



Exploring the Workplace Culture of an Eastern Ontario University's Writing Center: A Quasi-Ethnographic Study

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The tutors or consultants working in university writing centers help students with their general assignments and academic writing. Very little attention has been paid to ethnographic-based research in this domain. This quasi-ethnographic paper aimed to fill this research gap by exploring: (a) the culture within which the writing consultants working for the writing services of an Eastern Ontario university provided their services to students, and (b) the discourse produced within that culture. **Method:** An ethnographic research design was adopted for this study. The sample comprised a diverse group of 11 consultants (four females and seven males). The data

were collected through participant observations and semi-structured interviews. **Findings:** Employing social constructionism, activity, and social theory of genre, this research found that (a) collaboration, commitment, friendship, respect, and patience characterized the culture within which the writing consultants working for the university examined provided their services to students, and (b) academic and non-academic discourses were produced within that culture. **Implications:** The study is expected to benefit those who teach academic writing as it (a) illustrates the knowledge, ideas, customs, patterns of behavior, and beliefs that distinguish the group examined, and (b) identifies the nature of the discourse produced by that group.

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Introduction

Academic Writing Centers in universities aim to achieve high standards of written academic English by offering students support and guidance in their assignments and general writing tasks (Malenczyk, 2023) (Martinez, 2020). These Writing Centers in institutions are staffed by trained tutors who provide individual instruction to students by strengthening their curricular writing needs (Milán, 2021; Sabo et al., 2023). These tutors engage with students in shaping ideas and generating a thorough process culminating in accomplishing all their writing needs, like literature reviews, research papers, and critical and descriptive essays (Ullman et al., 2020). These tutors are entrusted with the task of catering to students' all types of writing needs outside regular classes (Waller, 2002), primarily to develop their writing skills rather than just improving grammar or vocabulary (Bibb, 2012; Emran et al., 2024). During the last two decades, research studies have frequently called for more empirical evidence to validate the practices of writing centers (Driscoll & Perdue, 2012; Gillespie, 2001; Lemke, 2005).

Uysal and Selvi (2021) questioned the students' satisfaction with the service quality offered by these writing centers and felt the need to enhance tutor specializations. Olson et al. (2021), too, drew attention to the problems at the writing centers of universities in Thailand and argued that the centers did not always run smoothly. Savarese (2020) called for additional class time and financial support for the tutors. Bromley et al. (2015) found that writing centers are seen only as centers to improve grades rather than centers for enhancing writing skills, thus hinting at the limited role of tutors. Missakian et al. (2016) discovered that writing centers were more engaged in checking grammar and punctuation, which are detrimental factors to students' motivation and performance in improving writing. In addition, Cheatle and Bullerjahn (2015) found that not all teachers in these centers encouraged learners to join the writing center because of their heterogeneous scientific backgrounds.

The aforementioned studies are evidence of the role of tutors or consultants working in writing centers to help students with their assignments in general and academic writing in particular, but very little attention has been paid to ethnographic-based research (Falconer, 2013; Oslund, 2011). As Smart (2006) puts it, researchers aim to learn less about how members of a social group view and function within their private and self-constructed corner of the earth. The purpose of this quasi-ethnographic study is to explore the culture within which the writing consultants working for the writing services (WS) of an Eastern Ontario University provide their services to students and the discourse produced within that culture. The significance of this study lies not only in filling the gap identified but also in its contribution to theory and practice in academic writing. Besides benefiting those who teach academic writing, the study would also benefit the institution studied here as it aims to explore the actualities of the academic writing center and provide valuable insights to its administrators, tutors, and consultants. To achieve this objective, the following two research questions were developed:

1. What characterizes the culture within which the writing consultants working for the WS at Eastern Ontario University provide students with consultations on their assignments?
2. What is the nature of the discourse produced within that culture – the culture where students receive consultations on their assignments?

Lillis (2008) sets forth three different levels of ethnography as prerequisites for research about writing in academic settings: (a) ethnography as a method orients researchers' attention towards writers' perspectives about their production; (b) ethnography as a methodology enables researchers to discover the dynamic and complex meanings embedded within texts and also enables them to explore the practices constituted in and by academic writing; and (c) ethnography as profound theorizing challenges the ontological gap between text and context.

