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Reflections on creativity in writing centre praxis: Pedagogical encounters in a university of technology

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ABSTRACT

On entering a university of technology (UoT), students encounter a pre-existing university culture and history. It is within this milieu that they are expected to develop creativity and criticality so that when they enter broader society, they can face complex problems. In a UoT, working in silos with a theory-praxis disconnect constrains the ability of higher education to better society and transform lives. Writing centres are key role players in creating a learning environment to shape student futures. In this collaborative reflection we, as two writing centre practitioners, use the 'What? So what? Now what?' model (Rolfe, Freshwater & Jasper, 2001) to reflect on and highlight the creativity inherent in writing centre praxis. The Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engeström 1987) concepts of mediating artefacts, rules, community, and division of labour are used to explore how the culture and history of the university environment are present, enacted, and embodied in our pedagogical encounters. These reflections focus on three selected pedagogical encounters in our writing centre praxis: a design classroom engagement; a teacher assistant training activity; and a tutor training activity. The reflections highlight the importance of collaborative and creative approaches to learning, enabling student voice and encouraging resilience.

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Introduction

Writing centres, present in universities globally, are thought to offer students a non-hierarchical, free space (Nichols, 1998; Clarence, 2023) to develop their reading and writing practices in a critical and creative manner. We believe, following Coleman and Tuck (2020: 575), that writing is a "valued academic practice" as it makes visible the thinking (Zinsser, 2006) of students. Thus, "writing as a mode of learning" (Emig, 1977: 122) is central in a university and, along with the creativity it affords, offers students a wide range of epistemic engagements. The criticality and creativity obtained through the dialogue enacted in a writing consultation is needed in our world. It is the authors' belief that writing centre work adds to how students are equipped to address the complex problems faced by humanity (Giroux, 2018). As writing centre practitioners in the Global South, we value the contribution we believe our work makes to our communities through its potential for problem solving. A writing centre is thus pressed to provide and value spaces where students pause to consider their selves and how they might develop as active critical citizens in relation to their role in global geopolitics.

Writing maps the shaping and reshaping of thought, and the dialogue a writing centre consultation offers in this process of knowledge making is the 'work' that we so value (see Nichols 2017a; Clarence 2019). This unfolding and development takes place, in the main, in individual writing consultations where a tutor using multimodal pedagogies may embody a reader (Archer, 2018), provide critical friendship (Carlse, 2019), and play the role of an "attentive listener[s], to help students to develop an ear for their writing and to learn how to effectively situate that writing in terms of style and argument within disciplinary conversations" (Nichols, Adair, Asfour, Bekebu, Khofi & Pauw, 2023: 221). Writing consultations offer the possibility of a 'pause' in which students may present their ideas and possibly challenge rigid and restrictive thinking within our UoT sector (Coleman & Tuck, 2020). Here, we posit, is an opportunity for the growth of creative and critical thinking. In this paper we reflect on our praxis to tease out how creativity in our pedagogical encounters creates these non-hierarchical spaces we value, how it enables us to challenge what exists, and to enjoy engagement and dialogue in the creation of new knowledge.

At an institutional level, however, we question, as do Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni (2019), how writing is perceived in our UoT. As Coleman and Tuck (2020: 591) caution, in the South African UoT sector… "students are in practice 'locked-in' to curricular and pedagogic choices that are best able to meet the demands of industry, while reinforcing generalised and decontextualised notions of

academic writing", and in turn risk being positioned as not measuring up (Simpson, 2011). Along with this deficit view of student writing, writing centres themselves are often misunderstood (Clarence, 2019), being seen either as peripheral to learning or, as in our lived experience, and that of other writing centre practitioners, as 'miracle workers' who will 'fix' students (Sefalane-Nkohla & Mtonjeni, 2019). As writing centre practitioners we function within a particular UoT culture and history, which is often not consciously evident to us. Garraway and Winberg (2019) provide a comprehensive overview of the histories of technikons and UoTs in South Africa, which details how institutional culture and identity shifts occur and might come to bear on beliefs and approaches to writing. It is valuable therefore for us to reflect on the hidden aspects of our socio-cultural learning and teaching (L&T) environment, as we acknowledge, as does Viquez Fernandez (2021: 1), that "self-reflection makes people more conscious about what needs to be changed or modified when teaching".

This paper is a reflection on our experiences as we argue that reflective practice affords us the space to strengthen and maintain our beliefs, in the importance of writing centre work in our UoT. This writing centre work continues, often despite the environment which is sometimes, through factors not within our control, counter to our pedagogical principles. This reflection thus seeks to reaffirm and bolster our belief in our work. Through a reflection on the creativity in our practice, we explore the value of our approach to the students we serve.

