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Cross-disciplinary synergy: First-year students' experiences of learning academic writing through integrated writing support at a University of Technology

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An important role in socialising first-year students into universities is initiating them into different conventions of academic writing. Support programmes, such as writing centres, have been established in several South African universities to help students with this objective and the broader issue of academic literacy. The assumption is that such interventions bridge the articulation gap between basic and higher education phases and expedite academic success. This article draws from a larger PhD study that explored nursing students' experiences of developing their academic writing skills at the writing centre. The focus of this article is on understanding first-year nursing students' experiences of learning academic writing through the integrated writing interventions of language and discipline practices at a writing centre based at the Durban University of Technology (DUT). These students were regarded as relevant because their curriculum incorporates a more structured academic writing component with the writing centre. The study adopted the Academic Literacies Model (ALM), which fosters a social view of academic writing and advocates for integrated support to the teaching and learning of academic writing. Guided by the qualitative constructivist paradigm, phenomenography was adopted as a research methodology. Data were analysed according to phenomenographic categories. Whilst the study uncovered various factors influencing the development of academic writing amongst the target population, there was a clear need for shifting from interdisciplinary (at least two disciplines) to a transdisciplinary (more than two disciplines) academic literacy approach to students' learning experiences. As such, the article recommends the intentional inclusion of various stakeholders (writing centre practitioners, discipline lecturers, clinical and academic support staff) to mitigate students' writing challenges and develop sustainable and relevant academic literacy practices.

Keywords: academic literacies; academic writing; extended curriculum programme; writing centres; phenomenography.

Introduction

The importance of sound academic writing practices for university students can hardly be overstated, considering that success in higher education has been intrinsically tied to academic literacy.[1,2,3] However, most students in South African tertiary institutions, especially in universities of technology, struggle with learning and maintaining the required academic writing practices.[4] This has been shown to impact their academic progress and throughput. According to the Council of Higher Education (CHE),[5] approximately 55% of students who enrol for undergraduate programmes in South African universities never graduate and most drop out in their first year. Given the extent that such high levels of attrition are attributable to poor academic literacy, there is a need to create effective academic support programmes to mitigate the challenges experienced by first-year students.[6,7]

Leibowitz and Bozalek have asserted the need to transform learning and teaching strategies in higher education institutions.[8] This includes, but is not limited to, exposing first-year students to both discipline-specific (curricular) and general academic literacy support structures.[9] Whilst, traditionally, academic support structures for first-year university students tended to focus mainly on 'underprepared' students,[10] recent development has indicated the shortfalls of such approaches, hence the need to expand support to all students.[11] This need has been shown to transcend national borders. At the global level, these transformation imperatives manifest as part of the response to the need to accommodate student diversity and globalisation.[12]

The call for widening participation in Western higher schooling systems has further led to growing variety inside the ethnic, social and linguistic compositions of student populations. Whilst this can be considered favourable, this diversity has increased the need for support programmes to standardise student learning experiences and outcomes. The higher education context involves adapting to new ways of knowledge production and organisation. Such adaptation needs are usually challenging for first-year university students, regardless of their educational backgrounds. Thus, the development of students' academic writing calls for a social practice approach to teaching and learning across disciplines, to accommodate other social variables that contribute to academic writing development and proficiency.[13]

South African universities, in view of changing student demographics, have engaged to transform teaching and learning, to ensure that first-year students cope successfully with the quest for epistemological access into different disciplines.[14] The argument, laid out in expansive academic literacy studies, is that effective academic literacy is the key to epistemological access.[8]

Through various interventions such as writing centres, higher education institutions hope to go beyond the teaching and learning of isolated skills. In association with academic departments, writing centres attempt to foster long-term students' writing development.[15] There is a demand for the institutionalisation of such collaborative practices that are responsive to students' academic needs,[16] because of the variegation of academic and professional writing needs in different disciplines. As such, the support ought to transcend the generic academic literacy offered within institutional writing centres, to include discipline-specific writing.[3] As such, it is more critical for writing centres to develop and sustain long-term collaboration with the various academic departments and their parallel professional contexts.

