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“A hundred times we learned from one another” Collaborative learning in an academic writing workshop

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Using Design Research as methodology and research design type, this article reports on a research proposal writing workshop conducted with Education postgraduate students, with the aim of ascertaining the roles that conversation, collaboration and feedback play in constructing meaning and supporting writing. It was found that through conversation, as part of a general discourse within a community that students whose first language may differ from that of others, but for whom the language of learning is English, are able to share with tutors and other students, and to negotiate meaning. The construction of knowledge is consequently dependent on conversation between students, their peers and the tutors within a collaborative community, such as a writing centre, in which feedback on writing is offered and received in order to support student writing.

Key words: academic writing; academic writing support; collaborative learning; feedback tutoring; writing centres

Introduction and Background to the Study

Transformation in South African higher education since 1994 has seen many students, including highly motivated ‘thirty-something’ adult students, returning to postgraduate studies, especially within the field of Education. However, the majority of these students tend to be speakers of English as an additional language and as a result of their education legacy, were not equipped with adequate education and academic skills, or the academic literacy needed to succeed at tertiary level, especially in terms of research report writing. One way to rectify the outcome of this legacy is to provide academic support. Therefore, as a way of supporting these students through the process of writing research proposals (an aspect of research report writing), and at the same time developing their academic literacy, intervention was made within a writing centre, the staff of which were trained in peer tutoring as underpinned by the theory of tutoring.

A review of the literature on tutoring has revealed a theoretical framework that emphasises collaboration, with writing centre pedagogy (see Boquet, 1999, 2002; Bruffee, 1993; Gillespie & Lerner, 2003; Harris, 1983, 1992; Pemberton & Kinkead, 2003) following the academic literacies approach (Lea & Street, 1998). Firstly, the literature indicates that it is through conversation within the community of writing that students – whose first language may differ from that of others, but for whom the language of learning is English – are able to share with another student or other students and to negotiate meaning (Dowse & Van Rensburg, 2011; Nel, 2006). Secondly, the construction of knowledge is dependent on the conversation between student writers and tutors, with the former bringing the content knowledge to the collaboration table, and the latter contributing the knowledge of the discourses pertaining to writing. Thirdly, the tutor’s role is strictly facilitative: developing a positive attitude amongst students, modelling strategies they may use, and discussing expectations about the conventions for writing within a given discipline (Barnett & Blumner, 2001; Mullin & Wallace, 1994; Murphy & Sherwood, 2003; Ryan, 2002).

In terms of the *context* for collaborative learning, the literature indicates that it is well-suited to the environment of a writing centre. In the South African context, where students, particularly mature students, tend to see the supervisor as an all-knowing figure, Nichols (1998:92) has argued that writing centres would be a suitable place to “shift the authority” to students who are not accustomed to discussing their work. They may thus benefit from the expectation that they take control in tutorial sessions, and do most of the talking in dialogue with writing mentors.

In terms of collaborative learning *per se*, in this context, the literature indicates that this ‘talking’ encapsulates the essence of the role of the tutor, and is seen as the active engagement of students in conversation at as many points in the writing process as possible, ensuring that the conversation is guiding them towards the way in which they will eventually choose to write (Bruffee, 2001). A distinction ought to be made at this stage between *talk*, *conversation* and *discourse*. Talk is conceived to be the main means by which these students interact with the academy. When they enter the writing centre, their talking is considered to constitute a meaningful conversation, while overall, their participation and their collaborative learning add to the general discourse about academic writing, and about the discipline in which they are working. What initially originates in conversation and takes place in ‘public’ between the student and the tutor, becomes incorporated into thought, “If thought is internalized [sic] conversation, then writing is internalized [sic] conversation re-externalized [sic]” (Bruffee, 2001:209).

So, in sum, the literature reveals what we know about the calibre of the student, the potential for collaboration with a tutor, and the difference a specific context, such as a writing centre, can make in terms of collaborative learning. The aim of this article is to understand specifically how the intervention of a writing workshop within the context of a writing centre can support postgraduates in the writing of their research proposals. The research question is formulated thus: *How can a writing workshop effectively support postgraduate students in Education in the writing of their research proposals?*

Theoretical Framework underpinning the Writing Workshop

Taking into account the way in which collaborative learning is theorised, it is vital to no longer conceive of academic writing as a merely “solitary act”, but rather as a socially constructed process, or a “social artefact” (Clark, n.d.). Writing centre staff, in discussion with particular supervisors, decided to conduct a workshop, rather than working individually as is normally the case, with 16 postgraduate students, who had yet to complete research proposals. The week-long workshop was devised around the theory of collaborative learning in which learning and understanding was scaffolded by conversation, seen as “integral to writing” (Harris, 1992:369). This offered a new model for learning, which involves the acculturation (Bruffee, 1993) of a student wanting entrance into a new academic community to conversation with their academic peers.

