Chapter Four

Writing Centre Apologetics: A Case for Writing Centre Efficacy Studies in South African Higher Education[1]

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Introduction

Since 1994, South Africa's higher education system has expanded and opened to students from all walks of life, providing previously disadvantaged citizens with greater access to higher education (Msiza et al. 2020). Through massification and internationalisation, institutions can offer promising prospects for students looking to improve their lives by transcending their circumstances through higher education. On the other hand, massification and internationalisation pose serious difficulties in areas of the higher education sector such as (1) institutional management and governance, (2) funding, (3) quality and relevance, (4) democratisation and capital formation and (5) infrastructure (Kipchumba 2019: 138). I shall focus on the role that support services, like writing centres, play in meeting the difficulties posed by massification and internationalisation with specific reference to quality and relevance. Writing centres, after all, are concerned with the quality and relevance of the abilities students require to advance in their academic careers and beyond.

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1   The term 'apologetics' gained popularity in the Christian Theological tradition, where it can be defined simply as the act of defending one's faith. The term derives from the Greek term *apologia* ('a defendant's reply to accusations of the persecution'), which is traditionally used in the legal context, but traces and catalysts for this action can be found in various biblical passages, including Acts 22: 1, Acts 25: 16, 1 Corinthians 9: 3, 2 Corinthians 7: 11, Philippians 1: 7, Philippians 1: 16, 2 Timothy 4: 16, and most notably 1 Peter 3: 15, which states that believers 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have' (Beilby 2011: 11). As a result of the desire to defend one's faith on rational grounds, the discipline of Christian Apologetics arose. Inevitably, modern sciences began to pose difficult questions to Christian Theology considering scientific discoveries that may rule out the existence of God. As a result, Christian Apologists were forced to defend their faith on rational grounds, frequently using data from modern science. As a result, the use of this term in conjunction with the concept of writing centres is not a call to defend writing centre practice in a religious sense, but we, too, believe that our services produce results, but we, too, require 'hard science' to justify its role in higher education.

Writing centres serve the purpose of improving student academic writing. Thus, by implication, their developing of student writing abilities proves their importance in addressing the need to develop this elusive (tacit) skill. Given the importance of academic writing, there seems to be a prevailing underestimation of its value and strenuous teaching and learning implications, especially regarding the unconventional role that writing centres play. To this end, Whitehead (2002: 499) argues that within '[the] higher education settings, acquiring the skill of an academic writing style is seen to be paramount of importance as well as a prerequisite for student progression'. The importance of successfully teaching academic writing is further emphasised by the fact that 'writing can ... play a gate-keeping role in higher education' (Arbee and Samuel 2015: 49) because it is one of the primary means of evaluating competence. In addition, as Elton (2010) points out, the teaching of academic writing is seldomly combined (or properly integrated) in its generic or disciplinary form, mainly because of the tacit nature of academic writing knowledge.[2]

Considering the importance of academic writing as a primary method of communicating knowledge and the challenges of teaching this tacit knowledge, writing centres offer a relevant service to address systematic shortcomings. Thus, in following Lea and Street's 'academic literacies' approach, Archer (2010: 507) argues that: 'Writing Centres are involved with the emancipatory dimension of knowledge, such as constructing arguments and thinking through ideas. They are also involved with the technical dimensions of knowledge, such as the mechanics of writing. Thus, they are in a unique position to empower students within the system'. Therefore, given its importance and despite its lack of proper integration, the writing centre has the potential to fill this prevailing gap through focused intervention.