This article seeks to expand on the initial justification for academic writing support interventions. It explores the possibility, dynamics and extent to which acquired academic literacies could enhance professional competencies amongst undergraduate nursing students. The study investigated first-year nursing students' experiences of learning academic writing through integrated writing interventions within a writing centre located at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) in South Africa. It draws on Thesen et al.'s study on the broader understanding of students writing practices in the South African higher education context.[17]

The article is divided into five sections. The first section presents the setting of the study, which is a description of the DUT writing centre and the writing intervention. The section that follows presents the conceptual framework for academic writing and mainly elaborates on the academic literacies model (ALM). The description of the methodological choices precedes the presentation of the findings, discussion and conclusion.

Integrated writing support at the Durban University of Technology writing centre

Durban University of Technology established its writing centre in 2013, as an independent unit outside of academic faculties. There are six writing centres located across the Durban and Pietermaritzburg campuses of the university. The writing centre offers a student-centred collaborative learning space that focuses on developing students' academic literacies. It offers writing companionship for all students and staff, through one-on-one and group consultations, responsive workshops and writing tutorials. The writing centre recruits' postgraduate students from multiple disciplines as writing tutors. This enables tutors to share disciplinary knowledge and effectively engage with all students.[18] The writing centre is fully funded by the University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) and is one of the university's special projects.

In addition to generic support, the writing centre offers embedded academic literacy support to students in the foundational programmes of the different departments. In 2018, the writing centre in the Pietermaritzburg campus entered into a collaborative arrangement with the Department of Nursing's Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP). The arrangement was to give academic writing support to the ECP students as part of the Essentials for Professional Practice (EPP) module, which is aimed at equipping students with essential skills to succeed in their academic and professional activities. As academic literacy is seen as one of those essential skills in both aspects, the writing centre had to engage with all first-year ECP students, through in-class writing tutorials, workshops and one-on-one and group consultations. With regard to the academic literacies theory in teaching practice underpin the centre's integrated writing intervention programmes through interdisciplinary collaboration. The activities include support on basic academic writing practices, an offering of context-embedded tutorials and integrated examples of content knowledge.

The content of writing tutorials is specific to nursing and designed collaboratively with the lecturers from the Department of Nursing. This is in line with the view of Clarence who asserted that the strength of writing centre practice is in constantly finding new innovative ways of collaborate with departments of various disciplines to ensure that writing development is embedded in specific academic practice.[3] The writing tutorials focus on the low order concerns (LOCs) that generally concentrate on sentence structure, punctuations, spelling, word choice, grammar and mechanics. The workshops and writing consultations focus on higher order concerns (HOCs), which are crucial elements of assignment writing. These include thesis or focus, audience and purpose, organisation, development and referencing. The HOCs writing support adopts the process approach to academic writing, in which students are encouraged to develop their writing through a series of iterative stages.

Academic writing as a social practice

Tertiary institutions are a new environment for first-year students and present them with learning and writing experiences, different from their previous education level. This demands another socialisation for learners who are coming from secondary schools and other pre-university activities. Predictably, this proves to be a challenge for learners.[20,21,22] Harvey prescribed a deliberately crafted socialising initiative for new students in higher institutions of learning, intending to induct them into the tertiary education system.[22] This, according to the author, would make students consciously aware of the particular lifestyle of learning in a new academic environment and would affect their overall knowledge because tertiary institutions change the identity of students through student support initiatives. The socialising initiative would therefore, enable students to cope academically and imbue them with demands of the new identity.

This study adopts the ALM as the theoretical framework. Academic Literacies theory situates writing within a socio-cultural context.[19] The ALM conceptualises literacies as social practices and focuses on students' identities and learning experiences.[19] According to a panel of researchers working for the Centre for Applied Linguistics, academic literacy includes:

> ... reading, writing, and oral discourse for school; varies from subject to subject; requires knowledge of multiple genres of text, purposes for text use, and multimedia; is influenced by students' literacies in contexts outside of school, and; is influenced by students' personal, social, and cultural practices.[23]

According to McKenna, academic literacy is not one, but many things; it is the language of academic disciplines.[24] She observed that as far as many disciplines in higher education are concerned, academic literacy is 'no-one's mother tongue', as such to be accepted, ideologically to one or the other disciplinary 'tribe', a student has to acquire this language. Academic access as a code language of epistemological access in many disciplines has to do not only with 'ways of using language but also the beliefs, attitudes and values of the group'.[24] Whilst many students come with no knowledge of generic and specific disciplinary literacies, some come with literacy practices that closely approximate them to cracking the code of the literacy of the discipline they want to join. Others on the other hand will keep on using wrong literacy practices until they are kicked out by the disciplinary tribe.[24] It is therefore the responsibility of institutions to ensure that every student that gains access to 'university gates' achieves the acquisition of values, beliefs and attitudes for the discipline they want to join if they are to become successful beyond the university gates.

