

THE WRITING CENTRE: A SITE FOR DISCURSIVE DIALOGUE IN MANAGEMENT STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the ongoing conversation, in the *South African Journal of Higher Education* (SAJHE) and other journals, about academic literacy development in higher education. It reports on a small-scale quantitative study on the effect of writing centre support on students' academic performance, in the disciplinary context of management studies. The study generated questions and areas for reflection about how to assess the ways in which writing centres can become more valuable programmatically, institutionally, theoretically and methodologically. Its uniqueness arises from the attempt to look at the development of academic literacy writing competences not during the transition



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from school to university, but at the exit point of an academic bachelor's degree programme. It raises questions, such as: Is there a value for academic discourse induction even at this exit stage, and what impact does it have on the development of writing competences? How does this impact become known?

Keywords: discipline-specific academic literacies, academic writing, writing centre, collaboration, small-scale evaluation, marketing

INTRODUCTION

The importance of writing, as an academic literacy practice that enables access to disciplinary discourses and communities, and as a dominant assessment tool in higher education, is well documented as a theoretical construct. From an 'academic literacies' perspective, writing is understood not as a generic technical skill, but rather as a social practice that takes on meaning depending on the context, audience and purposes within which it occurs (Lea and Street 2006; Lillis 2003). Particular disciplines are argued to have signature discourses, which are often understood only tacitly even by members within the field of study (Jacobs 2005, 2007). The discourse (the broad signature of communication in the discipline) is embedded in all communication strategies of reading, writing, speaking and listening. It is this signature writing that constitutes high stakes communicative learning, into which many novice students in higher education are being inducted in the process of learning to become a member of the discourse community. Because it is often via writing that students demonstrate 'alignment with the discourses and content' of their subjects (Richardson 2004, 518), their performance of academic writing tasks determines whether they either pass or fail courses and impacts on their progression and graduation (Archer 2010; Lillis 2001). Writing can, therefore, be said to play a gate-keeping function in higher education. Indeed, 'as long as the production of texts such as essays and reports is the chief means of evaluating students in tertiary institutions, academic writing competence will remain the key to success in higher education' (Chandrasegaran 1996, 1).

Yet, at the same time, also widely acknowledged in the literature, are the challenges associated with trying to develop academic writing competence, particularly in the context of the massification of higher education, which internationally has resulted in progressively larger and more diverse student bodies (Ganobcsik-Williams 2012). Higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world increasingly have to engage with the rich diversity of students' heritages, in terms of students who are drawn from different (multi-linguistic) repertoires, differing experiences of language teaching and learning, different linguistic systems and divergent levels of preparedness for entry into higher education (Thaiss et al. 2012).

One institutional response to such challenges has been the establishment of writing centres to help support student writing development. At writing centres, students can have a conversation with a more experienced writer who will give them advice about their written drafts (North 1984). Conventionally, these centres have placed their emphasis on intervention at the interface between the world of schooling and entry into first year higher education, or at the point of transition from one dominant language system to another (e.g., when entering a foreign country). As far back as North's (1984) seminal article 'The idea of a writing centre', however, the marginal position of writing centres (both physically and in relation to the work of academic disciplines) has been recognised as preventing such centres from realising their full potential. Inadequate funding and associated capacity constraints also limit writing centres in this regard. This might be explained by an expectation that such induction into the shaping discourse of writing should have already been foundationally established by 'feeder' institutions. Furthermore, many writing centres operate campus-wide across several different disciplines and provide generic rather than discipline-specific writing support. This raises the question of whether writing centres are directed towards accessing the epistemic know-how (academic literacy discourses) of higher education in general (Morrow 2009) rather than offering direct support to specific disciplines within academia. What exactly are writing centres aiming to accomplish (as independent generic sites or discipline-specific discourse shapers)? When could such goals for academic writing be activated successfully and by whom? When and how can the products of such activity be best yielded or measured?

Scholars have proposed different ways of addressing the challenges identified above, including the establishment of discipline-specific writing centres located within particular academic departments (Bouhey 2012). However, Butler (2013, 80) is critical of the fact that although there is much (uncontested) theoretical justification put forward for discipline-specific academic literacy interventions, very little 'substantial' evidence is provided for the 'real impact' of such interventions, with existing evidence generally based on small samples and student opinions/perceptions, rather than assessment outcomes such as marks. Furthermore, there is a need for longitudinal studies to investigate 'whether the benefits of discipline-based programmes are sustained in the longer term' (Kennelly, Maldoni and Davies 2010, 61). The study reported on in this article explored the impact of (management studies) discipline-specific writing centre support on students' assessment outcomes, by comparing the assignment marks obtained by users and non-users of such support over a six-year period. Management studies is a broad discipline encompassing overlapping sub-disciplines (e.g., accounting, marketing, management, economics and information systems) and involving much interdisciplinary writing. Assignment genre types include general academic genres (e.g., research paper) and business genres (e.g., report, case analysis, business proposal), with business genres oriented towards decision-making, problem-solving and team work (Zhu 2004). The uniqueness of the

study arose from the attempt to look at the development of academic literacy writing competences not at the moments of transition between phases of the education system, but at the exit point of an academic bachelor's degree programme. Is there a value for academic discourse induction even at this exit stage, and what impact does it have on the development of writing competences? How does this impact become known?

