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CHAPTER THREE

A relational approach to building knowledge through academic writing: facilitating and reflecting on peer writing tutorials

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In 1984, Stephen North wrote a paper¹ in which he argued that writing centres need to focus primarily on developing the capacity of students as writers, rather than only or mainly on polishing the writing tasks students seek help with. This now-famous paper in the writing centre field speaks about an approach to writing support and development that focuses on who is doing the writing, and how they learn to write effectively over time. This learning is grounded both in the context of each task writers are working on, and in levels of abstraction away from specific tasks towards a more long-term, versatile proficiency in academic writing that can be adapted to a range of writing tasks. In essence, North contends that students will find growing as a thoughtful writer difficult if they are not enabled or encouraged to think about writing at two levels: one where approaches to writing are related to the context of a specific task, such as a technical report; and another where writers can move beyond specific tasks to see writing patterns, practices and approaches more generally or abstractly so as to be more successful at learning and constructing different genres down time. This is encapsulated in his exhortation for writing centres to work with the writers, rather than only with the writing (North 1984).

This chapter picks up on that argument to look at how this might be achieved in writing centre tutorials, where peer writing tutors² sit outside of the disciplines, and act as students' critical friends to prompt, question, guide and advise student writers, focusing ideally on both the writer *and* the writing. Although writing tutors generally do not act as disciplinary specialists (Robinson 2009; Thompson 2009), they must recognise the nature of the tasks students are working on, and conceptualise their role in helping students to see how their writing and reading is bringing them further into disciplinary academic discourse communities (Robinson 2009). Thus, rather than trying to be mainly general or generic in their talk with students, peer writing tutors need to move between the general and the more specific, task-related writing concerns. This would enable students and tutors to talk together about particular disciplinary or subject-related tasks, while also building a more general proficiency in and understanding of what successful academic writing is, and what it requires of the student.

But, what is generalisable, or 'conceptual' about writing? I define 'conceptual' in this chapter as writing patterns, practices or approaches that are not context or task-bound. How can a more conceptual understanding of genres, forms, or purposes of academic writing be

useful in drawing our focus in writing centres between the texts themselves and the writers and their writing practices at a generalised level? How do more generalised or conceptual understandings of successful writing develop through writing itself, in specific contexts and for particular purposes? In responding to these questions, this chapter advances an argument about writing centres playing a vital role in helping student writers to build knowledge about writing, both in generalised and context-specific ways. It further suggests a theoretical tool that can be applied in thinking about writing, useful for both peer writing tutors and student writers.

Using a tool drawn from Legitimation Code Theory, called Semantics - in particular semantic gravity and the notion of gravity waves - the chapter will explore how peer writing tutors can reflect on their tutoring practices more critically with a focus on enabling students to move between these two levels in their writing. The tool, as will be demonstrated, enables tutors to guide students to more overtly connect context-independent understandings of academic writing with their more context or task-dependent realisations in written texts. Key to the understanding and application of this tool in peer writing tutorials is the notion of movement between - to avoid getting stuck either on high level conceptual conversations about the purpose and execution of academic writing forms, or on a localised focus on just the assignment in front of the tutor and student. Semantics offers us a tool that can focus our thinking and doing on connections, and movement between a more generalised understanding of, for example, the principles of writing a good introduction, to helping the student revise their text effectively, gaining a deeper understanding of what introductions do in a specific piece of writing.

Data drawn from writing tutors' narrative reports, generated in a writing centre within a historically disadvantaged university³, and written after their writing tutorials with undergraduate students, form the basis for this exploration. Applying the conceptual and analytical tools drawn from Semantics to these data, the chapter will consider how tutors' conversations with students in a university writing centre do move between the local context of their essay and more conceptual notions of the forms and purposes of genres or parts of genres, like reports or essays. Rather than arguing that this movement is not already happening in writing centre tutorials, the chapter will offer a conceptual and practical analysis of existing tutoring practice - fairly typical of many writing centres in South Africa and abroad - that can assist writing peer tutors and writing centre directors with realising critical and forward-looking reflections on the work they are doing. On this basis, they can develop a different kind of consciousness about the conversations they could and do have with student writers. This chapter concludes that equipping writing tutors with analytical tools such as the one provided by LCT Semantics, as a form of explicit praxis (Maton, Carvalho & Dong 2015), can enable robust and versatile conversations between writing tutors and students in

the writing centre. This chapter will show how theorising writing centre work more overtly with tutors is a necessary move leading to changed praxis with student writers in this context.

The chapter begins by locating writing centre work within the discourse of Academic Literacies as a critical field of inquiry and pedagogy, and then moves to consider how Semantics can offer us new ways of seeing and thinking about the work we are doing within this framework.

