Part 1: Reimagining writing centre practices

Chapter One

Reimagining the Role of Writing Centres: From 'Safe Spaces' to 'Brave Spaces' in Pursuit of Equity and Inclusion

Sherran Clarence, Nottingham Trent University

Introduction

Peer tutors[1] are core to the daily workings of a university writing centre. In many writing centres across the UK, South Africa and the United States, these peer tutors are senior students, either at senior undergraduate or postgraduate level in their studies. The level at which peer tutors are working as writers themselves, and as mentors or guides for other students, has implications for how these tutors are trained, supported and extended in their roles. Directors of writing centres responsible for the training and development therefore need to think carefully and critically about the work their centre does, its mission and vision in relation to the goals of the centre itself and to the university community at large (Carter 2009) and the needs of the students (and staff/faculty) the centre serves.

Across higher education sectors in the last two decades there have been louder and louder

1 In some writing centres these are consultants, but the term peer tutor is more widely used and recognised in the literature, especially as regards tutor training and development guides (see Standridge 2017).

calls for greater attention to be paid to questions of equity, diversity, inclusion and representation within universities. Student populations are increasingly diverse – socioeconomically, linguistically, in terms of race, gender, home language, nationality, (dis)ability and sexuality (CHE 2013; Quaye, Harper and Pendakur 2019). In some respects, universities have grasped and responded to aspects of this greater diversity but the notable increase in student protests over the last several years, for example #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall in South Africa (Langa 2017) and protests related to the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements, as well as anti-Islamophobia protests on campuses in the US, (Binkley 2018; Mendoza 2016) indicates that much more needs to be done. These protests are not just highlighting social issues that affect students (and faculty/staff); they are highlighting changes that need to be made to curriculum, to pedagogy and assessment (Langa 2017) and to the ways in which university structures consciously and unconsciously exclude students who do not 'fit the mold' or represent the 'somatic norm' (Puwar 2004: 3).

Many students have highlighted, through these and other protests and complaints, that the university does not necessarily feel 'safe' for them or like a 'home' where they can flourish and thrive, socially as well as intellectually. Rather, for many students, the university can feel like a proverbial minefield, where they are constantly trying to find spaces where they can feel safe within a large environment that may feel alienating, strange and unwelcoming (Boughey and McKenna 2021; Case 2007). Imagine, if you will, being a student from a working-class home who attended under-resourced primary and secondary schools, who speaks, reads and writes English as an additional language. You are the first person in your family to go to university. You are sitting in your first university lecture and the lecturer is giving an overview of the course or module, explaining what is coming up and what the 'rules of engagement' are. In class discussion, you are given a long list of required reading that needs to be done before lectures and tutorials so that you can answer questions and participate, several written assignments (which **must not be** plagiarised!) and a set of learning outcomes that you need to now decode and meet over the semester. You feel lost, at sea, unable to see a clear path forward. Very little of what is happening is familiar to you from your home or school background. You want to ask what you should do but you are afraid you will 'out' yourself as not being 'university material'. Everyone else seems calm, ready to take this all on. Add to this, perhaps, a curriculum based on the works and thoughts of 'dead white men' (Pett 2015) and assignments that demand 'proper academic writing and referencing' and you may really start to feel alienated, panicked and unsafe.

Many students who share some or all of these and other, characteristics that make university exceptionally tough going come every year to university writing centres for help with their written

assignments and for reassurance, care and comfort. Additional support structures within universities include academic advising units, First Year Experience programmes and extended foundation or support programmes, all of which provide much needed academic and pastoral help for students. Students need help meeting their lecturers' academic expectations, but they also need to feel that they are not alone, that there is at least one academic space on campus that can feel safe for them. But what makes a space like a writing centre safe? What does it mean to be a 'safe space' within a university for such a diverse cohort of students? Who decides what that safety looks like and feels like? How is that space constructed and maintained and for whom? Can we make everyone feel safe when we all have such different reasons for feeling unsafe on campus and in the wider world?

This chapter picks up these questions and the concept of 'safe space' as it relates to the training, development and support of peer tutors who are tasked with being a front line of support and care for students who come to the writing centre feeling lost, at sea, unsafe and in need of help and care. I would like to explore, in this chapter, what we may mean in writing centres when we call them 'safe spaces', because I worry that we do not necessarily think hard enough about what we mean by 'safe', who we are making the centre 'safe' for or 'safe' from and whether the forms of 'safe space' we create actually do engender greater equity, inclusion and a sense of representation for diverse student cohorts. Yet, in striving (rather) to be 'brave' spaces are we creating a false binary – brave or safe – rather than seeing our work with students in a continuum – betwixt and between and both brave and safe – as needed? This is a conceptual exploration, but I am drawing on my experience of being the coordinator of a university writing centre in South Africa where I was responsible for training and supporting several cohorts of peer tutors, as well as my experience of working in higher education as an academic writing specialist and mentor for over 15 years now. I hope to provoke discussion within writing centre teams about their conceptions and creation of 'safe' and 'brave' spaces for students and specifically offer generative ideas for peer tutor development and for collaborative working with academic lecturers that could address some of the issues this chapter will raise, making writing centres ambidextrous spaces that can be both brave and safe and, in the enactment of this, champion and advance equity and inclusion within universities.

