The role of a Writing Centre in a South African university of technology (UOT)[1]

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ABSTRACT

Academic development, pedagogical growth, and curriculum expansion remain an ongoing process at institutions of higher education in South Africa. The prospects of expanding educational opportunities to a larger number of hopeful students in South Africa have resulted in the creation of facilities that extend the growth of academic literacies such as the writing centre. These centres have contributed to opening opportunities to not only a larger number of students in scientific and technical fields but also to giving an opportunity to less-advantaged students by offering one-on-one services to grow and nurture their academic literacy capabilities. The focus of this paper is to investigate the role of a writing centre in a South African university of technology with the aim to understand what role this facility plays in the academic development of the students affiliated with such institutions and to unpack the effect of such a centre on the development of curricular and academic literacy. This paper presents findings that were gathered from a PhD study that used a mixed-method approach to investigate how facilities such as a writing centre impact the academic development of students in a university of technology. The study examined the power relations among the tutor (in the writing centre) and tutee (the students using the writing centre) and analysed these relationships by means of critical discourse analysis theory to focus on the intangible assets of the student. Using mixed-methods analysis, the researcher was to be able to understand the perceptions, views, expectations and experiences of students using the writing centre to explore the different ontologies and epistemologies associated with curriculum development, and how this defined the role of the writing centre.

Keywords: academic development, writing centre, pedagogy, curriculum growth, University of Technology, role theory

INTRODUCTION

The success of education hinges on understanding students' experiences in their educational journey. Their involvement is pivotal to understanding and unravelling the role of facilities made for the academic development of students. Frank Clint (2018) explains that academic development is the process of helping students use their knowledge and skills to perform well in university in preparation for their professional

workplace in the future. Thus, it is imperative to understand that the involvement of students in their learning journey provides an understanding of how educational development can be mapped out, developed, and understood from the students' perspective.

Levin (2000: 155) posits: 'education reform cannot succeed and should not proceed without much more direct involvement of students in all its aspects'.

Writing centres (WrCs) have been introduced in several universities in South Africa as a mechanism for addressing the various changes and developments that have come about with the growth of polyglot societies in higher education (HE) and that have occurred in the general pedagogy in institutions of HE (Archer, 2010; Nichols, 1998). These studies mention polyglot societies and the nature of the environment because the issue of communication is central to developments associated with learning. The majority of students that are enrolled in a university of technology (UoT) do not have English as their first language. This not only creates barriers to learning but difficulties in academic development processes and abilities, which are mostly embedded in higher-order learning dynamics that most WrCs focus on. Nichols (1998), in explaining what a WrC is, argues that WrCs are based on the paradigm that language and knowledge are created socially through conversation or dialogue with people and texts. As a result, the process of language and communication is developed through communities of practice (COPs) that are fostered through WrC practice. A WrC is an alternative to the belief that knowledge is handed down from master to disciple. Archer (2010) explains that the introduction of WrCs in South Africa has led to academic development becoming more integrated into the mainstream as WrCs encourage direct involvement with the students on the development of academic literacies of students. This paper focuses on analysing the role of a WrC in a UoT. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to understand how operational and administrative frameworks within a WrC define the role of such a centre in a UoT in South Africa. By analysing the structure of the Durban University of Technology's (DUT's) Writing Centre, we can understand the role it plays in academic literacy development. This research was premised on the idea that tradition (the olden ways of studying based on one language) in education is no longer the standard, but that it is constantly evolving to suit developments in economic, social and political spheres (Kelly, 2009; Taba & Spalding, 1962). The idea of tradition links to the idea that educational institutions did not previously have spaces that allowed academic development and support in various languages, which is a crucial and salient feature of the WrC as it has a variety of students from different linguistic and traditional backgrounds. This aspect is imperative because students who find it easy to express their most vital and original ideas in their first language then struggle to express them literally. The WrC offers a bridge in academic development and translation as part of the support for students. As a result, student involvement and direct contact are imperative in developmental approaches to teaching and learning. This paper, through exploring the administrative and operational nature and development of a WrC, looks at the role the WrC plays in promoting the academic development of students. This approach enables us to better understand the WrC's significance and contribution to the development of the curricula. The paper uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a theoretical framework to explore WrC in South Africa, such as that of a UoT. In doing so, I briefly trace the evolution and explain the operational approach and structure of the DUT WrC. The evolution and historical structure build a foundation on which to understand why there was a need for a WrC and, consequently, to answer the question of what role it plays.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF A WRITING CENTRE

Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA is a perspective of multidisciplinary discourse studies that specifically focuses on the discursive reproduction of power, such as the disparities found in language communication (Van Dijk, 2015). In this study, the idea of CDA was characterised by the common interest in demystifying ideologies and power through the systematic and reproducible investigation of semiotic data, which are spoken, written

or visual (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Manjeya (2017) elaborately explains that this, as a result, illustrates how CDA relates to the process of writing and literacy (in the case of this article, the student's ability to read and write in the institution's medium of communication) by examining the various power relations that are explicated in the reproduceable investigations built around semiotic data, which also emphasises self-reflection. This process of the WrC strongly emphasises the development and building up of the student by focusing on statements such as 'what you can expect at the WrC'.

The CDA power relations analysis relates to the structure of the WrC that tries to understand how power and inequality can be analysed to help understand how the development of academic literacies is viewed from the experiences of the student. Fairclough, Mulderrig and Wodak (2011) explain that CDA is not a discrete academic discipline; instead, it is a problem-oriented research approach that uses several methods in research. Fairclough, Mulderrig and Wodak (2011) further agree with Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000) that the main focus of CDA is structured around social practice and development for language as a practice. As a result of the nature of CDA, it is unique in its view of the relationship between language and society and in its critical approach to methodology.

This shows how this theory is used to describe the structure of the WrC. Firstly, it caters to the relationship between language and society. As a result, this theory gives clarity to the discussion on how language is influenced by society through a COP as is elaborated by Geller et al. (2007), Archer (2010) and Denny (2010). The various views intertwined in understanding the connection of language to society is what shapes the discursive analysis. Kress (1990) defines CDA as a multifaceted domain of inquiry whose main facets are centred around social practices linked to various disciplines. CDA focuses on language discourse and on how language reflects power dynamics. Fairclough (2013) explains that CDA has a basic property: it is relational; hence, it deals with how language reflects power dynamics by trying to create a balance and benefit in both parties. The focus of CDA in this paper is on individuals and social relations and is implemented by attempting to cater to the layered character. The intricate details of the theory thus give light for the investigation by giving the students a voice, as elaborated by Fairclough (2013), and it shows that discourse is not simply an entity definable on its own but that it is rather understood as sets of relations that are constructed around the social practice of relationships in which the concept of power is ubiquitous.

Finally, when applied to the WrC setting, CDA enables one to see how power can shift to the student who receives intangible assets (the skills students take with them to their professional workplaces) to prepare them for the academic and professional fields. There is a need to understand how the criticality of this discourse and its type are imperative in the development of pedagogy for academic development.

Bitzer (2009) explains that 'academic development' is the dominant term for tertiary education development in the HE context, incorporating the ideas of the students, staff, curriculum, and institutional development. By understanding CDA, power relations analysis in the WrC, which relates to the structure of the WrC, one can attempt to understand how power and inequality can be analysed. This, in turn, can help understand how the development of academic literacies is viewed from the experience of the student. This paper breaks down the interplays involved in the tutor-student relational dynamics. This development can either be embedded in different phases of the social structure found within educational facilities or be multidimensional and distributed (Boud, 1999). Within the DUT structure, this embodiment is embedded in each department as an extension and requisite of student development, which falls under the portfolio of teaching and learning within faculties. In most cases, academic development is encouraged by breaking down barriers in language and communication. Given that the world we live in is multilingual, various curricula have focused on ensuring that language is not a barrier in academic development, hence, the creation of facilities such as the WrC. The WrC's role in academic development is a central concept in this paper.

Daniels (2016) explains that pedagogy is both the science and art of education because the substance of pedagogy lies much less in the process it brings into play than in the theoretical reasoning through which it discovers, evaluates and coordinates these processes of discourse. All of these are crucial steps in analysing the critical discourses that make up the language and communication dynamics of consultations between the tutor and tutee. Pedagogy mainly relates to the practices of how best to teach and improve the curriculum of academic development by creating a lasting skill for students in tertiary education. Pedagogy has often been identified by academics as the development of curricula, which also denotes the same phenomenon but emphasises improving what already exists (Manjeya, 2017).