Developing a writing centre pedagogy: Academic Literacies

Writing centres, globally and in South Africa, have worked for many years in what Andrew Rijn (2008) has termed borderlands. Essentially, we are there for the university, but we are also there for the students, and we are there with our own philosophy, goals and pedagogical approaches for opening up emancipatory spaces for students to talk about, think about and work on their writing (Carter 2009; Grimm 1996; North 1984). In many instances, the emancipatory, student-centred goals of writing centres are at odds with wider understandings within universities about the nature of academic writing, where writing well is construed as a skill, and something that students should either already have or be able to master within an extra-disciplinary space such as a writing centre, or a writing/literacy development course. Grimm captures this well when she argues that writing centres are often seen as “handmaidens of autonomous literacy - a value-free, culturally neutral notion of literacy”, that although strongly challenged by writing centres is still a conception at work in higher education today (Grimm 1996:524). Therefore, there are writing centres in these borderlands that lean towards trying to teach students how to write in ways that construe writing less as a meaning-making, contextualised, value-laden practice that shifts depending on the context that students are writing within and about, and more as a decontextualised set of skills that, if applied well, will lead to success (see Archer 2010; Nichols 2011). Conversely, though, there are many writing centres that focus their work around literacy as social practice (Carter 2006; Lillis 2001) and work to help students write effectively within the social and academic context - usually a discipline or subject - they are studying. Within the field, therefore, there are different understandings of what a writing centre is, should be, or could be, and writing centres are positioned differently within their university or college contexts depending on which understanding is employed to shape that writing centre’s vision and mission.

The understanding of writing centres employed in this chapter, and of the writing centre it uses as an illustrative case study, is grounded within a notion of writing as an academic literacy practice that develops over time, and within the disciplinary and academic contexts in which meanings and knowledges are produced and debated. Writing centres that ground their approaches to writing development within the discourse of Academic Literacies

(Lillis and Scott 2007) view writing as a particular kind of literacy practice that is infused with certain values, and shaped by particular conventions. These values and conventions indicate not only what counts as legitimate knowledge, but also what counts as legitimate ways of presenting, debating, critiquing and disseminating that knowledge to the discourse communities in which one is working and writing.

Understanding writing as a social practice in this way leads writing centres to develop related approaches and strategies for engaging both students and faculty members (teaching staff) about how academic writing can be done well, why some forms and methods of producing written texts are more valued than others, and whether and how texts can be produced differently. For example, peer writing tutors focus on creating conversations with students that are, ideally, focused less on correcting errors and more on exploring, with students, how they have understood the task they are responding to, and how they need to make and clarify meaning in their writing in appropriate ways (Hutchings 2006; Robinson 2009). The student's voice and ideas are the focus of the conversation, with the peer tutor using their own experience as a writer, and their critical insight into the kinds of revisions the student's writing may need, to ask questions that prompt the student to think about their writing in productive ways. Typical initial questions in this kind of writing tutorial might include:

- What do you think the lecturer is asking you to do with your writing here? Are you creating an argument? Are you writing a descriptive report or a narrative? How do you understand the purpose or point of this piece of work?
- How have you gone about writing this draft so far? Where did you start, and what are you stuck on now that you'd like some help with?
- What would you like to achieve with this piece of writing - what kind of feedback or result would you like from your lecturer?

It would be impossible to argue that peer writing tutors working in writing centres informed by an Academic Literacies framework such as this never talk to students about spelling errors, grammatical mistakes, long sentences or referencing conventions. However, it would be important to acknowledge that writing tutorials informed by a discourse that sees writing as a value-laden, rhetorical practice rather than a set of decontextualised skills does provide a compass point for resisting the dominant conceptions of writing as 'skill' that hold sway in higher education.

Academic Literacies, as a framework for writing centre work, creates a firm, helpful ideological 'holding structure' within which writing peer tutors and consultants can work effectively to resist correcting or instructing students. It enables us to theorise our work, and

create writing interventions and conversations that cohere with a social practice view of writing. However, I would argue here that Academic Literacies doesn't necessarily give us firm, practical tools within which to reflect on, and reshape, our work with students within this context. Particularly, it does not yet give us effective tools to think about knowledge - knowledge in the disciplines, and also knowledge about writing in academia - and how this could be built over time. Put differently, although an Academic Literacies approach does enable tutoring that can ask questions not just about how we do things, but also why we do them differently in specific discourse communities or disciplines, it does so in what we could term a "soft focus" way (Maton & Chen 2015:42). A concern is that what we may miss with a soft-eyes approach to meaning-making through writing using this approach alone is a more nuanced understanding of how we can build knowledge, about academic writing specifically, *cumulatively* (Maton 2009) over time. Questions that expose the social, constructed nature of writing by themselves do not necessarily enable us to see how we cumulatively build meaning or understanding through writing over time, and how we do so across disciplinary contexts. This is especially so if we do not have a conceptual 'toolkit' that can enable interrogation at a deeper level of what we are writing about, why, and how.

This chapter proposes one dimension of Legitimation Code Theory, Semantics, as part of a complementary writing 'toolkit' for writing centres. It turns to this now to consider what this approach can add to Academic Literacies in terms of focusing writing centre work on how and where it can enable a more overt focus on cumulative development of knowledge about writing in higher education.

Semantic gravity and the notion of 'waving' through writing

Legitimation Code Theory, or LCT, is described by its founding author, Karl Maton, as a realist sociological 'toolkit' that extends the prior work of Basil Bernstein and Pierre Bourdieu in the main, specifically Bernstein's code theory and Bourdieu's field theory (for a fuller account please refer to Maton 2014, chapter 2). Important to note for this chapter is LCT's over-arching concern with uncovering and characterising the underlying organising principles of fields, such that we can understand what values, norms, intentions and so on drive, shape or challenge the practices and actors we observe and engage with on the 'surface'. LCT is relational; in other words, it does not see fields as 'either/or' sets of choices or binary positions, but rather as 'both/and' sets of practices or positions that need to be understood as continua involving contextualised choices and movement between one and another position. For example, a popular debate in Academic Literacies, especially regarding writing centre work, which happens in extra-disciplinary spaces, is whether we should aim to be either more generic or more specific in our approaches to working with student-writers. A

relational approach such as that offered by LCT would argue that we should rather be asking which elements of our work are generic and which are specific, and when and how we could employ both, moving perhaps between the two rather than trying to squeeze our work into one or another ‘box’, lauding one and vilifying the other.

