Chapter Ten

Reimagining Writing Centre Consultant Training: Establishing a Conceptual, Reflective and Values-based Approach to Support Transformative Learning

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Introduction

The consultation space and the consultants (tutors) who work with students in these spaces, are the heart of a writing centre and the most powerful means we have through which to effect transformative change. Yet, despite this potential, consultations often remain largely text-focussed, primarily attending to the immediate needs of students and thus reinforcing normative institutional practices, with little attention to students' authorial identity development. To address this challenge and align consultation practices with a vision of writing centres as transformative learning spaces, we argue that writing centres need to rethink their approach to consultant training.

In this chapter, we, staff members of the Faculty of Health Science Writing Lab (FHS WL) at the University of Cape Town (UCT), present our argument for the impetus to reimagine consultant training, review the literature that has informed our thinking and, alongside this, provide a descriptive narrative of how this has influenced the development of our consultant training programme. We then present a critical reflection on our experiences of this process, by exploring the challenges, affordances and benefits we have encountered on the journey. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for other writing centres who are similarly interested in adopting strategies to strengthen the transformative potential of writing centre spaces.

Writing centres as transformative learning spaces

In South Africa, writing centre scholarship has been strongly influenced by the transformative

ideology (Lillis and Scott 2007) of the academic literacies approach (Lea and Street 1998; see Clarence and Dison 2017 for a review). This body of work has developed our understanding of academic literacies as a complex suite of contextually-situated, socially-negotiated practices, which both influence and express a writer's identity. Accordingly, many writing centres have expanded their focus from students' immediate writing products (texts) to their longitudinal development as writers.

These ideas were central in guiding the establishment of the FHS WL (Muna et al. 2019) and are the foundation from which we are developing our identity and vision for the WL as a mutually transformative learning space (Grimm 1996). For us, this means a space in which we work to address the power imbalance between educator and student by reinforcing students' ownership of their learning, development and texts and by recognising that we too are on a learning journey; and where, from an Interpretivist perspective, we endeavour to recognise the diversity of students' knowledges as their truth, by resisting normative and prescriptive approaches in favour of co-constructing knowledge with students. Ultimately, our goal is to enable and support the important work of transformative identity development (Mezirow 1997), which, for us, has come to mean situating *authorial* identity development as central to what we do. Although this goal has become our Southern Cross, we have encountered multiple confounding and competing factors along our journey towards aligning our work to our values.

While a focus on authorial identity development aligns closely with the espoused sectoral values and goals for transformation and decoloniality in higher education (UCT Curriculum Change Working Group 2018), the systemic and practical application of these is lagging. Writing centres still exist in service to the institution, providing support to students to enable their academic success. And, to evaluate this 'success', students are still primarily required to write for assessment purposes, which creates a high-risk, performance-orientated environment that rewards those who demonstrate proficiency in the assessment criteria within the prescribed timeframes (Luckett and Shay 2020). To mitigate the risks and succeed within this system, most students prioritise instrumental goals (Grimm 1996; Dowse and Van Rensburg 2011; Cheung et al. 2018), such as meeting assignment criteria and deadlines and achieving particular grades and so often want consultants to tell them what to do, or 'fix' their texts (North 1984; Dowse and Van Rensburg 2011; Clarence 2019). As a result and in a well-intentioned effort to meet the students' most pressing needs (Simpson 2011; Clarence 2019), consultants are pulled into tension between the transformative ideologies valued by the writing centre and normative values and approaches that are rewarded by the institutional system, with the latter often winning out.

By repeatedly allowing only the instrumental goals to take priority, we undermine students' authorial identity development and risk perpetuating colonial and normative practices inherent in the system (Lillis and Scott 2007; Clarence 2019). And yet, if we do not prioritise students' immediate needs, we risk losing sight of the text (Lillis and Scott 2007), dismissing students' valid concerns (Grimm 2009) and risking our institutional reputation (Clarence 2019). It is therefore clear that if we want to narrow this gap and mitigate the risks, a balance must be struck that equilibrates the tensions experienced between addressing instrumental and developmental goals.

Furthermore, as each student represents a dynamic and unique intersection of knowledge, identities and proficiencies (Archer 2010), consultants cannot be taught a pre-determined set of practices (Nicklay 2012) that will allow them to effectively meet all students' needs. Thus, the challenge for the WL has been in finding flexible ways to equip and train consultants to maintain sight of and address both the immediate and long-term needs of a diverse student population in a manner that affirms and empowers students to take conscious ownership of their writing as a representation of themselves and to use their own knowledges and literacies to engage with and reshape academic 'norms'.

Writing centre consultant training: Challenges and risks

The goal of consultant training is to prepare consultants to meet the needs of a diverse student population, through developing their understanding of the importance, challenges and pedagogies of academic literacies (Archer and Parker 2016). Although the nature and focus of training varies from one centre to another, consultants usually receive intensive training following their recruitment, with further training throughout their tenure (Nichols 1998; Archer 2008; Daniels and Richards 2011; Boughey 2012; Arbee and Samuel 2015; Muna et al. 2019).

