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Agency and commitment in sustaining a university writing centre: A social realist perspective

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Background: Massification of higher education has led to increased student diversity, and the growing realisation that academic discourse is a very specialised practice that students from all language backgrounds groups struggle to master. In addition, this article also examines the implications for writing centre practices and institutional level involvement, emphasising spaces where strategic mediation is needed. The inadequate writing skills of students is a result of the lack of guidance students often receive from lecturers. To address this problem, writing centres were established in universities and delegated to assist students to master academic writing.

Objectives: The study aims to demonstrate how lecturers and students as primary agents apply their powers and properties to ensure the sustainability of the writing centre.

Method: A qualitative method was employed in this study by conducting focus group interviews with 20 lecturers and 48 students from four different faculties through purposive sampling to evaluate their commitment to ensure the sustainability of the writing centre. This study draws from the theory of agency as a theoretical lens to evaluate how lecturers employ their emergent power and properties of adaptability, teamwork, and knowledgeability to ensure the sustainability of the writing centre.

Results: The results highlight the significant role of lecturers in working towards solid collaborations with the writing centre to ensure writing centre sustainability.

Conclusion: The study concludes that lecturers demonstrated a high level of commitment through exercising their agency by restructuring their resources to transform the situation.

Contribution: The study recommends the need for improved communication and collaboration between writing centre staff and lecturers given their position in the institution.

Keywords: agency; disciplinary writing; lecturers; sustainability; writing centre.

Introduction

The post-apartheid government attempted to rectify the ills of the Apartheid Era by democratising the education system by promoting racial, gender, and socio-economic equality (Adetiba 2019). Consequently, institutions of higher learning had to change their admission requirements to accommodate students with different demographic and socio-economic backgrounds (Bazana & Mogotsi 2017). Decades after democracy, many South African university students are still first-generation students from vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds, which becomes evident in their distinctive writing and reading challenges. Underdeveloped writing skills can be attributed to the fact that most students do not receive instruction in their home language at secondary and higher education (Eshah 2022). To support the literacy development at most South African universities, writing centres were established, and students are encouraged to visit these centres with writing tasks from their various courses to help them improve their writing. It is important to recognise that writing centres are often characterised by different hierarchies of expertise, ranging from employing coordinators with formal qualifications and teaching training, to writing centre tutors who hold different levels of experience and might need constant supervision.

Writing centre staff often attempt to work with content lecturers, as research shows that lecturers, students and writing centre tutors must be equally committed to improving the writing skills of students (Ginting & Barella 2022). This has led to different models of writing support and collaboration between academic staff and writing consultants to assist students on assignments that include writing, reading, and responding to rhetorical choices (Mtonjeni et al. 2023). The aim

of this study is to investigate the levels of commitment from two sets of stakeholders, namely students and lecturers, to the sustainability of a specific South African writing centre. This study adopts the definition of 'commitment' by Cownie (2017), who views commitment as ongoing interactive exchanges and the motivation to invest in continuing that interaction between academics, students, and institutions distinguished by interdependency. This article addresses the following research question: How have lecturers and students as primary agents used their power and properties to support the sustainability of the writing centre?

Problem statement

Writing centres have often been marginalised because they function outside of the mainstream curriculum and do not offer credit-bearing courses. The temporary nature of employment within writing centres, and funding that is often sourced externally (Clarence 2019; Dison & Kadenge 2023; Ginting & Barella 2022), further contribute to writing centres not being sufficiently integrated in university planning and structures. In this case, the chosen university has unstable institutional funding to appoint permanent coordinators or offer extensive tutor training and relies merely on part-time writing consultants with limited training opportunities. Another factor that impacts the marginalisation of writing centres is their relationships with academic staff. Historically, the role of academic staff has been the teaching of disciplinary knowledge. However, because of the diverse student body that enters this university, lecturers find that poor academic writing levels significantly impact teaching and learning. It is important to acknowledge that these challenges are experienced differently by students: first-generation students frequently feel excluded while navigating unknown academic cultures, while continuing-generation students may view the same experiences based on their families' previous exposure to university. Content lecturers typically do not have the training, nor the time, to teach academic writing conventions, and therefore often make use of writing centres to support their students' writing. The extent to which content lecturers partner with writing centres can impact students' perception of the writing centre, and students are often hesitant to visit writing centres which are marginalised within university communities, specifically because of the deficit view attached to many of these centres – that only weak students visit these centres. This leads to a cycle of further marginalisation of writing centres, ultimately threatening their existence. Against this backdrop, this article argues that the marginalised position of writing centres poses a challenge for the sustainability of these centres within universities.

