

Academic Writing Centres as Stages of
Performance: Experiences from two
Norwegian Institutions

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Outline

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3. Directive vs. non-directive mentoring (Brooks (1991) vs. Carino (2003))
4. Two cases: UiT and UiO
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Writing centres as stages of performance

- Although the writing centre is supposed to be a comfort zone or safe space for students in which they can escape the judgemental gaze of the professor, they are nevertheless vulnerable in the sense that they reveal their own weaknesses and uncertainties to strangers.
- In this sense, students also ‘perform’ academically in the writing centre, and the centre can be seen as a low-threshold stage on which the students show up more or less prepared, and where they to a high extent need to improvise in their encounter with a mentor that they may or may not have met before.

Stages on the path to academic
literacy/writing competence

Four stages in the acquisition of narrative competence (Erzählkompetenz) among children

1. The linear-chronological stage
2. Causal linkage stage
3. The listener-oriented stage
4. The dramatic scenario

(Hoffmann, Ludger: Zur Bestimmung von Erzählfähigkeit. Am Beispiel zweitsprachlichen Erzählens. In: Konrad Ehlich/Klaus R. Wagner (Hg.): Erzähl-Erwerb. Frankfurt a. M. 1989, 63–88.)

Transferred to the student's way towards academic writing competence

1. Reproduction of curriculum (describe, summarise)
2. Cause and effect
3. Reader-oriented
4. The professional scenario

Directive vs. non-directive mentoring
(Brooks (1991) vs. Carino (2003))

Brooks: 'Minimalist tutoring: Making the student do all the work' (1991):

'the goal of each tutoring session is learning, not a perfect paper' (128)

Hands-off approach to student texts: 'improve the writer, not the writer's text' (128)

Focus on structure, organisation, logical reasoning (Higher order concerns)

"The less we do *to* the paper, the better. Our primary object in the writing center session is not the paper, but the student. Fixing flawed papers is easy; showing the students how to fix their own papers is complex and difficult. (...) If, at the end of a session, a paper is improved, it should be because the student did all the work." (132)

Carino: 'What we talk about when we talk about tutoring. Power and Authority in Peer Tutoring (2003)

- Challenges writing centres' widespread acceptance of non-directive mentoring
- Reflect 'idealistic notions of an equal partnership between a peer tutor and a student writer but fail to acknowledge real, and often crucial, differences in their level of expertise in writing.' (112)
- There *is* a hierarchy between mentor and student, this should be acknowledged
- 'Peer tutoring should not be dismissed, but refigured in terms of the way authority and power play themselves out depending on the players in any given tutorial' (117).
- Writing centre sessions 'depend on authority and power; authority about the nature of the writing and the power to proceed from or resist what the authority says. (...) Writing centres should not be ashamed of this fact.' (121)
- Suggests flexibility rather than nondirective peership. Shift between nondirective and directive mentoring depending on the situation and the student

Two cases: UiT and UiO

- UiT the Arctic University of Norway: directive approach, often only written feedback (e-mail)
- University of Oslo (UiO): non-directive approach

UiT: Academic writing centre at the HSL faculty

- Established 2014 on mandate from the Dean (top-down)
- Based at Faculty for humanities, social sciences and education at campus Tromsø
- Serves four campuses across Northern Norway from Harstad to Kirkenes (Harstad, Tromsø, Alta, Kirkenes, 900 km/560 miles)
- Requirement that the writing centre helps students at other campuses via e-mail (pre-pandemic approach?)
- Result: written feedback rather than face to face meetings between student and mentor

UiO: Academic writing centre at University library

- Established 2016 on initiative from writing centre director Ingerid Straume (bottom-up)
- Based at the University library
- Serves the entire university (campuses around Oslo)
- Face to face meetings between students and mentors, oral consultations with open questions, hands-off approach

Approach at UiT: Directive

How we worked:

Written feedback

More focus on paper than student

Help with revision of paper rather than development of writer

MA students as mentors

Benefits:

Improved papers

Low threshold (students do not need to meet the mentor)

Safe

Disadvantages:

Writer is not challenged

Writer is told what to do to improve the paper, but does not necessarily learn from this (does not improve the writer)

The mentor does more of the work for the student (time-consuming for the mentor, less learning for the student)

Social aspect disappears

Approach at UiO: Non-directive

How we work:

Face to face consultations (zoom or physical)

Open questions (guidance rather than feedback)

Focus on the student, not the paper

Both undergraduate and graduate students work as mentors

Benefits:

Improves/develops the writer (and consequently the papers)

Student meets a person, social aspect

The student is challenged

The student does most of the work and learns from this

Less time consuming for the mentor preparing

Student feels empowered and ownership to their own work

Disadvantages:

Higher threshold /less safe (?) Student is forced to meet with an external reader and answer questions (disadvantage?)

Each paper is not necessarily improved

Do we risk losing the more insecure students?

What should a writing centre be?

1. A place in which the student feels comfortable and secure enough to discuss paper drafts, writing process or other questions related to academic writing regardless of which stage they are at.
2. A place that the student can walk out of with a sense of empowerment, yet challenged to develop own writing, bringing with them new tools to apply in the learning/writing process to reach a new stage in their academic development.

Herein lies a challenge for the writing centre staff: balancing act between being a comfortable zone yet a place in which we do not simply give the right answers or tell the student what to do, but rather challenge the student to reflect upon their own writing or work process, although it may feel less safe or comfortable for the student. In order to do this, it is important to keep in mind that the centre is a stage of student performance and that it may cost students a lot to seek help from mentors, regardless of how much the mentors themselves feel as the students' peers.

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- The writing centre UiO vs. UiT = a place for challenge and learning – not only a safe space but also a place in which something is required of you (nondirective)
 - However: not necessarily true that one does not learn from a fix-the-text approach with feedback/advice for revision
 - Feedback from UiT students show otherwise:

'Thank you so much for your help, once again. It is incredible how much I learn from your feedback. I become blind to my own text when I've written for several hours.'
Student, social sciences' (BA level)

Thank you!