



Writing Centre Consultations in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Perspectives from tutors at a selected University of Technology in KZN

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Abstract

As the landscape of Higher Education evolves, the role of Writing Centres (WC) has become increasingly critical in supporting students' academic development. In particular, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into the writing process has the potential to revolutionise the way Writing Centre consultations are conducted. AI-powered writing assistance tools have emerged as a valuable resource for students, providing instant feedback, suggestions, and even automated essay generation. This shift has significant implications for Writing Centres, as their role may need to adapt to address the changing needs of student writers. Utilising the social constructivism theory, this study explored the experiences and perspectives of Writing Centres tutors in consulting with students in the age of AI, focusing on the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on Writing Centre consultations at a selected University of Technology (UoT) in KZN, South Africa. Through qualitative reflections from Writing Centre tutors this study explored how AI tools, including grammar checkers, plagiarism detectors, and content generation software, are impacting the Writing Centre consultation process; the challenges and opportunities they present; and their implications for writing support in a higher education context. Emerging themes from these reflections highlighted the advantages and challenges brought about by AI into the Writing Centre environment. The findings revealed that on the one hand, AI enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of feedback and allows the tutor to focus on higher order concerns during consultations. On the other hand, various challenges were underscored relating to the over-reliance on AI, the loss of voice, maintaining personalised interactions, as well as ethical considerations that require careful consideration. The findings therefore highlight the importance of balancing the use of AI with traditional tutoring methods, ensuring that the human element remains central to writing support. The study recommends that Writing Centre tutors should stay abreast of the latest developments and to engage in ongoing professional development to understand the implications of these technological advancements.

Keywords: Writing Centre, Artificial Intelligence, consultations, tutors, students, UoT

1 Introduction

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) has significantly transformed various educational practices, including Writing Centre consultations. Writing centres, as integral components of academic support, are not immune to this technological upheaval. AI tools, such as grammar checkers and content generators, offer new avenues for assisting students in developing their writing skills [14]. The integration of AI in this setting requires a review of the ways in which these technological resources impact the nature of tutor-student relationships and the general effectiveness of writing assistance.

This research therefore focuses on the experiences and perspectives of Writing Centre tutors at a selected University of Technology (UoT) in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), examining the challenges and opportunities brought about by AI and its impact on writing consultations. Through written tutor reflections, this study explored how AI has impacted the role of Writing Centre tutors, the nature of student consultations, and the overall dynamics of the Writing Centre. Emerging themes from these reflections highlighted the advantages and challenges brought about by AI into the Writing Centre environment.

2 Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Higher Education

In the rapidly evolving landscape of academia, the role of Writing Centres has become increasingly crucial as institutions grapple with the challenges and opportunities presented by the rise of AI. Writing Centres, traditionally tasked with supporting students in developing their academic writing skills, now face the complex task of navigating the integration of AI-powered tools and their potential impact on the writing process [11]. One key aspect of this dynamic is the growing prevalence of AI-powered writing assistance tools, which have the potential to revolutionise traditional approaches to writing instruction [13]. These AI-based platforms offer automated feedback on various elements of writing, including organisation, coherence, grammar, and vocabulary [12].

Students are increasingly familiar with these various AI tools that enhance their learning experiences, including language translation tools like Google Translate, virtual

assistants like Siri and Alexa, and writing tools like Grammarly, which offers grammar, syntax, and style suggestions [14]. They also utilise online resources like Coursera, and edX, which leverage AI to personalise learning, as well as AI-powered tutoring platforms like TutorMe and Mathway, which provide instant feedback. Additionally, students employ speech-to-text and text-to-speech tools like Temi and NaturalReader, and AI-driven learning management systems like Canvas, Blackboard, and Moodle. Moreover, they utilise Quillbot, a paraphraser app that helps with writing and plagiarism checks, and ChatGPT, a chatbot that generates human-like text responses [12]. These AI tools have become an integral part of the student experience, enabling them to work smarter, learn more efficiently, and develop essential skills for the future [17]. Consequently, rather than utilising a single AI tool, students are utilising a range of them, and they employ the ones that best suit their goals.

