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Diffracting our Stories:
New questions about roles in and beyond South African university writing centres

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Abstract

South African writing centre scholarship reveals how writing centres have responded to changing circumstances in higher education. Much of this scholarship reflects processes of ongoing reflection and reflexivity, engaging and interrogating notions of resilience, agency and literacy in different ways. In this paper, we identify three broad writing centre narratives apparent in this scholarship. We then trouble some of these stories, including our own, by turning to bystander theory as a lens and diffraction as a methodology. This allows us to question how writing centre narratives assign the roles of victim, perpetrator and upstander in higher education, and in writing centres specifically. We wonder together about the roles assigned in these stories and their effects. We call for a more critical approach to understanding South African writing centre work and argue that our stories and roles, by over-focussing on the micro-level and neglecting the meso- and macro-levels, may unintentionally shield universities from having to enact systemic transformation.

Keywords: writing centres, diffraction, bystander theory, resilient pedagogies, higher education transformation

Introduction

We are two South African scholars, each working in different discipline-specific writing centres at a large, research-intensive university in Johannesburg. For almost a decade, we have collaborated and reflected together on the work that we do, and the stories that we and other writing centre practitioners tell about this work. Increasingly, we have felt the need to examine critically our deeply held values and beliefs about these writing centre narratives and practices. We want to ask new and more generative questions, not just about writing centres, but about agency and actors in higher education more broadly.

South Africa has a rich tradition of writing centre scholarship, striking in its detailed analysis of a range of writing centre practices and contexts. This is, broadly, captured in three edited books on writing centre pedagogies (Archer and Richards, 2011; Clarence and Dison, 2017;



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Rambiritch and Drennan, 2023). The multiple narratives about this work are layered, complex, intersecting, critical and sometimes contradictory. They should not be read in a temporal sequence; each one is told and developed alongside and sometimes enmeshed with others. In this paper, we begin by recounting briefly three of the stories commonly told about writing centre work in South Africa. First is the South African 'writing centre grand narrative' (McKinney, 2013) – the story that is told about South African writing centres' history and reason for being (Archer and Richards, 2011). The second story is particularly resonant with our writing centre work; the story about the transformative potential of developing student writing in the disciplines (Clarence and Dison, 2017; Dison and Moore, 2019; Nichols, et al., 2023a). The third story is the account of how writing centres work in times of social disruption and challenge; the story of resilient pedagogies and resistance to epistemic and linguistic injustices (Rambaritch and Drennan, 2023).

Both resilience and resistance are, however, contested concepts, especially as they relate to human agency. Bracke (2016: 13), for example, argues that the entrenchment of resilience at the core of most everyday conceptions of human agency is part of 'neoliberal worlding'. She further argues that this neoliberal conception of resilience actively undermines agency; that by expecting individuals to 'bounce back' in the face of unyielding structural inequality, 'resilience quietly shuts down pathways to another kind of future' (Bracke, 2016: 15). Interestingly, Mahmood (2005, in Bracke, 2016: 11) also critiques making resistance central to agency, arguing that in so doing, a performative dimension to agency is introduced which can lead to misrecognition of how agency and power operate.

With Barad (2007), Bracke (2016) and others, we became increasingly uncomfortable with traditional notions of reflection, resistance and resilience that underpin these stories, including our own. Bozalek and Romano (2023: 2), in this journal, suggest that diffractive methodologies offer 'alternative modes of criticality and critique' that ensure that researchers do not simply produce or displace the same ideas (Geerts and van der Tuin, 2021; Haraway, 2004). Diffraction offers a mode of analysis that both decentres the researcher(s) and is grounded in personal 'entanglement' in the work; it implies a 'self-accountable, critical, and responsible engagement with the world' (Geerts and van der Tuin, 2021: 174). Diffraction interferes with entrenched ways of seeing, so that difference and effects of difference emerge (Barad, 2007). Importantly, diffraction is an 'ethical and socially just practice, in that it does not do epistemological damage, pitting one theory/position/stance against another, but carefully and attentively doing justice to a detailed reading of the intra-actions of different viewpoints and how they build upon or differ from each other to make new and creative visions' (Bozalek and Zembylas, 2017: 118). Diffraction is not a rejection of what has been theorised before. Rather 'the foundations of the old, so to say, are being re-used to think anew' (Geerts and van der Tuin, 2021: 175). We therefore looked for a theory that would enable us to see our work from a new perspective. Bystander theory seemed to offer a potentially useful lens for troubling the prevailing narratives about writing centres in South African higher education and for questioning how relationships are explained in writing centre scholarship.

