The Politics of Space in South African Writing Centres: Whose Knowledge is Centred?
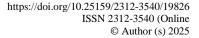
Lutendo Nendauni
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8320-4556
Cape Peninsula University of Technology
nendaunil@cput.ac.za

Abstract

This article examines South African university writing centres as contested spaces where language, knowledge, and power intersect. Drawing on Lefebvre's spatial triad and decolonial theory, the article explores how the material layout, institutional messaging, and everyday practices within these centres either challenge or reproduce epistemic hierarchies, often privileging English and Western academic norms while marginalising local languages and alternative ways of knowing. Employing a reflective practitioner research approach, this study used spatial ethnography, discourse and visual analysis, and semi-structured interviews with students. The findings reveal that while the perceived and conceived dimensions of writing centre spaces largely uphold colonial logics, the lived space concurrently fosters moments of resistance, hybridity, and creativity. Specifically, students and tutors challenge dominant norms through translanguaging, code-switching, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems. These practices accentuate the transformative potential of writing centres as sites of epistemic justice. The article concludes by offering context-specific strategies for reimagining writing centre spaces, tutor training, and multilingual practices to promote greater inclusion and decolonial transformation in postcolonial higher education. Though situated in the South African context, its insights are applicable to other multilingual and postcolonial settings globally.

Keywords: writing centres; spatial politics; decoloniality; epistemic justice; multilingualism; South African higher education

Introduction

Since the end of apartheid in 1994, South African universities have undergone significant transformation to redress historical injustices and promote greater equity and access in higher education (Badat 2010). One such intervention has been the establishment of writing centres, which are intended to support students in the development of academic literacy, particularly those from historically marginalised groups who may be perceived as underprepared for university-level study (Archer and Richards 2011). Based on my experience working in a university writing centre, I have noticed that these places are often seen as neutral and merely as support services. However, this view often obscures the more complex political and epistemological issues embedded within these centres.

Writing centres are typically regarded as key sites for fostering academic skills, critical thinking, and good communication. Their stated aim is often to enhance student success and prepare learners for academic and professional life. Yet, I contend that the design and operation of writing centres can inadvertently reflect and reproduce the dominant power structures of the university. This article challenges the assumption that writing centres are politically neutral (North 1984). Instead, it argues that they are deeply contested spaces in which language, knowledge, and power intersect. Certain epistemologies and communicative practices, particularly those aligned with Western academic traditions, are privileged, while others are marginalised or rendered invisible (Canagarajah 2002).

Importantly, writing centres do not operate in isolation but are embedded within universities that remain shaped by settler-colonial and apartheid logics. As Mbembe (2016) and Heleta (2016) remind us, the contemporary South African university continues to privilege Eurocentric traditions and institutional arrangements rooted in colonial and apartheid histories. These structural conditions frame the work of writing centres, constraining their transformative potential while simultaneously creating opportunities for resistance. Any attempt to decolonise writing centres must therefore be situated within this wider struggle to decolonise the university itself.

My engagement with the physical and discursive environment of the writing centre has prompted critical reflection on whose knowledge is legitimised within these spaces. The languages displayed on our walls, the texts we celebrate, and the frameworks we draw on to advise students all convey particular ideological commitments. While the intention may be to empower students, this is often pursued through the implicit promotion of Eurocentric norms, which consequently limits the possibilities for epistemic diversity.

In this article, I examine the politics of space in writing centres in South African universities with a specific focus on the kinds of knowledge that are legitimised, marginalised, or excluded. I address the following research questions:

(1) Whose knowledge and ways of knowing are legitimised in writing centre practices?

(2) How do the spatial arrangements and linguistic landscapes of writing centres reflect and reinforce dominant epistemologies?

(3) How might writing centres disrupt rather than merely reflect dominant epistemologies?

There is a paucity of scholarship that critically engages with the spatial politics of writing centres in South Africa, particularly through decolonial perspectives. I draw on Lefebvre's (1991) conceptualisation of space as well as decolonial perspectives (Mignolo 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013) to reveal the complex entanglements of space, language, and epistemology in these institutional sites. While grounded in the South African context, the insights offered in this article have broader relevance for writing centres in other postcolonial settings grappling with questions of equity, epistemic inclusion, and transformation.

