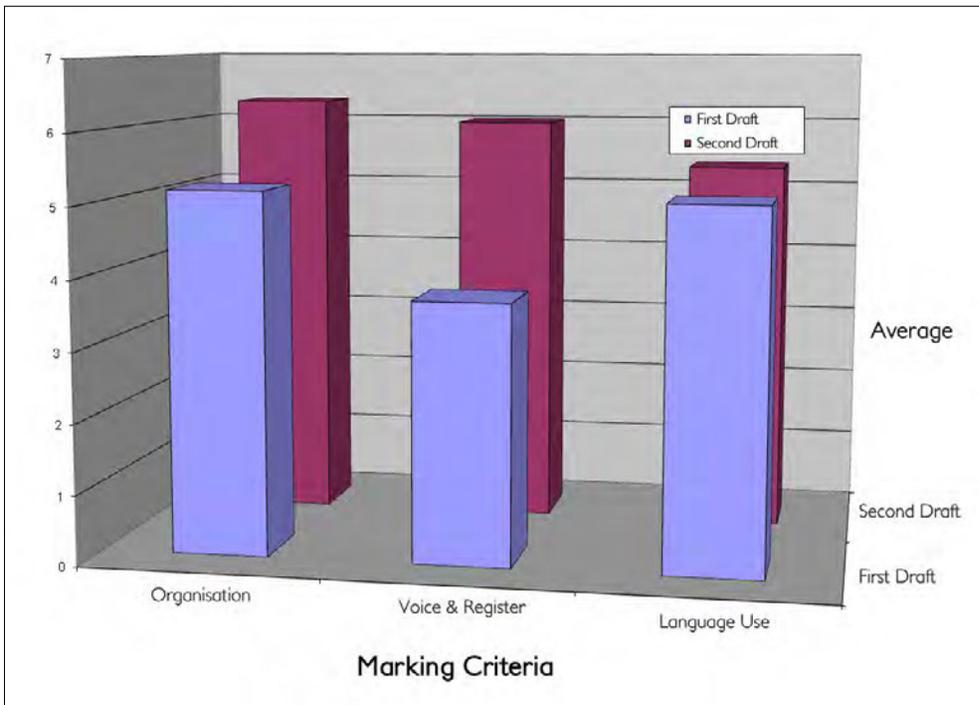
Figure 9.4   *Average improvement from first drafts to final essays*

Both consultants and students identified organisation as the most commonly addressed aspect of writing. Encouragingly, the comparison of first and final drafts revealed that the majority of students did show an improvement in the organisation of their essays. The average mark out of 10 for the first drafts was 4.8 and this average improved in the final essay to 6.2. Many students came to the Writing Centre to understand the topic and analyse what the essay required, or to get feedback on whether they had tackled the topic in an appropriate way. Most students found that once they had learned how to divide a topic into its components, identify the key concepts, and focus, they were thereafter better able to tackle subsequent essays. Development of an argument was another commonly encountered issue, inextricably linked to the organisation of an essay. It is clear that many students do not have a good understanding of structure or genre when they come into the university and start writing, but that most of them grasp the basic concepts fairly easily and manage to improve on essay organisation.

In looking at the average marks given by the external marker to the three categories, it appears that the Writing Centre seemed to help this group of first year students most in the area of acquiring academic discourse in particular disciplines. Students seemed weakest in this area in their first drafts (the average mark was 3.1 out of 10) and improved substantially through consultation with the Writing Centre (the average for the final essay mark was 5.9). Students coming straight from school tend to be unfamiliar with the academic discourse of their discipline and unsure about what style and language are appropriate. The use and correct citation of references is also something students learn at university and often struggle with at the beginning. It is therefore not surprising

that consultations at the Centre have resulted in improved marks in the 'voice and register' category.

Improvements in voice and register can also, however, be indicators of a process of 'acculturation' at first year level. I have already made the point that discursive practices are ideological in the ways they serve to maintain existing social relations of power. On the one hand, it would be in the learners' interests if they could conform to the expectations of the institution. On the other hand, by doing so they are, to some extent, reproducing the ideologies and inequities of the institution and society at large.

So, for instance, learning the 'genre' is about learning what conventions are at work in a domain of practice. 'Genre' straddles both the categories of both 'organisation' and 'voice and register' in that it describes the relationship of the social purpose of a text to the textual structure. Kress argues that the learning of genre is 'intimately linked with the codification of knowledge in a society' (Kress 1982:123). Learning how each discipline presents students with appropriate knowledge, appropriate ways of organising that knowledge and appropriate ways of representing social relations between the writer and reader can lead to either acculturation into those knowledge practices or critical awareness thereof.

Language and grammar problems are often the main reason lecturers send students to the Writing Centre, yet few consultants and students mentioned language and grammar as key components of their consultations. The external examiner's assessments also found that the smallest improvement took place in the 'language use' category. We find that students who ask for help with grammar often have overriding problems with structure, voice, register and general understanding of the task. In these instances, working with language and grammar is of secondary priority until the student has a better grasp of the key concepts and academic literacy practices. Also, even when language problems are addressed in a consultation, this by itself is unlikely to lead to a notable improvement of students' grammar, particularly among second language speakers. While students who come to the Centre learn to express themselves in a more academically appropriate tone and style (as reflected in the 'voice and register' marks), improving grammar is a more long-term development as the result of increased practice in reading and writing.

Conclusions

I have attempted to describe one study in the hope that this will contribute to the debate of how best to investigate Writing Centre interventions on student writing. I have shown how forty first year students were tracked by looking at individual student development as writers, multiple drafts of assignments, and the marks of the students across a particular course. From this study, it is does appear that the Writing Centre UCT contributes to the Academic Development Programme in terms of its goals of research-led development, widening access, promoting excellence through equity, ensuring the provision of key abilities in graduates. However, a weakness of this study was perhaps the lack of comparison of student writing across disciplines. A business report is rather different from a technical description, which in turn is not the same as a discursive essay in the humanities. It is hard to gauge from this study the extent

to which the Writing Centre answered to the specific needs of students from different disciplines, or to see where students experience similar problems across the curriculum. This would, however, perhaps be better conceived as a separate study in order to probe the disciplinary questions in any depth.

One student maintained that the Writing Centre 'changed the way I thought about putting information into essays'. Perhaps this comment summarises the Centre at its most useful, where it assists students to become adept at negotiating the epistemology of a particular subject, and inculcates a meta-understanding of how knowledge is linked to appropriate form. Many students indicated a shift towards a greater sense of autonomy and agency in their work. This move towards independence is difficult to quantify as a less dependent student may well get lower marks, especially in first year, but will almost certainly make a better researcher and critical thinker later on.

It is interesting that although the UCT Writing Centre is embedded in an academic literacies approach to student writing and takes into account institutional relationships of discourse and power and the contested nature of writing practices, the students' responses tended to reveal an outcome more akin to 'academic socialisation'. Academic socialisation is about induction into the institution's dominant norms, values and cultural practices. The students' comments about genre, organisation and structure and the technicalities of referencing all point to this induction process. Competence in academic literacy practices, on the contrary, includes the ability 'to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes' (1998:159). To some extent, this study did interrogate these aspects of student writing by looking closely at student voice and register. However, it did not overtly question the extent to which the students had become critical or gained meta-awareness, and also did not engage in a systematic analysis of affective and identity issues which emerged in students' comments.

It is evident from the assessments of the essay drafts as well as the students' responses that the Writing Centre provides an invaluable service to undergraduate students, particularly in introducing them to academic literacy practices in a supportive environment. This is reflected in the students' marks, often making the difference between passing and failing assignments, and even the whole course. From the students' responses, it is clear that the Centre is appreciated for the way in which it makes writing a less anxious and solitary activity, and also for the transferability of the academic literacy practices acquired in a consultation. For first year students who find themselves in large classes with little contact with their lecturers, having undivided attention for the duration of a consultation could help them come to terms with the unfamiliar, and often seemingly anonymous, academic environment. Many students reported increased confidence in their own abilities to understand and write an assignment. This confidence is particularly important for students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds who feel overwhelmed by their own perceived lack of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1991). The Writing Centre appears to validate students' voices, and in this way makes the grading of essays only a part of a more complex, polyvocal and reciprocal conversation about knowledge.

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PART 4

MENTORING SPACES

10 Communities of practice

Reflections on writing, research and academic
practices in a writing centre

Thokozile Lewanika and Arlene Archer

Introduction

The concept of learning through 'communities of practice' is described by Lave and Wenger (1991) who argue that learning does not occur as an individual activity focused on the internalisation of knowledge, but rather as a socially mediated process through 'communities of practice'. They propose that human beings are constantly engaged in a wide variety of collective pursuits in which our interactions as individuals shape both the processes and the outcomes of these pursuits in informal learning environments. Over time, this collective learning results in 'practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise' (Wenger cited in Smith 2003). Accordingly, these sustained communities are defined by Lave and Wenger (1991) as 'communities of practice'.

Wenger (as cited by Smith 2003) assigns three characteristic features to a 'community of practice': a common pursuit that is understood and continually negotiated by its members, member-interactions that produce a 'social entity' and a 'shared repertoire' of continually developing but sustained communal resources. In this chapter we present our University of Cape Town Writing Centre as a 'community of practice' in which the academic identities and/or practices of our student consultants are continually developed through mutual engagement. We encompass Writing Centre staff members,

student consultants as well as students seeking Writing Centre services in our definition of 'members' of our 'community of practice'. We propose that the student consultants enter our Writing Centre community with distinct academic identities and/or practices that are transformed by interactions within this community. The chapter explores the reflections of the University of Cape Town Writing Centre consultants on how working at the Centre has improved their own academic practices and equipped them as possible future academics.

Overview of the UCT Writing Centre

The Writing Centre is a project based within the larger Language Development Group at the University of Cape Town. Our Writing Centre has two main areas of focus, the first of which is a developmental focus. As part of the larger Language Development Group we focus on research-driven developmental work, particularly through curriculum involvement. This entails working in partnership with faculties to develop the curriculum in terms of language development, access and equity issues (see Archer 2007). Second, the Writing Centre provides a walk-in, one-on-one consultancy service to students from all faculties and academic levels of the university.

Academic writing is one of the primary means of assessment in tertiary institutions and has been described as a 'gatekeeper' by Gee (1996), Bartholomae (1985), Lillis (2001), Street (2004) and others. In the South African context, Leibowitz (2000) has suggested that students who are proficient writers may perform better than those who are poor writers, even if the latter had a better understanding of the subject matter. Therefore, helping students with writing could help improve their overall academic performance. In some instances, our assistance and support as a writing centre may mean that the student stays in the tertiary system and proceeds to graduation. The philosophy of our UCT student consultancy is that writing is a developmental process, and all students can improve their writing, whether they are highly experienced academic writers or complete novices. Often, poor writing is a result of poor understanding of the task at hand, the concepts involved, or the form the writing should take. The Writing Centre aims to assist by increasing students' understanding of writing as a process; enabling a 'thinking-through-writing' approach; helping students focus on the task; alerting students to academic writing conventions; educating students on academic voice and plagiarism; helping students understand how to select appropriate sources of information; improving students' sense of coherence, cohesion and logical structure in writing; improving students' ability to edit for some common grammatical errors.

Consultants' appointment and training

Our Writing Centre employs eleven to thirteen student consultants that are either Master's or PhD students. There is a strong emphasis on equity and multidisciplinarity in the selection process. At the time of writing, the group was diverse in terms of gender (four males, seven females), age (from mid-20s to mid-40s), languages spoken, nationality (including people from South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, England, Lesotho and Tanzania) (see table 10.1). In 2005, the Centre for Higher Education Development, with the backing of the Andrew W Mellon Foundation introduced an internship programme

for students on the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Programme (MMUF). The long-term objective of Mellon Mays is to address the serious under-representation of black faculty members in higher education in the USA and more recently, in South Africa. Mellon Mays aims to do this by 'identifying and supporting students of great promise and helping them to become scholars of the highest distinction' (Andrew W Mellon Foundation 2003). Consequently, Writing Centre internships were formulated to enable Mellon Mays graduates to advance to postgraduate study through a mentored work-study programme. Each year, between one and three consultants are Mellon Mays interns.

Name	Study Programme
Moeain Arend	PhD Education
Megan Cawood	Master's English
Clement Chihota	PhD English
Ellen Hurst	PhD Linguistics
Thokozile Lewanika (Mellon Mays intern)	PhD Molecular & Cell Biology
Patricia Lumba	Master's Information & Library Studies
Kapambwe Lumbwe (Mellon Mays intern)	PhD Ethnomusicology
Mokhantso Makoae	PhD Sociology
Astara Mwakalumbwa (Mellon Mays intern)	Honours Gender Studies
Lawrence Ngorora	PhD Environmental & Geographical Sciences
Kahilu Shakantu	PhD Property Studies

Table 10.1   *Details of the Writing Centre student consultants*

The Writing Centre consultancy positions are advertised annually and prospective consultants are required to submit a copy of their writing with their application letter. Short-listed applicants are then interviewed by a panel comprising Language Development Group representatives. MMUF interns undergo the same application process as general consultants, and are required to have the same general abilities. The consultants undergo a five day (20-hour) training programme at the beginning of the year in which practical and theoretical issues related to writing and Writing Centre practice are discussed. This programme is facilitated by various Language Development Group staff, and its discussion topics include writing as a process, theoretical approaches to student text, academic voice and plagiarism, consultation strategies, and postgraduate writing. The MMUF interns and general consultants receive the same initial training and engaged in all the Writing Centre activities throughout the year.

