

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Practices and Spaces (Location): Reflecting on the Contribution of Writing Centres for Decolonisation in Higher Education

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Abstract

The location of writing centres in universities has attracted attention from practitioners and researchers in the field of academic support scholarship. These writing centres, known as spaces where students discuss their writing ideas, have become part of the decoloniality discourse in South African higher education. This study adopts a mixed-method approach and builds upon Grimm's theory of transitional space to examine tutor perspectives on the contribution of writing centres' pedagogical practices and physical location to the decolonisation of education at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) and Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT). The findings reveal that the writing centres in these contexts contribute to the decolonial agenda by employing various approaches such as multilingualism and one-on-one consultations that are sensitive to the African context. However, despite these positive contributions, it is necessary to initiate decolonial discussions that address historical past injustices. The study recommends that the creation of decolonised spaces is a complex process requiring collaborative engagement between writing centres and the university community, including management. Writing centres have an integral role to play in decolonising the university space, particularly in the South African context.

Keywords: decolonisation; pedagogy; safe spaces; transformation; writing centre

Introduction

Decolonisation has become a prominent topic in South Africa's discourse on transforming Higher Education (HE) (Stein, 2016; Heleta, 2018; Janks, 2019). The need for a departure from the traditional Western approach to higher education (Nanima 2019) has been emphasized, requiring an acknowledgement of the complexities surrounding university students' diverse identities. Writing centre spaces are strategically positioned to facilitate the desired changes needed to achieve decolonisation in HE. Decoloniality, as a concept, involves shifting the site of knowledge creation. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016) states that decolonisation aims to make the invisible visible and to analyse the mechanisms responsible for producing such invisibility or distorted visibility. In the African context, notable writers, such as Wa Thiong'o (1992), have contributed significant work that provides an African perspective on the concept of decolonisation. Their contributions have sparked an academic renaissance that places Africa at the forefront of critical thinking. By framing research questions from an African perspective and grounding the lenses of inquiry within an African context, the writing centres at DUT and MUT are able to meaningfully address the pressing need for decolonisation. These centres focus on producing knowledge that is relevant to the African context and aim to address the academic challenges faced by students. It is important to note that writing centres in South Africa are still in their early stages of development across higher learning institutions.

At the very least, writing centres should train staff in HE institutions to effectively respond to the growing call for decolonisation in education. This training equips them with the necessary knowledge and skills. The need for reform and transformation of HE institutions has been emphasized since the inception of democracy in the country. The recent student unrest #FeesMustFall underscored the need for redress and reformation (Hlatshwayo and

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Shawa, 2020; Molefe, 2016). According to the Education White Paper 3, the higher education system must be reformed to address historical injustices, serve a new social order, meet national demands, and adapt to new realities and possibilities (DoE, 2013). The government of national unity unanimously agreed on the need to restructure higher education. Goal 6 of the Education White Paper 3 explicitly focuses on equality issues in higher education transitions (Mbembe, 2016). The National Working Group Report (DoE, 2002) proposed a new institutional landscape aligned with the vision of a non-racial, non-sexist, and democratic society. This new landscape aims to respond to South Africa's human resource and knowledge needs, positioning writing centres as spaces that contribute to the decolonisation agenda and proposing how they can work towards decolonised writing centre spaces. Janks (2019) demonstrated how students often find themselves in inhospitable spaces that do not align with their identities. Students and staff who have experienced higher education often feel constrained by the dominance of Western culture at universities (Nyamnjoh, 2016). While Western dominance in higher education permeates various paradigms, this study emphasizes that writing centres pedagogical practices and physical space are particularly evident. Understanding the power dynamics of writing centres rhetoric (Delport, 2019) and their potential contribution to the decolonising agenda is crucial. These factors can help transform the educational landscape into spaces where students can thrive and connect with their identities.

The Department of Higher Education (DHET) has taken significant steps to address historical injustices. Notably, one commendable action has been the increased support provided to students who are unable to afford the high tuition costs. Many universities have responded promptly by establishing academic support units, including writing centres (Leibowitz, 2014). Writing centres serve as student-centred collaborative learning spaces that prioritize the development of academic, research writing and critical skills. They provide a platform for tutors to share disciplinary knowledge and effectively engage with all students (Mitoumba-Tindy, 2017). Therefore, this study examines the contribution of writing centres to the decolonisation agenda in South Africa's higher education, focusing on two case study institutions, DUT and MUT. The current study was guided by the following critical questions:

- i. What are the pedagogic approaches writing centres use in the quest for a decolonised education system?
- ii. To what extent can the writing centre tutors contribute to the decolonisation of education?
- iii. How do the pedagogical practices and physical location of writing centres contribute to the decolonisation of education?

