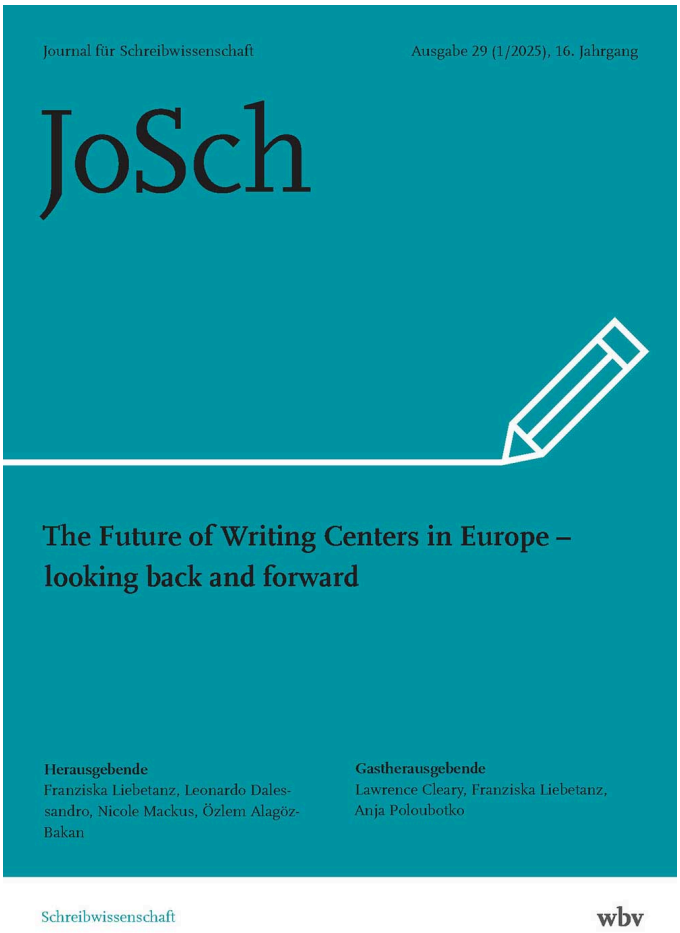

The demographics of our student clientele and tutors in our Writing Center have changed over the years, and we are imagining how new ideas and paradigms can be realized for the future as we work towards decolonization in the academy. In this article, we introduce our Writing Centre at a medium-sized Canadian university and explore multilingual tutors' experiences in tutoring multilingual students. Analyzing the tutors' reflections, we discuss the impact of the Western ideology of writing on multilingual tutors' writing centre practice and identity. We suggest that decolonizing academic writing pedagogy is essential to make our future writing centre more inclusive and equitable for the diverse demographic of student clientele and tutors. Gastherausgebende: Lawrence Cleary, Franziska Liebetanz, Anja Poloubotko

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Writing Reimagined: Decolonizing Academic Writing in a Writing Center

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Abstract

The demographics of our student clientele and tutors in our writing center have changed over the years, and we are imagining how new ideas and paradigms can be realized for the future as we work towards decolonization in the academy. In this article, we introduce our writing center at a medium-sized Canadian university and explore multilingual tutors' experiences in tutoring multilingual students. Analyzing the tutors' reflections, we discuss the impact of the Western ideology of writing on multilingual tutors' writing centre practice and identity. We suggest that decolonizing academic writing pedagogy is essential to make our future writing centre more inclusive and equitable for the diverse demographic of students and tutors.

Introduction

The demographics of higher education are changing worldwide, with more diverse student enrollment (UNESCO 2022). Writing centers reflect this change, as the presence of multilingual students and tutors has grown significantly (Rafoth 2015). Like many writing centers, ours is working to adapt and envision how new paradigms can better support students. Multilingual students, for whom English is an additional language, often struggle with writing assignments, and we wonder how best to help them. In today's multicultural academic and social environments, cross-cultural competency and sensitivity are essential.

To respond to the demographic change, we believe higher education should be decolonized, starting with our writing center and how we teach academic writing. Attas (2023) says, "decolonization could be understood as 'taking away the colonial,' but this raises the question of what "colonial" means. Colonization involves one group taking control of the lands, resources, languages, cultures, and relationships of another group" (Attas 2023: para. 1) which is how Canada came to be a country. Colonization has led to a Eurocentric ideology which means that European/Western-focused cultures and languages are viewed as superior to others. What does that have to do with academia? For students for whom English is not their first language to be admitted to a university, they first need to achieve a certain benchmark or standard and evidence of language proficiency, which might lead to a perceived

hierarchy of language use, making their first language inferior to English and making them feel inferior to native speakers of English.

