

The Academic Writing Challenges of Undergraduate Students: A South African Case Study

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Abstract

This article discusses the academic writing challenges of undergraduate students at Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), South Africa. It examines challenges such as lack of a mastery of academic writing conventions, analysis of writing topics, using writing to construct social identities; ability to research and apply knowledge across different context and poor sentence skills. It also focuses on the implications of these challenges for students' academic development and possible strategies to address these challenges. The article draws on sustained interviews with twenty 2nd year students, 1st year student reflections and discussions with four Communication lecturers. The data revealed that academic writing challenges of students in universities of technology are consequences of students' linguistic and general literacy backgrounds, their attitudes toward academic writing and the privileging of middle-class literacy practices in South African higher education. To mitigate these challenges, this article proposes the following strategies: the integration of academic literacies in disciplinary curricula, the promotion of multimodalities of teaching and assessment as well as collaboration between language lecturers and core course specialists. It also recommends intensive academic reading and writing workshops, and increased formative feedback.

Keywords: Academic writing, Academic literacy, South Africa, Cape Peninsula University of Technology

1. Introduction

Academic writing plays a critical role in socialising students into the discourse of subjects and disciplines in universities. However, with the massification higher education, many students especially those in many South African Universities of Technology are struggling to maintain academic writing standards that are acceptable in higher education. This has increased the demand for academic development programmes as a viable strategy to enhance the academic writing skills and other soft skills required by students (Reda, 2011; Jacobs, 2007; Layer, 2006). This article discusses the academic writing challenges of undergraduate students in Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), South Africa. It highlights the major weaknesses in student writing such as lack of a mastery of academic writing conventions, analysis of writing topics; using writing to construct social identities; ability to research and apply knowledge across different context and poor sentence skills. It also examines the implications for students' academic development and the strategies for addressing these challenges. The article is written against the backdrop of discrepant narratives about why university of technology students struggle with academic writing and the increasing pressures on South African universities to transform and "to standardise and systematise the teaching and learning context by introducing quality assurance measures" (Bailey 2008: 2). It is also set against the backlash of increasing "marginalization of writing from mainstream curricula" especially in universities of technology such as CPUT (Archer 2010:496).

Furthermore, the article is framed around the epistemological assumptions that academic writing challenges of students in universities of technology are consequences of students' linguistic and general literacy backgrounds, their attitudes towards academic writing and South African universities' privileging of middle-class literacy practices. For example, undergraduate students are expected to possess excellent English language and higher order thinking skills such as logical and critical thinking as well as analytical and innovative skills. However, in advocating for these high order thinking skills, institutions like CPUT are often oblivious of the schooling experiences of students and how they influence their writings in higher education (Pineteh, 2012; Jacobs, 2007). To address these issues, this article

refers to academic writing as a literacy practice rather than a skill because writing in higher education is not simply “a set of neutral techniques that are somehow separate from the social context...” (Archer 2010: 499). Rather it denotes “not just what people do, but what they make of what they do, and how it constructs them as social subjects” (Clark & Ivanic 1997: 82).

2. Key Research Questions

This article attempts to answer the following three key research questions:

1. What are the academic writing challenges of undergraduate students at CPUT?
2. Why are these students challenged by academic writing activities?
3. What are the possible strategies for addressing the academic writing challenges of CPUT undergraduate students?

The following questions guided the data collection process and the responses to the questions provided a framework for the discussions in the ensuing sections of this article.

