Chapter Two

Being and Becoming: Decolonising the Fundani Writing Centre Cosmos

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Introduction

A call for decolonisation and decoloniality in respect of university curriculum, knowledge systems and institutional culture (Heleta 2016; Ndhlovu and Kelly 2020; Le Grange 2018, 2021; Lejano 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, 2015) has been a motivating force for a serious rethink of writing centre practices. After analysing literature, Le Grange (2018: 9) characterises decoloniality as that which concerns a critical awareness of the logic of coloniality (the colonial matrix of power); it is a critique of coloniality, it resists expressions of coloniality and takes actions to overcome coloniality. For Mignolo (2005: 8) coloniality 'exists an embedded logic that enforces control, domination and exploitation disguised in the language of salvation, progress, modernisation and being good for everyone.' Ndlovu-Gatsheni describes coloniality as a darker side of modernity that needs to be unmasked. The author also warns Africans to be vigilant against normalising and universalising coloniality 'as a natural state of the world' (2013: 11).

Opportunity to reimagine practices was presented to the writing centre practitioners at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) when the Vision 2030 Strategy was adopted in 2021, with its core focus: *Oneness* (*Ubuntu*) and *Smartness* (technology). Oneness focuses on human-centricity whereas, smartness entails technological development and innovation, which must advance humanity. CPUT Vision 2030 therefore challenges everyone in the university to strategically come up with programmes and pedagogical practices within which *Ubuntu* is embedded and enacted. The reimagination of practice was directed mainly at epistemological assumptions and ideological edifices that remain unchanged and uncontested in the writing centre space. Examining the

practices of CPUT writing centre after its inception in the 1990s, how it has evolved over time until 2015 and the consequences of the 2015 and 2016 #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movement, became imperative.

The need for critique and radical transformation of pedagogical and curriculum practices bestowed a responsibility to writing centre practitioners and social actors in the university generally to rethink their practices to avoid being trapped in the abyss of untransformed Eurocentric ways of knowing, doing and being. Besides 2015 and 2016 student protests, agitation for transformation in higher education is synchronous to calls by Mezirow (1998) for transformative critical reflection, Nichols' (1998) need for writing centres to shift power to students, Giroux's (2004, 2009) critical pedagogy and Hlatshwayo, Shawa and Nxumalo's (2020) *Ubuntu currere*. Such calls challenge writing centre practitioners and social actors not to rest on their laurels but to reimagine the university beyond the present. Hlatshwayo et al. (2020: 3) proclaim, 'a *currere* that fails to adhere to critique and exhibit newness is subsequently anti-emancipatory.' This suggests that curriculum or pedagogical practices should always evolve – should be subject to further inquiry and renewal.

To achieve education for total emancipation, Giroux (2009) asserts that learning environments should not be removed from the larger political, economic and social forces that shape them and as a political project, education should illuminate the relationships among knowledge, authority and power. For instance, the continued alienation and disempowerment of students called for disquiet, interrogation and critique of their social reality. While acknowledging the revolutionary work done by Academic Literacy specialists to move from the Study Skills discourse to Academic Socialisation and, to a certain degree, Academic Literacies Approach (Lea and Street 1998, 2006), one cannot be oblivious to the fact that the hegemonic discourse practice of the writing centre largely focuses on epistemology and disciplinary genres (Clarence 2012) with little advances on the work of criticality and consciousness-building around issues of ontology and axiology. Thus, this emphasises the need to unmask and reveal contradictions inherently existing in the current writing centre literacy practices, to reflect on and enact the 'requisite' authentic transformations.

McKenna (2004: 273) describes academic literacy as concerning support given to students so they can have easy access to 'the linguistic codes or cultural practices of the academic communities.' Academic literacy is central to the academic success of students. Confronted with a social reality of students who were struggling with their higher education studies, Morrow (2009) proposed the concept of 'epistemological access' (EA) to explain that reality. EA is providing students with access to the 'university goods', that is, 'powerful' knowledge (Young and Muller 2013). Keser and Köksal (2017) argue that epistemology is concerned with attempts to reach the most reliable knowledge.

Reliable or powerful knowledge is said to be 'found in school subjects such as maths, science, history, geography, English and the arts, given that they are taught according to the canons of their parent disciplines as studied in higher education, for instance and reinforced by school subject associations' (White 2019: 431).

Essentially, the question of 'whose knowledge' looms large when the reality is that curricula in South Africa remain largely Eurocentric and continues to reinforce white and Western dominance and privilege (Heleta 2016). Hordern (2022) suggests that knowledge should be enabled to become meaningful and accessible to all in society without retreating into elitism and obsolescence. Therefore, the valorisation of epistemologies tends to de-emphasise the ontological subjectivity of students, an act that may contribute to the alienation of the majority of working-class students in South Africa (and globally): Perceptions of marginality and alienation serve to create feelings of isolation and self-consciousness, which have negative impacts on academic performance and persistence' (Herbert, Baize-Ward and Latz 2018: 539).

Boughey and McKenna (2021: 65) rightly called for the interrogation and critical reflection on 'why it is that students do not always do what we would like them to be able to do' ('remedial' measures put in place). This succeeds a call made by Archer (2012: 362) that writing centres need to be grounded in critical discourses in order to understand and articulate individual cases and institutional practices. In this chapter we argue that such calls for radical and critical transformative agency in writing centre practice should be energised on the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* (Ramose 1999, 2002) and decoloniality, as these metatheories are local, relational and antithetical to Eurocentricism, as a dominant force in South African higher education curriculum, culture and practice: 'Indeed, the dominance of the African sub-continent by the colonial culture is everywhere to the point that the African intellectual history is shaped and determined by Eurocentrism' (Dladla 2017: 42). This essentially side-lines, distorts and silences African indigenous knowledge systems, philosophy, culture and languages.

Eurocentrism is the belief that events that have shaped 'the international' have originated in Europe whereby Europe has the agency to alter 'the international', but such an agency does not exist outside of Europe (Çapan 2017: 656). Through education, students are expected to learn to 'speak well' and gain skills and Eurocentric knowledge that will allow them to enter the marketplace but not allow them to fundamentally change the status quo in society and the economy (Heleta 2016: 4). This has deeper implications for the decolonial transformation of society in the Global South in general and Africa in particular. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015: 490) states categorically that 'Africa is today saddled with irrelevant knowledge that serves to disempower rather than empowering

individuals and communities.' Despite the call for the transformation of higher education (White Paper 1997) and decolonisation of curriculum by decolonial scholars and members of the Fallist Movement, so much remains unchanged. There is a tendency for actors (lecturers, researchers and students, etc.) to rely on theories developed in the Global North whose historical and contextual reality is different and, therefore, are not fit or relevant to address social problems experienced in Africa, in particular by Africans. Thus, Heleta (2016: 5) challenges all in academia to free education from Western epistemological domination, Eurocentrism, epistemic violence and world views that were designed to degrade, exploit and subjugate people in Africa and other parts of the formerly colonised world.

This chapter contributes to the current debate on the decolonisation of higher education raised by students during the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements of 2015 and 2016 by reviewing and re-imagining the writing centre pedagogical practices. The intention is to make visible Eurocentrism embedded in the CPUT writing centre practice, identify possibility for the decolonisation of practice and promote social justice and decolonial responsiveness at the writing centre. Pursuit of epistemology without ontology and axiology, in the writing centre, is antithetic to the attainment of social justice, which is understood by Coleman (2016: 17) as be an underpinning value that suggests that all students, irrespective or their social class, race, gender or disability, should be afforded the opportunity to participate as equals in the learning spaces of HE. Thus, the chapter seeks to address the following questions:

1. How can writing centre practice be enhanced to expose Eurocentrism, de-marginalise the African knowledge system and promote a radical form of social justice without compromising the writing centre's value and status in the academy?