Having established the context and outlined the research questions, the following section reviews existing scholarship on writing centres, spatial politics, and decolonial perspectives, highlighting the gaps this article seeks to address.

Literature Review

This section reviews how university writing centres are conceptualised and studied within academic research, with particular attention to their roles, practices, and spatial dimensions. Drawing on both local and international scholarship, the review explores ongoing debates about whether writing centres function merely as sites for developing academic skills or whether they also serve as spaces where knowledge, power, and identity are negotiated. I pay special attention to how these centres intersect with broader issues of language, culture, and decolonial imperatives, especially within the South African higher education context.

Writing Centres and the Deficit Model

Much of the earlier literature on writing centres, particularly in North America, focused on their role in helping students acquire academic writing skills (North 1984). These centres were often framed as apolitical service units aimed at improving student performance. However, scholars have increasingly critiqued this so-called "skills-based" or "deficit" model, arguing that it positions students as lacking and in need of fixing, rather than recognising their existing linguistic and intellectual resources (Lea and Street 2006). In South African writing centres, this deficit model persists despite growing calls for transformation and inclusivity (Archer and Parker 2016). Writing centres are often expected to help students adapt to university expectations without questioning whose expectations these are, or what ideologies underpin them.

Scholars have increasingly begun to conceptualise writing centres not only as pedagogical but also as ideological and epistemological spaces (Jonker 2020;

McKinney 2013; Sefalane-Nkohla and Mtonjeni 2009). This body of work emphasises that writing centres are sites where knowledge is contested, negotiated, and produced. Tutors and students are not just engaging in the mechanics of grammar and structure, but also in broader conversations about identity, power, and legitimacy in academic discourse. Yet, in the South African context, very little research has explored how these ideological dimensions manifest spatially in writing centres.

International Perspectives on Postcolonial and Multilingual Contexts

South Africa is not alone in facing knowledge legitimation challenges in writing centres. In Latin America, for example, intercultural universities have set up writing centres to support students from indigenous and rural backgrounds, often working in several languages (Mato 2016). According to Navarro Cira (2022), these centres also grapple with balancing local knowledge and academic norms, and with the dominance of Spanish or Portuguese over indigenous languages. Similarly, in South Asia, writing support initiatives in countries such as India and Pakistan navigate a mix of English, local languages, and regional academic traditions (Sultana 2023). In both regions, as in South Africa, there is a tension between supporting student success and challenging the dominance of Western academic models. These international cases show that the politics of language, knowledge, and space in writing centres are global issues.

Spatial Politics and the University

The "spatial turn" in the humanities and social sciences, influenced by theorists such as Lefebvre, has highlighted how space is socially produced and politically charged (Lefebvre 1991). According to Lefebvre, space is not just a physical container but a product of social relations and power. He introduced a spatial triad, which includes perceived space (the material environment and daily routines), conceived space (the design and official planning), and lived space (how people experience and interact with it). In the context of higher education, space has been shown to reflect institutional values and reinforce social hierarchies (Temple 2024). This implies that classrooms, offices, and student support spaces are not neutral; they are embedded with meanings and assumptions about who belongs, who leads, and who learns. However, literature on the spatial politics of writing centres specifically remains limited. While some researchers acknowledge spatial concerns (McKinney 2013), few explore them through Lefebvre's framework or link them to broader debates on knowledge and power in postcolonial contexts.

In my own professional experience, I have observed how the physical layout of the writing centre (desks, posters, tutor positioning) communicates authority and expertise in subtle but powerful ways. These spatial choices are rarely questioned, yet they shape how students relate to the centre and to academic discourse itself. This lack of critical attention to the spatial and symbolic dimensions of writing centres in South Africa presents a clear gap that this study seeks to address.

Decolonial Perspectives in Academic Spaces

The decolonial turn in South African higher education, especially following the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements, has raised urgent questions about whose knowledge is valued in our institutions (Heleta 2016; Mbembe 2016). Decolonial theorists such as Mignolo (2007), Maldonado-Torres (2007), and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) speak of the coloniality of knowledge, which in the context of this article, is the continuation of colonial ways of knowing and being, even after the end of formal colonialism. In response, concepts such as epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2007) and pluriversality (Santos 2014) are calls to resist the dominance of Western epistemologies and to embrace a world where many ways of knowing coexist. In writing centres, these ideas are particularly relevant. For instance, who gets to define what "good writing" is? Whose languages and experiences are centred or silenced? How can writing centres shift from being sites of assimilation to sites of epistemic liberation? Can the writing centre shift if the university does not?

