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**Repositioning Writing Centres  
as Hubs of Academic Agency  
in South African Higher Education**

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**Abstract**

*This paper critically interrogates the persistent remedial positioning of writing centres in higher education, with particular reference to South Africa's multilingual and unequal educational context. Drawing on the academic literacies framework, inclusive pedagogies, and theories of student empowerment, the study challenges deficit discourses that frame writing centres as peripheral "fix-it" spaces for underprepared students. Adopting a conceptual and critical approach grounded in an integrative review and synthesis of South African and international scholarship, the paper reconceptualises writing centres as developmental hubs of academic agency, epistemic access, and institutional transformation. It argues that academic writing should be understood as a socially situated and epistemic practice, rather than a neutral technical skill, and that students should be recognised as active contributors to knowledge production. The paper proposes a set of interrelated strategies for repositioning writing centres, including collaborative curriculum partnerships, dialogic pedagogies, translanguaging practices, feedback literacy development, and intentional rebranding to disrupt stigma and marginalisation. By foregrounding linguistic diversity and academic agency, the paper positions writing centres as central to fostering equity, intellectual engagement, and inclusivity in higher education. It concludes by identifying directions for future empirical research on the implementation and impact of these transformative approaches across diverse institutional contexts.*

**Keywords:** *Writing centre, academic literacies, deficit discourses, academic agency, linguistic diversity*

**Introduction**

As a writing centre practitioner in a South African university, I have often encountered a paradox: while writing centres are essential to student learning, they remain persistently misunderstood and undervalued. Institutions frequently perceive them as remedial spaces tasked with "fixing" weak writers (Archer, 2010; Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni, 2019), rather than as integral sites of intellectual engagement and transformation. Such perceptions are far from harmless; they

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reproduce deficit discourses (Boughey and McKenna, 2021) that pathologise students, marginalise linguistic and cultural diversity, and relegate writing centres to the periphery of institutional life.

This paper engages with and extends established scholarship that has critiqued the remedial positioning of writing centres in higher education, with particular reference to South Africa's multilingual and unequal educational context. Building on the academic literacies tradition and earlier critiques of deficit discourses (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis, 2014; Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni, 2019), the paper asks what it would mean to reimagine writing centres not as sites of repair but as hubs of academic agency. This question is especially urgent in multilingual and unequal contexts such as South Africa, where universities face the dual imperatives of widening access and ensuring student success (Kaburise, 2014). When writing centres are conceptualised as remedial, these imperatives are sidelined; when they are positioned as spaces of possibility, they are placed at the heart of higher education transformation (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis, 2014).

Drawing on scholarship in academic literacies (Lea and Street, 1998), inclusive pedagogies (hooks, 1994), and student empowerment (Canagarajah, 2013), this paper rejects deficit framings and instead foregrounds critical engagement, linguistic diversity, and the co-construction of knowledge. To advance this argument, I first examine how prevailing narratives of remediation shape the positioning of writing centres. I then propose strategies for challenging deficit discourses, adopting pedagogies that foster academic agency, and rebranding writing centres as intellectual partners in teaching and learning. The central claim is that, by embracing a developmental orientation, writing centres can move beyond remediation to become transformative spaces that support not only individual students but also institutional equity and intellectual vibrancy.

South African universities operate within an education system marked by deep inequalities and linguistic diversity. Many students transition from under-resourced schools where English is taught as an additional language, often with limited opportunities for extended writing practice. Consequently, disparities in language proficiency and academic preparedness reflect systemic rather than individual shortcomings (Muyambi and Ahiaku, 2025). Within this context, writing centres were established not merely to "fix" student deficits but to address the structural and linguistic challenges inherited from the broader schooling system. They thus serve as critical spaces for epistemic access and equity.

### **The Evolution of Writing Centres in South Africa**

The development of writing centres in South Africa is inextricably linked to the country's broader historical and socio-political transformations within higher education. Emerging in the early 1990s, following the end of apartheid, these centres became a key institutional response to the expansion of access for historically marginalised students. Universities faced the dual challenge of widening participation while addressing enduring inequalities in schooling and language preparedness (Archer, 2010; Clarence, 2011).

