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Theoretical grounding of writing centre practices: a foundation for tutor training

Abstract

A variety of factors influence the strategies and practices of writing teachers and tutors, such as beliefs about writing and how writing can be learned; following mandates by educational authorities; uncritical adherence to the latest, most fashionable practice; and poor support of writing facilitators in the contexts in which they are employed. These factors increase the need for creating among facilitators of writing an awareness of the different theoretical approaches and traditions of writing and learning to write in applied linguistics and education, as well as the pedagogic practices in writing centres that are associated with them. This paper takes as its point of departure the three main educational theories underpinning writing centre work: The Current-traditional paradigm, Expressivism and Socio-constructionism. However, we argue that theories used to characterise and justify writing centre work need to be adapted to suit specific

historical and local contexts. In particular, we propose that writing in South Africa should acknowledge the need to identify theoretical and analytical lenses that are appropriate to their specific institutional contexts. The discussion of the main theories and pertinent sub-theories is followed by a tabulated summary of each theory, underlying beliefs, associated writing centre models, tutor roles that align with each approach, and the associated tutoring strategies. The article is concluded by outlining a broad framework to underpin tutor training, which draws on powerful theories that originated in the global North as well as theories that are particularly relevant to the global South and speak to its complexities.

Keywords: tutor roles, tutor training, writing centre models, writing centre theory, writing centre pedagogy, writing centre practices

Introduction

A variety of factors influence the strategies and practices of writing teachers and tutors. These include beliefs about writing and how writing can be learned (Hyland, 2003: 1-2; Ivanič, 2004: 220; McCarthy Woodard & Kang, 2014: 59-62); following mandates by educational authorities (Smagorinsky, Lakly & Johnson, 2002); poor support of writing facilitators in the contexts in which they are employed (Clarence, 2016: 39); and 'drift[ing] along uncritically' with the latest, most fashionable practices (Weideman, 2007: 32). Fifteen years ago the applied linguist Roz Ivanič (2004: 242) called for creating an awareness of the different theoretical approaches and traditions of writing and learning to write, as well as the pedagogic practices that are associated with them in order to assist teachers and tutors to justify their own practices, combine elements from different theoretical frameworks in a considered eclectic way, or radically change their practices.

Similar to applied linguists, writing centre directors and practitioners have called for a theory-supported pedagogy in writing laboratories and centres. This call should be contextualised against the backdrop of an increasing emphasis by writing centre scholars to 'further legitimizing the discipline and moving past the 'lore' that has long shaped our identity' (Denny, 2014: 2-3). In the mid 1990s Clark and Healy (1996) called on writing centre practitioners to 'acknowledge the theoretical, pedagogical, and political facts of life'. Grimm (2009: 16) too acknowledged the need for a theoretical model of writing centre practices that challenges or 'profoundly alter[s] assumptions about students, about language, and about literacy learning that were prevalent in earlier versions, and [that] signal awareness of twenty-first century linguistic and cultural realities'. More recently, Nordlof (2014: 46) argued for the importance of developing a theoretical perspective on writing centre work as an important asset in itself and a complement to a research agenda. Slemming (2017: 21, 25, 30) states unequivocally that writing centre research has been under-theorised. She finds support in general claims about academic development in South African higher education by scholars such as Boughey (2010) and Quinn (2012). In Slemming's opinion, this gap could be closed by drawing on basic education theories, which can offer additional theoretical lenses to be considered in tutor training programmes.

This article aims to engage with the debate on theorising writing centre work by providing an overview of educational and linguistic theories that both underpin writing centre work and may inform writing centre research. It is believed that knowledge of empirically tested models and approaches to teaching writing may increase the tutor's flexibility in applying the most useful conferencing models (Blau, Hall & Strauss, 1998: 38). Although the importance of ongoing evidence-based research in informing writing centre theory and practice is of paramount importance, a first step in the theorising of writing centre practices is to take cognisance of existing theories that may serve as reference points. We use Appleby-Ostroff's (2017) 'three main theories underpinning writing centre work' as our point of departure: The Current-traditional paradigm, Expressivism and Socio-constructionism. However, we agree with Leibowitz, Goodman, Hannon, and Parkerson (1997: 10), that theories used to characterise and justify writing centre work need to be adapted to suit specific historical and local contexts, and we support the view of Vorster