Literature review

The role of lecturers in facilitating academic writing

In South Africa, the engagement between academic staff and writing centre practitioners has often been dictated by necessity (Collett & Dison 2019) with limited interaction except in exceptional cases where both parties were eager to collaborate. However, a wealth of opportunity for collaboration exists. Archer (2010), for example, indicates the important role content lecturers play when writing centre consultants teach students approaches to academic writing including the use of voice and other conventions such as referencing. Teaching and learning of such aspects of writing are simply more effective if they are embedded within disciplinary contexts and curricula (Archer 2010; Moxley & Archer 2019).

When the teaching of these aspects is restricted to the domain of writing centre consultants, without collaboration with content lecturers or reinforcement of writing centre learning in students' content classes, students tend to distrust writing centre consultants, as these are seen as peers with less power than their content lecturers (Rodriguez 2020). While peer consultants have the affordance of providing a more supportive environment, since they are fellow students who are more easily approachable, without collaboration between the writing centre and content lecturers, a power dynamic can be created where students claim that they were 'misled' by writing consultants who contradict comments from lecturers (Rambiritch & Carstens 2022; Rodriguez 2020). Thus, instead of a synergistic relationship between academics and writing centres, conflict can arise that might marginalise writing centre support even further (Appleby-Ostroff 2017; Rodriguez 2020).

Another point of potential conflict that can arise between academic staff and writing centres is different views of how good academic writing is developed. Archer and Parker (2016), for example, found that content lecturers were often far more rigid compared to consultants when assessing the writing skills of students, mainly because lecturers tend to focus on lower-order issues such as grammar instead of higher-order writing abilities and heavily penalise students for poor grammar usage (Archer & Parker 2016). Writing centres, however, have long resisted being 'fix-it shops' (Drennan 2017; North 1984) for grammar editing. Increased collaboration between writing centres and academics could help towards dialogue around what constitutes good writing and could mediate mutual expectations.

The role of the writing centre in promoting student autonomy

Rodriguez (2020:2) describes autonomy as the degree to which a 'student experiences self-determined independence, separate from outside influence'. He believes that the most common way to achieve agency and autonomy is through collaborative, peer-directed learning methods that students will seldom encounter within traditional classroom settings (Rodriguez 2020). This non-hierarchical approach is evident in the literature on writing centre pedagogy, in that peers consider how students want to learn, in contrast to lecturers who might be out of touch with the needs and realities of students (Rodriguez 2020). Although peer engagements can

replicate indirect forms of positionality, the imbalance of power in lecturer and student relationships means that lecturers' comments and decisions might influence aspects such as students' grades and progression. Accordingly, the scholarship on writing centres from the 1980s onward largely promoted a noninterventionist ideology 'cautioning tutors about imposing their own ideas on a student's text' (Clark 2001:33; Moore 2023). However, all writing consultants are not equally able to use methods that encourage student autonomy and this can cause tensions between the student, the lecturer and the writing centre consultant.

To address the challenge of some writing centres remaining undemocratic spaces, Rodriguez (2020:3) introduced a 'minimalist' approach which outlines the role of writing centre consultants as 'making the student do all the work'. However, this creates an inconsistency, as some consultants restrict autonomy by providing unrestrained direction while the minimalist approach of other consultants undermines support by removing guidance, thus shifting the complete burden of learning to the student. Although the minimalist approach enhances student autonomy and problem-solving confidence, directive tutoring has been demonstrated to improve fast task performance and decrease errors (Carstens & Rambiritch 2021). Some writing centre interactions successfully encourage autonomy by using non-directing language, integrating student views to ensure students feel valued and motivated, and recognising students' expressions of disagreeable emotion (Patall & Zambrano 2019).

