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Writing Centres in the Netherlands: Nondirective Pedagogies in a Changing Higher Education Landscape

Abstract

This article examines the pedagogy of Dutch writing centres, comparing and contrasting it with the original interpretation of nondirective coaching and the way that has developed since the 1970s. Based on recent literature and contacts with American colleagues, we have drawn the tentative conclusion that generally, Dutch writing coaching is more strictly nondirective than it currently seems to have become in US settings. We then evaluate this practice in the context of the internationalization of research universities that has taken flight over the past 20 years, leading to many programs now being taught through English, which is the native language neither of the vast majority of our students (whether they are Dutch or international students), nor of their teachers. This has given rise to a shift in the needs and questions being expressed in our writing centres and an effect on our thinking about writing centre pedagogy.

This article positions itself in the context of a global development: philosophical and pedagogical questions raised by changing student populations. It examines how the “Englishization” of higher education in the Netherlands is impacting the choices that Dutch writing centres have traditionally made in situating themselves on the directive-nondirective continuum. We aim to illustrate the radical nature of nondirectiveness in Dutch writing centre pedagogy and contextualize it within the far-reaching implications of internationalization and the shift towards the use of a nonnative language of instruction—a shift occurring in Europe over the last 20 years but one only recently begun in the Netherlands. English-Medium Instruction, in which tertiary education takes place in a linguistic space that is fundamentally alien to both the majority of students and their lecturers, has made us rethink the essence of what writing centres aim to achieve by reassessing the boundaries between coaching and teaching, the role of feedback, and the needs of a diversifying student population.

Writing in Dutch Higher Education

The Netherlands is a small, densely populated, northwestern European country with some 17 million inhabitants. Higher education in the Netherlands is offered at two types of institutions: *hogescholen*, or universities of applied sciences, which include institutions specializing in a particular field, such as agriculture, fine and performing arts, or educational training, and fifteen *universiteiten*, or research universities. Since September 2002, the higher education system in the Netherlands at both types of university has been organized around a three-cycle system consisting of bachelor’s, master’s and PhD degrees; this system conforms to the teaching at the tertiary level according to principles agreed to in the Bologna process (an intergovernmental cooperation of 48 European countries, the goal of which is to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher-education qualifications). Students typically enter university bachelor’s programs at age 18 and master’s programs at 21.

In the 1990s, Dutch research universities began offering programs in English, thus attracting students from other parts of Europe and beyond. Driven partly by ideological and political—or even idealistic—motives and partly by financial considerations in an increasingly competitive higher education market (since students from abroad often pay higher fees), English-Medium Instruction quickly gained momentum. Approximately 75% of programs at the master’s level in the Netherlands are now taught through English instead

of Dutch, and increasing numbers of undergraduate courses are switching the language of instruction, too.¹

The learning objectives of all bachelor's programs, whether taught through Dutch or English, will include in some way or another the claim that graduates will be able to communicate orally and in writing, with partners within and outside the field, in Dutch as well as in English (in master's programs, often in English only). When it comes to teaching academic writing to help students achieve that goal, individual study programs have a lot of freedom. Dedicated "first-year composition" or "Writing 101" courses are rare. Some students are being offered outstanding training in academic writing in English or Dutch, or nothing at all, while other students may find themselves in a first-year course on "academic skills," usually offering a few writing lessons and a writing assignment, but also presentation skills, study skills, information skills, or more. Writing assignments in the curriculum often just serve as summative assessment. Practically all bachelor's programs will require students to do an individual research project in the final year: the bachelor's thesis. The study load of the thesis varies among faculties, departments, and programs; a range of 15 to 25 pages (or between 5 and 15 European Credit Transfer Equivalent points) is considered normal. The master's thesis usually comprises 25–50 pages.

