RESEARCH NOTE

Using reflective pedagogy to improve writing consultant practice

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Abstract
This research note considers the potential of reflective pedagogy as a means to improve writing consultants' practice. Through the use of literature and reflective examples, I illustrate how reflective practice has enabled me to improve my pedagogy in the transition from being a novice writing consultant to becoming a senior consultant at the Stellenbosch University Writing Lab. Furthermore, I reflect on how writing consultants, as key agents in the writing centre space, can utilise reflective practice to leverage the potential of writing centres as transformative spaces in South African higher educational institutions.

Keywords: reflective practice, pedagogy, power, transformative spaces

1.   Introduction

The concept of 'writing centres' originated in England, and was originally conceptualised as 'writing laboratories' (Carino 1995: 103). Centres addressing academic literacy are relatively new in academia, and were implemented and expanded in American education in the 1920s and 1930s (North 1984: 436). Since the emergence of writing centres in American educational institutions, three paradigms of writing instruction have dominated: traditionalist rhetoric, characterised by the remedial form of writing assistance; expressivism, which involves the use of heuristic questioning and allows the writer to generate his/her authentic voice; and social constructivism, which focuses on the social and cultural-historical contexts in which writing develops (Murphy and Sherwood 1995: 2–3). There are therefore degrees of difference in the pedagogy of writing centres as it pertains to social context, the academic culture of the institution, and individual instruction between writing consultants.

Literature further indicates that there appears to be a disjoint between how writing instructors and the main university structure perceive the role and pedagogical orientation of writing centres. According to Murphy (1996: 240), the term "writing laboratory" was done away with as it gave a negative or remedial connotation to the services rendered by such support structures. Therefore, in the 1970s and 1980s, a paradigm shift emerged in the conceptualisation of writing centres, from peripheral and supplemental forms of instruction, to places which develop critical-thinking

skills and consciousness about writing through their pedagogy (Murphy 1996: 241). Thus, writing centres were no longer restricted to offering remedial writing support, but emerged as spaces for students to develop into autonomous writers. Murphy's concept builds on North's (1984: 22) critique of how faculty perceived the role of the writing centre despite its philosophical "renaissance" in the 1970s, moving from a remedial paradigm to a process-driven and student-centred one. However, the perception of writing centres as "fix-it shops" or "first-aid stations" still prevails amongst both students and lecturers (North 1984: 434).

Writing centres are an even more recent addition to the South African higher educational context compared to that of the UK and the US. According to Archer and Richards (2011: 6), South African writing centres developed as a result of unequal access to academic literacy and discourses during the apartheid regime. Consequently, during the 1990s, a small number of South African universities (namely, the universities of Cape Town, the Western Cape, and the Witwatersrand) instituted writing centres either under general academic development or as part of their humanities faculties (Archer 2008: 248–249, Archer and Richards 2011: 6). Although there are now writing centres at several universities, South African writing centres often struggle with similar challenges as those faced by international centres, such as lecturers and students mistakenly viewing writing centres as remedial or editing services (Daniels and Richards 2017: 60). My own experiences, as well as those of my fellow consultants, also reflect this phenomenon. These experiences led to me adopting a reflective practice as a writing consultant, which not only incorporated expressivist and social constructivist aspects but also a major self-reflective component.

Against this historical backdrop, the Stellenbosch University Writing Laboratory (SU Writing Lab) is confronted with additional challenges, as it has to establish a fair and equitable pedagogical approach to the multilingual policy of the university. According to Daniels and Richards (2017: 60–61), the conceptualisation and establishment of the SU Writing Lab in 2001 occurred in response to a need for academic writing development on campus, and, in a way, acknowledged and reflected the multilingual nature of these South African university students by attempting to represent both Afrikaans and English equally. However, not all languages can be represented equally on Stellenbosch campus, as South Africa has 11 official languages and students come from many different provinces, before factoring in the international student population. Therefore, in addition to the power relation between student and consultant regarding the creation of knowledge, a language component exists where one is either a native speaker of English or an English as a Second Language (ESL) speaker, both of which influence the consultation dynamic. Carter (2009: 136) describes the ambiguous roles that writing centres fulfil for students, consultants, and lecturers as the "writing centre paradox":

> The writing centre is made up of a series of rhetorical spaces in which tutors and students attempt to negotiate academic projects assigned by and evaluated by individuals who are not directly associated with/involved in the writing centre's daily activities. We represent the student, not the teacher. We represent the system, not the student. We represent neither, and we represent both.

Considering the aforementioned dynamics of the South African university environment, it is important for writing centre consultants to be cognisant of the inherent power relationship between the consultant and student, especially regarding how the academic seniority of the consultant might affect this relationship. This power relationship is further influenced by

the diverse nature and backgrounds of students in terms of race, language, and cultural ethnicity, amongst others. Thus, in this research note, I argue for the use of reflective practice to ensure the equitable and productive mediation of the intrinsic power relationship between consultant and student.