Some scholars have begun to address these questions. For example, Jonker (2020) highlights the need for writing centres to move beyond assimilationist models and support decolonial, multilingual, and inclusive practices. Similarly, McKinney (2013) examines how the physical layout, language policies, and daily practices in writing centres can either reinforce or challenge institutional power structures.

Despite this growing interest, there is still little research into how the actual spaces of writing centres can support or undermine decolonial aims, especially in South Africa. It is also important to recognise that writing centres are not free-floating entities. They are embedded within universities whose broader knowledge project often continues to privilege Western epistemologies. This creates a structural contradiction: while writing centres may attempt to promote decolonial and multilingual practices, their institutional positioning frequently requires them to maintain the very academic norms they seek to challenge (Namakula, Kimani, and Kadenge 2025).

To sum up this section, the review shows that writing centres are often viewed through a deficit lens, overlooking students' knowledge and identities. It also highlights a lack of research on how the physical and social spaces of writing centres shape power, especially in South Africa. Furthermore, while decolonial calls have gained momentum, they have not fundamentally disrupted the larger university project. This means that the struggle to decolonise writing centres sits within and is contingent on the broader struggle to decolonise higher education knowledge systems. This article aims to address these gaps through spatial and decolonial perspectives. This review demonstrates the need for a deeper exploration of how spatial and decolonial dynamics intersect in South African writing centres. Building on these insights, the next section outlines the theoretical lenses that inform my analysis.

Theoretical Points of Departure

This study employed a dual theoretical lens, combining Lefebvre's spatial triad with key concepts from decolonial theory, to examine the politics of space in South African writing centres. Through this approach, I understand how writing centres, often seen as neutral support spaces, can either reproduce or challenge deep-seated power relations, particularly concerning knowledge. Before I explain how these frameworks intersect, it is important to clarify two central concepts that underpin my analysis, namely "epistemic justice" and "coloniality of knowledge."

Epistemic justice refers to the fair recognition and valuation of different ways of knowing, ensuring that no group's knowledge is systematically excluded or devalued within educational spaces (Fricker 2007). In contrast, the coloniality of knowledge highlights the ongoing dominance of Eurocentric or Western epistemologies and the continued marginalisation of indigenous, African, and other non-Western ways of knowing, even after the formal end of colonialism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). Together, these concepts are central to understanding the politics of knowledge in South African writing centres. While epistemic justice points towards the possibility of inclusivity and recognition of diverse epistemologies, the coloniality of knowledge highlights the structural barriers that often prevent such recognition. Framing writing centres through these lenses makes visible the tensions between transformation and assimilation, and highlights the need to reimagine these spaces in ways that affirm multiple epistemic traditions rather than reproducing inherited hierarchies.

Lefebvre's Spatial Triad

Lefebvre's spatial triad provides a powerful framework for analysing how space is produced and experienced within the writing centre. Lefebvre (1991) conceptualises space through three interrelated dimensions:

- Perceived space: The material and sensory features of the environment (e.g., physical arrangement of desks, languages visible on signs, daily routines).
- Conceived space: The official plans, policies, and institutional discourses that define and justify the space (e.g., mission statements, official communications).
- Lived space: The everyday experiences, feelings, and symbolic meanings that users bring to and create within the space (e.g., students' and tutors' interactions, feelings of belonging or exclusion).

However, it is important to note that writing centres do not exist in isolation. They are embedded within the larger spatial and epistemic architecture of the university, itself shaped by histories of colonialism and apartheid. South African universities continue to occupy land dispossessed through colonial conquest, and many campuses retain apartheid-era spatial designs that perpetuate inequality and exclusion (Badat 2010; Mbembe 2016). These material and symbolic structures reinforce what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) terms the "coloniality of knowledge," sustaining Eurocentric academic traditions while marginalising African epistemologies. Thus, before turning to the

writing centre as a particular site, it is necessary to recognise that its spatial dynamics are part of the broader Western construct of the university. This larger context sets the conditions within which writing centres operate, shaping the extent to which they can either reproduce or resist colonial logics.