This paper claims that collaboration, commitment, respect, friendship, and patience characterize the culture within which the writing consultants, working for the WS of an Eastern Ontario University, provide their services to students and that academic and non-academic discourses are produced within that culture. As an ethnographic-based study, the present study can be situated within the literature relating to exploring what Smart (2006) referred to as the private and self-constructed world within which the writing consultants, working for writing centers at universities, provide services to students.

Literature Review

Writing centers, Academic writing, and ethnography

In older days, writing centers were seen as places that served to make better authors and not better texts (North, 1984), "grammar and drill center[s], the fix-it shop[s], the first aid station[s]" (p. 437). This hints at a misconception that writing centers were mere editing services, not places that aimed to help authors develop their writing abilities and skills as writers. Bruffee (1984) viewed writing tutors or consultants as peers who were supposed to use conversation and collaboration to help students develop as writers. These centers rarely talk about academic writing, nor do the consultants or tutors working in these centers develop a clear and thorough understanding of the services that writing centers should provide to students (Milán, 2021); Ramirez-Espinola (2022); (Uysal et al., 2021).

Kaufhold and Yencken (2021) studied the contribution of academic writing centers in multilingual settings and found that they are integrated with higher education language policy in universities. Retrospectively, Carter (McCarthy, 1987) described academic writing as "coherent prose with a thesis and sub-points, unified paragraphs, and explicitly connected sentences" (p. 244). Faigley et al. (2007) indicated that regardless of the academic writing task assigned to students, several features characterized academic writing, such as an introduction, thesis, well-structured body, argumentative style, citation, and intertextuality (which becomes plagiarism if cited improperly), readable word choice, proper grammar, and finally proper sentence and paragraph construction. Keeping this definition of academic writing in mind, it is easy to understand why tutors adopted the collaborative teaching and mentoring style (Maffetone & McCabe, 2020) and accepted the institutional ethnographic approach related to individual cultural and social experiences (Nicolas, 2023).

Fetterman (2019) argued that ethnographic definitions encompass either a materialist or a conceptual view, and ethnographers must examine both perspectives to provide an account of a culture or subculture. From an ideational perspective, culture refers to knowledge, ideas, and beliefs that distinguish a social group, such as students or teachers (Smith, 2006). From a materialist perspective, an educational ethnography relates to

students' observable way of life, customs, and patterns of behavior (Murphy & Margolis, 1995; O'Reilly, 2009; Wargo et al., 2021; Zilber & Zanoni, 2022). This quasi-ethnographic study is concerned with the ideational and materialist views of culture. (Goodall, 1994) defined this type of culture as the sum that includes values, routines, and meanings that shape an experience. Everett and Johnston (2012) described it as: "A system of shared knowledge that is socially transmitted over time among organizational members" (p. 523).

Writing programs and writing centers design a kind of institutional ethnography (Malenczyk, 2023; Martinez, 2020), which culminates into a narrative discourse. Lemke (2005) defined this kind of discourse as a social activity of creating meanings using symbolic systems, like language, in a particular setting. Wodak (2014) described it as a social practice that suggested a dialectical relationship between a discursive event and what frames it, like "situation(s), institution(s), and social structure(s)" (p. 5). Wodak and Van Leeuwen (1999) suggested that discourses should be thought of as being compromised of different types of participants, behaviors, objectives, values, and locations.

Previous Studies

While much attention has been given to non-ethnographic-based research such as Oslund (2011), in which the author, drawing on Foucault's argument about the connection between individuals and the institutions for which they work, argues that forms like the United Auto Workers Position Audit are not impartial as the working-class employees who fill in the said form do not share the tacit literacy understandings of the intellectual-class employees who evaluate the form. Another pertinent example of non-ethnographic writings is Driscoll et al. (2012) study in which they systematically analyzed 270 articles published between 1980 and 2009 in *The Writing Center Journal (WCJ)* to determine if the examined articles were replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD) articles. Haswell (2005) describes RAD scholarship as "a best effort inquiry into the actualities of a situation" (p. 201): inquiry that is systematized (in sampling, executing, and analyzing) to be replicated, precisely circumscribed to be expanded, and factually supported to be proved. Driscoll et al. (2012) found that only 5.5% of the 270 articles examined were RAD. However, missing from these results was a clear indication of whether some of the articles they examined were ethnographic-based articles.

