Chapter Eleven

'This Work has Paid Off in Bountiful Ways'. Development of Writing Tutors as Emerging Academics at a South African University Writing Centre

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Introduction

Most of the research on writing centres in South Africa has focussed on the writing development of students (Archer and Richards 2011; Archer and Parker 2016; Clarence and Dison 2019). In addition to this role, writing centres can provide a powerful context for writing tutors'[1] development as emerging academics (Archer and Richards 2011; Lewanika and Archer 2011; Clarence 2016; Archer and Parker 2016). However, this aspect of writing centre work is largely invisible and unrecognised within university settings (Archer and Parker 2016). This chapter reports on the first stage of a study on the growth and development of tutors at a writing centre at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in South Africa, which is based on tutors' reflections from a collaborative ethnographic (CAE) process. Our mutual engagement in this research project has felt like a natural continuation of our work together in the Writing Centre. Each of the three tutors has had experience of working closely with the coordinator and shared responsibility for writing centre work and/or scholarship in different contexts.

The tutors at the Writing Centre are postgraduates – Master's or doctoral students. Writing tutors are described by Nichols (2017: 184) as 'potential future scholars'. In this study we use the

1 Writing centres use different terms for student tutors, such as tutor or consultant. These terms have the same meaning.

term 'emerging academics'. While we claim that working in a writing centre can facilitate growth of professional capabilities generally, our main focus in this chapter is on those capabilities that are valuable for an academic career and how these are developed. There is not much research on the development of writing centre tutors as emerging academics in the South African body of writing centre literature. The work that resonated most for us in relation to tutor development were publications by Lewanika and Archer (2011) and Archer and Parker (2016). Both of these studies were conducted at the University of Cape Town (UCT) which is a historically advantaged university (Cooper 2015). Conducting research on tutor growth and development in the context of a historically disadvantaged university would make a worthwhile contribution to this relatively new field. We argue that many Writing Centre tutors at UWC come from backgrounds that place them in marginalised positions with regard to the university and that working at the Writing Centre has the potential to equip them to negotiate their paths into academia and assists them to develop the capabilities and attributes that can help to prepare them for an academic career. Writing centres tend to occupy marginal spaces at universities, existing outside of disciplinary learning and teaching (Archer and Richards 2011; Clarence and Dison 2018). Because of the marginalised nature of the Writing Centre, these processes are not visible or recognised as significant within the university. We argue that the ways in which tutors' development can be enabled in a writing centre constitute practices contributing to social justice and institutional transformation.

We begin by providing a background and context of the UWC writing centre, followed by a review of literature that theorises writing centres in relation to tutor development. We then describe the collaborative autoethnographic methodology employed to elicit data on capabilities developed by the researchers through working at the Writing Centre. Two themes that emerge from the data are discussed in detail. These are, firstly, identity formation as emerging academics and, secondly, multidisciplinary and collaborative engagement of UWC Writing Centre tutors. We conclude by emphasising the valuable role that a writing centre can play in the development of tutors as emerging academics. We suggest that the writing centre community can pay more focussed attention to their role in developing writing tutors as emerging academics and gain recognition of this contribution within higher education.

Background and context

UWC Writing Centre

UWC was originally established by the apartheid government as a university for 'coloureds'[2] as part of a racially differentiated higher education system. It has transformed into a high-quality university in both teaching and research. It has a diverse student population, with many coming from poor socio-economic and educational backgrounds (https://www.uwc.ac.za/about/mission-vision-and-history/history) and a significant number of postgraduates from various African countries.

The UWC Writing Centre was established in 1994 as part of the Academic Development Centre to assist students from disadvantaged schooling backgrounds, many of whom did not have English as their first language, but may have been conversant in other languages (Leibowitz et al. 1997). Over the years, the role of the Writing Centre has changed to assist students from diverse backgrounds, as there was a recognition that acquiring academic literacies is challenging for all students, not only English Additional Language (EAL) students (Archer and Richards 2011).

There is only one writing centre at UWC and it is available to assist students from all faculties in the university, namely, the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Community and Health Sciences, Dentistry, Economic and Management Sciences, Education, Law and Natural Sciences. Despite the significant and widespread need for development of students' academic literacies, the Centre is small and under-resourced, particularly in terms of staff. The staff complement consists of one full-time academic post, that of coordinator and one full-time administrator. In addition to this, it employs approximately fifteen writing tutors, who work for ten hours a week, for nine months of the year. Writing tutors are UWC-registered master's or doctoral students with diverse disciplinary backgrounds and previous work experiences. They come from different African countries and most are either bilingual or multilingual. The writing tutors' work at the Centre is temporary as they can only stay for as long as they are registered students of the university. As such, the Centre recruits new tutors every year and it has put in place a robust training programme to develop their capabilities for facilitating students' writing development.

Tutors are relied on to do the bulk of the Writing Centre day-to-day work. This consists of individual and group consultations with students and workshops on aspects of academic writing

2 The term 'coloured' refers to a racial category imposed by the apartheid government as an official definition between 1950 and 1991. All people were identified as either 'white', 'black', 'coloured' or 'Indian' and treated differently within the state systems.

such as developing argument or referencing. The Writing Centre is, at times, requested to provide written feedback on a whole class of students' assignments with verbal feedback and engagement in groups. One of the areas that the Centre has been involved in, which we would like to expand, is working with lecturers to embed development of academic literacies within modules. We will discuss this further below.