Understanding our context

Winberg (2005: 196-197) points out that UoTs, to their own detriment, often "try[ing] to be many things to many stakeholders". In our context, in order to fully understand our writing centre work, taking into consideration how its history is embodied and enacted in our praxis, we offer a brief overview of our UoT environment, with the belief that the more we reflect on its history the more able we are to free ourselves from normative patterns of thought. This is supported by Engeström (2001: 137) who maintains that the "... problems and potentials of activity systems can only be understood against their own history". As a background to the Durban University of Technology's (DUT) history in South Africa, Colleges of Advanced Technical Education were created in 1967 when the technical higher education system was highly regulated by the oppressive Apartheid regime. From the 1980s, with global pressure for democratisation, there was an effort to decentralise curricula development away from the National Education Department. In 2003, UoTs were established and were largely the result of mergers between historically black and historically white

institutions (Cooke, Naidoo & Sattar, 2010), with the DUT coming into being from a merger of the Natal and ML Sultan Technikons.

Despite these more 'visible' or 'physical' changes over our recent history and pressure for post-graduate qualifications, the transformative goals we aspire to in our beliefs about the role and nature of our writing centre praxis, our institution continues to face the challenges of a lingering past. Coleman and Tuck (2020: ??) suggest that academic writing "acts as a proxy" for socio-political understandings of the nature, role, and significance of higher education. We acknowledge how traces of our former technikon selves might persist, with a subtle yet pervasive effect on our current UoT culture. In the South African context, we believe that writing centres have an important role to work in a student-centred manner with a diverse student body. Moreover, the socio-economic context places students under considerable pressure. This is evident in our DUT context where in 2023, 68% of students were funded by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) (Department of Student Services personal communication: 18 October 2023). Through our tutoring we aim to provide collaborative learning environments and offer a nurturing and inclusive space where mutual learning occurs. The Writing Centre is perfectly positioned to offer support to the institution's shifting identity and pedagogical transformation and, relatedly, the success of students. The writing centre environment supports students in developing agency in their academic journeys.

Writing centres in a socio-cultural frame

Broadly, since the 1970s, with a growing focus on the thinking of Vygotsky, there has been a shift in view from the intra-psychological world of students to that of their environment, the social milieu in which education takes place (Taber, 2020). Young people in a university, in late adolescence, are developing their sense of identity and 'self' away from their home and family 'culture' and, following activity theorists Stetsenko and Arievitch (2004: 479), this self is "formed by collective voices and dialogues" present in the "pedagogical encounters" (Davies, 2009: 5) of our UoT higher education environment. It is within these sociocultural contexts that the self is "embedded and…intrinsically interwoven" (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004: 475).

Bringing the shift from individual to socio-cultural into the academic development space, Wilmot and McKenna (2018) plot the socio-linguistic arguments leading up to the 'New Literacy Studies' turn. This thinking challenges the positioning of writing as a neutral set of skills and the student as 'lacking' and argues for the value of transformative curricular change rooted in this socio-cultural

view of higher education. Writing centre work is deeply dialogical and creates a space where creativity can be fostered intentionally. This work becomes a powerful and generative educational space. It is within this development that we see the significance of imagination and creativity, which in the last half a century is also being placed within a sociocultural frame. Zittoun, Glăveanu and Hawlina (2020: 2) write how "imaginative processes grow out of social interactions, use cultural resources, build on our experiences of the world while constantly transforming and expanding them". Glăveanu (2020: 335) suggests that understandings of creativity at a socio-cultural level are needed to "relate[s] ideation to embodied action" at an individual level. Taber (2020: 3) emphasises "the role of culture (and therefore less directly, history) in the development of the individual". Our reflective observations, using the socio-cultural concepts put forward by CHAT, thus seek to foreground human development as a socio-cultural phenomenon and remind us as writing centre practitioners to recognise and value practices which foster creativity. In this reflective paper we choose to discuss three illustrative aspects of our writing centre praxis: an interior design classroom engagement; a teacher assistant (TA) training activity; and a writing centre tutor training activity. In doing so we explore the socio-cultural nature of creative praxis in our higher education environment.

This reflection uses CHAT concepts of mediating artefacts (both material and non-material) such as signs, symbols, and tools, and the socio-cultural concepts of rules, community, and division of labour shown in Figure 1 (Engeström, 1987), as a "conceptual tool" (Foot, 2014: 329) to explore three pedagogical encounters. These concepts aid in reflecting on the role of creativity and criticality in our praxis, in this "study of what humans 'do'" (Er, 2014: 2). Further, these concepts are used to explore how the culture and history of our UoT might be present, enacted and embodied, in our experiences. "History is always present in human activity" (Engeström & Sannino, 2021:7), and can both enable or constrain what we do, how we think, and the rules by which we engage. These authors warn that when "one tries to understand actions without historicity, consequential phenomena…are easily dismissed as arbitrary irrational features, even pathologies, of certain individuals or classes of people, to be eliminated or, at best, ignored" (2021:7). Clarence (2019) questions what writing centres say they can do and what is possible in differing and uneven institutional contexts. She questions the "gaps" between writing centres' stated values and what they can achieve "on the ground" in their day-to-day pedagogical encounters. Clarence (2019) cautions writing centre practitioners to acknowledge this difference in theory and practice to be able to conduct "careful critique[s] of our own blind spots" (Clarence 2019: 118). We note how the use of CHAT concepts might shift our self-awareness and reveal tensions and contradictions in our socio-

cultural environments (Brown, 2021). We welcome these possible shifts to generate new insights into our practice and university environment.