As such, developing appropriate literacy goes beyond mere mastering of specific technical writing conventions; it's socialisation to certain value systems, ways of thinking and communication. This is why much of the literature on academic literacies advocates an embedded approach for academic literacy curricula.[2,25,26,27] These authors argue that the embedded curriculum approach would enhance student experiences of learning academic writing and constructing knowledge in that discipline. Boughey and McKenna[2] had suggested different models of interaction between writing practitioners and students. Street[13] suggested that effective collaborative learning between different stakeholders is crucial in supporting students to develop such appropriate academic literacy practices. Salamonson et al.[28] also contended that embedded academic support is one of the key strategies for supporting academic writing development for nursing students. Kift and Field[29] advocated a holistic approach that integrates fundamental academic support to discipline-specific activities.

These scholarly positions depart from the erstwhile academic literacy practices in which the development of writing and language competencies were separate from discipline-specific activities. They argue that effective academic literacy development of first-year students involves not only coaching in academic writing technicalities but also being immersed in disciplinary writing idiosyncrasies.[30]

According to Dison and Clarence,[31] disciplinary requirements of academic writing play a critical role in socialising students to academic literacies discourse. As such, the activities of the writing centre ought not to be viewed as an end to themselves, but as an integral part of a broader and integrated academic literacy socialisation, which includes discipline-specific and professional activities.

Therefore, in addition to disciplinary socialisation, students need to develop various socio-professional literacy identities relevant to their professional aspirations.[32] It is noncontroversial to contend that different social and professional contexts require different and specific identities. For example, nursing students chosen to participate in this study are required to develop generic academic literacies because of them being students in a higher education institute. In addition, they need to develop and be competent to the nursing-specific jargon and mindset, both in their nursing education and clinical practice settings. As such, if writing is part of socialisation, it could be argued, therefore, that nursing students are required to be socialised in the different contexts they find themselves if they are to practice the correct form of literacy. Effective academic literacy support would need embedment in all the three contexts.[33]

Figure 1 reflects that writing as an academic practice needs to be more visible between and within disciplines.[3] As such, it is more critical for all stakeholders not only to develop the collaboration but also to be able to sustain it long term.

The empirical dimension of this study is based on phenomenography, a qualitative research approach that assesses how participants make sense of their experiences of a phenomenon.[34] The study methodology and design is presented further.

Methods

Study design

This study employs an interpretivist paradigm to capture the subjective experiences of first-year ECP nursing students on their learning of academic writing. It explains the dynamics of individuals who are engaged in the social world they are interpreting.[35] Locating this study within an interpretivist paradigm is important because the writing centre, which provides the context for the study, adopts policies of teaching and learning of academic writing that should be informed by the contextual realities of the students. Phenomenography was employed as a research methodology because it is a research approach that effectively represents the qualitatively different ways people experience, conceptualise and understand various aspects of a phenomenon. The focus is thus on the variation of participants' experiences of phenomena.[36] In this study, phenomenography was useful in understanding how nursing students experienced and conceptualised academic writing in relation to the discipline of nursing.

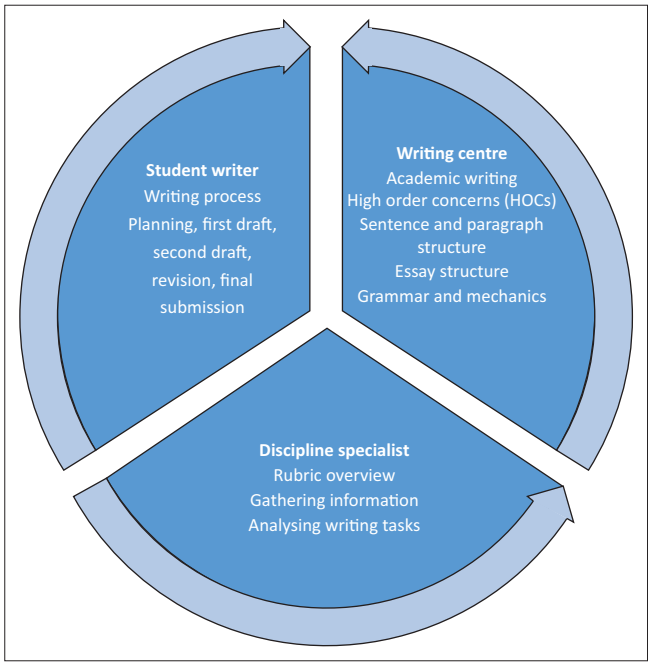


FIGURE 1: Writing centre integrated writing support provided to extended curriculum programme nursing students.

