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Universal Design for Learning and writing centres in South African higher education

Abstract

Could a transformative, inclusive and emancipatory educational framework like the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) advance academic success for all? Could racism and dis/ableism be dismantled through such an emerging educational trend that offers a redefinition of dis/ability abolishing oppressive pedagogical practices that perpetuate constructed views of special needs, often negatively correlated with racial and intellectual superiority? Could such a framework that foregrounds physical, cognitive and linguistic injustices advance achievement beyond merely meeting academic literacy standards within higher education settings like writing centres in a post-Covid 21st-century South Africa? These critical questions are some of the tensions raised in this paper proposing a compelling, yet controversial attempt at advancing student learning and achievement within an expanded definition of disability offered by the UDL framework developed by Rose and Meyer at the Center for Applied Special Technology at Harvard University. While Covid-19 centred around a pandemic, this global catastrophe accelerated the technological thrust into virtual and blended learning mediums of learning and engagement. Yet, given the technological explosion of the mid- and late 20th century, in many ways education have headed towards this direction. Now more than ever, the awareness of the Universal Design for Learning within the role of the writing centre and academic literacy is especially critical, given the drive for technologically driven approaches to address issues of social justice. This paper seeks to understand the obstacles and opportunities of the UDL framework within the role of writing centres in post-Covid 21st-century South African higher education. Through professional insights as a qualified practising writing consultant both locally in South Africa and in the United States, this reflective critique on the emerging vociferous dialogue around the adoption of the Universal Design for Learning framework at higher education institutions in South Africa, and its implications for the role of the writing centre, are based on this author's pragmatic, commonplace experiences as well as research studies conducted on UDL and the Harvard Review. It is hoped that this reflective paper may make visible some of the inherent juxtapositions Universal Design for Learning may hold for meeting individual students' learning needs principled on its universal approach to learning success for all, affording opportunities for further research and critique.

Keywords: cross-pollination, differentiated pedagogy, digitalised academic literacy, dis/ability, UDL, learning styles, multimodalities, post-Covid, voice, writing centres

1. Universal Design for Learning and Writing Centres in South African Higher Education

While the SARS-CO-2 Coronavirus disease of 2019 (Covid-19) centred around a pandemic, this global catastrophe has accelerated education with technology. Yet, education was always headed towards this direction since the global information and technology explosion of the late 20th century. Within a South African context, learning with technology seen against the non-equitable systemic educational deprivations of its past and its continued disparate present (Sayed, are of especial concern. As the majority of young South Africans reel under the weight of unemployment and poverty, a lack of access to resources remains an enormous educational burden for the country. Inevitably, repercussions and concomitant responsibility inherent in this situation affects places like writing centres in higher education institutions striving to support student learning and success.

Writing centres are supportive academic spaces that are a pivotal hub for academic development of individual student thought, learning and voice. Already by 2011, Archer and Richards (2011) and Nicholls (2011) were contributing to an emerging body of South African scholarship on the role writing centres could play in advocating/developing student voice and inclusion, especially given the writing centres' unique non-threatening micro-teaching-learning environments and approaches. While at that time a comparison between American-born examples of the silent 'client' and the all-knowing 'consultant' practices were in the main under scrutiny (Nicholls, 2011), developing an inclusive student voice for academic empowerment for today's post-Covid, technologically driven 21st-century South African education may still see writing centres as dichotomous micro-teaching spaces, albeit now led by student peers.

However, whilst writing centres are commonplace machinery at higher education institutions in South Africa, they may be characterised by the fluidity and mobility of its student consultant staffing model, the one-on-one student-peer approach to consultations/feedback and varying levels of consultants' academic knowledge and expertise that have an impact on pedagogy and practice. Moreso, while the issue of power may arguably be regarded as levelled, as consultants in the main in South Africa are also students, pedagogical practices may still be seen steeped in the authority of the academy often reproduced and upheld in places like the writing centre (Archer & Parker, 2016; Nicholls, 2011). It is here that this reflective paper offers a contentious critique of the emerging dialogue on the adoption of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework in writing centres at higher education institutions in South Africa.

