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Challenges and potentials for Writing Centres in South African tertiary institutions

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Abstract

There are many challenges involved in developing and running Writing Centres in tertiary contexts in South Africa. These challenges include recognizing the role Writing Centres need to play in the redress of basic academic literacies. They also involve emphasizing writing as a mode of learning where higher cognitive functions such as analysis and synthesis are developed through verbal and written language. Academic discourse takes a distinct written form, comprising often unspoken conventions which dictate appropriate uses of lexicogrammatical structures. Each discipline also has its own particular 'dialect'. Acquiring these 'foreign' methods of communication poses a challenge to many students, not only English Additional Language students. One of the main challenges for Writing Centres is to provide access to academic and disciplinary discourses through making explicit how texts work in a critical manner, whilst at the same time inducting students into these discourses. This paper examines some key tensions in Writing Centre practices in the South African context, including debates about decontextualization, skills versus practices, process versus genre approaches to writing, the challenges and opportunities of the one-to-one. It explores how the Writing Centre at the University of Cape Town tries to address some of these challenges, and looks at the potentials for Writing Centres in tertiary institutions.

Keywords

Writing Centres, Academic literacies, Writing, Higher Education

Introduction

Issues around language and writing are particularly interesting in the South African context where the legacy of apartheid is still prevalent in non-equitable educational systems. Systematic African educational deprivation has led to “a persisting heritage of educational underpreparedness” (Moore 1996, 7) which includes linguistic, numerate and conceptual analytical competencies. As a response to this situation, from the 1980’s South African 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. Initially this was done in the form of separating out students who needed additional assistance. These programs were soon criticized as a stigmatization of ‘historically disadvantaged’ students and as separating the learning of ‘skills’ from the learning of content. This has led to Academic Development becoming more integrated into the mainstream over the last years. Of course, the debate between integration of language and content is ongoing and the degree of integration varies across departments, faculties, as well as institutions. Writing Centres in South Africa need to take this context of academic development into account as most Centres were born out of this context. The Writing Centre at the University of the Witwatersrand is an exception, as is Stellenbosch University’s Writing Place in its location in a larger language centre with more of an entrepreneurial emphasis. However, in most institutions, the links with Academic Development have often given Writing Centres their unique character.

The support model of earlier Academic Development programmes impacted on Writing Centre identity. The walk-in centres functioned as an extension of the remedial, separate concept of Academic Development, often with funding coming from outside the institution. The form these interventions took were mostly ‘add-on’ measures where the weaker students were siphoned off from the mainstream. Writing Centres were seen as remediation centres to rectify language ‘deficiencies’ in individual students. This situation is not unique to South Africa; Grimm talks about the “sticky history of remediation that haunts writing centre work” in the United States (1999, 84). The ‘quick fix’ model and deferment of responsibility for writing is

difficult to combat for most Writing Centres in South Africa. An unfortunate consequence of this could be the marginalization of writing from mainstream curricula. In some contexts, there have only been some fundamental shifts in the curriculum to accommodate writing and other academic literacy practices.

In general, Writing Centres and language development programs in South Africa have to take the following factors into consideration. Firstly, the fact that most students need to write in English, a language other than their mother tongue. Secondly, the academic underpreparedness of all students, but particularly those from previously disadvantaged communities. Thirdly, the fact that all students need to learn the academic discourses of different disciplines. And finally, the fact that students come to tertiary institutions with different literacies and cultural conventions.

An academic literacies approach to student writing

Not only historically disadvantaged students need assistance with writing. The language of academia is “a very specialized discourse which presents a problem for all students whether they are first or second language speakers” (Angelil-Carter 1993, 8). One of the central tensions of Writing Centres is the decontextualized nature of the operation, especially in a purely ‘drop-in’ situation. However, writing within the disciplines is vital in order to acquire discipline specific conventions. Take the teaching of referencing as an example. It is difficult to teach referencing effectively in isolation – the communication of research within a particular discipline requires higher order abilities such as comprehension, summary and synthesis of relevant information from a number of sources (Angelil-Carter 1995).