However, Falconer (2013) emphasized the need to conduct ethnographic research in the context of writing. In an empirical study, Falconer (2013) explored the effectiveness of the pre-service training sessions planned by a mid-sized Canadian university for preparing new tutors before they start providing services to university students on their academic writing. A clear and thorough understanding of the culture within which tutors (or writing consultants) provide services to students was beyond the remit of Falconer's ethnographic-based study but fell within the remit of this study. Falconer focused on the culture within which tutors were prepared to provide consultations to students on their university assignments. Informed by the Chicago School of Pragmatism, Falconer considered the cultural and historical factors in his ethnography, which was beyond the scope of my study. For Falconer, previous studies have yet to evaluate the influence of the cultural and historical elements on the cultural practices of the academic writing centers.

Miley (2017), in an ethnographic study, examined the writing center at her institution from a different angle. Miley investigated how her writing center's work coordinated and

influenced the other tasks done within the institution. This is consistent with the idea of 'ruling relations' of [Smith \(2006\)](#), who considered institutional ethnography a practice and a step forward in writing. [LaFrance and Nicolas \(2012\)](#) viewed institutional ethnography as a critical ethnography that did not seek to understand the culture of the institution but instead asked researchers to focus on individuals and their experiences "as uniquely responsive to the social organization of the institution" (p. 134). Within the scope, [Martinez \(2020\)](#) attempted a treatise on institutional ethnography; [Wargo et al. \(2021\)](#) defined the parameters of academic writing; and [Zilber et al. \(2022\)](#) designed templates of ethnographic writing as guidelines for the writing centers.

Theoretical Framework

A combined theoretical framework was employed to orient the analysis of this study. This included the social theory of genre, social constructionism, and activity theory. The social theory of genre helped in identifying the genres created by the group under study, the knowledge generated by these genres, and the purposes of these genres; the social constructionism theory helped in exploring the inner soul of the culture within which such genres were created; and the activity theory helped in discovering who was doing what, why, and how.

In general, genre studies is an area of situated discourse analysis ([Bhatia, 2004](#); [Hengst, 2020](#); [Swales, 2014](#)), which centers on the following aspects of discourse: discourse organization, textualization of lexicogrammar, and contextualization of discourse. According to [Zhou \(2012\)](#), genre theory generally considers genres as communicative events with mutually identifiable communicative purposes in a specified community, regardless of the different approaches and orientations. Genres are "highly structured and conventionalized constructs which have been conventionally identified in terms of moves" (p. 324). For [Swales \(1998\)](#), these communicative purposes are associated with rhetorical moves. [Dudley-Evans and John \(He, 2006\)](#) defined a 'move' as a unit that pertains to both the producer's purpose and the content that s/he likes to communicate.

In an interview on genre as a social action conducted by the Composition Forum Journal, [Caroline Miller](#), the anthropologist, said that 'genre as a social action' was a description exactly like the description of 'genre as regulated improvisational strategies' ([Dryer, 2015](#)). She added in the same interview that she was reluctant to use 'is' instead of 'as' (in the phrase 'as a social action') because the type of questions and inquiry a researcher is pursuing determine which genre description to use. [Miller \(2015\)](#) considers a sound definition of genre must focus on the social action it is employed to achieve, not on the form and substance of the discourse. This is because the genre is understood as (a) a typified rhetorical reaction to a repeated rhetorical situation, (b) a pragmatic act, (c) an important social action, and (d) mediation between the producer's purpose and the receiver's social need. [Smart \(1997\)](#) perceives it as a comprehensive rhetorical strategy created collectively by community members to generate knowledge essential to their aims.