and Quinn (2017: 32) that academic development staff (which include writing tutors) have to acknowledge the need to identify theoretical and analytical lenses outside the global North (Europe and North America). '[I]t is time for us to seek new theoretical and analytical lenses and to develop our own theories appropriate for the global South' [Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean] (Ibid.). The discussion of the three main theories underpinning writing centre work is followed by a tabulated summary of each theory, its underlying beliefs, the associated writing centre model, tutor roles that align with the approach, and the strategies most commonly associated with it. The article is concluded by outlining a broad framework to underpin tutor training, which draws on powerful theories that originated in the global North as well as theories that are particularly relevant to the global South and speak to its complexities.

Educational and linguistic theories underpinning writing centre work

The Current-traditional paradigm

The 1950s and 1960s were characterised by what composition theorists in the US call the Current-traditional period, Text-centered period, Product approach (Johns, 2005: 23) and Skills Discourse (Ivanič, 2004). This approach, which is based on the premise that texts are autonomous objects, has its theoretical roots in Structuralism and Behaviourism, and implicitly in Chomsky's Transformational Grammar (Hyland, 2016: 4). In the language classroom it manifested in teaching methods such as the Audiolingual and the Grammar-translation method. Ivanič (2004: 227) draws attention to the underlying belief that writing consists of applying knowledge of aspects of linguistic patterns and rules for sound-symbol relationships and sentence construction. Classroom practice centres upon sentence-level writing, paragraph-level organisation and error avoidance or 'correctness' (Hyland, 2003; Lea & Street, 1998; Ivanič, 2004). A fairly recent example of a product-centred approach is White's (2007) measurement of increases in the use of morphemes, words and clauses in student essays, as indications of language improvement. Although averaging the T-unit length of a text provides some indication of the development of a writer, it can only 'describe a static outcome of the writer's dynamic and complex effort to make meaning' (Brandt, 1986: 93).

The earliest writing centres, from the 1920s to at least the early 1970s, reflected the rule-bound scientific character of the Current-traditional approach. This type of instruction was perceived by the public and university administrations as necessary to acculturate underprepared students admitted to the academy under open admissions programmes (Carino, 2003: 100). They were aptly referred to as 'labs' and 'clinics', with the term 'laboratory' evoking scientific connotations, and 'clinic' evoking medical and psychological associations (Waller, 2002: 3). These laboratories viewed the writing centre as a 'storehouse' of knowledge that is exterior to the knower but can be accessed (Lunsford, 1991) via the tutor who 'hands out' skills and strategies to individual learners.

In these writing laboratories students were afforded the opportunity to first self-correct errors in drafts; and failing that, to have their papers corrected immediately, line by line, by the instructor, thereby 'encouraging the internalisation of discursive norms' (Boquet, 1999: 467). Surface features, also known as 'lower-order concerns', such as grammar and spelling, were emphasised. Students had to master these skills and transfer them to other contexts, focusing on attempts to 'fix' problems with student learning (Lea & Street, 1998: 158). This approach was largely responsible for the 'fix-it shop' label that is still attached to writing centres.

Writing centre approaches steeped in the Current-traditional paradigm emphasised the authority and the remedial role of the lecturer or tutor, for example by acting as 'diagnostician', 'expert', 'rule-giver', 'initiator', and 'evaluator' (Harris 1986, 39), and the passive role of the learner or student (Appleby-Ostroff, 2017: 71).

Expressivist and process approaches

The second major paradigm mentioned by Appleby-Ostroff is the Expressivist or Neo-Romanticist approach. When the Expressivist movement originated during the 1960s, it was characterised by a severe form of political activism, which demanded that writing practices be aimed at 'liberating students from the shackles of a corrupt society' (Berlin, 1988: 485). However, it was a moderate group that became the dominant proponents of the Expressivist movement in composition writing, represented by scholars like Peter Elbow (1973).

