The writing centre as a third space in higher education: An autoethnographic reflection

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ABSTRACT

Writing centres in higher education are often perceived as remedial spaces, yet they play a far more complex role in supporting student learning and shaping professional identities. In this article, I use autoethnography to explore how writing centres function as Third Spaces that blur the boundaries between teaching, academic development, and student support. Drawing on Third Space Theory and Academic Literacies Theory, I critically reflect on my experiences as a writing centre practitioner, examining the institutional positioning of writing centres and the evolving identities of those who work within these spaces. Despite contributing significantly to academic literacy development, writing centre practitioners remain in liminal professional spaces, often caught between academic and administrative roles. Through this reflection, I highlight how writing centres challenge deficit-based institutional narratives and foster student agency beyond the classroom. I propose that universities should move beyond the service-based model of writing centres and recognise them as intellectual spaces that play a critical role in academic development. I argue that through formally acknowledging writing centre practitioners as Third Space professionals, institutions can enhance their legitimacy and impact, strengthening their role in fostering inclusive, student-centred approaches to academic literacy.

Keywords: writing centres, Third Space, autoethnography, academic literacies, higher education, professional identity, hybrid roles, transformative pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

I sit in the writing centre, observing students as they walk in, some hesitantly and others with quiet determination. A first-year student holds a draft covered in red ink; his eyes filled with uncertainty. “I’m not good at writing”, he whispers. I smile and gesture for him to sit. “Let’s talk about it”, I say. Conversations then unfold across tables, between sentences, and within silences. On the other side, a postgraduate student struggles with structuring an argument, while a second-year student navigates the complexities of academic language. These encounters reveal the writing centre as a space where identities, knowledge, and roles are negotiated (Nendauni 2025). I, too, find myself in an in-between space, neither fully a lecturer nor entirely an administrator, but rather a practitioner negotiating the hybrid and often ambiguous terrain

of a university writing centre. For me, the writing centre is more than a place for improving writing skills; it is a space of negotiation, transformation, and learning (Nendauni 2026).

Higher education institutions traditionally separated academic and support functions, reinforcing distinctions between teaching and student services. However, writing centres challenge these rigid boundaries by providing a space where students engage in learning beyond formal classroom instruction. While often perceived as remedial, researchers such as Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni (2019) argue that writing centres are dynamic environments that foster academic literacy, critical thinking, and disciplinary engagement. My experiences as a writing centre practitioner have demonstrated that these spaces do more than assist with writing mechanics, they cultivate student agency, encourage meaning-making, and facilitate intellectual growth (Nendauni 2025). However, despite our crucial role as writing centre practitioners, our professional identity remains ambiguous. This ambiguity surrounding our professional identity invites a deeper examination of the unique position we occupy within higher education, one that I think can be fruitfully understood through the lens of Third Space.

Accordingly, this article explores writing centres as Third Spaces, drawing on the work of Bhabha (1994) and Whitchurch (2008, 2013). To be explicit, these are hybrid spaces that blur the boundaries between established roles and structures (Whitchurch 2008). Writing centres embody this hybridity, operating at the intersection of academic and support services, where students negotiate academic conventions rather than passively receiving instruction. However, writing centre practitioners are not the only professionals navigating such liminal roles. Research on academic development practitioners highlights similar tensions surrounding identity, legitimacy, and recognition in higher education (Sheffield and Serbati 2022). Writing centre work is situated within the broader field of academic development, yet discussions of professional identity in this field rarely account for the specific experiences of writing centre staff. In this article, I extend this conversation by exploring how writing centre practitioners function as Third Space professionals within academic development, this highlights both the challenges and opportunities of this positioning.

Guided by autoethnographic reflection, I examine my own experiences as a writing centre practitioner, situating them within broader institutional and theoretical contexts. Three key questions drive this article:

- To what extent do writing centres function as Third Spaces in higher education?
- How do writing centre practitioners navigate their identities as Third Space professionals?

- How do students perceive the writing centre as an alternative learning space beyond the traditional classroom?

This article is situated within broader debates on decolonising higher education in South Africa. Scholars such as Heleta (2016) and Mbembe (2016) argue for dismantling colonial epistemic structures and embracing inclusive pedagogies. Writing centres, through their dialogic and student-centred practices, act as spaces of epistemic access where knowledge and identity are co-constructed. Through personal narrative and theoretical engagement, this article contributes to discussions on the evolving role of writing centres, and it advocates for their recognition as integral sites of academic development rather than peripheral support units. I content that acknowledging writing centre staff as Third Space professionals would not only elevate their institutional status but also enhance their ability to support student success.