To understand pedagogy more intricately, it is imperative to understand critical pedagogy. Giroux (2020) explains that critical pedagogy asserts that students can engage their learning from a position of agency, and that, in so doing, they can actively participate in narrating their identities through the culture of questioning, which opens up a space of translation between the tutor and tutee. Wink (2005) notes that critical pedagogy is the prism that reflects complexities between teaching and learning; it sheds light on the hidden subtleties which the naked eye cannot see in the practice of teaching and learning. Wink (2005: 41) goes on to explain that, when using critical pedagogy, one has to 'learn to relearn to unlearn'. Pedagogy can thus be explained in terms of the general understanding of science and education, and in terms of the fact that it is critical in understanding students' experiences. This study, as a result, utilised critical pedagogy as this outlook strongly relates to understanding the main framework in the development of academic writing. Critical pedagogy is relevant in understanding student academic development and how the WrC contributes to this. Pedagogy is the way that defines the theory and practice of the various methods and ways of teaching and learning, and it is best understood as the art, science or profession of teaching.

The idea of the 'role' as a word in depicting the role of a WrC has been explored within various social contexts. Role theory explains and illustrates the special, social connotations a specific entity has in society within a given community or cluster (Biddle, 2013). It is imperative to understand the role the WrC plays in promoting academic literacy development. This study is based on the premise that the centre in itself is considered a facility, not only for those who have difficulty expressing themselves literally but also for those who do not have the medium of communication as their first language. As a result, responsiveness, knowledge, and ideas about the role of the WrC in itself are marred by the student's ideas of how this facility is fit for the undergraduate curriculum (Hutchings, 2006; Manjeya, 2017). This paper forms part of understanding the role of a WrC and the paper explores the perceptions and views of both the students and the administration of the WrC.

Evolution of the University of Technology in South Africa

The need to expand education and integrate the English language into the global economy resulted in the creation of UoTs, such as the DUT, in South Africa. In this generation, language has not only broken down communication barriers but has allowed the development and integration of multidisciplinary education and opportunities. Scholars such as Mbembe (2015) and Wa Thiong'o (1992) have explored the issue of language in education and have shown that inclusion of its variants is a juxtaposition of development and global integration. The DUT's (2008b) website explains how and when the educational landscape in South African HE shifted by noting:

> The Higher Education landscape changed in South Africa in 2002 when ML Sultan and Technikon Natal merged to form the Durban Institute of Technology on 1 April 2002. (Durban University of Technology, 2008b)

This change was to further streamline and harmonise the activities of all tertiary institutions in South Africa to position themselves against global benchmarks and to attract the finest students and staff (Department

of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2017). Matoti et al. (2011: 1142) explain that 'during the restructuring of Higher Education in South Africa, some Technikons were merged with universities to form Comprehensive Universities'. Technikons were changed to UoTs and, at the time of publishing this article, there were five of these in South Africa. As a result, all former Technikons were redesignated UoTs. The progress of UoTs has since evolved and continue to grow to suit the context in which they are birthed, and they have, indeed, harmonised their activities with the global community through decolonisation and curriculum integration to suit the current educational debate on Africanisation and indigenisation as well as on the nature of the South African HE curriculum (Le Grange, 2016; Shay, 2016). However, in as much as this debate ensured the growth and significance of curriculum development in HE, it is imperative to note that this paper discusses the role of a WrC in a UoT. The current debate on curriculum and its significance to African HE has focused on the versatility of the traditional university as it is programme or discipline based (according to the structural makeup of the institution). Hence, the adoption of a WrC has been smooth. However, when it comes to a UoT, specifically in South Africa, the application and role have shifted due to the fact that UoTs by creation are not discipline specific but programme specific. The role of a WrC in a UoT is, therefore, shifted to the student body for which it needs to cater. Most UoTs having transitioned from Technikons, which were institutions largely characterised by technical programmes, leaves the role of the WrC much to be desired as they need to be structured in line with the programmes that the specific UoT offers.