Besides addressing the specific gaps identified above, there are other reasons why measuring the impact of writing centre support is 'a subject of great importance to writing centres' (Archer and Richards 2011, 12). First, writing centres are faced with having to justify their continued existence, operations and funding. Much of the research on writing centres and their efficacy has arguably been directed towards this agenda of survival. This may be because writing centres tend to adopt a resource-intensive one-to-one pedagogical approach (Borg and Deane 2011), making them very much subject to calls for accountability from funders. However, in focusing their research efforts on exploring students' perceptions of and satisfaction with their services, rather than on their impact on student writing and concomitant academic performance (Jones 2001), writing centres have failed to provide the most persuasive evidence of their efficacy. Measures of impact are likely to be more convincing to funders than studies of satisfaction and perception, which, it has been asserted, tend to be biased towards positive feedback particularly when such feedback is solicited at writing centres (Archer 2008; Bell 2000). Accordingly, it has been argued that 'in the current climate of financial constraint, we need to move beyond consideration of satisfaction and perception to measures of impact' (Borg and Deane 2011, 330). Second, measures of impact (e.g., assessment outcomes in the form of student grades, which will be the focus of the study) could help to address the frequent disconnect between writing centre and institutional assessment (Bell and Frost 2012). This is because such measures may be more closely linked to the achievement of wider institutional and/or national higher educational goals, such as retention, throughput and graduation. In so doing, writing centres may be seen as extended service arms either to help achieve institutional goals of productivity or to justify resource subsidies, thereby entrenching their institutional status.

The article proceeds by reviewing the literature on measuring the effects of writing centres, and showing how the current study is located within, and contributes to, this literature. It then moves on to contextualise and describe the empirical study, outlining how the study addressed some of the limitations of previous studies. Thereafter, the findings, implications and limitations of the study are presented and discussed.

CHOOSING A METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY

There is great variation among writing centres in terms of their national and institutional contexts, and their theoretical and philosophical conception (their

notions of what the agenda of developing writing entails and their perspectives on how writing is to be developed – as a disembodied linguistic system of autonomous rules or as an immersion into employing the discourse of a specific discipline). They also vary in terms of their resource constraints and enablers, their different linkages with ‘home content disciplines’ and the different relationships between ‘content’ and ‘language’ experts (Archer and Richards 2011; Pemberton and Kinkead 2003; Thaiss et al. 2012). This variation influences aspects, such as: what sort of assistance is provided (generic or discipline-specific; add-on or mainstream; remedial or for all students; individual or group; face-to-face or online; one-off or repeated; mandatory or voluntary) and by whom (writing centre academics or student tutors; in collaboration with disciplinary academics or not).

With regard to the methodological approaches adopted, ‘the field is rich with anecdotal evidence, reflections and studies that are qualitative in nature, but quantitative studies published in journals remain lacking’ (Huang 2011, 13). The bias towards qualitative case studies, focusing on thick descriptions of writing centre work, could in part be attributed to the barriers to undertaking more objective assessment (Jones 2001) and to the view that writing centre work is a ‘profoundly local practice’ (Santa 2009, 5). There may also be discomfort with quantitative assessment, both in terms of finding statistical analyses daunting to perform and in terms of uneasiness at reducing the complexity of writing centre work to quantitative measures (Bell and Frost 2012; Lerner 2003). For example, Archer and Richards (2011) argue that the work of writing centres cannot be understood only in terms of contribution to throughput. Other factors also contribute to the lack of empirical research on writing centres. The following kinds of questions arise: Is it likely that a combination of factors (such as student motivation, their biographical language teaching and learning experiences) intersect with the input of the writing centre and may impact on students’ performance? Is it possible to isolate categorical correlations between the centre intervention and academic student performance (Archer 2008)? If writing centres deal with students from a range of disciplines, how do we account methodologically for the variations in terms of the student populations they serve, the types of writing tasks set by lecturers in different disciplines, the marking criteria these lecturers use and the ways they mark? Can we generalise our findings (Jones 2001)? Such diverse foci clearly complicate the issue of measuring writing centre effects, with a lack of agreement as to what should be measured. Options include writing centre usage, user profiles, grades (Lerner 1997; Yeats et al. 2010), writing processes (Bell 2000), development on assessed writing, subsequent course performance or some combination (Archer 2008; Huang 2011).

Despite the above challenges, quantitative studies are needed in order to diversify the extant literature (Yeats et al. 2010). Other arguments for undertaking quantitative studies are that administrators tend to find ‘numbers, digits, results’ (Lerner 1997, 2) persuasive in supporting writing centre applications for funding, space and other

resources (Bell 2000; Bell and Frost 2012; Ganobcsik-Williams and Broughan 2011). Such studies can also help to link writing centre outcomes to institutional measures (Lerner 2003), and can often be undertaken much more quickly and with fewer resources than qualitative studies, which can be time-consuming and painstaking in terms of analysis (Borg and Deane 2011). By contrast, quantitative research can often draw on easily available existing data, and the statistical expertise required, if not available within the writing centre, should be fairly easily accessible in the form of colleagues or postgraduate students in other departments (Lerner 1997, 2003). Furthermore, contrary to popular misconception, quantitative studies do not necessarily have to be large scale.

