

**Supporting first-year student academic literacy development  
and emotional well-being through a pedagogy of care  
in South African writing centres**

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### **Abstract**

Writing centres are often described as supportive, non-judgemental spaces that aid student academic literacy development, promote well-being, and encourage a sense of belonging and self-assurance. This paper explores how writing centre pedagogy intersects with care principles to support student academic literacy at a South African university in the Gauteng Province. Qualitative methods, such as individual and focus group interviews, were used to collect data from students and peer tutors to understand their perspectives on writing centre practices. Findings indicate that the writing centre is a familial space where friendships and emotional support coexist with academic literacy development. Additionally, peer tutors help students feel safe in potentially alienating and unfamiliar spaces, especially for first-year students. This paper emphasizes the importance of environments that support academic growth and community, suggesting that care-infused pedagogy in writing centres can empower students and enhance academic success.

**Keywords:** Emotional support, pedagogy of care, peer tutors, first year, writing centre

### **Introduction**

In South Africa, writing centres have played a crucial role in enabling students to access dominant discourses, contributing to their success (Archer, 2012; Namakula & Prozesky, 2019). According to Archer (2012: 353), writing centres in South Africa 'are potentially a locus for change, political spaces with a transformative agenda, which attempt to transform teaching and learning processes, while democratising access to education'. By positioning writing centres as spaces for change, the implication is that they are not just for tutoring or academic support but are envisioned as sites where broader social, political and educational transformations can occur (Archer, 2012). The emphasis on transforming teaching and learning processes indicates a



commitment to innovative pedagogical approaches and methodologies that challenge traditional norms and practices and promote inclusive and equitable educational practices.

As transformative spaces, writing centres have also been positioned as spaces that are welcoming, inclusive and free from judgement and hence often referred to as 'safe spaces'. Clarence (2024: 9) explains that the notion of a safe space 'is to create a space that is welcoming to those who do not always feel welcome in the academic community and to actively encourage and amplify their voices, experiences and concerns'. Thus, these centres have become essential support systems for students navigating the academic complexities of higher education (Clarence, 2019, 2024; Rambiritch, 2022). The emphasis on safety in writing centres aligns with the pedagogy of care aiming to create environments where all students, regardless of their backgrounds and linguistic abilities feel respected, supported and encouraged to develop their reading and writing skills and academic abilities (Clarence, 2019, 2024). According to Clarence (2024: 10), safety in this case is 'linked to dignity, to intellectual expression and to political expression'. Providing a space for students to engage with academic reading and writing in a supportive and non-threatening manner, these centres empower students to become confident and proficient readers and writers. Therefore, writing centres as safe spaces position themselves as transformative spaces where students are encouraged to express their ideas in their language. As such, they prioritise student wellbeing and academic success within the higher education context which is often alienating for some students.

Beyond their functional role in enhancing academic literacy practices, writing centres have emerged as spaces that encourage a sense of community and belonging in the often-isolating landscape of academia (Govender, 2023; Sparks & Louw, 2023). As an environment that offers trust and respect and is non-judgemental, writing centres provide students with a respite from the high-stakes, competitive nature of many academic settings, allowing them to explore their ideas, voice their concerns and receive supportive feedback without fear of ridicule or stigma (Govender, 2023; Sparks & Louw, 2023). In addition, since participants in this study are Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) students, there are further implications for modelling a pedagogy of care in the writing centres in this study. By actively supporting these students and making this pedagogy of care an explicit aspect of the writing centre's practice, we can inspire and enable them to enact similar approaches and practices in their future classrooms. Therefore, I argue in this paper that the role of writing centres extends beyond providing academic reading and writing support to recognising how personal, emotional and social factors can impact students' development of academic literacy practices. Furthermore, I agree with Clarence and Dison (2017), who contend that the pedagogy of care is a crucial aspect of writing centre identity and practices because it aligns with the ideology of academic literacy being a social practice. The next section of the paper examines the background of this study and illustrates how writing centres have been shaped by South Africa's political and historical contexts.

