

Reimagining our space: Taking social justice principles online?

Avasha Rambiritch

ORCID: 0000-0002-6182-0905

Unit for Academic Literacy, University of
Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

avasha.rambiritch@up.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Issues of social justice have been at the forefront in the quest to support students at the faculty-specific writing centre that is the focus of this study. This is in an effort to ensure that the centre remains not just a safe but a brave and non-judgemental space. The onset of Covid-19, and its imposition on our daily practices, required a hasty re-evaluation of our offering. This paper will outline our migration to a fully online mode of support and aims to establish whether the social justice principles harnessed in face-to-face support can and have been applied in the online platform. We approach this inquiry by invoking the voices of the writing centre consultants who spearhead our social justice agenda, with a view to determining their perceptions regarding this issue. Findings from such a study can be applied to the training offered to consultants in the hope of improving our offering.

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Introduction

The onset of Covid-19 shuttled us into an era of unexpected changes, new technologies and novel ways of teaching and learning. It also brought to the fore the severity of the human condition, making more apparent than ever the social inequalities that plague us. The South African higher education context was challenged to find effective solutions to ensure the successful completion of the academic year. Universities moved online, exploiting the features of their learning management systems to make teaching and learning as interactive as possible. But in a country of extreme inequality, moving to an online platform presented many more setbacks than were anticipated. While universities extended their resources to provide both data and laptops to students, access and connectivity issues often prevented active participation. Students' home or living environments were not always conducive to learning, and this, coupled with student hunger, presented a dire picture for South Africans and the world at large. The university at which this study is situated was no different from other universities in its efforts to support students. Lectures were moved online, and study guides and other resources were made available on the learning management system (LMS). As lecturing staff mastered the art of online teaching and learning, other support structures such as tutorial classes and structures offering emotional and psychological support migrated online as well.

The faculty-specific writing centre that is the focus of this study, constrained by the restrictions Covid-19 presented, made the decision to move fully online. Using the electronic booking system, announcements were made to all users that the writing centre would be offering both synchronous and asynchronous consultations. Despite being forced to embrace this change, we saw this as an opportunity to extend the services of the writing centre and possibly reach more students than we had previously. However, while we expected students to opt for synchronous consultations, we had surprisingly little uptake. The synchronous option replicated the face-to-face (FTF) consultations closely, allowing some level of interactivity. Synchronous consultations would be offered through our LMS on a platform called Blackboard Collaborate Ultra. Features include video and audio, chat boxes, document sharing, breakout groups and polls, to name a few. Importantly, the sessions could be recorded and downloaded for the student to access multiple times. The asynchronous option entailed email consultations. Once the student had made a booking on the booking system, the writing centre consultant would contact the student via email. The student would then email the document to the consultant, who would spend 50 minutes on it. This was the amount of time that would have been spent on a FTF consultation. Feedback was given using track changes and comment

boxes. Once the document was returned to the student, the student could ask further questions via email (see Rambiritch & Carstens, 2022).

In light of the uptake of asynchronous consultations and the urgency that necessitated this move, writing centre consultants were challenged to engage in online consulting with no prior training. Having previously marketed the writing centre as a safe and non-judgmental space (Clarence, 2019; Rambiritch, 2023) where students could talk freely about their writing concerns, we were concerned about whether the new mode of consulting would allow us to continue to uphold our mission. This research, therefore, aims to investigate whether there is evidence of consideration of principles of social justice during asynchronous consulting. The next section of this paper will provide an overview of asynchronous writing support, followed by a discussion of the principles of social justice. The results of a small-scale qualitative study will then be presented with a view to answering our research questions.

Asynchronous writing support

Asynchronous writing support does not occur in real time; rather, in most cases, it takes place via email. Hewitt and De Pew (2015: 130) indicate that the advantages of using asynchronous technology include (1) higher levels of temporal flexibility, (2) increased cognitive participation because of the time allowance for amplified reflection, (3) higher potential to use the increased allowable time for processing information, (4) multiple opportunities to write and read, and (5) the existence of an archival record of transactions conducted in the environment. Despite these advantages, they acknowledge that the asynchronous platforms “lack immediacy and thus may contribute to a sense of participant isolation, or what the online education literature would call loss of social presence” (Hewitt & De Pew, 2015: 131).

