“OUR STUDENTS CANNOT WRITE”: THE POOR QUALITY OF ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN CAPE PENINSULA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the poor quality of academic writing skills in Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), South Africa. It attempts to understand why undergraduate students in this university struggle with academic writing and how the poor quality of their writing skills minimises their chances of completing their degrees and diplomas in record time. Also, it seeks to propose ways to improve the quality of academic writings in the institution. Based on my professional practices and experiences as a Communication lecturer at CPUT, the article argues that the poor quality of academic writing can be blamed on students’ attitudes towards academic writing and lecturing staff’s appreciation of the role of academic writing in higher education. It can also be attributed to the university management’s inadequate commitment to development of academic writing skills. To improve the academic writing skills of undergraduates in this university, this article proposes that students should take ownership of the learning process and core discipline lecturers and academic development lecturers should work collaboratively. Also, academic development lecturers should design curricula that are responsive to the writing needs of students and they should write and publish on their teaching practices. Finally, the university should recruit ‘the right staff’ for academic development courses such as Communication and Academic Literacy. It should also provide adequate and well equipped support systems such as Writing Centres.

KEY WORDS: Academic writing, academic literacy, South Africa, Cape Peninsula University of Technology

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the poor quality of academic writing in Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), South Africa. It seeks to understand why undergraduate students in this university struggle with academic writing and how the poor quality of their writing skills minimises their chances of completing their degrees and diplomas in record time. It also proposes ways to improve the quality of academic writings in the institution. The article reflects on my professional practices and experiences as a Communication lecturer at CPUT. It is written against the backdrop of discrepant narratives about why CPUT students cannot write 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 South African Universities of Technology’s commitment to increase research outputs and throughput rates. The article argues that the poor quality of academic writing in this university can be blamed on students’ literacy backgrounds and attitudes towards academic writing as well as academic staff’s understanding and appreciation of the role of academic writing in higher education.

STUDENT WRITING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Although there is a paucity of literature precisely on how CPUT students write, there is avalanche of general literature on student writing in higher education around the world. I do not intend to explore this vast body of knowledge in its entirety but simply to highlight topical issues that have informed this article. I am particularly interested in the conceptualisations of academic writing in higher education and curriculum issues in articles like Fairclough 1992; Ivanic 1999; Lea & Street 1998 & 2006; Lillis 2001 & 2003 and Street 2004. These articles have been at the epicentre of debates about the usefulness of academic writing in universities and new literacy studies (Street 2004). They have also been concerned with new epistemologies in higher education and the “radical rethinking of what counts as literacy” especially in this age of increasing access to university education globally (Street 2004:10).

Although, the articles address student writing in higher education from different perspectives they however provide a prism through which academics in other universities like CPUT can interrogate academic writing. For example Lea & Street (1998) locate student writing in higher education within the broader context of academic literacies, moving away “from a skilled-based, deficit model of student writing, [concentrating on]…the complexity of writing practices that are taking place at degree level in universities” (157). For them, academic writing is not naively a repertoire of writing techniques but it is also a cultural and social practice, which involves negotiating power, authority and identity within the landscape of universities (Lillis, 2001; Kelder 1996). Student writing should therefore be understood as a space for the development of study skills, a process of academic socialisation within academic disciplines and as academic literacies (Street 1984 & 1995; Kelder 1996). This means university students should be able 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). This literacy practice 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). These multifaceted interpretations of academic writing have somehow remained invisible in student writing at CPUT for years. This is because students and academics of this university often minimise the role of student writing in enhancing teaching and learning in higher education.