Students are not blank slates as Paulo Freire (1970) has maintained since the 1970s. Decolonization acknowledges that students come with a wealth of knowledge in languages, cultures, and unique attributes to contribute to the conversation. Based on this, we understand the decolonization of the writing center as a process in which we reflect our views on Eurocentricity, our role in reproducing assumptions on (language) hierarchies, and appreciate the diversity, competencies, and abilities of international students. Students are traditionally not invited into the dialogue to search for solutions; this is where we propose a change. We need to learn to listen, oppose superiority of one culture and language over another, and then make changes accordingly to what we have learned together.

What decolonizing the academy looks like is still under construction, but in our writing center as a microcosm of the wider university, it starts with listening to students and hearing their concerns and frustrations with a system that is beyond their control and then encouraging them into leadership roles to become decision and change makers. Although we cannot bring about decolonization of the academy single-handedly as writing center practitioners, we can jointly engage in the struggle and dialogue about how to change our practice to involve everyone in the decision-making process. The writing center is a good place to start because students from all backgrounds and disciplines meet here to work on writing and understanding how the academic system works as it pertains to writing. We are not there yet but are working on decolonization to the best of our current understanding.

In this article, we discuss how we can be part of the change. We explore ways that facilitate the decolonization of academic writing and writing centers through multilingual and native English-speaking tutors' reflections. Employing tutors who come from different backgrounds and opening up the conversation uniquely positions us to learn how to navigate changing academia. Multilingual tutors are ideally suited to assist multilingual peers because they share similar experiences; they have the opportunity to learn from and gain empathy for the complexity of writing as it relates to culture and identity from native English speakers. In addition, native English speaking tutors have the opportunity to learn from multilingual peers and to share similar experiences with native English speaking peers. In the writing center, we hear honest first-hand experiential accounts from students who may not feel free to express themselves in a classroom setting. In the writing center, we talk about the challenges of how to navigate some of the contradictions in academic writing and tutoring.

The goal of our academic writing classes is to prepare all students for the essays and other written assignments they will encounter in their studies at the university. The goal of our writing center is to help students who seek help with their writing assignments. Our students come from diverse backgrounds and have different expectations of what university writing should be. They come from very different places of preparedness. Some of the questions we ask ourselves are: How do we teach and tutor writing in an environment that fosters a global culture? What do we do to foster cross-cultural understanding? We speak gener-

ously about diversity, yet we represent fairly normalized standardized expectations of writing mechanics and essay structure. How do we operate within that tension? How do we live with that dichotomy as we aim to decolonize those traditional standards? Can we actually do that, and if so, how? In this article, tutors' thoughts on their experiences as tutors and students invite us to reflect on that dichotomy. Together, we try to articulate our hopes and goals for a decolonized writing center.

The discussion here builds on our presentation on the future of writing centers at the Canadian Writing Centre Association conference. We, as tutors and instructors, co-presented and shared our experiences and thoughts on how the changing demographics at our writing center affect us. We imagined our future writing center in response to the change. The multilingual tutors also shared their insights into and experiences as multilingual tutor identities in the colonial academy. With additional research, revision and editing, we jointly compiled and wrote this article as an experiment in active non-hierarchical student instructor knowledge-construction and collaboration. We adopted this method of writing since we believe that including the student tutors in this conversation, co-constructing knowledge and disseminating it with them is one example of decolonizing the academy.

Our Writing Center

The University of Winnipeg is a medium-sized university with 8,673 undergraduate students and 272 graduate students, where 11.8% of the student body identify as indigenous and 18% identify as international students (UW Fast Facts 2023). The Department of Rhetoric, Writing, and Communications is home to our writing center where students can access writing tutoring, which is covered by student fees. Second-, third-, or fourth-year undergraduate students, who completed a required academic writing class at the beginning of their university studies and are interested in being writing tutors, are required to take a 3-credit hour course that covers tutoring pedagogy, tools, strategies, and etiquette. Once they complete the course, they become writing tutors. The coordinator trains tutors via the required course, evaluates the tutors, schedules tutor visits to classes, promotes the writing center across campus, and connects with other faculties and departments.

The writing center usually hires about 30–35 tutors per year. Tutor wages are a little more than minimum wage. Their tutoring schedules are flexible, and we work with the tutors to fit the tutoring hours in between their classes since they are usually full-time students. The writing center supervisor manages tutor scheduling and day-to-day activities in the writing center. Students from all departments are welcome to sign up for one-hour appointments to access help with existing class writing assignments. The writing center logs somewhere between 1200 and 1500 one-hour tutoring appointments per year. We also send tutors to classes if professors would like tutors to help with writing assignments in class.

