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Academic Writing in Times of Crisis: Refashioning Writing Tutor Development for Online Environments

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Abstract

This paper builds on a discussion launched by the EATAW 2021 conference panel, 'Writing Tutor Development: Challenges and Opportunities in the Current State of the Art'. As a critical discussion of the panel's themes, the paper engages with academic writing in times of crises by zooming in on infrastructures of writing support, namely the complex system in which Academic Writing Tutoring takes place, contextualised within the Centre for Academic Writing (CAW) at Coventry University, UK. Beginning with a consideration of what constitutes a 'writing tutor' in contemporary contexts and at CAW, the paper outlines a range of academic writing support identities and roles, unravels the institutional drivers that shape them, and offers perspectives on reconciling apparently disparate roles. Next, the paper addresses the issue of agency in terms of the challenges of enculturating writing tutors into communities of practice, discourse communities, and research networks. This is done with a view to reflecting on the practices in CAW and beyond, thus demonstrating the need for varied development and support pathways to facilitate the move towards online delivery amid, and after, a time of global crisis, namely, the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion centres on how challenges can be overcome through sustained professional development, focusing on the role of technology in not only refashioning academic writing support, but also the roles and practices of Academic Writing Tutors at CAW. Issues of digital pedagogies, technologies, and digital literacies permeate this discussion of the online pivot and crisis pedagogies, offering analysis, reflections, and questions to guide future directions in (online) Academic Writing Tutor development and Academic Writing (crisis) Pedagogies research.

Introduction

This paper presents a critical discussion of current challenges and opportunities relating to the development and professionalisation of Academic Writing Tutors and other writing development staff, building on a themed panel debate held at 'EATAW 2021'¹. Placed within a period of global crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic – and contextualised within the Centre for Academic Writing (CAW) at Coventry University, UK, the paper reflects on academic writing as an

¹ All panel members have worked as peer and/or professional writing tutors. Panellists offered perspectives from their current roles as writing centre managers and/or as academics, scholars, and researchers working in a writing centre and the wider fields of Academic Writing Development, Applied Linguistics, Human Geography, and Education. Their aim was to reflect on and share challenges they face, discuss good practice in contemporary writing tutor development, and contribute to developments in the field.

infrastructure of support, by first unpacking what a 'writing tutor' is in today's Higher Education (HE) writing development landscape. To do this, the complex professional identities of writing tutors are expounded, with consideration given to the issue of tutor agency and the challenges of enculturating writing tutors into communities of practice, discourse communities, and research networks. With a critical understanding of these identities, the paper reflects on the response to the COVID-19 pandemic online pivot by CAW and its team of writing tutors from a range of backgrounds. In so doing, technology's role in refashioning academic writing support as well as the remits and practices of academic writing tutors is discussed, signalling current and future directions for the field and practice.

Academic Writing Tutors at CAW: Implications for a UK University Invested in Writing Development

The quintessential writing tutor role is that of the Peer Writing Tutor, described in detail, for example, in Bonnie Devet, Susan Orr, Margo Blythman, and Celia Bishop's award-winning² book chapter 'Peering Across the Pond: The Role of Students in Developing Other Students' Writing in the US and UK' (2006). Student peer writing tutors are at the heart of writing centres in universities, colleges, and schools in the United States, Europe, and across the world (Dalessandro et al., 2015; IWCA Peer Tutoring 2022). Also discussed in Devet et al. (2006) are writing development staff in universities in the UK, who occupy different roles in relation to tutoring students and working with university staff. Apart from the peer writing tutor role, therefore, there are other writing development roles that diversify this common paradigm.

The existence of a variety of writing support roles reflects the complex and relatively unique labour composition of CAW, which makes of the centre a felicitous and fitting case study for a critical discussion of Academic Writing Tutor identities and development. Founded in 2004, CAW was the first UK university writing centre with a remit to serve students and staff across an HE institution. To fulfil this responsibility, from its inception, CAW has been composed of writing development staff including professional Academic Writing Tutors and Lecturing/Researching academics (Deane & Ganobcsik-Williams, 2012). Focusing on Academic Writing tutoring, profiles showcasing CAW's work detailed its practices aligned to the centre's role and purpose (Deane & Ganobcsik-Williams, 2012), and research highlighted its developments in online, asynchronous pedagogies (Angelov & Ganobcsik-Williams, 2015). At CAW, Academic Writing Tutors in particular, are responsible for delivering one-to-one writing tutorials (in person, by email, or live online), writing development workshops (general and faculty specific), and single-question drop-in sessions (including Faculty outreach drop-ins). They also develop Academic Writing resources and keep up to date with writing tutoring pedagogy and scholarship.

