

## CHAPTER 23.

# THE REGIONAL WRITING CENTRE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK

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*In April 2007, Ireland’s first Regional Writing Centre at the University of Limerick was launched. This chapter outlines the various international, European, national, regional, and institutional winds to which the growing Centre responded. Trailing UL’s Regional Writing Centre through its path from inception to fruition, the profile reveals the influences that have shaped its ethos, guided its development and served to sustain it. Furthermore, the profile outlines the Centre’s variegated approach for achieving what it hopes to be a more systematic approach to undergraduate, postgraduate, and professional writing development at UL and the region.*

The University of Limerick (UL) is one of Ireland’s youngest universities. Established as the National Institute for Higher Education (NIHE) in 1972, the institute attained its current university status in 1989. Describing itself as “an independent, internationally-focused university” (University of Limerick, 2009, p. 1), UL is often referred to as more of an “American-style” university. Proud of its record of innovation in education and excellence in research and scholarship, the university’s mission is “to promote and advance learning and knowledge through teaching, research, and scholarship in an environment which encourages innovation and upholds the principles of free enquiry and expression” (University of Limerick, 2009, p. 1). In 2011, 1,300 staff strive to qualify UL as an exceptional, vibrant learning environment for 11,300 students.

Astride two sides of the River Shannon, the UL campus ranges over 130 hectares in Counties Limerick and Clare. Its recreational, cultural and sporting facilities are renowned, enhancing the university experience for students, staff and the wider, surrounding community. Further augmenting the university experience, the Regional Writing Centre at UL, formed in April of 2007, is a relatively new addition to campus life. Central in all aspects, the Writing

Centre is situated in the Main Building, roughly equidistant from all other campus localities.

As with most third-level institutes around the world, participation in a global economy and moves toward a mass education have changed the context into which learning is facilitated (Ivanič and Lea, 2006). Increased attention has been given to the link between education and career opportunities. In its mission statement (University of Limerick, 2009, p. 1), the university stresses its relationship to Ireland's national goal of preparing its citizens to participate in a global, highly competitive knowledge economy. In an effort to upskill its workforce, Ireland's third-level institutes strive to be more inclusive. As a result, student populations include an ever-increasing number from backgrounds that do not include the cultural and economic support systems that students from more traditional backgrounds might take for granted. In order to accommodate spatial and temporal varieties, such as distance learners, and encourage institutional collaborations, greater emphasis has been placed on teaching with technology. Additionally, with state aid diminishing, there is a greater reliance on international students for revenue, infusing the facilitation of learning and, in particular, meaning-making tasks with further language and cultural challenges. Funding challenges also inspire a greater interest in the link between scholarly research and entrepreneurial development. Finally, in an effort to increase enrolment and to improve retention rates, attention has shifted to the student experience. Educators are subject to a mounting pressure to evidence the quality of their performance. Against this backdrop, the Regional Writing Centre has taken shape and has thus far survived and, in some respects, even thrived.

## FROM INCEPTION TO FRUITION

Prior to the establishment of the Regional Writing Centre, there had been a growing concern among faculty at UL about the writing competencies of their students. Initial responses to anecdotal concerns included ad hoc writing clinics and seminars. Much of that response came via UL's Language Support Unit. Strong support for a university-wide initiative on writing was evidenced by the intensity of the interest. An interdisciplinary working group was formed to investigate the means that this support might take. The disciplinary diversity of the interest was reflected in the make-up of that initial working group, which included representatives from each of the four Faculties; namely Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; Education and Health Sciences; the Kemmy Business School; and Science and Engineering. The efforts of those interested in developing a writing initiative culminated in:

- a week-long consultation with visiting Professor Jim Henry of Virginia's (US) George-Mason University. Jim led a series of workshops on writing and, with interested parties, explored how that university-wide support could be translated into a systematic, comprehensive approach to writing, while addressing individual, disciplinary concerns;
- a student and academic staff audit of attitudes to writing, writing practices, and writing needs;
- several submissions for funding for a UL initiative; and,
- eventually, the establishment of a consortium of higher education institutions in the Shannon region and a Higher Education Authority Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) award for the establishment of the Shannon Consortium Regional Writing Centre in April 2007.