Literature Review

Many students enrolled in higher education institutions, especially at universities of technology (UoTs), face difficulties in learning and communicating in English. Janks (2019) notes that students with English as an additional language (EAL) often find themselves in unwelcoming university spaces. The transition to university has seen a significant increase in the number of Black African students, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Dlamini, 2017; Briggs *et al.*, 2012). At DUT, Black African students make up 77.38% of the total student population (Dlamini, 2016), while at MUT, they comprise 99.6% (MUT Annual Report, 2017). Low-income and first-generation students, as highlighted by Motsabi *et al.* (2020), are less likely to engage in academic and social experiences that support academic achievements, such as group study, interaction with faculty and peers, participation in extracurricular activities, and utilization of support services. These challenges can be exacerbated in larger research universities, where class sizes are often bigger, and faculty interactions are limited (Kim, 2009). As a result, students often feel disconnected from lectures, content delivery, and peer interaction. In the South African context, this is further worsened by the existing colonial education system that fails to resonate with students. The #FeesMustFall movement sparked a transition towards a decolonized, Afrocentric education that acknowledges the diversity and needs of students in higher education (Hlatshwayo and Shawa, 2020). Writing centres, as academic support spaces, play a critical role in facilitating this transition by providing epistemic access to academic discourse.

In South Africa, writing centres play a vital role in serving the university community by offering academic support to undergraduate and postgraduate students and staff. The DUT writing centre was established in 2013 and MUT recently opened a writing centre in 2021. Both DUT and MUT are located outside of the academic departments or faculties and serve students from all disciplines. Writing centres offer spaces where students develop their writing skills and cultivate their academic voice through knowledge-based writing (Nanima, 2019). Given the writing centre's role and contractual location, it has become necessary for them to articulate their stance on the decolonisation discourse and devise strategies to incorporate a decolonised perspective into their instructional approach. The call for decolonisation in writing centres is not limited to South African universities. In the North

American context, for example, Yende (2020) highlights how the decolonisation debate has prompted writing centre practitioners to critically reflect on their assumptions. Throughout history, the role of writing centres has been reimagined and re-conceptualised. It is crucial for writing centres to foreground an image that is empowering and inclusive, emphasizing their core function as a space where any university student can bring their written work for review by an attentive tutor. Despite their importance, writing centres often operate on the fringes of universities and face budgetary pressures, necessitating the need to demonstrate their relevance and ability to achieve objectives. Archer and Richards (2011) suggest that some writing centres may be experiencing an identity crisis, leading to mixed messages about their role in the university community.

The important role of writing centres in the decolonised education agenda is being threatened, despite their capacity to empower. Archer and Parker (2016) propose the concept of transformational writing centres, which serve as welcoming sites that nurture diverse processes and perspectives of writers. This perspective aligns with the ideology of the liminal space, as defined by Nichols (2017) as a safe space. Trimbur (2010) affirms that social justice and the democratization of higher education have always been integral to the mission of writing centres. At DUT and MUT, the writing centres embrace their identity as support systems for students across disciplines, from undergraduate to postgraduate studies. Tutors collaborate with students at various levels of writing proficiency. Collaborative engagement is a fundamental principle of writing centres' pedagogy, emphasizing a critical approach to developing students' academic, research writing and critical skills. Consequently, writing centres serve as dialogic spaces that recognize the complex relationship between spoken and written language. This study focuses on the contribution of writing centres as both physical spaces and pedagogical practices in the context of decolonisation within two South African universities of technology.