The three examples selected for this reflection took place within one calendar academic year, prior to the time of writing. Choosing examples showcasing different university environments allowed the authors to reflect on a range of their L&T engagements. As writing centre work in our institution is mostly responsive to lecturers' requests, the kinds of engagements vary year by year. It is worth noting that often our pedagogical encounters hinge on relationships formed with individual lecturers and not on institutional plans for L&T. These critical incidents were all group engagements as opposed to one-to-one interactions. Our "on the ground" experiences align to and illustrate Clarence's (2019) concerns about the "gaps" in writing centre theory and praxis.

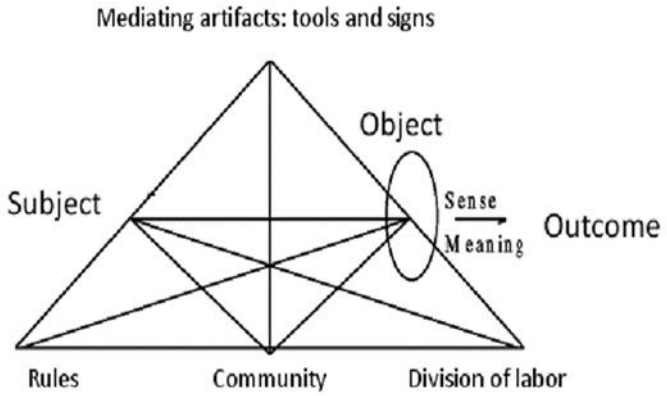

Figure 1. The structure of a human activity system (Engeström, 1987:78)

CHAT provides a useful way to view individual and collective experiences in our writing centre. Foot (2014: 329) points out the affordances of CHAT to a research approach which, by offering a multi-dimensional, systemic approach that "includes both psychological motives and all kinds of tools, as well as the always-present dynamics of power, money, culture, and history", enables researchers to "analyse complex and evolving professional practices and practitioners to engage in reflective research."

In this paper we chose to focus on different roles and functions of our work to provide a reflection which takes into account the interconnectivity required to be creative. In the methodology we provide our reflective model, discuss the value of reflection, and outline our reflective process.

Methodology

In this reflection we aimed to understand how creativity is both present in our praxis and used as an educative tool. We selected Rolfe et al's (2001) 'What? So what? Now what?' model as it provides a straightforward means to critically explore the creativity in our praxis. This model enables researchers to unpack an experience or event and analyse and evaluate its significance. These reflective insights become useful to improve our practice, and, in this study, we acknowledge that a critical view of our work is needed to remain aware of potential historical and cultural 'holding patterns'. In a research process, critical reflection is "dialogic, integrative and transformative"' as it draws on both theoretical and practical knowledge" (Fook, 2010: 6). Fook further argues that "it can elicit deeper and more complex understandings that can unearth and unsettle assumptions (particularly about power) and thus help identify a new theoretical basis from which to improve and change a practice situation" (2010: 61). Similarly, Gardner (2014: 81) affirms that reflection as a research process enables "the idea of working with unconscious assumptions and values while framing questions sensitively to explore challenging issues". In our process, "reflection on action takes place out of the activity of practice" and in this way "it is considered of more conscious and reasoned process" (Cirkovic-Miladinovic & Dimitrijevic, 2020: 48). As researchers, we sought to engage through reflective discussions of our three examples of writing centre praxis to reach this valued conscious and reasoned awareness. Through discussion about our work, it became evident that much of it involves dialogue and creativity. Through sharing, for example, how poetry was incorporated in a writing workshop, we noted how many of our pedagogical encounters involve creative practice. We identified, for purposes of illustration and analysis, three instances where creativity was evident in our work, enabling students to enjoy a free space in learning and development.