Nevertheless, Lea and Street’s model for approaching academic writing has continued to forerun or to provide a framework to critically unlocking student writing in different contexts. In attempting to read student writing in the United Kingdom (UK) as dialogic rather monologic practices, Lillis (2003) uses Street (2004)’s premise as her point of departure. She explicitly frames her thoughts
around the binary co-dependent: critique and design. For her, conventional pedagogies in universities are still rooted in “monologic-dialectic perspectives on meaning making” which inextricably ignores the voice of the student (Lillis 2001:204). Drawing on Bakhtin’s Dialogic Imagination, she represents student writing as an interactive, dynamic and reflective process which helps students to learn through interactions with peers and lecturers. In academic writing, this dialogue stimulates meaningful participations from both students and lecturers, which often results in knowledge development (Gee & Green 1998; Van de Ven 2009). For her the monologic model is a deficit model which is rigid and undermines reflectivity, progression and cognitive development.

Essentially, the monologic model is product-oriented and minimises the potential of academic writing to develop students cognitively through the dialogue between student and writing tutor (Lillis 2003; Yong, 2010). She therefore proposes a dialogic approach and discusses how this approach can be brought to bear on the development of pedagogies of academic writing. For this dialogue to be meaningful to both the student and writing tutor, we should concentrate on ‘talkback’ not feedback, which involves “focusing on the student’s text in process, an acknowledgement of the partial nature of any text and hence the range of potential meanings…” (Lillis 2003:204). Lillis’s model encourages us to read student writing as heuristic, creatively expressing student experiences, backgrounds, emotions and ideological frameworks. Here, the concept of dialogism suggests that “pedagogic practices are oriented towards making visible/challenging/playing with official and unofficial discourse” (Lillis 2003:193). Although I would like to subscribe to this model, I also need to be aware of the “mismatch of values and expectations concerning writing” in CPUT (Gambell 1987: 506). For example, while some academic development lecturers at CPUT are obsessively concerned about the use of language, some are more concerned about the argumentation and the overall thinking put into the writing process. So, what constitutes a good of piece of academic writing depends largely on the lecturer’s expectations. Also, the massification of South African universities and the ensuing large classes inhibit the application of ‘talkback’ when assessing student writing. Ultimately, to understand the reasons for poor quality academic writing in this context, we need to pay close attention to the linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds and literacy experiences of students. Leibowitz (2004) captures this situation neatly when she analyses the educational policies that are “intended to increase equity of access to education, and democratise the management and governance of schooling” (35).

SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES IN A POST-APARTHEID ERA

Modern universities are “shifting from elite to mass higher education system where there is a greater cultural, linguistic and social diversity than in the past” (Lillis 2003: 192). The massification of and the ensuing shifting vision of universities today is the direct consequence of increasing government influence and pressures of globalisation (Shore 2010; Kreber 2003, Lea & Street 2006). This has shifted the core business of modern universities from the development of educated citizenry to the “commercialization of teaching and research... [reinventing them] into transnational business corporations operating in a competitive global knowledge economy” (Shore 2010:15/17).
In South Africa, the shifting vision of universities is espoused strongly by 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). 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, Jansen 1998, Leibowitz 2004 and Young 2005). For example 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, p.341). OBE was intended to forge a teaching and learning framework which privileges outcomes rather than content and process (Jansen, 1998; Ensor, 2004). However, these policies have only exacerbated the educational challenges in South African partly because they were implemented hastily, often without due consideration of the uncharacteristic diversity of the new South Africa and different configurations and challenges in schools and universities (Leibowitz 2004 and Pineteh 2012). Moreover, although the government is pressuring universities to increase their student intake annually, it still expects the same universities to maintain high quality research, teaching and learning. This is untenable because massive enrolment and quality outputs are a serious mismatch especially in a university of technology like CPUT. Also, the disproportionately amount of subsidies from the same government has had visible implications for the quality teaching and research (Pineteh, 2012). The South African government’s approach to addressing the challenges in schools and universities illustrates the “embeddedness of education institutions and practices in the wider society and the enormous constraints that such embeddedness places on educational reforms fulfilling their more ambitious goals” (Kraak and Young 2001:1).