The structure of UoTs was such that its context defined its mandate. The context of a UoT is different from that of a traditional university because, unlike traditional universities, the UoT was closely monitored by the state, as is explained by Matoti et al. (2011), and it had different admission requirements for its programmes. This not only has implications on the institutional curriculum and culture but also cultivates an environment that allows for COPs such as the WrC, which is a major role of the facility as identified within most traditional universities (Johnson & Louw, 2014). Research COPs are what give a suitable environment for the birth and growth of WrCs. Furthermore, recruitment of the employees of these UoTs has been based on experience in the field rather than academic experience because UoTs were meant to prepare skilled labour for industry and not necessarily to cultivate research. This structure allowed the space for the WrC facility in a bid to improve the academic literacy performance of the student body. The above-mentioned structure also included the integration of academic experiences and work into the professional world, therefore meaning that, in the right circumstances, such placements can engender a deeper level of learning (Matoti et al., 2011). Furthermore, this deeper level of learning can be encouraged through the establishment of WrCs, which defines another one of its major roles.

Evolution of the Writing Centre

The first WrCs to be established in South Africa was in the 1990s with the University of Witwatersrand (Wits), the University of Cape Town (UCT), and the University of the Western Cape (UWC), which are all traditional universities (Archer & Richards, 2011). This chapter of South African universities began by reflecting on what the transformation of education would be like in universities in the post-apartheid era. The history and role of the WrC in South Africa have largely been influenced and shaped by the decisive moments of opening access to HE to students whose admittance had been curtailed by squandered intellectual abilities, which was caused by Bantu education and the old order of separate development (Archer, 2010; Archer & Richards, 2011). This issue perpetuated various debates on transformation and access to education, hence, giving a context and history of the WrC in South Africa by understanding how the intricacy of their link shapes the history of the WrC. Transformation, as a result, highlighted the change from a previously rigid system that did not afford the majority of students the right to an opportunity to learn in institutions of HE. Various debates circulated the changing landscape and how it opened many doors to whom the majority had been previously shut out.

The history of the WrC is shaped through understanding the complicated identity of negotiations woven into the idea of non-traditional students seeking to perform the kinds of writing that universities demand – that is, to acquire the cultural capital of academic literacies. Given the history of South Africa, therefore, many relations are to be traced back to the transformation of and access to HE for WrCs. Ajayi (1996) discusses the growth and context of South African WrCs. In pursuit of unravelling the history of the WrC and how it was eventually presented and introduced at UCT, Wits, and UWC, it is of pivotal importance to understand the basis of the need for the facility itself. Archer and Richards (2011) identify the main reason for the existence of the WrC in South Africa, and they summarise it as a process of multimodal means to communicate beyond what is traditionally identified as 'writing'. In other words, the role of the WrC is essentially to help develop and learn academic writing. The question then arises: if this was the structure of a WrC in a traditional university, how, then, is the role of the facility perceived in a UoT? The ideas of transformation and access that lie at the foundation of the WrC's creation are not perceived as part of a curriculum that is dominated by existing world views; these ideas are crippled by the power play that dismisses the phenomenon of the WrC in UoT as an African facility addressing African academic problems. Rather, it builds on the idea that a UoT is created based on programmes. It is, therefore, created for the research purposes of the institution; hence, it is founded as a COP in research to build on the ideas of transformation and excess in the academic literacy as explained by Heath (1983), Johnson and Louw (2014) and Lea and Street (1998); it is not founded on the ideals of the structures and context of western education. Therefore, the role of the WrC is built around creating solutions for academic literacy growth and development by understanding the community in which it is birthed.

The English language has increasingly been recognised as an important mode of communication in the academic world. However, over time, cognitive use of the language in academia has seemingly become difficult as most students do not have English as their first language. This has created barriers to thriving and development for both graduate and undergraduate students in South Africa. Al Fadda (2012), Bacha and Nahla (2002), and Olivas and Li (2006) concluded that the main challenges students face are a consequence of the levels of their language competency, which is a result of English being a second language of communication in both academic and social contexts. This challenge has resulted in the creation of WrCs in South Africa along with the need to rapidly increase academic development in HE. It is, however, important to note that the services that the WrC offers are not only for those who have English as a second language but also for those who have it as a first language. The construct and art of writing are not something that an individual is born with but rather born into, with many students having trouble adapting to academic writing, as explained by Lillis and Turner (2001). It is imperative to note that the construct of writing and academic literacy is not a born attribute but is rather a social practice born from the norms and practices of an educational culture (Gee, 2004). Reading and writing is built around the fact that every writer needs a reader to form the web that ties communication in society. And the society, in particular, is that in which the WrC is to be, which is subject based as it is drawn into the UoT society – that is, it draws from the educational and traditional cultures of the institution. So, everyone needs to, at some point in their life, learn academic writing and literacy. This is because no one is born with an academic language (in both its modes: oral and written); rather, it is learned, acquired and developed through formal education. It is within this formal education that various facilities are constructed to build upon the growth and development of pedagogy as a whole. Therefore, assistance from this facility is for every student to 'learn to write and write to learn' (Durban University of Technology, 2015).