The second theory employed here is social constructionism. [Debra Journet](#), a professor at the University of Louisville, argued that the essence of social constructionism or the social construction of reality lies in the assertion that knowledge is made, not found, and groups of people make it, not individuals—it is socially constructed ([Smart, 1997](#)). In addition, [McEwan \(2003\)](#) consistently argued that social constructionism assumes that all knowledge, including science and history, is strongly imbued with the biases and

preconceptions of the individual who has that knowledge and the society within which the individual lives so that knowledge is made rather than discovered. Social constructionism is not only an assertion; it cuts across several disciplines and includes a broad range of assumptions Smart (1997). Elaborating on the main concepts and assumptions of social constructionism, Bruffee (1986) pointed out that social constructionism assumes that realities, such as knowledge, information, texts, etc., are constructs or linguistic entities produced by communities and social groups. Sullivan (1995) consistently indicated that social constructionism considers knowledge, information, texts, etc., as a product of consensus obtained through communal discourse.

Activity theory is the third theory employed in this study. Historically, activity theory originates in the writings of Kant and Hegel, in the writings of Marx and Engels, and the cultural-historical psychology of Vygotsky, Leont'ev, and Luria. However, in modern times, it is becoming an international and multidisciplinary theory (Engeström, 1999). Hasan and Kazlauskas (2014) claim that activity theory is "all about who is doing what, why, and how" (p. 9), and it provides researchers with the lens to help them understand human activities. Several researchers have employed activity theory to investigate discourse in professional organizations. From this point of view, all types of genres, like the ones produced by the university under study here, are seen as "one part of a local, historically and culturally situated sphere of collaborative endeavor in which thinking, knowing, and learning are distributed across several people" (Smart, 2003) to achieve the defined goals of the organization or workplace.

Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized an ethnographic research design, which ideally helps describe or represent in words what researchers live through while studying the culture that constitutes the very matrix within which individuals formulate their ideas and carry out their actions (Goodall, 1994). According to Watson-Gegeo (1988), an ethnographic work examines the behavior of people "in naturally occurring, ongoing settings, with a focus on the cultural interpretation of behavior" (p.576) and is predicated upon the following six principles: (a) ethnographic research, in all disciplines, focuses on the behavior of the social groups being studied; (b) it is holistic in the sense that all aspects of a culture or behavior should be described; (c) it is powerfully informed (guided) by theory; (d) besides being emic research, ethnographic work should be etically extended to make cross-cultural comparisons; (e) based on the previous principle, ethnographic research is comparative by nature, and finally (f) it assumes that language is acquired through social interaction and it is a conveyor of knowledge.

Flewitt (2011) indicated that early ethnographers tended to stay in the research community for years. Green and Bloome (2004) proposed three possible ways for ethnographers to be immersed in the field: (a) doing ethnography, (b) adopting an ethnographic approach, and (c) using ethnographic methods and techniques during fieldwork. Doing ethnography is predicated on a broad, deep, long-term study of a social or a cultural group conducted within an anthropological framing, and adopting an ethnographic approach is predicated on a more focused investigation of some aspects of a group's everyday life and actions. The current study adopted an ethnographic approach.

Sampling

The research took place at the writing services of an Eastern Ontario University. Using purposive sampling, a diverse group of 11 consultants (four females and seven males) was selected—all given fictitious names. The participants' backgrounds included subjects like women and gender studies, public policy, political science, and applied linguistics and discourse studies.

Data Collection Methods

The data for this study was collected through observations and interviews with consultants. The writing consultants' behaviors, practices, and routines that shaped their experience and facilitated interaction between them and the students seeking their services were closely observed. There were five consultation sessions; each involved a consultant and a student, and they all signed the required consent forms. During the time the five participants were observed, one consultant was excused from work for health reasons, but he signed the consent form to attend the interview. The maximum time allowed for each consultation session was 40 minutes, while some sessions lasted 50 minutes.

In addition to observations, e-mail interviews were conducted with six consultants and the writing services coordinator. When required, follow-up phone interviews with some consultants were also conducted—usually to clarify things or seek more details. A few documents on relevant genres were also collected for analysis. Although [Hammersley \(2006\)](#) highlighted employing multiple data collection methods as a feature of ethnographic work, others argued that interviews are culturally sufficient and appropriate forms of ethnographic studies depending on the research questions ([Hockey & Forsey, 2020](#)). This is not meant to prove the superiority of interviews over observations in ethnographies but to validate interview-based ethnographies.