From my perspective, writing centres act as scholarly interpreters, essentially assisting students to understand better the tacit knowledge of academic writing and how to present their knowledge in their own voice. Writing centres have the potential and are often the nexus between generic and disciplinary academic writing development. For this reason, students visit the writing centre when

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2   In his paper titled, 'Academic Writing and Tacit Knowledge', Elton (2010) argues for the use of an interdisciplinary approach (that is, close collaboration between academic writing and disciplinary specialists) when instructing students in academic writing and skills adjacent to it. It is possible that interdisciplinarity will make it easier for students to make the transition from their personal writing to academic writing. The reason for this is because the conventions and norms of academic writing are not often explicit to disciplinary specialists themselves. Instead, field experts acquire these abilities implicitly through observation and experimentation. Because of this, there is a disruption in the progression of transferring academic writing skills. As a result, writing centres have an important role to play in the process. This is since the low stakes/safe environment provides opportunities for students to receive guidance on academic writing principles, which has the potential to supplant the shortage of academic writing development in disciplinary fields.

they need guidance in understanding how to relate the demands of presenting their knowledge in an academically appropriate way whilst staying true to their academic voice – and adhering to international academic standards.

Given the importance of our work, we should be able to reflect on and interrogate our practices to report and replicate successes. Hence, Archer (2010: 508) argues that because of this positionality, we must continually reflect on our practices and share our experiences with our community. Wenger (as cited by Archer 2010: 508) posits 'that if a community of practice lacks the ability to reflect, it becomes 'hostage to its own history' – that is, continually being undervalued. The close-knit writing centre community of South Africa has a long-standing tradition of sharing best practices at conferences, colloquia and producing high-quality research because the community believes that the support writing centres provide are applicable, meaningful and crucial to student success. Thus, the South African writing centre community must also strengthen their focus on empirical studies since, absent such research, claims of our practices and successes would continue to be unsubstantiated.

Writing centres are generally misunderstood and undervalued, perhaps because our research is not always formulated in such a way to show our progress and successes to the broader academic community. As North (1984: 433) observed in *The Idea of a Writing Center*, practitioners have long expressed frustration that colleagues and university administrators often misunderstand the objectives of writing centres. (Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtojeni 2019). The challenges facing writing centres are twofold: first, the perception among colleagues that they are primarily 'fix-it-up shops' or proofreading services and second, insufficient support from university management structures (Schell-Barber 2020: 108; Richards et al. 2019; Perdue and Driscoll 2017; Archer and Richards 2011: 13). Perhaps, academics do not fully understand the vital role of academic writing and the laborious enterprise of academic writing development. By receiving inadequate support, writing centre practitioners face the challenge of building writing centres that could have a widespread impact on their institutions and society.

Writing centres could, for instance, reconsider their methods of 'convincing' their institutions as to why their resources should be trusted to writing centres. In discussing the marginalisation of writing centres, Simpson et al. (1994: 78) refer to the 'competition of resources'. They contend that the non-credit-bearing status of writing centres is a key factor in the lack of resources available to writing centres. Since non-credit-bearing entities at institutions, such as writing centre support services, do not directly contribute to revenue generation, they are not prioritised. Simpson et al. (1994), therefore, suggest that we (writing centre practitioners) state the case of retention, whereby

improving retention rates (compounding over time with continual optimisation) translates to the institutional ability to improve throughput. In supporting the notion of retention, Bell and Frost (2012: 19) and Lerner (1997, 2001) argue that administrators should 'investigate the presence of the writing centre as a factor of retention'. The case for retention may attract the attention of university management structures because state-funded higher education institutions in South Africa rely on student throughput rates to retain as much of their government funding as possible (Styger et al. 2015). Therefore, throughput and retention rates could be addressed by focusing on the shortcomings of academic writing development in curricula (Coyle 2010: 195) and embedding writing centre interventions in high-risk writing-intensive courses.

