



CHANGING SPACES

Writing Centres and Access to Higher Education

Editors | Arlene Archer & Rose Richards



Changing Spaces: Writing Centres and Access to Higher Education

Published by SUN PReSS, a division of AFRICAN SUN MeDIA, Stellenbosch 7600
www.africansunmedia.co.za
www.sun-e-shop.co.za

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First edition 2011
ISBN 978-1-920338-59-6
ISBN 978-1-920338-60-2 (Electronic)

Set in Times 10.5/13
Cover design by Elbie Els
Typesetting by Johannes Richter

SUN PReSS is a division of AFRICAN SUN MeDIA Pty (Ltd.). Academic, professional and reference works are published under this imprint in print and electronic format. This publication may be ordered directly from www.sun-e-shop.co.za

Printed and bound by SUN MeDIA Stellenbosch, Ryneveld Street, Stellenbosch, 7600.

Acknowledgements

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

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

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

In addition to this, funding for this project was supplied by the South African Department of Education, the University of Cape Town's Writing Centre and Professor Magda Fourie-Malherbe, the Vice Rector (Teaching) at the University of Stellenbosch.

The Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of South Africa (HELTASA) provided funding for a writers' retreat in 2008, where several of the contributors were able to work on their articles, receive feedback on their own writing and provide feedback to others.

Permissions

Permission has been obtained for reprinting the following articles:

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

Leibowitz B & Parkerson A. 1995. A conversation about the UWC Writing Centre Project. In: B Leibowitz & T Volbrecht (eds). *AD dialogues: Language in development*. Vol.4. Bellville, Western Cape: University of the Western Cape Academic Development Centre. 161-177.

Nichols P. 1998. A snowball in Africa with a chance of flourishing: Writing centres as shifters of power in a South African university. *Current Writing*, 10(2): 84-95.

Van Rensburg W. 2004. The discourse of selfhood: Students negotiating their academic identities in a writing centre. *Journal for Language Teaching*, 38(2): 216-228.

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Foreword

John Trimbur

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Introduction

Writing centres as alternate pedagogical spaces

Arlene Archer and Rose Richards

Why a book about writing centres in South Africa?

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

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

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

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

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

Writing centres and access: Harnessing diversity as a resource

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Institutional placement of writing centres

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A transformational agenda: Writing centre theory in practice

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Future directions for writing centres in South Africa

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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PART 1

ALTERNATE PEDAGOGICAL SPACES

1

Student culture and cultural change

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

Pamela Nichols

Introduction

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

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

The University of the Witwatersrand

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

South African educational context

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

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

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

Literacy and language environment

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

1 SAADA became HELTASA.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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