

CHAPTER 19

Writing centre tutors' experiences and perceptions of online academic support: Reflecting on the digital transformation during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Academic writing support initiatives have historically been conducted and designed around face-to-face interaction in physical spaces. Writing centre tutors have the role of critically interrogating academic discourse and practices that may lead to changes in norms and standards. This paper seeks to explore how writing centre tutors experienced the transition and service delivery from face-to-face to online tutoring. The transition from tutoring writing in co-presence settings to synchronous and asynchronous digital teaching formats is important to the digital transformation. The Covid-19 pandemic has permeated nearly every facet of human activity, and the tertiary institutions are no exception. As a result, the writing centres at Durban University of Technology (DUT), South Africa accelerated their transition

to online tutoring and learning systems. The transition and service delivery from face-to-face to online tutoring expedited the creation of an enabling online environment that initiated innovative tutoring techniques that have been used for all undergraduate students. The study is premised on Mezirow's (1978) transformational learning theory, which studies tutors' decontextualized and recontextualized academic writing practises following their transition to online tutoring. Data collection included reflections from 12 writing centre tutors within a qualitative inquiry. Data were collected and analysed using NVivo to find common themes and trends to accomplish the purpose. The findings indicated that tutors do indeed possess a set of important ideas that may contribute significantly to the transformative learning process and that the writing centre, through its approaches and learning practices, can serve as a vehicle for achieving actual transformation. There is no doubt that technology can increase the quality of education globally and improve academic writing support outcomes. Thus, multimodality in writing centres can thus help bring out the richness of diversity, enabling more students to participate successfully in diverse communication processes.

Keywords: academic writing, Covid-19, digital transformation, physical spaces, writing centre

Background

The Covid-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in history. These massive unplanned disruptions in higher education necessitated an unplanned and unbudgeted transition from traditional learning to an exclusively online learning setup, which later on took various forms of blended learning (Jelińska and Paradowski 2021). DUT writing centres experienced an unprecedented shift from the

day-to-day work involving face-to-face consultations and workshops where students could schedule appointments on the WCONLINE in advance and walk-in for face-to-face consultations. This enabled tutors to work with students on all phases of writing from brainstorming to revising. During face-to-face consultations, tutors would assist students, provide feedback, share tips and strategies, and help them plan for further developing or revising their writing.

The Covid-19 pandemic has complicated writing centre practices and challenged tutors in several ways (Nanima 2019; Westfall 2021). The DUT writing centre had to transition to an online learning platform with insufficient training, bandwidth and little preparation. The centre also had to adjust to the idea of relying on technology for all its activities. Moreover, the total shift overlooked the digital and gender divide that exists among different categories of students in most tertiary institutions in South Africa. Adjusting to this change came with a tantamount responsibility of ensuring that students and staff who use the centre are catered for. This was almost impossible considering that many students come from communities that are plagued with problems beyond their control such as lack of gadgets and poor connections. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds are the ones that are affected the most. Closures can also have considerable effects on students' sense of belonging and their feelings of self-worth which are key for inclusion in education. Thus, tools such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google classroom, WhatsApp, and Lark education, have become the new mediums of interaction and these tools have changed the way of consulting and reaching out to students. These platforms of communication facilitate an efficient and effective way of reaching out to colleagues and students through video meetings, chat groups and sharing of learning material. This chapter, therefore, reflects on the

dynamics experienced by writing centre tutors at the DUT Midlands campus in this forced migration to an online learning platform. This chapter is predicated on the notion of transformational learning, which is based on experiences, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action.

Transformational learning theory

The transformational learning theory developed by Mezirow (1978), resonates with the present study, which reflects on writing centre tutors' decontextualised and recontextualised academic writing practices involving a shift to online tutoring. This theory is rooted on how people view the world and become receptive to changes through reflective experiences. Transformational learning was developed to provide a holistic objective lens to learning that is influenced by personal experience. In this instance, the focus is on the tutors' experiences of digital transformation during the Covid-19 pandemic. The apparent shifting to online tutoring indicates that writing is strongly influenced by writing centre pedagogical practices and the nature of how tutors experience the transformation.