Additionally, in the process of addressing its domestic problems, the new South Africa also wanted to position itself strategically in the global marketplace. Schools and universities were therefore pressured “to prepare South Africa for participation in a sophisticated global economy” (Ensor 2004, p.341). Despite all the attempts to deracialise universities and after almost two decades into democracy, South Africa is still grappling with issues of race, gender, class and ethnicity, particularly in the higher education sector. In this context, teaching and learning is only about imparting knowledge but also about negotiating space, identity and power. Despite the pressure meted on South African universities to transform, many of these universities are still elite and exclusive institutions in terms of the quality of their students, their staff composition and financial demands. This means that South African universities are still “increasingly being challenged in terms of their responsiveness and relevance to societal problems” (Waghid 2002, p.457). This responsiveness to societal problems includes inter-alia forging a representative higher education system which realistically depicts the racial and gender demographics of
South Africa while at the same time preparing South Africans to face the challenges of global markets (Jansen, 1998 & Waghid, 2002).

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 academic writing in particular. Universities like CPUT now have to deal with even more under-privileged and unprepared students with mediocre academic literacy skills, matriculating from very dysfunctional high schools (Pineteh, 2012). They are now burdened with the responsibility of developing the skills neglected by schools, in order to prepare their students for postgraduate studies and for the workplace. Moreover, “the commodification of education [in the South African context] is increasingly expressed in a new currency of transferable, portable outcomes and qualifications that provide the logic for qualifications and outcomes-driven approach to educational reform” (Young & Gamble 2006, p.3). Here, the specificities of course contents and teaching strategies focus on the outcomes rather than on the process of cognitive development and knowledge acquisition engrained in the academic writing process. In the case of CPUT, the situation is disturbing because the institution is actually a product of unusual merger of two erstwhile Technikons [Technical colleges] whose main preoccupation was to prepare their students for the South African workplace. So, even though CPUT is branded as a full flesh university of technology, it still operates in a nuanced way, like a Technikon, with its staff clinging to the academic culture of Technikons (Pineteh 2012).

TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING IN THE CONTEXT OF CPUT

I teach communication skills at CPUT and my key responsibility I suppose, is to develop skills that can put CPUT graduates at a competitive advantage in the workplace and also prepare them for postgraduate studies. Essentially, the course is divided into two main sections: academic literacies and business communication. These sections cater for different genres of writing including inter-alia academic essays, term/research papers, business letters and technical reports. For the three years that I have lectured in this university I am always amazed by the extent to which students and academic staff disregard academic writing as a vital literacy practice in higher education. Here, several contesting narratives have attempted to articulate the role of Communication and the usefulness of academic writing in a university technology. These narratives have percolated into criticisms of the course contents and teaching strategies of academic development courses like Communication. Some of these criticisms are also rooted in the misconception that university of technology students do not really need academic writing to survive in the world of work. But “the role of proficient writing in fostering the thinking process and academic success cannot be underestimated” (Bacha 2002:165). This is because 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). To this end, 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 the cognitive development of students. For a student to succeed in CPUT, they “need to develop their writing skills in order to cope with university course work” in different disciplines (Bacha 2002:161) and they should have a repertoire of other academic literacy skills (Lillis 2003, Lillis, 2001, Lea & Street, 1998).

**COMMON PROBLEMS WITH STUDENT ACADEMIC WRITING IN SOUTH AFRICAN UOT**

Academic writing in higher education provides a prism through which student can develop cognitively, socialise into the culture of higher education as well as negotiate identity and power (Lea, 1998; Lea & Street, 2003, Lillis, 2003). To be proficient in academic writing, a student should be able to apply myriad human skills and organise their thoughts coherently and cohesively, while applying specific discipline instructions and conventions. It also “involves negotiating social relationships, attitudes and values” in one literacy activity (Valentine 2006: 90). Academic writing is a movement through different writing stages and social experiences, which often require reflective and critical thinking. Quality academic writing in higher education therefore depends solely on students’ ability to read critically, interpret, analyse and synthesise ideas in a very methodical manner (Perin, Keselman and Monopoli 2003; Gambell 1987, Kelder 1996, Kinsler 1990).

