Part 3: Lessons from Covid-19

Chapter Eight

Developing Resilient Pedagogy: New Questions for Writing Centre Practice at the Wits School of Education Writing Centre

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Introduction

The context of Higher Education (HE) in South Africa is constantly changing and, in the last decade, has been confronted with momentous events in the form of student protests (#Fees Must Fall) starting in 2015 and the Covid-19 pandemic starting in 2019. These disruptions have required paradigm shifts and bold and significant responses from different stakeholders that include university management, academic and support staff and students in the HE sector. Writing centres across South African universities are amongst the stakeholders that have been affected and influenced by these macro-contextual occurrences but that have responded by formulating creative and sustainable solutions. This paper seeks to document the key turning points at Wits University School of Education Writing Centre (WSOE WC) and explicate how the Centre has evolved in terms of its pedagogical approach over the years. Each turning point is characterised by a conceptual shift or historical upheaval in the Higher Education sector that presented several challenges for writing centre practices. Following these varied episodes of change and associated challenges, the WSoE WC has sustained its core principles and practice of providing much-needed academic literacy support to students. As we have evolved, we have adapted to the different demands of the continuously changing context of practice. While we have had to change the pedagogical

focus and mode of delivery, we note how the WSOE WC has, with resilience, developed and sustained the core function of supporting students' effective learning in the university environment despite the challenging context of change and disruption. Following these observations, this chapter highlights the different ways in which the WSOE WC is demonstrating and has always demonstrated, pedagogical resilience over the years and has enabled students to 'rehearse their academic identities and to strengthen their voices so that they (can) participate in university life' (Richards, Lackay and Delport 2019: iii).

The notion of resilience has underscored the success stories of many writing centres across the world, particularly in South Africa where writing centres are seldom prioritised (Archer and Richards 2011; Daniels, Richards and Lackay 2017; Kadenge et al. 2019). The WSoE WC, for example, has a history of relentlessly negotiating its relevance and significance, both physically and intellectually, within the university (Kadenge et al. 2019). This capacity to deal with difficulty and overcome challenges that threaten functionality is essentially an attribute of resilience (Bahadur et al. 2015). The concept of resilience, however, in comparison to previous times, has gained more currency since the Covid-19 pandemic and is now considered one of the prerequisite characteristics of institutional quality (Schwartzman 2020; Stommel 2021). The inclination is to consider resilient pedagogy as something new and that various pockets within the university space must quickly adapt and acclimatise to the 'new norm'. Stommel (2021) maintains that the discourse on resilient pedagogy is not entirely new, but one that has been amplified by the occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic. A more concise conception of resilient pedagogy, thus, implies that it is 'messy, iterative, and continuously reflective by emphasising process over product' (Thurston 2021: 4). In our case, resilient pedagogy constitutes the process over the last 10 years in which we have engaged in continuous adaptation and critical reflection, challenging our own practices and changing them for better and more effective ones. We argue in this paper, through our illustrations of four turning points within the WSoE WC that our approaches and practices are and have always been, embedded within a framework of resilience. As will be explored in the proceeding sections, each turning point was marked by significant change and associated challenges and, at each turn, we have, in numerous ways adapted and remained resolute in maintaining the core functions of our centre, that is, the provision of pedagogically sound academic literacy support and development to meet the needs of our students.

Key research questions

While we have engaged consistently in the practice of reflecting on our pedagogical approaches over the years, it is equally important to go back to each turning point and elicit the significant challenges and opportunities as we envisage academic literacy support and development in Higher Education beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, the overarching research question we address is: What aspects of the WSoE WC practice characterise pedagogical resilience? To address this question, the following sub-questions were used to guide the conceptualisation of this chapter:

1. What are the key turning points of the WSoE WC over the last twelve years since its inception in 2010?

2. What are the challenges we confronted at each turning point and how did they influence the WSoE WC's pedagogical practices?

3. What lessons and opportunities were realised at each turning point and how did they shape/influence the WSoE WC pedagogical and assessment practices?

4. What new questions beyond the turning points do we have now?

Methodology: Critical review of literature and practitioner enquiry

This chapter, for the most part, is conceptual as it offers a critical review of both international and local literature that mirrors the broad landscape of writing centre practice. This forms the backdrop to our reflection as writing centre practitioners[1] having experienced, in over a period of twelve years, the four transformational turning points in the WSoE WC. We show how, for each turning point, we have resisted reverting to previous ways of thinking and practicing in meeting the normative institutional demands. We review our evolving model in terms of the pedagogical approach (dialogic) and mediation. In addition, we extend this criticality by analysing our capacity

1 Author Laura Dison as academic director and Author Emure Kadenge as research director (former peer tutor and current lecturer)

development in terms of peer tutor[2] training and interrogation of our materials and how these have played out at each turning point. In doing this we assume, following Tight (2019), a researcherly attitude' where we document the WSOE WC narrative over a twelve-year period, by critically explicating the traversed turning points and raising questions that are critical for advancing enduring writing centre practice at the WSOE WC and in higher education in general.