This democratic approach is also supported by South African writing centre experts such as Erasmus (2021) and Nichols (2020), who believe that students want to be noticed and heard by choosing their own languages and own words to construct their ideas and meaning and take ownership of it. However, they argue that our present writing centre culture does not promote independent and creative thinking, and very often isolates students and limits their creativity (Erasmus 2021; Nichols 2020). Undemocratic writing centre spaces, as argued by Rambiritch and Drennan (2023), mainly result from a directive approach taken by some consultants during consultations, who still adopt a 'teacherly' role instead of a peer-tutoring approach. Clarence (2019) likewise shows that writing centre consultants struggle to produce playful and creative consultations where students can practise their agency and voice as writers without too quickly arriving at a firm decision that meets both disciplinary and academic standards.

Within writing centre spaces, it is therefore important to emphasise to all stakeholders that consultants are collaborators, not assessors, to prevent students from depending solely on their feedback for grading and to help students take ownership of their own work. An unequal relationship could pose a challenge for the sustainability of the writing centre because writing centre consultants could be held accountable for students receiving bad grades. This could result in writing centres further marginalising themselves.

Theoretical framework

This study has used Margaret Archer's Social Realist Theory as a theoretical lens to evaluate the commitment of lecturers and students to ensure the sustainability of the writing centre. Archer's (1995) theory uses the concepts of *structure* (social or physical, e.g. policies, professional bodies, buildings), *culture* (values, ideologies and beliefs that manifest through discourses), and *agency* to understand the social world. Context is an important aspect of this theory because it shapes the interplay between structure, culture, and agency. To evaluate and understand the level of commitment of lecturers and students, the three aspects of Archer's theory are conceptually separated, and the interplay between them will be examined. Archer (1995) views agency as the personal and psychological characteristics of individuals as they relate to the world. She distinguishes between 'corporate agents' and 'primary agents'. She believes that corporate agents can communicate shared interest and exercise 'corporate influence for decision-making' (Archer 1995:258–259), while primary agencies arise from people's social contexts and primary agents lack the ability for calculated action to form and reform culture and structure within organisations. Within the context of the current study, lecturers and students with interests in the writing centre act as primary agents as they attempt to improve the limited opportunities available to them; they demonstrate early signs of increasing their collective actions by applying their power to reorganise themselves as corporate agents to ensure the sustainability of writing centres.

Case (2015:843) uses Archer's Social Realist theory within the context of higher education and describes agency as 'the domain of human action and interaction' where agents and actors become part of and engage with structure and culture, which in turn also engage with each other. The South African higher education landscape is affected by very specific economic and social conditions (Boughey & McKenna 2021) that lead to the contextual uniqueness of the sector. The study will demonstrate how lecturers and students within a South African higher education context are confronted with structures and cultures and how they respond to these through their own agency.

Research methods and design

Research design

A qualitative research approach was employed to evaluate the commitment of lecturers and students to work towards the sustainability of a South African writing centre. This article focuses on the first two stakeholders, namely students and lecturers. Focus group interviews were used for students and lecturers to obtain what Babbie (2021) describes as a rich understanding of social phenomena.

Research participants

The total of 20 lecturers and 48 students were selected for this study through purposive sampling, which means selecting participants in specific settings or roles matching specific

criteria (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim 2016). The selected participants were chosen as they would be able to offer access to specific experiences (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit 2004); in this case, participants who had interacted with the writing centre were essential to understand the motivations behind these interactions. Four focus group interviews consisted of five lecturers per group, and 48 students were divided into eight focus groups, comprising six participants per group. Both students and lecturers were all from diverse faculties including Engineering, Built Environment and Information Technology, Health and Environmental Sciences, Humanities, and Management Sciences, with several departments within each. The size of the focus group is supported by Basnet (2018), who proposes that the group size should range between four and ten participants, as managing interviews with larger groups can become challenging.