To be ‘literate’ does not simply mean having acquired the technical skills to decode and encode signs and symbols, but having mastered a set of social practices. This view of literacy as social practice, argued by, among others, Heath (1983), Street (1995), Baynham (1995), Barton and Hamilton (1998) and Gee (1996), engages with diverse notions of reading and writing that are emerging from current social and technological changes. Street refers to the ‘ideological model’ of literacy (1984, 1995) where literacy learning involves learning particular roles, forms of interaction and ways of

thinking. According to the ideological view, there are many literacies, linked to the social institutions in which they are embedded. Literacies are therefore understood as multiple, socially situated and contested.

In an attempt to draw out the implications of this approach in the tertiary education context, Lea and Street (1998) outline an ‘academic literacies’ approach. They argue that approaches to student writing in higher education have fallen into three main categories which can be tied to particular historical periods: ‘study skills’, ‘academic socialization’ and ‘academic literacies’. The ‘study skills’ approach to student writing is based on a limited understanding of literacy which emphasizes surface features of grammar and spelling. The ‘academic socialization’ approach focuses on inducting students into the institution, which is assumed to have relatively homogeneous norms, values and cultural practices. Lea and Street advocate an ‘academic literacies’ approach, which takes into account institutional relationships of discourse and power and the contested nature of writing practices. According to this view, a feature of academic literacy practices is “the requirement 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” (1998,159).

Often Writing Centres are constructed as the handmaidens of autonomous literacy, expected to deal with heterogeneity by controlling it, rather than by interpreting or negotiating it (Grimm 1999, 82). However, different approaches to student writing can determine the character and identity of a Writing Centre within the educational system, influencing whether Writing Centres are humanistic or technocist, hegemonic or counterhegemonic, remedial or developmental. See table 1 below for an application of Lea and Street’s (1998) model to the Writing Centre context.

The strength of Lea and Street’s (1998) argument is that each approach successfully encapsulates the other; these approaches are not mutually exclusive nor are they linear stages of ‘progression’. This concept of inclusivity helps to explain institutions’ often eclectic approaches to teaching writing.

Table 1. Exemplification of Lea and Street's (1998) model in the Writing Centre context

Approaches to literacy	Study skills	Academic socialization	Academic literacies approach/multiliteracies
Description of the approach / assumptions	Student writing is seen as comprised of atomized and transferable technical skills. The emphasis falls on surface correctness of language, grammar and spelling. Normative standards of instruction and assessment exist in this approach.	This approach involves inducting students into the institution, either through a process or a genre approach to teaching writing (discussed later in this chapter).	Literacies are seen as social practices. This approach sees institutions as sites of discourses and power, and writing as embedded in different disciplines and discourse communities. The emphasis falls on a multiplicity of approaches to writing instruction and assessment. Change and contestation are encouraged and ambiguity is embraced, rather than reductionism.
Writing Centre's role	In this approach, it is the Writing Centre's role to advance a mastery of skills, such as vocabulary, sentence complexity and variety. Writing Centres act as remediation centres to rectify 'deficiencies' in language.	In the process approach, students learn how to develop their analytical and critical thinking skills through dialogic exchanges with the writing consultant. One-to-one consultations reinforce the uniqueness of the student as a learner whose intelligence and writing processes cannot effectively be addressed by the unitary practices of the study skills' model. In the genre approach, the Writing Centre's role is to teach the genres of power in order to allow students to gain access to them.	Writing Centres respect and encourage multiple literacies.
Consultants' role	The consultants' role is to teach skills and rules, and to correct student errors.	The consultants' role is to inculcate students into a new 'culture'. In the genre approach, this tends to be more of a one-way communication. However, a process approach emphasizes dialogue.	The consultant's role is to facilitate reflexivity and awareness of academic practices; to emphasize and upfront students' resources and how they negotiate conflicting literacy practices.
Student's role	The student's role tends to be passive and involves the internalization of sets of rules.	The approach here is one of apprenticeship learning; the apprentice writer learns from a more experienced and knowledgeable writer. In the process approach, students gain confidence in discovering their own 'voice'. In the genre approach, the student gains confidence in a range of genres.	The student needs to explore various 'voices' in his/her own writing, as well as in the valued texts of the discipline.
Critique of approach	This approach tends to be reductionist, decontextualized and overly focused on the end product rather than the process of writing. It also emphasizes student deficit and encourages dependence rather than critical thinking.	The process approach can assume sameness amongst students, and ignore change or power in institutional practices. Student writing is often seen as a transparent medium of representation. In the genre approach, the emphasis on direct transmission of text types can lend itself to uncritical reproduction. It tends to reify power as a possession of a particular text-type rather than seeing it as relational. Both genre and process approaches emphasize social mobility within set structures, rather than encourage change of those structures.	This approach is probably more appropriate for advanced students. It could be seen more as the end of a process rather than the beginning.