In terms of theoretical and conceptual issues, training generally includes topics such as: the social nature of language (Nichols 1998; Archer 2008); writing as process (Lewanika and Archer 2011); the idea of writing as thinking (Nichols 1998; Lewanika and Archer 2011); the role of audience (Nichols 1998; Boughey 2012); academic voice and plagiarism (Lewanika and Archer 2011); cultural translation (Nichols 1998; Daniels and Richards 2011); access and redress (Archer 2008); ethics and logistics (Nichols 1998); the principles and goals of collaborative consultations (Nichols 1998; Archer 2008; Boughey 2012) and generic language development (Arbee and Samuel 2015). While, in relation to practice, training tends to focus on consultation activities and strategies such as: task

analysis (Lewanika and Archer 2011); error analysis (Nichols 1998); evaluation and self-evaluation (Nichols 1998; Lewanika and Archer 2011); genre teaching (Archer 2010; Lewanika and Archer 2011; Boughey 2012); constructive feedback (Boughey 2012); collaborative discussion (Nichols 1998; Daniels and Richards 2011; Dowse and Van Rensburg 2011); using a Socratic approach (Nichols 1998); educating students on academic voice and plagiarism (Lewanika and Archer 2011); and improving students' sense of coherence and cohesion (Lewanika and Archer 2011).

At the WL, we devote approximately 10 per cent of consultants' time to training, with the whole team (two full-time academics and four part-time postgraduate consultants) meeting for about four hours once a month to learn together. Yet, despite the comprehensive range of theories, concepts, practices and strategies which consultants are commonly exposed to, we, like other writing centre coordinators and consultants, are aware that there is often a disjuncture or 'gap' between the theory covered in training and the practices employed when working with students (Clarence 2019; Dowse and Van Rensburg 2011; Simpson 2011). In part, this theory-practice gap is likely due to consultants' challenges with internalising writing centre theories and applying these in practice (Simpson 2011). However, it also derives from the tension consultants experience when prioritising between students' immediate instrumental goals and their longitudinal development as writers. We believe that it is possible to ease this tension by actively seeking alignment between these seemingly competing priorities and agree with Clarence (2017) that what is required is a conceptual 'toolkit' that enables navigation between the theories which inform our understanding and thinking about writing and the practices through which we apply these to text.

Narrowing the theory-practice gap: Aligning instrumental and developmental goals

We began to rethink our approach to consultant training in 2019, when we encountered a paper by Cheung et al., (2018) in which they describe their qualitative analysis of academics' understanding of the domain's authorial identity. Like Cheung et al., (2018), we understand authorial identity as the sense of self an author has and how they represent themselves in their texts (Pittam et al. 2009).

Cheung et al's. (2018) framework identified five key domains of authorial identity: confidence, valuing writing, ownership and attachment, authorial thinking and authorial goals; and two sub-domains: tacit knowledge and negotiating identities. Based on our own close reading of theirs and others' work (Pittam et al. 2009; Maguire et al. 2013; Cheung et al. 2015), we understand these

domains as follows. Authorial confidence is understood as the belief or feeling that you can rely on, or trust in, your ability to write and think well. Valuing writing relates to the value you attribute to your own writing, as well as to writing across a variety of genres and contexts as part of the process of learning and constructing knowledge. Ownership and attachment are understood as taking pride in your work and the sense that the ideas expressed are your own. Authorial thinking refers to the expression of individual, creative thought and thought processes. Authorial goals relate to how writers intentionally communicate with their target audiences to persuade them about an idea or perspective. Tacit knowledge is understood as the aspects of successful writing that are not the focus of conscious thought or attention. As a sub-domain, tacit knowledge can be understood in terms of the attitudes, perspectives and practices required to develop within each of the main domains described above. Finally, negotiating identities refers to how a writer manages their various personal, academic and professional identities and how these identities influence their authorial identity projected through the text.

This framework echoes current understandings about the features of a mature authorial identity (Archer 2010; Bird 2013; Cheung et al. 2017; Pemberton 1994; Pittam et al. 2009) and is congruent with established frameworks for authorial identity, such as developed by Ivanic (1998). However, while Ivanic's (1998) framework primarily organises the domains of authorial identity at the level of the social 'possibilities for selfhood' (p23), Cheung et al.'s (2018) framework offers a refined view of these domains in more direct relation to the level of the discourse. As such, Cheung et al.'s (2018) framework represents a practical and helpful contribution within which theories can be operationalised, practices can be organised and pedagogical interventions can be orientated.

Although we also recognise limitations with this framework – it was developed based solely on perspectives from the global North, it does not provide clear definitions for all the conceptual domains identified, nor does it fully define the relationships between the domains - we still feel that it offers a valuable and productive starting point for bringing theory and practice into closer alignment.

We began adapting and developing the framework through our monthly training sessions; producing definitions and operationalising each of the key domains, mapping out how we might see levels of development within these domains manifest in student talk and text and curating collections of consultation practices and strategies that could be consciously put to work to address specific needs.

Following this initial phase, we focused training sessions on individual domains by reading and discussing literature, developing associated resources for students and continuing to adapt the

framework.

By positioning each domain of authorial identity as a developmental goal and orientating training around these goals, we sought to empower ourselves to make thoughtful assessments about the areas of development where a particular student could most benefit from our support. Likewise, when students raised concerns about their texts, we wanted to be better able to see how these issues related to specific aspects of authorial development.

Although this initial shift in our approach to training enabled valuable intellectual gains in terms of how we were able to think and talk about our work, it did not seem to produce a similar level of impact in the consultation space. Consultants continued to express challenges with applying theory in practice and the short reports written by consultants following each consultation continued to describe a primary focus on text development.

We needed to focus our attention more explicitly on both our practice - by critically exploring what we were doing during consultations - and on the relationship *between* theory and practice - by finding a vehicle through with to navigate the pathway connecting theory to practice and practice to theory. It is in this regard, we view action research as offering a valuable approach.