Writing centres. As in many European countries, writing centres are a relatively new phenomenon in Dutch higher education institutes. However, the number of Dutch writing centres is increasing. Before 2004, writing support would be offered either through language centres or through centres for study skills. The first facilities for individual peer-to-peer-tutoring were set up in 2004, one in Groningen as part of a curriculum course called "Writing tutoring," and a separate writing centre in Nijmegen where tutoring was offered as a job opportunity for students. Both initiatives were inspired by what colleagues had seen abroad through coincidental contacts with colleagues in, for example, Germany, South Africa, and the United States. Since 2008, the number of writing centres has grown steadily to currently 20.

There is quite a bit of variation between these centres in terms of organization and size. While most centres operate with student peer tutors, in some centres faculty or staff carry out the writing consultations. Some centres offer services for the entire university (sometimes embedded in the university library), while others are part of a specific department and serve the students of one particular program only (for the organization of Dutch writing, see

1 In this article, we will focus on the Dutch system because we are most familiar with it, while realizing that the landscape in Dutch-speaking Belgium is quite similar. Moreover, we will focus on research universities more than universities of applied science because that is where writing centres started and where they flourish most.

Waanders, 2020). This explains the large variation in size (between 120 and 2,100 sessions annually). Most serve students at both BA and MA levels; in some centres, the focus is on the final thesis while in others, most sessions revolve around shorter term papers. All of the centres, however, offer free individual tutoring sessions, and most centres will ask students to send their texts in beforehand, providing the tutor with the opportunity to prepare the most fitting strategy. Typically, writing centres are not based in a Dutch or English Department, but work independently from the universities' curricula. This means that Course Based Tutoring (Corbett, 2015, pp. 40–41) is an exception.

The topics discussed during tutorials fall into three categories. To understand this classification, it is important to realize that in virtually all courses, writing assignments are intended to train students in reporting the results of small-scale research projects, whether empirical or literature research. Moreover, in many writing centres, most sessions concern master's or bachelor's theses. These sessions cover a variety of topics: first, the writing process in general, including such issues as writer's block, the lack of an overview, task orientation, and planning; second, the research itself, including formulating central and sub-questions, goals, methods, as well as managing theory; and third, the text organization, including effective paragraphing and argumentation. In general, our writing centres focus more on higher-order concerns than lower-order ones: approximately 80–85% of topics discussed during tutoring sessions concern issues of structure (of the process, the research, and the text). Finally, and we will return to this below, approximately 15–20% of students' questions concern lower-order concerns, such as style, linguistic issues, referencing, and layout.

Dutch and Flemish instructors of academic skills at both research universities and universities of applied sciences are organized in a scholarly organization which convenes an annual conference and maintains a website (<https://www.nacv.nl/>). In 2016, a special interest group on writing centres was set up; since then, its 40 or so members meet twice a year to discuss practice and develop joint research activities. Many writing centre professionals also participate in activities hosted by the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing and European Writing Centers Association.

Pedagogical choices. Partly because of the small size of the country, partly because of the pivotal role played by one or two directors in the development of the Dutch writing centre scene, Dutch writing centres share a broad consensus on writing centre philosophy. After the first centres were set up at the start of this century, their directors quickly agreed upon their choice of pedagogy, which they summarized as “nondirective on the product and more directive on the process.” In the years that followed, while some centres suffered budget cuts and had a hard time convincing university boards to continue their support, the one in Nijmegen grew, prospered, and became a source

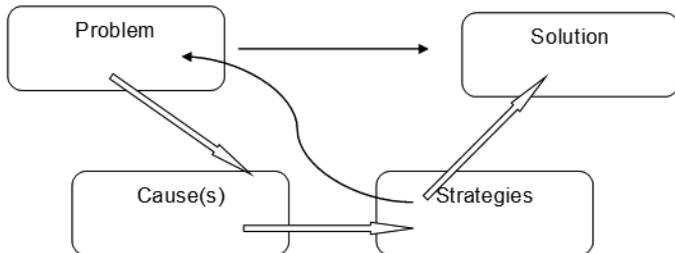
of inspiration and training. This exchange of knowledge and materials led to similar set-ups at other universities. Peer tutor days were organized, and, in due course, peer tutors became initiators and coordinators of new writing centres.

