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Providing 'auxiliary' academic writing support to postgraduate students: a socio-cultural approach

Abstract

TThis paper describes and justifies the conceptualisation and adoption of a socio-cultural approach to academic writing support which was part of the inception of a broader orientation programme in a newly established Centre for Postgraduate Studies at a research-intensive South African university. The role of writing support is considered in relation to the increasing pressure being placed on academic writing in higher education, in light of growing demands to increase postgraduate student outputs. The paper argues for the use of an 'academic literacies' approach for the initial conceptualisation of a writing support programme that accommodated both discipline knowledge as well as the linguistic experiences of the students. The paper provides conceptual insights which may contribute to the literature on this topic in South Africa and stimulate further debate.

Key words: Academic literacies, academic writing support, postgraduate, socio-cultural, South Africa, best practice.

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1. Introduction

Higher education, both in South Africa and internationally, has and continues to experience many changes, with stakes being raised and increasing demands being made by stakeholders. Research on higher education, particularly literacy, details the increasing pressure on universities to accommodate a wider range (both linguistically and culturally) of students; a change seen as a consequence of a massification of higher education internationally (see, for example: Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Daniels & Richards, 2011; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011; Thesen, 2013). These international trends are also being experienced in the South African context, with the government's National Planning Commission releasing a set of ambitious "quantifiable targets for 2030" (National Planning Commission, 2011: 267-278). In addition, South Africa is in the unique contextual position of needing to address an equity problem as a result of our undemocratic past. The widening of access to higher education to people of all races and linguistic backgrounds is now a reality in practice, but ideologically and epistemologically, it remains a contentious issue (Jacobs, 2013; Morrow 2009). There is thus additional pressure and need to support students to ensure that real access is made a reality for all – a common goal for all those working in academic literacy and academic development-type centres and units in South African higher education institutions (see, for example: Archer, 2007; Archer & Richards, 2011; Boughey 2005; Boughey & Niven, 2012; Jacobs 2013).

At the heart of the issue of student outputs is academic literacy, and writing in particular. As such, research on academic writing and support pedagogies is a developing trend in higher education research. In her paper "Risk in Academic Writing", Thesen (2013: 104) explains, "there is no research without a written, recognisable product that can travel beyond the laboratory or research site and translate insight into knowledge that makes a difference". Indeed the collection of papers in "Changing spaces: Writing centres and access to higher education", edited by Archer and Richards (2011), details how writing is key for expressing ways of knowing and understanding. This attention to language and knowledge is not new in higher education research; however, Aitchison and Lee (2006) comment how the link is becoming increasingly prevalent in research on student writing and academic achievement in higher education. Significantly, literature adopting this issue as their object of inquiry is widely dispersed geographically, suggesting that the 'problem' of academic writing is not special to South Africa alone, nor can it be considered to be simply a problem of language. This supports Boughey's (2002) argument that development of students' academic literacy practices in the South African context should no longer be conceptualised as being restricted to English language interventions (often aimed at supposedly 'under-prepared' black students), but that rather it is a necessity that transcends boundaries of race, culture and linguistic group. This is further supported in South African and international literature, as seen in the papers by Archer (2007), Wingate and Tribble (2012), Larcombe, McCosker and O'Loughlin (2007) and Lea and Street (2006). In light of these changing pressures, this paper addresses the question: How can a socio-cultural approach to academic writing inform the design of an auxiliary writing support programme for postgraduate students?

This paper provides insights into a support programme launched at a research-intensive South African university, with the aim of providing auxiliary support to postgraduate students outside of, and complementary to, the traditional supervision structure as well as a language/writing centre model. While recognising the contribution made by these approaches it is beyond the scope of this present article, given that our objective was to provide auxiliary writing support that strengthens and enhances the existing supervision model. Furthermore, funding constraints did not allow for the creation of a writing centre model, as used at other universities in South Africa, at this stage. Rather, drawing on an 'academic literacies' approach to writing support, as contended by Lea and Street (2000), and as agued for in the South African context by Jacobs (2013), the paper describes work that was done during the inception phase of the Centre for Postgraduate Studies. It describes two activities that were used to implement the adopted approach.