3. The Context of Higher Education in Post-Apartheid South Africa

The landscape of South African universities and universities of technology has changed significantly since the demise of the apartheid regime. Although the legacy of apartheid is still ubiquitous in South Africa, higher education has become more accessible to South Africans regardless of race and gender (Pineteh, 2012; Archer, 2010; Leibowitz, 2004; Leibowitz, Goodman, Hannon & Parkerson, 1997). The shifting vision of South African universities is attributed to the government's envisions to redress the ills of the apartheid era, democratise the education system through the promotion of racial and gender parity, and the development of skills that are responsive to needs of the new South Africa (Pineteh, 2012; Archer, 2010; Leibowitz, 2004). The government's meddling in the way South African universities are managed has resulted in the irruption of infamous educational policies and curriculum documents aimed at restructuring schools and universities as well as fostering the social changes promised by the new political dispensation (Leibowitz, 2004; Ensor 2004; Waghid, 2002). For example, the implementation of outcomes-based education (OBE) curriculum in 2005 and the National Qualification Framework (NQF) as well as the Higher Education Qualification Framework (HEQF) exemplify the new government's political will in addressing the challenges in schools and universities (Chisholm, 2007; Young, 2005; Leibowitz, 2004; Jansen, 1998). On the one hand the NQF was mandated to “to steer South Africa along a high skills, high growth path of economic development [which] would lay the foundation stones of a new democracy society” (Ensor 2004: 341). On the other hand, OBE was intended to forge a teaching and learning framework which privileges outcomes rather than content and process (Jansen, 1998; Ensor, 2004).

The pressure on South African universities to transform and to perform has had far reaching implications for teaching and learning in general and for student literacy practices such as academic writing. Although South African universities privilege middle-class literacy practices, the landscapes of South African universities have changed drastically over the years (Smith, 2012; Shore 2010). Today, universities like CPUT now have to deal with a contingent of students from previously marginalised and under-privileged communities who are often not intellectual and emotionally prepared for higher education. This academic unpreparedness has affected their literacy practices and their overall academic development (Pineteh, 2012; Archer, 2010; Leibowitz, 2004). It is therefore the civic responsibility of these universities “to address the realities of educational transformation” (Archer 2010: 495).

4. Student Writing in Higher Education

Representing academic writing in this article as a literacy practice suggests that writing is linked “with what individuals as socially situated actors do, both at the level of context of a specific situation and at the level of context of culture” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999: 21). This justifies why academic writing is at the centre of the scholarship of teaching and learning in universities. It also explains the burgeoning research interests in student writing in higher education (Tuck, 2012; Lillis & Scott, 2007). For example New Literary Studies such as Lee & Street (1998) and Street (2004) discuss student writing as academic literacies, heralding “the role of literacy practices in the success or failures of students, as they negotiate the complex demands of their degree journeys” (Tuck 2012: 210). For them, student writing in higher education are social and cultural practices that are ideological in nature. Academic writing as a literacy practice is not simply about conforming to a set of conventions or disciplinary rules but it is also a cultural and social practice, which involves using different cognitive abilities to negotiate power, authority and identity within the landscape of universities (Beard, Clegg & Smith 2007; Street, 2004). It is highly dependent on the context, on power relations and on the social relationships that human beings construct when they write (Archer 2010; Lillis, 2001; Kelder, 1996). It is also the discursive space which establishes “the link between

students' entry into disciplinary communities and their acquisition of the formal conventions associated with the academy" (Leibowitz et al 1997: 5).

The purveyors of New Literacy Studies such as Mary Lea and Brian Street criticise the deficit model which represents student writing as somewhat reductionist, meaning it is dependent on a set transferable skills, and language proficiency rather than critical thinking. This model claims, student writing is based on "relatively homogeneous norms, values and cultural practices" and it is a "transparent medium of representation [which] is probably more appropriate for advanced students" (Archer 2010: 497/498). This article is framed around around academic literacies model because university students are expected to use academic writing to access university culture, understand disciplinary discourses and negotiate power relations as well as construct their individual identities, new generic and discipline specific knowledge (Jones, Turner & Street 1999). To this end academic writing is a literacy practice because it provides "the link between students' entry into disciplinary communities and their acquisition of the formal conventions associated with the academy..."(Leibowitz, Goodman, Hannon & Parkerson 1997: 5).