2. What resources can be recruited to augment the transformative-liberatory work of a decolonising writing centre?'

The international writing centre landscape

Writing centres have a long history in the United States of America that dates back to the 1930s (Chang 2013; Johnston, Cornwell and Yoshida 2008; Williams and Severino 2004). Originally, they were viewed as places to fix the writing of American students who had limited writing skills (Johnston, Cornwell and Yoshida 2008). The term 'writing laboratory' or 'writing lab' was used for early writing centres and is still used extensively in some universities in South Africa. Writing lab centres have experienced several transformations, from 'writing clinics' to the 'writing centres' of today (Chang 2013). When writing centres started, they were not described as a place for conversation about writing (Boquet 1999). Instead, instructors did the talking and students were expected to listen, go and improve their drafts.

Writing centres have evolved to focus more on the writing process and to become part of writing programs in universities. Now, writing centres have been established in junior colleges and senior high schools (Johnston, Cornwell and Yoshida 2008). Conversations about writing, dialogue and sharing of ideas is now facilitated in the writing centre. This helps in the process of developing the students' academic writing and themselves as academic writers (Archer and Richards 2011). Clarence (2019) suggests that there is growing body of writing research internationally and in South Africa which theorises academic writing practices. 'This research powerfully reflects a community of practice that is committed to social justice, diversity and critical approaches to academic writing, reading and knowing in higher education' (Clarence 2019: 118).

Archer (2010: 506) defines the pedagogy of the writing centres as involving the emancipatory dimension of knowledge, such as constructing arguments and thinking through ideas. She went further to state that writing centres are involved with the technical dimensions of knowledge, such as the mechanics of writing. This characterisation places writing centres in a unique position to empower students within the university system. Writing a foreword for the first book on South African writing centre, *Changing Spaces: Writing Centres and Access to Higher Education*, John Trimbur argues the situation of new university students in South Africa makes us aware that literacy is at once normative and potentially transformative (2011: 2).

Growth of writing centres has not only reached South Africa but some Asian countries such as Japan, India, China, Singapore and Taiwan. Kunde et al. (2015: 14) credits Japan for having played a dominant role in the development of writing centres in Asia. The start of most current Japanese writing centres could be traced back to 2004 when Waseda University, Osaka Jogakuin, Tokyo University and Sophia University each opened a writing centre (Johnston, Cornwell and Yoshida

2010). These universities provided liberal Arts programmes and English as a dominant language of instruction. A few universities in some Asian countries, for example, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore have a form of organised support to help their students learn the art of academic writing. As much as most writing centres in Asia tried to distance themselves from proofreading, the challenge that has to be met is to assist undergraduate students who need this service since some are developing their English linguistic knowledge at university (Ubaldo 2021).

Writing centres in Asia were in the main established to provide English writing support for students and to support the publication of faculty research in English. Later, they evolved to provide English Second Language (ESL) or English Foreign Language (EFL) learners (Chang 2013; Tan 2011). Except for the provision of academic literacy to bilingual and multilingual students (and lecturers) writing centres in Asia operated based on the North American idea. The writing centre, according to Steven North, 'represents the marriage of what are arguably the two most powerful contemporary perspectives on teaching writing: first, that writing is most usefully viewed as a process; and second, that writing curricula need to be student-centered' (North, 1984: 438).

The Fundani Writing Centre context

Writing centres in South Africa emerged in the mid-1990s as part of the academic development project. Their focus was to support 'educationally disadvantaged' students whose apartheid schooling had not prepared them for the cognitive and discourse demands of university study (Dison and Clarence 2017; Dison and Moore 2019). Many writing centres are situated within teaching and learning centres and they are often seen as a centralised service detached from disciplinary realities. Writing centres were framed ideologically as a skills offering (Archer and Richards 2011), a space to 'fix' students' writing. Although this contributed to entrenching the deficit frames of students; especially first-year students (Archer 2008; Paxton 2007), writing centres have and continue to evolve.

Writing centre practitioners and managers have now contributed to the shaping of new ideology through the publication of book chapters and journal articles. Currently, writing centres are deeply involved in the transformational project that defines a shift away from a traditionalist skills discourse to a progressive discourse on Academic Literacies that emphasises issues of 'identity', 'history', 'power', 'voice' and 'meaning making' (Lea and Street 1998; Ivanic 1998; Lillis and Scott 2007; Jacobs 2007, 2013). The shift is difficult to accomplish due to the positioning of writing centres in

institutions – both geographically and strategically. 'The revolution and evolution of writing centres have resulted in writing centres taking various roles and functions at different institutions' (Tan 2009: 47). Writing centres can be located in the library, a learning centre, an English department, or a residential hall and they may be centralised at just one location or may have several satellite centres, in the universities campuses (Haviland et al. 2001; Tan 2009).

Shortly after the writing centre at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) was established, the writing centre at Peninsula Technikon emerged. In 2005, as part of the government process to transform higher education, Peninsula Technikon and Cape Technikon merged to form the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). This meant that writing centre practices of the Cape Technikon, which was located in the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) and Cape Peninsula Technikon, part of the Educational Development Centre (EDC), would have to be re-aligned. A new name was adopted – Fundani Centre for High Education Development (that is 'Fundani CHED'). In the former Cape Technikon, it was mainly the Academic Literacy lecturers who provided academic literacy support to the students and lecturers. Focus was largely on facilitation of academic literacy intervention workshops rather than one-to-consultations. At Peninsula Technikon, it was the writing consultants who consulted and presented workshops for students. They were under the guidance of the writing centre coordinator, who is now an Academic Literacy lecturer.

The writing centre at the former Cape Technikon was located at the Student Learning Unit, which included tutoring and mentoring development. In the former Peninsula Technikon, the writing centre operated purely as a writing centre. There was limited engagement between disciplinary lecturers and the writing consultants: for any strategic or conceptual engagement that was required, it was conducted by the writing centre coordinator. After the merger, coordination was centralised under the Head of the Department of Student Learning Unit, which is a division of Fundani CHED. The original functions of these writing centres were now integrated. Then, mathematics support was initiated, which later evolved to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) support. The expansion of support included the training and development of the teaching assistants (TA) and retention officers (RO) and the provision of academic literacy support to satellite campuses.

For practical reasons, the CPUT writing centre is known as the 'Fundani Writing Centre' and it shall hereinafter be referred to as such. Fundani Writing Centre is seen as both a physical and an ideological space for holistic development of undergraduate students. Ideological space can be defined as a place where hegemonic discourses are interpreted and interrogated and transformational epistemologies are enacted. It focuses on cognitive-linguistic, psychosocial, academic and strategic

literacies development of CPUT students enrolled in six faculties – Applied Sciences, Business and Management Sciences, Education and Social Sciences, Engineering, Informatics and Design and Health and Wellness. There are four Academic Literacy lecturers employed on a permanent basis by the university. Annually, writing consultants/learning facilitators who are externally funded are employed on a part-time contract from the neighbouring sister universities.

Permanent staff members ensure continuity and stability of Fundani Writing Centre support in the university before and during the employment of consultants. As a result, the Academic Literacy lecturers facilitate academic literacy interventions, team-teach in the faculties, consult with students both face-to-face and online, participate in the teaching and learning committees, attend conferences, conduct research and publish papers and book chapters. There is a positive tension between what the Academic Literacy lecturers should do and what the function of writing consultants should be. However, due to limited funding and the fact that CPUT does not offer linguistics and language-related courses and cannot employ and grow its own timber, the Fundani Writing Centre does not attract a lot of writing consultants. The bulk of the work falls on the shoulders of the Academic Literacy lecturers.

The Fundani Writing Centre has an established physical presence on two campuses: the Bellville campus and the District Six campus. The writing centre provides limited support to some of the satellite campuses such as Mowbray, Wellington, Granger Bay, the Media City building (Cape Town), the Roeland Street building (Cape Town) and the Virtual Tours campus. During the Covid-19 lockdown period, the writing centre operated online. It was partially equipped to offer online pedagogical assistance, but within a short period of time, it offered a fully functional digital service. This meant that hard-copy material that existed was transferred to online resources, now uploaded on Blackboard. Students' assignments were either submitted via WCOnline Booking System or emailed to the administrators who distributed them equally to the Academic Literacy lecturers and writing consultants/learning facilitators. Since the national lockdown, the Fundani Writing Centre operates as a hybrid facility.