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of peer tutoring and collaboration within and from writing centres, before moving on to discuss the concept of a 'safe space' drawing on a range of literature. This will then be applied to thinking about two ways in which writing within universities can be experienced as unsafe or alienating to students, before considering the concept of brave spaces as a counter to narrower notions of safe spaces and how we might begin to create these more consciously within our own contexts.

Peer tutoring in the writing centre

Writing centres first emerged in the United States in the 1970s, typically getting their start within English departments of faculties and linked to courses in rhetoric and composition (Boquet 1999). Now no longer just for students studying English Literature or Composition Studies, there are different kinds of writing centres across universities and colleges in the US, and the basic model of a writing centre has been exported and adapted across higher education sectors in the United Kingdom, South Africa, Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, Canada and China (Sefalane-Nkohla 2019). Many of these writing centres have a director or coordinator(s) who manage the centre, from creating its mission and vision, managing its budget, directing outreach within the university community and, crucially, selecting, hiring, training and supporting a cohort of peer tutors. In some writing centres, for example the Coventry University Centre for Academic Writing in the UK, these peer tutors are employed on academic contracts at the level of senior lecturer and professional tutor (CAW, nd). A more common model, though, is to employ senior undergraduate or postgraduate students on short-term contracts to work as peer tutors while they are studying (Govender and Alcock 2020; Archer 2010).

These tutors typically receive initial orientation training, where the writing centre as a concept and a practice is explored; what is 'academic' about writing and how that is expressed in different genres and kinds of assignment students might bring to us, how we work with student writers through conversation rather than instruction, useful practices for making students feel welcome, power and authority in writing peer tutoring – these are relatively typical topics for orientation (Standridge 2017; Clarence 2016; Murphy and Sherwood 2011). In many writing centres, certainly in South Africa, peer tutors or writing consultants continue to meet as a group throughout the academic year for the purpose of continuing development and learning (Rambiritch 2018; Clarence 2016; Daniels and Richards 2011). Regular training and development meetings provide excellent opportunities to turn the selection of topics for discussion over to the tutors, to engage them more directly in their own learning (Clarence 2016) and to discuss problems that arise as the semester progresses, questions tutors have and feedback from students and lecturers.

Regular development and training opportunities can also create a space where tutors and writing centre coordinators or directors can tackle pressing yet tricky topics that are often too big for an initial orientation, or that need longer periods of time to be thought about carefully and collectively unpicked. I am thinking, in relation to my earlier comments about student protests and the slow pace of transformation on many campuses, of topics related to racism, sexism, homophobia,

ableism and other forms of discrimination – often expressed subtly rather than in an out-and-out manner (Crandall and Garcia 2016). These forms of discrimination may inadvertently affect or direct conversations with students, reflect beliefs tutors may unconsciously hold about (some) students, reflect beliefs many lecturers hold about their students and what counts as 'successful' or 'good' academic writing and therefore mean that writing centres – and academic writing as a practice – may be 'unsafe' for students who feel and are discriminated against. The next sections delve into three ways in which discrimination finds its way into academic writing and writing centre practices.

Microagressions

Most forms of racism, sexism and 'classism' are no longer overt – in South Africa, the US and the UK, for example, it is fairly widely accepted that calling people openly racist and sexist names or mocking people's accents and so on is unacceptable. However, because racism, sexism, misogyny and 'classism' are embedded in the construction and maintenance of the structures within our societies, including our educational institutions, they still exist and are still enacted, albeit in less visible or overt ways. This enactment tends to occur more commonly through different forms of microagression. Microagressions can be verbally expressed, expressed through behaviour or expressed through the creation of environments that are hostile to certain groups of students (or faculty/staff) (Sue et al. 2007). According to Crandall and Garcia (2016: np), 'Many people of color, women, LGBTQ and other "minoritized" groups – social groups that may not be the minority in number but continue to be systemically oppressed and excluded – on college and university campuses experience microaggressions on a regular basis'.

