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Academic Literacies in a South African Writing Centre: Student Perspectives on Established Practices

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Abstract

Through a case study conducted in 2014 and 2015 at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa, the researchers collected focus group and survey data to develop a better understanding of the kinds of students who use the university's Writing Centre and their perceptions of the support they receive. The research question at the core of their study asks whether a South African writing centre's academic literacies practices and philosophy should be adapted or changed to better serve today's students.

The results of the study demonstrate that the vast majority of students who visit the writing centre speak English as an additional language and believe they need more writing support with a focus on lower order concerns than that currently offered through the academic literacies approach at the university. The researchers conclude that the South African undergraduate students at the University of Johannesburg need differentiated forms of writing support that go beyond the orthodoxies of the current academic literacies approach embraced by the University's writing centres. The researchers recommend new interventions (including composition courses) and models of writing support that target English as an Additional Language (EAL) students without adopting a deficit-perspective and without abandoning the long-term project of challenging the privileged status of the English language within the institution.

Introduction

In an essay profiling the University of Cape Town (UCT) Writing Centre, Arlene Archer notes that Writing Centres in South Africa "are potentially a locus for change, political spaces with a transformatory agenda, which attempt to transform teaching and learning processes, whilst democratising access to education" (2012, p. 353). She argues that immediately following the end of apartheid, the "realities of educational transformation" led to a close association between Writing Centres and what were then referred to as "Academic Support" units. When they first emerged in the early- and mid-1990s (Dison & Clarence, 2017), many of these Writing Centres were designed to serve a largely remedial function with the goal of simply fixing the "language deficiencies in individual students" (Archer, 2012, p. 353). In other words, a strong current of writing scholarship in South Africa at this time was informed by a so-called "deficit perspective," which assumed that students lacked necessary skills or did not have the necessary linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1977) to be successful at university. From their inception, however, South African Writing Centres have also challenged this deficit model of academic development. As Archer and Richards (2011) observe, Writing Centres have always been able to take advantage of their unique institutional location, their status as semi-autonomous or liminal spaces, and serve as agents of change for students who have been historically disadvantaged and denied access to higher education. Indeed, Writing Centres in South Africa (and, we would argue, elsewhere) often find themselves simultaneously "helping students gain access to dominant practices and helping them to critique these same practices on which their success depends" (Archer & Richards, 2011, p. 7). One of the strategies for negotiating these rather different positions has been to promote an *academic literacies* approach to writing instruction which tries to reform the institution to ensure epistemological access for students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds (under Apartheid). This approach prioritises higher and middle order concerns such as critical thinking, the role of audience, discipline-specific rhetorical strategies, and organisation, over lower order concerns such as grammar, spelling and punctuation.

While there is certainly much to recommend the academic literacies approach to writing instruction, little research has been done to assess its impact on different kinds of students. As Ellen Hurst has noted in her discussion of academic writing support in South African universities and colleges, "surprisingly few [scholars] directly discuss the impact of learning through an additional language and little research appears to have been published on the teaching or development of English to support EAL students in South Africa" (Hurst, p. 82). She also observes that, somewhat ironically, the more inclusive academic literacies approach to writing instruction "has led to a neglect

of the different experiences of" (p. 89) EAL students.

Lori Salem's recent study (2017) of who chooses to visit writing centers in the United States may help us understand the apparent neglect of EAL students' needs in South African Centres. Salem argues that current Writing Centre pedagogies (in the United States) are oriented towards learners who are already academically prepared and so do not serve many of the students who come to the Centre looking for assistance or instruction. Interestingly, Salem suggests that Writing Centres' "fear of being perceived as remedial" (p. 162) is one of the primary reasons they have adopted pedagogical practices that privilege academically prepared students and disadvantage EAL students or those who do not understand the expectations of academic writing and do not have a sense of self-efficacy as writers. In other words, Writing Centre orthodoxies there (which, as in South Africa, promote inclusive, undifferentiated pedagogies and do not focus on the lower order concerns such as English grammar) seem to be disadvantaging the very students who need their support the most (Salem, 2017). No research has been conducted in South Africa to determine whether academic literacies pedagogies are disadvantaging EAL students in a similar manner.

In short, the growing body of literature informing the academic literacies approach to writing instruction has not explicitly addressed the question of how it could be adapted to better serve the EAL population. We do not know whether the diverse levels of proficiency South African students have with the English language warrant differentiated kinds of support from Writing Centres. The current study, undertaken at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in South Africa, attempts to address these gaps in the literature through a case study exploring *the degree to which the academic writing instruction provided by UJ's Writing Centre suits the needs of its students*. The following research questions have guided our efforts:

- What kinds of students currently use the Writing Centre and what kind of support do they think they need?
- What are students' perceptions of the academic literacies work done by the Writing Centre?
- Are students receiving the writing support they believe they need from the Writing Centre?
- Should the current academic literacies practices and philosophy be changed or adapted to better support the students using the Writing Centre?

A Brief History of Academic Literacies

The *academic literacies* approach adopted by South African Writing Centres is informed by the work of the New London Group (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009) which has come to be known as New Literacy

Studies (NLS). Based on research begun in the 1990s by James Gee (a linguist) and Brian Street (an anthropologist), NLS distinguishes between the "autonomous" and the "ideological" conceptions of literacy and argues in favour of the latter. The autonomous conception presumes that reading and writing are a set of independent, neutral, and universal set of technical skills, which once taught to and learned by anyone, and particularly students, can be transferred seamlessly from one academic context to another (Street, 2003; Street, 2012). Thus, the act of introducing "literacy to poor, 'illiterate' people, villagers, urban youth, etc., will . . . have the effect of enhancing their cognitive skills, improving their economic prospects, making them better citizens, regardless of the social and economic conditions that accounted for their 'illiteracy' in the first place" (Street, 2012, p. 28). Of course, literacy educators and policy makers rarely acknowledge the assumptions which allow literacy to be seen as neutral or universal. Critics of the autonomous conception of literacy argue that the presumption of neutrality is precisely what enables it to serve as a tool of western imperialism, facilitating the imposition of western standards and values on other cultures or cultural groups (Street, 2003).