However, the 'competition for resources' concept contradicts the ethos of writing centre scholarship, which centers around fostering sustainable development. Considering this, there are at least three factors worth considering: (1) some argue that universities of the Global South have continued neoliberal tendencies (Cini 2019);[3] (2) which is driven by capitalist ideals with the tendency to 'commodify' (Hölscher 2018), that is, turning students into clients or marketable goods; and (3) the writing centre exists to develop better writers, not only better writing (North 1984). Therefore, even though the argument for retention and throughput may run the most probable course for resources, we run the risk of driving neoliberal capitalist ideals. In other words, writing centres could quite easily become part of the production line without the lasting effects we wish to cultivate, such as developing writers as individuals. Archer and Richards (2011) argue that 'the work of writing centres cannot be understood only in terms of contribution to throughput', but other indispensable intangible skills must be considered. Notwithstanding, if writing centre practitioners could produce sound evidence of the efficacy of their work (both positive and negative results) and how this could increase retention and throughput, then institutional management could be in a better position to support and establish writing centres as strategic interventions.

With the growing concern about language skills and the marginalisation of writing centre practice, we are not only obligated to review the support we provide to a highly diversified and growing student population but also to review our strategies on how to reach a wider audience with the necessary resources aligned with our central focus. I argue that a starting point is to investigate the possibility of developing an efficacy assessment protocol for writing centres in the South African

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3   Neo-liberalism is still a movement that we do not fully understand, however a common trend is to homogenise the student and staff population largely due to the capitalisation by means of massification (Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). Large student population rarely allows for personalised interventions and accommodating difference.

Higher Education sector. An efficacy assessment protocol could provide evidence of the efficacy of writing centres whilst upholding the ideals of writing centre practice, that is, producing better writers, but on a larger scale.

This chapter, therefore, intends to highlight the importance of all levels of inquiry in writing centre scholarship. It, too, strives to emphasise the importance of efficacy assessments in South Africa and how they can complement the already stellar scholarship and support we provide. I will initiate this exploration by taking a closer look at what writing centre efficacy assessment means, locating its position in writing centre scholarships and referring to a sample of studies that have attempted to achieve this. After that, we will explore the justification for the need for efficacy assessments and why efficacy assessments are in the minority.

In search of writing centre efficacy assessment studies

A proposed framework for categorising writing centre research

It is essential to define what writing centre efficacy means to come closer to conducting studies on the efficacy of writing centres. Babcock and Thonus, in their book *Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice* (2018: 4), make a compelling case for evidence-based practice. More importantly, they argue for a practical distinction between writing centre research and writing centre assessment. According to their definition of research, which is 'a diligent and systematic inquiry or investigation into a subject to discover or revise facts, theories, application', by inference, 'research, then, does not necessarily involve evaluation or judgement. Nor does it seek immediate application to a local context; rather, it opens inquiry beyond the local context (the individual writing centre) to global context and applications' (Babcock and Thonus 2018: 4). It is standard practice to apply the term 'research' in a broad sense. As a result, we unintentionally lump a great deal of different endeavours under the research umbrella. This is because, in the traditional meaning, everything that is publishable can be considered research.

However, if we consider Babcock and Thonus' (2018: 4) definition of assessment, which is 'to estimate or judge the value, character, etc., of; to evaluate', we note a slight difference in approach. Their goal is not to diminish the significance of traditional research; instead, they wish to define terms. This is because the definition of terms influences the methodology or, more crucially, how we frame the questions we ask in our research. Yet, there are intersections between research

and assessment: (1) both rely on empirical data; (2) both involve inquiry, which can be defined as 'seeking knowledge, operationalised as the request of data;' and (3) both strive for an 'evidence-based approach to our work' (Babcock and Thonus 2018: 4).[4] Writing research and assessment both follow the same path, but they examine the environment around them from different angles. Writing centre research, as suggested above, might investigate specific aspects of operations and their success. Still, it does not necessarily prove a writing centre's efficacy in totality. At the same time, writing centre assessment seeks to investigate the efficacy of the writing centre as a whole in its local context, therefore, taking into consideration its unique character, positionality and the effect it has on its institution.