Study population

The target group for this study was the first-year students admitted into the ECP stream of the Department of Nursing. The ECP students, usually 20% of the annual intake, undergo 5 years of nursing training, instead of the 4 years undergone by the rest of the students. In order to improve their academic literacy, the department of nursing offers them the EPP module that includes academic writing presentations, tutorials from the writing centre, computer literacy from the information and Communication Systems (ICS) department and information literacy from the library department. The researcher, as a participant, wanted to understand the contribution of the intervention programme of the writing centre on the academic writing skills of these students. Thus, the study used purposive sampling for the selection of the participants (see Table 1).

As shown in Table 1, participants comprised equally distributed males and female, who come from predominantly rural backgrounds. All participants isiZulu speaking black people, albeit a sheer coincidence.

Data collection and analysis

The data production strategy in phenomenography assists participants to reflect on their experiences of a phenomenon.[34] As such, data production comprised a complex battery of activities by participants. These included individual interviews and two focus group discussions. This triangulation of data-collection methods was intended to produce a comprehensive reflection of the phenomenon. Through these activities, the participant was encouraged to

TABLE 1: Biography profile of participants and schooling background.

Number	Name (pseudonym)	Race	Gender	First Language	Schooling background: Rural or urban	Nursing as a first choice
1	Participant – 01	Black person	Female	IsiZulu	Urban (Former model C)	Yes
2	Participant – 02	Black person	Male	IsiZulu	Urban (Township)	No
3	Participant – 03	Black person	Female	IsiZulu	Urban (Township)	No
4	Participant – 04	Black person	Male	IsiZulu	Rural	No
5	Participant – 05	Black person	Male	IsiZulu	Urban (Former model C)	No
6	Participant – 06	Black person	Female	IsiZulu	Rural	Yes
7	Participant – 07	Black person	Female	IsiZulu	Rural	Yes
8	Participant – 08	Black person	Female	IsiZulu	Rural	No
9	Participant – 09	Black person	Male	IsiZulu	Rural	No
10	Participant – 10	Black person	Male	IsiZulu	Rural	No
11	Participant – 11	Black person	Male	IsiZulu	Rural	No
12	Participant – 12	Black person	Male	IsiZulu	Rural	Yes
13	Participant – 13	Black person	Female	IsiZulu	Rural	No
14	Participant – 14	Black person	Female	IsiZulu	Rural	No
15	Participant – 15	Black person	Female	IsiZulu	Rural	No
16	Participant – 16	Black person	Female	IsiZulu	Rural	No
17	Participant – 17	Black person	Male	IsiZulu	Rural	Yes
18	Participant – 18	Black person	Male	IsiZulu	Rural	No

reflect on their development of effective academic writing development.[37] As such, participants were able to reflect on the impact of the activities of the writing centre, discipline lecturers and clinical mentors, in their academic writing development.

The variety and diversity of approaches in qualitative research design mean that there are different ways of analysing social life, and therefore multiple perspectives and practices in the analysis of qualitative data exist.[38] There is no single technique for analysing data in a phenomenographic study because research questions often guide the type of analysis.[39] Thus, the researcher focused on examining the differences and similarities in the experiences of the participants. The phenomenographic data analysis method prescribed by Sjostrom and Dahlgren[40] was used to analyse data in this study. It consists of six stages, namely familiarisation, compilation, condensation, preliminary grouping, a preliminary comparison of categories and outcome space.[39] Therefore, data from different sources were transcribed and translated and hand coding was applied to generate specific themes relating to student experiences. After transcribing all the interviews, I read and compared them repeatedly, thinking about similarities and differences both within a single transcript and across all transcripts. Because the 'how' aspect of language learning has been thoroughly studied, my analysis focused on the 'what' aspect of second language experience, which has not been extensively studied. However, the ultimate aim of analysis in this approach was to discern and identify participants' qualitatively different experiences or understanding, in a limited number of categories[39] as reflected in the results discussed further.