The Fundani Writing Centre provides reading and writing consultations to undergraduate students and also works with lecturers to plan and facilitate discipline-specific academic literacy interventions on academic literacies-related topics. The online pedagogy utilised is based on two methods – the review of essays or reports using track changes and providing oral feedback on Microsoft Teams or Blackboard and the WCOnline Booking system. Nonetheless, the dialogic oral feedback strategy suffered due to network problems, load-shedding and shortage or lack of data. This means that the scornful, traditional launderisation strategy was resorted to, which challenges

the ontological position adopted by the writing centre to promote dialogue and intersubjectivity (Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni 2019). Launderisation of the writing centre service means students would drop in their essays/reports to be 'fixed' and come back later to 'pick them up' – with no prospect for transformative dialogue on conceptual and substantive issues. This practice thwarted the *raison d' etre* of the writing centre – to work with writers not writing (North 1984; Carlse 2019; Carstens and Rambiritch 2020). Thus, the post Covid-19 era calls for the hybridisation of pedagogic engagements. This includes recognising the need to restore transformative dialogue if any meaningful act of seeing and serving students as equal partners is to be achieved.

A small number of students visit the Fundani Writing Centre in Cape Town, Bellville and Tygerberg campuses via referrals from other student support units such as the Student Counselling Unit, the Disability Unit, residence managers, tutors, mentors, senior students and the office of the Student Representative Council (SRC). The primary target of the writing centre is the undergraduate students doing their first, second, third year and Advanced Diploma level (formerly known as B-Tech[1]). Thus, the writing centre's scope at CPUT is regulated by the institutional policy on student development. Postgraduate students registered for Masters and Ph.D. fall beyond the scope of the services of the writing centre and must, as a consequence, seek assistance from the Centre for Postgraduate Studies (CPGS). However, with the help of the Fundani Writing Centre practitioners, the CPGS is planning to establish the postgraduate writing centre.

Some of the students at CPUT are referred to the writing centre by lecturers, peer mentors and Student Counselling Unit: they are facing psychosocial challenges which transcend academic literacy development. Since these challenges (cognitive, cultural, financial and emotional) have a significant impact on the students' academic progress, writing centre practitioners have to go an extra mile to provide psychosocial support. This expands the scope of work for the writing centre practitioners whose praxis compels them to listen and offer advice. It is perhaps the principle of non-judgementalism and of creating conducive atmosphere that encourages students to be comfortable, open and willing to share their lived experiences. Thus, to realise the act of developing students holistically, of being responsive to the student needs, of radically transforming student and lecturer support and of ensuring writing practitioners contribute meaningfully to transforming student-writers, including the culture, identity and structure of the university, the third tier of the Academic Literacies Model should be enacted, decoloniality pursued and *Ubuntu* be embedded in the institutional praxes.

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1 B-Tech is the abbreviation for Bachelor of Technology, which was offered by Technikons and Universities of Technology, and has now been changed (after the recent recurriculation process) to 'Advanced Diploma.'

Academic literacies and its transformative potential

Among others, practices of the South African writing centres are theoretically informed by the work of the New London Group (Cope and Kalantzis 2009). In 1998, as part of a contribution to New Literacy Studies (the 1996 London Group), transformation of higher education (massification) and recognition of shortcomings in the traditional literacy practices, Street and Lea (1998; 2006) conceptualised and published the Academic Literacies Model. The theory sees literacy as a social practice and therefore recognises the plurality of literacies hence 'academic literacies' instead of a singular 'academic literacy.' In this chapter, the use of a singular form subsumes the plural. According to Lea and Street (1998) the Academic Literacies Model 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. It developed in recognition of a growing mismatch between students' needs and experiences, the curriculum and the academic institution (Lea and Street 1998, 2006).

The Academic Literacies Model is divided into three main perspectives: Study Skills, Academic Socialisation and Academic Literacies Approach. The *Study Skills Approach* refers to atomised skills, surface language features and grammar. It sees writing and literacy as primarily an individual and cognitive skill (Lea and Street 2006). Writing is not some neutral activity which is learnt like a physical skill, but one which implicates every fibre of the writer's multifaceted being (Ivanic 1998: 181). *Academic Socialisation* is about inculcating students into a new 'culture' in the disciplines. It focuses on student orientation to learning and interpretation of a learning task. However, it lacks focus on institutional practices. The *Academic Literacies Approach* sees literacies as social practices (Lea and Street 1998). It is concerned with meaning making, identity, power and authority. It foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context (Lea and Street 2006).

The Academic Literacies theory defines the contested nature of the conventions of knowledge production and the determination of academic writing conventions as encroaching on the students' meaning-making capabilities (Lillis and Scott 2007). The authors claim, 'we move on to consider how academic literacies constitutes a specific epistemology, that of *literacy as social practice* and ideology, that of *transformation'*, is instructive (2007: 13). As a transformative approach, Academic Literacies theory involves a critical engagement with academic conventions and an ability to locate these conventions within 'contested traditions of knowledge making' (Lillis and Scott 2007: 13). This requires writers to question these conventions and to determine how they may affect their

meaning making – an issue that is not only epistemological, as it appears, but ontological. Moreover, Academic Literacies theory explores alternative ways of meaning making in academia, valuing the resources that students bring to the university as 'legitimate tools for meaning making' (Lillis and Scott 2007).

Vincent and Hlatshwayo (2018) posit that black students who constitute the majority of first-generation students in South Africa often struggle to fit into alienating university cultures. Culture is the expression of human thought or creativity, as wherever human beings exist, they express their thought in language and culture (Komo 2017: 82). Students who do not hear their languages on campus, or even worse, have them being dismissed, are not going to feel welcome at university (Boughey and McKenna 2021: 66). These authors further argue that such students suffer from what Fricker (2007, 2013) refers to as testimonial injustice, which manifests when someone's identity is not recognised. Disapproval of the non-recognition of African students' culture and being is expressed by Komo (2017) who asserts: 'it becomes absurd to affirm that some human beings or human societies, who have their own cultures and languages, do not think' (Komo 2017: 82). To deter the situation, universities should follow Gore's (2021: 214) suggestion: 'the need to change higher education content, teaching methods and academic staff from being Eurocentric to addressing the needs of all students, including black students.'

Grosfoguel (2013: 75) adds that 'the knowledge produced from the social/historical experiences and world views of the Global South, also known as 'non-Western', are considered 'inferior and not part of the canon of thought'. This, according to Grosfoguel (2013), is often accompanied by epistemicides (the systematic destruction of the sciences, philosophies and histories of the conquered). 'Epistemicide, according to Santos (2018: 8) is 'the destruction of an immense variety of ways of knowing that prevail mainly on the other side of the abyssal line—in the colonial societies and sociabilities.' Heleta (2016) states that curriculum studies (including research and development) remain predominantly white in South African academia and therefore reinforce white and Western dominance and privilege. As such, it is very much prone to what Mills called 'white ignorance' (2007: 13). This refers to doxastic dispositions or a social structure which creates some veil that blinds white people to the privileges they continue to enjoy and the denial of cumulative effects of past differential treatment (Mills 2007).

Critique of Eurocentric values, which present knowledge as if it was the only kind of knowledge in existence, must empower the working-class students (and lecturers/writing centre practitioners) to unmask and reveal systems of oppression and marginalisation embedded in the curriculum and pedagogical practices. That would ensure different ways of thinking and viewing the world

emerge – ways that are both pluriversal and dialectical. In response to the Eurocentric view that the colonised did not have rationality and therefore were inferior to their Western counterparts, Mpofu and Steyn (2021: 12) challenge everyone to be conscious of the fact that the colonised and the enslaved were humans who practiced science and religion and had histories of their own. The authors claim that this is a truth that the empire could not and cannot live with.