THE ROLE OF WRITING CENTRES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Writing centres play a vital role in supporting students' academic literacy by enhancing their writing, critical thinking, and communication skills (Namakula 2024). This support is particularly important as students transition into higher education, where academic writing expectations become more demanding. As a writing centre practitioner, I work directly with students to help them develop their ability to engage with academic discourse, structure their arguments, and refine their writing skills. Like other practitioners (Archer 2010; Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni 2019), I offer one-on-one writing consultations, academic literacy workshops, and tailored resources. I also assist students in navigating complex academic conventions, empowering them to become more confident and independent writers.

In her study, Namakula (2024) emphasises that writing centres are not merely remedial spaces but dynamic learning environments that serve students across disciplines. This means that with offering individualised guidance, these centres help students adapt their writing to different academic contexts. Our work in the writing centre also involves supporting students in interpreting feedback from their lecturers, integrating sources effectively, and developing critical arguments. In doing so, the writing centre functions as a space where academic literacy is not simply transferred but co-constructed through dialogue and reflection. According to Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni (2019), this challenges the traditional perception of writing centres as spaces where students come to "fix" their writing and instead highlights their role in fostering deeper engagement with academic practices.

WRITING CENTRE PRACTITIONER VERSUS ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS

As a writing centre practitioner, I share a common goal with academic developers: supporting student learning while navigating complex institutional structures. However, I have often found that despite our shared purpose, writing centre practitioners are rarely acknowledged as contributors to academic development. Instead, our roles are frequently confined to student support services, reinforcing the perception that writing centres function as remedial spaces rather than as sites of academic engagement.

Sheffield and Serbati (2022) argue that academic developers often operate within Third Spaces, blending academic and administrative roles to bridge teaching and institutional policies. I see strong parallels between this and my own experiences in the writing centre. Like academic developers, I engage in teaching, student support, and institutional strategy, but unlike them, my work is primarily focused on direct student interactions. While academic developers typically concentrate on faculty development, curriculum design, and policy implementation (Ramsden, Prosser, Trigwell and Martin 2007), writing centre practitioners work closely with students, guiding them through writing and research processes and helping them engage with academic discourse (Namakula 2024). This hands-on approach is what sets my role apart, yet it is also what limits my visibility within broader academic development conversations.

The institutional divide between faculty development and student support often makes it difficult for writing centre practitioners to be seen as academic contributors. I have observed that academic development literature tends to focus on institutional strategies and faculty engagement (Perkmann, Salandra, Tartari, McKelvey and Hughes 2021), while largely overlooking the ways in which writing centre professionals contribute to academic success. In my experience, writing centres not only complement academic development but also expand its scope by encouraging student involvement in the co-construction of knowledge. While academic developers focus on teaching strategies, my work in the writing centre provides students with individualised support, allowing them to navigate academic writing in ways that make sense for their disciplines and learning styles (Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni 2019).

Despite these contributions, I have found that writing centre professionals are often underrepresented in academic development discussions. Many universities classify us as support staff rather than academics, limiting our ability to influence pedagogical reforms and curriculum design (Lerner 2009). I have experienced how this classification affects institutional decision-making. Writing centre staff are often excluded from conversations about academic

literacy policies, even though we are directly involved in shaping how students engage with academic writing. Beck, Jones, Storm, Torres, Smith and Bennett (2021) argue that integrating writing centre practitioners into academic development discussions could help bridge the gap between faculty development and student learning, creating a more holistic approach to teaching and learning support. I argue that writing centres must be repositioned within academic development structures, allowing us to work more collaboratively with faculty and academic developers, and to liberate spaces.

To move forward, institutions should recognise that writing centre practitioners do more than provide writing assistance, we engage in transformative pedagogical work that helps students develop their academic voices. I have seen first-hand how writing centres challenge deficit-based approaches to student learning by fostering student agency and intellectual engagement. Rather than operating in institutional silos, writing centres and academic development units should collaborate to create integrated faculty and student support systems. I think if universities acknowledge writing centre practitioners as Third Space professionals, we can contribute meaningfully to curriculum development, faculty training, and broader institutional strategies for academic success.