It could be exactly these limitations that have led to the largely negative stance of the writing centre community towards asynchronous tutoring. Mackiewicz (2005: 211), in attempting to determine whether the online writing labs (synchronous and asynchronous) had fulfilled their potential, identified several disadvantages to such tutoring. Its lack of non-verbal cues, aside from being considered impersonal, may have negative effects, especially for non-native speakers who rely on non-verbal cues to construct meaning during FTF consultations (Mackiewicz, 2005: 219). Another disadvantage is labelled “one round” consultations: this is the typical email consultation that lacks sustained dialogue (Mackiewicz, 2005: 219). Concerns relate to the fact that the tutor focuses solely

on the text and not on the student, and there is no guarantee of follow-up questions from the student. This sole focus on the text is contrary to what most writing centres aspire to: improving the writer, not the writing (North, 1984). Mackiewicz (2005) also highlights some significant advantages of asynchronous tutoring: (1) that students are generally very familiar with such computer-mediated technologies and may not be negatively affected by the lack of non-verbal cues and (2) that the missing non-verbal aspect might push students to ask questions they would not ask during FTF consultations. Importantly, Mackiewicz (2005: 222) reminds readers that in asynchronous consultations, the tutors' comments are permanently available to the student. She thus concludes that the advantages of such consulting far outweigh the disadvantages.

Shang (2017: 496) compared 44 English first language (EFL) university students' experiences of asynchronous peer feedback (APF) and synchronous corrective feedback (SCF) to determine whether the utilisation of these modes affected EFL students' writing in terms of syntactic complexity. While findings showed a "significant relationship" between SCF and APF use in total words, the feedback that occurred in APF was "potentially more usable than that in SCF in writing more sentences" and that, as "students added more words, they increased writing scores after using APF" (Shang, 2017: 507). Shang concludes too that although learners generally accepted both online feedback modes, they preferred the asynchronous peer revision work over revising with the synchronous feature (Shang, 2017: 507).

Responses and experiences regarding asynchronous writing support are thus mixed, though "mostly critical, ambivalent, or, at best, philosophical" (Kavadlo, 2013: 1). It is this often-negative response (see Mackiewicz, 2005; Hewitt & De Pew, 2015) to asynchronous tutoring that Denton (2017) laments. Warning writing centre proponents to not rely on lore, as has largely been the case with early writing centre research, she implores readers to "engage in scholarship, furthering our understanding of writing center work through research and inquiry" before disregarding asynchronous tutoring (Denton, 2017: 176). In describing the "continued, contested presence of asynchronous online tutoring" (Denton, 2017: 177) as tutoring that is "ineffective and unrewarding" and "lacking dialogue and interaction" (Denton, 2017: 177), she notes that what is surprising is the "absence of scholarship" on asynchronous tutoring (Denton, 2017: 177). Her research examines how tutors and students interacted in the asynchronous online format. Her findings indicate that (1) while asynchronous tutoring is labour-intensive, it is not much different from FTF or synchronous tutoring interactions; (2) although the cues that the tutors work with are textual only, they use those

cues to construct an idea of the student they are working with; and (3) each student participant indicated that their tutoring interaction was beneficial (Denton, 2017: 197).

Despite the benefits it may offer, asynchronous tutoring remains contested. Further research and inquiry must be conducted, especially regarding its suitability for use in a particular context, with a particular group of students. In the same way that the field should no longer rely on lore, “one size fits all” solutions also cannot be applied. This research hopes to contribute to a better understanding of asynchronous tutoring by determining whether it allows for the application of the principles of social justice. To date, no such study has been conducted in the context of a South African writing centre, and very few have been conducted internationally. In keeping with the focus of this research, the next section of this paper will provide an overview of the concept of social justice before providing background to the role of social justice in the writing centre context.

Social justice

There is no shortage of literature espousing the application of social justice principles in the context of a writing centre. However, despite the mass of literature published on the topic, the International Writing Centre Association’s (IWCA) efforts in promoting social justice through their social media platforms, special interest groups on social justice, and multiple conferences dedicated to social justice and the writing centre, the question remains whether these principles are being realistically and practically implemented in writing centres. The issues of social justice, as urgent as they are, cannot and should not remain abstract concepts or discussion tools for the experts who make policy decisions but should be applied in practice to the teaching and support we render in higher education (Rambiritch, 2018). Gross’s (2018) contention is that there is ample opportunity for writing centres to take up social justice initiatives, but there may be a bigger gap between theory and practice than writing centre scholars would hope. This research, like that of Gross (2018) and Witherite (2014), hopes to make a contribution in this regard by foregrounding issues of social justice and advocating for the implementation of its principles in asynchronous writing support through a small-scale empirical study. In doing so, we hope to bridge the great divide between theory and practice inherent to writing centre work related to social justice.