Decolonisation, in a physical sense, involves reimagining the planning, titling, and adornment of structures within the institution. Oparinde and Govender (2019) opine that institutions of higher learning should thoroughly reconceive, reimagine, reassess, and reconceptualise the curricula, methods, and processes in the bid to ensure decolonisation. Mbembe (2016) asserts that many institutions, through their apartheid architecture and symbolism, aim to traumatize and victimize black students. The concepts put forth by Nyamanjoh (2015) and Mbembe (2016) are crucial in defining the physical characteristics of decolonised writing centres. Decolonised writing centres' physical space should be receptive, inclusive, and accommodating to diverse identities. It should actively avoid using symbols and images that glorify the oppressive system that disadvantages students. Instead, it should prioritize student identity, culture, and language in the pursuit of social justice. Furthermore, the space of decolonised writing centres should be transitional, with its architecture reflecting the centre's transient nature. Nicholas (2017) explores how writing centres in South Africa have evolved as safe spaces within a challenging campus environment.

Sabuncu (2019) further emphasizes the significance of architecture in fostering a sense of belonging, noting that building design affects our emotions. Thus, in addition to embracing multiple historical narratives, the design of writing centres should physically convey its transient nature as a safe space. The call for the decolonisation of writing centres extends beyond South African universities. In the North American discourse, Yende (2020) highlights how the decolonisation dialogue has prompted writing centre practitioners to engage in introspection and challenge their preconceptions. This has led to discussions about the process of genuine decolonisation. Furthermore, relevant notions related to the decolonisation of writing centres have emerged, expanding the mentoring philosophy of these centres. For example, one such notion explores decolonisation as an anti-oppressive form of teaching (Yende, 2020). This study argues that by incorporating such pedagogical philosophies into writing centres, they remain pertinent to various decolonisation discourses and agendas.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing from the theory of transitional space, Grimm (1999) begins from a position that views student writing and literacy as a social practice mediated by university contexts. Conceptual literature on writing centres as transitional spaces is premised on pedagogical practises that foster active engagement and collaborative learning. The transitional approach of writing centres pedagogical model focuses on writing as a social construct, thus developing the writer, not the writing (Clarence, 2012). According to Archer and Parker (2016), the writing centre is a space of "learning and engagement" where ideas and disconnected thoughts are structured. In these spaces, students are afforded learning opportunities to experiment with different genres without being judged (Archer and Parker, 2016). Writing centres are conceived as transitional spaces within the university environment, whose main purpose is to develop students' writing and provide support for programmes utilising different pedagogies and theoretical

underpinnings (Nichols, 2017). This understanding of writing centres as transitional spaces by Grimm (1999), resonates with the present study, which looks to reflect on the decontextualization and re-contextualisation of writing centres within DUT and MUT. It is within the broader scope that Banda (2019) points to the nuances, highlighting the role of writing centre tutors as agents for identity change in offering inclusive spaces for socialising students in the academy and the quest for a decolonised education system. Mtonjeni and Sefalane-Nkohla (2019) affirm that writing support initiatives are largely influenced by diverse institutional contexts. Additionally, writing centres are influenced by the institutional position of these spaces and their role in fostering non-judgmental approaches in developing students' writing practises (Burke, 2020). The understanding of writing centres as transitional spaces promotes and fosters social transformation that challenges institutional power structures and dominant discourse. Thus, the need for DUT and MUT writing centres to critically reflect on their daily pedagogical practises that foster social engagement.

Methodology

Data for this study were provided by the writing centres at DUT and MUT, employing a mixed methods approach. Due to the smaller number of tutors, a case study methodology was chosen. According to Sarah *et al.* (2011), the case study approach is particularly useful for gaining an in-depth understanding of an issue, event, or phenomenon within its natural real-life context. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, capturing the tutors' reflections on the contribution of writing centres to decolonisation in higher education (HE) at DUT and MUT. These reflections served as qualitative and quantitative data in the study. Qualitative research approaches involve the systematic gathering, organization, and analysis of textual data acquired through conversation or observation (Creswell, 2013). On the other hand, the quantitative approach focuses on numerical data (Apuke, 2017). In this study, a survey questionnaire was used to collect data on tutor demographics and perceptions of space. Interviews were conducted using purposeful sampling, targeting 13 tutors who worked at writing centres for one to two years. This selection criterion ensured that the chosen tutors could effectively share and reflect upon their experiences. Gatekeeper and consent letters were used to facilitate researchers' access to participants and research sites, ensuring proper permission was obtained. Each of the 13 tutors was individually interviewed through MS Teams for a duration of 30 to 50 minutes, using standardized open-ended interview guides. Additionally, focus group discussions were conducted face-to-face at each writing centre site, two at DUT and one at MUT to explore the tutors' perspectives and experiences regarding the research questions. All necessary COVID-19 protocols were strictly observed during the data collection process. The gathered data was thoroughly analysed, coded, and categorized into relevant themes. The analysis focused on identifying similarities and variations in the pedagogical practices of the 13 tutors concerning the decolonization of education. Qualitative data was analyzed using SPSS 28 to determine descriptive and frequency results, while content data was analysed using Nvivo.