WRITING CENTRE PRACTITIONERS AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

As highlighted in the introduction of this article, I contend that writing centre practitioners occupy a unique and often complex role in higher education, that can at best be explained through the concept of Third Space. In simple terms, Third Spaces emerge between established academic and administrative roles, offering an opportunity for hybrid forms of engagement and learning (Whitchurch 2008). This intersection of academic and professional domains is crucial in understanding the diverse responsibilities of writing centre staff. Research across different countries, including the UK, USA, Canada, and Australia, has shown that Third Space roles bridge domains such as learning and teaching support, student services, and research management (Whitchurch 2008; Smith, et al. 2021).

In my role at the writing centre, I navigate this hybrid identity daily. My work involves balancing teaching, academic support, and administrative tasks. Unlike traditional lecturers, I do not assess students' work in terms of tests and exams, yet I contribute significantly to their academic development. Similarly, I am not strictly an administrative staff member, but I am deeply involved in pedagogical practices that shape student learning. This hybrid positioning enables me to challenge conventional academic boundaries and provide a collaborative, student-centred space where academic expectations are negotiated rather than rigidly imposed.

The concept of professional identity in the writing centre is also central to understanding the challenges writing centre practitioners face. As the boundaries between academic and professional identities in higher education become increasingly blurred, writing centre staff find themselves categorised in roles that do not easily fit into traditional academic or administrative categories as argued by MacFarlane, Scott, and Caleo (2018). Scholars have coined terms such as "blended professionals" (Whitchurch 2008), "hybrid professionals" (Veles and Carter 2016), and "pracademics" (Dickinson, Fowler and Griffiths 2022; Posner 2009) to describe this evolving role.

Despite the important contributions writing centre practitioners make to student success, this hybrid professional identity is often not formally recognised. Writing centres are frequently marginalised within university structures and viewed as peripheral to academic success (Veles and Carter 2016). I have experienced this personally, as writing centre staff are sometimes seen as support staff rather than fully-fledged academics, despite the depth of pedagogical work we engage in. Similarly, some scholars argue that in certain institutions, writing centre staff are classified as "non-academic", a label that can undermine the significance of our work (Sebalj, Holbrook, and Bourke 2012; Szekeres 2011). This lack of recognition is problematic because, despite not being classified as academic staff, we contribute directly to student success through teaching-related activities, curriculum support, and academic development initiatives. Many professional staff often feel invisible or undervalued within our institutions (McIntosh and Nutt 2022).

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the flexibility and innovation that Third Space professionals bring to higher education. As universities shifted to online learning, writing centre practitioners adapted their services by offering virtual consultations and helping students navigate new digital learning environments (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield 2023). This adaptability reinforces the importance of the Third Space role in higher education, as writing centre practitioners continued to ensure that students received essential support even in challenging circumstances (Zellweger-Moser and Bachmann 2010). I contend that recognising writing centre staff as key academic contributors, institutions can enhance student learning and strengthen the role of writing centres as transformative spaces within higher education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand the role of writing centres in higher education, I draw on Third Space Theory (Bhabha 1994; Whitchurch 2008) and Academic Literacies Theory (Lea and Street 1998). These theoretical frameworks help illuminate the hybrid positioning of writing centres, both as

learning spaces that challenge traditional academic hierarchies and as sites where practitioners navigate complex professional identities.

Third Space Theory and writing centre practitioners

Third Space Theory, introduced by Bhabha (1994), describes liminal spaces where identities, practices, and power structures are negotiated. In higher education, Whitchurch (2008) applies this concept to the growing category of Third Space professionals, staff whose roles transcend conventional academic and administrative boundaries. These professionals, including writing centre practitioners, operate in hybrid spaces where they engage in teaching, student support, and institutional strategy, yet often face a lack of formal recognition. Whitchurch (2013) identifies four types of Third Space professionals:

- Bounded professionals (working within fixed institutional structures)
- Cross-boundary professionals (engaging across multiple roles)
- Unbounded professionals (working fluidly beyond formal definitions)
- Blended professionals (combining academic, support, and managerial roles)

Aligning with Whitchurch's (2008) concept of the "blended professional" identity, my role spans academic, support, and administrative domains. This hybrid position, though challenging, is enriching as it fosters innovative approaches to student support and academic literacy development. Recognising writing centre practitioners as integral academic contributors would enhance their ability to influence institutional policies and improve student learning outcomes. However, despite the pedagogical significance of this work, writing centre practitioners often face institutional marginalisation (Veles and Carter 2016), as universities frequently classify them as support staff rather than academics, limiting their influence on curriculum and policy development.