The ongoing training comprises formal training and sessions where the consultants introduce issues based on current problems or interesting issues that pertain to writing

consultations. The training of consultants provides an invaluable opportunity for postgraduate students from a range of disciplines to encounter writing pedagogical strategies, which not only empowers them to assist other students along a mentoring-type model, but contributes to their own development as writers and researchers. Some of the issues dealt with in the ongoing training sessions are feedback on workshops and individual consultations, scientific reporting, plagiarism packages, multimodality, discipline discourses, multilingualism and higher education, English as a second language and school literacies, creative writing, and grammar.

Reflective practice in the Writing Centre

Reflection is important as it enables the Writing Centre community to 'understand its own state of development from multiple perspectives, reconsider assumptions and patterns, uncover hidden possibilities, and use this self-awareness to move forward' (Wenger 2000:230). Reflection is built into Writing Centre practice and our consultants are required to write short reflective pieces after each consultation, monthly reports reflecting on trends, as well as an annual report. This is complemented by ongoing reflection through dialogue in the weekly seminars.

Van Rensburg argues that the Writing Centre could serve as an 'ideal rehearsal space in which students are able to develop an alternative 'discourse of selfhood' while negotiating their academic writing identities' (2004:216). Speaking in the South African context, Van Rensburg proposes that African students entering the University are 'positioned as lacking real academic literacy ... as 'amateurs' ... to be 'initiated' into the discourse community' (2004:217). He attests that some of these students reject these 'makeshift academic identities' and instead develop an 'alternative discourse of selfhood' which allows them to negotiate and develop their own academic writing identities (2004:217). He looks at the 'processes involved in the negotiation of an own identity within an academic discourse community' (2004:217) using reflective practice (narratives), interviews and written texts obtained from students seeking Writing Centre services. While Van Rensburg (2004) explores the effect of Writing Centre practice on the academic writing identities of students seeking Writing Centre services, we focus on its effect on the academic practices of our student consultants. Similarly to Van Rensburg (2004), we use reflective practice to explore consultants' experience of academic writing pedagogy and practices in the Writing Centre.

Nomdo proposes that 'learning from one's experiences goes hand in hand with the appropriate skills of enquiry with which to reinterpret such experiences' (2004:206). He describes reflective practice as a methodology that has its roots in Moon's parameters of experiential learning theory. Moon argues that 'reflection entails considering something in more detail with a purpose and/or outcome in mind and it extends beyond simple recall' (cited in Nomdo 2004:206). Accordingly, the consultants provided narratives on how their work at the Writing Centre has affected their academic identities and practices and their attitudes towards careers in academia. In addition, short interviews were held to seek clarity on some of the issues raised in their narratives. The data emanating from these narratives and interviews are explored within this chapter. There is general consensus amongst the consultants that their academic identities are

continually developed by the Writing Centre, as is revealed in the following analysis of the consultants' written reflections.

Consultants' reflections on working at the Writing Centre

The narratives elicited from the Writing Centre consultants reveal that their participation in the Writing Centre 'community of practice' has largely positive influences on their academic identities and practices. The consultants all describe the Writing Centre as a comfortable interactive space in which they are able to negotiate their academic identities and writing practices. All the consultants report improvements in their academic research and writing abilities as well as increased confidence in themselves as academic writers and possible future lecturers. In addition, the consultants describe how peer interaction with students and amongst themselves has significantly increased their knowledge of the variety of writing practices across various disciplines at the University.

Community: 'Writing with comrades-in-arms'

Clement describes the Writing Centre as a 'community of practice' in which he is surrounded by peers working towards a common goal. He reflects:

> I also feel as if I am inserted in the midst of a community of fellow researchers and writers. For that reason, my own research/writing process has become less solipsistic. I feel as if I am operating from a base that is well populated with fellow 'comrades-in-arms' (both other postgrads, especially those in the writer circles and the other consultants). In that regard, I feel as if I am operating from a 'comfort zone'.

Postgraduate study can be a solitary experience, particularly if the entire programme is by dissertation only. Clement's reflection reveals how the comfortable environment and 'sense of belonging' he found in the Writing Centre helped him deal with an aspect of his academic identity. These elements of Clement's reflection are echoed by Moeain. Moeain recounts the commencement of his PhD study as an 'isolating experience' and describes how working in the Writing Centre 'socialised him into a community of students doing postgraduate research and lifted the tyranny of isolation' he had been experiencing. Moeain narrates how his fellow consultants became 'mirrors' reflecting his own progress and anxieties, and how their advice on various academic issues (such as writing research proposals, data collection strategies, time management) re-integrated him into academic social practices. In the Writing Centre, Clement and Moeain constantly encounter fellow students engaged in a 'common struggle' and their interactions with these students help them to redefine and consolidate their own academic identities. The 'sense of belonging' and 'common struggles' are both key elements of 'communities of practice', as discussed earlier.

Clement and Moeain's experience of the Writing Centre as a comfort zone is shared by Lawrence. Lawrence's narrative describes the Writing Centre as a community of practice in which his interactions with students and his fellow consultants enable him to comfortably 'explore and formulate' his understanding of academic identity. Lawrence uses the Writing Centre as a rehearsal space to negotiate his 'discourse of selfhood' or academic identity, as argued by Van Rensburg (2004). Lawrence's reflections mention

two key elements that are important for active participation in a community of practice, namely freedom of expression and respect. He writes:

> ... the environment that I work in at the Writing Centre is so friendly and flexible. It is partly this aspect of the working conditions of freedom of expression and flexibility, meeting varied and new opportunities daily when on duty that allowed me to express myself without reservation or restraint within the norms of academia, of course ... In the meetings, I find myself gifted with a platform where ideas are shared to increase my wisdom and knowledge meanwhile my contribution appears to be valued whatever I say and whenever I speak.

Besides combating the isolation of postgraduate study, a community of practice like the Writing Centre helps to define an academic identity. Wenger argues that by participating in communities of practice we 'define with each other what constitutes competence in a given context' (2000:229). Communities produce a shared repertoire of communal resources, such as a shared discourse, routines, 'stories' and operational ethos. To be competent is to have access to this repertoire and to be able to use it appropriately. The idea of 'respect' for each other's ideas seems to be an important element in creating 'safe houses' (Canagarajah 2004) for trust and respect to develop – both prerequisites for a sense of community.

Dialogue: developing written texts

The importance of dialogue in the writing process is well recognised. Muriel Harris, one of the key Writing Centre figures in the United States, argues that 'talking with students as they write indicates that we view writing as a process of discovery in which we can help the writer learn how to shape a piece of writing as it is taking form ... students can see that writing is primarily an act of communication in which the needs of the reader are crucial considerations' (1986:3). Several consultants describe how verbal communication in Writing Centre practice, namely one-on-one student consultations, Writing Centre meetings and Writer Circles, has contributed to the development of their own academic writing practices. Patricia, for instance, describes how dialogue on written texts allows a writer to 'open a piece of writing to multiple levels'. Patricia narrates how working in the Writing Centre has brought her to the realisation that writing is about 'openness (defence of one's work), communication and learning'. She reflects:

> For me openness as a trait in writing has been enriched, because the processes are training my mind ... The whole communication process brings students to understand their thoughts, sift through their material in order to convey their most abstract and complex ideas in carefully chosen words – a fundamental to success in academics and in life. This process has also taught me to always arrange my thoughts carefully in order to convey my inner thoughts.

The importance of dialogue in the development of academic writing is also noted by Kahilu. Kahilu describes how the Writing Centre initial and ongoing training, as well as the one-on-one student consultations have increased her awareness and appreciation of writing as a 'developmental process in which thought processes and writing processes are

not mutually exclusive activities but rather, they feed into each other'. Both Patricia and Kahilu further describe how the thought processes in writing are facilitated by dialogue. While Patricia and Kahilu's reflections exemplify how the dialogue aspect of Writing Centre practice transforms the academic research and writing practices of our student consultants, Ellen's reflections provide a tangible example of the same. Ellen narrates:

> I began to write my PhD thesis last year, and got stuck after writing the first draft of Chapter 1. Through feedback from colleagues at the Writing Centre and the writing circle forum, I've been able to address some issues in the framing of my PhD question, which has recently led me to start to rewrite this first chapter. It is interesting to compare the way I'm approaching writing the chapter at the end of a year working in the Writing Centre environment, with my approach at the start of the year.

It is interesting to note here that talking about her and other people's research in various fora allowed Ellen to rethink and clarify her research question which, once defined, enables her writing to progress more easily. It is clear that dialogue is integral to learning, both exploratory conversations and more guided structured dialogue. We emphasise the importance of mutual engagement through dialogue in our 'writing as a process' themed one-on-one consultations with students.

Disciplinary crosstalk: enrichment through diversity

As mentioned earlier, the Writing Centre consultants come from a wide variety of disciplines, including Molecular and Cell Biology, Linguistics, English, Information and Library Studies, Ethnomusicology and Property Studies. This diversity in academic disciplines contributes to the 'shared repertoire of communal resources' in our Writing Centre, satisfying another key element of 'communities of practice'. Although our consultants each bring the specialised writing practices of their respective disciplines to the Writing Centre, it is in their 'joint enterprise' as a single 'social entity' that their strength lies. Several of the consultants credit the initial and ongoing training activities and Writing Centre meetings with playing an important role in helping them to understand the writing practices that shape disciplines outside their respective fields of study. For example, Moeain narrates how 'discussions regarding disciplinary discourses serve to illuminate the opaque taken-for-granted literacy practices of the genres of the various disciplines of the University'. In addition, working with students from all the faculties further increases the consultants' exposure to writing practices across various disciplines. The consultants' narratives reveal how multidisciplinarity in their academic studies as well as the diversity in student consultations continually enriches their academic writing, research and pedagogical methods. (See Paxton *et al* 2008 for further discussion on how we raise awareness of different disciplinary discourses in the training programme by focusing on writer's stance.)

Thokozile comes from a scientific discipline and prior to working in the Writing Centre she had not encountered much academic writing outside her discipline. Thokozile's narrative describes how working in the Writing Centre has increased her appreciation of the diversity in academic writing practices, and how she has used the writing practices of other disciplines to enhance her own. She reflects:

> When I first started to work at the Writing Centre I struggled to read through student texts from the Humanities, especially Philosophy and Religion. I thought a lot of the text was 'waffle', and I approached these consultations with dread. After a few months of consultations, Writing Centre meetings and Writer Circle interactions, I came to appreciate that the 'waffle' was often 'preamble' and a discipline-specific trend. This realisation changed my attitude towards consultations with Humanities students and helped me 'waffle' academically in my own thesis when my results were equivocal, which deepened my understanding of academic writing practices.

The transformation of Thokozile's academic practices through exposure to a wide diversity of academic research is shared by all the consultants including Kahilu, who was pursuing a PhD in Property Studies. Kahilu narrates how the diversity of academic disciplines she encounters in the Writing Centre 'opened her eyes' to the numerous possibilities in academic research and writing. She describes how this exposure enabled her to approach her own work differently, and how she used this to 'explore alternative perspectives from the sociological field in developing [her] conceptual framework'. The reflections of these two consultants illustrate how interactions amongst the 'human capital' in our Writing Centre lead to the development of the academic research and writing practices of consultants. It is clear from the afore-mentioned narratives that Writing Centres create a space in which cross-disciplinary interaction leads to further development of the consultants' academic practices.

'The Gift': Teaching as a mutual learning exercise

Writing, research and teaching are all vital elements of academia. Earlier, we described the Writing Centre as an ideal 'rehearsal space' in which students develop their academic practices. Several of the student consultants had academic teaching experience prior to their consultancy work at the Centre. Of the eleven consultants, four had lectured at tertiary institutions, two had teaching experience at secondary school level and one had taught at primary school level. The remaining four consultants had not taught formally. It is interesting to note that not all the consultants were interested in pursuing careers in academia when they joined the Writing Centre; however, all but one of them express interest in pursuing academic careers after working in the Centre for approximately a year. Some consultants narrated how they were not even aware that they had academic teaching potential prior to working at the Writing Centre. For example, Lawrence expresses the following in his reflections:

> ... after the acceptance of the appointment to work in the Writing Centre I initially asked myself how I could do this job with the little experience that I had ... What would I know about writing anyway ...