Findings and Analysis

This section presents the data collected as discussed in the methodology section. The demographics of the participants, the analysis of their perceptions, and the emerging themes are all discussed below:

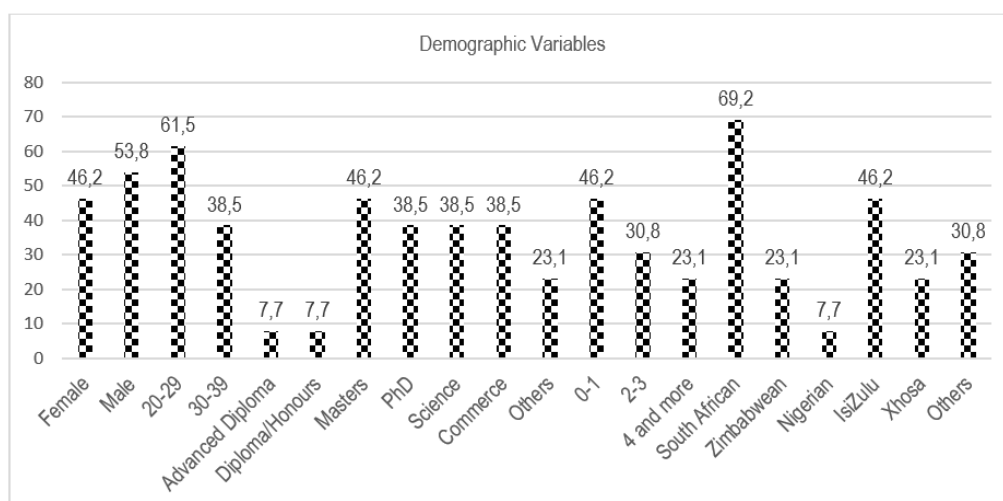


Figure 1: Demographic variable of the participants

Figure 1 shows the demographic data of the tutors who participated in the study. The sample consisted of tutors at DUT and MUT, ranging in age from 20 to 39 years. The sample's age distribution is consistent with that of individuals reading for postgraduate degrees in South Africa. The tutors' age profile was nevertheless deemed acceptable. Male participants made up 58.3% of the sample, while female participants made up 46.2% (see Figure 1). To adhere to the integrated case study approach, data were acquired from 13 tutors, all from the African population group. Regarding the participants' home languages, the majority of nine (69.3%) indicated that they had chosen two out of the eleven official South African languages, specifically isiZulu and isiXhosa. Additionally, four tutors reported their first language as Shona, Ndebele, Northern Ndebele and Yoruba. It is important to note that although participants' home languages are typically associated with specific population groups, they were not compared to the overall South African population. However, the KwaZulu-Natal region encompasses an area where the isiZulu language is spoken, and the sample included representatives from all the major language groups. Writing centre tutors at a postgraduate level were included in the sample. Writing centres employ students at master's and doctoral levels from multiple disciplines to assist students from all disciplines. As a result, the sample composition was deemed appropriate for this study.

The five-point Likert scale is classified as an interval scale, with distinct ranges corresponding to different levels of agreement or disagreement. A mean score falling within the range of 1 to 1.8 indicates a strong disagreement. Scores ranging from 1.81 to 2.60 signify disagreement. The range of 2.61 to 3.40 represents a neutral stance. Scores falling between 3.41 and 4.20 indicates agreement, while scores ranging from 4.21 to 5 signify strong agreement. Since people have a preconceived perception of a given situation this will result in their expectations becoming a reality. Tutors were asked about their perceptions on some statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. In the first statement and second statements, assisting students and dialogue engaging the mean is 4.3077. Hence it means that the majority 53.8% and 46.2% respectively, of participants strongly agree with assisting students in bridging the literacy gaps prevalent in higher education and engaging in dialogue with students. Table 1 summarises the five-point Likert scale:

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on the Perceptions of what constitutes a decolonised writing space

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|-------------------------------|----|---------|---------|--------|----------------|
| Bridging the literacy | 13 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 4.3077 | .85485 |
| Dialogue Engaging | 13 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 4.3077 | .75107 |
| Social Justice | 13 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 4.1538 | .68874 |
| Creating Learning Community | 13 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 4.1538 | 1.14354 |
| Supporting Lecturers | 13 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 4.3846 | .76795 |
| Constructive Feedback | 13 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 4.7692 | .43853 |
| Students as Critical Learners | 13 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 4.6923 | .48038 |
| Theoretical practices | 13 | 2.00 | 5.00 | 4.0769 | .86232 |
| Welcoming Space for Students | 13 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 4.6923 | .48038 |
| Create Space for voice | 13 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 4.5385 | .66023 |
| Indigenous Language | 13 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 4.3077 | .63043 |
| Nurturing Space | 13 | 2.00 | 5.00 | 4.2308 | .92681 |
| One-on-One Engagement | 13 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 4.5385 | .66023 |
| Critical Thinking | 13 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 4.4615 | .51887 |
| Empowering Students | 13 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 4.5385 | .51887 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 13 | | | | |

Note: 5 – strongly agree, 4 – agree, 3 – neutral, 2 – disagree, 1 – strongly disagree

As can be seen, 'offering constructive formative feedback' received the highest mean value 4.7692, which is approximately 76.9% of the tutors. This indicates that tutors strongly agree with these statements as the higher means are, the stronger tutors agree. 'Supporting students to develop from being surface learners to deep and critical learners and creating a welcoming space for students to ask questions to clarify their thoughts' received a strongly agree from the tutors with a mean of 4.6923 which translates to 69.2%. These findings reveal that tutors use these approaches or techniques to decolonise the writing space.

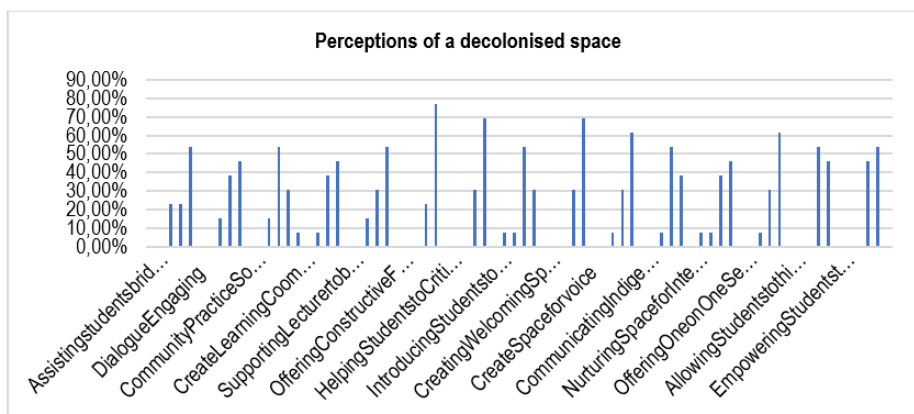


Figure 2: Tutor perceptions of a decolonised writing space

Table 2: Emerging themes from the focus group discussion

| Themes | Number of times mentioned in interviews | Mentions by number of participants | Main points from themes |
|--|---|-------------------------------------|---|
| Theme 1: Student-centred Pedagogy i. Current practice vs. ideal practice ii. Pedagogy iii. Communication iv. Knowledge production v. Language | 43 5 9 10 95 | 13 2 6 1 13 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writing centre tutors' reflections uncovered that through the application of the student-centred approach as the guiding pedagogy, a contribution to the decolonial agenda is in progress. The study cited the suitability of the one-on-one nature consultations as an ideal environment for the tutor to draw out the experiences of the student. Multilingualism: Another dominant theme that emerged from the reflections was the significance of multilingualism in the process of decolonisation. |
| Theme 2: Student empowerment i. Identity ii. Culture iii. Social Justice iv. Restorative justice v. Inclusivity vi. Transformation vii. Indigenous knowledge systems | 15 13 12 4 23 20 11 | 13 6 13 3 13 13 4 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A large part of decolonisation also has to do with unpacking the methodology that we use to consult students at writing centres, which we see as credible as the sources that we draw from. Putting the student at the core centre allows the consultations to be guided by the student's needs and opportunities for dialogue between the tutor and the student. |
| Theme 3: Transitional space i. Space ii. Transitional iii. Transformation | 39 9 10 | 13 10 13 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In this study, there is a strong assertion from the findings that writing centre spaces are viewed as structured yet fluid spaces for students' academic writing development. Notably, writing centres according to participants provide a safe environment for both students and tutors to engage critically with the phenomenon to develop and enhance learning. |