While much of the existing literature on Third Space professionals focuses on academic developers (Sheffield and Serbati 2022), writing centre professionals remain underrepresented in these discussions. Yet, both groups face similar challenges in terms of legitimacy, career progression, and institutional visibility (Caldwell 2022). Through framing writing centre work within the broader discourse on academic development, this article extends discussions on Third Space identity, positioning writing centre practitioners not as peripheral staff but as key contributors to student success.

Academic Literacies Theory and student learning in writing centres

While Third Space Theory explains the institutional positioning of writing centres, Academic Literacies Theory (Lea and Street 1998) offers insight into how students engage with academic writing. Lea and Street (1998) critique traditional 'study skills' models, arguing that academic writing should be understood as a social practice shaped by disciplinary norms and institutional power structures. They propose three overlapping perspectives:

- Study Skills Model – Writing is seen as a technical skill that can be taught generically.
- Academic Socialisation Model – Writing is part of learning disciplinary conventions.
- Academic Literacies Model – Writing is a complex practice involving negotiation of meaning, power, and identity.

Many students enter the writing centre expecting a study skills approach, assuming that good writing is about fixing grammar or sentence structure. However, I encourage them to engage in academic socialisation and literacies to see writing as part of disciplinary participation rather than as an isolated skill. This aligns with research suggesting that writing centres should challenge deficit-based narratives and instead foster student agency and critical engagement with academic discourse (Lillis and Scott 2007; Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni 2019).

Additionally, writing centres serve as sites of linguistic negotiation, particularly for multilingual students who must navigate the dominance of English in academic writing (Joubert and Clarence 2024). My observations align with studies showing that students often struggle with disciplinary expectations, citation practices, and argumentation strategies rather than with surface-level language issues (Nichols 2017). By creating a space where students can question and adapt academic conventions, writing centres operate as transformative learning environments rather than mere remedial services.

Theoretical integration: writing centres as transformative third spaces

Combining Third Space Theory and Academic Literacies Theory provides a complex framework for understanding writing centres. Third Space Theory explains the hybrid professional identities of writing centre practitioners, while Academic Literacies Theory highlights the student learning experiences that unfold in these spaces. Together, these perspectives reveal that writing centres are not simply sites of academic support but critical

spaces where both students and practitioners negotiate knowledge, identity, and institutional constraints.

Despite their transformative potential, writing centres remain marginalised within higher education. This article argues that recognising writing centre practitioners as Third Space professionals would not only elevate their status but also strengthen their role in shaping institutional policies on academic literacy. With situating writing centres within the broader field of academic development, I advocate for a more integrated, institutionally recognised approach to writing support, one that moves beyond remedial narratives and acknowledges the intellectual contributions of writing centre staff.

Both Third Space Theory and Academic Literacies Theory provide critical lenses through which I analyse the role of writing centres in higher education. Third Space Theory helps illuminate the hybrid positioning of writing centre practitioners, demonstrating how they navigate academic and administrative roles while shaping institutional discourse on academic development. This perspective is particularly useful in understanding the professional challenges writing centre staff face, including issues of legitimacy, career progression, and institutional recognition. Meanwhile, Academic Literacies Theory highlights how students engage with writing centres, shifting from deficit-based models of support to more transformative, knowledge-construction practices. Together, these theories frame my analysis, guiding the exploration of how writing centres operate as dynamic learning spaces that foster student agency while simultaneously contending with institutional marginalisation.

POTENTIAL COUNTERARGUMENTS FOR RECOGNISING WRITING CENTRES AS THIRD SPACES

While I argue that writing centres should be recognised as Third Spaces in higher education, I am aware that this shift is not without challenges. Universities operate within tight budget constraints, competing priorities, and entrenched institutional structures, all of which can make it difficult to reposition writing centres as central academic units. In my experience, one of the most common forms of resistance comes from faculty members who view writing centres as peripheral support services rather than integral partners in teaching and learning. Additionally, administrators often prioritise initiatives that offer immediate, quantifiable outcomes, making it difficult to advocate for writing centres, which focus on long-term academic development rather than short-term fixes.