2. The adoption of a socio-cultural orientation to academic literacy

Understandings of literacy, particularly academic literacy in a higher education context, have experienced substantial shifts in recent years, with a more social understanding being advocated. Following Boughey (2002), who draws on Gee's (1990) definitions of 'discourse' and 'literacy', we[1] agree that academic literacy work is essentially about using language to reflect the values and attitudes about what can count as knowledge in any given context. Working from this understanding as well as drawing on literature advocating for a more socio-cultural understanding of literacy (see, for example: Archer, 2000; Archer & Richards, 2011; Boughey, 2002, 2013; Gee, 1996; Jacobs, 2013; Lea & Street, 2000; Thesen, 2013), we understand 'literacy' to include multiple different forms of literacy practices (beyond just reading and writing). As such, we aimed to take into account the social aspect of language in the design of our writing support programme.

Social and cultural contexts are important, as, according to Gee (2010: 167), when students learn literacy practices they are in fact participating in "the distinctive social and cultural practices of different social and cultural groups". Put differently, when students learn the literacy practices legitimised in a university context, they are in fact learning ways of being, doing and knowing, which impact on their social identity. Developing academic literacy therefore, transcends simple language, and is more deeply embedded at the social level. Given the associated personal transformation that occurs, students' own experiences and literacy practices will come into play in how they learn and perceive academic practices. Due to the diversity of students in any given higher education context, support programmes need to be acutely aware that the academic practices expected of students are more often than not unknown, foreign, and often in contestation to their own literacy practices. Being mindful of this, as well as the language-specific concerns of students, was a necessary consideration in our programme.

The work undertaken and reflected on in this paper was developed within a socio-cultural conceptualisation of academic literacy, closely aligned to the theoretical positioning advocated by New Literacy Studies (NLS). According to one of the definers of the movement, Street (1984), the key thesis of this movement is the conceptualisation of literacy as a social practice, not as a set of skills one needs to acquire. By foregrounding the social within this understanding, literacy is no longer limited to the singular, but is rather conceptualised in its plural form, to take into account the existence of multiple literacies, which vary according to time and space and are "contested in relations of power" (Street, 2003: 77).

A significant development in this school of thinking was the understanding of literacy to be ideological in nature. This move, according to Gee (2010), was in reaction to more traditional cognitive psychology approaches to literacy that saw literacy as a cognitive phenomenon – a mental processing activity. In contrast, Street (1984) distinguishes between two models of literacy: 'autonomous' and 'ideological'. Within the autonomous model of literacy, literacy is considered to be a set of "cognitive, technical and neutral skills" (Street, 2003: 77). The ideological model, in contrast, views literacy as a social practice, and as such, offers a more nuanced view of different literacy practices within different contexts. Pointedly, the ideological model conceptualises literacy practices as inextricably "embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles"; that is, "the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being" (Street, 2003: 77). According to Lea and Street (2006), the autonomous model of literacy came to inform the so-called 'deficit model' of literacy pedagogies. This model has traditionally informed the once-off grammar 'fix it' approach, whereby writing problems are attended to outside of the discipline through generic language courses. This approach has been criticised in literature on academic writing (see, for example, Jacobs, 2013; Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011; Lea & Street 2000), with the ideological model being foregrounded. This model is claimed to have informed support programmes (or at least the conceptualisation of programmes) that aim to move beyond a 'quick fix' approach, adopting a more social-practice orientation. The work undertaken in this paper sought to adopt this social practice approach.

3. How we conceptualised language within the socio-cultural orientation to literacy

Prior to the development of our writing programme, we first needed to consider how we were conceptualising language within the socio-cultural approach to academic writing. The work of Christie (1985, 1990) played a pivotal role in how we sought to align ourselves theoretically, particularly in the adoption of her understanding of language as a 'resource'.