Narrowing the theory-practice gap: Using action research to enable consultant development

Action research (AR) is a method of enquiry primarily focussed on '...improving the quality of human life, acquiring knowledge to become better practitioners and developing strategies to address problems.' (Beaulieu 2013: 33). However, in terms of the context and goals and thus design of the research, there is significant variability (see Beaulieu 2013 for a review). As such, researchers and practitioners need to make careful and considered choices regarding the form of AR that most appropriately aligns with their ideological orientations.

AR is a formal and legitimate qualitative research method, which can yield 'living' theoretical explanations about the contextualised focus of the research (Beaulieu 2013; McNiff and Whitehead 2010). However, AR can also be used as a scholarly activity to both improve practice and enable 'authentic professional learning' (Webster-Wright 2009) and development, although this latter goal has attracted some criticism (Beaulieu 2013; McNiff and Whitehead 2010; Newton and Burgess 2008, Noffke 1997). As Noffke (1997) highlights, the use of AR for professional development raises questions of power and privilege – who is being developed? To what end? And, in whose interests?

While Webster-Wright (2009) critiques the terms 'development' and 'training' as implying some deficit on the part of the professional. As we intended to use AR as a scholarly and developmental activity, we were attentive to these concerns. Given the standard writing centre model of employing postgraduate students as consultants, there is a legitimate need for training and development, as consultants are learning to perform a role that is new to them. However, alongside this, we have been conscious of using AR to enable consultants to direct their learning and critically reflect on their own practice. Our adoption of McNiff and Whitehead's (2010) values-based approach to AR aligns with the transformative ideology of the Writing Lab and provides a cyclical framework for learning, practice, reflection, evaluation and development, through which we can continually improve how we authentically live our transformative values through our day-to-day work with students' texts.

An important foundational principle is that the focus of the research is on the practitioner's (or, researcher's) own actions. As McNiff and Whitehead explain (2010: 36), 'You cannot "improve" someone, or "educate" them, because people improve and educate themselves.' This idea aligns with a transformative perspective of educators as facilitators, rather than owners, of students' learning (Mezirow 1997) and with a focus on dismantling traditional power structures. As such, if we want to improve students' authorial identity development (the impact of our teaching practice), rather than trying to 'improve' students, we should focus on improving our own practice through learning and reflection, so that students will respond in positive ways (McNiff and Whitehead 2010).

A second important principle is that the goals for improvement should be values-based. In other words, practitioners must identify the values they want to embody through their practice and focus on researching their actions to better understand what they do and why they do it, in relation to living their values (McNiff and Whitehead 2010). The affordance of this is that it allows the space for utilising a wide variety of pedagogical practices, while still maintaining a clear developmental focus, by holding the practitioner accountable to their value/s.

These two principles go some way to mitigate the concerns raised regarding issues of power (Beaulieu 2013; McNiff and Whitehead 2010; Newton and Burgess 2008; Noffke 1997; Webster-Wright 2009). Although the WL, as an institutional unit retains power in terms of implementing and structuring the training programme and activities, the primary site of development lies with the consultant themselves and they are in control of how to direct their learning. As such, within the structure of the programme, the consultants' power to retain ownership of their learning journey is respected and reinforced. Each consultant embodies both the researcher and the research subject and in this way is positioned as a knowledge maker.

Through our training programme, we began to explore our personal and collective values and how our values aligned, or could be aligned, with the conceptual domains of authorial identity development (Cheung et al. 2018). For example, the domain of authorial confidence, can also be framed as *valuing authorial confidence*. Through this process, we became better able to align our values with the theories informing our work and acutely aware of the need to hold our practices accountable.

In AR (McNiff and Whitehead 2010), holding practice accountable to values is largely mediated through critical reflection, which takes both personal and social issues into account (Hatton and Smith 1995) and is an essential practice in transformative learning (Mezirow 1997). Through reflection, claims to new knowledge about practice are interrogated in relation to evidence and values (McNiff and Whitehead 2010). This interrogation occurs first on an individual or 'personal' level and then at a group or 'social' level, where members of the group act as 'critical friends' (Costa and Kallick 1993; McNiff and Whitehead 2010) by providing feedback and constructive critique to one another. Learnings derived from reflection are then applied to future actions, leading to revised or refined claims to knowledge about practice. Through an iterative process, personal claims to knowledge may become validated at the social level and ultimately legitimised as living theory (McNiff and Whitehead 2010). We introduced reflection in two ways: firstly, by encouraging a practice of *regular* individual reflection and secondly, through critically reflective discussions as part of our meetings.

After each consultation, consultants complete a short report, the intention of which is to enable continuity in terms of the support students receive. As many students often only visit once per an assignment (especially at the undergraduate level), the focus in terms of continuity should not be on the text, which is likely to change, but rather on the student – making these reports the ideal site in which to consider aspects of students' authorial identity development. We therefore integrated a space for individual reflection into this existing system, which both encouraged a focus on authorial development and a practice of regular reflection.

Student reports are an integrated function of the WCONLINE (v8.0.77. ©2023) scheduling and consultation software we use. As part of our training programme, we developed and piloted several iterations of a guide to encourage engagement with both instrumental and developmental goals and the interrogation of practice. Our current version (Table 1) provides consultants with a series of prompting questions for each section of the report. These questions still speak to the issues consultants typically described in their reports, such as the student's reasons for visiting the WL, aspects of the student's writing practice that were addressed and aspects of the student's writing that need further support. However, consultants often framed their comments about these in direct

relation to the text, thus here we have purposefully framed the questions in direct relation to the student. Building on this existing functionality of the report, the reflective guide further prompts consultants to also describe how the consultation addressed aspects of the student's development as a writer and to reflect on their assessment of the students' needs, areas for further writer development and the effectiveness of the consultation.

