

# Remarks on the writing centre and the future library

*Best practice article*

**David Burke**

*University of Oslo*

## Abstract

---

Implicit in the discussion about the “open” future of the library are questions about the library’s identity in an increasingly digital context, and anticipations of change (Anderson, Fagerlid, Larsen & Straume, 2017). But the “open” future of the library does not need to be a passive future. Much like the traditional library, whose books and reading rooms were positioned between students and faculties, the future library can still occupy a significant space, even as digital access supplants books and librarians do less shushing.

But the future library must actively seek to occupy that space. As a future library service, a writing centre can be positioned to help.

This best-practices discussion identifies key aspects of the operational model at the University of Oslo’s Academic Writing Centre to demonstrate how a writing centre can actively (re)position the university library in the future. Drawing from Academic Literacies theory (Lillis, 2001; Lea & Street, 1998), this paper characterizes the space between students and instructors in the context of academic writing, mindful of both the tenuous identity formulation processes germane to the writing process (Ivanič, 1998; Lillis, 2010), and the faculties’ primary mandates to teach the stuff of study. From its position somewhere in between faculties and the students, and with an awareness of the nature of the gap between the two, the Writing Centre aims to actively support students and instructors toward each other and spark broader collaboration with the University Library.

On a practical level, this paper discusses successes and challenges for the Academic Writing Centre so far, and offers insight into the Writing Centre’s important role in the future library.

**Keywords:** writing centre, future library services, academic literacy, academic writing

**\*Contact:**

e-mail: [davidaburke001@gmail.com](mailto:davidaburke001@gmail.com)

## A picture of the future

On the way to my office, I walk past an image that hangs in a stairwell. No one sees this image except library staff, and hanging as it is, between floors in the office wing of the library, those who do see it, see it as matter of routine. It becomes unremarkable.

The image is a reprint of a painting. A green midground merges with a blue background at a low horizon line and forms the approaching horizontal plane. Centered, and standing alone midframe is a single bookshelf. Differentiable by their various spine colors, books stand side by side in the shelves. Here and there, a gap within the books. Here and there, a book lays slantwise across the empty space left by a missing other. As the eye rises, one realizes that the top of the bookshelf is slanted forward and downward like a roof. The whole thing becomes unsettling until the eye completes the journey to the top of the frame where a slender font displays the painting's title – Statsbiblioteket i 100 år—that is, “The national library in 100 years.”

I love this image because it captures an inevitable sense of loss, and hanging in the back stairwell of the library, it also seems to express a sort of sarcastic resilience on the part of the library itself. This image suggests that the future library looks different. But, for as much as that point may be worth our attention, this image fails to capture the ethos of the library entirely. There are no people here—no staff, no students, no researchers and no interactions. Yet, it is precisely those interactions that will define the future library, even as the look of the library is changing.

Or perhaps it is more appropriate to say that the library is in-between. Practically, the library is in between digitalization processes. Functionally, the library is in between students, researchers and the broader university community and the information, digital or otherwise, that they use to do the work that they do. So it seems appropriate then to begin my discussion of writing centre practices with this in-betweenness—this liminality—in part because of the implicit context of transition that framed VIRAK 2019, and in part because the business of a writing centre is to be in-between.

I have two objectives. I aim to discuss some of the key practices at the University of Oslo (UiO) Academic Writing Centre and how they work, but I also aim to explain why a writing centre can be such a valuable part of the library's future. In that light, it seems necessary to address the two most common challenges I hear to this placement before I go on to highlight key practices.

### **Challenge one: A writing centre in the library?**

The first and most obvious challenge may be seen as a manifestation of that image in the library stairwell. The idea, simply put, is that a writing centre goes beyond the core practice of the library. While this may be true, rather than overextending or diluting the library, the inclusion of a writing centre works to reposition the library as a more active support service, especially as new digital realities promise more complex interactions (Anderson et al., 2017; Gullbekk, 2016), not just for the library, but for the university community as a whole.