Originating in the field of social psychology, to reframe why some people intervene in situations of social conflict and others do not, bystander theory (Darley and Latané, 1968; Latané and Darley, 1969) is mostly used in research on bullying and gender-based violence. It is a useful framework for understanding social roles and agency. We decided to 'interfere' with the writing centre narratives by diffracting them through bystander theory; to be attentive to any patterns of differences that emerged; and to begin to consider the possible effects of any such patterns of difference. By identifying who tends to be characterised as 'victim', 'perpetrator' or 'upstander' in writing centre narratives, we can question these roles, especially our own, and begin to engage critically with the effects of the differences and questions that emerge. Our choice to diffract writing centre narratives through bystander theory is novel and, we will argue, generates new ways of seeing writing centres and their roles in the university.

In this paper, we present a diffractive framework through which to reimagine and reconceptualise the role of South African university writing centres and practitioners. Exploring the implications of this diffraction, and applying the framework in any detail, is the work of our next paper.

Story One: South African Writing Centres' 'Grand Narrative'

South Africa has its own 'writing centre grand narrative' (WCGN) – a term first introduced by McKinney, 2013 – that shares some similarities with the WCGN of the Global North. Many started modestly, in English or Education departments, or as part of a broader academic development programme that offered generic language and study skills courses (Archer and Richards, 2011). We too have a history of being consigned to library basements, of trying to be safe or cosy spaces where students feel comfortable and can talk about their writing, and of having to resist the various remedial conceptions identified by North (1984, 1994) and others, of being the 'grammar drill' centre or fixit shop. Most of our centres would also agree that writing is a process; that writing centres are essentially dialogic rather than transmission-oriented; and that writing centres should be student-centred and focus on the writer and not the writing (Nichols, 2017; North, 1984). Their main work is one-on-one non-directive writing consultations, although some writing centres align themselves with the more directive teaching of academic literacies (Pinetah, 2014).

However, as Santa (2009: 5) points out, in many ways, writing centre work is a 'profoundly local practice'. South African writing centres began to emerge in the early 1990s, at the same time as the country made the seismic political shift from Apartheid to a constitutional democracy. The establishment and development of writing centres in South Africa was strongly connected with the democratisation of education in the country and with the opening of universities to increasingly diverse student populations.

Much early writing centre work focused on helping students to understand academic literacies conventions that are often very different from school and community discourses (Boughey and McKenna, 2016; 2021). Nichols' (1998) seminal work emphasised the importance of a dialogical approach that challenged power relations and hierarchies. Some writing centres understood their work to be part of facilitating epistemological access (Morrow, 2009) – not just

physical access to higher education (Archer and Richards, 2011) – and developed programmes to equip 'under-prepared' students to engage productively with university discourses and ways of thinking. However, from the beginning, this work was characterised by most universities as 'dealing with the language problem' or 'helping second language students succeed at university' (Clarence and Dison, 2017: 7).

More recently, many South African writing centres are likely to tell the story of the 'writing centre movement', which is likened to revolutionary politics, in which the writing centre is central to the struggle to transform and decolonise higher education; to resist the hegemony of English; to resist the neocolonialism of the Global North; to oppose mainstream educational practices and be, instead a 'liminal' or 'anti-space' (Hotson and Bell, 2023: xiii). Rambiritch and Drennan (2023) use the metaphor of the hero in Campbell's journey to illuminate the peer tutors' role as mentor and guide in finding creative solutions to issues we face. They conducted a study highlighting peer tutors' archetypal functions in the writing centre space, and their argument presents possibilities for heightening awareness in the training of peer tutors for transforming the nature and quality of writing within the university. They suggest that 'it is the task of mentors, helpers and protectors, in the form of lecturers, tutors, peers and the like, to help the student-hero overcome these challenges and come out victorious at the end of their education journey' (Rambiritch and Drennan, 2023: 305).

Story one is therefore not static and has continued to evolve and develop in response to the persistent and increasingly complex challenges facing higher education. In the context of writing centres, and writing development in higher education, there is also a recognition in this account that generic approaches have very limited effect (Wingate, 2011). They tend to lead to a surface-level approach to writing (Macvaugh, et. al., 2014) and neglect the disciplinary specificity of academic writing (Mitchell and Evison, 2006). The WCGN has consistently viewed academic literacies as a set of social practices to enable all students to succeed at their academic work across a range of disciplines. Although the writing interventions are located within the writing centre itself, increasingly an argument is made for critical reading and writing to be developed contextually and to be brought into creating a 'meta-awareness around writing in the disciplines' (Clarence, 2011: 111). Dison et al. (2023: 275), for instance, describe how the writing centre at their university has expanded its role by collaborating with lecturers in discipline-based writing projects to make writing criteria and expectations in the discipline explicit.