Initially, many South African writing centres adopted Anglo-American models that emphasised individual, one-on-one consultations aimed at addressing students' perceived deficiencies in language and writing (Archer, 2010). While these approaches provided essential support to students unfamiliar with academic discourse, they often perpetuated deficit perspectives by casting students as problems to be "fixed," rather than recognising them as emerging scholars with valuable linguistic and cultural resources (Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni, 2019).

Over time, local scholarship began to challenge the limitations of these imported models, advocating instead for practices that are responsive to South Africa's multilingual landscape, cultural diversity, and the principles of academic literacies (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis, 2014). This evolution has been as much ideological as pedagogical: it entails recognising writing as a socially situated practice, inseparable from issues of power, disciplinary norms, and identity formation.

In my own practice, I have observed that the trajectory of South African writing centres mirrors the central argument advanced in this paper, which is the imperative to move beyond remedial paradigms towards a developmental orientation. Contemporary scholarship increasingly foregrounds multilingualism, translanguaging, and collaborative learning as key components in fostering academic agency (Clarence and Dison, 2017; Makalela, 2015). Nevertheless, writing

centres are still frequently positioned as peripheral support structures for “underprepared” students, both in institutional policy and in public perception.

Tracing this history situates the present study within a critical tradition, one that recognises the formative stages of writing centre practice in South Africa while advocating for their reimagining as central, transformative spaces within the university. Engaging with this evolution allows for a historically informed and contextually attuned call for rebranding and pedagogical innovation, both of which are essential to advancing equity, access, and intellectual inclusivity in South African higher education.

### **Conceptual Approach**

This paper adopts a conceptual and critical framework to interrogate and reposition the role of writing centres within higher education. Grounded in a social constructivist epistemology, it views academic writing and literacy not as neutral, technical skills but as socially situated and culturally mediated practices. The theoretical stance draws on scholarship in academic literacies (Lea and Street, 1998), inclusive pedagogies (hooks, 1994), and student empowerment (Canagarajah, 2013) to critique prevailing deficit narratives and propose transformative pedagogical approaches.

To develop this analysis, I conducted a qualitative, integrative literature review and critical synthesis of South African and international research on writing centres, academic literacies, multilingual pedagogies, and higher education transformation. Key texts and recent empirical studies were purposively selected to construct a framework that exposes structural inequalities, challenges deficit discourses, and affirms the epistemic potential of writing centres. Particular attention was given to literature that foregrounds linguistic diversity, translanguaging, and collaborative learning, using these insights to inform the proposed strategies for repositioning writing centres.

Although the study is primarily conceptual, it draws on illustrative examples and insights from existing case studies, policy documents, and practice-based scholarship to ground theoretical claims in authentic contexts. This approach bridges theory and practice, offering a developmental, agency-focused vision of writing centres as intellectual partners embedded within curricula.

This methodology is especially appropriate for exploring transformative educational paradigms because it integrates critical theory with practical application, foregrounding the socio-political dimensions of academic writing and the institutional structures that enable or constrain it. Reflexivity is central to the paper’s methodological integrity. I have deliberately interrogated my own pedagogical assumptions, institutional positioning, and emotional responses, acknowledging that practitioner-based reflection is inherently situated and partial. Although no formal data was collected, the conceptual contribution is firmly underpinned by systematic reflection, scholarly synthesis, and iterative engagement with interdisciplinary theories.

### **Reframing the Purpose of Writing Centres**

The historical positioning of writing centres has profoundly shaped how they are understood and utilised within higher education. In many Anglo-American contexts, writing centres initially emerged as initiatives to “support” students perceived as linguistically or academically underprepared (García, 2021). Although the field has evolved considerably, the narrative of “fixing deficits” remains stubbornly entrenched (Archer, 2010; Lillis, 2014; Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni, 2019).

This remedial framing does more than misrepresent the work of writing centres; it actively limits their potential. It shapes how institutions allocate resources, how students engage with these spaces, and how their contributions are valued (Bouhey and McKenna, 2021). In South Africa, these challenges are further compounded by structural inequalities in schooling and disparities in access to literacy resources (Kaburise, 2014). Rather than confronting systemic inequities, many institutions shift the responsibility for “bridging the gap” onto writing centres, as though the issue lies with supposedly “deficient students” rather than with structural barriers (Bouhey, 2010).