Results

Figure 2 presents the findings pertaining to the first-year nursing students experiences of learning academic writing skills. It portrays the complexities of the different experiences, which together comprise the phenomenon. In phenomenography this is referred to as the outcome space that, according to Marton,[41] is 'the logically structured complex of the different ways of experiencing an object', acting as a 'synonym for the phenomenon'. As such, these results represent experiences of the phenomenon in the same way as categories of description represent conceptions. Therefore, in phenomenography, the outcome space represents both the phenomenon and different ways of people's experiences.

Bruce et al.[42] illustrated that the outcome space may be presented as a 'table, image or diagram and serves the purpose of depicting how each category relates to each other'. Bruce et al.[42] further describe the outcome space as a 'diagrammatic representation' of the categories of description; whilst Säljö[43] suggested that it

reflects a 'map of a territory', interpreting how people conceive an aspect of reality. In this study, nursing students were required to describe their experiences of learning academic writing in the writing centre.

Category one: Students' experience

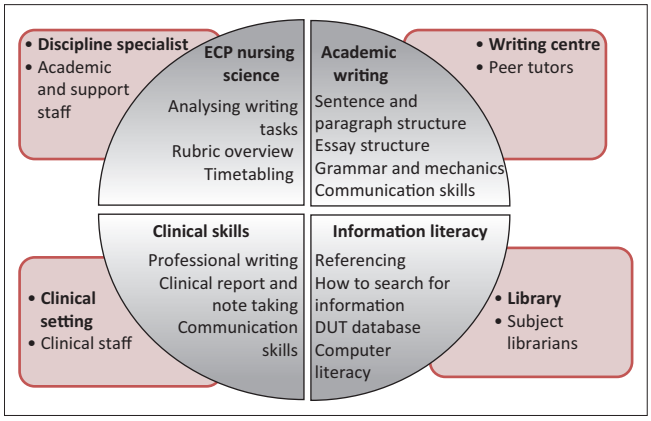
The given category of the outcome space (Table 2) presents results of student reflection on their pre-university background, self-acknowledged writing challenges, the experiences of learning new writing conventions. Most of these were gathered during in-class writing interventions. These in-class tutorials were part of the compulsory writing centre that mainly focused on LOCs such as grammar and basic academic writing conventions.

Despite acknowledging poor schooling and writing background, most participants were confident of their writing abilities. Hutchison[44] and Archer,[1] have described this apparent contradictory phenomenon, in which students often overestimate their abilities. This is often attributed to the euphoria of successful completion of high school and admission to higher education, which leaves students with a feeling of temporarily heightened capabilities, especially during the initial days of their university life. Nonetheless, most students encountered challenges in mastering basic grammar and academic writing norms. This challenge was reflected on their interviews, as the word 'difficult' recurred in 14 out of 18 responses. This initial 'shock', enabled students to reflect and come to terms with their specific writing challenges. One participant shared their experience:

> 'I had to learn new styles of writing. The university writing is different from how we were writing at schools. Lots of our writing requires us to research before writing and that is not easy. For example, I cannot use a first-person "I" or mix tenses when writing an essay. These are some of the things we were not taught at school.' (Participant 05, Student, Male)

Another participant explained:

> 'I struggle with some of the aspects of writing such as paraphrasing, it is new and with time, I will learn and improve. After all, writing expectations at university are different from high school writing. The assignments, projects and presentations demand a lot of reading and writing.' (Participant 09, Student, Male)



DUT, Durban University of Technology; ECP, Extended Curriculum Programme.

FIGURE 2: Proposed transdisciplinary collaboration for integrated academic writing support.

TABLE 2: Outcome space reflecting the categories of description.

Scope of writing support intervention	Category
In-class writing tutorials:	**One: Student's experience:**
• First semester – One period a week (1 h)	1. Participants' school, language and cultural experiences
• Compulsory attendance	2. Participants' writing challenges
• Focuses on LOCs	3. Resisting new writing conventions
	4. Self-improvement and embracing change
Workshops:	**Two: Writing centre support:**
• Once quarterly	5. Learning academic writing at the writing centre
• Compulsory attendance	6. Writing mistakes as a reminder of writing weakness
• Specific writing tasks discussions	7. Receiving and using feedback
• Focuses on HOCs	8. A writing centre as a student-centred collaborative space
• Assignment rubrics	
One-to-one or group consultations:	**Three: Writing in the discipline:**
• At least one consultation per writing tasks	9. Writing variations from the writing centre to clinical contexts
• Compulsory attendance according to content lecturer (however not enforced by the writing centre)	10. Transference of writing practices from different contexts
	11. Writing proficiency as student nurses

LOC, Low order concerns; HOC, High order concerns.

