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From ‘business as usual’ to ‘business unusual’: Online academic literacy development for Education students during the Covid-19 pandemic

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic brought about restrictions on physical interactions, which in many ways changed how we live and work. Due to these restrictions, writing centres at universities and other educational institutions around the world had to transition from traditional ways of supporting students to online or remote methods. To save the academic year, Wits University’s teaching and learning and other student support programmes, including the Wits School of Education Writing Centre (WSoE WC), were compelled to adopt Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL). Transitioning to ERTL meant¹ reimagining student support in an online mode. This paper explores how the WSoE WC transitioned from face-to-face student consultations to offering online academic literacy support and development. The paper highlights the adaptation process in the transition, particularly how the WSoE WC dealt with the varying complexities accompanying ERTL. The main question guiding this exploration is: How did the WSoE WC negotiate the move to online academic literacy support and development during the Covid-19 pandemic? Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the director of the WSoE WC, who steered the adoption of the online mode and the peer tutors who worked directly with students online. The findings show that transitioning to the online mode during ERTL was difficult and complex. However, collective and individual agency enabled continued student academic literacy² support despite disruption and change. This paper contributes to the ongoing conversation around the role of writing centres at universities in South Africa and beyond, particularly during disruptions.

Keywords: *Academic literacy support and development, COVID-19, Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL), writing centre*

1 bit.ly/3rmXyKO

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2 Academic literacy in this case includes both writing and reading.

1. Introduction

The transition to emergency online teaching and learning was a strategy adopted at many higher education (HE) institutions to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus while ensuring the continuity of academic programmes (Cranfield *et al.*, 2021; Hedding *et al.*, 2020; Knoetze & Du Toit, 2022; Matarirano *et al.*, 2021). Likewise, South African universities took measures that saw the implementation of ERTL employing both synchronous and asynchronous modes of instruction (Matarirano *et al.*, 2021). Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, many universities had Learning Management Systems (LMSs) in place that were minimally used to supplement traditional teaching and learning. The onset of the pandemic, coincidentally, impressed the need for these LMSs as the only platforms for teaching and learning. Many students, however, struggled with accessing the new mode of online learning due to shortages of electronic devices and data to access the internet (Menon & Motala, 2022; Moodley, 2022; Osman & Walton, 2020). Universities made considerable efforts to provide electronic devices for students in challenging socio-economic conditions and negotiated with various phone telecommunication service providers to provide students with data at lower costs (Hedding *et al.*, 2020). The ERTL period has thus not only drawn attention to universities' crisis preparedness but has opened discussions about the accessibility and feasibility of online teaching and learning, particularly in contexts like South Africa rife with inequalities (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2022).

Moving online required of the WSoE WC, which had previously relied on face-to-face traditional consultations as the primary mode of facilitation, to address students' academic literacy needs online. As a result, implementing ERTL required not only moving teaching and learning online, but also a shift in pedagogical practices beyond uploading resources for students on the LMSs. Academics, for example, had to "upskill and familiarise themselves quickly with online learning platforms and all that they entail, including increased administration" (Hedding *et al.*, 2020: 1). Likewise, the WSoE WC practitioners were trained to work with the online instructional and learning pedagogies to ensure continued students' academic literacy support (Dison & Kadenge, in press). In other words, universities were forced to reimagine, reshape, and restructure teaching and learning and "rethink how to support their staff and students" (Van Wyk, 2021: 137). Given the writing centres' importance and contribution to student learning, as discussed in the following section, it was critical that such support services serve as the centre of student success during the pandemic (Van Wyk, 2021). However, universities were to find new ways to continue providing academic support while not endangering students or violating Covid-19 restrictions. The WSoE WC had to respond not only to an increase in student numbers, but also to students' academic literacy needs that needed to be addressed remotely.