There are three forms microagressions can take: microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations (Sue et al. 2007). A microassault is an explicit verbal or nonverbal insult or attack, for example, a lecturer using racist examples or making openly sexist comments in a classroom full of Black and women students. A microinsult is a subtle comment about some aspect of a person's minoritised identity that is demeaning or rude and assumes their 'lesser' status to the insulter, for example, commenting on how good an Asian student's English is. A microinvalidation is an experience that excludes or invalidates a person's minoritised reality, for example, hosting a workshop on diversity and inclusion that pays attention to white and Black people's experiences while excluding the voices and experiences of Asian, Coloured or Latinx people in the room (see Crandall and Garcia 2016).

It is important to note that many people who enact microagressions are not actively trying to exclude or harm minoritised people; they have good intentions and may not even see themselves as racist, sexist or in other ways biased or discriminatory. This means, for many students and faculty/staff who are harmed by microagresssions, identifying and naming these so that those enacting them can see their behaviour and make changes is difficult and they often wonder if they are being overly sensitive or misreading the situation (Lewis, et al. 2019). Further, people who do have good intentions and see themselves as caring and good may struggle to hear that their behaviour, words or the environment they are comfortable in has harmed or made others uncomfortable. Microagressions are an expression of systemic inequities and exclusions, rather than down to certain individuals holding racist or sexist beliefs and their resulting pervasiveness makes them hard to eliminate (Crandall and Garcia 2016).

Microinsults and microinvalidations may creep into writing consultations or tutorials. With the best of intentions, an English speaking, white writing tutor may compliment an Asian or Black non-mother tongue student's command of English or accent, not realising that this is underpinned by assumptions that are racist. Examples that are used to explain concepts or aspects of writing may invoke sexist, racist or ableist orientations to the world that may make those hearing them feel invalidated, provoked, or excluded. Looking beyond writing centres to writing as an academic practice, there are further ways in which dominant cultural and social positions and forms of symbolic 'capital', such as being English speaking, or having attended a strong secondary school and having educated parents, are reflected in the 'ways of knowing, doing and being' (Clarence 2021: 4) at university that are validated and legitimated through the ways in which writing tasks are set, created and assessed.

Ableist academic writing conventions

A second area of discrimination I would like to focus on that is not widely appreciated or spoken about in relation to academic writing is ableism. This pertains to the ways in which we ask students to produce or create written assignments and the ways in which we present students with assignment briefs and written documents they need to use to create their own written work. Ableism can be understood as actions, policies and environments that benefit or favour able-bodied people. Here, I am referring not to physical disabilities but to people who are neurodivergent, meaning

people who live with autism, dyslexia and/or ADHD[2]. A significant example of ableism is the way in which formats are prescribed for creating academic texts: 12pt, Times New Roman, 1.5 or double line spacing – this is a fairly standard requirement for typing academic assignments in many universities and countries. If not Times New Roman, which is serif font, then other similar serif fonts are prescribed (for example, Cambria). The rationale is that serif fonts are easier to read, especially over longer pieces of text, such as an essay, thesis or book (Wood 2011). However, many neurodivergent people struggle to read serif fonts. Sans serif fonts, such as Calibri, Verdana and even Comic Sans are much easier for them to read (and to write in) (British Dyslexia Association nd; The Advonet Group 2021). Yet, none of the instructions to students I saw when I worked in a writing centre seemed to acknowledge this as an option. As a lecturer and tutor, I was responsible for enforcing these conventions, correcting students when they did not type in the 'right' font.

A further example of ableism is also related to formatting: the insistence on full justified text (lining text up with both margins). This is a common format for printed text prescribed to students as required and recommended reading, yet for people living with dyslexia, autism and ADHD, reading left justified text is generally easier (British Dyslexia Association nd; The Advonet Group 2021). Further, reading and writing on coloured rather than white paper is also easier for many neurodivergent people, which are invisible and unknown to lecturers, writing peer tutors and peers unless they are disclosed. Many people who do live with autism, ADHD and dyslexia may not even have been assessed and given a formal diagnosis, making it harder for them to understand why they may be struggling with reading and writing and thus making it harder for them to advocate for themselves in an academically demanding environment like university. If those who assist and guide students' learning are more aware of the ways in which we may be making learning harder for some or many students, we can begin to create more inclusive, more enabling environments that then benefit all students and not only those who need the accommodations to succeed.