While the implementation of such tools has shown promising results in enhancing student learning and improving the efficiency of writing instruction [16], Writing Centre tutors must carefully consider the potential challenges and ensure that AI is used in a way that supports and enhances, rather than undermines, the development of students' writing skills.

3 The importance of Writing Centre consultations in the age of AI

The integration of AI in education has been extensively studied [6] [22] [18] [23] [8], with particular emphasis on its applications in writing instruction. AI tools like Grammarly, Hemingway Editor, and OpenAI's GPT-4 have become prevalent in assisting students with writing tasks as these tools offer benefits such as instant feedback, error correction, and suggestions for improvement. However, concerns about over-reliance on technology, the potential loss of critical thinking skills [5], and the impersonal nature of AI feedback have also been raised. [14] concur by stating that despite AI offering efficiency and customised writing, there are concerns regarding students overly relying on it in addition to concerns regarding its accuracy. Hence, researchers suggest the emphasis on human-to-human interaction [17]. Providing human feedback and guidance is a key aspect of the Writing Centre's services as AI tools lack the empathy of human tutors who can offer personalised support and constructive

feedback. This helps students identify areas for improvement and develop their writing skills in a supportive environment.

Writing Centres play a role in supporting students with their writing because the consultations at Writing Centres typically involve personalised discussions between tutors and students aiming to improve writing skills through dialogue and collegial support [15] [7] [2]. The advancement of AI powered tools that can generate high quality text raises concerns about the future of writing pedagogy [10]. Consequently, it is important to explore how these technological advancements impact the interactions, between tutors and students as the effectiveness of writing support provided in Writing Centres.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of social constructivism perceives learning as a dynamic, social and collaborative process between learners and instructors. In this social process different tools such as books and technology are perceived as aids which assist learning [3]. The main principle of the social constructivist theory undergirding this study postulates that the actors are the ones who are responsible for shaping the learning; consequently, there is a need for constant critical inquiry from those who are guiding the learning [9]. Therefore, in the context where AI is having a profound effect on the process of learning how to write effectively for academia, experienced peers in learning, such as Writing Centre tutors, should be able to guide students by critically reflecting on the impact of AI in learning how to write for academic purposes. However, prudence needs to be taken since the constructivist theory encourages the learner's agency in the learning process. Rather than the tutor instructing the student, the tutor should strike a balance that will let the student use AI in a way that upholds academic integrity and will ultimately be beneficial to the students writing.

4 Methods and analysis

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative research methodology, utilising written reflections from five (5) Writing Centre tutors at the selected UoT. [20] state that the purpose of qualitative research is to gain understanding of people's ideas and feelings. These insights can then be used to build survey instruments for use in quantitative studies or serve as the basis for stand-alone qualitative studies. This study is well-suited for the qualitative research design as it seeks to explore the perceptions and experiences of Writing Centre tutors conducting consultations in the age of AI. To record the individualised experiences of Writing Centre tutors, this study also used an interpretivist paradigm. According to [1], interpretivism aims to comprehend the experiences of the people under investigation, including their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in their natural surroundings. The tutors were required to write a detailed 4-page reflective report based on the topic “Writing Centre consultations in the age of artificial intelligence.” The tutors were asked to write on several subtopics including their experiences with students who come to the Writing Centre having done their assignments using AI, how they have incorporated AI into their Writing Centre consultations, as well as the challenges and advantages they have noted pertaining to AI and Writing Centre consultations.

The reflections provided in-depth insights into the tutors' experiences and perceptions of Writing Centre consultations in the age of AI. The reflections were analysed thematically to identify common themes and patterns related to the impact of AI on writing consultations. According to [4], thematic analysis is a method for identifying, evaluating, arranging, characterising, and reporting on themes found in a data collection. Research participants were identified using pseudonyms for the purpose of confidentiality. The following section provides an analysis of the tutor reflections.