Semantics is one of five dimensions of LCT and it reveals one set of organising principles that shape and inform what academic disciplines do with knowledge and ways of knowing. A key focus of this dimension is how to move between more context-independent meanings or understandings (for example, an abstract notion of the form introductions take on in written texts) and more context-dependent or applied meanings (for example, looking at one specific Introduction and discussing its features in the context of the longer text) (see Maton 2014). Semantics would argue that having an ‘either/or’ approach to teaching students, in this example, how to write an introduction may limit their ability to do so ably in further writing. For example, if students were only given an abstracted list of features of a good introduction, such as the steps it should contain, they may struggle to realise this in their own writing. Yet, by the same token, if they were only taken through an analysis of the introduction they are currently writing and shown how to make it better, they may only be able to improve in this one instance, and lack the understanding to repeat the learning in further essays. What would be more helpful would be to weave both approaches together into a discussion about what, in general, makes an introduction ‘good’, and use that knowledge to analyse a specific introduction to strengthen it and reinforce the general understanding or principle of introducing an argument in writing. To build understanding and practice over time, students need to be able to move, in ‘waves’ (see Figure 2.1, below), between more abstracted, generalised meanings, and more contextualised, connected applications of those meanings. This back and forth waving would build their knowledge and practice cumulatively, rather than in a segmented, piece-by-piece fashion (Maton 2014).

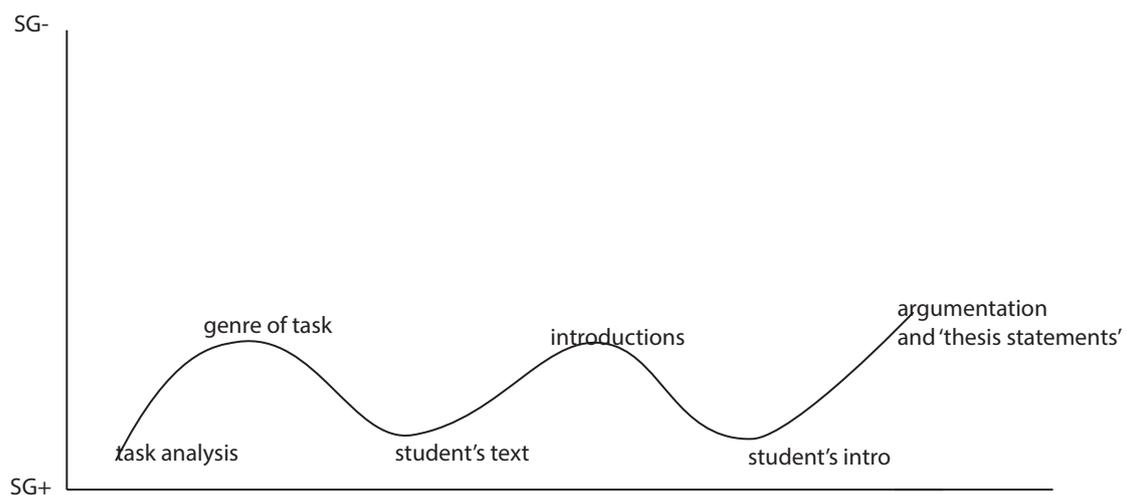
There are two organising principles within the dimension of Semantics, but the small-scale project this chapter reflects on used only one of the two for purposes of simplicity, and because of time constraints within the peer tutor development programme within the writing centre. The two organising principles are semantic gravity (SG) and semantic density (SD), but only semantic gravity, and gravity waves, will be used in the analysis of the data discussed here.

Semantic gravity (SG) describes the degree to which meanings are tied to their contexts (Maton 2014). Weaker semantic gravity describes a situation where meaning is less dependent on context, for example where one is working with abstract or highly conceptual or theoretical knowledge. Stronger semantic gravity describes a closer relationship between knowledge and the context in which it is used, for example when theory is being applied to a problem or task (Maton 2014). The ability to accumulate knowledge and move it between

and across contexts and tasks is compromised when teaching and learning leans too far towards weaker or stronger semantic gravity to the exclusion or limitation of the other. In other words, if learning is only/too abstract or only/too context-dependent, students may struggle to and use knowledge to make meaning differently in other contexts.

This movement is captured in LCT in the form of a gravity ‘wave’ (see Figure 2.1 below). The point of entry (higher or lower) can depend on the teaching and learning context, but for the purposes of writing tutorials, peer tutors often start with the task and student in front of them, indicating a lower or more context-dependent entry point. The idea is not just to move up toward a more decontextualised meaning or understanding but to come back down carefully, and then build back up again, repeating and varying the ‘steepness’ or ‘frequency’ of the waves. This variation would depend on the task the student and tutor are working with, the student’s level of comfort and confidence with their task and writing, and an acknowledgment of the learning needs of the student in relation to the task. Thus, these waves need to be used as a guiding tool, rather than a uniform template all tutorials should strive to emulate.