Anglocentrism in academic writing

A third form of discrimination is related to the Anglocentrism in many universities, even those not located in the Global North or Anglophone world. This specifically relates, for the purposes of this

2 Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder. For a useful summary of what this is and how it affects those living with it, please see: https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd/living-with/

chapter, to the forms in which we expect students to evaluate, create and assess knowledge, from the genres we ask them to write in (the dominance of the academic essay) to the ways in which we express 'voice' and 'authority' in academic texts. For example, do we allow students to write in the first person or insist on the rather odd and alienating third person; do we allow students to use colloquialisms and contractions, which sound more like speech, or do we mark these as 'wrong' in our feedback and assessment? Do we recognise forms of creating and evaluating knowledge that lie outside of the dominant forms we have learned as students ourselves and therefore prize as markers of success, of being a legitimate knower, of a high academic standard being adhered to? Many of the ways in which we write in English in academia, for example, are inherited from the Enlightenment, particularly the demand for clarity and the use of non-emotive, rational, non-colloquial terms and language (Turner 2003). As Turner puts it, 'It seems that logical exposition, concision in choice of lexis and economy of style continue to be the norms within which academic writing pedagogy and expectations of a smooth read, operate' (2003: 190).

This is a difficult topic for writing centres to grapple with on their own because their peer tutors have no control over what kinds of assignments students are asked to complete, or the formatting and writing conventions they are told to adhere to. Their task is to help students decode, understand and successfully complete whatever task is at hand. However, writing centres increasingly play roles within the wider university community, collaborating with lecturers and curriculum designers on feedback-giving on student writing, writing different kinds of assignment briefs, guiding student writing and embedding writing-intensive teaching into the curriculum and more (Is Ckool et al. 2019; Esambe and Mkonto 2017; Daniels, Richards and Lackay 2017). This means, if we take it, that there are opportunities to discuss with lecturers what assumptions and expectations underpin their assessment plan and assignment briefs, why the conventions they are insisting on are necessary and where there may actually be some flexibility or options for change, how they give feedback to students and what they choose to focus on (which is almost always possible to change).

Anglocentrism in academic writing practices is not easy to see if you see aspects of writing such as genre (that is, 'this assignment has to be as essay/a report/a case brief, etc.') as ideologically neutral or value-free and just 'the way things are done'. It is not easy to see if you have learned to write in the dominant genres, have mastered their forms and idiosyncrasies and now no longer see them as strange, or further, as Anglocentric and therefore not 'the way things are done' for many students who bring with them other knowledge-making and writing traditions and forms. This makes taking or creating opportunities to surface Anglocentrism in academic writing important and necessary. Writing centre practitioners could use existing collaborations to, as a starter, encourage

lecturers to make visible the values and assumptions that inform their assessment practices and explain what these are and why students need to adhere to them too, so that students who do not understand that underlying reasons for the conventions can begin to see and follow them. This could then be built on with braver lecturers, to revise existing assessment plans and briefs to create different forms of creating and evaluating knowledge that challenge Anglocentrism and bring different forms of knowledge-making, writing and creating into the classroom that honour and recognise the diversity of the student cohort.

These considerations lead me back to my earlier questions about safety and what universities may mean when they talk about 'safe spaces' on their campuses: what makes a space 'safe', 'safe' for whom and 'safe' from what/whom? When writing centres strive to create safe spaces, what do they mean? More importantly, if they are willing to be introspective and critical, what can they mean that may be more inclusive, more enabling, more critical and therefore 'brave' more than 'safe'?

Meanings of safety in educational spaces

The notion of 'safe spaces' has been applied to many different parts of educational structures such as schools and universities, from safe classrooms (Flensner and von der Lippe 2018) to safe writing centres (see special issue of *The Peer Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Fall 2017). The concept of a 'safe space' first emerged in the 1980s in LGBTQ+ activism, deemed necessary to enable people who did not feel safe in society more widely to have spaces where they genuinely could speak up without fear and be themselves without judgement or prejudice (Flensner and von der Lippe 2018). This concept, quite logically, was taken up and moved into a range of spaces where similar concerns may be raised and experienced, in other words, where there is difference and diversity as well as a power structure that makes some feel more comfortable and accepted than others and tends to silence or marginalise those who are marked as 'different'. These spaces included school classrooms (Flensner and von der Lippe 2018; Iversen 2019), theatre and performance groups (Hunter 2008) and university writing centres (Archer 2010; Shabanza 2017). The point of the 'safe space', allowing for contextual variance, is to create a space that is welcoming to those who do not always feel welcome in wider society and to actively encourage and amplify their voices, experiences and concerns.

Over time, then, different dimensions of 'safety' have emerged from the enactment of safe spaces across these different contexts. Safety is linked to dignity, to intellectual expression and to political

expression. In terms of dignity, safe spaces enable participants to 'be themselves' and to have their personal sense of dignity respected and to a significant extent, protected from attack (Callan 2016 in Flensner and von der Lippe 2018). For example, I have a right to feel safe from personal attacks such as having peers shout me down or say unkind things to me in a formal space like a classroom or community group. Intellectual safe spaces are more likely to be found in schools and universities, where participants feel able and encouraged to express their views without, again, being talked over, shouted down or dismissed (Callan 2016 in Flensner and von der Lippe 2018). Linked to this is the notion of political safe spaces, which are perhaps the most challenging in our increasingly diverse social contexts. Here, safety attaches to (perhaps contentious) social and political views – think of radical extremism as a stark example – and the demand, in democracies especially, to give everyone a 'safe' space to hold and express their views without being silenced, shamed or marginalised.