The issues and principles of social justice have been discussed extensively, yet researchers are quick to confirm the elusiveness of the term (Sleeter, 2014; Rambiritch, 2018). Most commonly, it has been associated with Rawls (1971) and his notion of justice as fairness, liberty and equality, and

Young (1990), who championed social justice to move beyond issues of distributive justice, to the idea of justice as enablement. Issues of justice should not be limited to the “distribution” of rights and justice as commodities, but rather that individuals be enabled to:

learn and use skills, to play and communicate with others, participate in running institutions, share in determining their own lives, and express their feelings, experiences, and perspectives (Young, 1990: 37, as quoted in Lotter, 1999: 95).

In the context of education, narrow definitions of social justice limit concerns to those of access and widening participation. While there has been a move, internationally and nationally, to widen participation in all areas of education, issues of social justice cannot be limited to numbers and statistics. The principles of social justice must be expanded and must impact the teaching and learning students engage in (see Rambiritch, 2018). Teachers and lecturers in higher education must apply principles in their teaching (and training) that are aimed at developing the student holistically, an education that encourages students to ask critical questions and empowers them to be agents of transformation.

Such an education is synonymous with Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogy, an education system greatly opposed to the “banking concept of education” (Freire, 1970: 53), where education becomes the act of depositing, in which the students are depositories and the teacher the depositor. In the context of a writing centre, this would be synonymous with the writing centre as a “storehouse” where skills and strategies are prescribed and handed out to individual learners (Lunsford, 1991: 4). According to Freire (1970), social justice in education involves allowing students to be inquirers, not containers: to present an education that encourages dialogue, problem-solving and critical thinking (Rambiritch, 2018: 50). This and other views (Giroux, 1997; Gor, 2005; Hackman, 2005; Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011; Dover, 2013) have become the foundation of critical pedagogy, outlining the principles inherent to a critical approach to education: dialogue, problem-solving, critical thinking, student empowerment, student-centred focus, holistic education, and analysis of power. Rambiritch (2018) applied these same principles to the faculty-specific writing centre focused on here. The study revealed that these principles were “successfully applied in the context of the FTF writing centre” (Rambiritch, 2018: 58), “based on an understanding of these principles and feedback from the writing centre consultants”. The present study hopes to extend Rambiritch’s (2018) work in two main ways. The first is to situate this study in the online realm by focusing on asynchronous writing centre consultations. Secondly, we hope to extend our understanding of these principles to encompass those experienced in the context of the writing centre and perhaps use the findings of this study to move our writing centre from a “safe space” to a “brave space” (Arao & Clemens, 2015).

Social justice and the writing centre

Hallman-Martini and Webster's (2017) warning that discussions of the politically focused, identity-based dynamics of writing centre labour should not elicit discomfort, silence or silencing, elicited more than slight discomfort for me, as the coordinator of a small, faculty-specific writing centre. And excuses of our focus on "writing only" were hastily discarded when challenged with their arguments that when acting under the guise of writing only, we are still acting politically and that when we choose to silence or ignore differences in our space, we offer continued support to systemic power structures (Hallman-Martini & Webster, 2017). This study, then, is the first step in the direction of transforming our writing centre into a braver space by "fostering a learning environment that supports participants in the challenging work of authentic engagement with issues of identity, oppression, power and privilege" (Arao & Clemens, 2015: 138).

Suhr-Sytsma and Brown (2011) do this by focusing their research on issues related to racial injustice by asking how can tutors "better identify and challenge the everyday, often subtle, language of oppression in their own discourse and in that of other tutors and writers in the writing center" (Suhr-Sytsma & Brown, 2011: 13). Their research focuses on how tutors perpetuate and challenge oppression in the language used during writing centre consultations, emphasizing that individuals can be empowered to challenge oppression through specific attention to language even when that language is unintentional, subtle, and complexly intertwined with oppressive systems (Suhr-Sytsma & Brown, 2011: 14). A major contribution of their research is the list they provide of ways the tutor can challenge oppressive language use, which can be used and expanded on by others. Importantly, this document serves as a valuable resource that can be used to "foster productive dialogue about language, oppression and resistance" (Suhr-Sytsma & Brown, 2011: 14).

Sharp and Rosenberg's (2018) study arose out of disturbing events on their campus. In an effort to reach out to minoritised students, their writing centre put up promotional posters using gender non-binary pronouns (I, you, she, he, xe, they, his, her, hir, they) to indicate clearly "that our writing centre respects all gender pronouns" (Sharp & Rosenberg, 2018: 217). When multiple sets of posters were defaced/vandalised, writing centre staff saw the immediate need to open up and engage in dialogue with various university stakeholders about whether spaces were being opened up to minoritised groups on the campus. In the long term, the writing centre staff see the urgent need for "hosting queer zine workshops, facilitating the production and dissemination of these zines across

campus and alliance building across the institution as being directed towards transformation” (Sharp & Rosenberg, 2018: 225).