A new vision for the Writing Centre was conceptualised in 2018, which argued for an expanded role of the Centre, which up until that point had been focussed mainly on individual and group consultations with students. It emphasised the need to consider the Writing Centre critically within the UWC context more broadly. The vision was that UWC should adopt a more integrated strategy for the development of students' academic literacies with a greater role for lecturers in the faculties and departments. It also identified a need for there to be more collaboration of the Writing Centre with courses and organisations on campus that were involved in developing students' academic literacies such as academic literacy courses in the faculties, the UWC library and student support services. One of the additional suggestions was for the Centre to become a 'vibrant hub for promotion of scholarship on writing, as well as exploration of academic reading and other literacies on the boundaries of academic writing' (Dison 2018). One of the ways in which the latter was later practised was through several Open Mic poetry readings for UWC students, when the Centre had the capacity to offer these.

It was not possible to implement the vision at an institutional level at that point. Nevertheless, the Centre has maintained an ethos of being a warm, welcoming space, where opportunities for development were provided which tutors could take up. Naturally, there was variation in the extent to which tutors became involved in the work of the Centre and took up developmental opportunities. When we argue that a writing centre can provide an enabling space for tutor development, we focus on those tutors who choose to exercise agency in their participation in the Centre (Archer and Parker 2016) and take up development opportunities.

Context provided by the Writing Centre for tutor development

Archer and Parker (2016) describe writing centre spaces as 'both transitional and transformative – hidden and sometimes not valued or significantly acknowledged by university leadership' (Archer and Parker 2016: 45). Writing centres are transitional in that they can facilitate a transition process for students in terms of their writing and for tutors, from postgraduate students to professionals, possibly academics. This will be discussed further below.

Writing centres simultaneously play *normative and transformative* roles. In their *normative* role, they assist with socialising students into the dominant academic literacies of the universities (Archer and Parker 2106; Clarence and Dison 2017; Lillis and Scott 2007). The *transformative* role of writing centres enables students' critical engagement with regard to academic literacies (Lillis and Scott 2007). Both the normative and transformative roles contribute to furthering social justice at different levels, particularly given the inequalities in our society. For example, writing centres can 'offer possibilities for transformation, not only of the learner but also of the social and political contexts in which learning and other social action take place' (Saunders 2006, as cited in Moje 2007: 31). On the other hand, students' increasing grasp of university and disciplinary expectations, their ability to meet these expectations and their academic achievement arising out of this can build their general sense of self-worth and confidence at an individual level. This may enable their successful negotiation of academic culture and subsequent integration into their respective professional fields.

With regard to the students at the UWC Writing Centre, we focus mainly on playing a *normative* role. However, in most of our practices, there is not much continuity for working with students, with the exception of the few projects where we work in a sustained and integrated way with them in a disciplinary course. We believe that our *transformative* role is most prevalent in the processes that the tutors go through. We will unpack this more as we identify some of the capabilities that the co-researchers in this project developed as tutors and explore how these capabilities developed within the context of the Writing Centre.

According to Archer and Richards (2011: 9), writing centres occupy a liminal space on the margins of the institution 'to which members of a group withdraw and redefine their identities before re-emerging in society to play a new role'. This metaphor applies to both students and tutors. The metaphor is apt for tutors as they are transient in the organisation. They enter the writing centre as postgraduate students and undergo both formal and experiential processes of professionalisation. The metaphors of initiation and rite of passage have been used for tutor training and development (Kail 2003; Campbell 2008). Gillespie and Lerner (2000) argue that being a writing centre tutor can empower individuals in a unique way, going so far as to say that the experience of becoming and being a writing centre tutor may 'change your life, if you allow it to' (9).

Writing centres in South Africa have been seen to provide a 'safe space' for students in a sometimes harsh environment (Archer and Richards 2011: 9). The discourse of 'writing center as home' has been used (Miley 2016: 18) and writing centres have been described as 'communities' (Lewanika and Archer 2011). They are seen as 'safe spaces' because they are not linked to assessment

and the type of judgement that this entails. They strive to provide a relaxed atmosphere where tutors engage with students on work in progress in order to help them to gain 'a better understanding of what is required of them as writers and thinkers' (Clarence 2019: 122).

In addition to providing a safe space for students, they can provide such a space to tutors, where they are likely to develop a sense of identity as staff of the centre, while in some disciplinary departments they may be fairly marginalised as postgraduate students. Furthermore, it can provide a place of belonging during the often isolating process of doctoral study (Lewanika and Archer 2011).

Tutors' development as emerging academics within writing centres

Writing centres can facilitate tutors' development of professional and academic identity. Professional identity formation within a relatively stable context can be seen as a process where an individual's identity develops over a period of time, during which the values, norms, standards and characteristics of a particular professional community (for example, academia or particular disciplines) are internalised. This results in an individual 'thinking, feeling and acting like a member of that community' (Cruess et al. 2014: 1447). In other words, in developing a professional identity, individuals begin to acquire a sense of belonging within a profession. Central to the process of professional identity development is experiential learning through participation in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), which is enhanced by guided reflection by role models and mentors (Mann et al. 2009). When we discuss the development of writing tutors further on, we consider how tutors are influenced by both formal training as well as experiential learning that takes place through engagement, collaborative work and mentoring in the Centre.