On the continuum of directive to nondirective pedagogies (see for instance Carino, 2003; Corbett, 2015), the pedagogy that has developed and is shared among most centres in the country can be said to be radically nondirective. Crucially, Dutch tutors are taught to focus on strategies for the process and strongly discouraged from giving feedback on or suggestions for the product, the text. This is not so much because we are motivated by ethical perspectives on the nonhierarchical relationship between a peer tutor and a student, nor because of a fear of “plagiarism” (cf. Carino, 2003). Instead, the rationale is partly practical: because of the decentralized nature of the teaching of academic writing in the curricula, it would be dangerous to pretend that we know, for example, how a particular first-year psychology paper should be structured, what citation system should be used in this biology essay, or whether or not the introduction of an anthropology thesis contains a research question. Most important, however, we believe that a nondirective approach is a more effective tool for empowering students to become more independent in evaluating and improving their own writing. We recognize ourselves in the following definition:

In non-directive coaching, the individual or group is the expert and they set the agenda. The coach helps them to think through that agenda and then apply their own expertise to achieve the outcomes they want [...] Non-directive coaching is facilitative. It is based on reflective learning and structured problem solving. The coach requires knowledge only of how to help people learn and problem-solve for themselves. (Braddell, 2017, p. 6)

Our underlying pedagogical perspective is pictured in Figure 1:

Figure 1:
Pedagogical Perspective in Writing Centres in the Netherlands



What we teach our writing tutors to do is to follow the alternative route and take the “detour” to a solution via causes and strategies, which is radically different from what most instructors or thesis supervisors do when discussing a text with a student (see de Jong, 2006). In a writing centre session, tutor and tutee will try to analyze the problem, find the causes, and practice strategies for detecting a problem and solving it. The emphasis is on strategies that can be used in similar situations, thus aiming to prompt transfer of knowledge and produce a long-term effect on the student’s writing skills. Preconditional for this transfer is that the tutor explicitly presents what is done during a tutoring session as a transferable strategy, one that the writer can use again to evaluate and improve their writing. For instance, in one of our centres, a form lists “Steps to find out which text type is expected” (see De Jong, 2017). The steps include analyzing the rhetorical problem (audience, goals, and reflecting on what content, structure, and style would help achieve those goals); looking for guidelines; finding examples; analyzing content, structure, style, and mechanics; comparing those findings to the results of the rhetorical analysis; and, finally, checking web sites for additional information. Because writers can use this form repeatedly for any future question on a genre or section, we see it as a sustainable and empowering tool.

We regard the nondirective approach as a pedagogical rather than a conversational principle. Instead of being related to the way in which a writing tutor communicates ideas and suggestions to the student, it is, in our view, a didactic position adopted by the tutor. This approach distinguishes us from a common thread in writing center literature that identifies various forms of didactic, albeit Socratic, methods as nondirective tutoring. A case in point would be an example of a tutor-student interaction, put forward by Peter Carino, that he says, “illustrates non-directive peer tutoring at its best” (Carino, 2003, pp. 103–104):

Tutor: *You seem to have your thesis at the end and the first parts talks about steps in the experiment. Is that the way you want it?*

Student: *Yes, we are supposed to use an inductive pattern and draw a conclusion.*

Tutor: *Ok, that’s good. Now, on the third page you talk about mixing the chemicals and then heating them, but **you don’t explain why**. Do you see what I mean? **Could you add a transition to get the reader from one to the other?***

Student: *Yes, I could say how I mixed the chemicals until they got syrupy, that’s how they should be, before I put them on the Bunsen burner, something like “Once the chemical thickened to reddish syrupy consistency, they were placed on the Bunsen burner.” And then add some stuff about the temperature ...*

Tutor: *Yes, that would really help.*

Contrary to Carino, we find the tutor's suggestion (in bold) in the above paragraph to be quite directive, according to our standards. The tutor indicates a problem ("you don't explain why") and suggests a solution ("could you add a transition"), including a reason why this would be a good idea ("to get the reader from one to the other"). While, admittedly, in terms of rhetoric, this behaviour might be called "nondirective" (because the tutor does not explicitly tell the student what to do), we would argue that the underlying didactic situation is one in which the tutor is being quite the opposite—bluntly put, they are hedging in order to leave room for the writer to ignore their very directive advice. In our current practice, the tutor would start by testing whether the writer agrees that there is, potentially, a problem in the text: "At some point, I found it difficult to understand why exactly you carried out certain procedures. What might be the response of your readers?" The tutor would then go on to ask questions, such as

