

# An Introduction to Higher Education Writing Centres

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## Introduction to AISHE Academic Practice Guides

This series is dedicated to the  
memory of our dear friend  
and colleague, Dr John Panter,  
15 April 1941 – 13 November 2015.

*Suaimhneas síoraí dá anam dílis*

The All Ireland Society for Higher Education (AISHE) is pleased to bring you a new series of booklets, each of which offers guidance on a particular theme, for practitioners in higher education. Entitled the AISHE Academic Practice Guides, the series is designed to support the development of teaching and learning in practice.

The booklets are written by practitioners, for practitioners. Based on experience and scholarship, each guide offers an overview of the particular topic to help readers situate the experiences presented in other sections of the booklet. Case studies or examples of practice from contributors' higher education experience are presented and, finally, each booklet suggests resources that the reader may find helpful in their own practice.

We wish to acknowledge the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education for supporting this publication series. We also acknowledge the work of all those colleagues, networks and communities of practice who contributed to the project through writing, providing case studies and co-ordinating contributions in order to bring the series to publication.

Moira Maguire, AISHE President  
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# An Introduction to Higher Education Writing Centres

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# Foreword

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This booklet is one of a series commissioned by the All Ireland Society for Higher Education (AISHE) and the Irish Network for the Enhancement of Writing (INEW). It is intended as a first step for colleagues who are new to the idea of a writing centre in a higher education institute. The booklet is organised into two sections.

Part 1 provides a brief overview which answers the broad question of what is a writing centre.

Part 2 presents four case studies of writing centres.

The booklet draws on another publication, *The Maynooth University Guide to Setting Up a Writing Centre*, which was developed collaboratively with the support of the Higher Education Authority Strategic Innovations Development Fund (SIDF).

We are grateful to the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education for supporting this publication. We also acknowledge the help of our AISHE colleagues, particularly Saranne Magennis and Moira Maguire, and the work of those colleagues Franziska Liebetanz, Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams, Katrin Girgensohn and Kirsten Jansen who contributed case studies to this publication.

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# Part 1 – Introduction to this booklet

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## Purpose and audience

The purpose of this booklet is to provide readers with an introduction to the concept and role of writing centres in higher education institutes. It is intended to provide an overview of the ethos and practical activities of higher education writing centres.

It is not a guide to setting up a writing centre; for a more comprehensive guide on that topic, we refer you to *The Maynooth University Guide to Setting Up a Writing Centre* (2015). This booklet is intended for any intelligent reader interested in the topic. It will be of particular interest to colleagues working/teaching in higher education in Ireland.

## Overview and provision

Internationally, there is a large writing centre community, which is global in reach and highly collaborative. The nascent Irish writing centre community reflects that collegiality with a great deal of sharing of expertise and resources across the sector.

In Ireland, dedicated writing centres in higher education institutions are a relatively recent phenomenon. However, their growth in the past decade has been significant. Currently, five of the seven Irish universities either have writing centres as a mainstream provision or in pilot mode. In the institute of technology (IoT) sector, the proportion of institutions with writing centres is smaller; however, there is a great deal of interest in the area at present, and we estimate that the provision of centres in IoTs will grow substantially in the coming years. Affiliate and private higher education providers are also contributing to the conversation on writing centres and many of them also look set to offer writing support through the writing centre model in the not too distant future. The potential national provision of writing centres in higher education institutes is something we anticipate and welcome wholeheartedly.

Why an institution might choose to set up a writing centre is a matter for themselves. However, the reasons and contributing factors as to why writing centres are currently being established nationally may include the following:

- *the much greater diversity within the student population*
- *the recognition that writing can be used not just as an output of enquiry but as a form of enquiry and learning*
- *the increasingly complex nature of the written word, where students need to navigate in multi-modal ways through a growing variety of genres*
- *the desires and influences of a range of stakeholders including employers*
- *a greater focus on graduate attributes, which frequently include statements on written communication*
- *the continuing need for good writers*
- *the acknowledgement that good writing can be learned, can be transformative and can be enjoyable.*

We do not suggest that this list is exhaustive or that all of these factors did not exist in the past. What we suggest is that the current prominence of these issues may be contributing to the growing provision of writing centres in higher education in Ireland.

## The Idea of a Writing Center

Stephen North's seminal article, 'The Idea of a Writing Center', provides a wonderful overview of the work of a writing centre. The writing centre, he notes, 'represents the marriage of what are arguably the two most powerful contemporary perspectives on teaching writing: first, that writing is most usefully viewed as a process; and second, that writing curricula need to be student-centered' (North, 1984: 438). In North's essay, a key message is that writing centres are concerned with working with writers and not solely with fixing text. North declares, 'in a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction' (North, 1984: 438). Because of this emphasis on the writer, many centres will be very clear about the fact that they are trying to help students to become better writers, particularly through the development of good writing processes. These ideas are captured in our respective writing centre missions.

In Maynooth University, we state that:

[The Maynooth University Writing Centre works collaboratively to support our students to become more competent, flexible, fluent and enthusiastic writers.](#)

In the University of Limerick (UL), the Regional Writing Centre's mission is as follows:

[The mission of the Regional Writing Centre is to engage both students and staff in a burgeoning national conversation on writing and to thereby provide all students and staff who avail of our resource with a framework for developing as effective, efficient, persuasive scholarly writers and writing mentors.](#)

For each institution and for each writing centre, the mission and values may vary. However, the focus on the writer is a very important common element and a defining quality of writing centre work.