There are, thus, different notions of safety, especially within educational spaces, which is the focus of this chapter. It may be obvious to readers, though, that there are also limitations or problems with some of the ways in which the concept of a 'safe space' is deployed. Education – higher education in particular – is not actually supposed to be or designed to be 'safe', as in safe from being intellectually or even personally challenged around views you may hold or things you feel you 'know'. If we all knew everything, we would not need schools or universities. Higher education is supposed to be profoundly transformative (Ashwin 2021; Case 2013), personally, professionally, intellectually. We are not supposed to enter education with a set of views and knowledge and leave completely unchanged. This process of transformation – the transformative potential and role of education – implies risk, then, and unsafety at times.

While no one should feel unsafe in themselves in terms of having their dignity or right to be part of a conversation or space undermined, critics of safe spaces argue that education needs to create carefully unsafe intellectual and political spaces to enable learning and growth. Views that create unsafe spaces for many, such as radically sexist and racist right-wing views, need to be challenged rather than left alone, which an extreme version of a safe space may imply. There is, thus, a challenge to 'safe' spaces which invites us to think more carefully about, for example, who decides what 'safe' means in these spaces, who is made 'safe' and who is not and how we would know that, and how we can invite students and participants to co-create spaces they can co-exist in, rather than creating these spaces for them from outside of their realities and experiences of the world.

'Safe' is a word mentioned in a great deal of writing centre literature in a range of national contexts, including South Africa, the US and the UK. When the notion of safety and safe spaces

is invoked in writing centre scholarship, it tends to be in relation to dignity safety (Callan 2016 in Flensner and von der Lippe 2018), meaning making students feel 'at home' and welcome (Archer 2010); and to a limited notion of intellectual safety, meaning giving students a space to be 'unafraid of making mistakes' (Nichols 2011: 22)) and to 'explore, understand and practice disciplinary genres and conventions' (Shabanza 2017: 165). However, as I have suggested elsewhere (Clarence 2019), many writing consultants/peer tutors may struggle to create truly playful and imaginative consultations where students can try out their agency as writers and their voice in written texts without reaching a firm resolution in the form of a piece of writing that meets disciplinary and academic standards and will therefore receive a passing mark. The structure of university assessment tends to create limitations on more critical or adventurous notions of 'safe spaces' linked to developing and expanding student agency, I would argue; do students already struggling to make sense of the university and its demands feel 'safe' when they come to a writing centre consultation/tutorial to find they are asked more questions they may not have answers to, offered more options than they know to choose from? For example, asking a first-year student how they want to write their text, what they would like it to sound like, whether they think what they have done meets the requirements? Is that not why they are with us in the first place, to find out how to write their text and what to make it sound like so that they can meet the requirements, which they need help decoding in the first place?

I am not suggesting that instead of continuing to focus on student agency and enabling students to own their writing and participate fully in conversations, we start writing or talking over students' work and ideas or telling them what to write, how to sound 'academic' or how to do what is needed to pass. Not at all. I am, though, asking all of us who work with student writers to think again about what we mean by 'safe' when we talk about the writing centre, given that many of the conventions we implicitly conform to as writers ourselves may feel alienating to many of the students we are trying to help, trying to create a safe space for, trying to include. In reflecting on my own relationship with writing and how I have spoken to and assisted student writers and peers over the last 15 years, I can see that I have often invoked Anglocentric and ableist norms and conventions, without thinking much at all about where they come from, whether they do make sense to student writers and whether they can be taken on by these writers in ways that feel as authentic to them as they do to me (an English-speaking, white, culturally Anglophone person). For those of us who already understand and know how to use academic writing conventions to create successful texts, seeing these conventions as strange, alienating, exclusionary to other ways of knowing, writing and creating is difficult (Bharuthram and McKenna 2006).

Being brave, then, in surfacing, challenging and changing these conventions is difficult, too. It may be beyond the writing centre to exert significant pressure on lecturers across the curriculum, and it may feel irresponsible or beyond our remit to start encouraging students to break the rules when we know they will be punished with low marks for doing so. The system needs radical change, really, and writing centres are but one part of a complex university organism, which is again part of a larger and more multi-layered higher education sector, which is in turn, part of society. It feels like an overwhelming task when we think in these terms. And we may feel that we are already safe enough: welcoming, kind, intentionally inclusive of all students. But I would argue that there is always more to learn, to reflect on, to change through learning and growth. Writing centres have been using the notion of 'brave' spaces, particularly in the US, to do this kind of learning and growth (see Standridge 2017; Oweidat and McDermott 2017) and I would like to challenge the global writing centre community, especially in spaces where significant social change is being demanded and is needed, to be willing to be provoked, challenged and uncomfortable so as to think more carefully and critically about how we could be brave spaces and what this might look like in terms of tutor training and development and wider collaborative work across the curriculum.

