

RESEARCH NOTE

Adapting writing laboratory activities to different spaces and cultures

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My experience as a writing laboratory consultant at Stellenbosch University's Writing Lab (SU Writing Lab), from 2004 to 2012, was so enriching because I had come from a background where such activities were either a novelty or did not formally exist. So it was very exciting for me to realise that I could actually be paid for providing writing advice and mentorship to other writers, something I had been doing and would have happily continued doing for little or no thanks at all! But working as a trained writing consultant was really an eye-opener. It changed my perspective of writing lab activities especially in terms of scope, space, and the value I attached to the exercise of consulting on writing. I remember very well that, while at Stellenbosch University, I had to provide writing consultations for students from different cultural backgrounds – an aspect of life at the SU Writing Lab that Sharifa Daniels, one of the people in charge, was very passionate about. The South African students came from many different cultures. I also worked with students from other African countries, especially those from the francophone diaspora, where these students from, for example, Congo Brazzaville and DRC Congo, were required to write their theses and dissertations in English. There was also a good number of students from Namibia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, Lesotho, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and from the Magrebian countries. In addition, there were also many Chinese and Korean students whose commands of English were sometimes minimal. These students did not only come from different socio-cultural backgrounds but also brought with them writing problems that had deep-seated linguistic causes originating from the different languages they spoke. This was quite a challenge for me, as I had to somehow navigate their different linguistic spaces whilst trying my best to understand the message they intended to convey, as opposed to what they had actually written, in order to give them the assistance they needed. One strategy I found very useful in surmounting this language difficulty, which I still use today, was the use of paraphrasing. I would ask my students to verbalise in their own words whatever they were trying to put down in their writing, the latter which I found problematic. In this way, it would be much easier for me to detect if the student's writing problem was due to a lack of mastery of grammatical rules, inadequate vocabulary, or to literal translation from their first language or ignorance of what form the language in academic writing should take. Another challenge that I faced was the fact that the students came from different academic disciplines which required specific ways of writing in terms of formatting and referencing. So I necessarily had to widen my scope of reading on research methods, theoretical approaches, and referencing

styles that were appropriate for the work of the student(s) in front of me. I found this particularly rewarding as I ended up a “jack of all trades”, acquiring writing competences that up until this time were unknown to me. Such experiences really help one to grow as a professional writing consultant who gives their best and is appreciated by students. When this happens, you may have students requesting several consultations with a consultant whom they find helpful and knowledgeable. Sometimes such meetings end up forging long-lasting relationships. In my case, some of the students I helped back then still write to me, and it warms my heart to know that I did something that enabled someone to progress. Furthermore, this experience in different academic disciplines helped to build my confidence as a writing consultant to the extent that I now feel that I can assist anybody with writing problems, no matter the person’s level or area of study. One other experience which I carry with me, and which has been very useful in my work today, is the idea of adapting writing activities to different spaces. We were required to do this at certain points at the SU Writing Lab. There were times when we had to change venues as a result of the huge number of students we had to work with who could obviously not all fit into the SU Writing Lab’s space. I recall the makeshift consultation spaces the consultants set up at SU’s Engineering faculty, under the leadership of Rose Richards and Sharifa Daniels, to provide writing assistance to final-year engineering students. We also had to travel a good number of kilometres from the main campus, where the Writing Lab is located, to get to SU’s Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences at Tygerberg Campus, to conduct individual or group consultations with students working on individual or group projects. This act in itself made me realise that the SU Writing Lab’s activities are not restricted to any particular site, and that circumstances such as limited space, time, and even the number of students one is working with can influence the quantity and quality of consultations. Whatever the case, what matters is that the student leaves the consultation feeling satisfied, and the consultant fulfilled, which was always the case at SU’s Writing Lab.