This approach has damaging consequences. It stigmatises students, leading many to approach writing centres with hesitation or even shame (Archer, 2010). It also obscures a fundamental truth: academic writing is not a neutral skill. As academic literacies research demonstrates, writing is a socially situated practice that involves negotiating power, identity, and access to disciplinary

communities (Lillis, 2014). To counter this, a paradigmatic shift is needed, one that positions writing centres as developmental rather than remedial. This shift entails:

- Recognising writing as an epistemic practice: Understanding writing as a mode of learning, thinking, and knowledge generation, rather than the mere production of error-free texts (Wingate, 2015).
- Positioning students as emerging scholars: Designing pedagogies that validate students' linguistic and cultural resources, positioning them as contributors to knowledge rather than as recipients of correction (Canagarajah, 2013; García, 2021).
- Critiquing institutional narratives: Challenging policies and practices that frame writing centres as compensatory services rather than intellectual collaborators in teaching and learning (Boughey and McKenna, 2021).

Without this reframing, writing centres risk perpetuating the very exclusions they seek to redress, remaining trapped in cycles of corrective work that neither disrupt inequities nor foster academic agency. Through adopting a developmental orientation grounded in academic literacies and inclusive pedagogies, writing centres can be repositioned as central actors in the intellectual and transformative mission of higher education.

### **Challenging Deficit Discourses**

Deficit discourses continue to shape how writing centres are conceptualised and experienced, often with detrimental consequences for both students and practitioners. These narratives define students by what they supposedly lack: language proficiency, academic skill, or readiness for university-level work (Boughey, 2010; Lillis, 2014). Such framings marginalise students and constrain the pedagogical potential of writing centres, confining them to corrective functions rather than enabling them to serve as transformative spaces for intellectual engagement (Boughey and McKenna, 2021).

When a writing centre is reduced to a “fix-it shop”, attention shifts to surface-level correctness (grammar, punctuation, and referencing) at the expense of deeper processes of meaning-making, critical engagement, and epistemic development (Wingate, 2015; Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni, 2019). This reinforces the misconception that academic writing is a neutral, technical skill rather than a socially situated practice embedded in power relations and disciplinary cultures (Lea and Street, 1998). In multilingual contexts such as South Africa, such reductionism silences the linguistic and cultural resources students bring with them, perpetuating epistemic injustice (Canagarajah, 2013; García, 2021).

Institutional positioning further reinforces these deficit narratives. Writing centres frequently operate outside mainstream academic departments, framed as peripheral “support services” rather than as intellectual collaborators in teaching and learning (Archer, 2010). Their contributions to curriculum design, pedagogical innovation, and institutional transformation are often overlooked (García, 2021), perpetuating cycles of under-recognition and under-resourcing.

This is not a benign misunderstanding. The persistent remedial framing of writing centres serves institutional purposes: by casting writing centres as spaces for “bridging the gap” for allegedly deficient students, universities evade the more difficult task of confronting systemic inequities. Responsibility for student success is by this means individualised, deflecting attention from structural barriers and maintaining writing centres at the margins. Sustaining this narrative allows institutions to avoid substantive change while continuing to externalise accountability.

Challenging these entrenched discourses demands both advocacy and structural reform. Based on current scholarship and practice, several key strategies can support this transformation:

- Collaborative curriculum design: Embedding academic literacies within disciplinary teaching to prevent their isolation in separate “remedial” spaces (Wingate, 2015).
- Integration into formal programmes: Establishing credit-bearing modules or co-teaching initiatives that position writing centres as integral to academic development for all students (Lillis, 2014).

- Disrupting stereotypes: Showcasing success stories from diverse student groups, including high achievers and postgraduates, to counter the misconception that writing centres cater solely for “weak” students (Archer, 2010).
- Institution-wide dialogue: Facilitating sustained discussions on language, diversity, and equity to reframe academic success as a collective institutional responsibility rather than an individualised problem (Boughey and McKenna, 2021).

