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The role of writing centres in negotiating inclusive learning spaces in the context of Covid-19

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic catapulted higher education institutions to shifting their teaching, learning and assessment practices. Universities globally were abruptly forced to close their doors and adapt to digital learning platforms with the intention of meeting students' learning needs. In a University of Technology (UoT) context such as the Durban University of Technology (DUT) in South Africa, the university had to relook the way it interacted and engaged with students. Writing centres at universities in South Africa have evolved and have led to the development of opportunities for collaborative learning underpinned by humanistic principles and interconnectivity in teaching, thinking and learning. Traditionally in the writing centre, students grow and develop in an informal way by face-to-face interactions in a physical space with tutors, peers and writing practitioners. However, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the writing centre has shifted to virtual learning platforms in order to continue creating inclusive and flexible learning spaces to foster criticality and academic and social resiliency in students. This paper explored how the writing centre as a vibrant community of practice (CoP), with the use of digital platforms initiated innovative tutoring techniques to contribute to creating a safe, enabling learning environment for students during these uncertainties. Paulo Freire's idea of a Humanising Pedagogy (1970) and Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice *were used to gain insights into the contextual dynamics that shape a writing centre's practice as the centre conceptualises how to respond to the 'new normal' in higher education. This paper asked a fundamental question about learning approaches and what is most valuable, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Data collection included written reflections from eight writing centre tutors from one writing centre site and surveys with 20 student users. This enabled an understanding of their perceptions and experiences of using the writing centre remotely, within a qualitative, exploratory inquiry. The findings revealed that the writing centre acknowledges the socio-economic difficulties faced by students and sees the value of CoP and a humanistic approach in its work in assisting students in coping with challenges and the realities that currently confront them. It found that tutors are central to contributing to transformative, multi-modal learning, and the writing centre can serve as a vehicle for promoting and sustaining inclusive learning environments and new ways of supporting students during uncertain times such as the pandemic.*

Keywords: *communities of practice, inclusive learning, students, tutors, writing centres*

1.   Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic permeated nearly every facet of human activity, and higher education institutions are no exception. Universities worldwide had to adapt to changes in teaching and learning with the intention of meeting students' learning needs. At a University of Technology (UoT) such as the Durban University of Technology (DUT), the university had to relook the way it interacted and engaged with students during challenging times. Writing centres in South Africa have historically been defined by face-to-face consultations in a physical space, and the onset of the pandemic challenged us to embrace new ways to continue supporting students in their writing. The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted our familiar ways of being; we had to transition to online learning platforms with limited preparation, training and in most cases no experience of tutoring online. Given that we needed to continue offering an inclusive learning environment while knowing that there are acute socio-economic barriers, particularly the digital divide, our role as writing centre practitioners was steeped in an understanding that "Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world … not just the result of cognition, learning involves the integrated functioning of the total person – thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005: 194). Additionally, the abrupt online move resulted in a drastic shift in our thinking about how our roles could enable meaningful, inclusive learning. This is aligned to Natanasabapathy and Maathuis-Smith's (2019: 373) view that transformative learning "is a cyclical process of being and becoming".

Also, given our context and locality, we were faced with a huge challenge in terms of poor access to technology, an unstable internet connection and high data costs. The writing centre had to adjust to the idea of depending on technology for all activities, some of which include creative writing competitions, discussion forums, and open-mic sessions for student writers, poets and storytellers, to name a few. Adjusting to this change required deep scholarly engagement, as we knew we had a huge responsibility of ensuring that our students were able to access our support during the pandemic. This was challenging, particularly within the South African context, considering that many students come from communities that are inadequately equipped with technology infrastructure, coupled with students not having devices such as laptops (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). Many continue to battle the digital divide, particularly on the African continent. This is as a result of socio-economic factors, geographical area, race, class, gender, age and educational background (Mpungose, 2020; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2019). Mpungose (2020: 7) maintains that students are unevenly challenged and "there is a critical need for increased investment in upgrading resources, both in universities and at community level, because of the digital divide". Mupongose (2020) states that although efforts have been made in the South African context to provide students with laptops and internet access (Rodrigues *et al*., 2019), there is limited research on the challenges students experience as a result of the digital divide when they are at home in their communities.

