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Exploring multimodal approaches for writing centres in remote and in-person configurations

Abstract

Writing centres have had to adapt to many challenges, including the move to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. In South Africa this move was complexified by differential access to digital environments and contextual issues such as lack of electricity and rolling blackouts. Writing centres also need to consider the increasing massification of higher education and ways of harnessing diverse resources to enrich communication. This paper explores writing centre approaches to research and pedagogy within a social justice agenda, including combining an academic literacies approach with a multimodal social semiotic approach. It also investigates innovative approaches to teaching writing in diverse and multilingual contexts, including expanding the repertoire of resources used in writing consultations. It argues that the explicit utilisation of a range of modes can enhance writing production and enable writers to actively explore different modes for constructing meaning. The paper reflects on developing inclusive multimodal writing centre materials. It then explores the changing function of modes in online and face-to-face consultations (post-pandemic lockdowns), including talk as mode, silence as mode, visual modes, and the use of time. The aim is to interrogate our academic practices concerning the diverse languages and various forms of communication that students possess, whether in virtual or physical learning environments.

Keywords: *academic literacies, materials development, multimodality, social justice, social semiotics, writing centres, writing pedagogy*

1.   Introduction

It is apparent that the vastly increased reliance on the digital as a result of the pandemic has worsened inequalities and deepened data injustices (Heeks & Renken, 2018). With the closing of face-to-face tuition at universities during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, writing centres had to find innovative ways to get around the access issues. This paper investigates transformative pedagogies and innovative approaches to teaching writing in online, blended and face-to-face contexts. Reading and writing practices are profoundly social, involving the development of specific types of identities. Academic writing is also considered a

'high-stakes' activity (Lillis & Scott, 2007: 9) as it is one of the main modes of assessment in higher education. This paper explores how writing centres can explicitly utilise multimodality to enhance writing practices. Multimodality refers to the integrated use of semiotic resources (such as language, image and music) in texts and communicative events (Kress, 2010) like writing centre consultations. Reflecting on using a range of modes to develop thinking within multilingual and diverse contexts will enable a better understanding of what writing centres have to offer higher education in terms of pedagogical innovation and social justice. The paper argues that the explicit utilisation of multimodality can enhance writing production and enable writers to actively explore different modes for constructing meaning. This includes looking at the ways in which new technologies can enable modes to be configured and to circulate in different ways. Kress defines 'mode' as "a socially shaped and culturally given resource for meaning making" (Kress 2023 in Jewitt, 2014: 60). Modes can be linguistically or non-linguistically based and have their own particular potentials and limitations. After discussing the advantages of combining an academic literacies and multimodal approach, this paper considers ways of developing inclusive writing centre materials using a range of modes. It then reflects on the changing functions of modes in online, blended and face-to-face consultations (post-pandemic lockdowns), including talk as mode, silence as mode, the use of time and visual modes.

2. Combining academic literacies and multimodality within a social justice agenda

This section expands on the ways in which combining academic literacies and multimodal social semiotic approaches can serve a social justice agenda by writing centres in South Africa and elsewhere in contexts of superdiversity. The focus falls on the ways in which these approaches can theorise some of the pedagogical shifts from digital to physical spaces. Many practitioners at writing centres in South Africa have worked towards developing ethical theories and methodologies that embrace diversity. One of the main approaches taken by writing centres has been an 'academic literacies' approach (cf. Archer & Richards, 2011). An academic literacies approach "challenges us to consider what transformation in our current context means, and how our work from writing centres can contribute to transformative moves in higher education" (Dison & Clarence, 2017: 9). A feature of an academic literacies approach is the awareness of when and how to switch practices between one context and another, and to deploy a repertoire of resources appropriate to each context, whilst understanding the social meanings and identities that these resources evoke (Lea & Street, 1998: 159). This approach thus goes beyond simply inducting students into higher education. It seeks to "give students access to both the means to work within those communities of practice successfully *and* the means to eventually critique, challenge and change their knowledge-making practices over time" (Dison & Clarence, 2017: 8). This practice-based approach is useful to explore the interdisciplinary nature of writing centre work, as well as varied reading and writing practices emerging from social and technological changes, including those emerging during the Covid-19 lockdowns.

