The Space Between: Pedagogic Collaboration between a Writing Centre and an Academic Department

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The expectations placed on students with respect to appropriate academic writing may hinder successful participation in Higher Education. Full participation is further complicated by the fact that each discipline within the University constitutes its own community of practice, with its own set of literacy practices. While Writing Centres aim to help students navigate their apprenticeship into these practices, their location on the periphery of academic activity may undermine these efforts. This article reports on an intervention aimed at initiating a more integrated approach to the provision of writing development services. It was undertaken within a qualitative, interpretive design-based research framework. The results suggest that Writing Centres can add significant value by leveraging their unique location within universities, that is, in the spaces between academic disciplines, to assist students to achieve epistemological access to a discipline. Writing consultants (the focus of this study) need to interact with different academic discourses. The result is that they engage, to an extent, in disciplinary 'boundary-hopping'. We argue that Writing Centres should facilitate this by fostering a space for engagement between disciplines. The article concludes by arguing that further research on using the interstices between disciplines as a resource for developing student academic writing is required.

Keywords: academic literacy; writing centre; teaching intervention; access; participation

Introduction and background

The expectations placed on students with respect to writing in ways that are appropriate for academia can unintentionally limit, rather than widen, *real* access to higher education (Lillis, 2001; Hutchings, 2005; Mgqwashu, 2009). In this article, *real* access is defined as that which promotes not only physical access,

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but also epistemological access into the cultural knowledge-making practices that are dominant in institutions of higher education (Starfield, 1994; Daweti, 2002). Thus, access is more than simply *participation* or enrolment; it must *also* involve throughput (Slonimsky & Shalem, 2004). One dominant knowledge-making practice is academic writing, in general, and essayist literacy, in particular (Lillis, 2001; Daweti, 2002; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). However, students' acquisition of essayist literacy is fraught with challenges.

This article begins from the assumption that one of the roles of Writing Centres (and, crucially, academics) is to assist students to navigate their apprenticeship into academic communities of practice. Writing Centre consultants can play a crucial role in helping students acquire essayist literacy (Archer, 2008). However, as Writing Centres are often marginalised from mainstream university curricula, this can hamper their ability to do so (Archer, 2010). The University of Johannesburg's (UJ) Writing Centre was, both figuratively and physically, situated apart from academic departments and so, at best, on the periphery of academic disciplines. As Hutchings (2005: 731-732) notes, this peripheral status renders Writing Centres "weak agencies for departmental intervention, support and organisational learning" as they are "outside students' respective disciplinary practices". This marginalised position has prompted scholars such as Mgqwashu (2001) to question the ability of Writing Centres to meaningfully contribute to the development of student academic literacy. According to Mgqwashu (2001), initiatives such as the Writing Place, or Writing Centre, should work across programmes with the aim of improving teaching and assessment of writing in specific fields of study. For Writing Centres to contribute meaningfully to the promotion of real student learning and success, they will have to engage in strategic, pedagogic collaborations with academic departments (Jacobs, 2007).

This article reports on a design-based research intervention undertaken by the Writing Centre co-ordinator and a Geography lecturer. The aim was to initiate an integrated approach to the development of student academic writing. This article explores, in particular, the role of the writing consultant in this process rather than that of students. We were informed by the notion that each academic discipline constitutes its own discourse community and we thus premised our intervention on the notion that students must learn essayist literacy conventions within the domain of a specific academic community (Elbow, 1991; Lillis, 2001; Daweti, 2002). This article adds to the literature in two ways. First, the 'intervention' undertaken contributes to a bouquet of options available to Writing Centres and offers insights into the advantages and shortcomings of the process, in particular, by documenting the "voices" of the writing consultants involved. Secondly, we argue that Writing Centres can transcend the teaching of isolated 'skills' and become involved in fostering engagement between and within disciplines if they engage collaboratively with professionals located within specific academic disciplines.

In the next section, a brief account of design-based research is provided. Thereafter, the intervention is described in detail. Due to the design-based nature

of the study, the literature within which the intervention is located is integrated into the discussion of the intervention itself as well as into the discussion of the results thereof. In this respect, the article reflects the complex engagement between theory and pedagogy that characterises design-based research (Design Based Research Collective, 2003; Collins, Joseph & Bielazcyc, 2004).