In the context of CPUT, producing academic writings which apply these characteristics and conventions is still incredibly challenging to many students. This is because the students of this university are richly diverse especially in term of linguistics and and educational backgrounds as well as social orientations (Leibowitz, 2004). However, the majority of them seem not to be academically and/or emotionally prepared for higher education. This unpreparedness is often blamed on a basic education system which continually disconnects high schools from universities (Archer, 2010; Pineteh, 2012). These students are predominantly scholars from very dysfunctional high schools, so they enter university with “a baggage of experiences, attitudes and skills that are not properly suited to university work” (Afful 2007:143). Seemingly, CPUT attracts this quality of students not because of their practical approach to teaching and learning but because well established traditional universities like University of Cape Town, University of Witwatersrand, University of Pretoria and University of Stellenbosch still attract mostly top matriculants in the country. I am not insinuating that all students in CPUT are not very proficient in academic writing or that second and third language speakers of English cannot write. By contrast, I am arguing that the poor quality of academic writing can be blamed on a slew of factors, including the quality of students. I discuss these factors succinctly in the following section.

Mindful of the role of academic writing in higher education and dynamics of South African universities of technology, the first main problem with academic writing in this context is the attitudes, apprehensions and misconceptions that students bring to this literacy practice (Pineteh, 2012; Gizik and Simsek, 2005). Here, student performance in writing tasks clearly suggests that these mental
configurations have severe implications for their commitment to academic writing across different disciplines. For instance, academic essays, technical reports and term papers that I have evaluated, the following error types recur in student writing activities. Firstly, the 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. Inadequacy of research 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 unsubstantiated (Gambell 1987; Lea 1994 and 1998). Secondly, despite the paucity and superficiality of ideas, most of them lack careful organisation. Here, the design of the paper 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). These papers are usually disconnected from 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 through out 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. Sentences are often truncated and convoluted and students still struggle with grammatical aspects such as noun-verb agreement, tenses and spelling. These weaknesses recur because students construe academic writing as a product and not process which requires drafting, editing and re-drafting (Henning; Lea 1994 and 1998). Finally, social media has also affected the way students in CPUT write. Because they spend endless hours on facebook, emails and twitters, they unconsciously transfer instant messaging style into academic writing. Their academic essays are usually fraught with inappropriate register, slang and encrypted phrases not suitable for an academic audience. Moreover, easy access to “the internet allows [students] to cut from a huge range of texts and paste into their own work” (Asworth, Freemood & Macdonald 2003: 258). Their writings invariably ignore important characteristics of academic writing such as audience, situation purpose and context.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE POOR QUALITY OF ACADEMIC WRITING IN CPUT

The university is a completely new world to scholars from high school, a seemingly complex one which “involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organising knowledge” (Lea & Street 1998:157). The world of university is one whereby students are constantly constructing new processes, new identities and giving academic and social life new meanings across space and time (Ivanic, Edwards, Satchwell & Smith, 2007; Gee & Green 1998). Today, students in higher education are expected to produce “knowledge which is social accountable, reflexive, trans-disciplinary and problem-oriented” (Waghid 2002:461). Furthermore, university landscapes have been complicated further by the irruption of social media in higher education. The unwavering interest in technology-based teaching and learning especially in universities of technology means students have to
deal with the chaos of the mediated world on a daily basis (Ehlers & Schneckenberg 2009). To this end, socialising into the culture of university depends on a co-dependent partnership between students, academic staff and the management of the university. For a student to succeed in a university they must take ownership of the learning process while tapping into with professional expertise of academic staff. Here, academics provide mentorship to students while they embark on the quest for knowledge. Students should also be provided with adequate facilities and/or infrastructural support by the university. In the same token, for the quality of academic writing to improve, students must take ownership of the writing process, receive guidance from staff and they should be provided with the right facilities and infrastructural support (Arkoudis & Trans 2010; Yong, 2010, Bailey 2008).