Table 1. Reflective guide for completing student report forms

Report Section	**Reflective questions**
Issues addressed:	Why did the student come to the Writing Lab? From the students' perspective, what aspect/s of their writing did they want to work on? From your perspective, did this align with your assessment as a consultant? For example, a student may come for help with coherence (authorial thinking), but through talking with them, you found that their thinking was clear, but they lacked a sense of purpose (authorial goals). Descriptive overview of the consultation How did the consultation progress? For example, did you begin with a discussion and then read together and then analyse a section of text? What aspects of the student's development as a writer did you focus on and how? For example, did you focus on building confidence by providing positive constructive feedback on everything they had done well? What aspects of the student's writing practice did you focus on and how? For example, did you focus on integrating sources, or writing a strong comprehensive conclusion?
Issues that still need to be addressed:	What aspects of the students' development as a writer need further support? For example, building confidence or developing authorial goals? What aspects of their writing practice need further support? For example, how to do a task analysis or writing a comprehensive paragraph?
Additional comments:	What worked well? What tools or approaches did you use that helped the student to move forward in some way? Why do you think these strategies were successful? What didn't work? What tools or approaches did you try that the student was not receptive to? Why do you think these strategies were unsuccessful? Based on your analysis, what would you do differently next time and why?

The practice of individual reflection has been reinforced and supported by the reflective group discussions, which have become a standard part of our monthly training programme. This space for social reflection has allowed consultants more opportunities to explore the affective domain of their work and their personal values with a group of people, who are all acting as critical friends to one another.

Critical reflections on the development of our consultant training programme

In response to the call for chapters for this volume and building on our established practice of reflection, we, the authors of this chapter, held a series of four reflective discussions to critically interrogate the development of our consultant training programme and explore our experiences of this process in relation to the challenges and risks we faced and the opportunities and affordances we encountered.

Method

Participants

Ideally, the whole WL team would have participated in the critical reflection. However, due to the demands of their Ph.D. studies, two WL consultants chose not to participate. As such, this work includes and represents four of the six members of the WL staff team.

Natashia is a senior lecturer and has been the coordinator of the WL since its establishment in 2015. Taahira is a full-time lecturer (appointed in 2018) and a Ph.D. student in the WL. Both Natashia and Taahira have previously worked as writing centre consultants and both also hold postgraduate qualifications in the biosciences. Nontobeko and Veneshley are currently both health sciences Ph.D. students; Nontobeko is a senior consultant, appointed in 2018 and Veneshley is a novice consultant, appointed in 2022.

Research design and data collection

To explore and reflect on our experiences of the WL consultant training programme, we held a series of four reflective discussions over a two-month period in 2022. Each discussion was initiated by a single prompt circulated before the meeting:

1. Discussion 1: Critically reflect on how you experience tensions, challenges, risks and opportunities as a WL staff member.

2. Discussion 2: Critically reflect on the affordances and limitations of an AR approach to staff/consultant training.

3. Discussion 3: Critically reflect on how you have put AR into practice, highlighting challenges and lessons.

4. Discussion 4: Critically reflect on your professional learnings, highlighting challenges and lessons.

Discussions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and took place in either a hybrid or fully online format through the Microsoft (MS) Teams platform. This platform allows the organiser of the meeting to record a video and automated transcription of the meeting, both of which are integrated functions of the MS Teams Office application. The recordings were automatically saved to the WL's OneDrive account and the transcriptions were downloaded for analysis in an access-controlled MS Team.

Data production and analysis

Natashia and Taahira assumed primary responsibility for the data production and analysis, however all four authors participated in the process. Guided by Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (2006; 2019), we began by familiarising ourselves with the data. As part of this process, the automated transcription of each discussion was checked against the video recording of the discussion and corrected for transcription errors. The four clean transcripts were then combined into a single word document for analysis. Taking a primarily deductive approach, we collaboratively

coded the data for content related to our discussion prompts, with all authors contributing to the process and providing clarity regarding their meanings in relation to codes assigned to their own data items (that is, those things which they themselves said during the discussions).

In seeking to identify both semantic and latent meanings, we worked recursively to generate, refine and define themes in the data related to the experience of being a WL staff member, the adoption of an AR approach to our training and the impact this has had on our professional learning. The intention of this process was not to achieve consensus, but rather to surface the diversity of our perspectives as a source of richness in relation to shared meanings or themes. Below, we discuss the following themes: 'There are inherent tensions in the role of WL staff member' (which speaks to the competing goals and priorities we face); 'A focus on professional learning can feel like a competing priority' (which speaks to the challenges of introducing new ways of learning); 'Learning a new 'language' takes time' (which recognises the protracted process of acquiring new theoretical orientations); 'Using a conceptual framework enables flexibility' (which highlights the affordances of these tools for recognising alignment between theory and practice); 'negotiating priorities is risky business' (which acknowledges the risks consultants face and the social nature of language and learning as protective factors); 'Establishing a reflective practice is hard for scientists' (which speaks to the challenges of traversing disciplinary contexts); 'Structure is both constraining and supportive' (which explores how we have engaged with adopting and using these tools); and 'Reflection enables you to grow differently' (which highlights the transformative learning experience).