Social constructivist theories of identity formation conceive identity to be a dynamic phenomenon that is continually negotiated and co-constructed within a social and relational environment (Wong and Trollope-Kumar 2014). Scanlon (2011) describes the process of identity formation as that of 'becoming' rather than 'being' a professional. Rather than reaching a final endpoint, professional identity formation is seen as 'a multidimensional, evolving and lifelong process throughout one's career' (Wong and Trollope-Kumar 2014: 490). The concept of academic identity formation is problematised within the context of the wide-ranging changes happening in universities (Barrow and Xu 2021). Academic identity is fluid (Findlow 2012; Lopes et al. 2014, cited by Barrow and Xu 2021) and academic work is increasingly diversified (Osbaldiston et al. 2019). These factors will be explored further in our discussion section.

According to Lewanika and Archer (2011) and Archer and Parker (2016), working in a writing centre improved tutors' writing, research and teaching skills, while boosting their confidence as academic writers and possible future lecturers. Past and present tutors in both studies indicated that through interactions with students and fellow tutors they learned more about writing styles across disciplines. One informant in Lewanika and Archer's (2011) study observed that discussions, which took place in tutor training sessions regarding disciplinary discourses, served to 'illuminate the opaque taken-for-granted literacy practices of the genres of the various disciplines of the University' (153). Another informant in that study found that the diversity of academic disciplines exposed to in the Writing Centre opened her eyes to the numerous possibilities in academic research and writing. This enriched her approach to her own work and influenced her to 'explore alternative perspectives from the sociological field in developing [her] conceptual framework' (Lewanika and Archer 2011: 154). Strategies such as 'free writing' learned at the centre and the regular practice of helping students led one tutor to formulate internal strategies which she applied and improved her metacognitive abilities in academic writing (Lewanika and Archer 2011). Teaching is a fundamental capability for academics that is often not built into doctoral training (Dison and Hess-April 2019; Leibowitz et al. 2017; Mantai 2019). Through practice and training processes, tutors also gained knowledge of pedagogical strategies for teaching within a higher education context (Lewanika and Archer 2011) and enhanced the quality of their teaching practice when they began their careers as academics (Archer and Parker 2016).

Methodology

Research design

Our research project on the development of writing tutors as emerging academics consists of a number of phases. This chapter reports on the first phase, which was conducted using a collaborative ethnography (CAE) method (Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez 2012). The CAE process was undertaken by the Writing Centre coordinator, Arona and three past and present tutors from the UWC Writing Centre, hereafter referred to as co-researchers. Two of these three tutors, Phoene and Mapula, are co-authors of this chapter, while Irene chose not to participate in writing this particular chapter.

Collaborative autoethnography (CAE)

CAE is a methodological variation of autoethnography, which is a qualitative research method in which the researcher draws on his/her autobiographical material as 'a window into the understanding of a social phenomenon' (Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez 2014: 376). Autoethnography is autobiographical in the sense that researchers collect data about their personal experiences and socio-cultural environment and ethnographic in the sense that the data is analysed and interpreted 'through an ethnographic research process to gain a sociocultural understanding of personal experiences' (Chang et al. 2014: 376). Collaborative autoethnography, as the name suggests, takes a more collective approach to the autoethnographic method. In CAE, two or more researchers share their autobiographical materials related to a common social phenomenon; in this case development of tutors as emerging academics. They then analyse and interpret the collective data to interpret the meanings of their personal experiences within their sociocultural contexts (Chang et al. 2014).

CAE holds potential for shifting the power relations that exist in conventional research processes. People can be involved in the research who might otherwise be in hierarchical relationships to each other. Typical power relations are altered to contribute to a mutually enriching process amongst researchers (Hernandez, Ngunjiri and Chang 2017). When multiple autoethnographers engage each other in CAE research, they 'complement, contradict and probe each other as critical peers' (Hernandez et al. 2017: 252). Through this process, individual perspectives are tempered through intersubjectivity and the interaction of multiple voices as they explore the social phenomenon (Chang et al. 2012). When two or more researchers contribute to data generation, analysis and writing/performing, CAE is strengthened by the contribution of multidimensional perspectives on the research (Chang et al. 2013). Applying different disciplinary and experiential perspectives can 'deepen the analytical and interpretive components' of the research (Lapadat 2017: 598).

Data collection and analysis

In our project, the four co-researchers met every week for ten weeks to write and reflect. Both Phoene and Irene are Kenyan, currently living in Kenya. Thus, it was necessary to meet online. Phoene, Mapula and Irene wrote about experiences of their own development while working at the Writing Centre, particularly the capabilities that they developed or expanded and the processes

through which this took place. The use of CAE methodology was exploratory and we felt that we were finding our way through the process (both collaboratively and individually). Our narratives provided a stimulus for discussion, which was recorded on the online meeting platform.

We used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2008) for extracting themes from the data. We looked for themes which constituted capabilities of writing tutors and also searched for data which referred to how these capabilities were enhanced or developed in the Writing Centre. We used a combination of inductive and deductive methods to analyse the data (Freeman and Richards 1996). We were aware of the themes which had been identified in literature but, in some cases, we reorganised the themes or identified more themes. For the purpose of this chapter, Phoene and Mapula each identified one theme which resonated for most for them from the data and Arona initially wrote up the other elements of the chapter which encased the discussion of these themes. Mapula chose to focus on opportunities for development through collaboration. Phoene focussed on development of professional identity. We wrote on one Google Drive document and then engaged with each other about the different sections and worked collaboratively on the whole chapter (Bozalek et al. 2016). We are intending to still do a more careful and systematic coding and analysis of the data.