With an understanding of the evolution of the WrC, one can conclude that the specific roles of the DUT WrC are to

- act as a familiar COP

- engender deeper levels of learning

- develop and learn academic writing

- create solutions for academic writing through practice.

Although the specific roles can be separately explained, they are dependent on each other. These roles are also the intent of the given UoT in which it is birthed. A look at the growth of academia and the construction of the curriculum can shed more light on these roles as explained below.

Academic growth and curriculum construction within the WrC

The growth and development of academic curricula have been introduced in institutions of HE as a substantial effort in building the educational discourse and its improvement through the creation of WrCs. This section discusses the role of the WrC in the development of academic writing in South Africa. Archer (2010) has articulated that issues around language and its development in South Africa are significant when one views them in relation to the ongoing legacy of apartheid, which is still evident in non-equitable educational systems across the country.

The systems of African education that have been set up to help develop academic writing as a whole, on both educational and professional platforms, have resulted in the adoption of a continued system that produces unprepared professionals in both academic and professional careers. Desmond (2018) explains that the curricula throughout our education system are in dire need of transformation; hence, a collective approach to the roles of different facilities is important to understand the options for development. Learners and students too often do not see themselves in the curricula, making education an alienating endeavour rather than a liberating experience. This, therefore, explains why the development and set pedagogy of the South African curriculum in academic writing need investigation, particularly as they relate to what the role of the WrC really is. The gap that is created by this system of pedagogy, specifically its effects on English in UoTs, signifies a need to create space to understand its role.

The DUT WrC Model

As has already been discussed on the various types and models of WrCs in South Africa and how they came to be, it is imperative to explore the policy formulation that builds up the DUT WrC's operational and administrative framework to understand its role. The DUT WrC was started in the Faculty of Arts and Design in early 2008 (Durban University of Technology, 2008a). The WrC was situated at City Campus and was operational on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. The centre was operated and overseen by a parttime coordinator and consultant (Durban University of Technology, 2008a). The policy and operational framework of this WrC would

- provide a friendly and relaxed learning environment where students would work on pre-arranged writing tasks

- investigate providing a variety of resources to the students such as one-on-one tutoring and small group work (Durban University of Technology, 2008a).

As a result, the 2008 policy and operational framework of the DUT WrC explain the main aspects of the pillars that built the policy that established the DUT WrC of 2017. A look into the structures as explained above clearly shows that the model that was built around it was not developing into an emergency writing clinic, but rather into a space to learn to write and write to learn. Also, taking into consideration the fact that DUT is programme based and not discipline based, the centre was developed around the offered programmes on each campus. A point to note will reveal that this move – as far as the decolonisation discussion is concerned – is a move towards a transformation that is subject based (Desmond, 2018). This WrC, like the UCT WrC, was built as an extension of Centre for Higher Education Developments (CHED); thus, the models of DUT (a university of technology) and UCT (a traditional university) did differ in the

structure of idea and funding but they both worked towards the integration of writing development into assignments, which is part of pedagogic growth in academia. They also differ in the type of student body that uses this facility as an extension of academic support and development.

The operational guidelines of the DUT WrC included that there was to be intricate collaboration with lecturers and the WrC staff and, as encouragement of the use of the WrC, they would award students with a certain percentage on their final mark. This, however, can be said to have worked against the various models of WrCs in South Africa. This retrogression was as a result of students using the WrC to gain extra marks instead of actually using it as an opportunity to learn; hence the assertion that many WrCs in South Africa are emergency writing clinics (Bacha & Nahla, 2002; Hutchings, 2002, 2006).