The main aim of this paper is to explore how the WSoE WC negotiated the transition to the new online teaching and learning mode to provide academic literacy support and development to students during the Covid-19 pandemic-imposed lockdown. Using Archer's sociological perspective of Structure, Agency, and Culture (SAC), we explore how the WSoE WC practitioners, within the global Covid-19 restrictions and institutional ERTL structural confines of working online, were able to exercise their collective and individual agency to continuously provide academic literacy support to students. In addition, we explore the various complexities and opportunities that came with the use of this agency.

There is a plethora of research in the field concerned with the implications of Covid-19 on HE (see Alex, 2022; Essop, 2021; Fynn & Van der Walt, 2023; Landa, Zhou & Marongwe, 2021; Moodley, 2022). However, ERTL experiences of writing centre practitioners working in university contexts that are structurally and culturally designed for the traditional face-to-face mode, students' experiences of ERTL, and the impact of ERTL on students' learning and progression with studies must be considered. This paper adds to the existing body of work and extends it by bringing in the voices and experiences of WC coordinators and peer tutors who, at the time of ERTL, were confronted with the challenge of supporting students' academic literacy development despite the complexities of the new online mode. Our approach in this paper follows Du Plessis et al.'s (2022) observation that, as HE practitioners, despite the different capacities, we need to evaluate our initial thoughts and reactions at the time the pandemic hit and from there make sense of it and draw lessons to integrate with decisions going forward.

In the following sections, we present the study's methods, theoretical framework, and locate the WSoE WC within the larger context of writing centres at South African HE. This is followed by a summary of the study's findings, where we detail how the WSoE WC functioned online during Covid-19, as evidenced by writing centre practitioners' experiences and perspectives.

2. Methods

This study employed a social-realist approach as its philosophical underpinning. The social-realist perspective highlights the significance of engaging the social to understand the world. Hence, ideas and concepts that focus on relationships among individuals within societies and societal structures become relevant in understanding the world (see for example, Archer's [1995] social-realist perspective). In line with the social-realist perspective, this study focused on how members of the WSoE WC negotiated the transition to ERTL to provide academic literacy support and development to students during the pandemic-imposed lockdown. We thus employed a qualitative method. The study was set in the Gauteng province of South Africa at a university's writing centre; this writing centre was purposefully selected because of its consistent use of the traditional face-to-face mode of interaction with students for over 12 years prior to the pandemic (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). We conducted semi-structured interviews with five key members of the WSoE WC. These included the director of the writing centre; the administrator and coordinator; a senior peer tutor who coordinates writing centre programmes for post-graduate students; and two peer tutors who mostly work with undergraduate students. Each of these participants was purposefully selected according to the following inclusion criteria: they all had been working with the writing centre for at least 5 years and formed part of the team that worked during the pandemic and ERTL period. Table 1 below shows details of the participants' characteristics.

Table 1: Summary of participants – WSoE WC practitioners' roles and responsibilities

Position	Role	Number of Years at WSoE WC
Director	Oversees the running of the WSoE WC, including staffing, training of peer tutors and all WC academic literacy development activities	13
Administrator and Coordinator	Manages the WSoE WC administration, which includes setting up meetings, student groups and assignments for peer tutors	8
Senior Postgraduate Peer Tutor (SPT)	Coordinates and facilitates postgraduate students' WC activities	10
Undergraduate Peer Tutor (PT 1)	Tutors undergraduate students in groups and individuals	7
Undergraduate Peer Tutor (PT 2)	Tutors undergraduate students in groups and individuals	6

Ethical approval was obtained from the Non-Medical Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Witwatersrand (H22/08/24) and from the Director of the selected writing centre to conduct this research. In addition, informed written consent was individually obtained from all participants and ethical expectations were adhered to by the research team.

Data were gathered by means of semi-structured individual interviews, which included open-ended questions about their experiences of working as a team and with students during ERTL. While some of the interviews were held face to face, others were held online using Microsoft Teams, depending on each participant's preference. Each interview session lasted between 30-45 minutes and was audio-recorded (with consent from the participants).

