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Writing in the academy

Collaborative writing development with students and lecturers at the UWC Writing Centre

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Introduction

There is contestation in the field of student writing development in higher education. One debate concerns whether writing can and should be taught outside the disciplines in which the writing needs to be done. There is also still debate about whether or not ‘writing courses’ or writing places (that tend to divorce the actual practice of writing in the disciplines, and the disciplinary content and value systems that inform what is written and how it is written) have a valid place in higher education. Academic writing is not a generic skill that can be taught, and then applied uncritically or unadapted across the disciplines with students ‘picking up’ the implicit disciplinary rules and conventions as they move between different disciplinary spaces (Coffin *et al* 2003:3). Academic writing is, in fact, a social as well as a knowledge practice that is informed by the values and academic conventions of particular disciplines and the ways in which knowledge is constructed and disseminated by these disciplines (Lillis 2002). Furthermore, viewing academic writing as a practice instead of a ‘skill’ allows us to move away from seeing student writing as an individual act done by an ‘autonomous, socially neutral’ person using language as a ‘transparent medium of communication’ in which the meaning just has to be uncovered by the writer, and where literacy is ‘universal’ (Lillis 2001:31). Instead, we can more accurately understand student writing as ‘a social act’ that uses

language to make meaning and construct identity, which is done in socio-historically contested academic spaces where literacies are ‘numerous, varied and socially/institutionally situated’ (Lillis 2001:31).

Learning to be a capable, thoughtful and critical thinker, reader and writer is a challenging process that develops over time, and must happen at a disciplinary and departmental level, with all teaching staff actively engaged in academic literacy practices. Boughey (2002), drawing on the work of Street (1984, 1993, 1995), argues that academic literacy is a set of ‘social practices’ and this means that ‘the way in which meaning is derived from, or encoded into, print is perceived to be dependent on factors such as the way individuals perceive themselves in relationship to the texts they encounter and on the value they ascribe to those texts in their daily lives’ (3). Literacy is always ‘multiple’: there are many ‘literacies’ which students need to become familiar with in the academy (Gee 1994:xviii). This ties in with Burke’s argument that writing is an inherently social practice, and one cannot think about teaching it or doing it without also thinking about the context in which one teaches and writes, and the factors informing that context, such as ‘complex intersections and inequalities of age, class, dis/ability, ethnicity, gender, race and sexuality’ (2008:200). This is the notion of literacies used in this chapter.

It must also be added that writing is a knowledge practice, informed by the content that is being drawn from in the writing tasks, that influences the form and purpose of what is written. It is clear, then, that a support structure such as a writing centre or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course, functioning in a space outside this disciplinary context, cannot fully develop students as practitioners of the academic literacy practices, and ways of knowing and making knowledge, in a deep and meaningful way. But this does not mean that there is no role for writing centres and academic literacy practitioners in higher education environments.

Writing is a powerful tool for thinking and learning about disciplinary content, as well as a necessary means of assessing content knowledge. This view of writing in the academy is not a new one. Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) started in the 1970s in the United States, building writing-intensive courses and campus-wide writing programmes in many universities and colleges (Maimon 1992). There is a wealth of research and scholarship, as well as experiential knowledge, on the role writing can and does play in helping students to learn in a more engaged and critical way. Yet the practices in many university classrooms and lecture halls do not necessarily or extensively reflect this theoretical and experiential knowledge. There is a gap between what academic lecturers and tutors think students need to do to develop as competent writers and thinkers, and what these lecturers and tutors are doing to help students to achieve this goal. A writing centre, focused as it can be on holistic student writing development, can reach out to academic lecturers to begin to close the gap, and grow from knowledge to practice through collaboration and joint production of research and scholarship. Writing centres cannot act alone, or apart, from the disciplinary contexts in which students write, because, as Boughey, Street and Gee would argue, these disciplinary contexts have specific literacy practices that students must be socialised into and this involves learning to write effectively (Boughey 2002; Gee 1994; Street 1995).