It is also worth noting the fact that it appears that the term 'efficacy' has, for the most part, been favoured over 'assessment' (see Tiruchittampalam et al. 2018; Missakian et al. 2016; Arbee and Samuel 2015; Irvin 2014; Bredtmann et al. 2013; Williams and Takaku 2011; Yeats et al. 2010; Hoon 2009; Henson and Stephenson 2009; Jones 2001; Mohr 1998 Roberts 1988). The terms 'assessment' and 'efficacy' are used interchangeably; nevertheless, they have different meanings but with similar results. 'Efficacy' denotes the 'power or capacity to produce effects; power to effect the object intended' (OED Online 2022). I take the liberty of refining these terms by suggesting that we refer to the 'assessment of writing centre efficacy' or 'writing centre efficacy assessment'. In doing so, we retain the notion of estimating/judging/evaluating the capacity of writing centres but add that it evaluates the effects or changes they enable in a given institution. In other words, researchers embarking on an assessment of writing centre efficacy could, for instance, measure whether writing centres are, in fact, creating better writers across a given institution. To further qualify this proposal, I will wager to explore different research expertise in the writing centre community.

Effective writing centre scholarship necessitates a combination of quantitative and qualitative research. Ligget et al.'s (as cited in McKinney 2016) classification system identifies three key types of inquiry in writing centre research: theoretical, practitioner and empirical. McKinney (2016: 9) postulates that these are distinguishable 'by what counts as evidence'. For instance, theoretical

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4   For the readers that are interested in reading more about the concept of 'evidence-based approach' I would highly recommend reading Babcock and Thonus's (2018: 23–57) chapter, *Research Basics in Evidence-Based Practice*, here they explore the development of the field across disciplines with a focus on the application thereof in the health sciences. They do an exceptional job of indicating how the principles of evidence-based practice could be applied to writing centre research. Regrettably, I will not be able to discuss this at length in this volume; however, I urge interested writing centre researchers to do a close reading of their contribution to sharpen empirical research endeavours.

inquiry draws from secondary sources (typically literature reviews, like this chapter), practitioner inquiry uses the author's own experience (for example, studies of various aspects or elements of academic writing consultation sessions), whereby empirical inquiry uses data collected to be interpreted by the researcher as evidence (see Figure 1, illustrating the reciprocity of the variations of inquiry).
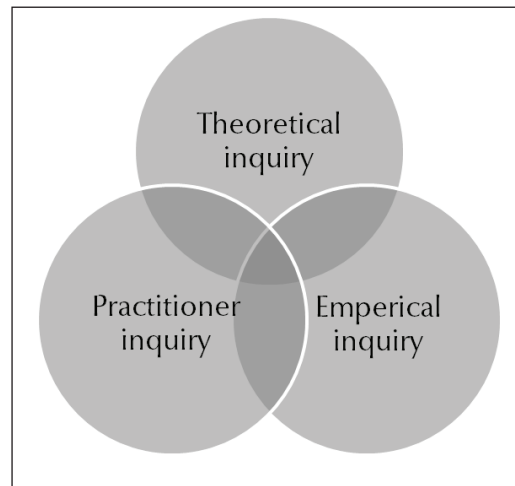

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Figure 1: Primary Categories of Writing Centre Inquiry

Theoretical inquiry is and has been, indispensable to the formation of writing centre research because it seeks to describe, explain and justify practice (Gillespie et al. 2002: xix). Much like Nordlof's (2014:49) attempt to link a theory, namely Vygotsky's social constructivism theory of learning, to describe the 'directive/nondirective continuum'.[5]   In distinguishing practitioner enquiry from theoretical and empirical enquiry, Ligget et al. (2011: 58) argue that theoretical enquiry

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5   Here I would like to commend Carstens and Rambiritch's (2021) paper, 'Directiveness in Tutor Talk', whereby they put 'directive/nondirective continuum' to the test by applying an evidence-based research approach. Carstens and Rambiritch collected 10 video recordings of consultations at the UP writing centre with linguistically diverse students attending the writing centre for the first time. By way of a micro-pragmatic analysis of directiveness Carstens and Rambiritch (2021: 165) found that 'directive tutoring can and does stimulate learning and interactive discussion with undergraduate, first-time visitors to a writing centre'.