Design-based research

Design-based research, used primarily in educational settings, is often criticised by both positivist and interpretivist researchers. This is because it does not rely either on conducting empirical tests, or on 'objective' observation of phenomena. Instead, it involves the researcher implementing innovations, evaluating these innovations *during* implementation and making changes to the implemented innovation *while the implementation is ongoing*; in other words, it involves deriving "research findings from formative evaluations" (Collins *et al.*, 2004: 16). In such research, the actions of the researcher/s are integral to the outcomes not only of the planned intervention, but also of the research project undertaken. As Collins *et al.* (2004) argue, it is unlikely that planned interventions will specify what to do in all possible scenarios and it is thus inevitably necessary, if the end goal is to be achieved, that researchers make various decisions during the implementation process.

In this research, it was apt to adopt such a research paradigm, because we were concerned with "how, when and why educational innovations work in practice" (Design-Based Research Collective, 2003: 5) and because, although we had a plan and a clear idea of what we wanted to achieve, we could not adequately control all of the factors at play. Kelly (2004) names three distinct 'types' of design-based research projects, one of which is the collaborative teaching experiment. This study falls within this subtype in that it is a collaborative attempt at fostering integrated student academic writing development (informed by established theory) through a broad initial plan which allowed for flexibility during implementation, in order to facilitate significant epistemic access on the part of students.

The intervention

The problem

Established in 2002, the UJ Writing Centre is a fully funded student resource centre. Services are free and readily available. The Centre's philosophy is four pronged: it is process-oriented, non-evaluative, people-centred and non-remedial. Writing Centre consultants are postgraduate students with above average writing skills, hailing from an array of disciplines. They all undergo an induction process that involves an initial training course and ongoing development throughout the year, the purpose of which is to induct them into the debates and issues in respect of student academic literacy development. This is similar to the University of Cape Town (UCT) system (Archer, 2008, 2010), as well as those of other Writing Centres locally and internationally.

The goal of the Writing Centre is to impact positively on the quality of student writing and, to this end, it employs pedagogical tools such as collaboration, peer learning and individualised instruction. It seeks to assist students to navigate (or make sense of) their literacy apprenticeship. The location of the Writing Centre, however, both physically and figuratively, on the periphery of academic practice proved to hinder the realisation of this goal. Operating from this peripheral 'space', it was evident that the contribution of the Writing Centre to the development of Geography students' academic writing was *ad hoc*, limited and often superficial. This was despite the Geography lecturer and Writing Centre Coordinator actively encouraging students to make use of the services of the Centre. Take up of Writing Centre services was low and, when students did approach the Centre, they did so too close to the due date for submission to allow for any meaningful intervention. Therefore, a collaborative pedagogic intervention was designed and implemented to try and overcome these hurdles. That said, all participants gave full informed consent and participation was completely voluntary.

The plan

From the outset, the focus of the intervention was the writing consultants, rather than the students. The aim was to establish whether or not drawing writing consultants closer to the academic discipline of Geography could enable them to better facilitate epistemological access for Geography students or not. This was based on the premise that, if the mediators (the writing consultants) were more capacitated, they would be better placed to assist the students. To this end, however, the intervention itself must be regarded as an outcome of the massification of physical access to university. That is, the lecturer-to-student ratio was high and precluded direct intervention between the students and the lecturer, in part due to high student numbers, but also because of timetabling constraints. However, it is important to note that the intervention reflects the philosophy of both the authors, that is, that academic literacy should be explicitly taught, embedded into the curriculum and elevated by foregrounding it in assessment opportunities (Mgqwashu, 2001).

The intervention was structured around a specific task, namely the writing of a Geography essay, based on a topic covered in the first-year curriculum. In this regard, we were informed by the work of Ballard and Clanchy (1988, 1991) which calls for overt enabling of students to read (and use) the essential features (its rituals, values, language styles and behaviour) of the academic culture. Academic essays are one such feature of Geography. In addition, some of the writing rituals embedded in essayist literacy include stating opinions supported by scientific evidence; using specific language styles and registers; using the passive voice, and in-text citations and referencing.