### Who uses the centre?

A good writer is always aware of his/her audience. Similarly, the writing centre must know its audience and the audience's expectations. In higher education, some writing centres work exclusively with undergraduate students, others work with both undergraduate and postgraduate students, including PhD candidates. Most centres will work with students across a range of disciplines and at all levels. Generally, writing centres work with mainstream students, non-traditional students and students with a range of particular learning or other needs, as well as international students. Given this audience, writing centres could be said to be largely student facing. However, because higher education institutes in Ireland tend not to

have a tradition of writing programmes, where these programmes exist, they tend to have strong connections with writing centres and writing centre personnel. As a result, staff who are involved in a writing centre in Ireland may find that a good deal of their work can be staff facing. This work with staff may take two forms. Firstly, writing centre staff may work with colleagues to help them to support student writing. This may take the form of team teaching with staff and/or working with them to integrate writing into their modules/curricula. (For further information on this work please refer to this series booklet entitled *An Introduction to Writing in the Disciplines (WID) Curriculum*). In this way, writing centre staff may be instrumental in the development of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), Writing in the Disciplines (WID) or Writing- Enriched/Enhanced Curriculum (WEC). Secondly, some writing centres work directly with staff to support them in the development of their own writing; this might include facilitating writers' groups, writing for publication programmes, writers' retreats etc.

### WHAT HAPPENS IN A WRITING CENTRE?

In terms of day-to-day activity, a writing centre may offer a range of writing-related supports and services; however, the core activity of the writing centre will be one-to-one consultations between students and tutors (sometimes called 'consultants'). Generally, these one-to-one consultations are by appointment, though some institutions offer drop-in sessions. The length of

the session varies but, in Ireland, it typically lasts between 30 and 60 minutes. One-to-one writing consultations are the bread and butter of the writing centre. While there are many variables from centre to centre, the one constant, as Ryan and Zimmerelli describe in *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, are the 'students seeking help as they work through different stages of the writing process' (Ryan and Zimmerelli, 2010: 6). As a result, in terms of the pedagogy associated with tutoring in writing, it is personalised and learner-centred. It is also typically non-directional. Ryan and Zimmerelli understand writing as 'a process of discovery – of exploring, testing and refining ideas, then figuring out the most effective way to communicate those ideas to an audience' (Ryan and Zimmerelli, 2010: 7). As each writer will be at a different stage of the writing process, conversation between the writer and tutor is central to working out the direction the writing consultation will take.

### HOW A ONE-TO-ONE WORKS

The format of a one-to-one consultation will vary; nonetheless, the following is a reasonable description of what one might expect to happen in many writing centre consultations. A one-to-one will begin with informalities, followed by the tutor asking the student about his/her concerns about writing in order to find out what the student wants to work on in the session. From the students' perspective, it is a good idea to give this a little bit of thought before they arrive at the appointment.

If they are working on an essay title or another assignment, it is important that they bring that question with them and any attempts they have made to answer it. Once the student and the tutor have figured out what they will work on in the session, the student then has the tutor's undivided attention for the remainder of the one-to-one session to work through his/her concerns. A few minutes from the end of the session, the tutor will begin to wrap up the appointment; this may involve completing a 'record sheet' which records the student's initial writing concerns, what was covered in the session and any agreed action from the appointment. Both student and tutor sign off on this record.

#### TUTORS

In practical terms, the writing centre employs, on a paid or voluntary basis, writing tutors to work with students who will use the centre. Tutors may be peer tutors, undergraduates, postgraduates, and/or postdocs. It is up to each writing centre to decide on the best tutor profile for their centre. The variety notwithstanding, all writing centre tutors will themselves be excellent writers with effective writing processes. They must also be interested in helping students, be good listeners and have the capacity to empathise with fellow writers. Writing centres generally provide training for tutors and, frequently, there are continuing professional development opportunities for tutors throughout the academic year. Tutors may also be involved in researching in writing.

For further information on tutoring in the writing centre we refer you this series booklet *An Introduction to Tutoring in the Writing Centre*.

#### OTHER ACTIVITIES

Besides one-to-one appointments, a writing centre might also be involved in a host of other writing-related activity including:

- *Discipline-specific work with individual departments*
- *Referral to other services/supports on campus*
- *Access to relevant materials, writing resources and handouts*
- *Web-based learning materials, including self-diagnostic tests*
- *Interdisciplinary and collaborative workshops, for example, working with the Library, Access, Assistive Technologies, individual or groups of academic departments to facilitate relevant workshops for writers*
- *Scheduled topic-specific sessions ('hot topics')*
- *The provision of writers' retreats/writers' groups.*

The extent to which any/all of the above are offered is entirely institution dependent.

#### Other considerations

As with any other centre or support on campus, there are a number of things to be considered when an institution sets up a writing centre. These considerations include the rationale for the establishment of the centre, the recruitment and support of writing centre staff, the location of the centre, the equipment and resources required to run the centre, the centre's advertising strategy, the centre's management and funding structures, the evaluation/quality assurance strategy, the scope of the centre, and so on. The case studies in Part 2 of this booklet address some of these considerations. Other ideas around answering these questions are provided in *The Maynooth University Guide to Setting Up a Writing Centre* (2015).

#### Some last words

In 'The Idea of a Writing Center', North explains that motivation to engage with a piece of writing is what drives the student to seek out consultations. Conversation, therefore, is key to the process. He explains, 'These opportunities to talk with excited writers at the height of their engagement with their work are the lifeblood of a writing center' (North, 1984: 443). The writing centre, therefore, is a place of writing and conversations about writing. It is a place where writing is practised and celebrated.

It can certainly contribute to a culture of written expression on campus and is clear evidence of an institution's commitment to supporting its students in their development as writers. It is also usually a wonderfully collaborative and stimulating place to work and learn.

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# Part 2 – An introduction to higher education writing centres – four case studies

As we mentioned at the outset, this booklet is intended as a first step for colleagues who are new to the idea of a writing centre in a higher education institute. While there are some general trends and shared values across most centres, we appreciate that the context is different in every institution.

In this second part, we provide some models of the practical work of writing centres through four case studies, national and international. We are very grateful to our colleagues in these institutions for their contribution and assistance. We trust that this material will further help you to work out what is best for your own institution.

The case studies are from:

- *European University Viadrina, Germany*
- *University of Limerick, Ireland*
- *University of Minnesota, United States of America*
- *Coventry University, United Kingdom*

## European University Viadrina, Germany

Katrin Girgensohn  
Franziska Liebetanz

### Context – description of education/institutional setting

For more than three hundred years, from 1506 to 1811, Frankfurt (Oder) was the home of the first public university of the principality of Brandenburg. More than 55,000 young people studied there until 1811. As a result of its geographical location on the Oder River, which divides Germany and Poland, the university became a meeting ground of East and West for scholars and students from both sides of the Oder.