Further, student writing development within a space like a writing centre can be sustainable only if the writing centre is working to consolidate and extend the literacy and writing development already embedded in the disciplines. Partnerships between writing centres and disciplinary lecturers and tutors are needed to ensure that student writing development is more holistic, and more sustainable in the long term. Focusing on the work currently being done by the Writing Centre at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), this chapter will argue that writing centres have a valuable role to play in collaborating with academic lecturers to develop more writing-intensive teaching methods and materials. It will also contend that there is a need for writing centres to work collaboratively with students as well, to guide their own writing development across all faculties and disciplines.

A brief background of the UWC Writing Centre

UWC initiated the Writing Centre Project in 1994, as part of a broader Academic Development Programme (ADP) designed to give the large numbers of non-traditional students from disadvantaged schooling backgrounds who were entering the University the necessary support in navigating and negotiating the new academic environment in which they found themselves (Leibowitz *et al* 1997). The idea behind the ADP was to provide students with what Morrow (1993) termed ‘epistemological access’ to the institution – inducting students into the new academic discourses in which they were required to work in order for them to produce primarily written work of an acceptable standard. Many of the students who were accepted at UWC, then and now, speak English as an additional language (EAL). Many UWC students come to the University from socio-economically disadvantaged households, finding the gap between high school and first year large and difficult to bridge on their own. Building this bridge for themselves is the first hurdle they encounter on moving into the academic environment and discourses. A second, and significant, hurdle is the way in which these discourses are communicated to students once they are in the Higher Education (HE) environment. Teaching staff often believe they are being transparent in making their assessment criteria, expectations and requirements known to students, while students often struggle to decode the academic conventions they are required to conform to, and so struggle to produce acceptable written work (Lillis and Turner 2001). This seems to be an especially challenging process for EAL students from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (Lillis 2001).

The Writing Centre, as it is at present, aims to support students with their writing task, in order to help them produce work of an acceptable standard by assisting them with decoding and making sense of these academic conventions and assessment criteria. It is a walk-in Centre where students can bring drafts of their work to trained writing consultants for a one-on-one consultation, and in this respect works in a similar fashion to the way it has done since 1994 (see Leibowitz *et al* 1997). Students are also referred to the Writing Centre as part of specific relationships created with course convenors and lecturers. They are invited to approach the Writing Centre for assistance, and to brief the writing consultant/tutor on the assignment task and criteria before referring students. In these cases the lecturers receive detailed feedback on the group of students they have referred, and how they were assisted with the consultant/tutor. The Writing

Centre provides its writing tutors with ongoing training, as well as an initial block of orientation and training, before consultations with students commence.

Resources are an ongoing concern in terms of hiring and retaining qualified and experienced tutors. All the tutors employed at present are MA and PhD candidates, with a great deal of relevant experience. However, they are paid from a limited pool of funding that pays a low hourly rate; lower than senior postgraduate students should be paid for tutoring work. This means that most of the tutors have to find other tutoring work to make ends meet, as well as do their own research. Each tutor works a maximum of twenty hours per week, and none of the tutors are presently involved in planning and running writing workshops on campus, as time and budget constraints do not allow this. This creates extra work for the coordinator, and hinders tutor development in the necessary areas of planning and facilitation of writing workshops, and collaboration with lecturers on writing development in the disciplines. This then restricts the extent to which the UWC Writing Centre can support students in their disciplines, in interactive workshops beyond the one-on-one consultations. It also limits the extent to which we can become involved in collaborating with lecturers and tutors on student writing development.