## **Background**

The historical context of writing centres in South Africa is closely tied to the country's post-apartheid transformation and the need to provide equitable access to higher education (Archer & Richards, 2011; Sefalane-Nkohla & Mtonjeni, 2019). Writing centres in South Africa emerged in the mid-1990s as a response to the influx of underprepared students (mostly Black) admitted into higher education institutions (Clarence, 2024; Clarence & Dison, 2017; Rambiritch, 2022). These early writing centres aimed to counter the negative effects of poor schooling, a dysfunctional education system and students' preparedness by implementing support programmes to equip students with the necessary skills for academic success (Nichols, 2017; Slemming, 2017). As the country attempted to rebuild its national identity amid post-apartheid turbulence, writing centres became 'safe spaces' for marginalised students, advancing a transformational agenda to redress past inequalities (Arbee, 2020; Sefalane-Nkohla & Mtonjeni, 2019).

While the notion of safe spaces in writing centres is intended to foster an environment free from harsh judgement and negative feedback, significant criticisms arise when facilitating students' engagement with their academic voice and new ideas. Clarence (2024) argues that the concept of writing centres as 'safe and transformative spaces' is complex and has been explored in the literature. She contends that describing writing centres as a safe space can also be problematic (Boquet, 2002; Clarence, 2019, 2024). Boquet (2002) and Clarence (2019, 2024) assert that these centres can perpetuate invisible academic standards, potentially limiting their transformative potential and aligning too closely with institutional priorities rather than challenging dominant academic discourses. While writing centres aim to create spaces free from overt judgement, they may still invoke invisible standards of 'good' academic writing that students are expected to conform to (Clarence, 2019). Writing centres should also remain open to critical engagement, encouraging students to be sceptical and ask questions, rather than simply accepting the dominance of ways of writing and constructing knowledge. This means going beyond socialising students to use academic discourses knowledgeably and effectively. Thus, the goal should not be to choose between socialisation and critique but for writing centres to create a balance where both processes coexist, enhancing their transformative potential. In this context, writing centres could avoid becoming, as Grimm (1996) puts it, 'handmaidens' to the university's priorities of writing and reading skills development, and could rather become spaces for critical engagement with knowledge and power structures (Archer, 2010; Clarence, 2019, 2024). To truly be transformative, writing centres need to find ways to make these invisible standards visible and open them up for questioning and debate (Ahmed, 2012).

Despite these criticisms, it is crucial to recognise that writing centres have made substantial progress, particularly in South Africa. Over the years, these centres have evolved significantly, shifting their focus from peripheral support for at-risk students to integral roles within academic disciplines and broader student populations (Evans-Tokaryk & Shabanza, 2022; Namakula, et al., 2023). Writing centres like the one examined in this study exemplify this shift, moving from the margins to becoming central to enhancing student access and success within higher education (Dison & Moore, 2019). Scholars such as Clarence (2024) and Boughey and

McKenna (2021) describe universities as spaces that alienate students who do not fit these dominant norms and expectations, particularly prevalent in the South African higher education context. According to Mthabela (2022), institutions often struggle to provide inclusive and supportive environments for students, especially those from historically disadvantaged backgrounds who often enter higher education with a limited understanding of what to expect. This lack of understanding can lead to feelings of disconnection and marginalisation. Consequently, students often feel pressure to assimilate into a dominant institutional culture that is rooted in colonial and apartheid legacies. This pressure can be overwhelming for students from marginalised backgrounds, resulting in a sense of non-belonging (Bangeni & Kapp, 2005; Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023; Mthabela, 2022). Moreover, the lack of representation and recognition of their backgrounds can contribute to students' feelings of alienation from the dominant academic discourse and practices, which often overlook their ethnic and cultural ways of knowing, being and constructing knowledge (Bangeni & Kapp, 2005; Monte, et al., 2008; Mthabela, 2022). As Monte, et al. (2008: 3) point out, '[w]hen we indulge in academic writing, then a disengagement from our bodies takes place. As we engage with the principles and laws of academic writing, we are also moving beyond ourselves to transcend feeling, emotion, and spirit.' Monte, et al. (2008: 5) further contend that this disengagement reflects a broader conflict between dominant Western literacy models and Indigenous ways of knowing, where 'our own brand of reading through the body conflicts with dominant western models of literacy'. However, drawing on Indigenous perspectives, such as Māori approaches to knowledge, writing centres have the potential to support students in integrating their cultural ways of knowing into conversation with Western academic norms, nurturing a more inclusive environment for knowledge-making and writing (Hook, 2010; Monte, et al., 2008).

