

# Writing circles as transformative spaces

Sioux McKenna and Kirstin Wilmot





# A transformative intervention

In a context where there are serious calls for transformation of the curriculum

Postgraduate writing circles  
– peer led opportunities to  
develop writing practices



# South Africa

- Move to democracy and broadening of access to Higher Education
- Uneven schooling and social backgrounds exacerbated by injustices of apartheid
- Role of HE in transforming society as set out in White Paper
- HE as a major social mobility structure
  
- Beware of exceptionalism: happened rapidly in SA with end of apartheid, but broadening access through massification is international phenomena – brings implications for curriculum and pedagogy (Trow 1973).

# Addressing the South African context

- Remedial, add-on models – study skills approach
- Little effect and allowed curriculum to remain untouched
- Academic socialisation model – but problematic given hegemony of Western knowledge and current call for decolonisation
- Academic socialisation model most drawn on at present (Jacobs 2013) but “fails to address the deep language, literacy and discourse issues involved in the institutional production and representation of meaning” (Lea and Street 2000: 35)
- Move to academic literacies model – been around for long time but very unevenly taken up (Niven 2014)

# Academic Literacies

- The discourse of the decontextualised learner (Boughey and McKenna 2016)
  - Who succeeds or fails is on the basis of inherent skills or attributes. This led to study skills and language courses.
- Challenges to autonomous understanding of texts as separate from meaning-making. (Autonomous= literacy as set of cognitive, technical and neutral skills). Street's ideological model as more useful for understanding the socio-cultural phenomena of disciplinary writing norms.
- Reading and writing in the academy is thus “rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being” (Street 2003:77)
- When students take on the literacy practices they are participating in the “distinctive social and cultural practices of different social and cultural groups” (Gee 2010:167)



# Writing Circles

- Not intended to be panacea – only one small aspect of a larger whole
- Sociocultural orientation to literacy (Aitchison 2009)
- Peer-led spaces for writing, horizontal spaces (Boud and Lee 2005)
- Writing groups are “inspiring and creative places where people talk, write and learn together because they are being nurtured, empowered and stimulated” (Aitchison 2009: 261)
- Agenda is negotiated but usually includes a small piece of generative writing followed by peer-review
- Item for peer-review is usually circulated beforehand and read aloud in group, followed by comment from group



# Our Writing Circle Programme

- Postgraduate groups
- Pilot study (2015)
  - Group A:
    - 1 group of 8 multi-disciplinary students
    - met once a week for 6 months
  - Group B:
    - 1 group of 13 single discipline students
    - met every day for two weeks
- Current programme
  - 13 groups, 6 to 8 students per group
  - multi-disciplinary (but divided into Natural Sciences and Humanities & Social Sciences)
  - meet weekly or fortnightly for 2 hours, co-ordinated by PhD student or Post-Doc



# Methods



- Pilot study data: Anonymous evaluations and observations (one of authors was the coordinator)
- Main study data: Interviews and anonymous online survey by coordinators
- Interpretivist analysis – themes emerging related to RQ and informed by literature
- Research question:

**What role can writing circles play in providing a transformative space for postgraduate students?**

Individual transformation

Curriculum transformation



# Individual Transformation: developing voice and identity

- “... it helps to rethink research angles and to explore forms of writing”
- “It helps alleviate feelings of anxiety about writing”
- “...confidence in writing”
- “...effective organisation of writing”
- “getting feedback from peers... learn how to strengthen an argument”
- “Critical review sessions provided an opportunity to practice critical reading and critiquing”
- “Made much more aware of how I write, and found that I could improve my flow of writing as well as the professional level at which I could write. I am also writing more often now and I am not so daunted by the idea of starting a piece of writing”
- “...boost your confidence”

# Individual Transformation: creating collegial safe spaces

- “I would like to think of Writing Circles as **safe spaces** where writing can be **explored and experimented** among peers”
- “It allows students an **open, friendly** and **constructive space** for seeking and giving help to each other... opportunities not readily available in academic departments...”
- “..a **committed community** of fellow academics who turn up for the writing circle and who take discussing the work of others seriously”
- “Avenues to **meet others** and **getting to know and appreciate what others do**. Makes one to understand what and how others contribute to knowledge.”
- “Opportunities to **meet and make friends** with others in the group”

# Individual transformation as central goal of education

- Harvey and Green (1993) suggest that a key understanding of quality in HE is as transformation: “Education is not a service for a customer but an ongoing process of transformation of the participant”
- Theories of conceptual threshold crossing likewise argue that it is the transformation of the individual that is at the heart of the education process because this is central to the “personal capacity for knowledge capability” (Meyer and Land 2005)

# Curriculum transformation: Making the practices explicit

- “makes one understand **what and how others contribute to knowledge**”
- “With research becoming increasingly transdisciplinary in nature, it helps to **draw on this experience**”
- “Sometimes it took a bit longer to **explain why we had written something in a certain way** ... everyone learned from the experience”
- “The downside is that **each discipline has a certain way of writing** and so the feedback can confuse one’s writing or contradict the supervisor’s counsel”
- “...students agree that peer feedback from other disciplines makes them **aware of text related issues in their writing**, and to become aware of **writing as a form...**”



# Curriculum transformation: Spaces for challenge

- “... investigate new forms of writing – not only as tool for decolonisation in context of efforts to transform South Africa universities but also to give space to explore how theories intersect in lived realities. Writing Circles can offer spaces to interrogate acquired forms of academic writing and to become aware of the import of textual forms used in different disciplines as part of a theoretical reflection.”
- “It was useful to discuss other types of research and other ways of doing things”
- “Thus, academic writing could turn from requirement and challenge to opportunity”
- “..different perspectives add richness to feedback and produce ideas that may otherwise not have emerged”
- “Applied to the multilingual context of South Africa, this would also mean to make visible the second-language use of English and giving access to and exploring ways to negotiate this multilingual environment – so as to find links between the writing ‘self’ in creative theorisation, but also to rehearse research questions in order to explore unexpected perspectives and angles of argumentation in the thesis/proposal.”

# Conclusion

## What role can writing circles play in providing a transformative space for postgraduate students?

- Writing Circles can play a significant role in **individual transformation** – spaces of rehearsal as students take on the literacy practices (and associated identities) of knowledge producers in the discipline, rather than knowledge consumers. Fosters confidence and proactive approach to writing development.
- Writing Circles can contribute towards the larger project of **curriculum transformation** by making the practices explicit and thereby opening them for challenge. Horizontal nature of the groups is key – fosters student agency.

