

Writing Support Services in Norwegian Higher Education

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Editorial

In the autumn of 2024, the Norwegian Network of Study Skills Centres and Writing Centres in Higher Education ([Nasjonalt nettverk for studieverksteder og skrivesentre i høyere utdanning, NANSU](#)) celebrated its 10-year anniversary. This special issue is a celebration, not only of the network, but also of the wide range of writing support services in higher education that have evolved over the past decade.

The first network meeting took place in Haugesund in June 2014 with twelve participants. At that time, the network consisted of four institutions: Oslo and Akershus University College (HiOA, today Oslo Metropolitan University), Stord and Haugesund University College (HSH, today Western Norway University of Applied Sciences), The University of Stavanger (UiS), and The University of Agder (UiA). In 2014, Norway had three writing centres: the Learning support centre at HiOA and the writing centres at HSH and The Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU). Since this first meeting, writing support initiatives have been established around the country. Some have come and gone while others have persisted. Today, the network consists of nine writing and study skills centres, and the annual network meetings count 40 to 50 participants. In total, the network has 90 individual members.

Norwegian Writing Pedagogies

Compared to other European writing centres, many Norwegian writing support services are quite strongly influenced by North American process-oriented writing, not least the educational movement called Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). Here, writing is seen as being central for students' thinking and learning processes. Some of the movement's key ideas include a stronger focus on the writer than on the writing and an emphasis on higher order concerns instead of details and formalities. More broadly, the movement foregrounds a dialogic mode of consultation.

In Norway, these ideas were introduced by the three Norwegian writing pioneers Olga Dysthe, Frøydis Hertzberg, and Torlaug Løkensgard Hoel, who co-authored a classical book called *Skrive for å lære: Skriving i høyere utdanning* (Writing to Learn: Writing in Higher Education) in 2000. Olga Dysthe, with a PhD in applied linguistics from the University of California, Berkeley, has been particularly influential in the introduction of portfolio didactics, and – engaging the dialogism of Bakhtin’s literary theory – in reconceptualising teaching and feedback processes in the classroom. In addition to writing support services, process-oriented writing pedagogies have been implemented in departments of education, teacher education and language departments, and in Norwegian schools (for an example, see [The Norwegian Centre for Writing Education and Research](#)).

Characteristics of Norwegian Writing and Study Skills Centres

In addition to being strongly influenced by North American process-oriented writing, a special characteristic of Norwegian writing support services is that they are, for the most part, organised in close connection with the university library. However – as in most other countries – the variation in institutional organisation, mandate, disciplinary orientation, and services is significant. While most writing and study skills centres focus on offering courses and guidance in academic writing, some also address topics such as presentation techniques, AI literacy, and Norwegian as a second language.

Today’s writing and study skills centres have been developed according to the needs of their respective institutions and target groups. For instance, one of the first Norwegian writing support services, The Learning Support Centre at former Oslo and Akershus University College, grew out of a joint pedagogical development project (2008–2010) between the Learning Center & Library, the Study Section, and the Pedagogical Research & Development Center. Their common concern was a need for centralized study support to improve the learning environment for students in general and, in particular, for students with Norwegian as a second language. An initial idea of the project was to offer a language and writing support service for the latter. However, as it turned out, these students did not want a separate service, and the service became available to all students (Jonsmoen, 2015).

In most of the writing and study skills centres, students are guided by writing mentors trained in consultation skills, academic writing, and dialogic text response. In the capacity of being peers, the writing mentors share similar experiences with the students they assist, which allows them to better understand the students’ struggles compared to regular staff or faculty. When following the dialogic tradition introduced by Dysthe, Hertzberg and Hoel, the writing mentors help the students to identify potential and points for improvement in their own texts. Instead of giving summative assessments, their feedback is formative. Most importantly, the mentors listen and ask open-ended questions like “What do you mean here?” or “Where do you think this part fits in your text?” to help the writer proceed in their writing process. Since writing mentors are not experts on the topics students write about, students must be more active during the consultation and take more responsibility for their own text. Through dialogue, the student must articulate their problems, ideas, and solutions, making them clearer in the process (Dysthe

et al., 2010). When receiving questions about their writing, students not only have to think about the answers; they also learn to pose similar questions with regards to their own writing. In this way, the dialogical approach may contribute to developing a meta-language on writing and increased awareness about writing processes more generally.

About This Special Issue

One of the aims of this special issue is to show the variety in how these centres are run; another is to inspire other institutions to start up their own writing support services. Through research articles, theoretical studies, and best practice examples, this special issue further explores some of the theoretical and methodological backgrounds mentioned above, including challenges and possibilities relevant to writing support services in Norway. The contributions to this special issue address the variety of target groups aimed at by writing support services: students, PhD candidates, and faculty. Moreover, these papers reflect a variety not only in content but also in form. As Kåre Johan Mjør puts it in his contribution, academic writing “represents a type of text based on certain conventions that are largely normative, but where there are still a number of choices you can make » (p. 7, the editors’ translation). Thus, the reader will find both best practice articles and academic papers written in different styles in this special issue.

Taking an academic writing course for PhD candidates at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences as a starting point, Kåre Johan Mjør reflects in his essay on how we can *talk* about the practical task of writing in the classroom. By taking Joseph Harris’ *Rewriting: How to Do Things With Texts* (2006) as point of departure for what good writing in a research context is, he presents concrete examples of writing – such as Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* – one can use to support PhD candidates in finding their own voices.

Kari Mari Jonsmoen from Oslo Metropolitan University presents a qualitative study on the use of language partners (*språkmakkere*) for students with Norwegian as a second language in higher education. Language partners, who are often second language users themselves, can contribute to increased language skills both orally and in writing, and, on an institutional level, help create an inclusive learning environment that sees the value of a heterogeneous student population.

In the light of the introduction of generative AI to higher education, Johannes Servan from the University of Bergen asks how writing guidance can be adapted to the new academic reality while keeping its focus on the students’ development and capacity for thinking. Appealing to the importance Hannah Arendt ascribes to discretionary judgment and thoughtful actions, he argues that the dialogue-based writing pedagogy central to Norwegian writing support services *is* a solid basis for meeting challenges posed by generative AI – but this basis can be challenged by structural factors.

Anne-Lise Eng, Lars Rune Halvorsen, and Stine Løkkeberg from Østfold University College evaluate in their study whether pre- and post-testing increases learning in an e-learning course on academic writing and what kind of teaching format their first-year students prefer for

classes in academic writing. Based on the results, they conclude that pre- and post-testing has an effect but that students prefer blended learning.

Grethe Moen Johansen presents a training program for writing mentors at Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet) that is based on confluent pedagogy. This program focuses on personal engagement, self-experience, and reflection to prepare new writing mentors for the practice of dialogic consultation.

Bodil Moss reflects in a best practice essay on an essay course developed for faculty at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL). She experiences a wish for ready-made templates and criteria and shows how this form of assessment disconnects with the essay's possibility to open for investigating professional experience.

We hope that this variety of perspectives and forms will inspire further development of writing support initiatives and more diverse approaches to scholarly communication.

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