Considering these challenges, writing centres have emerged as pivotal institutions in supporting marginalised students as they navigate the new demands of academic literacy, building on their existing knowledge and skills while fostering engagement with the academic expectations of higher education. By providing a supportive space for students to develop their academic literacy practices, writing centres drawing on the pedagogy of care can help bridge the gap between students' prior experiences and the demands of higher education. This is particularly important for students who have been historically marginalised or underprepared for academic demands due to poor schooling. Recognising the critical role of student wellbeing in developing academic literacy practices, writing centres can respond by offering support that empowers students both academically and emotionally, ultimately contributing to their academic success.

### **The pedagogy of care in writing centres: Theory and practice**

Writing centre practices involve a critical examination of the theoretical models that shape writing centre pedagogy, challenging existing assumptions about students, language and literacy learning, and adapting these theories to align with the unique contexts of South Africa. Carstens and Rambiritch (2021) emphasise the importance of identifying theoretical and analytical lenses

appropriate for specific institutional contexts, advocating a nuanced understanding of the theories underpinning writing centre work to enhance student support and learning outcomes. In particular, their article highlights the need to move beyond traditional theoretical paradigms and embrace theories such as socio-constructivism, sociocultural theory and critical pedagogy to create inclusive and empowering writing centre spaces (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2021). These theoretical frameworks emphasise social justice, dialogue, problem-solving, critical thinking and student empowerment, aligning with the transformative agenda of the writing centre in South Africa to address past inequalities and support diverse student populations.

Central to these theories is the emphasis on creating spaces that challenge traditional paradigms and foster nurturing relationships. This aligns with the concept of care in pedagogy, as explored by scholars such as Nel Noddings, bell hooks and Paulo Freire, who advocate an educational model that prioritises the holistic development and empowerment of students. Nel Noddings, a prominent philosopher of education, has long championed the 'ethics of care' in teaching and learning. Noddings' (2012) work emphasises the importance of cultivating caring relationships between educators and students, arguing that this approach is essential for fostering meaningful learning outcomes. Similarly, bell hooks and Paulo Freire have also written extensively on the role of care in education. hooks (2003), drawing inspiration from Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed,' champions a pedagogical model rooted in mutual respect, empathy and genuine concern for the holistic development of students. In her work titled 'Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope', hooks argues that 'committed acts of caring let all students know that the purpose of education is not to dominate or prepare them to be dominators, but rather to create the conditions for freedom. Caring educators open the mind, allowing students to embrace a world of knowledge that is always subject to change and challenge' (hooks, 2003: 91). Paulo Freire (2007) emphasises the humanisation of both the teacher and the learner, arguing against traditional education models that treat students as passive recipients of knowledge, which he terms the 'banking model' of education. Instead, he supports a dialogical approach where teachers and students engage in mutual learning processes.

In the context of this study, Freire's emphasis on dialogical engagement aligns with the writing centre's approach to facilitating academic literacy development. Peer tutors use conversational techniques that make students active participants in their learning, promoting critical thinking and self-expression (Clarence, 2019, 2024; Dison & Moore, 2019). In addition, hooks' (1994) concept of engaged pedagogy advocates an education that goes beyond acquiring academic literacy practices to nurturing and empowering students. Similarly, Noddings' ethics of care emphasises the importance of building nurturing, responsive relationships between tutors and students, attending not only to the development of academic literacy practices but also to emotional and personal growth. Collectively, these approaches provide a lens through which to understand the use of a pedagogy of care in writing centres. This approach can empower students to develop their voices and writing as they receive support that respects their individuality and potential. In prioritising the establishment of caring relationships between tutors

and students, writing centres can create 'safe-ish' learning spaces where students feel empowered to take risks, express their unique perspectives and engage in the writing process with greater confidence and agency (Sykes & Gachago, 2018).

The use of writing consultants or peer tutors, as is the case in this study, who act as critical friends who listen actively, pose thoughtful questions and offer advice and reassurance is a crucial aspect of this approach, fostering an environment of trust and mutual respect (Clarence, 2024). In the context of writing centres, Noddings' concept of care suggests that peer tutors should cultivate empathy and attentiveness towards their students. This involves establishing a supportive and nurturing learning environment that encourages meaningful connections between tutors and students, despite the power dynamic between them. However, recognising that peer tutors may not always feel comfortable or confident working in this way, writing centre coordinators must employ a similar pedagogy of care in training and supporting their tutors. This means providing tutors with ongoing development and support throughout the academic year to ensure they are well-equipped to navigate both the emotional and pedagogical demands of their role. In this way, the model of writing centres pedagogy not only emphasises the emotional, social and cultural experiences of students but also extends that same care to the development of peer tutors, ensuring that both peer tutors and students are supported meaningfully (Munje, et al., 2018).

