

Review of *Writing Centres in Higher Education: Working in and across the disciplines*

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Clarence, S. & Dison, L. (Eds.) (2017). *Writing Centres in Higher Education: Working in and across the disciplines*. African Sun Media, pp. (222), R365, \$22.10, £16.94, €18.80, ISBN: 9781928357544

This book is a much-anticipated contribution to tertiary writing development theory and practice. It develops several of the themes and conversations explored in an earlier collection, *Changing Spaces: Writing Centres and Access to Higher Education* (Archer & Richards, 2011). Both books primarily reflect the work of South African writing centres but, as noted by Ganobcsik-Williams in the foreword of this book, 'its arguments and the examples it offers will speak to those working in other contexts to support writing and academic development' (p. 3).

In their introduction, Clarence and Dison foreground notions of space and transformation, exploring what it means to work both within a discipline but also apart from it. Drawing on Academic Literacies theory, they strongly resist deficit notions of writing centre work and suggest that writing centres have the potential to operate as agents of transformation, both within and across disciplines. This position should have resonance for anyone working in higher education, where the prevalence of neo-liberal, managerial approaches to academic development and writing development can stifle well-theorised and principled practices.

The book is presented in three parts. Part one includes a range of chapters on theorising and extending writing centre practice in universities. Part two comprises a number of case studies that showcase how writing centres negotiate practices in the disciplines. The book concludes with two important chapters in part three, which explore approaches to evaluating writing centre work.

The title of the first chapter, 'The Place of Education Theories in Writing Centres,' is a little misleading, as Slemming takes on a range of issues, and the section on the place of education theories is actually quite short. As the framing chapter for this section, and one that raises a critical concern, I was hoping for a more detailed exploration of the theories, and how they could be used in a more systematic way. Chapter two describes, in detail, one approach to writing development: 'Writing Intensive.' With regards to the theme of space, Nichols advocates for – as an alternative to writing centres as safe spaces – the notion of writing centres as free spaces; 'necessary generative places for democratic practice and action' (2017, p. 37). This seems an important and timely distinction to raise. This chapter also echoes Clarence and Dison's concerns regarding deficit models of writing development, a strong thread that runs through the book.

In chapter three, Clarence explores the use and application of Maton's *legitimation code theory* (LCT), and one dimension of this theory – *Semantics* – within the broader academic literacies frame. Clarence shows how – through reference to work done with peer tutorials – the tool of semantic gravity, with its notions of waving and weaving through conversation about writing, adds a useful and necessary dimension to the academic literacies approach in writing centre work. This chapter offers a powerful blend of theory and practice, and illustrates the need identified by Slemming in chapter one for more of this kind of work. Clarence's work exemplifies

how practitioners who draw mindfully on specific aspects of theory, and who are aware of the history and theoretical development of writing centre work, have the tools to reflect on and develop the work of writing centres in more coherent, research-led ways.

Mitumba-Tindy's chapter also demonstrates a thoughtful use of educational theory in writing centres. He draws on Vygotsky's concept of the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) and shows how writing centres can be ZPDs. He broadens the application of ZPD to theorise the work of writing centres. Of particular interest is how he shows that the writing centre can operate as a ZPD for both student writers and the writing consultant; this is congruent with Nichol's and others' notion of writing centres as a democratic space.

Huang and Archer present the argument that writing centres need to be ready to assist students with multimodal texts – not just written ones – and that digital media consultations require that writing consultants be trained to support argument in visual as well as written modes. Their insights offer important ways of thinking about writing centre work both now and for the future, but it seemed to me that their argument may apply to some disciplines more than others, and may not transfer well to some of the professional degrees, in particular. On the other hand, their work reinforces the importance of discipline-specific writing centres: rather than training generic writing consultants in digital media consultation 'just in case', this could and should be done in writing centres in the disciplines where multimodality is valued, practised and assessed. Pearman, later in the book, develops this thread and draws connections between the production of written text and the production of video. Through careful analysis, she shows what this could look like in a writing centre consultation, and offers a particularly useful framework for consultations on video construction, in the form of a table of guiding questions.