Discussion of selected themes arising out of the reflections

All writing centres have the potential to contribute to tutors' development of capabilities and confidence. In the collaborative autoethnographic (CAE) component of this study, we reflected on the particular contribution of the writing centre at UWC, a historically disadvantaged institution. We view writing tutors as emerging academics, who are likely to face a number of challenges, such as negotiating the alien culture of the academy (Orbe 2008) and feeling a low sense of confidence about being able to succeed in academia. In our discussions, we also explored the idea that tutors from marginalised backgrounds hold transformative potential to bring change and innovation in this environment. They have potential to contest and transform normative teaching and learning practices in academia. From the written reflections and group discussions, we identified several themes that outline ways in which the work of writing tutors at the UWC Writing Centre can contribute to their development as emerging academics. In this chapter, we focus on two of these themes, that is, the development of professional academic identity, and the cross-disciplinary and collaborative engagements of writing tutors.

Development of academic professional identity

Academic identity development among emerging academics is characterised by a wide range of insecurities relating to their self-efficacy to perform conventional academic tasks, their (in) authenticity and (il)legitimacy to occupy and navigate an academic professional environment and a sense of liminality that is characteristic of becoming a part of the academic community (Archer 2008; Mantai 2019; Hollywood et al. 2020; Larsen and Brandenburg 2022). These insecurities can be heightened in a neoliberal context where academic identities are constantly evolving (Shahjahan 2020). Tutors' reflections revealed that the UWC Writing Centre enabled their development of key capabilities for academics, specifically with respect to teaching and learning, boosted their academic profiles and confidence and equipped them to adapt to contemporary dynamic academic identities. These capabilities were developed through exposure to training processes at the writing centre, but also came about inadvertently, through participation in communities of practice that tutors engaged in as they performed various roles at the centre.

Previous research has described writing centres in South Africa as communities of practice in which tutors begin to understand and embody an academic professional identity (Lewanika and Archer 2011). Similarly, in our context, tutors reflected on the UWC Writing Centre as a community in which they were *socialised* into the academic profession. They observed that they had developed capabilities, specifically teaching and facilitating learning, which are expected of academics, often assumed, yet not deliberately nurtured within disciplinary training (Dison and Hess-April 2019, Leibowitz et al. 2017, Mantai 2019). Consequently, while postgraduate students may be competent within their respective disciplines, they may perceive themselves to be falling short of a key expectation of an academic professional (Jepsen, Varhegyi and Edwards 2012). In turn, their sense of confidence and preparedness for an academic career is negatively affected. In contrast to this, some of the writing tutors experienced an increase in knowledge and confidence about teaching. For example, Irene, a former tutor at the UWC Writing Centre, had recently started a lecturing position. She recalled training sessions at the Writing Centre which influenced her pedagogical knowledge and practices – conscientising her to facilitate learning, rather than edit students' writing – a perspective that continues to influence her personal approach to work colleagues and students.

> I recalled that one of the writing centre training sessions was about how to respond to students' writing. [...] The idea was to move us from being editors of students' work and towards becoming facilitators in the acquisition of academic literacies among our clients.

Phoene observed:

> One of the things I carry with me is a better understanding of what academic literacy is all about and how to support students to develop it. I not only got trained but I also lived it, sharing with the student and every time I tried something out, I would reflect and improve on my writing around it. I found it enriching to understand what academic writing is about.

The idea that understanding a culture (for example, academic culture) brings about a consciousness where one can begin to contest some aspects of that culture has been highlighted in previous research among former writing centre tutors turned practising academics (Archer and Parker 2016). This can especially ring true for emerging academics such as our tutors who, much like the students who they serve, are marginal to the university culture. Idahasa and Vincent (2014) have found that marginality can be a resource with regard to first-generation female academics in South Africa. They note that 'occupying a position on the margins but at the same time having some access to power by virtue of being academics provides the ability to 'see' those who are in a similar position [...] and to be a resource for those people' (65). Irene's and Phoene's narratives above highlight this possibility, showing that the experience of working at the writing centre can attune tutors to the centrality of academic literacies to supporting students' learning at university. Most importantly, it can engender a willingness to support students' development of academic literacies and facilitate their acquisition of tools to achieve the same within their disciplinary teaching practice. Taking this approach, which embeds academic literacies within disciplinary training, is distinct from conventional approaches where disciplinary training and academic literacy are not integrated (Collett and Dison 2019) and transformative, in that it recognises and addresses a key barrier to success at university especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Archer and Parker (2016: 15) in their interviews with academics who were previous UCT Writing Centre tutors found that they had become capable of 'recognising and reflecting on accepted norms and destabilising them in the process'. They argued that these academics had learned how to 'employ a critical 'academic development' perspective' through their work in the UCT Writing Centre and they were able to apply this in their teaching (51). The authors argue that the 'consultants-turned-academics are better equipped to deal with the complexity of academia and effect change where it is warranted' (Archer and Parker 2016: 51).

Both Irene's and Phoene's narratives above illustrate the significance of deliberate developmental processes at the UWC Writing Centre on tutor's professional identity development. While

knowledge that is gained through participation in communities of practice can be explicit, often it is tacit (Lave and Wenger 1991). Reflections by Phoene and Mapula, who worked at the Writing Centre both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, emphasised the significance of the writing centre's physical space, where tutors from different backgrounds could easily draw on each other's experiences and expertise. Covid-19 containment measures however meant that such unstructured interactions shifted to online platforms, like Google Meet and WhatsApp. We aim to explore the opportunities and limitations that such platforms presented for tacit learning in subsequent phases of our research. Thus far, in contrast, reflections by Phoene, who only worked in the Writing Centre during the Covid-19 pandemic, highlight formal and informal interactions with lecturers rather than peers as sites where she acquired tacit knowledge, which influenced her professional identity development.