However, Lawrence titled his narrative 'The Gift' which describes how the Writing Centre experience has 'unleashed' his teaching potential. Patricia relates how the times she has seen a student more than once and seen improvements in their writing has 'brought a smile to [her] face'. Generally, the narratives produced by the consultants illustrate how the Writing Centre is a favourable 'rehearsal space' in which they explore and develop their pedagogy. Clement, for instance, describes how the Writing Centre's

formal training activities provide him with a 'deeper understanding of theoretical concepts of language learning processes', while student consultations provide him with 'opportunities to translate theoretical knowledge into everyday practice'. Astara is thankful for the 'sneak-preview of the life of an academic' that Writing Centre practice provides. There is general consensus amongst the consultants that the initial and on-going training activities as well as the one-on-one student consultations increase their knowledge, understanding and implementation of pedagogical methods. Moeain's reflections illustrate the development of personal pedagogy through Writing Centre practice.

Prior to his PhD study, Moeain taught in a high school for five years, tutored in the UNISA Adult Education Diploma course and worked as a curriculum advisor in the Western Cape Education Department. With considerable teaching experience behind him, Moeain's application to work in the Writing Centre was motivated by a desire to 'assist in developing students in higher education and acquire new skills in the field of literacy teaching'. However, his experiences as a consultant have shown him that his 'ignorance is not a solvable problem', and that he has as much to learn as he has to offer. He reflects:

> I have come to appreciate that knowing and knowledge exist amongst people ... through the social interactions in the Writing Centre I have concluded and accepted that my understanding of literacy is ever-shifting and that the cliché 'there are more questions than answers' will always ring true for me when attempting to understand the complex landscape of literacy teaching and learning...

Moeain's reflections reveal a transformation in his identity and practice as an educator. His interactions within our Writing Centre community of practice have changed his perception of teaching from an exercise in which he solely imparts knowledge, to one that acknowledges that he is an active participant in a mutual learning exercise. Moeain's acknowledgement that 'knowing and knowledge exist amongst people' allows him, as an educator, to be 'open' to the countless learning opportunities presented in 'classroom-type' teaching activities. This attitude could help facilitate access in the learner-educator power relationships that exist within institutions of learning.

Writing Centre teaching practices have brought about a similar attitudinal transformation in Kapambwe. Kapambwe had seventeen years of teaching experience at primary and secondary school levels prior to joining the Writing Centre. He describes his earlier attitude towards writing as 'hard labour that would drain one's energy until one dropped dead'. As a gifted musician, he had long favoured teaching the practical aspects of music, including mixing sounds, sonic movements and dancing, over academic writing. However, Kapambwe narrates how the initial and ongoing training activities in the Writing Centre have benefited him immensely and enabled him to develop a variety of teaching and writing skills. His narrative describes how he applies the interrogative practices he uses in one-on-one student consultations to develop his own academic writing, citing the importance of 'academic voice', referencing and avoiding plagiarism

as examples. Kapambwe's reflections reveal how educating others often leads to the development of the educators themselves.

Megan describes also how the teaching practices in the Writing Centre have not only developed her teaching ability, but her academic writing as well. Prior to working at the Writing Centre, Megan had taught English as a foreign language and worked as a primary school teacher for a year. She relates that working in the Writing Centre has developed her teaching and communication, which has resulted in her becoming a 'better writer'. Like Kapambwe, Megan describes how constantly helping students with their writing helps her 'formulate internal strategies' for tackling her own writing. She describes the 'free-writing' tool as one strategy she has used successfully in every essay she has submitted in the last academic year. Free-writing involves putting pen to paper for a fixed time and writing whatever comes into your mind in a 'stream of consciousness' way with no self-censorship.

The consultants' reflections illustrate how the teaching element of Writing Centre practice helps to develop their identities as educators as well as their research and writing practices. While the initial and ongoing training activities provide theoretical frameworks for pedagogical strategies, the student consultations help them 'translate theoretical knowledge into everyday practice', as described by Clement.

The importance of affect in effective teaching

In their initial and ongoing training activities, the consultants are taught how 'affect' can influence academic writing. We draw on Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' as 'socialised subjectivity' (1992:126) to talk about an individual's accumulated experience of social actions. In our Writing Centre, affect is described as the complexity of elements, academic and non-academic, which inform and affect the text of students at any particular moment, including social background, language fluency and thesis supervision. These are important considerations for effective diagnosis of learning and writing difficulties and the implementation of successful intervention strategies. Patricia's academic teaching experience prior to her current course of study was confined to facilitating Information Communication Technology (ICT) workshops in Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs). She narrates that being aware of the complexity of issues that affect a student's writing ability and placing herself in a student's thoughts has been instructive for her. Patricia's reflections were shared by Mokhantso, who had lectured for eleven years prior to joining the Writing Centre. Mokhantso reflects:

> One thing which I learned to practice was patience with writers who to me appeared to be less committed to their work but also to always remember people's socioeconomic backgrounds as a reality which affects even the form/appearance of their work and expectations.

Mokhantso's reflection illustrates the importance for educators to consider the variety of issues that affect a student's academic performance and motivation. Academic careers in tertiary institutions involve teaching duties as well as conducting research and producing publications. However, many lecturers have little formal training as 'educators' and often lecture because they are experts in a particular field. This lack of 'teacher training'

is sometimes detrimental to students as lecturers may fail to consider affect issues in their teaching or supervisory roles. In providing awareness of 'affect' issues in initial and ongoing activities our Writing Centre practice is preparing consultants not only to be better academic researchers and writers, but also better educators. The effectiveness of Writing Centre practice in improving appreciation of affect issues in pedagogical approaches is well summarised by Clement: 'I have learnt to take into account both what they [students] say and what they do not say and to draw appropriate conclusions and devise appropriate intervention strategies'.

Conclusions

Learning is a social process and participating in communities of practice is essential to learning (Wenger 2000:226). Wenger argues that if a community of practice lacks the ability to reflect, it becomes 'hostage to its own history' (2000:230). As a community, we work on developing a common language to talk about teaching, learning and writing processes. Not only are we interested in creating a community of practice amongst the consultants, but amongst our students as well. In this regard, the most important role of consultants is, through mentorship, to help students adopt a new identity, that of educated people who have something important to say. An assignment written within the university community is the result of serious reflection about a specific topic. The act of writing about the topic makes public the reflection, and the assignment becomes part of an ongoing dialogue among scholars. The premise underlying the consultant-student relation is Lave and Wenger's argument that learning is not located in the acquisition of structure, but in the increased access of learners to participating roles in expert performances (1991:17). The Writing Centre enables students to 'step out' of the role of regurgitators of dry and unrelated facts, and into the role of people who can make educated arguments.

A 'shared repertoire' (Wenger 2000:229) is actively encouraged in the UCT Writing Centre through regular meetings, common theoretical readings which are used to theorise our practice, and our routines of operation and reporting. The reflections of our student consultants illustrate how our community of practice has indeed led to the transformation of their academic identities as postgraduate students and educators, the development of their academic research and writing practices, as well as the development of their pedagogy. This rehearsal of 'life as an academic' in our Writing Centre has, since 2000, produced sixteen academic appointments in a range of departments at various institutions, including UCT, University of the Witwatersrand, University of Lesotho, University of the Western Cape, Stellenbosch, UNISA, CPUT and Rhodes. We hope that the 'rehearsal space' of our Writing Centre primed these individuals for academia and that we have had some, even if minor, impact on the teaching practices in the realms in which these former consultants now operate. The academic appointments of former Writing Centre student consultants suggest that Writing Centres could facilitate equity appointments in institutions of higher education.

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11

'Conversations' with postgraduate writers

Understanding the role of the peer tutor

Cilla Dowse and Wilhelm van Rensburg

Introduction and contextual background

Within the South African framework, academic development programmes at higher education institutions were initiated in the 1980s to address various skills, of which academic writing was one (Quinn 1998). In the early 1990s, writing centres were established in a number of South African institutions (Nichols 1998) to provide a resource for the diverse educational, social and cultural needs of the students who make up 'the mosaic peculiar to the new South Africa' (Johnston in Goodlab 1995:67). This access to universities, colleges and technikons has necessitated the need for academic and writing support particularly as the majority of these students were English Second Language (ESL) students and as a result of their South African education legacy, were seen to be equipped with inadequate education and skills needed to experience academic success (Archer 2010).

A recent study has revealed that more than half the student population in South African HEIs are over the age of 23 (CEPD 2005) with a significant number being postgraduate students wanting to upgrade their qualifications (Duke and Jones 2005). In addition, the Department of Education has called upon teachers to become lifelong learners and this, together with various postgraduate programmes that HEIs offer, has seen many teachers, highly motivated adult students, returning to higher education studies. It is for this specific type of student that the Postgraduate Writing Support Centre within

the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg was established in 2002, a move which Jackson, Leverenz and Law (2003) deem as important, as a writing centre housed within an academic department in comparison to a writing centre housed in some other administrative unit has a tremendous impact on its operation. However, due to institutional politics, the Postgraduate Writing Centre has subsequently been subsumed by the Faculty of Education's Centre for Education Practice Research (CEPR). Regardless of this new development, the position of the peer tutor remains crucial.

The role of the peer tutor in the writing centre is not only diverse and multiple; it is also political and contested (Cogie 2002; Hawkes and Murphy 2002; Murphy 2003, 2004, 2009; Murphy and Stay 2006; Waring 2005). Tutors often have to negotiate and mediate the uneven power relations that may exist between study supervisor and postgraduate student writer and furthermore, the tutors' own positions in consultation sessions are questioned and compromised. Many issues are raised by the idea of a 'peer' tutor. Trimbur (in Barnett and Blumner 2001, 2008) argues that the term 'peer tutoring' is a contradiction in that, as a peer, one does not have the necessary qualifications or expertise to tutor, and yet when one has been trained, one is consequently set apart from peers by the acquisition of skills (2001:290). Trimbur continues to explore this paradox by writing that peer tutors are usually identified as 'highly skilled academic achievers' and 'independent learners', which reinforces the gap between a peer tutor and a student (in Bushman in Wallace and Simpson 1991:32). Bruffee (2001:207, 2007, 2009), however, posits that the peer tutoring process is valuable as a student is far more open to interaction with a peer than a lecturer with learning becoming a 'two-way street' emphasising the value of the inherent verbalisation and questioning (Gartner 1994) resulting in an improvement of the student's work. In addition, peer tutoring has the advantage of providing learning assistance to less advanced students (Cuseo online), thus offering an effective way to help students learn actively and meaningfully. Models of peer tutor training highlight the balance between emphasising the tutor's role as a peer and a co-learner, and emphasising the peer tutor's role in producing 'experiential knowledge of the process of peer critiquing and co-learning to write' (Trimbur 2001:292).

This fine balance is also to be maintained in the collaborative process of tutoring. True collaboration takes place when both peer tutor and tutee are 'part of the same discourse community and meet as equals' (Clark, cited in Shamoon and Burns 2001:226). Active student participation is thus encouraged, but Brooks argues that peer tutors should take on a secondary role with a minimalist, hands-off approach when tutoring, so as to keep the writer focused on his/her own writing and ensure that he/she is the 'active agent' (2001:224). In maintaining control over his/her writing and retaining ownership in the process of a consultation, the writer learns from the process to develop as a writer (Ryan 2002:31-41; Ryan and Zimmerelli 2009), an ideology which North reinforces by saying that 'our job is to make better writers, not necessarily – or immediately – better texts' (2003:41).

However, discussion has revealed that although this type of peer tutoring has become the norm in writing centres, alternate forms of tutoring needed by writers at various stages of writing development, either as in a novice, intermediate or advanced writing stage,

should be considered. For example, Shamoon and Burns discuss such alternatives, which they refer to as 'directive and public' (rather than collaborative and private), and lean on 'imitation, modelling and emulation', which are consequently opposed to current orthodoxy (collaborative, interactive conversation) (2001:230-237).

Added to this question of which type of peer tutoring is most effective in a particular context, is the debate of whether a peer tutor should be a 'generalist' peer tutor or a 'domain-centred' peer tutor (Kiedaisch and Dinitz 2001:260). Research in the USA has shown that there are arguments for and against both 'generalist' and 'domain-centred' peer tutoring. An argument against 'generalist' peer tutoring is that writing centre peer tutors are not, and cannot be, experts in a variety of fields. For instance, according to Samson (in Wallace and Simpson 1991:232-242), a peer tutor, not well versed in technical terms or technical fields, will know very little about what the tutee is writing and, thus, a peer tutor should be 'domain-centred'. Conversely, research has shown (*ibid*) that students from certain faculties, such as English, Communication and Education, with specialist tutor training, can become effective peer tutors in, for example, technical, psychological or legal fields. Such tutor training, including training in understanding basic concepts in the new discipline and its special writing requirements, needs to be undergone.

