

https://dspace.org/

A social constructivist approach to writing centre practice: challenges of raising academic genre awareness through group writing consultations

Shabanza, Kabinga Jack

2019

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/28615

Shabanza, Kabinga Jack (2019) A social constructivist approach to writing centre practice : challenges of raising academic genre awareness through group writing consultations, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/28615>

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Abstract

For the past decade, South Africans universities have been grappling with an exponential increase in the number of new entrants, mostly from previously disadvantaged backgrounds and schools; who are often un- or underprepared for higher education. As a result, in academic support services such as writing centres, group writing consultations (GCs) have been implemented as a strategy to cater for more students with limited resources, personnel, and time. The facilitation of a GC however presents new and unsurmountable challenges for writing consultants, due to its complexity and difference from the one-on-one or individual consultation. This thesis used the Social Constructivist, New Literacies Studies (NLS), Academic Literacies, and Writing Centre Practice lenses to investigate the challenges faced by students and writing consultants in GCs, and whether GCs assist in raising the students' awareness of academic and disciplinary genres. The rationale behind this study is that the GC may provide an environment, which is conducive to the learning and practice of these academic and disciplinary genres.

Data was collected in two phases: through questionnaires, focus groups, video observations in 2014, and additional questionnaires in 2016, each time with students and consultants. The *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS) was used for the quantitative data analysis of the questionnaire data sets, and *Atlas.ti7* was utilised for the qualitative content analysis of the focus group and video observation data, both through a deductive approach. The study identified key social constructivist features of the GC such as collaboration among students, multiple perspectives, peer learning, development of student voice, and consultant positive attitude. The main finding was that GC discursive practices centred on social interactions through questioning as a GC facilitation strategy, group discussion, collaboration, modelling, as well as facilitation through explanation, clarification, and elaboration.

The study found that, if not dealt with by the writing consultant, factors such as non-participation or dominance by a few group members, the unpreparedness of students, a consultant's negative attitude, an outspoken consultant, the lack of time, and group disorganisation, could impede effective social interactions and learning in the GC. The findings highlighted the group consultation dynamics, particularly its pedagogical perspective, thereby enriching the existing literature which has been focusing on peer group writing, group

discussions, and writing circles. It brought new insights in the domain of writing, and its combination of theories and principles of New Literacies Studies (NLS), Social Constructivism with its ZPD and Academic Literacy (AL) model together with writing centre theory and writing centre practices, yielded new insights and newness in writing skills practices, boosted by social interactions and peer learning. The study also foregrounded the shift in South African universities' writing centre practices, from the one-on-one or Individual Consultations (IC) model to the GC model that resulted from ever-increasing numbers of students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds in South Africa, who get admission to universities. The significance of this study resides in that, for AL and writing centre practitioners, as well as departmental academic staff, awareness of this social constructivist nature of the GC can assist in focusing the GC practices on social interactions, in attempts to familiarise students with disciplinary genres, rather than solely on the writing process or the text itself. Priority should be given to practices conducive to effective social interactions and learning.