Also, an American-born design for learning, the UDL claims to address physical and cognitive inclusivity often related to racial, cultural and economic differences, offering learning success for all. The UDL, embedded in architecture, technology and critical pedagogy (Thibodeau, 2021; Kearney, 2022), claims to dismantle racism and dis/ableism through alliances with such emerging alternative educational scholarship like Critical Race Theory, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Alim, et al., 2014; Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016). UDL's goals, more so, are to redefine disability towards disbanding oppressive pedagogical practices that perpetuate constructed views of special needs (Harvard Educational Review Forum, 2017), often negatively correlated with race and achievement.

Such issues are significant and challenging for education in general. However, positioning the role of the writing centre within a UDL as an asset-based, specialised space in the day-to-day academic lives of students, makes for a controversial, yet compelling attempt for advancing individual student academic inclusion in writing centre work. This paper, therefore, scans a brief background and analysis of the UDL framework regarded as an emerging, asset-based universal approach to individual pedagogy, and its possible implications for the role of the writing centre at higher education institutions in 21st-century South Africa. This reflective paper offers some thoughts for critique of UDL as opportunity, and obstacle, in writing centre work. In this brief analysis the following sections are included:

- A brief background and critique of the Universal Design for Learning framework
- *Cross-pollination* and critique of universality
- Implications for the role of the writing centre within the UDL in 21st-century South African higher education

Drawn from professional experiences as a South African practising academic research and writing consultant, this paper is an attempt at scrutinising the possibilities the UDL may have as an emerging framework within South African writing centre contexts. It is hoped that through this brief reflective analysis of some of the tensions, obstacles the UDL may pose to the commonplace practices at writing centres in South Africa, and the opportunities it may offer for individual student development and voice may be raised. Inherently also, this paper aims to make visible for further critique some of the contradictions the UDL may hold for meeting individual students' learning needs principled on its universal approach to learning success for all.

2. A brief background and critique of the UDL framework

The origins of the concept of, and the term, Universal Design, emerged in the 1980s through the work of American architect, Ronald Mace (1941) (Burgstahler, 2008; Kearney, 2022; Stapleton-Corcoran, 2022). In its original application, universal design was about the principles behind the design of products and spaces/environments for accessibility to all people without the need for adaptation or specialisation regarding people with disabilities (Connell *et al.*, 1997). In other words, a universal design of a single product or structure used *universally by all*. Such architectural designs considered barriers of accessing building entrances, pedestrian sidewalks and curbs, among others, that disregard people with physical disabilities. Mace realised that constructing sidewalks and entrances that catered to this sector of the population also benefited others like children in perambulators, cyclists, and those with pushcarts and grocery trollies (Connell *et al.*, 1997). Addressing physical spaces for accessibility and accommodation for those with physical barriers was seen as addressing inequality and discrimination (Stapleton-Corcoran, 2022) for all.

Following the USA's 1997 reauthorisation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975, a policy aimed at mainstreaming students with disabilities into general education classrooms, considerable widespread interest in the issue of inclusion arose. Edyburn (2005) explains that while students with disabilities had been given physical access to the general education classroom, concerns around how students would access the general curriculum surfaced. Thus, emerging from American public education policy and architectural

design for advancing access to people with disabilities, the term Universal Design for Learning (UDL) was developed by David Rose and Anne Meyer at the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. The work of CAST aimed at 'revolutionising' how students with special needs were to be taught (Thibodeau, 2021: 1). By 1990, the goal and introduction of technology to customise teacher and student learning experiences evolved into not just addressing disabilities of individuals, but disabilities of schools (Thibodeau, 2021) in general.

In South Africa, a country that has undergone tremendous political and educational upheaval, a similar suit followed to advance democratic reform and inclusion goals. Over the last three decades, both policy and practice have guided transformation of the education system towards addressing disparate issues of the past (Daniels, Daniels & Babcock, 2015; Jansen, 1998; 1999; Jansen & Christie, 1999; Soudien, 2014). However, while policy has guided transformation and inclusion goals prioritising race (Daniels *et al.*, 2015), issues around disability and inclusion in curricula, teaching and learning has been contentious. In response, the Department of Education's White Paper 6 of 2001, has aimed solely at addressing special-needs education towards building an inclusive education and training system in line with global trends. Its implementation saw the mainstreaming of special-needs education especially for mild and moderate mental and physical disorders, and learning and cognitive disabilities in public schools. Special schools also became inclusive schools catering for multiple disabilities. Nonetheless, of dire concern for teaching and learning has been the contested 'one-size-fits-all' curriculum and concomitant assessment demanded within the system.