The intervention was launched with the Geography lecturer joining the writing consultants in their weekly developmental sessions. During these sessions, the assessment task and tools, namely the essay question, the academic sources and the

assessment rubric were shared with the writing consultants. Lively discussion sessions ensued to develop a common understanding in terms of how the academic essay was to be written, what it should 'look like' within the boundaries of the Geography academic discipline, and what sort of feedback writing consultants should give to the students. It is important to note that these sessions were collaborative in nature and all parties contributed to the discussion.

The sessions served to reveal what is often referred to as the 'hidden curriculum' or the hidden 'rituals of the academic tribe of Geography'. That is, to academic outsiders (like the writing consultants or first-year students), what a Geography essay should 'look like' is not obvious, whereas to insiders it is. Those who lack this cultural capital often experience university life as disempowering (Hutchings, 2005; Mgqwashu, 2009). To this end, we found value in the notion that universities (and academic disciplines) have particular sociocultural histories and a range of particular practices or shared values and conventions that have evolved over time, most of which are embedded and hidden from outsiders (Lillis, 2001). Thus, access to these practices requires access to the particular academic society (or tribe) that both builds and defends the practices. It is hoped that explicit teaching of these rituals by an insider will unveil the "institutional mystery" (Lillis, 2001: 20) that shrouds academic (and discipline-specific) ways of thinking, valuing, interacting, speaking and, indeed, writing (Gee, 1996). The result should be improved epistemological access to the university. We found that the manner in which an insider (the Geography lecturer) can engage with outsiders (in our instance, writing consultants) can facilitate this process.

The students were then given the essay task; the academic resources to be used, and the rubric.

Table 1: Geography assessment rubric:

Criteria	Not achieved	Partly achieved	Almost achieved	Achieved	Achieved with distinction
Introduction	Very poor – language needs work, ineffective, unsuitable = 0	Weak introduction, needs a great deal of revision = 0.5	Partly effective, but language and logic needs revision = 1	Clear, effective and logical = 1.5 to 2	Excellent, sets the scene well, logical and effective = 2.5 to 3
Headings	No headings at all = 0				
Headings of a very poor standard or very few headings = 0.5	Headings given, but weak = 1 to 1.5	Headings are partly effective = 2 to 2.5	Appropriate, effective, headings = 3 to 3.5	Excellent use of headings, effective, appropriate and interesting = 4	
Addressing the question	Not addressed at all = 0	Addressed superficially = 0.5 to 1 to 1.5	Addressed part of the time = 2 to 2.5 to 3 to 3.5 to 4 to 4.5 to 5	Addressed much to most of the time = 5.5 to 6 to 6.5 to 7 to 7.5 to 8 to 8.5 to 9	Fully addressed = 9.5 to 10 to 10.5 to 11
Logical argument	No logical argument, essay is almost impossible to read = 0 to 0.5 to 1 to 1.5 to 2	Essay is readable, but needs a great deal of revision and editing = 2.5 to 3 to 3.5 to 4 to 4.5	Argument can be followed, needs some editing = 5 to 5.5 to 6 to 6.5 to 7	Easy to read, logical and coherent = 7.5 to 8 to 8.5	A pleasure to read, beautiful, logical, coherent argument = 9 to 9.5 to 10
Correct information that is supported with evidence	No or very little evidence provided = 0 to 0.5	Some evidence provided = 1 to 1.5	Part of the necessary evidence required was provided = 2 to 2.5	A great deal of evidence provided = 3	Sound argument was backed by strong evidence = 4
Conclusion	Very poor – language needs work, ineffective, unsuitable = 0	Weak conclusion, needs a great deal of revision = 0.5	Partly effective, but language and logic need revision = 1	Clear, effective and logical = 1.5 to 2	Excellent, wraps up the essay very well, logical and effective = 2.5 to 3