Christie (1990: 8) reports on a tradition in past research on literacy whereby language is considered a "neutral commodity which, once learned, simply becomes a kind of carrier… by means of which various forms of content or information are 'conveyed'". In

this line of thinking, language is considered to be independent from the modes through which it is expressed, and, problematically, from the knowledge it expresses. Language, then, is seen to merely 'clothe' (Christie, 1990: 8) the knowledge being produced and act as a 'vehicle' (Christie, 1985: 298) for its expression. Due to this, Christie (1990: 8) contends that the problematic dichotomies between 'form and content', 'form and function' or 'process and product', come to exist in language education and research. Instead of focusing on the meaning-making potential of language, these dichotomies cause educators to focus on the surface features of language, such as syntax, grammar and spelling (and hence the adoption of a 'deficit model' in support programmes). This focus has been identified as informing many South African programmes and is critiqued by Boughey (2002). In her view, when this position to language is adopted, 'problem' students are seen to have *language* 'problems', which are often attributed to their status as second language speakers of English. As such, she argues that students' inability to "manipulate the forms of the additional language in a way that will allow them to receive and pass on the thoughts developed in the disciplines" – a linguistic issue – is foregrounded. Instead, she offers an alternative understanding that is more closely connected to issues of knowledge building: that it is more likely an issue of students' "lack of familiarity with using language to construct thought in new and unfamiliar ways" (Boughey, 2002: 302). This misconception, Boughey (2013) and Jacobs (2013) argue, can be attributed to literacy work (particularly in South Africa) often being un-, or under-theorised, which results in common-sense assumptions about language and literacy being posited. These understandings are argued to persist in the South African higher education context today, and this aspect was something we strove to overcome in our programme.

In contrast to language as a 'vehicle', Christie (1990) advocates that language be conceptualised as a "resource" (Christie, 1985: 299). Similar to a NLS's positioning, language is then considered to be a social practice, and significantly, one which is never neutral, as it is "centrally involved in the ways in which information, thought, feeling, attitude, are established" (Christie, 1990: 9). In line with this understanding of language, Christie (1990) argues that one is able to make explicit the links between language and knowledge creation. This linkage illustrates the dialogical relationship between the two literacy practices, and is especially pertinent to writing practices in higher education. This theoretical alignment has been advocated by a number of scholars (see, for example, Boughey, 2002, 2013; Jacobs, 2013; Thesen, 2013) in the South African context and was the position we aimed to adopt in the development of our writing programme. Through the work done with students, we aimed to make explicit to students "the way language is used to structure experience within the university" (Boughey, 2002: 299).

4. Alignment with an 'academic literacies' model of writing

Given the criticism of the deficit model approach to academic writing support, we sought to gain more insight into why this approach is critiqued in literature, both in South Africa (Boughey 2002) and internationally (Lillis & Scott, 2007). In order to do so, we closely

considered the work of Lea and Street (2006) in their outline of the three main models that Jacobs (2013) argues has come to inform the teaching of academic literacy in higher education contexts. In light of this understanding, we aimed to adopt an integrated approach in our own work; one that draws on key features from all of the three models, as stipulated by Lea and Street (2006).

Building on NLS, Lea and Street (2006: 368) offer three models of literacy: the ‘study skills model’, the ‘academic socialisation model’, and the ‘academic literacies model’. These scholars describe how previous understandings of literacy and educational research have focused on the dominant deficit model, or ‘study skills model’; essentially on how one can ‘teach’ students the surface features of language form, which can then be transferred to any given context. Subsequently, literacy practices (and the conventions governing such), such as academic writing, are most often assumed as ‘common-sense’, and are not often, if ever, made explicit to learners. Indeed Jacobs (2013) argues that this model was traditionally dominant in the South African context, and still persists today, despite changing notions of literacy. It is considered problematic as it treats literacy as a cognitive skill devoid of contextual influences and implications and focuses only on the forms of surface-level textual components of writing.

The ‘academic socialisation model’, in contrast, is argued to adopt a student orientation to learning and is concerned with acculturating scholars into the discourse of the subject and the different necessary genres (Lea & Street 2000, 2006). According to Jacobs (2013), this is the model most drawn on in South Africa at present. Despite transcending issues associated with the ‘study skills model’, the ‘academic socialisation model’ is too, criticised for treating disciplines and institutions as homogeneous, and treating writing as a neutral and transparent vehicle for thought (echoing concerns raised by Christie, 1990), which can be unproblematically transferred between contexts. In so doing, Lea and Street (2000: 35) contend that it “fails to address the deep language, literacy and discourse issues involved in the institutional production and representation of meaning”.