The study reported on in the article delimited its focus on a single small-scale case study of management studies students, focusing on one consistent task in one module marked by one lecturer over a number of years. The target focus chosen was an exit level module, enabling the possibility of seeing what use value is attributed to writing centres at this stage of a student's career. The article focuses on how the use/non-use of the writing centre is linked to students' grades on an assessment task. The interest is to understand what added value a writing centre provides at this late stage of their bachelor's programme, since it is presumed that induction into the discourse of management studies ought to have been adequately mediated for students already.

Coined by Bell (2000, 16), the term 'small-scale evaluations' refers to 'a series of carefully limited evaluations, which, pieced together after a few years, create a fairly comprehensive picture'. Small-scale evaluations should focus on just one specific concern at a time; additionally, they should be easily replicable in terms of cost, time and labour, be credible to funders, and share their designs and results to enable replication and comparison (Bell 2000). The narrow focus of small-scale studies may facilitate such comparison and help build a body of writing centre research that acknowledges context, while still allowing for some sort of coherence across studies.

Very few such studies appear in the literature, located predominantly within the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) (e.g., Lerner 1997; Newmann 1999 in Lerner 2003; Yeats et al. 2010). Accordingly, this area of research would benefit from the publication of more studies in different contexts (Yeats et al. 2010).

THE WRITING PLACE

The Writing Place (WP) on the University of KwaZulu-Natal's (UKZN) Westville campus was established in 2006 as a student-driven initiative, under academic supervision, to assist management studies students with their academic writing. In its first year of operation, two honours students were appointed as joint co-ordinators and five other students, ranging from second-year undergraduate to honours level, were appointed as consultants on the basis of their experience and expertise in academic writing, as well as their people skills and interest in student development (Court

and Visagie 2007). Co-ordinators and consultants (all management studies students) received intensive training upon appointment, as well as ongoing development during weekly meetings with the academic supervisor, based largely on a model of a generic language development focus. The role of consultants was to familiarise students with the conventions of academic essay writing and to act as neutral readers of their drafts, focusing on structure, argument flow, writing style and referencing, rather than on content or editing for grammar, spelling and punctuation. Services provided included workshops run during mainstream lectures upon invitation (which served both to advertise the new initiative and to cover some basics of academic writing, which would provide a foundation for subsequent consultation), as well as individual and small group consultations. Consultations were generally 45 minutes in duration; however, during periods of peak demand, the duration was sometimes reduced to 20 minutes so that more students could be accommodated. The nature and extent of collaboration with disciplinary experts teaching mainstream modules ranged from 'none at all' to 'some engagement'. The latter category included, for example, lecturers who might invite a WP consultant to give a talk or hold a workshop during a lecture, or who might provide details of their assignments and assessment criteria to the WP in advance, or even attend a WP meeting to explain task requirements and expectations so that consultants would be better placed to provide pertinent feedback on students' drafts. The category of 'quite strong partnerships' included, for example, WP support that might be embedded into a module, or the WP might have input into the design of writing tasks. In the module that is the focus here, the extent of collaboration between the disciplinary lecturer and the WP was limited to the lecturer always providing the assignment document and marking rubric to the WP in advance and also attending WP meetings to discuss the assignment and rubric with consultants whenever invited to do so.

In their report reviewing the first year of operation of the WP at Westville, Court and Visagie (2007) focused largely on management and services considerations of the writing centre in a student and consultant evaluation feedback model. Whilst the results reflected a positive valuing of the centre, it offered limited critique of its theoretical model or the underpinning curriculum goals of the centre. What impact the centre was having on the students or their assessment grades remained largely unanswered. Further studies probed only circumspectly the relationship between users and non-users of the WP (Arbee and Goodier 2008). The study reported on in the article aims to fill these gaps.

MEASURING THE IMPACT OF WRITING PLACE SUPPORT ON STUDENT PERFORMANCE

The study aimed to measure the impact of discipline-specific WP support on students' assessment outcomes. In order to address this aimed, the marks of students who did

and did not consult the management studies WP during the completion of a written task were compared.

The study focused on a third-year undergraduate marketing communications module at the Westville campus of UKZN. Over the six-year period for which data is available, enrolment figures for this module ranged from 203 to 349 students per year. The module is one of four compulsory third-year modules taken by students majoring in marketing, most often as part of a three-year general commerce degree. Each module is assessed via a test, a group assignment and an examination. The focus here is on the group assignment in the marketing communications module. Focusing on one module reduces between-subject variance (Yeats et al. 2010); similar arguments could be made for the decision to focus on one assessment task (reduction of between-task variance) and on a module taught by just one lecturer (reduction of between-teacher variance).