We use Nordstrom's (2021) Practitioners Inquiry (PI) methodology to examine our own practice, systematically and intentionally, by asking questions and challenging our own assumptions about our practice. The PI research methodology has roots in self-study where forms of human engagements are studied from the perspective of those involved (Berry and Kitchen 2020). Traditionally, the PI methodology has been used in collaborative research projects and teams deliberately with the view to positively influence practice from gathered insights. Similarly, undertaking this study was a collaborative activity which we found hugely meaningful as we created opportunities for lengthy and deep conversations about the work we have been doing at our centre for the past twelve years. We treated our professional context of practice, the WSOE WC, as the site of enquiry (Cochran-Smith and Donnell: 2012). In doing so, we reveal (i) how the WSOE WC has evolved in response to the contextual demands; (ii) the areas of effectiveness which may need further improvement; and (iii) raise questions for consideration as we chart the way forward for the WSOE WC and writing centres in general beyond the Covid-19 pandemic.

The following section showcases the four turning points that identify challenges confronting us at that time, the inherent opportunities and how we have used responsive and flexible writing pedagogies generated from within our specific writing centre space. The discussion of each turning point reveals the form and foci that demonstrate our resilience in the face of immense external pressures. We base each turning point on extant bodies of knowledge in the academic literacies and writing centre fields and explore the impact of the Writing Centre in challenging some of the deeply held assumptions about student deficit and the importance of writing in particular social contexts. We show how the shifts in our practice have contributed to the transformation of

2 Peer tutors are senior students (from third year to Ph.D.) who are selected on their academic writing ability and listening skills. They are trained to support and develop students within the school with academic writing and generally inculcating an appreciation of appropriate academic writing conventions. At the Wits School of Education (and in many other universities in South Africa), peer tutors were formerly referred to as writing consultants but the name 'consultant' implied expertise and was too tied to the business world (Clarence 2013). This, and additional motivation from funders, led to the adoption of a more appropriate name, 'peer tutor', which encapsulates the idea of a peer supporting another peer in a friendly and non-judgemental way (Carlse 2019).

assessment thinking and practising at the WSoE WC.

Engaging in a process of self-reflection by narrating our experiences of working in the WSoE WC space across these turning points has enabled us to interrogate our assumptions about shifting writing centre practice. This approach is guided by the view of reflection (Brookfield 1995; Mezirow 2009) that emphasises the importance of interrogating the hidden assumptions and power dynamics that shape our teaching and learning practices.

Turning point 1: Establishing a writing centre informed by academic literacy models

The focus in academic development in the 90s was on the support programmes offered to 'educationally disadvantaged' students whose apartheid schooling had not prepared them for the discourse demands of university study (Scott 2009). It soon became apparent that the standard approach to literacy development work was remedial in nature, aimed at 'bridging the gap' that existed between these students' prior schooling and the expectations of higher education literacies and learning. It was important to transform the student deficit model to the recognition by writing centre and academic development practitioners that this approach had failed on several levels and that stand-alone generic programmes alone were not addressing the dynamics of the changing demographics at the university or the systemic structuring of inequality (Boughey and McKenna 2021). We needed a systemic overhaul to shift some of the intransigent systems and deficit conceptions of student learning. Working with students on their writing in the disciplines (Ganobcsik-Williams 2006; Deane and O'Neill 2011; Lillis et al. 2015) has formed part of an important global shift towards the establishment of discipline-based writing centres which focus on equitable ways of enabling meaning making.

The purpose of the WSOE WC, established in 2010, was to enhance academic literacy development at all levels of study through the creation and implementation of a peer tutoring model. Education students were seen to have discourse requirements and demands that were best mediated by peer tutors with a foundational knowledge of the course content and the assessment task demands[3]. The Writing Centre quickly become a visible writing space for supporting

3 The development of students' understanding of literacy in the classroom as future teachers was a key consideration in the Council of Education offering financial support from 2014 to present.

undergraduates and post graduate writing development. As pointed out by Dison and Clarence (2017: 9) in their edited collection on writing centres in South Africa, 'the establishment of these writing centres signaled a recognition that widening access had not necessarily resulted in enhanced access for many students'. The Writing Centre needed to play a key role in helping students benefit from an explicit focus on reading and writing.