Noddings (1984, 2002) emphasises the importance of care as a core element in pedagogical relationships between teachers and students. She characterises the experience of caring in terms of engrossment and motivational displacement. Engrossment involves being open and receptive to the needs of the students, actively listening to and understanding what they are trying to convey. Motivational displacement refers to directing one's energy towards furthering the students' goals and projects, showing a genuine desire to support their learning. Noddings' principles of care, characterised by engrossment and motivational displacement, are exemplified in the operation of the writing centre in this study, and perhaps in others in South African universities. Using peer tutors, writing centres can provide a nurturing environment where students are not intimidated and judged. This approach not only addresses the students' academic literacy practices but also fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment, crucial for first-year students who often feel alienated in the broader university context. By embodying the pedagogy of care, writing centres can help students deal with their emotions and meet the academic demands of higher education.

### **Research design and methodology**

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore how the Writing Centre at one university in Gauteng Province, South Africa, integrates the pedagogy of care into its practices to support first-year students in developing academic literacy. The case study approach was chosen for its ability to provide an in-depth, contextual analysis of complex phenomena within their real-life settings. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide rich and diverse insights into the Writing Centre's practices. The sample included students

who regularly used the Writing Centre's services and peer tutors who worked within the centre and were responsible for offering academic literacy support to students. Criteria for selection included varying levels of student engagement and peer tutors' different durations of involvement with the centre. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation and their rights, including confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Data was anonymised, and all personal identifiers were removed to protect participants' privacy. Pseudonyms were used to replace any identifying information where necessary.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions involving nine students and seven peer tutors. These methods allowed for a deep exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions. The interview and focus group guides were developed based on a review of the literature on the pedagogy of care and were piloted with a small group of four participants (two students and two peer tutors) prior to the main data collection. Feedback from the pilot was used to refine the instruments, ensuring clarity and relevance of the questions. For example, adjustments were made to certain prompts to better align with the participants' experiences and to address any ambiguities identified during the pilot phase. Interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data analysis involved coding the transcripts using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. This process involved a systematic approach to identifying and analysing patterns within qualitative data. The process began with familiarisation, during which I thoroughly read the transcripts to understand the content. I then generated initial codes by highlighting significant quotes relevant to the research questions. These codes were organised into broader themes through an iterative process to ensure an accurate representation of participants' experiences. Themes were subsequently reviewed against the entire dataset for coherence. To address potential bias and positionality, I revisited the data and themes multiple times and cross-referenced the findings with existing literature to validate interpretations and ensure the credibility of the analysis. Findings from the interviews and focus groups were triangulated by comparing responses from different participants and groups to identify common themes and discrepancies. This process involved cross-referencing key points raised in individual interviews with the insights from focus group discussions. By integrating multiple perspectives, this approach ensured a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how a pedagogy of care is embedded in the Writing Centre's practices, validating findings and minimising bias. This rigorous approach enhances the credibility and replicability of the findings.

## **Findings**

The findings of this paper are examined in light of the existing literature and theoretical framework. The following themes were generated: emotional reassurance and support, which emerged as critical components of student development of academic literacy practices; the role of peer support in emotional empowerment; peer learning and collaborative opportunities; a safe learning environment, supportive and encouraging environment. This discussion will delve into

how these elements articulated by the participants, align with and extend the theoretical understanding of effective pedagogical practices within writing centres.

### ***Emotional reassurance and support***

The insights from participants highlight how the writing centre extends beyond providing academic literacy support to providing emotional reassurance that nurtures students' confidence and sense of belonging. Peer tutors, Annet and Buli, explained that the Writing Centre not only develops student academic literacy competencies but also functions as a support system akin to a family, offering emotional reassurance that significantly enhances students' academic journeys. For example, Annet observed that students often possess the necessary reading and writing skills but lack confidence in their application – the Writing Centre helps them recognise and harness their potential effectively. This is what Annet said:

I feel like a lot of what we do is emotional reassurance as well. Students that I have experienced have skills; they are there, but they are not sure of themselves. They know that they have it but do not know that they use it already.