Our reflective process

This reflection was a collaborative process between the authors. We chose to meet face-to-face for discussions, starting with verbal brainstorming. We deliberated on the range of activities we engaged in as practitioners on two of our seven campuses. We came to the realisation that the intentional use of creativity was an aspect of our work that we had not previously acknowledged to ourselves and yet is a significant part of building students' confidence, voice, and self-expression. Additionally, as writing centre practitioners, working creatively affords us creative expression and enjoyment that deserves acknowledgement. Our reflective process was deeply dialogical, as we met

together on average twice a week to discuss, read, and then write up our reflection. This was done over a period of six months and included seeking the input of a critical friend. The reflections were presented twice at L&T conferences, one institutional and one national. Feedback received was taken into consideration for the development of our reflection. Consensus on the analysis was guided by CHAT concepts used as a conceptual tool. Initially we had a wide range of possible themes (e.g., collaborative learning and communities of practice) but agreed on the most salient being creativity, student voice, and resilience.

The reflection necessitated revisiting the chosen activities so that we were able to explore what went into the planning and how each of the activities proceeded. We were able to review the session plans, videos, and PowerPoint slides, enabling a deeper understanding of these creative pedagogical encounters. In this reflection on our professional practice all classroom engagement data was anonymised and ethical standards adhered to.

This reflective professional practice study focused on three selected aspects of our writing centre praxis: poetry in an interior design class; visual metaphors in a teacher assistant training workshop; and video creation in a tutor training workshop. These pedagogical encounters were selected as illustrative examples of creative praxis across different stakeholder groups within our UoT. Although there are other examples of creative praxis, these were selected to highlight a range of the types of pedagogical activities we engage in on a yearly basis. This was enhanced by concepts drawn from CHAT to understand and deepen our critical engagement with our own experiences as writing centre practitioners using creativity in our praxis in a UoT. The following section outlines the pedagogical encounters, the critical incidents on which we reflect: poetry in an interior design class; visual metaphors in a TA training workshop; video creation in a tutor training workshop.

What? so what? – linking our praxis to theory

Poetry in an interior design class

In responding to the 'What?' question of Rolfe et al's model (2001), we focus on a classroom engagement when an interior design lecturer invited writing centre participation when she used poetry to extend her students' design thinking. They were designing a restaurant interior and were encouraged to do some word play as a brainstorming activity. In the class, the use of an online dictionary and thesaurus was demonstrated. Then the lecturer and practitioner introduced the idea

of using poetry to extend students' thinking about their design concepts and encouraged the students to develop an 'I am' poem (ReadWriteThink, 2024) written from the perspective of their design concept. For example, when designing a restaurant themed on 'the desert', the students wrote a poem from the perspective of a desert. There was time in class to write and this collaborative session, where a writing centre practitioner, tutor, and lecturer worked together to provide feedback on writing, was a positive experience in that writing was not seen as 'just for marks' and the students were given space to reach their creative potential. As framed by the CHAT triangle concepts, the 'division of labour' and expected 'rules' for engagement between the lecturer, writing centre practitioner, and students shifted.

In our 'So what?' response, our reflection shows how challenging broader institutional rules and division of labour can be used to facilitate engagement in learning. As Brookfield (2015: 13) points out, "the criteria, power dynamics and wider structures that frame a field of practice" are to be noted if a reflection is to be critical." Following Brookfield (2015), we note how the unspoken classroom dynamics of lecturer-student shifted and that, as a result, students' perceptions on writing and how it is used in higher education were challenged by an 'unexpected' creative writing task. The introduction of a playful and "low-stakes" (Bean, 2001: 88) writing activity allowed creativity through the space made for exploration and novelty. Writing was foregrounded as a tool for thinking as the 'I am' poem deepened understanding of the design concept from the perspective of the 'concept', the designer, and the design user. There was an opportunity within this creativity for critical engagement with the task. In this way the poem as a 'tool', the mediating artifact in the educational culture of a design classroom, developed student thinking about their design concepts.

The writing centre practitioner was also invited to attend the lecture when the students performed their poems, providing a sense of audience to the students and allowing for the further integration of the writing centre's role in this class. This contributed towards the development of collaboration and community between academics in the higher education space. It also demonstrated the use of collaboration to the students. This poetry performance session, despite potentially being a tense situation for the students, was by contrast an affirming experience as the lecturer and practitioner were able to give positive feedback to all. The invitation for creative expression allowed a certain freedom within the academic context, an alternative space free from overt judgement and critique (Clarence, 2023).

This educational experience embodied how free thinking in a creative space can contribute to design practice. Thus, in a sense, the 'rules' of summative assessment shifted, and the unspoken culture of a UoT classroom, which could be thought of as "career-oriented" (Garraway & Winberg 2019: 40), was contested. The students' poems showcased their creativity, even though they expressed in class not all feeling equally confident as creative writers. The poems enabled novel and interesting perspectives on the mood and ambience the students were trying to achieve in their restaurant designs. In this interaction, the 'rules' of a classroom community changed when the writing centre practitioner was invited to be part of the class, even at a time which some students experienced as awkward. The division of labour also changed as the writing centre practitioner took responsibility for preparing the class activities, running the workshop session, helping to provide feedback along with a tutor, and attending the final stage of the poetry activity with the lecturer. In this pedagogical encounter, the culture of the classroom was mediated by the creation of a poetic artefact and shifted to an educational collaboration. The foregrounding of a creative writing exercise challenged the normative expectations of the students in their visual design class, and thus the use of creativity in this context had the potential to contribute to a shift in educational culture. In writing about the conditions needed to achieve critical reflexivity, Gardner (2014: 5) introduces the notion of culture, saying that "individuals influence and are, in turn, influenced by those they work with, the organisations in which they are based and the prevailing culture", and we see this cultural shift reflected in this joint educational activity.