From being 'safe' to being 'brave' in educational spaces

'Brave spaces' is a concept developed by Arao and Clemens (2013), social justice educators in the United States, to counter aspects of the notion and enactment of safe spaces. While they argue that there is nothing inherently wrong with what Callan calls 'dignity safety' (2016 in Flesner and von der Lippe 2018) – including students, making them feel seen, respected and listened to – what tends to happen in many 'safe spaces' in universities (and likely in society more broadly) is that safety is conflated with comfort and those who feel most comfortable are those for whom the space is safest (and for whom the world feels fairly safe too). In Anglocentric university contexts, like South Africa and the UK, those who feel safest, intellectually and socially, tend to be middle-class, comfortable in English as a medium of instruction and learning, familiar with the ways of learning, writing, thinking and socialising at university (Boughey and McKenna 2021). The problem with conflating a safe space with a comfortable space and prioritising dignity safety over more critical forms of intellectual and political safety, is that those who are comfortable are resistant to being discomforted and to change that includes and legitimates other ways of knowing, doing and being that are unfamiliar to them. Consequently, those who are often or always out of step cannot feel truly safe because the needs

of those who are already safe are elevated above or louder than the needs of those who are not.

Brave spaces are conceptualised as spaces that have elements of both safety and risk. The example Arao and Clemens (2013) use is education that touches on white privilege and acknowledging and seeing this in how some move through the world with greater ease than others, meaning white people compared to people of colour and Indigenous people. For most white undergraduate students, thinking about and acknowledging their privilege and how structural racism benefits them, even without their conscious engagement, is difficult – it is emotionally and intellectually challenging and uncomfortable. Many feel unsafe and may even feel attacked for being white, something they cannot help being. Rather than retreating into a more traditional 'safe space' where students who express anguish or struggle are not pushed further or asked to engage more deeply, which is counter to the goals of social justice education and race equity, Arao and Clemens (2013) deliberately designed what they termed a brave space, where they used tasks and activities to gently but firmly push all participants to think about their political and intellectual beliefs, knowledge and actions. This honoured their need for dignity but pushed them forward to set up a group dynamic in which all participants were part of creating a space in which important work could be done together, not avoiding but supporting discomfort, which can be a risky undertaking.

Risk is a necessary part of the transformative role of education in society. Risk is an inherent part of academic knowledge-making and writing because meanings are never stable, always contested and shifting; not even conventions and 'rules' are as stable as we may believe they are (Thesen 2014). Yet, many students – and lecturers – seem to see academic writing as a practice governed by a stable set of conventions expressed in different kinds of 'how to' guides in the form of books, pamphlets, Online Writing Labs (OWLs), style sheets and so on. These guides have a flattening effect in the sense that they present the act of successful writing as the act of decoding the style sheet or rules correctly and meeting their demands, rather than as a complex act of meaning-making (Thesen 2014). Further, when you layer in different forms of ableism, microaggressions in the examples or case studies used, or feedback given to students and Anglocentrism in the genres, formats and conventions students are required to follow, the act of academic writing becomes even riskier for many students as they navigate an intellectual and emotional landscape that may feel unfamiliar and unsafe.

Writing centres can, inadvertently, add to this lack of safety by reinforcing the 'how tos' of successful writing – in other words by telling students 'this is how you write an introduction', 'this is the structure of a 5-paragraph essay', 'this is the tone you need to write in', 'this is the way you present Results in a scientific report' and so on. This may feel helpful and productive: students come to us

wanting to know how to write a successful piece of work for assessment and we teach them tools and offer advice on how to do that. But do we stop to consider the extent to which student writers do experience this? They may have a more polished piece of work and have learned something of the way the university or their department and discipline like things done, but where are they in this process? Have the examples we have used made sense to them or been representative of an aspect of their ways of knowing, being and doing? Have we talked over their concerns with our good intentions, focussed more on the writing than on the writer sitting in front of us? Have we reinforced blindly Anglocentric conventions that make little sense unless they are carefully unpacked and explained? Have we called a student who challenges conventions, pushes back and wants to do things differently as a 'tricky' consultation or a 'difficult' student, or have we stopped to consider what they are asking for or pushing back against and how we could listen differently?