Figure 3.1: generic semantic gravity wave for a heuristic writing tutorial



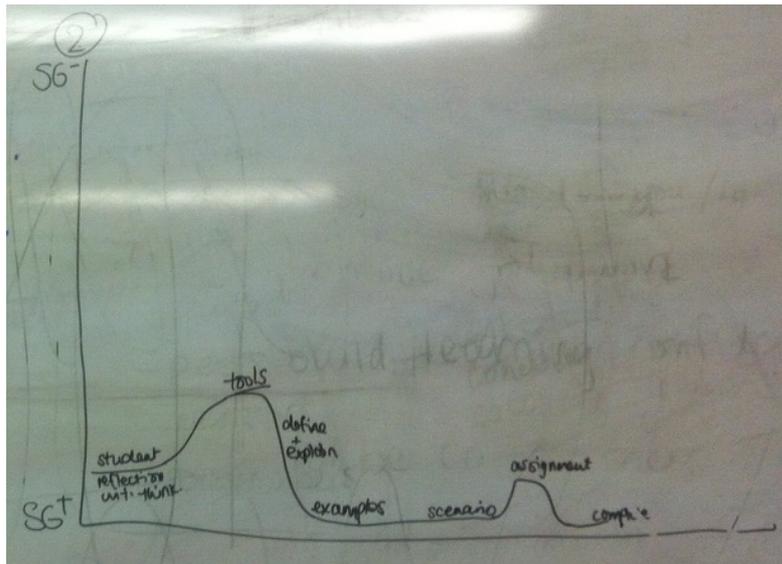
From workshop to peer tutorials: methodology

This small-scale exploration of what Semantics, and the semantic gravity wave in particular, offers peer writing tutors in terms of both reflection and changed tutoring practice began with a workshop in 2014. The workshop was an hour long, held during a regular team meeting time within the writing centre, and was led by the coordinator of the centre (also the author of this chapter).

The workshop began with a brief description of semantic gravity, specifically the notion of cumulative learning understood as students having the ability to wave between stronger and weaker semantic gravity in their writing practice. This was then connected to peer writing tutorials using examples drawn from the tutors' prior experiences in the writing centre, as well as previous semester reports they had written. We spoke in the workshop specifically about essay writing as a dominant form of text-production within the university (Lillis 2001), although in its conceptual form semantic gravity can be applied and adapted to working with students on any form of text. The peer writing tutors were encouraged to think about their own tutoring practice - typical writing tutorials they facilitate with student-writers - and speak to one another about whether and how semantic gravity waves might provide them with new insights into how they are working, and how they might work differently in future tutorials. Specifically, they were asked to do a 'light touch' semantic analysis of a recent peer tutorial they had facilitated, using the concepts of stronger and weaker semantic gravity, and the semantic gravity wave. The feedback from the tutors was then captured by the coordinator on the whiteboard (see Figure 2.2), and as a group we discussed how we might use this tool in upcoming tutorials, as both a way of being more conscious of how the conversations with students could be structured, and as a reflective tool in their narrative reports (which are written after each writing tutorial).

Following the workshop, the tutors were asked to make use of this tool to inform their practice, although how they made use of it was left to them to decide, using their judgement within each tutorial and with each different student. They were asked not to share the tool explicitly with students, as this would be unnecessary at this stage, but rather to use it to become more aware of moments when they may be stuck too much in the local essay context (stronger semantic gravity) without lifting the conversation 'up' to achieve a less context-dependent understanding (weaker semantic gravity) of the issue the student needs to work on (or vice versa). Framed already by a strong Academic Literacies approach, the semantic gravity wave was introduced to tutors to add depth to their conversations with students through focusing them on how students were able to construct knowledge cumulatively (or not) about academic writing. Thus, students would have hopefully benefited from its tacit influence on the tutors' praxis.

Figure 3.2: example of the tutors' initial analysis captured on the whiteboard



The tutors in this writing centre write brief reports on each writing tutorial, detailing what they have worked on with the student. In addition to providing basic information, such as prep time and task type, they are also asked to reflect in a short narrative on how they feel the session went, which can include their own personal feelings about the session, notes on the level of the student's participation, and details about the task itself and the kinds of issues grappled with. Below is a basic example, with student and tutor names excised.

Figure 3.3: example of a peer tutor report on a writing tutorial

Student: XXX

Staff or Resource: XXX

Date: September 19, 2014, 10:00am - 11:00am

Assignment (what was the student working on): Essay

Preparation time: less than 15 mins;

Areas you worked on together: task analysis; argumentation style; introduction; conclusion; referencing;

Comments (your reflection on how the session went): The session went well though I was anxious looking forward to my graduation. The student wanted me to check her work and advise her accordingly. We discussed the work and most of her challenge was in text referencing. I took her through referencing and all techniques she wanted to know about referencing. However, I was pushed to kind of editing because that was the biggest gap in her work.

Tutors, as may be seen from the above (fairly typical) example, are encouraged to be honest in their reflections, and to think about what went well and what did not go as well as it might have done, as this is not just a reporting tool but also an opportunity for ongoing learning.

The data discussed in this chapter are drawn from the tutors' narrative reports written in August and September 2014, after the workshop. The narrative reports selected for this

data set were purposively sampled from all of the reports captured in the writing centre's online reporting and booking system, WCOOnline, and only reports written during August and September were downloaded and collated. Within this subset of reports captured in the system, further selection for the dataset involved reading all the reports to determine whether there was sufficient detail to analyse using semantic gravity. Reports that were too brief (for example, some simply noted that they enjoyed the session, or that the student found it helpful, without any details about the nature of the session beyond that) were excluded. What remained were 40 reports that were analysed initially to get a sense of whether and how semantic gravity waves could be 'seen' in tutors' reports, and then in more detail. Through a careful coding of these reports using stronger semantic gravity (SG+) and weaker semantic gravity (SG-), I mapped illustrative waves in tutoring practice with the aim of understanding how tutors were trying to make use of the tool in reflecting on their conversations with students about their writing practices.

