

## “We are not a ‘fix-it shop’”: The writing centre as a uniquely configured learning space

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### Abstract

For decades, writing centre practitioners have contested and protested against the demeaning characterisations of their pedagogic space. The Cape Peninsula University of Technology’s (CPUT) Writing Centre has endured stigmatisation as a “clinic”, “laboratory”, “fix-it shop”, and “remedial agency for removing students’ deficiencies in composition” (Archer and Parker 2016, Drennan 2017, Moore 1950, North 1984). Although writing centre practitioners and theorists have described these centres as hubs for nurturing and enhancing students’ intellectual and linguistic capacities in order to engage and master disciplinary literacies and genres while contributing to the transformation of educational projects, such a value tends to be misrecognised – by both lecturers and students at CPUT – as focusing on improving grammatical competence. This article contributes to the discourse of redefining the writing centre as a space with unique transformational pedagogies in the context of a university of technology, namely CPUT.

Underpinned by the Academic Literacies approach (Lea and Street 1998), this study views the institutional spaces in which our writing centre operates as “constituted in, and as sites of discourse and power”. The research purpose is to determine how the CPUT Writing Centre is viewed by the students who make use of it. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the researchers sought answers to the following two questions: (i) How is the CPUT Writing Centre configured to support learning at a university of technology? and (ii) How do students characterise the CPUT Writing Centre as a learning space with its own unique pedagogy? The article reports on students’ perceptions and assumptions about the Writing Centre as a learning space at a university of technology in the Western Cape (CPUT). It also examines the permutations of a uniquely configured learning space, the impact of its attributive conversations, and the extent to which it is (mis)recognised as a transformative agency.

**Keywords:** Writing centre, academic literacies, learning space, student writing

## 1. Introduction

Two decades ago, Lea and Street (1998) asserted that entering higher education can be problematic for those trying to learn the rules of entry. Some first-year students have difficulty in adapting to the university environment as they find themselves bereft of the cultural capital needed for them to successfully pursue their studies, not to mention the weakness of the level of education given at especially disadvantaged schools (Cross and Carpentier 2009). It must be noted that even students from well-resourced schools sometimes struggle to meet the academic literacy demands at university. Academic literacy is a challenge not only to the students, but to some lecturers as well. Sibomana (2016) opines that academics and scholars from non-English backgrounds are at a disadvantage as they have to adhere to academic literacy conventions in a language in which they may not be completely proficient.

It is the duty of content specialists working with academic literacy practitioners (Jacobs 2007, 2013) to teach the tacit dimensions of the curriculum to their students. In order to be “literate”, students do not simply have to acquire the technical skills to decode and encode signs and symbols, but also need to master a set of social practices (Archer 2012). Carstens (2012) extends this by introducing the concept of ‘multiliteracy’ – the notion of combining a range of abilities that are conducive to making meaning, mediation, and the negotiation of knowledge. Each discipline is a social space within which students need to learn and master the unique “ways of understanding, interpreting and organizing knowledge” (Lea and Street 1998) in a particular discipline, referred to as “Discourse” (Gee 1999, 2001).

For Gee, discourses always involve more than language: they involve coordinating language with ways of acting, interacting, valuing, believing, feeling, and with bodies, clothes, non-linguistic symbols, objects, tools, technologies, times, and places (Gee 1999: 25). Although coming with some linguistic, intellectual, and social capital, many students from formerly marginalised communities do not possess the type of cultural capital that is sufficiently aligned with tertiary education (Akoojee and Nkomo 2007, Bharuthram and Kies 2012). To mitigate the alienating effects of this reality, supportive interventions are useful and ought to be promoted.

The transition from secondary to tertiary education is not straightforward for many students, especially those that speak English as a second or third language (du Plessis 2016, Papashane and Hlalele 2014, Pineteh 2014) as is the case for many students at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) where this study took place. These students require support that will liberate them from the deficit and lead them into full participation in the disciplinary communities. In addition to inducting new students into an academic discipline so that they can develop their practical know-how, space has to be created that allows them to ask their own sets of questions about the world, and to produce their own knowledge (Liccardo, Botsis and Dominguez-Whitehead 2015). All the same, the situation at our university is paradoxical: CPUT is trying to maintain the balance between its productive relationships with industry (vocationalism<sup>1</sup>) and embracing the character of a research-intensive university characterised by investment in life-long learning, research, and service. As such, the dominant practice of plunging students into the institutional and disciplinary culture makes conformity and transformation difficult to manage.

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<sup>1</sup> “Vocationalism” is the practice of promoting efficient application of acquired knowledge (Gonon 2009, Ottewill and Wall 2000).

As part of the democratisation process, the South African higher education system has been under pressure to provide access to tertiary institutions and quality education for all citizens of the country (Cross and Carpentier 2009). This imperative brought about a great opportunity for development (in the form of improved agency) for many students, including the formerly marginalised. The overriding purpose has been to promote equitable and universal access to meaningful learning opportunities in schooling (Motala 2017). Being at the centre of emergence of academic development, writing centres play a crucial role in ensuring access and participation (Boughey 2002, Boughey and Niven 2012, Leibowitz et al. 1997). Archer (2011) weighs in on the debate by asserting that writing centres are well equipped to play a vital role in equity redress. These contributions continue to receive attention from researchers both locally and internationally.

Undergraduate students are expected to possess excellent English language and higher-order thinking skills such as logical and critical thinking as well as analytical and innovative skills. However, in advocating for these higher-order thinking skills, institutions within a vocationally-orientated establishment are often oblivious to students’ schooling experiences and how these experiences influence these students’ writings in higher education (Jacobs 2007, Pineteh 2012). In these institutions, the transformative role of the writing centre still needs to be recognised. In fact, for decades, writing centre practitioners have contested and protested against demeaning characterisations of their pedagogic space. These centres have endured stigmatisation by being labelled as a “clinic”, “laboratory”, “fix-it shop” and “remedial agency for removing students’ deficiencies in composition” (Archer and Parker 2016, Drennan 2017, Moore 1950, North 1984).