As a US response to a general curriculum, in 2002, Rose and Meyer (2002) revealed their founding principles of UDL. Given an increasing diverse student population that seeks academic achievement gains (Edyburn, 2005) within education curriculum systems that evidence the contrary, the concept of a universal design for learning is seen as a universal means of approach to achievement. The UDL focuses research, development and educational practice on understanding diversity and applying technology to facilitate high cognitive achievement in learning for all (Edyburn, 2005; Rose, 2001). Thus, grounded in emerging insights about brain development, cognition and digital media, the UDL as a curriculum approach aims to universally address diversity in curricula. The UDL framework embedded in cognitive neuroscience (Rose, Rouhani & Fischer, 2013; Rose, 2016) sets "to eliminate barriers to learning and support the development of expert learners while addressing aspects of inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility"¹ (Kearney, 2022). The UDL has since emerged as an educational framework for creating learning environments that address diverse needs of students (Stapleton-Corcorran, 2022), both physical and cognitive.

To this end, the UDL contests the term 'disability' and has constructed its framing on *dis/ability*. Used in this form, 'dis/ability' is said to offer the potential for fertile discussions and actions. As such, *dis/ability* is meant to open critical conversation towards dismantling systems and categories that demarcate rank, power and privilege for students (Harvard Educational Review Forum, 2017; Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016). The UDL's definition recognises universal student heterogeneity and diversity as an asset, and student skills and talents as varied (Jung, 2021). Inherent to this recognition is a definition of learning that aims to eliminate educational barriers for dis/abled students.

1 Origins of UDL – Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA) (pressbooks.pub).

Thus, the term 'dis/ability' with a forward oblique (/) after the prefix, for the UDL sees disability not as an individual trait, but a constructed product of culture, politics and economics (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016). Whilst acknowledging that disabilities of biological and psychological differences do exist and require special attention, the issue of normative definitions that identify and define students with special needs that deem what is mainstream in general education are made visible and contested in the UDL (Harvard Educational Review Forum, 2017). The UDL believes that such normative definitions of disability, usually correlated with race, culture and class differences, have brought with it dire consequences especially for judging achievement, access and progress; more so among disparately diverse student populations (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016). Such consequences continue to serve oppressive regimes within education and society like tracking of students according to ability.

Hence, the notion of specialised and tracked classrooms as a norm is extensively taken up by the UDL. Frattura and Capper (2015), in their Cornerstone 3 Module on *Transform Teaching and Learning*, assert that interventions that have students grouped according to abilities/disabilities identified against the normative bell curve are mere reinforcements of a tracked system. The authors claim that educators develop programmes for specific learning, cognitive, or emotional behavioural disabilities that follow a deficit model and a perceived norm that begins and maintains the cycle of failure. In particular, they contend that the Response to Intervention (RtI) approach to addressing such 'disabilities', in effect decreases achievement for such students. In solidarity with the UDL, the notion of a transformative, inclusive and emancipatory pedagogy that aims to abolish teaching frameworks that promote racial and intellectual superiority is fundamental. However, in counterpoint, Frattura and Capper (2015) believe that an *identity*-relevant education makes for a more appropriate inclusively supportive term than the UDL's *dis/ability*.

Nonetheless, at its core, the UDL is an approach that is said to provide all flexibility to students in the ways they access and engage with course/learning materials to demonstrate mastery of learning objectives (Jung, 2021). Critically, while the UDL seems to be developing technologically-led universal learning materials (Edyburn, 2005; Novak, 2021), it does not so much provide a universal pedagogical model of its own in meeting individual student needs. Premised on universal principles and the use of technology, the UDL acts on existing alternative, individual pedagogies (Daniels *et al.*, 2015; Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016), offered through such psycho-biological and social theories and practices as Multimodality, Differentiated Pedagogy, and individual alternative pedagogies such as Learning Styles, approaches to be used within a UDL philosophical framework.