According to their reflections, even whilst acknowledging their shortcomings and the need to develop university-specific writing practices, some students were reluctant to learn new writing conventions. This was also influenced by the still self-perceived competencies that had enabled them to succeed in high school, as seen in the following reflection:

> 'I write well but my lecturer deducts marks if my assignment is submitted without consulting the Writing Centre. I am required to consult and get a stamp to show that I worked with a tutor on improving my writing. My writing is good and readable; I feel I do not need extra help with my writing.' (Participant 13, Student, Female)

On the other hand, the inertia may have been influenced by the fact that over 70% of the participants had studied in poorly resourced rural schools, which had crippled their ability to develop basic writing and literacy skills. As such, the feeling of 'starting-over' might have been debilitating:

> 'I feel I write better than some of my friends in the mainstream. I do not understand why I should attend writing tutorials and workshops … The fact is English is our second language.' (Participant 14, Student, Female)

This reluctance was reflected in erratic attendance and poor in-class participation. However, in time, this inertia was replaced by the necessity for developing literacy practices for effective academic and professional participation:

> 'As an aspiring nurse, it is important to write well and use clear English. Therefore, everything they teach us was because they want us to write well. When we are in hospitals, we always do a better job than the students who do not attend writing tutorials.' (Participant 01, Student, Female)

The other participant also added:

> 'At first, I felt the writing tutorials was a waste of time because all we did was learn about writing. Most sessions focused on how to improve my writing and get good marks on my assignments. However, I enjoy writing exercises at the end of the session. I find them useful, although it creates more writing for us.' (Participant 17, Student, Male)

The participants acknowledged the values of writing tutorials to their academic development. According to Participant 17, the collaborative learning initiative aimed at supporting them, as nursing students, to enhance their writing skills. The study affirms that effective learning of academic writing is grounded on an academic literacies approach that allows students to recognise the gaps in their learning experiences. As such, these student experiences show a shift in student perception of their writing competencies and their need for academic literacy support.

Category 2: Writing centre support

In Category 2, student reflections were directed towards HOCs writing centre support. These are organised in the form of workshops and are offered once a quarter – coinciding with first assignments. In these workshops, students are supported in essay writing – which follows a process approach – and conventions of academic integrity (paraphrasing, referencing and avoidances of plagiarism). In this category, participants reflected on the effectiveness of the writing centre in their development of academic literacy, receiving actionable feedback and the conflict between writing centre and disciplinary writing prerogatives.

The residual reluctance to support was still reflected in student responses, even with regard to HOCs, as stated here:

> 'I write well but my lecturer deducts marks if my assignment is submitted without consulting the writing centre. I am required to consult and get a stamp to show that I worked with a tutor on improving my writing. My writing is good and readable; I feel I do not need extra help with my writing.' (Participant 13, Student, Female)

This point was reflected by some participants, where they felt undermined for being taught what they deem 'easy stuff'. The experience of being treated as incompetent

compared with other first years was a cause for concern. Whilst some felt that writing an assignment was a skill they had already mastered in their previous education and needed no support, others felt the need to adopt university-specific conventions:

> 'At the beginning of the year, I struggled with lots of things…. University is not easy, there is so much to learn and understand in a short space of time. I had to learn how to type my assignment, research and reference my assignment.' (Participant 03, Student, Female)

Other participants shared their positive learning experience and valued the one-on-one writing consultations:

> 'I feel I have a good command of English and I write well. When I went for writing consultation, there were so many grammatical mistakes in my assignment draft and I was a bit irritated and embarrassed. I could not believe how many unnecessary grammatical errors I made.' (Participant 01, Student, Female)

One of the participants appraised the writing centre as a place that has helped her hone her writing skills by demanding that students plan what they write before bringing their work to the writing centre. However, despite the positive experiences with the interactive mode of delivering writing support at the writing centre, some participants encountered challenges with how feedback was handled:

> 'I do not like working with different tutors on the same writing tasks. I go there today one tutor tells me to work on the structure and referencing, I go back the next day and another tutor tells me a different thing to work on the argument of the assignment. I do not like that, and it does not help me with improving my writing.' (Participant 02, Student, Male)

This sometimes hampers the positive experience regarding the use of the writing centre in general and the confusion surrounding the use of the feedback. As Archer[45] has pointed out, tutors often undervalue the critical role of constructive feedback. A lack of uniformity in feedback has both advantages and disadvantages for the learners and the tutors.