The Writing Centre has undergone several changes since 1994, under the leadership of different coordinators. It is difficult to say with any authority how the previous coordinators approached their work with students and academic lecturers. Apart from the initial few years of the Writing Centre little concrete documentation remains to tell us about the theoretical and practical underpinnings of Writing Centre work. However, from a report written in evaluation of the Writing Centre in 2003 by the UWC Academic Planning Unit it does seem that the Centre was operating without a coherent plan for its long-term role in student writing development and teaching support and development. While well-organised and clearly passionate about reaching out to students at all levels using a ‘process approach’ to writing, there was a clear sense of the Centre experiencing ‘mission drift’ and straying too far from its ‘core business’ by trying to take on too many projects in response to individual requests for help (Wood 2003). The concern in 2003 was that there was no clear mandate given to the Writing Centre and that without any permanent appointments, or structured institutional support and guidance, the Centre would remain in this drift, and lose its ability to have an impact on students, or on academic lecturers. Institutionally, much has changed since 2003. The Division of Postgraduate Studies now provides writing support and development to all postgraduate students and their supervisors and lecturers, allowing the Writing Centre to focus on the undergraduate student community. There is also a new Strategic Plan for Teaching and Learning, incorporating the introduction of Graduate Attributes into existing and new curricula. There is a clear institutional commitment, and need, to create a defined mandate and role for the Writing Centre as it adapts to these changes, and to support the work it is doing into the future. This is exciting, as there is now scope for changing the way in which the Centre can, and will, try to work with students, and in particular with academic lecturers.

The response to the Writing Centre since it has resumed work with students in August 2009, after being closed for a semester, has been very encouraging. The number of

students coming to the Centre and academic lecturers reaching out for advice and assistance has increased monthly, especially since the beginning of the 2010 academic year. The writing tutors have consulted with 446 students in the first semester, with 21% of these students returning for follow-up appointments (UWC Writing Centre 2010a). Three lecturers have approached us, explicitly for assistance on behalf of these students, and the initial feedback from the writing tutors to them has been well-received. It has also resulted in further requests for similar relationships in the second semester with the same, and new, lecturers. It is clear from this response that there is a great need for the Writing Centre at UWC. For the present coordinator and academic leadership there is therefore a need to create a firm mandate for the Writing Centre, to align the work it does with the current Institutional Operating Plan, the plans for teaching and learning and the embedding of Graduate Attributes into existing and new curricula. It is also necessary to think very carefully in terms of resources about how to plan for the present and build towards the future of the Writing Centre as a relevant and useful partner in the writing development of UWC students.

Key to this process is an understanding of what the Writing Centre can practically do, in terms of resource and personnel availability and in terms of its institutional role and mandate. Also key to this process is realising the limitations of the work any Writing Centre can do in terms of having an impact on the development of student writing, and sustaining this. As Archer notes, in writing about student writing interventions at the University of Cape Town (UCT) Writing Centre: '[s]tudents write in a range of courses, get feedback, do a range of reading, and it would be difficult to ascertain the extent to which one or two visits to the Writing Centre' could impact 'on their writing within this larger context' (2008:249). She adds that Writing Centre practice at UCT (and this is true for UWC and indeed most writing centres in South Africa) is rather '*ad hoc*', with students coming for once-off consultations with writing tutors, while a smaller portion of these develop and maintain a long-term relationship with the Writing Centre and writing tutors (Archer 2008:249). However, having recognised that it is difficult to determine the exact impact a writing centre intervention or consultation can have on students' writing in terms of improving it, one can (as Archer has done), indicate clearly that the Writing Centre plays an important role in helping novice academic writers to locate their own voice and clarify their position in relation to the texts they are reading and drawing from for their writing. Writing tutors make the writing process a less solitary and anxious one and the Writing Centre can help students to develop a meta-awareness of their writing, and can help them to improve their writing through a critical and supportive evaluation of the written work as a response to a particular task or set of assessment criteria (Archer 2008). This sense of the Writing Centre as a safe, non-judgemental space in which to develop their own confidence and ability has been echoed by UWC students in recent focus group interviews (UWC Writing Centre 2010b).