The task in question in general required students to engage with the marketing communications activities of a particular organisation or brand, although the specific approach and focus may have differed from year to year. This task suggests the activation of advanced knowledge structures within the discourse of the Management Studies discipline, foregrounding also how it articulates within a worldview of media, communication and networking in a broader social context. In the period under study, students were required to analyse how marketing communications were used to build a strong brand identity for any brand appearing on that year's list of top global (2007A) or South African (2012) brands; perform a marketing communications audit of a selected organisation (2007B); critically evaluate a current marketing communications campaign (2010, 2013); report on the marketing communications practices and outcomes of a South African brand (2008); and create a marketing communications plan for a client (2009).

The 2008 and 2009 tasks required that some empirical research be undertaken, while the tasks in other years did not. Furthermore, while all the tasks involved analysis and/or evaluation of existing marketing communications activities, the 2009 task in addition required the creation of a marketing communications plan. Learning outcomes across all years were therefore combinations of those found at the higher levels (i.e., analyse, evaluate, create) of Bloom's revised taxonomy (Krathwohl 2002), in keeping with the level of study under focus (final-year undergraduate). Students worked on the assignment over a period of approximately ten weeks in groups comprising four to six members.

Although groups were encouraged to make use of the WP while working on the assignment, it was not mandatory for them to do so. Self-selection, therefore, accounted for the designation of groups as either 'WP users' or 'WP non-users'. 'WP users' are defined here as groups that consulted the WP for feedback on their assignment drafts, and 'WP non-users' as groups that did not.

As university databases do not keep records of WP usage, the data was drawn from the module lecturer's own records comprising the following information for

each group: (1) their status as either a WP user or WP non-user; and (2) the mark achieved for the assignment. This information had been extracted from the actual assignment documents. Groups that made use of the WP services were required to attach the original WP feedback sheet (bearing the centre's official stamp, the signature of the consultant and the consultation date) to the assignment submitted for assessment, as evidence of having attended a WP consultation. The presence or absence of this sheet indicated to the lecturer whether the group should be classified as a WP user or WP non-user. The data (covering all assignments in the six-year period under focus) had been captured in an Excel spreadsheet each year as soon as marking had been completed, and then checked against the assignments to ensure that no capturing errors had occurred. Ethical clearance for the use of this data in the research study reported on here was granted by the university's research ethics review structures (protocol reference number HSS/0800/014).

It should be clear from the above description that the study retrospectively drew on data that had already been collected for module monitoring purposes; in other words, the data had not been specifically gathered to address a pre-planned research objective. As such, the study is constrained by the nature and scope of the available data; for example, while the data permits exploration of the impact of WP support on students' assignment performance (marks), it cannot speak to students' motivations for either accessing or not accessing the available WP support.

KEY FINDINGS

This section outlines the key findings related to WP usage, as well as the performance of WP users and WP non-users.

WP usage

Table 1 provides an overview of WP usage for the period under focus. Of note is that in 2007 two assignments were set (designated 2007A and 2007B); while from 2008 onwards only one assignment was set (in accordance with module co-ordinator reviews of the assessment strategy). All these assessment tasks focused on the broad area of a communication strategy in Marketing. No data for 2011 is presented since the data was not under the jurisdiction of one of the authors of the article and cannot be validated.

Table 1: WP usage per year (2007–2013)

Year	Number of groups		
	WP users	WP non-users	Total
2007A	34 (67%)	17 (33%)	51 (100%)
2007B	21 (40%)	31 (60%)	52 (100%)

Year	Number of groups		
	WP users	WP non-users	Total
2008	40 (54%)	34 (46%)	74 (100%)
2009	27 (66%)	14 (34%)	41 (100%)
2010	10 (24%)	32 (76%)	42 (100%)
2012	40 (78%)	11 (22%)	51 (100%)
2013	47 (82%)	10 (18%)	57 (100%)

To help visualise the WP usage per year, the trend is shown in Figure 1:

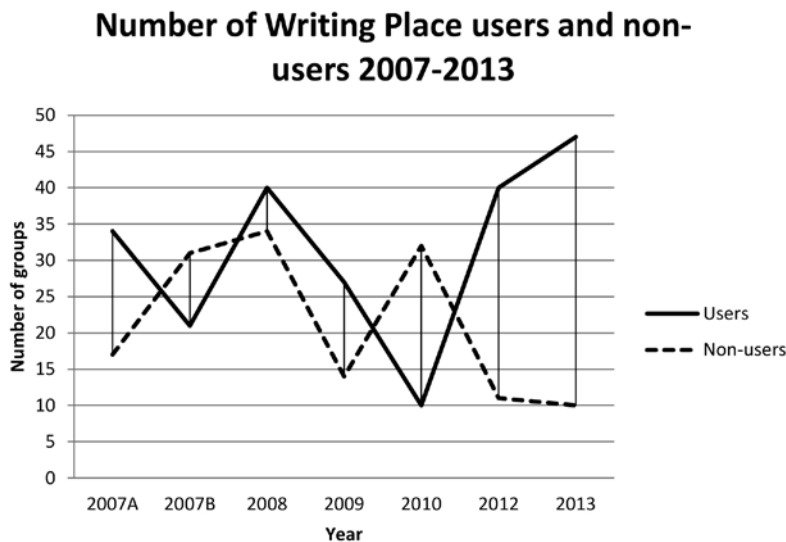


Figure 1: Number of WP users and WP non-users (2007–2013)