In addition to the frustration about feedback provided by the writing centre tutors, there was general confusion on the role of the writing centre. One of the participants considered the writing centre as a place where students go for ' eradication of errors' (Participant 08, Student, Female).

Another student conceded to having felt irritated because of tutors at the writing centre:

> '... picked out many grammar and literature mistakes.' (Participant 04, Student, Male)

The frustration was mainly based on the expectation that, instead of a space for collaborative learning, the writing centre is a corrective or a remedial setting wherein tutors point out the mistakes and fix them for students.

Category three: Writing in the discipline

In this category, participants reflect on the transference of academic writing competence from the writing centre (through task-specific consultations) to the nursing discipline, to the clinical setting. Whilst academic literacy socialisation is meant to be interdisciplinary and integrated, it was unclear whether that intention was understood by participants. Most understood literacy practices of different contexts (writing centre, discipline classrooms, clinical setting) as unrelated and tended to devalue the 'generic' writing practices from the writing centre in favour of mastering discipline-specific jargon and clinical terminologies:

> 'What is expected of us in the clinics are terminologies. It is more of the terminologies than the academic writing…words in hospitals are abbreviated because they are aware of what it stands for… these are hospital terms that are relevant to the field and they rarely use full words.' (Participant 11, Student, Male)

The assumption is that students in professions such as nursing do not need to master basic academic writing but their disciplinary jargon is endemic and has been observed in the literature. Salamonson et al.[28] asserted that institutions of learning usually make assumptions about nursing students that are detrimental to their writing. One assumption is that nursing students would naturally learn academic writing through their interaction with disciplinary texts. However, Whitehead[46] observed that 'nurses often have a contractual obligation to participate in scholarly activity, where good writing practices are essential for job survival and security'. Writing is also arguably the most important exhibition of one's demonstration of scholarship. According to Miller et al.[47] and Mitchell et al.,[48] the development of generic academic writing conventions is a prerequisite to discipline-specific epistemological access.

Whilst this has been established, this integrated nature of academic literacy socialisation was not clear to some participants:

> 'It is slightly different. In hospitals, clinical terms are shortened or abbreviated which you cannot do in the university.' (Participant 14, Student, Female)

However, others felt that they were able to make the transference between contexts:

> 'As much as it is all writing, there is a huge distinction between academic and professional writing. In a hospital report, I am expected to use clinical terms, abbreviations for some of the terms. There is a format to follow. Unlike assignment writing where I only have to respond to the research question using academic writing including referencing.' (Participant 10, Student, Male)

Whilst participants views differed on the need for the integrated approach to academic writing, some argued that the discipline lecturers were also not invested in the approach:

> 'Lecturers do not give us feedback with regard to our writing; the feedback we get is for the content and marks. The feedback from the tutors is about our assignments on what we have done

> well and how to improve my writing.' (Participant 07, Student, Female)

On the other hand, nursing practitioners in the clinical setting were reported as more critical to student writing:

> 'The head of the ward constantly read our notes and picks on all the writing mistakes, which is embarrassing and makes me sad. I remember her shouting in front of colleagues about how I need to write in "proper English."' (Participant 04, Student, Male)

Whilst the need for maintaining the integrated approach to learning academic literacy may not be immediately apparent to some participants, their reflections and experiences further consolidate this need. However, the deliberate commitment of different stakeholders (writing centre, discipline lecturers and nursing practitioners) may need to be mobilised and coordinated if this approach can lead to perceptive and effective academic literacy development.

Discussion

As argued here, the ALM contends that developing writing competency in higher education is but a part of a larger socialisation practice in which students are assisted to develop appropriate academic literacy. According to scholars in the field,[19,24,30] academic literacy involves the ways of writing, reading, thinking and communication, within a broader context of the disciplinary value system. As such, the activities at the writing centre are but a part of such socialisation, as it only develops partial aspects of academic literacy. The success of its activities rests on the collaboration of other stakeholders in specific disciplines and professions. Students have to be able to transfer competencies gained in one context to be fully functional in another.[1,23]

As indicated in the 'Results' section, there are various hindrances to such ideal outcomes. Previous research has documented roadblocks to the transference of academic writing,[49] students' perception of academic literacy transference,[50] theoretical applications of learning transfer,[51] and contextual factors that affect different kinds of writing transfer. As also indicated in the present study, most participants have less-than-optimal academic literacy backgrounds, having gone through under-resourced rural schools. Whilst that was a challenge, some participants had a distorted perception of their literacy competencies, which made them reluctant to fully participating in academic literacy support activities, such as writing tutorials, workshops and task-based consultations.