Data Analysis

[Smart \(1997\)](#) pointed out that producing an ethnographic account requires the following two levels of activity: (a) collecting a particular type of data about the community or group being investigated and (b) interpreting the data collected. For Smart, this data type refers to the participants' observations and demonstration of events occurring within the examined context, and for van Maanen ([Smart, 1997](#)), this type of data analysis is called participants' "first-order constructs." Smart demonstrated that interpreting the data collected refers to identifying the important themes in the participants' first-order constructs, coding them together, and then using them to produce a textual representation of the group's life. Finally, due to the limited time this quasi-ethnographic study was conducted, it was difficult to reach large-scale conclusions on this significant topic. Extending large-scale and more valid conclusions requires longer hours of observation and longer flexible conversational interviews.

Findings

The first research question (RQ1) developed for this study relates to what characterizes the culture within which the participants (writing consultants) function. Answering this question required two things: (a) identifying who is doing what, why, and how (activities

and routine) and (b) customs, patterns of behavior, ideas, beliefs, and values that characterize the culture within which the writing consultants (participants) function. These two things can be achieved with the help of both the activity and social constructionism theories. That is to say, identifying all these crucial factors can be achieved with the help of the activity theory which provides researchers with a lens for understanding groups' activities, the purpose behind their activities and how they can be carried out (Hasan et al., 2014); and with the help of the social constructionism theory which provides researchers with lens for uncovering the inner soul of the culture within which activities are carried out (Bruffee, 1986; Smart, 1997; Sullivan, 1995).

Activities and Routine

Throwing light on the activities of the coordinator of the writing center under study, it was revealed that she had an extended background in working for the writing services and in coaching and preparing consultants to work for the center. She summarized her duties as follows: (a) providing training and support to all writing consultants in the said center – consultants are usually graduate teaching assistants studying at the university under study; (b) designing and facilitating discipline-specific writing workshops for faculty in their classes; (c) dealing with writing-related academic integrity offenses committed by the university students; and finally (d) doing some fund-raising work to secure more funding to the writing center.

As for the consultants' activities and duties, their overarching responsibility was to help students (on a one-on-one basis) create meaningful and authentic knowledge and develop their abilities and skills as writers. That is to say, their job is three-fold: review, discuss, and explain. They review students' work, discuss it with students, and explain to students how to write correctly when necessary. What the consultants discuss with students includes things like thesis statements, argumentative style, word choice, grammar and punctuation, cohesion, cohesiveness, citation and referencing, and overall structure. This clearly shows what the consultants do, how they do it, and the purpose behind it. As Hasan et al. (2014) put it, these three things are a basis for the activity theory.

A careful examination of the data collected shows that all participants have somehow established routines with some differences. For example, every consultant gets the 'identification badge' from the help desk before s/he goes to the room allocated for providing services to students, where consultants are supposed to log into the staff portal (a portal available on the university site) through which they can see the students online waiting for their service. Consultants are supposed to do nine hours of service a week: some complete their hours in two days and some in three days. The writing consultants may do more than one shift daily, but a single shift should not last for more than three hours (they take a break and then return to work). Once they have done their hours for that day, they log off and submit the 'badge' to the help desk again. Some consultants use their laptops to log into the system, and some use university laptops.

Interestingly, one of the consultants revealed that if no students were online waiting for service, she worked on her thesis or listened to music with an eye on the screen. Sometimes, she added, she engages in friendly conversations with other consultants. When a student appears, she selects the student and then hits 'call' – students are assigned to consultants once the 'call' button has been hit. It is important to mention here that this activity is what

all consultants who participated in this study performed when a student appeared online. Once a student has been assigned, the concerned consultant heads towards the hall and gets the student. A consultant usually calls the student's name, introduces herself/himself to the student, welcomes the student, and shakes hands in some situations (some students may not extend their hands for personal reasons). It is also interesting to mention here that when a consultant gets her/his students from the hall (where students usually register their names and wait for their turns and where the help desk is stationed), s/he asks students about how well they are and exchanges some pleasantries with them.