Conversely, the ideological conception favoured by NLS holds that literacy is not neutral, but rather a social practice, which varies according to context, time, and space, and is "embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles" (Street, 2003, p. 77). Literacy is ideological in the sense that it is necessarily conceptualised, taught, and learned by a group of people who might share a unique history, job market, social values, educational system, and so forth. For instance, a given zeitgeist or socio-economic climate is going to determine, at least in part, a group's understanding of what "literacy" means and how it ought to be developed or practiced. As Mary Lea argues, it is precisely because literacy practices are "deeply social activities" (2008, p. 230) that they cannot be developed in one context and then moved or applied to another. The context in which reading and writing practices are acquired is, therefore, the only one where they can effectively be used. This means that "familiarity with and understanding these practices takes place in specific social contexts, which are overlaid with ideological complexities, for example, with regard to the different values placed on particular kinds of written texts" (Lea, 2008, p. 230). Thus, in this view, reading and writing are not transferrable skills, but context-specific social practices.

Those social practices are acquired, practiced, and in many ways, defined in the classrooms of higher education, which are, of course, social spaces where instructors wield considerable power and influence over learners. Brian Street observes that the "ways in which teachers or facilitators and their students interact is already a social practice that affects the nature of the literacy being learned

and the ideas about literacy held by the participants, especially the new learners and their position in relations of power" (2003, p. 78). This is a particularly important consideration in South African universities today where the majority of students enrolled in undergraduate programs are "new learners" who do not speak English at home and who are the first in their family to attend university (Lewin & Mayowo, 2014).

The Academic Literacies Higher Education Landscape in South Africa

While important long-term political projects are undoubtedly served by NLS-informed academic literacies pedagogies, recent data suggest that many students are not receiving the kind of writing support they need to succeed at university today: South Africa currently has one of the lowest university graduation rates in the world (Mafenya, 2014). Only 27 percent of undergraduates complete their degrees in the minimum time and approximately 50% ultimately graduate (Lewin & Mayowo, 2014; Council, 2013). Moreover, a recent proposal for curriculum reform observes that "South Africa's graduate output has . . . major shortcomings in terms of overall numbers, equity, and the proportion of the student body that succeeds" and concludes there are "no grounds for hoping that the patterns are a temporary aberration" (Council, 2013, p.15). Of course, there are many social, economic, and historical factors contributing to South Africa's low throughput rates, but research demonstrates that academic language skills—especially the students' writing and reading abilities in English—continue to be one of the most important barriers to students' access and success (Letseka, 2008; Slonimsky & Shalem, 2008; Clarence, 2010; Lewin & Mayowo, 2014). This obstacle, it should be noted, continues to exist in spite of twenty-odd years dedicated to the NLS approach in writing instruction. While a lot of good work is being done in Writing Centres to make universities more inclusive institutions dedicated to the continued development of students' writing skills, the data above suggest that a significant number of South African students may benefit from additional forms of support.

While the target population for such support is relatively easy to identify, there is no simple way to deliver interventions specifically tailored for those students. Academic literacies methodologies provide the same support for all students while acknowledging that the institution needs to be inclusive towards historically disadvantaged populations. This leads to "interventions targeted at a particular demographic – that of black students, yet it raises tension through the implication that this group of students is in some way educationally 'deficient'" (Hurst, 2014, p. 79). In the post-apartheid context of South Africa, an implied correlation between race and educational deficiency is politically

untenable. Indeed, the Academic Support units created in South African universities in the 1980s were rightly "criticized as a stigmatization of 'historically disadvantaged' students" (Archer, 2010, p. 495) and worked to develop more all-encompassing pedagogies which would benefit or be relevant to all students. Thus, it has and continues to be imperative for South African Writing Centres to avoid conceptualizing their work in terms of students' deficiencies: doing so would increase the risk of perpetuating the race-based thinking of apartheid that lead to so many of the problems faced by today's South African universities in the first place (Boughey, 2002; Boughey 2007; Hurst, 2014).

NLS has a certain appeal, therefore, for Writing Centres in post-apartheid South Africa that are trying to develop targeted interventions without necessarily labeling students as 'deficient' in some way. After all, when literacy is defined as a social construct, then students' deficiencies in those areas must be seen as socially constructed as well. However, as Ellen Hurst observes in her overview of academic literacies scholarship in South Africa, "English proficiency itself is not usually framed as an academic literacy" (2015, p. 79). Indeed, NLS rejects the conception of literacy as mere language proficiency or as "a set of transferable skills rather than critical thinking" (Pineteh, 2014, p. 14) more broadly; to focus on language proficiency would be to implicitly accept a view of literacy as a set of transparent, homogeneous skills that somehow exist outside social or ideological influence.