In a bottom-up-process, the European University Viadrina Writing Center was founded in 2007, an initiative of Katrin Girgensohn, at the time a PhD-student with a dedication for writing as well as for student-centered pedagogies (Bräuer and Girgensohn, 2012). What started as a ‘One-Woman-Show’, today is a vital center staffed by one full-time director, two half-time academic positions for coordinating peer tutors and directing the writing fellows program, a fulltime academic position for law writing and 15 peer tutors – a development that was largely possible through peer tutors’ commitment (Girgensohn, 2012). However, the center is still fundamentally dependent on external funding that currently comes mainly from a German federal program called ‘Quality Pact for Teaching’.

The center belongs to the larger unit ‘Center for Key-competences and Research-oriented Learning’, which is institutionally tied to the Vice President for Teaching. The center is open to students of all levels and from all faculties. Peer tutors have to go through an intense tutor education program, consisting of three modules (worth 12 ECTS) and a public presentation of an e-Portfolio. On successful completion of this program, they can apply to work as a peer writing tutor, a writing fellow or as a special content tutor for academic writing at the faculty of cultural and social sciences.



### Description of how the writing centre works

The Viadrina writing center follows the student-centered, process-oriented approach already pointed out in this booklet in terms of drop-in and appointed tutoring sessions, as well as writing groups, short-term-workshops (Lunchtime Lessons), writing events like the ‘Writing marathon’ or ‘Long Night against Procrastination’, and in-class-workshops or team-teaching.

A new development is the center’s writing fellows program. The program was initiated in 2013 in cooperation with the writing center in Madison-Wisconsin (USA) and the writing center at Goethe-University in Frankfurt/Main (Germany).

It is meant to tie the work of the peer tutors closer to the curriculum. Faculty from all disciplines can apply to work with our writing fellows, who are peer tutors with some working experience in the writing center and with an extra training in written peer feedback. Faculty design their courses in a way that allows for drafting and for submission of two texts during the semester. Writing fellows provide feedback on the teacher’s assignment brief in the first instance. Then they provide written feedback on students’ first drafts; after sending that feedback to the student, they consult individually with the writers to talk about the feedback and to plan the revision process. The program is very successful because it reaches out to students who might not come to the writing center voluntarily. Furthermore, it sensitizes faculty to

process-oriented writing pedagogies and it helps to make the writing center visible at the university (Kirschbaum and Liebetanz, 2015).

Our everyday work is quite multilingual. Writers, as well as peer tutors, have diverse linguistic backgrounds and usually speak several languages. For example, currently three of our peer tutors call Polish their mother tongue. 40% of the writers in our consultations are non-native writers of the German language. Furthermore, many students have to write in English these days. Thus, peer tutors often talk about texts written in foreign languages and often tutor in English or code-switch during conversations to help students express their ideas more easily and to be able to work truly collaboratively (Voigt and Girgensohn, 2015). In addition, we view the learning and our work in the center as part of our research-informed practice and as a topic of enquiry. If students agree, we collect data from consultations, e-portfolios, workshops, etc. Some students dedicate their Masters or Bachelor theses to developing knowledge grounded in this data through empirical studies. The writing center also provides colloquia for PhD students and conducts studies by deepening ongoing writing center evaluations.

Another important part of our work is the ongoing peer tutor education and professional development, with staff meetings every other week, ongoing education twice a semester and on several other occasions. Peer tutors usually have more duties than tutoring e.g. helping with public relations,

developing new ideas and materials and so on. They also participate in local and international conferences.

Similarly, we consult and collaborate with faculty from all disciplines to support them with integrating writing to learn and learning to write in their classes.

Networking is also very important for our center. We hosted the first peer writing tutor conference in German-speaking countries as well as the first European Peer Tutor Day on July 18<sup>th</sup> 2014. We are very committed to bringing writing center people together through actively participating in regional and national associations.

### Key benefits of the writing centre for students, staff and the institution

A key benefit of the writing center for the university is a slowly, but steadily rising awareness for the value of writing, for writing pedagogies and for peer learning. In Germany, writing is a traditionally important medium for student learning, but since Humboldt’s times it had never been taught explicitly (Foster, 2006; Kruse, 2006). German university teachers usually have not had experience with institutionalised writing support. Therefore, their first perception of the writing center tends to be that of a fix-it-shop for weak writers. Furthermore, students often feel overwhelmed by the demands of academic writing without explicit teacher support. Many of them

have a negative attitude towards academic writing instead of seeing its potential as a tool for self-regulated learning. We dedicate much time and effort in our attempts to challenge and change these perceptions and to create a positive image of writing. After eight years, we can see that our efforts are bearing fruit. Faculty are collaborating with us, students naturally make use of the writing center and general doubts about the value of a writing center are diminishing.

Another impact of the writing center to the Viadrina’s institutional development is the spreading of peer tutoring. Peer tutoring with well-educated and ongoing mentored students proved to be so successful at the writing center that other peer tutoring programs were modelled on it. At Viadrina, peer tutor education exists in the areas of intercultural learning, language learning, learning to learn, didactics for content tutoring and diversity awareness. Peer tutor education for e-learning peer tutors will follow soon. All peer tutor education classes are integrated into the curricula of all faculties, and students can get credits for them, which count to their degree. This acknowledges the fact that, in these classes, students gain valuable key competences for their studies as well as for their professional lives after university. Students who pass all three classes belonging to one peer tutoring track additionally receive a certificate that, together with a personal e-Portfolio, proves their employability. Thus, at the European University Viadrina, valuable prompts for students’ preparation for the job market come from the writing center.

Not to be forgotten is the fact that the writing center is a very important support structure for a university like Viadrina that wants to welcome and support international students from all over the world. With more than 200 partner universities and more than 25% non-native students, the European University Viadrina is one of the most international universities in Germany (European University Viadrina, 2015). International students, at 40%, make over-proportional use of writing consultations; they participate in internationally mixed writing groups, and we dedicate special workshops to this group. Consequently, for partner universities as well as for individual students, the existence of the writing center is important in their decision-making for studying at the German-Polish border.