Such shifts have led to the emergence of the second story that focuses on the transformative potential of developing writing in the disciplines. Clarence and Dison (2017) reflect critically, along with other international and South African scholars, on why and how some writing centre praxis has moved closer to the disciplines in the South African writing centre context.

Story Two: The Transformative Potential of Developing Writing In and With the Disciplines

There are arguments, from scholars such as Gardner and Ramsey (2005: 26), that 'writing specialists do their best work when opposing the practices of mainstream education, creating an

anti-space'. This is a dimension of the global WCGN that we question. In South Africa, where historically and systemically so much has been done to deny most of our students access to mainstream education, our best and most socially just work may be to create transformative spaces within mainstream education for writing development. This does not imply a passive acceptance and transmission of disciplinary norms and values; rather, it is a critical engagement with the discipline to facilitate access to knowledge and knowledge building through ongoing writing practices.

Discipline-based writing centres are still the exception in South Africa, where the norm remains to have a general writing centre for the university, either associated with the university library or with a version of a student success or academic support unit (Jacobs, 2015). Central to story two is the argument that writing can be used as a way of engaging all students with core course concepts, and to facilitate epistemological access (Morrow, 2009) to disciplinary content and writing in the discourse. The need to develop a disciplinary identity is seen as fundamental to writing development (Jacobs, 2007). Writing development is central to knowledge-building (Moore, 2022; Nichols, 2017; Quinot and Greenbaum, 2015; Wingate, 2011) and relationships are forged with disciplinary experts to embed the explicit teaching, modelling and critique of writing in courses for all students (Jacobs, 2007, 2013, 2015). Like story one, story two asks critical questions about the equitable purpose of meaning-making and engages with scholarly ways of thinking about student development and academic literacies in the disciplines.

Working with students in the disciplines can take several forms. Firstly, writing centre practitioners may collaborate with disciplinary experts on specific writing projects within or across disciplines (Daniels, et al., 2017; Esambe and Mkonto, 2017; Mtonjeni and Sefalane-Nkohla, 2017). This involves developing writing interventions to teach disciplinary thinking and writing (Bean, 2011). Secondly, writing-intensive courses can be conceptualised as a 'systemic mainstream project' in the university (Is Ckool, et al., 2019: 132) in which re-designed courses 'use writing as a vehicle for delivering course content' (Nichols, 2017: 41). Writing-intensive courses have been successfully implemented across all five faculties at one South African university since 2016 and are underpinned by core principles that foreground writing as critical thinking and communication (drawing on Elbow, 1998 and Bean, 2011). There is an explicit awareness of a dialogic pedagogy in academic writing (Bean, 2011) using process-oriented, non-directive approaches that encourage negotiation and responsibility-sharing.

The third approach to integrating writing practice in the disciplines is the emergence of writing centres that are located physically in the disciplines, and which involve long-term collaborations with disciplinary experts (Dison and Moore, 2019). In practice, disciplinary writing centres offer both individual consultations with peer writing mentors and curriculated writing groups (Dison and Kadenge, 2023), tutorials, lectures and written draft review as part of core courses across the degrees. Through a collaborative pedagogy (Jacobs, 2007) with course teachers, tasks and assessments are co-designed. The peer writing mentors, drawn from the discipline, play a key insider-outsider role in assisting students to become familiar with discourse norms as well as helping them to articulate problems and challenges, and communicating these

to teaching staff. Dison and Moore (2019) argue that through iterative cycles of reflection and dialogue with staff, students and writing mentors, writing is responsive to both disciplinary and student needs, which positively affects students' engagement and success.

Generative ideas have emerged from story two in re-thinking the quality of assignments, including multimodal elements, multilingualism and using technology to support reading and writing processes. The focus is on making the tacit explicit – enhancing awareness of requirements and processes – and developing metacognition so that students understand and can make choices about how they engage and write. There is a sharper focus in this story on how students experience writing and assessment expectations in different modes (Huang and Archer, 2017) and a shift towards more theorised approaches to writing pedagogies in the disciplines. Designing 'learning oriented assessment tasks' (Carless, 2015: 26) is fundamental to this process to encourage 'critical thinking about disciplinary concepts and theories, and to teach use of disciplinary evidence to make arguments' (Bean, 2011: 229). Some of this scholarship is congruent with Barad's (2007) concept of agential literacy, in which agency is conceived as distributed, rather than an individually located capacity, and in which it is acknowledged as being co-constructed. Agential literacy further 'recognises that knowledge is not transmitted … but is embodied, embedded and enacted in material-discursive social-scientific practices' (Taylor and Fairchild, 2019: 6).