A theory of collaborative learning directly involves the students’ action and attention, conversing amongst themselves, whilst the tutor stands on the side-lines, teaching indirectly. This empowers the students, who actively question and synthesise what the tutor says (Bruffee, 1993) into a simultaneous combination of their listening, reading, talking, writing and thinking skills (Fitzgerald, 1994; Lunsford, 2003), while building their own understandings through self-discovery. Bruffee (1999:87) has argued that, “collaboration encourages students to accept authority of helping one another learn and to acknowledge the authority of other students – their peers – to help them learn themselves.”

This interaction reinforces the claim that the most important things cannot be taught, but must be discovered by and appropriated for oneself (Rogers, cited in Schön, 1991). Harris (1983) claims that modelling, offering a critique of thinking out aloud, and providing support from an experienced writer such as the tutor, will motivate the student and lend validation to his/her writing as he/she has attempted to put his/her thoughts down on paper.

Inherent in collaborative learning is the theoretical concept of feedback, and students benefit greatly if it is clear, constructive and developmental (Carless, 2006; Lea & Street, 1998; Parkerson, 2000), particularly if they understand that writing involves producing a text that evolves over time. Feedback can be received from supervisors and lecturers, or in many instances, can be combined with peer feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2006) in “learning with and from peers” (Walters & Koetsier, 2006:272). This peer feedback offers constructive formative feedback, which assists in the development of academic writing. Feedback from the tutor ensures that contrasting concepts, such as tutor/editor, novice/expert, process/product, control/flexibility and tutor/teacher, exist at either end of the continuum, and when combined with peer interaction, guarantees that it is a “communicative act” (Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis & Swann, 2003:119). The more students talk about their proposed research, the more they are able to clarify their thinking. The feedback given by their peers and/or tutor enables them to develop a greater depth of understanding, which then assists them in their writing (Nel, 2006).

In summary, the writing workshop devised for this study was underpinned by the pedagogy of tutoring within a writing centre that draws on collaborative learning. This involved conversation, and the constant giving and receiving of critical feedback, which took into particular account the value of conversation in developing clarity and greater understanding.

The Research Design

This article reports on an intervention in the form of a research proposal writing workshop, implemented in a writing centre over a period of one week, with 16 postgraduate Education students, who had registered for honours, master’s or doctoral study, and were in the process of writing their research proposals. In conceptualising the design for this study, Design Research, which has been described as “the systematic study of designing, developing and evaluating educational interventions [...] as [a] solution for complex problems in educational practice, which also aims at advancing our knowledge about the characteristics of these interventions and the processes of designing and developing them” (Plomp, 2009:13), was considered appropriate. In addition, this research is situated in the critical pragmatist paradigm, where not only the question of “what works?” but also the question “does it empower the writer?”, are answered in alignment with the description of design research above.

Design Research is interventionist, involves practitioners, is iterative, process-focused, utility-

oriented as well as theory-driven (Van den Akker, Gravemeijer, McKenney & Nieveen, 2006). This study comprises three phases, namely a preliminary, development and assessment phase (Plomp, 2009, 2013), driven by Nieveen's (2007) criteria for high quality interventions that comprise *relevance, consistency, practicality* and *effectiveness*, under varying degrees of focus. The intervention addresses a need and should be based on state-of-the-art knowledge, termed relevance or content validity. Construct validity or consistency ensures that all components of the intervention are linked together, and the intervention should be

usable for the purpose for which it was designed, hence the attendant criterion of practicality. In order to see if the intervention works, it is assessed, so as to ensure that the final criterion addresses effectiveness. However, this can be expected, or it can be actual (Nieveen, 2007).

Each phase also has its own research question and, based on these, data is collected, analysed and reported on, as each phase's findings inform the subsequent phase. Figure 1 illustrates the Design Research phases with their processes, with criteria applied to each; as well as research questions, with their accompanying data collection strategies.