To see oneself as an (authentic) academic, but also to be seen as one, is a key aspect of one's professional identity (Archer 2008). Previous research has reported emerging academics' anxieties concerning their positioning by themselves and others as (in)authentic and (il)legitimate scholars within academic communities (Archer 2008). Huber (2010) has found that professional mentors are a key support system for first-generation graduates navigating the norms of new work environments. Within the academic context, collaborative writing has been recognised as a valuable activity for developing the skills of graduates or young academics and boosting their confidence in writing (Chang et al. 2016). In her narrative, Irene highlighted an opportunity to collaborate with senior academics in a research project and how this process bolstered her profile as an academic and affirmed her confidence and identity as a scholar. She participated in a collaborative writing process based on a project that she had been involved in in the Writing Centre. This resulted in a published book chapter. Irene further elaborated that her professional experience at the Writing Centre had proven to be valuable to her transition into an academic position as follows:

> Interestingly when I interviewed for a part-time teaching position in a private university here in Kenya and was asked what value I could add, I talked about being part of collaborative research and supporting students to develop academic literacy skills since I had worked at the UWC Writing Centre before.

Tutors also described the significance of writing centre structures and processes in reinforcing their professional identity. The value of a structured writing centre work environment was highlighted by Irene and Phoene who both described its influence on their professional conduct as academics.

Irene noted that the Centre's structure provided a sense of order and impacted on how she organised and approached her academic responsibilities. In addition, the tutors identified writing centre processes which signified that they were recognised and valued as academic professionals and this influenced their self-perception as members of an academic professional community. In this regard, they contrasted writing centre tutors with faculty tutors who support students in disciplinary courses. Faculty tutors implement instructions from lecturers, who are the core academic staff. Within the Writing Centre, this distinction (tutor versus lecturer) was seen to be less apparent as tutors worked collaboratively with the coordinator and lecturers and were more agentic. Rather than responding to instruction, Writing Centre tutors proactively performed the majority of the writing centre work. Alongside the coordinator, they participated in briefing meetings with lecturers and collaboratively prepared academic writing workshops for different departments. Once they had been through a training process, they also had full control of their personal engagements with students during consultations. Their execution of these functions was supported by a review of practices, for example, during weekly meetings that informed upskilling intervention strategies, based on identified needs. Systems of accounting (for time and work done) and reward for extra effort further reinforced this professional dynamic. In one of our discussions, Phoene stated that the tutors' work at the Writing Centre 'felt like a real job', echoing the significance of the Writing Centre environment in which tutors embodied the roles and responsibilities of an academic professional and were recognised as such. In turn, tutors developed a professional identity in which they came to 'think and see' (Cruess et al. 2014) themselves as part of the academic professional community and not merely 'appendages' to the system.

Our discussion thus far clearly demonstrates that a writing centre can facilitate tutors' development of an academic identity in the conventional sense – it enables tutors to embody the values and standards expected of an academic and reinforces their confidence as authentic members of the professional community. Beyond this, however, the value of the Writing Centre in equipping tutors to adapt to *evolving* academic identities was also reflected on in our discussions. Academic identities are not stable. According to different theoretical frameworks, the meaning of 'academic' itself is seen as increasingly fluid and therefore in need of redefinition (Findlow 2012; Lopes et al. 2014, cited in Barrow and Xu 2016). According to Fanghanel (2007), perceptions of academic identity and being a lecturer at university level prior to the eighties was taken for granted and seen as unproblematic. Academics were seen as 'experts' in their fields of research who seemed de facto qualified to pass on their knowledge to future generations (Fanghanel 2007: 4). However, in a context of increased massification since the nineteen-eighties, teaching has become

a much more complex activity. In addition, the tasks of academics have diversified. They have had to become 'multitaskers', people who manage funds, paperwork, emails, meetings, supervision, teaching and research in order to succeed in academia (Osbaldiston et al. 2019, cited in Barrow and Xu 2016: 2).

Tutors' reflections highlighted ways in which working at the Writing Centre can potentially enhance their responsiveness and adaptability to contemporary dynamic academic identities. The Centre's work is not fixed. Even though tutors' work mainly comprises one-on-one consultations with students, they are often required to design interventions that respond to the needs of students in different departments and to adapt such interventions to the needs of specific groups at different levels of study. The discussion in the second theme of this chapter elaborates on some of these interventions. Phoene, who was in the final stages of her doctoral studies, reflected that performing different academic tasks enhanced her understanding of normative demands of an academic, the time and 'mental' demands of different tasks and increased capacity to plan and allocate time to various responsibilities.

She also noted that working closely with practicing academics had alerted her to the demanding nature of an academic career and that this had led her to potentially reconsider this option. The significance of this experience is elucidated in relevant literature which suggests that unrealistic expectations about the nature of academic work, workload and time pressures among emerging academics can influence their overall career satisfaction (Hollywood et al. 2020), with possible implications for their disengagement from academic careers. Phoene's reflection highlights the ways that the Writing Centre influences emerging academics' development of a realistic view of the demands of an academic career and can potentially enhance their capacity to balance various academic identities. The need for adaptability became even more apparent while working within the Covid-19 pandemic context where all interactions were online. The strategies adopted by tutors to support students and lecturers under these circumstances will be explored in greater depth in subsequent phases of our research. At this stage, our reflections reveal that tutors were working in a context in which they did not know what to expect and thus had to be open to changing workplace demands, which resonates with the dynamism that characterises 21st-century academic identities.