Simultaneously with the process of data collection, initial data analysis began. The research team transcribed all audio-recorded interview sessions verbatim. Data were analysed inductively using the study's theoretical framework and identified themes from the raw data. We used a constant comparative method of data analysis "where the information gathered is coded into [identifiable] themes or codes" (Hewitt-Taylor, 2001: 39). With this method of analysis, initial codes identified by the research team were cross-checked, re-coded and any discrepancies were resolved. The cross-checking allowed for the identification of relationships between initial codes (Hewitt-Taylor, 2001). The identified themes include uncertainties of working within the 'business unusual' mode; complexities and constraints within the 'business unusual'; writing centre practitioners' agential response to challenges and complexities of working in the 'business unusual'; and eliciting lessons from the 'business unusual' operations during ERTL.

3. Theoretical framework: Archer's Structure, Agency, and Culture (SAC)

This paper draws insights from Archer's SAC analytical framework of three complementary perspectives on how the social world works. Archer (1996) contends that the world is separated into "the parts" and "the people". The "parts" are composed of two domains of structure and culture, and the "people" represent agency. The domain of structure refers to the broader social, economic, political, and cultural conditions that shape individuals' actions and choices (Archer, 1996). Structures have causal powers and emergent properties that condition agents

by enabling or constraining them as they pursue what they consider important. In this paper we consider the broader or macro-contextual conditions of Covid-19 restrictions, the South African HE and Wits University environment at the time of ERTL as the governing structure. At that time, the operations of the WSoE WC were conditioned by international, national, and institutional Covid-19 regulations. Archer (2007) argues that structure provides the framework within which human beings operate but does not define their actions; people have the capacity to exercise agency and make choices within the constraints of structure.

The domain of culture, on the other hand, refers to ideas, beliefs, values, ideologies, and concepts held about the world at a particular time (Archer, 1996). For example, the generally shared academic literacy norms and practices upheld at the WSoE WC constitute the centres' culture. One such ideological belief is that students are active participants in conversation with peer tutors in the writing development process (Kadenge *et al.*, 2019). In this study, we acknowledge the interplay between the notions of structure and culture and as Boughey (2012) states, the emergence of new structural arrangements paves the way for new forms of practices, though conditioned by existing culture. In view of this interplay, we develop an understanding of the views and beliefs writing centre practitioners hold about academic literacy support, even within new structural arrangements of online teaching and learning and how they made sense of their experiences during the ERTL period.

Archer (1996) views agency as the ability of individuals to act intentionally and purposefully, which depends on the role and position they hold in the world. Archer (1995: 249) views agency as "reflective, purposeful, and innovative". In this study, agency is evident in the actions of the director, administrator, and peer tutors as they make choices, set goals, and take steps to achieve those goals. For example, every day in the writing centre, peer tutors exercise agency in their tutoring strategies and decisions about how to best support their students. This lens is useful in this study to understand how the WSoE WC practitioner, either as a collective or as individuals, invoked agency around the various limitations within the new 'business unusual' structure they were working within.

4. Writing centre in context

Writing centres have been widely recognised for their contribution to enhancing student access and success and have commonly been referred to as transformative and safe spaces. As Archer (201: 353) notes, writing centres are regarded as "political spaces with a 'transformatory' agenda aimed at democratising access to education". Writing centres also serve as a means for marginalised students (second or third English language speakers) to gain access to dominant academic literacies, which in turn facilitate their ability to engage with academic discourses more effectively (Evans-Tokaryk & Shabanza, 2022; Namakula & Prozesky, 2019). Writing centres primarily aim to improve students' academic literacy practices, providing resources such as workshops, tutorials, and one-on-one consultations with peer tutors to help students become more effective communicators in academic settings (Arbee, 2020; Manjeya, 2021).