Writing centre scholarship in story two reveals how being taught discipline-specific ways of thinking, reading and writing has enabled students to succeed academically (e.g. Bean, 2011; Daniels, et al., 2017). However, a counterargument exists that discipline-based programmes can be 'more affirmative than transformative' if they provide epistemological access to the disciplines without changing the status quo (Luckett and Shay, 2020: 50). Clarence (2018: 209) describes the neoliberal ideologies that 'cast the system and its standards as unproblematic, and the students and staff that cannot fit in as needing support'. This critique highlights ongoing contestations about the purpose and role of writing centres in higher education. Nonetheless, story two opens up possibilities for working both normatively – by making discourse norms explicit through teaching, modelling and scaffolding – and transformatively – by encouraging students to interrogate assumptions and power relations in text, and to critique dominant ways of thinking and writing in the discipline (Lamberti and Archer, 2023; Lillis and Scott, 2007; Paxton and Frith, 2015).

In both stories one and two, the 'academic literacies' approach underpinned much writing centre work (Lea and Street, 1998). This approach has enabled questioning disciplinary contexts and their writing practices. There have been critical questions about the discourses and linguistic choices valued by universities within story two and an exploration of the role of writing centres as 'change agents' beyond the constraints of normative assessment practices (Archer and Richards, 2011).

Story Three: Resilient Pedagogies in Times of Disruption

The past ten years have seen a range of disruptions to higher education. The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall campaigns, which called for free, decolonised higher education, led to many writing centre practitioners exploring ways to decolonise writing centre praxes (Mtonjeni, et al., 2023). A different kind of disruption was the Covid-19 pandemic and the turmoil it unleashed. Although not a focus of this paper, generative artificial intelligence (AI) is a newer disruption that has significant implications for writing centre pedagogies. This is where our third story emerges. During this time, we have engaged in a process of ongoing critical reflexivity, underpinned by resilient pedagogical practices (Thurston, 2021), the hallmark of South African writing centre 'success' stories (Rambiritch and Drennan, 2023: xx). These stories tell of developing flexible and resilient writing centre pedagogies that sustain learning experiences in disruptive circumstances (Dison and Kadenge, 2023; Moore, 2023; Nichols, et al., 2023b).

Over these ten years, resilience and resilient pedagogies have been viewed as 'continuous adaptation and critical reflection, challenging our own practices and changing them for better and more effective ones' to sustain 'pedagogically sound academic literacy support and development to meet the needs of our students' (Dison and Kadenge, 2023: 196). Writing centres nationally displayed 'robust reflection' during the student protests and encouraged participation and investment from all stakeholders (ibid.: 205). They continue to demonstrate resilience by formulating responsive and flexible writing pedagogies specific to their teaching and learning contexts. We perceive these principles of resilient pedagogy as impacting our teaching beyond a pandemic or a protest in enhancing accessibility, critical inquiry and connectivity with others. In other words, story three claims that resilient pedagogy has the potential to bring about longer-term and sustainable changes.

In this narrative, writing centre practitioners find resilience and resilient pedagogies to be a useful framework because of the focus on pedagogies and course design. Resilient pedagogies are seen to centre the design of teaching and learning activities and interactions that support meaningful learning and that are resistant to disruption (Jhangiani, et al., 2021). In the writing centre context, this often means rethinking and planning learning experiences and dialogic interactions for students in online and blended modes. However, resilient pedagogies can be conceptualised and applied in various ways and some scholars rightly approach the notion of resilience with caution. Resilience has been problematised as a neoliberal concept, one that actively undermines systemic change and that places the burden on individuals to adapt to unchanging and untransformed university structures (Bracke, 2016).

Resilience has also been conceived, questionably, as a fixed intrapersonal or psychological attribute, ignoring the vastly different conditions in which students learn, and so been critiqued as a point of privilege (Stommel, 2021). In a recent book chapter, Moore (2023) broadens the conception of resilience in a writing centre context by moving beyond the framing of resilience in psychological terms. She proposes a more integrative framework that illustrates how students work with lecturers to overcome academic and socio-cultural challenges. The focus here is on developing 'skills and strategies for coping with challenges (e.g., seeking social support, reducing

avoidance and disengagement) and providing appropriate resources such as programs which facilitate social connection (e.g., mentoring, peer support groups) and accessible student support' (Fullerton, et al.: 2021: 17). However, this reframing does not extend beyond individuals and programmes; the macro-level remains unyielding.