Covid-19 has augmented the digitalisation in universities, and this is evident even in the current (post)pandemic era. Given the current context (post)pandemic, it is important to note that some researchers (Liu & Long, 2014; Nikoubakht & Kiamanesh, 2019) argue that face-to-face teaching and learning cannot be replaced in higher education. These authors maintain that it is the cornerstone of most institutions of higher learning. On the other hand, scholars Anderson (2016 and Bates' (2018) view is that a blended learning approach, combining face-to-face and online learning, can be a suitable way forward. Online learning has been around for many decades; however, when the pandemic hit, many institutions migrated to Emergency Remote Teaching, Learning and Assessment (ERTLA). This migration was

needed particularly during hard lockdown periods, as learning could not be discontinued. This saw a blend of online platforms in the higher education sector globally. Traditional learning management systems (LMS) such as Moodle were now being used in combination with social media platforms, and other platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams became the go-to for many students and academics.

Traditional face-to-face teaching transmuted into ERTLA, and there was limited insights into the most effective ways this could be done. The pandemic demanded that writing centres rapidly reconfigure our delivery and evaluate the viability of tutoring online. We shifted to virtual learning platforms in order to continue creating inclusive and flexible learning spaces to develop student writers and foster criticality and academic and social resiliency in students during a time of severe anxiety and uncertainty. Our familiarity with sitting side by side, engaging with hardcopy, printed texts was no more. We decided to adopt a multi-modal approach, which included WCOnline (a scheduling and reporting solution for academic support centres), Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp video conferencing and telephone calls. We had been using WCOnline as a conferencing tool to schedule our bookings and capture student data prior to Covid-19. At the time, we had not explored the possibility of WCOnline as an online tutoring platform simply because writing centres have traditionally been known for our pen-and-paper status quo and face-to-face interactions where students and tutors engage in reading and writing activities and students receive prompt feedback in real time. WCOnline included video, audio, text-based chat, and a synchronous whiteboard. In addition to this platform, we used MS Teams. WCOnline platform enabled writers to join the online consultation through a link on their appointment-reservation form, which takes them to a portal with a central whiteboard with video and chat features. Similarly, MS Teams enabled students to join the online session from a link sent to their e-mails. Students had the option to use the video and audio communication feature, but some sessions relied on chat as well in cases of technology problems or writers' preferences during the tutoring consultation. Some tutoring sessions used the share-screen or whiteboard feature, where students could upload a draft of their work. Due to the numerous connectivity problems, we also allowed for WhatsApp calls for individual and group sessions. Our experience was that students were quickly able to engage in WhatsApp calls, and effortlessly set up chat groups on WhatsApp to connect with one another and tutors. These spaces have engendered a sense of belonging for students.

While the adaptation was generally positive and successful, we experienced challenges from both writing centre tutors and the students. Inasmuch as we wanted to preserve the same dialogic educational approach used in our face-to-face consultations, we needed to understand how our students and tutors navigated their way in the online space, and the factors that enabled and constrained their learning. The lockdown forced us to move out of our comfort zones and to think deeply about how we embrace change during periods of insecurity, fear and the unknown, and how to move from where we are to where we want to be.

Online learning, particularly during hard lockdown periods, isolated students from their fellow classmates, tutors and lecturers, and resulted in an absence of community and therefore a need for belonging (Peacock & Cowan, 2020). Furthermore, university closures can also have considerable effects on students' levels of stress, sense of belonging and their confidence and feelings of self-worth, which are key for inclusion in the higher education sector. Abu *et al.* (2021) explain,

> Aside from concerns about the pedagogic adequacy of education provision and the ability and capacity of students to access it, moving away from the physical campus has implications for a sense of belonging at university, which in turn influences engagement, retention and attainment.

In a cross-sectional study by Besser, Flett and Zeigler-Hill (2022) analysing the challenges experienced by students in their learning and life conditions due to rapid adjustment to synchronous online learning brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, low levels and mattering and a sense of belonging were evident.