Once both the consultant and the student are seated at the same table in the service room, the consultant hits the 'start' button (once this button has been hit, the system starts counting the minutes spent with the student) and then asks the student about her/his field of study (discipline) and the level of the course for which the student was assigned to write. Usually, after they adjourn the sessions, consultants write a note about what they did in each session, which generally lasts for forty minutes maximum unless the student is satisfied and their needs are met. In their notes on students, consultants mention the student's name, field of study, and course level before submitting the note online. Following asking the students about their field of study and the course level, the consultants ask for the instructions given to students by their instructors on how to do the assignment. If a student did not have the assignment instructions or was not given a written outline, s/he would be asked to explain to the consultant what he should do. In connection to this, one consultant indicated that some students came to the center for help to understand the instructions for their assignments. Similarly, other consultants also mentioned that they asked their students to brief them on their work at the beginning of the session and explain if the students had specific questions.

Ideas, Beliefs, and Values

Friedman et al. (2013) define the term value as: "What a person or [a] group of people consider important in life" (p. 349). A close consideration of the data collected for this study shows that several values, including collaboration, patience, commitment, friendship, and respect, characterized the culture within which the writing consultants held their sessions and function. The following account sheds light on these values and how they characterize the culture within which the consultants function.

A pertinent example of collaboration is Zachary's (consultant) session with Hannah (student). Hannah (a student) asked Zachary (a consultant) to help split her assignment into two parts and then paginated each part differently. Although consultants are not supposed to provide service on such issues, Zachary did his best to help her, but he could not—he was not much acquainted with Mac laptops. The next day, it was observed that Zachary asked Fiona (another consultant) for help, but she could not help, so he went to the assistant coordinator's (Lara) office next door. The assistant coordinator came to the writing services room and tried her best but failed to help the student solve that issue. Zachary, Fiona, and Lara reflected how collaborative they were. Collaboration characterized not only the relationship among consultants but also between consultants and their students. Students never hesitated to explain to consultants what they did and what they were supposed to do. They always explained the discipline-specific technical terms that consultants were not acquainted with.

Besides collaboration among consultants, between consultants and students, and between the administrative staff (Lara), and both consultants and students, Zachary showed his patience and firm commitment to helping Hannah. There was another scenario in which Rose (consultant) helped a student who had hearing and speaking disabilities. She wrote for him on paper to make him understand what she was talking about, and the student also did. It was also observed that some writing consultants showed patience while waiting after their shifts finished for their students to make the changes they suggested on their assignments.

The value of commitment was profoundly evident in the consultants' care for helping the students develop their writing skills and abilities. They were very respectful and committed to their jobs. This was observed in all five sessions and echoed what Bruffee (1984) suggested: that consultants should function as peers who are supposed to use conversation and collaboration to help students develop as writers. It is also consistent with what North (1984) highlighted that writing consultants should serve to make better authors and not better texts. Both statements here mean that writing consultants should do their job as readers, not editors. This is precisely what was observed and examined and how they socially produced and constructed knowledge with the help of both theories' lenses: activity theory and social constructionism.

These observations explain what Journet Smart (2003) claimed: that the essence of social constructionism or the social construction of reality lies in the assertion that knowledge is made (not found) and groups of people make it, not individuals. Consistent with this, McEwan (2003) argument that all knowledge, including science and history, is strongly imbued with the individual's preconceptions and the culture within which s/he lives and functions. It is worth mentioning here that Watson-Gegeo (1988) highlighted the point that ethnographers examine the behavior of people "in naturally occurring, ongoing settings, with a focus on the cultural interpretation of behavior" (576). Similarly, Fredrick talked about a sense of responsibility, saying that some (not too many) students tried to push him to fix their papers. Still, he explained to them that consultants are supposed to do more than fix things; they are supposed to explain, discuss, and teach students how to fix things. In this regard, Fiona said that she does her best to have students involved in the discussion about their writing. Consistently, North (1984) made it clear that the writing centers should not be seen as "grammar and drill center[s], the fix-it shop[s], the first aid station[s]" (p. 437).

The value of friendship was exhibited when Rose exhibited a sense of humor when asked what characterizes the culture within which they (as consultants) function. Rose said she exchanged 'general pleasantries' with students as a friendly gesture. Rose's sense of humor reflects the friendly relationship that connects consultants and their clients (students). Not to forget the friendly relationship that also connects consultants here. Likewise, the value of respect was also observed among the consultants. The consultant participants, Fiona, Rose, and Harry praised their students' work and showed respect for the work done by students. Doing so boosts students' confidence and falls in harmony with what North (1984) highlighted: writing consultants should serve to make better writers, not better texts. With the help of the activity theory lens, consultants can be viewed here as 'confidence boosters.' What they did can be understood with the help of activity and social constructionism theories as a sense of respect and dedication to developing students' abilities and skills.