This constant flexibility, pivoting, reflexivity and programme development – done at speed and in demanding circumstances – takes a significant toll on those working in writing centres. As we thought about it, we began to feel uneasy about the heroics and positioning in these narratives – including our own. Of course, we are not alone in this. Several scholars question the individual cost of resilience and the 'business as usual' approach in times of disruption. Going further back, other scholars question the WCGNs; the idea of 'community' on which it is premised; and the binaries it sets up between 'good' writing centres and those who do not fit the narrative (Denny, et al., 2018; McKinney, 2013; Severino, 2023). McKinney (2013) not only points out the essentially 'othering' nature of many of these stories, but she observes that most of this 'othering discourse' takes place at writing centre conferences.

South African writing centre practitioners have begun asking several 'burning questions' that scrutinise how the writing centre is positioned. A recent South African writing centre book, *Reimagining Writing Centre Practices: A South African Perspective* (Rambiritch and Drennan, 2023), poses a set of questions that critically examine who writing centres serve and what is required to institute a more socially just, inclusive and responsive pedagogy. For example, Clarence probes the idea that writing centres should be safe spaces and argues that, instead, they should be 'brave spaces' to avoid 'conflating a safe space with a comfortable space' (Clarence, 2023: 12). This raises the question of whether writing centres' focus on dignity and physical safety could be at the expense of intellectual risk-taking and critical engagement.

Building on these vital questions, this paper interrogates entrenched positionalities in writing centres. The next part of the paper presents a critical analysis of the three writing centre stories. Our diffractive methodology resonates with Rendón's (2005) argument that teaching and learning policies and practices ('privileged agreements') in higher education institutions need to be exposed and radically re-conceptualised to promote equity and inclusivity for students from marginalised groups. Similarly, we argue that we need to re-think the tacit agreements in place at the university for the people who work at the coalface of reading and writing development in universities.

Re-examining Writing Centre Narratives through Diffraction

Since 2015, we (the two authors) have established an informal community of practice for discussing discipline-specific writing centres. We have engaged in what we consider to be critically reflective conversations, in which we examine our assumptions about our academic practice and explore structural and pedagogical possibilities for deepening our understanding of social justice and inclusivity in a higher education context. We draw on the scholarship of teaching and learning, using evidence from research to guide and interrogate our practice. These

conversations span societal and cultural issues at the macro level, institutional perspectives at the meso level, and practical applications at the micro level.

Both in our personal conversations, and in the discourse at writing centre conferences and meetings, we noticed how strongly writing centre practitioners identify as change agents, as resisters, as responders, perhaps even as heroes. The verbs were telling: pivot, shift, push, respond, engage, develop. We were struck by how much of the action and change centred on writing centre practices, and much less than expected on students or the university or broader university structures. We seemed to expect ourselves to constantly do more, do better, be more responsive to students' needs and challenges – but did not seem to hold others in the university to the same standard. In addition, our focus seemed to be on micro-level pedagogical strategies within the writing centre, rather than on broader onto-epistemological questions.

These reflections troubled us, but did not seem to take us forward. We began to feel that these conversations were reaching the limits of their potential; they were becoming descriptive rather than generative or transformative. Knowing that scholarship on diffraction poses similar concerns about traditional reflective practices, we turned to the idea of diffraction as a methodology to grapple with our positioning and to enable scrutiny of accepted writing centre concepts and narratives.

Traditional practices of reflection and reflexivity have been criticised for being limited and self-serving, in that they can lure us into reductionist ways of thinking about things and words (Bozalek and Zembylas, 2017). Haraway (2004) suggests that diffraction both builds on reflection, reflexivity and self-reflexivity, and moves with and beyond these practices to yield different insights. Diffraction offers a useful alternative, as both a metaphor and a strategy for making a difference in the world (ibid.). In our case, we read our writing centre narratives through bystander theory (Darley and Latané, 1968) and looked for differences and tensions in our stories, as well as opportunities to think differently about our work and how we understand it.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2024) defines diffraction as 'the process by which a beam of light or other system of waves is spread out as a result of passing through a narrow aperture or across an edge, typically accompanied by interference between the wave forms produced'. It is this interference that is generative. As a methodology, diffraction reads a body of knowledge (or a set of stories) through another theory or body of knowledge, to disrupt, produce difference, and to interfere (Bozalek and Zembylos, 2017).