Working with student writers and academic lecturers at UWC

The current practices of working with student writers and academic lecturers and tutors at the UWC Writing Centre are influenced by New Literacy Studies, and the WAC movement. In terms of working with students, we are informed first and foremost by

the view that writing is indeed a practice, rather than a generic skill, and that it always happens in a social and disciplinary space informed by certain values and ways of knowing and disseminating knowledge (Archer 2008; Lillis 2001). Writing tutors do not correct or edit students' work, but rather 'provide [them] with an audience prepared to draw their attention to the academic norms of writing' (Bharuthram and McKenna 2006:497). Writing tutors thus approach students' writing by looking first at issues like whether the student has correctly interpreted the task; the way in which the relevant ideas and concepts have been discussed in response to the set task; the internal coherence of the written work; and the way in which the student has structured the written text in response to assessment criteria and departmental guidelines. Tutors ask questions of students, and each consultation is conversational as opposed to didactic. The student is being encouraged to think through their own work with the guidance of the tutor, who can explain and intervene where necessary to help the student understand more clearly what is required of their writing, and how to go about fulfilling the requirements more consciously (Goodman 2010). Surface errors like poor grammar, spelling, and punctuation are referred to and examined only once the writer can express their ideas more clearly, and in such a way as to allow students to learn to find the errors in their own work and do corrections on their own. This is achieved mainly by pointing out a small sample of common errors, explaining why they are problematic and then working through examples with the student that will enable them to continue to do further and future corrections independently. Although many lecturers and tutors complain mainly about the students' inability to write in full sentences, and their poor grammar and spelling, we find that very few students have a genuine inability to produce a sensible piece of written work. The majority of students we consult with at the UWC Writing Centre need assistance with task analysis and directing their answer towards the task in a more focused and relevant way, with clear reference to source texts (UWC Writing Centre 2010a).

In terms of writing as a social practice, the Writing Centre offers students a supportive, 'all-inclusive, writing environment to which all students, irrespective of their levels of writing proficiency, can come, and benefit from conversing with peer tutors for whatever writing problems they encounter' (Xudong 2009). As Harris eloquently argues, a writing centre provides 'a focal point, a place for writing on campus, a center for writing.... Here is a place where writers write, where they talk, where there is institutional commitment to writing, where ... collaboration is a normal part of writing and that writers really do write for readers' (1992:157-158). Through the conversational approach, the writing tutors meet students at the point at which they are in their writing process, whether they are doing a task analysis before reading or writing, or whether they are polishing a final draft before submitting it. Regardless of the disciplinary background of the tutor or student, the two can have a conversation that provides the student with a critical reader who can see their written work in a different light, making visible and clear some of the missteps or misunderstandings that the student may have made. The student can then begin to work out, with the tutor as a guide, ways to redraft the work so that it responds comprehensively to the task or assessment criteria.

Taking the concerns of the lecturers and tutors together with the concerns the students bring to the Writing Centre, there seems to be a correlation of sorts. When students bring their work into the Writing Centre, they fill in a form that allows them to indicate (by ticking boxes), what they would like to work on in their consultation. This form has been in place prior to this year, but it has now been adapted to suit the present needs and orientation of the Centre as we try to find out more about what in particular students need assistance with. There are boxes for ‘language use – grammar, punctuation, spelling, vocabulary and style’ and ‘plagiarism and referencing’ as well as boxes that address the structure and coherence of writing, reading and research, and task analysis. A preliminary survey of these forms thus far into 2010 seems to indicate that students ask for help in two main areas: working on coherence and structure (and the way in which they have used evidence and research); and the polishing of the final draft. Slightly lesser concerns are task analysis and referencing and plagiarism. The help given by the writing tutors based on their assessment of the written work in relation to the task indicates that students are assisted in two key areas: clarity of ideas and the linking of ideas and concepts across paragraphs; and logic of argument, including assignment plan and structural conventions. Far fewer students than those who ask for help polishing their drafts receive this help because tutors report that few students are at the final draft stage when they come to consult. Many need to be encouraged to go back to task analysis, clarifying their ideas and structuring their writing more coherently (UWC Writing Centre 2010a). According to tutor feedback thus far, it seems that the students who fall into this category are unable to see these errors in their work, and struggle to articulate their difficulties with academic writing. This is specially so with first year students, who have yet to become familiar with their disciplinary contexts and often misunderstand or miss altogether their lecturers’ and tutors’ expectations of their written work.