The Discourse Produced

The second research question (RQ 2) developed for this study pertained to the nature of the discourse produced within the private and self-constructed corner where consultants provided their service to students. Answering this question requires identifying the different genres that work as 'conveyor belts' for the discourse produced by students with the help of their consultants. So, doing this can be achieved with the help of the social theory of genre. Regardless of genre theory's different approaches and orientations, it generally looks at genres as communicative events with mutually identifiable communicative purposes in a specified community (Zhou, 2012). Based on the data collected, it was evident that consultants usually received undergraduate and graduate students from a host of disciplines such as psychology, sociology, economics, business, law, history, language studies, women's and gender studies, communication and media studies, music and culture, public affairs and policy management, international affairs, social work, human rights, philosophy, political sciences, cognitive sciences, and health sciences. The types of assignments (genres) that students usually seek service for included literature reviews, research papers, abstracts, proposals, essays (critical and descriptive), reflections, précis, infographics, media analyses, commentaries on workshops, and written plans for events.

A careful consideration of the types of assignments for which students seek service shows that not all are academic. For example, genres such as infographics, media analyses, commentaries on workshops, and written event plans are non-academic. Some consultants indicated that the non-academic discourse accounts for 5% at maximum. To elaborate, such genres may not have the features of academic genres highlighted by Faigley et al. (2007), such as a thesis, argumentative style, citation and intertextuality, and readable word choice. Contrary to this, these features characterize academic genres, such as literature reviews, research papers, abstracts, proposals, reflections, and critical and descriptive essays. Besides, the purpose and rhetorical moves of workplace genres (non-academic ones) and those produced for academic purposes are not the same. A germane example is when students seek service for their media analyses, in which they were assigned to analyze things such as the colors used in an advertisement, the main message, and the targeted audience. Another pertinent example is when communication and media studies students are asked to analyze a news item. What they care for in such situations is what Inman and Beale (1994) called the 'five Ws and H': what happened, who are the people involved, where, when, why, and how that happened. The purpose of doing so is not to help such students improve their academic writing but to help them master workplace writing, as they may work for the media in the future and not for academic settings. Beautifully, Dias et al. (1999) described the difference between academic writing and workplace writing as two different worlds.

Conclusion

Two research questions guided this study. The first question related to what characterized the culture within which the writing consultants, working for the WS at an Eastern Ontario University, provided students with consultations on their assignments. The second research question pertained to the nature of the discourse produced within that culture. The findings obtained from this study revealed that collaboration, commitment, respect, friendship, and patience characterized the culture within which the

writing consultants functioned and that both academic and non-academic discourses were produced within that culture. Genres such as infographics, media analyses, commentaries on workshops, and written plans for events work as a 'conveyor belt' for non-academic discourse, and genres such as literature reviews, research papers, abstracts, proposals, reflections, and critical and descriptive essays work as another 'conveyor belt' for the academic discourse. It is worth mentioning here that the results obtained from this study, with the help of both the social constructionism and activity theories, enhance the argument made by Journet (Smart, 1997) that knowledge is made, not found, and groups of people make it, not individuals.

Although extending comprehensive and thorough answers to the questions developed for this study is difficult in quasi-ethnographic research, it is assumed that the findings obtained here are significant as they will enrich academic writing literature that has not broadly embraced ethnography (Falconer, 2013) and will also contribute to both theory and practice in the field. The study would benefit those who teach academic writing as it (a) identified the nature of the discourse produced within the examined, as Smart (2006) puts it, self-constructed corner of the earth and (b) illustrated how collaborative, committed, patient, friendly, and respectful the diverse group of writing consultants examined were while providing their service to students. Furthermore, the study would also benefit the writing center examined, particularly the university it belongs to, as it explored the actualities of academic writing there. Lastly, having said that it is difficult to extend large-scale conclusions in this limited (in terms of time) quasi-ethnographic study, further research is recommended and required.

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