

CHAPTER 31.

CHANGING ACADEMIC LANDSCAPES: PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES OF TEACHING WRITING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

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This paper looks at the principles and practices of teaching writing in the Writing Centre at the University of Cape Town (UCT). It outlines some of the context of higher education in South Africa and how writing centres need to contribute to both access and redress of past inequities. In order to critically engage with writing, the UCT Writing Centre takes an “academic literacies” approach, which focuses on contextualized social practices, rather than decontextualized skills. This practice-based approach helps to explore the interdisciplinary nature of the work, as well as the changing representational landscape in higher education. The paper explores some of the impact the Writing Centre has had on student writing, and argues that the Centre contributes to higher education transformation through the mentoring of postgraduate students as future academics.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Writing Centre at the University of Cape Town (UCT) is one of the oldest Writing Centres in South Africa and has been operating since 1994. Writing Centres are potentially a locus for change, political spaces with a transformative agenda, which attempt to transform teaching and learning processes, whilst democratizing access to education. In most tertiary institutions in South Africa, the links with Academic Development have often given Writing Centres their unique character. From the 1980's, tertiary institutions developed units

for Academic Development, or Academic Support as they were known then, in an effort to address the realities of educational transformation. The support model of these earlier programmes impacted Writing Centre identity. The walk-in centres functioned as an extension of the remedial, separate concept of Academic Development—they were seen as remediation centres to rectify language deficiencies in individual students. The quick fix model and deferment of responsibility for writing, the “sticky history of remediation that haunts writing centre work” (Grimm, 1999, p. 84), is something that the UCT Writing Centre has had to work against. In an effort to do this, the ethos of the centre is one of voluntary and confidential usage for all students, from all disciplines at all levels of study. The intensive training of the consultants ensures a degree of professionalism, as well as rigorous intellectual engagement with students’ ideas.

Although the Writing Centre has been located in varying institutional places at different times in its history, it is currently based within a larger structure called the Language Development Group. This location has served to situate the work (Thesen & Van Pletzen, 2006). Although both the Language Development Group and the Writing Centre focus on developmental work (working in partnership with departments to develop language in the curriculum), the Writing Centre tends to have more of a “service” element. In particular, the one-on-one consultancy serves to accommodate individual students in unique ways.

The cognitive as well as the affective value of the one-on-one consultation is well-documented (Harris, 1995; Flynn, 1993). The complexities of different languages and discourses amongst students are well addressed by this model. The premise underlying the consultant-student relation is Lave and Wenger’s argument that learning is located in the increased access of learners to participating roles in expert performances (1991, p.17). Thus, the most important role of consultants is to help students find their own voices as part of adopting a new academic identity. The philosophy of the student consultancy is that all students can improve their writing, whether they are highly experienced or complete novices. Sixty-four percent of our clientele are women, more than half speak English as a second language (although it is difficult to get the exact data on this), 30 percent are postgraduate students, and 45 percent hail from the Humanities faculty.

In 1999, the staffing model of the Writing Centre changed from three full-time staff members and two coordinators to one coordinator and 10 part-time postgraduate students. The reasons for this change were manifold. Firstly, it was felt that more than three years of one-on-one consulting led to consultant burn-out, whereas fresh consultants each year keep the energy of the project alive. Secondly, by employing 10 consultants, a range of disciplines could be accommodated in the Writing Centre. Thirdly, the Centre became a mentor-

ing space for postgraduate students, creating a vibrant cross-disciplinary intellectual community, with many consultants using this as a training ground for moving into academic jobs within their disciplines. Lastly, the current model is extremely cost effective, and most of the funding for the part-time consultants is external. The source of this funding is a philanthropic organization that has consistently funded the Centre for more than a decade.

MISSION AND VALUES

Broadly, the Writing Centre aims to promote and facilitate access to higher education, within an ethos of social justice and national redress. Social, political and economic power is closely associated with knowledge of certain discourse forms and the Centre plays an important role in equity redress at UCT. Writing is one of the main means of assessment. Developing students' writing helps them to improve their academic performance and may mean that they stay in the tertiary system, and proceed to graduation. The Centre aims to assist by increasing students' understanding of writing as a process; enabling a "thinking-through-writing" approach; helping students to focus on the given task; heightening students' sense of audience in writing. We alert students to academic voice and plagiarism and help them understand how to select information from a variety of sources. Lastly, we improve students' sense of coherence, cohesion and logic in writing, and improve their ability to proof-read for some common grammatical errors. It is clear from the above that the Writing Centre is involved with emancipatory aspects of knowledge production, such as constructing arguments and thinking through ideas, as well as technical dimensions, such as the mechanics of writing. It is thus in a unique position to empower students within the Higher Education system.