Thus, South African Writing Centres remain committed to an academic literacies approach that focuses on higher order concerns and eschews interventions targeting English as an Additional Language (EAL) students through the provision of, say, instruction in the fundamentals of English grammar. The practical (and rather strange) result of this unwavering commitment to the academic literacies methodology is that "surprisingly few [scholars] directly discuss the impact of learning through an additional language and little research appears to have been published on the teaching or development of English to support EAL students in South Africa" (Hurst, p. 82). In short, the more inclusive academic literacies approach to writing instruction "has led to a neglect of the different experiences of" (p. 89) EAL students. This, in a country where less than 10% of the population speak English as a first language and the vast majority of university students speak English as an additional language.

Academic Literacies at the University of Johannesburg: A Case Study

The University of Johannesburg (UJ) is a comprehensive African university with a total enrolment of approximately 50,000 students and an annual intake of about 10,000 students. According to data collected each year through a Student Profile Questionairre, more than 50% of UJ students self-

identify as being the first in their family to attend university, over 45% report poor study practices, and over 60% indicate that English is not their first language (Van Zyl, 2014). The UJ Writing Centres are part of the Academic Development Centre which is housed in the Division of Academic Development and Support. The mandate of the Writing Centres is to "assist both undergraduate and postgraduate students and staff with their *academic literacies* needs. Their services are informed by several theories, including the New Literacies Studies (NLS) theory, which considers writing as a social practice and a social process of discovery" (Academic Development and Support, 2014, p. 29). With regard to the specific pedagogical practices employed by Writing Centre staff, official Writing Centre policy is to help "student writers engage with their writing and the arguments it contains rather than on basic grammar, spelling and punctuation" (p. 29). In other words, the UJ Writing Centres focus on higher order rather than lower order concerns in their approach to writing instruction. As is typical in post-apartheid South Africa, the Writing Centres' priority is to promote epistemological access for students (in part by reforming the institution) rather than to help students improve their lower order writing skills in English.

It is important to note that there is no mandatory composition course or formalized Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) or Writing in the Disciplines (WID) program at UJ. There are three academic writing modules (English for Law, English for Economic Sciences, and Language and Skills for Science) taught by the Academic Development Centre, but these are restricted to students in those programs. While many individual academic programs require students to take courses that involve a certain amount of writing, these course are not typically designed by writing specialists and do not provide students with formative feedback on their writing, opportunities to revise their writing, low-stakes or no-stakes writing exercises where students can practice their writing, or much formal instruction in class on the writing process.

While there are four Writing Centres at UJ—one on each of its four campuses—the research reported on here focuses exclusively on the Writing Centre at the Auckland Park Campus (APK). The APK campus is UJ's largest by a significant margin. It is home to the greatest number of students and the site of the majority of the university's administrative operations, including the Academic Development Centre. In the 2014 Academic Year, staff at the APK Writing Centre conducted a total of 2,579 face-to-face appointments, 2,107 with undergraduate students and 472 with post-graduate students. Over the course of the year, 1,348 unique students completed face-to-face appointments with the Writing Centre. All of the students who participated in this research project were undergraduates in 2014 who had attended at least one face-to-face consultation at the APK Writing

Centre. All of the Writing Consultants employed at the Writing Centre were enrolled as postgraduate students at UJ and participated in the three-day training program (approximately 18 hours of instruction) in writing pedagogy held immediately before the beginning of the academic term.

The training program for the Writing Consultants includes a mixture of lectures and interactive activities and is informed entirely by the academic literacies philosophy and writing centre theory and practice. The curriculum includes an overview of academic literacies theory, NLS scholarship, the pedagogical rationale for Writing Centres, facilitation strategies, group work, the "writing process," reading consultations, academic integrity, Writing Centre ethics, health and wellness, and equity. Training and professional development continues throughout the academic year with mandatory weekly one-hour meetings where Writing Consultants engage in formal study of relevant scholarship and discuss their experiences, challenges, and successes when working with students. There was no formal instruction on how to support English Language Learners or teach lower order skills in 2015 when this research was conducted.

Each year, the Academic Development Centre hosts a "Colloquium" to showcase Writing Centre scholarship. All Writing Consultants are encouraged to present relevant research at this event and, to facilitate their participation, the Colloquium organizers establish a kind of peer review process whereby junior Consultants are paired with senior Consultants or faculty members who provide feedback on their work before the Colloquium. This ambitious training and professional development program ensures that most of the Writing Consultants rigorously follow established best practices in academic literacies pedagogies when they work with students. While the training provides the Consultants with a comprehensive set of tools and resources to provide their students with support related to higher order concerns, organization, and discipline-specific convention, it eschews discussion of specific strategies for helping students address lower level concerns. Consultants are advised to identify no more than three lower level issues in a piece of writing, but given no explicit guidance or information for how to provide instruction in this area.

Methodology

An anonymous survey and focus groups were used to determine what kinds of students used the Writing Centre, the kind of writing support students think they need, students' perceptions of the academic literacies work being done by the Writing Centre, and students' beliefs regarding the value of the writing support they are actually receiving. After collecting and analyzing these data, we were able to address the fundamental question at the heart of this paper: Should the current academic

literacies practices and philosophy be changed or adapted to better support the students using the Writing Centre?

All data collection methods (e.g., instruments, recruitment methods) were approved by Research Ethics boards at the University of Johannesburg and University of Toronto Mississauga. Both the survey and focus groups were conducted in English. Survey data were collected through an anonymous online survey sent in April 2015 to each of the 1,334 unique students who used the Writing Centre at least once in the 2014 academic year. Approximately 13% of the students (174) responded to the survey, of whom 54% (91) indicated they were in second year at the time of data collection; 50% (87) of these students identified 2014 as the year they enrolled at the University of Johannesburg. These data suggest that approximately half of respondents were in their first year of post-secondary studies when they used the Centre's services. Only 15% of the respondents indicated they were in fourth year or a post-grad program. No incentives were used to recruit survey participants.