Appleby-Ostroff does not distinguish theoretically between Creative Self-expression and Process as variants of Expressivism, whereas applied linguists such as Johns (2005), Hyland (2003; 2016) and Ivanič (2004) make a clear distinction. Creative Self-expression, which derives from literary creativity, is discovery-led and inner-directed, with no context to be specified. Learners are allowed to write at length on their chosen topic, with most of the content coming from their own experience (Ivanič, 2004: 229). The role of the teacher is merely responding to writers' ideas, and not focusing on formal errors and error correction. Process approaches focus on the writer's cognitive and metacognitive processing.

Lunsford (1991) used the 'garret' as a metaphor to characterise the solitary and individual activity associated with expressivist views of the writing centre. During the early period of the Expressivist approach some centres identified themselves as clinics and implemented a psychotherapeutic approach to writing laboratory work (Boquet, 1999: 469), where psychotherapists ask questions in order to draw from their patients the knowledge they already possess (Boquet, 1999: 470). These clinics saw knowledge as residing within the learner; it was the responsibility of the tutor to draw out this knowledge using the so-called ¹Socratic method.

¹ The Greek philosopher, Socrates, became famous for responding to a question with another question. In other words the Socratic Method does not provide the answer; students have to think critically and through a series of questions to discover their own answer (Fox, 2017:13).

The Socratic method goes along with a non-directive approach, where all agency is situated in the tutee. Typical advice emanating from a minimalist, non-directive approach, include prohibitions such as the following: 'Tutors should *not* provide a thesis statement; provide specific details; suggest specific wording; or point out specific errors or correct them' (Ibid).

Expressivist approaches highlight the role of the tutor as listener who is interested in each student as an individual, a person who may have something to say (Harris, 1986: 38). The listening role extends into the role of a 'counsellor'. Harris (1986: 46) cites Taylor (1985: 29), who borrows from the counsellor's world the following conditions for helping relationships: the creation of an atmosphere of acceptance and trust; openness about goals; and reacting to writing in a non-threatening way. Unfortunately, as pointed out by North (1987), this approach offers no clear theoretical principles from which to evaluate 'good writing' or offer advice to assist the student in becoming a good writer.

The Process approach has its origin in the Cognitive Psychology of the late 1970s, with its focus on the interaction between the writer's long-term memory and the task environment (Ivanič, 2004: 231). Like Creative Expressivism, the Process approach to teaching writing emphasizes 'the writer as an independent producer of texts' (Hyland, 2003: 10). Also similar to Creative Expression, the focus is on the individual, but with an added emphasis on the writer's cognitive and metacognitive processes as he/she produces texts (Johns, 2005: 24). Process writing is in essence a problem-solving activity, consisting of pre-writing (planning), writing and post-writing (editing and revising) activities, whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas in order to make meaning (Zamel, 1983: 156). Hyland (2003: 12) adds the importance of feedback and revision in the process of transforming both content and expression. The process of writing and learning to write is therefore both a cognitive and a metacognitive process (Ivanič, 2004: 231), and has been attractive to teachers, as they are able to translate writing into a set of elements which can be taught explicitly and which have an inherent sequence. Since the 1980s the majority of manuals and textbooks about writing have incorporated this approach.

In line with Appleby-Ostroff's lumping together of creative expression and process, writing centre scholars typically also do not make such a distinction. One exception has been found, namely the Roehr *Tutoring Book* (2015), which states that process approaches in writing centres are underpinned by the belief that in the process of writing, planning and revising the student writer will become more fluent in expressing his/her ideas (Roehr, 2015: 13). It is not surprising that the writing centre literature is silent on tutor roles that fit a process approach. In our view, however, it is important that tutors should take cognisance of the advantages of process approaches, and see their role in facilitating this process, especially in cases where a student has a semester- or a year-long engagement with the centre. In order to fill the gap related to highlighting the process of writing development over time, we suggest the metaphor of the writing centre as a 'manufacturing plant'. For each product there is an agreed upon design and a set of specifications, as well as a manufacturing process. The latter may involve mixing ingredients and pouring the mixture into a mould, or assembling parts according to the

design, and exercising quality control to ensure a flawless product. The role of the tutor in a writing centre may be compared to that of a 'quality controller', who reviews the quality of all factors before, during and after the production, and gives feedback on the performance to facilitate improvement, if necessary.