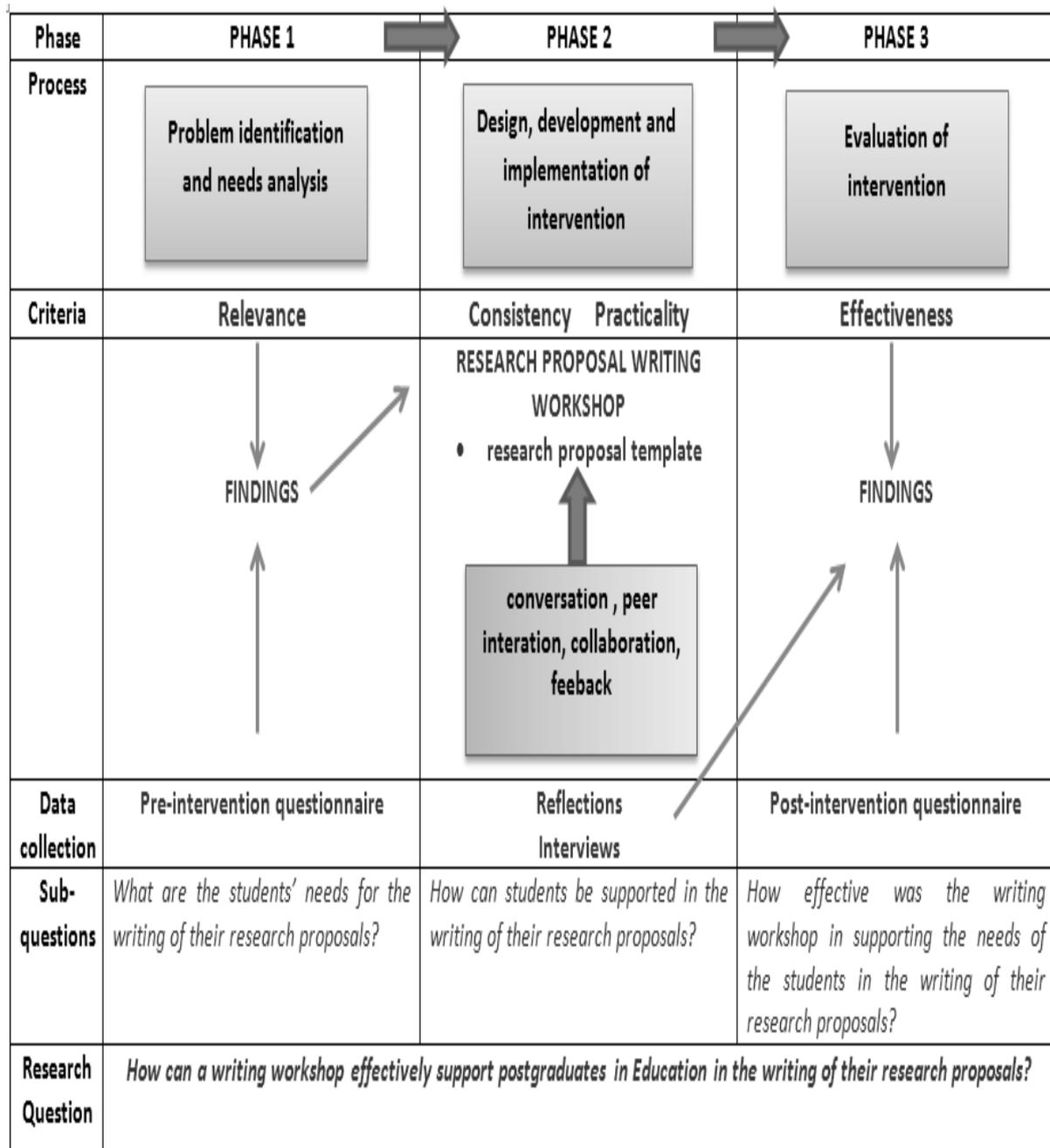


Figure 1 Design research process of the research proposal writing workshop

Phase 1: Problem Identification and Needs Analysis

The tutors in the writing centre were approached by a number of students who were finding difficulty in writing their research proposals. Instead of working individually with the students, we decided to offer a week-long workshop aimed at proposal writing. To identify what was needed, and answer the research question: *What are the students' needs for the writing of their research proposals?*, pre-intervention questionnaires were completed by the students, which were intended to identify the students' perceived needs for the writing of their research proposals, and thereafter, to capture expectations of the workshop.

The questionnaire revealed important insights, which informed the design and development of the intervention. Many of the students had failed to have their proposals accepted either by their supervisors or the Higher Degrees' Committee, whilst others had begun writing, but were experiencing difficulty in completing, or had yet to begin. The majority wrote that they wanted *help* in writing a *good* proposal, ensuring that the format was correct, with *verification on the correctness of the proposal*; that the research question was *formulated and relevant to the research problem*; that the topic was *researchable*; and that there was *confirmation on the need for such research*. Some expressed a wish to *finalise the proposal* or even

find the focus for their research. Annie, Lindiwe, Nora and Odette¹ wanted clarification on *"how to write [a] dissertation successfully, ways of going about research"*, and *"assistance on the research as a whole"*. As Paul explained: *"before starting on Monday morning I did not know whether I was going or coming"* [sic], indicating the confusion many of the students felt when faced with the daunting task of writing a research proposal, either from the beginning, or after some failure in their attempts. Addressing fears and confusion about writing, as well as developing an understanding of the genre of research proposal writing, is important, as *"every one of us was tense and maybe [arrived with] with a bit of frustration"* (Paul), where Nev noted *"when I came here I was lost and discouraged."*

Finally, with this particular group of students, English was not their mother tongue: *"as English is my second language sometimes it is hard to put an academic paragraph"* (Matt). Thus, developing academic literacy as well as English proficiency, the scaffolding of entry into the academic discourse through collaborative learning required feedback. These vital aspects informed the design of the workshop, and were underpinned by the criterion of *relevance* (content validity), which guided the intervention and its design needs, based on state-of-the-art (scientific) knowledge (Nieveen, 2007).

