

Writing Centres in the Arabian Gulf Region: Dialogic Investigations

Habib Bouagada

INTRODUCTION

Any cogent enquiry into the emergence and the development of writing centres will be circumscribed within the boundaries of North America, their birthplace (Harris, 1982). A similar enquiry into writing centres operating in the Gulf region will fall short of yielding the tangible results required to give us a full grasp of these centres' dynamics, a situation that can largely be explained by the paucity of resources and the lack of elaborate, in-depth studies on the subject. Notwithstanding the relatively short span of time that saw the burgeoning of universities across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries by the second half of the twentieth century, writing centres were soon to gain ground, usually at the instigation of Western expatriates holding teaching and administrative positions in colleges or universities or, to a lesser degree, of their local counterparts trained in English-speaking countries. Oddly enough, at a time when writing centres in the Gulf region have been on the rise with the new millennium, centres in North America are facing closures, the recent one being the writing centre affiliated to the University of British Columbia in Canada.

Writing centres in the Gulf region are seldom incorporated into a historical account in any coherent way, due, in large measure, to their fairly

H. Bouagada (✉)

Royal Commission Colleges and Institutes of Yanbu, Yanbu, Saudi Arabia

recent existence. As a natural consequence to this state of things, one hardly gets any idea whatsoever of their function or their position within established academic institutions as a whole. Two considerations stem out upon a close scrutiny of the writing centres' *modus operandi*: a substantial number of writing centres appear to be embedded within larger institutions from which they secure their *raison d'être*, thus acquiring a peripheral and undervalued position that makes of them vulnerable entities at the mercy of the tidal contingencies resulting from a confusion as to what status they are entitled to; whereas other centres, particularly the centres in Qatar and United Arab Emirates (UAE), function as full-fledged co-systems in the way they adopt specific norms, behaviours, and policies. In this respect, writing centres operating in Qatar, affiliated in their majority to American institutions, purport to have attained a level of excellence that gives them a distinctive academic position since the adoption of English as a medium of instruction. This "has shaped the dynamics of [the] Writing Centers and challenged their creative ingenuity and capacity to offer excellent proactive services to their students. The future of the English writing program in Qatar is bright, as it can further benefit from harnessing the resources of other language skills to help its growing student population"(see Julian Williams, Chap. 3 in this book).

Looking back at the history and the recent development of writing centres across the Gulf region, one cannot fail to experience a feeling of déjà-vu with respect to the rationale behind their inception and the functions they assume on the ground. There is widespread consensus among writing centres' users that writing centres in the Gulf region, with slightly varying degrees of approach, have been a natural and practical emanation of North American models, whose emergence in the 1950s—though no accurate date can unquestionably be ascertained—had a rationale of its own. From a place that offered remedial services for learners' writing deficiencies to a contemporary institution integrated into distance education and virtual technology, writing centres in North America have come a long way and have translated into a unique experience whose intricate tapestry can be reflected in the different appellations attributed to them. The names "writing centre", "writing lab", "writing clinic", and "writing studio" are the multiple facets of a rich historiography compared with which the nascent writing centres in the Gulf region are only at their stammering stage.

In terms of their own inception or the trajectory they have pursued, writing centres in the Gulf region were created as a replica of those in North

America, with the exception that writing centres in the West are to be found in secondary and post-secondary education, while their counterparts in the Gulf region are confined to post-secondary education only (Blumner, 2008). This disparity, in itself, is indicative of a long writing tradition in Western academia, of which writing centres are a natural recipient. In the Gulf region, however, writing centres are a novelty in a tradition whose foundation is deeply rooted in orality, and, therefore, their existence can only be legitimized by the very existence of the institution of which they are part.

The reality of the Gulf writing centres being what it is, it stands to reason that these centres should claim ownership of their practices in relation to their learners' specific needs. A close look at the internal workings of these writing centres shows indisputable evidence that most of these centres have arguably disentangled themselves, though partly, from the very concept of a writing centre as upheld by the International Writing Centres Association (IWCA). Such disentanglement is not tantamount to a genuine autonomy sought by these writing centres, but their current situation was rather *de facto* imposed by exogenous and endogenous parameters that have hampered their functionality, or at least have endowed them with a mission not so much akin to that of the IWCA.

