

CHAPTER 27.

DEVELOPING A “KIWI” WRITING CENTRE AT MASSEY UNIVERSITY, NEW ZEALAND

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This essay outlines how the teaching of writing has been introduced into the curriculum of a New Zealand university over the last 20 years. Starting with a description of her accidental introduction to teaching writing, the author outlines early initiatives such as the development of a WAC programme in the sciences, and New Zealand’s first OWLL. Despite this early promise, recent years have seen the emergence of uncoordinated initiatives in the teaching of writing that have led to various groups competing for ground. Nevertheless, a promising new development—New Zealand’s first Writing Centre—aims not only to support students, but also to teach writing theory to a first generation of students. The author sees “becoming an ethnographer of your home campus” as an essential aspect of developing a writing programme, and describes the writing centre initiative as “something unique: not a transplanted idea but a kiwi writing centre . . . which will be informed by international theory and experience but emerge out of unchartered antipodean ground.”

GETTING STARTED

A little over 20 years ago, in 1989, I unwittingly took my first steps towards developing a “Kiwi”¹ Writing Centre at Massey University, in Aotearoa New Zealand. A colleague had returned from sabbatical in the US fired up with a mission to start a writing centre to improve students’ writing skills in the College of Business. She rang me to see if I would take on the job as sole tutor on a .5 position. I pointed out that, as a recent MA in Victorian literature, I knew nothing about teaching writing and even less about business writing—and had no idea what a Writing Centre was. “No worries,” said my colleague airily, “we

think you have the kind of personality needed for the job,” as if that were the only qualification needed to teach writing.

As it happened, no one in New Zealand would have been more qualified than I was to take on New Zealand’s first writing centre work. At that time, writing was not a part of the New Zealand tertiary curriculum: most universities had no writing courses of any kind, there were no PhDs in Rhetoric and Composition, no WAC programmes, no freshman composition, no writing centres. And so I stepped uncertainly into a new space as a pioneer—and soon became passionately committed not just to making my little Centre work for my students but also to making the teaching of writing an uncontested, integrated part of the university’s curriculum.

I had no idea what a Writing Centre could or should be. This was before the Internet revolutionised our ability to access information, and, because it was not a research field in New Zealand, our University library carried scant resources on writing pedagogy, let alone writing centre theory. I discovered the Writing Center listserv in 1990-91²—it was a lifeline at times, and I was overwhelmed by the generosity of list members who took the time to send me resources. More often than not, though, reading the e-mail discussions felt more like eavesdropping on a conversation on an alien planet. The conversation may have been in English, but the largely American cultural context in which it took place was beyond my comprehension: the terminology was opaque, and the assumption that a whole institutional infrastructure around writing was in place was unimaginable at that time in a New Zealand context. So I had to invent my role as writing tutor. My students, and some faculty, certainly had an expected role for me which could only be described as a combination of proof reader and magician.³ I was not entirely familiar with the concept of peer tutoring at this time—but the role I carved out for myself was, in effect, that of a peer tutor, puzzling over assignments with the students who found their way into my office, talking to faculty, listening, reading, asking questions.

Early on I came across Elaine Maimon’s comment (in McLeod & Soven, 1992, p. xi): “Those who would change curriculum must become ethnographers of their home campuses,” and this resonated strongly with what I wanted to achieve in a New Zealand writing programme: something that drew on international scholarship but emerged out of the context of a New Zealand university, something unique and carefully crafted to meet the needs of New Zealand students. To do this, I needed to pay attention to the political, educational, and cultural context in which I worked.

This profile essay outlines the development of a writing centre in a New Zealand university over a 20-year period, within the context of writing instruction emerging within the Aotearoa New Zealand university curriculum.