Multiple disciplinary and collaborative engagements of UWC Writing Centre tutors

Collaboration and cross-disciplinary engagements are integral to all functions of a modern university. It is necessary for all academics to be able to create and participate in team projects where they would work with peers from any disciplinary background. The present-day university environment is dynamic and complex. Research is increasingly conducted within applied contexts by interdisciplinary teams. Academic roles have expanded beyond the traditional focus on research and teaching (Bryson 2004). These include administrative and managerial roles. As academics, they are expected to manage growing research groups, liaise and negotiate with different stakeholders within and outside the academic environment, source and manage research funds and possibly take up leadership roles within the faculties (Cunningham et al. 2015; Menter 2016). These transitions can be challenging as they are not always supported by formal training. By participating in collaborations, particularly within cross-disciplinary contexts, academics can create platforms for sharing knowledge, information, skills and resources as well as for building synergies for the completion of big projects. Collaborative work can also constitute safe enclaves for emerging and marginalised academics, within which they can increase their productivity, in spite of the complexity of their work environment (Tynan and Garbett 2007).

The work of writing tutors at the UWC Writing Centre is cross-disciplinary by its very nature. In this space, tutors enter a learning and teaching environment where they support students' development of academic literacies. This work is in many ways very different to the research activities in their postgraduate programmes. The centre provides support to students and academic staff from all seven faculties of the university, but, due to capacity constraints, the students' disciplinary areas are not matched to the tutor's disciplinary background. Therefore, the writing tutors must always be prepared for students from any discipline and writing on any subject matter. In their interactions with students and lecturers, the tutors are challenged to interrogate knowledge from different fields of study and to understand the requisites for a broad range of text genres. They are also expected to be cognisant of the varied applications of academic writing conventions across different disciplines. To capacitate tutors for this task, the centre emphasises these elements in its training programme. Furthermore, the tutors are trained to support students at any level of study, including first-year students, postgraduates and adult learners.

Working in these multidisciplinary contexts, the writing tutors gain a broader perspective of the academic discourse and theoretical knowledge beyond the scope of their own studies. They

also form a deeper understanding of conventions across disciplines. Commenting on this aspect, Phoene wrote:

> Working in an interdisciplinary context has exposed me to the diversity of academic writing approaches in different disciplines at the university ... This can be challenging and often times requires a bit more research in order to effectively support such students...[furthermore] my appreciation [of this diversity] has been enhanced.

In our discussions, Phoene explored the idea that her 'experience of engaging with different disciplines' might be valuable for her in her future academic career.

> Especially when you're doing collaborative research with teams of people from different disciplines – I think that will be relevant, you [can] know where people are coming from – you know the value they can contribute and you know the limitations of where you're coming from.

Thus, this exposure could give her more appreciation of the workings of different disciplines and openness to hearing what and how they could contribute to addressing a particular problem. Knowing 'the limitations of where you're coming from' can be a step towards appreciating the need for multidisciplinary research and can put an academic in an advantageous position to engage in such research.

The tutors also have the opportunity to work collaboratively with various members of the campus community including their peers at the centre, academic staff and other student support services. For instance, the tutors are required to carry out various administrative and marketing tasks, in addition to supporting students' development of academic literacy skills. These tasks are performed in teams, where tutors can take advantage of the knowledge and skills gained from their diverse disciplinary backgrounds and collectively rich life and work experiences to develop solutions. Collaborative teamwork fosters camaraderie and a collegial culture in the Centre. When reflecting on this area of her work, Irene noted the development of relationships within the teams and their importance in creating safe spaces for peer-to-peer learning and support.

> To deal with my own inadequacies, I was very careful to listen and observe what the more experienced tutors were doing ... I found myself seeking support from Kenny,

> Retang and Rasheeqa.[3] In fact, Kenny sat in two of my sessions and gave me very valuable feedback. With time, I learnt to take a middle ground and became more confident about my approach to students' work and my role as a facilitator who supports the academic literacy skills acquisition process.

Irene also highlighted how she gained support from these relationships even in her own doctoral research work, when she was writing her first article for submission to a journal.

> I got a lot of help from two colleagues who had either published or were in the process of doing so. [They] read my article and commented on it constructively, which encouraged me.

When tutor teams collaborate with academic staff in the faculties, it is mostly to plan and implement strategies towards addressing students' academic writing challenges within the modules. In this role, the writing tutors provide feedback on written tasks in specific modules, advise lecturers on the assessment processes, develop and facilitate workshops on various academic literacy topics for students and/or facilitate training workshops for tutors and graduate lecturing assistants (GLAs). This work brings tutors closer to the learning and teaching processes taking place within the faculties. In the one-on-one consultations with students, the writing tutors apply the guidelines they learned during their training. However, when working with lecturers, the tutors have to align their input with the lecturer's teaching philosophy and the objectives outlined for the course. During the group discussions, participants in this study agreed that these elements constitute a unique, but powerful training process for a teaching role at university. The writing tutors have an opportunity to learn from experienced academics and to contribute meaningfully by exploring innovative solutions under the tutelage of their own coordinator and the lecturer, in a way that is not common in the faculties. This was highlighted by Irene in her reflections:

> Involvement in this [collaborative] project has exposed me to processes that take place 'behind the scenes' to facilitate learning, which had I not been a writing centre tutor, I may only have encountered in [an actual] teaching role.