Given the importance of academic literacy practices in HE, writing centres have the mandate to ensure that students develop the necessary skills to succeed (Drennan & Keyser, 2022; Guskaroska *et al.*, 2022; Khumalo & Onwuegbuchulam, 2023). This is because academic literacies are "linked to student access which includes both retention and throughput" (Archer, 2008: 248). It is important that they have access to these literacies because students get to be "recognised as legitimate participants through their accumulations of cultural or academic

capital" deemed important (Widin, 2018: 67). Provision of academic literacy support is critical because writing centres "provide a pathway or access to the university and enable (or not) students to accumulate the cultural capital to succeed in HE" (Widin, 2018: 68). This role was especially fundamental in the context of the pandemic that was largely characterised by distance and isolation, with writing centres providing an alternative for personalised interaction.

5. Findings

Four themes were identified from the data in relation to the participants' experiences working online. The themes include:

- Uncertainties of working within the 'business unusual' mode
- Complexities and constraints within the 'business unusual'
- Writing centre practitioners' agential response to 'business unusual'
- Eliciting lessons from 'business unusual' operations during ERTL

In the sub-sections that follow, we explain these themes and use verbatim quotations to illustrate participants' points of view.

6. Uncertainties of working within the 'business unusual' mode

From the findings, we identified that the experiences of the writing centre practitioners in relation to the ERTL started off with a sense of uncertainty and confusion. In reflecting on their initial responses to ERTL, all the practitioners described different levels of uncertainty ranging from panic to deep worry. These initial reactions highlight doubts that existed about the role of the WSoE WC being unable to teach academic literacy skills in this 'usual' way. PT1 mentioned:

I was sad more than anything. It put me into a very dark depression that I've never felt in my life because more than worrying about myself and worrying about my family, I was more worried about the world and the students. I got into panic mode, honestly, because I had only spent a few weeks with my students. I really panicked, and I felt like the students are not used to me face-to-face. So how are they going to be able to, let's say understand, or connect with me online?

Here, our attention is drawn to the fact that the stated uncertainty and confusion created was beyond the control of the writing centre practitioners. In highlighting this, the director of the WSoE WC expressed her bewilderment, as the centre had to deal with this unnatural situation and said:

... an absolute disaster for us because we work in such an embodied way, such a way that relies on interaction and engagement and the writing centre is based on relationships and relational pedagogies in a way, and I just thought it's going to be an absolute disaster because it's quite something to get the peer tutors on board to do consultations and to train them and so on.

Like the director, the administrator and coordinator explained:

Never my wildest dreams did I think that would happen. I don't think any one of us thought that would happen and that we'd be forced to go online, rather than face-to-face, especially for something [teaching academic literacy] that needs you to be face-to-face.

From these initial responses to ERTL, the experiences of the writing centre practitioners illustrate the difficulty of navigating the new structural arrangements of working with students online, especially given the deeply held beliefs and practices of how writing centre interactions are social and interpersonal. In this way, a tension arises between structure and culture, and both are serving as constraints in moving from traditional to more non-traditional pedagogical practices. Deviating from the norm, in this case the 'business as usual' way of conducting writing centre work was challenging for the writing centre practitioners who, despite the obvious radical turn of events, were lamenting the traditional face-to-face mode of teaching academic writing. The next major theme identified explains these complexities.

7. Complexities and constraints within the 'business unusual' mode

As indicated in the previous section, findings indicate that moving consultations online came with complexities that affected the confidence and general efficiency of writing centre practitioners in the new 'business as unusual' mode. Practitioners were concerned about the implications of the online move on their work as well as the learning and development of students' academic literacy practices online. The director and PTs mentioned:

So, I think that I was worried that students didn't know how to get on online, because it was new to all of us. The Teams meetings and Zoom and all that was foreign to us. And in the beginning, it was also a problem not only with those programmes being foreign, but also people not having data, which was very important. And they [the students] didn't have data, or they didn't have connectivity ... So, it was impacted by all other things besides just the lockdown.

I was sad for the students who didn't necessarily know how to use computers and to access, you know, things and how to get back inside when it kicks you out. Issues of access really made me sad, and we know that connectivity is a South African issue.

