



# Beyond Barriers and Resistance: Peer Tutor Reflections on Writing Centre Practice During and Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract.** Writing is a core staple of academic and discipline-specific discourses. Students, therefore, having entered the university, are required to demonstrate a minimum proficiency in academic writing as well as the potential to build upon effective academic discourse. Academic writing is thus vital to students' academic access, performance, and success. Writing Centres play an important role in supporting students in the successful completion of their academic journeys through integrated writing support. The study discusses how peer tutors at the selected University of Technology Writing Centre adapted their pedagogical practices during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. The shift from face-to-face, physical location to blended support meant that peer tutors needed to reconceptualise strategies on how they strive to provide a learning environment that enhances students' academic writing experiences. Tutors' experiences during hybrid consultations and their reflections in written reports are used to explore the pertinent challenges and opportunities for Writing Centres. Adopting a reflective approach, the study interrogates the need for the development of innovative techniques that enhance substantive remote tutoring experiences and academic writing development. The study adopted the academic literacies model as the underpinning theoretical framework. Data from this case study indicates that tutors reflect on pedagogical practices as well as blended learning environments when engaging with students. This study concludes that Writing Centres need to devise hybrid support strategies that are responsive to students' needs for tutors to effectively support all students.

**Keywords:** Academic literacies · Academic writing · COVID-19 · Hybrid · Peer-tutors · Transitioning · Writing Centre

## 1 Introduction

Academic writing is illustrative of a disciplinary worldview and how knowledge is produced and shared within higher education [1]. Epistemological access and students' success are regarded as complex processes that most South African universities address through initiatives such as Writing Centres. Writing Centres are conceived as spaces, in the university environment, whose main purpose is to support writing, provide remediation for weak writers and provide support for programmes utilising different pedagogies

and theoretical underpinnings [2]. According to Archer and Richards [3], the Writing Centre is a “learning and engagement” space, where ideas and disconnected thoughts are structured. In this space, students are afforded learning opportunities of experimenting with different genres, without being judged. Writing Centre spaces provide opportunities for students and tutors to engage and reflect on their learning process [4]. Writing Centres need to be constantly re-evaluated to restructure writing support practices [5]. Notably, in early interventions, the Writing Centre focused on developing the writing, not the writer.

Contextually, the pedagogic aim of Writing Centres goes beyond mastering writing conventions and offers writing companionship for students to develop, reflect and enhance their writing process [6]. This allows students to reach and fulfil their diverse writing potentials through engagement with writing practices underpinning writing as a social construct. Concerns about students’ academic writing in undergraduate programmes have been well documented in institutions of higher education. The role of peer writing tutors is to assist and support students’ writing development within the discipline [7]. Peer tutors’ role is seen as that of assisting students with a discipline-specific text that is crucial to students’ access and success in higher education. In this manner, [8] reconceptualises Writing Centres’ role in developing students’ academic writing. It is suggested that there is a need for Writing Centres to rethink their role in socialising students into the disciplinary discourse within higher education [9]. Thus, university Writing Centres are viewed and understood as collaborative spaces of engagement and learning [10].

In 2020, the COVID-19 era of unexpected changes necessitated the move to find different novel ways of teaching and learning in higher education. As such, institutions had to develop pedagogical strategies to facilitate the shift from face-to-face to remote teaching and learning. This meant transitioning academic activities and support programs to online platforms [11]. Given the centrality of academic writing in how knowledge is produced and shared within higher education, institutions developed new innovative ways of supporting students’ writing development [10]. To this effect, some scholars argue that blended, and hybrid models of writing support are likely to prevail in the post-pandemic world [12].