Do you know what information your readers expect or need? Can you take another look and try to discover what information you do provide? Do you have any ideas what places in your text could benefit from such additions? Are there other passages in your text that may benefit from a similar closer look? ... Do you know now how you could identify those? ... And what will you do when you've found them?

English-Medium Instruction. The Dutch and international students who come to our centres are ever more often studying in English-taught programs. This phenomenon is referred to as English-Medium Instruction or, alternatively, Education (EMI or EME) or Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education (ICLHE).

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of this language shift: in the European higher education context, it means not only do students learn in, but also instructors teach in an additional language. Many lecturers report feeling "different," less flexible, less likely to use humour, less effective, or less thorough (see, e.g., Airey, 2011; Kling Soren, 2014). For students, learning in English means that they often lack authentic linguistic input: the implicit learning of codes and conventions that happens in classrooms where a common native language is shared cannot be taken for granted in the EMI classroom. To make it possible for students to learn the language of a discipline in conjunction with the content, instructors would need to provide scaffolding and pay explicit attention to the instructional language, which is something that many higher education lecturers believe is not part of their brief (cf. a paper on this topic with the telling title "I don't teach language" [Airey, 2012]). In fact, it has rightly been argued that the term *EMI* is more applicable in many northern European higher education contexts than *ICLHE*, since most programs simply assume that instructors and students have acquired the necessary language level previously and do not consider the teaching of English language skills as

one of the learning goals; English is merely the vehicle through which content knowledge is taught (Schmidt-Unterberger, 2018). Although the effect of being taught in an additional language on students' acquisition of content has received attention (Airey, 2011; Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2013), not much has been written specifically on the teaching of writing in an EMI context (on the potential of collaborations between content teachers and language teachers, see most recently, Eriksson, 2018).

In our writing centres, this internationalization means that more and more sessions are held through the medium of a language that neither the tutor (peer or faculty member), nor the student may feel entirely confident and comfortable using. This is especially important given our radically nondirective approach, in which tutors will not give feedback on a text but coach the student into developing strategies. Internationalization is affecting our practices in a number of related ways. First, perhaps most notably, it adds an extra challenge to the already complex set of aims that a writing tutor tries to achieve; to adequately discuss complex content and deal with the emotions that, as is well known, often accompany a writing process are simply more difficult in an additional language, no matter how advanced one's proficiency in English.

Second, we notice that the dynamic between tutor and student is sometimes complicated further because some non-Dutch students, especially those from educational cultures characterized by significant power distance between students and teachers, may find it difficult to accept the fact that their writing tutor is "only" a student and will not "simply" evaluate their work and give instructions on what to improve (on the topic of power and authority in the writing centre context, see Carino, 2003; Girsensohn & Macgilchrist, 2018).

Third, and most importantly, we have noticed a distinct increase in requests for explicit feedback. Obviously, the challenges of academic writing in a nonnative language are even bigger than those of writing in one's native tongue, and many students—especially incoming international students but also Dutch students starting an English-taught master's program after completing a Dutch-taught bachelor's program—turn out to need reassurance and instruction. This includes, but is not limited to, questions about lower-order concerns. Obviously, this situation causes dilemmas: providing direct feedback goes against our philosophy and requires detailed knowledge of disciplinary linguistic conventions that most of our peer tutors do not possess. We are keenly aware, however, of the reasonableness of the students' call for help.