However, whilst such pedagogies may contribute towards a holistic individual approach to learning (Moodley, 2014; Tomlinson, 2000). Moodley (2014) has provided an extensive critique on the contributions, complexities and contradictions of a learning style approach to curriculum implementation in South Africa, which reveals that a UDL approach may not be as simple to implement within a post-Covid-19 South African context. Contradictions such as the conceptualisation, implementation and resource development of learning styles that profile students according to their individual learning preferences to provide a tailor-made curriculum accordingly may not be as simple within higher education settings in South Africa. These views are explored and questioned by other theorists who have raised similar concerns around a learning styles approach to pedagogy.²

2 <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-problem-with-learning-styles/>

For example, a rigorous empirical study by Papadatou-Pastou *et al.* (2020) found that the term 'learning style' was conceptualised and understood differently by educators and that the learning styles of students were identified by their teachers in various ways. Moreover, the implementation of learning styles in the classroom was left to individual teachers, "resulting in a multiple of different ways in which LS (learning styles) are implemented" rendering "its theoretical delineation impossible and its meaningful use in practice the least questionable" (Papadatou-Pastou *et al.*, 2021: 526). The general lack of consensus has escalated a growing body of sceptics in learning styles literature such as Coffield *et al.* (2004), Curry (1990), Franklin (2006), and Papadatou-Pastou *et al.* (2018, in Papadatou-Pastou *et al.*, 2021: 526-527), calling for support for "the abandonment of the use of LS in education". Herein may lie a contestable critique/tension against the UDL in its universal design in employing learning approaches that have received positive and negative criticism over the years and have also been rejected in some quarters for inherently perpetuating discrimination (Avramidis & Norwich Norwich, 1994; Westby, 2019). It is expedient, hence, to provide a brief definition and description of the concept of cross-pollination underpinning the UDL's approach to universality in employing existing alternative, differentiated, pedagogical practices.

3. Cross-pollination and critique of universality

The term 'cross-pollination' has come to be defined in educational research as a "mechanism for an interchange of ideas between more than one pedagogical or theoretical frameworks" (Thorne, 2008, in Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016: 366). Whilst keeping frameworks intact, this interchange of ideas embraces and connects the strengths from each educational and pedagogical framework in order to argue for, enable, and extend existing frameworks to respond to educational needs. Such interchange or cross-pollination of ideas sees a fertile space for new and expanded ways of discussing critical issues in educational research (Harvard Review, 2017; Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016). Waitoller and King Thorius (2016) clarify that cross-pollination in the UDL is a coming together of critical ideas of various alternative scholarship trends meant to advance and account for an inclusive pedagogy. As such, the UDL offers an inclusive pedagogy for students deemed dis/abled that could universally benefit all.

Therefore, strategically, the UDL is premised on three key principles existing in alternative brain-based pedagogy (Dunn & Dunn, 1978), aimed at engaging the full participation of all students towards gaining mastery and becoming experts. These are the why, what and how of learning (Rose & Meyer, 2002; CAST, 2018). Drawing from Rose and Meyer (2002), Frattura and Capper (2015), confirmed in Waitoller and King Thorius (2016), elucidate that through its neuroscience technological framework, the UDL's principles identify three primary neurological networks that affect learning. These networks are based on human variability, identification of parts of the brain that manage the affective, and recognition and strategic networks that seek to ask the why, what and how of learning (Rose & Meyer, 2002; CAST, 2018). Therefore, fundamentally, the UDL believes that all pedagogy should by design be accessible to all students through addressing the what, how and why of learning (Edyburn, 2005; Harvard Educational Review Forum, 2017). The UDL's critique is that any curriculum that is designed without the full range of student diversity in mind is a disabling curriculum (Harvard Educational Review Forum, 2017; Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016). Critically, therefore, rather than seeing students as being disabled, these guiding principles are expected to underpin the design and implementation of a curriculum. As such the UDL's cross-pollination goals, materials, methods and assessments are to reflect the following universally (Novak, 2021; Rose, 2001; Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016):

1. Multiple means of representation that looks at *what* the various modalities and learning styles are that students perceive and comprehend information through – visual, tactual, auditory, kinaesthetic.
2. Multiple means of action and expression that speak to *how* the activities should be designed and implemented that cater to individual physical, emotional, cognitive needs of students.
3. Multiple means of engagement on *why* something is done instilling student motivation, persistence and engagement.