2.   Reflection as a tool to improve writing consultant practice

While there are criticisms against narratives and reflections as a method of social research, Schielly (2013: 60) argues that this method is not meant to summarise the fields it explores, but to offer perspectives and insights that might not be provided through other research methods. She further argues that reflective practice is not meant to define or draw conclusions, but to illuminate and inquire about our lived experiences, and their implications for research, theory, and practice. Similarly, Murphy and Sherwood (2003: 7) assert that for a writing consultant to be effective in their pedagogy, the consulting practice cannot rely on "hit-or-miss, trial-and-error experimentation". The authors argue that informed practice requires a combination of formal and accredited training; extensive reading into the theories and philosophies of tutoring and academic writing; ongoing interactions with peers; discussion of concepts, ideas, and problems, as well as constant reflection. In this next section of the research note, I discuss the merits of reflection as I experienced it in my own practice as a writing consultant.

My own experience with the SU Writing Lab started amidst a transition period in my academics. I became a writing consultant after changing my study field from the natural sciences to the social sciences. Thus, I have always been mindful of the complexity and fluidity of pedagogy, power, and agency, especially as it pertains to the student as a voice and a writer. In being a writing consultant, one navigates the space of occupying an authoritative capacity and simultaneously being a student/writer oneself. The challenge then arises when the student whom one is consulting latches onto one of these roles in the extreme form. I have experienced students who expected me to fulfil the role of their lecturer by telling them exactly what they should write, where they should look for sources, and even what they should expect for a grade. The problem here is obvious: the mission of the SU Writing Lab is to assist students in finding their own voices, and to empower them to have their voices heard whilst still adhering to the academic voice required within the university context. At times, students have resonated with my role as a peer/student to the extent that they conflate the academic space of the SU Writing Lab with that of a social environment in which they talk to a friend. Such situations pose their own challenges, such as steering the consultation in an academic direction without evoking a power dynamic and disrupting the natural flow of interaction. Through reflection, I was able to identify the aspects of my own practice that potentially led to such situations in consultations.

In my three years at the SU Writing Lab, my strategy to deal with these dichotomous relationships was to make use of the support available to me at this institution. Firstly, I relied on my autonomy as a writing consultant and secondly, I sought the mentorship offered by my colleagues when necessary, specifically the senior writing consultants and the heads of the SU Writing Lab. This mentorship enabled me to develop my own reflective practice as a consultant. One of the cornerstones of the success of the SU Writing Lab was the recognition that each relationship between a consultant and student is unique, and a measure of privacy is required for its optimal productivity. I recall one interaction I had with a particularly volatile student who did not receive criticism about his work well. While the head of the SU Writing Lab was concerned about the consultation, she did not interfere, but allowed me to connect with the

student, and to leverage a connection with him that he did not have with any of the other consultants. We went on to have several enjoyable and productive consultations after that.

However, there are consultations that prove to be outside the reach of the experience of a novice consultant. One such consultation was between me and another student from my honours course. Although I tried to establish clear boundaries for this consultant/student interaction by explaining the mission of the SU Writing Lab to her, this student aggressively tried to make me complete her reference list for her. This situation was made more challenging by the fact that the student was significantly older than I was. Seeing that the student was not cooperating, the head of the SU Writing Lab came to assist me in explaining that we do not do students' work for them but act as peer consultants who assist them in developing their own academic writing skills. Being able to reflect and discuss particularly challenging consultations gave me the confidence to use my agency to establish appropriate boundaries during consultations. Incorporating reflection into my consulting practice also reminded me to stay aware of how the power relationship between students and myself, as a consultant, could affect our individual interpretations of the same experience. This then allowed me to develop my pedagogical style in a more individualised and productive way for each student.

3.   Conclusion

Through my reflective examples, I have shown that there is still much ambiguity in the conceptualisations of writing centres with regard to pedagogy and power structures. The literature does not contain many accounts of the actual experiences of the students who regularly attend writing centres for the purposes of their academic development. While there are studies which address the function and transformative potential of writing centres, I argue for further research into the use of reflective practice by novice and senior consultants in attaining such a transformative space in South African universities' writing centres. In their discussions of writing centres, researchers often do not account for the integral role of the writing consultant. South African universities have a long way to go in ensuring inclusive and equitable learning spaces (Simpson 2011: 185), however, the writing centre offers a space where these values are embedded in practice.

Writing consultants are arguably the most valuable resources of writing centres. Thus, their experience could provide valuable insight into the dynamics of power, practice and pedagogy, and should be utilised in writing centre research as it pertains to transformation in the higher educational context in theory and in practice. Writing consultants are the potential agents of change in how they conduct their consultations and the spaces of learning that they create. It is crucial that consultants are aware of the central spaces that they occupy in the transformative agenda. I have therefore argued for the use of reflective pedagogy not only to mediate the power dynamic in the consultant/student relationship, but also to facilitate the development of both the consultant and student as autonomous participants in the collaborative writing process. In the case of Stellenbosch University, by purposefully reflecting on our writing styles, personalities, and pedagogy, writing consultants might leverage a level of rapport in their consultations that enables the mission and vision of the SU Writing Lab to manifest in their practice as well as the broader university environment.

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