Dismantling deficit discourses and replacing them with developmental, agency-centred narratives enables writing centres to move from reactive, corrective models to proactive spaces that foster critical literacy, academic agency, and institutional transformation.

### **Embracing Linguistic Diversity and Academic Agency**

One of the most urgent challenges, and indeed one of the richest opportunities, in rethinking the role of writing centres lies in meaningfully engaging with linguistic diversity. Dominant models often privilege standardised academic English as the primary marker of legitimacy (Wingate, 2015). While this stance is frequently justified as necessary for academic success, it marginalises students from multilingual backgrounds and undervalues the richness of their linguistic and cultural repertoires (Canagarajah, 2013). In South Africa, where eleven official languages coexist alongside English as the principal medium of instruction, this exclusion not only limits students’ expressive range but also undermines their confidence and perpetuates epistemic injustice (Boughey and McKenna, 2021).

Linguistic diversity, however, should be viewed not as an obstacle but as a resource for learning and knowledge production. Translanguaging, which is the dynamic and fluid use of multiple languages in meaning-making, offers a powerful pedagogical framework for achieving this (García, 2021). Following Makalela (2015), I argue that enabling students to brainstorm, draft, and discuss ideas through their full linguistic repertoires before shaping them into dominant academic forms affirms their identities while deepening cognitive engagement.

This embrace of linguistic diversity is inseparable from the cultivation of academic agency. By academic agency, I refer to students’ capacity to take ownership of their learning, engage critically with academic conventions, and position themselves as active contributors to knowledge (Boughey, 2013). Agency is not merely about conforming to disciplinary norms; it entails understanding their socio-political dimensions and making deliberate, informed choices about how to navigate or challenge them (Lillis, 2014).

Writing centres are uniquely positioned to nurture such agency by creating pedagogical spaces that:

- Encourage dialogue: Shifting consultations from directive correction to collaborative meaning-making in which students’ voices are prioritised (hooks, 1994).
- Integrate multilingual practices: Designing workshops and consultations that value translanguaging as a legitimate intellectual and pedagogical resource (García, 2021; Makalela, 2015).
- Foster critical literacy: Enabling students to interrogate how disciplinary norms are constructed and how their own perspectives might challenge or extend these norms (Canagarajah, 2013).

When approached in this way, writing centres cease to be spaces where students simply learn to conform to existing academic models. Instead, they become sites where linguistic diversity and academic agency are harnessed to expand the possibilities of knowledge production and to advance a more inclusive and transformative higher education environment. Critical literacy, therefore, underpins academic agency by enabling students to recognise how academic conventions are shaped by power relations and to make conscious, strategic choices in navigating them. In this sense, agency emerges not merely from the acquisition of skills but from a critical understanding of how knowledge is produced, legitimised, and contested within the academy.

### **Steps towards Rebranding Writing Centres**

Repositioning writing centres as hubs of academic agency requires more than pedagogical change; it demands a deliberate and visible rebranding effort that challenges entrenched

perceptions. Rebranding, in this context, extends beyond adopting new terminology, it involves redefining how writing centres present themselves to students, academics, and institutions alike. It requires reshaping both the symbolic and practical role of writing centres within higher education (Boughey and McKenna, 2021).

#### *Shifting Institutional Narratives*

Promotional materials and institutional communication often, albeit unintentionally, reinforce deficit thinking by framing writing centres as services for “struggling” or “underprepared” students (Archer, 2010). To counter this, an asset-based discourse should be adopted, one that emphasises growth, empowerment, and intellectual collaboration. For example, describing a writing centre as “a space to develop your scholarly voice” or “a hub for critical thinking and academic creativity” signals inclusivity and positions the centre as a site for all students, including high achievers and postgraduates, rather than as a remedial facility (Wingate, 2015).

#### *Engaging in Cross-Disciplinary Partnerships*

Embedding writing centre practitioners in teaching teams and curriculum design processes represents one of the most effective strategies for dismantling the perception that writing centres are peripheral “fix-it” spaces (Lea and Street, 1998). Through co-developing workshops, co-teaching modules, and collaborating on assessment strategies, practitioners can make their intellectual expertise visible and demonstrate how their work contributes to disciplinary knowledge-making (Mutero and Chimbari, 2021). Such partnerships integrate academic literacies into mainstream programmes, reducing the isolation of writing development from the broader academic project (Lillis, 2014).