Part 1 concludes with a reflective chapter on what American writing centres can learn from South Africa about the affordances of multilingualism. Written with particular reference to Stellenbosch University's multilingual Writing Lab, this chapter acknowledges the problematic dominance of English and the role of language in oppression and as a barrier to access to higher education. I was struck by the author's surprise at the notion of 'language as resource' as opposed to 'language as integral to identity' (2017, p. 102). I did wonder if this pragmatic approach to language, that Bailey Bridgewater associates with South Africans, would have been as prevalent if she had spoken to writing centre practitioners in a broader range of contexts. I was also interested by her claim that having a language policy – which most American universities do not have – was an enabling and necessary factor in highlighting the role of language in learning. Whether or not South African universities' language policies are, in fact, enabling multilingualism is just one of the questions that this chapter elicits. It offers, therefore, a useful starting point for much-needed conversations about strengthening multilingual practices at any university's writing centre.

In the first case study, Esambe and Mkonto explore the paradox of the difficulties and the necessity of developing students' writing capacity within disciplines. Based on their work in a university of technology (UoT), they identify the conflicting forces of student diversity in terms of culture, language and class; and often-rigid disciplinary expectations when it comes to writing. They introduce Photovoice as a research tool, which they describe as a 'visually intensive narrative technique' with 'emancipatory intent' (2017, p. 114). I was eager to learn more about how it was used and what insights it generated, but this was not explored as fully as it might have been in the rest of the chapter. In a later chapter, Mtonjeni and Sefalane-Nkohla also identify a tool they used in their research at a UoT – that of metadiscourse – with a particular focus on two metadiscourse markers: transitions and hedges. They provide a persuasive account of the value of this tool, particularly for academic literacy specialists working in an unfamiliar discipline, such as those in the sciences. In particular, they show how this tool helps to create a shared language for students, academic literacy specialists and disciplinary specialists, to talk about writing.

Daniels, Richards and Lackay's case study describes writing development in a first year Engineering course and further explores the paradox identified in the previous chapter. They too ponder the theme of space – physical, curricular and identity-related – in the disciplines, and ultimately conclude that, despite tensions, collaboration with faculty can lead to discipline-

specific spaces that are generative spaces. Given they have worked with Engineering for over ten years, their insights into sustained writing development over time are important, as is their argument that universities need to be thinking about writing centres' relationship with the faculties in the longer term.

The last case study in this section explores the potential of group writing consultations, especially for promoting reflective practice. Shabanza carefully explains the pedagogy and structure of a group writing consultation, and explores the potential of group writing consultations to promote deeper meta-awareness of disciplinary genres and expectations. He also argues that a focus on reflection in writing consultations can help to reconcile students with the conventions of writing in their discipline. The focus, in these case studies, on meta-cognitive approaches, identity and space offers a welcome contrast to the deficit 'skills' discourse so prevalent in many universities; a discourse that is consistently critiqued in this book through the lens of academic literacies theory.

The book concludes with a powerful and persuasive chapter on evaluating writing centre work. Dison and Mendelowitz problematise traditional approaches to evaluation that neglect students' voices, identities and experiences, and argue that 'deficit discourses abound as institutions attempt to insure themselves against the risk of low throughputs by managing "risky" students through careful and systematic measurement' (2017, p. 194). Significantly, this chapter does more than argue the point; it demonstrates a contrasting approach to evaluation, by drawing on data, methods and student voices from a focus group evaluation of writing centre work. It shows how focus group evaluations can be a productive alternative that allows engagement with student-identified affective and identity issues; and an alternative that is congruent with a broader drive for transformation.

Student writing development is an area where much time, energy and money is spent trying to improve students' 'skills', but where interventions do not always draw on the range of research available. (This always strikes me as a particularly odd anomaly in academic contexts). As a result, too often, these well-intentioned interventions fall into the 'deficit discourse' camp. This book, with its evidence-led case studies, and critical and reflective chapters, demonstrates an alternative that is both practical and theoretical. I am glad to have this book on my shelf and recommend it to anyone working with student writing in higher education.

References

- Archer, A., & Richards, R. (2011). *Changing Spaces: Writing Centres and Access to Higher Education*. African Sun Media. <https://doi.org/10.18820/9781920338602>