This paper presents a case study of how the shift to online and blended space impacted how writing support is realised and negotiated during and post-COVID-19. Situated in the Midlands campus Writing Centre of the selected University of Technology (UoT), the study reflects on the peer tutors’ experiences and perceptions of transitioning from face-to-face, physical location to online space. Embedded in the academic literacies model, this study first focuses on the values and principles that view writing as a social practice [13]. Secondly and centrally, the research aims at assessing the innovative strategies that peer tutors employed when engaging with students during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

The current study adopts the academic literacies model for understanding Writing Centre practices and developing sound pedagogical and transformative approaches to learning, writing and reading [14, 15]. The novel view of this approach is an important factor that has influenced the conceptualisation of integrated writing support offered by

Writing Centres. This approach enables tutors to develop effective strategies to assist students writing development and learning process. This agrees with Clarence and McKenna [16] the transformative goal of academic literacies model which “focuses on changing literacy practices and understandings in ways that enable students to learn how to know, and show what they know, more successfully.”

As such in utilising the academic literacies model it becomes pertinent to assess in the varied contexts of higher education, the values that guide the type of assistance given to students considering contextual and circumstantial aspects. There is no denying that the COVID-19 pandemic provided a debilitating context which affected teaching and learning and the effort to engage in academic writing development at the Writing Centre. It becomes pertinent then to assess the values that guide the type of writing support provided for students at the Writing Centre during and beyond this pandemic. Moreover, to realise the ethos of the academic literacies model it is also crucial to assess the innovative ways Writing Centre tutors used to assist students considering the constraints posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2 Problems and Methodology

The shift from face-to-face, physical location to online space meant that Writing Centres needed to reconceptualise their pedagogical practices and reimagine their physical space to continue supporting students during and beyond COVID-19. The article focuses on understanding how COVID-19 impacted Writing Centre tutors’ academic support practice during and post-pandemic. It was important to interrogate tutors’ perceptions regarding the values/principles and the pedagogies that guided their academic support practices during and post-COVID-19 pandemic times. This study utilises the qualitative interpretive approach which recognises that reality is subjective, socially constructed and a combination of various perceptions [17]. The study context is the Midlands Campus Writing Centre at the selected UoT. The Midlands Campus Writing Centre is one among six Writing Centres in the UoT tasked among other duties to assist students and staff with writing in different disciplines, reading, researching and referencing. These tasks are achieved through trained tutors and Writing Centre professionals.

The study draws on data from the written reflections of twelve peer writing tutors who were part of the Writing Centre during the COVID-19 outbreak from 2020 to 2021. The study reflects on how Writing Centre tutors’ experiences transitioning from face-to-face, physical location to online space through self-administered written reflections. Pertinent questions that guided the written reflections were grounded on the views of the academic literacies model but specifically tried to inquire regarding the following major themes: *Values and Principles Guiding Writing Centre Practice; Innovative Strategies Employed by Writing Centre Tutors During COVID-19; Ways of Enhancing Writing Centre Practice During and Beyond Pandemic Times.*

Adopting a purposive sampling approach, the twelve participants working in the Writing Centre were selected for the study. The purposive sampling method was used considering that it allows units (people, organisations) are selected based on the judgment of the researcher [18]. Notably also, in purposive sampling participants are selected because they are solidly knowledgeable regarding the experience or phenomenon under

investigation in research [19, 20]. Against this backdrop, the participants in this study were selected considering their unique position as Writing Centre tutors knowledgeable regarding the current study's research problem.

Collected data were presented and analysed by operationalising the content analysis and the thematic approaches. Content analysis according to [21] involves the presentation of data using words and themes making it possible to draw some explanation of the results. This data analysis method is adopted considering that it can be applied to a broad range of texts [21], which is important since the data for this study consists of written reflections in textual form. Secondly, the thematic analysis approach was also used to analyse generated data considering that it is convenient for assessing participants' experiences and perceptions in addition to their construction of events in their contexts [22]. In utilising the above two analytical approaches the strategy was to methodically examine the data in the form of text, organising them in themes guided by the research objectives, and discussing the data linking perceptions to the theoretical perspectives and conclusions in extant literature.

A constraint attributed to the qualitative interpretive approach utilised in this study is that it lacks precise procedures to realise substantial and reliable results. Similarly, there is a possibility of bias on the part of research participants and probably from the researchers' interpretation of data. All these points to the issue of trustworthiness which is the degree of confidence in research data, interpretation and methods [23]. To address the issue of trustworthiness in this research, the triangulation method was used, and the strategy was to discuss and interpret generated data endeavouring to compare and corroborate findings with views from extant literature [24, 25]. Lastly considering ethical concerns regarding ensuring confidentiality and participants' anonymity, codes are used to represent participants; their real names are not used in the presentation of data and discussions.