Multimodal social semiotics is an approach to communication, pedagogy and research that focuses on the use of multiple modes, genres, and media in meaning-making practices (cf. Kress, 2010; Jewitt, 2014). Different texts support particular types of interaction. For instance, a reader can flip through a book by turning the pages, whereas the same reader would need to scroll or click on hyperlinks in a screen-based document. A multimodal approach examines

writing as part of a multimodal communication landscape and looks at the ways in which writing is embedded within a wider social context. It also focuses on why individuals realise meaning (their interest or motivation), and how they realise meaning in terms of the design of their texts. It thus enables a non-deficit view of student writing, with a focus on understanding why students choose to represent in the way that they do. It can open up discussions around texts and how apt the students' representational choices are for the disciplinary context. Questions that may arise using this approach include: How did the student use the modes available to them to create their text? What did they highlight? What was gained and lost in the process of moving from one mode to another? A crucial concept in the field of social semiotics is that signs are inevitably moulded by the context in which they are created, as well as by their importance within specific material, cultural, and social settings. Whereas an academic literacies approach is useful for investigating embedded social practices over time, social semiotics is productive in decoding the ways in which texts work and interact with one another. This is especially useful in thinking around 'new' genres that students are required to produce for assessment, such as blogs, PowerPoint presentations, data visualisations, websites, and assignments that include visuals (cf. Archer, 2011)

Combining academic literacies approaches and social semiotics can be extremely useful in interrogating meaning-making practices within writing centres. Both approaches question the 'myth of technological transparency' and the idea that writing has an "essential nature unaffected by the mode of production and presentation" (Haas 1986, in Ching, 2018: 2). Utilising these approaches in combination enables theorising about student and researcher 'interest' (Kress, 2010), even within constrained representational environments where one might not expect much room for 'choice' (as in certain disciplines or certain highly conventionalised genres). Both approaches also question dominant and 'common-sense' approaches to texts. In addition, combining academic literacies and social semiotics firmly situates meaning-making decisions within social, institutional and technological contexts (Simpson & Archer, 2017). This acknowledgement of the relationship between text-making and social practices is crucial for writing centres in South Africa, as access to the dominant forms of meaning-making is important for student success.

3.   Developing inclusive writing centre materials

It is important to be critical of the materials that writing centres produce and use, and this is where a social semiotic approach can be extremely useful. The usual critical questions apply to these texts, namely who are we representing in the sources, who are we excluding and how are we representing participants? In multimodal texts, this includes visual considerations such as the use of inclusive images. Also, attention needs to be paid to the audio, in terms of music, but most importantly, in terms of speech. According to Blommaert (2005: 222), attributions for accents are often made using center-periphery models that place social values onto the same or slightly different language occurrences. Because of this social (de)valuating of certain accents, it is important to be mindful of the languages, dialects and accents employed in the videos.

Online writing consultations and workshops can either be synchronous (where students and tutors communicate in real time) or asynchronous, where students communicate in a delayed way such as via e-mail or where pre-recorded videos serve as 'workshops'. Gourlay's (2022) discussion on lecture videos has resonances in many of the asynchronous 'workshops' that our writing centre ran at the beginning of the lockdown, when many students did not

have access to data and Wi-Fi and hence synchronous options were limited. Our experience resonated with Gourlay's as the time taken to produce these videos or narrated PowerPoints became an issue. Another concern which resonated was the fact that a video can be distributed to a much larger audience rather than a live event. This caused some presenters to become perfectionist, and re-record repeatedly every time a small error was made. In some ways, a finished recorded product is seen to reflect on the producer. Gourlay (2022) argues that hand in hand with the above perfectionism during lockdown went a kind of bravado to show that the individual is coping with the situation, especially in manipulating the technologies. This assessment reflects the pressure that some of the presenters at the writing centre confronted during lockdown. All of the above means that producers of these writing centre video texts and workshop materials tended to expend a lot of time and effort in their making.