The criterion for selecting student participants was that they had to have been undergraduate students who had physically visited the writing centre before the COVID-19 pandemic. Lecturers included in the study were permanent lecturers who had previously collaborated on discipline-specific writing tasks. All of the focus group interviews were conducted in person; interviews took approximately 60 min., and were audio recorded for later transcription.

Data analysis

The audio recorded data were transcribed into a written document. This was read in combination with the raw notes taken during the data collection processed. Patterns started to emerge as far as themes were concerned and were highlighted in the field notes, as recommended by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). Subsequently, data were analysed through thematic analysis, by means of an inductive and descriptive process (Shaw 2010). Thematic analysis presented an open and theoretically adaptable way of analysing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Ethical considerations

This study forms part of a broader research project for a doctoral study. Ethical clearance was received from the University of the Witwatersrand and the Institutional Planning and Quality Enhancement at the university where the study was conducted. The ethical clearance number is H21/09/12. The author confirms that the content has not been previously published or disseminated and complies with ethical standards for original publication. Participants were given detailed information about the purpose of the study, and they were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any given time without consequences. Anonymity of participants was ensured throughout the data analysis process. A numbering system was used both during the focus group interviews and during data analysis to protect the identity of the participants. Verbatim quotes were used during the analysis and reporting stages. Before the official analysis started, the transcribed document was sent by email to all the participants, giving them a chance to make any amendments or clarifications; no amendments were requested due to this.

Findings and discussion

In the focus-group settings, lecturers and students (in different sets of focus groups) were asked several questions about their involvement with the writing centre, the perceived weaknesses and strengths with regard to the writing centre and its sustainability, and the value of the writing centre. Four main sub-themes related to the research question addressed in this article (How have lecturers and students as primary agents used their power and properties to support the sustainability of the writing centre?) emerged inductively from these focus group interviews, as outlined in Table 1.

Theme 1: Collaboration between lecturers and writing centre staff

The importance of actively creating an awareness of a service such as the writing centre, which is often seen as peripheral to the university, emerged from the viewpoints of both students and lecturers. Feedback from students specifically indicates the role of lecturers in sensitising students to the value of the writing centre. Several students indicated that they would not have known about the writing centre had it not been for their lecturers, as indicated by the quotations below:

> 'If it was [*sic*] not for our lecturer honestly, I would not have known that there was a writing centre, but I always thought it was for PhD students, I did not know that it applied to everyone that wants assistance with an assignment.' (Student 4, focus group 1, Faculty of Humanities)

> 'Our Auditing lecturer was the only lecturer who advised us to visit the writing centre but all the other lecturers, even though we submitted assignments, never mentioned anything about the writing centre.' (Student 8, focus group 2, Faculty of Management Sciences)

> 'The lecturer emphasised the need for us to attend because we were never aware of such a facility on campus, I think that is why students never go there … When the lecturer mentioned that we must use the writing centre for 123, then I went, and I was happy … Students are still trying to find their identity in the new environments, so lecturers need to encourage the first years to visit the writing centre.' (Student 9, focus group 2, Faculty of Management Sciences)

TABLE 1: Themes identified with relation to the sustainability of the writing centre.

Theme	Description of sub-theme
Theme 1: Collaboration between lecturers and writing centre staff	There is a need to foster more solid collaboration between lecturers and the writing centre to ensure the sustainability of the writing centre.
Theme 2: Desire to form part of consultants' selection process	Lecturers have highlighted their desire to be involved in the selection process of consultants and suggested different ways on how they be part of the process.
Theme 3: Teaching and assessment collaborations with lecturers	Writing centres play a significant role in collaborating with lecturers at the level of actual teaching and assessment.
Theme 4: Creating incentives for writing centre visits	Lecturers shared the different ways in which they make writing centre visits compulsory by offering incentives to ensure students visits the writing centre.