This abrupt move to online mode presented difficulties with access to technology and students' competency with working with technology. For example, practitioners highlighted internet connectivity and data availability as major issues that implicated their work as well as students' learning.

... but at the same time, we've got to acknowledge that there were terrible challenges around Wi-Fi, quite a few of them themselves couldn't come in and didn't have access. So, we really were dealing with a lot of challenges.

Technological challenges thus present themselves as a structural constraint that shaped how writing centre practitioners worked and certainly impacted their ability to provide smooth tutoring services to students. In addition to technological constraints, practitioners were also concerned about the loss of a sense of community, a core aspect that defines the WSoE WC. Peer tutors said:

I think I was worried generally about the first-year students ... it's also really their socialisation as well. When they get into groups in the writing centre, they get to see their peers and with that they feel secure (PT1).

Sometimes you'd see that a student has read your comment, but because you're not face-to-face with them, they can decide to ignore you. They can decide to only engage in the parts of the lesson that they find relevant to them to such an extent that even if you

probe, even if you call them by name and say, "Jamie, say something", if Jamie does not want to talk, Jamie will just keep quiet or Jamie will just log off. So yeah, in that sense, it was hard because now you felt like I'm not doing what I feel I need to be doing (PT2).

The loss of a sense of community was also felt in post-graduate student groups and it impacted the way students responded and interacted between themselves. The SPT stated:

The biggest challenge during the sessions on WhatsApp was that students were not active in the conversations that were happening in the WhatsApp group.

In social-realist terms, these writing centre practitioners felt constrained mostly by technological structures, because it shaped how they supported students with their academic literacy practices. According to Archer (2000), the conditions in which persons or agents find themselves have an impact on them and force them to respond in specific ways. In the following section, we report insights on how practitioners adapted to the uncertainties and complexities they encountered.

8. Writing centre practitioners' agential response to 'business unusual'

Beyond the complexities and constraints, writing centre practitioners were able to exercise their agency. Reflecting on their experiences allowed them to express the personal and collective decisions they took to continue serving students. Acknowledging this exercise of agency, the director said:

Despite this reality and awareness [of Covid-19 and its constraints], there was exercise of agency from all of us at the WSoE WC.

Providing more details about how a collective form of agency was exercised, the director and administrator mentioned the following:

What we wanted to make sure was that we could network; that we were finding materials that were suitable; that we were putting people together; that we were keeping the momentum going. You know, trying to keep developing materials, consolidating them, making sure that peer tutors had a sense of where they were going. So, I think we tried our best, but we knew that at the very least there were some connections that students were talking through their ideas. The peer tutors were getting them to write, to do a bit of reading to understand.

We realised that we had to do something because this [ERTL] would go on. So, we just had to put them [first year students] in groups.

The use of the pronoun 'we' indicates collective agency by the writing centre practitioners. This relates to Archer's notion of corporate agency. So, while the existing complexities around ERTL continued, the structural limitations as well as culture of the WSoE WC provided a platform for the enablement of the agency of the practitioners. While the writing centre defines the peer tutor's role, peer tutors showed their exercise of agency in deciding the best possible ways to engage with students online. Some of them mentioned:

I had to immediately switch myself to say that even though I enjoy working with students face-to-face, the reality is that I cannot go on to face-to-face with them. At that time, I thought to myself, let me give them what I can. So, I already had a WhatsApp group which already existed. I just needed to change what it was used for. Initially, it would be used

for announcements and maybe sending resources to students. But then now I had to use it as a platform to conduct my consultations. One of the first things that we did is that we set up ground rules for how WhatsApp was going to be used, seeing that it now became a classroom (PT2).

What I did was I started recording, giving recordings on voice notes on WhatsApp. And then because the students had their WhatsApp group, I would send to one of the students and then the students would post it in the WhatsApp group. And then they would also ask me questions, as if we were in class. At that time, what was happening was that there was no accountability. I was not being asked if I had the class, but I continued! The students would get in touch with me, and I would send them responses with voice notes. I also went on Zoom (PT1).