During remote teaching, different ways of relating to the screen generated specific types of time and space. Goffman (1981) outlines three forms of talk in a lecture. There is 'fresh talk', 'memorisation' and 'reading aloud' . The fact that the speech is recorded in a video or narrated PowerPoint changes the nature of 'fresh talk' to something less spontaneous and more performed. Gourlay (2022: 7) argues that the screen is "enrolled in a wider act of *symbolic hygiene*, in which the lecturer curates a carefully staged and scripted performance which is 'cleaned up' in various respects". This feeds into an underlying ideology of efficiency and the notion of education as 'delivery'. In this conception, "apparently messy elements and 'noise' in the system are managed out" (Gourlay, 2022: 8). In synchronous consultations and workshops, using Zoom or Teams, Ebben and Murphy (2022) have identified 'materiality of self-consciousness', namely a heightened awareness of self-monitoring, as an aspect that is largely absent from in-person encounters. In face-to-face classrooms, awareness of the self is more about what one is saying and how it is being received than how the self appears to others in the kind of 'self-mirroring' that happens on these platforms.

In creating writing centre materials, it is important to embrace diversity through materials that can 'travel' across contexts. Here the relation between the local and the global is important. Semiotic entities in materials can point to the local whilst at the same time indexing global ideologies, and often these entities can be rooted in power relations that underlie globalisation. As an example of this, a study which interrogates the relation between local and global semiotic representations in English teaching videos in Angola will be presented briefly. This study shows how the semiotic choices made in producing a teacher training video impact on the construction of English teaching (Pearman, 2017). For example, the choice of pronouns in the voice-overs and the framing of shots are shown to be significant, including the point of view, the angles, and the sequencing of shots. In these videos, local environmental signs can be used to indicate local contexts, such as flags, monuments, local languages and familiar flora (Pearman & Archer, 2022). However, even if the represented objects are extremely local, if they are selected carefully, they can also be used to refer to more generic classroom settings. A school bell, chalk and chalkboard are featured in the Angolan video. These material artefacts are clearly not used in all schools, yet they are identified as signifying schools and general classroom settings. Within video production, utilising close-ups of objects and individuals can simultaneously refer to both specific and global aspects. Employing extreme close-up shots can activate mental frameworks and establish shared situations, generating visuals that are both generic and particular. The unexpected framing of shots such as asymmetrical or extreme angles can also render familiar images like classrooms, desks and students unfamiliar, thus resonating in both local and global scenarios. The considerations

raised by this study are useful for producers of writing centre materials, specifically videos and PowerPoints, as they create awareness of the multimodal semiotic resources that can establish the local, but that are also able to travel to wider contexts.

4. Face-to-face and remote configurations in teaching academic writing

As mentioned earlier, the increased reliance on the digital as a result of the pandemic has worsened inequalities in terms of access to Higher Education. In South Africa tertiary institutions were forced to face the challenges of technology-based inequities amongst students and staff. The main issue was accessibility to laptops, but also lack of access to Wi-Fi and the high cost of data. Both staff and students were allocated a small budget for data, some sites were zero-rated, and the university provided students with basic laptops. With the closing of face-to-face tuition at universities, our writing centre had to find innovative ways to get around the access issues. We did this by keeping teaching materials low tech whilst still enabling the personal aspect to remain by utilising low or zero-rated chat rooms. We also incorporated choice for students by creating multiple formats for learning materials by, for instance, making audio recordings, captions and transcriptions available together with the videos so that students with different amounts of data could access the texts in different ways. Because of the economics around the 'digital divide' (Van Dijk, 2020), teaching mostly had to be asynchronous, and visually interactive platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams were not always possible, whereas more writing-based or audio ones such as WhatsApp were prevalent.