Semantics in action

The claim that this chapter is making is that semantic gravity and gravity waves are a tool which can enable writing tutors to firstly, distinguish between more context-dependent and context-independent meanings within the process of creating written texts, and secondly, to wave between these meanings and weave them together into a cumulative understanding of texts as written artefacts involving both kinds of meanings. The reason why a conceptual and analytical tool like semantic gravity is helpful to peer writing tutors, and indeed to anyone involved in student writing development, is twofold. In the first instance, the notion of waving and weaving in tutorials provides an accessible and recognisable visual representation of what we could strive for in terms of a successful tutorial. In the second, having a tool like this to guide both reflection on past tutorials and action for future tutorials can provide tutors with an additional compass to that provided by Academic Literacies, to orient them when they are pressured by students and lecturers to 'fix' bad writing rather than focus on helping students become more capable writers.

This part of the chapter discusses two main findings of this small-scale study. The first finding speaks to the ways in which tutors were able to think about the distinction between more and less context-dependent meanings in students' writing, and how reflections on their tutoring practice indicate waving between stronger and weaker semantic gravity in forms of semantic gravity waves. The second finding considers the challenges tutors grappled with in applying the notions of waving and weaving in their conversations with student-writers. This second finding is useful to consider in refining and extending tutor development in writing centres.

Semantics in the context of facilitating and reflecting on peer writing tutorials

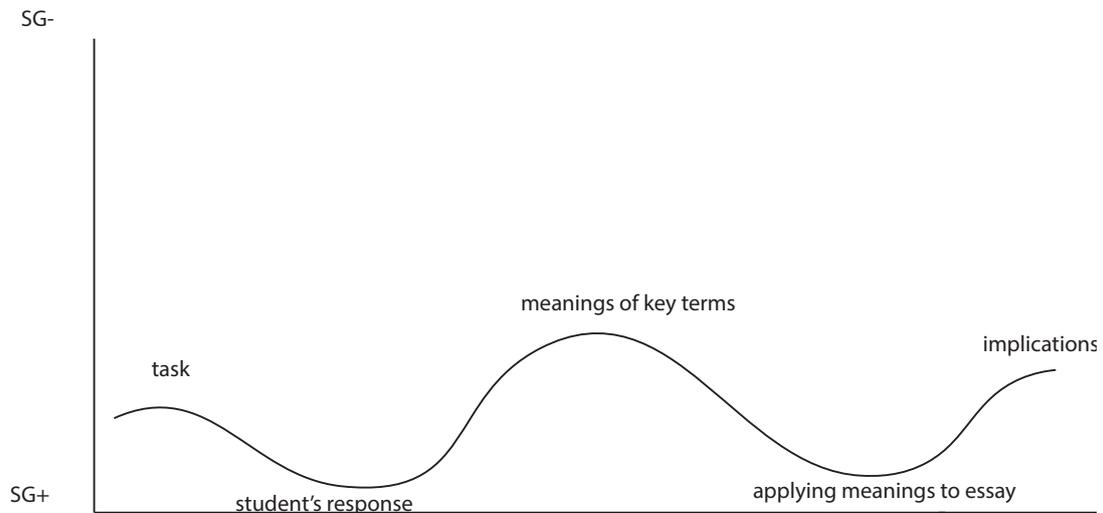
As indicated in the previous section, the selected 40 narrative reports were read several times to obtain an initial sense of the semantic waving in the tutors' accounts of the writing tutorials, before they were more decisively coded. The tutors' comments were marked as indicating downward shifting towards stronger semantic gravity, understood here as the students' written text or task itself (SG+), or shifting upwards towards weaker semantic gravity, understood here as lifting the conversation out of the context of the text to speak about principles or forms of academic writing more generally (SG-). The selected extracts here are illustrative of whether and how semantic gravity waves can be seen in tutors' reports on writing tutorials with students, post-workshop. All tutors have been assigned a number as a form of pseudonym.

In the following extract we can see the tutor starting, fairly typically, with task analysis. Many students, coming from one way of thinking and writing in high school into quite different ways of doing so at university, struggle to work out what is expected of them in terms of thinking, reading, research and writing at this level (Kapp and Bangeni 2005). Here, in talking to the student about the meaning of the task in terms of the 'content' words (e.g. gender inequality) and the 'direction' words (e.g. Discuss), and then how the essay question could be approached, the tutor implies a semantic gravity wave. The wave starts with the task as a point of relatively stronger semantic gravity, and then shifts up to weaken the semantic gravity in talking more abstractly about 'culture' and 'gender' connected to the student's research. Although this is related to the task at hand, it exhibits weaker semantic gravity in this moment because this part of the discussion could be broader than the chosen meanings the student will use in the essay. The tutor then indicates a strengthening of semantic gravity again, moving the conversation to the student's cultural context, and how the concepts discussed could apply within the essay at hand. Finally, the tutor indicates a weakening of the semantic gravity again as the student is encouraged to respond to the task by drawing implications of examining gender equality in her culture. Again, although this conversation is all focused on the task the student is working on, there are moves towards and away from this one specific essay question. The student is being encouraged to interpret particular task words in relation to this task (i.e. What is gender? What is culture?) (SG+) and also analyse the task in ways that could be carried on to future tasks (i.e. unpack key terms in general; relate these key terms to the focus of the essay task in general) (SG-).

