A Writing Centre in India – A Case Study of the Writing Centre at Parvatibai Chowgule College of Arts and Science, Goa, India

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Abstract

Academic writing, as a method of writing student assignments and research papers has been introduced in college education in India in the past few years. Institutional writing support for students is novice concept in India and not much has been documented in this regard. This article explores the case of the Writing Centre at the Parvatibai Chowgule College, Goa, India, that aims to
introduce academic writing throughout all its offered courses and therefore develop the writing skills of its students. Further, this article reviews the literature on writing centre evolution across the globe, in Asia, and discusses the issues and concerns of academic writing amongst students in the college. The article also describes the efforts taken by the advisors at the centre to increase the footfalls and promote the services offered by the Writing Centre.

**Keywords:** Writing Centre, Academic Writing, Writing Centres in Asia, Writing Centres in India

**Introduction**

Academic writing is a well-known term in the educational discourses across Americas, Europe and even South Asia. However, in India, academic writing is not propagated as a method of writing student essays and work assignments in the educational discourse, it is however developing as a skill used by content writing companies. These organizations operate as outsourced help and work-from-home jobs that cater to students studying in foreign universities and institutions, who find it difficult to meet the academic standards set for the written work in international universities.

However, this facet of academic writing and writing across curriculum is undergoing a process of change, as many educational institutions are now developing courses and course content, which matches and meets international standards of education. It has therefore become imperative, to develop an academic form of writing and evaluating student essays and submissions. Thaiss and Zawacki (2006, p4) broadly defined ‘Academic Writing’ as ‘any writing that fulfills a purpose of education in a college or university. They further defined it as professional writing that trained ‘academics’ (teachers and researchers), do for publications read and conferences attended by other academics’ (p 4). Institutional support for writing, besides, classroom instructions have emerged to understand and develop this methodical and rhetoric structure of writing. Writing Center/Centre, also known as writing labs are a direct result of this institutional writing support. This case explores the development of The Writing Centre at Parvatibai Chowgule College of Arts and Science, (PCC), Goa, India.

**Evolution of the Writing Centers – a look at History**

In order to make an in-depth study on the evolution of institutional support for writing in India, the evolution of this kind of support across the world needs to be studied. Carino (1995) in his article ‘Early Writing Centers: Toward a History’ charted out the growth of the writing centers. He states that these early forms of writing support developed in the early 1900s, under the laboratory method, which involved a classroom intervention, from the teachers and instructors, in the writing process of the students. They were mainly viewed as remedial fix-it shops to improve composition, grammar and rhetoric skills.
Carino (1995) further stated that these classroom techniques developed into individual ‘writing labs’ which were a recognizable part of the higher education system by 1940’s. These labs had now transitioned into places, not only for students with special needs in composition but to all the students from various departments. With the passing of decades, the evolution and development of these writing centers continued and the emphasis on the work and methodology developed. From the formal laboratories, which completely depended on the teachers, they have evolved as warm, student-friendly places where guides, tutors and counselors work with students to improve the student’s written work. Besides, with the advent of open admissions large number of students from other countries, as well as first generation college goers began to secure admissions, these writing centers, or labs were seen as a haven for remedial writing work. Carino (1995) concluded that, like the current writing centers across the globe, the earlier ones also faced an identity crisis.

How does one view a writing centre in an academic institution? Are they looked upon as informal, open to all students yet a place where serious work is undertaken? They are, nevertheless, a part of the academic discourse, which help students with more than just grammar and composition like their ancestors. It would be safe to say that the Writing Centre discussed in this case, is currently viewed as a remedial centre to fix and improve a student’s writing.

Writing Centers in Asia
In retrospect, one can assume that with the growing liberalization in the education, the exchange of ideas between Western and Asian countries, led to development of writing centers in Asia. Tan (2011) investigated this development of writing centers in Asia. Her study found some evidence, which suggested writing labs and writing support institutions for developing academic writing were effected in Asian countries like Taiwan, Hong Kong and Korea by individuals who taught professional and academic courses in these countries. She, however said that, an extensive and exhaustive search of an online list of universities in Thailand and Philippines and an exhaustive check through the full list of public universities in Malaysia did not return any hit based on the search of the term ‘writing center’ or its British spelling. Nevertheless, she argues that, there has to be an institutional support for writing in the form of online writing labs or writing centers. This cannot be ruled out, as most Asian institutes have sent faculty members to pursue doctoral studies in North America, and, it is possible that they can bring back the ideas of institutional support for writing (Tan, 2011).

In addition to this, Chang (2013) studied the development of various models of writing center in Taiwan and stated that the Taiwanese writing centers were inspired from their western counterparts and began developing in the early 21st century. They function on similar lines as those in the U.S. – which is to improve writing abilities. However, in addition, since they are Taiwanese, some of them offer bilingual-writing support in English and Chinese. Chang (2013) further stated that some of these centers also offer language support, tutoring and one-on-one interactions and operate under the control of the language center. Chang (2013)
concludes that like other Asian countries, Taiwan, too has realized the need to start institutional support for writing and the importance of academic writing and therefore has witnessed the growth of a few writing centers. Nonetheless, these writing centers are not restricted to writing assistance only, but also provide language assistance. This feature of writing centers in Asia, where English could be a second language in some countries, seems to have become a common feature.