Written language skills (academic English)	Many spelling mistakes = 0 Ineffective, incorrect use of punctuation = 0 Weak sentence construction = 0 Poor, weak vocabulary = 0 Lack of cohesion = 0			Few spelling mistakes = 0.5 Good use of punctuation = 0.5 Okay sentence construction = 0.5 Okay vocabulary, turn of phrase, register = 0.5 Partly coherent = 0.5	No spelling mistakes = 1 Excellent use of punctuation = 1 Good sentence construction = 1 Good vocabulary, turn of phrase, register = 1 Coherent = 1
References cited in text	No references cited in the text = 0	Some references cited, partly correct = 0.5 to 1	Many references cited, mostly correct = 1.5 to 2	Many references, but not all, and system used is correct (most of the time) = 2.5 to 3	All references cited, correct system used throughout = 3.5 to 4
Reference list	No references list = 0	Some references in the list, partly correct format = 0.5 to 1	Many references listed, mostly correct format= 1.5 to 2	Many references listed, but not all, and system used is correct (most of the time) = 2.5 to 3	All references listed, correct system used throughout, cited references match list completely = 3.5 to 4
Evidence of planning (mind map)	No evidence of planning = 0	Totally ineffective mind map = 0.5	Partly effective mind map, lacks detail = 1	Effective, sufficient detail, outline of argument = 1.5	Good, effective mind map, a great deal of detail, argument is clear and content well thought out = 2

They then had to generate a first draft which was informally assessed (using the rubric) by the lecturer and the writing consultants. The majority of the students did submit a first draft. The informal assessment served to provide students with an opportunity to get meaningful and constructive feedback on their writing, so as to enhance their writing practices and increase their chances of academic success. It was

clear that, in order to reach a common understanding of what essayist literacy within the discipline of Geography means, a process of engagement between the lecturer and the writing consultants was required, in order to bring these outsiders closer to the Geography community of practice. Regular engagements took place once every week (or every second week) over the course of a semester, allowing the writing consultants to meaningfully engage with the essay topic and its broader relevance within the pedagogic aims of the Geography course; critically engage with the various perspectives on the given topic which the academic source material elucidated, and deconstruct the assessment rubric to fully understand the pedagogic expectations revealed within it. This was a response to a need for the writing consultants to be capacitated to give the students as much meaningful feedback as possible.

The first drafts were returned to the students via one-on-one feedback sessions with the writing consultants, leveraging the particular advantage of Writing Centres, namely one-to-one pedagogy, which is not always possible in other contexts. The students received both written and oral feedback in line with the strategy promoted by Murtagh and Baker (2009). The students then had to re-draft the essay using the feedback. This second draft was also informally assessed. This labour-intensive process of drafting and re-drafting can facilitate deep learning and meaningful engagement, and is a crucial component of situated learning (Choi & Hannafin, 1995).

The data

The writing consultants reflected on the intervention as it was being carried out. However, upon completion, they also engaged in a final, written reflection on the entire process. This was partly because it is difficult to appreciate the value of such a labour-intensive intervention while immersed in it. Reflection after the fact also enabled consultants to establish the value of the intervention in a more holistic manner. Specific questions were reflected upon, namely: Has the intervention increased your confidence in dealing with Geography students? Do you think that you are now better equipped to help Geography students than before? What value was there for you in terms of accessing the assessment criteria, the reading material and the essay topics? Do you think this process has had a knock-on effect in terms of how you help other (non-Geography) students? For the lecturer: What part(s) of this process and the tools (for example, readings, assessment rubric) could be improved? For the writing centre: How can the training and induction of consultants be improved?

In total, seven of the nine writing consultants submitted reflections. In addition to this, the Writing Centre co-ordinator and Geography lecturer also engaged in reflection on the intervention. The data collected was analysed using qualitative thematic analysis. This involves coding data to allow for the identification of recurrent themes emerging from qualitative data, and grouping these together in order to generate findings, conclusions and theory (Gibson & Brown, 2009). In the analysis, a

number of themes emerged. However, due to spatial constraints, only three of the more prevalent and significant themes are explored in this article.