Speaking to lecturers and tutors about their students’ writing reveals, anecdotally, that the chief concerns seem to be language use and plagiarism and referencing, followed by structure and coherence. In terms of the statistics gathered thus far, students seem to require more assistance with understanding their task correctly and responding in an appropriately structured written task containing well-researched content, than with polishing their grammar or correcting their referencing. This feedback reinforces the sense of a gap between what the academics see as the main problems with student writing, which seem to focus on students’ use of English as a formal language of instruction, and the actual writing needs of the students, which relate to the deeper issues, such as understanding and responding accurately to the task. This gap is a central part of how and why the Writing Centre wants to work at UWC into the future.

It is fairly clear that the way in which the Writing Centre currently works with students is not very different from the way in which it has done so in the past, and our practices are closely aligned with many other national and international writing centre practices, like Stellenbosch University Writing Lab, University of KwaZulu-Natal Writing Place and the London Metropolitan University Writing Centre as cases in point. What is new, for the UWC Writing Centre, is the way in which we want to reach out to academics, and work with them to change the way in which literacy practices are understood and taught within the disciplines, with a particular focus on writing development. The ambitious goal

is to develop, with academics as partners, a campus-wide WAC approach to encourage academic lecturers not currently doing so to use writing for learning, evaluation and thinking in their classrooms as well as for assessment. The starting point is to approach a few interested lecturers and slowly and steadily build a community of practice which will take on its own momentum and become a part of the institutional culture of teaching and learning over time. Practically, the Writing Centre has started doing this by collating short reports on groups of students linked to certain courses who have come into the Centre for help. This feedback is sent to the lecturer for their information and, hopefully, action in some cases, and to establish a wider network of relationships between disciplines and the Writing Centre. This approach has thus far achieved positive responses from the lecturers concerned, and is a building block in the overall process of creating these collaborative relationships. Two new potential relationships between the Writing Centre and course convenors have developed out of this practice so far. The Writing Centre will become involved in these courses in the second semester, jointly working on ways in which to create more space for students to write in different ways, for assessment and learning. The challenge is to keep the momentum going so that the concept builds and becomes more widely practiced over time without over-extending the Centre's limited personnel and financial resources too soon, and, so that the faculties and lecturers will take on full responsibility for these courses and the students' writing development within them with the Writing Centre as partner in, rather than driver of, these disciplinary ways of working.

For the UWC Writing Centre, working on a WAC approach means working collaboratively with lecturers over time to develop more writing intensive courses, a key feature of WAC. WAC proponents define the movement loosely as encouraging a culture of 'writing to learn and learning to write', with an understanding that WAC programs or approaches are not 'additive, but transformative – they aim not at adding more papers ... but at changing the way both teachers and students use writing in the curriculum' (McLeod 1992:3). Central to this approach is an understanding of what students need to write in particular disciplines, how they need to write, and the purpose of what is written in terms of the objectives and outcomes for the course (Nichols and Brenner 2009). In spite of much literature on WAC and using writing as a tool for learning and not just for assessment, much of the writing being done by students in higher education is 'high-stakes', meaning it is for assessment and there are marks attached. There is a clear sense, from the UWC Writing Centre's engagements with lecturers and tutors thus far, that low-stakes writing – writing that is not for marks and is used as a tool for processing and evaluating information as a way of learning and understanding it – is not highly valued or readily used. This is largely because lecturers fear that they will not be able to monitor whether students are learning effectively because of having large classes and no time to read and comment on all students' work, and that students will not come to class and do the writing unless there are marks attached. Neither of these arguments is particularly convincing, even though lecturers and tutors with large classes and heavy teaching loads do have some reason for concern about setting more writing tasks for their students.