### **3 Results of the Research and Discussion**

#### **3.1 Values and Principles Guiding Writing Centre Practice**

Responses to the question regarding the values and principles that guided Tutor's online consultations with students during the COVID-19 pandemic reveal that participants developed and deployed various positive values and principles which assisted them to deal with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic on academic writing processes. Table 1 summarises participants' responses.

A notable foundation of the academic literacies model is the understanding that the writing process is a social practice, which among other values aims to go beyond the emphasis on language and written aspects prevailing in academia [13, 26]. Participants' responses under the theme of values and principles guiding Writing Centre practices have variously validated the view of the academic literacies model rooted in social practice. Notably, participants' responses reveal different value systems and principles guiding their remote interactions and consultations with students at the Writing Centre context of this study. It is revealing to note that there are certain values which judging from the participants' views were prominent. Some of these values and principles occurring at least two times include Honesty, Professionalism, Dialogical approach, Patency, Time

**Table 1.** Values and Principles that Guided Tutors' Consultation during Pandemic Times

Participants	Values and Principles
T1	Self-development, Interpersonal Skills, Being Frank, Responsibility, Honesty, Tolerance, Adaptability
T2	Willingness to Learn, Guiding and Assisting, Sensitivity to Student's Background, Adaptability
T3	Teamwork, Punctuality, Professionalism, Honesty
T4	Self-development through reading, Dialogical consulting approach, Encouraging students to read widely
T5	Honesty, Patency, Time management, Unbiased
T6	Patency, Honesty, Comfortability, Time Management, Setting Priorities
T7	Academic humility, Dialogical approach, Going the extra mile, Giving positive affirmation, Approachability
T8	Good communication, Professionalism, Punctuality, Discretion, Teamwork
T9	Reliability, Discipline, Professionalism, Hardworking
T10	Openness, Sense of responsibility
T11	Punctuality, Self-motivated, Professionalism, Teamwork, Student Centeredness.
T12	Professionalism, Honesty, Respect, Sympathy, Empathy, Punctuality, Trust, Teamwork, Accountability, Reliability, Integrity, Responsibility

management, Punctuality, Teamwork, and Responsibility. It is further apparent from the responses that most of the values and principles enumerated by the participants are those that encouraged and facilitated academic writing consultations based on the understanding of the writing process as a social practice.

Arguably also, these values and principles enumerated by participants could in many ways have assisted them to go beyond the barriers set by the COVID-19 pandemic to assist students remotely (online) in their writing difficulties during the pandemic time. Even though the responses have been positive, however, it will be central to undertake a systematic study to evaluate to what extent each enumerated value and principle impact the successful academic writing process. Understanding this could be central to a better understanding of how socio-ethical values and principles can impact and guide peer writing tutors and Writing Centre professionals. On this, it is pertinent to explore all factors (including values and principles) that impinge on academic literacies' vision of reconceptualising and realising integrated writing support offered by Writing Centre tutors [15], and how Writing Centres were able to sustain their status as collaborative spaces of engagement and learning [27] during pandemic times. It is also central to understand the nexus between the values and principles and the different strategies employed by the tutors to consult with students in the face of the barriers and challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 3.2 Innovative Strategies Employed by Writing Centre Tutors During COVID-19

Participants' various narratives reveal that there were novel and innovative strategies employed by the Tutors to assist them to go beyond the barriers imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Their responses reveal explicit and implicit affirmation of the utilisation of different online applications and programmes to assist students during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Some of the most revealing narrations are presented below.