It is therefore to understand this tension that various models of peer tutoring, as well as a variety of strategies employed in writing centre practice which have already been researched and critiqued, are looked at in more depth. Models of peer tutoring developed by authors such as Bruffee and Haring-Smith were investigated to understand how each model impacts on the ideology of peer tutoring, as well as alternate methods and techniques. Traditional peer tutor training manuals written by Harris *Teaching One-to-One Conference;* Bruffee's *A Short Course in Writing* and Clark's *Writing in the Center: Teaching in a Writing Center Setting,* tutor training programmes developed by Gillespie and Lerner, Murphy and Sherwood, and Ryan, as well as training manuals for tutors formulated by certain American universities, were studied in an effort to understand what constitutes the role of the peer tutor, the implications for the writing centre and, consequently, the development of conversations of knowledge.

Crucial to the debate are ethical issues such as plagiarism, 'owning' of texts, collaborative learning and imitation. Clark and Healy (2001) query how ethical are the increasing amounts of assistance from peer tutors, and thus writing centres, with regard to students' work. The use of collaboration between peer tutor and writer is an added contentious issue with regard to both collaborative learning and its application to the writing (Harris 2001, 2008), as well as the idea that over-collaboration could lead to writing centre dependency (Walker 2001).

Based on the above, the aim of this chapter is to understand the role of a peer tutor in developing conversations of knowledge in postgraduate writing support.

Research design

The research project took the form of a critical qualitative case study in the context of the Postgraduate Writing Support Centre of the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg.

A case study is used to gain in-depth understanding of a particular situation and meaning for those involved, interest being in the 'process rather than the outcome, ... in discovery rather than confirmation' (Merriam 1998:19, 2009), a 'description of *how, where, when and why* things happen' (Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit 2004:41; Yin 1984). In addition, the case study using the qualitative methodological tools of questionnaires, observations and interviews therefore investigated the phenomenon of peer tutoring with postgraduate students attempting to identify the diverse and multiple roles of the peer tutor and assuming a critical dimension by taking into account the delicate balance of power that needs to be negotiated and maintained between study supervisor and postgraduate student writer. The unit of analysis or object of investigation (TerreBlanche and Durrheim 1999; Henning *et al* 2004) was the interaction between the tutors and the postgraduate student writers during various tutoring contexts in the writing of research proposals, research papers, mini-dissertations and dissertations, not just to describe the case but to 'see patterns, relationship and the dynamic that warrants the inquiry' (Henning *et al* 2004:32).

An understanding of this phenomenon of peer tutoring began with observing both the experienced tutor and the students in their one-on-one tutor sessions, where we were participant observers, and later active participants in tutoring one-on-one sessions, online tutoring and workshop tutoring. A research proposal workshop, in which specific topics were discussed, was held to offer support to postgraduate students finding difficulty in the writing of this important paper and it was these students who formed the 'sample' as described by Henning *et al* (2004:71), as people who 'travel on the journey' with us as 'desirable participants' and lead to a better theoretical understanding of the phenomenon.

Being active participants in this study as the peer tutors allowed us to put into practice what writing centre manuals and peer tutoring guides authored by Gillespie and Lerner (2003, 2008), Ryan (2002, 2009) and Murphy and Sherwood (2003) have advocated as the role of a peer tutor and the method of tutoring. Therefore, in this study we saw our role as valuable, as we were able to develop understanding and construct knowledge from the point of view of the researcher, the peer tutor as well as postgraduate students, writing our own postgraduate research proposals and research papers with the support of the writing centre.

Biographic data gathered through pre-workshop and pre-tutoring questionnaires have shown that postgraduate students in the Faculty of Education at this particular HEI are practicing teachers, and usually serious students who are mature (all over the age of 25), experienced and motivated. Tutors therefore have to take note that these students are adult by definition, should be treated with respect, and be allowed to develop open negotiation and dialogue which will lead to co-operation (Gravett 2001) and collaboration. A further aspect to be taken into account is the accumulated life and professional experience which the adult learner should be encouraged to bring to the table of learning, ensuring that both the adult learner and tutor understand the value of this prior knowledge and experience and draw on it as a resource (*ibid*), particularly as the research is usually based on their school practice.

Working at postgraduate level, the student is given the choice of programme within the faculty (such as Environmental Education, Education Management, Adult Education, and Inclusive Education). Each programme consists of course work modules with a research module giving the student an open choice of topic for his/her research but which should be 'relevant to their own short-term and medium-term career prospects', should be intellectually stimulating, is researchable and will add value to the area of study and is at the same time personally interesting and worthwhile (Mouton 2001:39-40). The research proposal, a document that outlines how it is proposed that the research is conducted and which 'embodies the logic of the research project' (Mouton 2001:45), is the initial step which culminates in the writing up of the research paper or mini-dissertation.

What the data revealed

Findings emerging from this case study of three different tutoring contexts (one-on-one sessions, group workshops, and online tutoring) have revealed that the peer tutor working within the **community** of a writing centre enters into **conversation** with student writers and through **collaboration**, **co-constructs** knowledge.

Although the themes that have emerged from the findings will be discussed separately, it is imperative to understand that in the context of the writing centre, they do not and cannot exist separately but are interlinked and intertwined, one needing the other to exist.

Developing and experiencing a community

The word 'centre' may represent the centre of a circle, and thus the writing centre may be seen as an actual place, a physical space central to the faculty or university although Clark (online) postulates that writing centre work should be conceived of primarily as a 'pedagogical concept', as well as an actual place. In other cases, as described by Harris, writing centres consider themselves to be on the margins of the institutions and thus free from institutional restraints or as 'cutting edge' (in Gillespie, Gillam, Falls Brown and Stay 2002:75). The physical space or environment of a writing centre is an important aspect and should be welcoming to a student writer. Grimm (1999) explains that the tutor needs to promote the writing centre as a place for all writers not just remedial writers, finding joy, challenge and stimulation in teaching everyone including 'those students relegated to what many consider the academic dump' (Boquet 2002:36).

The writing centre, therefore, by being a non-threatening environment (Hadfield, Kinkead, Peterson, Ray and Preston 2003), a 'safe house' (Papay 2004:11) induces a sense of community. Carino (1992:38) defines the writing centre as 'evok[ing] the communal aspect ... as a microculture in which camaraderie replaces the competitive atmosphere of the classroom' and where 'we [the tutors] attempt to create a community in the writing centre' (Boquet 2002:27; Geller 2008). However, Davis (2000:196 cited in Boquet 2002:143) explains that 'community is not a product; it cannot be built or produced'. One experiences community by *knowing the different students* (Nev[1]). It is thus within the physical space of the writing centre that the peer tutor attempts to create an atmosphere where the student experiences a sense of community which does not

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1   Pseudonyms for the sixteen participants are employed to preserve anonymity.

have to involve large numbers of people, but most importantly involves the student, the peer tutor and the supervisor – an equilateral triangle – a stable foundation where the supervisor's expertise supports the peer tutor and student in conversation and then in writing.

The community of academic practice describes how students are socialised into the different ways of thinking, reasoning, reading and writing with the peer tutor offering them 'rehearsal space' which is vital in participating in academic discourse (Van Rensburg 2004:222). This allows students to become agents of their own writing, gaining their voice (Woolbright 2003), negotiating their academic identities (Van Rensburg 2004) and becoming empowered (Cooper 2003) consequently leading peer tutors to become 'agents of change in writing pedagogy' (Cooper 2003:59). Community is therefore created and experienced between tutor and student in one-on-one consultations, in online tutoring or between tutor and students. Experiencing community gives the student a sense of belonging, unity or kinship and it is this belonging which allows access to the faculty, the field of study and the discourse. In the informal atmosphere of the tutoring sessions *a good atmosphere* is experienced where we *meet new friends* and *gain experience* (Connie), a place *for acquiring knowledge and skills* (Annie), where student writers are *relaxed* (Matt), *feel safe* (Katie), and this *helps build confidence* (Matt) allowing one to *plunge into the unknown* (Katie). In tutoring situations where talk is central, *we sat next to each ... and I think it's also very important because it makes us to bond with each other* (Matt) which leads to experiencing community.

Davis (2000:194 cited in Boquet 2002:143) explains that what community shares, is 'sharing' itself. *If you share information* (Lynne) by *supporting and caring* this develops *a fascinating working environment* (Nev) reinforced with the thought that *it's the people that you are with ... are the ones that help you to cope ... because they were there, somewhere I got my strength from them and whenever any of us felt down, the others pepped her up* (Odette). The social relationships that develop through tutoring sessions are as a result 'cemented' through talk (McAndrew and Reigstad 2001:5) allowing one to experience community reinforcing Elbow's concept of 'a community of writers' which indicates fellowship, cooperation and dialogue to be at the very core of the writing process (Elbow and Belanoff 1989), with student writers needing to be part of the community in order to learn how to write in that community (Smit 2004).

Facilitating conversations

Just talking, or the active engagement of students in conversation at as many points in the writing process as possible (Bruffee 2001, 2007, 2009), demonstrates the power of oral language which facilitates learning in general and writing specifically (McAndrew and Reigstad 2001, 2008). During workshops or group sessions the students were either paired off or grouped, encouraging them to talk about their research as Barnes (1990, cited in McAndrew and Reigstad 2001:4) states that students 'have already taken possession of complex ways of making sense of the world ... for the social and cognitive skills they have developed in various contexts in and out of [learning institutions] provide their most valuable resources as learners'. The encouraging of conversation involved the students in talking, questioning and thinking about various aspects of their writing,

which Barnes (1990, cited in McAndrew and Reigstad 2001:4) explains, benefits learning as 'exploratory talk' or 'informal, tentative talking it over' (McAndrew and Reigstad 2001:4), in order to gain clarity as Rosie concludes *I gained a better understanding*. Bruffee explains that in order to learn to think better, one needs to converse better and 'to learn to create and maintain the sort of social contexts, the sort of community life, that foster the kinds of conversations we value' (2001:206-209) or, as Odette explains, *the more you talk, the more you understand.*

It is 'just talking' in this community that helps develop the flow of language for the students and even more so for English second language speakers. During these 'talk' sessions the student is able to engage with peers to verbalise his/her internal reflective thoughts, breaking up ideas into smaller issues which are then discussed in an attempt to find contextual meaning and understanding (McAndrew and Reigstad 2001). Conversations between people in the community of the writing centre are where students seek out genuine information by *ask[ing] other's opinions* (Lynne) that might otherwise be suppressed or eliminated (Boquet 2003*)* and, as a result *this answered all my concerns ... I would see the pattern* (Debbie). In addition, this interaction allows the student time to explain what he/she currently understands and if peer critiqued, is able to bring about modifications and/or changes.

Conversation is seen as a 'social constructionist code work to talk about knowledge and teaching and learning'. This interaction is created through social activity rather than in the individual mind with the resulting conversation and consensus building not only stimulating the general process of knowledge construction but also reproducing the very dialogic process of writing (Gillam 1994). Bruffee explains that ideas originate during conversations which take place in public between people and later becomes internalised into thought (2001:210). Tumi explained her experience thus: *I learned to listen to every idea coming while I am busy writing and to put it on paper and later will be edited.* It was consequently during the interaction with peers or peer tutors, either in paired or group sessions, that student writers shared ideas and were then able to 'compose through inner speech' (Bishop 1992 cited in McAndrew and Reigstad 2001:4).

Talking, as seen in all tutoring sessions, is central to the process of tutoring (North 2003) and writing (Boquet 2002) where student writers are encouraged to talk to their peers and their tutors, allowing them 'to bounce their ideas off an audience, which requires them to practice rhetorical skills as they adjust the ideas to the audience, and they thus develop the analytical and critical skills that are essential to drafting and revising' (McAndrew and Reigstad 2001:4). *I was able to open my mind concerning writing* (Nora). This talking involves the student writer bringing the 'conversation of knowledge' to the collaborative table and the peer tutor, the 'conversation of the conventions of discourse' (Bruffee 2001:210-213).

Pemberton (2002) states that postgraduate students tend to be quite active in writing centre tutor sessions as they have disciplinary knowledge and consequently are able to discuss their topics drawing on their expertise with texts and documents. Tutoring is therefore talking, illustrating that writing is not solitary but a process that, through 'the unique conversations about reading and writing' (Kail, quoted in Boquet 2002:44),

allows student and peer tutor 'growth in writing and personal relationships' (McAndrew and Reigstad 2001:4-5).

Collaborating to co-construct knowledge

Collaboration is a powerful learning tool (Harris 1992:369) and 'writing center pedagogy has given high priority to working collaboratively and interactively' (Harris and Silva 1993:532), encouraging people to 'engage in a process of intellectual, social and personal negotiation' (McAndrew and Reigstad 2001:5). However, as many constraints are placed on the collaborating environment, from institutional burdens to worries about ethics, peer tutors should strive to remember that collaboration is more than just theory and doctrines. Collaboration is a learning technique that provides a benefit to real people throughout society (Annett 1997). In the context of tutoring, collaboration has multiple meanings and can be interpreted as the interaction between peer tutor, as reader, and the student in order 'to promote dialogue and negotiation' and 'heighten the writer's sense of audience' (Harris 1992:369). In peer tutoring the tutor helps the student *face-to-face, hands-on* (Paul) to develop strategies and through the process of tutoring, to become effective writers. Tutors are not personal editors but need to work collaboratively with student writers to guide them, especially English second language speaking students who do not have the native speaker intuition to identify errors in their own writing (Harris and Silva 1993) and in addition, exhibit less facility for revising by ear or in an intuitive manner as to what 'sounds' right (Harris and Silva 1993).