One major argument against integrating writing centres into academic development structures would be the issue of funding and resource allocation. Universities already face

financial pressures, and expanding the role of writing centres may be seen as an unnecessary expense. However, I counter this by highlighting the cost-effectiveness of writing centre interventions. Research has shown that academic literacy support improves student retention and success rates, which ultimately benefits the institution financially (Nichols 2017). Rather than viewing writing centres as an additional expense, universities should recognise them as a strategic investment in student achievement. One practical solution would be to embed writing centre initiatives into faculty training programmes so that academic literacy support is integrated within existing teaching structures rather than operating as a separate service requiring additional funding.

Another common source of resistance is faculty scepticism. Some lecturers may believe that writing centres interfere with their teaching duties, or that writing instruction should stay within subject-specific courses instead of being handed over to the writing centre. Just as Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni (2019) say, there are faculty members who assume that writing centres exist solely to "fix" students' grammar, overlooking the pedagogical depth of our work. To counter this perception, I actively engage faculties in collaborative initiatives, such as discipline-specific writing workshops and curriculum-integrated writing support. When writing centre practitioners work alongside lecturers to embed writing into their courses, faculty begin to see writing centres not as separate entities but as partners in student learning.

I think institutional inertia also poses a challenge. Universities often operate within rigid structures, making it difficult to introduce changes that blur the boundaries between academic and support roles. As such, writing centre practitioners, like other Third Space professionals, struggle with issues of legitimacy and recognition (Whitchurch 2008). I have seen how writing centre staff are often classified as administrators rather than academic personnel, which limits their ability to influence curriculum decisions. A possible solution is for universities to redefine professional categories so that writing centre practitioners are recognised as academic development professionals rather than as support staff. This could involve formalising career pathways for writing centre professionals, allowing them to take on leadership roles in curriculum design, faculty training, and institutional literacy policies.

It is also my observation that universities often prioritise STEM and technical skills over academic literacy, making it challenging to secure institutional support for writing centres. However, I argue that academic literacy is crucial across all disciplines. To strengthen this case, I advocate for data-driven approaches, demonstrating how writing centre support enhances student performance, retention, and graduation rates. While challenges exist, they are not insurmountable. Through faculty collaboration, curriculum integration, and institutional

advocacy, writing centres can move beyond a service-based model to become essential spaces for academic transformation. Universities that embrace this shift will strengthen their support structures and foster more inclusive, student-centred pedagogies.

METHODOLOGY

I adopted an autoethnographic approach, which allowed me to critically reflect on my lived experiences as a writing centre practitioner while situating them within broader institutional and theoretical contexts. Autoethnography, as a qualitative research method, combines personal narrative with scholarly analysis, making it a suitable approach for examining the hybrid and often marginalised role of writing centre practitioners in higher education (Luitel and Dahal 2021). Given that writing centre professionals navigate complex institutional structures, this methodology enables me to offer an insider perspective on the challenges, tensions, and opportunities inherent in this work.

Data collection and analysis

The data for this study comes from three primary sources: personal observations, narrative reflection, and institutional discourse analysis.

Firstly, personal observations were gathered over several years of working in a university writing centre. Through careful observation, I examined how students engage with academic literacy support and how writing centres are positioned within the institution. These observations were recorded in field notes and reflective journals, allowing me to identify recurring patterns in student interactions, faculty perceptions, and administrative challenges.

Secondly, I employed narrative reflection, drawing on my own experiences as a writing centre practitioner. I documented key moments of professional negotiation, institutional marginalisation, and pedagogical transformation. These reflections, written over time, provided insight into the ways in which writing centre work aligns with Third Space Theory and Academic Literacies Theory.

Lastly, institutional discourse analysis was conducted by examining institutional documents, policies, and faculty communications related to writing centre operations, academic literacy, and student support. This analysis helped contextualise my reflections within the broader structural frameworks that shape the role of writing centres in higher education.

To analyse this data, I employed thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), identifying key themes such as: the hybrid and often marginalised identity of writing centre practitioners; the evolving perceptions of writing centres from remedial spaces to transformative learning

environments; the institutional barriers that limit writing centres' integration into academic development structures. Through constant comparison and iterative reflection, I refined my analysis to ensure that personal insights were systematically linked to theoretical perspectives and broader institutional trends.