Description and interpretation

There are inherent tensions in the role of WL staff member

In reflecting on their roles, both Natashia and Taahira highlighted ideological orientations, national imperatives, institutional priorities and contextual issues (discussed earlier in this chapter) as informing their perspectives. Natashia positioned her role as coordinator as synonymous with the WL, seeing it as a representation of herself, 'We have a particular kind of ideology and there are certain practices and theories that we recognise as valuable... [we serve] the students...we serve the institution...But there's also this...movement of activism around transformation and decoloniality, that we also feel very kind of called to be part of...'

Given the array of competing priorities around the WL, this perspective enabled an equilibrated sense of responsibility for Natashia, however she also recognised that it obscured some of the

internal tensions, '... sitting in the role as the coordinator – sort of holding the Writing Lab, so to speak – I look at things from that perspective. And when I do, it means I miss certain things that others see, because they are differently positioned in the space.'

Taahira positioned herself in tension between the students and the consultants, saying 'there's a lot of emphasis on the responsibility towards the students we serve ... But we also have a responsibility to the students we employ ... the consultants.' While she recognised the risks of over-prioritising consultants' needs, especially given that they will move on once they graduate, she still felt responsible for their development. Taahira highlighted the challenges postgraduate student consultants face such as heavy workloads and the precarious nature of part-time employment and felt that, 'Having been in that previous kind of consultant role gives us this affordance to change kind of the way we see consultants and where they head to in future. I'm talking about capacity development.' She described her view of the consultant role akin to Dowse and Van Rensburg (2011) as an opportunity, 'for rehearsal to becoming an academic or an educator, a teacher, whatever you will. Alright, so we've got this opportunity for kind of true transformation.'

Although the WL does provide a mutually transformative learning space (Grimm 1996), which we view as beneficial to consultants, transformative learning is an uncomfortable process (Mezirow 1997). Veneshley articulated this discomfort as a,

> constant battle between yourself and your studies and being a student and a consultant and that's kind of why it's a challenge...you're constantly trying to be flexible and you're trying to see how you can work with the different people...in the different spaces and those different roles. So you're constantly adapting.

The need to constantly adapt also echoed in Nontobeko's description of feeling pulled between 'what the writing centre stands for, as well as the students' goals and my own goals', as she strove to, 'work collaboratively with the students, to help them to build confidence in their ability as writers and just help them see value in the writing and how ideas are being communicated.'

Within this web of competing priorities, both consultants felt primarily responsible for meeting students' immediate needs (Clarence 2019; Simpson 2011), as Veneshley said, 'someone's coming to you about something that they need help with. You want to try your best and see how you can help them.' Thus, the challenge as Nontobeko expressed, lies in 'trying to maybe hold all these roles, or the different things that are expected, with a single goal to ensure that the student is being satisfied with whatever service they are receiving when they come to the writing centre.'

A focus on professional learning can feel like a competing priority

The overarching shift in our programme has been from a focus on student needs to a focus on consultants' professional learning and development as knowledge makers. And to enable this, a shift from learning as an activity that takes place during training sessions, to learning as an activity that is part of our daily practice (Webster-Wright 2009).

In relation to this, Natashia described how she has come to see her own development as aligned with her daily work, 'instead of thinking about how I can improve this student or help this student, you're thinking, how can I improve myself so that the student will respond to me better?' However, for the rest of the team, situating professional learning as part of their practice felt like, as Taahira described, 'that huge tension between the [student's] needs and you know, your own personal needs as well.'

Self-development was interrogated as a competing priority, with Nontobeko asking, 'While improving our practice, do we not then negate the students' immediate needs or goals?' For Veneshley, it produced a sense of uncertainty about her purpose. Although she articulated her main goal as working towards students' development as writers, she also asked,

> if we're going to constantly focus on improving [authorial development], will that not cause some sort of distraction from how we are teaching it, if that makes sense? ... I'm not saying that there is anything wrong with what we're doing. But what I'm trying to say is that I don't want us to get distracted from the main goal.

In part, these contentious feelings arise from the inherent complexities and uncertainties of working with people (Webster-Wright 2009). However, the experience of this may be exacerbated when also necessitating a paradigmatic shift. As Natashia highlighted,

> science has a strongly positivist perspective that we are trying to achieve a singular version of the truth. So, we're trying to figure out the facts, basically what is known? What is always true? What is absolute? But when we move into a social science space and educational space, like the Writing Lab, because we're now dealing with people and their lived experiences and their identities, that singular version of the truth is just not aligned or applicable to this kind of work. We have to think from an interpretivist perspective that recognises that there are multiple truths. Because what each person is

> experiencing is true for them and may be different from everybody else. That doesn't mean that it isn't true. So, I think it's about that shift that has to happen and that's a difficult shift because that's a paradigm shift.

And, in addition to these overarching shifts in ontology, there is also the need to grapple with differences between the process and outcomes of learning as a student, with which consultants are familiar and the ways of learning as a professional (Webster-Wright 2009).

Learning a new 'language' takes time

There was also a strong assertion among the group that coming to understand theory was a challenging and protracted process. As Natashia reflected, 'it probably wasn't until into my second or third year working as a consultant that I really started to feel like I understood academic literacies and that theory and what that theory was saying about how things worked ... it took time.'

Similarly, Nontobeko shared,

> We had trouble at the beginning to understand all these, with the new terms and the new theories and the practice mainly at the writing centre. And I think how we become comfortable with it, it comes with experience and more training. I don't think I could say that I was comfortable at the beginning when I started working at the writing centre ... even now there are things that I'm just like ... what is this?'