X was expected to discuss the positive and negative implications of gender equality or inequality in her culture, however, she simply identified and described gender roles. Therefore, the session was focused on interpreting the task properly. We spoke about the meaning of keywords in the question such as; culture and gender and she

was able to describe her culture and identify some of the positive and negative implications of gender equality in her culture. (Tutor 3)

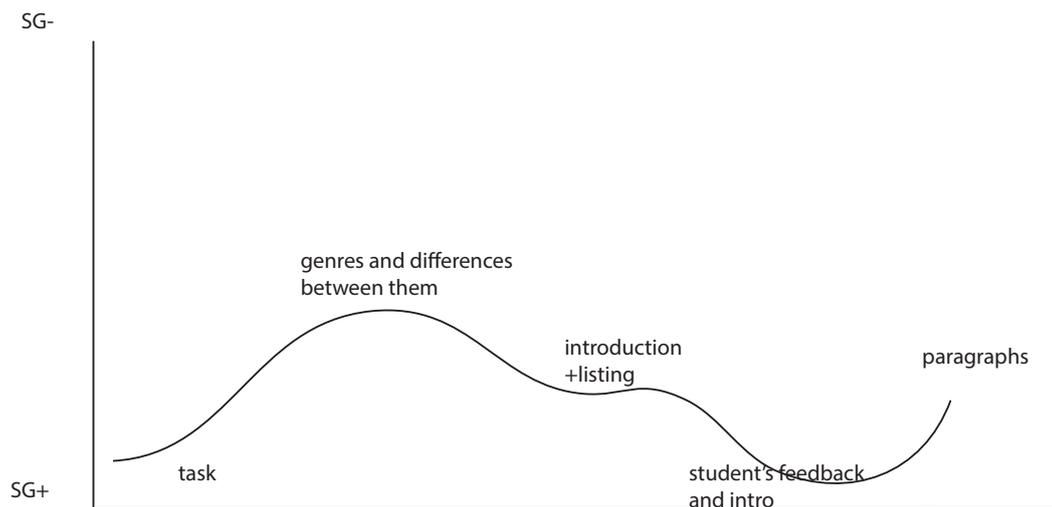
Figure 3.4: semantic gravity wave for Tutor 3



In this next extract, we see the tutor making a conscious decision to shift the conversation up towards weaker semantic gravity -- here the differences between written genres -- and remaining in that space to talk about introductions outside of the immediate context of the student's essay. Thereafter he draws the student down to talk about feedback on her previous essays, and how to address this through writing an introduction that satisfies the needs of this task, and her other academic tasks more generally. This process enabled the opening out of the conversation into talking about aspects of writing that would take the student further towards her second draft.

The student's challenges ranged from interpreting questions, task analysis and writing introductions. Time was allocated to clarify the difference between a report and an essay, and a normal essay from an argumentative essay. Assuming that the student understood these concepts, I asked her to list the components of an introduction which she struggled to do. Further interaction proved that comments on her previous essays were that, they were either too short or too long, but all wrong. The student was assisted through the process of identifying requirements for an introduction while making links to the task requirements given by the teacher. This created an opportunity to talk about paragraphs that were not available in the draft. (Tutor 2)

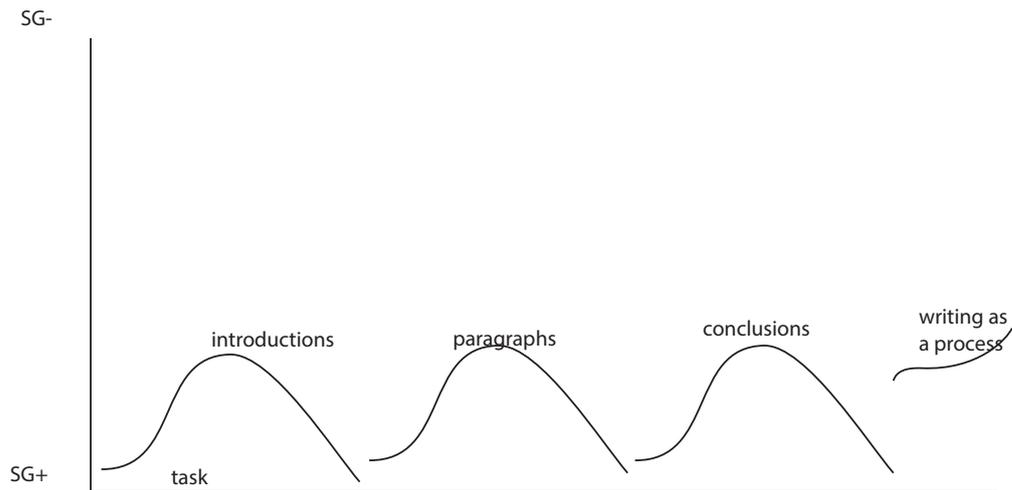
Figure 3.5: semantic gravity wave for Tutor 2



In this final extract we can see Tutor 5 trying to implement her idea of an ideal wave, and, by her own reckoning, succeeding, possibly due in part to the student's strong written draft. We see her starting, again where tutorials tend to start, with the student's work and her understanding of the task thus far. The tutor then shifts the conversation up the wave by using 'the funnel metaphor' to talk about introductions more generally, before shifting down towards the student's introduction, to analyse it anew, and look for ways to make improvements. It does seem, from the tutor's account, that there may be a break in the wave between the discussion on the introduction, and the discussion on paragraphs that follows a similar wave, and this can be the case in writing tutorials, where sections of the essay can seem segmentalised (first the task, then introductions, then paragraphs, then conclusions). Thus, Tutor 5's attempt to consolidate the conversation at the end, more abstractly, could contribute towards bringing all these segments together into an understanding of writing an essay as a process of working on all the parts to create a coherent whole.

