

An interview with Sharifa Daniels

Rebecca Day Babcock 

Department of Literature and Languages, University of Texas Permian Basin, USA
E-mail: babcock_r@utpb.edu

Rebecca Day Babcock: *Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this special issue. After working together with you for 14 years on various projects, I do have some questions about your history. How did you get into this line of work?*

Sharifa Daniels: My first introduction to a writing centre was in 1984 as a student at the University of Iowa. I had just enrolled for a MA in Linguistics, and was approached by the director of the writing lab to work as a consultant in their writing centre. I was completely puzzled by the invitation. Not only was a ‘writing lab’ a foreign concept to me (and, I imagine, for any South African student at that time!), but I had mixed feelings about the extent to which an English second-language student and native-Afrikaans speaker like myself could assist other students at the university with their writing. However, when I learnt that I would be enrolling for a credit-bearing module, “Teaching in a Writing Lab”, I was more enthusiastic as this would add to the credits I was required to complete for the MA degree. When I started the module, my knowledge of the role of the writing lab, and the theory and pedagogy that underpinned its work, was extremely limited.

RDB: *Can you tell me more about the programme at the University of Iowa?*

SD: Reflecting on that introduction to writing centre work, I realise now how fortunate I was. The writing lab at the University of Iowa was one of the first of its kind in the USA, and Prof. Lou Kelly had created a writing centre where students were encouraged to “talk on paper”. These conversations on paper involved getting students to tell their stories. A typical consultation would start with an introductory conversation. Through asking questions about the student’s home life and probing deeper, the student narrated his/her story. As the story unfolded, the student was requested to continue that conversation on paper. While these consultations were individual, developmental, and supportive, the approach differed vastly from current practice. Unlike the consultations at the Stellenbosch University (SU) Writing Lab, a considerable amount of writing was done during these sessions. At the end of the session, the students handed in their writing. There were scheduled follow-up consultations, and before the next consultation, the consultant would read the students’ responses and formulate specific questions for the session. In this regular dialogue, there was a gradual and subtle progression to more analytical questions and therefore more critical answers. I remember a few of the international students I worked with becoming impatient and constantly asking, “When are you going to teach us grammar?”.

When I returned to South Africa, there were no writing centres at South African universities yet. Over the next decade, the political landscape in South Africa underwent tremendous change. In the context of transformation in higher education, universities were expected to become more accessible to a broader student population, and writing centres emerged as part of the measures to support such students. When the post at the SU Writing Lab was advertised in 2001, I applied, and the rest is history.

RDB: *You have a passion for helping students and for educational equity, inclusion, and access. How did you translate that passion into your actual work with students?*

SD: My appointment at the SU Writing Lab came at the right time in my career. I have vast knowledge of and experience working with educationally marginalised communities. My secondary school educational work with disadvantaged communities provided me with a good understanding of the challenges such students faced when entering university. Assisting students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds to navigate the higher education terrain successfully was one of the goals I was passionate about in my work at the university. My appointment at the SU Writing Lab was an opportunity to realise this goal. Moreover, increasing access for marginalised students to historically white universities and making that access smoother was even more important for me.

While universities were proclaiming themselves as more inclusive, socially just, and welcoming of a more diverse student population, these students often struggled in the transition to university. Moreover, social justice is often equated with granting students access to spaces/institutions from which they were previously excluded. But social justice is so much more than this. Many previously excluded students who were admitted to historically white institutions reported that they found the academic spaces inaccessible and unfriendly. I believe that this is because there is often a misrecognition of their knowledges and capabilities, especially when we engage with them as “the other”.

From the outset, the SU Writing Lab was promoted as a facility for all students, not just for those in need of “remedial” support. This stance was a departure from that of existing South African writing centres where institutional politics (and funding) often dictated which students should have access to the writing centre, and where the writing centre was earmarked as a space dedicated predominantly for the non-traditional higher education student. To this end, the SU Writing Lab’s mission statement clearly stated that it was an inclusive space on many levels:

[We] are open to students from all faculties and disciplines; we work with students at all levels of study – under-graduate and post-graduate; and we also work with students in both languages of teaching and learning at the university [and even other languages if we had the capacity].