5 Findings and Discussion

Thematic analysis of the reflections resulted in several themes emerging from the reflections. The study found that AI has both positive and negative impact on Writing Centre consultations. Notably the most dominant themes emerging from the reflection

encompassed the dimensions of AI in Writing Centre consultations and two key themes relating to the negative aspects of AI in Writing Centre consultations.

Theme 1: Enhanced feedback and efficiency

AI offers real-time feedback on grammar, punctuation and vocabulary. This helps students improve their language skills as they receive immediate feedback and guidance on their writings. AI also assists the tutor to understand the assignment sheet faster and better.

As stated by Tutor 5: *“The Writing Centre has many students coming from a wide array of disciplines. Sometimes students come with work where they would need to explain discipline specific concepts to me so that I can assist them more effectively. But the problem is that they may not be able to explain to me in a way where I can get a full picture. By using AI to search for the discipline specific terms I gain an understanding of the lecturer’s expectations in the assignment question. This puts me in a better position to assist the student in line with the assignment question expectations.”*

Theme 2: A focus on higher order concerns

Another positive main theme that emerged focused in the tutor student interaction. This theme had components that enhanced the collaborative learning experience as well as elements which inhibited learning. From the positive aspect tutors reflected that the use of AI in the sessions allowed them to focus on the higher order concerns. Therefore, lower order writing issues such as grammar do not dominate the consultation but rather more substantive issues such as clearly outlining the purpose, guiding the reader through the text and argumentative reasoning. As stated by Tutor 2:

“AI tools have really boosted our services by giving us instant grammar and syntax checks. This allows us as tutors to focus on the higher order needs such as analysis, argument, organisation and reasoning.”

However, the tutors also highlighted that at times students who had relied on AI were overconfident in the session that their work was correct. These results are consistent with [10] who postulate that AI tools were found to build confidence amongst writers. However, in the context of this study, this can prove to be a barrier in learning because students tend to think that what the AI has generated does not require further refinement, which is not the case.

Theme 3: The loss of voice

Writing Centres assist students to have and express their voice in their writing. According to [7], Writing centres are safe spaces where students can practise and find their own "voice" as authors. The Writing Centre's function is to facilitate dialogues in which students can "try on" various "voices" or approaches to articulating concepts and assertions in their writing. Negatively, the advent of AI has impacted the students' development of their own voice in their writing. Tutor 3 stated:

"...AI tools are affecting students in that students do not use their own words to argue in assignments which is something the university takes pride in."

In addition, Tutor 5 mentioned:

"Ultimately, they miss the point that they should be more engaging with the information by highlighting their own voice in relation to the information received from the tool."

This was further supported by Tutor 4:

"AI also plays a huge role in helping students, but it creates laziness among students in terms of thinking and writing your own work. For example, some of students just generate information and do copy and paste, some ended up having similar answers because of using AI."

Theme 4: Challenges of Over-Reliance on AI

Students have become overly reliant on AI and are therefore not developing as much as they could potentially develop in their writing without this over-reliance.

Tutor 2 narrated: *“A student came in with an essay that was clearly generated by an AI tool. The language was overly formal, and the sentences were awkwardly structured. I asked the student to explain the main points and supporting evidence, and they struggled to articulate their thoughts. I encouraged them to re-write the essay in their own words, focusing on understanding the content rather than relying on AI-generated text.”*

Tutor 2 lamented that over-reliance on AI has resulted in some students not understanding what they have written in addition to overusing AI as to write for them instead of as a supplementary tool. He stated:

“...students are submitting the very same work because they used the same AI tools.... Copy and paste sometimes comes with different colours and font sizes, students fail to return the words to the normal font style and size, which proves they have copied from the internet.”

Another challenge of overreliance on AI tools has been the overuse of jargon and technical terms. Tutor 2 wrote:

“A student submitted a paper filled with technical terms and jargon, which made it difficult to understand. They had relied heavily on AI-generated text without fully grasping the context. I encouraged them to use simpler language and explain complex concepts in their own words.”