Focus group data were collected during two sessions conducted in May, 2015. In total, nine students participated in the focus group sessions, all of whom were black and in their second or third year of their undergraduate program. The facilitator of the focus groups was a Principal Investigator of the study from the University of Toronto Mississauga who was appointed as a visiting scholar at the University of Johannesburg in 2014 and 2015. None of the students who participated in the focus groups knew the facilitator from another context. All participants had visited the Writing Centre in the past year and were recruited by email invitations sent to the same students who were invited to complete the survey. Posters promoting the focus groups were also displayed around the Writing Centre. Each of the students who participated in a focus group was entered into a random draw for a R250 gift certificate to takealot.com.

During the focus group sessions, students responded to a number of open-ended, general questions about academic writing instruction, the different kinds of approaches to writing instruction taken by the university and the Writing Centre, and the importance of writing skills in general. Each focus group session lasted approximately one hour. The focus group data confirm and help illuminate our survey results, particularly with regards to students' perceptions of the importance of writing (in English), the kind of support provided by the Writing Centre, and students' sense of self-efficacy as writers.

While the response rate for the survey was somewhat lower[1] than we had expected, the respondent characteristics are consistent with those of the larger target population (i.e., the UJ

Writing Centre students as a whole). None of the survey data were at all surprising to the Writing Consultants from UJ; in fact, the data appear to confirm what the Writing Consultants knew to be anecdotally true about the students with whom they worked on a regular basis. As the analysis below demonstrates, the voices of the students captured in the focus groups bring the survey data to life, confirming and supporting those data in compelling ways. However, neither the surveys nor the focus groups allow us to generalize our findings beyond this immediate context. As with any case study, our findings cannot be generalized to a larger population and have no predictive power. Our claims are qualified and restricted to the specific population of students in our case, not UJ or South African students more broadly.

Student Survey on Academic Writing Instruction

Demographics

The students visiting the UJ Writing Centre (hereafter referred to as WC Students) have diverse academic interests and varied motivations for writing. Responses to the question "What is your major or field of specialisation?" revealed no pattern indicating that students from specific disciplines were more or less likely to visit the Writing Centre. The most popular area of specialization was "Development Studies" (14%), followed by "Psychology" (12%), "Education" (9%), and a variety of courses in the STEM disciplines (9%). The majority of respondents (148 or 86%) indicated that they had taken "at least one course that requires a lot of writing" and more than half of those students (54%) specified that the writing-intensive course was "required for my program"; slightly fewer (39%) claimed to have taken the writing-intensive course out of "personal interest." Irrespective of their reasons for taking the course, almost all of the respondents (91%) found the writing assignments either "very interesting" or "somewhat interesting." When asked about the average grade they expected to receive in their undergraduate studies, the WC Students' answers were as follows: 23% expected an "A"; 31% expected a "B"; 40% expected a "C"; and 6% expected a "D". Nobody expected to fail.

The demographic data related to WC Students' language background tell an interesting story about students' relationship to the English language. An overwhelming 86% of respondents claimed that English was *not* their first language. When these same EAL students were asked whether they thought their children would speak English as a first language in twenty years, 77% answered "yes," suggesting that most EAL students think of their first language as one which has declining importance in South African society.

The answers to the question "What language do you usually speak when you are with friends" reflect the remarkable complexity of the South African linguistic landscape: 83 (50%) claimed to speak English with friends; 39 (23%) spoke isiZulu; 18 (11%) spoke a mix of languages; and the rest spoke a variety of different languages. The most revealing response to this question, however, was "[I speak] English because i have friends from diverse cultures." English is clearly a *lingua franca* for this student and, presumably, others.

Interestingly, the responses to the question "What language do you usually speak at home?" were very different. Only 8 students (5%) answered that they spoke English at home. Conversely, 95% spoke one of 10 other South African languages at home; the most common languages spoken at home were isiZulu (34%), Sepedi (13%), Sesotho (11%), Setswana (11%), and Xitsonga (8%). Four students (2%) indicated that they spoke more than one language at home. While almost all of the students spoke multiple languages and did not identify English as their first language, just over half (56%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "Do you think the University of Johannesburg's Writing Centres should provide writing support in a language other than English (e.g., IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, Afrikaans, or any other of South Africa's eleven official languages)."

Students' Perception of the Importance of Writing (in English)

Survey respondents were overwhelmingly of the opinion that their writing skills were important in both the short term (i.e., their academic success) and the long term (their post-university careers). In response to the question "How much do you think your academic writing skills will impact (or have already impacted) your success at university?", 71% of students answered "a lot" while only 4% answered "not much". Similarly, 99% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "UJ graduates need to have strong writing skills in English because English is the international language of business."

Students' Sense of Self-Efficacy as Writers

Somewhat surprisingly, most students who participated in this survey had high self-efficacy when reflecting on their writing skills in English. Over 18% rated their "general writing and communication skills in English" as "excellent" while 43% rated themselves as "good".[2] On the other hand, only 38% rated themselves as "average" or "weak" in this area. The results were similar when students were asked to rate their "formal academic writing skills in English": 7% thought they were "excellent";

50% rated themselves "good"; and 42% judged themselves to be "average". In spite of this generally positive assessment of their current writing and communication skills, when asked "how important is it to you that you *improve* your general writing skills (in English) as part of your university education", almost 98% of respondents concluded that this was "very important" or "important." Of course, all respondents to this survey had attended the Writing Centre in the previous year, so the answers to this last question are not especially surprising—Writing Centre users believe they need to improve their writing. It is noteworthy, nonetheless, that the majority of participants in this research project believed they had good writing skills, but also acknowledged that they needed to improve those skills while in university.