Stellenbosch University (2002)

To reflect this ethos, the composition of our group of consultants reflected the disciplinary, cultural, and linguistic diversity that we embraced. Our consultants were postgraduate students from various faculties, and comprised South African and international students. Although these consultants were competent academic writers and possessed excellent interpersonal skills, we still offered them a rigorous training programme where they could gain confidence in their work as consultants who could work across disciplinary and cultural boundaries. These additional

skills allowed them to instil trust in the students they work with and, in a subtle (subliminal) way, debunk the myth that knowledge only resided in specific racial groups.

RDB: *Language is an issue in South Africa as in other places. What do you see as the larger impact of your bilingual work in the Writing Lab/Skryflab on social justice issues for students and multilingualism in general?*

SD: The language issue is a complex and perplexing matter, and the policies that university management formulated were beyond our control. However, the SU Writing Lab always strived to give “life to its ethos of being a multilingual and inclusive space for academic transformation within the institution’s language policy” (Daniels and Richards 2017: 59). We often referred to the SU Writing Lab as a “contact zone” where we grappled with linguistic and social challenges in a flexible manner. Issues such as language equality and equity always informed our deliberations. Our organisational structure reflected both languages of teaching and learning at SU – the SU Writing Lab had both an Afrikaans and an English Head. Furthermore, we appointed both Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking consultants. Over the years, our experience and research showed that while language equality was important, equity prevailed in our engagements with students and each other. We respected our students as individuals who have something worthwhile to say irrespective of what language they spoke.

RDB: *Are there any achievements or successes that hold special memories for you? What do you see as your legacy, and how do you want to be remembered, both at Stellenbosch and abroad?*

SD: I want to be remembered for the transformative role I played in the establishment of this supportive and inclusive space. I am proud to be one of the architects of this uniquely multilingual and multicultural writing centre. With my colleagues, I ensured that the space we set up at SU (a university that grappled with a historical legacy of inequality) was inclusive and equitable in nature, and that we lived that ethos and those values in our interactions in the SU Writing Lab. Over the years, our writing centre model has been researched by the writing centre community nationally and internationally, and has served as a template for universities who were establishing new writing centres. Several South African and international writing centres have incorporated and adopted features of our model into their own writing centres, which I interpret as acknowledgement of our successes as a writing centre.

RDB: *Any tips for those who are trying to set up inclusive writing centres?*

SD: To run a successful writing centre, you have to “buy into” and understand the idea of a writing centre! This was a belief I consciously preached and consistently practised (and is a part of my legacy)! Moreover, one of the major threats facing the future of writing centres is having external stakeholders or parties defining these centres’ shapes and practices. These parties often have limited knowledge and understanding of writing centre practice and pedagogy. It gave me enormous satisfaction when I heard my colleagues talking about the SU Writing Lab in various forums and displaying their understanding of the workings of a writing centre while also challenging misconceptions. It was clear that we shared a common vision for our Lab.

Time and again I was struck by how our staff, even the most recent appointments, had internalised the values and ethos of the SU Writing Lab, and how that would inform their daily operations. Equally gratifying was seeing how students of different cultures could work across borders in the

SU Writing Lab space, and how students worked together across linguistic and racial barriers. My experience was that students are open to working with anyone if they feel they are benefiting from the experience and are being supported. This was one way of breaking down entrenched notions of whose knowledge had power and was valued. Being part of a community of practice that had a transformative agenda made coming to work worthwhile for me.

At managerial level, my contribution to the transformation and development of the Language Centre (in which the SU Writing Lab resides) was through engaging in a critical manner and opening up the conversation to engage diverse perspectives of the issues. Instead of always going with the flow and assimilating quietly, I sometimes presented a view and voice that was not always the dominant one. I believe that by challenging the status quo through expressing my views in these forums, people could be conscientised about the alternative views and previously silenced voices present in their midst, and hopefully encourage a more critical dialectic for the Language Centre environment.

Finally, I was honoured to be part of the broader South African writing centre movement and to contribute to its development to build a vibrant community of practice. What was clear from the outset was the need for a space specifically for writing centres and writing-centred people. And thus the Writing Centres' Indaba was born! Through this platform we could support each other, learn from each other, and provide opportunities for growth.