Japan has played a dominant role in the development of writing centers in Asia. Johnston, Yoshida and Cornwell (2009), during the Japan Association of Language Training (JALT) 2009 Conference, highlighted the development of Writing Centers in Japan. It was mentioned that the concept of utilizing writing centers in the education sector, started somewhere around 2004 in Japan. Five writing centers from Japan, two from South Korea and one centre from India (current case) were a part of this symposium in 2009. It should however be noted that, though this concept is only a decade old in Japan, within a few years of their introduction, universities in South East Asia, felt a need to have a brainstorming session to develop and evaluate and exchange ideas on functioning of these writing centers. This shows the growing awareness about institutional writing support and writing centers in Asia. Johnston et al. (2009) concluded that though these centers were considered as a successful addition to the educational discourse, like their inspirations from the US and Western world, faced similar challenges – How to get students to use the Center? How to shun the image of being a proofreading and a remedial center? These questions continue to linger on at the Writing Centre PCC.

The Writing Centre at Parvatibai Chowgule College of Arts and Science

It appears that the concept of institutional writing support is now, no longer a novice concept. Not even in India. One of the participants of the JALT 2009 Conference was The Writing Centre from Parvatibai Chowgule College of Arts and Science (PCC), Margao, Goa, India. This college was founded in June 1962. At present, it has 21 undergraduate departments, 6 postgraduate departments for Arts and Science and 3 Ph.D programmes.

Exchange of ideas and thoughts between the University of Ottawa and Parvatibai Chowgule College of Arts and Science was one of the primary reasons, for the conception of the Writing Centre. The centre was inaugurated in the year 2008 and is currently in its 8th year of operation. It has, since then, concentrated on improving written work of the students through one-to-one sessions with trained advisors. Through the years, faculties at the college have felt that students were not able to write academically or write across curriculum. Therefore, the Writing Centre’s role in improving students’ writing across curriculum as well as teaching them academic writing was thought to be a significant one. A similar thought was mentioned by Gill (1996), in her article “Another Look at WAC and the Writing Center” and Wallace (1988) in “The Writing Center's Role in the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Program”

The Writing Centre’s (PCC) major work areas are developing academic writing and rhetoric, structuring and presentation, grammar and spelling. Peer tutoring
is not heavily relied upon at the centre, primarily because; academic writing pedagogy is currently in its nascent stages in the college. In this scenario, it was felt that having peers to tutor students could hamper the quality of tutoring sessions and therefore trained advisors and dedicated faculty members conduct one – to – one sessions with the students where personal theories of their writing are addressed. Though some departments at the college have experimented with peer tutoring, it has not been widely propagated. Primary reason for avoiding peer tutoring is the lack of sufficiently senior tutors in the college. As the age and the academic gap between the senior most and the junior students is about 2 years, it was difficult to develop and adequately train peer tutors. Besides, another reason to avoid peer tutoring was resistance to advice given by peers or student tutors, who are considered as friends and not experts, as previously observed by Waring (2005) while researching peer tutoring.

Since its inception, the centre’s major work has been one- to-one interactions through sessions with students, where the basics of general academic writing was introduced to them. The core problem area for students was grammar, sentence structuring and presentation. Though the language of instruction for education in the state of Goa, in most schools is English, students who study in languages other than English – especially regional languages like Konkani, Hindi and Marathi are also predominant in the college. As mentioned earlier, students securing admissions to First Year of college, find the concepts of writing rhetorically and adapting academic forms of writing, an entirely new concept, and therefore quite challenging. This is because; primary schools and high schools do not follow academic writing concepts. Writing problems, like those of students with English as a Second Language (ESL) background are common for such students. The issues faced by some of these students are also similar to those faced by ‘international students’ who are trying to understand and develop rhetorical patterns of writing as explained by Devet, Burr, Chan, Farrar and Ogawa (1997).

Faculties from both the streams – Arts and Science, identified and understood the need for The Writing Centre. Though footfalls of students increased over the years, the centre continued to be grappled with concerns about getting students to understand the importance of academic writing and developing writing across curriculum. Besides, like its counterparts in Asian countries, the centre had to continuously maintain that it is not a proofreading facility (Johnston et al., 2009).Since the academic syllabus of the University at Goa relied more on end of term exams, written assignments and papers on certain subjects were introduced as a part of the coursework. However, the College realized that to meet international standards, it was necessary to develop a syllabus, which gave the students a chance to widen their thoughts and ideas on a subject and one, which was more conducive to research.

With this deliberation, the college chose to take the path of ‘autonomy’. Under ‘autonomy’, the management and the teachers could design a course curriculum that was different from the guidelines prescribed by Goa University, which governed the syllabus of study at PCC. The college was granted autonomy in the year of 2014. This new development in course content and design brought forward the need to
design an academic writing course. Along with it came the need to promote the Writing Centre.