Collaboration can also be interpreted as the interaction between students, where there was active involvement in discussions during workshops and group sessions which Paul described as *super* as it involved *meeting other students and getting information from others* (Patrisha), demonstrating that knowledge is constructed in social communities. The students experienced community through *friendship, working and helping each other* (Anton), and through talking in pairs or groups, discovered the value of *listening and formulating ideas with peers* (Katie). Paul observed that during group work *we shared experiences and ... it helped and we could share* which illustrates that collaborative learning directly involves the student writers' action and attention, with the student writers conversing among themselves. This empowers the student writers (Nichols 1998), who actively question, query, discuss, de-construct, re-construct and synthesise what is said (Bruffee 1993), combining listening, reading, talking, writing and thinking skills simultaneously (Fitzgerald 1994; Lunsford 2003).

The resulting collaborative learning which, described by Bruffee, 'encourages students to listen to each other accepting the authority of helping one another learn and to acknowledge the authority of other students, their peers and in turn helping them learn themselves' (1993:87), occurred during discussions where students could *learn from others* (Connie) about the writing of their research proposals and papers, and encourage peer critique by *ask[ing] other's opinions* (Lynne) as well as *try and help the other ones* (Odette). Harris (1992:370) explains that 'collaborative learning about writing involves interaction between writer and reader to help the writer improve her own abilities and produce her own text' which is what occurred during discussions where *we are also able to help one another ... with other students when we work together* (Matt) and,

consequently, Lindiwe was able to reflect: *my way of thinking has developed*. Bruffee (1993) explains that more is learnt from what is said through the powerful force of interaction with others. This influence on one another is the experiencing of community, a community of knowledge, a community of practice (Wenger 1998) where participants speak the same language.

In collaborative learning the tutor tends to stand on the sidelines, teaching indirectly but with *help from facilitators* (Patrisha) *coming in from time to time to assist* resulting in *overwhelming support* (Matt). However, the tutor remains connected with the student writer by being the reader or audience who, through interactive questioning, evaluates and collaborates during the process of writing (McAndrew and Reigstad 2001).

This idea of collaborative learning, which Nev found *very informative,* offers a new model for learning which involves the 're-acculturation' (Bruffee 1993:20) of a student through conversation with peers wanting entrance into a new community, such as the academic and professional disciplines of higher learning. This was particularly evident with the sample of participants who initially were reluctant to participate in conversation and collaboration, perhaps as a legacy of their education system. Collaborative learning has major advantages for student writers who, through conversations, 'challenge one another with questions, use the evidence and information available to them, develop relationships among issues, and evaluate their thinking' (McAndrew and Reigstad 2001:6), working towards strengthening the students' skills (Harris 1992). Gere (1987:75) explains that 'the process of working together enables writers to use language as a means of becoming competent in the discourse of a given community'. Bruffee sums up by stating that 'collaborative learning models the conversation by which communities of knowledgeable peers construct knowledge' (1993:52). Thus, it is the role of the peer tutor to facilitate collaboration between students and themselves, to construct knowledge which will then support and inform their writing and ultimately lead the students to negotiate and develop their academic identities (Van Rensburg 2004).

It is through language, talking and writing, in the interaction with society, that ideas gained from previous discussions, readings, thoughts and writings are shared and, as a result, knowledge is constructed. Petraglia (1991:38) states that 'knowledge is created, maintained and altered through an individual's interaction with and within his/her discourse community'. Vygotsky (1978:86) explains that students/student writers have an 'actual developmental level' and 'a level of potential development' in the development of their language and literacy. Students, according to Vygotsky, are able to work without assistance but could progress to the level of potential development with the help and support of a teacher, a tutor or a collaborative group, moving them beyond what they can currently achieve. Thus the social nature of language, literacy and learning is demonstrated through the process of tutoring and collaboration where the student writer is able to construct understanding as a direct result of conversation. Conversation simulates the general process of knowledge construction, also reproducing the very dialogic process of writing, which can be translated into academic writing and, in the long term, help students gain entry into the larger discourse. 'Social construction, dialogue, literacy, and learning all inter-weave during a tutoring session' (McAndrew

and Reigstad 2001:2) and, accordingly, knowledge becomes the product of collaboration during the process of social interaction.

During workshop and group sessions, the social interactions relied on were the writing conversations which were most beneficial to the intellectual development of the student writer as they revolved around tasks that the student writer cannot do alone, but in which he/she required assistance and the extensive use of peer group critiquing to reflect the workings of discourse communities. These were the sentiments of Paul: *[The sharing of community] ... is of the utmost importance ... and you can't do it alone* which was echoed by Connie who explained that *I can help others*. Collaboration and collaborative learning play a more important role in social constructivist writing instruction as described by Rosie: *I had some ideas but they were not as clear as I understand them now*. Lindiwe found that a result of the collaboration led her *to develop more ideas* whilst Matt *was able to write with confidence*. The collaboration, aimed at downplaying the role of the tutor as an authority figure or the single source of knowledge, demonstrated that the peer tutor's voice is one of many and in the context of these collaborative conversations the peer tutor was seen as a co-learner. *It was exciting throughout and everyday to go home having learnt so much!* described Paul's experience of collaboration where meanings were negotiated and knowledge constructed (Murphy and Sherwood 2003:4).

Lunsford (2003, 2009) explains that, in collaborative conversations knowledge is constructed by agreement or consensus within discourse communities. A student, in a letter to Lunsford, writes 'knowing happens with other people, figuring things out, trying to explain, talking through things ... we are all making and remaking our knowing and ourselves each other every day' (Lunsford 2003:53). Connie and Nora, after being members of the community participating in these collaborative conversations, explain *I have the light* and *Now I have courage*.

The result of knowledge being constructed is that it supports students in the writing up of their research papers. Writing, recognised as a social act, described as 'the social-epistemic or social constructivist theory of writing' (Gillespie and Lerner 2003:13), requires students to interact with others during the learning and writing process. Lunsford (2003:47) explains that 'knowledge and reality as mediated by or constructed through language in social use, as socially constructed, contextualised, is, in short, the product of collaboration'. The results of such interactive workshops or group sessions focusing on collaborative talk allowed the student writers to make significant progress: *I could not believe that in 5 days I would be where I am with my proposal* (Tumi); *I really enjoyed writing my proposal* (Nora); *Easy for me to complete my proposal* (Rosie); *How easy it is to write a research proposal* (Patrisha) and *I didn't know it was so easy* (Connie). Nev's final comment concludes that this was *The most successful workshop*.

The role of the peer tutor is an inductive one, using a student-centred model or a Socratic method of dialogue which assumes the student writers can do the work, can answer their own questions, solve their own problems, and learn through self-discovery. Thus, it is the role of the peer tutor with the student writer members of the postgraduate community to facilitate collaborative conversations leading to the construction of knowledge.

Discussion of the unexpected

Facilitating empowerment

Although the major theories underpinning tutoring such as social constructionist theory, theories of talk, and writing and collaborative learning (McAndrew and Reigstad 2001) have been discussed above, one of the major theories, that of a feminist approach to tutoring, has not been discussed yet tutoring sessions, in which the feminist goal of sharing power and liberating the student's voice (Woolbright 2003) has been alluded to.

Schniedewind (cited in Woolbright 2003:69 and Boquet 2002:27) explains that feminist values emerge from a 'hidden curriculum' and these can be measured against our interactions with students as in tutoring sessions. These are 'the development of an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust and community; shared leadership; cooperative structure; the integration of cognitive and affective learning; and action'. These values characterise peer tutoring in that tutoring is non-hierarchical, cooperative and interactive, being 'conversations between equals in which knowledge is constructed' (Woolbright 2003:69) based on the student's experience. Schniedewind elaborates by writing that when individuals have 'opportunities to come to know each other as people, speak honestly, take risks and support each other ... feminist values of community, communication, equality, and mutual nurturance are reinforced' (in Boquet 2002:27). Students who have been tutored in one of the tutoring sessions, as described above, have commented positively on the support and guidance that they have received: *support [from the tutors] to me was the best* (Anton); *here was a good atmosphere ... [the tutor] helped us equally without being biased ... she loves us all ... she was too jolly* (Annie); *the facilitators have stayed or spent every minute of every day with us giving support'* (Debbie); *[the tutors] are wonderful in working with the students ... the overwhelming support ... feel relaxed and help build your confidence in what you are writing)* (Matt); *the commitment of these people [the tutors] ... their patience* (Nora); *[the tutors are] hardworking, supporting and caring* (Nev); *patience and on-going support* (Paul) and *[the tutors'] patience was phenomenal* (Rosie).

However, Schniedewind's final feminist value implies that action taken by the students has the possibility of transforming institutions. According to Sommers (1992) this action is the encouragement to empower the students 'not to write in the persona of Everystudent, but rather to write [papers] that will change the academy' (cited in Woolbright 2003:78). Paul, during the interview, states that *through a hands-on type of support* and *feedback* he was able to maintain his voice but hopes that his comments will help *transform and change their [higher education institutions'] approaches.* This sentiment is echoed by Nichols who states that within the South African context the writing centre could become an 'agent of change' (1998:92).

Occurring disjunctures and tensions

What has emerged from the findings is, however, that there is a disjuncture between writing centre theory and practice. Hemmeter (1990) says that understanding of theory and the practice employed is not a pressing problem as there is no need to adhere to theory strictly, as theory is there as a framework and needs to be contextualised so that

it fits the writing centre that it serves. In many cases it was found that the student writers at postgraduate level are ill-equipped with the necessary skills to undertake research and then write it up. Cooke (cited in Sully 1995) states that many students have no clear or realistic idea as to what is expected of them in higher education institutions and many students' language skills which relate to writing (reading, listening, vocabulary) are poor. As explained above, these students tend to be mature professionals motivated by the transformation in higher education to continue with postgraduate study but whose education, a product of the previous dispensation, was influenced by global and ethnic isolation, lack of instruction in mother-tongue and English.

As a result, when a student visits the writing centre or attends a workshop, the peer tutor's role is seen as a continuum with contrasting concepts, such as, tutor/editor, novice/expert, process/product, control/flexibility and tutor/teacher, and existing at either end of the continuum, changes. In postgraduate writing, research proposals and research papers, product seems to take precedence over process. A successful research proposal provides the entrance to research and product is consequently important. To achieve a postgraduate degree, the end result – the research paper – is once again the product. Perhaps during the period taken to write the research proposal, conduct the research and then write it up, the student does work through the process of writing and improving his/her skills. However, as the student writer's main focus is the completion of the writing assignment – the research paper – the role of the peer tutor becomes, firstly, one of the teacher who takes on a directive tutoring stance in order for the paper to be written. As the student writer completes the paper the tutor secondly takes on the role of editor, particularly as it is the assumption of the faculty that this is the role of the writing centre.

In questionnaires, students identified many concerns which revolve around the writing of the proposal and ultimately writing up their research. It appears that these student writers have, to some degree, attended lectures on writing, research methodology and how to write a proposal and the research paper, but still are not confident. These concerns include writing a *good* proposal, *finalising* and *fine-tuning* the proposal, *confirming format and content, developing a topic* and *confirming the need for such research.* Paul confirms that time is wasted and little direction and support is given to the student writers by their supervisors: *what I could not achieve in one year, I achieved in a week* and Katie requests *Please train all the supervisors to assist their students in the drafting of the proposal,* which is reiterated by Lessing and Lessing (2004) who have identified the need to train supervisors in research supervision and methodology. As a result, where does the responsibility lie? Is teaching the student writer how to write a proposal from the beginning and guiding him/her through the various stages the role of the peer tutor?

As product seems more important, one also needs to ask the question 'How directive then should our tutoring be?' As previously stated, in writing a research proposal which is the gateway to further research, product rather than process is important and, consequently, tutoring tends to move down the tutoring continuum and become directive in order to achieve the product. Elbow (in Pemberton and Kinkead 2003; Belanoff 2002; Elbow and Belanoff 2003) reinforces the fact that a fine balance needs to be achieved. Tutoring in the writing centre context cannot just be 'coffee, cookies and couches' but should with either

'Socratic or Rogerian nondirective tutoring [which] cues students to recall knowledge they have and construct new knowledge that they do not have' and slip between or move up and down the continuum of tutoring, depending on the needs of the student writer (Pemberton and Kinkead 2003:102). Robertson and Apanewicz, a director and a peer tutor respectively at the Sheekey Writing Center at La Salle University, believe that a writing centre must consider, 'Where is the line?' when concerned with the ethical issue of how much help a tutor should offer a student writer (Annett 1997). However, in the South African context with transformation in higher education and the motivation of teachers to become lifelong learners and continue with postgraduate studies, one then needs to question the ethical boundaries, but at the same time ensuring that the writing support needs of each student is met, thus moving up or down the peer tutoring continuum. Clark and Healy (2001:255) suggest that writing centres are 'proactive' in their work 'exercise[ing] a broad, encompassing vision' by being open to all students and the larger discourse community but emphasising 'individualised writing instruction' to maintain an ethical stance.