Visual metaphors in a TA training workshop

To answer the 'What?' (Rolfe et al. 2001) question in relation to the second pedagogical encounter, we focus on another creative educational activity, when writing centre practitioners were invited by lecturers to engage with the university's General Education TAs during their training. This request for collaboration arose when TAs observed their students' difficulties with reflective writing. The activity reflected on here is a collaborative engagement between the General Education lecturers, their TAs, and the writing centre. The intention of this General Education module, a compulsory university-wide first year foundational module, was to provide a learning space alternate to discipline-specific L&T norms. It aimed to provide a holistic learning experience in which new students explore their emerging conscience and identity as critical and creative thinkers. General education, according to the General Education Task team (2012), "aims to provide an enhanced theoretical, philosophical and writing intensive approach to curriculum, with a focus on local context" and, according to Bawa (2013), provides students with a holistic education, life skills, and attributes so that they will be able

to function successfully in society. This initiative was one of several aimed to challenge the historically created culture of a technikon (Garraway & Winberg, 2019), one geared through the politics of the Apartheid education system, to control thought and status quo. General education at DUT therefore aimed to provide students with life-long learning within their local context and a holistic education to go beyond learning in their respective disciplines. The philosophy of humanism underpinned this change, which sought to support and prepare students more effectively for a diverse and globalised workplace. It can further be argued that the introduction of institutional writing centres came about in response to the humanism which underpinned the need for a shift in the way in which students were supported in higher education (Govender & Alcock, 2020).

The reflective writing required in this General Education module has changed over the recent past from reflective writing about cultural artefacts to the use of creative methods to facilitate a variety of reflections (e.g., a photographic poster, a poem, and a written reflection). The writing centre practitioners designed the workshop alongside the lecturers' assessment task so that the TAs also experienced using visual metaphors to deepen reflection, as would the students they teach. To introduce this exercise the writing centre practitioners asked the TAs to share their views on reflective writing and then a short introduction to visual metaphors was given. The TAs were asked to share their favourite metaphors for 'education' and then they made photographs to show their beliefs in greater detail. The following guidelines were given to the 61 participants: using your cell phones, go on a short 'walk' around this venue and reflect on yourself as a teacher. Make two photos that show your teaching philosophy. These photographs were then shared and explained in a plenary session.

In this activity the photograph can be seen as a 'tool', an actual physical artefact which mediates the reflective process in this L&T experience. This exercise worked well to demonstrate the power of visual language and how visual metaphors speak in a deep and sometimes unexpected manner (Mitchell, 2008). In the first activity, the collaboration between a lecturer, writing centre practitioner, and tutor was an example of a small-scale or micro-level engagement, whereas the engagement with the TAs had the potential to filter through to each first-year student in the institution.

So what? - In the activity the TAs took a range of photographs to represent their beliefs, experiences, and feelings in relation to teaching. There was a great sense of excitement and energy in the room as they shared their reflections in a plenary session. The metaphors functioning as mediating

artefacts, symbols of their educational philosophies, gave rise to innovative ways to philosophise about teaching. Modelling creative educational practice, we suggest, inspired a growth in confidence in the use of alternative methods in the TAs developing teaching praxis. A creative activity such as this use of visual metaphors could serve to demonstrate how breaking conventional classroom rules can deepen critical reflection. As Clegg (2008: 220) suggests: "To understand creativity, we need to go beyond functionalism to consider the conflict, rupture and qualitative changes that inevitably come with creation." The TAs experienced an activity unbound by verbal instructions, where their reflections were facilitated by imagery alone. This creative breaking of conventional classroom rules was a tacit demonstration of the power of creativity to foster self-learning. The classroom mood of excitement allowed the TAs to trust the unknown, a creative process where rules were not the focus. The vulnerability that TAs might have experienced in the creative process was an important reminder of what it feels like to be a new student at university. It can be argued that a sense of community was created through this visual metaphor experience which would then underpin the TAs' teaching of reflective writing.