However, the unpleasant facade of the massification of universities especially in the context of South Africa is that universities now have to deal with students with a “wide range of life experiences and interests as well as different reasons for wanting to participate in higher education” (Lillis 2003:192). Today, CPUT is a microcosm of the diverse South African higher education landscape in terms of race, class, ethnicity and schooling experiences (Pineteh, 2012). And the debates on the poor quality of academic writing here have been racialised or framed around the discourse of second or third language speakers of English. These debates presuppose that CPUT students cannot write effectively because of their English Language deficiencies. While the mastery of English language can enhance academic writing, 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 which can be learned regardless of the linguistic background of the student (Archer, 2010). The poor academic writing skills of CPUT students is largely a direct consequence of lack of cognitive skills stemming from poor literacy backgrounds as well as their attitudes towards academic writing (Leibowitz, 2004). For many students leaving South African high schools today, university entry is simply the next sensible thing to do, a response to ‘university education for all’ promise by the black leadership. This means that many prospective students are not always intellectually and emotionally prepared for higher education and they often spend months struggling to adapt into this new learning space. At this stage in their lives, they respond to university life and challenges as if they were still in high school (Leibowitz 2004 & Pineteh 2012).

Higher education is not for the faint-hearted, given that it requires emotional and intellectual preparedness. In higher education, students are expected to “integrate identified information with previous knowledge, connect information across sources, and organize the information for presentation in a written or [oral] report” (Perin, Kesselman and Monopoli 2003:20). Quality academic writing therefore involves the interplay of myriad cognitive skills which “facilitates both academic learning and later workplace competence” (Perin, Kesselman and Monopoli 2003: 20). But many 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. Often, the students do not accord writing tasks the respect they deserve and consequently become dependent on Communication lecturers.
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“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 devalues 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 disinterest and often “regard it as a time consuming and unpleasant chore” (Yong 2010:147).

Moreover, CPUT like many universities of technology places significant emphasis on virtual teaching and learning. Notably, this generation of students is technologically savvy but this affinity for technology also impacts negatively on their academic writing. The internet provides easy access to an avalanche of information which students can use to conceptualise writing topics. But because of student attitudes towards academic writing and their lack of cognitive ability to process the bodies of knowledge available online, they end up plagiarising the information. They lack critical thinking skills and “prior knowledge [which] may also impede the ability to compose from sources” (Perin, Keselman & Monopoli 2003:20). Although technology has provided unrestricted platforms to access knowledge, the culture of reading seems to be dissipating. Today, students spend hours networking and constructing multiple identities on the internet but they do not read the rich academic information available to them. They are often disinterested in reading academic books. Despite their ability to perform multiple tasks at once and critically evaluate information they do not bring these skills to bear on their academic writing projects (Elhlers & Schneckenberg 2009). Their writings are usually fraught with patches of information downloaded off the internet simply because they do not have the time and patience to read, analyse and synthesise information. The lack of commitment and the overly reliance on patched writing, articulate the strong culture of consumption which has propelled students to imagine “the university as responsible for delivering education to the student” rather than students actively involved in the process (Asworth, Freewood & Macdonald 2003:259).