As a result, the creation of the WrC was based on the need for the development of academic writing and support to move towards the growth of curriculum for the University. As the realisation of this need grew, the current WrC had to grow to become a place that would cater for more students that were enrolled at DUT as it was only available at one campus (City Campus). There was thus a proposal to expand the project of the WrC to the other campuses, which included Steve Biko, ML Sultan, Pietermaritzburg and Riston (Pratt, 2008). This proposed extension was based on a 'macro' approach in which the diversity of approaches to teaching and learning in the university programmes would be accommodated by the WrC (Pratt, 2008).

This macro approach views communication in written modes as a social process; hence, the practice of the WrC is a social, community practice in which learning is gradual. In this proposal, consultations were not designed to fix problems but rather to establish effective academic writing practices (Pratt, 2008) so that fewer problems were experienced in the acquisition of the intangible assets offered by the university. The proposed extension, which is the current form of the WrC, was designed to employ a 'hands-on' approach that would be modelled around developing writing competence at the requisite university level (Pratt, 2008). The proposal to formulate and build the WrC explained the nature of discourse at the university in relation to pedagogic development. It stated that

teaching of written communication is often hindered because the field is highly politicized and fraught schisms and disputes. The approach envisaged here embraces diversity as a resource rather than a threat to tenure, publication, or power. The givens therefore are:

- Communication in written mode is a social process best learned and developed as part of the human socialization process which notices diversity of disciplines and professions

- Communication in written work is crucial to intellectual development and closely linked to learning (Pratt, 2008: 2).

When illustrated in a diagram, the process above can be depicted as in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1:
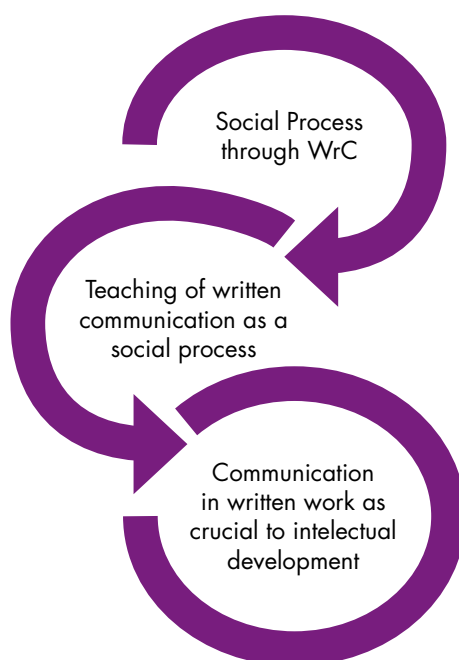*Social Practice and Writing Centre*

Figure 1 illustrates how the DUT WrC integrates into the patterns of socialising at DUT. The operational and administrative framework of the WrC is set up in such a way that the centre breaks its specific functions according to the needs of the campus, hence the importance of the UoT being programme based. In moving forward with the current decolonisation discussion on the curriculum in South African universities, this marks a way forward in that the WrC's role is to also use its social practices as a facility to help decolonise the curriculum by tapping into the patterns of socialisation that make up the diverse educational culture that builds up a UoT.

The major role of the WrC is thus to facilitate the growth and development of academic literacies by adopting and integrating into the institution's patterns of socialisation. It also has a creative writing component that is used to target emerging writers who are usually high performers. The DUT WrC hosts an annual creative writing competition (Mheta, 2016). This is where they encourage writing of various genres from poetry to essay writing. This initiative is a strategy to counter the stigma that is often associated with using WrCs – that is, the perception that only students with difficulties use the WrC. The main aim of the WrC is to

- develop student writing

- create confidence to write more in budding writers

- promote reading and writing outside disciplines (Mheta, 2016).

The major role thus takes into consideration the type of institution in which the WrC is developed. In a traditional university, the operational and administrative frameworks will be based on the need to develop and grow academic writing, whereas, in a UoT, the framework is based on a bigger need to develop and grow academic literacy. The main conditions of the WrC are, therefore, that any approach by the WrC must be thoroughly planned and researched and that academic programme teams must be actively engaged with adequate writing support that contributes directly and indirectly to academic growth (Pratt, 2008). The structure of the proposal of the current WrC, as a result, builds up the policy formulation in

which operational and administrative frameworks of the WrC are developed and designed to fit the DUT WrC model.