Scholars have voiced that the new blended approach and online education environment requires those in the academic project to reflect deeply to understand what a sense of belonging entails for university students (Brodie & Osowska, 2021). For those of us in the writing centre community it is clear that the affective dimension of teaching and learning is imperative to students' sense of belonging and relatedness. In addition, the notion of community is further valued in writing centre work, and from our experience this was more so in the online space during the unprecedented pandemic. Students longed for meaningful interaction as they faced tensions academically, socially and emotionally (Zamora *et al.*, 2022). When students experience meaningful interactions, they develop a network of valuable relationships which can inspire learning at university. Sadly, as proclaimed by Blignaut *et al.* (2022), "the neoliberal higher education space has little patience for the social and non-measurable". This is concerning in an era where we see how students grow and develop with "access to sources of emotional, academic and practical support" (Kirby & Thomas, 2022: 375). The writing centre acknowledges the importance of providing supportive spaces for students to navigate the numerous requirements and stress placed on them while at university. As a result, this paper explores how the writing centre as a vibrant community of practice (CoP), with the use of digital platforms initiated innovative tutoring techniques to contribute to creating humanising, enabling learning environments for students during uncertain times.

2. Theoretical framework

Many theories are applicable to writing centre work. However, for this research, Paulo Freire's idea of a Humanising Pedagogy (1970) and Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of Communities of practice were unpacked. These theoretical lenses were used to gain insights into the contextual dynamics that shape writing centre practice, as the centre conceptualised how to respond to the 'new normal' in higher education. Writing centres in South Africa have traditionally been on the periphery of the university and have struggled to be seen for its value in contributing to student development and success (Archer & Richards, 2011). However, recent times have seen a shift in the understanding of the role of writing centres in contributing to the holistic development of university students (Dison & Clarence, 2017; Nichols, 2017). The writing centre enables students to develop criticality and build confidence for life-long learning.

Writing centres are perfectly positioned to foster academic learning while igniting a sense of connectedness, relatedness and belonging. Researchers in education have expressed that the affective side of teaching and learning should not be seen as a soft approach or "less academically rigorous approach" (Blignaut *et al.*, 2022), but rather one that is central to promoting wellbeing and well-rounded students (Tice *et al*., 2021; Kirby & Thomas, 2022). Blignaut *et al*. (2022) affirm the value of the affective side of teaching and learning in higher

education and maintain that it is "central to a relationship-rich education that can invigorate a learning environment that could foster and sustain a sense of belonging in students". These views are heightened by Abu *et al*.'s (2021) assertion that failure in acknowledging the significance of the affective dimensions of students' higher experiences could come at a cost (Abu *et al*., 2021).

Freire (1970) encourages educators in his work to listen to their students and foster engagement in contextualised, dynamic, reflective, and personalised educational practices that is humanistic by nature. Collaboration and interaction bring us a step closer to a university environment that promotes and values humanisation, social justice, and social and academic transformation. This is aligned to Boughey and McKenna's (2015) view of understanding students as 'social beings'. As a writing centre practitioner, I have seen that students thrive when a sense of community, collaboration and engagement in learning is fostered. Peacock and Cowan's (2019) study explored the idea of using a tutor system to nurture a sense of belonging and reported that trustworthy and meaningful interactions with tutors contributed to students' confidence, identity construction, and sense of community. The writing centre environment presents possibilities that enhance students' belonging, and these transform and impact their academic motivation, social and critical thinking skills, emotional being, success and retention (Abu *et al.*, 2021).

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015: 1) define Communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly". Wenger (2010: 179) describes a CoP as a social learning system that "… locates learning, not in the head or outside it, but in the relationship between the person and the world, which for human beings is a social person in a social world". We experienced CoPs being formed in two ways at the writing centre during the pandemic. One CoP was formed among tutors themselves who have a collective identity. Tutors often learned from one another and leaned on one another for support and advice on how to assist students navigate the online space. The other CoP was evident in the sense of 'community' we offered students during the 'new normal'. This is affirmed by Padayachee and Kluyts (2023), who explain that "Members of a community of practice gain access to a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems … members benefit from a shared practice." Inasmuch as writing centres were intentionally created to support the practice of reading and writing, our work and interactions enabled CoPs to emerge organically as well, and this was evident during the pandemic. As such, these online spaces and CoPs became spaces of collective critical inquiry and reflection. Gibbs (1988: 9) encourages us to remember that "… it is not sufficient to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting on this experience, it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential lost".