In general, the online space presents different opportunities for tutors in terms of forming relationships with students, procedures for responding to documents online, and creating appropriate tutor roles. There were clearly some losses in the move to purely online/remote writing consultations during the Covid-19 lockdowns, due to the lack of access mentioned above, but also losing some aspects of the interactivity and the personal of the face-to-face. However, there were also gains and important lessons to be learnt. If access to visually interactive platforms like Zoom and Teams is limited, as was sometimes the case, an online environment can be rich with written text. Often feedback took the form of writing. This could be seen as an advantage, as tutors were able to provide extensive written comments on student writing through comments, questions and suggestions. The digital environment may be better for doing a task analysis, for example when one needs to organise a spatial or hierarchical display of information. In addition, working online could also create opportunities for more collaborative forms of writing and the easy sharing and revising of texts. It could serve as a gateway to other sites through links, thus expanding the textual environment. However, a disadvantage of working with a document online was that sometimes more emphasis was placed on the product rather than on the process. It is for this reason that our writing centre stopped doing e-mail consultations post-pandemic. We have maintained the hybrid model of allowing students to choose between face-to-face and online consultations. However, the online consultations entail meeting on either Zoom or Microsoft Teams in a designated time slot. This ensures that the interactive, dialogic aspect of the consultation is not lost.

In South Africa, there are other issues affecting online consultations, including the rolling electricity blackouts, known as 'loadshedding'. This impacts severely on the ability to work and teach online, leading to cancellation of online appointments. In this recent bout, our writing centre has been encouraging students to attend in person, as online connectivity can be tricky with the different loadshedding schedules. As an aside, when students are waiting for tutors at

the writing centre, they often talk amongst themselves about their assignments. Face-to-face engagement "involves embodied human subjects, co-presence, happenstance, serendipity, unpredictability, materiality, and all the physical and particular aspects of being in a room with people, sharing air, light" (Gourlay, 2022: 8). The next sections will explore some of these issues – looking at how co-presence and materiality manifest in different forms of engagement and representational modes in writing centre consultations.

5. Talk as mode in improving writing

Writing centres embrace the complex relationship between the spoken and the written, and how the written is understood by a reader. Writing centre pedagogy is based on the belief that a critical way of being develops through discussion and argument. Writing centre tutors thus offer students the opportunity to articulate problems, refine their concepts and explain what they are doing to a non-specialist audience. This helps students to acquire a vocabulary or 'metalanguage' to talk about their writing and develop self-critical practices in order to reflect on their work. At the end of a consultation, tutors often get students to articulate the ways in which they felt it had helped them. This is an important activity, as it helps students to verbalise aspects of their own writing. An important affordance of synchronous online consultations is the ability to record this 'talk' for later reference.

Besides the cognitive affordances of talk as mode, there are many affective affordances, including the engagement of feelings and the ability to identify with a fellow student acting as a peer mentor. Here laughter plays an important role and is a mode of communication in its own right. There are many different functions of laughter, such as nervousness, acceptance, parody, congeniality. Many of these conversational aspects are lost in online asynchronous consultations and workshops, for instance, the importance of visual laughter as well as auditory laughter. However, in synchronous situations the same prosodic features of laughter and humour still apply, such as pauses, pitch, volume and range of voice.

A multimodal perspective is interested in the different pedagogical affordances of moving across modes when thinking and writing. For instance, moving from writing to reading when getting the student to read their own essays aloud ensures student participation and avoids one-way communication in a one-on-one consultation. Students also often pick up on their own language mistakes and logical inconsistencies when reading aloud, and aspects such as punctuation become embodied through pacing as breathing. This is also pertinent to movement of meaning across languages, or in practices such as 'translanguaging' when a person's full multilingual linguistic repertoire is employed, rather than trying to keep narrowly focused on a single language (Creese & Blackledge, 2018). One way of drawing on students' multilingual resources at the writing centre as well as enabling conceptual understanding is to get students to talk about their writing in any language before writing in the medium of instruction (cf. Daniels & Richards, 2017). Also, students can do free-writing exercises in their first languages as a way of getting ideas out without having to worry about the form. Those in translanguaging refer to a semiotic 'repertoire' that communities have developed in response to their social needs. From a multimodal perspective, this repertoire would encompass speech resources as well as resources such as gesture, image, and so on. These 'non-verbal' cues are an affordance of face-to-face consultations.