It seems that to achieve a fine balance, there is a need for the community between students and peer tutors to include supervisors so that the writing up of proposals and research is workshopped using a specific format, agreed upon by faculty, which will meet with approval by the Higher Degrees' Committee. Student writers agree that once *everything [the format] was explained in detail* (Nora) and there was a template to follow as *I would see the pattern* (Debbie), writing the proposal was *easy and interesting* (Connie) and *not that difficult to come up with a proposal* (Lynne) as *I had gained an idea of writing a good proposal* (Mo), followed by *I could not believe that in 5 days I would be where I am with my proposal* (Tiny). In addition, the supervisor's role should include 'expertise in the research area, support for the student, and balancing creativity and critique' (Hockey 1994:293 cited in Lessing and Lessing 2004:75) as well as guiding, advising, ensuring scientific quality and providing emotional support (Mouton 2001).

It is important for students and tutors to be able to work collaboratively to produce writing that meets the needs and goals of the institution. However, this cannot happen if supervisors are not aware of what constitutes the primary function of any writing centre. Lindiwe suggests *that the supervisors work with the writing support centre* which should help to alleviate some of the confusion about the purpose of a writing centre. Supervisors need to be informed and more contact should be made directly between writing centre tutors and supervisors. This would benefit students by keeping the lines of communication open between those reading their work, allowing for more open discourse between supervisor and tutor, if necessary, creating the equilateral triangle of student, supervisor and tutor which will support successful writing and supervision especially important at postgraduate level and thus become 'a key determinant of the success or failure of the project' (Cross 1999:138-9). If everyone is willing to work together, writing centres can continue to be places where students can get the support they need and tutors can do the kind of work they are best equipped to do, work which includes working with lecturers and supervisors (Bruffee 1993:81), and developing the potential to act as agents of institutional change resulting in changes in the way the coursework is taught and consequently with continued writing centre research, reaffirming Nichols' (1998) stance.

Concluding remarks

Irene Clark (online) states:

> As the romantic concept of writing as a solitary act has been replaced by the idea of writing as a social process, writing centres are recognised as an appropriate environment for students to receive their first introduction to the academic discourse community. Thus, although writing centres remain eminently practical, flexible and student oriented, they have moved beyond the realm of makeshift and whatever works, mentality. In fact, one might say that the writing centre has now become a pedagogical concept as well as an actual place.

However, in order for peer tutoring to be successful tutors should not just be selected and thrown into the practice of tutoring with little or no guidance. Bruffee (1987) posits that there needs to be an effective training course to develop in them the ability not only to cope with the demands of academic discourse but also to enhance their own academic development. This lack of a training programme is what prompted research into the role of the peer tutor at postgraduate level.

Therefore, the findings of this research have helped to develop an ideology of peer tutoring by revealing that the role of the peer tutor in writing centre work is one of facilitation in which conversations with students who make up the postgraduate community, through interaction with one another or the peer tutor, lead to the construction of knowledge. Tutors are collaborators and consequently their main aim is to assist students in achieving their goals (Murphy and Sherwood 2003). Even though Osman and Castle reveal the HEIs are more concerned with costs rather than considering the development and growth of postgraduate students and offer 'no place for them to flourish' (2006:516), Healy (1994:1-3) explains that the role of the peer tutor should be to provide 'nourishment for writers, infecting clients with the bug to collaborate' which would then assist them in writing and ensure that over-dependency is not an issue. However, in order for a peer tutor to be effective, the tutoring practice cannot rely on a 'hit-or-miss, trial-and-error experimentation' (Murphy and Sherwood 2003:7). Informed tutoring practice depends on training which could be through formal accredited channels or through extensive reading into the theories and philosophies of tutoring and academic writing, on-going interactions with other tutors and discussion of concepts, ideas and problems as well as constant reflection. Although the peer tutor usually is a 'good' writer, training will develop in the tutor technical skills, improved writing skills, critical reading skills and, over time, an evolving philosophy and insight (Murphy and Sherwood 2003).

On-going training of peer tutors will aid in fulfilling the diverse and multiple roles of tutoring. In addition, interaction with and support from faculty is also deemed important to facilitate the process of writing and assist in negotiating and mediating the often uneven power relations (Kail and Trimbur 1987) that may exist between study supervisor and postgraduate student writer ensuring that the future of peer tutoring in postgraduate study is on the *write* track.

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2   Writing centre research dates back as far as the 1920s. Modern writings have resulted in articles and small text being published in academic journals or writing laboratory newsletters and those earlier than the 1970s have more recently been published in collections. Very few individual editions have been published under one author. We have attempted to find the original texts. However, as these reflect very early dates we have generally referred to the collections which tend to be more current.

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12

Becoming a writing centre consultant

Effecting change on the part of a postgraduate student entering into the consultant experience

Zach Simpson

'Change is a complex and somewhat painful process. It is time-consuming and fraught with many pitfalls. It is not black and white, with clearly delineated boundaries'

– Courtland, Welsh and Kennedy 1987:317

Introduction[1]

This study is located in the Writing Centre at the University of Johannesburg and examines the development of a postgraduate student, named Danica[2], who was employed to work in the Centre as a part-time writing consultant. The goal of the Writing Centre is to assist students from across all Faculties and disciplines in the University in navigating their apprenticeship into the academic community so that they can write in ways that are appropriate in higher education, but also so that these students become aware that the university is a conglomeration of disciplinary communities each placing unique expectations on them. In this chapter, I examine the ways in which Danica's entry into the consulting-experience affects (or does not affect) her understanding of academic writing.

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1   This chapter is based on MA research undertaken at the University of the Witwatersrand. The author would like to express his gratitude to Prof Hilary Janks and Dr Belinda Mendelowitz for their support, guidance and wisdom offered during the completion of this project.
2   This is a pseudonym.

In other words, I seek to examine whether or not Danica's understandings of academic writing undergo change during the consultant-experience, through her interactions with fellow writing consultants and through the experience of having to tutor novice academic writers. This goal is informed by Gee's (1996) argument that the way we think, feel and speak is informed by the social groups that mould us and, in pursuing this goal, I have also been informed by the notion that writers change as they come into contact with new communities (Ivanič 1998).

Methodological approach

In this research, I make use of a two-pronged methodological approach: I gather reflective artefacts produced by Danica and I observe her participation in group discussion. This is in line with the theoretical framework of the study: communities of practice. The communities of practice literature suggest that learning, meaning and knowledge are developed through participation in practice (Wenger 1998). As such, it takes place at the nexus of the social and the individual, hence a methodological approach that attempts to gain access to both the individual and the social. The decision to focus this chapter on one particular case prevents steadfast conclusions from being drawn. However, it allows for the complex and nuanced nature of changing consultants' attitudes towards academic writing to be emphasised. An ironing metaphor may be useful here: whereas a more extensive study un-creases the folds evident in the data, in this chapter, the focus on one specific case allows for those very creases to become the object of study.

In total, three written artefacts of reflection were produced by Danica over the course of the research period. This period was approximately two months at the beginning of Danica's appointment as a writing consultant. Only the first two months were utilised as it was necessary to examine the initial change-processes undertaken by Danica. Indeed, significant change would more likely occur over an extended period of time, but it was felt that these first two months represented an important 'contact zone' in which the complexity and challenge of change might become evident.

The first written artefact collected was an extended metaphor for academic writing which Danica was asked to develop. The second was a description of her writing 'process' where Danica was asked to cast her mind back to the last piece of extended academic writing she was required to do and describe, in as much detail as possible, the process she went through in completing that writing task. Finally, Danica was asked to write a 'writing history', focusing specifically (but not exclusively) on her transition from school writing to university writing. In addition to these artefacts, I also recorded and transcribed group discussions which feature Danica participating in discussion with both me as facilitator, and her fellow writing consultants.

Teacher change

Although some studies (Scott and Rodgers 1995; Tsui 1996) present teacher change as fairly simple to enact, much of the literature on teacher change demonstrates the fact that changing teachers' attitudes towards writing is not a simple, linear process but that it is complex and takes place over long periods of time (Courtland and Welsh 1990; Kennedy 1998; Wilson 1994). Indeed, teacher learning is a life-long activity (Johnson 2006).

There are a number of factors that inhibit change in teachers' attitudes towards writing. The first of these is that teachers' initial assumptions, beliefs and practices are difficult to break. When teachers enter into the teaching-experience, they rely on their prior experiences to make decisions and interpret situations (Kennedy 1998; Shi and Cumming 1995). This means that they are likely to teach in much the same way they were taught (Winer 1992; Kennedy 1998). For this reason, teachers' assumptions about teaching and about their role as teachers as well as the practices they employ come to have a direct bearing on teacher change (Courtland *et al* 1987). With regard to writing in particular, teachers' own prior experiences with writing may be a significant obstacle to initiating change (Wilson 1994). These beliefs are particularly resistant to change because they are abstract, formed early in life, associated with deep emotions (often fear and anxiety), connected to their self-image (particularly as teachers) and are often mutually reinforcing (Kennedy 1998). In addition, because such changes take place internally, it is difficult to chart changes in attitudes towards writing (Winer 1992).

A second reason for the difficulty of change is that teachers often see value in their current practices. They are thus reluctant to change (Courtland *et al* 1987). Courtland *et al* (1987) argue that the first step towards change is making a decision to change. Such a decision is unlikely to be made if teachers attach particular value to their current practices. Indeed, as Wilson (1994) points out, teachers often believe that grammar and mechanical correctness are the most important aspects of academic writing and are unwilling to accept that there may be benefits to engaging with student academic writing at the level of meaning-making rather than form. Without a decision to change and a belief in change, teachers are unlikely to take ownership of their own change processes (Courtland *et al* 1987). It is because of teachers' attachment to their current values and beliefs that Wilson (1994) identifies change as occurring in three stages: initial resistance, conversion and continued uncertainty. This suggests that despite being 'won over' after their initial resistance, they may continue to be unconvinced by their new knowledge and ideas. It is for this reason that, even when teachers do adopt new beliefs, they do not necessarily abandon the old ones (Kennedy 1998).

A third factor that may inhibit teacher change is the difference between teachers' espoused practice and their actual practice. Teachers, including writing teachers, may often hold a particular belief but claim to hold a different one (Kennedy 1998). Kennedy (1998) refers to this as a discrepancy between teachers' espoused ideals and immediate concerns in practice. In instances where such a discrepancy exists, Courtland *et al* (1987) suggest that confrontation would enable teachers to become aware of the lack of congruence between their espoused and practiced ideas. It is this discrepancy that may also account for Kennedy's (1998) finding that teacher education programmes had a greater influence on teacher's espoused ideals than it did on their practice.

A fourth reason is teachers' desire to ensure that their students achieve institutional success. In a study of teacher change, Tsui (1996) describes an instance in which a teacher found it difficult to implement a process approach to writing because it conflicted with what was expected of the curriculum and the teacher in question was concerned that the students may be penalised. Wilson (1994) further argues that teachers often

resort to old practices because they are preoccupied with ensuring that students meet institutional expectations. This is important for writing centre practitioners because a tension often exists, on the part of writing consultants, between getting students to 'get it right' (thereby garnering institutional success) and getting students to reflect on writing (thereby developing those students as writers).

Finally, teachers' attitudes may also be resistant to change because it is easier for them to resort to old practices. This relates to teacher ability. In some instances, teachers may agree with certain beliefs but be unable, in practice, to implement them (Kennedy 1998). With regard to writing, it has been shown that teachers often find it easier to resort to error-correction, than to engage with student writing at other levels (Kennedy 1998). Wilson (1994) also found that writing teachers resort to old practices because they struggle to translate new approaches into different and varying contexts.

Danica – 'correct grammar and spelling is what makes writing good'

The Theory …

The dominant approach to student academic writing is what some (Lea and Street 1998; Ivanič 2004) have called an academic skills approach and others (Johns 1997) a traditional view of literacy. Regardless of the term used, such an approach focuses on grammar rules, syntax, spelling and punctuation as indicative of successful writing (Lea 2008). Within this approach, these problems are seen as relatively easy to solve (Lillis 2001) and the 'skills' are viewed as applicable across all contexts of writing (Lea and Stierer 2000).

However, this ignores the fact that higher education is a social institution with a particular sociocultural history and a particular range of practices (Lillis 2001). Neglecting this fact has sustained the cultures of power (that is, the rules for participation that govern talking, behaving and, indeed, writing) that characterise higher education (Delpit 1988; Luke 2009), not just in South Africa but in countries around the world. The implication of this is that the development of student academic writing is a process that occurs within particular institutional frameworks (Starfield 2007). This is because, upon entering university, students are expected to operate within literacy practices that are culturally and epistemologically bound to institutions of higher education (Luke 2009). Not only may these practices be unfamiliar to students, but they may also, depending on factors such as school attended and cultural capital, also contradict the practices that students are already familiar with. That is to say, the demands made on students in terms of academic ways of knowing and writing may conflict with their primary ways of knowing and more familiar ways of writing (Lea and Stierer 2000).