Students' Perception of the University's Writing Support and Instruction

Survey participants were generally satisfied with the university's efforts to teach academic writing skills. Almost 85% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "UJ currently does enough to ensure all students have the appropriate writing skills to be successful in their courses." A similar number, 81%, agreed that "UJ currently does enough to ensure all graduates have the appropriate writing skills to be successful after university." These data suggest UJ students want to assume full responsibility for their own education and take the initiative to develop their writing skills. This is a particularly interesting finding when considered in the context of responses to another question which asked whether "the university should require all students to take a 'general writing' course (for example, one that teaches the basics of grammar and paragraph structure) in first year." The vast majority of students, 77%, answered "yes" to this question and an even higher percentage of respondents (88%) agreed that "the university should require all students to take a course in 'academic writing' that would teach them the specific skills they need for their major or area of Specialization." Over 65% of survey participants even agreed that "the university should have a mandatory 'writing proficiency test' as part of the admissions process, and then require all students who do not meet a certain standard to enroll in a writing course." In short, most students indicated that they would like to improve their writing skills within the formal academic structure provided by some kind of composition course. Such a course was not offered by UJ at the time this research was conducted, although as we note above, academic writing modules are offered for Law, Economic Sciences, and Sciences.

In apparent contrast to the Writing Centre's claim that its support model focuses "on helping student writers engage with their writing and the arguments it contains *rather than on basic*

grammar, spelling and punctuation" (Academic Development and Support, 2014, p. 29; emphasis added), students identified grammar as one of the most frequent areas of focus in a face-to-face appointment with a Writing Consultant. For example, when students were presented with a list of nine different skills and asked to identify those they worked on with a Writing Consultant, the second most popular selection, with 97 responses, was "Grammar". Further confirming the apparent focus on lower order concerns in the Writing Centre is the fact that an overwhelming 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "The Writing Centre has helped me improve my general writing skills (paragraph structure, organization, grammar, etc.)."

The Writing Centre also provides students with support for the higher order concerns more consistent with the academic literacies philosophy it explicitly promotes and follows. For example, 92% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Writing Consultants helped them "understand [their] instructor's expectations" and over 80% agreed or strongly agreed that the Writing Centre helped them understand "the kind of writing (or genres) required in different departments or subjects." These data suggest that teaching of lower order concerns is offered in addition to, not instead of, instruction on higher order concerns.

Finally, just over 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "The Writing Centre has helped me develop writing skills that I will use in whatever job I have after I graduate" suggesting that most students believe the writing skills they develop at the Writing Centre are relevant outside the university. The fact that students have faith in the transferability of the writing skills they are developing speaks volumes about the kind of instruction they are receiving and the more general message they hear about the importance employers place on applicants' "writing skills."

Student Focus Groups on Academic Writing Instruction

Students' Perception of the Importance of Writing (in English)

When discussing the relative importance of developing writing skills and mastering course content in university, one student argued that they were both important because "we are going to leave this environment and when we start working with clients and so on and so forth, I cannot really you know, stick to just my content. I need to learn how to communicate with, you know, the everyday men in a sense, so both are very important." Another made a similar point when she noted "once you are able to write in English, then the content does not become a problem for you, because you might be able to master the content but when it comes to writing, you cannot express yourself fluently, so writing

forms a very crucial part of content, so I think the implementation or the presentation of content actually depends on the writing skills." Indeed, all of the focus group participants agreed that students needed to focus equally on developing their writing skills and acquiring disciplinary knowledge in their courses. One even suggested that she didn't believe she really understood the content unless she was able to communicate that understanding: "it is like, you know, you never gone through the content, because you don't know how to package it." All of the students also agreed that writing skills were important for very practical reasons related to assessment and grades. As one astute participant noted, "if you can know the answer to something but you can't get it together, get it to the right words, it really doesn't count. You lose marks on things that you know, you know?"

There was also near unanimity on the question of whether "general writing skills" (defined by the moderator as spelling, grammar and basic paragraph structure) or "discipline-specific writing skills" (defined by the moderator as the more specialized kind of writing done in specific disciplines) were more important. With the exception of one student, all participants agreed that it was essential for students to learn and develop both sets of skills in university. For example, an anthropology student argued that universities should teach "both, because if I'm writing to someone who's not doing anthropology, that person may be confused. Like they can't read what I write. So, if I am writing to someone who's not doing anthropology I [should] write in a general way the person could understand." A student from a completely different discipline supported this observation, noting "I'm saying both as well, because general is something that we need throughout our lives, and [when] I compare my essay that I write in applied marketing [I see that it] is not the same as what I write in philosophy. They are totally different. So, I feel like I need that background to be [able to understand] this is how a philosophy essay is like, this is how applied marketing is supposed to be." The general consensus was clear: students believe they need instruction in both general and discipline-specific writing practices.

Students' Perceptions of Writing Centre Support

Most participants' assessment of the quality of support they have received from the Writing Centre was very positive. One student, for example, characterized the Writing Centre as simply "the best" and the rest of the students agreed enthusiastically with this assessment. Another pointed out "the good thing [about the Writing Centre] is that it tells you at least try to write something and then [a Writing Consultant] will see what your problem is." The rest of the students agreed that they had all learned a great deal from this approach. A third student observed that the writing consultants "don't

tell you what to write" and that this helps to inspire students to keep trying out "possibilities" of "what they can do." These comments confirm that the model of instruction employed by Writing Consultants is consistent with the ideals of NLS-informed academic literacies pedagogy where the focus of a session is on higher order concerns and strategies for making the students feel empowered by the writing process to generate their own ideas and engage in the process of knowledge production in a discipline-specific manner.