Last but not least, the university profits from the national and international attention that the writing center draws to our university, due to our networking activities, public events and/or tributes we get.

#### **Contributor's reflections - inspirations and aspirations**

Results of an empirical study about writing center leadership (Girgensohn, 2013) show that successful writing center directors in the USA have internalized collaborative learning as 'a way of living with and dealing with other people' (Parnitz, 1996). We think that at the European University Viadrina's writing center, we live this way of

collaborative leadership too. Kenneth Bruffee's concept of collaborative learning is for us not only an important model for writing pedagogies, but also for every action and interaction that takes place with regard to the writing center. It is vital for us to respect and highlight peer tutors', faculties' and administrations' views, ideas and contributions. Collaborative learning is crucial for our writing center and its development. This might sound like a straightforward aspiration but, in practical terms, it is hard work.

With regard to collaboration within the writing center team, this means for example that we let peer tutors work very independently. This includes allowing them to make mistakes in their work – but helping them reflect and learn from it. This is also true vice versa, e.g. when we collect the 'lessons learned' from our tutors every semester. The lessons learned are written reflections about what went well and what would need more attention or improvement in the everyday work. Usually, our peer tutors tell us quite frankly their opinions. We think that this is possible because we care very much for building what Bruffee (1999) calls 'a community of knowledgeable peers' within the writing center on the one hand, but on the other hand, we always try to allow and to foster what Bruffee calls 'boundary discourse'. Boundary discourse is discourse that questions and problematizes the 'standard discourse' that develops in communities. To make boundary discourse happen alongside the peeriness and friendship that rules the writing center, we make

time for communication as often as possible. For example, we hold team meetings every other week, where we talk through the written reflections peer tutors write after every consultation, where tutors talk about their ongoing duties, and where we encourage discussions about concerns and worries.

With regard to collaboration outside the writing center, e.g. with faculty, collaborative learning implies a willingness to take other opinions seriously, even if we have a different point of view, for example, about how writing assignments should be designed.

Collaborative learning inside and outside the writing center is demanding, because it requires that we listen carefully, discuss in detail, learn to achieve and live with consensus and, overall, that we invest a great deal of time in every interaction. Although this sometimes seems not to be the most effective way, we are convinced that this approach has contributed to the success of our writing center.

Additionally, we like to experiment and try ideas in practice. We often tend to pioneer ideas without worrying too much about the pros and cons, because we think we can learn most by practising. This attitude might also be influenced by our experiences with learners of writing: you only learn it by doing. Sometimes we fail. For example, we did not succeed in implementing high school writing centers in the region – but we learned a lot from trying to (Herkner et al., 2012).

#### **(English) Resources we found useful (limited to 5)**

<http://writing.wisc.edu/blog/> (Blog of the writing center of Wisconsin-Madison with weekly posts on current writing center topics)

<http://www.wlnjournal.org/blog/> (Blog for connecting writing centers worldwide)

Murphy, C. and Law, J. (eds.) (1995). *Landmark essays on writing centers*. London: Routledge (Collection of classic writing center texts)

<http://wac.colostate.edu/> (Resources for writing across the curriculum, all open access)

[http://comppile.org/search/comppile\\_main\\_search.php](http://comppile.org/search/comppile_main_search.php) (inventory of publications in writing studies, including post-secondary composition, rhetoric, technical writing, ESL, and discourse analysis)

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## Regional Writing Centre, University of Limerick

Íde O’Sullivan and Lawrence Cleary

### Context – description of your education/institutional setting

The University of Limerick (UL) is located on the west coast of Ireland along the picturesque River Shannon and enjoys an unspoiled natural environment blended with state-of-the-art teaching and research facilities [...] With close to 12,000 students, including more than 2,000 international students each year, UL is a young and enterprising university with a proud record of innovation in education and scholarship. A survey of Irish students recently voted UL Ireland’s most popular university with a satisfaction rating of 85%. UL offers more than 70 undergraduate programmes across Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Education and Health Sciences, Science and Engineering and the Kemmy Business School. UL also delivers a strong postgraduate offering with more than 100 taught postgraduate programmes to Doctoral and Post-doctoral level.

(University of Limerick, 2015)

In 2006, amid growing concerns for our graduates’ articulacy in writing and an identified need for the development of a coordinated, systematic approach to the development of writing at the University of Limerick, initial seed funding allowed for the provision of workshops on different aspects of academic writing. During this time, UL’s Writing Research Forum was formed and work began on exploring possibilities of how best to support student and faculty writing. In 2007, Ireland’s first Writing Centre was formed, namely, the Shannon Consortium Regional Writing Centre. This Strategic Innovation Funded (Irish Government) funded initiative was a collaboration between the University of Limerick, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick Institute of Technology and the Institute of Technology Tralee. During this period, the two writing consultants managing the Regional Writing Centre (RWC) at UL researched and carefully planned the future of the RWC and presented this vision in a thorough academic/business plan. This vision was aligned closely with the institutional and national context (Cleary and O’Sullivan, 2015; O’Sullivan and Cleary, 2012; Cleary et al., 2009) and contributed to the University’s strategic plan. In 2010, following the initial SIF-funded project, the University of Limerick agreed to fund the Writing Centre at UL from its core budget. The RWC continues to be supported in this way and has, since its inception, continued to grow and develop.

### Description of how the writing centre works

The RWC at UL is part of the Centre for Teaching and Learning. It is one of five learning centres at the University, which all strive to support student learning and engagement and to enhance the student experience, a priority in the University's strategic plan. Equally, the RWC has an important faculty development focus to assist faculty in developing their students' writing and their own professional writing. The mission of the RWC is 'to engage both students and staff in a burgeoning national conversation on writing and to thereby provide all students and staff who avail of our resource with a framework for developing as effective, efficient, persuasive scholarly writers and writing mentors' (Regional Writing Centre, 2015).