Lea and Street (2000) argue for the (supposedly) advantageous ‘academic literacies model’: one which is closely aligned with NLS, and, rather than treating literacy at the level of skill or socialisation, it addresses it at the level of epistemology, with a move to privilege *practice* over *text* (Lillis & Scott, 2007). According to Lea and Street (2006: 369) it is concerned with “meaning making, identity, power and authority”. In addition, this model is claimed to not limit literacy practices and demands of practice to that of the discipline and institution, but also incorporates how other forms of literacy outside the institution impact on what is required of the student to learn (Lea & Street, 2000: 370). By advocating for a shift in focus from *text* to *practice*, the academic literacies model is argued to be able to offer a “transformative”, as opposed to a “normative”, approach to writing practices (Lillis & Scott, 2007: 12). This theoretical position allows for student writing ‘problems’ to be contextualised and problematized within a socio-cultural perspective – incorporating considerations how language and writing act to legitimise what can or can’t count as knowledge in the university context – thus incorporating the many relevant issues beyond the traditional “identify and induct” approach offered by normative approaches (Lillis & Scott, 2007: 14).

Despite the supposed advantages of the academic literacies model, Baynham (2000), among others, have critiqued the model for losing the textual focus of writing completely. What is essential to highlight, however, is that the three models of literacy, as described by Lea and Street (2006), are not intended to be mutually exclusive, but are rather conceptualised as overlapping and fluid. For instance, working within an 'academic literacies' model, the authors argue that textual features can be related back to deeper epistemological issues of the discipline, in order make explicit to students how claims to knowledge are made (Lea & Street, 2006).

In light of this, we sought to align ourselves with the richness offered by the academic literacies model (particularly the epistemological issues of the discipline), whilst at the same time making provision for features offered by academic socialisation model and the study skills model (which retain some of the textual focus). The aim was that this would enable issues of linguistic diversity and the associated complexity this brings to writing support, particularly in a South African context, to be appropriately addressed. Jacobs (2013) argues that this approach has not yet been fully implemented in a South African context. In response to this, this paper describes how we worked towards opening spaces in line with this approach.

5. An 'academic literacies' approach: design decisions and practical considerations

Building on Baynham's (2000) critique, a secondary issue raised by Wingate and Tribble (2012) concerns the ability of the socio-cultural orientation to offer a realistic writing pedagogy, especially for postgraduate students. Despite this, other scholars such as Jacobs (2013) writing in the South African context, encourages the field of academic literacy to embrace the rich insight the model offers in working towards improved writing support initiatives in the future.

In our writing programme, we aimed to work towards providing a platform whereby students could be exposed to the academic literacy conventions and rules needed in order to 'play the academic game'. We wanted to emphasise writing as a social practice, and one that is central to the research process, not as something outside of, or in addition to, broader research practices. We also aimed to open up spaces where different disciplinary conventions could be revealed, debated and challenged. One starting point for conceptualising such an approach was to draw on practical examples in literature where these concerns were being embraced. Peer learning and generative writing techniques are two such examples and are further elaborated on in the next section.

5.1 Peer learning

Literature on learning in higher education is showing an increasing interest in the role of students learning from their peers (see, for example, Akhurst & Kelly, 2006; Boud & Lee,

2005; Dowse & van Rensburg, 2015). The use of this form of learning is being drawn on in different areas of higher education and in different disciplines – for example, for supervision practices within psychology (Akhurst & Kelly, 2006) and for academic writing support within the fields of academic literacy and education (Aitchison, 2009 and Dowse & van Rensburg, 2015).

In their paper arguing for peer learning to be conceptualised as a pedagogic discourse, Boud and Lee (2005: 502) call for pedagogy to be "reconceptualised as significantly 'distributed' and 'horizontalised', with an associated dispersal of responsibilities and of agency". In so doing, they advocate for a view of pedagogy that incorporates and engages with the wider research context, taking into account not only the hierarchical (and often privileged) teaching-learning relationship provided by teachers and supervisors, but rather a holistic account of a wider distribution of more horizontal (in terms of power relations) learning opportunities with peers. The so-called 'horizontalising' of learning potential that peer learning creates (as argued by Boud and Lee) opens up space for other kinds of learning potential; at a postgraduate level, this would be outside of the traditional supervisory relationship. The opening up of this learning potential made this approach attractive to us; however, when considering how it could be used in our writing programme we did not, at any stage, conceptualise this to be in competition with, or to in any way replace, the role of the supervisor within postgraduate studies.