In 2017, Anderson et al. remarked that “the increased pace of digitalization and the purchase of digital resources can make the scope of available information so overwhelming that it can contribute to new types of problems for democracy” (p.14, my translation). Perhaps the socio-political framing of this argument may seem a bit abstract in the face of the mounting practical considerations brought about by these new digital realities, but the practical implications of one in five bachelor students dropping out, as reported by the Norwegian newspaper *Universitas* in the summer of 2019 (Hollum, June 8) are harder to ignore, especially as funding is increasingly tied to performance, student and otherwise – and performance is increasingly measured in the simple metrics of completion and publication. Though the navigation processes between information and its written redeployment have traditionally been a solitary endeavor for the student or the researcher, the connection between information literacy and student writing is obvious. Thus, there is an opportunity for the university library to reposition itself. No longer merely a passive repository, the future library can become an active initiator of good academic practice, and a writing centre can help. After all, nearly every student or researcher that crosses the library threshold or logs into the library’s databases will at some point thereafter, sit in front of a blinking cursor on a word processor page and begin the task of writing.

### **Challenge two: Teaching belongs to teachers**

But, shouldn’t the faculties teach writing? The answer to this question is more complicated, and heavily context dependent. In the Norwegian higher education context that I am addressing, they do, to varying degrees. But, in the absence of an institutional writing support structure, like the freshman composition courses common in the US, the quality and consistency of writing instruction in Norwegian higher education is largely dependent on the individual efforts of individual instructors (for a more detailed contemporary view of writing support and instruction in some Scandinavian and European higher education contexts (see Gustafsson & Ganobczik-Williams, 2016).

While it is not my aim to diminish the role of subject-specific writing training, research suggests that while subject instructors often “have their own fairly well-defined views regarding what constitutes the elements of a good piece of student writing in the areas in which they teach [...] the epistemological and methodological issues that underlay them [are] often expressed through surface features and components of ‘writing’ in itself...” (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 162).

Moreover, without an institutional writing support structure to establish common frameworks of knowledge (Burke, 2019), students are frequently faced with a situation where they must relearn the performance of academic writing on a case-by-case basis, often with very little guidance save the framing of the writing assignment itself, the feedback they may receive, and their final grades.

To illustrate my point, one professor once told me that all students in his introductory courses are told to rewrite their semester papers after the first submission because “there’s always something they can improve.” This sort of expression demonstrates just how unhelpful certain writing instruction can be, especially in the hands of instructors whose primary concern is the stuff of study, and whose long acculturation to a particular discourse may leave the why’s and how’s of writing undefined, or unexplained. This expression also opens the door to a consideration of what a writing centre positioned outside of a faculty might be able to contribute. Of course, these are broad terms here, and surely there is excellence in writing instruction across the University, but even in instances where there is the will and the competence to teach writing on a deeper level, instructors still face significant limitations to time and resources, as well as their primary mandates to teach the stuff of study.

On the other hand, the writing support that the writing centre at UiO provides is based on a pedagogical model that is often quite different from the common skills- and performance-oriented writing instruction students may receive from their instructors. We aim to develop the writer, not to correct or direct the writing. Furthermore, a hybrid writing pedagogy (see expanded description in Straume, 2017) influenced by the Norwegian process-oriented approach (Dysthe et al., 2010; Hoel, 2008) as well as EAP/ESL genre-orientations (Swales, 1990) and Academic Literacies thinking (Ivanič, 1998; Lillis, 2001; Wingate, 2015) places far more weight on process and performance awareness than on product. In short, writing centres like ours can often offer something fundamentally different for the writer. While students and junior academics still receive formalized directions, writing centre support can work to bridge the gaps between stated expectations and the processes that produce quality academic writing. Seen this way, a writing centre is not so far afield from a library’s core literacy support mandate.