The piece was well-written and I was able to move from the conceptual to the concrete aspects of her writing fairly easily. We started off discussing her topic and I was immediately able to gauge how knowledgeable and comfortable she was with the topic. We then moved to conceptual understandings of introductions - I used the funnel metaphor which worked really well. After that we spoke about her introduction specifically and moved to conceptual understandings of paragraphs, following the same format till the conclusion. At the end of the consultation I tried to consolidate by speaking about writing as a process and the goals of the writing centre in terms of providing ways of understanding academic writing as opposed to merely imparting skills. (Tutor 5)

Figure 3.6: semantic gravity wave for Tutor 5



What the semantic gravity wave has offered peer writing tutors, seen in these three extracts, is both a new way of facilitating their conversations with students as a powerful form of ‘tacit praxis’ (Maton, Carvalho & Dong 2015), as well as a new language for reflecting on their tutoring practice. I am not contending that tutors only started using this dialogic approach with students after the workshop on semantic gravity waves; the tutors have been taught to work in these ways in this writing centre since 2009, and the way we work mirrors the ways in which other South African and international writing centres work (Archer 2010; O’Neill et al. 2009). These kinds of conversations are shaped by the Academic Literacies approach we have chosen to use in our student-facing work. I am contending, though, that learning to use semantic gravity, even in this simple way, has facilitated new kinds of conversations about peer tutoring in the writing centre, and a way of analysing peer writing tutorials such that we can talk more clearly about how students can build knowledge about academic writing practice more consciously, and cumulatively.

Using this tool, focused on building knowledge and meaning in higher education in cumulative and connected ways over time, is not without its challenges in a place like a writing centre, where tutors do not usually see the same students over and over with successive writing tasks. The second finding speaks briefly to the challenges, before the chapter concludes.

Breaks in the waves: limitations encountered in waving and weaving with students

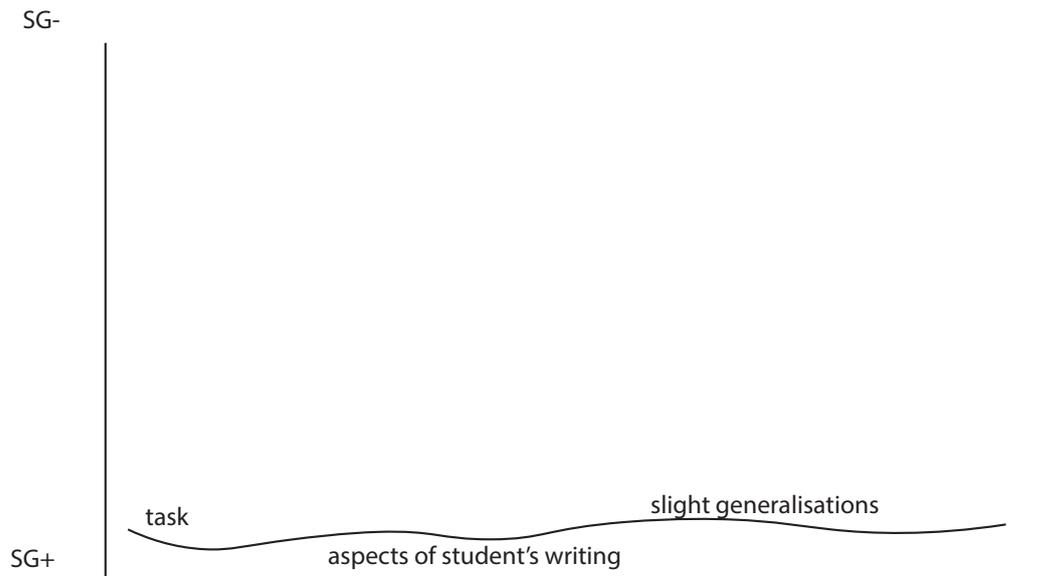
As with all tools for thinking and action, as much as there are possibilities and exciting options for change and improvement, there are also limitations that can frustrate progress and change. In the data available from tutors’ reports, it is clear that there are two significant areas of frustration: one is students’ level of progress on the task by the time they come to the

writing centre, which affects their ability to engage with the tutors in a give-and-take conversation about aspects of their writing. The other is the ad hoc nature of writing centre tutorials, with many students coming for follow-up tutorials with the same or new tasks, but an equal or greater number coming only once or twice, thus limiting the potential for cumulative knowledge-building from the writing tutors' viewpoint.

In this extract, the tutor reflects on the difficulty of this particular tutorial because of the student's struggles with expressing his ideas in English (not his mother tongue). The tutor thus made the decision to keep the wave for this tutorial fairly low overall, focused on making sure that by the time he left the student would have a clearer understanding of his task, and how he could revise what he had written to create a stronger second draft. Although she mentions talking about aspects of academic writing 'more generally', the impression from this narrative is that the tutor's judgement was against pushing the student too far up the wave as she deemed this inappropriate given the student's level of progress with his writing thus far.