If we accept academic literacy as a set of social and knowledge practices, with the insight that academic literacy proficiency is achievable over a lengthy time period only, which goes beyond simply learning and mastering certain cognitive skills, then we need to accept that all disciplinary lecturers, not just those who work in EAP-type courses or writing centres, are academic literacy practitioners. Accepting this and implementing teaching and learning strategies that recognise it are two different matters for many academics though. Thus, in order to achieve success in this area, the Writing Centre needs to tread carefully to strike the right balance between offering support and ideas, and being more closely involved in the development of different kinds of writing-intensive interventions in different departments and disciplines.

A starting point here is to acknowledge the resource and teaching constraints placed on UWC staff. Many academics, especially those teaching first year students, who need much of the writing development help, teach large numbers of students – as many as 400 in a first year politics module, and as many as 650 in a first year law module. It is thus challenging to engage students in a more interactive teaching process that attempts to model academic behaviour that students need to master, like engaging deeply with readings, and unpacking arguments to assess evidence and the validity of claims. Many lecturers feel immense pressure to cover a certain amount of content in a limited amount of time. This means that many feel less able to interact with the class because students are often under-prepared for lectures as they struggle to engage with the course readings and materials, and furthermore many feel too intimidated to speak up in large class settings, so interacting can be a slow process. Academics need also to engage in increasing amounts of administrative work, and feel great pressure to conduct research and publish in their areas of interest and expertise. All this means that many academics could truthfully acknowledge that they are under-resourced, and even unwilling, to take on a greater role in building an institutional culture of academic literacy as a set of ongoing social practices, rather than skills that can be learnt apart from the content.

A writing centre can work with lecturers to provide them with valuable support in terms of discussion about the objectives of writing in their courses and disciplines, and to assist in the development and collation of materials and other resources that can practically help them to support and develop their students' writing. In this way, a collaborative relationship can grow and begin to critically examine the assumptions and objectives underpinning the kinds of writing tasks that are set for students, and the way in which the questions and assessment criteria are phrased and communicated to students. As outsiders to the discipline, writing specialists can ask questions that will encourage lecturers to think about why their students write what they do and how they assess what is written. Lecturers can also be encouraged and supported in thinking through how they learnt to become confident and proficient writers in their discipline and to take some of these insights into their own teaching and engagement with students – all part of the process of making the tacit knowledge and practices more explicit (Jacobs 2007). Writing can be used effectively as a tool to deliver, think about, and learn, as well as to assess, content knowledge, and there is a clear space emerging at UWC for lecturers to work with the Writing Centre to re-imagine ways in which to use writing.

It is possible to bring low-stakes writing into lectures and tutorials regularly in ways that will benefit students, and that will not necessarily create more work for the lecturers and tutors. For example, designing lectures so that there is a clear summary that could be made of each one, and asking students to take the last ten minutes to write one paragraph summarising what they understood as the key points of the lecture, or asking them to write down three questions they have related to the content or readings referred to in the lecture, can be very simple and useful ways of getting students to write in a focused way. Even in large classes, lecturers and tutors can take this work in and read a percentage of the total, as a way of monitoring what students are taking away from lectures and tutorials. In this way the content and style of the lectures and tutorials can be adjusted as the course progresses, taking the students' own reflections as part of the teaching and learning process. Talking to students about the purpose of this process, and highlighting the value to them in terms of their learning, and the writing they will eventually do for assessment, can go some way to ensuring 'buy-in' from the students. Having these discussions will also go some way to making explicit some of the tacit dimensions of the discipline (Jacobs 2007), such as the importance of being able to summarise a core text, reading, or lecture, or the value attached to writing in a clear and focused way that expresses an idea or set of ideas accurately.

Working from within writing centres in South African universities

I would like to suggest here that there are two ways in which a writing centre can play a role in developing a meta-awareness of writing practices in the institutions in which they are located, in the thought processes of both disciplinary lecturers and students. Students need to develop their reading ability and level of comprehension in order to do effective research before they can think clearly about their own position or opinion on any given topic they are being asked to respond to. Once they are able to read strategically and with understanding they can decide on a position and find evidence and explanation to justify that position. Only once those practices have occurred can they begin to write back to the task and meet the assessment criteria. Thus, one cannot view a writing centre's role as focused only on developing students' writing, and on nothing else. One could ask, then, how a writing centre would work differently or uniquely compared to academic literacy specialists already working in the faculties at various levels; how could a writing centre make a unique contribution?