#### *Showcasing Diverse Success Stories*

Storytelling can serve as a powerful rebranding tool. Sharing narratives from students across all levels: first-years, postgraduates, international students, and top performers, disrupts the stereotype that writing centres exist solely for “weak” students (Archer, 2010). Similarly, highlighting examples of collaboration with academic staff reinforces the intellectual credibility of writing centre practitioners and underscores their role as partners in pedagogical innovation (Canagarajah, 2013).

In essence, rebranding constitutes both a strategic and pedagogical undertaking. It invites institutions to reconceptualise how writing centres are perceived and, crucially, how academic success itself is defined and supported. When coupled with pedagogies that foreground linguistic diversity and academic agency, rebranding positions writing centres at the core of higher education’s transformative agenda.

The following section outlines specific pedagogical practices that writing centres can implement to enact this vision.

### **Implementing Pedagogies for Academic Agency**

Rebranding a writing centre holds little value if it is not accompanied by substantive pedagogical change. Without meaningful transformation in practice, rebranding risks becoming a superficial exercise, an attractive façade concealing the same deficit-oriented approaches (Boughey and McKenna, 2021). To cultivate genuine academic agency, pedagogies must be intentionally designed to make this agency visible and tangible in students’ learning experiences. Below are some strategies:

#### *Dialogic Consultations*

Traditional writing consultations often rely on directive approaches in which practitioners “fix” students’ texts. While such methods may be well intentioned, they inadvertently reinforce dependency and deficit thinking (Gutiérrez, Morales and Martinez, 2009). A dialogic model, by contrast, positions students as co-constructors of knowledge. Rather than prescribing changes, consultants might ask questions such as, “What argument are you developing here?” or “How does this reflect your position within the debate?” This approach encourages reflection, independence, and deeper engagement with the writing process (hooks, 1994; Wingate, 2015). In a remedial model, consultations tend to focus on surface-level errors; in an agency-oriented model, they prioritise meaning, argumentation, and critical self-awareness.

### *Workshops on Critical Engagement*

Students benefit considerably from workshops that extend beyond technical skills to focus on critical academic practices, questioning disciplinary norms, synthesising sources meaningfully, and interpreting feedback as a developmental tool (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis, 2014). Such sessions foster critical literacy, enabling students to recognise and navigate the power dynamics that shape academic knowledge production (Canagarajah, 2013).

### *Multilingual and Translanguaging Practices*

In multilingual contexts, translanguaging provides a valuable pedagogical resource. Allowing students to brainstorm, draft, and discuss ideas in their full linguistic repertoires affirms diversity as an intellectual asset and deepens conceptual engagement (García, 2021; Makalela, 2015). This practice enables students to process complex ideas in meaningful ways before expressing them within the conventions of academic English.

### *Developing Feedback Literacy*

Feedback literacy involves equipping students to interpret, evaluate, and act on feedback effectively. Rather than viewing feedback as a prescriptive list of corrections, students are encouraged to see it as a collaborative dialogue through which they refine their thinking and strengthen their autonomy (Carless and Boud, 2018). This repositions feedback as a mechanism for reflection and growth, transforming it from a corrective tool into a driver of academic agency.

Through these strategies, writing centres can become spaces where students learn not merely to produce academic texts, but to position themselves as active, critical participants in their disciplines. Pedagogies that nurture agency are, therefore, inseparable from the broader transformative mission of higher education, cultivating graduates who are empowered, reflective, and capable of contributing meaningfully to knowledge production.

## **Practical Challenges and Solutions for Implementation**

Implementing a transformative agenda within writing centres presents several practical challenges that necessitate deliberate advocacy and strategic responses. These challenges often stem from institutional structures, entrenched perceptions, and resource constraints, each requiring thoughtful negotiation, as discussed below:

### *Institutional Resistance*

Academic departments sometimes resist collaborative curriculum design or co-teaching initiatives, viewing writing as a discrete technical skill rather than an embedded academic practice. To address this, writing centres might initiate pilot programmes in departments that are more open to collaboration, demonstrating tangible improvements in student writing and learning outcomes. Publicising these successes can help build trust and generate broader institutional buy-in.