Dixon (2017) bravely recounts instances and incidences in the writing centre that speak to its not always “tidy, one-dimensional and uncomplicated nature”. Her contention is that keeping discomfort, pain, depression, anger, desire, or sex out of the writing centre discourse does not keep those feelings out of everyday writing centre practices; that gossip, sexual tension, tearful arguments, seduction, anxiety attacks and sexual harassment also make up the everyday practices of a centre. Dixon implores writing centre staff not to hide or tidy up these narratives but instead to tell them, listen to them and embrace them as a distinct part of our centre. Hermann (2017), too, validates the role of writing centres as excellent spaces to explore, teach and engage with social justice issues, as well as a starting place to combat discriminatory rhetoric that appears orally and in writing. Hermann’s (2017) focus is the LGBTQ+ students, an often “invisible minority” who may have specific concerns that must also be addressed to ensure a “productive and safe environment in which to work and learn”. Hermann (2017) rightly points out that addressing LGBTQ+ concerns in the writing centre does not only serve minority students but provides opportunities for all students to engage in societal discourse and build critical thinking skills.

Witherite (2014) and Gross (2018) both conducted perception studies with consultants in their writing centres that were focused on social justice issues. Witherite (2014) investigated how peer tutors experience and conceptualise social justice issues within the context of tutoring sessions in the writing centre. Using concept mapping, interviews and a social category ranking task to attain rich qualitative data with a sample of eight writing centre consultants, Witherite (2014: 123) found that the tutors were generally aware of particular social justice issues and that tutors were aware that social injustice often manifests in language, though they are often at a loss as to how they should respond. Participants indicated that while their responses to social justice issues ranged from neutral to negative, they believed that these responses could impact engagement in the session.

Witherite (2014: 124) contends that because social justice issues can lead to awkwardness or completely obscure the goals of the session, addressing these issues should be an ongoing goal of writing centres. Gross’s (2018) doctoral study is aptly titled “Doing the work of the ‘woke’: Writing Centre tutoring and social justice”. “Woke” tutors, according to Gross (2018: 11–12), are “critically conscious of social justice issues as they arise in the writing centre; tutors who have the kind of awareness of systemic oppression that impacts their way of being in the world”. Gross (2018: 40)

surveyed 101 tutors in writing centres at 21 institutions to determine the extent to which writing centre tutors in the east-central region of the US are critically conscious; how they perceive their level of critical consciousness to influence their tutoring practice; the characteristics of tutoring sessions in a writing centre in which tutors have comparatively high levels of critical consciousness and what tutor education at that site looks like; and the role it might play in developing and encouraging tutors' critical consciousness. His findings indicate that while the majority of tutors were critically aware of social justice issues, there were a few tutors whose responses showed ignorance or a lack of concern. Tutors were also more critically aware of sexual-based discrimination as opposed to other forms of discrimination, and tutors who had experienced some form of discrimination were more critically aware of discrimination in general. Importantly, tutor responses indicated lower critical consciousness on questions specific to the writing centre context than they did on the survey overall, and 57% of them reported not being able to think of a time when they were a tutor for social justice. These findings suggest the need for more in-depth discussion of all aspects related to social justice during tutor education programmes.

Drawing deeply from these studies, the present study aims to delve into an area that has remained untouched in our writing centre and attempts to extend these issues into the online realm. This study, largely exploratory in nature, will rely on the voices of our writing centre consultants to provide a glimpse into the social justice issues harnessed (or not) during asynchronous consultations.

The research project

In this small-scale research project, a questionnaire containing seven open-ended questions was administered to all six writing centre consultants. There were no discussions pertaining to social justice before the consultants received the questionnaire. The decision not to discuss this topic was taken deliberately to prevent any possible contamination of the research. As coordinator of the writing centre and researcher, it was important that consultants' understanding of, and experience with, issues of social justice not be influenced by my views and opinions or those of other participants. Participants were sent the questionnaire via email, and once completed, it could be emailed back to the researcher. Questionnaires did not require participants to disclose any personal details. While it can be argued that this system (emailing questionnaires) does not guarantee the anonymity of the consultants and their responses, in light of the lockdown, this was the only option available. It was also hoped that the coordinator's attempt to create a platform for open dialogue

during the training and our weekly meetings would encourage consultants to respond without fear of reprisal.