It is our belief that everyone in a university community has an equal role in how, or whether, writing is perceived as a "mode of learning" (Emig, 1977). Therefore, this activity demonstrated, through interrupting the traditional conceptions of who has the responsibility for teaching writing in higher education, that in fact this responsibility needs to be equally shared and valued. If our students are to benefit fully, writing centre work needs to be supported by all university stakeholders. We all need to feel confident to use novel ways to facilitate talking about writing. Thus, in this instance, the division of labour allowed for the interconnectivity of the students, lecturers, and writing centre, something we welcome and value as writing centre practitioners.

Video creation in a tutor training workshop

The DUT Writing Centre tutor induction training workshop was conceptualised by the writing centre practitioners to share writing centre best practices and equip incoming tutors with the capabilities and knowledge to work with students. This induction training is usually held in the first quarter of the year to orientate tutors. The training workshop is held over two full days and includes various teaching-style activities. These include role play activities that highlight tutoring scenarios to prepare tutors to work with diverse students; group discussions around tutor ethics, roles, and responsibilities; conducting writing consultations; and navigating the complexity of tutorship. The Writing Centre models the sharing of ideas in a flexible, inclusive learning environment. These

creative activities enable tutors to share their perspectives on their role in enabling student learning and development and sets the tone for the rest of the year.

In addition to the induction training, writing centre practitioners further facilitate tutor training sessions within their writing centre sites. The training sessions vary at each of the sites as per the needs identified by the site writing centre practitioner. We acknowledge the significance of inducting, particularly new entrants such as our writing centre tutors, into the higher education landscape. Tutor training outlines an academic literacies approach to student writing, which considers "institutional relationships of discourse and power and the contested nature of writing practices" (Lea & Street, 1998: 250) and the enactment and embodiment of one's identity (Archer, 2008) The tutor training programme includes creative activities, research relating to writing centre history and practice, T&L in higher education, and ensuring that tutoring is not just a set of skills (McArdle & Coutts, 2010) but an enabler of tutors' self-awareness and growth that will contribute to their academic and professional lives. We value embedding both scholarly research and practice-based activities in our training as these allow tutors to gain an understanding of the writing process and how it requires support, commitment, and cumulative effort (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2014).

We use an academic literacies approach in our training to enable the creation of opportunities for students and tutors to question the ways in which they are working with knowledge and demonstrating that knowledge through their writing. This approach allows for transformative learning and teaching and underpins a responsive writing centre practice in the increasingly changing higher education sector, particularly in the South African context. Academic literacies are underpinned by an ideology of transformation influenced by many societal factors (Dison, 2018) and researchers Lillis and Scott (2007), Jacobs (2014), and Martin and Ebrahim (2016) emphasise the need to approach literacy engagement and development as a set of social practices. Academic literacies require the inclusion of creative opportunities for students and tutors to question the ways in which they are working with knowledge and demonstrating this in their writing (Clarence, 2011; Govender & Alcock, 2020).

The academic literacies approach to peer tutor training allows tutors to develop their academic identity, engage in deep learning, and creatively build their knowledge. Writing centre peer tutors "act as a scaffold helping the student do things he or she cannot perform alone" (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2014: 55) and this mediated interaction allows a student to actively participate in their own learning (Lustick, 2010). Collaborative interaction and learning take place in the tutoring

consultation and this builds academic identity and lifelong learning for both tutors and students. Fiorella and Mayer (2013: 287) explain that "learning activities that require students to both prepare and produce explanations for others can result in better long-term understanding of the material." Govender and Alcock (2020) affirm that tutor and student engagement, deep discussion, and critiquing during consultations cultivate advanced learning. Writing centre tutors have a significant role in facilitating student learning and development. As a result, our tutor training programmes are creatively planned, designed, and implemented. Through structured training and development programmes we embed and link theory and practice to equip tutors to work with university students. The training provides tutors with an ideological and epistemological lens through which to carry out their tutoring. This theoretical underpinning is essential to developing tutors' understanding of their work and role in fostering criticality in students and contributing to their academic and professional lives.

In this iteration of the training, tutors were asked to create cell phone videos to generate their own training content, using different tutoring scenarios to demonstrate tutoring styles. The requirements for the video were introduced and the tutors brainstormed in groups of five to six. They planned and scripted their videos with guidance from the practitioners and had 45 minutes to create a two-minute video. The recorded videos were played in a plenary session where the writing centre practitioners facilitated critique to highlight different tutor styles, techniques, and practices. A series of prompts were used in this discussion including: What surprised you in this session? What didn't work so well? Why? What would you do differently if you were the tutor? What, from this video, might influence you the next time you tutor?