is 'reflexive, experientially based research that requires dialectic to examine the experience and to arrive at carefully investigated and tested personal knowledge'. On the other hand, the empirical researcher works with a 'pre-established agenda or well-crafted plan for intensive investigation over time' (Ligget et al. 2011: 58) – in this case, whether writing centres are effective. Considering these levels of enquiry might be worth considering whether the South African writing centre community could benefit from working towards a common goal in strategically organising research or developing its own taxonomy of methodological pluralism (see, for instance, Table 1).

Table 1: Taxonomy of Writing Centre Research (Adapted from Ligget et al. 2011: 55)

Methodologies Pluralism in Writing Centre Research			
Inquiry categories	**Research focus**		
Practitioner	Narrative		
	Pragmatic		
Theoretical	Historical		
	Critical		
	Conceptual		
Empirical	Descriptive	Survey	
		Text analysis	
		Contextual	Case study
			Ethnographic
	Experimental	True Experiment	
		Quasi-Experiment	

By understanding the various categories of inquiry and how these categories operate in terms of research, we will be better able to build strategies around the types of inquiry and how these could be meshed together to strengthen our understanding of how our writing centres function, and in this case, a step closer to writing centre efficacy assessment. I will later expand upon the potential of creating a national platform of aligned research efforts catered to different categories of inquiry and

preferred research methods. Herein we recognise our strengths in the South African Writing Centre Scholarship and strategically integrate findings to report on a fuller picture. It is important to note, however, that effective collaboration requires clear communication and a shared understanding of research goals and methods. Researchers must be willing to work together, share resources and data and coordinate their efforts. Later we will explore some recommendations to achieve this ideal.

Literature on empirical inquiry focusing on writing centre efficacy

To conduct a comprehensive literature review on writing centre efficacy assessment, it was necessary to focus on published works categorised as empirical inquiry. Thus, I excluded studies on theoretical and practitioner approaches from our search. The primary focus was to find studies that followed the principles of empirical inquiry, which involves collecting and analysing data through systematic observation or experimentation of writing centre efficacy. To locate such studies, an extensive search on various institutional repositories and Google Scholar was conducted utilising a combination of key terms, including 'writing centre,' 'efficacy,' 'assessment,' 'evaluation,' and 'impact'. After careful analysis to determine their fit into the category of empirical inquiry on writing centre efficacy, several relevant published works were retrieved (see below). While it is not feasible to examine each of these studies in this chapter, I will discuss some arguments for the justifications of writing centre efficacy and assessment and probable reasons for the lack of these studies. By doing so, I hope to motivate further analysis of these or similarly published works and integrate their findings towards a strategy for South African writing centre efficacy assessment.

- Two Ph.D. studies (Grinnel 2003; Bennet 1988) were conducted to examine the effect of writing centre attendance on writing performance.
- Four books (McKinney 2016; Schendel and Macauley 2012; Babcock and Thonus 2012; Gillespie et al. 2002) were published on the topic of conducting writing centre research, with significant emphasis on the complexities and need for writing centre efficacy. These volumes covered important research methodologies enabling writing centre inquirers to conduct empirical research on efficacy assessments.
- In the Gulf region (Tiruchittampalam et al. 2018), researchers measured the effectiveness of

writing centre consultations 'on the essay writing skills of L1 Arabic foundation level students at an English-medium university in the Gulf region'.