By implication, even though ERTL was a new structure for writing centre practitioners, they were able to take actions that framed the extent to which they were able to conduct their 'business', despite the limits imposed by the Covid-19 lockdown. This, according to the SAC perspective, aligns with the concept of reflexivity and helps in understanding agency where everyone is a reflexive being as we can "deliberate about our circumstance in relation to ourselves and, in the light of these deliberations, we determine our own personal courses of action in society" (Archer, 2003: 167). The examples of excerpts above demonstrate how practitioners were able to employ reflexivity and deliberate on the issues they encountered and took action to support students.

9. Eliciting lessons from 'business unusual' operations during ERTL

As previously noted, the abrupt transition of student academic literacy support to online brought several complexities, as well as some key lessons. Despite participants' elaborateness with the many difficulties that came with the ERTL period, they unanimously shared the view that this was a season of tremendous learning. The director of the WSoE WC said:

I think we need to also be much more structured ... as much as we work in a dialogical open-ended space, we need to find a balance between providing quite a lot of guidance in a fairly structured way, but holding on to those principles of working dialogically you know. I think that we've got a pedagogy in the writing centre that has stood the test of time and disruption. But it has to keep adapting, and maybe we need more things in place for it to keep adapting and adjusting to the changing conditions and circumstances.

The SPT reiterated similar sentiments, noting that the Covid-19 pandemic was a "double-edged sword" which presented an added benefit. The SPT went on to explain that:

What it means is that going forward, I think we need to be able to offer students three options. Send your work through online, two one-on-one or physical one-on-one consultations and, three an online consultation ... we can offer students options I hope that we'll be able to start thinking of that now. We should offer students that option of sending their work ... during the last research weekend we had asked a few students why they don't come to the writing centre. And some of them said that they felt, you know, the usual thing of being ashamed and feeling that they're exposing themselves. So, they prefer sending their writing and nobody can see them. They need an option for that could be an option for such a student who feels too exposed to show their face. If they are faceless by sending just their writing, we could be better able to reach out to such students. So, I think the blessing has been being able to open up options for students.

It is clear in these sentiments that the difficulty of supporting students in the unfamiliar 'business unusual' mode facilitated a shift in how WSoE WC practitioners thought about students' learning in academic literacy support. Instead, the challenging ERTL period was conceived as a time for exploring possibilities of growth and development of the services offered to incorporate both the 'business as usual' and the 'business unusual' models. In addition to this, the director continued:

... we have to find creative ways ... we also have to value our creativity that we can do this. We can also bolster the way we provide support and cater for diversity ... and for first years, many of whom are coming to this for the first time, we can play a more developmental role and a more kind of teaching role, and the pedagogy of writing but imbedding us at the same time as building in these tools for people to reflect and give each other feedback dialogically.

As argued in the SAC perspective, structures are forces that bring about conditions that can be constraining and/or enabling, thus presenting opportunities for learning and growth. The Covid-19 pandemic brought about a lockdown situation where all contact teaching and learning activities were prohibited for fear of escalating the disease. Within that imposed ERTL structural set up, the WSoE WC practitioners went through a process of learning and devising some innovative mechanisms to set up in their writing centre. Their agency is demonstrated by their capacity to begin internal conversations, and possibly collective engagements that sought even to change the writing centre's pedagogical stances and circumstances for more sustainable ones in the face of disruption and crises.

10. Discussion

The findings highlight WSoE WC practitioners' experiences with ERTL, developing student academic literacy practices, and 'business as un/usual'. In this section, we explore the findings using Archer's SAC to understand the transition from 'business as usual' to 'business unusual' mode better. Beginning with the uncertainties of working in a 'business unusual' mode, we found that the practitioners' initial response included feelings of panic and worry. This finding is consistent with Giaimo's (2020) explanation of his initial reaction as a writing centre practitioner during the Covid-19 crisis. WSoE WC practitioners, like Giaimo's (2020) reflection, have been able to engage in recognising how the new mode of operation – 'business as unusual' – which was imposed at a macrolevel and across the HE institutions, compelled them to respond in a variety of ways. For instance, university policies around Covid-19 required of the writing centre to move online, which influenced how practitioners responded. This necessitated that peer tutors be aware of these arrangements and negotiate them during tutoring sessions.