Methodology

This study is informed by a view of the world that sees knowledge as socially constructed. Socio-constructivist research relies on the participants' views of the situation being studied, derived by asking questions that are broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons (Cresswell, 2008: 8). This open-ended questioning allows the researcher to listen carefully to what people say or do in their life settings (Cresswell, 2008: 8). Qualitative methods are used to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant, and include small-group discussions, semi-structured interviews and in-depth interviews (Hammarberg, Kirkman & De Lacey, 2015). Qualitative research thus also includes the use of questionnaires that ask open-ended questions.

This study is thus largely qualitative in nature, taking an inductive approach, that is, a method where one's experiences and observations, including what is learned from others, are synthesised to come up with a general truth (Walch, 2004). In this case, the views/perceptions of writing centre consultants in respect of social justice (issues/definitions/experiences) in one site (the writing centre in question) are taken as the general truth. We accept, however, that the truth of the conclusions of this inductive argument is probable, based on the evidence given, and are not certain (Copi, Cohen & Flag, 2006), thus warranting further and extended research based on the findings of this study.

The participants

The six writing centre consultants who formed part of the study were all postgraduate students at the university. As a small faculty-specific writing centre that employed only six consultants, all consultants formed part of the study. They had been employed at the writing centre for periods ranging from five months to three years. The table below provides an overview of the participants.

Table 1: Consultant metadata

Consultant	Years at WC	Year of study	Race	Gender	First/home language
1	3	Completed MA	White	Male	English
2	2	Final year LLB	White	Male	Afrikaans
3	2	Final year MA	White	Female	Afrikaans
4	3	1st year of PhD	White	Female	English
5	5 months	2nd year of MA	Black	Male	isiZulu/English
6	5 months	2nd year of MA	Black	Female	Shona/English

The questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to elicit the writing centre consultants' opinions or perceptions on social justice. As this would be our very first step towards researching and investigating issues related to social justice, the questions were designed to determine:

1. consultants' understanding of the term "social justice" by asking them to define/explain the term and identify (five) principles of social justice (based on their personal definition of the term) (Questions 1 and 2);
2. whether consultants are comfortable discussing issues related to social justice during a consultation (Question 3);
3. consultants' perceptions on social justice and asynchronous consulting: the aspects/principles harnessed during such consultations (Question 4);
4. consultants' perceptions on social justice and face-to-face consulting: the aspects/principles harnessed during such consultations (Question 5);
5. whether consultants encountered instances of language use by students or in their writing that can be considered oppressive (Question 6); and
6. whether consultants had any additional comments or views they would like to add (Question 7).

Data analysis

The data was analysed, keeping in mind the research questions, focus and aim of this study. As indicated, this is a largely exploratory, descriptive study with the aim of understanding consultant

perceptions or views that will form the foundation for further discussions in this regard. Thus, this study can be referred to as a qualitative descriptive study, the goal of which is a comprehensive summarisation, in everyday terms, of specific events experienced by individuals or groups of individuals (Lambert & Lambert, n.d.). Data presented in such studies involves a straightforward descriptive summary of its informational content organised in a logical manner (Lambert & Lambert, n.d.). Data analysis and presentation for this study align with this.

Once collected, the data was read through thoroughly by the researcher to ensure a good understanding of consultant responses. The small sample size and limited number of open-ended questions made this a manageable process. In keeping with the aim of this study, responses are shared so as to give the reader a clear understanding of consultant responses. Frequencies are provided for the questions that allowed this (Question 1 & 2). Responses to other questions were summarised and presented in a manner that preserved the intended meaning.

Findings

Questions 1 and 2 were focused on determining consultants' understanding of the term "social justice", as well as having them identify principles of social justice. This information is particularly important. On the one hand, any future discussions or research on the topic will be grounded in consultants' definitions, that is, their responses will be framed by the narrowness (or broadness) of their understanding, and on the other, these definitions could become the basis for discussions focused on extending them to encompass a wider perspective, which is one of the aims of this research. Consultant definitions are closely related to issues of equality, with five out of six consultants making reference to "equal", "equality" and "equitable" in their responses. The table below indicates the keywords referenced in responses, as well as their frequency.

Table 2: Keywords and frequency in definitions of social justice

Keyword	Frequency	Responses
equal, equality, equitable	5	Social justice issues are the principles, concepts or topics that affect human rights, opportunities and equality .
injustices	3	Social justice is the recognition of previous and current injustices and the intersectional assessment of those injustices with the aim of creating more equitable spaces.
rights	2	I understand social justice as the notion that everyone is entitled to equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities.
opportunities	2	I understand social justice as the notion that everyone is entitled to equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities .
marginalised	1	I understand social justice to be any movement centred around advocating against and dismantling systemic/institutional injustices that affect a particular marginalised group in society.
respect	1	Social justice is based on how we live, equality in the society, respect . Every human has to be treated the same and we have to have the same advantages.
fairness	1	Social justice deals with the politics of fairness, substantive equality and equal outcomes . This idea also fosters a critical view on the injustices that social inequalities bring about, and a willingness to conceptualise a change for the better from those injustices.