In talking about writing in this paper, I use the term 'practices' rather than 'skills' in order to emphasize the social nature of what we do as writers. As argued above, the term 'skills' suggests a set of neutral techniques that are somehow separate from the social context that favors them. Pedagogically, the term 'skills' is prescriptive and seems to represent a deficit view of the learner writer as someone who does not have the desirable package of techniques. Clark and Ivanic use the term 'practices' to refer to "not just what people do, but what they make of what they do, and how it constructs

them as social subjects” (1997, 82). The concept of ‘practice’ offers a way of linking writing with what individuals as socially situated actors do, both at the level of context of a specific situation and at the level of context of culture (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999, 21).

Ways of integrating writing into the disciplines at the UCT Writing Centre

Given that writing provides access to and a way of learning the structure of disciplinary thought such as ways of thinking, reasoning, interpreting and explaining that is typical to a discipline, separation from context could be problematic (Archer 2008). The Writing Centre at the University of Cape Town (UCT) has thus attempted to set up coherent links with departments and course curricula and to integrate writing and other academic literacy practices within content subjects. After giving a brief overview of the UCT Writing Centre, I will explore how we have attempted to integrate writing in different ways.

The Writing Centre at the University of Cape Town began in 1993. Although it has been located in different institutional places at different times in its history, it is currently conceived as a project based within a larger structure, the Language Development Group. The Language Development Group focuses on teaching academic literacy practices within curricula and courses, whereas the Writing Centre tends to operate more on a voluntary, ad hoc basis. However, as part of the larger Language Development Group we do focus on developmental work, particularly through curriculum involvement. This means working in partnership with faculties to develop aspects of the curriculum in terms of language development.¹

The Writing Centre also has a ‘drop-in’ one-on-one service. The cognitive as well as the affective value of the one-on-one consultation is well-documented (Harris 1995, Oye 1993, Flynn 1993) and the walk-in centre is important to meet students’ immediate needs which may not be met in individual departments. The philosophy of the UCT student consultancy is that all students can improve their writing, whether they are highly experienced academic writers or complete novices. The service is thus

¹ See Thesen and Van Pletzen 2006 for an historical account of the Language Development Group.

offered to students at any level of study and across all disciplines. The premise underlying the consultant-student relation is Lave and Wenger's argument that learning is not located in the acquisition of structure, but in the increased access of learners to participating roles in expert performances (1991, 17).

The UCT Writing Centre attempts to link writing and disciplinary context by employing consultants from a range of disciplines, embedding writing workshops into particular courses, working in tandem with the Language Development Group, working with lecturers to integrate writing into the curriculum, teaching credit-bearing stand alone courses, developing efficient systems of feedback to the institution, and conducting interdisciplinary writer's circles for postgraduate students.