Reflection has played a central role in education from the days of Dewey (1933) and has been associated with high levels of learning (Biggs, 1999; Schon, 1983). Reflective practice can have many benefits for higher education as learning not only takes place from doing, but also from thinking about or critically reflecting on what we do. There is no absolute right way to reflect; however, reflection enables one to learn, question and review an existing understanding. Relatedly, when we experience situations out of the norm such as the pandemic, we can learn through critically reflecting on our practice during such uncertain times (Sy & Cruz, 2019). Freire (1970) maintains that it is in the intersection of reflection and action where people become more fully human (Bartolomé, 1994; Huerta, 2011). Bartolomé (1994)

supports Freire's notion of reflection and action asserting the value of humanising education by recreating and reinventing approaches to teaching. He proposes that is it imperative to consider "the sociocultural realities that can either limit or expand the possibilities to humanize education" (Bartolome, 1994: 177).

In this paper the tutor reflections will help us to understand the nature of tutorship better and will allow us to examine and change our pedagogical spaces and relationships in ways that promote holism so that we do not reduce these interactions to sets of skills (McArdle & Coutts, 2010). At the writing centre we want to promote a 'more fully human' world through our work and the pandemic offered us the opportunity to reconfigure and reshape our offerings during challenging times. Mezirow suggests that critical reflection should be a key element of reflective practice as it advocates for "autonomy, self-development and self-governance" (Mezirow, 2000: 28). In reflecting on our practice during the pandemic we resolved to continue to contribute to transformative learning and to promote and sustain inclusive learning environments for students during uncertain times.

3.   Methodology

This research was interpretivist by nature, enabling an exploration of the challenges, enablements and constraints faced by writing centre tutors and students during uncertain times. As a writing centre we needed to understand more fully how students and tutors adapted to the new normal in higher education to continue to support students. The data were collected during the first year of the pandemic to determine what needed to be done to be responsive to students' learning needs.

Data collection included written reflections from eight writing centre tutors from one writing centre site and surveys with 20 students over a period of one week in the first semester of the university year. This enabled an understanding of their perceptions and experiences on using the writing centre remotely within a qualitative, exploratory inquiry. Writing centre tutors provided written narrative reflections prompted by key statements in a reflective questionnaire including, *Reflect on the innovative strategies you employed when engaging with students during the Covid-19 pandemic.* Similarly, students were asked to share their views on how Covid-19 affected their learning; what they liked most and least about online delivery of writing centre tutoring. Questions included: *Which online forum did you use to meet the writing centre tutor* and *What was your experience of using the writing centre remotely?*

Bryman (2016) and Creswell (2019) assert that there are numerous analytical procedures that may be used to analyse qualitative data including narrative analysis, discourse analysis, framework analysis, grounded theory and theme (or content) analysis. Data were collected and analysed thematically to find common themes and trends related to promoting and sustaining inclusive learning environments for students during challenging times. Nowell *et al.* (2017: 2) state that thematic analysis involves the identifying of common themes, topics and patterns of meaning that repeatedly come up from the data collected. Thematic analysis enables one to be able to identify and describe implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes – and was used to decode data. Questions were open-ended to be able to solicit detailed understanding of the area being analysed. Data from the narrative reflections and surveys were transcribed verbatim and analysed using the latest version of NVIVO software. All participants provided voluntary participation in the research and participants' names were anonymised to ensure confidentiality. Participants were allocated a relevant participant

number. For example, tutors were categorised by the letter T and students by the letter S, followed by a number, for example, T2 or S5. The ethical considerations for this study centred predominantly on issues of confidentiality where participants were assured that their names would not be divulged. Participants were given a detailed letter on the study and consent was requested. The findings of this study aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of the writing centre in providing inclusive and flexible learning environments during challenging times such as a pandemic.