In my own practice, I have observed how the physical arrangement of desks, the languages on signs, and daily routines often reinforce existing hierarchies. For example, tutors are usually positioned as experts at the front of the room, while students are seen as recipients of knowledge. Similarly, official communications tend to emphasise "academic excellence" and "professional writing" but rarely acknowledge linguistic diversity or alternative epistemologies. The lived experiences of students and tutors often reveal both alienation and resistance. Saxena (2009) has shown how some students feel excluded by the dominance of English and Western norms, while others find creative ways to assert their identities, such as code-switching or rearranging furniture for more collaborative dialogue.

While Lefebvre's spatial triad offers a useful vocabulary to interrogate spatial politics, I am mindful that it originates within a Western epistemological tradition. This risks reproducing the very Eurocentric frameworks that decolonial scholarship critiques (Mbembe 2016). To avoid this, I deliberately position Lefebvre in dialogue with African-centred philosophies, particularly Ubuntu, and decolonial theory (Mignolo 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). This dialogic approach enables me to move beyond a Eurocentric reading of space towards a pluriversal framework that is attentive to colonial and postcolonial power dynamics shaping South African universities.

Ubuntu, encapsulated in the phrase "I am because we are," shifts the focus from individualised, competitive models of learning to ones that value community, reciprocity, and shared growth (Hlatshwayo and Shawa 2020). In the context of academic support, Ubuntu challenges the logic of deficit remediation and invites us to design writing centre practices that are collaborative, inclusive, and affirmative of students' cultural identities. For example, in the centre where I work, I have seen students rearrange the furniture into circles to encourage group discussion, which feels more in line with African traditions of learning together.

Decolonial Theory in the Politics of Space

While Lefebvre's framework helps in mapping the complexities between material arrangements, institutional ideologies, and lived experiences, it needs to be combined with decolonial theory to fully address the question of whose knowledge is centred. Decolonial theorists such as Mignolo (2007), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), and Maldonado-Torres (2007) urge interrogation of the ongoing legacy of colonialism in institutions, particularly regarding knowledge production. The concept of the coloniality of knowledge is especially relevant in the South African context, where the privileging of English and Western academic conventions continues to marginalise other ways of knowing and writing. In this regard, decolonial theory introduces key concepts such as

"epistemic disobedience," which refers to the refusal to accept only Western knowledge as legitimate, and "pluriversality," which advocates for the recognition and coexistence of multiple epistemologies (Mignolo 2007; Santos 2014). These ideas push me to understand the writing centre as more than merely a site of support or assimilation, but as a potential space for epistemic liberation. Hence, the integration of Lefebvre's spatial triad with decolonial thoughts.

By combining Lefebvre's framework with decolonial theory, I can better see how the physical and social set-up of the writing centre can either support or block different kinds of knowledge. This synthesis illuminates how the predominance of English on signage, the focus on Western norms in policy, and students' feelings of exclusion or acts of resistance are all interconnected and deeply political. This combined theoretical approach not only sharpens my critique of current practices but also guides my vision for reimagining the writing centre. It enables me to imagine practical changes, such as introducing multilingual signage, redesigning spaces with student input, and training tutors in epistemic justice. I argue that writing centres can be more inclusive if we approach spatial politics through integrated interventions. In Table 1, I provide some of these practical interventions, which I draw from this paper's theoretical lenses.

Table 1: Decolonial and spatial politics integrated interventions

Lefebvre's Dimension	Writing Centre Manifestation	Decolonial Intervention
Perceived space	Material arrangements (e.g., signage, desk layouts)	Multilingual displays; dismantling English-only zones
Conceived space	Institutional policies and mission statements	Co-creating guidelines via indabas (deliberative forums)
Lived space	Student–tutor interactions	Legitimising translanguaging and indigenous knowledge integration

In Table 1, Lefebvre's spatial triad is integrated with decolonial thinking and explicitly anchored in African ways of knowing, particularly Ubuntu. Ubuntu emphasises relationality, interdependence, and collective knowledge (Hlatshwayo and Shawa 2020). This informs the interventions proposed: arranging desks for collaborative dialogue, co-creating policies through deliberative forums, and legitimising translanguaging and indigenous knowledge in tutor-student interactions. These practices reflect African epistemologies that value community, reciprocity, and multiple ways of knowing, showing how they concretely shape the spatial and social dynamics of the writing centre. This helps me find practical ways to change writing centres so that they become more open and fair. Through changes to the physical space, the centre's rules, and our everyday practices, I believe we can start to break down old colonial patterns and create a place where everyone's knowledge is valued.