During the years since CAW's establishment, the University has expanded significantly from a single institution into the 'Coventry University Group' of institutions, as shown in Figure 1. Along with this expansion, writing support has grown and diversified. In addition to CAW's Academic Writing Tutors, Assistant Professors and Lecturers in Academic Writing, and Hourly Paid Lecturers in Academic Writing, new roles including Academic Writing Developers, Academic Skills Tutors, and Academic Progression Coaches have been created to provide writing development and support in other areas of the Coventry University Group, as illustrated in Figure 2.

² This chapter won the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) Outstanding Scholarship Award (2007). See: International Writing Centers Association (2019) 'Back Matter', *The Writing Center Journal* 37.2 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26922029>

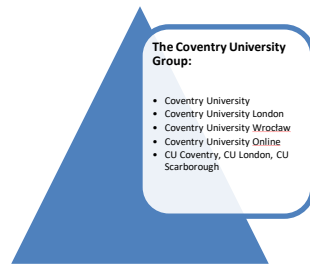


Figure 1. Areas of the Coventry University Group



Figure 2. Academic Writing Development Provision across the Coventry University Group

At CU Coventry, CU London, and CU Scarborough, Academic Writing Developers provide both student writing support (e.g., writing tutorials and workshops) and support for academics in writing assignment briefs and teaching writing (i.e., Writing in the Disciplines (WiD)) (Clughen & Hardy, 2012; Deane & O'Neill, 2011). Academic Skills Tutors at Coventry University London carry out writing tutorials and a programme of 'Spotlight' writing and academic skills development workshops, and Academic Progression Coaches at Coventry University Online support students with their writing. CAW's Academic Writing Tutors, too, provide writing tutorials for Coventry University London, as well as writing tutorials and workshops for Coventry University Online students and for students at the branch campus Coventry University Wrocław. In addition, CAW's Assistant Professors and Lecturers offer consultations and workshops to staff across the Coventry University Group in teaching WiD and in writing for research dissemination and publication. Given this complexity, as associated with different areas of the University Group, for the remainder of this paper, the phrase 'Academic Writing Tutor/s' will be used as an umbrella term designating Academic Writing Developers, Academic Skills Tutors, and Academic Progression Coaches.

The above roles and remits constitute the work of writing development staff in the Coventry University Group's model of "whole institution" writing provision (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2011), of which CAW has oversight. Informing these roles are the educational and professional backgrounds of staff employed to do this work. In the UK, writing development staff bring to

their roles knowledge and qualifications in a variety of fields, often including, for example, EAP, TESOL, English Language, English Literature, Education, Linguistics, Psychology, Counselling and Mentoring, and Study Skills. It is important to note that not all writing development staff have formal qualifications in the field of Academic Writing. This is because very few academic/professional courses in Academic Writing currently exist, apart from CAW's own PGCert in 'Academic Writing Development' and PGDip/MA in 'Academic Writing Development and Research'³, a suite of programmes particularly designed in response to this gap in professional provision. Some staff at CAW have now completed these Postgraduate qualifications, alongside participating in other formal and informal professional development opportunities offered to all Academic Writing Tutors as an enculturation route into the field of Academic Writing Development.

Moreover, changes at Coventry University maximising online education have also called for reshaping the practices and contexts of writing development and the roles of Academic Writing Tutors. Thus, one important theme that threads through CAW's evolution is a need to understand distance pedagogies better and to support writing development online and internationally. Advances, such as the Coventry Online Writing Lab (Ganobcsik-Williams & Broughan, 2011), discussed later in this paper, and asynchronous online writing tutorials (Angelov & Ganobcsik-Williams, 2015), position technological innovations at the centre of CAW's progression – a progression further accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding how to engage Academic Writing Tutors in this development is an evident challenge. Therefore, a more thorough understanding of Academic Writing Tutors' professional identities, profiles, and practices is needed as a basis for change.