Appoint consultants from a range of disciplines

In an attempt to address some of the disciplinary context, the UCT Writing Centre appoints consultants from a range of disciplines. In this way, we are able to access the consultants' knowledge, as well as establish strong links to their departments. The consultants are all post-graduate students at Masters and PhD level and are thus fairly deeply immersed in the practices of their disciplines, which currently include property studies, sociology, linguistics, environmental sciences, library science, microbiology and ethnomusicology. This cross-disciplinarity enables us to give our clients fairly specialised advice on writing in the discipline, but also creates an interesting and vibrant space for discussion of academic conventions.

The consultants attend a five day initial training programme at the beginning of the year and ongoing training sessions throughout the year which aim to combine the generic and the discipline-specific. This training includes topics such as multilingualism, English as a second language, disciplinary discourses, postgraduate issues, multimodality, creative writing, referencing and academic voice. One such training session involved consultants thinking about the discourse characteristics of writing in their own disciplines, particularly in terms of writer's stance (Hyland 1999). The hope was that this analysis would give the consultants a metalanguage to talk about the features of a range of disciplinary discourses with each other and with the

students. Through this process (both the seminar and a collaborative paper that arose from it), we have gained some insight into the ways we mediate students' acquisition of disciplinary discourse. The conclusion we reached is that "what needs to be made explicit is not so much the particular conventions as much as that conventions exist, are challenged by particular social environments and can change" (Paxton et al 2008, 118).

Embed workshops in courses

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. For instance, for the last three years we have run workshops in first and second year architecture concentrating on critical analysis and writing a visual comparison. The students either have written an outline or an abstract of their assignments in preparation for these workshops.

Another example is the Writing Centre's four-year involvement in the Centre for Film and Media. 'Media and Society' is one of the biggest first-year Humanities courses. It addresses image literacy and media writing. The Writing Centre conducts a drafting exercise with approximately 500 first-year students in 20 workshops. We have collaborated closely with the convener, who has built some of our suggestions into the course. The rationale for the workshops is to allow students to critically engage with the academic discourse specific to Film and Media by peer editing their first assignment. This assignment involves a multimodal semiotic analysis of a media text, usually an advertisement. The workshops tend to concentrate on writing an introduction, emphasizing the importance of having a clear thesis or argument. This is especially tricky in a semiotic analysis which can often feel like a list of unconnected points, arranged according to tools of analysis rather than according to themes. This was one consultant's account of a workshop:

After talking about what should go into an introduction and emphasizing the importance of having a clear thesis or argument, I got the students to say to each other what they thought their main argument was in the essay. Many of them had extraordinary difficulty in expressing this in a specific way, and often resorted to vague generalities.

In preparation for the workshops, the convener of the course conducted a training session with the consultants around the task, the departmental expectations and the marking criteria. Based on our recommendations from the previous year, the tutors marked the first drafts of the essays before the workshops. When issues of content arose, these were discussed with the tutor and, in some workshops, it seemed like a generative environment was created for this kind of discussion. For instance, in one workshop, the students did not know certain concepts such as ‘anchorage’, ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ and so discussion of these and how to apply them in a textual analysis ensued.

The feedback from consultants and students suggested that the workshops created a ‘safe academic space’ to discuss the writing practices at university level. The nature of lectures does not offer many opportunities for students to practice academic discourse, whereas these kinds of workshops can create a space for students to make meaning of their disciplines. These initiatives play an essential role in illuminating the often opaque social practices and writing conventions defining the academic landscape of the university.

Work with lecturers to integrate writing-to-learn in their courses

Writing Centre practitioners can assist lecturers in mainstream courses to utilize writing as a mode of learning integral to student development. The emphasis here falls on writing in order to learn, as well as learning to write. Writing is a problem-solving activity in which students generate and organize their own arguments and clarify ideas in order to communicate these effectively to their readers. Writing may also involve the assimilation, interpretation and reformulation of other peoples’ ideas and the formation of individual opinions. Educationalists such as Vygotsky (1962) and Bruner (1967) have pointed out that higher cognitive functions, such as analysis and synthesis, seem to develop most fully only with the support system of verbal, and particularly written, language.