This UL-led initiative, now located within the Centre for Teaching and Learning, resulted in two Writing Consultants being employed to run the Shannon Consortium Regional Writing Centre in UL and to collaborate with colleagues in Teaching and Learning support services across the Consortium to develop writing initiatives in each of these institutions: Limerick Institute of Technology, the Institute of Technology Tralee and Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. The two Writing Consultants (authors of this article) have always had an interest in developing their careers as writing developers. Lawrence has a strong background in writing, including rhetoric and composition, from Illinois State University, while Íde's doctoral research was in the area of applied linguistics, with an important influence from the European tradition in academic literacies. The combined approach that they bring to the Centre has resulted in a unique blend of the New Rhetoric (Berlin, 1982) and Academic Literacies (Lea and Street, 1998), influencing the direction the Centre has taken. This has led to the Writing Centre practicing a non-invasive, inductive approach to writing development, utilising peer tutors and experts who work with both students and staff to identify their writing practices in order to assess and improve strategic effectiveness, thus producing "better writers, not better writing" (North, 1984, p.438).

In this national context, into which early Writing Centre initiatives were introduced, writing was recognised as a central skill in preparing students for the knowledge economy. All other benefits were, and to a large extent still are, subsumed into writing's contribution to knowledge creation, dissemination and storage. Writing Centre support would be student-centred and augment a positive student experience. Writing Centre support would assist with recruitment efforts and increase student retention. International and non-traditional students would be attracted to the university by the support, and that same support would give hope to a population of students that might otherwise have

given up. Research students would receive support in the complexities of research writing, and faculty would have somewhere to turn to help them in their endeavours to enhance student writing development. With more students signing on and more students staying on-board, more students publishing research and increased utilisation of writing expertise in classrooms, writing would make its contribution to the upskilling of the nation.

In addition to the broader cultural, economic and political contexts informing the approach that writing development would take, the working group took into account the results of the student and staff surveys of writing needs. The analysis of the surveys revealed that students recognised the importance of writing for both their academic careers and for their future professional development. Furthermore, the need and the desire for a systematic approach to the development of writing became obvious. The multiplicity of writing-related needs was evident in the surveys, and it was agreed that a writing centre that would incorporate a multidimensional approach would best meet those needs.

A Regional Writing Centre at the University of Limerick would be the first of its kind in Ireland. The Writing Centre would serve as a vital nexus of university writing activities at UL and across the Consortium. The factors motivating such a choice are explored in depth in Cleary, Graham, Jeanneau and O'Sullivan (2009, p. 4.12):

The establishment of a Writing Centre is an important and, in the Irish HE context, ground-breaking step. It provides a centralised locus for the provision of a systematic discipline-specific writing support and development programme. The Writing Centre responds directly to the writing needs identified in the staff and student surveys carried out at UL and corroborating evidence from students and faculty surveys replicated in the other three institutions in the Shannon Consortium. While initial writing support was provided on an ad hoc basis, the move now is clearly towards a *Writing in the Disciplines* approach with elements of the *Writing Across the Curriculum* and *Writing to Learn* approaches being incorporated. The *academic literacies* approach, encapsulating both the study skills and acculturation models, has also been influential. Such an eclectic approach satisfies the multiplicity of writing needs of UL students identified in the online surveys.

Responding to the multiplicity of demands meant that the Writing Centre was charged with supporting the development of academic writing among un-

dergraduates, postgraduates and researchers and with supporting staff in their teaching of academic writing. The objectives of the Centre, as set out in the first phase of the SIF project (2007-2009), were as follows:

- Improve writing skills of students in the collaborating institutions to assist them with current studies and future professional lives.
- Support course and curriculum design/development.
- Foster meta-cognitive thinking about writing.
- Bolster recruitment and retention efforts, by supporting students with particular needs, specifically mature students, first years, students in Access programmes.
- Conduct ongoing evaluation of interventions.
- Initiate a site for action research output related to writing.
- Share existing expertise and experience to date among collaborating institutions.

Charged with the responsibility to design, deliver and evaluate writing-support interventions and to assist with the development of an academic plan for the continued development of the Writing Centre, the two Writing Consultants set about developing Ireland's first Regional Writing Centre.

A first priority for the Writing Centre was to support student writers. With the goal of bolstering student recruitment and retention, strong emphasis has been placed on facilitating first-year students' acculturation into the academic community, while also reaching out to targeted groups of students with particular needs. This goal has been achieved through the following media:

- *Writing Interventions in Disciplinary Modules:* The two Writing Consultants have worked closely with subject specialists to design such interventions in a significant number of disciplines. Such interventions are delivered by the Writing Consultants or trained tutors or teaching assistants from within the discipline.
- *One-to-one Tutorial Assistance:* The number of one-on-one sessions in the Writing Centre has been steadily increasing since our inception. In accordance with this, the number of tutors and the disciplines they represent has also increased. Undergraduate peer-tutors are recruited from the module Peer-tutoring in Academic Writing, based on their performance in that module. Postgraduates are selected based on an interview and an evaluation of their writing and, subsequently, trained in our Writing Centre tutoring techniques.
- *Stand-alone Workshops:* These generic writing initiatives include essay-writing workshops, academic-writing workshops and writing support for mature students, facilitated by the two Writing Consultants and trained tutors.