Although writing centre practitioners and theorists have described these centres as a hub for nurturing and enhancing students’ intellectual and linguistic capacities to engage and master disciplinary literacies and genres, such a value tends to be misconstrued and misrecognised by both lecturers and students at CPUT. To transform the deficit view of the CPUT Writing Centre’s services has been daunting for various stakeholders (e.g. students, lecturers, curriculum developers, and writing centre practitioners). It is the aim of our article to investigate (i) how the CPUT Writing Centre is configured to support learning at this university of technology, and (ii) how students characterise the CPUT Writing Centre as a learning space with its own unique pedagogy. As such, this article reports on students’ perceptions and suppositions about the Writing Centre as a learning space at CPUT. It also examines the permutations of a differently configured learning space, the impact of its attributive conversations, and its recognition as a transformative agency.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 The writing centre and dialogues**

The two research aims of this article, stated above, are fundamental to the understanding of the rationale behind the establishment of writing centres, and also the current positioning of these centres in the changing landscape of higher education in South Africa. According to Harris (2004), the development of writing centres began as a result of an apparent “literacy crisis” during the mid-1970s in North America. Harris estimates that there are now more than 1000 writing centres in North American and Canadian tertiary institutions and secondary schools. Nichols (2017) confirms this history of writing centres but challenges us to go “back to basics” regarding the purpose and fulfilment of the democratising role of the writing centre going into

the future: “[The writing centre] developed from progressive pedagogical movements, yet in its transplantation to South Africa, some of its democratising philosophy appears to have been unrealised” (Nichols 2017: 183).

Thonus (2002) states that the writing centre concept that was established in the US in the 1970s has developed over the decades into a sophisticated service supporting students in first-year writing programmes (and beyond) across the full range of disciplines. In the following excerpt, Dison and Clarence (2017: 9) provide some background to the phenomenon of the development of writing centres in South Africa:

Writing centres in South Africa, moving into the 2000s, saw both the higher education and schooling sectors undergoing significant curricular and organisational changes. The latter half of the first decade of the 21st century also saw several new writing centres established across the country, especially in former technikons (now universities of technology). The establishment of these writing centres signalled a recognition that widening access had not necessarily resulted in enhanced success for many students, and that students across the university needed additional time and support in becoming proficient and confident writers.

The first attempts by institutions of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa to improve academic writing seemed to be viewed and conceived of as a way of stigmatisation between students, bringing into comparison the advantaged and disadvantaged (Archer 2010). The students who spoke English as an additional language were constructed as lacking learning and language skills, conceptual knowledge, and the ability to think critically (Boughey 2010). As a result, this stigmatisation crippled confidence and successively the ability to see oneself as a potential university student with the capacity for development (Cope and Kalantzis 2014, Kress 2003). This created a need to address the issues of transformation and access in institutions to enable pedagogic growth.

Expressing his frustration, North (1984), in his well-known article “The Idea of a Writing Center” challenged some of the misconceptions often associated with writing centres by staff members and students. Typical of these misconceptions is that these centres are a place where only “bad” writers go to have their “bad” papers fixed. North (1984: 438) states that “our job is to produce better writers, not better writing”. Transformation of the way in which these students are perceived by the academy, and are inadvertently positioned in a negative way by the university, can only occur when responding to the whole student: to what they tell us about their academic identities in their narratives; to how they represent authority over their work, their research, and their practice in their writing; and to how they interact with tutors in the writing centre (van Rensburg 2006).

The dominant discourse across departments at CPUT is mainly orientated towards meeting the needs of industry (i.e. vocationalism). This discourages or hinders students’ critical engagement with knowledge structures and epistemologies. Put differently, conformity to the existing onto-epistemologies limits the space for questioning and experimenting on structure and culture. Students are therefore encouraged to focus on the mastery of disciplinary knowledge, not the contestation or transformation thereof. Du Plessis (2016) notes that some students are allowed to graduate with low levels of academic literacy and language proficiency, and believes that this

creates another form of social injustice. Papashane and Hlalele (2014: 661) maintain that “lower than expected academic literacy limits epistemological access/academic participation and that there is an inalienable need to enhance students’ academic literacy as a critical cognitive catalyst towards the creation of sustainable learning ecologies”. These authors explain sustainable learning ecologies as the practice of creating an enabling environment that is consistent with how students learn. This environment should be open, dynamic, flexible, and adaptive to meet the intellectual, material, and spiritual needs of all students irrespective of their educational and socio-historical backgrounds (Papashane and Hlalele 2014).

A critical-theoretical conceptualisation of social justice was offered by Nancy Fraser who claimed that justice requires redistribution of resources and the recognition of cultural difference (Fraser 1998). This proposed account of recognition entails that everyone has an equal right to pursue social esteem under fair conditions of equal opportunity. The recognition of human dignity comprises a central principle of social justice (Honneth 2004). According to Mladenov (2016), a strategy of redistribution could be either affirmative or transformative: the transformative strategy is appealing to our writing centre project. Redistribution, according to Mladenov (2016), could promote surface reallocations of economic outputs without touching the underlying structures that generate economic inequality, or it could attempt deep-level economic restructuring. In terms of access to cultural and linguistic capital (discourses), the writing centre plays a crucial redistributive role informed by recognition of the need to connect students’ cognitive, linguistic, and cultural capital to the agency that is required of these students in the process of becoming<sup>2</sup>.