Reflecting on this activity, using the "So what?" prompt (Rolfe et al., 2001), gave rise to much hilarity and robust debate. This allowed the development of tutor agency, as so often tutor training content from the Global North is used as examples in tutor training, and our own contexts and experiences are not present. This creative exercise provided an opportunity to value ourselves and our experiences through laughter and critique. Our collective wisdom and knowledge were drawn on in this session, and implicit in this activity was how our writing centre community was valued. This creative exercise allowed tutors to imagine themselves into tutoring scenarios in a scholarly manner and this facilitated learning from each other. The groupwork fostered a sense of confidence in community and the belief that there is a wealth of knowledge to draw on in our community of practice (Lewanika & Archer, 2011), in the development of tutoring in higher education. The video becomes a 'tool', a physical manifestation of tutors' combined understanding and knowledge of

tutoring. How these videos subsequently mediate the culture of the writing centre will become apparent when they are used in future training exercises. When seen through the lens of the CHAT concept of a 'psychological tool', this creation of our own training material, an 'instrument', will allow us to work in a theoretical space more creatively and authentically.

Students come from diverse disciplines and writing centre interactions create a space of commonality and interconnectivity, a community where writing as a mode of thinking is valued (Emig, 1977). It is our belief that writing has equal value across all fields. The writing centre community therefore has the opportunity to mediate and influence the culture of our UoT where, through our pedagogical encounters, how writing is seen could be altered.

Now what? – looking forward through analysis and discussion

Guided by the Rolfe et al. (2001) model of reflection, in this section we focus on the 'Now what?' of our praxis. We explore what is salient about our writing centre practice that arises from our reflections on the culture and history of our UoT environment. The CHAT concepts of mediating artefacts, rules, community, and the division of labour are used to create a deeper understanding of how creativity can be used in L&T to foster alternatives and innovation. Our reflections on three aspects of our creative writing centre praxis bring to the fore various ways in which creativity allows for the breaking of traditional educational 'norms' and practices, and in turn fosters criticality. In the words of Clegg (2008: 221), a "critical assault on confining ideas, structures and even modes of 'being' is fundamental to creativity. Creative and critical faculties are intimately linked." This reflection on our professional practice created a space in which the values and competencies of collaboration and creativity became visible. Here we draw on the learnings from our three activities to understand what we want to retain and, in some instances, change in our writing centre practice. The key themes which emerged are creativity, student voice, and resilience.

Creativity

Writing centre work is based on the understanding that writing is a social practice (Nichols, 1998) where the community of practice is socially mediated (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lewanika & Archer, 2011). In writing centre work we argue that creativity underpins not only what we do but also the way we do it. Glăveanu (2020) explains that only recently is creativity being defined outside the idea of a 'product' or outcome. More recently creativity is viewed as "processes connecting creative

ideation, behavior and material outcomes" (Glăveanu, 2020: 335). Writing centre praxis is aligned to this as it is within this process, a tutoring engagement that is largely socio-cultural, that learning is takes place. We need to intentionally plan educational spaces where creativity is used and valued. This is done with the belief that as CHAT theorists suggest, the human mind is at play in our physical world and is not, as we sometimes like to imagine, housed in our brain or cranium. Mind is embodied where people are active at work or play (Sannino & Engeström, 2018: 44), when people "engage with the world by means of cultural artifacts such as signs and tools". In this reflection our gaze was redirected to the power of creativity as a 'tool' within our praxis and how it may be both collaborative and innovative. CHAT, as a conceptual tool, allowed a macro-micro analysis to consider how the socio-cultural is inseparable from and in human activity in a writing centre. Perhaps our writing centre work, if we focus more intentionally on creativity in the social aspects of classroom practices, will provide playful ways to relate to each other, link theory and praxis, and break free of complacency and the need to stick with the familiar to offer the curricular change that Wilmot and McKenna (2018) urge should be transformative.

We need to remember to value creativity simply for the process work it enables and its potential to bring joy, innovation, and playfulness to our educational environment, as was so evident in the design class poetry writing engagement. Creativity is inherent in writing centre praxis, and this reflection is a significant reminder of this. Clegg (2008: 221) reminds us that "[w]e need to understand the full context of the creative process in all its different psychological, social, political, economic, environmental and aesthetic aspects" if we are to use all its affordances in the development of holistic institutional responses to our writing development needs.

Student voice

Through our reflections on these three creative activities, we found that students became more confident in their self-expression, that their voice came to the fore more readily when playfulness and vulnerability were encouraged in the educational space. In higher education, the idea that "students have an authentic and valuable voice in the decisions that impact their learning and education has become a phenomenon known as 'student voice'" (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023: 555). Broadly, the mandate of a writing centre is to provide 'rehearsal' space (Nichols, 2017a) outside the traditional classroom where this authenticity in student voice is encouraged and where, if the sometimes-stagnant culture of a UoT classroom can be challenged, listening occurs. In the TA training an opportunity for the expression of "unobservable thoughts, feelings, experiences, and

understandings" was provided, using photographic visual metaphors to elicit reflection on teaching philosophies (Richard & Lahman, 2015: 4).