Table 1 indicates that, in general, the number of WP users was greater than that of WP non-users. However, of particular concern is the sharp drop in WP usage between 2007A (67%) and 2010 (24%). The trend in usage from 2010 (24%) to 2013 (82%) increased sharply. Overall, however, a zig-zag trend in the usage of the WP was apparent over the six years (2007 to 2013), as shown in Figure 1.

This zig-zag trend in WP usage might be attributed to various factors, including the nature of the assignment task. As noted earlier, the 2008 and 2009 tasks involved empirical research, and the 2009 task additionally required the creation of a marketing communications plan. It is possible that the inclusion of the empirical research component in 2008 and 2009, and the creative component in 2009, may

have led students to downplay the importance of the written/discursive aspects of the tasks, thus leading to lower demand for WP support in those years.

Although students are encouraged to have their assignment drafts ready well in advance of the submission date so that they have sufficient time to consult the WP and then revise their work, this, from the authors' experience, does not always happen. Time management, therefore, appears to be a key issue affecting WP usage. There is generally a high demand for WP consultations shortly before the assignment submission date, and not all groups can be accommodated in the limited number of consultation slots available at this stage. The number of consultation slots on offer is also linked to the number of WP tutors appointed, which in turn is dependent on the level of funding allocated for this purpose and which varies from year to year. Such factors may have contributed to the dip in the 2010 usage figures.

Performance of WP users versus non-users

Figure 2 shows the results of a preliminary analysis comparing the performance of WP users and non-users, in terms of the average group mark achieved for the assignment (out of a possible 100).

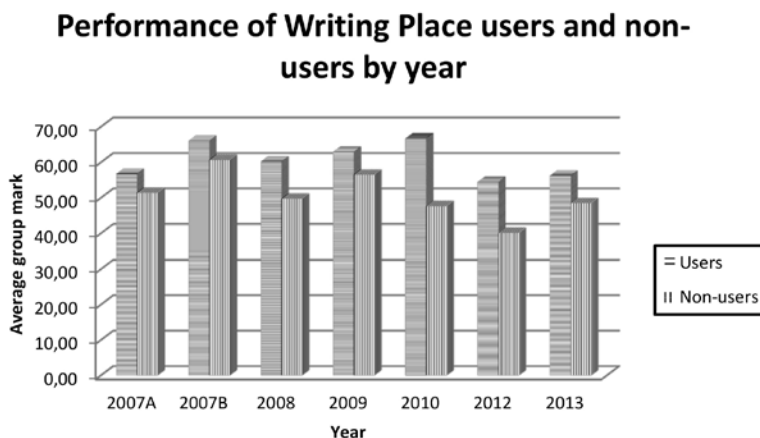


Figure 2: Performance of WP users and non-users by year

From a visual inspection of Figure 2, it is clear that WP users performed better on average than WP non-users; whether this observed difference was statistically significant will be examined shortly.

Figure 3 shows the variability of the performance of the students as measured using the coefficient of variation:

$$\text{Coefficient of variation} = \frac{\text{standard deviation of the group marks}}{\text{average of the group marks}}$$

Variability of performance of Writing Place users and non-users by year

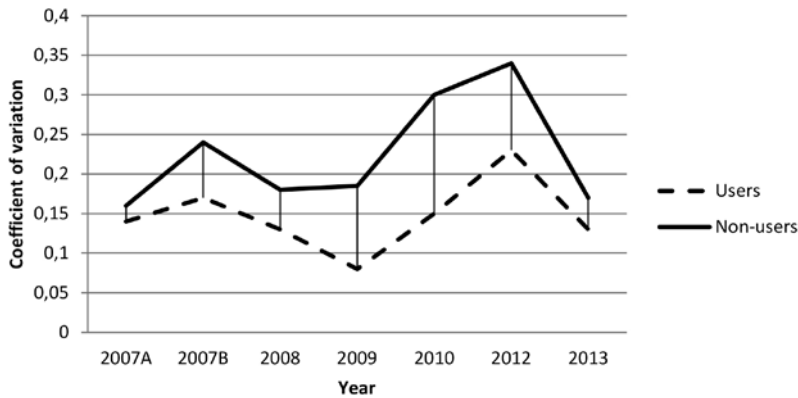


Figure 3: Variability of performance of WP users and WP non-users by year

A visual inspection of Figure 3 indicates that there was greater variability in the marks of WP non-users compared to users.