The assignment needs to be of interest to the students. It should lead to some understandings and conclusions about the subject that the students did not have before

(Fulwiler 1986). It is vital that feedback on writing is seen as part of the learning process and not just a question of giving a mark. Writers need to internalize the criteria for success. This can be done through detailed marking grids distributed to the students with the assignment topic. One way of opening up the processes of writing is to encourage more collaborative practices among learner writers. Students can collaborate on brainstorming ideas at the beginning of a task, as well as by reading and commenting on each other's drafts through a system of peer-review.²

Students write not merely to show their understanding, but as a central part of the process of constructing understanding. Writing is therefore a "curricular responsibility which must be addressed by all disciplines" (Moore 1996, 26).

Teach in mainstream courses

In order to stay in touch with the pressures, rhythms and challenges of tertiary teaching, it is important that consultants in the Writing Centre work together with mainstream lecturers in credit-bearing courses. For example, this year, one of the consultants linked up with a member of the Language Development Group teaching in the Health Sciences. The students in this group take a range of first year courses, including physiotherapy, occupational therapy and communication speech disorder. They were engaged in writing a final research report arising from a group work process. The consultant sat in on the relevant classes, and each of the students then consulted with him on a first draft of the assignment. Another example is the teaming up of a consultant with two Language Development lecturers on a Language in the Humanities course. This is an academic literacy course which caters for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. English is a second or third language for the majority of the students. The consultant's work involved observing teaching, participating in class discussion, facilitating small groups, marking assignments and attending meetings. This kind of collaboration is vital to prevent the consultants and the Writing Centre from becoming 'disembodied' from the rest of the university, and especially from the curriculum.

² See Archer 2000 for ideas on how to integrate writing into the curriculum.

Another important way of remaining connected to the curriculum is having Writing Centre members teach or co-teach stand alone courses. This may not be important for all consultants, but certainly for the full-time members of staff. At UCT, the Writing Centre co-ordinator teaches a seminar on a third year media course entitled 'Visual language and culture in the media'. This seminar focuses on definitions of text, writing as design, the relation between the verbal and the visual, the concept of a 'visual grammar', technologies of writing and point of view. Teaching in the Centre for Film and Media has enabled more meaningful connections with the Writing Centre to develop, especially in terms of the first year interventions discussed earlier. The co-ordinator also convenes and teaches a year long Academic and Professional Communication course in Engineering focusing on the development of academic literacy practices. There is an on-line writing component which culminates in a mini-conference where the learners present their research in a professional forum. Both courses create a space for 'trying out' different approaches to teaching writing, such as on-line fora, portfolios and multimodal assessment.

Develop feedback loops

The Writing Centre has to look for opportunities to use its sites of practice as sites of institutional learning. The one-on-one consultancy has been used to provide feedback to departments around the ways in which their students are grappling with particular tasks and, to a lesser extent, to feed into research on student writing. Through these feedback loops, the "relatively expensive model of one-to-one tutoring for students can be justified in terms of a data-gathering exercise to inform institutional development more broadly" (Moore, Paxton, Scott, Thesen 1998, 16). 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 from first year through to their doctoral studies.

Create interdisciplinary spaces: Writer's circles

Writer's circles are designed for postgraduate students in the Writing Centre as part of the recently launched Postgraduate Initiative. These circles comprise students from a range of disciplines who meet on a regular basis to discuss issues they encounter around writing and their research, as well as the "postgraduate condition" (Chihota and Thesen 2005). The circles convene regularly in groups of about eight students who attend on a voluntary basis. Circles focus on sharing experiences, peer review, confidence-building, socializing and networking. There is a strong emphasis on affect, and the circles are constructed as 'safe spaces' for discussing personal problems relating to the research and writing process. The activities in writer's circles are varied and include critiques of research agendas and methodologies, and peer reviews of extracts of writing, such as research proposals, abstracts, extracts from chapters. Seminars on aspects of writing such as cohesion, voice and use of sources also form part of the activities.