Diffraction as a method allows researchers to notice both *how* differences get made and the *effect* of these differences (ibid.). In other words, the purpose of diffraction is 'to interrupt our habits of thinking and doing' (Barad, 2007: 89). This is exactly what we seek to do in this paper: to interfere with our familiar stories and be attentive to the effects and implications of the differences that emerge. By interrupting our habitual ways of thinking about and doing writing centre work, we hope to trouble our assumptions and generate new questions that may help us to rethink our roles and deepen our insights. We suggest that a diffractive methodology alerts us to 'where the problematic reductions and assimilations of difference have taken place' in writing centre narratives (Geerts and Van der Tuin, 2021).

Bystander Theory

We decided to use bystander theory to diffract our writing centre stories, to interrupt our habitual ways of thinking and writing about our work, and to see what patterns of differences emerged. Bystander theory was first posited by Darley and Latané (1968) to explain why, in a crisis, some people assist and others look away. Through a series of experiments in social psychology, they rejected the idea that some people are simply less engaged or empathetic than others, and argued that the explanation lies more 'in the bystander's response to other observers' (ibid.: 377); that if others are present, people are less likely to act, believing that someone else will assist. This original research has led to a range of work on bystanders and, more recently, upstanders that asks what makes someone act and do the 'right' thing? Perhaps even more importantly, how do we understand bystanders' failure to act and what are principled and effective means of addressing this?

In bystander theory, there are four main roles: victim, perpetrator, bystander and upstander (Minow, 2017). Very simplistically, perpetrators commit the harm; victims are harmed; bystanders allow the harm to occur without acting; and upstanders take action to protect the victim, challenge the perpetrator or encourage bystanders to become upstanders. Matoba (2021) further suggests that there can be unconscious and conscious perpetrators, and that unconscious perpetrators can become upstanders through education and reflection.

We questioned, in the writing centre narratives, to whom are these roles assigned? And what would our stories look like if we diffracted them through bystander theory roles? We approached this 'wondering together' with a conscious attempt to engage some of the sensibilities necessary for diffraction identified by Bozelek and Romano (2023: 1): 'attentiveness, response-ability, accountability, generosity, and curiosity'. There is no intention to blame, to other, or dismiss. Rather, we set out to trouble writing centre narratives, including our own, with generosity and curiosity, attentive to the effects of the differences that our diffraction might reveal.

Differences and Effects of Difference

Who are the victims in our stories?

For a group of scholars who set out to be critical, student-centred and explicitly committed to facilitating epistemic access to higher education for all students, it was surprising how strongly, across many of our narratives, students are positioned as victims. This does not seem to fit with our sense of ourselves. But there it was, the pattern: students as victims of deficit positioning, of inadequate basic education, of hierarchical and unyielding university structures, of untransformed, colonial sites of higher education, of English hegemony, of brutalising mainstream educational practices, and of disruptive social conditions such as campus protests, the Covid-19 pandemic, and most recently, of the disruptive effects of generative AI. This unexpectedly strong victim characterisation appears across a range of scholarship. Notably, this characterisation often occurs whilst simultaneously embracing student agency. For example,

students are described as 'spaceless, voiceless and powerless' (Rambiritch, 2023: xvi) and as 'heroes' (Rambiritch and Drennan, 2023).

Recognising structural inequality and students' vulnerabilities speaks to an attentiveness to student contexts and constraints, which is important. But we queried whether conceptions of victimhood might not, in some ways, end up doing the opposite of empowering and affirming students. Could our strong rejection of the idea of a decontextualised learner (Boughey and McKenna, 2016; 2021) have led to the construction of a learner fixed and inert in their web of contexts? We were curious about the lack of student agency in many of our narratives; students are the centre of our stories but, in most cases, not the upstanders, the ones who make the change. We also considered the implications of this: What would happen to our stories if students were cast in the role of upstanders? Can students be perpetrators? If so, who are the victims and how might these changed roles affect our narratives?