Although, vygotsky prescribes a more student-centred teaching and learning approach, CPUT students still need the writing mentorship of academic staff. Student writing develops from modelling the writings of academics in their discipline or from reading their articles and book or by applying feedback or “talkback” provided by lecturers (Adams, 2008). Academics of a university play an important role in acculturating students in the specialised discourses of higher education and in developing their academic writing skills (Bartholomae 1985; Lea and Street 1998). But at CPUT the interest to develop student academic writing skills seems to reside mainly with a handful of academics driving academic development courses such as Academic Literacy, Language and Communication and English Communication. Ironically these courses still play a very passive role in the academic/ pedagogical processes in the university. And because this is a university of technology, other academic staff especially in mainstream disciplines, are often disingenuous about the role of academic writing in higher education. For them development of academic writing skills in CPUT should be the prerogative of courses concerned with academic development (Pineteh, 2010). Therefore, mainstream programmes do
not create space for extended pieces of academic writing in key assessments because the lecturers feel a university of technology should concentrate on providing their graduates with technical skills for the workplace rather than developing academic literacy. Clearly the specialised course lecturers disinterest in the development of academic writing and ultimately the neglect of writing concerns in their course have contributed significantly to the poor quality of academic writing skills.

Moreover, increasing access to tertiary education in South Africa means the class sizes have equally increased and are more diverse (Lillis, 2003; Perin, Keselman &Monopoli 2003; Afful 2007). Here, academics are pressured to publish in order to sustain its research image “in addition to teaching a steadily increasing and diverse student population in times of decreasing resources” (Kreber 2003: 94). This has transformed the classroom into a more complex space with myriads of writing challenges and many Communication lecturers “appear to struggle to accommodate the unfamiliar characteristic and complex needs of a diverse student body” Arkoudis & Tran 2010:170). These lecturers have to deal with even larger classes, equally large number of scripts and conversely limited contact hours.

Teaching large classes under immense pressure to increase throughput rates, research outputs, compromises the dialogic relationship between the student and lecturer. This 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. 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 on 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 without any sense of the complexities of plagiarism (Valentine 2003; Ashworth, Freewood &Macdonald 2003). Although ownership and originality are important, many academics tend to measure these novice writers against the works of seasoned 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). We cannot blame academic staff for the massification of modern universities but at the very least they can be blamed for succumbing to “monologism of institutional practices where control and predictability are emphasised over enquiry, contestation and negotiation” (Bailey 2008:1). Notably, 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.
In term of subsidies, academic development courses like Communication generate less money for the university than mainstream disciplines like Engineering, Accounting, Information Technology and so on. Since many universities rely on the financial support from government, CPUT prefers to invest in more courses and programmes that can generate more subsidies for the university. 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). Often, lecturers assigned to teach these courses do not have right qualifications and/or experience and they tend to ignore the academic writing components of the courses because they are not trained to teach the underlying concepts (Daly 1978 & 1977). Some of these lecturers are unfamiliar with basic academic writing principles and do not understand the role of constructive feedback in the writing process. 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.

The dwindling of financial supports from government has put immense pressure on universities to maximise any opportunity to attract more subsidies from the government. The politics of skills shortage or the development of critical skills especially in highly specialised technical sectors seemingly positions universities of technology at a more competitive advantage with traditional universities. The only way to enjoy this advantage is to increase throughput rates, at the same time minimising expenditure on adjunct or non-mainstream disciplines. As argued earlier, these courses are usually under-resourced in terms of qualified staffing and facilities that can help with the development of academic writing.

In addition to academic literacy programmes and communication, one main support structure that helps significantly in addressing poor academic writing skills is the Writing Centre. 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). Most traditional universities in South Africa invest substantially in Writing Centres but at CPUT, this support structure is still very dysfunctional. Many students are not even aware of its existence. Albeit it functions effectively on one of the campuses, other campuses do not enjoy the same privilege. This is because the coordinators do very little to publicise and sensitise students about the usefulness of a Writing Centre especially in a university whose main disciplines are hardcore science, engineering and business.

**PROPOSED STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF ACADEMIC WRITING IN CPUT**
The poor academic writing in higher education is a global problem and academics are likely to be haunted by this problem for a very long time especially given that university education is not for the elites any more (Shore 2010; Lea & Street 1998). In CPUT, this endemic problem will continue to riddle the scholarship of teaching and learning even longer because of the quality of students attracted by the university. Whether we like it or not, the poor quality of academic writing skills of CPUT undergraduates, has visible implications for the scholarship of teaching and learning. The significantly low throughputs and the increasing dropout rates at CPUT can be blamed on one level on students’ lack of essential academic literacy skills that can sail through their diploma programmes.