Our interest in peer learning opportunities arose out of the contended implications of such approaches, as outlined in the literature. For instance, Dowse and van Rensburg (2015) comment how through their use of peer learning with tutors for research proposal writing they were able to embed the notion of writing as a social practice. To this end, the approach created a sense of community for the students, which provided them with opportunities for conversations about their work; it allowed for collaboration and scaffolding of ideas; and it developed their confidence alongside language skills (Dowse & van Rensburg, 2015: 9). The authors also contend that being able to 'learn by doing' was beneficial for the students, particularly as a result of peer review.

The practice of peer review is an important component of peer learning, and is significant when considering student writing. Curry and Hewings (2003) comment how students are often compelled to rely solely on supervisor feedback, without necessarily agreeing with it or understanding it, due to this being the primary source of writing support. Croker and Trede (2009: 231) elaborate on how peer review practices can overcome this supposed obstacle by diversifying writing support outside of the supervisory relationship, as the aim is to "develop writing *abilities* rather than being concerned solely with the *products of writing*" (emphasis added). Reinforcing 'best practice' feedback techniques in a peer review scenario can be beneficial not only for the recipient of the feedback, but for the provider of feedback as well. By learning to engage in what Lillis and Swann (2003) call 'feedback dialogues' – flagging not only *what* needs revision, but also *why* it should be revised and *how* it can be revised – reviewers become more conscientious of their own writing style. Furthermore, Dowse and van Rensburg (2015) suggest that peer review allows for additional opportunities for students to talk about and defend their research, which helps clarify and develop their thinking.

Many lessons can be learned from engaging with the ideas of peer learning, peer review and 'good practice' features of feedback. Academic writing support programmes have begun to adopt many of these features. The role of the peer is particularly pertinent in the development of writing groups, which are growing in popularity, particularly in Australia (Aitchison, 2009; Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Larcombe et al, 2007; Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011) and more recently in South Africa (Chihota, 2008; Chihota & Thesen, 2014; Thesen, 2013; Wilmot, forthcoming). This form of learning was embraced in the conceptualisation of the writing programme discussed in this paper, as discussed in section 6.1. It has also subsequently informed the development of a writing group pilot programme (Wilmot, forthcoming).

5.2 Generative writing strategies

In her seminal work entitled "Writing as a Mode of Learning", Emig (1977) initiated a renewed interest in the role writing plays in learning. Aligning her argument with that of Vygotsky, Luria and Bruner, she contended that "higher cognitive functions, such as analysis and synthesis, seem to develop most fully only with the support of verbal language – particularly, it seems of written language" (Emig, 1977: 122). Writing was thus argued to be a process-driven tool of analysis and synthesis for meaning making. The conceptualisation of writing as a process to create meaning and to learn has informed what has come to be commonly known as 'generative writing' techniques and strategies.

Freewriting is one such generative writing strategy. Elbow (2000) defines free writing as a private writing exercise in which you write non-stop for a short period of time (no longer than ten minutes), during which you empty your thoughts onto paper (or computer) without stopping to think about grammar, punctuation, or how 'good' the writing is. Elbow (2000) contends that once freewriting becomes comfortable, it can benefit a writer in numerous ways, including: providing an easy, non-threatening entry point into writing; improving thinking; developing a sense of presence and voice in writing; and making writing common-practice. Furthermore, Smith and Coyle (2009) contend that writing nonstop allows space and flexibility for multiple ideas to be considered, resulting in a richness of thinking. In a similar vein, Elbow (2000: 88) further argues that freewriting can "help us *experience* ourselves as writers in certain deeply transformative ways". This is a significant finding when considering student writing, given the anxiety often expressed in entering into a different (academic) discourse. It is for these reasons that freewriting has come to be seen as a 'good practice' writing technique.