The move towards embedding writing in the disciplines is framed by literature on academic literacies which has shifted the interest away from 'skills' to issues of power and identity within institutions. Lea and Street (1998: 159) distinguish between three approaches that have characterised academic literacy development work, namely add on study skills approach, the 'socialisation' approach and the 'academic literacies' approach. The 'study skills' approach, focussed on teaching students to encode and decode the printed text and correcting students' inadequate writing errors. In the second approach, which subsumes the first, students are shown the 'rules of the game' as they are socialised into disciplinary discourses. In the third approach there is an ideological focus on transformation which resists the deficit framing of students. This supports Jacobs' (2015) view that students are inducted into thinking and practicing in the disciplines and critique and contest these practices. Boughey and Mckenna (2021: 64) describe the ideological model which enables lecturers and students to understand the role of redress, identity and self-worth.

What we have realised over the years in running the Writing Centre at the School of Education for both undergraduate and postgraduate students, is that it is useful to hold the academic literacies approach as an ideal to aim for, but that circumstances and conditions necessitate the application of more generic offerings even within a discipline-based writing programme. Students from backgrounds that did not prepare them for requisites of academic literacies at university, need to be acculturated into ways of practicing and thinking in the disciplines (Meyer and Land 2005) and it is not always possible to adopt an academic literacies paradigm. In a volume on normative and transformative approaches to writing development (Lillis et al. 2015). Paxton and Frith (2015: 156) reflect on the history of apartheid schooling and the ongoing lack of resources and inequities in SA schools. They argue that it is necessary to 'induct students into existing and available discourses' before tackling issues of power and identity in academic writing. For the WSOE WC, our underlying approach was to create a model of support that focussed on dialogue around disciplinary writing practices. Lillis (2006: 33) proposed a framework of different types of dialogue as a pedagogical tool for enabling student writers to 'participate in normative essayist practices at the same time as critiquing such practices'.

The training of peer tutors has presented many opportunities for shaping WSOE WC pedagogical practices as they have developed a range of sustainable interpersonal competencies and pedagogical strategies for listening and conversing effectively with their students (Nichols 2017a). Peer tutors have always been trained to work dialogically with students to help them make their meanings clear in contrast to a view of writing linked primarily to grammatical errors and accuracy. Peer tutors have responded well to the view of writing as a mode of thinking and value the creation of a meta-language about writing that name the thinking processes. This enables them to work with students to reflect on the content, processes and assumptions in their writing. It is evident that this holistic perspective on writing development has allowed students to be heard in an open and interactive space where they had been sent by lecturers for 'remedial' writing support. This philosophical shift helped peer tutors to be seen as insiders who assist students through conversations about writing as a process of identity formation. Following Lillis (2006), this approach requires peer tutors to induct students into academic writing through a detailed focus on student writing in dialogic conversations.

Informed by the theoretical work of the academic literacies' paradigm, writing centre practices have reframed the notion of writing strongly related to ways of thinking and practicing in Education with students as engaged participants in their writing development. This process has given rise to a culture at the School of Education of challenging deficit assumptions of students and highlighting the role of the WSOE WC as deepening students' critical and reflective engagement with course concepts through reading and writing activities. The next turning point shows how moving into the discipline of Education Studies solidified this re-positioning of writing centre practice.

A notable phenomenon at the WSOE WC from the start, is that peer tutor work involves shared assessment criteria, rubrics from Education Studies and working with students to engage with feedback. This has given rise to a range of suggestions and recommendations for changing assessment practices at the school. Many of these insights have emerged during tutor training when peer tutors reflect critically on their experiences and observations of writing challenges and affordances. A major assessment research project was initiated in 2011 and culminated in four published articles (Shalem et al. 2014), spurred on by a particular concern with epistemic weaknesses identified in student writing at the WSOE WC that could be attributed to the formulation of application type assessments. The 2013 Assessment project involved an in-depth exploration of undergraduate assessment tasks and accompanying rubrics. Colleagues have continued the practice of critiquing each other's assessments and writing briefs from a student's perspective (Bean 2001: 87) through questions about the clarity, level of complexity and explicitness of assignment questions.

Turning point 2: Moving into the disciplines and the inception of project WURU[4]: Resisting student deficit and marginalisation.

The model of writing support at the WSOE WC has shifted from its primary focus of providing writing support for the growing number of 'at risk' undergraduate students, to a more expanded vision of integrating a variety of writing development activities. In 2014, a significant project named WURU was established which would be formally embedded in Education 1 in 2014, a compulsory theoretical first year course. The uniqueness of the project was that it was designed in collaboration with Education 1 lecturers to cater for all Education students and not only those identified as 'borderline' by the faculty. WURU has been acknowledged, at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits University) and nationally, as a vibrant and transformative space for providing reading and writing support to first-year Education students (Clarence and Dison 2017; Kadenge et al. 2019).