Socio-constructivist approaches

The third approach highlighted by Appleby-Ostroff (2017: 71) is Socio-constructionism (also known as Socio-constructivism), which falls under Hyland's (2016) category of reader-oriented understandings of writing. Socio-constructivism has had a profound influence on all post-process approaches in writing pedagogy. However, approaches underpinned by the theory vary to some extent. In order to cater for some of the differences, Hyland (2016) further subdivides the approach in writing as social construction, writing as social interaction, and writing as power and ideology. Socio-constructivism as social construction and social interaction has been foregrounded by the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, according to whom the process of knowing involves intervention by other people. Therefore meaning making is mediated by community and culture (Bizzell, 1982: 398; Kanselaar, 2002: 1), and is dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981: 343) – the individual engages with many voices and many identities (Lillis, 2003: 198) through questioning, exploring and connecting. Socio-constructivism is often likened to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the notion of scaffolding. The notion of scaffolding became prominent in the work of Bruner (1983: 163), who defined it as a process of creating space for providing access to the learner, and then gradually removing the scaffolding or support as the learner develops the ability to manage the task independently. Vygotsky and Bruner's views of learning suggest that tutors should work on functions that have not yet matured, but are in the process of maturation.

Socio-constructivism as social interaction, in particular, has had a profound influence on writing centre pedagogy. Tutors and student writers are constantly in dialogue toward a negotiated meaning of writing prompts, student writing, instructor feedback, and the readings students respond to in their classes. 'Dialogue' has become known as 'collaboration' in writing centres. The latter has generally been attributed to Kenneth Bruffee, who in turn credits Edwin Mason and his colleagues at the University of London, with democratizing education and eliminating 'socially destructive authoritarian social forms' from education during the Vietnam era (Bruffee, 1984: 636).

Lunsford (1991: 9) used the metaphor of a ² Burkean parlour to describe the collaborative efforts in writing centres that are aimed at helping students not only improve their writing but also view their work in terms of a larger conversation. According to Lunsford (1991: 4), the movement to collaboration involves a shift 'from viewing knowledge and reality as things exterior to or outside of us [...] to viewing knowledge and reality as mediated by or constructed through language in social use, as socially constructed, contextualised'.

2 The metaphor was first introduced by philosopher and rhetorician Kenneth Burke for the 'unending conversation' that is going on at the point in history when we are born (Nordquist 2018).

Collaborative relationships in the writing centre entail that the tutor and the learner are 'peers involved in a give and take, a communal struggle to make meaning ... a very basic set of sharing, one that often extends well and beyond completing a particular academic exercise' (Behm, 1989: 6, cited by Eudice, 2003: 119). Lunsford (1991: 5) lists the following benefits of a collaborative approach in writing: problem-finding and problem-solving; transfer and assimilation (interdisciplinary thinking); sharper, more critical thinking (students have to explain, defend, adapt) as well as deeper understanding of others; and higher achievement in general.

The role of the 'coach' probably best characterises the (inter)actions of the tutor within a collaborative (writing as interaction) approach. The tutor is not the player 'but the person who stands at the sidelines watching and helping-not stepping in to make the field goal or sink the putt when the player is in trouble' (Harris, 1986: 35). The coach does not only make strategic and cognitive input, but also cares about the tutee as a person, and therefore engages in a motivational and affective relationship through encouragement and praise.