- In the United States of America there were 18 studies (Missakian et al. 2016; Irvin 2014; Schmidt and Alexander 2012; Bell and Frost 2012; Williams and Takaku 2011; Henson and Stephenson 2009; Williams et al. 2007; Thompson 2006; Niiler 2005 and 2003; Lerner 1997, 2001 and 2003; Carino and Enders 2001; Bell 2000; Mohr 1998; Field-Pickering 1993; Roberts 1988). In addition, one literature review examines the 'direct and indirect ways in which writing centre activities can influence writing performance and the delicate line between measurable and intangible outcomes that researcher tread in the field' (Jones 2001).
- In the United Kingdom, Birmingham, Yeats et al. (2010) examined the 'impact of attendance on two 'real world' quantitative outcomes – achievement and progression'.
- In Germany, Bredtmann et al. (2013) studied the 'effectiveness of the introduction of a Writing Centre at a university, which aims at improving students' scientific writing abilities'.
- A literature review on 'selected evaluation studies' (Hoon 2009) was done in Malaysia.
- From South Africa three studies: Arbee and Samuel (2015) report on a small-scale quantitative analysis of the effect of writing centre assistance on students' academic performance in the context of management studies; Drennan and Keyser (2022) study's goal was to assess the potential impact of a blended, subject-specific writing intervention aimed at improving first-year Law students' academic essay writing skills in terms of structure, organisation and argumentation; and Archer (2008) interviewed forty first-year students about their perceptions of the Centre and its impact on their writing, examined consultant comments, examined grades and compared independent assessments of the student's first and final drafts.

Across 30 years of research on writing centre efficacy, two major recurring themes arose: writing centre validity and continuous improvement of practices. Writing centre survival (or support) is perhaps among the most discussed topic in the broader writing centre community (Arbee and Samuels 2015: 51; Irvin 2014; Bell and Frost 2012; Yeats et al. 2010; Hoon 2009; Thompson 2006; Lerner 2003; Bell 2000: 7–8; Mohr 1998: 1). Even though we might not call it by name, our discussions orbit around our concerns for support or limits to our circles of influence; we frequently say or think along the lines of 'if only we had adequate support, we could …'. While empirical data can help demonstrate the efficacy of writing centres, we believe the primary goal should be to evaluate our services to benefit the global student. If we focus on improving our services and meeting the needs of our students, the evidence of our success will naturally follow.

Some reasons for the lack of efficacy studies

Exploring the positionality and efficacy of writing centres: Challenges and opportunities

Writing centres occupy a unique space at the intersection of different academic disciplines, providing a shared space for students and faculty from various fields. This position can provide writing centre practitioners and researchers with the advantage of engaging with diverse perspectives and approaches to writing. However, it can also present challenges, such as navigating different disciplinary conventions or effectively communicating with students and faculty from diverse backgrounds. Consequently, the complex and diverse nature of writing centres may contribute to the scarcity of research on their efficacy. As Hoon (2009) notes, writing centers vary in terms of the levels of education they serve, their institutional positioning, subject/discipline orientation, funding sources and the expertise and experience of their consultants. These challenges are significant, but the core function of writing centers is to guide students in academic writing, regardless of the context. Thus, the essential element to measure in addressing these challenges is the efficacy of consultation (independent variable) under certain conditions (dependent variable/s). In other words, we must explore ways to leverage this unique positionality. By investigating the efficacy of the writing centre phenomenon under varying conditions, we can identify opportunities to modify these constraints and better serve the writing centre's ultimate purpose.

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Linking to the positionality of writing centres is the concern that writing centres are, as previously mentioned, non-credit bearing, which most likely reduces the pressure to demonstrate efficacy. Bell and Frost (2012:16) refer to the issue of the marginalisation of writing centres and the 'common identity markers used by scholars to locate writing centres as "anti-curriculum"' (see also Richards et al. 2019). This critique implies that writing centres seemingly oppose traditional curricular activity; in their words, 'these markers situate writing center identity against opposing educational goals: writing centers are "liberatory" as opposed to "regulatory", or sites of "empowerment" as opposed to those of "coercion"' (Bell and Frost 2012: 16). Credit-bearing entities are outcome orientated or product orientated, whereas writing centres are process orientated, that is, the process of developing writers. Williams and Takaku (2011: 5) cite a critique posed by Jones (2001:5) that studying 'writing centre efficacy is invalid, not only because scholars cannot agree on what constitutes either good writing or growth in writing proficiency, leading him to ask: "How does one evaluate the impact [sic] of writing centres on writing ability if writing ability is so difficult to define?"' On several occasions at our Institution, we have had to mediate between consultant recommendations and