> 'Too much information is being given during orientation of which they don't pay attention to [sic] or forget the information given but they will pay attention to the lecturer because they think that this will assist them academically.' (Lecturer 8, focus group 2, Faculty of Management Sciences)

The data show that several of the students' lecturers demonstrated high levels of commitment towards the sustainability of the writing centre by actively making their students aware of these services during classes. Another student indicated that 'My lecturer puts the writing centre information in her study guides' (Student 7, focus group 2, Faculty of Management Sciences), indicating how lecturers can structurally integrate links to the writing centre through course documentation, and that in contrast to anecdotal accounts from lecturers, some students do in fact read this documentation. This evidence of lecturer agency in creating awareness of the writing centre is supported by best practices reported on in the literature.

Skead and Twalo (2011), for example, indicate how the University of Fort Hare requires lecturers to include information about their writing centre in all learning guides and assignment information. Similarly, Dison and Kadenge (2023) indicate that it is impossible to think that students would 'show up' at the writing centre without a referral from their lecturers, highlighting the cultural constraint at the institution.

Student 9 (focus group 2, Faculty of Management Sciences) pointed out that 'I went, and I was happy' highlights the influence that lecturers hold not merely as advisors, but also as agents who can actively contribute to student engagement with support services. In addition, this student's further reflection that 'students are still trying to find their identity in new environments, so lecturers need to encourage first years' further emphasises the critical role of lecturers in guiding students through transitional phases at university. This sentiment is echoed by Lecturer 8 (focus group 2, Faculty of Management Sciences), who shows great awareness of the information overload faced by students as they embark on university studies.

The quotations above provide examples of lecturers as agents who act deliberately to influence students' awareness and behaviours with regard to the writing centre. In social realist terms, this resonates with what Archer (2000) refers to as an 'active agent' – someone who can exercise some control over their own life. These lecturers as active agents therefore act synergistically with the writing centre (Appleby-Ostroff 2017; Rodriguez 2020) to ultimately ensure the sustainability of this resource that, through this collaboration, works towards students' academic writing self-efficacy.

Some lecturers take another approach in terms of active agency. Lecturer 6 (focus group 2, Faculty of Management Sciences), for example, indicates that 'I must ambush my students. They think they will have class, then the writing centre people show up'. Although exercising dominance over students could be a strategic move to support student writing through such a collaboration with the writing centre, this type of support could result in what Archer (2000) refers to as a 'constraining contradiction'. While the lecturer's aims are to help students improve their own writing, by taking away their autonomy, students might instead form a negative perception of the writing centre, which might threaten its sustainability within the university. Thus, instead of a synergistic relationship existing between academics, students and the writing centre, conflict can arise that might marginalise writing centre support even further (Appleby-Ostroff 2017; Rodriguez 2020).

Another form of constraining agency from lecturers is by choosing not to make students aware of writing centre services. If lecturers are silent about resources such as the writing centre, they can unconsciously hamper students who might otherwise benefit from these services, which, at the same time, creates a constraining environment for the writing centre and threatens its sustainability. One reason why lecturers might choose not to encourage their students to attend the writing centre might be because they do not trust in the quality of the writing centre consultants, which highlights the cultural constraint of the writing centre towards offering valued services.

Theme 2: Lecturers' desire to form part of consultants' selection process

Several lecturers indicated a desire to be more involved in the selection of writing centre consultants:

> 'The writing centre should also ask for a reference from lecturers when they are appointing consultants in the writing centre, even if you have to ask for transcripts or their latest assignment.' (Lecturer 7, focus group 2, Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences)

> 'I know my students best and will be able to tell which students can assist other students.' (Lecturer 2, focus group 1, Faculty of Humanities)

> 'They need to ask lecturers for transcripts or their latest assignment … some can be appointed on a probation basis …' (Lecturer 10, focus group 2, Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences)

To get the buy-in from lecturers in the writing centre's aim to be more integrated into the academic programme through collaborative awareness raising, the writing centre might need to consider this desire from lecturers to be more active agents in shaping academic support structures such as the writing centre. The temporary nature of writing centre consultant positions further raises the difficulty of these structural constraints in terms of the experience and training levels of these consultants. One lecturer, for example, commented on an experience of a consultant leading a class session:

> 'I would not have learnt anything as a student and if I was a student, I would not have stayed throughout the session, but some still stayed till the end. I don't think it was a very productive session. It was basically just talk and talk and going on. There was not really any engagement that did attend. It was not presented to students in a way they would understand it.' (Lecturer 5, focus group 1, Faculty of Humanities)

Another lecturer commented on consultants communicating unprofessionally: 'You would expect someone working in the writing centre to know all the correct formalities to set a good example' (Lecturer 8, focus group 2, Faculty of Management Sciences). Inadequate training of writing consultants can therefore act as a constraint for the sustainability of writing centres. As Behari-Leak (2015) points out, it is problematic to expect consultants with no recognised training in facilitation or workshopping skills to conduct sessions or offer workshops.

Theme 3: Teaching and assessment collaborations with lecturers

In addition to the theme of lecturers supporting the writing centre through awareness making, a further theme that emerged was that of collaboration at the level of actual teaching and assessment. There are certainly both structural and cultural constraints to such collaborations.

Universities typically do not support them through resources (either financial or logistical); in addition, subject specialists bringing language specialists into their teaching spaces is not part of institutional culture (Collett & Dison 2019). However, some lecturers in this study indicated a clear desire for formalising more collaboration with the writing centre, which in turn would contribute to its sustainability as an integral part of university student support. Some of the ideas proposed by lecturers are indicated here:

> 'If the writing centre has a list of workshops available for the semester or the year for students, then lecturers can do the planning for the semester by including the workshops in their planning.' (Lecturer 4, focus group 1, Faculty of Humanities)

> 'The writing centre must send a catalogue of the services offered to lecturers for them to decide which one they can access that students need most.' (Lecturer 7, focus group 2, Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences)

> 'The writing centre should ask lecturers for ideas on what they need to provide assistance on, maybe send around a survey, they can quickly send a link for a survey that ask what are your writing needs for the next academic year.' (Lecturer 13, focus group 3, Faculty of Management Sciences)

> 'Collaboration will be good, but it should be done the previous year to plan for the next year. If I see there is some content that students are struggling with, then I give my students an assignment on that content and send them to the writing centre.' (Lecturer 15, focus group 3, Faculty of Management Sciences)

The response by these lecturers emphasises a current lack of communication and collaboration between the writing centre and lecturers. Lecturer 17 (focus group 4, Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment and Information Technology) indicated that the writing centre must play a more central role in building relationships and reaching out to lecturers: 'It feels like if you have to [do] something with the writing centre or collaborate with them, you should approach them, and it should be the other way around'. Structural constraints in terms of timetabling and planning are evident, for example, from the statements by Lecturers 13 and 15, who indicate the importance of planning a year in advance. However, such collaborations are often difficult and sustaining them after a first intervention even more so (Collett & Dison 2019; Esambe & Mkonto 2017). There are several possible reasons for this. One is the temporary nature of writing centre positions, which make it structurally difficult to maintain relationships. Another is that lecturers often only see the writing centre as a support service that can be briefed about assignment expectations, rather than a partner in collaboratively developing student writing (Collett & Dison 2019). These challenges around collaboration and communication were highlighted by several lecturers, evident in their statements:

> 'I have had minimal contact with the writing centre thus far; I only receive emails from the Assistant Dean for Teaching and Learning who request lecturers to send students to the writing centre to get assistance with writing and no communication from the writing centre.' (Lecturer 2, focus group 1, Faculty of Humanities)

> 'I don't even know their correct email address to get in touch with them, so I don't know where to send the students to, I assumed students know where the writing centre is.' (Lecturer 10, focus group 2, Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences)

> 'We don't even know where they are.' (Lecturer 12, focus group 3, Faculty of Management Sciences)

Both lecturers and students, however, showed some agency in proposing ways in which relationships between the writing centre and the faculty could be strengthened:

> 'Perhaps we should submit our assignment through the writing centre links to lecturers.' (Student 6, focus group 1, Faculty of Humanities)

> 'In our study guides they give us dates for assignment submission and under the assignment announcement, they should mention you will get your assignment via the writing centre and give the contact details of the advisor for your department to get your assignment.' (Student 7, focus group 2, Faculty of Management Sciences)

> 'So, lecturers do inform us to visit the writing centre, although they don't do a follow up, to ensure that we go there.' (Student 9, focus group 2, Faculty of Management Sciences)

> 'Lecturers should be made aware of writing centre staff so you can attach a face to an email and if they can speak to the students again even if it is just once a semester or so forth. At the hotel school, for example, there are meetings, there are info sessions that are held once a week and if staff can go there to help students.' (Lecturer 14, focus group 3, Faculty of Management Sciences)

> 'A relationship needs to be established whereby you know that we will have our first years in February as soon as they enter the university and have writing centre workshops with all of them. The next workshops should take place around June, maybe two to three a year would be sufficed [sic].' (Lecturer 7, focus group 2, Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences)

These responses indicate a need for frequent communication from the writing centre, but also a need for more formalised integration of writing centre services into students' assessment tasks. More formalised collaborations, according to lecturers, can also include the writing centre being part of

staff meetings and student information sessions, as well as the need for formalised workshops which can be integrated into institutional planning. Writing centres such as that at the University of Fort Hare already have partnerships with lecturers, in that lecturers invite writing centre staff to address students in classes (Skead & Twalo 2011). In line with Archer's (1995) social realist theory, for such sustainable relationships to be lasting, solid procedural outlines and a commitment of hands-on teaching and writing centre collaboration with lecturers is needed at an institutional level (Dison, Oware & Maropola 2023). This is illustrated well by Lecturer 5 (focus group 1, Faculty of Humanities) who noted that 'the writing centre cannot function without the support of academic staff because it's their students and they know best how'.

Theme 4: Creating incentives for writing centre visits

Another theme that emerged from both lecturer and student focus groups is creating incentives for writing centre visits. Archer (2000) describes agency as the ability to act deliberately, make choices, and exercise control over a person's professional role, and the following lecturers demonstrate how they do exactly this to get their students to make use of the writing centre:

> 'I work closely with the writing centre staff, and they tell me who was there, and, on my rubric, I allocate marks for students; maybe 3% for students who visited the writing centre and deduct the marks if they don't visit.' (Lecturer 1, focus group 1, Faculty of Humanities)

> 'I would ask students to visit the writing centre in groups and include a part [on the rubric] where they must show that they attended the writing centre to get extra marks and those who don't visit don't get the mark.' (Lecturer 3, focus group 1, Faculty of Humanities)

> 'I first tried it, and it was a voluntary thing but very little [sic] of them did it then I thought, I will have to force you to help yourself and the only way you can really do it with students is by adding weight to it, so there were extra marks attached to it to their assessments for writing centre visits.' (Lecturer 15, focus group 3, Faculty of Management Sciences)

These lecturers exercised their agency by structurally creating incentives through mark allocations to encourage students to visit the writing centre. Their personal emergent powers of adjustment and creativity manifest in, for example, designing rubrics that encourage writing centre visits. Rather than accepting the status quo, these lecturers applied their personal emergent powers of adjustment and negotiation, using this opportunity to encourage students to visit the writing centre.