Final comment on the intervention

In summary, Archer (2010) identifies a number of means whereby Writing Centres can facilitate writing within disciplines, such as interdisciplinary writers' circles and embedding 'writing-to-learn' workshops into specific courses. This intervention contributes to that bouquet of strategies and presents a model for Writing Centre work involving accessing a space between academic disciplines to enable consultants, students and lecturers to work together to facilitate students' apprenticeship into academic communities of practice. An important principle of the intervention was *dialogue* between all of the participants in the project, as illustrated in the following diagram. However, in this article, we focus our attention only on the interaction between lecturer and writing consultants.
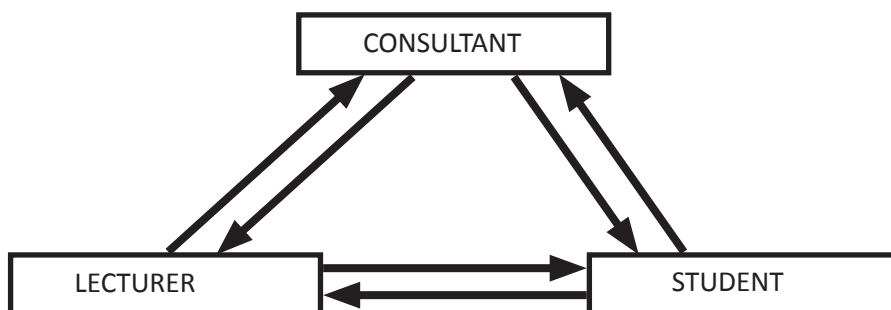
Results

Enhanced Writing Centre practice

One of the significant themes emerging was that of improved Writing Centre practice. Some consultants indicated that the intervention improved their practice as writing consultants. For example, one stated: "The process that I took on the geography students to a large extent was applied to others"; another stated: "I can at least say I now understand the general problems students have with assignments". Others reported more 'productive' one-on-one feedback sessions than previously.

Importantly, the data suggests that interaction with the academic insider (lecturer) is crucial to fostering improved practice on the part of writing consultants. Two of the consultants stated that "without an hour (*sic*) from the department ... it is difficult to help ... students" and "This entirely depends on the subject and the lecturer concerned". The bulk of the writing consultants labelled the intervention as "very beneficial", suggesting that "lecturers from other departments should make use of the weekly training sessions". In addition, many were of the opinion that the process had boosted their confidence in that they were able to advise the Geography students better.

However, not all felt that way, with a few stating that the intervention had only a "limited" effect or did "not really" impact on their practice. The Writing Centre Co-ordinator, however, was of the opinion that the intervention was an important consultant development opportunity and that the potential of the Writing Centre was more meaningfully realised through the intervention. In addition, although not formally analysed as part of this particular study, the Geography lecturer opined that the student essays were significantly better than in previous years. Specifically, academic arguments presented were more logical, more coherent and more structured. One writing consultant concurred, stating that "re-draft ... was much more coherent and had more content".

The intervention thus appears to have served to increase the success of the Writing Centre in assisting students navigate their apprenticeship into the literacy practices of their chosen academic discipline. If, as North (2003) argues, the primary purpose of a Writing Centre is to 'talk' with writers, it was evident in the data that the intervention helped the writing consultants to become more aware of the various nuances across academic discourses and so enabled them to facilitate such awareness among students, that is, to 'talk' more meaningfully with students. In particular, the often opaque rules and conventions of academic reading and writing were made more transparent to the writing consultants, the coordinator and the lecturer.

Meeting in a 'space between'

A second theme that emerged was that of disciplinary boundary crossing. It became clear that the Writing Centre (via the coordinator) and the academic department (via the lecturer) need to facilitate meeting 'in a space between' the centre and the department. The intervention described in this article helped us realise this. For example, access to the entire assessment task (academic sources, rubric and essay question) and opportunities to dialogue with the academic insider gave the writing consultants insight into the community of practice of Geography. The consultants commented as follows: "The reading materials broadened my horizons in geography"; "I got a better understanding of the topic"; "access to these materials enables me to understand the requirements from the lecturer", and the materials "helped me understand the topic more clearly".