#### T2

*The COVID-19 pandemic called for a lot of us to be out of our comfort zones. First, I had to learn to use programs like MS Team, and platforms like whiteboards. I heard to learn to generate links and invite the team/group members for the consultation meant for 2 or more students. ...Personally, making comments on the word document and send back to the student was undoubtedly inadequate. I strongly believe in hearing the student's opinions and getting to see if we understand one another. Therefore, for every session, I phoned the students over MS Team, and we discussed the entire work while I also made comments and notes on the word document. Almost 40% of the time, the student was not available on MS Team, so I would phone the directly, introduce myself and ask to have a one-on-one over MS Team.*

#### T3

*During the Covid-19 pandemic period, I have made use of several ways in engaging to students. The following are some of the ways: MS Teams, WhatsApp and Video calling. The features that MS teams have made it my preferred mode for consultation. Some sessions I recorded while doing the consultations with the student. This enabled the student to access the recording later on, after the consultations. With group assignments, I shared my screen and students could all contribute throughout the session. With some students, I made WhatsApp calls and Video calls to contact them faster.*

#### T4

*The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way we engaged with students. Before the pandemic when we had face-to-face consultations it was easier to notice if the student understood what was being discussed by looking at their body language and all. MS Teams, Whiteboard, Document Review and WhatsApp were some of the ways we used to reach and engage with students who required assistance. MS Teams and Whiteboard though able to mimic face-to-face consultations came with challenges as students complained that they cannot afford or did not have the data to come online to discuss the piece of work they would have submitted for review. MS Teams and Whiteboard from my point of view were the best platforms to use but sadly 70% of the time students would be unavailable or unreachable and the only solution would be to do a document review.*

#### T6

*As much as COVID-19 has disrupted a lot of interaction channels with students, in need of help when it comes to academic writing skills. The use of online correspondence (MS team, WhatsApp, whiteboard, and email) interaction for me, has increasingly given rise to the number of consultations I usually get. In comparison to face-to-face interaction.*

*For me, online correspondence is very conducive for both a tutor's and the student's health, during this pandemic. It also allows the student to have a back-and-forth WhatsApp conversation with me. On what is needed of the student, to be thoroughly done in his/her work. Promoting a constant, proactive, commutable tutor-student interaction, in various online media channels.*

## **T12**

*I engage with students in any way I can. Working online hasn't been easy for me and the students I have been tutoring. Online consultations came with a lot of problems. Some students have a poor network because they stay in remote areas, some don't have data, some have electricity, some are forced to do chores during the consultation time and some don't even know how to find the Writing Centre online platform. Since a lot of students have been failing to come online during their consultation times, I obtain their number from the booking and I call them on WhatsApp or directly to ask if they can come online. If they can't, I ask them if they are comfortable with consulting via WhatsApp. Most students prefer this and it makes everything easier.*

It has been established that the writing process as part of the academic literacies model is recursive, dynamic and flexible and that there are no prescribed routes or steps to take to achieve this [28]. As such, it is possible to adopt various means towards assisting students to be successful in their academic writing endeavours. On this, it is apparent from the different narratives of the participants that the dynamic and flexible nature of academic writing has enabled them to be innovative in their effort to overcome the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Online consultations using different digital and social media platforms have been expressed as being the way the participants as Writing Centre professionals used to assist students. Notably, the success of the participants could be attributed to the proliferation of different digital and social media in contemporary times which have contributed to revolutionising teaching and learning at various institutions of higher learning in South Africa and globally.

Discussing the impact of technological innovations on education, Serdyukov [29] notes that "Education not only needs new ideas and inventions that shatter the performance expectations of today's status quo; to make a meaningful impact, these new solutions must also grow large enough, to serve millions of students and teachers." This assertion, one would argue, validates the participants' use of available digital media approaches to overcome the constraints posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, some of these noted online digital and social media platforms like Emails, MS Teams, Whiteboard, Document Review, WhatsApp, etc. have been around for quite some time. But these platforms have not been used as mainline mediums used in teaching and learning at higher education institutions.