Moreover, in respect to universality in addressing inclusion, the UDL justifies its argument for cross-pollination, as it sees it futile to split the conversation on race and dis/ability, or any other deficit marker that has become identifiers of failure and special needs when addressing and accounting for educational injustices. Frattura and Capper (2015) affirm that UDL educational inequities are implicit in emphasising a relationship between racism and ableism, which are forms of exclusion for many. The UDL views the use of cross-pollination as a strengthening argument for universality. Furthermore, in their call for a cross-pollination of disability studies, critical race, and special education theory, the UDL levies four arguments/rationales that offer a theoretical and empirical basis for universality as follows (Harvard Educational Review, 2017):

1. There is a solidified view of racism and ableism as seen in Eugenics, the use of IQ in testing and the normative standardisations of the Bell Curve. These established hierarchies correlate with race and disability that the UDL on its own does not address.
2. As a related socially constructed system, the argument asserts that racism and ableism inherently cannot be defined without the deficit constructs where black is viewed against white and whiteness and disability without a constructed view of what constitutes ability. This argument is aimed at calling out the inherent biases of what constitutes smartness, or what a person's body should look like.
3. The argument of labels and labelling of students as a consequence of racist and ableist thinking is not explicitly accounted for. These labels are regarded as inherent to the consequences of labelling students and are tangible, long lasting producing hierarchies of differences that contribute to normative systems of oppression in schools and in society at large. These labels account for such contexts as intellectual supremacy and inferiority, cultural capital and access, and whiteness as property to be enjoyed.
4. In examining and interrogating the construction of normality, the argument sees the need to abolish racism simultaneously with the construct of ableism. To address the complex issues of equity and of understanding the reasons behind why, for example, black male students have a disproportionately larger correlation with dis/ability, the question of normality and whiteness are examined questioning the inherent nature of the normality of differences.

However, a strong claim against the UDL's universal framework is that fundamentally the UDL is about normalising disability while aiming to produce experts. While the purpose of the UDL is to get all students becoming experts, the critique against the UDL's ideology of universality is seen as perpetuating the ideal notion of normal, thereby intrinsically and paradoxically disabling those who may not fit the norm during the processes of reaching expertise (Frattura & Capper, 2015; Harvard Review, 2017; Navaitiené & Stasiūnaitiené, 2021). As a counter proposition, Frattura and Capper (2015) proffer an Identity Relevant Teaching and Learning pedagogy for all students through capacity building and a shared expertise model. Through a cooperative, socially constructed use of co-planning and co-serving, teams are meant to

work together to determine how learning occurs the best. Also, the Haas Institute at Berkley University, California, recommends a Targeted Universal approach as counter to addressing this critique (McKenzie & Dalton, 2020). These tensions around universality have offered room for further recommendations on the principles of UDL that incorporated may serve all students.

However, a further strong critique levelled against the UDL is its aligned thinking around curriculum implementation of normed groups. Here the call for high quality of learning for all synonymous with a rigorous and relevant normative application of curriculum infers that the UDL does not account for individual differentiation (Frattura & Capper, 2015). Whilst recognising the input of the UDL to promote identity through curriculum planning and individual student preference, Frattura and Capper (2015) negate the framework as inherently discriminatory, believing that these practices usually perpetuate the process of normed-group grading and engagement processes (Frattura & Capper, 2015). Counter to the universality principle of the UDL, an identity relevant teaching and learning approach is offered in Frattura and Capper (2015) and the Harvard Review (2017). This approach foregrounds individual student identity making room for individual learning styles and preferences.

In South Africa, these arguments have received mixed views. While emerging scholarship on UDL reflects a general caution to employing trends that may not particularly meet local contextual needs (McKenzie & Dalton, 2020), there is also rising interest in UDL as an answer to emancipatory pedagogy addressing inclusion (Daniels, Daniels & Babcock, 2015). Understanding South Africa's historical and cultural contexts may serve to understand this dichotomy. In its search to address racial and cognitive disparities of the past for/within its democratic system of education, South Africa has sought the adoption of several US-led trends in education. For example, Outcomes-based Education (OBE) seminally designed by Spady (1994) was adopted as a political instrument and approach towards democratising a new curriculum, distancing itself from the previous apartheid-designed legitimately discriminatory system of education (Moodley, 2014). However, a lack of teacher knowledge, training and time has seen this American-born system fail in South Africa (Jansen, 1998; 1999; Jansen & Christie, 1999). Other similar US trends like Gardner's (2006) multiple intelligences and individual profiling of students towards addressing diversity in education still attest to a failing education system in South Africa (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement [IAE], 2016). South Africa was placed last out of 50 countries in international reading assessments.