Enculturating Writing Tutors and Writing Development Staff into Communities of Practice, Discourse Communities, and Research Networks

Just as writing development roles at CAW and the Coventry University Group differ from that of the traditional student peer writing tutor role, so, too, do the disciplinary fields of or entry points into the roles in which writing development staff are grounded. Enculturation into these writing development roles, communities of practice, and discourse communities commences as soon as staff are in post. Weekly 'staff development and admin time' provides Academic Writing Tutors, for example, with opportunities for individualised reading on writing development topics they and their line managers have identified as new or relevant. To illustrate, for general tutor development, Murphy & Sherwood (2011) can offer guidance on day-to-day writing tutor practices, while for developments in the use of technology, such as giving audio feedback, research-based resources like Grigoryan (2017) may provide valuable insights. Development time can include reading and contributing to blogs such as *PeerCentered*, listservs such as *WCENTER*, and contributing to ongoing projects in the centre, for example, materials development for Academic Writing workshops in online contexts. Moreover, Academic Writing Tutors also scaffold each other through peer-observation and discussion of writing tutorials, and managers provide support through tutorial observations and feedback.

A challenge in the enculturation of writing tutors into their roles and the wider community emerges in the shift patterns that typify the roles. In these patterns, tutors work independently with their students and when they do work collaboratively with tutoring colleagues, this occurs in small teams that are formed around collaborative tasks, such as co-designing a workshop or support materials, and via changes to their regular schedules. To mitigate further the risk of siloing of Academic Writing Tutors in post, every semester, CAW organises a 'Staff Development Day for Academic Writing' involving all writing development teams and managers from across the Group. These events give tutors opportunities to present on their own work, offer perspectives on their practice, as well as to benefit from manager-led presentations and discussions, and internal and external guest speakers on topical issues in Academic Writing. Many Academic Writing Tutors also study Coventry University's postgraduate 'Introduction to Teaching and Learning in Higher Education' module and, upon

³ For details of these courses, see: www.coventry.ac.uk/cawma, www.coventry.ac.uk/cawpgdip, www.coventry.ac.uk/cawpgcert.

completion, gain 'professional recognition as [...] Associate Fellow[s] of the Higher Education Academy (AFHEA)' (CUG 2022) and develop their competences for working in a multicultural, global university. Overall, these socialised and collaborative practices reflect a keen interest in participatory and competence approaches to staff development (Barth & Rieckmann, 2012), drawing on peer relationships to exchange knowledge and scaffold learning (Curry, 2019).

Similarly, in terms of research and the tutoring community of practice, CAW promotes an approach in which Academic Writing Tutors can take agency. Research-enriched staff development opportunities are aimed to feed into practice and indeed into the organisation of the University's writing provision model. Institutionally, academic writing tutoring exists in a larger HE field of practice that tends to favour and work with skills-based pedagogies of writing. Such skills orientations rely on notions of transferability of academic writing and general induction to academic writing (Hallett, 2013). However, they are not without critique. The systemic provocation for Writing Developers is to change, and challenge, the actual institutional perceptions and practices of academic writing learning and teaching by advocating for the situated and contextualised nature of writing in the (inter)disciplinary, cultural, and social spaces of learning (Butler, 2013; Neculai 2015). Developing tutoring pedagogies embedded in the multi-stranded field of Academic Writing practice-cum-research is one way in which writing development work can respond to this challenge and effect change. In terms of online and distance tutoring pedagogies, there is evident opportunity to realise these complex aims, recognising the potential impact of the mode of delivery and literacy development, during and following the COVID-19 pandemic (Prihandoko, 2021).

Yet, research-based tutoring pedagogies are not uniform or straightforward either. The challenge in shaping a more coherent response lies in the ability to create practical points of intersection, a common ground between the multiple, often non-intersecting strands of the field of Academic Writing from the primary Writing Centre research to WiD/WAC, EAP, Academic Literacies, TESOL, Education, Applied Linguistics, Rhetoric and Composition, and Writing Studies. Rendering explicit these traditions as they are also embedded in local/national institutional/academic histories becomes then a staple for developing a research base for tutoring. CAW's Academic Writing Tutor community is itself diverse, with staff backgrounds and transdisciplinary identities grounded in, for instance, History, Politics, Literary/Cultural Studies, Health and Biomedical Sciences, Applied Linguistics, TEFL, and EAP. Additionally, there are other kinds of mutually enriching diversities: the multilingual and multicultural/multi-ethnic identities of Academic Writing Tutors as well as their various qualifications and institutional backgrounds. Acknowledging this diversity and working with its affordances has become an imperative in developing the complexity of tutoring at CAW (in peer tutoring contexts, see Clarence, 2018), and therefore the complexity of situated student writing (Lea & Street, 1998).