3 Past tutors from the Writing Centre gave permission for their real names to be used.

Mapula also shared this view, writing:

> During these interactions [with teaching staff], we gain a lot of insight into the practical aspects related to the application of teaching theory.

Because the centre supports different members of the campus community, the problems addressed in each individual collaborative project are unique and so, the solutions developed by the tutors are tailored to the needs within each case. As such, tutors would often prepare by first educating themselves on new processes/concepts that are relevant to the task. They also have to be creative and innovative when developing novel solutions. When reflecting on these processes, tutors involved in the current study pointed out that these collaborations provide a space where tutors can experiment with various tools and processes, in a safe environment, free from judgement. This is also an area of significant skills development. Mapula shared her experience in one such project:

> Collaborative work is often commissioned as 'projects' ... Here, I worked with various teams ... In some of these endeavours, I provided leadership. My role in the Biotechnology Hons project involved conceptualising, planning, creating content, establishing collaborations [with other support services] and facilitating the workshop ... I had to delegate [responsibilities] and manage resources for the whole project. This was a difficult task to accomplish, but I learned valuable lessons [on] planning, time-management, resource-management and contingency plans.

Our discussions also interrogated these collaborative engagements as potential communities of practice. Indeed, communities of practice were initially defined as groups of people working together on shared interests and sharing knowledge and skills through informal processes (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). Over time, the concept of community of practice was adopted by different fields, where it expanded in meaning and application within diverse contexts (Wenger 1998). Nevertheless, the collaborative engagements at the Writing Centre retain the core elements of any community of practice, that is, the existence of a community that is working together where learning takes place through mutual engagement (Lave and Wenger 1991).

It must be noted that many of the collaborative projects at the UWC Writing Centre are once-off or short-term engagements. We perceived that there was little interest from most of the academic staff to engage directly with the Writing Centre (Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni 2019).

Some lecturers did not even know about the Centre and others saw it as a service that students could be 'sent to' to improve their writing. We also found that many lecturers who did engage with us did not take up further opportunities for collaboration beyond the first intervention, even when the objectives of the first engagement had been successfully realised. There are a number of possible reasons for this. Some lecturers may not see students' development of academic literacies as an ongoing process that needs continued focus and scaffolding. Some may have continued with interventions to develop academic literacies of students within their modules without the assistance of the Writing Centre. We are aware that there are many demands and pressures on lecturers and it may be that they have limited capacity for additional collaborative work that takes time and effort. It could be a combination of these factors. Certainly those lecturers, who were in touch with the Writing Centre, would encourage their students to use the services of the Centre.

There are a few collaborative projects that continue for long periods. One example of this is the ongoing collaboration between the Writing Centre and the lecturer in a postgraduate programme in the Faculty of Education. Here, the tutors provide input on the assessment structure and formative feedback on a structured set of tasks throughout the course. The students' development of academic literacies is continuously monitored and responsive measures in the form of short workshops or process adjustments are applied when necessary. Over time, this engagement has expanded into a sustainable process, supported by learning and teaching theory and ongoing research. Due to the continuous development of effective procedures by all role-players and improving terms of engagement, this collaboration is growing less susceptible to the transience of tutors. Every year, the tutor team involved in this project changes without collapsing the collaboration itself. This suggests that within the context of UWC Writing Centre, or perhaps all writing centres, communities of practice can be used as highly effective strategies for embedding academic literacies in curricula, but their sustainability requires strong procedural frameworks and the commitment of proactive teaching staff.

Overall, the collaborative landscape at the UWC Writing Centre contains frequent short-lived and small-scale engagements and a few long-term engagements that grow around a well-defined purpose and evolve into self-sustaining organisms capable of self-check and self-repair. In the written reflections and subsequent discussions in this study, the tutors mostly reference the more established long-term collaborative projects as areas of learning and development. This could imply that these projects carry the most development potential for tutors when compared to shorter projects. It is perhaps, Irene's reflection on her participation in the collaboration with the Faculty of Education that encapsulate the importance of these long-term engagements:

> At the end of the collaborative [engagement for the year], the Writing Centre Coordinator and the Faculty of Education lecturer invited me to collaborate with them on a writing project that reflected on the collaborative work [...], which resulted in a published chapter in 2022. I am proud that this work has paid off in bountiful ways. I feel much more confident as a scholar going into the academic space. The book chapter will bolster my profile as an academic, not only as a publication, but also by demonstrating the ability to work in a team and achieve results.

Whilst the opportunity to participate in collaborative projects is equally accessible to all, it was noted in our discussions that the level of involvement is not the same among the tutors. Tutors are not limited in the roles they can play in these projects. It is clear that the three tutors whose reflections were captured in this study were intentional about playing serious roles in the different projects at the Writing Centre. As such, they were each later invited to take on greater responsibilities, which include leading important projects, participating in research and, in the case of Mapula, formally stepping in as the acting coordinator of the writing centre when the coordinator was on leave. These are privileges only accessible to tutors who prove their ability to handle greater responsibility. There are tutors in the Centre who prefer to play smaller roles in the collaborative projects, even if they had worked at the Centre for a long period. The choice to respond to the available opportunities is a matter of agency (Archer and Parker 2016). Some tutors are overwhelmed by the demands of their postgraduate research and are not able to invest more time in this area.