The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory provides both philosophical and theoretical resources to respond to the marginalisation and the silencing of knowledge and systems of meaning for certain groups in society. Critical Theory aims to interrogate and critique the hegemony of Western systems of meaning (Eurocentrism), monolingualism (English-only) and universalisation of knowledge systems developed in the world province of Europe. It is an approach that studies society in a dialectical way by analysing political economy, domination, exploitation and ideologies (Fuchs 2015). Giroux (2009), for example, sheds light on what critical pedagogy does, which we believe can guide writing centre pedagogical practices. He describes his work on critical pedagogy as grounded in critique as a mode of analysis that interrogates texts, institutions, social relations and ideologies as part of the script of official power.

Giroux (2009) stresses that knowledge would become meaningful only if it connects with the histories, values and understandings that shape students' everyday lives. This point is captured by Johnson and Morris (2010) who described critical pedagogy as an approach that encourages academics (as educators) to develop context-specific educational strategies where dialogues, if used by both staff and students, can open up space for critical consciousness to emerge. A writing tutor/learning facilitator[2] who is critically conscious of ideological and political forces that influence and possibly motivate writers to take particular positions and interpret texts and discourses the way they do, is better equipped to ask student-writers questions that enable them to think critically and deeply about their subject matter. For example, the Academic Literacies Model was developed in recognition of a growing mismatch between students' needs and experiences and the curriculum and the academic institution (Lea and Street 1998, 2006). Academic Literacies scholars pay attention to understanding and interrogating difficulties experienced by students in higher education, especially those whose cultural and linguistic capital is in disharmony with culture and curricula at university.

Although the Academic Literacies Model is a theoretical construct from the North, it advances

2 Learning facilitator is a name given to writing consultants/writing tutors at CPUT. This is in recognition of the broader scope of work done in the writing centre beyond linguistic development.

the transformation of society through literacies globally. In South Africa, many academic literacies scholars have developed scholarship around the theory, applying it in their situational context for knowledge building purpose – the development of conceptual tools instrumental for the attainment of the political project encoded in the Academic Literacies Approach (see Cecilia Jacobs, Sherran Clarence, Sioux McKenna, Lucia Thesen, Chrissy Boughey, Brenda Lebowitz, Arlene Archer, Pamela Nichols, Rose Richards, etc.). Heleta (2016) warns South African academia to be critical of 'global knowledge' and to not accept anything from the global North as the norm. This means that the work of academic literacies practitioners must be agentivised and integrated with theories from the Global South in order to speak to South African students' realities. In 2008 already, Archer, one of the stalwarts of the writing centre in South Africa, challenged writing centre practitioners to consider the power of writing centres in the knowledge production project: 'Social, political and economic power is closely associated with knowledge of certain discourse forms and Writing Centres need to play a vital role in equity redress in tertiary institutions' (Archer 2008: 211).

Another Academic Literacies specialist, Jacobs (2020: 227) challenges the use of the word 'support' to describe academic development work. She advocates for 'a shift away from the dominant asocial, acultural and apolitical construction of learning and learners, towards a class analysis that provides a more social view of learning and learners.' Jacobs (2020) believes such a social or contextualised view of learning would see students as being shaped by the very contexts in which they were raised, live and learn. Interestingly, the word 'support' is integral to the description given to the work of writing centres, including the CPUT writing centre. So, the critique advanced by Jacobs (2020) in line with Heleta's (2016) proposition sends a clear message to researchers and practitioners in the writing centre fraternity, to not just adopt concepts, categories and phraseologies uncritically but to value the exigencies of the situational contexts.

Conceptual/theoretical framework

The African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, decoloniality and the CPUT Vision 2030 Strategy were employed to conceptualise this study. The concept of *Ubuntu* is well documented. In brief, *Ubuntu* is an African concept that serves as a framework for humaneness between people within a community (Nyaumwe and Mkabela 2007). It is summarised in isiXhosa as, '*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*', which translates as 'a person is a person through other persons.' The concept of *Ubuntu* is found in most African cultures, though the word differs by language. It dates back to precolonial days and is part of

a long oral tradition (Mugumbate and Chereni 2019). Ramose (2002) defines *Ubuntu* as a collection of values and practices that Black people of Africa or of African origin view as making people authentic human beings. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing – an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world (Mabvurira 2020).

According to Sanni (2021), *Ubuntu* can be expressed in terms of sociality that binds the people. It is driven by communitarian values, which serve as a guide for an individual's way of life and these values have ontological implications. For Ramose (2002: 41), *ubu-ntu* is the fundamental ontological and epistemological category in the African thought of the Bantu-speaking people:

Ubu- as the generalised understanding of *be-ing* may be said to be distinctly ontological. Whereas *-ntu* as the nodal point at which *be-ing* assumes concrete form or, a mode of being in the process of continual unfoldment, may be said to be distinctly epistemological.

Dladla (2019: 159) interprets the above quotation well: 'In philosophical terms, *umuntu* precedes *Ubuntu* ontologically and, by virtue of such precedence, *umuntu* is the progenitor of the epistemology of *Ubuntu*. *Umuntu* is a Zulu word for a person. It has Xhosa and Sotho versions, namely: *umntu* or *motho* respectively. Elsewhere, Dladla provides a clear philosophical and practical distinction between *umuntu* and *ubuntu* (see the excerpt below):

> To make an English translation then, while *Ubuntu* can be thought of as describing the more general and abstract human-ness or be-ing human, *umuntu* on the other hand is the specific concrete manifestation. *Umuntu* is the specific entity which continues to conduct an enquiry into be-ing, knowledge and truth, something we would best consider an activity rather than an act, a process which cannot be stopped unless motion is itself stopped in line with this reasoning then *ubu-* should be regarded as be-ing becoming, verbal rather than verb (2017: 51).

Ramose, who mentored Dladla's trajectory in philosophy, personified *Ubuntu* and characterised it as a philo-praxis because it is always a process of unfoldment toward *umntu* (Ramose 2002). Ramose (1999: 52) paints a clear picture of *Ubuntu* when he says, 'one is enjoined, yes, commanded as it were, to actually become a human being.' Someone who fails to play his or her part is recognised as 'an animal'. 'He is not a person' (Ramose 1999: 52). Indeed, in isiXhosa speaking communities, one would often hear people saying, '*powu, yinja umntaka bani*' (so and so's child is a dog) if someone is

failing to live up their expectation as a human being who is supposed to live relationally with other human beings in society.

Clearly, the *Ubuntu* ethic imposes upon everybody a concept of duty toward other people. The concept of duty requires an individual to place the common good before individual satisfaction (Mkabela 2014). In other words, *Ubuntu* transcends the private sphere of self-absorption in favour of a relationship that covers the community as a whole (Sanni 2021: 3). In the context of CPUT, *Ubuntu* (Oneness) is invoked to deal with the hidden culture of individualism/isolationism, which is dubbed as the 'silo mentality.' This unwritten code is observed when people refuse to work across the boundaries of their disciplines or become reluctant to engage in an open dialogue regarding pertinent issues. In a public sphere where open and honest engagements are a norm, such hidden culture becomes dangerous, as it can sow disharmony, distrust and irreconcilable contradictions. With respect to unity of purpose, Omodan and Makena (2022: 107) maintain, '*Ubuntu* gives strength to overcome adversity and create a more just and equitable society.' As the African philosophy centring humanity, empathy, compassion and liberation from coloniality and Eurocentrism, *Ubuntu* is key to driving the decolonial agenda of the Global South.