Writing centres and writing centre practitioners are also frequently positioned as victims in these stories. A strong theme in many writing centre narratives is of marginalisation, lack of funding, lack of institutionalisation, of being perceived by both management and teaching staff as being on the periphery. Practitioners write of being over-worked, over-burdened and of being expected to offer a 'quick fix' to structurally entrenched academic literacies challenges. Again, whilst undoubtably true and frustrating, we wondered whether this victim role in so many of our tales ultimately serves our intended purposes. Thirty years ago, though writing about North American university writing centres, North (1994: 18) cautioned about an 'institutional martyrdom' and warned that 'agreeing to serve as the (universal) staff literacy scapegoat gives us no ··· power to alter what we believe are flawed institutional arrangements'. We may need to be attentive to the effect of this consistent victim positioning on our agency and effectiveness in achieving our stated goals for South African writing centres.

Furthermore, if we are victims, we can never be perpetrators. Is this too easy a position? The problem, we suspect, is that most people think of themselves as victims. University management are the victims of government policy, budget cuts, union demands; teaching staff are victims of increasing student numbers, neoliberal policies, bureaucracy and sometimes even of students. If we all cling to our status as victims, can we ever see our complicity and the harms we may commit, consciously or not?

Who are the bystanders and perpetrators?

Very often, the bystanders and perpetrators seem to be other university actors, whether administration, senior management or teaching staff who expect writing centres to provide solutions to a range of perceived literacies and learning problems. 'Mainstream education' is very often characterised as the perpetrator of the harms experienced by students. Sometimes, the harms are situated in broader conversations about gender, race or class, so the perpetrators can also be 'mainstream society', the state or the political economy.

Who are the upstanders?

Writing centre narratives tend to position writing centre practitioners as the upstanders; those who fight heroically, and often alone, to protect students against the harms committed by the university and society, to create 'safe', 'cosy', 'liminal', 'brave' or 'anti' spaces in which students can thrive, grow and develop as individuals, writers and part of a community. We damn the perpetrators, exhort the bystanders to join us and wring our hands over our students' (and our own) experiences. Underlying these positions seems to be the assumption that the broader university space is not and cannot be either safe or brave.

Writing centres and writing centre practitioners are the heroes of the story, the ones who make a difference, the revolutionaries who 'fight against the tide' (Rambiritch and Drennan, 2023: v). Daniels, et al. (2017: 132) argue that writing centres 'play a complex and multifaceted role in South African higher education' and that 'the nature of the writing centre is to meet challenges, to adapt and to make their institutional space work for them'. Clarence and Dison (2017: 13) echo this upstander role and suggest that writing centres must use their influence and skill to create and sustain 'greater social and academic justice on campus'. Similarly, Moore (2023) describes a resilient writing centre that can facilitate both social connection and support. As writing centre practitioners, we focus on the harms committed and we act; we develop programmes and responses to mitigate against these harms; we hold the space and advocate. In our own stories, we are 'transformational', 'resilient', 'flexible', 'student-centred', 'decolonial' – even though the rest of the university or society may not be.

We wondered about the effect of all this upstanding. Overwhelmingly, we suspect, exhaustion. How can we do and be all these things? Another effect is likely to be resentment that bystanders do not get involved and that perpetrators continue unchallenged. When diffracted like this, our role becomes uneasily close to being saviours of the students. Perhaps the most problematic effect of positioning writing centres as saviours of the victim-student, is it largely ignores the roles of bystanders (apart, perhaps, from 'othering' them). To a greater extent, it also ignores the roles of perpetrators. We are so caught up in our upstander role that we may be forgetting to step back and ask important questions. Questions such as: 'Why is all this saving necessary? Who are we saving for? And who are we saving from? Who is causing the harm? And how might it be different?'

All of the above are diffracted patterns and are not applicable in every instance; what we hope to do here is to *interfere* with our cosy stories and to think about the *effects* that this different lens might have.

Discussion

Across these writing centre stories, the roles of students as victims and writing centres as upstanders are strong and constant. We are curious about whether these entrenched roles might work against systemic transformation in higher education. In the original bystander study, Darley and Latané (1968: 377) identified what they term a 'diffusion of responsibility'; the more bystanders there are, the less likely people are to act – not because they do not care, but because

they believe someone else will assist. Paradoxically, writing centres' upstander role may let other actors off the hook, diffusing other university actors' responsibility. Resilient, student-centred practices at writing centres allow broader university systems to remain unchanged and unchanging; if writing centres are doing the work, others do not need to. Unintentionally, we may be enabling systemic apathy.

Jansen (in Czerniewicz and Cronin, 2023: 28) refers to 'pockets of freedom' in universities that 'can be exploited to do the work of resistance and generate alternatives' to traditional educational practices. These 'pockets of freedom' are also described as 'crevices' or 'enclave initiatives' (ibid.). Very often, these projects are short-term and grant-funded, run by contract staff. Although responsive, generative and research-active, the learning and innovation from these initiatives have limited, if any, impact on broader university structures or practices.