While the IWCA advocates a tutoring approach based on collaboration between tutors and learners in a way that promotes a process whereby learners can claim authority over their writing, most writing centres across the Gulf region still remain, to borrow North's (1984) terminology, a "fix-it shop" where the primary role of tutors is to assist learners with all aspects of writing assignments. There still seems to prevail on the part of tutors a propensity towards a prescriptive mode of tutoring that leaves no room for experimentation and risk-taking, which renders the writing centre an extension of the classroom or its own replica. Testimonies from tutors in Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, and, to a lesser extent, in Bahrain, Qatar, and UAE, indicate that writing centres are home to learners whose expectations of the centre is that of a place where their written work could be improved through the full agency of the tutor. The aggressive and direct intervention of tutors in the learners' writing can find its justification in the lowest scores, as indicated by international examination institutions¹ conferred on students from GCC countries in regular classrooms settings as well as at international proficiency examinations such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), with the writing skill being the main source of affliction, the students' "pet peeve" so to speak.²

An examination of the prevailing modes of operating across these writing centres reveals significant differences that prevent any attempt at viewing them monolithically, even if, by virtue of their affiliation to the Middle East–North Africa Writing Centres Alliance (MENAWCA), they ostensibly adhere to the same concept of a writing centre and display in their literature a feeling of working along the same continuum of ideas. These differences can be construed around key concepts: tutor training, discourse, and market-driven economy.

TUTOR TRAINING: A BLOT IN THE WRITING CENTRE LANDSCAPE

With the exception of a few manifest cases in the UAE and Qatar, if one may venture to make a blatant remark about writing centres in the Gulf region, it appears quite clearly that those who have taken it upon themselves the arduous task of establishing these places have, in good faith, put the cart before the horse. Faced with the pressing need to mitigate increasing learners' writing deficiencies, the creation of writing centres was believed to be the antidote to counteract writing shortcomings and weaknesses. However, amidst the momentum that the creation of the centres generated, tutor training has not been accorded the importance it merits. While the IWCA recommends the appointment of tutors and administrators with a background in writing centre work, the current situation of most writing centres in the region, particularly in Saudi Arabia, reflects a different reality. Most tutors attending to the daily needs of writing centres are regular English faculty or department members who find themselves caught between their core duties and their additional writing centre commitments. As Hamid Ali Khan Eusafzai (in this collection) states, "all tutors have different realisations of their role as tutors. The lack of a uniform understanding of the role of WCs means a lack of uniformity in the tutoring practices of these tutors. This implies that whereas the WCs have tried to import and appropriate the North American model of WC pedagogy, perhaps, they could not impart this model to their tutors or have been able to develop an indigenous model of WC tutoring more in sync with the local needs and students" (see Chap. 1).

Other than the broad mission statement outlining in malleable terms the principles and the policies governing the function of the writing centre, these tutors have only their own expertise to rely on. Lacking proper

tutoring manuals they can fall back on or extensive training in tutoring delivery, writing centre tutors echo the same discourse they perpetuate in their mainstream classroom teaching. When the IWCA postulates that appropriate tutoring should shun proofreading and “address editing and revising through practices consistent with current writing centre pedagogy”,³ it encourages a type of tutor–student rapport that hinges upon a tacit agreement among tutors and learners in which the active engagement of the learner in the writing process is paramount and the role of the tutor is confined to that of a facilitator. But how far is such a minimalist approach grounded in the actual writing centre reality? And assuming that writing centres espouse the principles of the IWCA, is there any mechanism in place that helps us assert or validate any success that can be attributed to them in a way that can grant them legitimacy? In the overall writing centre landscape, two realities are self-imposing: at one fortunate end of the spectrum, there are a number of writing centres, namely that of New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD), the American University of Sharjah, the American University of Ras al-Khaimah, and United Arab Emirates University, in addition to Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, Weill Cornell Medical College, Carnegie Mellon University, all housed in Qatar. The list is not exhaustive, but the significant fact that all these writing centres are affiliated to American universities or colleges is a hallmark in its own right. Put crudely, these centres, thanks to their affiliation to American universities, do not compromise on resources and qualified manpower in a manner that leaves most of the other writing centres in the region hide in envy.