Decoloniality is one of the theories used to view the world in which the African or non-white students develop or suffer intellectually, linguistically, socially and economically in the post-colonial space. Decolonial turn was announced by Du Bois in the early twentieth century and made explicit in a line of figures from Aimée Césaire and Frantz Fanon in the mid-twentieth century, to Sylvia Wynter, Enrique Dussel, Gloria Anzaldúa, Lewis Gordon, Chela Sandoval and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, among others, throughout the second half of the twentieth to the beginning of the twenty first century (Maldonado-Torres 2011). In addition, Maldonado-Torres argues that decolonising knowledge necessitates shifting the geography of reason, which means opening reason beyond Eurocentric and provincial horizons, as well as producing knowledge beyond strict disciplinary impositions (Maldonado-Torres 2011: 10). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015: 485) argues, 'decoloniality speaks to the deepening and widening of decolonization movements in those spaces that experienced the slave trade, imperialism, colonialism, apartheid, neocolonialism and underdevelopment. This is because the domains of culture, the psyche, mind, language, aesthetics, religion and many others have remained colonized.'

The presence of Western epistemologies in African universities perpetuates one of the colonial myths that epistemologies from inferior humans of the South are subaltern knowledge systems (Grosfoguel 2011; Mayaba, Ralarala and Angu 2018). African students are still expected to continue imagining Europe as the centre of gravity and to promote Western epistemic hegemony. Anyone

who strives to counter this hegemonic reality is deemed as problematic in post-colonial societies. Ndhlovu and Kelly (2020: 60) posit 'Euro-modernist epistemologies proceed from positivist "scientific" principles that turn a blind eye to the diversity of ways of reading and interpreting social experience.' Essentially, these epistemologies reflect and represent subjective perceptions about what constitutes valid and legitimate knowledge.

As a result of coloniality, 'the imperial attitude promotes a fundamentally genocidal attitude in respect to colonized and racialized people. Through it colonial and racial subjects are marked as dispensable' (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 246). Elswhere, Maldonado-Torres describes coloniality as that which survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and everyday (2007: 243). To counter the act of coloniality and ensure total liberation of the subaltern (the oppressed and marginalised), a revolutionary measure in a form of decoloniality was to be conceptualised and pursued. Ndlovu-Gatsheni postulates that decoloniality is born out of:

> a realization that the modern world is an asymmetrical world order that is sustained not only by colonial matrices of power but also by pedagogies and epistemologies of equilibrium that continue to produce alienated Africans that are socialized into hating Africa that produced them and liking Europe and America that reject them (2015: 489).

For Le Grange (2021), decoloniality is more than the removal of colonial governance. It entails the decolonisation of the interlocking domains of knowledge, power and being. The author credits Latin American scholars for giving clarity to the concepts of decolonisation and decoloniality. This has been helpful in understanding the legacy of colonialism which imbues the 'postcolonial world' and neoliberal order which makes decoloniality necessary (Le Grange 2021: 4). In his *Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality*, Maldonado-Torrres (2016: 7) asserts that decolonial movements tend to approach ideas and change in a way that does not isolate knowledge from action. This means that they combine knowledge, practice and creative expressions, among other areas, in their efforts to change the world.

Elsewhere, Le Grange refers to decoloniality as a critique or an analytic of coloniality (2018: 9). Le Grange (2018) went further to state that decolonial scholars are of the view that although former

European colonies attained independence, in postcolonial times, the logic of coloniality remains. Maldonado-Torres characterises coloniality as:

> surviv[ing] colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and everyday (2007: 243).

Coloniality can be divided into three concepts: coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge and coloniality of being. While the coloniality of powers refers to the interrelation among modern forms of exploitation and domination (power) and the coloniality of knowledge has to do with impact of colonisation on the different areas of knowledge production, coloniality of being would make primary reference to the lived experience of colonisation and its impact on language (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 242).

Coloniality is often invisible as compared to colonialism, which it succeeds. That requires theory to unravel the world and expose the onto-epistemological realities of Western rationality and African/South relationality. For Lejano (2021) relationality emphasises connectedness amongst the people and that the ethic of relationality is distinct from an ethic of rationality (the Western logic). 'To become cognizant of a White supremist ideology, therefore, individuals must be made conscious of the many subtle ways in which our values and beliefs are shaped by the messages we receive in our homes, workplaces, schools and various other institutions on a daily basis' (Powell 2000: 8). By virtue of its strategic in-between position and ability to engage in heteroglossic dialogues with many students, lecturers and institutional structures, the Fundani Writing Centre practitioners can conscientise individuals about the many subtle ways in which colonial values, cultures and ideologies shape discourses and practices, as indicated by Powell (2000).

Decolonial epistemic perspective is ranged against coloniality (Dastile and Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 109). According to the authors, this perspective builds on decolonisation discourse, but they say it adds the concepts of power, being and knowledge as constitutive of modernity/coloniality. Decolonisation aspires to break with monologic modernity by fomenting transmodernity, which is 'an invitation to think modernity/coloniality critically from different epistemic positions and according to the manifold experiences of subjects who suffer different dimensions of the coloniality of Being' (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 261). Essentially, the work on decolonisation, according to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021: 83), is aimed at dismantling the colonial structures of

knowledge. It confronts these Eurocentric ideas and rationalities which not only enabled physical colonialism but cognitive/metaphysical colonialism as well.

Moghli and Kadiwal (2021) explain decolonisation as a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, heterogeneous and multigenerational process, which builds on decades of work by scholars, activists and people from all walks of life who have been struggling for freedom and breaking structures of oppression. Decolonisation, according to Mills (2007), can be achieved by overcoming white ignorance and radicalising liberalism. So white ignorance is 'best thought of as a cognitive tendency – an inclination, a doxastic disposition – which is not insuperable' (Mills 2007: 23). Heller (1984) defines 'doxa' as everyday knowledge, an opinion not science or philosophy. Accordingly, 'doxa is inseparable from practical activity: it is in practical activity and nowhere else that doxa is verified' (Heller 1984: 203).

Writing about decolonisation of methodologies, research and indigenous people, Smith (1999: 39) argues that 'decolonization, however, does not mean and has not meant a total rejection of all theory or research or Western knowledge. Rather, it is about centring our concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our purposes.' Arguments put forward by African decolonial scholars (Dladla 2019; Le Grange 2018; Mills 2007; Ndlovu and Kelly 2020) speak about the need to disrupt the reproduction of colonial-apartheid power relations. Power relations are always present when humans engage in educational exchanges (Le Grange 2018). Ndlovu and Kelly (2020: 61) maintain, 'the challenge then is how the Global South might escape the capture of Western traditions while still remaining in dialogue.'

Contributing to the discourse of centering African epistemologies and of using technology intelligently to better humanity, the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) conceptualised Vision 2030 Strategy, (a decadal plan) which emphasises two dimensions – *Oneness* and *Smartness* – explained in Figure 1 below:

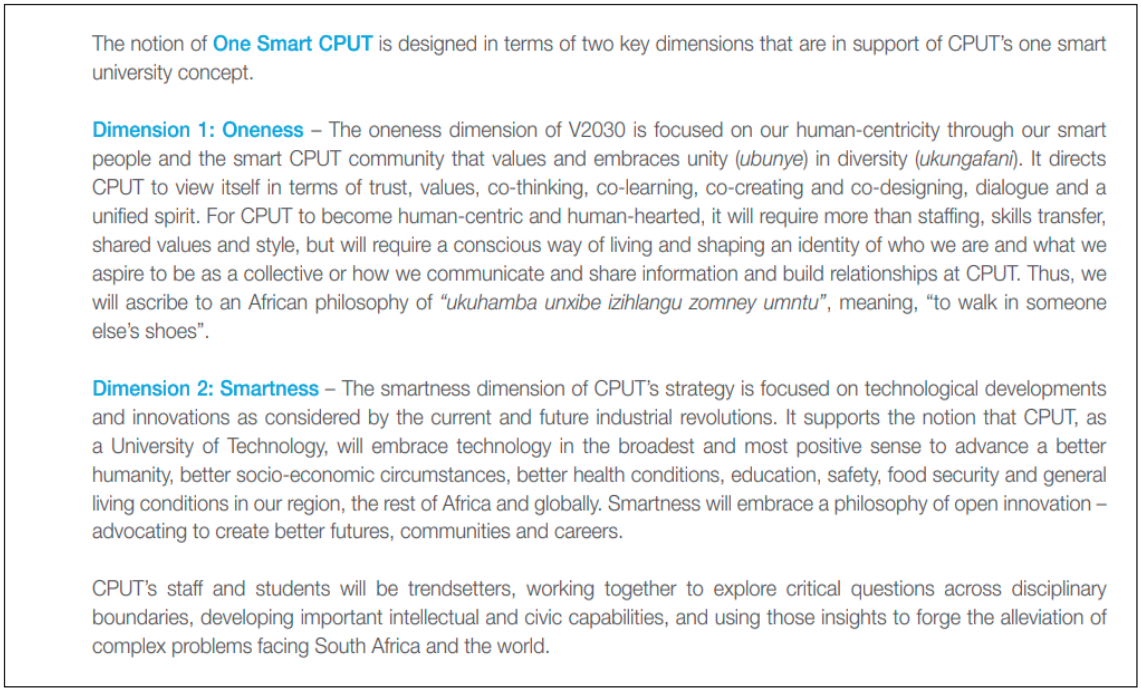

Figure 1: One Smart CPUT Vision 2030

All the same, a critical appraisal of the decolonial literature and writings on the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* was performed with the aim of initiating purposeful conversations between the writing centre practices at CPUT and metatheory (decoloniality and *Ubuntu*). A critical assessment of assumptions and (in)advertently adopted ideological stance by the writing centre practitioners were pivotal for decision making and conversations on the strategic direction of the writing centre in the next decade. Conversations also become complicated when scholars of curriculum engage with their peers (particularly with those with different histories, beliefs, and ideas), and listening respectfully to them allows one to interrogate their own understandings of self and of the field (Le Grange 2018: 7). Put differently, critical reflections energised on *Ubuntu* and decoloniality allowed the practitioners to think deeply about social, intellectual and ideological issues surrounding them and can also enable them to interrogate their practices in order to imagine and activate change in their praxis.

Data collection: Method and design

Study design

The chapter sought to determine how the writing centre practice could be radically transformed by centering the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. This includes exploring conceptual resources to strengthen the liberatory and transformative practice of the writing centre. The chapter employed a qualitative paradigm to study the above social reality. The writing centre practitioners were interviewed to critically reflect on how the writing centre can be decolonised and how the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* can be centred in the writing centre.

Reflection, a 'turning back' on experience for Mezirow (1998) can mean many things: it can be a simple awareness of an object, event or state, including awareness of a perception, thought, feeling, disposition, intention, action, or of one's habits of doing things (Mezirow 1998: 185). For Hickson (2011: 834), critical reflection helps one to identify and deconstruct their assumptions rather than focus on the narrative or the story. The author believes critical reflection has helped her to explore her ideas about uncertainty and change, flexibility, conflict resolution, knowledge, power and control. Fook (2015: 441) posits that reflective practice emerges principally from the work of Schon (1983).

Schon is one of the first scholars who raised awareness about the crisis in the professions, which is often represented by the perceived gap between formal theory and actual practice. Schon (1983) suggests that professionals use reflection to deal with the uncertainty that pervades their work and shapes their thinking and actions while learning from experience. However, the notion of critical reflection adopted in this chapter is provided by Mezirow who characterises critical reflection as 'the process by which people learn to recognize how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices' (Mezirow 2000: 128). This calls for the development of critical language to interrogate the taken-for granted stances, concepts and experiences in the academy.

While we concur with Mezirow (1998: 186) that critical reflection is a principled thinking, which ideally, ought to be impartial, consistent and non-arbitrary, as researchers, we believe that critical reflection should be informed theoretically and practically by the reality of one's social situation. For others, reflective practice is an activity that is Western-oriented and has no cultural translation (Gardner, Fook and White 2006). The critique performed in this chapter is not the one associated with Western tradition, which is ahistorical, atheoretical and presumably neutral, but the one

associated with the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, decoloniality and the centering of African philosophy of *Ubuntu* in the writing centre praxis.[3]

Recruitment of participants

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants. Participation in this study was voluntary and consent was obtained from the participants before the commencement of the focus group interviews. The participants were assured that they can withdraw at any point in the study and that their views are not intended to be used to compromise their *locu standi* as practitioners at the Fundani Writing Centre. Participants are four Academic Literacy lecturers and two learning facilitators/writing consultants who reflected their understanding of the history of writing centre practice, how decolonisation affected the practice after the Fallist Movement and how *Ubuntu* can be centralised in the writing centre pedagogy.

Data collection

Data was collected by means of document analysis and focus group interviews. The CPUT Vision 2030 strategy document was analysed to determine the underlying values, principles and propositions underpinned by the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. For this chapter, only the Dimension of Oneness is considered. Focus group interviews were conducted via Microsft Teams. The interviews were scheduled for one hour but lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. The conversation was informed by the following three questions:

1. What does CPUT Vision 2030, the dimension of smartness, mean for practice in your sector?

2. How has your sector transformed over the past few years in response to the Fallist Movement (#FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall)?

3. What would be the role of *Ubuntu* in changing practice in the Writing Centre?

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3 Praxis is part of critical consciousness through which one demonstrates the ability of reflexive thinking that leads to commensurate transformative action (Maseko 2018: 84).

For this chapter, only responses to the third question will be reported. The interview data was transcribed. In fact, transcription from Microsoft Teams was downloaded by the first author (lead researcher). After realising that sections of the transcript were distorted by Microsoft Teams, participants were invited to sit with researchers to view the transcript, listen to Microsoft Teams audio and identify and rectify distortions. The purpose was limited to correcting the errors, but not to tamper with the meaning. So, this was an iterative process with repetitive steps of listening and re-listening to the audio. The names reflected in the analysis (Findings and Discussion section) are pseudonyms: to protect the identity of the participants. Tim, Paulina, Zinzi and Odwa are Academic Literacy lecturers and Zein and Peter, the writing consultants/learning facilitators.

Findings and discussion

Regarding the role of *Ubuntu* in changing the writing centre practice, the participants showed understanding and appreciation of the idea. So much was uttered by the participants in relation to the implementation and valuing of *Ubuntu* as a guide to action in the writing centre. 'Attentive listening', 'non-intimidation', 'creation of rapport' as a strategy for open and frank engagement, 'relationality', treating 'students as equals' and 'human beings' as well as 'seeing the person, not language problems' are some of the key issues emerging from data. *Ubuntu* as a guide to action and restoration of relations between interlocutors is captured by Peter below and later by Tim:

> *Writing centre is meant to be a safe space where, as consultants, we listen attentively and engage students in a non-intimidating manner. As soon as you realise that the student you are consulting with is not relaxed, it's uncomfortable, probably because their writing is put under the spotlight you have to change your approach. You can ask about what made the student to choose the course and what future is imagined out of the chosen career path in the field of study. I guess that's* Ubuntu *in action* (Peter, Learning Facilitator).

From the above excerpt, the notion of writing centre as a 'safe space', 'attentive listening', 'non-intimidation' and creation of rapport were crucial to how Peter believes *Ubuntu* should be practicalised in the writing centre. 'The idea of the writing centre as a safe space in otherwise culturally hostile or alienating environments was common in this first collection of essays on South African writing centres…' (Nichols 2016: 184). This means that writing centres were designed to look

welcoming and to encourage students to relax and to think. As a result, students become open and willing to share their lived experiences and emotional being. It is within a safe context that remains academically grounded, rigorous and free from the harshness of the academic environment, that students can be mentored to be better writers (Banda 2019: 200).