Yet the search to educate a democratic South African student population for a 21st-century, digitalised global world craves the adoption of global trends towards irradicating discrimination and marginalisation through democratic, emancipatory educational frameworks like a UDL. Herein may lie the challenging role of support spaces like the writing centre that may hold sway in its approaches to individual pedagogy at higher education institutions in 21st-century South Africa for addressing inclusion and emancipation.

4. Implications for the role of the writing centre within a UDL in 21st-century South African higher education

In addressing the crucial questions raised in this paper, it is necessary to recognise the commonplace machinery that is the writing centre at higher education institutions in South Africa. Here, recognising the fluidity and mobility of its student consultant staffing model, the one-on-one student peer approach to consultations/feedback and the varying levels of

consultants' academic knowledge and expertise, among others, that influence pedagogy and practice at writing centres are crucial to reflecting on the implications for the role of the writing centre within a UDL framework. These implications extend even further, given the recent demise of a global pandemic that saw some writing centres operating exclusively online between 2020 and 2021. Such operations, conditional only to access and availability of digital technology, are correlated to prevailing unequal socio-economic divides in the country. Nevertheless, cognitive and social preparation of a 21st-century, post-Covid-19 diverse student body for a 21st-century world remains a vital priority for higher educational institutions in South Africa, and no less at its writing centres, has already been documented about the recent work of writing centres in South Africa. Daniels *et al.* (2016), Daniels (2017), Dalton, *et al.*, (2019), Moxley and Archer (2019), McKenzie and Dalton (2021), Nicholls (2011), and Richards, Lackay and Delpont (2019), among several other academics, have published extensively on the functioning of writing centres in South Africa and its goals towards serving students' individual academic literacy needs. However, writing centres in the main are still viewed as transient "spaces that suspend daily life in order to engage with ideas, prompt new ways of seeing and provide opportunities for reflection" (Archer & Parker, 2016: 43), rather than a teaching and learning opportunity directly connected to the daily lives of students within their individual physical, social and cognitive contexts.

While writing centres at higher education institutions in South Africa have consistently raised questions around its approaches in supporting student academic development and voice (Archer, 2017; Daniels, *et al.*, 2015; McKenzie & Dalton, 2021), issues around critical dialogue on inclusive practices and emancipatory pedagogies (Sayed, 2011) are marginal. With rapid interest on emerging technologically driven scholarship trends like a UDL becoming visible in South African higher education, a critical response from writing centres to meeting students' academic and personal development/identity needs as scholars for a 21st-century, post-Covid-19 digital world is rapidly being assumed. The question that begs, however, is how well writing centres are equipped to engage with such pedagogies, given its infrastructure and operation. Therefore, it is imperative to open up debate around the role of the writing centre within a UDL framework at higher education institutions in 21st-century South Africa that posits both opportunity and obstacle.

The following is offered as possible commonplace indicators of the implications for the role of the writing centre within a UDL framework in South Africa.

5. Considering possible obstacles for implementing UDL within writing centre work

5.1 English as medium

Whilst writing centres in South Africa are generally recognised as supportive academic spaces for cognitive and linguistic development in academic reading and writing across all levels and faculties, English dominates as medium. An obstacle arises here, given that South Africa's inclusive national language policy comprises eleven national languages, where a minority represent English as mother tongue.³ English is expected for both communicative and academic purposes, although the language of thought and cognition of most students is largely other than English. (Less than 10% of the South African population speak English.) However, with a rising student population of non-South Africans, English is firmly being established as

3 <https://southafrica-info.com/arts-culture/11-languages-south-africa/>

the universal language of academia. English for academic purposes is a specialised craft requiring a high level of knowledge and skills when applied to academic thinking, reading and writing. The speaking, reading and writing of English as a subject is not handled within writing centre work. The focus is placed more on the use of English as an academic language around its conventions and genres for approaching assessment requirements of the academy.