BECOMING AN ETHNOGRAPHER: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

New Zealand (Aotearoa is the Maori name) is located in the South Pacific with a population in 2011 of approximately 4.2 million people (Index Mundi, 2010). Although 70% of the population are of European origin (Statistics New Zealand, n.d.), New Zealand considers itself to be a bicultural nation, with both English and Maori (the language of the indigenous people) as official languages, although the language of tuition in most tertiary institutions is primarily English. We also have a growing Asian population, as well as attracting international students primarily from Asia and the Pacific. New Zealand university education was established in the 1870s and has a tradition similar to that of the British university system (Degrees Ahead, n.d.): most students enrol in a three-year degree (there are some exceptions in the applied sciences) and specialise from first year. An unusual feature of the New Zealand university system, and one that, until recently, it has prided itself on, is that it has an open entry policy for students over 20 years of age.⁴

My primary interest has been to develop a writing programme at Massey University. Massey is situated on three campuses: the original and most established campus in Palmerston North, in the lower North Island of New Zealand; Albany (near Auckland); and Wellington (the nation's capital). It offers a full spectrum of academic programmes from undergraduate to PhD and has an unusual student profile by New Zealand standards, due partly to its role as New Zealand's biggest distance education provider; in 2009, it had 34,000 students enrolled, of whom 60% were mature students (over 25), 50% were part-time, and 48% were distance students. It has more Maori students than any other New Zealand university and only 31% of its student population are recent school leavers.

FIRST STEPS: 1980-1999

While the idea for a writing centre came from a colleague who had encountered a North American writing centre, that the initiative took root can largely be attributed to the impact of a time of transition for New Zealand universities, which led to a perceived need for writing instruction within the curriculum. New Zealand was undergoing an economic and political upheaval between 1985 and 1995, which led to a change in the student population. Mature students, many affected by redundancy, were coming to the university to retrain. At the same time, changing social investment and attitudes meant

that there was concern to support equitable access to universities, particularly increased representation from Maori and lower socio-economic groups. Open admissions for mature students meant that for the first time large numbers of students without academic preparation were entering the university system.

The response to this transition took two forms at Massey University. First, the small writing centre in the College of Business became the core of a university-wide Student Learning Centre (SLC) in 1996, funded by government “equity” funding. The SLC developed a range of programmes, from learning skills to remedial maths and science, and writing support for both on-campus and distance students. Writing support in these early years was offered by tutors who were usually either experienced high school English teachers or who held post-graduate qualifications in English or Education. The support offered comprised primarily one-on-one support for both on-campus and distance students, and lectures to undergraduate classes. In the early years, the status of the SLC was considered remedial, and its legitimacy as university business questioned. Of particular significance was the fact that staff employed in the SLC was designated as non-academic staff, with a reporting line through Student Services.

Second, the opportunities presented by the economic and social upheavals of the 1980s and 1990s, combined with the identity crises of many English departments in the 1980s and 1990s,⁵ led to the development of writing courses as market opportunities. Massey University’s School of English and Media Studies showed a particularly early entrepreneurial spirit, with an undergraduate academic writing degree course emerging in the early 1980s. Because we had no “homegrown” PhDs in rhetoric and composition in New Zealand at that time, suitably qualified faculty (with qualifications in applied linguistics and, later, in rhetoric and composition) were re-located from overseas to direct the academic writing course, with faculty from the literature programme retraining to contribute to the course. Fulbright scholars from the US⁶ with an interest in WAC also had an influence on the development of the course in the mid-1980s. The development of this course was contentious, with some faculty of the view that this was an inappropriate function of an English Department; however, most English faculty engaged with the course and taught into it at some stage in its early development.

DEVELOPING DISTINCTIVENESS: 1990-2000

Between 1990 and 2000, Massey University’s writing programme developed further to incorporate two distinctive features that clearly established writing instruction as developmental rather than remedial.

One of the most distinctive features of Massey University's writing initiatives has been the commitment of the College of Science (CoS) to integrating the teaching of writing into its programmes. In the mid-1990s, a survey of employers of science graduates showed a particular concern with the generic skills of science graduates and in particular graduates' writing skills, and the then Dean began to champion the inclusion of writing in the new degree (Anderson, 1991). Prior to this, the College of Science had taken a range of approaches to integrating writing into its curriculum, but with the advent of a new degree programme in the applied sciences in 1995, which included a first year writing course (Anderson, 1995), the college took the opportunity to introduce writing as a core component of its curriculum through a first year science writing course and a "Writing Across the Curriculum" (WAC) programme (see Emerson et al, 2002, 2006).