In the context of CPUT, Academic writing and other literacy practices have been taught through mandatory courses such as Communication Skills and Academic Literacy. These courses are located within mainstream curricula in the different faculties of the university (Pineteh, 2012; Jacobs, 2007). The location of the offerings within mainstream curricula suggests that literacy practices play an important role in the cognitive development of students. Needless to mention that the "language of academia is a very specialized discourse which presents a problem for all students whether they are first or second language speakers" of English (Archer 2010: 496). Student success in any university is inextricably about developing a 'voice', a culture of intellectual enquiry and "aspects of social integration which involve the affective dimensions of their engagement with higher education" (Beard, Clegg & Smith 2007: 236). Effective academic writing provides an uncharacteristic space for students to negotiate and articulate these multiple discourses that shape higher education (Archer, 2010; Adams, 2008; Lea, 1998). It is critical not only for socialising students into discipline-specific writing but also for their cognitive development. For a student to succeed in a university of technology like CPUT, they "need to develop their writing skills in order to cope with university course work" in different disciplines (Bacha 2002: 161). In this light, the academic writing challenges of CPUT students fall within the realms of the three writing categories proposed by Lea and Street (1998): study skills, academic socialisation and academic literacies.

5. Methods of Data Collection

To understand the academic writing challenges of undergraduate students at CPUT, the researcher used qualitative research methods to collect empirical data from students and lecturers. These methods were used to gain access to the multiple realities and subjective meanings about academic writing at CPUT (Maree, 2007; Appleton, 1995). Here, one-on-one interviews were conducted with twenty 2nd year students in the Faculty of Informatics and Design at the end of 2012 academic year. The interview questions were developed from the three main research questions listed in section 2. The participants comprised of 12 males and 8 females, generally between the ages of 19 and 25. They were selected from two departments: Information Technology (IT) and Town and Regional Planning. The interview questions were developed by the author of this article and the actual interviews were conducted on the Cape Town campus by the author and a research assistant. The interviews were generally 20-30 minutes long. The questions were framed around student writing skills, writing assignments, interactions with Communication lecturers and so on. Additionally, two Communication course reflections were facilitated with approximately 150 1st year students registered for the IT programme in the Faculty of Informatics and Design. The reflections concentrated on students' academic writing experiences and other relevant topics taught in the course. In the interviews and reflections students were asked to comment on their academic writing strengths and weaknesses as well as on ways to improve their writing skills. Interviews were also conducted with Communication lecturers: one from the Department of Accounting in the Faculty of Business two from the IT department and one from the Department of Town and Regional Planning. They were 2 males and two females, ages between 30 and 55. The lecturers had at least a postgraduate degree either in Language Education, Linguistics or Applied Language Studies- the few cases with the right qualifications to teach this course. Communication lecturers were chosen because academic writing is located within the boarder Language and Communication skills courses. During the interviews, the staff members commented on their experiences as academic writing instructors, the challenges encountered by students and the implications for their academic development. The interviews also paid attention to the ways the challenges can be addressed.

The reflections and interviews provided a discursive space to unlock the individual writing experiences of students as well as CPUT students and lecturers' perceptions and opinions about academic writing. They also provided a forum to interrogate these phenomena and bring them to bear on the way CPUT students approach academic writing tasks. The analysis of data was done by the author and it concentrated on the subjective meanings of respondents' opinions, thoughts and their appreciations of student writing in this university.

6. Ethical Considerations

In terms of ethical considerations, participants were not coerced to participate in the research and all the interviews and reflections were conducted at their convenience. They were not obliged to answer any question they did not want to and they were free to withdraw from the research process at any time if they felt uncomfortable. Furthermore, for confidentiality reasons, the real names or any information that might reveal the identity of the lecturers and students, have been omitted in the article. Relevant excerpts from interviews have been quoted as lecturer or student response and only the participants' gender and the Faculties of lecturers have been used in the discussions.

7. Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

7.1 *The Academic Writing Challenges of CPUT Undergraduate Students*

The student composition of CPUT is very diverse in terms of race, linguistic background and cognitive development. However, the dominant academic discourse seems to privilege students from middle-class backgrounds. Here, students struggle to cope with institutional literacy expectations because the medium of instruction is English, which is not necessarily the native language of many students. Nonetheless, these students are expected to think and write using middle class literacy practices (Archer, 2010; Leibowitz, Bacha, 2002; Goodman, Hannon & Parkerson 1997). For example, to be proficient in academic writing, students are expected to be a critical and analytical thinker. They are expected to apply myriad human skills and organise their thoughts in a methodical manner, while applying specific discipline instructions and conventions. The following quote from a 2nd year IT student responds to the academic writing expectations of the university:

...Often I do not understand why I fail essays even though I put a lot of effort in writing these essays. I do a lot of research and I mention other authors but still my marks are always under 50%. The lecturer always says my essay is just my opinions or I am copying from other people. Or my ideas do not make sense and I am not thinking like a university students. But our lecturers fail to understand that some of us came from poor schools and our high school teachers did not teach us these things... (Student response)

This testimony illuminates the diverse literacy and schooling experiences of CPUT students and how they impact on their academic performance. Good quality academic writing in higher education is expected to reflect students' ability to read critically, interpret, analyse and synthesise ideas as well as use writing as a discursive space for constructing social identities (Perin, Keselman & Monopoli, 2003; Gambell, 1987, Kelder, 1996; Kinsler 1990). However, very often the academic writing projects of these students do not meet these expectations. Given their backgrounds, the institution and academic staff are supposed to find ways to systematically address these gaps (Jacobs, 2007; Leibowitz, 2004).

Maintaining high standards of academic writing in higher education is not negotiable but this should be negotiated against the backdrop of the demographics of the student body. The need to take cognisance of the diverse schooling backgrounds of students is echoed by a Communication lecturer in the Faculty of Informatics and Design:

Yes, the university expects students to produce essays of good quality but it forgets that many of its students are from poor and under-resourced schools in rural or peri-urban areas in South Africa. They are English second or third language speakers of English but they are still expected to write proficiently in English. These students also come with different literacy experiences but when we are marking their essays, we want logical organisation of idea and refined use of language. But in class, we can see that they struggle to understand basics concepts in English or apply their minds like university students... (Lecturer's response)

This respondent is a male Communication lecturer in the Department of Surface Design. His response highlights the process of socialisation into university culture and understanding of academic discourses as key challenges for CPUT students. For this respondent, the under resourced schools mentioned in the quote have failed to prepare students for the challenging world of higher education (Pineteh, 2012; Archer, 2010). The quote highlights uncharacteristic social class system riddling the educational system in South Africa. For instance, whilst learners from "more middle class urban schools [are] taught how to summarise, [are] allowed to practise writing assignments using secondary literature, or write poetry, African language students' accounts featured parrot learning, learning language solely via rules" (Leibowitz 2004:43). The CPUT's student body is still dominated by students from rural and peri-urban

schools with “a baggage of experiences, attitudes and skills that are not properly suited to university work” (Afful 2007: 143). Consequently, understanding and applying the highly complex cognitive skills in academic writing is very challenging to CPUT students from these backgrounds.

Academic writing challenges are evident in the slew of language; conceptual and stylistic flaws in scholarly papers submitted by CPUT students. For a Communication lecturer in the Faculty of Business, many students still struggle to master some of the basic academic writing conventions. He claimed that:

Marking student scripts is very stressful and frustrating to me because of the way these students write. Sometimes it takes me more than 30minutes to mark a three-page essay. Their writing is fraught with all types of errors that you can never imagine.-from spelling mistakes to poor sentence skills, coherence, cohesion, argumentation etc. I do not usually feel like I am marking university scripts... (Lecturer response)

His testimony hinges on several error types that recur in student writing tasks. For the respondent, student academic papers are usually superficial in terms of development of “problem, theory and argument” (Gambell, 1987: 501). Here, students are unable to conceptualise the topic using knowledge from different sources. Noticeably, students’ inadequate research skills and/or the lack of meta-cognitive skills to read, interpret and synthesis different texts usually culminate in papers with a paucity of ideas, which are often devoid of evidence or substantiated claims (Lea 1994 & 1998; Gambell, 1987). Also, despite the paucity and superficiality of ideas, most students submit assignments that are unedited and lack careful organisation. Here, students seem not to understand that academic writing is a process which involves drafting, revising and redrafting.