Grounded in Ubuntu and decolonial thinking, these interventions offer a pathway for transforming writing centres into inclusive spaces that recognise and value diverse epistemologies. In doing so, they not only guide local practice but also contribute to broader discussions on pluriversal and transformative approaches to academic support. With the theoretical frame established, the next section details the methodological approach used to investigate the spatial politics of the writing centre.

Methodology

This study is rooted in a reflective practitioner research approach, informed by my ongoing engagement with the writing centre as both a pedagogical space and a site of epistemic struggle. As a practitioner embedded in the daily operations of the centre, I draw on Schön's (1983) notion of the "reflective practitioner" to position myself not as an external investigator but as an engaged insider. This orientation centres a commitment to critically interrogate and transform the institutional practices in which I am directly implicated, rather than merely observing them from a distance. This methodological stance allows for a dynamic chemistry between observation, reflection, and action, enabling deeper insight into the spatial and epistemological dimensions of the writing centre.

I have been involved in the writing centre for over five years, taking on responsibilities in tutor training and academic literacy workshops. In this role, I have been directly involved in shaping consultation practices, developing training resources, and mentoring new tutors. This insider position gives me access to the everyday challenges and negotiations that define the writing centre, while also allowing me to see the tensions between institutional expectations and student needs. My practitioner perspective is, therefore, not neutral, but deeply informed by both my professional practice and my commitment to decolonial transformation in higher education.

Equally important to my methodological stance is my linguistic identity. I am multilingual, fluent in English and five African languages, and I have navigated language hierarchies throughout my academic and professional journey. While English is the dominant medium of instruction and institutional communication, I often draw on my multilingual repertoire in consultations to support students in articulating complex ideas. This practice has sharpened my awareness of the privileges and limitations associated with English, as well as the ways in which linguistic diversity can be both suppressed and strategically mobilised in writing centre spaces. My positionality as a multilingual practitioner enables me to critically reflect on how language hierarchies are reproduced, negotiated, and sometimes resisted in the centre.

Rather than treating the writing centre as a bounded case to be analysed from a distance, I approach it as a living, evolving space in which I am situated and to which I am ethically and professionally accountable. Through this insider perspective, I explore the

everyday workings of the centre with an emphasis on critical reflexivity, power dynamics, and opportunities for epistemic justice.

To gather data that reflects the layered realities of this space, I employed a multi-method strategy anchored in reflective practice. Firstly, I used spatial ethnography, which involved systematic observation of the writing centre's daily operations over a three-month period (August 2024 to October 2024) during peak consultation periods. My observations focused on documenting the fixed physical layout, the presence and placement of signage, the natural movement patterns of students and tutors, and the influence of spatial arrangements on power dynamics. These observations were recorded in a detailed fieldwork journal that also included reflective commentary and practitioner insights.

Secondly, I used discourse and visual analysis to explore the writing centre's environment and related texts. I examined visual materials such as posters, signs, and learning resources in the centre. I also looked at key documents, including the tutor training manual and promotional materials. My aim was to understand how the use of language, images, and themes in these materials reflected certain beliefs, values, and ideas about what counts as "good" writing, language use, and academic support.

To complement my practitioner insights, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with five students who regularly consult in the writing centre. These interviews, lasting between 15 and 20 minutes, explored the participants' experiences and perceptions of the centre's spatial and linguistic environment, the knowledge practices it supports, and their overall sense of inclusion or alienation. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed for thematic analysis. Table 2 below presents a profile of the interviewed participants.

Table 2: Participants' demographics

Pseudonym	Sex	Language Background	Year of Study
S1	Female	isiXhosa, English	Second year
S2	Male	isiXhosa, English	Third year
S3	Male	isiZulu, English	First year
S4	Female	Setswana, English	Third year
S5	Female	Afrikaans, English	First year

This table provides a snapshot of the linguistic and experiential diversity represented in the study, which is central to understanding how spatial and epistemic dynamics are negotiated in the writing centre.