Both aspects of this programme are unusual in that they emerged out of a collaboration between myself (a writing teacher from the SLC) and faculty from the College of Sciences as part of a PhD programme using an action research methodology (Emerson et al, 2006). In the first years of the first-year writing course, it was taught entirely by faculty from the CoS, who re-trained with my support as a writing teacher. The WAC component of the programme was intended to further extend science students' writing skills throughout the disciplines, using both a "Writing in the Disciplines" (WiD) and a "Writing to Learn" (WtL) approach. In particular, two Departments within the college developed whole-of-major approaches (modelled on Holyoak, 1998) to integrate writing into their undergraduate programmes (Emerson et al., 2002; MacKay et al., 1999)

In 2000, the science writing course was made compulsory for all students enrolled in any undergraduate science programme, and the course became domiciled in the School of English and Media Studies, under my direction.

A second distinctive aspect of Massey University's developing writing programme was the early development and extension of its OWLL (Online Writing and Learning Link⁷)—again, a first for New Zealand universities (Emerson et al, 2000; MacKay et al, 2000). This was developed out of the SLC in 1996, through a large grant from the Fund for Excellence and Innovation in Teaching, and has a distinctive feature in its focus on the needs of distance students. It has been through several iterations, with intensive investment and development in the last decade, and is now an extensive resource, providing static learning resources, interactive resources, and tutor-driven resources, including an asynchronous tutor-review service (called the pre-reading service), which enables distance students to engage with writing tutors and gain a similar level of support as that experienced by on-campus students (see <http://owll.massey.ac.nz/>).

By 2000, then, Massey had developed a range of writing programmes, located in two distinct areas: academic writing and science writing courses within the School of English and Media Studies, and support for writing in the SLC through face-to-face tutoring, a pre-reading service for distance students, and the OWLL. While the two parts of the programme reported separately, through quite distinct reporting lines, there was, at this time, some communication between the two groups, and a relatively straightforward distinction in function.

There was also the first sign that an institutional approach to writing might emerge, when, in 1998, Council approved the university's Learning and Teaching Plan, which included, as one of the attributes of a Massey graduate, that students be able to "communicate clearly and fluently with all individuals and groups with whom they will interact professionally" (cited in Massey University, 2005, p.1).

FRAGMENTATION: 2000-2010

Following these initial successes, however, in more recent years, a University-wide approach to writing instruction has not been achieved. Instead, the provision of writing instruction has diversified and boundaries have blurred—and while the university has made progress with supporting students' writing, the writing programme continues to face a number of challenges.

On the positive side, in response to the university's Learning and Teaching Plan (1998), the academic board in 2005 adopted a proposal for graduate literacy and numeracy requirements. Despite this, no centralised plan was put in place to operationalise the proposal—but literacy and writing development initiatives continued to develop in an ad hoc way. In 2008, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences made the academic writing course taught by the School of English and Media Studies compulsory for all students studying for a BA degree, which meant that by 2009 all students enrolled in the College of Sciences and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences were required to take a writing course as part of their first year programme. At the same time, the SLC diversified its writing programmes, including the development of writing support programmes for post graduates, and continued to extend its resources on academic writing for both distance and on-campus undergraduates. Also, in 2003, the SLC, in conjunction with the Halls office (the unit responsible for student residences on campus), developed a PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions) programme (Wilkinson, 2009a, 2009b), partly as a way of improving the academic profile of the Halls; while this programme was primarily designed

to support first-year science and business students, it signalled a commitment to peer tutoring programmes, which would become significant in future years.

However, there have been trends that suggest a need for vigilance. The university has developed a preparatory academic writing course positioned as pre-tertiary level within the Centre for University Preparation and English Language studies (CUPELS), and there are indications that programmes are looking to transfer writing instruction from their academic programme to the pre-tertiary programme. This may be a matter for concern, since such a move would position writing instruction within a remedial rather than developmental context. This concern, that writing could be seen as a remedial rather than developmental function of student learning, also emerged when the SLC, despite its programmes becoming more developmental, was amalgamated with Disability Services. Changed government funding policy, which looks to fund universities on the basis of completions while retaining open admissions, has led to a proposal to develop a literacy testing or pre-entry literacy course requirement for all students. Whether this will eventuate, and what its impact on developmental academic writing programmes might be, is yet to be seen. The challenge is to distinguish between pre-entry expectations and the academic writing skills rightly taught within the disciplines.

Those of us engaged in teaching writing now face a number of difficulties. First is the fact that writing instruction is now so fragmented in so many parts of the university (within different Colleges, in the SLC, and in CUPELS), with almost no coordination or communication, that we are often competing for ground. The second is that, while writing instruction has been established as part of the curriculum, there is little understanding or articulation of the theory of writing instruction or the relationship between writing, learning, and thinking within the disciplines.