In spite of their praise for traditional Writing Centre pedagogy, students did identify certain drawbacks with this model of support. The following comment is representative of a common criticism:

> So, I think the Writing Centre, if it could actually be able . . . if the people that assist us would actually be able to tell that your problem is grammar, and work with you on fixing your grammar, instead of saying that this entire thing is wrong. What exactly is wrong with this that I have written? So, I think it would be much more useful if prescriptions would be made for what I need to change.

This inspired another student to make a similar comment about the need for more explicit instruction in grammar and the basics of writing:

> Sometimes you will find that they [Writing Consultants] will say like, ok, maybe there is a specific problem with this sentence or this paragraph, and this and that, but then the next essay you write, you might make the same mistake because you . . . understood what problem it was in that context in that essay, *but you don't understand that your problem is grammar as a whole*. So maybe if we can have like workshops focused on grammar, workshops focused on writing a CV for example, so we can target those things instead of just making it assignment-based corrections. We [should] just make it like grammar in general. (emphasis added)

The rest of the participants were in general agreement with these sentiments. It is important to note here that these comments were made without any specific prompt regarding the value of "grammar instruction" from the moderator. The students had been asked to comment on Writing Centre pedagogy or practice; the moderator asked an open-ended question about the strategies Writing Centres use to support students as they try to improve their writing skills, and the participants responded by raising the issue of grammar instruction on their own.

Many focus group participants were unaware that Writing Centre pedagogy focuses on improving the writer rather than fixing a writing assignment. Indeed, they mistakenly believed that the Writing Centre prioritized individual assignments due in the short term over the development of their writing

in the long term. For example, one student observed that "basically the Writing Centre, to most students, is like a doctor. You only consult the doctor because [you are] sick." He went on to lament the fact that most students do not go the Writing Centre unless there is some kind of "emergency situation" and argued that the service would be more valuable if students sought and received support "when not even . . . under pressure." Others agreed with this point, noting that instead of visiting the Writing Centre to get feedback on a single paper, students should be getting more sustained instruction in writing more generally.

This observation is consistent with the focus group participants' unanimous and surprisingly enthusiastic support for a mandatory first-year composition course. As one student observed, "we need to have a course that actually focuses purely on language itself in the first year"; another agreed, insisting that "in our country we have a huge crisis in our educational system. It is not practical to expect each and every one who walks into UJ to have the same level of grammar, to have the same number of reading skills, so it is not practical in our country, so I would be in support of the program [mandatory first-year composition]". When the discussion turned to the question of whether such a course should be optional or mandatory, the overwhelming majority of students were of the opinion that "it should be compulsory, because if it was up to me, honestly I wouldn't take English. If it was up to me, I will be like no, I don't need English. . . . But now I have arrived here and I know that [it should be] required. So, if it is compulsory, it is really good." In other words, students were very much in favour of a course that could provide a more explicit focus on foundational reading and writing skills. For these students, a mandatory composition course would improve their overall writing health, thereby preventing the need to visit the Writing Instructor-Doctor to get medicine for their writing-related illness.

Of course, these students' observations and critiques are inconsistent with Writing Centre Consultants' and Coordinators' understandings of their pedagogies and the impact they have on students. In other words, writing instructors in South Africa would almost certainly reject the Writing Centre-as-Medical Clinic metaphor and refuse the deficit thinking motivating that metaphor. We must acknowledge, as well, that most students don't know what they don't know and, more importantly, that many students are unable to identify the kind of academic support they need to achieve their goals. But even if we take these qualifiers into consideration, our focus group and survey data suggest that South African Writing Centres need to reflect on their preferred pedagogy and, perhaps, the theoretical paradigms informing their work. If, as recent research suggests, South Africa's unacceptably low throughput rates are directly related to students' academic language skills

(Letseka, 2008; Slonimsky & Shalem, 2008; Lewin & Mayowo, 2014), this seems an urgent undertaking.

Discussion

Let us now consider the implications of the survey and focus group data summarized above in terms of the research questions that inspired this study.

Research Question 1. What kinds of students currently use the Writing Centre and what kind of support do they think they need?

This study demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of UJ Writing Centre users do not speak English as a first language, and even fewer speak English at home; indeed, virtually all of the participants were native speakers of one of South Africa's ten other official languages. They were first- or second-year students enrolled in a wide variety of courses from across the curriculum; most anticipated graduating with a "B" or "C" average. This profile of the typical UJ Writing Centre user is what the researchers expected, given anecdotal information gathered from colleagues and personal experiences working in the Writing Centre.

Somewhat more surprising was the finding that a strong majority of Writing Centre users sought (and often received) support with lower order concerns, not just higher order concerns. Most students expressed a strong desire for instruction and support with their grammar, and a strong majority acknowledged that "grammar" is a common area of focus during their Writing Centre sessions. This emphasis on grammar during Writing Centre appointments (which runs somewhat counter to the Writing Centre's mandate) might account for the fact that virtually all of the students participating in this study believed they improved their *general* (or lower order) writing skills at the Writing Centre. It may also explain the students' claim that the support they received from Writing Consultants helped them develop writing skills they will use *outside* the university.