To test whether the differences in average marks observed in Figure 2 were statistically significant, a t -test for two independent samples was performed. Because this test differs depending on whether the variances, σ^2 , of the two samples under comparison are different or not (where the subscript 'u' denotes users and 'n' non-users), an F-test was first performed to test the equality of the variances:

$$H_0: \sigma_u^2 = \sigma_n^2 \text{ versus } H_1: \sigma_u^2 \neq \sigma_n^2$$

where H_0 denotes the null hypothesis and H_1 the alternate hypothesis.

Table 2 shows the results of the F-test performed to test for the equality of the variances of the group marks for each year and the subsequent hypothesis test:

$$H_0: \mu_n = \mu_u \text{ versus } H_1: \mu_n < \mu_u$$

In the above hypothesis, the symbol μ denotes the population mean (i.e., what is being tested is whether the average marks of WP users and WP non-users are the same or whether WP non-users significantly have lower marks on average compared to users). The null hypothesis is rejected if the p -value is ≤ 0.05 . Applying this criterion leads to the conclusions in the last row of Table 2.

Table 2: Comparison of means and variances of WP users (U) and WP non-users (N) by year

	2007A		2007B		2008		2009		2010		2012		2013	
	N	U	N	U	N	U	N	U	N	U	N	U	N	U
Mean	51.41	56.74	60.68	66	49.74	60.2	56.5	62.93	47.66	66.7	40.09	54.45	48.5	56.21
Variance	71.13	61.66	214.22	124.6	80.3	65.8	109.35	25.84	204.3	105.6	184.7	150.97	68.5	52.3
Coefficient of variation	0.14	0.16	0.17	0.24	0.13	0.18	0.08	0.185	0.15	0.3	0.23	0.34	0.13	0.27
Number of observations	17	34	31	21	34	40	14	27	32	10	11	40	10	47
F-value	1.15		1.72		1.22		4.24		1.94		1.22		1.31	
P-value	0.3544		0.1043		0.2740		0.0008		0.148		0.3089		0.258	
t-statistic	-2.23		-1.41		-5.27		-2.17		-3.9		-3.36		-2.99	
P-value	0.01518		0.0824		0.0000		0.0227		0.0002		0.0008		0.0021	
Conclusion	$\sigma_n^2 = \sigma_u^2$ and $\mu_n < \mu_u$		$\sigma_u^2 = \sigma_n^2$ and $\mu_n = \mu_u$		$\sigma_u^2 = \sigma_n^2$ and $\mu_n < \mu_u$		$\sigma_u^2 \neq \sigma_n^2$ and $\mu_n < \mu_u$		$\sigma_u^2 = \sigma_n^2$ and $\mu_n < \mu_u$		$\sigma_u^2 = \sigma_n^2$ and $\mu_n < \mu_u$		$\sigma_u^2 = \sigma_n^2$ and $\mu_n < \mu_u$	

As shown in Table 2, there is significant statistical evidence that WP users perform better than non-users on average, because for all years the p -value was ≤ 0.05 with the exception of 2007B. In other words, the average assignment marks achieved by WP users were significantly higher than those achieved by non-users in all years, with the only exception being the second assignment in 2007 (i.e. 2007B), where there was no significant difference in the average marks of WP users and non-users. Consequently, it can be concluded that the WP is effective as a tool for improving the performance of students in their Marketing Communications group assignments.

The analysis of data also points to consistency in the performance of WP users and non-users over the years. Figure 3 shows that the extent of variability of group marks in relation to the population mean was always higher for non-users than users (i.e., in all years the group marks of non-users differed from the average mark of non-users more than the group marks of users differed from the average mark of users). In addition, Table 2 shows that the null hypothesis of equality of variances (hence standard deviation of group marks from the average mark) is accepted in all but one case (2009), indicating that there was no significant difference in the variance of the users in relation to non-users over the years.

DISCUSSION

Given the significant and consistent impact that WP use makes to students' performance, it is unfortunate that more students do not make use of this resource (with WP users constituting between 24% and 82% of the marketing communications class over the six-year period under study). The factors underpinning WP usage and non-usage should form the focus of future research endeavours. Understandings gleaned from such research could inform the development of strategies to increase WP usage. Possible reasons behind the usage or non-usage of the WP by the third-year marketing communications students in the study might be related to a number of factors, outlined below.

Understanding the WP programmatically

The nature of the assessment task for the WP to engage

The inclusion of an empirical research component in the task in certain years (2008 and 2009) might have led some students not to seek WP support, as they may have perceived the task to be an applied 'research' task rather than an academic 'writing' task. Furthermore, the potential audience (academic or professional) that students were writing for might also have had some impact. For example, in 2009, the task required students to create a marketing communications plan for a client, which perhaps led students to believe that the 'academic' writing support offered by the WP

might not be pertinent to a task perceived to be geared more towards a ‘professional’ audience.

Additionally, as the assessment task was a group assignment, perhaps some students believed that they would get adequate ‘resources’ to manage the assignment from their peers, suggesting that they might have expected their learning from the assignment to emerge from within the peer group rather than from a formal structure like the WP. (However, the findings showed that this belief the students might have had did not in fact materialise, as WP users consistently outperformed WP non-users.)

As noted earlier, a further consideration influencing WP usage might be related to students’ time management skills, which is something that could perhaps be addressed in the module.