Reliability, validity, and reflexivity

As an autoethnographic study, I acknowledge that my findings are deeply personal and subjective. Autoethnography does not aim for objectivity or generalisability in the traditional sense but rather seeks to provide deep, contextualised insights into specific lived experiences (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011). However, to enhance credibility and trustworthiness, I took the following steps:

- **Triangulation:** With integrating personal observations, narrative reflections, and institutional discourse analysis, I ensured that my findings were not solely based on individual perception but were grounded in broader institutional realities.
- **Engagement with literature:** I consistently linked my reflections to established theoretical frameworks and prior research, allowing for conceptual validation.
- **Reflexivity:** Throughout this study, I engaged in critical self-reflection, questioning my own positionality, assumptions, and biases to maintain intellectual integrity in my interpretations.

Limitations

As with all autoethnographic research, this study is deeply rooted in a specific institutional context. My experiences are shaped by the environment in which I work, and I recognise that writing centres at other universities may operate differently. The subjective nature of autoethnography remains a limitation, as my interpretations are influenced by my own experiences. I have, however, made efforts to strengthen reflexivity and theoretical grounding throughout the study.

I do not claim that my findings are universally applicable. Rather, I hope they offer meaningful insights that may resonate with or inform other writing centre practitioners and higher education professionals. Although autoethnography provides a detailed and personal account of my work, future research could expand on this by including the voices of other writing centre staff, faculty members, and students. This could be achieved through interviews, surveys, or institutional data, which would offer a broader and more balanced view of the writing centre's role as a Third Space in higher education.

Using autoethnography allowed me to present an insider's view of writing centre practice. It helped illustrate how these centres function as dynamic spaces where both students and practitioners engage with academic norms, institutional structures, and professional identities. Despite its limitations, this approach offers a valuable way of exploring the complex and often unseen work of writing centre practitioners.

NARRATIVE AND DISCUSSION

In this section, I critically reflect on my experiences in the writing centre through the lens of Third Space Theory and Academic Literacies Theory, demonstrating how writing centres operate as transformative spaces that challenge traditional institutional structures. I explore four key themes that emerged from my observations and reflections: writing centres as hybrid learning environments, the complexities of professional identity, shifting student perceptions, and the need for institutional recognition.

Writing centres as hybrid learning environments

From my experience, writing centres are neither purely academic nor administrative; instead, they function as hybrid spaces where students engage in learning beyond the formal classroom. Unlike traditional teaching environments, writing centres provide dialogic, student-centred learning opportunities, allowing students to navigate disciplinary conventions in a way that fosters agency and critical thinking.

One remarkable example is a group of students who initially approached the writing centre for help with structuring an assignment. Expecting prescriptive guidance, they were surprised when I encouraged them to reflect on their ideas and co-construct knowledge through discussion. Over time, I observed how students began to shift from seeing writing as a mechanical skill to understanding it as a process of meaning-making within their disciplines. This aligns with Academic Literacies Theory, which views academic writing as more than just a set of technical skills, but as a complex social practice shaped by institutional norms and power structures (Lea and Street 1998).

Be that as it may, despite the transformative potential of writing centres, I have found that their institutional positioning remains ambiguous. They are often seen as support services rather than core academic spaces, which can limit their ability to fully integrate into academic development structures. This perception needs to shift if writing centres are to realise their full potential as Third Spaces that bridge the gap between academic support and knowledge production.

Navigating professional identity as a Third Space practitioner

As a writing centre practitioner, I often find myself in a space that does not fit neatly into either academic or administrative roles. I am not fully a lecturer, nor am I simply an administrator. This in-between position reflects Whitchurch's (2008) idea of blended professionals, which refers to people who work across academic and administrative boundaries yet often struggle to be recognised by their institutions.

In my experience, there are ongoing tensions in how my role is understood. Many faculty members still assume that writing centre staff provide only remedial support. They do not always see us as professionals who engage in meaningful pedagogical work. I have often been asked to "stand in" for lectures or assist with marking, which reinforces the belief that writing centre practitioners are merely support staff rather than educators. This reflects what the academic development literature also shows, hybrid professionals often face challenges when it comes to career progression and institutional recognition (Caldwell 2022).