According to Archer (2003), our interactions with specific structures can either enable or hinder our pursuit of our personal projects. As a result, Archer (2003) encourages scholars to recognise that, while agents are formed by society, they have the capacity to influence, change and reshape society. The findings of this study have shown that writing centres operate within the larger university context that is governed by institutional regulations, conventions, and expectations. Writing centre practitioners aligned with these structural settings and adhered to the university's Covid-19 regulations and policies on online teaching and learning. Although this was largely experienced as limiting, this was also used as an opportunity for creativity in finding a way to adhere to the WSoE WC central philosophy and cultural practices that were informed by the centres' core values and beliefs about academic literacy development.

The abrupt transition to the online mode necessitated practitioners to rethink their strategies and adapt their practices (Van Wyk, 2021) and were, thus, able to “shape the social environment to be inhabited” (Archer, 1995: 201). This constitutes the notion of agency where practitioners were able to develop personal emergent properties. Understanding the causal powers and emergent personal properties of agency helps in understanding how the WSoE WC practitioners negotiated the macro-contextual Covid-19 pandemic-imposed structures that saw all teaching and learning migrating to a new and unfamiliar mode. Here we learn that reflexivity plays a crucial role, as all participating WSoE WC practitioners, in both their individual and collective capacities, showed how they responded agentially to the ERTL and working within the ‘business unusual’ mode. In the case of the WSoE WC, the director and administrator, at their coordination and planning level, managed to exercise individual and steer collective agency to ensure that some form of training, preparation and organisation were in place to ensure continuity of the student support service. Likewise, peer tutors who worked with individual groups of students devised coping and feasible strategies such as using WhatsApp, voice, and video-recording sessions to ensure students were supported during the ERTL period. Here we learn that reflexivity plays a crucial role, as all participating WSoE WC practitioners, in both their individual and collective capacities, showed how they responded agentially to the ERTL and working within the ‘business unusual’ mode.

11. Conclusion

To conclude, we reiterate the focus of this paper. We were interested in learning how the WSoE WC managed the shift from the familiar and traditional face-to-face or ‘business as usual’ model of providing academic literacy support to the new online or ‘business unusual’ mode. Our data revealed that the abrupt transition to online student consultations during ERTL was fraught with uncertainty and immense complexities. Using Archer’s concepts of structure, culture, and agency, we argued that WSoE WC practitioners were able to exercise collective and individual agency within the new structural confines of working online and managed, through agential responses, to find ways to continuously provide the much-needed academic literacy support to students while adhering to their core writing centre values and practices.

What this illustrates for writing centres and broader student support facilities in the higher education field is that, by their nature, institutional structures dominant at a particular place and time present limitations around what agents can or cannot do. However, as expounded in Archer’s notion of agency, even when options are limited, human innovation has managed to manoeuvre and find room to create opportunities. Without negating the possibility of the existence of other writing centres in complex contexts, our findings generally point to the interplay between structure, culture, and agency. More importantly, it is evident from this study that the times of grappling with structural conditions present invaluable opportunities of learning, extending both individual and institutional growth as writing centres across the world begin to chart more sustainable ways of navigating crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic-imposed ERTL.

While this study sheds some light on understanding how writing centres can navigate times of disruption, it is not exhaustive. We recommend further empirical studies at other writing centres in different geographical locations, especially with varying institutional structural arrangements to elicit further lessons. Equally, empirical inquiries on students’ experiences of writing centre support during the ERTL period are commendable for a holistic understanding of academic literacy learning and development during ERTL, in similar crises and beyond.

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