METHODOLOGY

The role of a WrC has been noted to be defined by the institution in which it is birthed. In pursuit of understanding the role of the WrC, a mixed-method study was used in which the researcher used both quantitative and qualitative methods of investigation to collect information from both students using and staff working in the WrC. As part of the study, numeric reporting on qualitative data through Likert-scale questionnaires was used. Epistemological (the nature or grounds of knowledge) and ontological (the nature of existing facts or of what is) values were used to understand the views of the students regarding what the WrC is and what role it plays in their academic journey. Ethical clearance for this study was granted as part of PhD research. Investigation for this study was undertaken through purposive interviews with the staff and open-ended questionnaires with randomly selected students who walked into the centre. With open-ended questions, the questionnaires asked the students to express their views on what the WrC is and what they believed it was for. The researcher used thematic analysis to group together themes that were identified in the questionnaires about the role of the WrC.

The study

This section reports on part of larger study by Manjeya (2017), which investigated the contextual, operational and administrative frameworks of the DUT WrC. In this study, research activities involved a pluralistic collection of data in which perceptions, knowledge and understanding of the services of the WrC are gathered using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The study looked at and relates to the theoretical aspect of CDA, which looked at the relationships between language and society; the study also explored the critical approaches of methodologies used by the WrC to communicate its role in a UoT (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). The researcher gathered data using questionnaires and interviews and formulated themes and trends, as they emerged from the student body, to illustrate their understanding of the WrC and the services it offers. This paper focuses on the data that explain the role of the WrC as defined by the students. The researcher collected data from all WrCs at DUT campuses. These data sets included responses on perceptions of (i) the role of the WrC, (ii) the booking system, (iii) the overall experience of the consultation, (iv) an understanding of the role of the student in the consultation[3], and (v) the final understanding of the writing process by the students at the end of the consultation. After the data were collected and gathered to explain the phenomenon of a WrC in a UoT, themes, trends and relations were developed to explain what the role of the WrC at DUT entailed. In this paper, only results that relate to understanding the role of the WrC in a UoT are included in the findings.

RESULTS

Lumen Learning (2020) explains that perception is the way sensory information is organised, experienced, and consciously interpreted. It involves both bottom-up and top-down processing. This study focuses on the understanding of how students interpret the sensations that are influenced by their available knowledge and experiences of and thoughts about their WrC experience, which are all strongly linked. The students' perceptions of services, operations and the administrative framework of the WrC have revealed what students in a UoT understand a WrC to be and what services it offers. This section reports on the findings that define the role of the WrC in a non-traditional university, which is DUT in this context.

Analysis of students' views on the role of the Writing Centre

Data from the study reveal the perceptions of the students, their responses to information and their awareness of the structures that build up the marketing that supports the operational framework of the

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3   See explanation in Manjeya (2017) regarding the evaluation of the power relations exhibited in the tutor-student dynamic.

WrC. To communicate what the WrC is to the larger student body, the facility sets up (i) roadshows (stands within the campus that had both visual and verbal signage of what the WrC is), (ii) workshops (classes that were provided to help students' academic development process) and (iii) writing competitions (an annual competition which encourages students' creativity in writing). This directly speaks to the main aspects of CDA and what it seeks to examine. CDA considers the relations of activities and nuances between language and society; a critical methodology was utilised to communicate the role of the WrC. The explanations below show how these activities provide a bridge between linguistic and societal interactions as well as the core function of the WrC.

The roadshow is meant to inform the students, in a fun, interactive way, of what the WrC is, what it offers, how the student can be helped, where the WrC is located, and how the student can access the WrC. In interviewing the WrC staff, one of the managers noted: 'roadshows are just a party they don't get the message and usually they manage to inform only a section of students who are available during that time, which might all be graduating'. Therefore, the roadshow serves to inform only the students that are on campus during that time; thus, it cannot be considered a successful tool in informing the students of the existence of the WrC. The data collected from 200 randomly sampled students revealed that each campus had at least above 90% of students who did not know or had any knowledge of the roadshows. This shows that the roadshow is not a good marketing tool as part of the operational and administrative framework as it only manages to reach a limited number of students. In other words, the roadshows that have been done reveal that they managed to only reach less than 10% of the student body who might have been leaving or graduating in that semester, hence validating the statement above by the WrC staff member.