These experiences align with a characterisation of learning through stages of, 'initial resistance, conversion and continued uncertainty' (Wilson 1994 cited in Simpson 2011: 179). Yet despite these difficulties, there was also a recognition of this discomfort as part of the learning process (Mezirow 1997). As Nontobeko explained, 'I think it's OK to have tension, as long as everything works well together to push you to be a better version of yourself or improve or develop your practice ... I guess you can't expect to grow without any tension. So, the fact that we are experiencing tension with this model, it means there's growth.' In navigating the pathways between theory and practice, a particular challenge Nontobeko articulated, was regarding the theoretical and conceptual language. She described using this language as, 'a daunting task because it was never like ingrained in our brains, that when you're talking about this, this is what it means. So, we always had to, like, go back to the document and read what is authorial identity'.

However, she indicated that engaging with the discourse in social learning contexts was

particularly supportive (Mezirow 1997; Nichols 1998), saying, 'all the training and having sat through so many sessions of reflecting and talking about difficulties that you might have experienced before and how to handle a certain situation if it were to happen in future, has really helped in the development of my practices.'

Nontobeko further reflected on how, through this learning, she is now able to connect theoretical ideas to student talk and writing and how that enables her to guide the consultation in particular ways.

> Obviously we don't use academic writing terms, or the terms that would be normally used in our training, when consulting with students, but obviously we would look at things ... like authorial thinking. Although we don't really use the words when you are talking to a student and you ask them what they're struggling with and then they start to clarify what they are thinking and what they think the problem is. Then I think that's where authorial thinking comes from. You see an incoherent text and you see that this person has a problem with authorial thinking if there's a lack of critical analytical engagement with the work and therefore you know where to focus...to actually help the student develop as a writer.

Using a conceptual framework enables flexibility

In addition to adopting a situated approach to professional learning as part of our strategy to narrow the theory-practice gap (Webster-Wright 2009), we also began working with tools such as our adapted version of Cheung et al.'s, (2018) conceptual framework for authorial identity development. Although acquiring a theoretical orientation to practice was experienced as a challenging process, the consultants described how the tools have enabled them to work in more flexible ways with a diverse student population (Archer 2010; Nicklay 2012)

Veneshley explained that she is,

> constantly still going back to [the conceptual framework]. It doesn't mean that I don't understand it, but it's because I'm trying to use it as a guide. So, I can definitely narrow down the focus area. Because we are being exposed to different situations ... we get students that come with different tasks, different things, different problems, the different

> areas that needs to be focussed on and so that is why I see the positive of how we are doing things.

Nontobeko also spoke to an increased sense of flexibility,

> So, I think because with having learnt the theory of academic writing and the practices of academic writing and how to go about having consultations with different people, then it teaches you to be able to be very flexible. And obviously because you've been exposed to the different methods of teaching, or collaborating with students, then you're not really overwhelmed with what you have to do in the consultation. And that's only now that I'm like, in quotation marks, a 'senior consultant'. Like at the beginning, I was really uncomfortable with students who just wanted me to teach, teach, teach. And I think now I understand where they might be coming from and I think I am able to accommodate that.

In this sense the conceptual framework not only enabled consultants to better tailor their practice to student needs, but also to be able to see ways to align and accommodate students' instrumental goals in relation to their long-term development as writers (Clarence 2017).

Negotiating priorities is risky business

Although conceptual tools are helpful in enabling us to develop a plan for how we can work with students to support their authorial development (Cheung et al. 2018; Clarence 2017), negotiating student engagement with this in addition to, alongside, or through the students' immediate needs is an uncertain and risky process (Clarence 2019). As Nontobeko expressed,

> the writing centre plays a role in helping students at any stage of their writing process, with obviously an end goal being helping them become independent writers. Whereas, the student, their role is to be able to read and understand a task and answer whatever questions may be posed at them, based on the given guidelines, which then becomes the driving force behind how students think of the tasks they are given and how they become goal orientated and not necessarily concerned with being strong independent writers, just focussed on getting good marks.

Veneshley felt similarly, saying,

> what I find challenging is the fact that we are trying to work towards this goal and what we stand for versus the student ... It's not like development is important to them. They're just trying to get to their deadline. They just want to get the work done. So, it's like you are stuck in the middle and you are trying to see how you can bring the two together, to make sure that you can have an impact on the student to show them that there is more to this thing just finishing that deadline.

As Nontobeko shared, consultants feel the risks of, 'losing the student's interest when trying to push the writing centre narrative, or my own narrative of just helping them build confidence and become independent writers' and 'of creating a narrative, if you focus more on the student's goals, that we are a 'fix it' garage', which can fuel students' expectations for the consultant to know everything, 'I always felt the pressure of knowing everything that the student comes with, whatever problem I need to be able to solve it.'

While consultants are acutely aware of the risk to our relationship with students when we do not fully meet their needs, Nontobeko's comment also highlights the risks that consultants face if they carry too much responsibility as she reflected earlier, to just, 'teach, teach, teach'. Nontobeko described how her practice has developed as she has focussed on applying strategies to equilibrate instrumental and developmental goals.

> I've moved to trying to make the student more responsible for the consultation. So, one of the things that I do, is I ask the student to tell me a bit about the assignment. And, that sort of gets them into a position where they're not expecting you to be the one talking all the time. So, I think once that then settled in their brain that this is not a lecture, or it's not a set up where I'm sitting here telling you what to do. It's supposed to be collaborative ... we share ideas and we talk about things that you've done to work on what you have and where you might be having challenges. And then I come in with, OK, let's see what we can do with that ... I just talk about their previous essay, especially for undergrads and ask them what it is their facilitator commented on. And they usually have the feedback on their laptops and they just go back and be like, 'Oh yeah, but I've worked on this and I think for this part, this is what I'm struggling on'. So, I think moving the responsibility from you as a consultant to it being the student's responsibility to sort

> of be able to pinpoint their areas of improvement really takes away the pressure and it obviously comes with a lot of reflection.