Marking student essays in this university is one of my worst nightmares. I am usually not motivated to mark because the essays are poorly written on all levels. The introduction, body and conclusion are not linked; paragraphs are illogical and often not well developed etc. Sometimes I feel like rewriting the essays for the students. I wonder whether they actually read these papers before submission... (Lecturer response)

For him, the design of many student academic papers is fragmented with no structural connection between the introduction, body and conclusion. Students often grapple with or fail to apply the concept of coherence and cohesion whereby they “select and order ideas to lead to a sound and well argued conclusion” (Gambell 1987: 502). This response suggests that student academic papers are often devoid of transition devices which enhance coherence and cohesion in academic writing. They are written with no clear statement of purpose or thesis which develops from the topic and permeates throughout the paper. Thirdly, the papers are usually fraught with mechanical weaknesses, especially in areas like paragraph and, sentence construction-grammar and syntax as well as style. For the respondent, sentences are often truncated and convoluted because these students still grapple with grammatical aspects such as noun-verb agreement, tenses and spelling. These weaknesses also recur because students misconstrue academic writing as a product and not a process, which requires drafting, editing and re-drafting (Lea, 1994 & 1998).

6.2 Why CPUT Students Challenged by Academic Writing

One key factor that has contributed to the writing challenges of CPUT students is the ubiquity of social media in higher education today (Pineteh, 2012). The increasing access to the writing genre of social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Blogging has impacted on the quality of student writing in this context. When writing academic papers, these students often struggle to switch from informal social media writing style that they now use often to the more restricted and more conservative formal academic style (Williams, 2008). Because they spend endless hours on facebook and twitter, they unconsciously transfer instant messaging style into academic writing. By contrast, students in higher education are expected to produce “knowledge which is social accountable, reflexive, trans-disciplinary and problem-oriented” (Waghid 2002: 461). A 2nd year female IT student commented:

I use facebook and twitter a lot, so when I write essays I forget that I am supposed to use formal English. My lecturer always points out that my facebook style of writing is not good for academic essays but I still do it because every day we are on facebook and it certainly affects the way I write...I know I am supposed to take control and change the way I write but facebook is part of me and it is difficult. For students like me to change, lecturers need to continue providing useful comments... you can see that my writing style has started to change. (Student reflection)

The interest in technology-based teaching and learning especially in universities of technology means students develop new writing styles while they deal with the chaos of the mediated world on a daily basis (Ehlers & Schneckenberg, 2009). Although the positive influence of social media on student writing cannot be ignored, for this participant, the use of facebook genre in academic writing shows the maturity levels and cognitive development of students at CPUT. This is evident from their inability to juggle different writing genres or to edit their own writings (Pineteh, 2012; Jacobs, 2007).

In addition, for most CPUT students, university is a completely new world, a complex one which “involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organising knowledge” (Lea & Street 1998:157). For instance, during the interviews, a Communication lecturer in the Faculty of Informatics and Design argued that CPUT students were yet to make the transition from high school to university. She claimed that:

CPUT students still think and act as if they are in high school. The way they interpret essay topics and express their thoughts in academic writing show clearly that they are not yet university students. We expect our students to demonstrate some high order thinking skills but the quality of their writing is a sharp contrast of what is expected of university students (Lecturer response).

For this interviewee, the university expects its students to possess critical and analytical skills, which they can use to deal with academic challenges in higher education. With these skills, students are able to use academic writing to unlock disciplinary discourses and construct new identities as well as make meanings of their social lives in a university environment (Ivanic, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998). However, her quotation suggests that CPUT students struggle with academic writing because they have not been fully socialised into the university space and therefore they cannot access and interpret the highly specialised discourses of higher education (Fernsten & Reda, 2011).

The interviews also revealed CPUT students often struggle with academic writing because they do not receive regular quality feedback on academic papers. While lecturers complained about large class sizes, students blamed the lack of lecturer attention to student academic writing. The following excerpts from a Communication lecturer and a 2nd year male IT student highlight these positions:

We all teach our students that writing is a process that involves drafting and redrafting but we do not give them the opportunity to redraft their essays. We cannot do that because of the large classes that we teach. So it is usually difficult to give comprehensive feedback when you have to mark more than 200 scripts and submit marks in 2 weeks ... (Lecturer response)

English is not my first language and I struggle to understand the assignment topics. Also, here at tertiary, they expect you to think deeper, to argue, to think out of the box but it is difficult to some of us because we come from poor high schools, we were not trained to think out of the box... Unfortunately our lecturers don't usually give comments that can help us to improve our writing skills (Student reflection)