### *Rebranding as a Superficial Exercise*

Rebranding risks becoming superficial if not accompanied by genuine shifts in pedagogical practice. Perceptions of writing centres are shaped primarily by the lived experiences of students and staff. Consequently, rebranding efforts should be grounded in consistent pedagogical practices such as dialogic consultations and translanguaging approaches, that reflect the centre's developmental ethos. Comprehensive training for practitioners and peer tutors is crucial to ensure alignment with this agency-oriented philosophy.

### *Student Stigma*

Many students remain reluctant to engage with writing centres due to persistent stigma that associates them with "weak" writers. To counter this, writing centres should adopt asset-based promotional strategies that highlight growth, intellectual creativity, and scholarly development. Sharing success stories from high-achieving and postgraduate students can help dismantle stereotypes, while offering workshops that appeal to a wide range of learners, not only those perceived as struggling, broadens the centre's reach and legitimacy.

### *Long-term Vision and Metrics for Success*

A truly transformative writing centre must be integral to the intellectual life of the university, fostering a culture in which all students view themselves as capable contributors to knowledge production. Measuring success, therefore, requires multidimensional and context-sensitive indicators, such as:

- Shifts in student perception: Evaluating whether students begin to view the writing centre as a site for critical thinking and scholarly growth rather than as a remedial service.
- Diversified participation: Tracking engagement across different student groups, including high achievers, postgraduates, and multilingual cohorts, to assess inclusivity and appeal.
- Institutional integration: Monitoring the extent of cross-disciplinary collaboration, co-taught courses, and curriculum partnerships that reflect the writing centre's embeddedness within academic programmes.
- Evidence of agency development: Analysing student reflections, feedback, and writing outputs for indicators of increased critical engagement, ownership, and disciplinary understanding.

These measures move beyond simplistic indicators such as attendance numbers or grammar improvements, instead foregrounding the developmental and intellectual contributions of writing centres to institutional transformation.

### **Conclusion**

This paper contributes to the growing scholarship on writing centres in higher education by critically reframing them as dynamic hubs of academic agency rather than as sites of remedial intervention. Drawing on the frameworks of academic literacies, inclusive pedagogies, and student empowerment, it has challenged entrenched deficit discourses and highlighted the epistemic potential of writing as a vehicle for learning, identity formation, and knowledge production.

Through positioning writing centres as intellectual partners embedded within curricula, through collaborative curriculum design, programme integration, and dialogic feedback practices, the paper advances a holistic and developmental paradigm that affirms linguistic diversity and fosters student agency. In doing so, it situates writing centres at the core of the university's transformative mission, emphasising their role in cultivating equitable, multilingual, and intellectually vibrant academic communities.

Practically, the strategies outlined provide a roadmap for writing centres seeking to enact inclusive and equitable pedagogies. Emphasising translanguaging and feedback literacy enables the design of responsive practices capable of addressing the structural inequalities that persist within South African and comparable higher education contexts. Moreover, the proposed strategies accentuate the importance of institutional collaboration, suggesting pathways for strengthening the recognition, sustainability, and strategic integration of writing centres across disciplines.

The paper acknowledges the limitations inherent in a conceptual study that relies primarily on secondary literature rather than empirical data. This opens avenues for future research to investigate the implementation and impact of these transformative approaches across diverse institutional settings. Longitudinal studies exploring students' experiences with translanguaging pedagogies, feedback literacy interventions, and the effects of embedded writing centre partnerships would yield valuable insights. From a policy perspective, universities should reconsider writing centres as critical agents of academic transformation, embedding them within institutional frameworks and resourcing strategies that prioritise linguistic inclusivity and student empowerment.

Ultimately, the paper offers a theoretically grounded and practically oriented vision for writing centres as catalysts of epistemic access and equity. In reimagining these spaces as intellectual partners rather than peripheral support units, higher education institutions can move beyond remediation towards fostering student agency, critical engagement, and social justice in academic practice.

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