Following from the initial freewriting stage is 'drafting'; another form of process writing which is considered to be 'good practice' (Boughey, 2014). Linked to both freewriting and peer review, the drafting stage provides a space for a writer to expand on ideas. Curry and Hewings (2003) contend that during the drafting stage students are able to engage with various forms of feedback (peer or supervisor) in the development of writing. The iterative nature of this stage is important as it allows for opportunities to work with different ideas, develop them through writing, engage with feedback, and redraft. Mind-maps and diagrams are also argued to be useful in the drafting stage of writing, for organising thoughts and developing the structure of the written work (Curry & Hewings, 2003; Boughey, 2014).

Generative writing strategies played a central role in the development of the writing programme reported on in this paper. Like Dowse and van Rensburg (2015), we too, value opportunities for students to 'learn by doing', rather than being spoken 'at' during workshops and other initiatives. For this reason, a large proportion of time was spent cultivating these skills and practicing them throughout the programme.

6. Two examples of situated postgraduate writing pedagogies

Peer learning and generative writing techniques played a significant role in both the conceptualising and initial implementation of our writing support programme. This section outlines and discusses two examples of practices adopted in the programme: writing groups and writing workshops.

6.1 Writing Groups

Writing groups (alias 'writing circles') are "inspiring and creative places where people talk, write and learn together because they are being nurtured, empowered and stimulated" (Aitchison, 2009: 261). While they are not a new phenomenon, the valuable role that they can play in supporting postgraduate students in higher education is increasingly being documented. This discussion draws on Aitchison and Lee's (2006) outline of the four pedagogical principles of writing groups (community, identity, peer review and 'normal business'), together with Aitchison's (2009) notion of the four key learning potentials associated with writing groups (learning about research writing; learning about ideas; learning about feedback; and learning to love writing). These are related to key arguments for peer learning more generally.

Aitchison and Lee (2006) argue that when writing is conceptualised beyond a language deficit model, broader socio-cultural issues can be incorporated and addressed. This is particularly prevalent among postgraduate students who, through research writing, are transitioning between, and grappling with, different identities as their group membership into academia begins to develop. Within this understanding, writing groups are closely aligned with an 'academic literacies' orientation to writing practices (Aitchison, 2009: 255), and were thus particularly interesting when conceptualising our programme.

According to Aitchison (2009), writing groups enable students to learn about research writing in that they expose students to different approaches to research writing and design, and crucially, how to take up a position within that frame. In so doing so, students are exposed to, and can engage with, different disciplinary perspectives and approaches to knowledge building, as enacted through writing. The interaction afforded by the group dynamic is also argued to allow opportunities to talk to peers about ideas and learn from each other. The facilitator of the group (a language not discipline expert) is crucial for creating a "low stakes" environment. This space thus becomes a place where students can express ideas freely due to it being "untied from evaluation" (Aitchison, 2009: 259), unlike a more formal supervision environment. The development of ideas through peer groups

is supported by the findings of Dowse and van Rensburg (2015), who comment how their students learned to collaborate on, and scaffold ideas in their peer group. According to Aitchison and Lee (2006), the on-going nature of the writing groups enables writing to be conceptualised as 'normal business', as an everyday operation of the institution. This, they argue, emphasises writing as an everyday, situated, social practice – reinforcing one of the main tenants of an academic literacies approach to writing.

Grappling with conflicts in identity in academic writing is a common trend in postgraduate research (see, for example, Larcombe et al, 2007; Chihota, 2008; Chihota & Thesen, 2014; Aitchison & Lee, 2006). Through the constructive yet supportive peer group, students are argued to be given opportunities to be exposed to various identity positions and can "rehearse" (Chihota & Thesen, 2014: 131) particular positions whilst learning about others from their peers. This peer dynamic, according to Larcombe, McCosker and O'Loughlin (2007), lessons the feelings of isolation and provides a space for students to develop their confidence in expressing a sense of self through their writing.