Question 2 required consultants to identify five principles of social justice. Responses and frequencies are tabulated below.

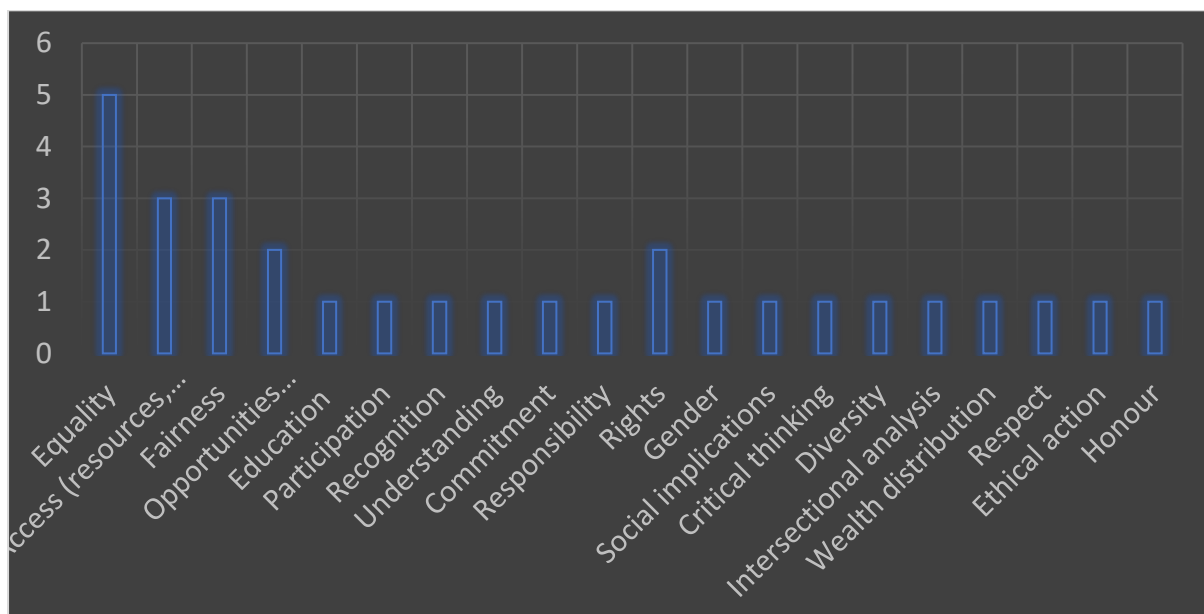


Figure 1: Frequency of principles of social justice as identified by consultants

Question 3 asked: “How comfortable are you discussing social justice issues during consultations?” In their responses, consultants were expected to consider this in relation to FTF and asynchronous

consultations. Five out of six consultants indicated that they would be comfortable discussing social justice issues during FTF consultations. Consultants noted that “face to face discussions tend to be more congenial and loose”; “better rapport is created between consultant and student, which facilitates space for conversation”; “FTF allows for a better opportunity to discuss social justice issues, since such a consultation is more of a conversation, and a consultant would be faced with a holistic individual and not merely a text on a computer screen”; “discussing social justice issues face-to-face avoid[s] the possibility for miscommunication or misinterpretation and that [this] would certainly be the more preferred setting to unpack issues relating to social justice as the conversation could take place with more nuance”. Consultant 6 indicated that s/he would not be completely comfortable “because I am not sure that what I say will be understood or used against me at a different time. I also believe that I should be knowledgeable in the subject before I discuss it in consultations”. With reference to FTF consultations specifically, s/he stated: “I think it will put me in a tricky situation, because of how backgrounds, living situations and lived experiences may be different. Due to my race, people expect me to have certain opinions and that they should be the same as theirs. They are things we may agree on, but some things I would not view the same way. I would be hesitant to broach the subject of social justice, but I would engage if the student wanted to discuss it”.

All six consultants agreed that the asynchronous platform was not conducive to a discussion of such issues: students are not conversational in these consultations; asynchronous sessions do not offer such a space; the student is not presented as a holistic individual but as a “cold text”; asynchronous consultations may potentially create a few “stumbling blocks” when attempting to have meaningful discourse around social justice and it leaves open the opportunity for misinterpretation, miscommunication and ambiguity.