As derived from the response of other participants, the lack of active collaboration between writing centre tutors and discipline lecturers created an impression that some lecturers did not value the contribution of the writing centre in the development of student academic literacy. Whilst this may have been the case, several participants observed the importance of effective academic literacy practices in a clinical context, where they have to deal with 'legal' clinical records. This further reinforces the need for a transdisciplinary approach in academic literacy development, even if not all stakeholders appreciate the importance of such collaboration. The results may only indicate the need for advocacy to bring all stakeholders to the same page with regard to the value of the contribution of each context.

Literature appreciates that such advocacy for synergy may not be without challenges, since this transdisciplinary approach emphasises collaboration and cooperation between different stakeholders, who may not directly work together.[52] According to Shrivastava and Ivanaj,[53] transdisciplinary is a 'dialogue and engagement across ideologies, scientific, religious, economic, political and philosophical lines'. In this study, the integrated writing support proposes transdisciplinary collaboration for the effective development of academic literacy practices. As such, collaboration for effective academic literacy learning must be a cross-disciplinary synergy between professional/disciplinary specialists (educators and clinicians) and writing and literacy specialists (writing practitioners), as illustrated in Figure 2.

Such collaboration is also likely to enhance the experiences of students undergoing such support. In this study, some participants were less enthusiastic about participating in the activities organised by the writing centre (tutorials, workshops and consultations) as they felt that the focus was on generic writing conventions, which was less urgent to their cause as nursing students and future healthcare practitioners. If well-implemented, this synergy will therefore bring together different expertise in the development of effective writing practice, making sure that generic academic writing conventions are immediately integrated into technical disciplinary and clinical writing prerogatives. Whilst professional experts focus on the development and application of pro-nursing literacies, the writing practitioners will assist with the development of generic academic writing conventions. Such collaboration will also enhance the ability for the transference of such literacy practices between the academic and professional contexts, which was one area participants struggled with.

Many institutions are experimenting with these cross-disciplinary collaborations in the context of academic writing. Other institutions have integrated their writing centres, as longstanding, rather than ephemeral and experimental components of institutions of higher learning.[16] This has created a need for the revision of how writing centres are to interact with faculties and disciplines for sustained periods. What this observation suggests is the need for the employment of practitioners who can supplement what happens at the writing centre. There has to be more than one component to the teaching of writing – one that is specialised in fields of study and one that caters to various fields. Disseminated approaches, according to Carstens,[54] move the responsibility for the development of academic, quantitative and information literacies to the mainstream, involving language

experts and 'faculty, administrators and other stakeholders'. However, Carstens[54] contended that for any successful collaboration to occur the players involved need to show 'a collective commitment to student success and willingness of commitment'.

Conclusion

The study concludes with a debate on the importance of collaboration between lecturers, writing centres and clinical nursing practitioners in reinforcing the value of each support context in the development and transference of appropriate academic literacy practices. Whilst data from this study have shown that some students participated in the writing centre initiatives out of compulsion, I contend that this is because of a lack of collaboration between relevant stakeholders. As such, the writing centre is regarded as peripheral because most of the activities are not credited. Students do not feel the immediate necessity to take writing centre activities as seriously as credited assessments within their specific disciplines. However, from my experience, I have realised that integrating some of the support (especially LOCs and HOCs) within credited foundational modules can bring effective results. For this to happen, both the disciplinary lecturers and clinical practitioners must be on board to assess the development of such competencies within their assessments.

The findings in this research therefore militate against the piecemeal approach to academic writing development be it the basic skills approach emphasised in most writing centres, or discipline-based writing. The evidence in this study and the conclusions drawn from it, advocate for the need for a shift from the interdisciplinary (piecemeal) to transdisciplinary collaboration for effective and transferable academic writing practices, particularly in professional fields such as nursing.

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The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

N.K. and S.R. contributed equally to this work. N.K. wrote the manuscript and S.R. supervised the project.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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