It should be noted that students received support with lower order concerns in spite of the Writing Centre's approach, not because of it. Informed as it is by NLS-informed academic literacies theory, the Writing Centre explicitly defines its preferred pedagogies in opposition to the kind of remedial support students identified as useful. This effectively means that Writing Consultants felt obliged to provide their students with feedback and instruction on their grammar, sentence structure, and other lower order concerns in spite of policies discouraging this approach and, most importantly, without

having received any formal training on how to do this.

Research Question 2: What are students' perceptions of the academic literacies work done by the Writing Centre?

Virtually all respondents spoke in positive, laudatory terms about the quality of support they received from the Writing Centre. They clearly perceived the writing instruction as beneficial, with many sharing anecdotes about how much they had learned from a specific Writing Consultant. Some students, however, mistakenly believed that the Writing Centre primarily focused on students' individual writing assignments and argued that Writing Consultants should instead take an approach that emphasized the more general rules, conventions, and principles of writing. These students characterized Writing Consultants who help students with individual assignments as doctors who cure diseases rather than instructors who facilitate the learning of academic literacies. Of course, this is a misconception the Writing Centre does not want to foster or allow to spread.

The accusation that the Writing Centre's mission is to fix bad writing rather than teach good writing seems less a criticism of academic literacy practices *per se* than it is an expression of students' desire for additional forms of writing instruction that explicitly focus on lower order concerns and so seem to better address EAL students' needs.

Research Question 3: Are students receiving the writing support they believe they need from the Writing Centre?

It is important to note, here, that students may not have been aware of many other forms of writing support offered by UJ Writing Centres, including group consultations, emailed consultations, workshops, and interventions embedded in credit-bearing courses. Our data suggest, however, that students believe they are not receiving the writing support as they would have wanted it from the Writing Centre. Survey respondents and focus group participants expressed a strong desire for additional writing support with a different focus. The two most common requests were for a compulsory composition course and mandatory appointments with Writing Centre consultants (an existing practice in some courses at the University). Both of these preferences were popular with students because they were not optional—indeed, most students recommended mandatory writing instruction because they believed the students who most needed support would not take advantage of it otherwise.

As the examples above demonstrate, the students also believe they need more instruction on lower order issues in addition to the support for higher order concerns they are already receiving. Students were unsure of whether such instruction was best delivered through a face-to-face consultation or in a classroom. Again, it seems worthwhile emphasizing that students are *not* unhappy with the existing *academic literacies instruction* at the Writing Centre; they are simply acknowledging that this support does not meet all their needs.

Research Question 4: Should the current academic literacies practices and philosophy be changed or adapted to better support the students using the Writing Centre?

Our data suggest that current academic literacies practices need to be adapted to better support University of Johannesburg Writing Centre users. While the Writing Centre is certainly benefitting some students in some ways, our research indicates that many of those who decide to visit the Writing Centre are looking for a different or at least additional kind of support. In her study of Writing Centre users and non-users at Temple University in the United States,[3] Lori Salem makes precisely this point (albeit with regards to a different demographic of students). She argues that current Writing Centre pedagogies are oriented towards learners who are already academically prepared and so do not serve many of the students who come to the Centre looking for assistance or instruction. Interestingly, Salem suggests that Writing Centres' "fear of being perceived as remedial" is one of the primary reasons they have adopted pedagogical practices that privilege academically prepared students and disadvantage EAL students or those who do not understand the expectations of academic writing and do not have a sense of self-efficacy as writers. Salem's argument about how this relates to Writing Centres' focus on grammar instruction and so-called lower order concerns in student writing is worth quoting in full:

> Orthodox writing center pedagogies for working with grammar and correctness are similarly slanted toward privileged students. Treating grammar / correctness as a 'lower order' or 'later order' concern means that frequently we do not address grammar much (or at all) in our tutoring sessions. For privileged students who grew up in homes where a white, middle-class version of English was spoken, this approach might be okay. But affecting a genteel disregard for grammar concerns makes no sense if we are working with English language learners, with students who spoke a less-privileged version of English at home, or with any student who feels anxious about

> grammar. If we regularly dismiss or defer ("later") students' questions about grammar, this doesn't make these questions go away, nor does it fundamentally alter the terms on which grammar is understood in the university or in society. It simply leaves students up to their own devices to deal with those questions. (2016, p. 163).

While the students to whom Salem is referring here are obviously different from those at the University of Johannesburg, and while we must be cautious comparing American and South African Writing Centres, the problem identified above is remarkably similar to what we have found at UJ. Indeed, many of the pedagogical "orthodoxies" Salem identifies as contributing factors to Writing Centres' failure to provide the writing support students need are core features of the academic literacies approach taken in South Africa.[4] Virtually everything Salem says about the culture of Writing Centres in the United States—from the tutoring pedagogy (non-directive questioning without a pen in hand) to the theoretical orientation (writing is a social practice) to the institutional politics (Writing Centre administrators going to great lengths to convince their colleagues that their staff don't "fix" students' writing)—is an accurate description of the University of Johannesburg Writing Centre. If we consider that the proportion of EAL students inadequately prepared for university is significantly higher at UJ than at Temple University, Salem's call for Writing Centres to re-examine their pedagogy and practices seems especially germane in the South African context.

Conclusion

The results of our research do not necessarily challenge the NLS understanding of literacy as ideological, nor do they necessarily suggest that the academic literacies approach to skills development and support should be abandoned. The data we have collected do, however, indicate that the University of Johannesburg's current model of academic skills support—with its privileging of higher order concerns—is not meeting many students' needs and suggest that changes to our preferred Writing Centre pedagogy are required. It seems clear that additional programming focusing on lower order concerns should be offered to students seeking writing support at our Writing Centre. The question, of course, is how a Writing Centre can best deliver that support and continue to provide students with a safe space where they can both access and critique dominant literacy practices.