Discussion

The theoretical framework of Transitional Space, as proposed by Grimm (1999), encompasses the concepts of student-centred pedagogy, multilingualism, student empowerment, and the creation of transitional spaces. This framework emphasizes the transformative potential of educational environments in promoting decolonisation and empowering students. These elements collectively contribute to the transformation of educational practices, fostering inclusivity, critical thinking, and student agency. By embracing these principles, writing centre spaces can become sites of empowerment, where students are actively engaged in their learning, diverse languages are valued, and decolonisation efforts are advanced.

Student-centred pedagogy

The reflections of tutors in both writing centres uncovered that through the application of a student-centred approach as the guiding pedagogy, a contribution to the decolonial agenda is in progress. The concept of student-centred philosophy can be understood as a learning process where the teacher/tutor avoids the transmission of knowledge directly. Instead, they allow students to construct their understandings using their experiences (Serin, 2018). Regarding these tutors, our study cited the suitable one-on-one nature of writing centre consultation as an ideal environment for the tutor to draw out the experiences of the student. More germane to decolonisation tutors reflected on how they were able to assist students to integrate into foreign university environments by sharing their own experiences. One tutor mentioned how:

“you need to talk about things they can relate to so that they can break out of the cage”.

The disposition of most tutors (being senior students who come from similar socio-cultural backgrounds as the students) provides a point of reference, particularly for first-time entrants. Additionally, it creates the outlook among students that they can also transition and be successful within the university space.

Multilingualism

During the process of decolonisation, one dominant theme that consistently emerged from the tutor's reflections was the importance of multilingualism. This perspective aligns with the ideologies expressed by various scholars on the subject. Notably, Mbembe (2016), Serin (2018) and Wa Thiong'o (1996) presented similar views in their respective works. These scholars argue that the monotonous use of English in academia is a perpetuation of the colonial legacy. Wa Thiong'o (1996) emphasised that language serves a greater purpose beyond mere communication, it encompasses inherent divisions related to culture, power, and race. This point is also echoed by Oparinde (2019) in that language is an identity. Consequently, for Wa Thiong'o (1996), a decolonised university in the African context should put African languages and culture at the centre of teaching and learning (Mbembe, 2016). Notably, tutors expressed that the university space is permeated by a fundamentally flawed perception that English fluency is an indication of intelligence. The tutors expressed how they have at times unconsciously adopted this perspective. Therefore, there is a need to constantly conscientize themselves so that they do not become appendages for monolingualism in the university space.

The responses received from the writing centres of the two universities of technology regarding multilingualism align with the direction many writing centres are currently taking. Brinkschulte *et al.* (2018) highlight from an international perspective that the internationalization of universities has led to academically diverse audiences with culturally heterogeneous backgrounds and expectations. Therefore, it is imperative for writing centres to address multilingualism in order to meet the expectations of these readers. Archer (2017) emphasizes the integration of multilingualism into tutor training and consultations at the writing centre as a means of addressing the challenges of academic writing. While there was a consensus among tutors regarding the importance of multilingualism, they also expressed concerns about other underlying challenges. These challenges stem from the fact that not all tutors are multilingual, and there is difficulty in implementing a uniform multilingual approach due to the variety of languages spoken in the South African context.

Student empowerment

People often perceive education as a singular concept focused solely on learning, disregarding the critical thinking aspects. However, at writing centres, we believe that education requires critical thinking and questioning when learning and acquiring knowledge. There is a noticeable apprehension within certain sectors of society when it comes to young individuals thinking outside the box, engaging in critical thought, and exploring knowledge beyond Western perspectives. Colonialism encompassed not only physical brutality and the exploitation of land and resources but also the intellectual colonization of the minds of the colonized subjects. Transformation involves recognizing students as co-creators of knowledge and intellectuals who, alongside tutors, have the power to effect change. Rethinking education involves African knowledge on an equal footing with other knowledge. This process is fundamentally decolonial, necessitating the cultivation of a decolonial attitude in knowledge production.