Mezirow (1997), in explicating the learning approach, notes that learning of transformation and learning by the experience are both critical in reflective teaching and learning. Mezirow added that this reflective-based learning develops "autonomous and independent thinking" (Mezirow 1997: 5). According to Mezirow (2000), three underpinning components guide teaching and learning practices, the centrality of experience, and rational discourse. Firstly, people critically reflect on relevant experiences and practices. Secondly, people engage in dialogues about their experiences and finally, learn from these experienced approaches (Taylor 2007). Under transformational learning

students learn by doing and thus learning knowledge is created through educational experiences. As such, tutors' life and practice experiences are central to learning and acquiring new knowledge (Kolb and Kolb 2009). This means writing centre tutors have an objective lens through which they critically reflect on the experience of online engagement with students to foster effective writing development. Secondly, tutors reflect on their experiences and share best practices of online consultations. Taylor (2007) points out that transformational learning enables and provides a safe learning environment where students are inducted and supported to meet the demands of the academic discourse. In this study, writing centre tutors critically reflect on experiences with tutoring techniques that have been used to expedite the creation of an enabling online environment.

Methodology

This study is based on a collaborative reflective exercise, between the writing centre tutors and the writing centre practitioner. Through reflective journals, the study examined the reflective experiences of 12 writing centre tutors from 2020 to 2021. The details of the collaborators are presented in Table 1. Data was analysed manually, and it was determined after this procedure that a software package would be required for the entire study. Data was collected and analysed using NVivo.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics

<i>Demographic Variables</i>	<i>n (%)</i>
GENDER	
<i>Male</i>	7 (58.3)
<i>Female</i>	5 (41.7)
AGE	
25-30	7 (58.3)
31-36	5 (41.7)
ETHNICITY	
<i>African</i>	11 (91.7)
<i>Coloured</i>	1 (8.3)
CITIZENSHIP	
<i>South African</i>	9 (75.0)
<i>Nigerian</i>	1 (8.3)
<i>Zimbabwean</i>	2 (16.7)
EDU LEVEL	
<i>Master's</i>	3 (25.0)
<i>PhD</i>	9 (75.0)
LANGUAGE	
<i>English</i>	1 (8.3)
<i>IsiZulu</i>	5 (41.7)
<i>Ndebele</i>	1 (8.3)
<i>Shona</i>	1 (8.3)
<i>Sotho (South)</i>	1 (8.3)
<i>Xhosa</i>	2 (16.7)
<i>Other Black Lang</i>	1 (8.3)
YRS TUTORING	
1	2 (16.7)
2	8 (66.7)
4	1 (8.3)
5	1 (8.3)

<i>DISCIPLINE</i>	
<i>Arts</i>	1 (8.3)
<i>Commerce</i>	1 (8.3)
<i>Human Science</i>	2 (16.7)
<i>Science</i>	7 (58.3)
<i>Tourism MGT</i>	1 (8.3)

Table 1 shows the age distribution of the tutors who participated in the study. The sample consisted solely of tutors at DUT's writing centre Midlands campus, ranging in age from 25 to 36 years. The sample's age distribution is consistent with that of individuals registered for postgraduate degrees in South Africa (Department of Science and Technology Report 2015). Male respondents made up 58.3% of the sample, while female respondents made up 41.7% (see Table 1). To adhere to the qualitative case study approach, data was acquired from 12 tutors, 11 African, and one Coloured population group. In terms of respondents' home languages, ten respondents said that they spoke one of the eleven official South African languages, while two tutors indicated that they spoke Shona and other Black languages in the African diaspora. The tutors are majority isiZulu speakers (41.7 %), which meets the demand of the students enrolled at DUT, as the majority are first language, isiZulu speakers. This aids in meeting student needs and ensuring that consultations are inclusive. The DUT writing centres primarily appoints postgraduate students on a contract basis. As a result, the sample composition was deemed appropriate because it comprised representatives from the major postgraduate educational levels.