Bharuthram and McKenna argue that '[m]ost lecturers are hired for their content knowledge' and 'are often unaware of the extent to which academic literacy is specific to the academy and that it comprises fairly significant differences across disciplines' (2006:497). They further point out that by the time most academics become lecturers, they have absorbed the literacy practices of their disciplines to such an extent that these have become 'ways of being in the world'. It can, therefore, be difficult for academics to step back and 'see' these practices from the perspective of their novice students or of those outside their discipline (Bharuthram and McKenna 2006). Jacobs, drawing on various writings from New Literacy Studies and Rhetorical Studies, argues in a similar vein that 'knowledge of disciplinary discourses has a tacit dimension, which makes it difficult for experts to articulate, and therefore difficult for students to learn' (2007:869). Data

from Jacobs' research shows that the 'rhetorical' processes through which disciplines communicate 'domain content' are rendered largely invisible to students, while emphasis is placed rather on developing content expertise – that these processes are thus 'tacit' (Jacobs 2007:870). This tacit knowledge, according to Jacobs, is acquired through being inducted or socialised into particular disciplinary 'communities of practice' (Jacobs 2007:870; see also Bharuthram and McKenna 2006; Boughey 2002), and the literacy practices of academic disciplines 'are best acquired by students when embedded within the contexts of such disciplines' (Jacobs 2007:870).

However, in spite of these claims, Jacobs in particular questions the premise that disciplinary lecturers must be the ones to teach these literacy practices to their students (2007:870). She argues, as do Bharuthram and McKenna, that while disciplinary lecturers may indeed have content expertise, and know the tacit knowledge and practices that have become 'ways of being in the world', many are not able to 'see' these invisible dimensions and unpack these literacies in ways that make them explicit and overtly learnable for the students (Jacobs 2007:871; Bharuthram and McKenna 2006:497). Thus, Jacobs (2007) argues for a collaborative pedagogical approach, where academic literacy practitioners work from outside the discipline to make the tacit elements of the discipline explicit to the lecturers working inside the discipline, so that both parties can work together as equals to explicitly embed the teaching of these literacy practices into the curriculum. She argues that through these collaborations, academic literacy practitioners can help lecturers to develop a meta-awareness of the 'generic structures and discourse patterns' of their disciplines, and that through developing this meta-awareness, lecturers can begin to have a critical understanding of the importance of, and ways of, teaching discipline-specific literacy practices (Jacobs 2007:872). One of the key literacy practices is writing.

If we look at the disciplinary lecturers first we can see that there is indeed a space for a writing centre to work collaboratively to create meta-awareness around writing in the disciplines. At UWC, in the faculties where teaching and learning specialists are employed to work with disciplinary lecturers to create awareness around teaching and learning and academic literacy issues, like critical reading, writing and research skills, it is often the case that these specialists are in some ways disciplinary insiders. The concern with this positioning of these specialists is that they would, certainly in Jacobs' thinking, be more likely to perpetuate the tacit dimensions of these disciplines by not making these fully apparent to either disciplinary lecturers or students. It is the contention of this chapter that a writing centre has a unique voice, and can be positioned in one or both of two ways within an institution like UWC. The first is to collaborate with the faculty-based teaching and learning and academic literacy specialists as 'co-outsiders' if you like, and therefore with the lecturers indirectly. The second is to carve out a role and mandate to work with disciplinary lecturers by bringing them into the process of co-building and sustaining a WAC approach to writing intensive teaching and learning. Regardless of how it is positioned in relation to faculties and lecturers, a writing centre can, and should, continue to play a valuable role in providing students with a supportive and critical academic space in which to further their reading and writing development, and in which well-trained peer tutors can make the writing process less solitary and

intimidating (see Archer 2008). This is the second way in which writing centres can work within South African universities (as has been discussed in the previous section).