Her approach to consciously using dialogue to help students develop knowledge about their own areas for development not only aligns practice to theory by reinforcing students' ownership of their learning (Cheung et al. 2018; Nichols 1998), but also works to alleviate the burden consultants may feel to 'know everything'. As such, strategically using dialogue to enable and guide student agency is both supportive in that it facilitates the process of negotiating priorities and protective in that it shifts the weight of responsibility away from the consultant.

Establishing a reflective practice is a challenging process for scientists

Although the value of reflection as a strategy for improving the alignment of theory to practice and balancing instrumental and developmental goals (McNiff and Whitehead 2010; Webster-Wright 2009), was collectively acknowledged, so were its associated challenges.

As Nontobeko expressed, '[reflection] is not something that we normally do [in science] and it's even more of a challenge if it's something that you don't really do, even in your personal life.' Veneshley shared similar feelings, 'What is a challenge for me is reflecting on myself, because it's not what you are told to do as a scientist.' Taahira echoed these sentiments, saying, 'it takes a long time to kind of focus on self, especially when you come from a positivist background. So, I'm finally being able to come to grips with reflection and it's part of my daily routine.'

In exploring these discomforts, Taahira posited that they may partly relate to the incongruence between a developmental focus and the largely mechanistic and procedural focus that imbued our basic science training,

> maybe [it is] discipline related? I don't know, maybe just it's 'the Ph.D.' you know? Get the job done. We're not interested in your own development, no one's asking you about your own development. I wonder if that is anything to do with the fact that as scientists, we see the world differently?

As a transformative learning practice, critical reflection requires you to challenges your frames of reference (Mezirow 1997) and interrogate the broader sociocultural contexts that inform experience

(Hatton and Smith 1995). The group's reflections shine a light on the experience of this for consultants who are traversing disciplinary contexts, such as between the hard and social sciences and highlight the associated, 'difficult ... paradigm shift' which Natashia spoke to previously.

Structure is both constraining and supportive

In relation to the protracted process of establishing a reflective practice, the issue of time was particularly concerning for consultants (Clarence 2019; Grimm 1996). As Veneshley shared, 'one of the things that I find challenging is, to basically find sufficient time to reflect properly.' Consultants felt that the use of structured prompts to guide individual reflections after each consultation exacerbated this issue. Nontobeko reflected that, 'sometimes you have back-to-back appointments. Sometimes you will have appointments that are so draining that you can't do anything after and you just leave the client report for another day. But even then, like having to write that much detail in a client report needs time.'

Nontobeko further explained,

> while it's very useful in giving you a structure, I feel that it's limiting in a way that you are limited to always going back to using these terms that we chose for this conceptual framework ... So, when you do your reflection, it's almost like you have this booklet that limits your reflection in a way that you always have to refer back to this, whereas if you didn't have this, then you would just like generally reflect on what happened in the consultation: What did the students say? How did you respond to it? And what were the things that were not said, that gave away how the student might be feeling or what they might be struggling with? So, you sort of always have to go back to like using these terms of the authorial confidence and stuff. Whereas, if it was not [action] research, you almost used like informal language of reflection.

Although the structured prompts are not a necessary part of reflection, Natashia expressed concern that without this structure, we might default back to simply reporting on consultation activities, rather than interrogating our practice. 'My feeling with the client report forms and maybe it's there in the title "client report forms", is that they do get used as reports, they don't get used as reflective spaces organically. It's not the default to use it as a reflective space.'

Natashia further added that for her, the structure also offers a way to acknowledge,

> students' immediate needs, which is the sort of typical things that would go into a client report form. What were the immediate needs? What did we do? How did we address those? Right? And then the need to still be thinking about authorial identity development...despite the challenges, this approach has value because it does push you, or give you a structured way, to be conscious about applying the theory in your practice.

Veneshley shared this perspective, saying that the structured reflection was the very thing that, 'allows us to narrow that [theory-practice] gap to bring the two together.'

In terms of navigating the challenges associated with reflection, Nontobeko highlighted the value of the AR approach saying, 'now at least we have, like something structured, we sort of have a guide ... I feel like that's what action research does for us.'

The experience of structure as both constraining and supportive draws attention to issues of power (Beaulieu 2013; McNiff and Whitehead 2010; Newton and Burgess 2008; Noffke 1997; Webster-Wright 2009). Although the structures were collaboratively developed and adopted by the team, the directive to do so came in a hierarchical manner via Natashia as the coordinator, as part of her vision for the WL. Although the reflections demonstrate initial feelings of resistance and resentment, as consultants have continued to use the tools, their comments indicate how they have come to find them to be supportive for aligning theory to practice (Cheung et al. 2018; Clarence 2017) and enabling a practice of situated professional learning through regular reflection (McNiff and Whitehead 2010; Webster-Wright 2009).

Reflection allows you to grow differently

To mitigate issues of power we have been conscious to create a space in which each team member can direct their learning in relation to their own values (McNiff and Whitehead 2010). The impact of this has been in the experience of growth that extends beyond the walls of the WL. As Nontobeko described,

> with action research, we're obviously afforded a chance to do some introspection and

> actually grow and improve in our practice. Which not only obviously impacts how we interact with students, but I feel like it also has an impact on how you interact on, like your daily life, because you learn things about yourself that you might have not noticed if you didn't have to do like a reflection on yourself ... action research forces you to actually go through this whole reflection process and come up with a plan on how to change, or how to implement change and what to do differently.