- *Online Resources:* Online resources are developed by the two Writing Consultants, with assistance from the Technology Enhanced Learning Advisor from the Centre for Teaching and Learning.

In addition to the above activities, further initiatives have been created specifically for postgraduate students, who seek support not only for the development of their own writing, but also training in best practice for tutoring writing. These postgraduate initiatives include writing workshops, for example thesis writing and writing-for-publication; writers' groups for postgraduate and post-doctoral researchers; and peer-tutoring and tutor training in writing.

The third key focus of the Centre has been on faculty development on best practices for teaching with writing. The aim has been to assist faculty in developing student writing, while also developing their own academic writing. Events have been organised to facilitate staff development in teaching with writing; for instance, writing-in-disciplines and writing-to-learn workshops and a symposium on writing entitled *Research on Writing Practices: Consequences for the Teaching of Writing and Learner Outcomes*. The number of staff participating in writing-in-disciplines initiatives has increased; equally, Writing Centre staff have been involved in the training of tutors on several discipline-specific modules. In 2009, the Writing Centre also made a successful bid to host the 2011 EATAW (European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing) conference, not only demonstrating the growing international status of the Centre, but also providing our staff with access to current research on best practices in teaching writing. Faculty development is an area that would certainly need to be developed further in order to incorporate writing into the curriculum in a meaningful way. The Centre would like to provide regular workshops to faculty on different areas of best practice for teaching and researching writing.

In relation to the professional development of writing amongst staff, the Centre for Teaching and Learning has been successfully supporting these writers for some time prior to the existence of the Writing Centre. This support has been primarily in the form of staff development workshops and writers' retreats, for which the theory and pedagogy have been developed by Professor Sarah Moore (2003), now Associate Vice-President at UL, through her collaborations with Professor Rowena Murray at the University of Strathclyde, Scotland, who has provided models for postgraduate and academic staff writing development (Murray & Moore, 2006).

Finally, in order to ensure the goal to initiate a site for action research and publication, Writing Centre staff conduct and publish action research to contribute to the body of scholarship on academic writing and the teaching of writing (Cleary & O'Sullivan 2008; Cleary, Graham, Jeanneau & O'Sullivan, 2009). Academic writing development in the Shannon region continues to be

based on researched best practices in writing and writing pedagogy, as evidenced by recent Writing Centre staff publications and the Centre's growing national and international links with writing programme directors and scholars.

## CHALLENGES FOR THE REGIONAL WRITING CENTRE

As the Centre grew, so did some of the challenges facing the Centre. Interestingly, our challenges did not relate to interest in the Centre or issues of visibility. In truth, the interest was so great, we were struggling to cope with the demand. At its inception, interest came only from a few departments in each of the faculties; now requests were coming from a vast range of departments across all four faculties. However, given the relative absence of a writing culture or writing programmes in the university, it was difficult to envisage from where the writing expertise to sustain the demand would emerge. We recognised that the development of this culture was going to be a slow process. To this end, in addition to the initiatives described above, it was decided that the development of writing modules would help to further the development of a culture in writing from which the required expertise would eventually emerge.

The development of a writing culture began with the development of a range of modules in writing, each assigned an individual code commencing with AW (Academic Writing), thus establishing an important identity for the Writing Centre modules. Academic Literacies 1 and 2 (AW4001 and AW4002) are offered to first-year students in the arts, humanities and social sciences. The aim of these modules is to facilitate the transition to university for students in this faculty. More importantly, these modules foster an awareness of writing among students at an early stage of their academic careers. The Writing Centre is responsible for training the tutors who are recruited from appropriate disciplines within the faculty, an activity which again fosters an important awareness of writing, while equally fostering a systematic approach.

Another module, Peer-tutoring in Academic Writing (AW4006), is offered as an elective module to students wishing to enhance their writing skills, while training to become peer-tutors in the Writing Centre. Again, this accredited module fosters an awareness of writing among students but, equally, it provides the Centre with a panel of well-trained peer-tutors to work in the Writing Centre. The development of two modules entitled Research Planning and Preparation and Scholarly Presentation and Dialogue in Research and Academic Writing, delivered as part of the Specialist Diploma in Teaching, Learning and Scholarship, is a third illustration of how expertise in writing is nurtured among our future teachers.