5.2 Expectations of the academy

It is here that the high expectations of academia on student achievement rates and success may be argued as an obstacle to the goals of UDL within what and how writing centres approach the purpose of their work. In the main, writing centre work helps students to meet the expectations of written assignments and research projects towards student assessment. Cognisant of faculty and coursework requirements, the focus is more on meeting the needs of the assignment/essay/writing piece than on the student as an individual. In the main, consultants review written work with the aim of engaging students with understanding and skills on how to meet the requirements of the genre, style and tone of the assignment task. Of importance, consultants are usually not content/subject experts. As peers they provide common experience-based feedback reliant on their immanent knowledge on how written pieces could be constructed, revised, and refined according to academic standards and conventions. Their training and expertise are outside the ambit of accountability to student subject knowledge or assessments.

5.3 Accountability for student progress

Herein arises a critical concern for a UDL approach, as student peers are uninvolved in direct accountability of student progress and achievement. As such, student consultants, usually contracted on an hourly, part-time basis, do not see themselves needful to take on the responsibility of lecturers and the pressure that carry. Generally, there is no personal responsibility or investment by consultants to follow the academic development and progress of students whom they consult. Moreso, the fluidity and mobility of the student consultant staffing model comprising full-time students offering a few hours in the week for peer consultations do not afford the kind of investment into transformation and emancipation in education expected by a UDL approach.

5.4 Pedagogic knowledge and training

If the expectation of a UDL transformative and emancipatory approach to writing consultations becomes incumbent to the role of the writing centre, then another obstacle that may arise will be on developing expertise, knowledge and training, both philosophically and pedagogically. Generally, consultants are full-time, postgraduate students offering their expertise as peers. Their work at the writing centre is peripheral to their own daily priorities. A UDL will require intensive pedagogic content knowledge training and capacity building to implement its goals within the writing centre. Moreover, the issue of cost and time both for training and remuneration would be serious matters for the writing centre to consider.

5.5 A space or a person

Critically, as characterised by Archer and Parker (2016), the writing centre sees its commitment to a space for nurturing academic literacy, and nourishing ideas rather than to curriculum and assessment. Within this space the emphasis of writing centre work may rarely be placed on universally addressing an identity-relevant pedagogy dismantling dis/ableism and racism

as propositioned in the UDL framework for emancipation and redress. While a peer-to-peer consultation model may seem to offer a semblance of a democratic safe space for interaction with learning materials, issues of hierarchy, bureaucracy and power are far from levelled for any universal inclusive application of cognitive or social equity to be addressed yet. Herein lies an argument against the philosophical and ideological constructs that underpin how the writing centre sees its role within South African higher education. In itself, the very character of writing centres may pose an obstacle within a UDL framework. Repositioning its goals beyond meeting academic literacy needs will require the very nature of writing centres to be revised for a 21st-century, identity-relevant pedagogy for a diverse, 21st-century global student body in South Africa.

6. Contemplating possible opportunities for the writing centre within a UDL framework

Notwithstanding the above possible obstacles that currently may hinder the implementation of a UDL approach within writing centre work, the role of the writing centre, now more than before, is seminal to cognitive transformation and social emancipation in South African higher education. With the principles of UDL positing universal opportunities for the development of individual student voice and empowerment towards expertise, the writing centre may here contemplate possible opportunities for repurposing/aligning its role through a cross-pollination with those of a UDL. The following possibilities for a UDL framework that could be contemplated through a cross-pollination of writing centre work that may proposition opportunities as “emancipatory tools in the struggle toward inclusive education” (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016: 373) may be:

- To nurture the idea of student experts to interrogate forms of oppression in especially pluralistic democracies. In promoting student experts, writing centres could go further from an inclusive standpoint to actually work towards dismantling racism and ableism. If employed, it would allow students to be more critical in and reflective of the very notion of ‘experts’.
- Through critical reflexivity and alternate curriculum content writing centres could question the use of language that would move to accept the idea of dis/ability as diversity, going as far as proposing that such terms as racism, ableism and gifted be ‘unlearned’ (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016: 376).
- That cultural dimensions of learning that could address the role of power and privilege could be used to shape and obstruct learning opportunities at the intersection of race and ableism. The combination would extend and enhance the current static view of culture that, through cooperative learning, the use of artefacts, structures, roles and responsibilities, may together work towards dismantling dominant cultural dimensions.
- The use of UDL along with an Identity Relevant Pedagogy as a means to minimise, if not to eliminate, the disruptions and fragmented methods of remediation and retrofitting currently practised in the pull-out forms of instruction of students who require a far more synthesised, comprehensive instructional package than currently is offered, which so far has seen minimal to no results (Stanford & Reeves, 2009).