A shift from physical to online space

The DUT writing centre had to adjust to the idea of relying on technology for all its activities, in the latter part of 2020 to meet the

needs of now virtual clients. While teaching and learning was done through technologies like Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Classroom, and WhatsApp, the Writing Centre mainly relied on its already-adopted WCONLINE booking system. The WCONLINE platform was then adapted to facilitate not only booking appointments but also conducting online consultations. In addition, the DUT writing centres adopted a multi-modal approach, which included Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp video conferencing calls and telephone calls. While this migration and adaptation has been generally positive and successful, there have been challenges experienced by both the tutoring staff and the students.

The reflections from tutors note the process of migration, which saw them using several technological platforms to reach out to students in need of their services. The initial experimentation with Microsoft Teams, Word, WhatsApp and Zoom to provide feedback to students became the 'new normal' during this period and was beneficial. Both tutors and students had to transform and adapt to this 'new reality.' However, some teething problems were experienced in reaching out to students, since the majority of DUT undergraduate students come from underprivileged backgrounds - access to computers or the internet was the initial hurdle. These experiences were a stumbling block in an attempt to adapt to multimodal learning environments, which was a perspective shared by various academics. The writing centre tutors, who struggled with student commitment before the Covid-19 lockdown, bore the brunt of this apparent challenges.

According to their reflections, tutors had three types of student users:

- Type A active: students who ask questions and contribute during a consultation.

- Type B passive: students who do not ask a question, never say a word nor contribute during a consultation.
- Type C non-digital natives: students who have limited digital resources or are computer illiterate and have no online learning infrastructure, laptops and access to the internet.

Attending to these three types of students virtually takes more attention and patience amid the pandemic. Active students were likely to initiate consultations, make follow-ups and attend to feedback provided. On the other hand, passive students and non-digital natives, although for different reasons, were unlikely to consult the writing centre of their own accord. Passive students would only come upon external compulsion from lecturers, while the technological challenges of online engagements scared off many non-digital natives. The widening gap in educational opportunity and support between students from different backgrounds, illustrated here is one of the greatest risks of the pandemic. Type C students provide systemic challenges, compounded by structural issues such as the often-interrupted supply of electricity and data, which have been seen as external impediments to physical-online transition in many organisations. Collaborative engagements between various stakeholders are therefore necessary for ensuring smooth and transformational pedagogical migration (Archer 2017). For example, the Midlands writing centre initiated integrated academic research support for undergraduate fourth-year nursing students.

Analysis and discussion

Use of online feedback

Determining the impact of tutor's online writing centre engagements with students was challenging during the pandemic and lockdown

period. While the tutor can readily read the student(s)' body language and facial expressions during face-to-face engagements, online consultations limit this non-verbal communication. This was most challenging in dealing with type B and C students, where unidirectional monologues were characteristic of consultation sessions. Unfortunately, these were the majority of the writing centre's users. As a result, tutors had to move to an inquiry-guided learning (IGL) model, characterised by rigorous and thoughtful questions (Baxi 1998; Levy 2012) that demanded students' engagement in the consultation process. A tutor who consulted with a type C student user narrates the pedagogical transformation.

My second most difficult session was an onsite consultation with a first-year student who was computer illiterate. It is not that she did not understand the content of what she was supposed to be writing, it is just that she had a challenge with typing the assignment properly, so most of our time in the session was taken up by the computer lesson that I had to give on typing. From this session I have learnt to ask students a few questions which help me understand their level of computer literacy, this often helps understand the student if they are having challenges with writing properly in an assignment.