There are three key challenges in the conceptualization of our Writing Centre's work. Firstly, the degree to which we need to provide students with access to dominant practices whilst at the same time enabling critique of these practices. Secondly, to make the tension between disciplinary conventions and the generic a productive one. Thirdly, to engage with the changing multimodal nature of student assignments.

CRITICAL ACCESS TO DOMINANT PRACTICES

The key question in terms of equity is how to provide access to dominant forms, while valuing and promoting the diversity of the representational re-

sources of our students. There are social, educational, and political advantages of acculturation into university practices. If students are denied access, their marginalization is perpetuated in a society that values these practices. However, socialization into dominant practices contributes to maintaining their dominance and can uncritically perpetuate the status quo. By dominant practices, I mean dominant languages, varieties, discourses, modes of representation, genres and types of knowledge.

This places the work of the Writing Centre in a double-bind. On one hand, it would be in our learners' interests if we could help them to conform to the expectations of the institution. On the other hand, by doing so, we may be reproducing the ideologies and inequities of the institution and society at large, and uncritically perpetuating the status quo. Feeling the right to exert a presence in the text is related to personal autobiography, and therefore is often associated with the gender, class, and ethnicity of the writer. Students need to think of themselves as people who have the power and authority to be authors. They also need to be made aware of hidden cultural assumptions in socially powerful discourses and to be taught the "rules" of what is appropriate in a way that highlights their social constructedness (Delpit 1988; Kress, 1982; Lea & Street, 1998). One of the consultants reflected on how working at the Writing Centre made her critical of certain aspects of academic discourse and institutional practices.

It forced me to know the "rules," it led to a critical look at why these rules are in place and whether they are still relevant or not. Understanding a system better automatically leads to questioning and exploring that system.

The Writing Centre consultants can talk to students about academic expectations in ways that acknowledge whose values are at stake. They can, for instance, critically highlight conventions around disciplines, genres, and academic discourse (such as the use of the third person, nominalizations, the passive). These conventions can be discussed in order to understand how and why they operate, and what "rules" would be the most appropriate for the students to apply in a particular context.

The approach described above is broadly known as an academic literacies approach (Lea & Street, 1998), which takes into account institutional relationships of discourse and power and the contested nature of writing practices. According to this view, a writer needs "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" (Lea

& Street, 1998, p.159). This view also engages with diverse notions of reading and writing that are emerging from current social and technological changes.

WAYS OF INTEGRATING WRITING INTO THE DISCIPLINES

One of the central tensions of Writing Centres is the decontextualized nature of the operation, especially in a purely drop-in situation. Given that writing provides access to and a way of learning the structure of disciplinary thought that is typical of a discipline, such as ways of thinking, reasoning, interpreting and explaining, the separation from context could be problematic (Archer, 2008). We attempt to link writing and context through embedding workshops in courses, teaching in mainstream courses, developing feedback loops, and creating interdisciplinary spaces.

Although we run generic workshops on topics such as task analysis, reading, structuring an academic essay, academic argument, referencing and language use, we prefer to embed workshops within departments and courses. Large-scale lectures do not offer students many opportunities to practice academic discourse, whereas these kinds of workshops can create a space for students to make meaning of their disciplines. The consultants in the Centre also work together with mainstream lecturers in credit-bearing courses in order to stay in touch with the rhythms and challenges of tertiary teaching. This kind of collaboration is vital to prevent us from becoming disembodied from the rest of the university, and especially from the curriculum.

We work with one of the biggest first-year Humanities courses, Media and Society, for example. It addresses image literacy, writing skills and media writing. For the past seven years, the Writing Centre has organized a drafting exercise with between 400 and 500 first year students on the course. The peer-editing has been built into the tutorial structure of the course and feedback is also given by the tutors. Between 40 and 60 students from this course take advantage of the follow-up one-on-one consultations. This intervention has contributed to a drafting process for the first essay and a peer-review process to be adopted by the department, thus entrenching the approach within the course.

In general, the Writing Centre looks for opportunities to use its sites of practice as sites of institutional learning. The one-on-one consultancy is used to provide feedback to departments around the ways in which their students are grappling with particular tasks. To this end, we maintain a comprehensive database on student consultations, which includes demographic information as well as details on specific consultations. This database also enables us to track the

developmental paths of individual students, sometimes across a number of years of their studies. Through these feedback loops, the one-on-one consultations can be justified in terms of data-gathering to inform institutional development.