Students’ understanding of the WP

It might be that students did not make greater use of the WP because they were either not aware or convinced of the value and potential benefit of doing so. If this is the case, then the findings presented in the article might be useful in helping to change this situation. Like funders, it is possible that students may have been swayed by hard quantitative evidence of WP efficacy. Indeed, indications are that this may well have been the case.

The module lecturer has made students aware over the last couple of years that WP users tend to perform better than WP non-users on the marketing communications assignment. It is possible that the sharing of this information with the students may have contributed to some extent to the higher WP usage apparent in the last two years (2012 and 2013), as shown in Table 1. A similar strategy could perhaps be employed to help to address the often erroneous perception that writing centres provide only ‘remedial’ support (Archer and Richards 2011), which may also be a reason why more students do not seek out their services. It is possible that final-year undergraduate students may also feel that, as senior students, they do not require much support with their writing. Accessing the WP may be conceived as a demonstration of their lack of ability or a marker of their deficiencies.

Another approach that the lecturer could consider to encourage WP use might be to ‘embed’ some WP support into the module, during class time, so that such support comes to be seen as an integral component of the module. Currently, WP support exists ‘outside’ the module and, as such, might be seen by some students as being of peripheral importance to their performance in the module.

Making writing centre attendance mandatory for all students is currently unlikely to be a feasible option given the capacity constraints that writing centres tend to face at the present moment; additionally, the notion of mandatory attendance is highly contested in writing centre practice (North 1984; Thaiss et al. 2012). Perhaps the challenges lie not with the writing centres only, but also depend on how disciplinary-

based experts understand and interpret the shared responsibility that both they and the writing centre staff have to inculcate quality exit level outcomes and graduate attributes amongst exiting students in higher education.

Staff engagement with the WP

The nature and extent of the disciplinary lecturer's engagement with the WP may be pertinent to whether or not students elected to access WP support. As noted previously, the engagement amounted simply to the lecturer always providing the assessment task and rubric to the WP in advance, and discussing task expectations with consultants on occasion. This sort of limited and behind-the-scenes engagement is unlikely to convey to students the value placed on WP support and its potential impact on their performance, which more collaborative and visible engagement between the lecturer and the WP (ideally embedded in the module, as noted above) might well achieve, thereby possibly contributing to greater uptake of WP support.

Currently, limited or no engagement between the disciplinary lecturer and the WP tends to be the norm across all of the final-year undergraduate marketing modules. Although this might seem to suggest that the lecturers transfer the responsibility for academic literacy out of their domain to the WP, this might not necessarily be the case. Previous research located in the marketing discipline at UKZN (Arbee 2012) points to a range of possible reasons for the lack of engagement. The following perspectives, which emerged from that study, out of interviews with the lecturers of the final-year undergraduate marketing modules, are pertinent in this regard: one lecturer viewed writing as a generic skill rather than as a discipline-specific practice and thus saw the writing development role as falling outside the lecturer's ambit of ('content') responsibility; a second lecturer conversely felt that the discipline had to take full responsibility for developing students' discipline-specific academic literacies (thus seeing no role for engagement with the WP); and a third lecturer, while acknowledging that both parties do have a role to play in this regard, seemed to view each party as undertaking its role separately rather than collaboratively.

Additionally, perhaps some lecturers, like students, may feel that writing support is not as important for final-year undergraduate students as for first-year students, as they may expect senior students to be more familiar with expectations; they may, therefore, choose not to engage with the WP on modules at this level.

It could also be argued that the very nature of a discipline-specific writing centre may contribute towards a lack of engagement because the lecturers are likely to expect the WP consultants to be familiar already with the appropriate management studies genres and discourse conventions and have expertise in the required literacies. Indeed, this raises the question of whether such engagement/collaboration is in fact necessary in this context (given that WP users do outperform WP non-users); thus perhaps challenging the often-held assumption that collaboration is necessarily always 'good'.

As noted earlier, the management studies WP provides support for academic essay writing at the broad disciplinary level. It functions more as a generic language development unit within the management studies context, rather than as a discipline-specific discourse shaper – perhaps a weakness that could be addressed. According to Zhu (2004), various management studies sub-disciplines may have their own discourse conventions and constitute different discourse communities. Thus, in a general undergraduate commerce degree comprising modules from several sub-disciplines, and in which students are accordingly expected to navigate various discourse communities and conventions, engagement between lecturers in these various sub-disciplines and the WP staff could potentially help to further enhance student performance – especially if the WP staff is not from the same management studies sub-discipline that the student's task is located within – by enabling support to be provided at a more discipline-specific level. Sustained collaborative engagement could help to make lecturers' tacit insider knowledge of their sub-discipline's discourse more explicit; furthermore, such engagement provides a space not just for surfacing, but also for questioning and challenging, pedagogical mainstream assumptions (Clarence 2012; Jacobs 2005, 2007; McKay and Simpson 2013).