I have also received emails from faculty lecturers making demands about academic literacy support, often addressing me in the same way they might speak to a tutor. These interactions remind me that, no matter how much I contribute to teaching and learning, I am still not always seen as an equal. My presence in the writing centre seems to shape how others view my status. Unlike faculty lecturers, whose roles are widely respected and understood, I constantly must explain and defend what I do. This lack of recognition affects my ability to grow professionally. When it comes to promotions, especially ad hominem promotions, the criteria are usually based on traditional faculty expectations and academic outputs.

For example, although I may hold academic status as a writing centre practitioner, the university requires that I have supervised master's and PhD students to be considered for promotion to the levels of senior lecturer and associate professor. But the question remains: how do I meet this requirement when the writing centre has no students formally enrolled under our supervision? I must approach faculties and ask to supervise their students, which depends entirely on whether I am assigned students and whether my expertise is considered suitable. Despite this limitation, I still support postgraduate students. Some consult with me directly, while others are referred by their supervisors. I help them craft clear and focused research proposals, shape their research questions and objectives, and strengthen their literature reviews. I also provide feedback on writing, helping them improve grammar, structure, and style. Through this work, I help students express their ideas clearly and confidently. However, such work is not accounted for in the promotion criteria, though it is very important and helps in the retention of postgraduate students.

To address some of the above challenges, I have made efforts to collaborate with faculty on curriculum-integrated writing initiatives. These partnerships have helped change some perceptions. A few lecturers now recognise the writing centre as a space that contributes to disciplinary literacy and student success. However, for substantive transformation to occur, I contend that universities need to formally recognise writing centre practitioners as academic development professionals. Our contributions ought to be appropriately valued within the broader institutional framework if we are to flourish fully within these hybrid roles.

Shifting student perceptions of the writing centre

In my interactions with students, I have observed a recurring pattern: many arrive expecting quick fixes to their writing challenges, often assuming that my role is to correct grammar or refine sentence structure. This deficit-oriented perception is unsurprising, given that institutional discourses frequently position writing centres as remedial support units rather than spaces for epistemic engagement (Nichols 2017; Clarence 2020). Such framings are further reinforced by broader institutional cultures that tend to externalise academic writing as a technical skill separable from disciplinary meaning-making.

However, as students participate in writing centre consultations, I consistently observe a shift in understanding. For instance, a student may initially request surface-level correction but leave having substantively reconceptualised and restructured their argument at a deeper level. These shifts emphasise the pedagogical premise that writing centres facilitate meaning-making and epistemic access rather than mere error correction. This resonates strongly with academic literacies scholarship, which conceptualises writing as a socially situated practice embedded within disciplinary epistemologies (Lea and Street 1998; Wingate 2018). From this perspective, writing development is not simply a matter of remediation but of participation in knowledge production practices.

Despite these shifts, institutional stigma remains a barrier. Some students hesitate to seek writing centre support out of fear of being labelled as “weak” writers. Addressing this issue requires a change in institutional discourse, where writing centres are positioned as spaces for academic growth rather than as remedial services. Universities should actively promote writing centres as intellectual spaces where all students, regardless of their proficiency levels, can develop their academic voices.

The need for institutional recognition

While writing centres play a crucial role in enhancing student learning and fostering academic literacy, they remain structurally marginalised in many institutions. They are frequently positioned as support units rather than integral academic spaces, which limits their influence on curriculum design and institutional policy.

As highlighted in previous section, one of the most pressing challenges I have faced is the lack of formal career progression for writing centre professionals. Unlike lecturers, who have clear pathways for advancement, writing centre staff often remain in fixed, non-academic positions, regardless of their contributions to teaching and learning. This reflects broader patterns in the academic development field, where Third Space professionals struggle for recognition and legitimacy (Sheffield and Serbati 2022).

To address this, universities should move beyond the service-based model of writing centres and integrate them more fully into academic development strategies. One key step is formalising career pathways for writing centre practitioners, enabling progression into leadership roles within academic development. Additionally, embedding writing centre pedagogy into faculty training programmes can reinforce the crucial role of writing centres in student learning. Lastly, reframing institutional narratives is essential to position writing centres as spaces for academic engagement rather than mere remedial interventions.