The RWC provides the following resources for all students at UL: one-to-one peer tutoring in academic writing; generic and discipline-specific seminars and workshops on writing; online resources; writers' groups; conversations with accomplished writers in its *How I Write, Ireland* interviews; and participation in UL's *One Campus One Book* initiative. Equally, it provides opportunities for students, undergraduate and postgraduate, to work as peer tutors in the RWC, ensuring they are well trained and have access to ongoing CPD activity. The ethos of the RWC encapsulates the role of our peer tutors and, consequently, our priorities when training our tutors in the RWC:

The Regional Writing Centre at UL offers a free and friendly place for all students (undergraduate and postgraduate) to come and address any aspect of their writing. This resource is dedicated to helping students develop strategies to become more confident, critical and autonomous writers. The Writing Centre practices a non-invasive, inductive approach to writing development, utilising peer-tutors and experts that work with both students and staff respectively to identify their writing practices in order to assess and improve strategic effectiveness. The Writing Centre is also available to staff who are interested in developing their students' writing.

(Regional Writing Centre, 2015)

In addition to this direct student-facing focus, the RWC has an extremely important role to play in working with faculty to develop student writing. The writing consultants, through the developing Writing Across the Curriculum programme, work closely with faculty to integrate the development of writing into their disciplines in order to further student learning and performance. The writing consultants work to integrate writing in the disciplines by working closely with discipline/subject specialists on writing-to-learn activities, clear assignment questions, clear criteria/rubrics for grading written work, and written and spoken feedback on written work. Equally, they stand ready to collaborate with staff on the design of writing materials and workshops tailored to

students' specific disciplinary writing needs or the development of modules which assist with the development of student writing. This is a collaborative process with Writing Centre staff acting as consultants for the integration of writing into the curriculum. In these consultations, an important emphasis is placed on writing to learn.

Finally, the RWC works with faculty and researchers at UL to support them in their own professional writing development in the following ways: writing consultations; group workshops and seminars; writers' groups; PhD writers' weeks; writers' retreats; online resources; and modules on writing for publication and thesis writing offered as part of the Specialist Diploma in Teaching, Learning and Scholarship and the Certificate in Generic and Transferable Skills. Like students, our faculty participate in our *How I Write, Ireland* interviews and our *UL One Campus One Book* initiative.

### Key benefits of the writing centre for students, staff and the institution

The development of the Regional Writing Centre at UL has raised awareness of the importance of writing, and the growing involvement of so many members of the campus community in our activities has highlighted the value of writing as a learning tool. The Regional Writing Centre at UL continues to go from strength to strength. Each year, the number of faculty and students availing of our resources grows. When working with faculty

and student writers, we are always mindful of our ethos and mission. Writers are at the heart of everything that we do, and we strive to enhance their experience of writing and, in particular, to help them grow as confident, critical and autonomous writers, whilst giving each of them a framework for developing as persuasive scholarly writers and writing mentors. We have always strived to avoid a deficit model, framing our approach, instead, in terms of an academic literacies approach (Lea and Street, 1998), shifting the emphasis from the deficit, skills-focused model to a dialogic model that encourages students to explore their subject and empowers them to negotiate their discipline with greater confidence. In line with our strategic goals, the Regional Writing Centre strives to enhance student learning and engagement and to work with faculty to enhance UL's identified graduates attributes, in particular articulacy. Against this backdrop, the Writing Centre continues to be supported by central administration and is valued by the campus community.

The Writing Centre at the University of Limerick has had an extremely important role to play in changing the landscape of writing development in Ireland. At the time of its inception, there were no other writing centres in the Republic. Today, five of the seven universities have writing centres. The Writing Centre at UL has been leading innovation in writing development nationally, providing academic leadership on best practice in the area in Ireland and guiding a number of the other universities and Institutes of Technology in their initiatives.

### Contributor's reflections - inspirations and aspirations

The development of a writing centre in the Republic of Ireland was a pioneering initiative. Although the absence of other writing centres did, at first, seem daunting, it presented wonderful opportunities for the development of a centre that could be truly adapted to a particular institutional and national context. In the absence of a prescribed method for its advancement, the two writing consultants charged with the development of the Centre could draw on the models employed in the many well-established writing centres and writing programmes across the globe in order to create a centre that would best support the writing community at the University of Limerick, but would also serve as a model of good practice in the Irish higher education context. The accomplishment of this goal was facilitated in no small way by the wonderful writing development community that exists across the globe. Much has been learned from collaboration with colleagues in European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW), European Writing Centres Association (EWCA), International Writing Centres Association (IWCA), Writing Development in Higher Education (WDHE) and more recently, the newly formed Irish Network for the Enhancement of Writing (INEW). The shared experience of best practice in writing development and writing pedagogy in these conferences and subsequent publications has been instrumental in shaping the Centre presented herein.

As the RWC grows, it strives to develop its Writing Across the Curriculum programme at UL. Currently, the Centre works closely with faculty to develop writing in the disciplines; however, this infusion of writing into the curriculum is primarily at modular level. The aspiration to create a Communication/Writing Enriched Curriculum at the University of Limerick, where faculty would engage with the Writing Centre and the Centre for Teaching and Learning on a whole-programme approach to developing not just writing but communicative competence in order to fulfil our commitment to the development of UL's graduate attributes, in particular articulacy, is underway, albeit at the early stages. Again, we look across the globe for guidance on the best approach to grow and expand this programme. The pioneering work of the University of Minnesota, reported in one of the case studies in this booklet, is proving instrumental in the planned pilot stages of this project. In the interim, the Writing Centre wishes to continue to work closely with faculty on the integration of writing into their curricula in innovative ways so that students are experiencing writing to learn right across their curriculum from year one through to graduation. The importance of giving students opportunities to engage in low-stake writing-to-learn activities regularly in their classrooms in order to facilitate their learning and engagement with their discipline and to prepare them for the high-stakes writing that they must complete for assessment is central to this development. In all that we do, we strive to keep writers at the heart of our Centre.

### Resources we found useful (limited to 5)

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#### WEBSITES

Academic Phrasebank, University of Manchester: <http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/>

The WAC Clearinghouse, Colorado State University: <http://wac.colostate.edu/>

UEFAP.com Using English for Academic Purposes: A Guide for Students in Higher Education, © Andy Gillet, 2015: <http://www.uefap.com/writing/writfram.htm>

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Regional Writing Centre (2015) *About the Regional Writing Centre* [online], available: <http://www.ul.ie/rwc/about-regional-writing-centre> [accessed 11 October 2015].