The intervention thus supports Elbow's (1991) contention that universities are not one homogeneous academic community, but are rather a conglomeration of different discourse communities (Daweti, 2002; Archer, 2010). Most university students (with perhaps the exception of those enrolled for engineering and medicine) are not apprenticed into one particular academic community. In particular, undergraduate students have to engage with multiple academic disciplines, each with its own culture and discourse. As Archer (2010: 251) argues "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". The need to access multiple academic discourses offers serious challenges to epistemic access. Writing Centres, then, have a crucial role to play in conveying the principle of discourse variation to students

(Elbow, 1991) and in assisting students to explore the numerous 'possibilities for self-hood' that exist within the university (Ivanic, 1998). In other words, Writing Centres need to facilitate simultaneous exploration of various 'academic tribes' by helping students realise that they hold multiple communal group memberships. Academics play a crucial role in assisting Writing Centres do all of this.

What the intervention clarified, however, was that writing consultants are placed in the invidious position of having to assist students across numerous disciplines, without themselves necessarily being insiders to those disciplines. Thus, writing consultants may need to locate themselves in the interstices of disciplines, the spaces betwee*n* academic disciplines, where a commonality of academic practices prevails, yet which also allow a view of the differences. When consultants take up occupancy of such an interstitial position, and academic insiders work with them to do this, the Writing Centre itself is able to move from the periphery of academic disciplines towards being located at the nexus of the academic enterprise. This has the potential to unleash a considerable force for academic change, allowing for more rapid epistemological access to both the university and the disciplines that engage with Writing Centres in this way.

A potential pitfall: Usurping the content tutor

However, the intervention was not without its pitfalls. It was found that the intervention may have unintentionally given the writing consultants a false sense of kinship with the discipline of Geography. Some of the consultants developed a (false) sense of geographical competency, with one reflecting that "after the whole programme with the Geography department, I feel better equipped to help their students, not just in their writing skills, but also with the content" and another mentioned: "I should familiarize myself more with the topic and geographical concepts". Clearly, such misconceptions of the role they play in helping students acquire epistemic access to the discipline needs to be managed. Writing consultants cannot replace tutors and lecturers. Fortunately, one consultant agreed, commenting that "[i]t can be dangerous at times since we are not content tutors but writing consultants". The intervention did not enable the writing consultants to become full participants in the Geography community of practice.

However, what is revealed, in this instance, is an inherent tension between facilitating students' access to discoursal expectations and 'teaching' content. The role of writing consultants is to 'talk' to students dialogically about writing *in* Geography but not to *teach* geographical content. This distinction is crucial: whereas the former requires an interstitial vantage point, the latter presupposes a location firmly within the discipline. Put more simply, it is only through the former (talking to students about writing in Geography) that the 'space between' disciplines can be harnessed as a pedagogical resource.

Discussion: Pedagogic collaboration between the Writing Centre and the Geography Department

We suggest that interventions such as this have the potential to bridge the gap between 'traditional students' (those with English as a home language and who come from resourced homes and/or had access to a good quality secondary school education) and 'non-traditional students' (Cross & Carpentier, 2009; Archer, 2010). Throughput rates suggest that 'traditional students', because of their cultural capital, manage to acquire academic literacy faster than most (Hutchings, 2005; Mgqwashu, 2009). Lillis (2001) argues that the conventions implicit in essayist literacy represent a pervasive, taken-for-granted epistemological orientation in academia. Without scaffolding or 'socialisation' into an academic tribe, students do not enjoy legitimate peripheral participant status, making learning difficult, which results in a lack of epistemological access and high failure rates (Young, 1993; Choi & Hannafin, 1995; Cottrell, 2001; Barrass, 2002). It, therefore, behoves insiders to seek possibilities for acculturation and mediated participation into academic communities of practice (Archer, 2008). Thus, by enabling the writing consultants, perhaps in the manner described in this article, they can better enable 'non-traditional' students. That said, we acknowledge that academic practices are seldom anyone's 'mother tongue' and usually all students need help in acquiring certain academic practices (Bourdieu, Passeron & De Saint Martin, 1994: 8).