Annet's observation that students often have the necessary skills but lack confidence in using them resonates with Noddings' (2002) idea of motivational displacement, where teachers aim to empower students to realise their potential. By providing emotional reassurance and encouragement, peer tutors can help students overcome self-doubt and build confidence in their abilities. This aligns with Noddings' notion of engrossment, which involves actively listening to students and understanding their needs (Noddings, 2002; Rose & Adams, 2014).

Similarly, Buli described the Writing Centre as more than just a literacy support programme; it also functions as a family and mentoring support system. This community aspect helps students feel cared for and reassured, especially during stressful times like exams. She stated:

I would describe the centre as more than just writing and reading. Definitely more than that. There is a lot of writing and reading and the improvement of those skills but at the same, there is also the family and mentoring that comes in you see the evidence of that when we do our last session they are like 'Ooh I actually had a family here' so that at some point and I guess knowing that there is help available as a student when you know I can actually go and call on someone you know. There is a lot of writing and reading and the improvement of those skills but at the same there is also the family and mentoring that comes in. During exams, she would send little messages like 'Is everyone awake? Wear a jersey, it is cold in the exam venue; take a pencil and a second pen'.

Buli's description of the Writing Centre as a family and mentoring support system reflects Noddings' view that care manifests within relationships (Rose & Adams, 2014). The community



aspect of the Writing Centre creates a sense of belonging and support, contributing to students' emotional wellbeing and reassurance during challenging times like exams. The WhatsApp messages sent during exams by mentors like Buli demonstrate caring that goes beyond academic support to include practical and emotional guidance.

And emotionally because it encourages the students and I remember last year we had a WhatsApp group because some of the people used to be back and say OMG that session helped, I was feeling down and that.

This personalised care and attention contribute to students feeling cared for and reassured, enhancing their overall learning experience and reinforcing emotional reassurance. The anecdote about students expressing relief and gratitude after sessions showcases how immediate, informal feedback can affirm the value of the writing centre's efforts as a 'safe space' for students (Clarence, 2024). Motta and Bennet (2018) highlight the importance of care as recognition, which involves acknowledging the complexities and wisdom of students who may have experienced exclusion in traditional educational settings. By embracing strengths-based knowledge-making practices and recognising students' experiential wisdom, educators can challenge deficit misrepresentations and foster critical reflexivity (Motta & Bennet, 2018). This is highlighted in the comments peer tutors shared about what the Writing Centre in this study offers students. In addition, a peer tutor shared her experience with the students that she tutors. She explained:

So, it helps them emotionally because the truth of the matter this stuff makes you stressed (they laugh) it really does freak you out and I think once you are able to deal with that it really is helpful (Thuli).

The humorous admission that academic stress can be overwhelming, coupled with the shared relief felt after effective support sessions, highlights the dual role of the writing centre in addressing both the academic and emotional needs of students. By creating a space where students can openly discuss their anxieties and receive reassurance, the centre helps mitigate the psychological burdens associated with academic work. The emphasis on emotional reassurance and support aligns with the principles of a pedagogy of care, as advocated by bell hooks. Just as hooks emphasises the importance of creating a nurturing and supportive learning environment, the writing centre does not just focus on providing academic literacy support but also gives emotional support to students who may lack confidence in their abilities. With this acknowledgement of students' emotional needs and providing a supportive community environment, the writing centre helps students build confidence in their abilities to write effectively within a supportive environment (Lopez, 2018). This approach reflects the idea that care and empathy are essential components of effective teaching and learning, as they contribute to students' overall wellbeing and success (Rose & Adams, 2014).

### ***Role of peer support in emotional empowerment***

Related to the previous theme, the excerpts from the interviews also reflect the importance of peer support in fostering emotional empowerment within the Writing Centre. This theme highlights the role of the Writing Centre not merely as a space for academic literacy development but as a community that supports students' emotional resilience and confidence. The data highlights the interplay between emotional wellbeing and academic success, emphasising the impact of peer support and encouragement on students' educational experiences. For example, Pabi, a peer tutor, stated:

I'm very fond of helping people especially when it comes to academic things. I have strength in writing, so I wanted to use that to be able to help other people.