Similarly, Tutor 5 noted that *“the students do not put in the effort to sift out what they don't need and align the information with their position or thinking.”*

Over-reliance on AI has also raised ethical concerns. This involves failing to reference or citing inappropriately.

Tutor 4 noted: *... Every university subscribes to a certain type of referencing. In that way, we are honouring the authors that have written different studies. Since students use AI tools like ChatGPT they do not get references, and they end up going to Google*

Scholar to acknowledge the wrong authors with the wrong information coming from these AI tools.

Tutor 5 added: *“The role of the WC is to teach how to use the AI with integrity, using the tools on its own is not problematic, but the AI must not be used as a substitute for doing research. Therefore, the role of the WC is to teach students that having AI does not mean that students are spared from critically thinking about the information they find through AI.”*

Furthermore, over-reliance on AI has resulted in students not valuing the human interaction that comes from one-on-one consultations. As Tutor 2 notes:

“There is a decrease in the number of students contacting us for assistance, as a result of their over-reliance on AI technologies and the resulting disregard for the value of human feedback and guidance.”

The need for human interaction in building a student’s writing abilities cannot be over-emphasised. As further stated by Tutor 2:

“When students rely just on AI, they lose out on the thoughtful and compassionate guidance that human tutors offer—support that is crucial for helping them establish their own writing style and deal with challenging real-world situations. Furthermore, because AI is not yet capable of comprehending context and details, it may provide inaccurate feedback that may hinder students’ progress. Because of this, students who previously used the services of our Writing Centre are now completely dependent on AI technologies, depriving themselves of the all-encompassing assistance that human instructors provide.”

Tutor 1 adds: *“We should really be looking at how to use AI to boost human interaction and feedback instead of trying to replace it. It’s very important to let students know what AI can and can’t do, so that they have a clear idea of what to expect.”*

6 Conclusion and recommendations

The incorporation of AI tools in Writing Centre consultations at the selected UoT offers both advantages and challenges. Findings have revealed that AI enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of feedback and allow for the tutor to focus on higher order concerns during consultations. However, over-reliance on AI, the loss of voice, challenges in maintaining personalised interactions, as well as ethical considerations require careful management.

The findings also underscore the importance of balancing AI use with traditional tutoring methods, ensuring that the human element remains central to writing support. Although AI is augmenting Writing Centre services, human feedback and guidance remain at the core of Writing Centre support. It is therefore important for Writing Centre staff to be mindful of the limitations and potential biases of AI tools and ensure that students understand their strengths and weaknesses. Evidently, Writing Centres need to start promoting the importance of writing and critical thinking in the AI era. In that way, Writing Centres could enable students to find their own writing voice. The findings of the current study reinforce the social constructivist theory in relation to AI, which is that the students and particularly the tutor play a critical role in moulding a valuable learning experience for the students.

As AI continues to advance, it is crucial for Writing Centre tutors to stay abreast of the latest developments and to engage in ongoing professional development to understand the implications of these technological advancements. It is therefore imperative for Writing Centres to work closely with the institutions within which they are located to develop comprehensive strategies that integrate AI-powered tools in a manner that complements the holistic approach to writing instruction.

Promoting academic integrity is also crucial role of the Writing Centre, particularly in the age of AI. This can be achieved in part by teaching students appropriate reference methods and how to avoid plagiarism. This will ensure that students produce original work and credit the rightful authors of the work cited. Writing Centres must also become advocates of the value of writing and critical thinking in the age of AI. Thus, Writing Centres could empower students to develop their own voice in their writings.

Looking ahead, AI will play an important role for the Writing Centre and the students in the consultation, and Writing Centres should encourage students to use AI with integrity. Future studies could therefore investigate the long-term effects of AI on students writing ability. Furthermore, future research could involve students and gather student feedback on the inclusion and integration of AI in Writing Centre consultations.

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