We posit, therefore, that one means of facilitating epistemological access is for academic insiders to engage in strategic and collaborative partnerships with organisational units such as the Writing Centre. Thus, we agree with Jacobs' (2007) argument that higher education institutions need to create discursive spaces for such collaborations to flourish. In particular, both the academic department and the Writing Centre have to change. The Writing Centre has to actively seek out collaborative opportunities, and the academics have to embed the teaching of academic literacy into academic disciplines. This will also enrich the academic discipline. As Gibbs (1992) argues, when more knowledgeable insiders mediate discipline-specific writing, they also mediate (deeper) discipline engagement. Jacobs (2007) further argues that collaborations need to be sustained. Cummins (1996) and Zamel (1998) further reinforce this point, maintaining that the entire academic community must assume responsibility for facilitating their students' process of acquiring academic literacy. If this is so, then the current positioning of the Writing Centre as outside of mainstream academic practice should be revisited.

Logistically, however, the intervention designed and implemented in this study was labour and time intensive. Both the writing consultants and the students required high levels of 'management' to ensure that all aspects of the project were completed. Students needed a lot of 'reminding' of the various steps the process required, and had to be checked upon to ensure that instructions were followed. In addition, as writing consultants are appointed in part-time positions at UJ (we are aware that, at

other institutions, such as Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, for example, this is not so), not all consultants attended all of the sessions. Some consultants returned the essays late, hampering the smooth flow of the drafting and re-drafting process. In addition, we encountered challenges with the use of the assessment rubric. Despite this not being the focus of the research, we concluded that rubrics (despite efforts to the contrary) are highly contested social artefacts open to multiple interpretations.

The intervention, albeit small in scale, illustrates the potential benefits of collaboration between Writing Centres and academic departments. It represents a move away from 'use' of the Writing Centre on an *ad hoc* basis (involving having to cajole students to initiate and maintain contact with writing consultants) to a more sustained, informed and meaningful engagement. It demonstrates practically how academics can de-mystify the 'institutional mystery' that surrounds academic discourse, generally, and essayist literacy, in particular (Lillis, 2001). As such, the intervention could be viewed as a first step in a progression towards an academic socialisation approach and, ultimately, an academic literacies approach (Lea & Street, 1998). That said, we are aware of the challenges surrounding the academic socialisation approach; in particular, problems of acculturation and reproduction of the status quo (Kress, 2003; Archer, 2010).

There are also limitations to this study. Not all the writing consultants participated fully in the intervention. The sample size is small. This has meant that the findings of this study should be regarded as indicative rather than conclusive. The study also did not examine the student experience of the intervention. Future research in this regard will have to include the student experience as a focus of inquiry, and analyse student texts in order to ascertain the extent to which demonstrable improvement in student writing is evident.

Conclusion: A beginning, rather than an end

In conclusion, Archer (2010) argues that the unique positioning of Writing Centres grants them enormous potential for advancing institutional change. By bridging disciplines, Writing Centres can turn the tensions between generic and discipline-specific writing practices into a productive resource (Archer, 2010). Our intervention suggests one possible way in which Writing Centres can leverage this position. In so doing, it contributes to the development of Writing Centre practice in South Africa. Thus, we agree with Archer (2010) that Writing Centres should establish collaborative partnerships with discipline-specific academics in order for students to understand the multiple ways-of-being in academia: "writing within disciplines is vital in order to acquire discipline specific conventions" (Archer, 2010: 496). However, this relies on writing consultants being introduced (during the course of their work) to different academic 'tribal' discourses. For writing consultants, this may mean that some degree of disciplinary 'boundary-hopping' is essential. As such, Writing Centres may need to develop consultants' ability to 'boundary-hop' so as to create spaces for engagement *between* disciplines.

This article constitutes a beginning, rather than an end. In line with the principle of progressive refinement (Collins *et al*., 2004), which characterises design-based research, this article represents a first version of a 'design' for the development of Writing Centre practice. However, this 'design' needs to be further developed in future research. We believe that such further Writing Centre research should be undertaken into how the space between disciplines is manifested and how it can be used to improve student academic writing. This will require a different kind of study than that conducted in this instance, one in which the interaction between consultant and student is analysed, in order to establish how the 'space between' is created, maintained and employed as a pedagogical resource.

Acknowledgements

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