Pabi's desire to use her writing strengths to assist others illustrates a foundational aspect of the Writing Centre's culture and practice: a deep-seated commitment to student development. This ethos of helping students, particularly in academic contexts, nurtures a community where students can lean on each other's strengths to overcome challenges. This statement reflects an intrinsic motivation to contribute positively to the academic community, suggesting that peer tutors derive personal satisfaction and fulfilment from supporting students. This motivation is critical in creating a supportive environment where students feel valued and understood (Munje, et al. 2018). In this instance, to draw on Noddings' (1992) work, care becomes very valuable in students' learning to read and write.

The comments below about a student misunderstanding the intent of the Writing Centre's support highlight the initial emotional challenges students face. The student's initial perception of being labelled a failure and their subsequent emotional response reveals how critical it is that the Writing Centre provides academic support beyond academic literacy.

And the fact that they are called writing centres when they get their first assignment is really tough on them. The student that I was telling spoke about that because she received an e-mail so she thought that she was called there because she is a failure so that is why she was crying and all that. (Morefe)

The comment above highlights a broader issue: the stigma and emotional turmoil that can accompany academic struggles. The writing centre's role in reframing these experiences as opportunities for growth rather than judgements on ability is essential in nurturing a positive and constructive learning environment.

The theme of emotional empowerment and peer support within the Writing Centre context stresses the integral role of emotional wellbeing in academic success. The data suggest that students benefit immensely from environments that not only address their academic needs

but also provide emotional support. In encouraging a culture of peer support and leveraging the individual student's strengths, the Writing Centre helps build confidence and resilience among its participants. Moreover, the centre's approach to addressing misconceptions and reframing students' experiences from failure to growth opportunities is pivotal in dismantling the stigma associated with academic struggles. This supportive environment where students feel understood and encouraged is essential in helping them navigate higher education's emotional and psychological challenges.

### ***Peer learning and collaborative opportunities***

Chrisy and other peer tutors highlighted that the Writing Centre facilitates a supportive group setting where students can initially work together and then gradually move towards independent learning. This transition is facilitated in a way that reassures students and builds their self-confidence. The emphasis on peer learning and group work reflects the Writing Centre's commitment to collaborative learning models. These opportunities for peer engagement enhance academic skills, build emotional resilience and in doing so develop a sense of community and mutual support among students.

And it gives the opportunity to work in a group. It is a peer learning opportunity. (Chrisy)

You start with them, and there is this support group around them, and then slowly they start working independently for themselves. Just giving them that back really reassures them a lot. (Zandile)

The Writing Centre promotes peer learning communities where students and peer tutors alike share knowledge and experiences and support each other. This community aspect contributes to a sense of belonging among the participants, making them feel part of a family-like group. This is reflected in one peer tutor comments below

I think also Writing Centre because it is consistent it provides. It is a learning community of equals. Even though students are coming to meet. They are meeting a tutor who is a fellow student. There is a sense that you are in a space that is safe. To show your ignorance without feeling shame. I think that is the biggest hindrance for people. Using the writing cent that sense of shame that I don't have the skills to do that. I think centre provides an opportunity for equals to feel safe it is not a teacher but a student environment. And in fact, that we are not going to mark their work it is safe to say I can show all my ignorance, and I will not be judged. (Neo)

This approach aligns with educational theories that advocate cooperative learning, where students learn from each other and gain different perspectives through collaborative efforts. Such experiences are crucial in developing both academic and interpersonal skills, reinforcing the value

of community and shared learning in educational success. The narratives shared above about the Writing Centre's practices exemplify how emotional support can transform students' academic journeys, making these elements crucial components of effective pedagogical approaches in higher education. This theme highlights the collaborative nature of the writing centre. Students learn from each other's experiences and share their own, creating a dynamic and supportive learning environment.

### ***Peer tutors as an embodiment of the pedagogy of care***

This theme highlights how peer tutors embody a pedagogy of care by establishing supportive relationships, creating a safe learning environment and serving as relatable role models for students. Their shared experiences and approachable demeanour enable them to provide the emotional and academic support that students need to succeed. This safe space is essential for students to express their ignorance without feeling judged or ashamed, which allows them to seek help and learn from their mistakes without fear of criticism. Nobuntu, a peer tutor, emphasises the importance of providing an environment where students feel free to show their lack of knowledge, knowing they will not be penalised:

The Writing Centre provides an opportunity for equals to feel safe. It is not a teacher but a student environment. And the fact that we are not going to mark their work, it is safe to say, 'I can show all my ignorance, and I will not be judged.'