In the writing centre context, Rambiritch (2018: 58) suggests that social justice is enacted “to empower students, give them a voice, develop them holistically, and contribute meaningfully to their learning as they find their way to academic success”. Driven by the need to disrupt epistemological challenges experienced largely by students who speak English as a second or third language, the writing centre’s justice-orientated pedagogies are aimed at empowering students to master, engage, and critique dominant discourses. Fraser (1995: 3) notes that “transformative recognition to redress racial injustice in the culture consists [of] anti-racist deconstruction aimed at dismantling Eurocentrism by destabilizing racial dichotomies”. Therefore, dialogue on transformation in the writing centre addresses one of the teaching and learning limitations which Leibowitz (2017: 96) refers to as “knowledge as separate from learning and as separate from language; the personal as separate from the social; and curriculum as separate from pedagogy or teaching and learning”.

The essence of the writing centre method is talking (North 1984). This dialogue has the potential to empower students to engage with the discourses in their respective disciplines. Rambiritch (2018: 52) states that “[in] the context of the writing centre consultation, the student is an equal partner whose voice, views, and questions are an essential part of the dialogue”. Dialogue is a dynamic social interaction between subjects who share narratives about their lived experience, challenges and progresses, their families, social class, culture, work realities, researches, dreams, and aspirations. The “interparadigmatic dialogue also involves a continuous, reflexive discourse between different theoretical perspectives for the purpose of fostering a greater

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<sup>2</sup> “Becoming” is an ontological sense of possibility which refers to the changes and adaptations that students go through in their studies in the process of being self-directed learners (Hamshire and Jack 2016). Bolton (1975) cites Plato who distinguishes between “being” and “becoming”: the former refers to that which consists of features which never change, while the latter consists of features which are never stable.

understanding of various standpoints in the human experience, and of human suffering in particular” (Nash Jr. and Wardell 1993: 287).

Bakhtin’s notions of ‘dialogue’ and ‘heteroglossia’ are central to writing centre praxis. Nesari (2015: 664) notes that “heteroglossia exists in a world of interactions in which a set of different voices create not only harmony but also disharmony”. Interactions between writing centre practitioners and students are characterised by the struggle of misunderstanding and understanding, alienation and affirmation, particularly since academic discourse tends to be complicated for many students speaking English as second or third language. Bakhtin (1981: 354) captures the essence of heteroglossia in this citation: “Within the arena of almost every utterance, an intense interaction and struggle between one’s own and another’s word is being waged, a process in which they oppose or dialogically interanimate each other”.

Middendorp (1992) asserts that heteroglossia survives and thrives because no word, phrase, sentence, genre, or authority can be canonised. This means that nothing is “written in stone” as commandments, which call for compliance and non-contestation. In the writing centre, talks go beyond intellectual and linguistic development, and include the non-cognitive dimensions of being and learning. As a result, the idea of the transitional space, crafted in writing centres and transposed when possible into mainstream teaching, enables us to symbolise and to make meaning from the interaction of the self with others (Nichols 2017). Thus, dialoguing for Middendorp (1992) is a manner of living which acknowledges the tentativeness and multivoicedness of humanity.

### **3. The writing centre: A uniquely configured learning space**

The Writing Centre at CPUT embraces the identity of serving students enrolled for diplomas and Bachelor of Technology (BTech) degrees in Applied Sciences, Engineering, Business and Management Science, Health and Wellness, and Informatics and Design. Centrally, the Writing Centre is firmly established in two main campuses with some presence in the satellite campuses (mainly on request). It maintains collaboration with support structures such as the Student Counselling section, the Disability Unit, residence managers, departmental tutors and mentors, senior students, and the office of the Student Representative Council. The permanent staff members serve on various teaching and learning committees, and facilitate discipline-specific academic literacies intervention programmes in the faculties and workshops on reading in the disciplines. These intervention programmes and workshops enable lecturers to empower their students by teaching the latter how to engage actively and critically with disciplinary texts.

Incorporated into the Writing Centre over the years is Chemistry, Physics, and Mathematics support of which the primary focus is to bridge the gap between secondary school mathematics and science, and first-year university mathematics and science. This sector (as it is referred to in our unit) intervenes to support the “underprepared” students and students at risk of failing. This goal is achieved by working collaboratively with various departments. Moreover, the Academic Literacies Sector works strategically with the disciplines either by developing discipline-specific, tailored interventions or through facilitating in the “in-house” Teacher Development Programme for new lecturers (from school or industry). Praxis in this programme is informed by constructivism, a philosophical outlook which emphasises that people ought to construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world based on their experiences and reflections thereon (Adom and Ankrah 2016, Biggs and Tang 2011). This provides an opportunity for the academic

literacies practitioners to dialogue with content lecturers theoretically and practically in order to conceptualise academic literacies interventions in the disciplines.

As a uniquely configured learning space, the writing centre provides “a platform where students can ask questions that the lecture environment, with large classes, might discourage them from asking” (Zuma, Popoola and Makondo 2016: 103). The CPUT Writing Centre advocates for the university structures to recognise the onto-epistemological and axiological challenges encountered by students (particularly those from the working class) in an attempt to make sense of and participate in the educational project. There is a strong move for the Writing Centre to work closely with the curriculum unit, however, at present, the identity and commitment of the former can be summarised as follows:

- Assisting students to close the literacies gaps in secondary education;
- Engaging in dialogue with students;
- Supporting lecturers to better engage with the literacies of their students and their disciplines;
- Offering constructive formative feedback;
- Helping students to develop from being surface learners to deep and critical learners;
- Using various theoretical and philosophical approaches to students to view the world relationally and in totality;
- Creating a heuristic space for students to ask questions to clarify their thoughts;
- Enabling students to critically evaluate reasoning, implicit assumptions, and ideological positionings of authors of texts;
- Empowering students to engage in independent inquiry, and
- Participating in university structures in pursuit of transformation and agency.