Table 1 Research proposal writing workshop

Research proposal writing programme	
Day	Activity
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding what comprises a research proposal • Conceptualising the research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you want to research? • What is the problem? • Why is it a problem? • What has the literature told you about the problem? • Is there a gap in the literature?
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing the problem statement (rough draft) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introducing the problem • Explaining the problem • Justifying the problem • Using the literature to support the problem or identify the gap
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing the revised introductory statement • Writing the revised problem statement • Writing the rationale • Writing the aims and research questions
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing a review of the literature
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing the research design and methodology • Writing the ethical clearance section

Phase 2: Design, Development and Implementation

The pre-intervention questionnaire revealed that none of the students had completed a research proposal and that they needed help in a number of areas, such as with conceptualising their proposed research by identifying a researchable problem, formulating a research question, finding the relevant literature to offer supporting evidence, and

identifying the appropriate research methodology. In addition, it seemed that they were unaware of how to put forward an argument, use the appropriate discourse and even reference correctly.

Taking the above into account, we had to find a way of effectively supporting the students in the writing of their research proposals, hence the second research question: *how can students be*

supported in the writing of their research proposals?

We took note of Plomp's (2013:31) simplified explanation of Design Research in which he writes: "given my context Z, if I do <intervention X (theory-based)> then I expect <(intended outcomes Y)>."

So, drawing on the understanding of what is involved in writing a research proposal, an intervention (X) was designed for the sample of Education postgraduate students (Z), to assist them in conceptualising, developing and writing their research proposals (Y). To accomplish this task, a framework drawn from the theory of academic writing and the pedagogy of tutoring informed the intervention. In addition, a needs analysis revealed aspects that would inform the design, and development of a programme with particular procedures, so as to systematically and developmentally support the students through the process of their research proposal writing. The programme outlined in Table 1 was drawn up to guide the activities for the research proposal writing intervention.

At the end of each day, the tutors came together to discuss progress, reflect on what worked and what did not, and to plan for the following day. In addition to these reflections, data collected from the students via the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires and interviews conducted at the end of the intervention was used in this section on the implementation of the intervention.

At the start of the workshop, an overview of the structure of the research proposal was discussed so that the students would understand the expected outcome. When teaching writing seminars to postgraduates, DeLyser (2003) breaks down large tasks into small, manageable topics; however, it is important to provide structure, which the students could use as a framework, as *structuring your work, especially research problem, was so understandable after all – steps to follow were discussed* (Debbie). Thus, students were introduced to the research proposal template, which would guide them in their writing of the various sections (see Singh, 2011), but care was taken so that the writing of the research proposal was not simply seen as a fill-in exercise.

The first task was to ascertain the subject the students were wanting to research (Creswell, 2003; Maxwell, 1994) by writing a sentence beginning with 'I want to find out ...', and then converting this 'want' into a question. Students were then paired off to enter into a conversation about their research, and to ascertain whether or not their statement matched their question (Creswell, 2003). It was interesting to observe the way in which the conversations in some cases took place through the medium of English, but that at other times, the conversations were in their mother tongue.

Initially, Odette said, "I think we spoke in English," but then corrected herself by saying:

[...] but we ended up speaking in our languages because when you talk to people in a language which is not your mother tongue – and not their mother tongue – then you have a problem. But when you speak in your own languages you are able to get information easily and fast.

This interaction, even though code-switching was used, is described by Bruffee (1999:87) as collaboration, which "encourages students to listen to each other accepting the authority of helping one another learn and to acknowledge the authority of other students, their peers, and in turn, helping them learn themselves". *Friendship, working and helping each other* (Anton), *interaction with other researchers* (Odette), *helped as those things were clarified there* (Paul).

The next part of the workshop was to initiate the introduction of the proposal, by writing a general statement of the problem, leading to a specific statement (Henning, Gravett & Van Rensburg, 2005), which would give the reader an idea of the problem, the content and context of the research (Creswell, 2003). Using the statement 'I want to ...' as a springboard proved difficult, and generally, the students' thinking did not stretch beyond South Africa. The tutors brought all participants into a group conversation: "It was good because we had to form our groups and talk to each other, but whenever we had problems we came together in a large group to discuss - it was very fruitful" (Odette). Each read out their general statement, whereupon the rest were asked to comment, query, give suggestions, and hopefully gain a clearer focus. An initial reading was usually insufficient, necessitating a second reading. However, in some cases, questions were asked to clarify what the writer was attempting to convey. In these conversations, the speakers picked up clues from one another as to whether the general statements had been understood and, if not, were able to offer suggestions. As Paul explains: "... and the group worked well – we shared experiences and [...] once we sat in that meeting things became very clear to us". Kuriloff (1992:136) states that it is important to "socialise students into discourse communities" in order for them to enter the academic writing community, and this group conversation of *listening and formulating ideas with peers* (Katie) was a first step towards consolidating this skill.