The selection of students for WURU is indicative of why this was a key turning point for the Writing Centre practices at the School of Education. It was initially decided that selection would be based on the students' first Education I assignment mark which they received in April. Students attaining less than 50 per cent were encouraged to join WURU. However, in view of the sort of thinking encompassed by the deficit view of students, a new approach was taken from 2018 where it was decided to allow first year students to join the programme voluntarily and the programme was marketed especially at Orientation. Students signed up willingly and in large numbers and the fact that it was voluntary seemed to remove the negative stigma attached to being 'invited' to a programme. WURU sessions continue to be run by peer tutors where both academic reading and writing skills are taught as well as guidance provided in relation to the Education I course work and assignments. WURU sessions are not a fixture on the academic programme timetable; however, they are held in line with the timetable periods. Besides the work-related subject matter, the peer tutors also support the students socially by discussing issues like the transition from school to university and other student- related social issues.

In a paper by Dison and Moore (2019) WURU was flagged as an important pedagogical initiative for developing students' reading, writing and critical engagement with course texts and writing requirements. As will be argued in this chapter, the success of this intervention has endured

4 The name was proposed by one of the peer tutors and voted, democratically, by all peer tutors in 2014. WURU is an abbreviation for Write Up Read Up.

through various disruptions over the years and continues to offer multifaceted support for first year Education students. Contextualised reading and writing materials produced at the WC have been embedded in mainstream tutorials. In line with this trend, the WSOE WC has extended its work steadily into the mainstream tutorials for all first-year students by involving the Writing Centre in the courses themselves. This has resulted in different forms of writing support collaboration with lecturers, and writing peer tutors have been trained to work with students on coursework that involves reading, writing and making rhetorical choices. These processes have addressed the constant concern expressed by lecturers that students do not integrate ideas from texts or external resources appropriately into their writing to bolster their own arguments and positions. Writing Centre practitioners hold strongly to the view that learning to write well at university is not simply developing a generic set of communication skills but involves engaging students with practices of what 'good writing is', 'which are shaped by the 'histories and cultures of our academic disciplines and institutions and which privilege the forms of writing which are valued by those with power within these contexts' (Ashwin et al. 2015: 29).

Dison and Mendelowitz (2017) argue that peer tutors' content knowledge allows them to help students identify conceptual misunderstandings through talking and writing about the content. Their subject matter credibility with students is enhanced but they have learnt, through modelling and role play, not to tell students what to write and to avoid 'over explaining' concepts and theories. Instead, peer tutors are encouraged in the training to use the concepts as a vehicle to empower students to develop their thinking and writing processes. We have drawn on Clarence's (2017: 51) use of semantic gravity, a tool from Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) to show the value of peer tutors 'mov(ing) between the generic and the specific task-related writing concerns'. The intention is for students to write effectively with an understanding of the generic principles of good writing that are applied to specific writing tasks in Education Studies.

Peer tutor training focusses on allowing students access to disciplinary languages manifested in learning and teaching materials 'that sought to make explicit to students the rules underpinning the literacy practices of (the) discipline' (Jacobs 2015: 135). The goal is for students to learn how to summarise academic arguments, how to quote and paraphrase texts using disciplinary conventions and how to integrate their own voices 'into conversation with other scholars' (Bean 2011: 232). Tools like concept maps have helped students connect disciplinary ideas by labelling links between ideas. The prime purpose of the training is for students to recognise and use the disciplinary discourse effectively and to develop a meta-awareness of how knowledge is produced in the discipline. This process of 'making the language visible' is an important form of dialogue (Lillis 2006: 38). For all

the main theoretical texts in Education Studies, critical reading questions integrating into the texts, prompt students to evaluate the quality of the argument and to reflect on their own approach to reading a text. The dialogic view of writing underpins these processes as peer tutors and students deepen their knowledge about writing processes in conversation and see knowledge as dialogic rather than informational (Bean 2001) within the disciplinary context.

The Project WURU as argued elsewhere (Kadenge et al. 2019), had to become more pro-active in creating transitional support structures for all students with the awareness that students did not identify as requiring support with their writing. We could not assume that students would 'show up' at the Writing Centre without being refereed by their lecturers or tutors or being encouraged through the various student networks. The changed model of writing development shows that our voices were heard in the institution as we conceptualised more inclusive and flexible ways of working with students.