The above developmental approach foregrounds the continuing growth of the whole person, a shift from the narrow cognitivist and vocationalist view of development. This is in keeping with Dall’Alba and Barnacle’s (2007) idea of building students’ capacity to create, innovate, and extend themselves rather than focusing on increasing their achievement of specified competencies. Thus, the writing centre pedagogies unite ontology and epistemology which, for Dall’Alba and Barnacle (2007), are inseparable.

#### **4. Theoretical framework**

This study is underpinned by Lea and Street’s (1998) Academic Literacies approach which was developed in recognition of a growing mismatch between students’ needs and experiences, and the curriculum and academic institution. The approach draws on a number of disciplinary fields and subfields such as applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, anthropology, sociocultural theories of learning, new literacy studies, and discourse studies (Lea and Street 1998, 2006). The Academic Literacies approach is divided into three main perspectives, namely Study Skills, Academic Socialisation, and Academic Literacies. Study Skills refers to atomised skills, surface language features, and grammar. It views writing and literacy as primarily individual and cognitive skills (Lea and Street 2006). Academic Socialisation is concerned with inculcating students into the new academic “culture”. It focuses on student orientation to learning and their interpretation of learning tasks, however, it lacks focus on institutional practices. The Academic Literacies approach views literacies as social practices (Lea and Street 1998), where these literacies are concerned with meaning making, identity, power, and authority. This model foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context (Lea and Street 2006).

'Academic literacies' is a conceptualisation of literacy based on the beliefs that literacies are heterogeneous, shaped by interests, epistemologies and power relations, have consequences for identity, and are open to contestation and change (Ivaniç 1998). Paxton (2012) characterises the Academic Literacies approach as one that understands literacies as social practices concerned with meaning making and contestation around meaning. Academic literacies research recognises that the construction of knowledge and contestation around meaning (knowledge making) is a dialogic process where students mediate texts through their own personal readings and understanding of the materials they encounter during their studies (Ivaniç 1998; Lillis 2001; Paxton 2006, 2007).

Academic literacies is seen as a critical field of enquiry which sets out to interrogate and challenge academic norms and conventions as well as institutional policy, particularly in relation to issues of identity and power (Coffin and Donohue 2012, Lillis and Scott 2007). Lillis and Scott (2007) point out that academic literacies should be considered that which constitutes a specific epistemology – that of literacy as social practice, ideology, and transformation. Maringe and Osman (2016) argue that the transformative process is never straightforward as it encounters human resistance, blind spots, and contradictions. This claim works well with Barnett's (2012) notion of learning for the unknown future. He stresses that pedagogy should prepare students for the complex world of uncertainty: "The students have, as it were, an indwelling in themselves, a confidence in themselves, an investment in their own selves that enables them to go forth into a challenging world" (Barnett 2012: 7).

According to Archer and Parker (2016), writing centre pedagogy is centred around the development of critical "beings" which is achieved through discussion and argument. Writing centres are thus dialogic spaces that embrace the complex relationship between the spoken and the written. For van Rensburg (2006), the writing centre is the best place that students can use as a "rehearsal space" to develop an alternative "discourse of selfhood" while negotiating their academic writing identities. In order to provide students with opportunities to stimulate their thinking, integrate ideas, and essentially improve both their thinking and writing skills instead of emphasising the finished product of writing, educators need to focus on the process of writing and the skills this fosters (Drennan 2017).

It was vital for us to investigate the affordances of the Writing Centre, as a number of students throughout the years are often referred or volunteer to go to this Centre to receive assistance with improving their academic reading and writing. Principal to this investigation was to determine how the participants/respondents view their engagement with academic literacies practitioners in the Writing Centre in terms of deconstructing disciplinary discourses, enabling students rhetorically with meaning making, and how the students' identities and histories impact upon students' learning (i.e. both students' integration into the disciplinary spaces and empowerment to engage with and critique disciplinary knowledge).

## **5. Methodology**

The study sought to investigate the views expressed by the participants/respondents about the CPUT Writing Centre as a facility and the services it provides (its practices), particularly in relation to these students' own academic literacies development. The study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the phenomenon of the "uniquely configured learning space" rendering a critical, developmental support service to the institution. In addition to interrogating



critical ideological issues associated with students’ academic literacies development, it was also essential to obtain information on the students’ levels of study, linguistic backgrounds, services requested, and which departments referred these students to the Writing Centre.

Tashakkori and Cresswell (2007: 4) define a mixed-methods approach as research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches and methods in a study or a programme of inquiry. Using a mixed-methods approach offers an innovative method for social and educational research (Plowright 2011). For Trahan and Stewart (2013: 60), mixed-methods research represents an attempt to move beyond the ideological clashes between qualitative and quantitative purists, and focuses instead on the pragmatic value of each approach.

For this study, the views of 75 English second-language speakers (30 first-year, 25 third-year, and 20 BTech students from different faculties) accessing the Writing Centre were solicited by means of a questionnaire. These students signed a consent form which detailed their voluntary participation and freedom to withdraw. Rich data was obtained from interviews conducted with 10 students from across all levels and faculties. Consultation forms<sup>3</sup> were used to track these students who gave their permission to participate in the study. SPSS was employed to analyse the quantitative data, and discourse analysis was used for the qualitative data analysis.

## **6. Findings**

The findings in this article are divided into two sections, namely the quantitative and the qualitative results in sections 6.1 and 6.2 below, respectively.