the expectations of faculty, staff, or students. This leaves students or consultants with a 'stuck-in-the-middle' dilemma.

With this in mind, we can consider developing an assessment framework that considers the unique positionality of writing centers and the process-oriented approach to developing writers. This framework could include both quantitative and qualitative measures that assess the impact of writing centre consultations on student writing outcomes and the effectiveness of writing centre pedagogy and consultant training. To address the critique that writing centre efficacy is difficult to define, the framework could also include a range of writing outcomes and proficiencies, such as critical thinking, rhetorical awareness and genre awareness, all of which are commonly associated with effective writing. In addition, the framework could include strategies for communicating the value of writing centre consultations to faculty, staff and students and promoting the integration of writing centre pedagogy into the broader curriculum. Ultimately, such a framework could help to establish the efficacy of writing centres as valuable resources for student writers and contribute to the broader conversation around writing pedagogy and assessment.

Addressing the challenges of reporting writing center efficacy: The need for self-mandated assessments

The positionality and non-credit-bearing status of writing centres are linked to the reporting that practitioners are required to do, which often focuses on 'bean counting' (Irvin 2014) and 'ticket tearing at the writing centre turnstile' (Bell and Frost 2014; Lerner 2001). Institutional management tends to prioritise writing centre attendance rather than the services' effectiveness. Consequently, practitioners tend to report on the effectiveness of their centres in terms of student satisfaction and perceptions linked to attendance statistics. However, this approach has not produced persuasive evidence of writing centre efficacy, according to Arbee and Samuel (2015: 51), who argue that writing centre reports on efficacy have been primarily motivated by the agenda for survival. As a result, it is less likely to find data that supports efficacy if writing centres are focused on survival. Writing centre directors face the ongoing challenge of providing data that supports the effectiveness of their centres in improving writing (Mohr 1998: 1). To address this issue, I propose that writing centres should initiate self-mandated efficacy assessments according to a framework that measures outcomes defined by the writing centre itself, as mentioned above. By doing so, writing centres can create a more accurate and comprehensive picture of their efficacy and use this information to inform future improvements.

Suppose we consider Thompson's argument for the value of externally mandated writing centre efficacy assessment. In that case, one can see the inherent value it holds for writing centre development: Thompson (2006: 1) lists four main advantages: (1) proof of effectiveness boosts the credibility of a writing centre within an institution; (2) the process of assessment enhances research activities; (3) increases the opportunity for reflective practices holistically and in terms of daily practices; (4) 'routine assessment is the intelligent, professional and ethical thing to do'. Therefore, writing centre managers should conduct routine assessments not just as a means to justify their position in a given institution but, more importantly, to foster professional responsibility and demonstrate the effects of our services through data and analysis (Bell and Frost 2014; Thompson 2006)