Students were at first hesitant to contribute, preferring to remain on the periphery of the group, where, she noted, "I learned that sometimes you are afraid to let other people learn about what you are doing. Sometimes maybe they will see that we don't know much." However, students gradually gained in confidence, and participated more freely, with discussions soon becoming heated, and productive, where it was noted that "the interaction

is super ... we are still learning, but in that meeting when we came together - we interacted" (Paul), as they often presented a different view from that which may have been expected. Interestingly, with clarification emerged a wider overview and even a global introductory statement. It was thus seen that collaborative learning through conversations, where "*a hundred [...] times [sic] we learned from one another*" (Paul), scaffolded the students' learning, which in turn motivated them to put something down on paper for their general introductory statements. Once students had clarity on what comprised these statements, they moved into revision mode, and worked on improving their own opening statements.

Developing 'the funnel of academic research' was the next step in the process (see Henning et al., 2005), and this guided the students into writing the problem statement, and the rationale for conducting the research. The concept of the reader as audience (Tate, Corbett & Myers, 1994) was discussed, which encouraged the peer reader to question and query until a clear logical storyline began to develop, showing that *discussions with other people were fruitful* (Debbie), but that ownership of the writing was retained by the student.

The conversations involved paired discussions as to whether there was a good link between the sections, ensuring a developing storyline and thus a chain of reasoning (Krathwohl, 1998). Peer critique (Bruffee, 1993) led the learning, which surprisingly took more time than was expected, where one student noted: "*It was a shock to me to see how much effort and time the proposal took*" (Katie). DeLyser (2003) explains an essential element of a writing workshop to be peer critique, when writers read, edit and comment on each other's work. However, it was found that although students thought they had written clearly, it was only through "out aloud thinking" with other students (Harris, 1983:75-76), followed by discussion and explanation, that the partner understood what was being conveyed. Thereafter, revision and rewrites had to be undertaken to ensure coherence. It appeared to be slowly dawning on students that writing is an iterative process (Coffin et al., 2003; DeLyser, 2003; Ryan, 2002), and not just a once-off endeavour. One student noted: "*I discovered that writing is not a simple process, but that if you share information, ask others' opinion, and writ[e] the gathered information, there will be progress*" (Lynne). Students also developed "a recognition of recursiveness in writing" (Gillespie & Lerner, 2003:13; Perl, 1980), by which there is "a forward-moving action that exists by virtue of a backward-moving action" (Perl, 1980:150), and a re-reading while writing and constant revision is a crucial factor (Gillespie & Lerner, 2003).

An added realisation was that writing cannot be readily undertaken until reading and research by

finding relevant literature (Connie) has developed a sufficient foundation on which to build. Kuriloff (1992) explains that students need to use writing as a tool for learning, and thereby create their own knowledge. However, students need to draw on their reading and research to reinforce the aim of an in-depth literature search prior to writing. This realisation resulted in discussion on the vital use of the library and electronic resources: *how to find information for the mini-dissertation* (Nora) and bring relevant books and resources for the following days. Queries about *how to quote authors* and *reference correctly* (Matt) were discussed amongst the students, letting them *gain a better understanding of referencing, quoting and structuring in general* (Rosie).

After two days of conversation and student interaction, the workshop moved into the computer laboratory, with the students being ready to begin writing in earnest. This 'writing', however, was not as simple as it sounded, as many students were not computer literate and so presented challenges for both students and tutors. A research proposal template had been saved onto the computer for each student and day three involved completing the cover sheet, writing the revised introductory statement and problem statement, then stating the motivation or rationale for the research. Technical issues came into play and informal lessons and collaboration between the more experienced computer-user and the novice took place, where students were "*learn[ing] a lot [about] technology on an informal basis*" (Katie). It was interesting to note that while many were not competent in using computers, during the week, they "*learned to type by [themselves]*", and that "*Cillaⁱⁱ was [very] impressed seeing me typing very well*" (Annie). During this time, the tutors moved around the class, interacting with the students; giving advice, encouragement and sometimes 'hands-on' help; and reinforcing the notion of collaborative learning.

Students were encouraged to read each other's work, and to question what they were reading, as this would help create an audience. Students "*can share [the way in which] he or she has approached the topic or a piece of writing [...] It helped us a lot - a lot [sic]*" (Paul). Bruffee (1999:91) states that group solidarity allows students to develop critical reading skills, which allowed them to critique their peers' writing in a "reasonable, temperate and constructive" manner, reinforcing the value of the giving and receiving of feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

Day four was spent writing the body of the proposal, giving details of the current debate, putting forward an argument, but always referring to the literature. At times, students identified gaps in their reading, being prompted to visit the Education library for advice on finding relevant sources and acknowledging that: "*students should*

take books [out of] the library” (Anton). In addition, informal lessons on using the internet and electronic databases were given, so that students developed the skill of accessing electronic resources. In the process, they “learned a lot about computers” (Connie). During this very busy day, some fruitful collaboration and conversation took place between the students, as they searched the internet and databases together: “There was this lady – the topic was very similar to mine. So we exchanged books, we talked and we exchanged a lot of information” (Odette). Promoting student interaction and conversation ensures that the student has the opportunity to talk about the proposed research and thus learn with and from their peers. But mostly students put down on ‘paper’ the conversation that had developed in their heads, or as Tiny explained: “I learned to listen to every idea coming while I am busy writing and to put it on paper, and [that] later [it] will be edited”. Esterhuizen (2001), in her discussion on academic writing, explains that once a student has read, accessed information and knows a great deal about a topic, it becomes easier to retrieve and generate ideas. In addition, the more the student reads and writes, the more he/she constructs understanding and at the same time develops academic literacy.