### **6.1 Quantitative results**

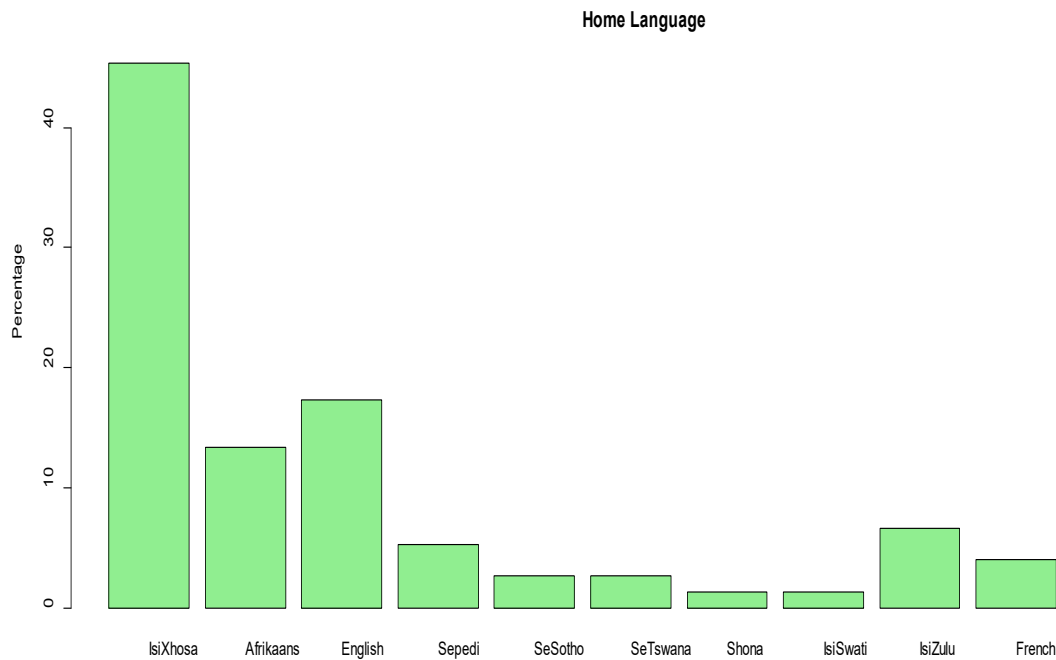
The questionnaire given to respondents was analysed in terms of the respondents’ demographic details, their referrals to the Writing Centre, their perceptions of the Writing Centre’s accessibility, the ranking of the services they requested, and their perceptions of the Writing Centre as a learning space.

#### **6.1.1 Demographic details**

The total number (n) of respondents who returned the questionnaires from the Bellville, Cape Town, and Tygerberg campuses was 75. The languages spoken by the respondents included IsiXhosa (45%), English (18%), Afrikaans (13%), isiZulu (7%), Sepedi (5%), French (4%), Sesotho (3%), Setswana (3%), Shona (1%), and Siswati (1%). A graphic representation of the respondents’ home languages appears in Figure 1 below.

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<sup>3</sup> When students make an appointment at the Writing Centre, they are required to fill out the consultation form (a physical or online copy) with their student information, referral information, the type of request, their assignment topic, and any suggestions made.



**Figure 1.** Respondents’ home language distribution

The respondents whose home language was isiXhosa comprised the majority of the data sample, with Shona and Siswati being the lowest at 1% each. In addition, it is interesting to note that French was also represented in this sample, with the total speakers comprising 4% of the total data sample.

### 6.1.2 Referral to the CPUT Writing Centre

A total of 72% of respondents were advised to visit the Writing Centre by their lecturers, while 12% were referred by friends, and 16% visited of their own accord. Table 2 below gives the distribution per faculty.

**Table 2:** Distribution per faculty

Faculty	Frequency	% per faculty
Business and Management Sciences	18	23%
Health and Wellness Sciences	26	35%
Engineering	26	35%
Applied Sciences	5	7%
<b>Total for all faculties</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>100%</b>

The results in Table 2 indicate that the Health and Wellness Sciences and Engineering faculties contributed the highest number of respondents, while the Applied Sciences faculty had the lowest number of respondents. A possible reason for the latter is a result of a lower student intake in this faculty, that these students’ timetables are exceptionally busy with classes and laboratory practicals, or simply that these students did not require the Writing Centre’s support during the time of data collection.

### **6.1.3 Accessibility of the Writing Centre**

The Writing Centre on the Bellville campus is strategically located in the Information and Technology (IT) Centre. The IT Centre has many computer laboratories which students use for their studies. The Bellville campus’ Writing Centre operates as a structured computer laboratory with a training facility and a consultation space. On the Cape Town campus, the Writing Centre is located in the E-learning Centre outside the main campus and operates as a consultation space. On the Tygerberg campus, the Writing Centre is attached to the library and operates as a consultation space.

Forty-one of the 75 respondents (54.7%) came from the Bellville campus while 18 respondents (24%) came from the Tygerberg campus and 16 (21.3%) from the Cape Town campus.

Of the 41 respondents from the Bellville campus, 35% indicated that the Writing Centre is accessible, 15% indicated that it is definitely accessible, and 4% indicated that it is not accessible. Of the 18 respondents from the Tygerberg campus, 4% indicated that the Writing Centre is accessible, 12% indicated that it is definitely accessible, and 2% indicated that it is not accessible. Of the 16 respondents from the Cape Town campus, 3% indicated that the Writing Centre is accessible, 18% indicated that it is definitely accessible, and 0% indicated that it is not accessible. It must be noted that there were more response options for the students to choose from in the questionnaire, but we are only discussing particular responses, hence some percentages will not add up to 100% per category.