The challenge we need to address, therefore, is how to adapt our pedagogy to the new context. What can we do? In our professional discussions, three broad themes emerge. To start with the role of our peer tutors, we need to explore what the shift to an additional tutoring language means for them, using the expanding literature on lecturers' experiences in EMI contexts as a starting point. It is likely that many peer tutors will need and benefit from training in

tutoring language, including the vocabulary needed to perform the didactic role that we require from tutors. Similar to EMI instructors, who need to develop special competencies in order to achieve their didactic and communicative goals, writing tutors have to have access to an advanced toolbox of coaching language.²

In addition, we will need to reexamine our pedagogy in the light of intercultural communication. We realize that our way of interpreting and applying nondirective peer tutoring fits well into the famously nonhierarchical nature of Dutch society, in which students learn from a very young age to interact with parents and teacher on an equal footing. When working with international students, peer tutors will need to take more time to discuss strategies, not by simply explaining what they are used to doing in a tutoring session, but by asking students what they have been used to and how they feel about following a nondirective approach. With students who are unfamiliar with Dutch educational culture, this conversation and evaluation will probably have to take place several times through the process.

Perhaps the most pressing question, finally, is how to respond to the increased call for explicit feedback, or “information provided by an external agent regarding some aspect(s) of the learner’s task performance, intended to modify the learner’s cognition, motivation and/or behaviour” (Duijnhouwer, 2010, p. 16). We recognize that students writing in additional languages in an EMI context need “cultural informants” (Myers, 2003, p. 55) and are aware that if we want to continue empowering them as writers, we will need to find ways of meeting their needs. So what kind of information about writers’ performance could our peer tutors give? The initial step will always be to explore how far a writer can get when they are offered a strategy to give themselves feedback. For instance, a writer wondering whether their text is “academic enough” will first be asked to define what they think “academic” means (e.g., content, argument, structure, style, referencing?), what the criteria might be, and how these can be assessed in a text. Perhaps the writer will be asked to find and bring to the next session a model to analyze. If this strategy does not work, a tutor might offer a reader’s response by explaining their impressions of the text at hand while emphasizing the individual nature of this response (in other words, another tutor may have a different impression). In a decentralized curriculum in which different departments and programs apply different criteria for what constitutes good academic writing, and in which writing conventions are very much situated in particular disciplines, we do not want the quality of our tutoring to depend on the accidental knowledge that a tutor may have of a

2 For instructors’ competencies, see, most recently, the 2018 special issue of *The International Journal of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education on Content and Language Integration in Higher Education: Instructional Practices and Teacher Development*.

specific discipline. That is why, thus far, our peer tutors have been told to refrain from evaluating text quality.

Given the developments sketched above, however, we may consider expanding the writing tutor's terrain by training some tutors to be language tutors, too, in both Dutch and English. The type of tutoring that this would require is a matter of debate: it may need to be more directive, as suggested by Vivian Cook (n.d.), but there may also be possibilities on the nondirective part of the continuum. We are currently exploring the potential for application in a writing centre context of Canagarajah's (2013) concept of translingual practice (see Brinkschulte, Grieshammer, & Stoian, 2018, about the potential of using students' multilingualism; see also Olson, 2013). We also see potential in approaches based on modelling (Harris, 1983; Clark, 2001; Shamon & Burns, 1995). It may turn out that this type of writing support is more suited to specialized language centres (cf. Corcoran, Gagné, & McIntosh, 2018, who suggest providing "a list of reasonably-priced and vetted editorial services" [p. 19]). That way, more stakeholders can be included to collaborate in developing effective approaches to deal with the consequences of internationalization and Englishization.

Ultimately, the question revolves around definitions of and conceptual boundaries between activities. For instance, do we believe that giving feedback on a text is part of writing centre work? When does coaching or tutoring become teaching? Perhaps we should decide that if our current pedagogical approaches do not work to address certain needs, it is better to organize separate courses or workshops, which would have the advantage of providing clarity to students about the differences in pedagogical approaches. Alternatively, we could try to develop new strategies that *can* deal with linguistic textual aspects without violating the nondirective principles. Clearly, the new internationalized higher education scene presents a challenge for our writing centres. We are aware that a number of students will not be well served by writing centres if we stick too closely to our chosen didactic approach. As writing centre professionals, we therefore need to continue experimenting with new approaches that serve our students in a changing context and also do justice to our pedagogical principles.

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