When asked about the aspects of social justice that are enhanced, activated or harnessed during asynchronous consultations, consultant responses were mixed. Consultant 3 simply responded with “None” and Consultant 4 that “It is difficult to see any enhancement, activation or harnessing of social justice aspects during asynchronous consultation” because “I am only exposed to the text, and not the holistic individual”. Other consultants indicated the principles of equality, fairness, diversity, equity and empathy. It is evident from these consultant responses that while consultants struggle to discuss social justice issues as they pertain to the student, they do attempt to apply these principles in the way they approach their work. Here, consultants alluded to the training that they undergo, which ensures that “we are sensitive to the varying needs and concerns that affect students, and

therefore handle our approaches to them accordingly.” Interestingly, Consultant 4 also noted that there are two social justice principles that consultants become aware of during consultations: poverty and economic injustice. She states that “In some of the documents that I come across, you can clearly see that the person was not exposed to some of the opportunities that other students in the University were.” While s/he did not elaborate, an awareness of such issues is the first step in being able to discuss such issues openly during our weekly meetings, then later, during writing centre consultations.

Consultants unanimously agreed that principles of social justice can be harnessed during FTF consulting. A recurring theme was the “human connection”, “human edge”, “personal interaction” and seeing the student as a “holistic individual”. Added to this, consultants indicated that FTF consulting allows for “empathy, sharing, laughing, complaining about the university or difficult modules that we may have shared, sharing interest in each other’s interests” (solidarity in writing centre parlance); “organic conversations to flow” and “that in being presented with a holistic individual, it sets one up immensely to enhance all social justice principles in one’s consultation”. One consultant raised two other important issues: “vital non-verbal cues” and “fair representation”:

During a face-to-face encounter, the consultant has the opportunity to pick up on vital non-verbal cues during the conversation, possibly leading to a more fruitful exchange. The other element of social justice that could be harnessed in this context is that of fair representation, as the consultants are made of a relatively diverse group of individuals. This could ultimately lead to the creation of a more comfortable, inclusive environment for those seeking assistance.

Both these issues can impact the quality of a consultation and may contribute to the student and consultant feeling comfortable and safe enough to extend their discussion from just academic writing to other (social justice) issues. The point on fair representation is particularly thought-provoking: that a student who visits the writing centre might feel uncomfortable or embarrassed about their need to seek such support, but seeing a diverse range of consultants might put them at ease as the students see themselves represented by/in this diverse group.

When asked if consultants have encountered instances of language use by students or in their writing that can be considered oppressive, answers indicated that when they did identify such instances, these occurred as a result of the student’s language barrier and was not a deliberate attempt to be inflammatory.

At the end of the questionnaire, consultants were given the opportunity to add in any further comments. Only two consultants chose to respond here (1 and 4), with one indicating that the way we consult asynchronously will change as we become more familiar with it and that this “inevitable shift will hopefully grow to include more space for social justice both in discussion and principle”, alluding to the fact that our asynchronous consulting strategies will improve with experience and, perhaps, training. The second comment is clear evidence of why this research and future conversations in this regard are crucial and speaks directly to the social justice issues discussed in Section 4 above:

I worry that the shift of focus onto social justice in academia is just a mirage, unless real changes in the lives of the oppressed can be seen. The key question, in my mind, is how to ensure that the people working at the writing centre are not bigots, do not mistreat students, and offer each student the same service. The question of what happens to students who have been failed by the systems they are obliged to participate in, in my mind, cannot be addressed on a consultant-to-student level. Most importantly, I think that consultants experience adverse effects to their mental health when they are confronted by such large, unsolvable problems. I have often felt under-equipped and helpless but I also know that the writing centre cannot train consultants to meet these problems. Often, I think, the best thing to do is to focus on the small, solvable problems, like how to write a good sentence.

The same consultant, in response to a question about how comfortable s/he would be in discussing issues related to social justice, stated:

This is an issue that is not directly relevant to the work that is done between me and a student, which focuses primarily on improving a student’s writing and addressing their concerns. I have experienced an incident where a student lamented that they could not write their dissertation in their home language, I empathised with this and the difficulty of powerlessness. A conclusion could not be reached on this issue since neither the student or I have the ability to address the specific concern of being able to write in one’s home language. As a consultant I am aware of the inequalities that have hampered students, I have heard co-workers and respected academics lament the state of schools in South Africa and particularly the difficulty of integrating people (who tend to come from under-privileged or marginalised groups) into the university. Very few solutions or strategies have been discussed with me.