The largest number of respondents indicated that the Writing Centre is accessible. 93% of the respondents in Bellville were positive about the Writing Centre accessibility whereas 7% were negative about accessibility. In Tygerberg, 89% of respondents stated that the Writing Centre is accessible while 11% were negative about accessibility. All of the respondents in Cape Town indicated that the Writing Centre is accessible.

### **6.1.4 Ranking of services requested**

The Writing Centre’s services were ranked as per the frequency of request: editing and proofreading (52 requests), referencing (48), essay writing (41), presentation skills (35), topic analysis (27), study skills (22), time management and goal setting (12), online social networking (6), and using computers for internet purposes (4).

### **6.1.5 The CPUT Writing Centre as a learning space**

The Writing Centre in Bellville has a large computer laboratory with cubicles dedicated for one-on-one and group consultations. In Cape Town and Tygerberg, the writing centres occupy respective dedicated space where only consultations occur. The results below are based on the contribution per campus to the total number (n=75). In Bellville, the number of respondents is 42 (56%), Tygerberg has 14 respondents (18.7%), and Cape Town has 19 respondents (25.3%).

Of the 42 respondents from the Bellville campus, 52% stated that the Writing Centre is a learning space, while 4% believe it is not. Of the 14 respondents from the Tygerberg campus, 16% stated that the Writing Centre is a learning space, while 3% believe it is not. Of the 19

respondents from the Cape Town campus, 23% stated that the Writing Centre is a learning space, while 2% believe it is not.

Finally, when asked if the Writing Centre helps students to perform well academically, 61% of the respondents answered “Yes”, 15% answered “No”, and 24% indicated that they “Don’t Know”. Overall, when asked whether the respondents believe that the Writing Centre is a learning space, 91% of them answered “Yes” and 9% answered “No”. When asked whether the respondents would recommend the Writing Centre to their peers, 81% responded positively whereas 19% responded negatively. There are sufficient negative responses that need to be considered to address some aspects of the Writing Centre service.

## 6.2 Qualitative results

The qualitative data for this study emanated from interviews conducted with 10 students (five first-year, two third-year, and three BTech students) from various faculties. The names of the participants’ are pseudonyms but the departments’ names are real. Participants’ voices are important since the quantitative paradigm ontologically does not accommodate them. The participants’ views and lived experiences were explored in terms of (i) how these participants reacted to being referred to the Writing Centre, (ii) how they experienced the support provided, and (iii) how they were affected personally by the discourses of the Writing Centre.

### 6.2.1 Reasons for consulting with the Writing Centre

When asked about what prompted the participants to visit the Writing Centre, the following responses were put forward:

Our lecturers always emphasise that we must reference, but they do not teach us how. They refer us to external places like the library or Writing Centre. Sometimes, they do not say it in front of the whole class, “you have a language problem. You must go to the Writing Centre, they will help you”. It is embarrassing! Some of us were identified... What is confusing is that at the Writing Centre they didn’t find any language problem. We realised it was the transport problems and the study skills.

Lisa, a first-year Civil Engineering student

In the extract above, Lisa expresses her unhappiness with her lecturer’s misdiagnosis of her “language problem”. However, she is grateful that, together with the writing consultant, they discovered that the actual problem had to do with her study skills and transport issues. Mismatch between students’ learning styles and the university’s expectations are captured below by Lelethu:

My writing skills were not suitable for a university student but as soon as I had my first encounter with the Writing Centre, I began to understand what kind of writing manner and style is preferred. As a first-year student, I am very happy I had that encounter at the very beginning because it has helped me adjust my writing skills in accordance to the university criteria.

Lelethu, a first-year Environmental Management student

Lelethu voluntarily went to the Writing Centre when she experienced writing challenges. She self-diagnosed, and is now happy with how her writing is improving after her Writing Centre

consultations. Unlike Lelethu, Xolani was motivated by his lecturer, and is delighted that his lecturer referred him to the Writing Centre:

Before I came to consult in the Writing Centre, I wasn't able to do an assignment without plagiarising. Maybe, if my lecturer did not encourage me to go there, I wouldn't know how to introduce references... Paraphrasing, it's not as easy as it seems. I still have a problem with paraphrasing.

Xolani, a first-year Food Science and Nutrition student

Sometimes students consult with the writing consultant more than once. Dineo gives a reason for this below:

I came for the second and third consultation because the writing consultant felt I should come back. I am glad my lecturers motivated us to give our assignment to someone else to read it before submitting a final draft or to get a second opinion. Ey, I was scared at the beginning, not knowing what to expect from the Writing Centre.

Dineo, a third-year Retail Management student

The participants provided different reasons for consulting the Writing Centre, and also expressed their happiness with the service.

### **6.2.2 Dealing with students' academic reading and writing challenges**

The following excerpt illustrates which of and how the participants' challenges were addressed:

Referencing has been a headache. The writing consultants have explained it so as to look fun and easy. When you tell them that your work is not up to standard, these people would smile and say "It's going to be fine".

Alwande, a third-year Biomedical Sciences student

Alwande believes that the writing consultants are warm-hearted, understanding, and encouraging. In the excerpt below, Kyle reflects on the literacy gap between secondary school and university:

The transition from being a high school student to university has been quite an eventful period. The Writing Centre consultants have taught me a lot of skills that I should use in my learning process as from now onwards. They taught me time management skills, and showed me how they are related to study skills. We are lucky that there are people at the Writing Centre to coach and guide you.