Multifaceted, multidisciplinary and collaborative roles at the UWC Writing Centre carry innumerable benefits for tutors who intend to pursue an academic career. The varied roles played by the writing tutors increase their capacity to handle greater professional responsibility and train them to adapt quickly in dynamic environments. The majority of writing tutors at the UWC Writing Centre are black African students, many of whom grew up in underprivileged communities, far removed from opportunity and influence that can afford them entry into the academic environment. However, collaborative and cross-disciplinary engagements at the Writing Centre bring these tutors faster to the 'big players' table' where they work directly with established academics. Here they can access mentorship, professional networks and career guidance. They also learn skills in leadership, management, conflict resolution and communication. These interactions afford them the recognition from potential future managers and supervisors. Importantly, tutors coming out of the Writing Centre with this vast experience and entering an academic career can potentially bring innovation and transformative developments into their research and teaching practices.

Conclusion

Writing centres are often undervalued and even invisible within university contexts. Whilst much research has been done about writing centre work with regard to students, with some exceptions, the growth and development process that *writing tutors* undergo, through working at a writing centre has not been widely researched. The reflections of the co-researchers in this study elucidated ways in which the UWC Writing Centre contributed to the development of tutors as emerging academics. Furthermore, the processes of development that Writing Centre tutors undergo can make a contribution to social justice and transformation in higher education.

We identified two ways in which working at the Writing Centre supported the co-researchers' development of academic, professional identity. Firstly, awareness about teaching and learning practices was raised through deliberate training processes. Furthermore, tutors developed confidence in their identity as legitimate and authentic academic professionals through working closely with experienced academics. The transformative potential of the Writing Centre was apparent in the way that tutors' experiences of working at the Writing Centre enhanced their awareness of and reflexivity on academic literacies as well as their capacity to support its development. We argue that such consciousness can extend into their pedagogical practices as academics. In a context where there is a diverse body of students from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds (Mdepa and Tshiwula 2012), academics who proactively develop academic literacies within their disciplinary contexts can reduce barriers to success at university.

Secondly, we found that the UWC Writing Centre not only socialises tutors into conventional academic identities with respect to teaching and learning, but can also assist them to manage evolving academic identities within an increasingly complex and dynamic university environment. Tutors highlighted capabilities that could smooth the way to navigating this context, including adaptability to the changing demands of an academic, ability to transgress disciplinary boundaries, innovation, teamwork and the ability to draw on collegial expertise. For tutors such as those at UWC, who are likely to emerge from marginalised backgrounds, having the tools and confidence to navigate complex academic identities can draw them from the margins to the core of academic communities of practice.

Even though reflections by tutors in this study highlight numerous developmental opportunities within the UWC Writing Centre, there is a need for a closer examination of the context within which such capabilities are developed. Reflections by tutors revealed that capabilities that were developed emerged from both deliberate and unintended processes. They pointed out deliberate

developmental processes that facilitated their sensitivity to academic literacies and their ability to work in cross-disciplinary contexts. However, other capabilities such as adaptability in dynamic contexts were tacitly developed as secondary outcomes of tutors' election to engage in different communities of practice. There is immense value in opportunities for experiential learning where tutors learn through agentic participation in communities of practice. We acknowledge, however, that because of the way that work is structured at the Writing Centre, not all tutors elect to take up these opportunities or they may participate in projects without taking the initiative that facilitates learning. The extent to which developmental opportunities are accessed by our tutors is worth exploring as we extend our research to other tutors in the writing centre. Ironically, it is likely that the lack of resources of the Writing Centre, particularly the fact that there is only one academic post, has increased the development of the pro-active tutors in the Centre, since they were called on to participate in tasks that might otherwise have been done by academic staff. Thus, while the under-resourced nature of the Writing Centre has meant that its overall work is constrained, there has been innovation and significant growth of tutors arising out of it.

In this initial phase of our study, which is based on reflections and discussions of three co-researchers and the Writing Centre coordinator, we see opportunities to expand spaces and communities of practice in which tutor development takes place within our Centre. These spaces can be enhanced by sustaining and extending collaborations with other structures within the institution, such as departments, faculties and student support services. In order for such expansion to take place, we need more recognition and support from the institution. This phase of our study suggests that the UWC Writing Centre has transformative potential. We will continue to research this transformative potential and actualisation. We hope that this will foster more recognition, support and collaborative engagement with the UWC Writing Centre.

The next stage of the research will take the data collection process beyond the narratives and reflections of the research team. A further phase will be conducted, which will include various other data-gathering tools, including interviews with current and past tutors of the UWC Writing Centre, focus groups and analysis of artefacts. We will hold regular reflections as researchers and these reflections will also be part of the data set. Our assumptions are that those tutors who choose to take up opportunities within the Centre undergo significant processes of development, particularly those who form a 'bigger picture' of the purpose of the Centre and see the potential for their own growth within this. We are also interested in the limitations and flaws of the Writing Centre context with regard to the facilitation of development that we are researching. Lastly, we would like to hear the ideas of past and present tutors about how the findings of this research could be taken further in higher education spheres of practice.

We believe that all writing centres are facilitating development of their tutors, but they do so in different ways. During this period, we plan to engage with other writing centres in South Africa and possibly some international writing centres about the role that writing centres can play in facilitating development of tutors. Through communication and collaboration, we can all learn from each other. We can also formulate strategies for increasing the visibility and valuing of writing centres and advocate for more recognition of writing centre work, including their role in facilitating development of writing tutors as emerging academics.

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