Ethical Considerations

Given my dual role as both researcher and practitioner, ethical reflexivity was central to this study. I ensured that all the participants fully understood the purpose of the research

and that their involvement was entirely voluntary. Pseudonyms were employed in reporting the data, and no identifying information about the participants was included. This study adhered to the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki for research involving human subjects.

Although visual analysis was a key component of the methodology, focusing on posters, signage, and spatial arrangements, I made a conscious decision not to include any images. This ethical choice protected the confidentiality of the institution and prevented indirect identification. Instead, I relied on detailed narrative descriptions to convey essential visual insights. This approach aligns with ethical research practice, particularly in contexts involving institutional critique and insider positioning.

Limitations and Challenges

As with any research, this study had its limitations and challenges. Firstly, only five interviews were conducted, which means that the findings may not reflect the wide range of student experiences across the university. Secondly, my dual role as practitioner and researcher may have influenced how I collected and interpreted the data, even though I made conscious efforts to remain reflexive throughout the process. Thirdly, the observations were carried out in only one writing centre, which limits the extent to which the findings can be applied to other similar settings. Fourthly, I faced restrictions in accessing certain institutional documents and spaces owing to administrative procedures, which may have affected the depth of insight in some areas of the study.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the key findings of the study, revealing how the writing centre as a physical and ideological space contests and reproduces broader structures of power. The analysis draws on data from spatial ethnography, visual and discourse analysis, semi-structured interviews, and my own practitioner reflections. I also engage with relevant literature to contextualise the findings.

Legitimised Knowledges and Ways of Knowing in Writing Centre Practices

The dominance of English in the writing centre emerged as a central concern, both in the material environment and in daily practices. English is the default language on signage, handouts, and digital resources, and it is almost always used in tutor–student interactions. This linguistic hierarchy is not simply a matter of convenience; it reflects deeper ideological commitments to Western academic norms and the coloniality of knowledge, as described by Mignolo (2007) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013). Although Afrikaans is less prominent in this writing centre, it is important to recognise that both English and Afrikaans are products of colonial history and institutional privileging. Thus, a critique of English dominance must not inadvertently reinscribe Afrikaans as neutral or less implicated. This finding is consistent with Archer and Parker (2016) who

noted that South African writing centres often reinforce English monolingualism, despite the country's official multilingual policy.

Students from multilingual backgrounds frequently reported the feeling that their home languages were invisible or even unwelcome. As one participant revealed:

> I sometimes want to use isiXhosa to explain my ideas, but I worry it will be seen as unprofessional. (S2)

This echoes Street's (2003) critique of the deficit model, where students are encouraged to conform to dominant norms rather than being affirmed in their diverse ways of knowing. Another participant expressed issues of discomfort during consultations:

> The writing centre tutors are always like, "Speak in English," because it's the official language of learning at the university. But honestly, I sometimes find it hard to say what I really mean in English. (S5)

This shows that students sometimes struggle to fully express their ideas because of linguistic barriers. This finding resonates with international research from Latin America and South Asia, where writing centres in intercultural and multilingual universities also grapple with balancing local knowledge and academic norms (Navarro Cira 2022).

However, the data also revealed moments of negotiation and resistance. For instance, I observed students and tutors code-switching during peer discussions, fluidly moving between English and indigenous languages to clarify concepts or express complex ideas, which challenges the monolingual norm and opens a space for epistemic justice (Fricker 2007; Santos 2014). In some consultation sessions, students strategically referenced indigenous knowledge or local proverbs in their assignments, legitimising non-Western epistemologies within the academic framework. As one participant stated:

> I often consult with [names tutor]. He is good in IsiZulu, so, I always talk to him in IsiZulu. … I like that, I wish all tutors were like that really ... students would understand better. (S3)

Although minimalist, these acts align with Canagarajah's (2002) argument that students in postcolonial contexts often hybridise dominant discourses, even as institutions seek to standardise them. Unlike some Latin American centres, where multilingual signage and resources are more visible as part of a concerted effort to promote plurilingualism (Navarro Cira 2022), such practices in this study's context remain largely informal and sometimes invisible, suggesting a contradiction between policy aspirations and lived reality.