During this period, a significant shift was that the peer tutors were constantly made aware in the training of 'changing conceptions of feedback' (Boud and Malloy 2013: 3) and reflective forms of writing to structure students' critical engagement with the feedback on their essays. In pairs or groups at the centre, students were encouraged to discuss the feedback they received and how best to address core conceptual, structural and language challenges. This was also an attempt to shift the focus away from an exclusive mark or results orientation to one in which students could learn strategies and take ownership of their writing. In line with this thinking, lecturers at the WSoE became more receptive to a process-oriented approach to feedback (Winstone and Carless 2020) through staff development seminars and strategy exchange sessions driven by the Writing Centre practitioners.

Turning point 3: Aligning with the transformation agenda.

During #Fees Must Fall, the greater Higher Education (HE) contextual environment was confronted with a tension whose effects are still in play today. The student-led protests began in mid-October in the year 2015 and the motivation for the protests was a fight against increases in student tuition. The students' argument was centred around the need for government to increase university subsidies to allow free higher education, particularly for students from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds (Maringira and Gukurume 2016; Mdepa 2022). While this took centre stage and caused students across the country to arise in protests, Griffiths (2019) argues that the protests were a manifestation

of deep-seated discontent amongst the South African populace. In fact, these protests brought to the fore discussions around social transformation with the decolonisation of HE in South Africa as the most topical. These concerns proliferated the HE space and the role of the university beyond the academic project was in question. The University of the Witwatersrand, being the centre of the #Fees Must Fall protests, was certainly confronted with the question of its role, relevance and contribution to the larger social transformation agenda.

As writing centre practitioners, with the very important role of strengthening students' writing skills and supporting their academic success, we were equally confronted with the need to question our own pedagogical approach and reflect on the ways in which we were contributing to the transformation agenda. We had always realised that our contribution was to mediate students' epistemic access beyond formal access to the university and the Writing Centre as a physical space. However, during the period of the #Fees Must Fall campaign, we dug deeper and interrogated the conditions for working differently with students. The scholarly literature on writing centre practices around this campaign (Nichols 2017b; Richards et al. 2019) is telling of the robust reflection in writing centres following the protests. We responded to the input from all stakeholders (peer tutors, students and lecturers) to change our approach to academic literacy support and development profoundly.

Nichols (2017b) notes the importance of confronting what she calls the 'codes of power' and the lecture room, by traditional design and default due to large numbers of students, often takes on the Freirean 'depositing' or 'banking' approach (Micheletti 2010) where students are mere recipients of information without an opportunity to speak and be heard. Symonds (2020) argues that it is important to challenge and transform the relationship between students and academics evidenced by the inception of writing centres, especially in South African universities, to create safe spaces for students to learn and create their own ideas through writing (Richards et al. 2019). In the aftermath of the #Fees Must Fall protest, the WSOE WC expanded its reflective capacity by holding ongoing discussions as a team to come up with our own interpretation of transformation. We raised critical questions about our role as a Centre and as individuals in contributing to the grand transformation agenda. It was during these reflection exercises[5] that we resolved to ensure that all our engagements with students 'speak to the strengths of learners rather than focussing on

5 The WSOE WC has a meeting every Wednesday afternoon, lunch hour, where WC management engages peer tutors to reflect on individual experiences for the week. These weekly meetings are also used to share information with peer tutors in terms of major assignments that students are more likely to bring and strategies on how to assist students better are shared.

perceived weaknesses' (Nichols 2017b: 185). In other words, we were deliberate in institutionalising a partnership with students where they knew that their voices, thoughts and ideas matter and they could self-express without fear or judgement. This was in line with our existing democratic and dialogic practices where emphasis in our peer tutor training was on the use of the Socratic dialogue or questioning patterns where the peer tutor, during an engagement with students, uses a variety of questions to try and understand students' ideas and slowly help them think of their own writing in more critical ways (Thompson and Mackiewicz 2014).