The focus of conversation began to shift between the tutors and individual students, where students noted that “the facilitator[s] have stayed or spent every minute of every day with us, giving support” (Debbie) and “they [the tutors] [make] you feel relaxed and help build your confidence in what you are writing” (Matt). The tutors moved around the lab, reading what the students had written, discussing with them issues that were perhaps a little unclear, and making suggestions. Whenever a student left the computer, the tutors immediately responded to the writing by typing in constructive colour-coded comments and suggestions, so that when the student returned he/she would be able to reflect on these e-conversations. Schön (1991) explains that this gives the student time to experiment with a new action, or to test tentative understandings and affirm what he/she has implemented or changed, thus reinforcing Harris and Silva’s (1993:532) idea that “a major goal of a tutor is to help students find their own solutions.” Anton explained: “Before I [knew] nothing about [how] to [write] logical[ly], but Cilla taught me how to do it, [and] somewhere I made a lot of mistakes”, and “the bright colours on my screen made me scared, but once I knew what they meant, I was able to read the suggestions and work through the revisions myself” (Nev). These comments reinforce the sentiment of Silver (1978, cited in Pemberton & Kinkead, 2003:104) that “probably the single most important condition for teaching writing is the willingness on the part of

the student writer to accept criticism and grow as a result of it.”

Most writing centre manuals emphasise the need for tutors to remain distant from the student’s work, so as to ensure that control is maintained by the writer him/herself. However, by the final day of the workshop, it was felt that a more directive tutoring approach was needed to ensure that the students would be able to complete their research proposals. Carino (2003) suggests that a more directive method of tutoring may have some efficacy, especially if the peer tutor displays more knowledge than does the student writer.

This last day of the workshop addressed the research design and methodology sections, and the students were asked to bring in any work done previously, as well as any reference materials, so as to add to the methodology resources available in the writing centre. A methodology framework was pasted onto all of the students’ proposals, guiding them in what was required to complete this section, and a model of a research design was projected onto the screen. The students could use their own previously written work, refer to the reference books they had brought, make use of the resource files, or read through the research design projected on the screen and model their work on it (Harris, 1983).

During the course of the day, discussions were held with the students about the most relevant research design and methods, once again securing the chain of reasoning (Krathwohl, 1998). As students completed the sections, they paired up to review each other’s writing. Drawing on a simplified version of the ‘six honest serving men’, students were asked to bear in mind *the what* (the research design and approach), *the who* (the subjects or sample), *the where* (the situation or context for research), *the how* (the methods of data collection and analysis) and finally, *the why* (the rationale for selecting this research design and methodology). By now, the students were quite comfortable with offering each other critiques and advice: “these suggestions and questions helped me make my work good” (Patrisha).

The final aspect of the research proposal to be completed was the ethical compliance section, and guidelines for completing this section were again pasted onto the students’ template, outlining areas to be addressed. This time the students worked together in their pairs and held discussions with each other in completing this last step, noting that: “this was a helpful exercise” (Lynne).

The week-long intervention was underpinned by the criteria of *consistency* (construct validity) requiring the intervention to be logically designed, and *practicality*, where it is *expected* that the intervention is usable in the context for which it has been designed and developed, and thereafter, *actual*

practicality, which assures that the intervention is usable in the context for which it has been designed (Nieveen, 2007).

As with every workshop, revisions and adjustments to the programme for subsequent workshops would probably need to be made, but these were informed by reflection and discussion between the tutors as well as student evaluation.

Phase 3: Evaluation of the Intervention

On completion of the week-long intervention, students were asked to spend 10 minutes completing a post-workshop questionnaire. Linked to the pre-workshop questionnaire, this aimed at eliciting an evaluative response from the students on whether they felt that their needs had been met. Students were asked to link their expectations of the workshop with what they had found most useful, most surprising and most valuable, and whether they considered such an intervention effective in supporting them during the writing of their research proposals. In addition, interviews were conducted with three students, who, based on their responses in the questionnaire, we felt could add value and offer more insight into the effectiveness of the research proposal workshop, and possibly offer suggestions to inform the revision of the workshop programme.

Emerging from the questionnaires and interviews was the surprise at *“how so many students don’t have a clue how to draft a proposal”* (Katie), which raises the relevant question of whose responsibility it is to ensure that those entering postgraduate study are supported through the process. Katie asked for us to *“please train all the supervisors to assist their students in the drafting of the proposals.”* In addition, Debbie suggested that workshops such as these *“should be part of the curriculum and be compulsory to all registered students,”* where *“continuous workshops should be arranged”* (Nora). It was felt that postgraduate students *need regular classes* (Nev), suggesting that even at postgraduate level, explicit teaching is advised (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006). In many universities, postgraduate studies comprise writing a full dissertation or a thesis and as such, there is no curriculum or structured programme in place, which was the case with these students. Consequently, students find themselves on their own, with little support other than that found in the supervisory dyad.