Expertise and professionalisation of writing centre scholarship

Efficacy assessment nevertheless requires expertise. In other words, writing centre efficacy studies necessitate expertise that occasionally falls outside the perview of the traditional writing centre director's expertise. Carino and Enders (2001:84) posit that quantitative research has fallen by the wayside due to a lack of statistical expertise for 'writing centre and composition scholars like writing that is more literary, writing that tells a good story', whereas '[q]uantitative research, in contrast, requires numbers and rouses math anxiety'. Bell (as cited by Hoon 2009: 49) also signalled that the academic writing centre directors are often based on rhetoric and language, not mathematics and statistics. Writing centre directors tend to be humanist scholars focusing on the value of social exchanges, manifesting in writing centres. Therefore, methodological approaches have primarily been qualitative (Arbee and Samuel 2015; Jones 2001; Bell and Frost 2012). Arguably, these traditional qualitative forms of research could be considered studies of efficacy describing the successes of certain aspects of writing centre work (see Carstens and Rambiritch 2020a; Govender and Alcock 2020), but not empirical inquiry required for efficacy assessment studies as a whole. Added to the issue of expertise is that writing centre staff (managers and consultants) conceive writing centre positions as temporary appointments before getting the job they studied for or desired. If writing centre positions are perceived as stepping stones, writing centre research, especially longitudinal research, does not necessarily build towards a career profile. This raises the question of whether the South African writing centre community should develop a plan to professionalise writing centre scholarship to make writing centre jobs a viable career option, ultimately leading to the recognition of writing centre work as a credible profession.

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An initial proposal for an inclusive writing centre efficacy assessment model in South Africa

Based on the above points, I propose a writing centre efficacy assessment model that considers writing centres' unique positionality and process-oriented approach. This model should include a framework that measures outcomes defined by the writing centre using quantitative and qualitative measures. The framework should assess the impact of writing centre consultations on student writing outcomes and the effectiveness of writing centre pedagogy and consultant training. The framework could also include various writing outcomes and proficiencies, such as critical thinking, rhetorical awareness and genre awareness, all of which are commonly associated with effective writing.

The model could incorporate collaboration and coordination of research efforts among various stakeholders (that is, multidisciplinary and inter-institutional collaboration) to address the expertise required for efficacy assessment. Writing centre directors should work together to create a national platform of aligned research efforts catered to different categories of inquiry and preferred research methods. Researchers must be willing to work together, share resources and data and coordinate their efforts. This collaboration could enhance research activities, promote reflective practices and contribute to the broader writing pedagogy and assessment conversation.

In conclusion, the proposed model for writing centre efficacy assessment should not only focus on providing data that supports the effectiveness of writing centres but also foster professional responsibility, enhance research activities and contribute to the broader conversation around writing pedagogy and assessment. Writing centre directors should conduct routine assessments not just as a means to justify their position in a given institution but, more importantly, to demonstrate the effects of their services through data and analysis. By doing so, writing centres can create a more accurate and comprehensive picture of their efficacy and use this information to inform future improvements.

Conclusion

Writing centres play a crucial role in the current higher education landscape, particularly in meeting the challenges of the internalisation and massification of higher education. However, it is important to acknowledge that these centres often struggle with limited resources to cater to the growing

student population. Despite this challenge, writing centres have a unique positionality that could potentially provide an advantage in acquiring funding to support their services. To cater to the diverse student population, writing practitioners and researchers need to continually review and reimagine the services they offer and the methods they use to reach a broader audience.

This chapter has explored guidelines for evaluating the efficacy of writing centres in South African universities, highlighting the need for a protocol that supports the principles of writing centre practice, including creating better writers overall and providing evidence of the efficacy of writing centres. By working together on research initiatives, writing centres in South Africa could improve their profile and attract more generous grants to support their work.

While it is true that there is very little 'hard' evidence of the effectiveness of writing centres, their persistence over many decades is a testament to their importance in the lives of student writers. Therefore, educational institutions should continue to support writing centres, especially as the student population grows and evolves with new learning preferences and challenges. Writing centres must push forward and earn a seat at the 'head table' to be recognised as a valuable and credible resource in the higher education landscape (Harris 2000).

In conclusion, writing centres have a significant role to play in the education of students and their efficacy needs to be evaluated to provide evidence of their impact. By working together, writing centres can overcome resource constraints and reach a broader audience, ultimately making a difference in the lives of student writers. It is important for educational institutions to continue to support writing centres, recognising their importance in the ever-evolving higher education landscape.

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