In many ways, the interdisciplinary nature of the Writing Centre can be constructed as a strength rather than a weakness. By appointing consultants from a range of disciplines, we are able to access their disciplinary knowledge, and establish strong links to their departments. In the training programme we examine disciplinary discourses in depth, and the multidisciplinary nature of the group enables unique insight into writing practices. These feed into the numerous interdisciplinary workshops that we run at both undergraduate and postgraduate level

CHANGING REPRESENTATIONAL LANDSCAPES

The third challenge for our Writing Centre includes the extent to which we are equipped to deal adequately with new technologies and emerging multi-modal genres in Higher Education. Reading and writing practices are only part of what people have to learn in order to be literate, and thus we need to learn strategies to help students gain competency in multimodal composition. Many assignments use visuals as evidence, whilst other assignments are predominantly visual in nature, such as posters, storyboards, or assignments that include CD-ROMs or other media. Related to these changing assignments are new technologies that enable a range of possibilities for individuals creating documents, including variety in layout, image, colour, typeface, sound. The challenge for our Writing Centre is to train the consultants to deal with the changing nature of assignments. This includes learning about the appropriate use of visuals, and the integration of visuals in multimodal texts.

These multimodal challenges are in line with current thinking about Communication across the Curriculum (CAC) (McLeod, 2008; Reiss, Young & Selfe, 1998). CAC points to a widened notion of communication (including the visual design of written assignments) and the redefined nature of texts through new technologies. Although this thinking is more commonplace in the United States, it is new in South Africa, and our Writing Centre is one of the first to begin theorizing about the changing nature of texts and the implications for our work. We have received funding (in partnership with the Institute of Education, University of London) to re-evaluate Writing Centres in South Africa in the light of our changing representational landscapes, looking at how a range of forms of communication and media influence texts in specific disciplines and the implications of this for writing pedagogies and academic literacies. We are

exploring the affordances of a range of modes in student assignments (particularly writing, image, colour and layout), the multimodal realization of academic voice, the complexity of visual-verbal linkages in texts and how these may differ across disciplines. We do not necessarily have the technological resources to show students how to use new tools, but aim to raise awareness of the ways in which multimodal texts are assembled.

IMPACT ON STUDENT WRITING: OUR ASSESSMENT

In the changing academic landscape, it has become imperative to evaluate the impact of Writing Centre work. However, there are numerous challenges involved in ascertaining our influence on student writing. Firstly, the one-on-one consultation is difficult to measure in any systematic way. Secondly, 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 is difficult to ascertain the extent to which one or two visits to the Writing Centre have impacted 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.

In conducting an evaluation of our Writing Centre's work, I focused on a few in-depth case studies of student writing, which seemed more appropriate than looking at breadth of impact (see Archer, 2008). The evaluation was achieved through interviewing 40 first-year students on their perceptions of the Centre and its impact on their writing; looking at consultants' comments on the student writing; looking at grades obtained. Finally, it compared independent assessments of the students' improvement from first to final draft using three criteria: organisation, voice and register, and language use.

Both consultants and students identified organization as the most commonly addressed aspect of writing. The comparison of first and final drafts revealed that the majority of students show an improvement in the organisation of their essays. Many students do not have a good understanding of structure when they come into the university, but most of them grasp the basic concepts relatively easily and manage to improve on essay organisation. It appears that the Writing Centre helped most in the area of acquiring academic discourse within particular disciplines. Students seemed weakest in this regard in their first drafts (the average grade was 30.1%) and improved substantially through consultation with the Writing Centre (the average for

the final essay was 50.9%). Students coming out of school tend to be unfamiliar with both academic discourse and the discourse of their discipline. They also battle with the use and correct citation of references. It is thus not surprising that consultations resulted in improved grades in the “voice and register” category.

However, improvements in voice and register can also 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. Learning how each discipline presents students with appropriate knowledge, appropriate ways of organizing that knowledge, and appropriate ways of representing social relations between the writer and reader can either lead to acculturation into those knowledge practices or critical awareness thereof. One student maintained that the Writing Centre “changed the way I thought about putting information into essays.” This summarises the Centre at its most useful, where it assists students to become adept at negotiating the epistemology of a particular subject, and inculcates understanding of how knowledge is linked to appropriate form. Many students indicated a shift towards a greater sense of autonomy and agency.

Grammar is often the main reason lecturers send students to the Writing Centre, yet few consultants and students mentioned this as a key component of their consultations. The external examiner found that in fact the smallest improvement took place in the “language use” category. 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 grammar is of secondary priority until the student has a better grasp of larger academic literacy practices. Even when language problems are addressed, this by itself is unlikely to lead to a notable improvement of students’ grammar, especially among second language speakers. While students who come to the Centre learn to express themselves in a more appropriate tone, improving grammar is a more long-term development as a result of increased practice in reading and writing.