However, writing pedagogy has failed to foreground the idea that writing is shaped by social, institutional and historical forces (Starfield 2007). Often, the conventions that dictate what counts as good writing are taken for granted rather than being stated to students (Lea and Stierer 2000). This is often done in subtle ways. For example, Kamler and Thomson (2006) argue against the notion of 'writing up' research because it neglects the fact that writing is a representation rather than an expression of truth. Indeed, as Lea

and Stierer (2000) argue, writing is far from mere transmission of knowledge, but is instead an active knowledge-making enterprise.

Despite assertions such as this in the literature, much writing pedagogy continues to view writing as mere reproduction of ideas, rather than as an important method of inquiry (Richardson 2000). In this chapter, I view writing as a process of 'discovery' (Zamel 1987), in which students do not simply regurgitate knowledge, but instead are engaged in a process of finding out about their topics and themselves through writing (Richardson 2000). Such a 'process' approach to academic writing understands it as involved in exploring one's thoughts and uncovering new thoughts through writing, thereby engaging in the creative construction of meaning (Tsui 1996; Kalman 2008).

Understanding academic writing as such has important implications for writing pedagogy in that traditional writing pedagogy often creates a sense of passivity or even resistance on the part of student writers (Lensmire 2000), whereas a process writing pedagogy necessitates that students maintain control and ownership of their own writing so that they can be allowed to make sense of the world for themselves (Lensmire 2000). This would engender commitment to writing rather than resistance on the part of students. Furthermore, traditional writing pedagogy expects students to write only when they know exactly what they want to say, rather than allowing them to write in order to discover new knowledge, thereby shutting down creativity on the part of writers and inhibiting their full engagement with their writing (Richardson 2000). Because writing is a process of discovery, writing pedagogy that focuses exclusively on form ignores how ideas come to be generated (Zamel 1987). Finally, traditional approaches to academic writing pedagogy focus on writing purely for assessment (rather than for learning) and on grammatical accuracy, both of which cause student-writers to experience a high degree of anxiety when writing (Tsui 1996).

The Practice ...

It would appear that Danica aligns herself with a 'skills' approach to student writing (Ivanič 2004) whether consciously or unconsciously in discussion around the role of grammar in academic writing. For example, Danica states that 'communicating clearly is using grammar and your spelling should be correct because meaning could be completely misconstrued if you just not using grammar and your spelling is completely wayward'. In this way, Danica appears to locate herself within what Johns (1997:6) calls a 'traditional view of literacy', a characteristic of which is a predominant focus on grammar. Danica places particular emphasis on grammar. This can be seen when, in the initial consultant orientation workshop, Danica asserts her agreement with the statement 'correct grammar and spelling is what makes writing good', arguing that 'anyone can think up a good story, whether or not you can *put it down on paper* is entirely up to you' (italics added). The italicised words illustrate Zamel's (1987) contention that a focus on form ignores how ideas *come to be on paper* in the first place and neglects the fact that writing is a process of discovery, wherein writing itself promotes the generation of new ideas.

Further evidence that Danica operates from within a traditional view of literacy resides in the fact that, when asked to choose a metaphor for grammar, Danica chose a map

book metaphor. She explained her choice by saying that to 'convey an idea you'd have to use the grammar ... in order to give an idea of where to go'. Once again, this illustrates Johns' view (1997) that within traditional conceptions of literacy, texts are not open to multiple interpretations. Instead, there is a sense that writing is seen as a perfect conduit for expressing pre-existent meaning.

That Danica chooses the metaphor of a map book to represent grammar is of particular significance in the data that she produced because metaphors of travel are common in her talk and reflection around writing. For example, in her metaphor for academic writing, Danica speaks about writing as 'entering a maze' and having to find the exit with the aid of a 'faulty compass and a badly smudged guide/map'. Similarly, in her description of her writing process, she uses words such as 'proceeded', 'reached', 'avenues' and 'proceeding' to describe this process. In addition, in discussion of her writing process, she speaks about the importance she places on 'mapping' her writing first, so that she does not 'get lost' later in the writing process.

This prevalence of travel metaphors in her talk around writing might appear to suggest that Danica sees herself as engaging in a personal journey of discovery when writing. However, there are no references (metaphoric or otherwise – except an isolated use of the word 'explore') that would suggest that this is in fact the case. Instead, Danica writes that 'the exit is the first place you head for', in this way foregrounding an orientation towards writing as product, rather than on writing as process. This, combined with the fact that Danica displays a preoccupation with form over meaning-making suggests a focus on writing as display of knowledge (Barnes 1976), rather than as inseparable from the construction of knowledge.

Increasing participation in a community of peer writing consultants

The Theory ...

Above, I demonstrated that Danica enters the consultant-experience with a noticeable 'skills' approach to academic writing pedagogy, one that emphasises the primacy of form over meaning-making. It is important to acknowledge that the way we think, feel and speak is informed by the social groups that have moulded us (Gee 1996). However, it is equally important to acknowledge that these ways of thinking, speaking and feeling change as they come into contact with new communities (Ivanič 1998).

The notion of communities of practice is useful in explaining the link between teacher learning and social and professional networks. Communities of practice are social networks that come about through their members' mutual engagement in a joint enterprise through the use of a shared repertoire (Wenger 1998). Although these members may have different interests and make diverse contributions as well as even hold varying points of view, they form a community of practice through their shared understanding (Lave and Wenger 1991). Indeed, as Wilson (1994) argues, collegial support is an important enabler of teacher change. Professional development does not take place only through formal training and development, but also through access to participation in social and professional networks (Johnson 2006). Communities of practice are driven by such participation. But, members participate within communities of practice to varying

degrees: some are peripheral participants, whereas others are full participants (Lave and Wenger 1991). Peripheral participation involves being located within, but on the outskirts of, the social community (Lave and Wenger 1991).

The notion of communities of practice also offers a theory of learning as a situated activity (Hanks 1991). Learning occurs through participation in the social world and is defined as legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991). Put more simply, learning is about engaging in and contributing to the practices of social communities (Wenger 1998) and is about the individual's developing relation to the practices of certain communities and his or her participation within these practices.

Learning, in communities of practice, is about moving from the legitimate periphery towards becoming a full participant which requires the mastering of new activities, tasks and understandings that enable participation in broader systems of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). Learning thus implies *becoming* a different type of person (Lave and Wenger 1991). Indeed, the title of this paper begins with the word 'becoming' and, as such, is concerned intrinsically with questions of learning and of change. Learning changes who we are and is therefore a process of becoming rather than an involvement with the accumulation of skills (Wenger 1998).

The Practice ...

There is some evidence to suggest that Danica, during the course of the research period, moves towards increased participation within her community of peer writing consultants or writing consultants. Danica's contribution to group discussions increases during the course of the research period. In fact, her participation rate in the community of writing consultants (measured as the percentage of total consultant talk offered by Danica) doubles during the research period. Such an analysis of total talk contribution is important as language use is related to issues of legitimate participation and access to peripherality within communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991), such as that of the community of writing consultants. This suggests that Danica may be becoming increasingly confident in her ability to talk as a participant in the community of writing consultants. This is a key characteristic of learning as legitimate peripheral participation within communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991).

However, not only does Danica's rate of participation change during the research period, but the nature of her participation also shifts. Analysis of the nature of Danica's talk indicated that her participation in group discussion with her peers is increasingly volunteered, rather than elicited, and increasingly directed at her peers, rather than at myself as facilitator. At the beginning of the research period, almost all of Danica's contributions were elicited rather than volunteered and were directed at the facilitator, rather than at one of her peers. In contrast, at the end of the research period, the vast majority of her contributions were volunteered and there was a more even split between contributions directed at the facilitator and those directed at her peers. The fact that Danica's participation is increasingly multi-directional rather than centred around the facilitator could illustrate Lave and Wenger's (1991) contention that language use in

learning in communities of practices is not about the transmission of knowledge but rather about legitimate peripheral participation with their fellow community members.

However, learning is not simply concerned with developing a relation to particular communities. It is also concerned with developing a relation to particular activities (Lave and Wenger 1991). As such, although analysing Danica's participation within a community of her peers suggests a developing relation to this community, attention still needs to be given to the nature of her contributions, that is, her changing/unchanging relation to the activities of writing and teaching writing. In particular, questions should be asked as to which topics Danica takes up as particularly important. It is to these questions that I now turn, framing their discussion within moments of resistance (to change) and moments of insight (that open up the possibility of change).

(Un)changing relations to academic writing and teaching writing

After the discussion on grammar in which Danica expressed her agreement with the statement 'correct spelling and grammar is what makes writing good', I asked whether listening to the ideas of others had in any way changed the way she would approach her work with student academic writing. Her response was as follows:

> I probably would have looked at grammar first and I know I shouldn't have, I probably would have. Cuz, I know the content is probably more important, it's just that going about trying to umm, establish what's important, when it comes to content is a bit more difficult than doing grammar, so it would be easier to just climb in and fix their grammar.

What Danica says here is certainly true. If language is 'a neutral vehicle for expressing pre-existent meaning, rather than a site of struggle in which meaning is produced' (Kamler 2001:38), it is easier to work alongside students to improve their writing.

However, this moment of insight does not lead to developed practice on Danica's part. This is evident in the fact that on both occasions on which she was asked to speak about problematic encounters with students in the Writing Centre, Danica mentions students whose grammar was problematic. About the first she says, 'I couldn't read a word that she had written ... all of it was incorrect, grammar, syntax, everything', and about the second she says, 'his grammar was just terrible'. In saying this, she appears resistant to conceptualising writing as involving adventurous play around meaning-making (Lensmire 2000) and instead predominantly attends to the formal aspects of students' writing when working in the Writing Centre. Nevertheless, despite this resistance, at the end of the first quarter, Danica reflects on the impact the consultant-experience has had on her own writing and writes that she 'realised by looking at others' work just how flexible language is and how playful one can become when approaching a text'. In saying this, she appears to embrace Lensmire's call for adventure in writing and engagement in play around meaning-making.

In addition to these contradictory impulses with regard to the value, role and place of grammar in writing, the contradictions in Danica's espoused attitudes also filter into her approach to students' difficulties with academic writing. To illustrate this, another moment of insight that Danica appears to experience during her first months as a writing

consultant relates to the fact that 'academic discourse is not anybody's home language and is closer to the home discourses of some than it is to others' (Angelil-Carter 2000:9). This can be seen in Danica's statement, at the end of the research period, that:

> [students] were spoon-fed this information [in school] and now they, well, discuss the underlying themes of so and so and how do they go, what is a theme, how do they go about finding it, how do they go about discussing, so I think it's a major problem as well.

Here, Danica illustrates Paxton's (2007:52) contention that students' practice of 'fact-telling' is due to their reliance on the discourses that ensured their success at school. Based on this, it would appear that Danica experiences a move towards understanding the 'triple disadvantage' of many students in higher education today: having to learn the conventions of academic writing, coping with working in a second or additional language and overcoming a history of poor schooling (Leibowitz 2000).

However, despite such moments of insight, Danica continues to operate from a deficit perspective on student writing. After encountering the above-mentioned student whose grammar was 'just terrible', she argues that 'if we have these kind of students, why don't we make some form of a, like a class'. Danica showed a particular commitment to this idea of the development of a language 'skills' class for students who Danica appears to argue are deficient in terms of linguistic resources and are thus in need of remediation. In doing so, Danica displays a resistance to the idea that academic writing practices are implicated in epistemological practices and, as such, the development of student writing is not simply about locating deficiencies in students themselves (Starfield 2007).

Therefore, in her conceptualisation of the place of grammar in writing, and her understanding of the ideologically problematic nature of academic writing practices, Danica exhibits contradictory attitudes. Accounting for these contradictions is no easy task. Below, I offer tentative findings regarding the implications that this case study may have for Writing Centre practice and teacher development.

(Tentative) Findings

In this chapter, I have offered three observations about Danica's process of becoming a writing consultant. First, I showed that she enters the consultant-experience with particular assumptions and beliefs about academic writing. I then demonstrated that her apprenticeship into the community of her peers was characterised by increased, more confident participation. Finally, I showed that this participation was nonetheless characterised by moments of both insight and resistance, which represent an 'ongoing flow of reflective moments of monitoring in the context of engagement in a tacit practice ... organised around trajectories of participation' (Lave and Wenger 1991:54). However, these reflective moments do not necessarily translate into developed practice (either as a writer or as a writing consultant), or at least not over the period examined herein. Instead, Danica appears to have created what Wilson (1994:41) calls a 'contradictory patchwork quilt of old and new' beliefs. This is unsurprising, as teachers' beliefs are formed early in life, are connected to their self-image (as teachers and as writers) and

form a network of mutually reinforcing beliefs and are, therefore, particularly difficult to change (Kennedy 1998).