Writing centre tutors have a valuable role to play in an environment that facilitates and supports creativity. The reality of our situation is that 80- 90% of students who consult our writing centre are English additional language speakers and finding their academic voice requires them to grapple with the multiple languages needed in higher education. In this environment, a playful, creative activity can perhaps provide some welcome respite from the demands of academic discourse. We concur with Nichols (2017a), who suggests that creative writing allows for the expression and valuing of multiple identities and cultures, working against hidden hegemonic educational practices. In considering the 'Now what?' of our use of creative activities we acknowledge that 'the visual' in L&T spaces is powerful in its ability to provide multiple understandings and representations of human experience as it gives voice to the contradictions and paradoxes, the "fuzziness of logic" in our humanness (Weber, 2008: 43).

Our students, digital natives, feel at home with the use of 'the visual' in their social media engagements and identities (Arnold & Casellas Connors, 2022). This equips them with the skillset required to function in these times. In this realm they hold the 'authority'. Arnold and Casellas Connors (2022: 40), in their work using 'the visual' to study student experience, propose that higher education research needs to intentionally "centr[e] student authority" to "lessen power differentials", and as a result give voice to students. If students are socialised to use and value creativity in their educational journeys, as a challenge to more traditional classroom practices, this way of interacting with the world may well serve them in all their roles in life.

Resilience

Current thinking on resilience suggests that the human ability to adapt to adversity stems more from the social ecology than an individual's traits or characteristics (Ungar, 2011; Theron & Ungar, 2022). As Masten (2019) further points out, individual resilience is built when resilient systems are interconnected. This reflection has foregrounded for us how we, as part of this interconnected social ecology in a UoT, need to continue to actively value and facilitate creativity in our work with students. This reflection has allowed us to explore the "active qualities of the environment" that contribute to resilience (Ungar, 2011: 2). We argue that creative activities in these various settings are a way to foster resilience through modelling how we value student voice and contributions,

which in turn influences the social ecology of the university as it enables the growth of self-confidence and self-efficacy.

Through valuing student voice, a writing centre provides a "free space that promotes criticality" (Nichols, 2017b: 37), one that we believe will support resilience. Tutors enable the crafting of students' voices when they provide them with a space where "conversation, collaboration, and invention flourish", and where "genuine thought and reflection…flow between formal and informal learning spaces (Thomas, 2019: 3). In consonance with understandings of how resilience is supported within a social ecology, we suggest that through creative practices which facilitate collaboration in low-stakes and enjoyable ways, we can potentially shift institutional culture by growing student feelings of belonging in the UoT community.

Through creative activity in classroom and training activities we can foster criticality and contribute to innovative problem solving in a fast-paced changing world. Dandgey (2021: para 2 line 1) explores how "creative writing brings students' attention to the concept of perspectives, an important aspect of critical thinking." An individual able to use multiple perspectives in their thinking is more likely to be a stronger problem solver (Govender & Alcock, 2020), and potentially more resilient.

To develop our creativity, it is healthy to "place ourselves in positions that are less familiar to us and be in dialogue with less usual or conventional perspectives" (Glăveanu, 2020: 344). Writing centre praxis is underpinned by dialogical approaches to learning (Moxley & Archer, 2019), giving opportunity for student growth. Creative classroom practices allow for collaborative learning to occur. Despite interacting, as one does in a writing centre consultation, "with the position and perspective…of people who think or live differently than us" (Glăveanu, 2020: 344), which may create discomfort, this is vital for the growth of creativity, criticality, and the building of resilience in the culture of a UoT community.

Concluding thoughts

Reflections on our creative activities highlight for us the potential of writing centre work as "[i]t is precisely human creative activity that makes the human being a creature oriented toward the future" where "creative activity is an important component of absolutely all aspects of cultural life" (Vygotsky, 2004: 9–10). Change will come about when we step out of our silos and work in ways that facilitate a social ecology that enables resilience and is one in which students' voice, needs, and

experiences are taken into account. This research invites us to explore further how the academic UoT environment can be reshaped by the interconnectivity of dialogic and reflexive pedagogies and creative and collaborative engagements.

The CHAT concepts of mediating artefacts, psychological tools, signs and symbols, along with the institutional division of labour, rules, and the community of our UoT environment, enabled us to explore how our pedagogical encounters may contribute to and be reshaped by the ever-evolving educational environment in our UoT. Perhaps our reflections may shift the ways we interrelate as an L&T community.

It is our hope that this reflection might be helpful in inviting discussion of how writing is a valuable aspect of L&T in all forms of higher education. We acknowledge, as writing centre practitioners in a UoT environment, our potential contribution in cultivating creativity. We use this reflection as a necessary tool to develop in ourselves, and possibly by extension our tutors and students, the awareness of how writing can be used to foster criticality as we face the complexity of life in the 21st century.

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