It is likely that there will be resistance from lecturers and tutors within academic literacy and academic development programmes and departments to collaborate in the development of a WAC approach. This approach would ideally see their role shift from being lecturers working almost completely outside the disciplines in more generic ‘skills’-type courses that they can create and own, to being collaborators and facilitators who would advise on and even co-create courses with disciplinary lecturers, but which the lecturers would ultimately be responsible for teaching and assessing. There is also likely to be resistance from disciplinary lecturers who do not necessarily see themselves as either willing or able to bring what many of them see as ‘skills development’ into a content-governed classroom space that already feels overburdened. The challenge is then how to build a bridge between the two spaces, and create room for collaboration and joint curriculum development that benefits the students, first and foremost, in terms of enabling greater ‘epistemological access’ (Morrow 1993:33) and also greater retention and throughput, and that also benefits the academic lecturers who are likely to have more engaged and confident learners in their classrooms and lecture halls, without threatening their sense of academic identity or adding to their workload significantly.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed ways in which a writing centre can be a part of this bridge-building process, and how it can make a unique and valuable contribution to the development of undergraduate student writing across the disciplines. Using the current revisioning and restructuring of the Writing Centre at UWC as a case study, and drawing on current and recent research into academic literacies and Writing Across the Curriculum and in the disciplines, this chapter has argued that a writing centre is an important tool in developing both the capacity of academics to bring writing into their classrooms in new and innovative ways as a tool for learning, thinking and assessment, and in developing the capacity of student writers through one-on-one consultations in a safe and supportive extra-disciplinary space.

It is important to reiterate that the UWC Writing Centre is part of a wider community of teaching and learning, as is any writing centre in a higher education environment. Writing centres should not be the sole initiators and drivers of faculty and departmental writing programmes, or writing intensive courses, although they most certainly have a valuable role to play in co-creating and co-sustaining these initiatives. As has been pointed out, there are gaps between what students consider to be their writing difficulties and concerns, and what disciplinary lecturers and tutors consider to be their students’ writing concerns and problems (although there are indeed overlaps). There is a role for the Writing Centre at UWC to step into this gap to work with both students and lecturers to foreground, theorise, research and sustain an environment that focuses on writing as a social and knowledge practice that must be embedded in the content and context of the disciplines in which it is done.

Informed by New Literacy Studies as well as a WAC approach, the Writing Centre provides students with a voluntary, walk-in place where trained peer tutors support and encourage their development as student writers. The tutors work from the position of critical but non-judgemental readers who guide students to help them understand and critique their own writing as they develop an awareness of the academic conventions to which they are being asked to adapt. Alongside this student support, the Writing Centre aims to extend its promising work within faculties and departments where it can support and collaborate with teaching and learning and academic literacy specialists who in turn work in collaboration with lecturers and tutors, or collaborate with lecturers and tutors directly. Working in either way, the goal is to build sustainable communities of practice that will critically evaluate the aims and objectives of writing in the disciplines, and work creatively and in partnership with the Writing Centre to bring different kinds of writing into the teaching and learning spaces to enable students to write to learn, and to learn to write, more effectively.

There is room in higher education institutions in South Africa for writing centres. They are an invaluable part of an institutional response to the learning needs of students and the teaching requirements asked of lecturers. However, a narrow and limiting concept of a writing centre as a remedial space where ‘weak’ students can have their writing problems ‘fixed’ or have their work corrected for grammar and spelling mistakes disables conversation and collaboration between writing specialists and academics, and between writing tutors and students. A writing centre can only provide the kind of support both students and academics need and desire if it can position itself as a place for the consolidation and extension of academic behaviours and practices around writing that are already, continually and collaboratively, being developed and practiced in content and context-embedded teaching and learning environments. Thus, writing centres need a clearly defined and institutionally supported and resourced mandate that enables them to play a unique and sustainable role in the development and innovation of writing development and research in South African universities.

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