These circles are important arenas for interdisciplinary debate and dialogue as they bring together students from various academic backgrounds. Chihota and Thesen (2005) claim that the mix of disciplines in writer's circles is extremely generative. Regardless of their disciplines, students at postgraduate level are all engaged in problem solving of some kind. The discussions in the Circles also provide "fascinating insights into postgraduate processes of knowledge making, particularly regarding cross- and interdisciplinarity. Many students are moving between disciplines, or are choosing to work in interdisciplinary ways, but these trends are not acknowledged by university structures and bureaucracies" (Chihota and Thesen 2005, 15).

I have attempted to outline some of the ways that the UCT Writing Centre has attempted to integrate writing in the disciplines. Through looking at UCT's model, I have argued that there is no 'quick fix' in line with the autonomous model where writing is concerned – institutions need multiple sites in and out of the curriculum for raising awareness of writing in the university. I will now move on to explore another key challenge in Writing Centre work, namely the degree to which we need to provide

students with access to dominant practices whilst at the same time enabling them to critique these practices.

Academic socialization versus critique of conventions

We have already explored the notion that discursive practices are ideological in the ways in which they serve to maintain existing social relations of power. Street (1996) shows how joining a particular 'literacy club' can be problematic for those trying to learn its rules of entry from non-dominant, or disadvantaged positions in the power structures of the university and the society in which the university is embedded. Social, political and economic power is closely associated with access to and knowledge of certain discourse forms.

Teachers of writing are in a double-bind. On the one hand, it would be in their learners' interests if they could help them to conform to the expectations of the institution. On the other hand, by doing so, they are reproducing the ideologies and inequities of the institution and society at large. Kress argues that the learning of genre is "intimately linked with the codification of knowledge in a society" (Kress 1982, 123). According to him, the child learns what s/he is allowed to say and in what forms; appropriate ways of organizing and telling that knowledge, and the appropriate ways of representing social relations between writer and reader. The key question in terms of equity is how to provide access to dominant forms, while at the same time valuing and promoting the diversity of representational resources of our students and of the broader society. The access paradox refers to the social, educational and political advantages of acculturation into university practices for individual students. 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. Dominant practices include dominant languages, varieties, discourses, modes of representation, genres and types of knowledge.

Process writing: helping students find a 'voice'

Writing can produce an 'identity crisis' which can be a major stumbling block to students. Many students in South Africa have to write in a language that is not their own and have to adopt specific discourses or genres. This may mean sacrificing other aspects of their identity. According to Clark and Ivanic, there are three aspects to the identity of a writer. Firstly, writers bring to any act of writing an 'autobiographical self': their personal autobiography up to that moment. Secondly, writers create through the act of writing a 'discoursal self': a representation of self through the discourses they enter into as they write. Thirdly, writers differ in how far they establish their authorial presence within a piece of writing (1997, 136). Many students approach academic writing without a sense that they have anything worth saying. Feeling the right to exert a presence in the text is often related to personal autobiography, and therefore is often associated with the gender, class and ethnicity of the writer.

The notion underlying some strains of process writing, namely allowing students to find a 'voice', is an assumption which is shown to be flawed when attempted in certain South African contexts. In 'progressivist' pedagogy, 'voice' is a critical term for formulating an alternative pedagogy. According to this view, making a space for student voice entails "replacing the authoritative discourse of imposition and recitation with a voice capable of speaking in one's own terms, a voice capable of listening, retelling, and challenging the very grounds of knowledge and power" (Giroux in Cope and Kalantzis 1993, 50). According to Murray, "it is the responsibility of the student to explore his [sic] own world with his own language, to discover his own meaning. The teacher supports but does not direct this expedition to the students' own truth" (Quoted in Cope and Kalantzis 1993, 53). It is clear that this version of the process approach concentrates only on the internal processes of the individual mind, without relating the writer to the social context in which s/he is writing. However, writing needs to be thought of as a cognitive process, as well as in terms of culturally shaped practice.