### **Practices that work**

Now I’d like to talk about specific practices at the Academic Writing Centre at UiO. By highlighting key aspects of our operational model, I aim to demonstrate what works and why it’s working, and ultimately show how our positioning in the library works to actively support students and faculties toward each other, and to spark further collaboration within the university library. I have divided this consideration into two levels, that of the individual, that of collaboration.

### **Practices that work: Individual interaction**

A central component of our practice is Academic Literacies (AcLits) theory. At a foundational level, AcLits theory points to “the ability to communicate competently in an academic discourse community” (Wingate, 2015, p. 6). The real significance of this perspective lies in its focus on the social aspect of the academic space, which “views the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of, discourse and power” (Lea & Street, 1998, p.159). As a student support service, or perhaps more accurately, a writer support service, the Academic Writing Centre at UiO takes these considerations of power structures and dominant discourses as a given and positions itself with the writer in the liminal space between assignment and submission, or between idea and articulation. Thus, we are always working with a mind toward the constant, active processes involved in “becoming” (Lillis, 2001, p. 48) a member of a discourse community. This dynamic, it should be noted, is difficult to create when writing support is based in a faculty or in writing centres that conceptualize writing as a set of skills. This in part because of the inherent power structure created by such an arrangement, and in part because the conceptualization of writing as merely a set of skills to be learned does not account for the complexities of access and exclusion endemic to the student experience at the contemporary higher education institution. Furthermore, such a framing does not account for the multitude of preferred writing performances a student may encounter over their course of study.

Of course, liminality can also be a challenge. In our experience, the most common reason students visit the Writing Centre is uncertainty. This uncertainty may stem from “gaps between academic staff expectations and student interpretations” (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 159), as evidenced by frequent student uncertainty about specific formal performance expectations, for example (Burke, 2019). But uncertainty may also stem from much fuzzier or less articulable aspects of writing performance, such as the privileged but often unexamined dominance of “essayist literacy” (Lillis, 2001, pp. 20-21, 38) in our writerly traditions, which “works against those least familiar with the conventions surrounding academic writing, limiting their participation” (Lillis, 2001, p. 53). This observation points to acculturation. Students trained in the same tradition are likely to be familiar with that tradition’s preferred performances, while newcomers and outsiders continue to miss the foundational assumptions (what else?) that silently underlay those performances. Here, we see that supporting student writers may require far more than simply providing information. In many cases, a writing centre, and even more specifically, a writing mentor’s ability to serve as a “cultural informant” (Minett, 2009, p. 72) can be profoundly important for student writers, whether their uncertainty is the product of a different cultural background, or merely part of acculturation processes germane to the student experience.

Most significantly, the operational model at UiO focuses on the formation of identity in the practice of the writer, thus the core of what we do is the one-to-one consultation. While our Writing Centre does employ a small number of academic staff with advanced competence, our model is fundamentally one of peer-mentoring. That is, our writing centre is staffed by well-trained students. The value of this model is its ability to create a non-hegemonic space for interaction. Writers come and discuss their work, not with instructors or those in positions of authority or dominance in the academic space, but with peers, a legitimizing interaction in its own right, and one “legitimized less through formal qualification and more through the personal and communicative dimensions of writing pedagogy” (Straume, 2017, p. 114, my translation). Where consultations with a writing mentor help student writers develop their own thinking and writing, benefits also come from the implicit value conferred by the validating processes of sharing and being heard and recognized. This student-facing orientation also lends itself to collaboration, which is the second level of our Writing Centre’s practice.

### **Practices that work: Collaborative interaction**

Legitimized as a key library service and empowered by the mandate of the students who use it, a writing centre can be uniquely positioned to help support faculties and departments, particularly in a context such as ours, where writing instruction is largely left up to the discretion of individual instructors. In this capacity, our writing centre is able to work from a position of competence within writing pedagogy to complement the instructor’s own position as a practitioner in a given field. This separation is crucial. By approaching specific writing contexts from a position outside the field, our collaborations with academic staff are generally marked by cooperation, not territorial tension.