In this consultation it was particularly challenging to move from the concrete aspects of the writing task to the conceptual principals [sic] of writing for a number of reasons. Firstly, English is not the student's first language and this came through in his writing. The student also had difficulty understanding what the question required, therefore I spent a lot of time analysing the task and asking probing questions to try and draw out the critical analysis that the task requires. I made the decision to focus on the content and ensure that the question was being answered as opposed to getting hung up on language. Rather, I used the opportunity to talk generally about concepts like academic writing and the reasons for referencing. It was a tough call to make and I feel like there was a lot more I could have done given the time, but unfortunately that was not the case. (Tutor 5)

Figure 3.7: low semantic gravity wave for Tutor 5



In this final extract, Tutor 1 highlights a perennial problem for writing centres: students coming right before their due date, and rushing to ‘fix’ their writing before handing it in. While the tutor has tried to draw the student up out of the context of her essay towards a more general understanding of how to write clear paragraphs and why these matter, it seems that overall he was frustrated in his attempts to keep drawing the waves up and then down again due to the student’s anxiety about ‘fixing’ her paper before submitting it. He does note, though, as many tutors do in these reports, that this session has helped the student to see the value of talking through their writing, and learning more about writing on a general, as well as specific level. This realisation has prompted her to promise a return visit further ahead of her next assignment’s due date.

...The student struggled to construct clear sentences. She wrote long clumsy sentences. Also, her paragraphs did not have a clear point with evidence and clear explanation of the evidence provided. As such, I deemed it necessary to discuss how to write a proper paragraph. Unfortunately, though, because the student’s work is due tomorrow, she was only concerned with what she called ‘fixing her paper’. ...On a good note, though, she promised to come some other time for a proper dialogue on essay writing and paragraphs. (Tutor 1)

In spite of challenges such as students coming to tutorials stressed before a due date, and having made little progress on their writing ahead of the tutorial, it is becoming evident that this tool is adding a useful dimension to the Academic Literacies approach tutors are

already invested in. By focusing their awareness on how students are learning from past feedback and writing, and where possible gaps in this learning exist, this additional, theorised approach within writing centres can help us better construct praxis that helps students to build their longer-term knowledge about writing. In other words, this approach can enable us, in concert with academic literacies approaches, to focus on the writer *and* the writing, without excluding one or the other.

Conclusion

All writing centres work towards an ideal of a successful writing tutorial in which student and tutor can converse generatively about the task at hand. Central to success is improving the immediate written text while also building the confidence and ability of the student to tackle future writing tasks using lessons they have learned from the current task. This ideal, in whatever form it takes based on different writing centres' philosophy, resources and institutional context, is necessary. If not for the ideal, what would we be working towards? What would we use as a compass point in the face of pressure from the university and from students to 'fix' their essays, correct their grammar, or teach them 'writing skills'?

Student demands, lecturer demands, and the kinds of timeframes writing tutors often have to work within, with students coming for help close to their writing deadlines, can undermine the use of a tool like semantic gravity for reflection and action. Segmented, rather than cumulative, learning tends to be a more common mode in higher education (Maton 2009) given the ways in which curricula and assessment tasks are modularised and broken into 'units' of learning. Overcoming segmentalism by enabling cumulative, relational learning is essential to providing the conditions for students to succeed in higher education (Maton 2009, 2014).

Thus, rather than being put off by the challenges we may confront when using such a tool as this, we need to continue to work towards the ideal, which references a more cumulative, ongoing form of learning about writing itself, and what it demands of writers in the process of thinking, writing, revising and so on. Semantic gravity, and the accompanying notions of waving and weaving through conversations about writing, provides both a conceptual and practical tool that writing centres can utilise, adding depth to current approaches to student writing development, in this case those shaped by Academic Literacies. We need to help students starting from where they are, rather than where we think they should be, and we would be irresponsible not to do so. But are we not also irresponsible if we ignore opportunities to challenge and push students further where we can, giving them greater insight into and access to the 'rules of the game' so that they can begin to play on more confident terms? I believe we would be.

Rather than bowing to the pressures exerted from within an understanding of writing and student learning as a decontextualised, autonomous, value-free process which underpins the ‘skills discourse’ so pervasive in higher education, writing centres have a powerful role to play in resisting these pressures, understanding that we would not be helping students to become more successful writers within their disciplines or fields in the longer-term if we did not resist. Instead, we can help peer writing tutors, using explicit praxis shaped by tools such as semantic gravity and the notion of gravity waves, to navigate the relationship in their own tacit praxis between working with the writer *and* working with the writing, such that both grow and develop. Tutors themselves need tools that give them both a conceptual understanding of tutoring writers, as well as practical, contextualised means for achieving the deeper, long-term goals that form the vision and mission for writing centres.

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Notes

¹ North, S. 1984. The Idea of a Writing Center. *College English*, 46(5): 433-446.

² While I acknowledge that many North American, UK and South African writing centres tend to call their staff 'writing consultants', at the University of the Western Cape we chose the terms 'peer writing tutors', and 'writing tutorials', because we feel they speak more closely to our aims of academic, peer-led, conversation-based writing guidance, whereas 'consultant' is a term often used in management discourses which we would rather avoid invoking.

³ Although the data has been generated in one writing centre, within a particular university context - a traditional, historically black university - the focus of the chapter is on theorising all writing centre practice and is not locked into a specific context.