My experience shows that writing centres are not merely remedial spaces but intellectual hubs where students engage in academic discourse, build disciplinary literacy, and navigate institutional demands. Nonetheless, they remain marginalised, often seen as peripheral rather than integral to the academic core. To address these challenges, I maintain that writing centres must be formally integrated into academic development structures, ensuring that practitioners are recognised as key contributors to teaching and learning innovation. Universities that embrace this shift will not only strengthen their academic support systems but also create more inclusive and student-centred pedagogies that benefit the entire institution.

TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

This article has examined how writing centres function as Third Spaces in higher education, creating hybrid learning environments where students and practitioners navigate academic expectations beyond rigid institutional boundaries. Through autoethnographic reflection, I have shown that writing centres extend beyond remedial perceptions, positioning themselves as critical spaces for meaning-making, disciplinary literacy, and intellectual agency. My experiences as a writing centre practitioner highlight the complexities of Third Space

professionals, who balance academic and administrative responsibilities while often facing institutional marginalisation. Despite their pedagogical significance, these practitioners struggle for recognition, reflecting broader challenges in academic development, such as unclear career progression, limited professionalisation, and exclusion from institutional decision-making.

Similarly, students' evolving perceptions of writing centres from remedial services to transformative learning spaces accentuate the need to challenge deficit-based institutional narratives. Writing centres are not mere support units but sites of knowledge construction, critical engagement, and academic confidence-building. However, their contributions remain undervalued, reinforcing the need for greater institutional recognition and integration within higher education. To realise the full potential of writing centres as transformative Third Spaces, universities should reconsider their approach to academic literacy, professional identities, and institutional support structures. I recommend the following key strategies for achieving this shift.

Recognising writing centre practitioners as academic development professionals

To move beyond the service-based model, universities should formally acknowledge writing centre practitioners as academic development professionals, aligning their work with broader academic literacy initiatives. This could involve:

- Reclassifying writing centre staff within institutional structures to reflect their pedagogical contributions.
- Providing career pathways that allow writing centre practitioners to progress into leadership roles in academic development.
- Integrating writing centre pedagogy into faculty development programmes, reinforcing their role in curriculum design and student learning.

Shifting institutional narratives on writing centres

Institutional discourse often frames writing centres as remedial spaces, discouraging students from seeking support and reinforcing deficit-based assumptions about academic literacy (Nichols 2017; Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni 2019). Universities should actively work to reframe writing centres as intellectual spaces, focusing on:

- Positioning writing centres as hubs for disciplinary literacy, rather than "fix-it shops" for struggling students.

- Promoting writing centres as inclusive spaces where students of all skill levels can refine their academic voices.
- Developing institution-wide messaging that emphasises writing as an ongoing process of learning, rather than a remedial task.

Embedding writing centres into institutional academic structures

To strengthen their role as Third Spaces, writing centres should be integrated into core academic policies rather than existing on the periphery of university structures. This can be achieved through:

- Collaboration with faculties to embed writing centre pedagogy into academic programmes.
- Incorporating writing centres into institutional teaching and learning policies, to ensure that they are recognised as essential academic spaces.
- Providing stable funding and resources to support writing centre initiatives, particularly in multilingual and diverse learning environments such as South Africa.

Promoting multilingual and inclusive writing centre pedagogy

Given the linguistic diversity of higher education institutions, writing centres should expand their role in supporting multilingual students by:

- Incorporating translanguaging practices that allow students to navigate academic writing in multiple languages.
- Training staff in inclusive pedagogies that accommodate diverse linguistic backgrounds.
- Developing multilingual academic writing resources to support students across disciplines.

To sum up, my reflections confirm that writing centres play a vital role in higher education. They are important spaces for academic growth, engagement with different disciplines, and student success. I hope that higher education policy-makers, including the DHET and CHE, could formally include writing centres in national academic development plans, recognising them as key parts of teaching and learning quality systems. It is also important to acknowledge writing centre practitioners as academic contributors. This recognition can help strengthen practices that support multilingualism, promote fair access to knowledge, and improve student

success. For this to happen, universities need to change their institutional culture and start seeing writing centre staff as central to academic work.

Through challenging deficit views of students, integrating writing centres into academic structures, and supporting the professional growth of writing centre staff, we can build inclusive and intellectually rich spaces, what some call "Third Spaces", where both students and staff can flourish. I believe the future of writing centres should not be at the margins of the institution but at the centre of higher education, where they truly belong.

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