How does one reconcile and capitalise on these backgrounds and promote at the same time a coherent set of practices that benefit both tutors and students, and enable their voices and signature practices? The mission, arguably, is to produce valid trans/interdisciplinary spaces for understanding tutoring as well as student writing, by enabling Tutor/Writing Developer agency for commonality of purpose. Activities in this arena include a reading and discussion group for Academic Writing Tutors on key writing centre research and pedagogy (Clarence, 2016); the ability to be involved in writing centre development projects and to report on these at staff development days (Clarence, 2016); and creating access to research-based talks by CAW's Assistant Professors and Lecturers in Academic Writing and access to presentations by external speakers, e.g., via 'The CAW Series for Staff' (flyers for a selection of these talks are presented in Figure 3).



Figure 3. Sample 'CAW Series for Staff' Advertising Flyers

Participation in research projects is another way in which Academic Writing Tutors can gain professional experience and contribute to knowledge production (Clarence, 2016). In 2019, for instance, Catalina Neculai (CAW) and Christopher Strelluf (University of Warwick, UK) led a research project to develop 'Literacies for Life in the City of Culture: A Community-Based Writing Centre in Coventry', drawing on Neculai's research on "the right to literacies" (2018) and Strelluf's work in critical linguistics (2016) and language attitudes (2015). These colleagues presented at a CAW team day, sought input from Academic Writing Tutors and Academic Writing Developers, and approached them to recruit a Research Assistant and Community Writing Tutor for the project's pop-up writing centre the central public library of the city of Coventry (the project flyer is shown in Figure 4).

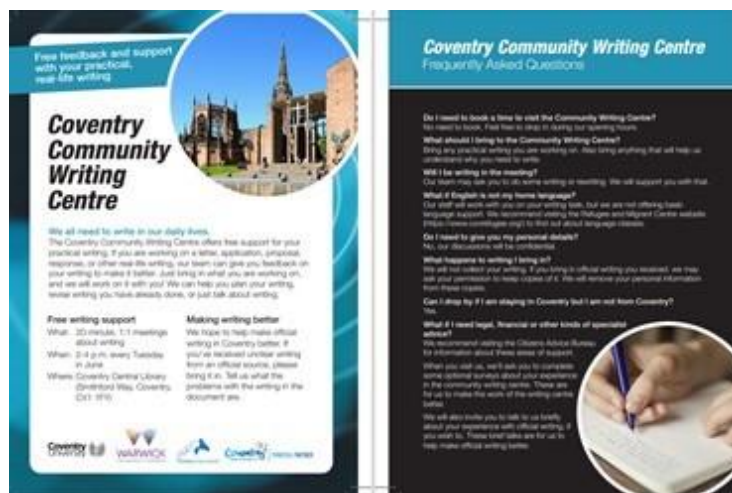


Figure 4. 'Literacies for Life in the City of Culture: A Community-Based Writing Centre in Coventry' Advertising Flyer

Bridging these various means of enculturation, a set of questions emerge around the need for Academic Writing Tutors to organise into a working community with shared goals and commonality of purpose:

- (1) How can we find points of intersection among a diverse professional community of Academic Writing Tutors?
- (2) How does one activate agency in the context of a peer tutoring community and in a professional tutoring community context?
- (3) How can a knowledge of diversity and of the means to activate agency be put to good use in the transition from emergency or crisis online tutoring towards a theoretically and practically grounded online and distance tutoring approach?

These questions are important for Writing Development/Writing Centre leads to ask and to explore with their tutoring and writing development staff in their own local contexts, especially in non-Anglophone institutions where the challenge of multilingual tutoring adds another layer of enculturation. To address part of this agenda, in the next section, the focus falls on online

and distance tutoring, with CAW as a case study serving to unpack these issues and finally, in the conclusion, to open them up to further questions, reflection, and discussion elsewhere.

The Role of Technology in Refashioning Academic Writing Support and the Remits and Practices of Academic Writing Tutors

Key factors that have shaped and reshaped Academic Writing support in recent years are online technologies and the pivot to online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the online writing centre is by no means an advent notion, and at CAW, the COWL (Coventry Online Writing Lab) initiative, begun in 2008, predated the UK's Spring 2020 national COVID-19 lockdown and online pivot, and sought to "provide a facility for online writing tutorials [that] would enable access to writing support for the increasing number of students who study remotely" (Ganobcsik-Williams & Broughan, 2011, p. 268). As a service development project, COWL was underpinned by a longstanding aim in digital pedagogy practices, where the goal was largely to emulate face-to-face practices (McCarthy, 2016; Selwyn, 2011) and make use of technologies to achieve specific pedagogical aims for supporting writing development. Through COWL, CAW's Academic Writing Tutors had worked for a number of years with students in asynchronous 'email' and synchronous 'live online' writing tutorials via Skype.