We argue that these terms aptly capture the work and position of many South African writing centres. Jansen emphasises that an unintended consequence of these 'enclave initiatives' is that 'systemic or system-wide change is not possible' (ibid.). In other words, the precise changes that these enclave initiatives promote and campaign for are never systemically implemented, precisely because of the enclaves' existence. Put differently, whilst intending to be upstanders, those working in enclave initiatives can become perpetrators, albeit unconscious ones, of the status quo. Importantly for our analysis, Jansen goes on to caution that 'there are hard lessons to be learned that are sometimes ignored in the optimistic, breezy accounts of alternative education; that kind of naiveté is not only poor analysis but also weak strategy when it comes to the politics of change' (Jansen, in Czerniewicz and Cronin, 2023: 28–29). Similarly, in his keynote address at the South African Association of Academic Literacy Practitioners Conference, Mgqwashu (2024) argued that educational development research in teaching and learning is 'mostly perennial diagnosis of the problems at micro-level leading to confined surface "solutions"'. If South African writing centres wish to effect lasting change in higher education, we may need to become more strategic in how we understand and write about our role and the roles of others, to extend our focus beyond the enclave.

The question of agency is an important one in this analysis. It is possible that these writing centre narratives accord or expect too much agency from writing centres – and perhaps not enough of other university actors. This can be seen in the simultaneous casting of writing centres as both upstander and victim. Belluigi (2023) shows how participants in a study tended to focus on the micro level when discussing their agency to contribute to transformation in higher education, and to actively avoid discussions at the meso and macro level. She goes on to observe that '[w]hile I do not refute the importance of initiatives, documentation, and scholarship to do with the micro-curriculum, it takes joined-up approaches to academic practice and academic structures to effect substantive change across the ecologies of higher education' (Belluigi, in Czerniewicz and Cronin, 2023: 139). Writing centre practitioners may need to adopt such a joined-up approach to effect the kind of change they envision, and to consider their agency at meso and macro levels. Such systemic approaches can be seen in some of the writing centre literature, such as writing intensive initiatives (Nichols, et al., 2023(a);(b). However, engaging more

consistently at meso and macro levels could help to both shift the narratives and the role stasis in these narratives that our diffraction has yielded.

Related to agency is the question of responsibility-sharing. Rather than continuing to add multiple upstander roles to our repertoire, it may be more strategic and effective for writing centre practitioners to ask how these upstander roles can be shared – and with whom. Here, Elmore's (2005) notion of reciprocal accountability is useful. He describes reciprocal accountability as 'an explicit contractual agreement between system-level and school-level people that every unit of increased performance that the system demands carries with it an equal and reciprocal obligation on the part of the system to provide access to an additional unit of individual or organizational capacity, in the form of additional knowledge and skill' (ibid.: 297). Such reciprocity would disrupt the 'writing centre as victim' narrative as well as the pattern of writing centres taking on multiple, and arguably unsustainable, upstander roles. Importantly, reciprocal accountability diffuses responsibility across the system, making it more sustainable. Equally, the essentialist narrative of 'student as victim' must be disrupted. Responsibility sharing should extend to students; the role they could play in a more systemic, shared approach must be explored.

Conclusion

Through diffraction, we hope to have interfered with our stories, and yours, so that we can see new things, ask different questions, and begin to enact different roles. Diffraction is helping us to ask hard questions about how sustainable our writing centres are in the long term. It is also helping us to question our resilient pedagogies, of which we were so proud. They were intended to respond to short-term crises; by becoming the new norm, they may also become convenient enablers of the university's status quo. Up until now, a big silence in our story has been to ignore whether our actions may shield universities from having to enact systemic transformation, or to make long-term financial and political commitments to the work we do. This uncomfortable question, of whether we may be unconscious perpetrators, cannot be ignored.

What does this mean for writing centres' stories in the future? One clear implication is that we need to be role-aware, very cautious about adding too many more upstander roles to our repertoire. Perhaps, instead, we need to become more strategic in forming partnerships and collaborations with those who we tend to view as victims, bystanders or even perpetrators, so that the upstanding work can be taken up by many.

If writing centres are indeed a movement, we must be careful of allowing ourselves to be characterised as the lone revolutionary. Heroic though that figure might be, it is only when the struggle reaches a critical mass that change becomes possible. Higher education in South Africa needs upstanders across micro, meso and macro levels to enable systemic change and transformation. It does not need more victims.

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