These questions and considerations of risk, as well as being honest enough with ourselves to see that what we say we can do and will do in theory or concept, is perhaps not the same as what we end up doing in practice (Clarence 2019), lead me to agree with Oweidat and McDermott (2017) who argue that the writing cannot be either brave or safe – it must be both all at once. We do need to be welcoming, kind, caring – we need to offer all students a form of dignity safety, where they feel they can be who they are in the world without having to apologise for or defend that. But we do also need to be brave, to push ourselves, students and the wider university community to confront discrimination, inequities and exclusionary systems, policies and practices with enough honesty and humility to accept our parts in maintaining them, and challenge ourselves to grow and change. Therefore, we cannot be either 'safe' spaces or 'brave' spaces, but both. Our work is to define for ourselves what both of these concepts mean within our contexts and look at how we move between both safety and bravery in the ways in which writing centres write and enact their own mission, vision, policies, methods and practices.

Both brave and safe: taking the writing centre forward

In this final section, I would like to pull these threads through to thinking about how we can challenge ourselves as directors/coordinators, administrators and peer tutors/consultants to reflect on training and development and on collaboration across the curriculum to find spaces to push ourselves from narrower notions of safety to bravery, and to focus in being brave on tougher questions about the issues raised in this chapter: ableism, discrimination and Anglocentrism, as

well as other issues that may be pertinent in different contexts. I have some ideas, which I will share here and I offer these as a generative starting point for reflection and conversations within your own writing centre teams and with peers and colleagues you work with outside of the writing centre too.

To begin with tutor training and development, a workshop on equity, diversity and inclusion would be a useful starting point. Peer tutors/writing consultants could reflect ahead of the workshop what they think these terms mean and how they have experienced both equity and inclusion as well as inequity and exclusion. This could then provide a basis for further, discomforting work on how the students that come to the centre may experience inclusion and exclusion and how the writing centre can use this greater insight and awareness to consciously create more inclusive environments, rather than assuming they are inclusive because they have characterised themselves as a 'safe, welcoming space for all'. Further workshops could then probe the issue of microaggressions, starting from peer tutors' own understanding and experiences as a way into thinking about how we talk to students and peers, the things we say and do, our intentions and how to be present to and aware of others' experiences of what we say and do. In training and development work with the tutors in the writing centre I was responsible for, we used to use role-playing to get into and tackle potentially tricky tutorials and troubleshoot these together: what could we have done differently? What would be a useful way to handle a tutorial like this? Scenarios created were, for example, tutorials where a student was quiet and did not respond readily to questions, leaving the tutor to do most of the talking, which prompted us to talk about the writing centre as method and how we talk to and draw out students on their writing. This kind of role-play, scenario-based activity works well, in collaboratively facilitated and created and, therefore, could be extended to posing scenarios that prompt tutors and coordinators/directors to consider inclusion, how we think about diversity in relation to writing, language and ways of creating knowledge, and how we create equitable or socially just spaces within our writing centres that are tangible.

This could lead into work around unconscious bias and positionality, which may explore the biases we hold about others and the understandings of 'good' writing that come with us into each tutorial. What we think a 'good' piece of writing is in terms of form, style, tone, register, vocabulary and syntax certainly affects how we approach the writer and any conversation about how to improve or develop the writing further. What we think a 'successful' student looks and sounds like affects our approach too. We all hold unconscious bias towards others based on who we are, our education, home background, friendships and so on; further, we all hold assumptions and beliefs about what makes academic writing look and sound successful or 'good' and we do not often stop to name these and explore where they come from and how they influence the ways in which we give feedback on

or assess other writers' texts. These conversations may well be uncomfortable, especially for tutors and directors/coordinators who are successful and comfortable within the university, whose ways of knowing, doing and being are generally represented and legitimated. But, while difficult, these conversations are necessary if our goal is to create truly socially just and brave spaces within and from writing centres. This work could address how writing tutorials/consultations are created, how we can begin and sustain conversations with students about their writing in a range of ways rather than in only a few ways that work for us but may not necessarily work for students quite as well.

A further area for peer tutor development would be around Anglocentrism and ableism in writing. This could include materials development, too. Specifically, workshops with peer tutors/consultants throughout the year could focus on unpacking and critiquing writing conventions and formats that we often see students bringing to the centre and struggling with. Discussions could focus on what the convention is, where it may come from, why we insist on it (what 'work' does it do in writing) and whether we could replace it with something else and get the same or a better outcome in writing. Rather than rejecting academic discourse, writing centres can develop a conscious pedagogy that enables

> marginalized students to become aware of how and why academic discourses situate them within certain power relationships and require of them particular subject positions. The goal of such pedagogy…is to teach students how to self-consciously use and be used by [academic discourse] – how to rhetorically and critically construct their subject positions within it (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 1999: 44).