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## Center for Writing, University of Minnesota – Twin Cities

Kirsten Jamsen

### Context – description of your education/institutional setting

The University of Minnesota is a large public research university, established in 1851 in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul and now made up of five coordinate campuses across the state. The Twin Cities campus is the largest, enrolling approximately 32,300 undergraduate students and 16,700 graduate and professional students. These students include 6,100 international students, from 142 countries; in addition, approximately 2,500 students study abroad annually—3rd most among U.S. universities.

Undergraduate students can choose from among 148 majors and take courses in the Colleges of Biological Sciences; Continuing Education; Design; Education and Human Development; Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences; Liberal Arts; Management; and Science and Engineering. In addition, the University of Minnesota offers 285 graduate and professional degree programs in the above colleges and in

schools of Dentistry, Law, Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Public Affairs, Public Health, Social Work, and Veterinary Medicine.

Like many other American public research universities, the University of Minnesota has a three-part mission to engage in research and creative activity, to provide educational programs and learning experiences, and to apply and extend scholarly expertise through outreach and public engagement in the state, nation and world.

### Description of how the centre for writing works

The University of Minnesota's Center for Writing works with the University's undergraduate and graduate student writers and with faculty and staff who teach with and study writing in all fields, as well as with primary and secondary educators across the state through its outreach program, the Minnesota Writing Project. Building on the histories of previously separate centers which began supporting student writers on the Twin Cities campus in the 1970s, the current Center for Writing shares the University of Minnesota's three-part of mission of research, teaching, and outreach, as revealed in the Center's mission statement:

*Through individual consultations and in partnership with academic departments, the Center for Writing has a comprehensive mission to support students and educators who practice, teach with, and research writing at the University of Minnesota, throughout the state, and around*

the world. To fulfill this mission, the Center

- *Encourages the development of writers and the use of writing as a tool for critical thinking, learning, and communicating in all fields*
- *Promotes expanded understandings of what writing is and how it works in the world*
- *Listens carefully to the ideas and perspectives of students, faculty, researchers, and academic departments*
- *Engages in collaborative learning, teaching, and research*
- *Develops and communicates current knowledge and research about writing and writing pedagogy*

The Center for Writing is committed to fostering and sustaining a culture of equity, inclusiveness, and openness, which includes respect for linguistic and disciplinary diversity. (University Minnesota, 2015)

Housed in the Department of Writing Studies in the College of Liberal Arts, the Center for Writing serves students, faculty and staff in all of the colleges and departments on the Twin Cities campus through its multiple programs. The most visible of these programs is Student Writing Support, which provides over 12,000 individual

face-to-face and online writing consultations each year to students on the Twin Cities campus, from first-year students to advanced doctoral candidates in a wide variety of academic fields. The Center's Writing Across the Curriculum program supports faculty, instructional staff and teaching assistants as they integrate writing into their courses through individual consultations, a regular series of public workshops and discussions and the pioneering Writing-Enriched Curriculum Project, which engages entire academic departments in a multi-year process of meaningfully infusing writing and writing instruction into their undergraduate curricula. The Center fulfills its research mission through the work of two programs: Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing, which both supports research into the ways in which writing can foster learning in and across the disciplines and promotes discussion throughout the University community on the study and teaching of writing, and the graduate minor in Literacy and Rhetorical Studies. The Center fulfills its mission of outreach and public engagement through the Minnesota Writing Project, the local site of the National Writing Project, committed to improving student literacy through the development of the leadership, voice and professionalism of preK–college teachers in the state of Minnesota.

These five programs are funded through multiple and various sources, including the College of Liberal Arts, the University's Office of Undergraduate Education, an endowment from the Deluxe Corporation Foundation, National

Writing Project grants funded by the United States Department of Education and external sales to local schools and districts.

### **Key benefits of the centre for writing for students, staff and the institution**

With our broad mission, multiple programs and deep commitment to writing as a tool for critical thinking, learning and communicating in all fields, our Center for Writing seeks to be, in the words of Stephen North, a visible center of consciousness about writing at the University of Minnesota. The Center for Writing staff members, which include both professional educators and university students, use a collaborative method of individual and small group consultancy, which honors the knowledge and experience our clients bring into the Center and positions ourselves as interested readers and fellow writers and educators. As an elective resource, our Center welcomes all students, faculty, and staff, guiding them to our appropriate programs or, if we cannot meet their needs, connecting them with other resources.

Students at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities benefit from individualized writing consultations in Student Writing Support. In these face-to-face and online collaborative consultations, our highly trained and interested writing consultants help students develop productive writing habits and revision strategies. Students can bring in any writing projects they are working on, whether academic or not, since our belief

is that the best learning happens when writers are working on projects they care about (and therefore we discourage instructors from requiring their students visit our Center). In addition to writing consultations, we offer a variety of videos, printable handouts and links to useful online resources on our Center’s website.

Both students using Student Writing Support and instructors using our Writing Across the Curriculum program benefit from how our web resources and individual consultations respond to their immediate needs and offer pragmatic strategies and approaches for writing and teaching with writing. Even with this focus on practical strategies, we also recognize the complex nature of writing as a social act and the continual development of writing abilities. Thus, our writing and teaching consultations encourage ongoing inquiry and reflection about how writing works in different contexts and for different audiences. We encourage writers’ authorship and authority by helping them both experiment with new processes and explore the effects of their rhetorical choices. With educators, we encourage them to reflect on their own experiences as writers and make explicit their tacit assumptions and expectations about writing in their fields. These kinds of investigations into disciplinary writing expectations have been very beneficial for the academic departments participating in our Writing-Enriched Curriculum project, helping faculty redesign their curriculum and writing assignments to help students in their majors develop the writing abilities they value.