Decolonizing Writing Center Practice

Our writing center sees a diverse range of students. Eighteen percent of the enrolled students at our university come from 75 different countries (UW International Students 2025). We seek to portray ourselves as, and strive to be, an inclusive place that aids students in whatever writing concerns they may face. Oftentimes, we come across multilingual students who are frustrated with their grades and the expectations they face during their writing process. They feel their writing is "not right" or lacking due to rigid writing expectations. They feel they are falling short of the expected standards. As much as we can encourage students to develop their writing in their own, individually unique way, we are still tasked with upholding a uniform expectation of a colonized institution that functions with power dynamics across social and cultural hierarchies.

Multilingual students still see their writing as something to be "fixed", to fit into the mould, and to hopefully pass their classes while adhering to a traditional ideology in research and presentation. This often causes students to see academic writing as an obstacle rather than as a skill that can be developed and is still under construction. Hence, students view writing mostly as getting the job done and fulfilling an assignment to be submitted instead of finding interest in the process of research and writing. Strict standards contribute to stress and impede growth and curiosity.

The emphasis on product over process in writing instruction has long shaped our educational approach, often sidelining critical thinking and reflective practices essential for intellectual development. Hayles (2024: 262) notes the detrimental impact of prioritizing output, asserting that when students perceive that only the final product matters, they focus on producing better output rather than enhancing their capacity to critically engage with important works and articulate insightful arguments. Hayles (2024) further claims that assignments that emphasize the writing process, such as peer reviews, iterative revisions and incorporating feedback, brainstorming, and in-class exercises, where students write freely without concern for structure or perfection, underscore the value of learning as a continuous journey. We are convinced that in times of GenAI, we need to encourage process-oriented writing as it is essential for fostering students' own voice and independent thinking. Process-oriented strategies convey that learning is the goal, with an improved final product serving merely as a byproduct of this endeavor (Hayles 2024: 262). Process-oriented writing allows multilingual students to critically engage in writing as a learning tool with their unique stories and styles, make meanings, and reflect on their linguistic and cultural repertoires instead of focusing on standard forms and later-order concerns in their writing (Moussu 2013). Later-order concerns can come later.

In the 1980s, Reigstad and McAndrew (1984) encouraged tutors to first deal with what they called higher-order concerns (HOCs). HOCs address the assignment level (what are the students expected to do), and the structural level of the text (what are the main ideas of the writing). Reigstad and McAndrew's (1984) philosophy of addressing HOCs first and then lower or later-order concerns (LOCs) has influenced writing center pedagogy since then

(Gillespie/Lerner 2008). Aligned with this pedagogy, our writing center states that tutors do not edit and proofread students' writing. However, we experience that multilingual students often ask for help with their grammar and want tutors to help them edit their work. Some even mention that their professors asked them to visit the writing center to improve LOCs, although their HOCs meet the assignment criteria. This tension causes tutor and student confusion during tutoring sessions. Multilingual students feel that their work is deficient and their writing problematic because it seems to not meet the standard criteria (Marshall 2010) of correct grammar and academic writing mechanics. This undermines their rich linguistic and cultural repertoires. Because of their language and writing, they are again made to feel inferior, which further disservices their learning. In our writing center, we coach tutors to value students' unique identity, work on HOCs, not ignore LOCs but to stress the harmony of both.

Matsuda and Cox (2011) say that those who have little experience with multilingual writers may see "surface-level errors" (2011: 5) as deficient or problematic. This is why it is important for our writing center to train tutors to work with multilingual students. Part of decolonizing our writing center is attempting to remove a colonial type relationship, which often *others* the marginalized group and practices power over them (Attas 2023); multilingual tutors can help remove the *othering* because they are able to understand the norms and conventions of other languages. They can relate to the struggles of other multilingual students and share their experiences. Being able to relate to multilingual students with their own experiences and then going over the requirements of an assignment goes a long way in assisting students. One of the multilingual tutors in our writing center shared:

> *As a multilingual student, I understand how multilingual tutees have diverse systems of coding information and arranging their thoughts. I also know it is not easy to translate everything into one language and neatly fit into a writing assignment. Based on my positionality and experience, I tell multilingual students writing is not just about language fluency, but they can create meaning even if they are not familiar with popular cultural references.*