Given the robust support they enjoy, these centres hire professionally trained and generously remunerated tutors, who, thanks to the variegated means at their disposal, offer writing services beyond what the common writing centres in the region can imagine. Here, learners frequent the centre for a wide range of assignments and meet with tutors who do not leave any stone unturned: from an essay in need of editing, a creative skill that needs to be honed, a science project to be reviewed, an IELTS exam to be prepared, to even an oral presentation that requires tweaking, every wish is fulfilled to the utter satisfaction of learners, who can ask for more. These centres can stage discussion among tutors on canonical pieces of writing where theories of writing are foregrounded. These are writing centres of a high order where it is not only the language that is given prominence, but the metalanguage in the form of reflection on the language itself. Though these findings are hard to substantiate by examples on the

field, it is quite apparent that, by dint of the literature they display, these centres function along the lines of the IWCA and aspire to a level of practice on a par with international standards.

On the other end of the spectrum lie most writing centres of the region. If there is a commonality among these centres, it is undoubtedly their “status” as home-grown, albeit the foreign influence at the heart of their inception. Despite the fact that “home-grown” is oftentimes synonymous with a poor trademark, it is, nevertheless, an expression of a genuine struggle against all odds.

Writing centres in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Oman, to mention only these, are battling quixotic forces that make the tutoring position they adopt an act of chivalry. Deprived of any training on how to build awareness on collaborative work, tutors welcome learners who, usually, struggle to get a writing task done or learners who need to boost a grade prior to an exam. Tutors may sit for hours on end waiting for a student to show up with a writing problem to be “fixed” and leave the writing centre with a feeling of “mission accomplished”. This is the way “collaboration” is perceived, a perception so much out of touch with what the IWCA promotes or what Lunsford (1991, p. 93) staunchly voices:

[C]ollaboration both in theory and practice reflects a broad-based epistemological shift, a shift in the way we view knowledge. The shift involves a move from viewing knowledge and reality as things exterior to or outside of us, as immediately accessible, individually knowable, measurable, and shareable—to viewing knowledge and reality as mediated by or constructed through language in social use, as socially constructed, contextualized, as, in short, the product of collaboration.

In the light of the above, what is enacted in these writing centres seems sheer felony, by all means condemnable. But are we not making a hasty judgement for the sake of a utopian writing centre (Harris, 1985) that the region cannot realistically afford? Are we not trying to emulate an exotic model at all costs, to the extent of jeopardizing both the cart and the horse? Any reasonable mind faced with the challenging and, at times, daunting reality of writing centres in the Gulf region will be prompt to notice that patience, appreciation, and recognition are of the essence. Tutors experience the double challenge of not seeing their work recognized, partly on account of the absence of any status ascribed to the writing centre itself. Usually encroaching upon the premises of English-language

departments, writing centres occupy a space not often academically visible and administratively relegated to an auxiliary position whose functions are defined, not by IWCA precepts, but by ill-trained tutors and, paradoxically, by learners themselves. Pure products of a schooling system where rote learning is a sacrosanct norm, learners are baffled to be even asked to write, let alone develop an idiosyncratic or a writerly identity. The natural consequence to a situation enforced on them is demotivation and, its corollary, resistance.