And, collaboration begets collaboration. In the fall of 2019, the UiO Academic Writing Centre worked with instructors from pharmacy, astrophysics, musicology, philosophy, area studies, and political science, as well as researchers at the Cultural History Museum, and the association of PhD and postdoctoral researchers at the University, among others. In each case, our courses and workshops were specifically tailored to the course of study or area of need and developed in consultation with the instructor or administrator who requested them. Notably, all of this work was initiated by request.

Broadly speaking, it is our writing centre’s involvement with both sides of the writing process that allows us to offer increasingly valuable support to students and instructors alike. Increased familiarity with the dominant and preferred performances within specific fields allows us to offer more useful support to students in individual consulting sessions. And, more contact with individual students allows us to provide instructors with better insights into student uncertainties. In short, more contact with students and more contact with faculties is allowing us to support students and instructors toward each other.

## Concluding remarks

My points here have been twofold. On one hand, I wanted to highlight key practices at the University of Oslo Academic Writing Centre. On the other, I wanted to express how and why a writing centre is such an ideal fit within the university library and how university libraries' embrace of the writing centres can help redefine the future as a more integrated, active support space. Beyond this, there is also a strategic value in incorporating a writing centre as a key library feature. In addition to providing a visible, interactive service to the university community, positioning the writing centre in the library can open the door to more interaction with the library's traditional purview, especially if we begin to recognize writing support as a vital element of information literacy.

## References

- Anderson, A., Fagerlid, C., Larsen, H. & Straume, I. (Eds.) (2017). *Det åpne bibliotek: Forskningsbibliotek i endring*. Cappelen Damm Akademisk.
- Burke, D. (2019, June 6). Times new roman, 12pt.: Encoding and decoding the 'academic' in academic writing. *Norwegian Forum for English for Academic Purposes*. Conference conducted at Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway.
- Dysthe, O. Hertzberg, F. & Hoel, T. (2010). *Skrive for å lære: Skrivning i høyere utdanning* (2. utg.). Abstrakt.
- Gullbekk, E. (2016). Apt information literacy? A case of interdisciplinary scholarly communication. *Journal of Documentation*, 72(2), 716-736.
- Gustafsson, M. & Ganobcsik-Williams, L. (2016). Writing centres and the turn toward multilingual and multiliteracy writing tutoring. In Hyland, K. & Shaw, P. (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of English for academic purposes* (pp. 517-529). Routledge.
- Hoel, T. (2008). *Skriving ved universitet og høyskolar: For lærarar og studenter*. Universitetsforlaget.
- Hollum, J. P. (2019, June 8). Én av fem bachelorstudenter dropper ut. *Universitas*, <https://universitas.no/sak/65883/en-av-fem-bachelorstudenter-dropper-ut/>.
- Ivanič, R. (1998). *Writing and identity: The discursal construction of identity in academic writing*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Lea, M. & Street, B. (1998). Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2), 157-172.
- Lillis, T. (2001). *Student writing: Access, regulation, desire*. Routledge.
- Minett, A. (2009). 'Earth aches by midnight': Helping ESL writers clarify their intended meaning. In Bruce, S. & Rafoth, B. (Eds.), *ESL writers: A guide for writing center tutors* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 66-77). Heinemann.
- Straume, I. (2017) Skrivsesenter i forskningsbibliotek: Om teorigrunnlag, identitet, og legitimering. In Anderson, A., Fagerlid, C., Larsen, H. & Straume, I. S. (Eds.), *Det åpne bibliotek: Forskningsbibliotek i endring*, (pp. 99-119). Cappelen Damm Akademisk.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wingate, U. (2015). *Academic literacy and student diversity: The case for inclusive practice*. Multilingual Matters.