The importance of individual attention and regular constructive feedback cannot be undermined in the development of academic writing skills. These respondents claim that for student writing to improve, there should be regular feedback through one-on-one interaction between students and lecturers. According to them, this “is a useful moment of intersection between the content and the individual approach to learning as well as the site of interaction between the socially determined aspects of literacy and the individual response” (Leibowitz et al, 1997: 7). Significantly, the second excerpt presupposes the students struggle because of they are not very proficient in English Language. However, although the role of English language proficiency cannot be ignored in this case, academic writing is more than just stringing sentences (Yong, 2010). It is part of a specialised discourse of higher education, which involves critical, analytical and reflective thinking skills. But because CPUT students do not apply these skills in their writing, academic writing in this context subscribe largely to the deficit skills model rather than the socialisation and academic literacies models (Lillis, Ivanic; 1998; Lea & Street, 1998).

In the reflection exercises, students also mentioned students' lack the emotional readiness and intellectual maturity that often enable university students to take control of their learning process. These deficiencies severely affect the way they approach the whole learning experience and the way they handle academic tasks including academic writing. The following quote from a first year IT student's reflection espouses the intellectual immaturity mentioned here:

I am an IT student and writing essay is not my thing. Even in high school I did not enjoy writing essays, which is why I chose to study IT. I thought I will not write long essays anymore. I always concentrate on my main IT subjects and not Communication because it is not very important to me. So when my Communication lecturer gives an essay assignment, I always leave it until the last minute. (Student reflection)

This quote highlights one of the factors which contribute to the poor quality of student writing at CPUT. It shows clearly that this student's does not understand the role of academic writing higher education, affirming why CPUT undergraduates do not accord writing tasks the respect they deserve. Naively, these students see academic writing as something for study and teaching skills rather than the interplay of academic literacies or the process of socialisation into discipline-specific discourses (Lea & Stierer, 2000). As a result, they become dependent on Communication lecturers “to perform most of the regulatory and reflective functions desired in the learner” (Kinsler 1990:304). Or

they simply approach academic writing with negativities and misconceptions, which stem from their imaginations of a university of technology. For them, the practice-oriented focus of the university should disregard academic writing as a critical practice in the learning process. Here, they do not understand that “academic writing is designed to be an enriching learning experience” (Yong 2010: 471). Instead they approach writing with mixed feelings and often “regard it as a time consuming and unpleasant chore” (Yong 2010: 147).

Moreover, the case of large classes discussed above is compounded by immense pressure on lecturers to increase throughput rates, research outputs. This compromises the individual attention that lecturers can give to students, mentioned in the preceding discussions. This individual attention often transforms into a rewarding relationship usually develops from the “social interactive approach to the teaching of writing” (Van de Ven, 2009: 2). Here, writing lecturers do not spend time to appreciate every piece of student writing as a developmental process. According to this Communication lecturer in the Department of Surface Design:

The number of assignments for Communication is a lot and we do not give comprehensive feedback and/or request resubmissions because there is no time. We are always under a lot of pressure-a lot to do but very little time. I also have to write paper and present at conferences or write articles for publication. (Lecturer response)

This respondent’s complaints exude the increasing pressures endured by CPUT academic staff and these pressures affect the way lecturers assess student writings. However, changing any literacy as problematic as academic writing, “is clearly an arduous and slow process, and requires much commitment” (Leibowitz 2004: 50). In evaluating student writing, lecturers tend to concentrate on the mechanic of the writing such as language-syntax, grammar and plagiarism, instead of continually recognising academic writing as process which “involves negotiating social relationships, attitudes and values” (Valentine 2006: 90). For example, the criminalisation of plagiarism in universities has tended to provide lecturers with a platform to easily condemn student writing even though these students are novice writers (Valentine, 2003; Ashworth, Freewood & Macdonald, 2003). A 1st year female Town and Regional Planning student reflects on her academic writing skills:

I have been encountering a lot problem with academic writing. I try to write my own arguments but my lecturer would tell me that I am plagiarising some other person’s idea. I know using another person’s idea is not a good thing but we do not know how to use other information to support our own ideas. Sometimes, lecturers ask us to reference but they have not even taught us how to reference... (Student reflection)