However, what needs to be assessed in this phase is whether the research proposal intervention was effective. Nieveen (2007), in her criteria for high level interventions, applies effectiveness in this phase, but looks at *expected effectiveness*, where using the intervention is expected to result in the desired outcomes; and *actual effectiveness*, where using the intervention ultimately results in desired outcomes. It was expected that during the

course of the week, most students would complete their research proposals. However, whether actual effectiveness had been achieved was in question.

Some students had completed proposals and others had some areas outstanding, but it seems likely that the conversations entered into during the workshop had scaffolded the students’ learning and writing development, where the following was expressed: *“this is an experience of a lifetime”* (Odette). This experience had led the students to work independently, with the internalised conversation: *“I gained a lot, especially structuring – it actually answered all my concerns on coming up with research questions, aims and methods to be used. I would see the pattern in all the aspects”* (Debbie).

Most students felt that the *“workshop was helpful [...] a good atmosphere for acquiring knowledge and skills for writing the proposal”* (Annie). Lynne *“discovered that writing is not a simple process but if you share information, ask other’s opinion and writing the gathered information, there will be progress”*, which reinforces the notion of collaboration with the value of *“friendship, working and helping each other”* (Anton). Making use of the research proposal template offered guidelines, and thus *“the structure made me feel safe”* (Katie), which allowed this student and others to progress confidently, knowing what was expected of them at each stage.

During the research proposal workshop, the social interactions relied on were the writing conversations. These were most beneficial for the intellectual development of the student writer, as they revolved around tasks that he/she could do alone, but in which he/she required assistance and the extensive use of peer group, critiquing to reflect the workings of discourse communities. Collaboration and collaborative learning play a more important role in social constructivist writing instruction, as described by Rosie, who said: *“I had some ideas but they were not as clear as I understand them now.”* Lindiwe found that a result of the collaboration led her *“to develop more ideas”* whilst Matt *“was able to write with confidence”*. The collaboration, aimed at down-playing the role of the tutor as an authority figure or the single source of knowledge, demonstrating that the tutor’s voice is one of many and in the context of the workshop collaborative conversations, the tutor was seen as a co-learner. Paul described his experience of collaboration as *“exciting throughout, and every day [I went] home having learnt so much!”*, where meanings were negotiated and knowledge constructed (Murphy & Sherwood, 2003). Finally, some students, for example Katie, felt that they could *“plunge into the unknown because [they knew] the basics”*.

Using a systematic and developmental approach for the research proposal intervention

allowed the students to break up the seemingly daunting task of writing the proposal to make it more manageable, with support being offered at each stage: “*everything was explained in detail [...] [which] helped me to finish up writing my proposal [...]*” and which “*open[ed] my mind concerning writing*” (Nora). Nev rated this workshop as “*most successful*”, particularly as it assisted “*my way of thinking, [which] has developed and I am able to develop more ideas*” (Lindiwe). Ultimately, it seems that the intervention assisted in building “*confidence in what you are writing*” (Matt), in addition to developing greater understanding. More importantly, it ensured that the conversations and the collaboration allowed the students to retain ownership of their writing, and strengthen their authority. As Connie put it, most students have “*the light*” and, even more surprisingly, Paul remarked that, “*what I could not achieve in one year, I achieved in one week!*”

Discussion

The postgraduate experience should be seen as a beneficial learning experience, one of “growth and empowerment” (Bailey, 2002:7), in which educators and professionals in education have the opportunity for further study to develop their competence in order to become change agents within their working environment. However, what emerged from this writing workshop is that many postgraduate students in Education, although motivated to upgrade qualifications, are poorly equipped to approach the task, and in many cases drop out, stop outⁱⁱⁱ, or are significantly challenged in completing their degrees (Holtzhausen, 2005).

Postgraduates are often under-prepared in the skills and techniques required to communicate their research effectively, as many have not been taught how to write (DeLyser, 2003), and once they enter university, it seems that these institutions offer “no place for them to flourish” (Osman & Castle, 2006:516).

Thus, teaching and learning innovations need to be put in place, which support the success of working adult learners (Walters & Koetsier, 2006). Such a workshop, underpinned by the pedagogy of tutoring and collaborative learning, would offer students a physical place, a “safe house” (Papay, 2002:11) and a “rehearsal space” (Van Rensburg, 2004:222) to develop their academic writing proficiency and to move more confidently into the role of novice researcher. In such a workshop, the role of the tutors could be identified as being that of “agents of change in writing pedagogy” (Cooper, 2003:59).

The findings emerging from this workshop indicated that the tutor develops a *community* within the workshop for and with students, by entering into *conversation* with them, and through *collaboration* they are able to *construct* knowledge.