The role of the WrC, in relation to the functionality of the students, clarifies the argument by Levin (2000: 155) who insists that 'indeed, greater student involvement would constitute an important reform in its own right'. Therefore, understanding of the role of the WrC through the roadshow is abstracted and only beneficial to the few who are available for this particular show on campus on the day it is held. A common debate in current education argues that students believe that they have a right to participate in the decision about their education. By not getting or understanding the role of the WrC through the roadshow, the students are left out of participating in the process of their education. Without students' understanding and participation, are the roles of the WrC attending to the current curriculum debate?

Responses to the workshop revealed that more than 90% of the students from all campuses have never heard about either the workshops or the writing competition. This explains how the lack of awareness about what services the WrC offers students can disrupt its service delivery and what the role of the centre is. This moves the idea in which the student is central to the core business of the WrC from the centre stage as students are neither aware of the services and the role of the WrC nor of how to use the facility (Levin, 2000). This affects the end product, which might affect the facility's contribution to pedagogic growth. Investigations with students revealed that most of the students viewed the WrC as an academic emergency room in which they could casually come and drop off a dying thesis or paper which the tutors would magically resuscitate after 30 to 60 minutes. This view triggers an argument of the communication not only about the efforts made by the WrC itself but also by the academics regarding what the WrC offers. In a bid to illuminate the centre, academics began giving marks – for example, 10% – for a WrC stamp. The process of writing is one that takes time, and, given the student structure and makeup of an institution such as DUT, there seems to be more than just a certain percentage attached to the relevance and role of a WrC. The slogan of the centre states: 'Writing to learn and learning to write'. Sensibly, this slogan goes a long way in fulfilling the role of a WrC: it is a process that is intertwined with language and society; hence, it is a community practice (Archer & Richards, 2011). This means that CDA looks to clarify and confirm that the role of a WrC is found within the links of language and society; however, the particular methodology applied in communicating what the WrC is, in this case, needs further investigation.

As part of the development of the administrative and operational framework of the DUT WrC, the facility has been put in place. This explains that the data given for roadshows, workshops and the writing competition are not based on a faulty administrative and operational framework, but rather that it is greatly influenced by student apathy towards writing and development towards the general pedagogy. This apathy is, then, what influences the views of the WrC as an emergency room waiting to attend to dying or stricken theses, dissertations and papers a few hours before submission. This, then, goes on to look at how this apathy influences the responses to understanding the writing process as well as the role of the student and the tutor.

CONCLUSION

The main issue discussed in this paper concerns understanding what the role of the WrC in a South African UoT is (Pratt, 2008; Archer, 2010; Archer & Richards, 2011). The paper explored the different theoretical underpinnings and evolution of the type of university in question to bring to light the kind of environment that will give light to understanding the specific factors that influence the role of a WrC in this type of institution. The paper went on to trace the evolution of the WrC in South Africa, how it was established in UoTs and why this was done. By examining the nature of their academic growth and development, and by examining the DUT model, the researcher was able to draw four significant roles of WrCs in UoTs. The researcher concluded that the roles of the WrC in a UoT are to (i) act as a COP space, (ii) engender a deeper level of learning in academia, (iii) develop and teach academic writing, and (iv) create solutions for academic development. Although these roles were arrived at separately, they cannot work independently of each other. Hence, the role of the WrC is a woven web of dependant variables. It is noteworthy that the differences between the roles of a WrC in a traditional university and in a UoT differ according to how the operational and administrative frameworks vary. The fact that the basis and need in which the two are set is what sets them apart. Also, the role of a WrC in a UoT is defined by the student body and the extent to which it is integrated into the institution. The paper, as a result, used responses from a larger study to analyse the awareness and expectations of the DUT students and what they viewed to be the role of the WrC. The perceptions of the students in relation to their awareness and expectations of the facility revealed that, indeed, the primary role of the WrC in UoTs is to promote academic literacies. The researcher, however, notes that these findings cannot be generalised as it is an investigation pertaining to a specific case study of a WrC in which results just like the model WrC can be institution specific.

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