Indeed, in more recent times the use of Emails, MS Teams, Whiteboard, Zoom and other online platforms have become prevalent, and one would argue that the adoption of these platforms in the Writing Centre consultation context is quite innovative. This agrees with the academic literacies model the vision of conceptualising and reconceptualising integrated writing support offered by Writing Centres and the need to develop effective strategies to assist students writing development and learning process [15, 16]. Moreso it is pertinent to see that these platforms have relatively allowed the participants as Writing

Centre professionals to successfully carry out their task of assisting students remotely during COVID-19 times.

However, the views expressed by T12 regarding the challenges experienced in the use of online digital platforms to assist students are pertinent to note. This view agrees with other views mentioned by participants regarding the fact that there are indeed constraints to the use of online digital platforms to assist students and some of the noted challenges include poor or no access to the internet, the inability of students to have the resources (phones, tablets, laptops) and requisite technical skills to be able to utilise the digital platforms properly. These issues must be addressed so that the aim of the academic literacies model of getting students to be assisted in their writing endeavours is realised. This is even more pertinent considering the need to continue to assist students with their writing and reading needs in the context of the so-called “new normal” occasioned by the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 3.3 Enhancing Writing Centre Practice During and Beyond Pandemic Times

Considering the constraints posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a need for the Writing Centres to devise ways to be relevant and cater to students’ academic writing needs. It was pertinent to inquire from the participants their perceptions regarding how the Writing Centre strategies can be improved during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and its debilitating effects on education in general at the universities. Their various reflections/narrations indicate their stance on the need to improve strategies used by the Writing Centre to cater for students’ academic writing needs, especially with regard to the English language medium used in the study’s context. Some of the salient perceptions of the participants are presented below.

#### T1

*As a tutor, I have seen firsthand how some students struggle to express themselves in English. The way I see it, the Writing Centre should do more to host writing workshops that specifically target students who struggle with English. In these workshops, students can be taught basic things like common spelling errors, the use of different punctuation marks and basic sentence construction. In my experience, these are the most common challenges among students. It would also help to partner and work closely with departments within the university to make this a more strategic process. Over and above this, students need to be encouraged to read.... The Writing Centre can host a book club that focuses solely on reading for academic writing.*

#### T4

*UoT’s main language of communication is English. The Writing Centre is not there to teach English, but we can partner with the English department to help assist students who do not come from English-speaking backgrounds. The Writing Centre can host different discussion forums in English on a variety of topics that can bring students to come and be part of and share their viewpoints in English. This will encourage students*



*to express themselves better in English as they will put more effort into figuring out how best to express themselves to their intended audiences.*

#### **T6**

*To address and cater for the needs of students who have English as a second language. As a Writing Centre community, tutors should offer students a fraction of various learning options. For the effectiveness of their writing and reading skills. Such as, using diversified resources rather than focusing only on textbooks. Propose Writing Centre competitions to improve their writing skills and English audiobooks which are aligned with their school courses. That will enable them to familiarize the sound of new English words. Online writing skill videos will boost the memory of different English concepts. Ultimately, making use of a wide spectrum of intelligence and multi-sensory experiences and resources.*

#### **T7**

*Without argument, English is the language of instruction and assessment at UoT, therefore in as much as the Writing Centre may want to meet students where they are in terms of their language abilities or inabilities, ours is not to encourage them to stay where they are. We can meet them where they are while also helping to grow them to where they need to be. What I mean is that the current state whereby each centre has a diverse complement of staff who speak a varied number of languages can still work as a means of helping English Second Language students to understand academic discourse.*

#### **T10**

*The Writing Centre is doing a lot within its limited resources. However, I have noticed that students consult at the Writing Centre when they are “forced” by their lecturers to do so. The writing capabilities of these students will be greatly enhanced if there could be a way for the Writing Centre to be included in the curriculum for the students. In our higher institutions in Nigeria, we all had to offer “Use of English” as a compulsory course in our first and second years, irrespective of the field of study. This greatly helped our academic writing as well as academic reading and served as a bridge between our pre-university writing and varsity writing. It was a course we all had to pass before we could graduate.*