It is evident from both responses that this consultant, while aware of social (in)justice issues affecting both students and consultants, feels helpless in his/her ability to make a difference and therefore believes that such discussions are futile. His/her stance, in light of this, is that consultants should rather focus on the work of supporting students in their writing. As the coordinator of the writing centre, these comments are especially telling, confirming to me that there is an urgent need to open up such discussions during our weekly meeting. Also of importance is the message that while it is not

the responsibility of writing centre consultants to provide solutions to the challenges our students experience, it is our responsibility to allow them to voice their concerns, to speak openly and freely about their challenges without fear of reprisal and to create a safe and non-judgemental space that is student-centred. This is in line with Young's (1990: 37, as quoted in Lotter, 1999: 95) position on the true aim of social justice: that, among other things, individuals "communicate with others, share in determining their own lives, and express their feelings, experiences, and perspectives" (see Section 3 above).

Discussion

The responses to the questionnaire provided valuable information pertaining to consultants' views on social justice in FTF and asynchronous consulting. Based on our findings, several conclusions can be drawn, as summarised below:

1. While consultants understand the concept of social justice, this understanding is limited to issues related to equality and access and principles of social justice as drawn from the field of education (see Section 3). While these are, no doubt, important principles, this definition must be expanded to include principles that relate to identity, oppression, power and privilege, to name a few.
2. Consultants unanimously agreed that FTF consulting provides an effective platform to discuss issues pertaining to social justice.
3. Consultants agreed that asynchronous consulting makes such discussions very difficult to approach. Their responses indicated, however, that consultants are *applying* such principles in the consulting strategies as a result of the training they received.
4. The majority of consultants indicated that they would be comfortable initiating and being a part of discussions related to social justice during FTF consultations, with only one consultant disagreeing (Consultant 6). Interestingly, the consultant who disagreed is relatively new, having been with the writing centre for only a few months, and has had no FTF consulting experience. It is very possible that with more intensive training and experience, s/he might be more open to such discussions.
5. While consultants clearly apply principles of social justice in their consulting strategies, there is no evidence that there are or have been discussions of broader social justice issues between consultant and student.
6. While consultants indicated that they did not experience instances of language use by students or in their writing that can be considered oppressive, one is led to wonder if

consultants, in their quest to improve the students' writing, disregarded this to focus on writing-related concerns or, as Witherite (2014: 123) found, tutors were aware that social injustice often manifests in language but were at a loss as to how they should respond.

7. Final comments from consultants foreground the worrying reality that, while acutely aware of the social injustices' students experience, consultants might themselves be struggling with such injustices within and outside the writing centre or, in their quest to support students, feel helpless and powerless. Such feelings of inadequacy, as pointed out by a consultant, might impact the mental health of consultants. These comments highlight the need to approach such discussions carefully. A good starting point might be to share and open up for discussion their responses to some of the scholarly literature referenced in Section 4 of this study.
8. If we, like Gross (2018: 11–12), would like to create “woke” tutors who are “critically conscious of social justice issues as they arise in the writing centre; tutors who have the kind of awareness of systemic oppression that impacts their way of being in the world”, we would have to heed his call for more in-depth discussion of all aspects related to social justice during our consultant training.

Conclusion

This research aimed to determine whether the social justice principles harnessed during FTF consultations can be applied to the asynchronous platform and whether this has been done. Consultant responses indicate that they cannot and have not. Our findings also indicate that further and more intensive discussions are necessary to help expand consultants' definitions of social justice. In light of the fact that asynchronous consulting has become a necessity as a result of COVID-19, more effective training on asynchronous consulting must be conducted to ensure at least a measure of real interaction between student and consultant, despite the lack of “humanness” that consultants allude to. As part of such training, it would be valuable to share with consultants the list Suhr-Sytsma and Brown (2011) compiled on how the tutor can challenge oppressive language. The comment from a consultant on “how to ensure that the people working at the writing centre are not bigots” also raised the issue that we should not just be concerned with how these issues relate to the students who visit us but also how consultants respond to each other. One consultant alluded to the diversity of the consulting staff, and while at first glance this is offered as an advantage, such diversity might create opportunities for bigotry and other injustices. We should, like Dixon (2017), implore writing centre staff not to hide or tidy up these narratives but instead to tell them, listen to them and embrace them as a distinct part of our centre.

This research has highlighted the reality that the writing centre at the focus of this study has a long road to travel in our quest to transform from a safe space to a brave space. While the study intended to determine whether asynchronous consulting provided a platform to consider issues of social justice, our findings have extended much further than this, pointing out the urgency of initiating dialogue pertaining to social justice and the writing centre. Also of importance is the need to incorporate a discussion on social justice and the writing centre into our consultant training and our weekly meetings in the hope that such openness will instil in our consultants the confidence to approach and address such issues, irrespective of the platform on which consultations occur.

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