6. 'Silence' as mode in online and face-to-face interactions

Due to its immateriality, silence is a "flexible mechanism for different types of content (memories, feelings, beliefs, etc.), or different forms (verbal, auditory, visual, etc)" (Adler & Kohn 2021: 3). Silence is not necessarily 'absence' or inaction and also need not be passive. It can be a powerful form of communication. Silence performs diverse linguistic functions. It can be used for its exclamative, interrogative or declarative force (Jaworski, 1993) and can signal agreement, dissent or frustration. It can also mean a person is anxious about speaking. It is important to hear and interpret silence in writing centre consultations, to pay attention to the gaps, pauses and hesitations. When we speak, we produce pauses for a variety of reasons. From a physiological point of view, pausing is necessary to breathe. However, pauses also serve discourse functions such as allowing other people to take a turn. Additional language speakers tend to produce "more pauses of longer duration and in mid-clause position … which can be explained by their limited proficiency in the language" (Kosmala, 2019: 1).

Listening is crucial to inclusive teaching and is one of the main features of writing centre work. When asked a difficult question about their writing or research, students may need thinking time to process their thoughts and formulations. Silence can be a positive in face-to-face situations, and people tend to be more comfortable with long silences in the face-to-face environment. Silence mostly has negative indications in the online space. In online workshops, silence feels like unresponsiveness and can be hard to interpret. This can lead to transmission pedagogy, where the presenter starts to fill in the gaps in responses by providing more input or answering their own questions. It can take both visual and verbal forms, as when someone's camera remains switched off throughout. According to Kosmala (2019), additional language speakers make use of more gestures during silent pauses than first language speakers, which is problematic for communication if the cameras are not turned on. She has identified five types of gestures during silent pauses, namely gestures that pertain to the meaning being expressed in the spoken content; gestures that point to or refer to specific things in time and space; gestures that serve to emphasise or demarcate segments of speech; gestures that reflect thinking processes and arise during communication breakdowns; or gestures that facilitate communication actions (such as speech acts or interactional moves, focused on interaction) (Kosmala, 2019: 3). It is clearly not necessary for writing centre tutors to be able to decode gestures as semiotic entities in this kind of technical way. However, it is worth noting that tutors learn to 'read' students in their silences, pauses and gestures, and for this, the face-to-face encounter is invaluable. Many of these nuances and the contextual and heterogeneous values of silence may be lost in an online interaction.

7. Time as 'mode'

Time can also be considered a mode, both in the process of text construction, as well as in pedagogical engagement. In terms of textual construction, one of the affordances of new technologies is the easy reproduction of text, as in the cut-and-paste of written text or the copying of an image. An example of how this plays out is students sending screenshots of their essay topics, rather than re-typing them or explaining them in their own words. This misses out on the time-based reformulating of a topic, which does have cognitive advantages that the instantaneous cut-and-paste may not afford.

In writing centre pedagogy, time as mode also plays a role. In general, writing centres provide spaces for slower and thoughtful conversations about writing and research. For instance, most writing centres have timeframes for meetings with students (half an hour or an hour) and constraints around student bookings (one booking per week at our writing centre, if space is available). These time constraints may at first glance appear limiting. However, constraints when writing can release a kind of creativity, as mentioned earlier with the notion of freewriting. In addition, those constraints can encourage time management amongst students. For instance, a while back our writing centre ran what we called 'shotgun' consultations – fifteen-minute slots, with no preparation or reading time. Tutors reported these as tiring, but invigorating, where one is able to home in on the crux of an issue, and not get bogged down by the detail or feel responsible for the whole piece.

8. Use of visual modes

As with 'time', for tutors it is useful to consider the visual mode as an aspect of both textual construction and multimodal pedagogies. In terms of textual construction, much has been written about the integration of images in writing, the choice and type of image, the 'functional load' of different modes in producing argument (Kress, 2010; Archer, 2016), and the relation between images and writing. Three semiotic systems are employed in most academic assignments. These include written language, images, and aspects of layout. The semiotic labour is divided among these different semiotic systems, and the nature of this division depends on the disciplinary context or on the focus of the assignment topic. Increased ease of access to different semiotic resources through technologies leads to "quicker mixes, assembly, reassembly and distribution of these modes" (Coffin, 2009: 515). Also, modes impose particular 'epistemological commitments' (Kress, 2003). For instance, the image of a building would have to be more specific than the written word 'building' in terms of style, types of doors and windows, roof line – representing a 'type' of building, even if it is a generic representation. The idea of epistemological commitment points to the fact that some modes are better than others for certain kinds of representational work.