Hyland's third strand of Socio-constructivism, characterised as 'writing as power and ideology', is built on and goes beyond Socio-constructivism in the Vygotskian and Bakhtinian sense. This approach, represented by paradigms such as the New Literacy Studies (Lea, 1998; Street, 1995; Gee, 2002) and Multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) may be referred to as 'Socio-political'. Socio-political approaches continue to emphasise the importance of social context on writing but also stress the role of power in mediating discourse, and the ideologies that maintain these discourses (Hyland 2016, 27; Ivanič (2004: 237). They are based on the belief that writing is shaped by social forces and relations of power, that writing in itself contributes to shaping social forces, and that writing has consequences for the identity of the writer (Ivanič, 2004: 238). Furthermore, Socio-political approaches or discourses emphasise writers' agency, in that they have the ability to resist and contest the status quo, and contribute to social change by using their freedom to draw on discourses and genres that are not privileged in the context, to mix resources and produce multimodal texts. Archer and Richards (2011: 13) assert that the tasks set for students' assignments in higher education now often require complex multimodal competencies.

Another approach that may be subsumed under socio-political discourses is that of multilingualism. Driven by the multilingual turn in language pedagogy, globalization, superdiversity, and critical approaches in applied linguistics, language pedagogues have increasingly turned their attention to the dynamic repertoires of multilingual speakers in urban settings worldwide (May, 2014: 1). In South Africa, the utilisation of students' multilingual repertoires as resources has been mentioned by Daniels and Richards (2011: 37ff.). They provide empirical evidence of a high incidence of alternating between English and Afrikaans in consultations at the University of Stellenbosch, especially in cases where Afrikaans first-language speakers come for assistance with assignments in English (2011: 40). However, no mention is made of the use of isiXhosa, the African language that features most prominently in the Western Cape, and which is one of the languages that should be developed by the particular university. We believe that in

light of the prominence of multilingual pedagogies such as translanguaging, research should be done on spontaneous shuttling between English and African languages during consultations where the consultant is conversant in an African language that is also one of the student's high-proficiency languages. The emphasis should be on how learning of subject-field content and the L2 can be positively impacted by drawing on all the semiotic resources students bring to the writing centre.

The writing centre underpinned by the Sociopolitical strand of Socio-constructivism can be likened with 'a safe space'. Dominant tutor roles are those of 'commentator' and 'activist'. Harris (1986: 35) describes the role of the 'commentator' as follows:

The teacher [read: tutor] as commentator needs to help the student see how and when the discussion is moving forward and, in connecting to larger perspectives, how all of it is related to the student's growth or improvement in writing skills.

The tutor as activist stresses that the process of design (which includes meaning making in any semiotic mode, including writing) breaks with the rigid boundaries of how we communicated in the past:

The profound, unsettling, corrosion and fragmenting of the social structures which characterised the later 19th and most of the 20th century, has led to the shift in perspective from 'just following tradition', from 'doing it the way you ought to do it' according to convention, to seeing all (semiotic) work as evidence of design (Kress, 2014: 4).

The activist also encourages tutees to resist and contest the status quo and contribute to social change.

Table 1 below summarises the five main approaches to writing that we have identified and discussed in this article thus far, the concomitant underlying beliefs about writing and learning to write, the role of the writing centre, the roles of the tutor and main strategies used by the tutor.

Table 1: Approaches to teaching writing, beliefs about learning to write, writing centre and tutor roles, and tutoring strategies

Approach	Beliefs about writing and learning to write	Writing centre role	Tutor roles	Tutoring strategies
Current-traditional (scientific)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing is an individual activity. • Knowledge is exterior and must be imparted. • Students are underprepared and in need of remedial action. • Good writing results in an error-free text. • Writing consists of applying knowledge of linguistic patterns and rules. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laboratory • Storehouse • Fix-it shop 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remedial teacher • Expert • Rule-giver • Diagnostician • Evaluator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directive/authoritative • Line by line correction of student papers • A focus on lower-order concerns, such as grammar and spelling
Creative expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing is an individual activity. • Students bring knowledge and experiences to the writing activity. • Knowledge is internal; has to be drawn out. • After 'diagnosis' students have to be 'treated'. • Writing is a non-linear, exploratory and generative process during which learners 'discover' their ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Garret • Clinic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listener • Psychotherapeutic counsellor • Lawyer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-directive • Minimalist approach: students do all the work • Attentively listening to students • Open-ended questions • Building rapport
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing is an individual cognitive and metacognitive process. • The writing process can be translated into a set of elements that have an inherent sequence and can be taught explicitly. • Through planning, writing and revising the learner will become more proficient in writing. • Feedback and revision help the writer in developing skills to transform form and content. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manufacturing plant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality controller 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction in the process of writing in appropriate phases, including prewriting, drafting, and revising • Flexible and cumulative evaluation • Feedback on drafts, followed by revision