Much like our work with university faculty, the Center’s Minnesota Writing Project supports the professional development of primary, secondary and college teachers through workshops, seminars and its signature program, the Invitational Summer Institute, now in its 25th year. This month-long intensive Institute embodies the National Writing Project philosophy of ‘teachers teaching teachers’ by engaging educators in teaching demonstrations, writing groups and literacy research study groups.

Because we welcome students and instructors from a variety of academic disciplines and work with educators from primary school to higher education, we are a uniquely multidisciplinary and multilevel space within the institution—one where there is opportunity for inquiry, dialogue and debate between students, educators and scholars of writing.

### **Contributor’s reflections - inspirations and aspirations**

The success of the University of Minnesota Center for Writing owes much to our participation in the larger communities of writing center professionals who have generously shared their practices and perspectives with us. These communities include the Writing Center Professionals of Minnesota, the E(arly Education)-12 Writing Centers Collective, the Big Ten Writing Centers, the Midwest Writing Centers Association, the National Writing Project and the International Writing Centers Association.

Collaborating with writing center colleagues across the globe—both formally via professional conferences and meetings and informally through phone calls and visits—has been a source of constant inspiration for our Center and a tool for self-reflection about our beliefs, values and priorities.

One of our core beliefs is that what we think of as *writing*—and how we engage in the practice of writing—continues to evolve, particularly as new technologies are developed. We embrace the idea of becoming what David Sheridan and others call a “multiliteracy center,” working with words, images, and sounds, or as our Writing-Enriched Curriculum project defines writing: ‘an articulation of thinking, an act of choosing among an array of modes or forms, only some of which involve words’ (<http://wec.umn.edu/>).

Yet, at its heart, our work is about *writers*, the human beings who seek to discover and articulate their thoughts through writing. I hope our Center continues to keep writers at the center, making administrative and programmatic decisions that best support writers in the hard work of making and communicating meaning. To that end, we have developed special annual programs that explicitly nurture writers: our Minnesota Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute, whose daily writing prompts, active writing groups and celebratory sharing of writing helps teachers at all levels become writers themselves; our Dissertation Writing Retreat, which provides graduate

dissertation writers with community, structure and support; and our Faculty Writing Hunkers, which bring together faculty from multiple disciplines and ranks to build a supportive campus culture for scholarly research and writing.

We strive to balance our desire to help writers meet the expectations and requirements they face in the university with our wish to help them become the writers they want to be and to speak with their own voices. This balancing act has become more profound in this era of increased globalization, migration and access to higher education. We feel that writing centers have an important role to play in challenging monolingualism and exclusionary practices in order to create an inclusive environment where diversity, multilingualism and global Englishes are respected and appreciated.

Our growth and improvement as a Center depends on the growth and development of the people who make up our staff, so professional and leadership development of staff are high priorities. Many of our student staff take on leadership roles in the Center and then go on to take leadership roles in education and other spheres. And our professional staff have learned much from and been guided by the perspectives of students—both staff and clients—to improve our policies and systems to make our Center more welcoming and accessible. We are not done learning how to be a writing center—just as we are not done learning how to write or teach writing—but we are fully engaged in the process of this work.

### Resources we found useful (limited to 5)

#### WEBSITES

International Writing Centers Association website (<http://writingcenters.org/>), with special attention to IWCA Summer Institute as a tool for developing writing center vision and leadership: <http://writingcenters.org/events-2/iwca-summer-institute/>

National Writing Project website (<http://www.nwp.org>), with special attention to the Writing Center resources page: <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/3584>

WAC Clearinghouse: <http://wac.colostate.edu/>

University of Minnesota website (<http://writing.umn.edu/home/mission.html>)

#### ARTICLES/BOOKS

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## Coventry University

Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams

### Context – description of your education/ institutional setting

Coventry University is a public university located in Coventry, England. Originating as Coventry College of Design in 1843, it became the Lanchester Polytechnic in the 1970s and was renamed Coventry Polytechnic in the 1980s. The institution achieved university status, as Coventry University, in 1992. In recent years the Coventry University Group has grown to include links with a number of overseas partner institutions and has set up the Coventry University London Campus (CULC) and the Coventry University College (CUC). Student numbers are increasing and more than 30,000 students are enrolled in 2015/16.

Long respected for its widening participation initiatives and focus on teaching, since 2010 'growth and continuous improvement in teaching and learning, research and internationalisation has seen the University rise rapidly' in UK higher education rankings and league tables (Coventry

University, 2015: 5). Coventry has been rated 'University of the Year for Student Experience' (Coventry University, 2015: 5) and in September 2015 was ranked 'Modern University of the Year' for an unprecedented third year running, scoring highly in terms of student satisfaction. In 2015, it was ranked in the top two UK universities for teaching quality (The Times, 2015). In 2014, Coventry was named in the list of the fifty best cities in the world to be a student (Wakefield, 2014). The University also achieved a 'world leading' research rating in the national Research Excellence Framework 2014 (Coventry University, 2015: 5).

### Description of how the writing centre works at Coventry University

The UK's first centrally-funded university writing centre, the Centre for Academic Writing (CAW), was created at Coventry University as a result of over eight years of conversations between staff across the institution about students' interest in writing support (Williams, 2004). Staff working with non-native speakers of English were being asked by native English speakers for access to writing development (Wilkinson, 2004), dyslexia tutors were receiving requests for writing support from non-dyslexic students (Williams, 2004) and students were approaching Subject Librarians for guidance on structuring their writing assignments, argumentation and referencing (Rock, 2004). A proposal to set up a writing centre was submitted to the University by a committee chaired by the



University Librarian (Noon, 2003), and CAW was established as a ‘strategic priority’ in 2004 (Coventry University, 2003; Deane and Ganobcsik-Williams, 2012).