Although employing this approach has always been one of the focal elements that defined our practice, the #Fees Must Fall protests and associated dialogues brought this to the fore. Thus, to strengthen the implementation of this extended dialogue and questioning approach, we conducted several workshops and training sessions with peer tutors where we explored the different ways through which we could establish and cultivate more inclusive consultations. What came out of those deliberations were ideas that included recognition of students' cultural and linguistic diversity and allowing students to engage with the literacy tasks in ways more relatable to them. This was certainly encouraged in other universities and a case to note, especially around intentionally partaking in the transformation agenda is that of the multi-lingual Writing Lab at Stellenbosch University where the Writing Centre accommodates different languages during writing consultations. Bailey (2016) explains that the Stellenbosch Writing Lab, particularly given the tensions around language policies in universities that was sparked by the #Fees Must Fall protests, became a hub for inclusion, social justice and support for students who would otherwise be estranged to the university space due to poor command in the academically accepted writing discourse. At that time, we encouraged similar practices and witnessed some consultation sessions being conducted in vernacular languages such as Zulu and Sotho to develop students' confidence and initiate comfortable participation (Bailey 2016). We went on to emphasise the importance of student voice during face-to-face consultations in all our peer tutor training. Our conception of developing student voice was to help the 'student-writers take greater control of the (diverse) voices in their texts' (Lillis 2006: 40). The issue of raising and strengthening the students' voice become a key aspect of our tutor training more generally and was particularly relevant during this time.

Turning point 4: Working online during the Covid-19 pandemic

The most trying phase in Higher Education and for writing centres in South Africa, perhaps, were the unprecedented challenges that came with the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemics' lockdown restrictions in 2020, most lecturers at the University of the Witwatersrand were forced to adopt emergency remote teaching (ERT) where all teaching and learning was abruptly transferred to the online mode (Hodges and Fowler 2020). This meant that course teaching and assessment material had to be developed and customised for the available tools on the online Learning Management System (LMS). Student support structures within the university were not spared; all our services were disrupted and needed to follow the ERT pattern or risk being dysfunctional. Most of our students were struggling and it was at this time that the 'digital divide' was exacerbated with many students not having access to the required digital technology to access online learning. Despite these glaring disparities, the academic year had to continue and students were still required to meet their academic obligations such as submitting assignments and meeting assessment requirements. It was at this time that our service was most needed, necessitating our alignment with the new instructional mode while sustaining our student academic literacy support offerings. However, the transition to the online modality, for both peer tutors and students, was difficult (Lee et al. 2022; Joosten et al. 2021; Rapanta et al. 2020; Weidlich and Kalz 2021).

It is important to mention that there was general pressure for staff and students to quickly master online instructional and learning design pedagogies (Rapanta et al. 2020). At the same time, there were stronger calls for developing a resilient pedagogy, one that is generally conceived as an approach to teaching that is flexible and adaptable, with the ability to sustain learning experiences despite disruptive circumstances or conditions (Schwartzman 2020; Stommel 2021; Thurston 2021). While the university was focussed on supporting academic staff to develop an effective online presence, we used similar resources and additional training to support peer tutors' online pedagogy with students. A peculiar challenge worth mentioning at this time, however, was that peer tutors were confronted with a double dilemma of learning the Wits University learning management system both as students and as course designers and instructors simultaneously. We were concerned about the quality of the online pedagogy given that our peer tutors were novice online teachers (Lee et al. 2022). As lecturers ourselves, we were cognisant of the challenges inherent in online teaching and learning and the heavy demand for additional mediation to ensure students participation and interaction (Culpeper and Kan 2020). Thus, we were deliberate in our approach to peer tutor training and ensured that it focussed on maintaining a clear focus on flexibility and resilience in

working with student writing in various online spaces. Some key skills honed in the training included how to maintain the dialogic approach and use effective communication, technological guidance on the digital site, time management as well as working with the new assessment modalities. We wanted peer tutors to feel equipped and confident to tackle the cognitive and technical challenges of supporting students in the new online mode.

Lillis (2006) asserted 14 years before the pandemic, that although different types of dialogue with students in a writing development context are usually associated with face-to-face talk, these can be readily applied to working with students in online and blended modes of communication. The WSOE WC drew on guidelines prepared by the Writing Programme on main campus to develop a manual on how to provide effective feedback to students online and pointers to peer tutors and subject tutors in the feedback process. An explicit aspect in the training has been on student and tutor reflection as they consider steps for addressing or 'talking back' (Lillis 2006: 41) to the feedback comments. It demonstrates the value of ongoing interaction with students to help them develop their agency and connection to others and to rely on their own evaluative judgements (Carless 2015).

During the student protests and the pandemic, the nature of assessment tasks presented many challenges for students and lecturers in a context characterised by high student numbers and a powerful culture of summative assessment that favours assessment for accountability. Over the years and particularly during Covid-19, the opportunity presented itself to help staff develop a range of authentic assessment tasks to find ways of 'designing out' plagiarism so that students, from their participation in authentic assessment tasks, could see the relevance of what they were doing to their future lives and selves. The WSOE WC reflected publicly by using various committee structures at the school, faculty and university, on possibilities for the development of sustainable online and/or blended assessment strategies for enabling critical thinking, reading and writing in the disciplines.