4. Findings and discussion

Three prominent themes emerged through the analysis of data. These key themes can help us to generate new ideas in this post-pandemic stage and beyond. The first theme unpacked the importance of students having *partnerships in learning,* particularly in times of heightened stress and uncertainty such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The data highlighted that students felt disconnected from peers and lecturers and relied on tutor support and conversational interaction as they navigated through their learning at university.

4.1 Theme 1: Partnerships in learning

The sudden onset of the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in disconnection setting in for many students and staff, particularly because there was no time to plan for the move online (Ngubane *et al.,* 2020). When asked about the experience of using the writing centre remotely, students expressed initial anxieties and tensions in adjusting to online writing centre consultations. However, it was further evident that students longed for engagement and support during a time that was unpredictable.

> *I was scared about using these new systems, but tutors reminded us that there was a real-life, friendly person on the other side of the screen – so that was nice. It was comforting to know I could ask questions in the chat bar ... It was different but a fun experience and best of all my tutor was patient and friendly throughout. She actually encouraged me to use the different online features like sharing my screen, and using emojis during the session so that I would understand how it worked for future writing sessions* (S8).

This comment highlights how the tutor enabled the student to be independent and take responsibility for their own learning. This is central to writing centre work as we advocate supporting students while they take responsibility and direct their own writing, learning and development while at university. These views are affirmed by Coutts (2019), who believes that it is essential for students to take ownership of their learning. Furthermore, S8 highlighted how the tutor encouraged participation and interaction during the session, which is affirmed by Vygotsky (1978), who encourages social interaction in learning. Similarly, tutors expressed some of the constraints they faced at the onset of the pandemic.

> *Time was a bit of an issue but as a team we decided that we would allocate a few minutes at the beginning of every online session to explain the platform to students. Many struggled to connect, did not use microphones and cameras and had not used WCOnline or MS Teams before* (T4).

> *It was exciting yet challenging at the same time because of the new meeting method. Signal coverage may be a problem there and there in my community and the issue of mobile data being so costly* (S2).

> *Tutoring online came with some difficulties but through the process we tried to ensure that students understood that we were there to support them with their written tasks. We had to be empathetic, flexible and open to changes in terms of the consultation platforms, sometimes delays in the time of the session however, this experience enabled us to adapt to difficult situations – it allowed us to grow* (T6*)*.

Within the South African context, there is a critical need for increased investment in upgrading technology resources, both in universities and at community level, because of the digital divide. Also significant is that university students are unevenly challenged and require training and support on LMS and other newly adopted online learning platforms.

> *There were times I couldn't reach a student on the WCOnline platform and had to contact them via our cells and facilitate the session. During such times, I really understood the challenges and disconnection our students faced. These situations made us reflect on the work we do and our role in providing a supportive space for students to work on their writing* (T1).

Comments from T1 and S2 show that not all students have equal access to technology and the issue of the digital divide requires that we find creative ways to make education more equitable. The comment from T1 highlights how the writing centre values reflective practice as it enables tutors to engage with the 'affect' involved in writing centre practice, as they interact with students not only on an academic level, but also on a socio-emotional level.

4.2 Theme 2: Communities of practice

The second theme was Communities of practice (CoP). Learning that takes place through CoPs is underpinned by socially mediated learning. Students and tutors shared their views on how the humanistic approach to working in the online environment contributed to knowledge construction, a sense of community and belonging.

> *Regularly connecting with our team helped us to deal with the hurdles we faced in the 'new normal.' For example, not being able to see the student's body language and facial expressions makes our writing sessions slightly difficult. However, in our weekly team meetings we often shared these views and discussed ways of working around that. For example, we consciously tried to probe more, be more engaging, and ask more questions so that we could make sure students felt comfortable and achieved their goals for the session. We also turned our camera's on at the beginning so they could see a friendly face* (T7).