Consequently, the further development of integrating indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) into current curricula becomes essential. In the context of the decolonisation of education within writing centres, IKS can be understood as an important component of broadening and diversifying the curriculum. Integrating IKS into the educational framework helps to challenge the dominance of the Western knowledge perspective while giving due recognition

to the rich indigenous knowledge and traditions that have historically been marginalized. However, decolonization should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a destination. It is crucial to unveil and acknowledge the intentional investment of vast wealth and labour in the decolonial agenda. Individual consultations play a central role in the work of writing centres. Nichols (2017) highlights one of the strengths of writing centres as its ability to shift authority from educators to students. In line with this, both staff and students visiting writing centres are treated as part of the writing centre family, granting them a greater sense of agency. Students who seek assistance at writing centres determine the focus of the consultation and retain ownership of their work (Dison and Collett, 2019). Writing centres have revolutionized their approach to decolonization by offering consultations in languages other than English, depending on the consultants' fluency. The conversations that occur during these consultations enable tutors and students to interact on a linguistic level and effectively communicate the students' needs. The writing centres' achievements depend on these interactions, with language playing a pivotal role in empowering students. Language not only instils confidence in both tutors and students but also establishes a professional working environment.

The colonizing power of language in education has been extensively documented (Wa Thiong'o 1996). Research demonstrates how monolingual speakers of dominant languages automatically receive privileges in educational settings (McKinney, 2016). Furthermore, in English-based university environments, monolingualism is often considered the norm, while multilingualism is unfortunately perceived as inadequate or deficient (Grimm, 2009; McKinney, 2016; Swartz *et al.*, 2018). Writing centres actively seek to challenge these assumptions. Mbembe (2016) argues that oppressed individuals are not on the periphery of society but rather immersed within it. Therefore, the goal should be to transform societal structures and include those who are already present.

“Students who have had consultations in their native languages have noted an increased clarity of communication and a greater willingness to openly discuss their writing concerns.”

A large part of decolonisation also has to do with unpacking the methodology used to consult with students at writing centres. Introducing various strategies is often met with a lot of resistance, as it is perceived to go against the grain of objectivity and concrete learning. For example, the utilization of storytelling involves drawing from individuals' lived experiences and occasionally works of fiction, which can serve to challenge and stimulate alternative lines of thinking.

“As consultants, we do have the space to recommend materials for students (...) This is where now you create that shift of knowledge, right. And also adding on the African perspective. So, when students read more materials, they then can also sort of become more critical thinkers.”

Transitional space

Regarding writing centres as transitional spaces, Nichols (2017) emphasises the role of writing centres as developmental learning spaces and their placement within a university. In the current study, there is a strong assertion from the findings that writing centres space are viewed as structured yet fluid spaces for students' academic and research writing development. The writing centres' goals are founded on flexible learning spaces, where effective writing development is context-based (Archer and Parker, 2016). This, according to Carlse (2019) affirms the specific functioning as that of a transformational learning space that forms part of the academic development within higher education. Writing centres, situated within libraries, defy the traditional notion of libraries as silent places and instead provide a safe and welcoming environment for students. In contrast to the colonial agenda perpetuated by the library's emphasis on silence, writing centres prioritize student-centred pedagogy, multilingualism, and student empowerment. Tutors in writing centres acknowledge and embrace students' diverse backgrounds, cultures, and languages during consultations. By creating a space that values students' identities and experiences, writing centres challenge the colonial legacy and empower students to express their thoughts and ideas freely. In this way, writing centres become transformative spaces that counter the traditional library setting and foster inclusivity, critical thinking, and the development of a decolonial mindset.

