

BOOK REVIEW

Clarence, S. & Dyson, L. (Eds.). (2017). *Writing Centres in Higher Education: Working in and across disciplines*. Stellenbosch, South Africa: African Sun Media.

Reviewed by Annsilla Nyar\*

A frustrated undergraduate student asked me in 2012: “Why is writing a paper at university so incredibly difficult?” It is only now, six years later, upon reading this excellent book that I feel fully equipped as a higher education professional to answer this age-old question in an informed and comprehensive manner. Certainly other higher education scholars and practitioners will similarly find the book of immense value to their work. It also provides an understanding of some of the complexity of academic reading and writing processes, particularly so in the South African context where lack of proficiency in English is seen as a barrier to student success. It is for this reason that this book is a most welcome addition to South African theory and pedagogy in the teaching and learning space. There is a need in South Africa to begin a truly national conversation about writing and this book would serve as a useful anchor for this type of conversation.

This edited collection of articles by Sherran Clarence and Laura Dison is firmly located in South Africa, and as such provides a uniquely South African take on writing centre theory and pedagogy. As a tool for effective teaching and learning practice, writing centres are now ubiquitous at many institutions of higher education. However there is not a great deal known about writing centres and their history and development. It can be said that it is also not common practice to question the epistemological assumptions underlying common pedagogical approaches used in writing centres. This is a knowledge gap that the book fills particularly well. Through the book it is interesting to have learned about the historical development of writing centres in South Africa and the theoretical and pedagogical approaches used in writing centres. Two articles herein can be singled out in terms of providing an in-depth understanding of how writing centres in South Africa are situated, theoretically and operationally, as well as in a historical sense: (a) Fatima Slemming’s article, “The place of education theories in writing centres: Why this makes for significant research”, and (b) Pamela Nichols’ article, “Writing Democracy: From writing centres to writing fellows to writing intensive courses in a university-wide writing programme”.

The book highlights the innovative nature of writing centre practice and continuing adaptation to the changing needs of students. For example, the article by Akisha Pearman,

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“Supporting academic communication in writing centres in the digital age”, is a nod to the advent of the digital revolution and the increasing influence of multimodal tools of learning in higher education.

Kabinga Jack Shabanza’s article, “Enhancing reflection on writing: using group writing consultations to develop meta-awareness of disciplinary writing”, was very useful in highlighting the universal problem of large classes and the ways in which smaller group-based writing consultations can possibly offset the disengagement which may occur in the context of large classes. Shabanza draws on his experiences from writing centres at the University of Johannesburg. This article is thoughtfully written and provides much-needed reflection for higher education professionals, particularly busy lecturers teaching large numbers of students.

The concluding chapter of the book, “Reflecting on writing centre practice through students’ experiences of a contextualised writing centre” by Laura Dison and Belinda Mendelowitz, provides an incisive summary of many key issues and themes interlinking the different articles in the book through the evaluation of a focus group conducted at the Wits School of Education (WSoE) Writing Centre. According to Dison and Mendelowitz, their focus-group data illuminate crucial issues of voice, identity and power which speak to broader issues of transformation in the higher education sector. The authors make a case for a discipline-based writing centre which would help students feel more situated in their own particular disciplines.

While the book is strongly rooted in South Africa, as can be seen in the case studies and examples drawn from South African universities, the themes and issues expressed in the book will undoubtedly find resonance with the global academic community who face similar challenges. This is particularly highlighted by Nicole Bailey Bridgewater’s article, “Diversifying monolingual tongues: What American writing centres can learn from their multilingual South African counterparts”. Bridgewater argues persuasively for the establishment of multilingual writing centres in the United States.

Producing a generation of confident academic writers should be one of the key goals of any institution of higher education. This book is testimony that there is a great deal of effort invested towards this goal in South Africa. It is well-written and solidly grounded in theory and pedagogy. It would not be an exaggeration to call the book required reading for all higher education professionals. Those working in the fields of education should be especially encouraged to read this book and see writing centres as an important form of student support. It is hoped that the authors may see fit to produce another book which would further broaden the scope of the book by featuring the perspectives of other universities in South Africa.

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