#### **T12**

*I think the first step for the Writing Centre to help these students is to provide a platform whereby students can come up with a specified problem other than just submitting work for “editing” as they say. ...writing includes reading and listening. Most students who have English as their second language may struggle with one of these and I think the Writing Centre needs to publicise that students can come forth with those kinds of problems even though it may not be writing. Since the Writing Centre has been around for some years now, it is now aware of most questions and problems students face every year. Assuming that these problems remain the same problems for new students every year, we could have something like a frequently asked questions database. For example, Hr students are coming asking for advice on how to write an application letter. We can write a how-to article that students can use so that when they write we would have*

*addressed most of the common problems they encounter. The good thing about it is every year, new students may still come and use that same article.... We need a continuous program that can help struggling students with their English.*

Interrogating ways of improving Writing Centre practices has led this study to consider how the Writing Centre can assist students in improving the English language medium. And it is apparent from the participants' responses that efforts of the Writing Centre have been geared towards improving the English reading and writing skills of students. Notably according to McKinney [30] "in many parts of the world, being literate in English is synonymous with being literate and with being educated. Alongside this, what counts as academic writing, and what kinds of English are recognised is a key concern." This study does not agree with the view that academic writing is synonymous with being literate or educated, however the assessment of ways that the Writing Centre can assist students with their need to master this language which is the main medium of teaching and learning in the study's context.

The assessment has been geared toward realising the need to assist the Writing Centre to become effective transitional spaces that provide integrated student support during and beyond COVID-19. The views expressed by the participants reveal their positive stance that indeed the Writing Centre practice can be improved towards assisting learners who come to the Writing Centres. It was obvious from the reflections that students who come to the Writing Centre do have difficulties writing in the English language and that there is a need to assist students to overcome these constraints. Most of the suggestions have pointed out the need to have workshops and devise different strategies at the Writing Centre to assist students to be literate in reading and writing in the English language.

The views and suggestions expressed by the participants in many ways agree with the academic literacies model which is also concerned with meaning-making and foregrounds what counts as knowledge in academic institutional contexts [13]. Notably, also the academic literacies model considers the processes of acquiring apposite and effective literacies practices as multifaceted, dynamic, situated and including epistemic matters [13]. Hence, the various suggestions by the participants including workshops, writing and reading contexts, etc. could be seen as a way to realise these attributes of academic literacies, especially with the effort to get the students in this study's context to grapple with the intricacies of the English language required for their learning.

It is pertinent to link the views in this section with the previous section which has considered how Writing Centres can become transitional spaces which utilise different remote strategies to assist students in the face of the recent COVID-19 pandemic. There is no denying the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a change in pedagogy and in the way, things were previously done in institutions of higher education. The move to remote learning and the co-option of different digital technology and social media platforms and incorporating them as innovative techniques is indeed a good strategy to enhance substantive remote tutoring in the Writing Centre. It is however apparent from the reflections of the participants that their tutoring online has met with some constraints hence the need to seek ways to improve online Writing Centre consultations. It is also pertinent that the suggestions to improve Writing Centre practices to assist students in developing academic writing consider the use of remote strategies. The use

of the different digital/online technology enumerated in the previous section can become central to realising this.

## 4 Conclusion

The study sought to reflect on how Writing Centre peer tutors experienced transitioning from face-to-face, physical location to online space during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on the academic literacies model, the study findings have shown that tutors adapted their pedagogical practices to develop effective academic support that is responsive to students writing needs. The tutors' reflections reveal a need for the Writing Centres to devise hybrid strategies that combine face-to-face and online tutoring to assist and support students in developing their academic writing practices. The study findings suggest an epistemological shift to create a responsive hybrid writing space and reconfigure the current writing support practice. This shift takes into consideration tutors' values and principles that guide their practice during and beyond pandemic times. It was with this realisation of the importance of Writing Centre practice as an important element, not only for its crucial role of peer tutors towards academic support but because the flexible mode of these academic literacies practice effectively supports students to develop as writers. This study concludes the Writing Centres' preparedness and the pertinent opportunities to substantively contribute towards the advancement of effective and accessible students' academic support experiences. The relevance and significance of this study rest in its aptitude to positively impact Writing Centre tutors' disposition toward an all-inclusive approach to hybrid academic writing development.

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