

CHAPTER 25.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ACADEMIC WRITING CENTRE IN THE NETHERLANDS

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Radboud University Nijmegen was the first university in the Netherlands to have a writing centre. Founded in February 2004, the Academic Writing Centre Nijmegen (ASN) was based on the outcomes of a feasibility study that demonstrated that at Radboud University Nijmegen writing problems were often not recognized as such, and that faculty could not always give students proper individual coaching, due to lack of time or expertise. The feasibility study also revealed that both students and faculty felt positive about the concept of the writing centre that was proposed, and in its basic philosophy that not the writing product but the writing process would deserve primary attention. The ASN has proven to serve a clear need: the number of consultation sessions has grown to an average of 45 sessions per week. Some three years after its start, more than 50 percent of the students knew about the writing centre's existence. Evaluation studies consistently show that after visiting the writing centre students are highly satisfied with the help that is provided. Supervisors of students who consulted the ASN generally felt that both their students and they themselves as staff members had profited from the services offered at the writing centre. In spite of these positive evaluations the university board decided in June 2011, in view of the need to cut university expenses, that central financing will have to end by 2013 and that from then on other means of financing have to be found.

In the past few decades academic writing has gained considerable attention at Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands.¹ Courses in general communicative skills (including composition), writing intensive courses, and online facilities such as WorldWideWriting and WritingStudio have grown into important tools to help students to improve their academic writing.²

Since 2004, the university also houses a writing centre: the Academic Writing Centre Nijmegen (from here: ASN, the abbreviation for the name in Dutch: *Academisch Schrijfcentrum Nijmegen*). In this chapter the development and the (still short) history of the ASN will be sketched, and the results of the work done in the ASN since it started offering its services will be discussed.

In 2003, after having been introduced to the newly founded writing centre at Stellenbosch University (South Africa), the second author of this chapter asked the University Board to be allowed to investigate the possibilities for creating a similar writing centre at Radboud University Nijmegen, taking into account, among other things, the favourable experiences of American universities such as Colorado State University, Purdue University, and the University of Maryland with their writing centres.

After some discussion between the University Board and the Assembly of Faculty Deans, financial means were granted for a feasibility study as asked for, to be carried out by the first author of this chapter together with her then colleague, Vincent Boeschoten. As a result of this feasibility study, which included interviews with students and staff members at the Nijmegen campus and consultation of international colleagues in the field of the teaching of writing, a proposal for founding a writing centre was put forward, including a business plan for an experimental period of two years. The proposal was well received, and the University Board decided to give permission and financial means to start the first writing centre ever at a Dutch university.³ For a first experimental period of two years, a total of 250,000 euros was granted to cover the costs of hiring personnel (part time manager, part time office manager, and tutors) and decorating the space that was made available (for free) in the university library. This made it possible to offer services to students and staff members without having to charge them, or their faculties.

There were some clear criteria, however, that had to be met if the ASN was to continue after the experimental period.

First of all, the ASN needed to maintain an academic status. Only university students could have access to its services, and these services could not be extended to students from other types of higher education, even if they would be willing to pay for it. Furthermore a full professor in communication (i.e., the second author of this chapter) would have to be prepared to carry the academic responsibility for the work in the ASN, and there would have to be frequent contact with experts in this field from universities abroad, for example Professor Dr. Leon de Stadler from Stellenbosch University (South Africa). The second criterion set by the University Board was that after one year, a total of at least 250 visits from students would have to be registered. That number would have to grow into at least 750 after two years. The final criterion to play a role in the decision to continue or discontinue

the ASN pertained to the evaluation of the services offered by the ASN: both students and staff members who had been in touch with the ASN would have to think favourably of what the ASN had done for them.

KEY ROLE FOR TUTORS

Following the basic philosophy of the writing centres in the US (and also in Stellenbosch, South Africa) the coaching in the ASN was, and still is, done by tutors who are in majority graduated students and PhD-candidates at Radboud University Nijmegen.

A welcome source of inspiration for the approach taken at the ASN was the work in the writing lab at Purdue University, as discussed in Harris (1995). As Harris points out, the primary responsibility of a writing centre is to work one-to-one with writers, and not to duplicate or usurp writing classrooms. The uniqueness of a writing center is its setting with “a middle person, the tutor, who inhabits a world somewhere between student and teacher”. It is in this specific setting that students are encouraged to think independently, to gain confidence in themselves as writers, and to put their theoretical knowledge into practice as they write. If only because of the power structure in academia as it is perceived by many students, the institutional authority automatically ascribed to the teacher often prohibits the collaborative atmosphere that is typical for tutor sessions in a writing centre (cf. Harris, 1995, pp. 27; 35-36; 40).