Kyle, a first-year Human Resources Management student

Kyle recounted how he gained strategic literacies (time management and study skills), and how he feels lucky to have received proper guidance from the Writing Centre. The rigours of university studies, however, can make one vulnerable, as Alwande's excerpt below illustrates:

Transition from high school to university was a colossal leap, which gave me a little of anxiety. I was so worried about how I was going to adapt to university writing, seeing that it demands a lot. For instance, I never thought citing someone's work would have

repercussions of criminal offences like plagiarism. The writing consultant showed me the secrets of analysing text and building argument like using the “What? How? Why? and Who?” questions. To be honest, at first, I was sceptical of going to the Writing Centre, but now I am now fully equipped, and I am able to do more.

Alwande, a third-year Biomedical Sciences student

Alwande described the failure to reference as having “repercussions of criminal offences”. He feels empowered “to do more” as the writing consultant explained questioning techniques for engaging with others’ and his own texts.

Not all experiences about the Writing Centre are positive, however. Below, Lisa claims not to have developed at all:

Before everything started, that is, before submitting my assignment, I felt ready and armed for varsity. Academically, socially and my health. It started as an interesting journey, learning new things, seeing new faces, different people, and new environments. But everything started to be opposite, too much stress, too much responsibilities, and so much to accomplish in a short period. Reading and writing has made my days at varsity all misery. Poor achievement is a nightmare. Even going to the Writing Centre – I have not developed at all!

Lisa, a first-year Civil Engineering student

Earlier on, Lisa indicated that her study skills and transport issues (not language) were the problems she faced that affected her writing. In this excerpt above, it is clear that she is frustrated, angry, and defeated as a result of her finding that the transition has not been easy. Similarly, Thando is grappling with academic writing genres or different ways of making meaning:

Academic writing is boring, but at the Writing Centre they try to make it interesting. Research makes a person feel small. I did well, getting good marks in the content. But this kind of writing!

Thando, a BTech Quality student

Thando is sympathetic to the writing consultants, but characterises academic writing as “boring”. He regards research as one academic practice that makes him “feel small”. Both academic writing and research are central to academic life, e.g. in learning and assessment.

### **6.2.3 Improving the relational ways of engagement with students**

The participants suggested a few ways of engaging the students:

I have also always found consulting with Sis B<sup>4</sup> extremely helpful. I am confident of my writing, especially in doing proper referencing... As a mature student, I feel like I can plan and write with great confidence... At the Writing Centre, they teach in a way that is fun, yet productive. They do their work with great passion. They must keep it up!

Siyabonga, a BTech Quality student

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<sup>4</sup> Here, “Sis B” is a sign of respect for the writing consultant who is an older woman. In many African societies, it is rude or disrespectful to call one’s elders by their first names. “Sis” is thus a shorthand for “sister” and “B” an abbreviation used here for the purposes of anonymity.

Siyabonga says he is confident and values learning made fun. Amahle is grateful for what she learned, and believes many students should be made aware of the Writing Centre's services, which she says are "life-changing":

I would sincerely like to say "thank you" to the consultant at the Writing Centre. He taught me about things that will help me in the future including referencing, paraphrasing, writing technique, etc. Without that knowledge, I would be stuck trying to figure out why our lecturer insisted on referencing and paraphrasing. It is a pity that many students are not aware how life-changing the Writing Centre is.

Amahle, a first-year Environmental Health student

For Dineo, going to the Writing Centre is anything but a "waste of time". For her, the knowledge shared there is "liberating", and she believes that visits to the Writing Centre must be made compulsory for all students.

When I was sent there, I thought it was a waste of time, but I was wrong. This knowledge is helpful and liberating. The university must find a way of making it compulsory.

Dineo, a third-year Retail Management student

The participants made suggestions about what needs to be done to improve engagements between the Writing Centre and students. This has implications for how the Writing Centre needs to position itself in respect to its mandate and advocacy work.

## **7. Discussion**

A number of issues emerged from both the qualitative and quantitative data. These emergent issues have far-reaching implications beyond mere cognitive, reading, and writing development. From the survey data, one can see that some participants were referred to the Writing Centre by their lecturers, some were encouraged by their friends to go, and others went there on their own. What is important is their opinions and experiences, about which Ivanič (1998: 181) opines that "all our writing is influenced by our life histories. Each word we write represents an encounter, possibly a struggle, between our multiple past experience and the demands of a new context".

Editing, proofreading, and referencing are ranked highly in the survey, and are features that are more concerned with the technical aspects of writing. These would then constitute properties of the Study Skills model; they are not transformative and ideological practices espoused in the Academic Literacies model which, if they were, would encourage students to challenge academic norms and conventions as well as institutional policy (Coffin and Donohue 2012; Lea and Street 1998, 2006; Lillis and Scott 2007). Lecturers prefer to refer students to the Writing Centre for assistance with editing and proofreading possibly because of the call for lecturers to seek support for students identified to be "at risk" or failing, and/or that these lecturers are not confident or do not have the time to teach writing skills. During the interviews, Lisa expressed her unhappiness at being identified in front of the class by the lecturer as needing to go for a consultation at the Writing Centre, this public identification being a violation of her privacy and dignity. She was also disappointed that her "language problem" was misdiagnosed by this lecturer.

Dineo and Alwande used such phrases as “Ey, I was scared”, “not knowing what to expect”, and “I was sceptical at the beginning” to describe how they felt when they began their Writing Centre consultations. Nonetheless, some participants (Lisa, Lelethu, and Kyle) reported that they benefitted from consulting the Centre. Adjectives such as “happy”, “empowered”, and being able “to do more” illustrate the participants’ positive emotions. Furthermore, Amahle, Lisa, Lelethu, Thando, and Siyabonga used phrases such as “This knowledge is helpful and liberating”, “I began to understand”, “I am very happy”, “it has helped me adjust my writing skills”, “extremely helpful”, and “I am confident of my writing” to demonstrate their liberation from the anxiety and tension caused by high-impact writing practices such as paraphrasing, referencing, research, and writing in context.