Contextual and individualised adaptations

While writing centre practice has always acknowledged the need for individualised response to student literacy challenges, the context of the pandemic re-emphasised this pedagogical axiom. Firstly, as indicated in the types of student users discussed above, student circumstances are not the same. As such, students demand equitable engagement. Kirchoff (2016) argues that great situational awareness

and emotional intelligence are vital skills for a tutor to determine and respond to students' various motivational levels. Thus, if we are to advance, we must be responsive and adaptable to students' unique writing needs. This notion of a Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger 2010) has been part and parcel of writing centre engagement before Covid-19. However, this has amplified the approaches in the online space to allow for effective online support. One tutor highlighted:

The first essential is to equip and infuse the writing centre tutors, who work directly with the students, with skills and values such as patience, humility and service to foster a suitable environment for them to be willing to understand and serve students from all walks of a life.

Secondly, Covid-19 has forced a transformative reflection in most writing centres. We had to rethink the meaning of writing centre support in ways that transform the way we conduct our online consultations. In many ways, Covid-19 has influenced the shift to new and creative approaches to online writing support. Additionally, it has emphasised the critical nature of rapidly shifting our beliefs and incorporating new knowledge and creativity. Another tutor added:

Students' interpersonal communication varies individually and culturally, and the writing centre works to honour the writer's communication style and needs by being open, flexible, and sensitive to the needs of each student.

Thirdly, forced migration has redefined the zones of possibility as far as writing centre support is concerned. We have thought about new ways of online engagement where the physical space will not matter because of the ability to use various e-learning platforms like MS Teams, Zoom,

WhatsApp etc. Nanima (2019) maintains that Covid-19 has expedited an irreversible transformational embrace of the fourth industrial revolution. As for writing centre tutors, continuous reflections must see us improving online academic support necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

A way forward for writing centre online spaces?

The shift to online support has been noted by Reville (2017: 2), “The field will show permanent changes as a result of this crisis and our adaptation to it ... because of this experience parents, students and teachers will be seeking profound changes in the way writing centres operate in the future”. The longer that our education system is interrupted, the more likely that these new experiments that writing centres and educators are doing, will take root. The learning goals or refocusing on the essentials was key to meeting the current situation and ensuring that the writing support was accessible and accommodative to all types of students (A, B, C). Focusing on the essentials, allows for tutors to go deeper, create spaces, build relationships, communities, and think deliberately about how they are engaging with students. It has also been an amazing time learning from each other in the writing centre. The key question is whether these changes that we see and experience, these new uses of technology, of teaching, of emphasising new skills, are going to exacerbate gaps between students with different backgrounds. We need to take a more optimistic look, but that will take deliberate effort and commitment to make sure that the lessons learned and the gains that are possible from this incredible time are spread across all our students. The challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic have enforced three lessons:

- a hybrid writing support consisting of online and face-to-face consultations.
- the inclusion of transdisciplinary approaches across all disciplines that foster equal dynamics of communication, and enable collaborative engagement and
- reflecting and refining writing centre pedagogical practice and becoming adaptive to the needs of the students

Conclusion

We are all intrigued by the prospect of a post-Covid-19 writing centre. When will it be safe to return to campus on its whole without the use of social distancing measures? When will normalcy be restored? While most will welcome a return to normalcy, others may wish for some of the pandemic's changes to persist, thereby creating a new kind of normal. Writing centres appear to be one area in our institution where the pandemic has brought about positive change. This article examined the experiences and perspectives of writing centre tutors on online academic support, while also focusing on the digital transformation during Covid-19. The findings indicated that tutors possess a set of important ideas that may contribute significantly to the transformative learning process and that the writing centre, through its pedagogical approaches and learning practices, can serve as a vehicle for achieving actual transformation. There is no doubt that technology can increase the quality of education globally and improve teaching and learning outcomes but, this cannot be achieved until all the needed infrastructure is also provided to the poorest, less privileged, and remotest communities. Therefore, writing centres could play a vital role in shifting assessment practices to include oral, visual, multimedia and

technology-enriched aspects. The fundamental pedagogical approach of writing centres is a one-on-one or group consultation, which is based on the notion that knowledge is not something we receive from books and lecturers, but something we produce in a community of informed peers. Multimodality in writing centres can thus help bring out the richness of diversity, enabling more students and staff to participate successfully in diverse communication processes.

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