Promotion of the effectiveness of the Writing Centre at Parvatibai Chowgule College of Arts and Science

A lack of students from either one of the departments of Arts and Science time and again, led the advisors to question the teachers’ and faculty members’ view on the effectiveness of the Writing Centre. Individual meetings with fifteen teachers from different departments helped the advisors gain an insight on the views of teachers on student writing. It was found that there was a lack of uniformity amongst the teachers on the various issues about academic writing and its application to student work. That academic writing is the backbone of effective education, was a thought that senior faculty members wished to percolate down to every instructor and faculty member, to create an efficient writing culture. The advisors at the Writing Centre (PCC) have regularly met teachers of the departments and faculties to promote the services of the writing centre. These meetings were also undertaken to ensure that faculty members are aware of the services offered by the Writing Centre, a recommendation which was made by Bishop in her 1990 article ‘Bring Writers to the Center: Some Survey Results, Surmises, and Suggestions’.

In the past years, most assessments in the college were mainly conducted based on a written exam at the end of the semester. Neither academic writing nor any of its concepts feature as important pre-requisites to student’s written work. The advisors at the Writing Centre initiated a study to compare the written work of those students who had undergone a session with the advisors, with the work of those who had not.

Comparative study of assignments to promote the effective of the Writing Centre

Advisors collected 50 assignments as random samples and analyzed them for their structure, presentation, rhetoric and grammar. Of these assignments, 34% had been through the one – to one sessions at the writing centre and were found to be well structured. 85% of the assignments that had not been through the one to one sessions were found to have poorly written abstracts, body sub-topics and conclusions. A significant difference between the assignments that had undergone a session at the Writing Centre, and those that had not, was evident. The results showed referencing and sourcing was challenging for most students, which further highlighted the lack of awareness in the area of academic writing. However, the results of the analysis pointed out that though some students had not visited the Centre for the sample assignments, they had done so in the past, for previous written work, and difference in the writing was visible – especially in their ability to write abstracts, conclusions and bibliography. It was observed, that though the instructors and faculty members had given a brief outline to the student before they assigned them the essay question; there were glaring omissions in the essays that had not been verified by the advisors. For
instance, most essays and assignments lacked in-text citations. Therefore they had an incorrect and sometimes, incomplete bibliography.

The comparative analysis pointed out the differences in the assignments and propelled the argument on required visits. Though the writing center visits are voluntary at the college, there is an increasing debate on establishing a policy of required visits. Clark, in 1985, more than two decades ago, in her article ‘Leading the Horse: The Writing Center and Required Visits’ had asserted on required visits to improve not only writing but also to develop a practice of visiting the writing centre from time and again. Further, she asserted that these required visits could develop a positive attitude towards the writing centre’s strategy (Clark, 1985, p. 34). Adding to this, however, Gordon (2008), cited in Rendleman (2013), found in her study conducted in 2008, that though most students did not favor the mandatory visits to the Writing Centre, but they also opined that most will either definitely return of ‘maybe’ return to the Writing centre as they have positively benefitted from the visit (Gordon, 2008, p.156-157). Babcock and Thonus also cited in Rendleman (2013), documented similar results, more recently, in 2012. It showed that along with higher grades, there was also an increase in intrinsic motivation amongst students post the required visit.

In the current case at Parvatibai Chowgule College, mandatory visits for classes up to the 4th semester are under consideration based on the results of the analysis. Hopefully, these visits, will result in percolating the essence of academic writing and improved writing skills through the various departments, and create a ‘law of the land’ image about academic writing in the college. Rather than being viewed as what ought to be done, it seems that this is a recommendation that has to be undertaken to improve writing skills at the college. Along with this, a 4 credit compulsory course on Academic Writing is under formulation, which will further promote the subject amongst first year students.

**Conclusion**
The Writing Centre at PCC is at a cusp. This cusp consists of students coping with issues of writing styles, students dealing with ESL concerns, and students who have a basic understanding of academic writing strategies with a need to further develop stronger rhetorical skills. Required visits along with promotion of the Writing Centre services through faculty and instructors seem to be the most viable solution. The question to ask then is “How many visits constitute ‘regular visits?” The answer is simple “As many as the student needs”. This means that once the required visits have been undertaken, the student should be encouraged to visit more often by both, advisors and the individual faculty. The essence of victory for the Writing Centre at PCC would be a student who returns to the Writing Centre even after the required visits.

The autonomy to conduct courses and with it, the academic writing course will further strengthen the process of permeating this form of writing amongst students. With this, the Writing Centre aims to develop batches of students, who are not only new to the concepts of academic writing, but also know the international conventions and strategies of academic writing. The Writing Centre at the Parvatibai Chowgule
College of Arts and Science hopes that, when these students venture out to foreign universities to pursue their further education, they are, not only aware of the concepts of academic writing and avoiding plagiarism, but are also equipped with the writing skills to do so. That they are aware of the benefits of the Writing Centre and that they are not tempted to turn to the so called ‘content writing companies’ promising them a ‘plagiarism free academic dissertation’ for an amount which could cost them their academic future.

Works Cited