In the lead up to the COVID-19 pandemic, the wider field of digital pedagogy had continued to expand and reorient itself (Carrier & Nye, 2017), moving toward a view of digital pedagogy as a distinct pedagogy that saw advantages in increasing student engagement (Croxtton, 2014; Power & St - Jacques, 2013), developing learner autonomy (Curry & Riordan, 2021), motivating learners (Abdelhafez & Abdallah, 2015), improving accessibility (Godwin-Jones, 2018), personalising learning (Kerr, 2016), and creating immersive virtual spaces for working across virtual communities and cultures (Chapelle, 2003). Through these advances in thinking that surround digital pedagogies, the potential affordances of technology for facilitating learning have grown exponentially, leading CAW, for example, towards more advanced practices in exploiting technology to support writing development, such as using audio feedback to complement written feedback and lend a more human tone to asynchronous academic writing provision (e.g., Grigoryan, 2017).

Coupled with these advances are noteworthy challenges whereby digital pedagogies can create both access and inequity, depending on student resources and access to technology (Hockly & Dudeney, 2018). Furthermore, training is required to ensure effective use of technology (Claypole, 2016; Kerr, 2015) and from an institutional perspective, the ethics of technology and data management need to be considered (Sharkey, 2016). Thus, the development of digital pedagogies for the online writing centre is increasingly a fraught endeavour, requiring a thoughtful and critical approach to the use of technology. Yet, while research and practice in digital pedagogies had been on the rise, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is now an increased interest in the topic, ushering fast-paced and greater advances in the field (Vääätäjä & Ruokamo, 2021). In reflecting on the interplay between technology and COVID-19, and the impact on academic writing tutoring practices, both across Europe and locally at CAW, there is much to consider.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education has been felt globally. Issues of access, mental health, and inequity pervade discussion on the topic (The Edge Foundation, 2020). From an institutional perspective, the online pivot was sudden and neither management nor teaching staff at educational institutions around the world were afforded adequate time or resources to effectively transition their pedagogies online, especially given the evident complexity of such an endeavour. Under the notion of a crisis pedagogy, Adedoyin and Soykan (2020, p. 8) note that "the crisis-response migration methods adopted by universities are limited to delivery media without taking cognizance of effective online education theories and models". Therefore, owing to resource allocation, the "crisis-response migration due to the pandemic should not be equated with effective online education [...] but rather be seen from the perspective of emergency remote teaching platforms".

CAW's first day of working remotely during the country's first national lockdown was Saturday 21 March 2020, and staff did not begin returning to working on campus until August 2021. For CAW, this was an overnight transition, reflective of Adedoyin and Soykan (2020), where Academic Writing Tutors were working from home, with limited internet facilities, technological support and resource, and needing additional training in digital pedagogies. In March 2020, CAW's Receptionists immediately rescheduled all writing tutorials to take place online and Academic Writing Tutors carried on providing writing support to students. For the first three months, only asynchronous 'email' writing tutorials were offered, since uniformity of staff members' remote working computer equipment and home working spaces could not be ensured – a strategic approach that sought to accommodate the diversity of Academic Writing Tutors' backgrounds, experiences, and home contexts.

Responding to the crisis with immediate effect and short-term plans meant that CAW could continue to support students using email and asynchronous delivery effectively (Angelov & Ganobcsik-Williams, 2015). However, in spite of the foundation granted by the uses of COWL, the move to working from home and solely online proved disruptive, in part owing to the students' needs being different during the pandemic. Thus, in the larger teaching and learning ecology of the university at that time, CAW's Academic Writing Tutors arguably offered more than a writing support service for students and became a critical and much needed point of contact for students who, like the tutees discussed in Rempel et al. (2022), may have otherwise had more limited opportunities for one-on-one learning and engagement on their degree courses. Therefore, while CAW's asynchronous provision unfolded, medium and long-term plans for synchronous and hybrid provision, delivered by CAW's Academic Writing Tutors, were simultaneously developed in order to reconsider the first response to online writing tutorials, to support students' changing needs, and to benefit from the growing body of knowledge and logistics in digital pedagogies.