A tutor's positionality affects tutoring practice; it is crucial to reflect today's diverse demographic of tutees in that of tutors. If students coming to the writing center see themselves reflected in the tutors, they feel a sense of camaraderie and belonging. Having more multilingual tutors in the writing centre will also change their positionality from 'English as an additional language (EAL) tutors' to 'multilingual tutors'. Because of their linguistic minority status, multilingual tutors may feel marginalized with their 'EAL identity', which may posi-

tion them as deficient (Marshall 2010). A multilingual tutor confesses their challenges with the notion of being an 'EAL tutor'[1]:

> *Sometimes I feel like imposter syndrome consumes me. The imposter phenomenon can be referred to as "an internal feeling of intellectual phoniness" (Freeman et al. 2022:1). It has individuals like me believe that I have scammed or conned others into overestimating my capabilities. How can I be a tutor when my grammar sucks? I often feel inadequate. One of the variables of the imposter syndrome associated with high achievement is the pressure to succeed leading to stress and maladjustment (Henning et al. 1998). Another factor that influences this syndrome is being a first-generation student or being the first in the family to attend post-secondary education (Peteet et al. 2015). Though I am not a first-generation student, as a first-generation immigrant, I am the first in my family to get a post-secondary education in the West. This is a big deal because the 'West' often dismisses education from the 'East'. Sometimes, my accent shows up on certain words; sometimes, it's the lack of vocabulary that makes me doubt myself. Despite where I am now, at the back of my head I still see myself as a young immigrant doing ESL classes. Even when I got to the point where I got moved to an advanced program in my reading and writing classes in the fifth grade, I was still doing ESL classes. It was the flaw in the system that made me feel like, despite the grades or achievements, I still didn't fit in the box of a proper English speaker. However, I'm in the process of learning to be more forgiving with myself, the same way everyone should be.*

Unfortunately, even as the demographics have changed, writing center practitioners, including tutors, may feel pressured to behave like a "proper writing tutor" with no foreign accent and mechanically correct writing. This dismisses multilingual tutors' positionality as "an asset to be welcomed" (Marshall 2010: 41). Our relationship with the writing process needs to be expanded and truly inclusive at its roots rather than just in its appearance and in empty statements. If we claim to aim for an inclusive environment without changing expectations and old habits, we would just offer empty words without substance. Our goal is that in our writing center we genuinely work towards an environment that allows for originality, curiosity, and joy of learning to be at the forefront, always focusing on a process-oriented approach to writing rather than basing all assessment on one final product. Writing is an iterative process, which can be messy, and if we want students to learn from the process in addition to the final product, we aim to embrace writing as a learning tool under construction. Seeing their ability to speak other languages as an asset rather than an impediment helps multilin-

1 The following student statements are reflection scripts they prepared for the CWCA 2023 conference presentation. The students included existing research in their contributions. The citations in the statements shared here are student generated

gual students gain confidence in their identities instead of considering themselves imposters in someone else's game.

Decolonizing Academic Writing for the Future Writing Center

The multilingual writing tutors and instructors in our writing center reflected on their first few years in a Canadian university as multilingual students and expressed their linguistic and cultural vulnerability and confusion in the academic writing world. Interestingly, the reflections show that their challenges with academic writing as multilingual students were not only due to their identity as EAL students but also because their cultural identities are distinct from the cultural norms surrounding them. The following are multilingual tutors' and instructors' reflections on their academic writing journey as multilingual students:

Multilingual Tutor's Reflection: Unlearning to Learn

> *I still remember that the score of my first academic final essay in another school was 42 percent. That was six years ago, and at that time, I didn't know how to cite sources properly, make sentences flow, or even know how to use my own words to rephrase other sentences. Back then, I didn't know that I had to explain things in detail in English writing because I wasn't trained to write that way in China. Mandarin is my mother tongue, and Chinese is a language that's known for its high context, which means we tend to give people indirect feedback or reactions to let them figure out what we mean on their own. Cognitive psychology explores how the structural disparities between Chinese and English languages impact how we store, organize, and process information (Schmitt et al. 1994: 421). In my culture, it is an art form using ancient Chinese poetry without explaining it when we write sentences with deeper meanings because we see those quotes as something everyone should know, which also leaves the readers a space for imagination. It can be seen as 'too extra' if the paper is filled with detailed explanations of the citations. Teachers often praise writings that don't sound too direct or followed by detailed explanations when students use literary quotations because this type of writing style shows that the students are deep thinkers and that they have mastered the art of creating imaginary space for their readers, which leads to higher grades. Since Mandarin and English contradict each other so much, I booked many appointments with the writing center, and I spent the first two years unlearning everything I learned from my first 18 years of Mandarin writing experience just to get a higher score in English academic writing.*

Multilingual Instructor's Reflection: Academic Writing as a Site of Conflicting Cultures

As a multilingual writing instructor, I often reflect on my experiences learning academic writing when I was a student at a Canadian university. I have been at various academic and emotional stages and states during the English academic writing journey. Academic writing was beyond the linguistic domain. It was a culturally bound and embedded space. When I read my essays, my prose sounded immature and awkward because of my English as an additional language and Koreanness. The grade wasn't also satisfying at first, which demoralized me and made me uncertain about my academic success and career in Canada. My new status as an English as an Additional Language student in Canada magnified these emotional challenges.