The relations between image and writing need to be explored in multimodal texts, such as similarity relations, opposition relations, complementary relations, and whole-part paradigmatic relations. In terms of similarity relations, one could look at how one mode exemplifies the other. In complementary relationships, what is represented in images and what is represented in writing may be different, but complementary. Here it is useful to bear modal specialisation in mind: language tends to realise sequential relations better than images which realise spatial relations, and images tend to articulate affect, attitude and emotion in more direct ways than in writing.

Writing centre tutors need to understand the workings of multimodal argumentation in order to support and develop the multimodal practices of text production in Higher Education (Huang & Archer, 2017). In terms of the function an image is performing in a text, the image can serve as an illustration, it can be used as evidence in an argument, or it can be a part of an argument. For instance, data visualisations can function as both evidence of argument or argument itself (Archer & Noakes, 2020). Data visualisations tend to carry a 'truth value' in academic texts and are often regarded as more factual and objective than other kinds of evidence. The type of image chosen for a particular purpose is important. In a scientific domain, for instance, a cross-section diagram, perspective drawing or simplified two-dimensional drawing may be more appropriate than a more realistic drawing or photograph.

Here, the questions writing centre tutors could ask include: 'What is the role of the image or the writing in communicating the argument?' or 'How is the specific image chosen apt in communicating the argument?'

A useful scaffolding activity for writing is that of visualisation or mind-mapping. Mind-mapping can be done equally well in-person and online, depending on the technical skills of the students and consultant. Online, there are useful programmes with diagrammatic templates that can help visualise the relationships between entities. In-person could allow the creative unfolding in real time in a co-created map or diagram. Kress (2010: 95) contends that a concept map is "organised through the affordances of image, using the semiotic logic of space and the modal affordance of spatial relations between simultaneously present entities". A mind-mapping process in the one-on-one consultation could enable a collaborative and negotiated approach to meaning-making, where knowledge is co-constructed. Although many students may be familiar with brainstorming activities, they may not consider using mind-maps in gathering information or planning assignments. Mind-mapping can be regarded as a crucial part of exploratory meaning-making, a creative activity emerging as a material artefact. It affords writers opportunities to "creatively generate, challenge and negotiate ideas, notions and questions of interest and then to compose these into meaningful arrangements" (Grant, 2012: 134). Decisions that can be discussed in the consultation include what topic headings and subheadings to choose and how to arrange and display these visually on a screen or piece of paper. The practice of mind mapping allows students to explore and construct a knowledge base by generating ideas that foreground their topic interest and then enables them to arrange these in hierarchical relationships. How students then write about these relationships is a crucial part of the one-on-one consultation at a writing centre.

9. Conclusion

This paper has interrogated some of the academic practices employed by a specific writing centre in South Africa within remote and in-person spaces, focusing on utilising students' multilingual and multimodal resources. It has shown how academic literacies and social semiotics can be combined to allow for an in-depth look at how texts are embedded in specific practices and communities. Fundamental both to an 'academic literacies' and a social semiotics approach is the ideology of transformation that seeks to "push back against dominant and 'commonsense' approaches to creating, assessing and critiquing texts in a range of modes" (Dison & Clarence, 2017: 8). The paper has focused on the unique affordances of the one-on-one consultation in online and face-to-face contexts and has argued that an approach which considers the full range of semiotic resources has the potential to make writing centres more democratic and inclusive. It is clear that new understandings of space and time require of us to learn new strategies and teaching techniques that work in online environments, especially as accentuated during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Post-pandemic, writing centres need to continue to grapple with varying modes of knowledge production and text creation. By actively employing the opportunities of multimodality, tutors at writing centres allow writers to use extra-linguistic structures in the process of conceptualising meaning. An expansion of the repertoire of resources used in both physical and virtual spaces can help to create semiotically open writing consultations, including multilingualism as a resource for meaning-making.

Acknowledgements

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