THE INVISIBLE TUTOR AND THE ANONYMOUS TUTEE

Now that writing centres have become an intrinsic part of a rising number of English as a foreign language (EFL) departments in the Gulf region, a new road map needs to be drafted for these centres to take on a vigorous presence that gives meaning to their existence and accords tutors and learners (or tutees) a sense of empowerment. In the current scheme of things, the tutor remains a shadowy figure lost in the vagaries of administration, themselves stranded between imported ideals and hard, inevitable facts. A decade or so since they have come on the academic scene, writing centres are yet to give any validation to their success. For this to occur, a new writing centre philosophy needs to be proclaimed and in which the learner does not enter and exit the writing centre in utter anonymity. With accountability comes a shared responsibility whereby learners' progress is monitored and accounted for. If need be, a contextualization or even a domestication of the IWCA pedagogy is to be negotiated for the Gulf region writing centre to have any relevance for its users. Today's main challenge is to redefine the writing centre on the basis of tutors' and learners' shared expectations and aspirations. It is a return to basics that precludes any attempt at prescribing a set of practices that, given the current scenario, will only lead to a simulacrum of a writing centre where functions, policies, and roles are ill-defined, blurred, and short-lived. In practice, it is up to the learner to prescribe the rules that he or she deems appropriate to his or her own learning and up to the tutor to deliver accordingly, all in a place where real answers are provided in any way, shape, or form that prioritizes the learner's needs. Whether it is evaluative or non-evaluative, prescriptive or descriptive, teacher-directed or learner-centred, the writing centre has to be a home where tutors and learners engage in a relationship that promotes understanding of learners' deficiencies on the part of the tutor and respect and recognition of the tutor's

commitment on the part of the learner. It is a *modus vivendi* within which is articulated a deep sense of responsible freedom characterizing the new tutor–learner partnership.

WRITING CENTRES: THE PRISON HOUSE OF NEOLIBERAL ECONOMY: A MYTH OR A REALITY?

It is easy to take a tendentious shortcut and stigmatize the rampant neoliberal economy as the scourge of societies that refuse to subscribe to the new order where human relations are governed by fierce competitiveness. But it is certainly true that with regard to this new order of things where the widespread formula is “use English or perish”, it is only natural that English is not only the driving force that differentiates between those who aspire to success and those who are destined to remain on the fringes of free-market society, but also a mechanism around which higher education in the Gulf region is undergoing massive restructuring.

In the long-term strategic plans (e.g., Saudi Vision 2030, Oman Vision 2040, UAE Vision 2021, etc.) that GCC countries have embraced, drastic shifts at the level of thinking, processes, and methodologies have to be made to align higher education institutions to the requirements of this crucial phase. In this global paradigm, English is, therefore, naturalized into a medium of academic achievement, a vehicle of a linguistic Darwinism where competence and success in the marketplace are the sole appanage of highly proficient English users. Employability and marketability are today’s buzzwords that have secured a comfortable and supposedly innocuous place in academic settings, to the point where they have become an integral part of governments’ official discourse. In this regard, Osman Z. Barnawi, the editor of this book, offers a thought-provoking and in-depth analysis of the kind of unprecedented upheavals that have befallen the Gulf region as a direct consequence of drastic neoliberal policies in his book entitled *Neoliberalism and English language Education Policies in the Arabian Gulf* (Routledge Research in Language Education book series).

What about writing centres in this grand design? Shall we perceive them as malevolent instruments in the hands of hegemonic powers lurking in the dark and concocting plots to maintain English as the master language? Are writing centres set up for a higher order where learners will be the future successful agents of neoliberal economy? And, by extension, shall we fatalistically regard English as the only conveyer of progress leading up to market prosperity and without which this prosperity comes to a

standstill? Affirmative answers to the above questions amount to a witch-hunt so dear to the proponents of conspiracy theories. Or shall we reconsider the concept, the status, and the practices of writing centres in a way that is neither subservient to the trappings of neoliberalism and its ramifications nor to the doxa erected as unchanging truth by practitioners out of touch with writing centres' realities? A safe approach, in this respect, is to embrace change whenever needed without compromising our identities as tutors and learners embarked upon the common pursuit of genuine satisfaction of learners' writing needs, irrespective of whether our meeting place is called a fix-it shop, a writing centre, or a support service. Whether we adhere to IWCA precepts or follow our own separate roads, whether we abhor neoliberal principles or condone them, the whole matter boils down to the fact that our path to success cannot be trodden without a constant questioning of our own beliefs and assumptions.

NOTES

1. <https://www.ets.org>
2. efl.com
3. <http://writingcenters.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/twoyearpositionstatement1.pdf>

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Habib Bouagada is Lecturer in English at Yanbu University College of the Royal Commission Colleges and Institutes, Yanbu, Saudi Arabia. He received a post-graduate diploma in the Sociology of Literature and a Master's in English Language and Literature from the United Kingdom as well as a Master's in Translation Studies from Canada. Bouagada has been lecturing in English and French for over two decades.