This sense of safety, reinforced by peer tutors who act as critical friends and provide both academic and emotional support within a non-threatening, student-centred environment, is highly valued by students. Students such as Thando recognise the importance of peer tutors presenting themselves as equals in the learning process:

They let you know that we are not perfect and we still learning but through the process of learning this is what we learnt. (Thando)

The data suggests that peer tutors play a crucial role in mediating the transition between students' existing knowledge and the academic culture of the university. By bridging this gap, peer tutors help students develop the confidence, skills and resilience necessary to navigate the academic demands of higher education. Students had this to say:

I think the centre is awesome especially because it is headed by young students who are still learning also. Like the way they approach it they let you know that we are not perfect and we still learning but through the process of learning this is what we learnt. (Thando)

Similarly, Nceba highlights how peer tutors' shared experiences enhance communication and trust:

I liked they use peer tutors because if it was big people (lecturer), we were not going to be able to communicate with them but because it is Z doing her 4th year, she is basing everything on her personal experience things that are happening now. (Nceba)

The responses above indicate that peer tutors, as relatable role models, create a supportive environment that helps students feel comfortable asking questions, sharing their challenges and bridging the gap between their existing knowledge and academic demands. This relationship between peer tutors and students furthers mutual respect and trust, which are essential in a safe learning space such as the Writing Centre in this study. Peer tutors' experiences as students navigating similar academic challenges make them ideal sources of inspiration and reassurance. They establish a sense of community among students, reinforcing the idea that they are not alone in their academic journeys. Particularly in higher education, where many students feel alienated or underrepresented, peer tutors – who often come from similar backgrounds and 'look and sound' like the students they assist – play an even more crucial role. Their personal experiences demonstrate that 'if they did it, so can I,' providing students with a tangible sense of hope and possibility. This relatability facilitates easier communication and interaction between students and peer tutors while encouraging students to believe that overcoming obstacles in their academic journeys is not only possible but achievable. These recurring themes emphasise the pivotal role that peer tutors play in the Writing Centre, creating a supportive environment that enhances effective learning. This aligns with the concept of a pedagogy of care, where peer tutors not only provide academic support but also serve as emotional anchors, ensuring students feel supported both intellectually and emotionally. The writing centre thus becomes a space where students can develop the confidence, skills, and resilience needed to succeed in higher education.

## Discussion

The study examined one Writing Centre in a South African university in Gauteng Province and how it embeds pedagogies of care into its practices to support first-year BEd students' development of academic literacy practices. Findings reveal that this particular Writing Centre provides academic and emotional support by embedding a pedagogy of care in its practices. This research contributes to the understanding of how writing centres can be spaces that embody the pedagogy of care as part of pedagogical practice – enabling students to develop academic literacy practices and promoting their emotional wellbeing. This approach helps to mitigate feelings of alienation and disconnection that many students, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, experience in academic settings (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Clarence, 2024; Mthabela, 2022).

The findings show that embedding a pedagogy of care within the Writing Centre's practices enables students' development of academic literacy practices. It highlighted that the emotional support provided by peer tutors is instrumental in building students' confidence and

facilitating their development of academic literacy practices. This finding is consistent with Noddings' concept of motivational displacement, where the tutor's encouragement helps students see their potential and capabilities. The peer tutors' empathetic approach creates a supportive atmosphere that allows students to overcome their anxieties and engage more fully in their academic work (Seery, et al., 2021). Furthermore, the study highlights that peer tutors play a dual role as academic mentors and emotional support systems (Pye, et al., 2016). Their ability to relate to students personally promotes a sense of belonging and community within the writing centre. This relational dynamic between tutors and students aligns with the principles of care and community advocated by theorists such as hooks and Freire, who emphasise the importance of empathetic and supportive educational environments (Dos Reis & Yu, 2018; Garcia-Melgar, et al., 2021; Seery, et al., 2021).