Spatial Arrangements and the Reinforcement of Dominant Epistemologies

The way the writing centre desks are arranged, usually in rows facing the tutor, along with the prominent display of Western academic posters and the noticeable absence of local visual representation, reflects Lefebvre's (1991) idea that space is socially produced and shaped by power relations. My observations confirm Temple's (2024) findings that educational spaces often reinforce institutional hierarchies and signal whose knowledge is valued. For example, all the posters on the walls are in English and focus on Western essay structures; there is nothing that reflects our local languages or ways of writing. In the institution under study, approximately 80% of students speak an African language as their home language, yet these languages are scarcely represented in academic materials or practices. This highlights the disconnect between students' linguistic realities and the dominant epistemic norms reinforced within educational spaces.

This visible aspect of the perceived space (physical layout, signage) directly signals to students which forms of knowledge are valued and which are marginalised, often without explicit acknowledgement from the conceived space (official policies or mission statements). This finding is consistent with McKinney's (2013) critique that writing centres rarely question their spatial and symbolic arrangements, thus embedding assumptions about legitimacy.

Accordingly, the arrangements in our writing centre are not uncontested in the lived space. I witnessed students moving chairs into circles for group discussions, physically reconfiguring the space to facilitate more collaborative and less hierarchical interactions. Similarly, tutors frequently encourage the use of multilingual glossaries during sessions, allowing students to explain key concepts in their home languages before translating them into English, challenging the expectation that only Western academic language is valid. Such acts of spatial reconfiguration and content adaptation suggest that, while the centre's spatial politics may reinforce dominant norms, they are also open to negotiation and reimagination. This is similar to what Corbett (2008) describes as the "ideological work" of writing centres, where even small acts can challenge the status quo.

What stands out in this context is the elusiveness of these acts of resistance. Unlike some international cases where spatial redesign is an explicit part of decolonial practice (Sultana 2023), here, resistance often takes the form of everyday improvisations, such as students rearranging furniture or tutors validating indigenous knowledge. This reflects both the possibilities and the limitations of challenging institutional norms from within.

Reimagining Writing Centres through Epistemic Justice

The lived experiences of students, gathered through semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations, reveal both the pressures of conformity and the possibilities

for resistance within the writing centre's space. Many students reported feeling a sense of alienation when their linguistic and cultural backgrounds were ignored or undervalued. As one participant stated:

> If I have to be honest, it feels like you have to leave part of yourself at the door to fit in here. (S1)

This is consistent with Carino's (2001) characterisation of writing centres as sites of both support and exclusion. Until students are allowed to bring their "discoursal self" to the writing centre, they will always feel alienated. Strayhorn (2012) highlights that students, especially those from underrepresented or marginalised backgrounds, should feel that they are accepted, valued, and included to thrive in academic spaces.

But these tensions also give rise to acts of resistance and creativity in the lived space, such as students translating theoretical concepts into their home language during consultations. This demonstrates translanguaging as a practical strategy for meaning-making. Similarly, I have observed students incorporating visual elements, such as indigenous symbols or family photographs, into their assignments to reinforce their cultural narratives and knowledge systems, even when such multimodal expressions are not conventionally recognised in Western academic writing. These practices reflect translanguaging and hybridisation, supporting the argument by Santos (2014) that pluriversality can emerge even in constrained environments. It is important to note that while writing centres encourage translanguaging, students may still be penalised by lecturers who enforce monolingual English norms. This creates a contradictory pedagogical landscape and limits the transformative reach of writing centres unless the broader academic community is engaged.

Interestingly, the findings revealed a complex picture in which some participants perceive mastering academic English as empowering, using it strategically for social mobility and to challenge stereotypes, thus appropriating the dominant discourse for their own agency. For instance, one participant stated:

> I don't have a problem with tutors who use English. At the end of the day, I need to be good at English if I want to find a job, so it's okay to consult in English. (S4)

Rather than challenging the dominance of English, this participant had absorbed the idea that proficiency in English is a prerequisite for success, perpetuating the marginalisation of African languages in academic and professional spaces. In my observation, other students actively blend Western essay structures with their own cultural storytelling traditions, creating new, hybrid academic forms that defy simple categorisation. This complexity supports Canagarajah's (2002) and Sultana's (2023) findings that students in postcolonial and multilingual contexts often appropriate and transform dominant discourses for their own purposes, rather than simply internalising them. This shows how their lived space becomes a site of active negotiation and re-creation.