The development of Danica and her fellow writing consultants as teachers of academic writing is of particular importance to me as many consultants express a desire to enter into academia and so, in their future roles, their status may be such that they can initiate change for the better in the ways in which the University deals with divergent meaning-making practices. But, of course, the research period of this project, being only two months, was far too short for substantive change to be seen. This is particularly so when one considers that teacher learning is both normative and life-long (Johnson 2006). Indeed, studies by Courtland *et al* (1987) and Courtland and Welsh (1990) showed that teacher change is effected over a period of years rather than months. This is because teachers must adopt new knowledge, skills, strategies, beliefs and behaviour, and doing this is a lengthy and messy process (Courtland *et al* 1987). The implication of this is that further research needs to be undertaken into how Danica's (or others') attitudes towards writing change over the course of a full year of service (and even longer) in academic writing pedagogy. It suggests that while change may be limited during the first two months it may be the case that as consultants become more familiar with their new understanding, their attitude towards writing and approach to the teaching of writing may shift in the long-term.

However, the relatively short period of this research is not the only factor that could have inhibited substantive change on Danica's part. I would like to suggest four other factors that may hinder change in writing consultants' (and other writing teachers') conceptualisations of academic writing and the teaching thereof. The first of these relates to Wenger's (1998) notion of outbound trajectories. Members of a community of practice who are on outbound trajectories do not see their membership in that community as lasting long. Instead, they are attempting to move away from the centre of that community in order to join new communities. This is certainly the case with Danica. I think it is fair to say that Danica's social goals involved pursuing a career in her own discipline and, as such, she may not have invested in developing herself as a teacher of writing. As McKinney and Norton (2007) argue, people invest in something because they assume that it will enhance their cultural capital which is defined as their knowledge, credentials and ways of thinking.

Second, and closely linked to this idea, is the fact that writing consultants' *inbound* trajectories may hamper changes in the way they understand writing and the teaching thereof. Their inbound trajectories comprise their prior experiences with writing and, in this regard, it must be remembered that Danica is a successful academic writer. As such, it is unsurprising that she is reluctant to change her attitudes towards academic writing. The discourses which inform her approach to writing at university have stood her in good stead and continue to do so, and there is therefore little need to critically reflect on those discourses and the implicit constructions of writing (and writers) they embody. Danica has 'cracked the code' of academic writing. As Courtland *et al* (1987) argue, the first step in effecting change is making a decision to change. Such a decision is unlikely to be made if there is no perceived value in change.

But, this raises questions about the kinds of writing tasks set for students and the ways in which writing is constructed within the university. It would appear that Bartholomae's (1985) contention that academic writing too often requires of students to report on the work of academia, rather than participate in that work, continues to ring true. In this way, students are constructed as illegitimate and marginal, rather than legitimate peripheral participants in the academic enterprise. A consequence of this is a view of writing as a tool for reflecting what is already known rather than a mode of learning. If it is the case that consultants perceive no value in change because their writing practices have garnered them institutional success, it would suggest a re-examination of the writing practices privileged within the university system as it may be failing to serve as a vehicle for the construction and extension of disciplinary knowledge, or as a tool for thinking.

Danica's contradictory attitudes may equally result from a keen awareness of students' positions of relative powerlessness within institutions of higher education. Indeed, if writing is understood as a socio-politically constructed practice, this would require that the ways in which writing becomes manifest be open to contestation and change (Ivanič 2004:238). But, current power-relations within the university dictate that students are not able to easily challenge writing conventions – not, at least, without the risk of censure. Simply put, it is, at present, students who must adapt and the university which remains the same. Because of this, Wilson (1994) explains, teachers of writing often continue to make use of old practices because they are preoccupied with ensuring students meet what is expected of them and achieve institutional success. Perhaps then, Danica's tendency towards locating deficit within students' writing is an attempt to enable those students to garner institutional success – an aim often at odds with that of developing students as writers in their own right.

Finally, the contradictions evident in Danica's talk around writing may point to a lack of confidence (or perhaps, ability) on Danica's part. It may be the case that although Danica has adopted new ideas she is unable to implement these new ideas in practice, thus illustrating Kennedy's (1998) contention that there may be a mismatch between teachers' adopted beliefs and what they actually know how to do. Because of this lack of confidence in the 'new' ways she learns through her experiences in the Writing Centre, she goes back to her 'old' ways. This is because Danica may feel inadequate when engaging with student academic writing at the level of ideas rather than at the level of mechanics. This may be the reason for Kennedy's (1998) assertion that the acquisition of new beliefs does not presuppose the abandonment of old ones.

Such an interpretation is given greater weight when one considers that Danica's own success as a student-writer is due, in no small part, to her ability to identify dominant discourses and adapt her own behaviour so as to fit in with those dominant discourses. Her ability to 'shape-shift' in this way as, I believe, successful writers (particularly at undergraduate level) are required to do allows her to identify the dominant discourse in her new community of writing consultants and adopt socially sanctioned ideas about writing. This may account for why she espouses these ideas but is unable to put them into practice.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that change did occur over the course of the first two months of Danica's consultant-experience, but that this change did not occur in a simple, linear fashion. This is because teachers often teach according to the ways they were taught and these beliefs and practices are resistant to change (Kennedy 1998). Practically, this means that if someone were taught writing as a set of grammar rules, they will tend to teach writing in this way as well (Kennedy 1998). In addition, it was shown that while Danica's entry into the consultant-experience was characterised by increased participation amongst her peers, this participation was characterised by often contradictory moments of resistance and insight, thus illustrating Wilson's (1994:106) description of teacher change as a 'stuttering, subjective process of negotiation'. I have argued that further research needs to be undertaken into whether or not change does occur on the part of writing consultants over an extended period of time, and have also identified other factors, besides time, that may hamper such change. These factors included inbound and outbound trajectories, a preoccupation with institutional norms as well as teacher ability.

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Afterword

Mary Scott

In this afterword to this impressive book I am drawing on the title of Somikazi Deyi's chapter. Somi refers to 'feed-forward' as an alternative to feedback. Taking that coinage as my prompt, I shall offer some forward-looking suggestions regarding ways in which issues and themes made visible in the collection might generate focuses of enquiry and reflection for further studies. What I say will be the personal view of someone now based in the UK whose reading of the book is inevitably shaped by her current context.

First, though, I would like to congratulate all the contributors to the collection on its timeliness. The editors, Arlene Archer and Rose Richards, ask: 'Why a book on writing centres in South Africa?' I would claim in response that in its focus on access and diversity in relation to student writing in higher education the book's relevance extends far beyond South Africa. For example, in the UK the 'widening participation' and 'internationalisation' agendas have led to a growing number of university centres which seek to address the literacy implications of the increasing diversity of the student population. The centres go by a range of names, such as language centre, language and learning centre, academic literacies centre. However, no matter what the name, the centres tend to focus primarily or exclusively on students' writing since written assignments are usually the key to student success.

The issues around access and diversity that concern the UK centres are expressed in the conference presentations and publications, and the online discussions, of organisations such as WDHE (Writing Development in Higher Education), EATAW (European Association for the Teaching Academic Writing), and BALEAP (British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes). A general overview of such sources would suggest that the primary concerns of UK centres echo those discussed in this edited collection. For example, as in the centres in this collection, UK centres consider what should be taught and how it should be taught; how writing teachers are recruited and trained; how student progress might be mapped; and how institutions and students perceive the centres and those who teach in them. The South African perspective on familiar issues prompts a useful and helpful reflection on similarities and differences.

However, to my mind, it is the title, *Changing Spaces*, and the several dimensions of meaning around change in conjunction with space that gives this South African collection its distinctiveness and opens up several possibilities for further reflection and enquiry. In looking for such possibilities I would give centrality to the principles that inform, in differing degrees, each chapter in this book. Foremost among these principles is a view of writing which is also reflected in the book's particular view of teaching and learning and, more generally, of education. It is a view of writing as produced in particular contexts and involving writers and readers in particular context-defined social relations. Within this framing students are perceived as bearers of resources of understanding and knowledge, which pedagogy needs to harness in the encouragement of student agency. At the same time the book recognises the tensions between this view of writing and pedagogy and the pressures on teachers, coming sometimes from students themselves, to teach what assessment criteria present as 'writing' and to make student progress visible in institutional, policy-driven ways.

I would hope that the writing centres in South Africa might produce further publications in which the application in pedagogy of the principles briefly outlined above, and their extension in theory building, might be further explored at both the micro level of rich analyses of student and other texts (as has been done for example in Thesen and Van Pletzen 2006) and at the level of policy as a creative contribution to new ways of addressing essential economic and market forces, such as employability.

 In the next part of this afterword I shall raise some questions not as criticisms of this book but simply as tentative queries for possible consideration. The first concerns the writing space as a geographical but mainly historical space, i.e. a post-apartheid space. The chapters refer to the histories of the centres within a changed and changing South Africa, but a question that occurs to me is: Do these accounts serve mainly as backdrop or explanation of the current importance of writing centres and their transformatory goals? In other words, is the past perhaps being too easily set aside in an idealistic focus on possibilities for the transformation of South Africa? (Transformation is a theme I will come back to towards the conclusion of this afterword).

Linked to this question is another regarding the writing centre as a 'safe' space for students. To my mind, the affective side of learning is very important pedagogically as is the opportunity for students to say what they might not feel able to express elsewhere

in the institution, an approach which can easily be neglected when the achievement of narrow criteria of academic writing is the goal and students are taught from one of the many 'how to' writing guides in bookshops or on the internet. But students' and teachers' feelings and aspirations are shaped, as Appadurai (1996, 2004) argues, within larger national and international histories and inter-relations. There are hints of such histories in the book. Perhaps they could be developed in future research.

A related theme that is more implicit than explicit in the book concerns culture. Currently in the UK the concern with globalisation and internationalisation has prompted attention to the cultures that students are seen to represent. The safe spaces of the South African writing centres with their face-to-face encounters with students with a range of backgrounds could produce widely significant, ethnographic-like studies that give visibility to the complexities which are hidden by still-too-common essentialist notions of culture.

An issue related to culture and, of course, to writing by student writers who represent a diversity of linguistic backgrounds, is multilingualism. Like John Trimbur, I would call for more attention to multilingualism. In fact I would suggest that writing centres in South Africa are well, perhaps uniquely, placed to do internationally relevant studies that could address the complexities often hidden in discussions of English as a lingua franca and could build on the criticisms of code mixing by, for example, Canagarajah.

As a UK-based teacher-researcher I was personally interested in the reference to the writing centres' employment of consultants who are students, mainly postgraduates but also undergraduates. At present this is rare in the UK. It would be interesting to consider the factors, especially the historical and political, that shape that teaches writing in different national and local contexts. A related area for investigation could be the names given to those who teach writing, teachers, tutors, consultants, peers ... What's in a name – historically, politically? And where does it position the holder institutionally?

An aspect of South Africa as a changed space is the increasing participation of South African academics internationally. Thesen and Van Pletzen (2006) pointed out a downside to this: South Africa is seen as 'exotic' and South African academics are asked why they use international references rather than creating their own. (But no-one asks US or UK academics why they refer to, say, Foucault or Derrida or Vygotsky). Such comments point to the wider issue of the centre-periphery, and an East-West or in this case North-South, divide. I would suggest that this book in its demonstration of re-contextualisations (for example, the use of communities of practice in ways that fit the particular context) offers a way of thinking beyond the power implications of current and historical international relations and could open up comparative dialogues around texts and conceptualisations that are valued in different contexts.

I referred earlier to transformation as a theme to which I would return. To my mind writing centres in South Africa (and in the UK, too) might subject the transformative-normative contrast to more detailed inspection – just what is meant by its different uses? However, I want to focus primarily on the implications of transformation as referred to in the book's introduction; *viz.*, the transformation of South Africa as a social space.

Higher education is seen globally as a key to reducing inequality. But its paradox is that it also increases inequalities. It, as a rule, confers advantage on successful students. Here is where I think writing centres might reinforce their wider educational goal of a changed South Africa by linking writing (if they do not do so already) to programmes of service learning which could draw students' attention to inequalities and issues of social justice. I think the book is much needed and raises explicitly or implicitly increasingly important issues relevant well beyond South Africa. I hope to read more – and soon.

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[*Changing Spaces*] makes a forceful and credible case for the role of writing centres in engaging with students, staff and institutional structures in understanding issues of access from a social perspective ... This is a specialist book for those working in writing centres and for academics of all disciplines. It is based on research and provides an important set of theoretical arguments, developed through reflection on writing centre practices, about student writing and the work of the university.

Professor Sioux McKenna
Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning, Rhodes University

How do we select and train tutors? How do we work with faculty? How do we combat the image that we are remedial, a 'fix-it' shop? How do we prove our worth? How do we show that we improve retention? ... *Changing Spaces* demonstrates the flexibility of writing centers and the unique roles they play in South Africa. Writing centers everywhere represent institutional responses to the learning needs of their students, and they do so because writing centers adapt easily to different contexts and situations. They meet students where they are, as a group and individually.

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