As previously outlined, peer review plays an important role in any peer learning space. Writing groups are argued to enable multiple opportunities for students to learn about giving and receiving feedback, and, when managed effectively by the group facilitator, to offer a 'horizontalised' learning dynamic (as contended by Boud & Lee, 2005). Chihota and Thesen (2013) contend that this learning opportunity opens up additional space outside of the formal supervision model for students to develop their writing abilities. The 'low stakes' environment as well as the trust gained from the on-going nature of writing groups is argued to make this sharing and receiving of feedback less daunting than in other academic spaces. The practice of peer review in writing groups is not only argued to be beneficial for students due to the advice they gain, but it is also seen to provide opportunities for students to really engage with the advice through on-going redrafting that the group structure allows (Croker & Trede, 2009). This iterative redrafting process is seen to complement the traditional supervision model, as it gives students time (and space) to produce more well-developed pieces of writing that they can then take to their supervisions.

Despite working within a more socio-cultural orientation, writing groups are also seen to be able to address the textual component of the research writing process. The facilitator of the writing group can provide key support in this area through exercises and feedback. Discussion between peers on various textual aspects can too, be taken up and developed in this space.

Apart from the academic benefits, as described above, writing groups can also provide a space where students can form a sense of community, in which they can learn to love writing. Literature shows that as peers develop supportive relationships they learn to work together to create coping strategies for common academic pressures while at the same time building each other's confidence (see, for example Aitchison, 2009; Chihota & Thesen, 2014; Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011). This emotional engagement is often cited as one of the most valued attributes of writing groups in literature (see, for example, Aitchison, 2009; Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011; Chihota & Thesen, 2014).

Writing groups, used extensively in Australia, have been in operation at the University of Cape Town for the last decade (see Chihota & Thesen, 2014) and have played a key part in the conceptualisation and initial implementation of the programme reported on in this paper. In this context, two different types of groups are being trialled (a long-term multidisciplinary group of Master's and doctoral students, and a short-term 'intensive' group comprising of Master's and doctoral candidates from the commerce faculty). Further insights into the development, implementation and evaluation of these groups can be found in Wilmot (forthcoming). Continual evaluation and research into this approach will continue to inform future development of this specific form of writing support at the university in question.

6.2 Writing workshops

Writing workshops remain a popular means of support because they are practical, focused and can benefit a large number of students at once, making it a more sustainable method than that of one-on-one consultations, among others. For this reason they have been used extensively across higher institutions internationally (Allison et al, 1998; Lea & Street, 2006).

Postgraduate writing workshops have been a popular form of support at the university where the reported programme is situated. Previously designed and run by the Dean of Teaching and Learning, and offered on a more informal and ad hoc basis, the workshops have always sought a social practice approach. The work done previously actively strove to avoid them being regarded within a deficit model to literacy; essentially as once-off, 'fix-it', grammar-based workshops where students can be sent by their supervisors to have their writing problems 'solved'. Rather, working within an academic literacies model, the focus of the workshops was traditionally in practice, and indeed in our conceptualisation for the current programme, to be on meaning-making and knowledge building; emphasising how ideas are developed through writing. The aim of the workshops was thus conceptualised to provide an interactive space where the ideological aspects of academic writing could be demystified, debated, and made accessible to students. Due to the solid foundational work by the Dean in question, many of the resources outlined in Table 1 are credited to her.

Table 1 illustrates the workshop themes and activities used that we believe encapsulate a socio-cultural orientation to literacy. Each theme covered has parallel activities that are completed by the students in the workshop, in order to work within the 'learn by doing' practice-based approach. On-going feedback from a number of writing support pilot programmes strongly indicates the need to do practice-orientated activities during workshops to ensure that the theoretical instruction is made practically accessible to students. This not only makes the learning experience more concrete for students, but it also highlights when students are experiencing difficulties or when they have disengaged.