CAW offers individualised and small-group tutorials during which students can discuss their assignment briefs with an Academic Writing Tutor and work on their argumentation and writing skills. To be available to a wide range of students, CAW is open weekdays throughout the calendar year, until eight o’clock Monday through Thursday evenings, and on Saturdays from nine to one o’clock. Tutorials are offered face-to-face in 50-minute and 20-minute timeslots, as well as online via the Coventry Online Writing Lab (COWL). CAW’s online writing tutorials take place asynchronously through Moodle and in real time through Skype. CAW’s team of professional Academic Writing Tutors also deliver optional undergraduate and postgraduate workshops on topics such as ‘The Writing Process’ and ‘Writing a Literature Review’, and create handouts and online guidance for use in writing tutorials and self-directed study (see, for example, CAW’s series of Coventry University Harvard Reference Style videos at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjJNN8PDYwc> and paraphrasing resources at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXkBeax\\_ddM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXkBeax_ddM)). Alongside the work of the Academic Writing Tutors, CAW’s team of Academic Writing lecturers teach credit-bearing Academic Writing modules to students from a variety of degree programmes as part of the University’s Add+vantage scheme.

In 2015, CAW opened a new writing development space, the ‘Academic Writing Studio’. This refurbishment of an existing teaching room into a ‘collaborative classroom’ provides an updated and more dynamic teaching space and maximises the use of facilities by enabling more writing tutorials to take place simultaneously in one room. Writing development activities include a ‘Drop in and Write’ open studio for students to write with an Academic Writing Tutor available at the point of need and improved facilities for ‘dissertation writing’ sessions for final-year students.

From the outset, CAW has engaged in staff development as well as its work with student writers. Initially, staff development focused on CAW lecturers offering advice to academics in teaching writing in the disciplines (WID). Since 2007, however, CAW’s lecturing team has run scholarly writing retreats for staff and postgraduate research students and one of the first events to take place in the new Academic Writing Studio was a writing retreat for research staff. The CAW lecturers work closely with the Research Office at Coventry University to provide writing development for postgraduate researchers and teach an MA module on writing for scholarly publication.

### **Key benefits of the writing centre for students, staff and the institution**

In May 2015, the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education reported that the ‘Centre for Academic Writing is regarded very positively by students as a source of guidance’ and identified CAW’s contribution ‘to the student learning experience’ as a feature of good practice at Coventry University (QAA, 2015: 26, 2). CAW is of benefit to students because it provides substantially more—and more equitable—writing support than the ad-hoc ‘pockets of provision’ that existed prior to the setting up of a centralised university writing centre (Rock, 2004). As well as offering writing development provision (in the form of writing tutorials, workshops, and some WID-informed teaching) to students throughout their degree study, CAW targets writing support at specific points in the student journey. This support includes introductory writing process and referencing sessions that are applicable to first-year students, final-year dissertation-writing sessions and Academic Writing Add+vantage modules that are available to help students practice and improve their writing skills during each year of undergraduate study. CAW also offers postgraduate writing workshops and its postgraduate writing for publication module.

A key benefit for staff of the institution’s writing centre approach is the knowledge that there is a hub for ensuring writing development. Academics can contact the CAW lecturers to discuss best practices for teaching writing in their disciplinary

classes, to seek advice on writing assignment briefs and to request information on a variety of writing development topics. Staff can also book individual consultations and writing retreats to work on their own scholarly writing and publications with mentorship from writing specialists.

The University benefits in more than one way from having a writing centre. Writing development, underpinned by research and expertise in Academic Writing pedagogy, is available to undergraduates, postgraduates, researchers, academics, and professional services staff. In addition, CAW’s outreach work includes the delivery of ‘taster’ sessions on writing at university for local schools and sixth-form students, and in terms of impact, CAW’s open-access *Coventry University Harvard Reference Style Guide and Glossary* (Deane, 2006) and YouTube videos on referencing are publicly-available to support student writers across the sector.

### **Reflections - inspirations and aspirations**

CAW has developed steadily since 2004, and in doing so has adhered to its core mission of helping students to become skilled academic writers and of mentoring staff to achieve their utmost as teachers and authors of scholarly writing (CAW, 2010). The ongoing aim of those working at the writing centre is to help to build and inspire a University community that views writing development as an important intellectual endeavour.

Considerations for continued development of the writing centre include planning scalable services and a return to investing in and prioritising ‘Writing in the Disciplines’ and ‘Writing Across the Curriculum’ strategies for supporting and cascading the teaching of writing. There is also a strong aspiration for CAW to contribute strategically and effectively to writing-for-publication support for postgraduate research students and for early- and mid-career researchers.

Finally, a future goal would be to encourage and help to grow a portfolio of writing development initiatives and services within the Faculties, Schools, subsidiaries and partner institutions that make up our University group. The challenges of such a project would promise to bring even greater flexibility and innovation to the concept of writing centre work at this institution.

#### Resources we have found useful (limited to 5)

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Williams, S. (2004) Writing Centre Interview [Interview by L Ganobcsik-Williams] Coventry University, 5 May 2004.

# About the authors/contributors

An Introduction to  
Higher Education Writing Centres

**Alison Farrell** is Teaching Development Officer in the Centre for Teaching and Learning, Maynooth University where she is also Head of the University's Writing Centre. She has been directly involved in education since 1994 and has worked in a wide range of pedagogical areas at all levels. She is a founding member and current co-chair of the Irish Network for the Enhancement of Writing (INEW). She is also the founder of the Summer Writing Institute For Teachers (SWIFT). Her research interests include composition and enquiry, literacy, academic writing and collaboration. She holds a PhD in English.

**Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams** is Head of the Centre for Academic Writing, Coventry University, England. She has served on the Executive Board of the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW) for a number of years and is also a past member of the Board of the European Writing Centers Association. She is Editor of the *Journal of Academic Writing*, and her publications include the co-edited book *Writing Programs Worldwide: Profiles of Academic Writing in Many Places* (2012) and *Teaching Academic Writing in UK Higher Education: Theories, Practices and Models* (2006).

**Katrin Girgensohn** founded the writing center at European University Viadrina in 2007 and helped to raise a European culture of academic writing as EATAW-board member as well as chair of the European Writing Centers Association from 2010-2014. At present, she is the Director of the *Center for Key Competences and Research-oriented Learning* at Viadrina. Her research interests include writing center research, peer tutoring and organizational development in higher education. She is currently working on a publication about the institutionalization and leadership of writing centers.

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Her current research focuses on adapting academic writing development to particular national contexts and on enhancing peer tutoring in academic writing. Other areas of interest include second language acquisition research and the development of new literacies.

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