Conversation is vital in the process of writing, from finding a topic, reading and deciding what to say about it, developing an argument for or against, and evaluating what has been written, and then re-writing an argument. This interaction and collaboration, in the relaxed atmosphere of the workshop, over time builds up the confidence of the student through conversation by discussing the subject matter on many levels, and strengthens the language and writing skills needed to convey the subject matter, or just very informal conversations.

Academic writing should no longer be considered a solitary act. Thus, with these postgraduate writers, during the writing workshop, conversation was facilitated, and a community was developed in which collaborative learning took place. Just talking, or the active engagement of students in conversation at as many points in the writing process as possible (Bruffee, 2001), demonstrates the power of oral language in facilitating learning in general, and writing specifically (McAndrew & Reigstad, 2001). During the workshop, the students were either paired off or grouped, encouraging them to talk about their topics. As Barnes (1990:54) states, students “have already taken possession of complex ways of making sense of the world [...] for the social and cognitive skills they have developed in various contexts in and out of [learning institutions] provide their most valuable resources as learners.” The encouragement of conversation involved the students in talking, questioning and thinking about various aspects of their writing, which Barnes (1990:54) believes will benefit learning as “exploratory talk” or “informal, tentative talking it over” (McAndrew & Reigstad, 2001:4). In order to gain clarity, Rosie concluded, “*I gained a better understanding.*” Bruffee (2001:206-209) explains that in order to learn to think better, one needs to converse better, and that “to learn to create and maintain the sort of social contexts, the sort of community life that foster the kinds of conversations we value”, or as Odette explained in her own words, “*the more you talk, the more you understand.*”

It is the act of ‘just talking’ in this type of community that helps the student who speaks English as an additional language to develop the flow of language and to develop improved English language proficiency. During these ‘talk’ sessions, the student is able to engage with peers to verbalise his/her internal reflective thoughts, breaking up ideas into smaller issues, which are then discussed in an attempt to find contextual meaning and understanding (McAndrew & Reigstad, 2001). Conversations allow students to seek out the genuine information, or “*ask[ing] other’s opinions*” (Lynne), which might otherwise be suppressed or eliminated (Boquet, 2002) and where it was possible for students to find that “*this answered all my concerns [...] I would see the*

pattern” (Debbie). In addition, they give them time to explain what they currently understand and, if peer critiqued or tutor critiqued, they use that feedback to bring about modifications and/or changes. Paul explained that the value of the writing workshop was that feedback was immediate, “and you move on [...] we had feedback the entire week, and on almost everything we were doing. We did not waste time gathering information and going away for weeks and months – we got feedback there [and then].”

So, in sum, students belonged to a community in which they could engage in conversation at any time in order to gain insight into the problems they were experiencing with their academic writing in their quest to make meaning (construct knowledge) in and through their writing.

Concluding Remarks

Conversation is seen as social constructionist codeword, used to talk about knowledge, and about teaching and learning. This interaction was created through social activity, rather than in the individual mind, with the resulting conversation and consensus building not only stimulating the general process of knowledge construction, but also assisting in the reproduction of the very dialogic process of writing (Gillam, 1994). Bruffee (2001) explains that ideas originate during conversations, which take place in public, between people, and later become internalised into thought. It was thus during the interaction with peers, either in paired or group sessions, that student writers shared ideas, and were able to “compose through inner speech” (Bishop 1992, cited in McAndrew & Reigstad, 2001:4).

During this intervention, the aim of the tutor was to develop a community for and with the students. By entering into conversation with them, and through collaboration and feedback, they were able to construct greater understanding and clarification, which fed into the writing of their research proposals. It was during this collaboration that other variables, which have been alluded to, such as computer literacy, knowledge of research methodology, linguistic competence, and the use of the mother tongue, were brought into focus. The tutor, as a trained conversationalist, is one important voice in the academic community, but he/she also has to adopt other voices, such as those of a linguist, computer instructor, research methodologist, and/or political scientist, for the conversation to be useful. This community of academic practice illustrated the way in which students are socialised into different ways of thinking, reasoning, reading and writing, with the tutors helping students to become agents of their own writing, gaining their voice (Woolbright, 2003) and becoming empowered with the relevant academic writing knowledge.

During the workshop, the social interactions relied on conversations about their writing. These were most beneficial to the intellectual development of the student, as they revolved around tasks that the student could not do alone, but in which he/she required assistance. The extensive use of peer group critiquing and feedback reflect the workings of collaboration within a community, echoed in the sentiments of Paul, where he expressed that “[the sharing of community and learning collaboratively] [...] is of the utmost importance [...] and you can’t do it alone”. The student participants in this study were all the ‘talkers’ in the conversation, participating in a larger discourse about academic writing and academic empowerment.

Notes

- i. Pseudonyms for the 16 participants are employed to preserve anonymity.
- ii. One of the tutors/researchers.
- iii. A common term which means that students take time out from their studies before resuming.

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