It could be argued that this notion of voice is a culturally biased one. White middle-class students from print-immersed environments already have an inkling of how a text works. According to Cope and Kalantzis, this same cultural bias also manifests in the assumption that all students will intuitively discover things for themselves (1993, 57). The reliance on rote learning taught by schools and the weak conceptual development of first and second year students militates against them finding a voice, as they may not have internalized the material sufficiently, and may therefore battle to converse or explain their thinking in conversational language. Writing consultations working within a process approach are thus heavily dependent on the broader teaching and learning context for their success.

The issues around the identity of a writer need to be made explicit. Different types of writing need to be modeled for students. On the one hand, writing where writers are at the centre, exerting control and establishing a presence. On the other hand, writing where writers have relinquished control of the situation to an impersonal source and other named authorities, sometimes resulting in plagiarism. Learner writers must have a sense of personal power or authoritativeness. Students also need to be made aware of hidden cultural assumptions in socially powerful discourses. Certain genres of factual writing, for example, deliberately downplay the author's voice and thus pretend greater objectivity than they actually have. This is more in line with the 'genre' approach to teaching writing, which I will now discuss in some detail.

Genre approach to teaching writing

From the early 80's, genre theorists, such as Kress (1982), Cope and Kalantzis (1993), and theorists who argue for explicit pedagogy, like Delpit (1988), and Heath (1983), argued that students should be taught the 'rules' of what is appropriate in a way that highlights their social constructedness. This was both a political and a pedagogical move. On the political side, they argued that learning new genres gives one the "linguistic potential to join new realms of social activity and social power" (Cope and Kalantzis 1993, 7). On the pedagogical side, they argued that writing could be taught better if the characteristics of textual forms were made explicit. The underlying assumption was that an explicit curriculum was essentially an equitable curriculum.

A critique of genre pedagogy is that teaching the explicit and implicit rules of power can potentially mean direct and formulaic instruction. The emphasis on direct transmission of text types could also lend itself to uncritical reproduction. However, generic forms are constantly shifting, being reinvented, and remade. Another critique of the approach is that it falls into an ‘acculturation’ model where the status quo of social relations is confirmed by the teaching of dominant forms, and socially legitimated ways of using language. In this way, genre pedagogy could emphasize social mobility within set structures, rather than encourage change of those structures. The acculturation model conforms to the ‘academic socialization’ approach outlined by Lea and Street (1998), as discussed earlier. Teaching genre for conformity could reflect a deficit view of students as not having the desirable package of techniques. Genre pedagogy does not always take into consideration the context of cultural texts, their discourses and institutional sites. Luke (1996) points out that genre pedagogy tends to reify power as a possession of an individual or a text-type, rather than to see it as relational. In the work of the Writing Centre, there should be a shift from the focus on generic forms, to making available knowledge of the potentials of the communication resources, and the possibilities of their use in specific social situations.

What is extremely valuable about genre pedagogy is that it aims to bring generic conventions into focus, to show what kinds of social situations produce them, and what the meanings of these social situations are. In looking at academic literacy practices, it needs to be made clear that textual production is dictated by discourse conventions, and that texts are structured in reasonably predictable ways according to patterns of social interaction in a particular culture. Students need to explore the nature of the discourse community they are working in to identify the discourse conventions and the dominant genres so that they can gain access to those genres.

It seems clear that genre knowledge needs to form part of Writing Centre practice. However, these genres should not be taught as ideal and stable forms. Although genre is about conventions at work in a domain of practice, it is important to bear in mind

that there is a tension between convention and a dynamic for constant change. This is the effect of the “constantly transformative action of people acting in ever changing circumstances” (Kress 2003, 108). Thus, there can be no sense of a ‘pure genre’; rather there is constant change, mixing and hybridisation of genres. A more generative notion of genre is not one where you learn the forms of existing kinds of texts in order to replicate them, but “where you learn the generative rules of the constitution of generic form within the power structures of a society” (Kress 2003, 121). This goes far beyond the transmission of genres, and is more in line with the ‘academic literacies’ approach to writing outlined earlier.