Discussion

In this section, we draw key insights from the four turning points described above to articulate the most significant of our WC principles and practices that have stood the test of time and that demonstrate our flexibility and resilience. The questions posed at the beginning of this critically reflective study helped us identify and expound on aspects of our practice at the WSOE WC that

characterise pedagogical resilience. Unpacking the turning points has been a meaningful exercise for our role as academic and research directors at the WSOE WC as it has enabled us to surface the challenges and opportunities manifested through each turning point and to consider how these situations and experiences have influenced the WSOE WC and broader pedagogical practices. It is evident that our practices and pedagogical approaches are not static and retain the values we uphold. While there have been numerous shifts in the contexts of practice and influence of our work, we have discerned some enduring resilient practices that have supported tutors and students' navigation of unprecedented events and the often unpredictable nature of the writing process.

Below is a discussion of four of these core writing centre practices.

Sustaining the dialogic approach

A key approach to developing criticality and the capacity to self-regulate in writing centre practice is the adoption of various forms of dialogic engagement with students. The dialogic engagement between peer tutors and students in writing centres is a social justice project underpinned by social justice principles that includes 'problem solving, critical thinking, student empowerment, social responsibility, student-centred focus, holistic education and an analysis of power' (Rambiritch 2018: 53). In agreement with this observation, through explicating the four turning points, we have shown that the WSOE WC has been committed to a similar social justice agenda where our broad aim has been to contribute to enabling epistemological access and academic success, particularly for marginalised students. The dialogic pedagogical approach has afforded us an opportunity to create an inclusive non-judgemental space where students can participate and be heard as they work their way through learning the conventions and codes of academic writing. What is apparent is that regardless of the modality, whether in a one-on-one consultation, group session or online engagement, the underlying framework has remained a dialogic approach. This has remained consistent over the years as peer tutors ask probing and incisive questions with the view to assisting students to clarify their thinking and understanding. Turning points one and two have established the groundwork for turning points three and four by supporting all incoming students rather than those deemed to be 'at risk'. They embody an approach to writing as a social practice in which texts are constructed in dialogue between students and the peer tutor.

The development of peer tutor reflexivity and agency

One practice that has reinforced and sustained our dialogic pedagogical approach over the years has been in the form and foci of our peer tutor training. Consistently, the focus of training for peer tutors has been on maintaining a clear emphasis on flexibility in working with student writing in the changing spaces described in the chapter. Our aim has been to ensure that students felt recognised and that after a writing conversation they feel more confident to tackle the cognitive challenges of the required writing tasks. In the first turning point, our mandate was to resist the overemphasis of generic approaches to writing. The second turning point saw us moving into the disciplines and the emphasis in training for peer tutors shifted to an awareness of writing as a process and developing an understanding of the subject specific conventions of Education 1 as illustrated in our discussion of the WURU intervention project above. A key defining focus during this time was resisting student deficit approaches and further marginalisation as was the original motivation for the WURU intervention project.

This philosophy was carried through to turning point three where, amid national student protests, we reflected and theorised on our role within a reimagined model for student support. We aligned our peer tutor training and focussed on developing an expanded vision of integrating a variety of writing development activities that recognised the individual identities of our students. Turning point four occurred during the onset of ERT due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Operating in a different online mode made us reflect critically on our pedagogically flexible approach for addressing inequities that were magnified by the pandemic. Writing peer tutors and students felt the loss of human interaction but a key lesson learned from ERT was that writing pedagogies that are traditionally used in individual and group consultations, could also be utilised in pedagogically appropriate ways online. Following this, peer tutor training focussed on humanising the online engagements by exposing peer tutors to a variety of activities to make the online sessions interactive.

An important observation is the mechanism through which, over the years, we have sustained our peer tutor training. The Wednesday lunch meetings at the WSOE WC stand out as an instrumental in-person or online platform through which the resilient dialogic pedagogical approach has been enacted. It is in these meetings that peer tutors, in conversation with the WC directorate and subject lecturers mediate and discuss the various course tasks as well as the specific approaches and strategies applied by peer tutors to support students. A variety of reading and writing oriented resource materials is shared and discussed, reinforcing the underlying dialogic approach. In addition, several workshops have been conducted to introduce innovative and creative strategies to

deal productively and critically with the demands placed on peer tutors and students by contextual and organisational change.