The role of the writing centre as currently structured may hold more than just a space to have influence on individual student learning. A UDL framework may offer an opportunity to recognise and advance individual differences that thus far have been exploited for division and superiority, towards enabling and empowering uniqueness, self-identity and individual

talent. Herein may be a view that through a cross-pollination with writing centre work, a UDL's quest for inclusivity may offer opportunities to be contemplated not so much as universality, but as uniqueness.

Centrally, hence, if the work of the writing centre is about academic literacy – reading and writing fundamental to thinking, doing and being in the world – then the responsibility in respect to how academic literacy is approached for academic success for all must be contemplated within its role. Writing centres in South African higher education face a burgeoning dilemma of whether it holds responsibility or not for enabling students with the skills and competences of academic literacy for a 21st-century world. They would have to grapple with their philosophical and pedagogical identity that could provide an identity-relevant pedagogical support for students; one that would need financial and academic investment to educate and train its staff for high-level expertise and knowledge as expected within a UDL framework.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, against the demise of the SARS-CO-2 Coronavirus disease of 2019, which has accelerated education with technology, South African higher education settings are as yet unprepared to meet equitable educational needs of all its student populations. As unemployment, poverty and a lack of access to resources remain an enormous educational burden for the country, the concomitant inherent repercussions and responsibilities continue to have an effect on places like writing centres in higher education institutions striving to support student learning and success.

While writing centres have striven to be supportive academic spaces for academic development of individual student thought, learning and voice at South African higher education institutions, the role writing centres play in advocating/developing student voice and inclusion, given the writing centres' unique non-threatening micro-teaching learning environments and approaches, continues to be shaped by the larger contexts of academia. Developing inclusive student voices for academic empowerment in today's post-Covid technologically driven 21st-century South African education may still see writing centres as dichotomous micro-teaching spaces, albeit led by student peers.

Nonetheless, writing centres as commonplace machinery at higher education institutions in South Africa, characterised by the fluidity and mobility of its student consultant staffing model, the one-on-one student peer approach to consultations/feedback, and varying levels of consultants' academic knowledge and expertise, influence, and skew pedagogy and practice. Moreso, while the issue of power is considered levelled, as consultants in South Africa are in the main students, pedagogical practices may still be seen steeped in the authority of the academy often reproduced and upheld in places like the writing centre.

This reflective paper offers a contentious critique of the emerging dialogue on the adoption of a Universal Design for Learning in writing centres at higher education institutions in South Africa. In its laudable claims for addressing physical and cognitive inclusivity often related to racial, cultural and economic differences, offering learning success for all, and in efforts to dismantle racism and dis/ableism through alliances with such emerging alternative educational scholarship like Critical Race Theory, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, a UDL's goals towards disbanding oppressive pedagogical practices may fall short in its implementational approaches in a South African setting. Resting on a cross-pollination

with alternative and differentiated existing pedagogies that in themselves require extensive training, knowledge and funding, for its success, shifts the gaze of a UDL's goals to more immediate contextual complexities that make a UDL unattainable.

Yet, it is hoped that through this brief reflective analysis of some of the tensions/obstacles a UDL may pose to the commonplace practices at writing centres in South Africa, and the opportunities it may offer for individual student development and voice have been raised. Inherently also, this paper has aimed at making visible for further critique some of the contradictions a UDL may hold for meeting individual students' learning needs principled on its universal approach to learning success for all. Finally, while UDL principles laudably may propose a universal solution for disbanding constructs of dis/ability and race, practically planning, preparing and implementing its goals may be easier said than done for writing centres in South Africa today. Further research will be needed to test and examine the rationale and application of a cross-pollination with writing centre work within an extended and enhanced implementation of the UDL framework. Such research must see writing centre work as grounds for fertile contexts towards supporting emancipatory inclusive education and success for all in South African higher education. Considering the tensions/obstacles and contemplating opportunities in practice will be necessary for the process of exploring the role of the writing centre within a UDL framework at higher education institutions in 21st-century, post-Covid South Africa.

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