Potentials of Writing Centers

What needs to be recognized in South Africa, is the enormous power that Writing Centres could potentially possess by virtue of their positioning. Writing Centres as they have been developed in South African tertiary institutions have the capacity to bridge disciplines in a common search for the most effective methods to instruct students. Although at times problematic, the tensions between generic and discipline specific approaches remain important and productive in the Writing Centre context. Also, according to Murphy, the potential that Writing Centers have to transform the rhetorical communities of tertiary institutions by “extending and redefining the dialogue on literacy education” (1995, 124), represents their most significant power and makes them agencies for change within academia. I have argued that consultants need to talk with students about academic expectations in ways that acknowledge whose values are at stake. According to one consultant,

I have also realised that purely transmitting and illuminating the invisible literacy practices of disciplines do not allow for a critical understanding of the discourses that shape the literacy practices of the various disciplines. In my development as a consultant and literacy practitioner I am now beginning to work towards including critical discussions around the ideological nature of texts in Writing Centre consultations with students.

Writing Centres can work effectively with students if that work is situated within a desire to understand and negotiate difference rather than the institutional need to manage or eliminate it (Grimm 1999, 82). The autonomous view of literacy has treated students as users of a system rather than as potential transformers of it.

Writing Centres are involved with the emancipatory dimension of knowledge, such as constructing arguments and thinking through ideas. They are also involved with the technical dimensions of knowledge, such as the mechanics of writing. Thus, they are in a unique position to empower students within the system. The complexities which arise where there are different languages and discourses amongst students can be well met by the one-on-one situation. The most important role of consultants is to help students adopt a new identity, that of educated people who have something important to say. An assignment written within the university community is the result of serious reflection about a specific topic. The act of writing about the topic makes public the reflection and the assignment becomes part of an ongoing dialogue among scholars. In order to help students to understand and to assume their new roles, consultants act as guides. Writing is one of the main means of assessment in tertiary institutions and to help students with writing helps improve academic performance. In some cases, our assistance and support may mean that the student stays in the tertiary system, and proceeds to graduation.

It is important for Writing Centres in South Africa to re-engage with our history of remediation and to redefine our practice theoretically. I have argued that Writing Centres need to be grounded in critical discourses in order to understand and articulate individual cases and institutional practices. Hence, the importance of developing a common theoretical basis through the training of consultants. In Lewanika and Archer (2006) we present the University of Cape Town Writing Centre as a “community of practice” in which the academic identities and practices of our consultants are continually developed through mutual engagement. In the selection and training of our consultants, we attempt to create our own disciplinary base in the Writing Centre which is used to inform the training, According to one of the consultants,

The annual training session as well as the weekly training meetings have provided me with valuable insights into what constitutes academic literary, into the structures of academic writing, and into writing as a process. I have become familiar with some of the theoretical underpinnings of academic

literacy – and researchers like Gee, Street, Hyland, and Cummings have begun to inform my understanding of the field.

Wenger argues that if a community of practice lacks the ability to reflect, it becomes “hostage to its own history” (2000, 230). As a community, we work on developing a common language to talk about teaching, learning and writing processes. Along with beginning to talk about and theorize writing practices, we also need to disseminate our research on academic writing practices; to “share more” of what we learn from students “who reveal the invisible borders to discourse communities” and “whose lived experience reveals the contradictions in our democratic discourse about literacy” (Grimm 1999, 92).

Conclusion

There is increasing diversity in terms of language, culture and educational preparedness within the student population in most South African tertiary institutions. Finding ways of designing interventions to accommodate and harness this diversity is becoming critical. Effective teaching of writing involves a dialogue between the culture and discourses of academia and those of students, offering students 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.

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