During summer 2020, Academic Writing Tutor training in digital pedagogies for writing tutoring and workshop teaching took place, taking a participatory approach, facilitating the Academic Writing Tutors' full engagement with the evolving digital practices at CAW. This development enabled synchronous online writing tutorials to be resumed and writing development workshops to be taught live online, reflecting the, by now well-established, iterative development of online pedagogies during the pandemic (Karakaya, 2021) and the affordances of digital pedagogies for teaching and learning (Curry, 2021). Through this process, instead of simply using technologies to emulate face-to-face and existing practices (Fullan, 2013), CAW operated from a position of openness, drawing on notions put forward by Tsui and Tavares (2021) who argue that the relationship between pedagogy and technology is not dichotomous and unidirectional but one of mutual shaping and co-construction. In so doing, CAW's managers, Academic Writing Tutors, Lecturers, and Assistant Professors considered how academic writing tutorials, academic writing workshops, and academic writing 'café' drop-in writing sessions could best be hosted online. Bringing a knowledge of effective writing pedagogies to the technology and allowing the technology to invigorate the pedagogy, all CAW teams worked together to adapt tutoring pedagogies in order to develop a mix of online classroom teaching (e.g., online workshops, following Hooley et al., 2021), as well as synchronous and asynchronous tutorials (e.g., following Angelov & Ganobcsik-Williams, 2015) to engage large numbers of students.

This synergetic approach to online academic writing provision, where technology shaped practice and practice shaped the use of technology, has resulted in a sustained hybrid approach to academic writing provision at CAW and Coventry University Group, allowing Academic Writing Tutors to emerge from crisis pedagogies and develop strong foundational approaches to Academic Writing digital pedagogies (Tsui & Tavares, 2021). This phase of evolution at CAW has reshaped practices therein, developing a diverse team of Academic Writing Tutors who draw on cutting-edge knowledge in academic writing provision. Owing to the Academic Writing Tutors' accumulated knowledge, confidence, and ownership of the process, CAW has refashioned its already developed practices, now attuned to contemporary trends in hybrid teaching and tutoring. Moreover, participatory practices have fostered professional agency among Academic Writing Tutors, demonstrating the affordances of such developmental approaches for enduring and overcoming challenges emerging from crisis pedagogies.

Conclusion

Drawing on the growth and developmental frameworks presented here, the paper concludes with a number of questions that arise out of this discussion, offering guidance for future directions in the writing tutoring field, and potentially setting up agendas for change elsewhere in other institutional and (trans)national contexts. The paper has reflected on the role of the Academic Writing Tutor and considered effective, research-informed means of developing tutors' capacity for online delivery during and post-pandemic. Contextualised within key areas that shape the roles and remits of contemporary writing tutors, the discussion has showcased a well-established writing centre model at a UK university in order to evidence writing development practices, challenges, and solutions documented in selected literature.

Notably, this paper also seeks to prompt further consideration of these topics and to elicit the experiences and 'best practice' recommendations of colleagues who work in writing development roles and as Writing Programme/Writing Centre managers or leads in universities and educational institutions in the UK, across Europe, and worldwide. To support this agenda-setting, we propose a set of questions that also stimulated debate at the initial panel at EATAW 2021.

First, the following are questions to reflect on contemporary writing provision and writing tutor development in the European context:

- Is it easier to 'mould' a writing tutoring community through 'training'? Might this result in a less durable community with weaker ties than a writing tutoring community that is built through ongoing professional development in the theories and pedagogies of writing support?
- How do we navigate disciplinary and institutional discourses about Academic Writing to position our work?
- How do different national Higher Education (HE) traditions determine the role of a writing tutor and where development opportunities lie?

Second, the following are questions to reflect on online writing provision and writing tutor development in the European context:

- Given that, in the contemporary writing centre, the notion of online provision is now taken for granted following the COVID-19 online pivot, do distinctions between online writing labs and physical centres still hold currency?
- Has the online pivot helped us develop effective and not crisis digital pedagogies that are culturally and socially situated?
- Is there scope for further evolution in the field of Academic Writing through engagement with technology?

Evidently, developing a rich understanding of the tutors' professional contexts and a nuanced awareness of tutor backgrounds and of means to engage tutors as active agents in their development, are key to overcoming unexpected challenges in Writing Development practices such as the online pivot caused by COVID-19. Looking forward, the field of Academic Writing will benefit from a deep consideration of these questions, from both a global, international perspective and a localised, institutional one.

Acknowledgements

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