Not all faculty members are equally convinced of the importance of giving feedback that is directed at stimulating the student’s development into a good writer, rather than at providing quick fixes of an imperfect draft. And even if they are willing to give development-directed feedback, where the writer is the one who recognises and solves the problem, supported by non-directive questions from the coach, they often do not have enough time available to do so. In a survey among teachers of the Faculty of Arts at Radboud University Nijmegen, it emerged that several interviewees also indicated that they felt uncertain about their expertise on this type of commentary (Stassen & Wilbers, 2006). Stassen and Wilbers also point at the advantages of development-directed feedback. In a qualitative study, seven students were observed in a total of 10 tutor sessions at the ASN. Although the results were based on a relatively small number of observations and therefore need to be interpreted with care, the study suggests that the tutor sessions did influence the strategic writing process of the students. Non-directive, development-directed tutor behavior led to a positive situational norm and independent student behavior. Students who distilled their own strategies from the development-oriented feedback of their tutors proved to use these strategies when working independently on their writing tasks (Stassen & Wilbers, 2006).

From the beginning, ASN tutors were thoroughly trained in providing development-directed feedback and in supporting various forms of academic writing by the manager of the ASN and by other experts in the field of writing education, for example Gerd Bräuer, University of Education Freiburg, and Leigh Ryan, University of Maryland. The manager of the ASN also offered support for faculty by asking questions on, for instance, how to improve their students' writing skills, how to assess their students' texts, and how to create programmes for writing across the curriculum. Furthermore, the ASN organised workshops, both for students and for teachers, about subjects such as writing effectively, collecting relevant information when writing an academic text, avoiding plagiarism, and developing writing assignments. Part of these workshops were, and still are, conducted by experts such as Cheryl Glenn, Pennsylvania State University.

To draw the attention of the target groups (i.e., students and staff from all faculties) to the ASN and to its basic philosophy, a number of marketing activities have been undertaken. There were "guest performances" of tutors in regular classes in all kinds of academic programmes, special lunches were organised to introduce staff members to the services of the ASN and to show them its location, a website including a short video clip was launched (<http://www.ru.nl/asn>), a newsletter was issued, advertisements were placed in the university magazine, favourably-priced memory sticks (including information on the ASN) were offered to students who paid the ASN a visit, and posters and flyers were distributed on campus, all stressing the basic ASN philosophy: better thinking produces better writing, and vice versa.

RESULTS

Since its start in 2004, the ASN was evaluated on several occasions. Each time the results were positive. Based on these outcomes the University Board decided in early 2006 to extend the first, experimental ASN period for two more years, until March 2008. By the end of 2007 it was decided to extend this period for another two years (providing for additional means to cover all expenses until March 2010), with the perspective that by 2010 a definitive decision would be made about the possible inclusion of the ASN in the university structure. Below the most important results from the evaluation studies are presented.

STUDENTS' FAMILIARITY WITH THE ASN

In a questionnaire study carried out in 2006 among a sample of 1,012 students at Radboud University Nijmegen, it was found that 54% were familiar with the existence of the ASN. Especially students from the Faculties of Arts

(80%), Management (76%), and Philosophy (75%) knew about the ASN; students from the Faculties of Science (41%) and Medicine (25%) were less aware of its existence. Those students who knew about the existence of the ASN were also asked if they knew that the ASN offered individual help with a diversity of writing tasks (90% said yes), if they knew that this service was for free (66% said yes), and if in the 24 months before the date of this study, they had ever felt the need for assistance in their writing processes (24% said yes).

CONSULTATION NUMBERS

From the start in March 2004, the total number of consultation sessions in that year was 301. One year later the number had grown to 1,001. In 2010, the total number of consultation sessions had reached 1,861, and based on the numbers from the first five months in 2011 a total of 2,100 consultation sessions are predicted (see Figure 1). On average, a student visiting the ASN has three to four consultation sessions; by implication, by the end of 2011 some 600 students are expected to have visited the ASN in that year.

Most students visiting the ASN prove to come from four faculties: Social Sciences(40%), Arts (25%), Management (14%), and Law (10%). This result does not really come as a surprise, in view of the relatively high numbers of students enrolled in programmes in these faculties, and in view also of the importance that these faculties traditionally attach to adequate writing skills.

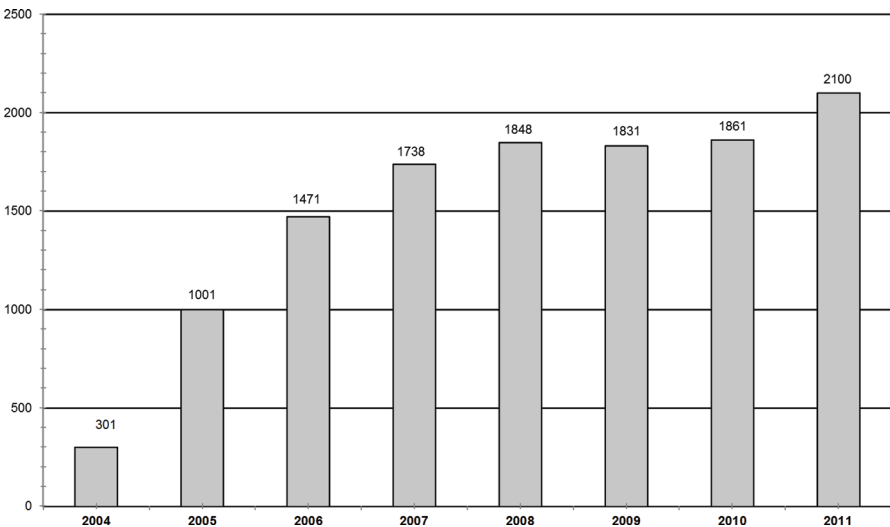


Figure 1. Number of consultation sessions per year.