The challenge was culturally induced. Many topics and examples in academic texts were based on the Canadian or American context. When I read and had to write an article in the Canadian context, I had to spend a lot of time researching and learning about the context. It was a good opportunity to learn about a new context, but with a time constraint, it wasn't always welcome. I sometimes felt like if the topics had been related to Korea, I could have understood it better and enjoyed writing more. The way of writing academic texts was also culturally different. Academic integrity was more strongly emphasized. The consequence of plagiarism was more serious. For many multilingual students, this is the most challenging part because they have to learn to write culturally appropriate academic texts. Often, most multilingual students learn to paraphrase and cite for the first time at a Canadian undergraduate or graduate school, which can cause unintentional plagiarism or severe anxiety about mistakenly plagiarizing.

These thoughts reflect multilingual students' challenges with academic writing due to its strict standards of mechanical correctness and the prescribed essay structure with an introduction, thesis, arguments to support a thesis, in-text citations properly cited with a Reference page. Not that these standards are wrong and unattainable, but in our opinion, scaffolding the learning as a process, explaining the parts along the way, and being open to exploring other ways of demonstrating knowledge other than the traditional research essay would benefit students and enhance learning; this is all part of decolonizing academic writing.

Multilingual students have knowledge about writing in their first language. What are those traditions, and how do they compare with the new writing culture? Writing culture intersects with writing and multilingual learner identity. In the last tutor's reflection, it is interesting to see the tutor had to unlearn her Chinese style of academic writing to learn the English style of writing because of different cultural expectations and practices in writing. The multilingual instructor's reflection also resonates with the tutor's experience as it discusses how these different cultural expectations become immense challenges in learning the

English style of academic writing in English-dominant institutions. It is evident that the one-size-fits-all essay writing standard and method confined them in the colonial institution, and the resultant challenges negatively affected their learner identity.

James Baldwin said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced" (Baldwin 1962: BR11). These reflections resonate with current discussions on the colonial academy, and the urgency for decolonization as necessary. We cannot make calls for inclusivity without changing the system in which we learn. Surface-level writing that attends to LOCs fits neatly into a prescribed mould and is deemed proper for success. In our academic writing classes, we experiment with multimodal communication styles. We encourage students to express their knowledge through art, music, radio programs, podcasts, and magazine articles, to name just a few. There is nothing wrong with a standard academic essay, but it is just one way of demonstrating knowledge. There are many other writing modalities that invite diversity, creativity, enjoyment, and student incentive all packaged in a learning process.

Multilingual students often experience a lack of academic and writing tools to navigate a new academic system foreign to them. For change to happen, pedagogical forms and expectations that welcome diversity in writing practices need to be explored. As instructors and writing center practitioners, we challenge ourselves to adopt culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy in our writing instruction, which allows us to learn about multilingual students' cultures and select teaching materials and topics that are relevant to them (Gay 2010; Ladson-Billings 1995 & 2021). Our hope with the aim to decolonize writing is to see more multilingual students view writing as a skill that aids their academic journey, instead of a barrier that discourages them from pursuing and presenting topics that they are curious and passionate about. Writing should not be understood as a one-size-fits-all method that furthers social hierarchies where writing standards are curated by a few for students to figure out.

Concluding Thoughts

The writing center at our university is a dynamic place where we have animated discussions about writing, teaching writing, languages, multilingualism, and the unique role that tutors play in this important junction. We are at a crossroads in the writing center because writing is at a crossroads. The demographics of our students and tutors in our writing center are more diverse than ever. GenAI has entered the stage and challenges us to rethink writing and tutoring as it has always been done. We are looking at other ways to be relevant and essential in these changing times. To that end, we aim to keep the line of communication open to students so we can engage in a conversation about how to best learn in a dynamic environment that invites curiosity and exploration, and regards mistakes as just another piece in the learning puzzle. As we work towards decolonization in the writing center, we also suggest the decolonization of academic writing by adopting responsive and relevant pedagogy in writing instruction. We see multilingualism as an asset to be celebrated, and multimodal

and process writing as essential to make our future writing center more inclusive and equitable for the changing demographics and times.

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