## SUSTAINABILITY OF THE REGIONAL WRITING CENTRE

Another responsibility of the Writing Consultants, in addition to developing student writing, was to assist with the development of an academic plan for the continued development of the Writing Centre. The most important aspect of this plan was the sustainability of the Writing Centre in the post-SIF (Strategic Initiative Fund) period. Throughout the SIF-funded period, the aim of the Centre was to ensure the development of initiatives that would be valued so greatly that the institutions would not want to do without them. However, as the SIF project neared an end in June 2009, the possibility of further SIF funding to sustain the Shannon Consortium Regional Writing Centre diminished as the economic climate weakened. The focus for future funding turned toward the individual institutions for sustainability. UL contributed matching SIF funding to sustain the Regional Writing Centre at the university for a further year, until June 2010. The efforts of the Centre staff in that year were to ensure that the funding for the Writing Centre would come from core budget. Embedding Writing Centre activity in core curricula, it was advised, was the means to ensuring sustainability. In addition to continuing the initiatives outlined above, the Centre was involved in the design and development of further modules to ensure its presence in the core activities of the university; for instance, the development of modules entitled Thesis Writing, Advanced Technical Communication for Engineers, and Educational Guidance have been developed in conjunction with the MA programme in English Language Teaching, the MEng in Mechanical Aeronautical Engineering and the pre-university Access programme respectively. It was hoped that these modules, alongside ever-increasing intervention within disciplinary modules, would be enough to ensure our sustainability in the university.

Efforts to ensure the sustainability of the Writing Centre have resulted in the Centre growing quite rapidly and in many diverse directions. Such diversity ensured the visibility of the Centre in its infancy and built goodwill amongst faculty and staff. However, with limited resources, such diversity and rapid growth would be difficult to maintain. Following the external evaluation of the Writing Centre in July 2008,<sup>1</sup> carried out by Professor Terry Myers Zawacki, former Writing Center Director and currently Director of the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Program at George Mason University, it was recommended that the scope of activities and initiatives the Centre had developed in the SIF-funded period be narrowed in order to ensure the sustainability of the Centre and to grow the Centre in the two areas central to its core mission, namely to assist students with their writing, through one-on-one and group support, as a



way to bolster both recruitment and retention efforts; and, secondly, to assist faculty across disciplines in their efforts to teach with writing.

In moving forward and developing new initiatives, we have been careful to ensure that they do indeed enhance these two areas of our core mission. As we continue to develop writing interventions in disciplinary modules, we will recruit postgraduate students from within the disciplines to help create and deliver such interventions, a task which will become easier as the culture of writing is developed. In her evaluation, Professor Zawacki recommended the development of a Writing Fellows programme to this end. Equally, we will strive to help staff to nurture these important writing skills in their own classrooms rather than always calling on the experts to intervene. This will entail supporting disciplinary staff through ongoing workshops on teaching with writing and by populating our website with useful support materials and resources.

## CONCLUSION

The primary research carried out at the inception of the project highlighted evidence of a non-systematic approach to writing development and support; it suggested that writing was not getting the attention it needed, despite its centrality to success at third level and its impact on students' professional lives. The Regional Writing Centre at UL now provides a coordinated, systematic approach to the teaching, learning and research of academic writing and to academic writing support across the region, supporting undergraduate and postgraduate student writers and collaborating with faculty to expand writing-based curriculum innovations. The Writing Centre's activities work towards enhancing the quality and effectiveness of teaching and research across the region, while enhancing the student experience. In its short existence, the Writing Centre has become an essential part of the regional landscape and is now recognised as a unique centre of expertise and knowledge in Ireland.

All of the efforts to ensure sustainability highlighted herein culminated in the presentation of a three-year business/academic plan for the Writing Centre to the University Executive Committee. At the time of the writing of this profile, it was announced that the Executive Committee, after much time and deliberation, had agreed to mainstream the Regional Writing Centre at UL. Consortium partners may wish to invest in the writing expertise offered by the Regional Writing Centre at UL, following a shared-services model, thereby benefiting from, yet avoiding the full cost of, programmes developed through UL writing expertise. Writing Consultants from UL will work with staff in each of these institutions to develop writing initiatives therein. Such expertise may

well be extended beyond the Consortium partners to the National University of Ireland, Galway, which has recently formed a new alliance with UL. Moving forward will bring new and exciting challenges for the Regional Writing Centre in its ever-expanding regional profile.

## NOTE

1. Following the original consultation with Professor Jim Henry, now Director of Writing across the Curriculum at the University of Hawaii, and formerly of George Mason University, it was agreed that a follow-up consultation in the form of an external evaluation would inform the future direction of the Writing Centre at UL.

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