Veneshley described the WL space and the role of a consultant as an opportunity for 'a different type of growth'. She described this as, 'personal development, personal growth and how you can improve', with the WL providing a unique space to engage with values.

> You're thinking about things that are important to you, that you can use to basically help the student or the people that you are working with. So, it comes down to you. Whereas in the Ph.D., your values don't matter. I know this sounds very harsh, but this is literally what it is. It's not about your values, it's about your work.

Taahira highlighted how she has found reflection to be a protective practice which can be used to debrief after stressful situations, 'I use it as a breakout, or if I'm feeling overwhelmed, you know, after workshop, you know, I just stop and I say, "OK, what happened there? What did I learn?"' This protective effect can also function through shifting our sense of positionality. Veneshley spoke to how reflection centres you, which can provide an appreciative reframing of sitting in tension between two things, 'I feel like the reflective part allows you to put yourself in the middle, so this is the part where it comes to the personal development ... so, that, I feel, it's a positive, because it allows you to grow differently.' She added,

> as much as reflection is a challenge, it's also a lesson because you start questioning your own identity and how it shapes you and your interactions with others in those different spaces, so you constantly learning to facilitate, or you're trying to improve your own teaching practices, your own interactions and your responses. So, you are more attentive at the end of the day.

These reflections highlight how the structure of tools such as the conceptual framework, the AR

approach and the reflective prompts have collectively supported a mutually transformative learning space and experience (Mezirow 1997).

Recommendations and conclusion

In this chapter, we have presented a description and reflection of our journey to establishing a consultant training programme that prioritises using a structured conceptual, reflective and values-based approach. Our reflections have highlighted an array of challenges and affordances we experienced and highlighted strengths and gaps in our programme, which is in an ongoing state of development. We conclude now by briefly distilling some of the lessons we have learnt, offering recommendations to others about the features of our programme that have been effective.

The WL, situated and positioned as it is, both within and between spaces as a transformative learning environment (Grimm 1996; Mezirow 1997), means that staff continuously experience tension between various competing demands and priorities, regardless of the role they occupy. For consultants, who are traversing disciplinary spaces, the introduction of professional learning (Webster-Wright 2009) as an individual and collective activity that occurs not only during training, but is situated in practice as well, can feel like yet another demand and expose them to further tension and feelings of risk. In addition, consultants may face significant paradigmatic incongruences and challenges to their way of being. To mitigate these tensions and help staff negotiate between and align competing priorities, we need to engage with the discourse in social learning contexts as we would with students (Mezirow 1997; Nichols 1998).

Including critically reflective discussions as part of training provides a space within which staff can unpack weighty ideas related to world views, values and theory, alongside the day-to-day activities of the writing centre. Furthermore, by reflecting within a social setting, individuals also come to appreciate a wider range of perspectives, which is important as although we may share values, the different roles we embody mean that we understand and prioritise these values differently.

In addition to exploring the relationship between positionality and practice, discussion spaces also give consultants an opportunity to practice using theoretical language, the unfamiliarity with which was identified as a major challenge in applying theory to consultation practices and in reflection. Theory acquisition can also be supported by collaboratively developing and adopting conceptual tools. We recommend that other centres consider including activities that actively work to align the theories and ideological orientations that inform your practice, with ways that

consultants engage with students. Consultants articulated that once they were comfortable using the theory, they felt substantive gains in their practice. This was expressed particularly in terms of being able to identify areas for authorial development across a diverse range on students and better manage the challenges of the consultation space.

Although the conceptual framework (Cheung et al. 2018) was helpful for identifying areas for development, negotiating with students to give these attention exposes consultants to professional and personal risks. Consultants need to be equipped with practices that enable them to equilibriabate the tensions between students' immediate needs and their long-term authorial identity development.

Including a structured approach to regular reflection was especially helpful in maintaining a view of both students' instrumental and developmental goals, as well as supporting consultants' acquisition of the theory and AR (McNiff and Whitehead 2010) was recognised as particularly important in guiding this process.

However, although staff came to see these practices and tools as enabling a transformative learning journey that extends beyond their role in the WL (Mezirow 1997), there were structural features of the programme that encountered initial resistance. One of the key challenges cited was the time required to engage with reflection in an authentic and meaningful way.

Within writing centres, time is always a limiting factor as writers work towards deadlines, budgets constrain the number of consulting hours available and consultants occupy the centre transiently between registration and graduation. Determining how best to manage resources and use our time effectively is an important consideration for coordinators who have a responsibility to staff, student and institutional needs.

Although the nature of the WL consultant training programme has changed dramatically, the investment of tangible resources such as budget and time have not. We have continued to devote approximately 10 per cent of our time to training, but how we work during that time has changed. We have also shifted the ways we work with time. By contenting ourselves with a slower, collective journey we have gone further than 'quick-fix' approaches would have achieved and by situating learning in practice, we have also stretched the time we have available.

Investing in consultants may seem like a distraction from the core student business of the writing centre and yet an investment in consultants is an investment in the centre, as they represent our 'frontline' workers. Although consultant turnover is high within writing centres, many go on to occupy academic roles and continue to use what they have learnt to support their future students (Archer and Parker 2016). In this way, an investment in consultants is not about growing our own timber, but rather pollinating the forest.

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