A PEER TUTORING CENTRE

Looking squarely into this situation, I have found my thoughts returning to my earliest experience of teaching writing, to the notion of a Writing Centre—and in particular a peer tutoring centre.

In 2008, I was invited to spend a semester as visiting lecturer at the Sweetland Writing Centre at the University of Michigan in the United States. Like my colleague 20 years ago, I came home with a passion to create a peer-tutoring writing centre at Massey as part of our WAC strategy and to build bridges within my home context.

Two practical factors have worked together to support the development of a peer-tutoring centre. First, the School of English and Media Studies was keen to develop its courses on academic writing beyond first year. Second, the SLC was reviewing its commitment to the PASS programme, and looking for new ways to extend the notion of peer-supported learning.

For the first time, the School of English and Media Studies and the SLC are actively working together. The peer review centre will be domiciled in and funded by the SLC with an academic affiliation with the School of English and Media Studies. I am writing two peer tutoring courses—Writing Centre: Theory and Practice and a Writing Centre Practicum. Because the centre is conceived as part of our WAC strategy, we anticipate inviting students from across the university who have demonstrated outstanding writing skills to apply to enrol in these courses. The courses will be offered for the first time in 2011 with the peer tutoring centre established at the start of the second semester in July 2010. We hope to have the peer tutoring writing centre in full operation by 2012, staffed by 10-20 fully trained part-time peer tutors.

I am ambitious for this project. I aim to make connections between the SLC and the School of English and Media Studies in a way that facilitates communication, coordination, and development. We cannot have a university-wide writing programme without coordination: this is one step towards this process. I also hope to engage a first generation of Kiwi students with an ability to see writing as an integral part of thinking and learning within the disciplines. My hope is that as these ideas become current within the New Zealand curriculum, they may come to influence long-term strategy for integrating writing into the curriculum.

Finally, what I hope to achieve is something unique: not a transplanted idea but a Kiwi writing centre. A straight transplant could never be a possibility. As just one example, most Writing Center texts are geared for a North American readership, making assumptions about student experience and institutional structures that are not applicable in Aotearoa. And while these texts may discuss the needs and experiences of specific indigenous peoples in their transition into academia, there can be no assumption that their experiences match those of Maori. There are no texts that address the needs and experiences of Maori in a writing centre context, or the needs of kiwi students more generally. We may have to make our own.

So the centre we are establishing, while it will be informed by international theory and experience, will emerge out of unchartered antipodean ground. I hope to do this through an unusual pedagogical approach: I plan to run the courses using an action research model, and in this way I hope to take my students with me, so that we can become, together, “ethnographers of our home

campuses.” Together, we will analyse our own context and develop a model for peer tutoring that is informed by international scholarship, but grounded in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The last 20 years have seen exciting opportunities for writing to emerge within the tertiary curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand. We do not, at Massey University, yet have a university-wide, coordinated writing programme. But we have taken huge strides—and we are contributing to the wider conversation in New Zealand universities concerning the integration of writing into the curriculum. The challenge now is to retain the legitimacy of writing as part of the academic programme and to develop coordinated approaches that are rooted in writing pedagogy. The new peer tutoring centre is one step to achieving these goals.

NOTES

1. “Kiwi” is a term used by New Zealanders to describe themselves (i.e. as a noun) and to describe a New Zealand context (i.e., as an adjective). It is a reference not to the fruit, but to the flightless nocturnal bird that is indigenous to these Islands.
2. The Writing Center listserv is a mailing list run through what is now the International Writing Center Association (IWCA); see <http://writingcenters.org/resources/starting-a-writing-cente/#Mail>
3. “Fix the writing, fix the writer—preferably in one 30 minute consultation” would be another way of describing the expectations on me.
4. Recent initiatives to cap university placements mean that this policy is currently under review.
5. During this time, enrolments in English literature programmes in New Zealand decreased, leading to a revision, in many places, of the curriculum.
6. Richard Adler, Richard Young and, later, Ruie Pritchard
7. The notion of an online writing lab did not make sense in a New Zealand context because we had no history of writing labs. Hence, we did not make use of the common term “OWL” or “online writing lab.”

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