There is, however, a fine line between incentive and penalty, and how lecturers frame mark allocation can influence students' perceptions of autonomy. Lecturer 15's (focus group 3, Faculty of Management Sciences) indication that they 'will have to force you to help yourself' might be communicated similarly in class and might again result in a constraining contradiction (Archer 2000). This becomes quite clear in Lecturer 5's (focus group 1, Faculty of Humanities) framing of penalising students for not visiting the writing centre:

> 'I threaten my students that I will access the class list from the writing centre on who access [sic] the writing centre during an assignment and will deduct marks if they did not visit the writing centre.' (Lecturer 5, focus group 1, Faculty of Humanities)

Although such requirements might improve the writing skills of all students and force them to engage with feedback from writing centre consultants, it can also limit students' agency in their choice of resources to draw on for assignments. Writing centre consultants elsewhere, for example Arbee (2020), have found that this can result in students who ignore the feedback from writing centre consultations, which emphasises the cultural constraint that students only go to avoid losing marks. Interestingly, multiple students who had previously used writing centre services indicated a belief that writing centre visits should be compulsory:

> 'If you get an assignment and you don't go to the writing centre, they have your names and student numbers recorded, then the assignment will become null and void.' (Student 8, focus group 2, Faculty of Management Sciences)

> 'Lecturers should incorporate a compulsory report from the writing centre into the assignment when they submit assignments, by doing so students will be encouraged to go to the writing centre to access the services.' (Student 10, focus group 2, Faculty of Management Sciences)

> 'They should make the writing centre visits compulsory so if you don't visit it, you will not be able to graduate and you will not be able to register for other modules.' (Student 5, focus group 1, Faculty of Humanities)

One can assume that these students felt they had benefitted from their interactions with the writing centre, so much so that they believe visits should be compulsory for all students.

Agency, however, is closely linked to autonomy, and it might be that these students benefitted because they acted as primary agents (Archer 1995) in choosing to visit the writing centre. Incentivising writing centre visits, rather than restricting personal agency through enforced visits or penalties, might encourage more students to seek out support from the writing centre.

A limitation of this study is that all students interviewed had frequented the writing centre in previous years. It would be interesting to also get the perspectives of students who chose not to do so.

Conclusion

An important tenet of social realism is that any action or absence thereof takes place within a context conditioned by the prevailing structural and cultural influence. The four themes highlighted in this article indicate a high level of commitment to the continuation and sustainability of the writing centre from both students and lecturers who have used its services before. However, structural and cultural

conditions must be enabling for students and lecturers to act on this commitment, and these can only be changed through corporate agency. Most participants in this study display primary agency – they lack the ability for calculated action to form and reform culture and structure within the university. However, there are also some signs of corporate agency, specifically among lecturers who have found ways of structurally integrating writing centre services into their courses. For example, by adding writing centre visits to marking rubrics, lecturers work towards the sustainability of writing centre services by making them part of future assessment criteria of departments and faculties, thus ensuring that the services become systemic.

The need for better communication and collaboration emerges from comments by both lecturers and students, and it is also clear that the writing centre staff need to act as corporate agents in actively seeking out and building relationships. The temporary nature of writing centre positions and dependence on external funding pose structural challenges to their effective functioning; however, stronger institutional support is needed. Even without this, though, both lecturers and writing centre staff have some agential possibilities that can be strengthened through relationship building. This study shows evidence of this through adaptability (e.g. lecturer changes to student resources such as study guides and inviting writing centre consultants into classes), and a desire for further teamwork (e.g. being involved in writing centre tutor appointments), and writing centre staff should work towards ways of further structurally inviting lecturers into the writing centre operations for increased shared ownership.

There are some limitations to this study. For example, the voices of writing centre consultants and coordinators were not included in this study, and this is something that should be explored in future studies. The study is further limited to a case study of one writing centre at a University of Technology, and the findings and results can therefore not necessarily be generalised to other writing centres. However, the results from this study do support themes in similar previous studies and therefore add to the scholarship in the field around the future of writing centres. The findings suggest that there is a need for universities to consider policy-level processes that support planned collaboration between faculties and writing centres, including stronger frameworks for consultant training and better institutional acknowledgement of writing instruction as an integrated structure of teaching and learning.

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Competing interests

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CRediT authorship contribution

Atrimecia B. Hass: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition (application), Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Visualisation. Ilse Fouche: Supervision, Software, Project Administration, Validation, Writing – review & editing. Laura Dison: Supervision, Validation, Funding acquisition (motivation letter), Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data supporting this study are available from the corresponding author, Atrimecia B. Hass, on reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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