The concept of the writing centre as a 'safe space' is central to its role in supporting students. This study shows how the writing centre provides a non-judgemental environment where students can freely express their academic challenges and seek help (Archer, 2010). According to Archer (2010: 14) writing centres in South Africa aim to create a 'safe space' that is 'safe from judgement and grades, safe from negative language and feedback, and that is safe enough to use to explore new ideas, scholarly identities, and voice'. This safe space allows students to 'try out and develop an authorial 'voice' and 'figure out what they want to say without fearing judgement, failure or ridicule' (Archer, 2010: 14). As safe spaces, Clarence (2019) suggests that writing centres aspire to be inclusive environments that welcome diverse student populations and support their unique needs. However, it is essential to recognise that while writing centres aim to be inclusive, this requires conscious effort and hard work to create. Clarence's paper also engages with critical perspectives that challenge the notion of 'safety' within academic spaces. It acknowledges that writing centres while aiming to be inclusive, must actively work to deconstruct and challenge dominant academic norms and standards that may alienate some students. As Nichols (2017: 183) argues, while writing centres developed from progressive pedagogical movements, 'in [their] transplanted to South Africa, some of its democratising philosophy appears to have been unrealised'. This suggests that writing centres need to actively work to deconstruct dominant academic norms. This critique resonates with the work of Boquet (2002) and Clarence (2019), who argue that writing centres must strive to make these standards visible and subject to critique to fulfil their transformative potential fully.

The study highlights that in embracing a pedagogy of care, the writing centre not only supports academic literacy development but also addresses the emotional and psychological needs of students. As Archer and Richards (2011: 9) note, South African writing centres 'have a strong sense of community and of the value of the individual' which challenges these centres to be 'safe space[s], discreet from the harshness of academia'. This approach is particularly significant for first-year students who are transitioning into a new environment with new ways of being and doing. This approach aligns with Freire's (1970) and hooks' (1994) critical pedagogical frameworks, which advocate education as a means of empowerment and liberation. By prioritising care, empathy and community, the writing centre supports students' overall

development and challenges the systemic barriers that hinder their academic success. This commitment to creating spaces that are not only academically supportive but also emotionally empowering is very important.

## **Conclusion**

The study highlights the importance of integrating a pedagogy of care into academic support services and university pedagogical practices. The study revealed that the writing centre acts as a familial space where students receive emotional reassurance alongside academic support. This dual focus helps students build confidence in their abilities and fosters a sense of belonging. Such an environment encourages students to take intellectual risks and engage more deeply with their studies, ultimately enhancing their academic success. The concept of the writing centre as a 'safe space' then becomes crucial.

This approach enhances students' academic literacy and emotional wellbeing, fostering a supportive and inclusive environment critical for their overall success in higher education. The findings contribute to the understanding of how writing centres can function as transformative and 'safe' spaces that support both academic and personal growth. By adopting a dual focus on academic and emotional support, the writing centre addresses the diverse needs of students and promotes their holistic development. This approach not only aids in acquiring academic literacy practices but also supports students' confidence and sense of belonging, which are essential for their success in higher education. The study highlights the importance of creating spaces that prioritise academic development, care and emotional wellbeing, particularly for students such as the ones in this study. Writing centres can better support the overall growth of students by addressing not only the intellectual but also the emotional and social dimensions of learning. This approach recognises that academic success is deeply intertwined with personal wellbeing and social belonging.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to enhance the effectiveness of writing centres and their contribution to student success:

Peer tutors need to be trained not only in academic support techniques but also in providing emotional and social support. Training programmes should include components on active listening, empathy and creating inclusive environments. This will equip them to better understand and meet the diverse needs of students so they can provide more comprehensive support that addresses both academic and emotional needs. Ongoing professional development opportunities for peer tutors to deepen their understanding of diverse student experiences and challenges.


Continuous research into the practices and impacts of writing centres is essential. Regular evaluations can help in understanding how effectively these centres are in meeting the needs of students and can guide further improvements. Writing centres should continue to critically examine and challenge the dominant academic norms and standards that may alienate some

students. This includes creating opportunities for students to engage in discussions about these norms and explore alternative ways of expressing their academic voices.

Future research could explore the long-term impact of the pedagogy of care on students' academic and personal development. This would provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of this approach and inform ongoing improvements in writing centre practices. The study also recommends conducting further research to investigate the experiences of students who do not use writing centre services to understand the barriers they face and develop strategies to make these services more inclusive and accessible.

By implementing these recommendations, writing centres can enhance their role as transformative spaces that support both the academic and emotional wellbeing of students. This holistic approach is essential for fostering inclusive and equitable educational environments that empower all students to succeed.

### Author Biography

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