Creation of rapport by changing topic, as alluded to by Peter, is testimony to this appearance of the writing centre. The shift in politeness strategy illustrates *Ubuntu* as a dynamic force, which, according to Dladla (2017), denotes humanness, which obliges one to be humane, respectful and polite towards others. When rapport is achieved, the possibility for interactants to be trustingly open and vulnerable to each other gets heightened. Both students and writing practitioners listen attentively and engage visibly – with authority and power equitably shared. Nichols (2016) takes the idea of listening to a different level. She states that the surfacing of the codes of power and the coaching of students so that they can speak and be heard, requires listening (Nichols 2016: 186). Nichols cites Delpit (1995: 47), on the special kind of listening we must embrace: 'we must be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge into our consciousness. In other words, we must become ethnographers in the true sense.' According to Nichols (2016) this sort of listening takes courage and resilience for it goes against the grain of hegemonic culture and requires us to hear that which might otherwise be silenced. This obligation toward other people is a specific value advocated in *Ubuntu* ethics. *Ubuntu* as ethics is inseparably connected to the recognition that motion is the principle of be-ing (Dladla 2017: 53). Thus, the ethics of *Ubuntu* revolves around contingency and mutability (Dladla 2017).

The power, depth and potentiality of *Ubuntu* as an African philosophy is often misconstrued or misjudged (see Tim's utterances) albeit having a deeper liberatory potential:

> *I feel strongly that* Ubuntu *is often misconstrued or mistakenly reduced to philanthropic acts of giving or caring for the vulnerable. I think it is much deeper than that. As a philosophy, it ought to guide our action, our relations as a people ... Quite seriously, it challenges the position to which Africans were placed by their European counterparts and therefore aims to improve their status and dignity globally* (Tim, Academic Literacy lecturer).

To Tim, many people hold a narrow view of the concept of *Ubuntu*, that is, philanthropism. However, from the above excerpt, *Ubuntu* is purported to do three other important tasks, namely: (i) recognition of students as a people, (ii) liberation of Africans from the zone of non-being and (iii) valorisation of their humanity and human dignity. This approach by the African philosophy of

Ubuntu is in stark contrast with its European counterpart. The European philosophy of Descartes and Kant was driven to the centre wherein knowledge was disconnected from the subjects that produced it, emphasising what was said and enunciated as 'knowledge', but concealed the subjects that produced it (Grosfoguel 2012). The strategy of 'hiding the body' and the situatedness of the European producer of knowledge enabled European produced knowledge as not just local but 'universal' – thereby acquiring epistemological validity – and, at the same time, negating the visibility and existence of the knowledge produced by the colonised non-European (Grosfoguel 2012).

As a guide to action, *Ubuntu* (philo-praxis) speaks to the need to redefine relations and recognise Africans as a people with rationality and relational capability. Therefore, *Ubuntu* should be at the heart of decolonising knowledge and pedagogical practices, which the writing centre must actively pursue. Heleta (2018) argues that decolonisation of knowledge is crucial in order to rewrite histories, reassert the dignity of the oppressed and refocus the knowledge production and worldviews for the sake of the present and the future of the country and its people, as well as the rest of the African continent. In the context of the writing centre, action refers to the laying down of foundation for critique and change. This includes sensitising our stakeholders (the majority of whom are students) about the need to confront the unequal distribution of power and contradictions that exist in the curriculum, to heighten the ontology of the often-alienated African working-class students. Essentially, the writing centre practitioners must challenge disciplinary lecturers to interrogate the type of knowledge imparted in their disciplines and determine its historicity (origins) including the valued sources of information. They would have to inquire: is the imparted knowledge promoting epistemic values, principles and world views emanating from the Global North or its alternative, Global South?

'Caring' and 'giving' are crucial elements of global ethics. From an African perspective, these concepts can be understood from the following characterisation: '*Ubuntu* is a comprehensive ancient African world-view based on the values of intense humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion and associated values, ensuring a happy and qualitative community life in the spirit of family' (Broodryk 2008: 17). *Ubuntu* is about activating everybody's relational agency or relationality. Relational agency therefore has some resonance with the work of Hakkarainen and his colleagues on reciprocity and mutual strengthening of competence and expertise to enhance the collective competence of a community (Hakkarainen, Palonen, Paavola and Lehtinen 2004). It 'allows us to work with others in pursuit of ever-expanding objects and to explore the possibilities that these new objects reveal' (Edwards 2007: 6).

Paulina has done some introspection during the interview process and identifies her complicity to the narrow perspective on *Ubuntu* thus:

> *I agree with Tim. In fact, I am guilty of thinking of* Ubuntu *only in terms of the famous phrase,* 'umntu ngumntu ngabantu.' *Never did I think it goes beyond that. I am glad we are having this conversation about it. In the writing centre, we need to fight for the recognition of students as a people and through our interventions bring their social realities to the fore. Examples given and sources cited must be contextualised in African reality* (Paulina, Academic Literacy lecturer).

Umntu ngumntu ngabantu translated as 'I am because we are' is an important stating point to recognise and learn how a person can be elevated and validated socially. According to Dladla (2017: 55) the aphorism applies to everybody including European descendants: it is said that '*lomlungu unobuntu*' [this white person has *Ubuntu]* or even '*lomlungu ungumutu*' [this white person is a human being]. In other words, this is not a biological valuation but an ethical one. Paulina defines the basic struggle of the practitioners in the writing centre as fighting for the recognition of students *as a people*. The challenge, as Ramose puts it, 'is to prove oneself to be the embodiment of *ubu-ntu* because the fundamental ethical, social and legal judgment of human worth and conduct is based upon *Ubuntu'* (Ramose 2002: 43).

African solidarity, humanity and cooperation transcends Western singularity and individualism. A pedagogy that values humanity, collectivity and sociality is a living organism, as it is open to possibilities, contradictions, transformation and growth. Waghid (2004: 64) posits that pedagogy should make us 'open to the unexpected, the uncertain and the unpredictable.' Possibility for growth, in the academy, is expressed by Odwa in the following excerpt.

> *No one develops in isolation...Mna colleagues, I think,* Ubuntu *in the writing centre can be achieved if we can relate to how we were assisted as undergraduate students who did not know much about writing at university. I always go back to lived experiences of constantly visiting the writing centre and seeking advice from my course tutors* (Odwa, Academic Literacy lecturer).

Statements such as 'no one develops in isolation' brings about the essential quality found in

interpersonal relationships, interdependence and the collaborative nature of African societies. *Ubuntu* for Mabvurira (2020) and Lejano (2021) brings about authentic individual human beings to be part of a larger community where their identity and development is intertwined with that of the communal others. *Ubuntu* is about communitarianism and co-development: everybody's contribution matters. Drawing material strength from others (tutors and writing centre practitioners) has, for instance, helped Odwa to navigate his university studies. This is in keeping with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of Zone of Proximal Development where the novice (student) interacts with the more knowledgeable other (teacher) until the novice can be independent.

Independence gains material value in collaboration. In the indigenous African context, for example, a sense of duty and responsibilities on individuals is more paramount than the notion of individual human rights. Related concepts, 'co-thinking, 'co-learning', 'co-creating' and 'co-designing' define the Oneness dimension (*Ubuntu*) in the CPUT Vision 2030 Strategy. This constructivist notion of co-dependence and co-creation is meant to counter individualism – a central concept of liberal education. Relationality for Lejano (2021) emphasises connectedness and that the ethic of relationality is distinct from an ethic of rationality (that is, dominant Western logic). Thus, the valuing of others, empathy and relational understanding of people's social reality are some key components of *Ubuntu*, which must be embraced and promoted in the writing centre.

'Dialogue' is one of main concepts reflected in the CPUT Vision 2030 strategy. The centrality of dialogue or conversation, in the writing centre pedagogy, is captured by Zein below:

> *What is central to the work of the writing centre is dialogue and engagements. Africans like to talk. This oral tradition helps one to express herself more and unpack things, which otherwise would not have been possible when writing. Academic writing has lots of rules and restrictions.* Ubuntu *will assist us in seeing the person not the language problem, which is ordinarily the main reason why students are sent to the writing centre by their lecturers* (Zein, Learning Facilitator).