This student blames lecturers’ apparent obsession with plagiarism as one of the contributing factors to the low quality of academic writing at CPUT. From this excerpt, the issue of plagiarism seems to have far-reaching implications for the way students write. Although ownership and originality are important, many academics tend to measure these novice writers against the works of experienced authors whose credibility as good academic writers span over several years of practice. Or they ignore that plagiarism at this level “involves participants’ values, attitudes, and feelings as well as their social relationships to each other and to the institutions in which they” study (Valentine 2006: 89/90). Moreover, large classes have resulted in the decline in feedback on writing assignments because the focus is on pass rates, which means “end-learning of assessment, formal procedures around quality assurance marking procedures and external adjudication” (Bailey 2008: 2). And because the quality of feedback is compromised significantly, writing ceases from being a process to being a product, where the emphasis is on the finish product. Students are not offered the opportunity to navigate the process of drafting and re-drafting, which is essential for the development of academic writing.

Furthermore, the participants claimed that a University of Technology like CPUT prefers to invest in courses and programmes that can generate more subsidies for the university. For them, the university understands the role of academic development courses especially in the development of writing skills, but it does not offer them the prestige and value that they deserve (Archer, 2010; Pineteh, 2012). The following comment from a Communication lecturer supports this view:

I think that the university is not investing enough to develop the academic skills of our students. Take the example of Communication; the university does not want to provide adequate support because it does not generate subsidies like the core disciplines. They think Communication is easy and anyone can teach it, therefore it is pointless recruiting more lecturers with suitable qualifications and experience. But some of these lecturers do not publish and cannot even teach academic writing. (Lecturer response)

Although this is not very accurate, inadequacy of qualified Communication and Academic literacy lecturers accurately reflects the priorities of the university. Using lecturers without the right qualifications as a strategy to cut the cost of investing in these courses, has had visible negatives effects on the way the courses are taught and assessed

(Pineteh, 2012). For example, these lecturers have tended to ignore the academic writing components embedded in the course outlines, partly because they are unfamiliar with the theoretical conceptions that underpin student writing in higher education. Also, they do not understand the role of constructive feedback in the writing process (Archer, 2007; Daly, 1977 & 1978). For them, providing feedback especially in large classes is a waste of valuable time. Moreover, the instructions provided by this calibre of lecturers are usually very convoluted and confusing to students who are already grappling with academic writing.

8. Proposed strategies for addressing the academic writing challenges of CPUT undergraduate students

This article has repeatedly echoed that “higher education no longer focuses solely on the interests of the elite but plays a role in educating the majority of a nation’s population” (Meyer 2012: 2007). Given the increasing access to universities nowadays, academics will continue to deal with students with very mediocre literacy skills and severe lack of university preparedness. Judging from the empirical evidence, this article proposes the following as short and long term strategies to mitigate the academic writing challenges of CPUT undergraduate students. Although these strategies require time and resources, most CPUT academic departments are currently involved in a Programme Review process to align courses with the Higher Education Qualification Framework (HEQF). This provides a unique opportunity to collaboratively redesign these courses to respond to the academic writing of students. This Programme Review should therefore consider the following proposed strategies:

1. Since several CPUT departments are in the process of recurriculation, Communication and academic literacy lecturers should be redesign academic development curricula in such a way that they are more responsive to the needs of students (Pineteh, 2011). Because subjects like Communication are supposed to develop academic writing skills and socialise students into disciplinary discourses, the contents and teaching strategies should be responsive to the generic and discipline-specific needs of undergraduate students. These curricula should “give young people the productive skills of design to make texts which fully match and express their needs and conceptions” (Kress 1996: 195). They should be able to develop students’ cognitive skills through academic literacies, problem solving and creativity and innovation. Such curricula will ensure that students use writing to “remake their systems of representation and communication, in productive interaction with the challenges of multiple forms of difference” (Kress 1996: 196).
2. As academic staff members engage in this curricula review processes, they should provide discursive spaces for valuable collaboration between Communication lecturers and disciplinary specialists in the new curriculum documents (Jacobs, 2007). Instead of blaming Communication lecturers for the weak academic writing skills of students, core discipline lecturers should create avenues for Communication lecturers to embed literacy practices within disciplinary curricula. Academic writing practices cannot be disassociated from core disciplines because “tacit knowledge is acquired through being socialised into communities of practice through interaction with the existing members” (Jacobs 2007: 75). For me, academic reading and writing in the context of universities of technology can develop more easily if embedded in core subjects. In fact “disciplinary specialists are best placed to induct students into the discourses of their disciplines” and academic writing is best taught within disciplinary spaces” (Jacobs 2007: 75).
3. The new curriculum documents should create space for intensive academic reading and writing activities which allow for experimentation with different writing challenges. These activities should promote and encourage critical self-reflection on academic writing exercises (Fernsten & Reda, 2011). The lecturers mandated to help with the development of the academic skills of students should engage more with student writing, providing clear instructions and feedback that can guide students to improve on the quality of their writing (Tuck, 2012; Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell & Litjens, 2008). These lecturers should focus more on a continuous developmental process, which orients students into the academic culture of reading and writing. This should be informed by the writing process, which involves drafting, revision and redrafting. Here, lecturers should attempt to re-ignite the culture of reading in students through exposure to different academic and non-academic texts. This will perhaps revitalise their confidence and minimise the ethos of ‘writing to pass’ which invariably puts tremendous pressure on students and ultimately increases the amount of plagiarism in academic writing (Bailey, 2008; Bacha, 2002; Kinsler, 1990).
4. The university should market and make its Writing Centres more visible to students on all campuses. Literature on Writing Centres such as Archer (2010) and Leibowitz, Goodman, Hannon & Pakerson (1997) espouse the strategic roles of a Writing Centre in the process of academic development. One of these roles is the one-on-one consultation with students which “has been used to provide feedback to departments

around the ways in which their students are grappling with particular tasks...” (Archer 2010: 503). They also expose students to several types of academic texts, which they can model in their own writing. Additionally, Writing Centres provide and facilitate remedial writing workshops which lecturers with large classes cannot afford to provide (Archer, 2010; Van de Ven, 2009).

5. On a more long term basis students should be orientated to take ownership of their own learning process, ensuring that they prepare adequately for academic tasks and understand the role of academic writing in their success. The view that students in CPUT should learn to take responsibility for their shortcomings, including their lack academic literacy skills featured prominently in the data. For respondents, taking owner of the writing process can help them to understand that effective academic writing is a process which requires effort and commitment. But for students to take this leadership role, they have to be mentored by lecturers, especially since their levels of cognitive development are still low. Also the mastery of English language plays a role in shaping our thoughts during a writing process and given that students in CPUT are second and third language speakers of English, the university should ensure that students immerse themselves “in a language learning environment” (Al-Khasawneh 2010: 3). This means attaching more valuable to courses like English for academic purposes and providing students with online interactive language programmes.

9. Conclusion

Not long ago, universities were for the financially and intellectually privileged. They were teaching and learning spaces that focused on the interests of elites rather than the general public. Majority of students who entered universities were therefore expected to be intellectually and emotionally prepared for higher education (Meyer, 2012; Smith, 2012 & Leibowitz, 2004). Today, universities have transformed from elite to mass institutions, catering for diverse student bodies. In the context of South Africa, increasing access to higher education means universities have to deal with students with attitudes and skills that are not suitable for higher education. The data presented in this article suggests that because these students enter higher education with weak literacy skills, they struggle to cope with institutional literacy practices and disciplinary discourses including academic writing. Here, their writings often lack the flair and sophistication which emerge from conceptual, reflective and analytical thinking. As discussed in the preceding sections, these challenges are consequences of students’ schooling experiences, literacy backgrounds and the attitudes that they bring to the university. They are also consequences of curricula that promote rote learning rather than the development of cognitive skills; the way academic staff members appreciate academic development courses. To address this situation, this article has proposed redesigning curricula that are responsive to the needs of students, collaboration between Communication lecturers and disciplinary specialists, students taking ownership of the learning process and adequate development of services such as the Writing Centre.

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