The Writing Centre has the challenge of providing access to disciplinary discourses through making explicit and critically explaining how texts work (Archer and Parker 2016: 44). From Xolani’s utterance that paraphrasing is still problematic for him, one can deduce that the service offered by the Writing Centre is not a once-off “quick fix”; it requires further engagement and refinement by the student. Even senior student Thando is grappling with the rigours of academic writing, which he describes as “boring”, and research, which makes him “feel small”. Jiang and Roberts (2011) state that in disciplines where interpretive understanding is emphasised, it is likely that students will engage in the construction of knowledge through discussion and inquiry. Elton (2010) believes that the difficulties arising from the largely tacit nature of academic writing may be overcome by students and tutors discussing students’ descriptions of their work.

Strategic literacies such as study skills and time management are key to students’ adaptation to and success at university. Poor transportation is a reality confronting many working-class students travelling long distances in and around the Cape Metropole to get to and from class (see Fataar 2015, 2016). Some participants believe that the Writing Centre consultants help students to unpack their challenges. Alwande was shown the value of the “What? How? Why? and Who?” questions when reading critically. Critical reading is defined by Boughey and McKenna (2016: 5, original emphasis) as “the ability to use our knowledge of the world and our knowledge of other texts to *interrogate* and *challenge* the text we are reading”. The “What?” question helps students to understand declarative knowledge which, according to Jiamu (2001), refers to knowledge of facts, concepts, objects, theories, and events. The “How?” question is associated with practical-procedural knowledge – knowing how to do something – which includes motor skills, cognitive skills, and cognitive strategies (Jiamu 2001). The students are assisted with how to apply rules, procedures, protocols, conventions, norms, and standards to solve problems (Hiebert and Lefevre 1986; Liccardo, Botsis and Dominguez-Whitehead 2015). The interrogative “Why?” question enables students to dig deep into hidden assumptions or ideological underpinnings, and to challenge the status quo. The probing “Who?” question explores the identities and statuses of the actors – students, lecturers, experts, researchers, industry boards, interest groups, and ordinary citizens. The “Why?” and “Who?” questions can be associated with humanistic subjectivities whereas the “What?” and “How?” questions address propositional and procedural knowledge (objectivist technicalities). In fact, all of these questions assist in making tacit knowledge overt (Elton 2010). Polanyi (1967) describes tacit knowledge as personal, context-specific knowledge that is difficult to formalise and communicate.

Nichols (2017) and van Manen (1977) recognise that feelings and knowledge go hand-in-hand in the process of learning. An example of alienation and a sense of loss is that of Lisa whose mental



state shifted from excitement to despair. However, Alwande, who characterised referencing as “a headache”, stated that the Writing Centre consultants are optimistic, non-judgemental, and caring. They told him that “It’s going to be fine”, meaning that this state of discomfort, as a result of not knowing how or being academically unpractised, is impermanent. Dall’Alba (2009) states that our world today is both the world it was yesterday and a changed one. Temporality, liminality, and the ontology of becoming (Archer and Parker 2016, Bakhtin 1984, Dall’Alba and Barnacle 2007) are pivotal to the holistic development of working-class students.

## **8. Conclusion**

This study explored students’ perceptions of the CPUT Writing Centre as a learning space. Two research questions were posed to be answered: (i) How is the CPUT Writing Centre configured to support learning in a university of technology? and (ii) How do students characterise the CPUT Writing Centre as a learning space with its own unique pedagogy? A mixed-methods approach was employed to answer these questions. The quantitative data showed which services were requested more than others, while the qualitative data provided narratives on the lived experiences of the participants. Generally, participants gave an overall sense of contentment of and appreciation for the Writing Centre’s services.

The results from the questionnaire indicate that the majority of participants were referred to the Writing Centre by their lecturers, and did not go of their own accord. Requests for editing, proofreading, referencing, and help with essay writing were ranked, with the latter placed at the bottom of the list. As such, basic technical, grammatical aspects were given preference. However, the interview data suggests that the writing consultants used strategies and techniques to enable students to engage with discourses and to ask questions. That is a possible reason why many participants indicated that they were satisfied with the Writing Centre’s services. Moreover, some participants expressed dissatisfaction with being identified as needing language help, for being misdiagnosed, and/or for not receiving the type of assistance they needed. Others indicated that paraphrasing, academic writing, and research remain challenging. This shows that there is no “quick fix” at the Writing Centre; rather, visitors to the Centre should embrace a process of development and consciousness-raising which goes beyond the narrow cognitivist and conformist tendencies. Borrowing from Bakhtin’s concepts, we believe dialogism and heteroglossia could lead to better pedagogies.

Furthermore, the participants’ positive and negative experiences about reading and writing practices of the university revealed that the Writing Centre has an opportunity to discharge its transformative mandate of empowering students to participate confidently in high-impact academic practices while challenging the dominant university culture (vocationalism). By fully understanding its value and contribution to students’ cognitive, linguistic, and affective development, one can use the Writing Centre to realise the Academic Literacies logic of transformation and criticality. This study showed the extent to which the Writing Centre is a uniquely configured learning space positioned to contribute to the discourse of transformation and decolonisation. The study also revealed that the Writing Centre can skilfully manage dialectical contradictions existing between helping the students to master and communicate content knowledge, and promoting the need for the development of students’ critical consciousness. Therefore, through dialoguing with various university actors, irrespective of their position and status, writing centre practitioners, operating across the university spaces,

could engage in life-changing conversations in recognition of students' identities, struggles, and aspirational goals.

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