Understanding the WP operationally

Other factors influencing the nature of either participating or not in the WP could centre on the availability (perhaps because of financial resource constraints) of WP tutors to provide support; their expertise in offering such support has not been formally examined in any depth. The sheer logistics of dealing with increasing enrolments of students in final-year management studies programmes could also have a long-term effect on the motivation of students who attempt to access the WP. The logistics of operational considerations of a writing centre are matters of concern that could be investigated further.

Understanding writing centres and the world of employment

Griffin (2001) raises another point that may be pertinent to the sort of collaboration in which writing centres serving business students may need to engage. He notes that although the disciplinary lecturer may be the primary audience for business students' writing, future employers are an important second audience (because writing tasks often require students to write for a business audience). Perhaps collaboration might then need to be extended to include this audience. This poses a question about what kind of collaboration from the discursive world of work could be infused into the WP as an induction programme for near exit level students.

Understanding writing centres within a macro-national perspective

Research exploring factors influencing levels of writing centre usage, and ways of encouraging greater usage of the services provided by writing centres, is important when set against a macro-national perspective, such as examining their potential purpose/role within the South African higher education landscape. Arguably, writing centres have an important role to play as ‘potential agents of change’ in that they are ‘uniquely empowering spaces which can contribute to the quest for social equality in ways that few other university structures can’ (Archer and Richards 2011, 6). Writing centres, potentially, are mediating centres, which induct students not only into the localised skills of orientation to linguistic writing skills, but also on how to produce attributes of the discourse of the discipline. Thus, they are a potential employability tool. However, whether the writing centres are choosing for pragmatic or operational reasons to confine themselves to a limited scope, is worthy of further investigation. Such research will have much wider macro relevance. What kind of expertise, therefore, will be required by writing centre staff, and how they mediate their expertise with the discipline experts, is a crucial point for further study.

Understanding writing centres’ impact methodologically

Studies exploring the efficacy of writing centres have tended to do so primarily from a qualitative stance. However, the study reported on here shows that a quantitative approach can also make a useful contribution to generating further questions that research needs to address in more systematic ways. Such studies should include understanding the writing centres’ impact by providing a ‘big picture’ view (especially when the data spans several years, as was the case here), which helps to identify trends and aspects of interest or concern for possible further study. The writing centre has potential to operate as a successful stimulus at many levels: at macro level, at programmatic level and at institutional level.

The current study was able to address questions such as whether the support provided by the writing centre makes a difference to students’ performance; what the extent of this difference is; whether this difference is consistently evident over time; and whether it is a meaningful (i.e., statistically significant) difference within a programme focus. The answers to these questions provide ‘hard’ evidence of writing centre impact, which could be persuasive to potential funders and others as outlined earlier, and also help encourage greater WP use among students, given the positive impact of WP support on students’ performance.

At the same time, the findings of the quantitative study presented here also provoke more questions – in other words, the stories behind the figures. The article should therefore not be read as an attempt to give priority to the quantitative research approach, but as an illustration as to how such quantitative small-scale studies are capable of generating potentially new questions for future studies. A follow-through

qualitative approach might be appropriate. It is between the cross-over of both the qualitative and the quantitative approaches that richer insights can be developed into the phenomenon of activating quality exit level 'graduateness' (Wheelahan 2003).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The article has made a case for the use of small-scale quantitative research studies within the context of exploring the value of writing centres within the specific discipline of management studies. The study probed beyond the conventional boundaries of research on writing centres, which has tended to use qualitative studies to justify their worthwhileness. The article offers insight into the noteworthy conclusion that writing centres do indeed influence the assessment performances of students in an exit level module. Moreover, the study also sheds light on how the nature of the task set by disciplinary experts could also influence whether students approach staff at the writing centre. The study has shown how specific group assignment tasks moved students to believe that it is not 'writing skills' they need, but broader social and discourse skills within the profession of management studies to conduct a communication-related task. Clearly, their response suggested that they believed that the writing centre could not offer such input. This perhaps points to the possible limited scope of expertise that lies within the writing centre, which cannot traverse into discursive academic literacy at advanced levels.

Both staff and students currently have only a superficial understanding of the potential that the writing centre can offer as a site for developing linguistic skills. This raises the question as to how and when the various stakeholders who shape the discourse of a discipline are collaborating in determining the scope of the work of writing centres. The present study revealed a hesitancy, with the stakeholders staring across their respective fences – each offering possible critiques of each other's inability to appreciate the expertise (and its boundaries) in the discourse surrounding management studies, with each activating discourses from their present vantage points: programmatically, operationally, pragmatically and theoretically.

When all of these stakeholders come to acknowledge their perceived vulnerabilities and values, it is likely that the writing centre will become a co-owned space for the activation of quality graduate potential. Such acknowledgment warrants a degree of confidence to collaborate, to exchange and to make implicit world views, perspectives and expertise (and prejudices), explicit.

The writing centre is not simply about producing writing; it is about producing graduates with the requisite discursive practices of disciplines: from the world of work, the world of academia and the world of academic literacy practices. Moreover, the students' ability to acknowledge what the writing centre is and how it could become a pivotal part of their academic growth will be crucial in this shifting dialogue.

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