T7 indicated the benefit of CoP in writing centre work and how through having collective identity they are able to engage on ways in which to improve their practice and thereby offer quality writing centre tutoring to students even during challenging times such as a pandemic.

> *My experience at first was difficult. It was difficult adapting to the online system but my tutor helped and reassured me that she was there to assist me by carefully listening to my thoughts, helping me unpack ideas and develop them. I preferred MS Teams and eventually I became more confident in using the platform and as a result I had really productive sessions with my tutor. It was nice to able to have discussion and knowing that there was someone to help with my schoolwork during a time I felt very isolated, scared and alone* (S1).

These tutor and students' responses show how a sense of community was formed (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). It is further aligned to Vygotsky's view that knowledge is constructed through the interaction with others. Student views show how they value the

collaboration and collegial support offered by writing centre tutors. Student S1 showed that in as much as there were negative experiences in online tutoring during the early days of Covid-19, having these connections and an attentive ear in the writing centre tutors cultivated a sense of belonging, relatedness and community leading to shared meaning making and knowledge creation.

4.3 Theme 3: Multimodal learning environments

Given the South African education context, the quick shift the online teaching and learning came with many challenges. Some positive experiences were evident and with time it is hoped that students may become more adept in using the online platforms such as WCOnline, MS Teams and LMS.

> *I feel it is important that we remain flexible in our offerings. Dialogical engagement is possible via the MS Teams platform and WCOnline since students can respond directly to suggestions we make and we encourage them to ask questions and engage with us albeit virtually. Multimodal environments that are planned and structured can contribute to quality teaching and learning* (T2).

> *This period taught me patience and made me reflect on the affective side of tutoring work and how students rely on our support. I think online tutoring at writing centres will not replace real-life writing centre centres entirely. Multi-modal learning environments should be used to foster innovative and inclusive learning at university* (T8).

> *It was time efficient and convenient because I work in Hammarsdale and I did not have to travel. The tutor was patient and helped me with connecting. I prefer online sessions as it saves traveling time and works for me* (S4).

The findings indicate that tutors possess a set of important values and ideas that are apposite to the transformative learning process and sustaining inclusive learning environments during uncertain times such as the pandemic. Furthermore, tutors contribute to the affective side of students' university experience through providing a nurturing environment, as well as motivating students to take responsibility and become active in their own learning. The findings reveal that the writing centre acknowledges the economic and social difficulties faced by students and sees the value of CoP and a humanistic approach to its work in assisting students in coping with challenges and the realities that confront them currently. We value reflection and will continue to use it to develop and inform our writing centre praxis. A reflective approach to our work allows us to sustain and improve our writing centres as a community of practice as we endeavour to ensure that our practice remains responsive and humanising even in times of uncertainty. Furthermore, findings revealed that technology can increase the quality of education and improve academic writing support outcomes and multimodality in writing centres can thus help bring out the richness of diversity, enabling more students to participate successfully even during challenging times. The findings indicate that tutors aim to be responsive to students' writing needs and preferences. In reflecting on the shift to online teaching and learning it is important that higher education institutions plan in advance of interruptions such as pandemics, student protests, civic riots and stay abreast of the ever-changing technology.

This research raises an important question for us in the writing centre and the university at large in terms of how we could improve the learning experiences of students' post-pandemic – a caring learning environment that is inclusive, flexible, promotes a sense of community and belonging.

5. Conclusion

While there is still a need for further research, there is much to infer from the findings of this small-scale research. Many lessons were learnt. We acknowledge the pivotal role of writing centres in creating a safe academic space to foster criticality in students and teaching and learning that is inclusive, reflexive, responsive, and relevant. Going forward we advocate flexibility; we are now offering a hybrid writing support consisting of online and face-to-face consultations. We understand the importance of reflecting and refining writing centre pedagogical practice and becoming adaptive to the needs of students. Through reflective praxis we aim to be able to more fully understand how collaborations could look and function in a post-pandemic world. This research argues for deep, scholarly engagement that could open up ways to authentically engage with past and current practices, generate new ideas for consideration and action in order to build, innovate and develop inclusive teaching and learning and quality education for all students.

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