Table 1: *Workshop themes and activities*

Theme	Justification
Generative writing	Learning to write for yourself, as a process to discover meaning. Free writing activities are used to demonstrate this writing process.
Critical reading and writing	Learning what it means to think, read and write critically. This key aspect is what distinguishes the academic genre apart from other writing genres. Without an understanding of this more macro genre level, students will not be able to engage with their research in the necessary rigorous manner needed to succeed in postgraduate studies. Activities including reading journals, reading maps and concept banks are given to students in workshops.
Learning about writing for others	This essential part of academic writing is explained to students so that they understand why it is important and how they can develop this. Activities that require students to engage with the idea of 'imaginary conversations' (Boughey, 2014) with potential readers in their writing is particularly useful for this feature of academic writing.
Conceptualising writing to be a three-stage, iterative process	Unpacking the writing process to foreground the value of writing for oneself (in a meaning-making process), then moving on to writing for another in cultivating a voice and making a contribution (drafting and redrafting) and only moving on to editing at the end of the process. An extended free-writing activity that addresses this 3-stage writing process is given in workshops.
Building new knowledge through creating arguments	Explaining to students why academic writing is all about making arguments, based on claims, which are substantiated with evidence. If a student does not understand this process and the reasoning behind it, they will not be able to do it in their own writing. A range of activities on identifying arguments in writing and the claim/evidence structure are done during workshops. Instruction and activities focused on using academic hedging techniques to substantiate/limit claims are given.

Theme	Justification
Cultivating voice/being authoritative	Unpacking what this actually means to students – why is it important and how you might go about it. Explanation about being a member of an academic community and taking up a position within that community of students is offered, together with examples of how this might be done. A 'voice-map' activity is given to students to help identify their voice among others
Defending your approach	This is explained to students in terms of their understanding of their own position, how it relates to other positions, and why they have adopted it. This is a crucial aspect of academic writing and falls under critical scrutiny in the examination process. If they student does not understand that they have to be able to (a) take up a position, and (b) be able to justify and defend that choice in relation to their academic community, they will not be able to produce a strong piece of research. A peer review activity based on a draft text can illuminate this point clearly.
The golden thread	Unpacking this concept for students to engage with, to understand the importance of writing coherently and logically in the academic genre. By explaining the difference between 'thesis as an argument' and 'using argument in the thesis', students can begin to see how the 'golden thread' (thesis argument) can be weaved throughout the dissertation, acting as a road map for coherent writing. Linguistic resources (for example, transitional words) are described and activities using such features are offered. A range of different activities requiring students to identify and explain the role of the golden thread is given. Activities on identifying and using transitional words and phrases are given.
Technical polishing	Explaining the importance of this, but how it should be the very final aspect of the writing process. Ideas are given about how self-editing can be undertaken and the role of using a 'critical friend' (peer review) is elaborated on.

One of the perceived limitations of the workshop approach to writing support has focused on the issue of providing only generic instruction to students. The programme being developed at the university in question is attempting to overcome such limitations through working collaboratively with academics in different disciplines and subject departments. A broader aim of the centre where this writing programme is housed is to eventually build capacity among academic staff themselves, so that ownership of, and

agency for, postgraduate writing support can, in time, be developed and enacted within the departments themselves, with guidance and support from the centre.

7. Looking ahead: where to from here?

This paper has described and justified the adoption of a socio-cultural orientation to academic literacy, and it has provided insight into two practical approaches for support that embrace this orientation. Working within this theoretical lens, the paper has described how an auxiliary academic writing support programme was conceptualised within an 'academic literacies' model at a South African university. The insights we have provided may contribute to the literature on this topic in South Africa, stimulate debate, and inform on-going academic literacy development.

The adoption of a socio-cultural orientation foregrounds writing as a social practice, embedded within a social context, which is always contested. This theoretical viewpoint also seeks to emphasise the need to conceptualise writing development as a practice-based pedagogy, not as a surface-level textual problem that can be 'fixed' through a once-off language workshop. To what extent we have managed to achieve an 'academic literacies' model however, is still up for debate, particularly as our programme is only in its infancy. While this was the intended aim, it is acknowledged to have been an ambitious one. What is argued, however, is that the conceptual work, reported on in this paper, has set a foundation for further development of this programme within the 'academic literacies' model. It is our hope that in time further opportunities for disciplinary epistemological issues, as well as the ideologies surrounding academic writing, can be opened up for postgraduate students. This is necessary not only so that the academic 'rules of the game' can be made explicit, but also so that students can begin to interrogate and challenge such conventions.

Notes

1. While the paper is single-authored, the work reflected was developed for the Centre for Postgraduate Studies. As such, 'we' is used to reflect the shared thinking of those working within, and affiliated with, this Centre.

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