This pedagogic approach underscores the writing centre as a method as well as a place (Standridge 2017), a way of approaching writing rather than only a physical place to talk about it, which could reshape the writing and content of materials we develop for students – the 'how tos' we offer them and how we do that, as well as materials for the collaborations we engage in with academic lecturers and departments. This may include practical steps around the production of materials in addition to their content. Writing centres could work with disability units on campus to learn more about invisible disabilities such as ADHD, the autism spectrum and dyslexia and how to develop materials, for example changing the font and spacing, to enhance students' experience of reading and writing. Writing centres could, for example start producing printed and online materials with coloured instead of white backgrounds, typed in both serif and sans serif fonts, so that all readers

are accommodated, rather than only those who can manage well with white pages and serif fonts. This is a simple change but could feel profound to a neurodivergent student who may now feel seen and supported where they did not before.

Building on changes we can control within our own centres, we can then explore how we use our learning and growth to effect wider reflection and change within the university, encouraging lecturers to think afresh about the writing conventions they adhere to, how they create and share materials such as assignment briefs, how these may reflect Anglocentric and/or ableist tendencies and how these may then exclude and further marginalise students whose ways of knowing, doing and being may differ from or be less dominant than the ones we legitimise through curriculum and assessment. Reflecting on Anglocentrism in writing especially could be a way for writing centres to actively join conversations on decolonising the curriculum and assessment – important conversations to be a part of, not only in South Africa but in other post-colonial contexts as well.

There are, however, limitations to this work that need to be acknowledged and that are acknowledged in literature on safe and brave spaces. A significant limitation is the affective labour of this kind of work and how that is recognised and managed. Tackling topics such as Anglocentrism in writing, unconscious bias and discrimination is emotional work, not only for those who are pushed out of their comfort zones to consider how privileges and positions they take for granted are not shared by everyone in the room and may need to be given up or changed to create greater equity and inclusion. Even when we want to be challenged, change, learning and growth is not without struggle and self-doubt and this can be uncomfortable. Thus, facilitation of these conversations needs to be carefully done, by facilitators who can accommodate discomfort and create a space for dignity safety without conflating this with intellectual and political safety, thereby letting a chance for deep reflection and change pass by. For some writing centres this may mean bringing in outside facilitators which may have time and cost implications that may stand in the way of having these workshops and conversations. A further limitation that has to be noted is the struggle many writing centre practitioners experience in trying to initiate and sustain relationships with disciplinary lecturers, many of whom are resistant to taking on what they see as 'more work' and to changing the ways in which they already teach and assess students.

Conclusion

To close, I would like to return to the provocation for this chapter captured in the call for chapters written by the editors of this volume: conceptualising and enacting writing centres as brave spaces. I began the chapter hoping to provoke writing centre peer tutors/consultants, directors, coordinators and administrators to rethink their conceptions of safe' spaces – most writing centres conceiving of themselves as such for students especially – and to think, too, about what it would mean to be a 'brave' space. The conceptual journey I have been on and have traced in this chapter, has led me to think anew about the practices of academic writing that all students need to engage in and that writing centres focus on decoding, unpacking and clarifying with students. Specifically, I have looked at ableism and Anglocentrism in academic writing and forms of discrimination that students may encounter linked to perceptions others (lecturers, peer tutors) may hold about their capacity to be successful writers and makers of meanings and knowledge at university. In thinking through how these aspects of the practices of academic writing may make the university and the work of writing itself, feel quite unsafe for many student writers, especially those who are not what Nirmal Puwar (2004: 3) has called the 'somatic norm'. In other words, students who are not middle class, not proficient in the language of learning and teaching, not fully prepared for the social and academic world of the university by virtue of their home and school backgrounds (see also CHE 2013; Boughey and McKenna 2021).

Writing centres have a powerful role to play in advancing greater equity and inclusion in the university and have a unique role to play in larger conversations about decolonisation and other forms of transformation of higher education. We occupy this role because we are safe spaces – spaces students seek out because we are welcoming, we are caring, we are there, primarily, for students. But this does not mean that those who staff writing centres and enact our methods and practices are not judgmental, not biased, not incapable of microaggressions that, with the best of intentions, may exclude or silence some students' ways of being in the world. Therefore, we do also need to embrace forms of bravery that enable us to confront the ways in which we shore up and maintain systems of knowledge and meaning making, as well as social systems, that include some and exclude others, that are comfortable for some and unsafe for others. We can hold ourselves to account and expand our own agency within our university contexts and communities. We are, in Inoue's words, 'more than centers of writing, but centers for revolutions, for social justice work' (2016: 4). In embracing this activist role, we can use our processes and practices of developing and training peer tutors and of creating and sustaining collaborations with lecturers and departments

in ways that do more visibly and meaningfully champion and advance equity and inclusion within universities.

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