First, while Writing Centres can and must continue to be an important part of the university's overall approach writing support, we think the challenges identified here require interventions and curricular changes that go far beyond what Writing Centres can deliver. It seems clear that an

effective way for UJ to provide its students with the writing support they need and deserve would be to implement a mandatory composition course in their first year of study. Such courses are, of course, the norm in many parts of the world and they are not necessarily perceived as remedial. Indeed, many composition courses have an explicit focus on social justice and are an important part of their university's strategy for ensuring access to all students. Perhaps most importantly, mandatory composition courses can serve important cohort- and community-building functions, improve students' self-efficacy as writers, and often introduce students to foundational academic skills (e.g., critical thinking or reading) other than writing. Of course, a new composition course could be specifically designed to serve the South African student population and with an eye to developing transferrable writing skills for students in all programs.

With a mandatory first-year composition course occupying a central place in the curriculum, the Writing Centre could adapt its pedagogy to support students in this course and those who have graduated from it. In short, it could continue to advocate for an academic literacies approach and help students and other stakeholders see literacy as a set of social practices, but could also include more of a focus on lower order skills and the mechanics of writing. There is no reason that one-on-one appointments could not include lessons on grammar, revision, stylistic fluency, and other sentence-level issues using similar resources and pedagogical strategies to those employed in the composition course. Similarly, the Writing Centre could develop and promote co-curricular offerings on basic grammar and other foundational writing skills—the kinds of programming that Salem argues Writing Centres around the world eschew for fear of being perceived as remedial. As with a mandatory composition course, such a shift in focus need not, of course, be thought of as remedial; instead, it could be presented alongside existing programming and pedagogies, as part of a renewed effort to respond to the demands of all its stakeholders, many of whom are multilingual and are asking for more dedicated foundational writing skills instruction. The instruction on lower order issues offered by Writing Centre consultants could be framed with a discussion of how discourse functions, how the language of academic power operates, and how students are socialized as academics. But the instruction in grammar would be available to those who wanted it.

We are aware, of course, that these recommendations have significant resource implications and that the logistics involved in making this kind of curricular change are extremely complicated. Such considerations go well beyond the scope of this paper, but this does not preclude our suggesting it as a strategy for addressing the challenges identified in our research.

Like most of our Writing Centre colleagues in South Africa, we recognize that "literacy" in South Africa's English-medium institutes of higher learning is a set of social practices that serve a gate-keeping function and disadvantage many students, particularly those who speak English as an additional language. As such, we reject the understanding of literacy as a set of universal, transferrable skills; and we understand that nothing is gained by characterizing Writing Centre users as students who have some kind of 'deficit'. That said, our research demonstrates that Writing Centre users, almost all of whom are EAL students who do not speak English at home, want and need an additional kind of writing instruction to that currently privileged by the academic literacies approach. Analyzed through this lens, our research supports Ellen Hurst's contention that, in order to "respond to the current post-colonial context in South Africa," Writing Centres need to acknowledge "competency and proficiency in the English language as an academic literacy" (p. 88). The participants in our case study understand that to be successful at university (and beyond) they must possess and develop certain literacy skills; they seem fully aware that these skills are in fact social practices defined by a society that, for better or for worse, privileges English and marginalizes their vernacular language. These students are under no illusions about the status of English as a colonial legacy, but they know that in order to be successful they need to develop their lower order and higher order writing skills in that language. They also understand that a compulsory composition course might provide the best option for doing this.

It is incumbent on writing studies scholars to acknowledge that South African students' lack of preparedness (and in particular their writing skills in English) contributes in significant ways to the unacceptably low graduation rates in South African universities. EAL students are simply not in possession of the literacy practices, the *linguistic capital* (cf. Bourdieu, 1977) assumed and required by the institution. There is no reason for the principle of inclusivity to preclude the development of differentiated models of academic support. And there seems little justification in letting the long-term projects of reforming the institution and challenging the privileged status of the English language prevent us from supporting the students who remain marginalized by the legacy of apartheid.

Endnotes

1. This is not, however, unusual. Recruitment and retention of students for pedagogical research can be challenging (Cyr et al., 2013; Khatamian Far, 2018), and many research projects suffer or are

abandoned because of low student participation numbers. We should have incentivized participation in the survey by offering a raffle prize or employing other strategies discussed by Cyr et al. (2013).

2. Please note, the researchers made a deliberate decision to use the admittedly artificial and problematic distinction between "general" and "academic" writing skills in the student survey and student focus group scripts. The language here ("general" and "academic") is meant only to get students thinking about writing as it is used in different contexts where the author assumes different audiences. It is not meant to imply a judgement or specific understanding of the academic literacies approach to writing support. The researchers employed different language when soliciting feedback from academic staff.

3. This essay, "Decisions . . . decisions: Who Chooses to Use the Writing Centre" won the International Writing Centres Association (IWCA) award for the best article in 2017. Its provocative thesis has generated a lot of discussion and reflection on the orthodoxies of American Writing Centre pedagogies. While it focuses on the American context, the argument is broadly applicable to South African Writing Centres where pedagogies informed by the academic literacies philosophy are strikingly similar to those Salem discusses in her research.

4. There are, of course, many interesting similarities and differences between the Writing Across the Curriculum approach to writing instruction that emerged in North America in the 1970s and the academic literacies model that originated in England in the 1990s. For an excellent discussion of the relationship between these two traditions, see Russell, D. R., Lea, M., Parker, J., Street, B., and Donahue, T. (2009).

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