It was evident from this study that the Writing Centre provides an invaluable service to undergraduate students, particularly in introducing them to academic literacy practices in a supportive environment. This was reflected in the students’ marks, often making the difference between passing and failing assignments and even the whole course. 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).

TRANSFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH MENTORING YOUNG ACADEMICS

In accordance with the developmental and equity focus of the UCT Writing Centre, we aim to develop future academics who are attuned to the academic literacy practices of their disciplines. There is a strong emphasis on equity, multilingualism and multidisciplinary in the selection process of the consultants. The group is diverse in terms of gender, age, languages spoken and nationality (currently including people from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Mauritius). The centre employs 10 postgraduate students from a range of disciplines (currently including linguistics, human genetics, educational technology, sociology, chemistry, democratic governance, adult education, environmental and geographical sciences, and social anthropology). They undergo intensive training throughout the year; training focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of Writing Centre work, including issues around access and redress, and the practical application of these. The topics include multilingualism, English as a second language, disciplinary discourses, multimodality, creative writing, referencing and academic voice.

Through the training we aim to develop a common language to theorize our practice and talk about teaching, learning and writing processes. Reflections from the consultants attest to how working in the Centre has led to the transformation of their academic identities as postgraduate students and educators, the refinement of their academic research and writing practices, as well as the development of their teaching (Lewanika & Archer, 2006):

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. . . .

This consultant’s reflections reveal a transformation in his identity and practice as an educator. His interactions within the Writing Centre community changed his perception of teaching from an exercise in which he imparts knowledge, to one that acknowledges that he is an active participant in a mutual learning exercise.

In the last 10 years, we have produced 16 academic appointments at seven different tertiary institutions in a range of departments, including Academic

Development, Religious Studies, English, Film and Media, Law, Botany, Nursing, Civil Engineering, Environmental and Geographical Sciences, Sociology. These are academics well-trained in teaching writing and academic argument. Seven of these young academics were interviewed to ascertain the degree to which the Writing Centre had prepared them for and facilitated their entry into academia. All commented on the significance of the Centre to the development of their pre-existing ideas of academic discourse, particularly the barrier that this specialized discourse can pose to second-language English speakers. In addition to academic discourse, they felt they benefited from their Writing Centre experience insofar as it improved their own research, writing and teaching. It did this by allowing them to appreciate a wide number of different disciplines, to be explicitly aware of the rules that they took for granted in their own writing, and to shift the focus of their teaching from “teacher-centred” to “learner-centred.” The specific experience of one-on-one teaching was beneficial in this regard. The Centre was regarded by all interviewed as a critically important space for mentoring new academics.

The Writing Centre is a very important mentoring space. Academics generally aren't taught how to teach. The writing centre certainly made me more aware of how to deal with students and especially where they experience difficulties. It was also useful to see students from across the academic spectrum and different faculties. You realise that there are certain academic norms regardless of the department.

By training young academics, Writing Centres can facilitate equity appointments in higher education in South Africa, and also contribute to changing these teaching and learning environments.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

Writing Centres need to be grounded in critical discourses in order to understand and articulate individual cases and institutional practices. I have shown how we pursued this at UCT by developing a common theoretical basis through the training of consultants. This sense of common purpose needs to be inculcated nationally. Although Writing Centres in South African tertiary institutions have been operating for a good few years, it is only recently that Writing Centre practitioners have come together more as a community. There are now regional groupings that meet regularly, an active listserv and national

seminars. UCT, together with Stellenbosch University, has taken the lead in putting together a national book outlining the approaches to and practices within Writing Centres in South Africa (Archer & Richards, 2011). The book serves to outline differing theoretical approaches to writing that underpin the various centres, as well as differing implementation of some of these theories in particular contexts. It reflects on good practice and also grapples with some of the tensions within Writing Centres, and between Writing Centres and institutions in terms of degrees of perceived legitimacy and authority. The hope is that putting together a book of this nature will help Writing Centres in South Africa to re-engage with our history of remediation and to redefine our practice theoretically.

In this profile, I have shown the ways in which our Writing Centre takes a multi-pronged approach to writing in the institution—providing one-on-one consultations, ad hoc and generic workshops at all levels, and more sustained departmental liaisons and curriculum development. There is no quick fix where writing is concerned; we need multiple sites in and out of the curriculum for raising awareness of writing. In addition, finding ways of designing interventions to accommodate and harness student diversity is critical. 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. The Writing Centre plays a central role in this endeavour through its unique positioning in the institution, its interdisciplinary nature (which needs to be reconstructed as a strength rather than a weakness), and its ability to create coherent communities of researchers and writers. This chapter has argued that the UCT Writing Centre contributes to transformation in terms of research-led development, widening access, promoting excellence through equity, and ensuring the provision of key competencies in our graduates.

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