Approach	Beliefs about writing and learning to write	Writing centre role	Tutor roles	Tutoring strategies
Socio-constructivist: Interactive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are no universal rules in writing: the 'rules' are arbitrary, socially constructed, situated and changeable. • Knowledge is constructed through language and interaction with others, and mediated through community and culture. • Writing presupposes many voices and identities. • Writers need 'scaffolding' and guidance to mature and become independent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Burkean parlour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coach • More experienced peer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-directive • A focus on functions that are in the process of maturation • Problem-based instruction • A focus on higher-order concerns, such as overall structure • Collaborative teaching and learning
Socio-constructivist: Socio-political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing is socially situated. • Various technologies, modes and languages can be used to make meaning. • There are power discrepancies in any literacy related activity • writing is ideologically inscribed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A safe space 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commentator • Activist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explicit identification of how semiotic choices position writers, social roles and social relations. • Respect for identity, personal experience and diversity. • Encourage students to speak freely; no need to transmit only established knowledge.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TUTOR TRAINING

The above overview, which has been summarised in Table 1, attempts to make transparent how educational and language theories have shaped language teaching and writing support in the context of a writing centre. The evolution of writing centre practices is most clear when we look at how the dominant theory at each point was strongly influenced by notions held about meaning creation, language learning, student identity and student needs as well as institutional climate. These factors impact directly on the roles played by the tutor and tutee/student. It is for this reason, especially, that as writing centres continue to affirm themselves as effective support structures, those who direct writing centres need to consider carefully the linguistic and educational theories underlying the approach that they take. Inevitably, this theoretical framework will influence the training provided to the tutors and the 'tutoring' provided to students. The proposed framework will also contribute to building a shared language for talking about writing centre work.

Dependent on the context of the tutoring – which may involve target discipline requirements and conventions, assignment-specific needs, the version of the assignment, the student's socio-demographic profile and identity – writing tutors may be required to draw from any one or a combination of the approaches outlined in this article. Appleby-Ostroff (2017: 9) mentions that in the law school context, peer writing tutors may need to rely on the directive tutoring strategies of the current-traditional paradigm to explain the formal conventions of a legal document. Another example is that a student who is a second or third language speaker may have particular concerns regarding grammar. To satisfy this need the consultant may have to teach a rule, and possibly correct the student's error in the text as an example. It is not unusual to identify specific areas that the student is struggling with, and provide additional resources to help them improve. This does indeed boil down to 'diagnosis' and 'treatment'. An expressivist stance may be necessary to focus students' attention on their own writing processes, and to reflect on the processes they follow. Collaboration, which is a signature characteristic of socio-constructivism, will highlight the importance of rapport with the tutee, whether the purpose is to attain social goals (e.g. through praise, encouragement, attentively listening to students) or textual goals (e.g. establishing and arguing a thesis). A socio-political approach may be needed when it is important to acknowledge the identities, literacies and semiotic resources a student brings to an assignment, while satisfying the requirements of the subject, the writing prompt and the subject lecturer (which will in all likelihood be the demonstration of powerful knowledges). A socio-political stance may also be necessary in a consultation with a postgraduate student who resists hegemonic genre conventions and expectations.

Drawing on multiple approaches in a single tutoring session and understanding students' historical and theoretical backgrounds are often necessary for effective writing tutoring, and therefore effective tutor training should include an overview similar to what has been given in this article. Current writing centre theory seems to favour this more flexible framework to tutoring, one that allows tutors to practise along a continuum of instructional choices, both collaborative and empowering (Corbett, 2013: 95).

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