However, there is a contradiction here. While literature often frames writing centres as sites of either assimilation or resistance (McNamee and Miley 2017), this study's findings suggest that they are spaces where power, knowledge, and identity are constantly negotiated. The presence of hybrid practices and moments of resistance complicates the narrative of writing centres as purely exclusionary, pointing instead to their potential as sites of epistemic justice and transformation.

To summarise the findings, this study confirms the persistence of language hierarchies and spatial power dynamics within South African writing centres, consistent with critiques by Archer and Parker (2016) and McKinney (2013). However, the findings also complicate the view of these centres as merely sites of assimilation. While English and Western academic norms dominate the perceived (e.g., monolingual signage) and conceived (e.g., institutional messaging) spaces, what emerged strongly from the data was the negotiation that took place within the lived space. These interactions challenge binary understandings of compliance versus resistance, revealing writing centres as dynamic and contested arenas of meaning-making.

The analysis in this study extends existing theory by showing that the "ideological work" of writing centres (Carino 2001) is not simply imposed from above. Rather, students and tutors actively shape these spaces through everyday practices such as code-switching and referencing indigenous knowledge. These actions are not only forms of resistance, but also creative expressions of pluriversality (Santos 2014), highlighting the agency of students in appropriating and transforming dominant discourses (Sultana 2023).

Nonetheless, a key tension persists between the stated aims of transformation in higher education (Badat 2010) and the ongoing privileging of English in both policy and design. Unlike Latin American writing centres that visibly incorporate indigenous languages (Navarro Cira 2022), South African centres show limited institutional commitment to multilingualism (Turner and Wildsmith-Cromarty 2014). This exposes a critical gap, namely that while the lived space holds promise, these practices remain informal and marginalised. Therefore, to advance epistemic justice, it is imperative that institutions formally recognise and support these hybrid practices. Writing centres, if reimagined beyond support roles and validated by the broader university, hold potential as key sites for decolonial transformation and the legitimisation of diverse ways of knowing in higher education.

Towards a Conclusion

This study has shown that writing centres are not neutral spaces. They are shaped by complex interactions between language, knowledge and power, often reinforcing colonial legacies. Drawing on Lefebvre's spatial triad and decolonial theory, the study demonstrated how the material, symbolic, and lived elements of writing centre spaces tend to privilege English and Western academic norms. These dynamics influence how

students engage with academic support and reinforce existing epistemic hierarchies. However, I also found moments of creativity and resistance such as code-switching, references to indigenous knowledge, and subtle spatial rearrangements that suggest writing centres can become spaces for transformation and epistemic justice.

Although grounded in South Africa, these findings are relevant in other multilingual and postcolonial contexts. Challenges such as monolingual policies, the symbolic dominance of Western norms, and the marginalisation of local knowledge appear in writing centres elsewhere, including in Latin America and South Asia (Navarro Cira 2022; Sultana 2018). Writing centres in these regions may benefit from adopting strategies that affirm linguistic diversity and challenge spatial hierarchies. I propose the following strategies for epistemic transformation.

Multilingual signage and materials: Introducing multilingual visual resources that reflect the linguistic diversity of the student body can make alternative epistemologies more visible and valued.

Participatory spatial design: Involving students and tutors in the physical redesign of writing centre spaces can help dismantle hierarchical arrangements and encourage inclusive, collaborative engagement.

Tutor training for epistemic justice: Professional development should include a focus on decolonial theory, linguistic diversity, and pedagogical strategies that affirm students' cultural and epistemic identities.

Faculty multilingual workshops: Writing centres should regularly conduct workshops to train faculty lecturers on multilingualism so that they can integrate it into students' assignments and exams.

While these recommendations are not universal solutions, they offer a starting point for reimagining the writing centre as a more equitable academic space. Challenges remain, including institutional resistance and limited resources, but context-specific adaptation grounded in ongoing dialogue can make meaningful change possible.

Future research should examine writing centres across different types of institutions or track the impact of spatial and pedagogical changes over time. Studies focusing on the experiences of tutors, especially those from marginalised backgrounds, are also needed. Ultimately, this study contributes to broader debates on how academic support spaces can move beyond assimilation and become sites of genuine inclusion, justice, and epistemic plurality.

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