Influencing writing practices at the School of Education

Many of the training activities at the Writing Centre have concentrated on addressing the concern by lecturers that students do not synthesise sources or references appropriately. The training has taken it further to include students and peer tutors in important discussions about literacy practices in the curriculum by embedding explicit discipline-based reading and writing activities. The ongoing challenge is to provide conditions at the WC through appropriate resourcing and institutional investment where peer tutors and students can continue to participate in these critical conversations with subject specialists. Our goal is for writing interventions to continue enabling epistemic access and writing mastery and no longer to be external to curriculum offerings as demonstrated by WURU and other writing intensive courses at the School of Education. This chapter has demonstrated how the tensions between normative and transformative approaches to writing have surfaced during times of disruption and have affected all aspects of academic literacies. We argue that a more integrated model underpinned by dialogic and interactive principles, contextualises the teaching of writing within the disciplines and makes it relevant to students' conceptual and literacy needs.

Influencing assessment practices at the School of Education

In this chapter, we have shown that strong partnerships have emerged between writing specialists, peer tutors and subject lecturers to develop strategies for promoting student engagement with criteria and rubrics, using exemplars of student writing to showcase quality writing and to improve pre-task guidance for students at different levels of performance. We argue that the WSoE WC has contributed to discussions in the school about alternative assessment strategies, drawing on dialogic and reflective writing as the cornerstones of writing centre practice. This has been an important way of confronting the tensions highlighted by Boughey and McKenna (2021: 68) between writing centre philosophies informed by sociocultural theories and academics who revert to 'de-contextualised understandings of learning and who direct their students to the centres to get their language problems 'fixed'.

Conclusion

We argue in this chapter that we have always used responsive and flexible writing pedagogies that are generated from within the specific writing centre space. Though we have drawn on strategies and models for working in new and dialogic ways with students, we have illustrated the resilient nature of our practice by formulating our own model of change specific to our teaching and learning context. We have resisted becoming socialised exclusively into 'westernised' ways of conceptualising and implementing writing centre practices and have turned to resources and affordances of our internal workings.

Over the years, the WSOE WC has contributed to the conversations about changing the framing of writing and student deficit in the school, and has contributed to the writing-rich orientation of mainstream tutorial pedagogies, and to challenging normative assessment practices, focussed on summative assessment. The peer tutors have played a major role in all four turning points as they have learnt to guide students to explore their writing and thinking processes. The sociological underpinning of the academic literacies' paradigm has guided all aspects of WSOE WC practice. A central concern in this chapter was to use our reflectivity to point to new directions for our centre and for writing centres in general, beyond the turning points. This is consistent with the ultimate objective of practitioner inquiry research that seeks to develop an improved understanding of the educational project with the view to identify and discard limiting practices and, at the same time, explore and promote identified transformational possibilities (Cochran-Smith and Donnell 2012; Nordstrom 2021).

As we conclude, we contemplate on two new questions that we believe point to several challenges we and other writing centres need to grapple with.

The first question is related to institutional and structural support. We question the extent to which the university is committed to supporting writing centre work, as more than twelve years since establishing our centre, we mostly rely on external funding for our core activities. A key principle in writing centre practice is for peer tutors to understand students' literacy histories and the implications of students' poor readiness for their participation in their university studies. As it stands, students continue to be underprepared for the kind of thinking, writing and academic rigour required at university because of their often under-resourced and inadequate educational backgrounds. This phenomenon was exacerbated by the loss of learning time during the Covid-19 pandemic period. While we have invested in rich peer tutor training and our peer tutors have evidently become more knowledgeable about students' writing practices and the nature of working

with all students dialogically rather than with a few students on the margins, we are still confronted with the challenge of dealing with huge student numbers beyond our capacity. It is, thus, timely to question institutional and structural commitments towards the work of writing centres. The role of inculcating and anchoring academic literacy practices within the university has never been more significant given the current demand on universities as instrumental in developing 21st century imperatives that include critical thinking, creative thinking, communicating and collaborating.

The second question emerging from this critical analysis relates to what we can do to avoid reverting to negative student deficit conceptions, as described in the first two turning points and traditional ways of working with students that do not enhance the quality of student critical engagement and learning. Students are coming to the institution even less prepared for the discoursal challenges of tertiary study post Covid-19. The university is increasingly relying on writing centre expertise to enhance the quality of university programmes and address the educational needs of undergraduate and postgraduate students.

In these institutional spaces, we will continue to question traditional framings of the 'student problem' and to work with subject specialists to find sustainable ways of systematising and institutionalising tried and tested approaches for enhancing academic literacy practices. We will interrogate how we can retain the affordances of the dialogic and interactive principles that underpin our contextualised WC pedagogical practices described in this chapter, especially in consideration of the new online mode with its inherent challenges of poor student participation and engagement. This chapter has allowed us to reflect deeply on our principles and practices and to strengthen the macro and micro level elements that have given rise to a changed model of writing support at the Wits School of Education Writing Centre.

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