For me, the first step to addressing this problem is to accept that given the schooling and literacy experiences of CPUT students, academics will continue to deal with students with very mediocre literacy skills and severe lack of university preparedness. So, instead of incessantly mourning and groaning about the quality of student, we should refocus our energies on socialising and acculturating them into higher education. Part of this process of socialisation and acculturation entails reiterating the value of academic writing in higher education. It also involves redesigning academic development curricula in such a way that they are more responsive to the needs of students (Pineteh, 2011). Because subject like Communication are supposed to develop academic writing skills, the contents and teaching strategies should be responsive to the writing needs of CPUT students. The 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” (Ibid: 1996).

For this to happen, the university should provide the technical and human resources to help with the development of these curricula and academic skills. One way of doing this, is for CPUT to emulate the example of traditional universities like UCT, Stellenbosch University and UWC, Wits University by investing in Writing Centres and Online academic literacy programmes (Archer 2010; Leibowitz; Goodman, Hannon & Parker, 1997). It should recruit more lecturers for courses like Academic literacy, English for Academic Purposes and Communication. If they recruit more lecturers with the right qualifications and experience, it means they will have small number of students and more attention to their writing needs. An alternative approach which I have proposed to the IT department is to introduce a tutorial model if the university cannot employ more lecturers. This will provide space for more practical writing activities facilitated by tutors under the guidance of the lecturer. By enhancing the academic writing skills of students, they would be able to handle other courses with more confidence. This is likely to enhance the overall performance of students and ultimately increase throughput rates and research outputs.

Also, for academic writing skills of CPUT students to improve, academics irrespective of the discipline should collaborate with academic development and communicative skills lecturers and not repeatedly blame them for students’ writing misfortunes. Content lecturers should include assignments
that require the application of writing skills. These assignments should carry instructions that clearly outline the expectations of the lecturers. After assessing the scripts, lecturers should provide meaningful feedback, which can help to improve the student’s writing skills (Rowe & Wood, 2008; Rae & Cochrane, 2008). This is an arduous task and therefore should be managed in collaboration with lecturers teaching the adjunct courses like Academic Literacy and/or Communication. 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 (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 in this context (Bailey 2008; Bacha 2002; Kinsler 1990).

The role of students in the development of academic writing skills is critical in this process. Firstly, they should take ownership of their own learning, ensuring that they prepare adequately for academic tasks and understand the role of academic writing in their success. Essentially, students in CPUT should learn to take responsibility for their shortcomings, including their lack academic literacy skills. This will help them to understand that effective academic writing is a process which requires effort and commitment. 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.

CONCLUSIONS

Our students do not think, read and/or write is a common rhetoric in CPUT. In departmental staff meetings and faculty academic forums, the complaints are so deafening that one wonders whether the university has been jinxed. In simple terms, we are insinuating that our students are not fit for higher education. In the Faculty of Informatics and Design, the Dean has even embarked on a campaign to attract “the right students” for the faculty. Although the complaints are sometimes hyperbolical, the single truth is that the academic writing skills of CPUT undergraduates do not reflect those of a university of student. Their writings often lack the flair and sophistication which emerges from conceptual, reflective and analytical thinking. On the one hand, this can be blamed on students’ schooling experiences, literacy backgrounds and the attitudes that they bring to the university. On the other hand, it also can be attributed to the way academic staff members appreciate academic writing and its role in developing the cognitive skills of students. To address this situation, students should take
ownership of the learning process, lecturers should rethink the way the approach academic writing and the university management should provide adequate resources to ensure efficient teaching and learning.

REFERENCES