RDB: *It sounds like the SU Writing Lab has been very influential in the global development of the writing centre movement. I know at SU you have worked as a group and a collaborative, but readers of this issue may be interested in knowing your particular contributions to these successes.*

SD: As someone who views the SU Writing Lab as an inclusive space where teamwork and collaboration take precedence, talking about myself in the first-person in this interview makes me extremely uncomfortable and self-conscious. However, our lab, through initiative and sheer hard work, achieved many successes.

As writing centre Head, advancing a collaborative ethos was a goal that I set out to influence. The SU Writing Lab collaborated with strategic role-players on several levels and in various ways as it was also important to confront the tension between diversity and quality. We wanted students to experience diversity as a positive feature that enhanced the quality of their education. For that reason, we ensured that the work of the SU Writing Lab was of a high standard at all times, and was grounded in and on solid scientific principles and research.

RDB: *That sounds like a great model. Please tell me more.*

SD: An important thrust was the SU Writing Lab's focus on postgraduate writing development. As the coordinator of the portfolio Postgraduate Development in the Language Centre, I collaborated closely with strategic role-players at the university regarding postgraduate language development. One of the outcomes of these collaborations was the establishment of the SU Writing Lab's presence in the Research Commons in the university's main library. Having writing consultations in this space designated specifically for postgraduate students sent out a powerful message about the work and profile of the SU Writing Lab. Moreover, it acknowledged in a very visible manner the role of writing in the research process.

Another accomplishment is the training programme that we developed for our writing consultants, and this was eventually accredited as a short course by the university. This constant investment in the development of the consultants ensured that we had a corpus or team of consultants who were immersed in writing centre pedagogy and praxis, and were investing in the development of other students. Many of our consultants have become leading academics and professionals, and claim that their experience in the SU Writing Lab contributed to their capabilities in their subsequent careers.

Participating in research projects and publishing this research allowed me to develop and to speak with authority about my field. Furthermore, on a personal level, as a woman of colour, I wanted to ensure that my contribution reflected my knowledge and understanding of the field. It was important that the people I worked with had confidence in my knowledge and leadership, and that I could be a role model for others. Among the writing centre scholarship that influenced and informed my thinking was that of Pam Nichols and Nancy Grimm, and I was fortunate to work closely with both of them. Similarly, I had opportunities to produce research publications with writing centre scholars both locally (e.g. Rose Richards) and internationally (e.g. Rebecca Babcock)!

RDB: *What are your fondest memories of your work in the Writing Lab/Skryflab?*

SD: The fond memories are too numerous to mention. I guess high up on my list is the connection with people – whether colleagues, consultants or student writers – and how they touched my life. Those many “A-ha!” and goosebump moments! I loved talking to students visiting the SU Writing Lab, observing their growth in this new environment, and creating the opportunities for them to use their voices more confidently as students. Additionally, the collaborative nature of our interactions and the relationships we built with the consultants, the student writers, and faculty afforded me tremendous satisfaction.

What stood out for me, though, was our consultants. I enjoyed the interviews we had with prospective consultants and, at that stage already, visualising the impact they could make in the SU Writing Lab. I have fond memories of our annual consultant training sessions, and getting to know the consultants. I always maintained that they were the heartbeat of the SU Writing Lab, and when I was proved right during the training sessions, I was inspired. I felt immensely proud that we had set up a facility of quality and trained consultants who were confident and instilled trust in the writers with whom they worked. We often underestimate our contribution to the development of these confident postgraduate students. Observing the consultants during consultations and hearing how they supported other students to develop their academic voices was magic!

The cherry on top was, of course, our SU Writing Lab team – an eclectic and diverse group of individuals. I have fond and humorous memories of the team, in particular when they were “under siege” and faced with external challenges and threats. Those were the moments our common vision, unity, and strengths were most evident and drew us closer. We had a history of putting up spirited resistance!

I have walked a long road with Rose and Anne-Mari, and they have played a major role in shaping and sharing my development, achievements, and positive memories of the SU Writing Lab. They will forever have a special place in my heart! Thanks, Colleagues.

RDB: *Thank you so much, Sharifa, for answering my questions. I wish you well in your retirement and life's next adventures.*

References

Daniels, S. and R. Richards. 2017. Equitable multilingualism? The case of Stellenbosch University Writing Laboratory. *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics Plus* 53: 59–77. <https://doi.org/10.5842/53-0-734>

Stellenbosch University. 2002. *Stellenbosch University Writing Lab aims and objectives*. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University.