Citing Bakhtin's (1981) concept of dialogicality and Middendorp's (1992) heteroglossia, Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni (2019) recognise the importance of dialoguing (as opposed to monologuing) during consultations. Pratt (1991) referred to dialogic and heteroglossic spaces as *contact zones* where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power. Participation in dialogue is essential for academic language learning (Smith 2022). Vaagan (2006: 168) states that in literary theory, dialogue (from Greek *dialogos* – conversation) signifies the

organising of fictional texts, usually novels, to allow the interplay of different voices, minds or value systems in such a way that none is superior to another. As they consult with students from various disciplines, writing centre practitioners ought to engage with disciplinary literacies (discourses) and the epistemic values which are often tacit (Jacobs 2021) and they must be able to empathise with those students' social and epistemic relations.

According to Zein, 'oral tradition helps one to express herself more and unpack things.' He also asserts that writing constrains the flow of ideas. Unlike oral tradition, it has a lot of rules and restrictions. In addition, Zein defines the ontology of Africans as people who like to talk. Orality is central to *Ubuntu* (Mugumbate and Chereni 2019). Its value in a decolonising university can be understood in three ways: (i) need for decolonisation of assessment practices, (ii) illumination of limitations of writing to meaning making and (iii) confinement of creativity and fluidity during academic writing. Thesen and Cooper (2013) argue that transformative practice calls for deep conversations about hopes and fears and attachments. They further state that such a conversation needs openness to risk and risk-taking.

Nichols (1998) posits that writing centres are based on the paradigm that language and knowledge are created socially through conversation or dialogue with people and texts. Important human actions and values such as listening, connectedness and inclusive pedagogies are enacted in dialogue (Smith 1999; Nichols 2017). Such actions and values are ontological. 'Seeing the person not language problems' (see Zein's utterances) is also deeply ontological. 'To be a human be-ing is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others and on that basis establish humane relations with them' (Ramose 1999: 37). Boughey and McKenna (2016) criticised the notion of centralising 'language problems' to Black students. Instead, the authors call for the focus to be shifted to more structural issues, which are often elided. Basseches (2005), Foucault (1984), Pollard (2014) and Pozo and McLaren (2006) propose both dialectical and critical ontology to be adopted as part of decolonising practices and to promote criticality. Invariably, the recommended conceptual and theoretical resources can strengthen Academic Literacies Approach (Lea and Street) which is central to the transformative and liberatory work of the writing centre.

While Zein suggests that students must be 'seen' as opposed to language problems, Zinzi says they must be seen as human beings and treated as equals:

> *In the Writing Centre, students are our major stakeholders. We cannot argue with that. Lecturers are also important. We have to treat students as our equals, as human beings who require assistance from us. Students are to be treated with the dignity they deserve. When*

> *they come for one-on-one consultations, they are to be assured that what is discussed from the consultation remains between the student and the academic literacy lecturer. That mode of rapport building allows students to open up with the lecturers during the consultation process* (Zinzi, Academic Literacy lecturer).

Disciplinary lecturers, writing centre practitioners and students are in a dialectical relationship, as they need each other for their educational project to be meaningful. Since students are major stakeholders, according to Zinzi, their voices matter. Issues of privacy, vulnerability and risk-taking are key to dialectical and dialogical engagements in the writing centre (and in the disciplines). When *Ubuntu* is at the centre such engagements cannot be unduly disconcerting. *Ubuntu currere,* which is characterised by Hlatshwayo et al. (2020) as emblematic of everything in the cosmos have the potential to emancipate educational and social relations of the African working-class students. For *Ubuntu,* which informs Africanist *currere,* is holistic, practical and integrated. It is poised to transcend colonial-epistemic relations between humans in the cosmos.

From the above discussion, one will realise that values and practices associated with *Ubuntu* are already operational in the writing centre space. Participants propose that they must be decolonised. Revolutionary practices of the writing centre practitioners can be deepened and critically sharpened by:

1. Adopting a critical transformative stance and humanising pedagogies to promote understanding of the students' social and epistemic relations;

2. Validation of the African working-class students in order to reduce their feeling of alienation and marginality in higher education;

3. Pursuing dialectical and dialogical engagements with students and disciplinary lecturers to expose inequalities and 'hidden' oppressive value systems embedded in the curriculum;

4. Adopting *Ubuntu currere* as a pedagogical practice to transcend and reconfigure the dominant colonial-epistemic model;

5. Recruiting *Ubuntu* philosophy and related conceptual and theoretical resources to strengthen the transformative and liberatory potential of Lea and Street's (1998) Academic

Literacies Approach;

6. Ensuring dialogue and orality (as opposed to monologue) define social interactions (during consultation) and proposed as alternative assessment practice;

7. Ensuring pedagogy of contradictions and open possibilities is pursued when providing academic literacy support;

8. Demonstrating the valuing of all students through attentive listening, empathy and relational understanding of their social reality; and

9. Ultimately, pursuing decoloniality to interrogate, dismantle and change the social reality of Africans and promote the perspective of the Global South.

Conclusion

The chapter explored ways in the writing centre practices can strengthened to expose Eurocentrism and centre the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* to promote a radical form of social justice without compromising the writing centre's value and status in the academy. It also sought resources to be recruited to augment the transformative-liberatory work of a decolonising writing centre. Using Mezirow's (1998, 2000) transformative critical reflection (focus group interviews) and analysing the CPUT Vision 2030 Strategy (document analysis), the Fundani Writing Centre practitioners interrogated their practices and explored ways in which the African Philosophy of *Ubuntu* can be employed to radically transform their praxis. Data collected demonstrated that there are values and principles employed in the writing centre pedagogy which can be leagued with *Ubuntu* but need to be strengthened to ensure decoloniality (and Africanisation) is sustained.

Concepts such as 'dialogue', 'orality' and 'collaboration' are already employed during consultation in the writing centre. They were used to empower students to develop cognition and functionality (academic socialisation) within the disciplinary structure and culture embedded in Eurocentrism. Dialogue and collaboration are emphasised in CPUT Vision 2030 strategy. These concepts are related to 'relationality', 'communitarianism', 'co-thinking', 'co-dependence' and 'cooperation' as central values espoused by the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Pivotal are the claims

advanced by the participants in respect of promoting African epistemologies and *Ubuntu*: Zinzi (*We have to treat students as our equals, as human beings ... with the dignity ...*), Zein (*seeing the person not the language problem*), *Odwa* (*No one develops in isolation),* Paulina (*... we need to fight for the recognition of students as a people*), Peter (*listen attentively and engage students in a non-intimidating manner*) and Tim (*challenges the position to which Africans were placed by their European counterparts*).

Adopting decoloniality, decolonisation and CPUT Vision 2030 Strategy as conceptual/ theoretical framework enabled the researchers (authors of the chapter) to look into how the writing centre practitioners can respond to call made by proponents of #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements and decolonial scholars. Engaging in conversation about how to radically transform the writing centre praxis is in keeping with valorisation of perspective of the Global South to counter the hegemonic epistemic relations of the Global North. Much more strategic and radical work needs to be done in pursuit of the struggle – to *decolonise higher education and decentre Eurocentrism*.

The chapter suggests recruitment and adoption of conceptual-theoretical frameworks from the Global South, Critical Theory, Marxism, decoloniality and *Ubuntu currere* or *Ubuntu*gogy, the writing centre practitioners can go a long way to assist students in their pursuit of dreams, liberty, morality and human dignity. Since the study was limited to the practitioners' critical reflection on the possibility of radically transforming the writing centre practice, more research is needed to determine the extent to which *Ubuntu* is embedded and how students view the writing centre praxis in line with the CPUT Vision 2030 and decoloniality.

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