The writing centres' setting and design have a significant impact on student engagement and creativity. By departing from the traditional library environment, writing centres stimulate thinking and encourage creativity through intentional colour choices and a conducive atmosphere. Additionally, the writing centres' seating arrangement fosters inclusivity and equality by promoting collaboration and shared participation among all individuals involved. Together, these elements create an empowering environment where students feel safe, welcomed, and comfortable to express their ideas and engage in the learning process. The writing centres' physical

setup and approach reflect the values of inclusivity, equality, and the promotion of a decolonial mindset in the academic context. According to participants, writing centres provide a learning space that is conducive to engaging and reflecting on practice as expressed in the following excerpt:

"I think there's research or evidence that shows that your environment affects your mind how you think and everything. So, writing centres need to take note of the setup. How things are because like what she said you want to make the student relax and feel like this is an informal setting, but still academic, and also like if we have if we could have these walls painted. (laughter) if you beautify the space there is this play on colour on the mind that will I think creates or relaxes the mind and things like that."

"... we now are contributing to the student's success in the university to say OK, now we have created an environment that allows you to thrive in the university space because now we are speaking to you in your language. We are paying attention to you we are being friendly like a positive space, which is what I believe universities want, to make students feel welcome"

"When I look at the writing centre or any space for academic writing, I always look at how we, as human beings, always learn how to speak before we learn how to write. And we are always better speakers than better writers. So, in any writing centre, like the bridge between a student coming in, they have an idea, but putting it down on paper is a bit difficult. So, we can create an environment where we make sure that the student's idea is still as articulated in an academic essay or assignment. I think then a lot of students will do well."

Notably, writing centres according to participants provide a safe environment for both students and tutors to engage critically with a phenomenon to develop and enhance learning. Within this space, writing centres are grounded on the notion of decolonisation where culture and language empower tutors to mediate and negotiate their roles and academic identity (Archer and Richards, 2011). This suggests that the placement of writing centres plays a critical role in the spaces they create and occupy. A particularly interesting finding was that of writing centres as liminal spaces within the institutional placement and power dynamics (Richards *et al.*, 2019). Participants described how the environment and academic identity shape this transformational space for students:

"When I look at decolonisation as a term, what comes into my mind is that it's more like there is something that is fixed and now you are trying to penetrate it and kind of transform it in a certain way to suit like a particular environment or people that are in that environment"

"I'm also thinking that also decolonisation of the education sector allows us to adapt to current times because things are now changing, and they are no longer like they used to be in the past. Therefore, it means now we should also not remove methods and practices that were operating or used. But we must add other methods that will ensure that we are adapting and continue to go forward."

The findings in this theme, "Transitional Spaces" suggest that participants understand writing centres as flexible learning spaces characterised by engagement and dialogue (Mtonjeni and Sefalane-Nkohla, 2019). Understanding this could be crucial to gaining a deeper comprehension of how decolonization can affect space and affect the transformational practice of writing centres. Participants' various responses reveal that decolonisation within writing centres space goes beyond physical space, but transformational pedagogy that is inclusive of students' diverse cultures and languages. Arguably, it is also central to understanding the nexus between physical and pedagogical space that provides a nurturing and supportive environment for students to engage in their academic development.

Conclusion

Decolonisation within writing centres is about challenging certain gatekeeping spaces where knowledge is confined to the dominant groups. Writing centres as transitional spaces play a central role in providing a safe accessible environment for all students. The reflections from writing centre tutors highlight the importance of a student-centred pedagogy and multilingualism in the decolonisation process. The student-centred approach allows students to construct their own understanding and facilitates their integration into foreign university environments. Tutors, who share similar socio-cultural backgrounds with the students, serve as points of reference and instil a sense of possibility and success within the university space. Efforts must be made to avoid perpetuating monolingualism and the flawed perception that English fluency equates to intelligence. Incorporating African languages into teaching and learning is crucial to challenging the dominance of English in academia. Additionally, student empowerment is seen as a vital aspect of decolonisation. Education should go beyond rote learning and encourage

critical thinking, especially in challenging Western knowledge and disrupting white supremacy. Integrating indigenous knowledge systems and adopting alternative methodologies like storytelling can foster a decolonial attitude in knowledge production. Writing centres are viewed as transitional spaces that provide safe and inclusive environments for students to develop their academic and research writing practices. The study, therefore, recommends that writing centres continue to prioritize student-centred pedagogy, create multilingual spaces, and pay attention to the physical environment to enhance the learning experience. Overall, a commitment to decolonisation and student empowerment is crucial for the transitional spaces of writing centres.

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