Most sessions (72.0%) are in Dutch; English (20.2%) is second. Most visitors (55.5%) to the ASN are graduates; 44.5% are undergraduates.

STUDENTS' SATISFACTION

In the period 2008-2010, 150 students who received one or more consultation sessions were asked to fill out a questionnaire about the general quality of the services provided by the ASN, the extent to which they felt the consultations helped them, the effect they thought the consultations had on their writing skills, and the role that the input of the tutor played in all this. All questions had the format of statements followed by five answering options, ranging from very negative to very positive. Table 1 shows the results of this evaluation.

QUALITATIVE OUTPUT

Due to the large number of consultation sessions, the different text genres, and the variety of academic discourse themes that are discussed, the ASN has gained more specific insights into the special demands of academic discourse. This expertise is a breeding ground for the development of different strategies to

Table 1. Results from Evaluation Questionnaire ASN (2008-2010)

Question	Scores	Percentage
Structure of the tutoring sessions	good or very good	88.6 %
Tutor's feedback	clear or very clear	90.7 %
Alignment of tutoring sessions with own needs	good or very good	82.7 %
Perceived atmosphere during tutoring sessions	pleasant or very pleasant	96.7 %
Usefulness of tutor's input	useful or very useful	87.3 %
Motivation after the tutoring sessions	improved or much better	86.7 %
Improvement of text after the tutoring sessions	better or much better	83.3 %
Improvement of writing process after the tutoring sessions	easier/faster or much easier/faster	69.4%
Improvement in enjoying writing after the tutoring sessions	more fun or much more fun	46.7 %
Services like contact, information, etc.	good or very good	96.7 %
Physical room of the writing center	pleasant or very pleasant	71.4 %

optimize the writing processes of academic texts. In April 2011, for instance, a workshop was organized for staff members about efficiently supervising writing to make optimal use of, often limited, coaching time. Another theme of this well-attended workshop, directed by Jude Carroll (Oxford Brookes University), was the coaching of writing in a second language. Recently the present ASN manager, Dr. Joy de Jong, published a handbook on Academic Writing (J. de Jong, 2011) that was based, among other things, on insights gained in the ASN.

OPINIONS FROM SUPERVISORS

Not only students, but also staff members who supervised students being coached at the ASN, were asked for their opinions on the effects of tutor-coaching. In an MA thesis, communication student Christa de Jong conducted 14 interviews with supervisors. It appeared that a large majority of the supervisors felt that the work done in the ASN had an added value, that the text versions that their students handed in after their consultation sessions clearly had improved, and that the students in general had learned to be more critical toward their own writing products. Most supervisors also felt that the ASN relieved them from their tasks by helping the students to clearly structure and formulate their theses, so that in their own discussions with the students they could concentrate more on the academic merits of the research presented in the text (C. de Jong, 2005).

OVERVIEW: INFLUENCE ON DEVELOPMENT OF WRITING CENTRES IN THE NETHERLANDS

The first seven years of the ASN have shown that a writing centre can play an important role in improving students' writing skills. The formula of individual consultation sessions focusing on possible ways to improve the writing process has proven to be successful—not only in terms of the fast-growing numbers of students visiting the ASN but also in the quality of the services rendered, as perceived by these students and their supervisors. Combined with other forms of writing education, such as traditional composition courses, writing-intensive courses, and modern online facilities, the services offered by the ASN have a clear added value. In view of all this, it is not surprising that the work in the ASN has drawn the attention of other universities. In 2004 and 2008, after the example of the ASN, the second and the third academic writing centres in the Netherlands were founded at the University of Groningen and the University of Tilburg. In mid 2011, the University of

Twente and Maastricht University were in the process of developing academic writing centres.

In spite of all this, the Nijmegen University board decided in June 2011, in view of the need to cut university expenses, that central financing of the Centre will have to end by 2013, and that from then on other means of financing have to be found. May there indeed be other means to keep the ASN up and running!

NOTES

1. Radboud University Nijmegen is a university located in the eastern part of the Netherlands, near the German border. It is the fourth Dutch university in numbers of students (some 16.000), and offers educational programmes and research facilities in seven Faculties: Arts, Law, Science, Medicine, Philosophy, Theology and Religion Studies, Management, and Social Sciences.
2. See <http://www.worldwidewriting.eu> and <http://www.writingstudio.eu>.
3. The financial and organisational responsibility is carried by Radboud into Languages, the Language and Communication Centre of Radboud Nijmegen University, supervised by Liesbet Korebrits (director) and by José Bakx (vice-director) for matters concerning the ASN. The first manager of the ASN was Ron Welters; in 2005 he was followed by Vincent Boeschoten. Since 2007, Joy de Jong supervises and coordinates the activities in the ASN.

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